What exactly is grammar?

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Introduction

What would you like to do on a rainy and windy evening? About 70 ELT professionals made their choice: going to Michael Swan’s seminar at the British Council.

With much time teaching grammar in the classroom, we thought we knew what grammar was until Michael asked this question. The answers collected were far from perfect. Then Michael invited the audience to imagine their life without grammar. He primed us living in a tribe as intelligent pre-human primates and starting to devise a communication system. We were happily making up clauses or sentences as we liked. However, this grammar-free excitement was soon overtaken by three fundamental problems: it can’t handle complex situations, or determine various relationships, or go beyond requests and statements. These are exactly what grammar can solve by ordering, inflection, and the use of function words in all variants.

Michael went on to explain the complexity of grammar in reality despite its simplicity in principle. Michael’s humorous and witty demonstration turned a commonly dry topic into an inspiring and juicy interaction. The discussions continued into the networking time afterwards. The audience left this rewarding seminar with their minds dancing with plans to help their own students.

Definitions and descriptions

Michael had a burning question at the age of 3 so he asked his mother: ‘Why do cats have tails?’ She answered, ‘They wouldn’t look complete without them, would they?’. She didn’t know she didn’t know the answer until she was asked the question!

Grammar – is something we know perfectly well until somebody asks the question. We work with grammar all the time. So if somebody asked you, ‘What is grammar?’, what would you say? This is a difficult question to answer. It is important to distinguish between definitions and descriptions. A description tells you something that is true, but it doesn’t show how that thing differs from something else. For example, ‘What’s a flower?’ ‘It’s something beautiful that smells sweet.’ But there are a fair number of other things in this room that are beautiful and smell sweet that are not flowers. So, descriptions have their limits.

Grammar - a dictionary definition

’T he rules in the language for changing the form of words and combining them into sentences.’ This is true, but not adequate. Dictionaries are full of words that you know, explained with words that you don’t know:

- cat - a domestic feline quadruped
- bus - a large road vehicle constructed on one or two levels

True enough, but what’s the problem? It doesn’t tell you what it’s for.

So the definition of grammar above is true, but it doesn’t tell us what grammar is for, or why we need it.

Why does language need grammar?

Michael thinks it’s a very difficult question. A good way to work out why you need something is to consider whether you could get by without it. Imagine yourselves at the very birth of language. An experiment. Nobody knows how language began. Imagine, you go back hundreds of thousands of years. You are a tribal primate – primitive but intelligent. We want to do more than just grunt. We want to have complicated grunts. And each of them stands for one of the things in our environment. That cave, that tree, that stone axe – it won’t work for long, will it? Because there are millions of things in our environment.

What if we lived without grammar?

How would you say: ‘There’s a bear!’ ‘It’s cold’, ‘I’m hungry.’ Simple vocabulary can draw attention to things that exist and basic needs, but it is just vocabulary. We’ve made sentences without grammar – combined words to refer to events and circumstance. But there are things we’d like to express that are beyond vocabulary.

There are three problems:

1. What goes with what? – e.g. bear big cave (which is big?)
2. Roles and relationships – e.g. kill sisters bear (which got killed?). Cause and effect, spatial, and time considerations come under this category.
3. Modality – with just vocabulary there is no way of showing that something is a question or negation or instruction or guess, etc.

We’ve discovered that there are certain things we cannot express if we only have vocabulary. Grammar provides three solutions to those problems above in one of three ways:

- ordering
- modifying words
- using grammatical words

That is all that grammar comes down to.

1. Ordering (solution 1): solution: word order, e.g. who did it, and who had it done to them; you can distinguish statements from questions by word order.
2. Modifying words (solution 2): change the form of words, e.g. add an ending.

You can show what goes with what. You can use different tone.
3. Using grammatical words (solution 3): use function words, e.g. add in small words that add meaning.

Why is grammar complicated?

Once language developed these mechanisms to make language work, these mechanisms (tricks) turn out to be useful for all sorts of other things as well. There is a range of things that you can do with vocabulary, but it may be more convenient to do it through grammar instead. 'Time' is an obvious one – you can use vocabulary e.g. ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow’, and some languages have no tense system, but within many word languages time is linked to the grammar (e.g. through tenses).

Complicity breeds complexity – groups of words can be grouped, and then the groups are grouped until language becomes very complex (like computers, which started out with a very basic programming system – but see what computers can do now).

When language change happens, it isn’t a case of one new form driving out the old. – it all accumulates, so old and new language co-exist together creating multiple complexities.