

**The Teacher Development Series**

# **Uncovering Grammar**

**Scott Thornbury**

  
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## About the author

I work in Barcelona, where I divide my time between teacher training and writing. I also serve on a number of boards under the UCLES CILTS schemes. I have taught and trained teachers in Egypt, the UK and New Zealand, as well as in Spain. I have an MA in TEFL from the University of Reading, as well as the RSA/UCLES Diploma. I have been involved in a number of course book projects, as well as having written three books on the subject of language teaching (including this one). I am presently writing a book on vocabulary, co-writing one on conversation, as well as co-editing a book on critical pedagogy.

### Thanks

This book, like its subject, more or less emerged, and I can't always trace to their source all the tributaries that have fed into it. Books and articles that have influenced me are mentioned in footnotes. But it's often been the conference workshops and short courses I've attended that have been more memorable, and hence more formative. For that reason, I particularly want to record my debt to Diane Larsen-Freeman, Peter Skehan, Rod Ellis, Leo van Lier, Martin Bygate, Dick Schmidt, Paul Nation, and Rob Batstone. (Of course, no blame should be attached to any of them for my uptake of their input.)

Closer to home, much chewing-of-fat with my workmates at International House, Barcelona, has helped uncover and scaffold my argument. For the same reason, I want to thank the members of the 'Dogme' discussion group – a truly emergent phenomenon. And a big thank you to Oliver and his class for their part in the process. The final product owes to the initiative, encouragement and insights of both Jill Florent (my commissioning editor) and Adrian Underhill (my series editor), as well as to the generous enthusiasm of Jim Scrivener and Tim Bowen, and to the truly inspired editorship of Alyson Maskell. To all of them my sincere thanks.

### Dedication

*For the staff and students of IH Alexandria, 1980–85.*

*"It goes on being Alexandria still."*

## **The Teacher Development Series**

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT is the process of becoming the best teacher you can be. It means becoming a student of learning, your own as well as that of others.

It represents a widening of the focus of teaching to include not only the subject matter and the teaching methods, but also the people who are working with the subject and using the methods. It means taking a step back to see the larger picture of what goes on in learning and how the relationship between students and teachers influences learning. It also means attending to small details which can in turn change the bigger picture. Teacher development is a continuous process of transforming human potential into human performance, a process that is never finished.

The Teacher Development Series offers perspectives on learning that embrace topic, method and person as parts of one larger interacting whole. We aim to help you, the teacher, trainer or academic manager to stretch your awareness not only of what you do and how you do it, but also of how you affect your learners and colleagues. This will enable you to extract more from your own experience, both as it happens and in retrospect, and to become more actively involved in your own continuous learning. The books themselves will focus on new treatments of familiar subjects as well as areas that are just emerging as subjects of the future.

The series represents work that is in progress rather than finished or closed. The authors are themselves exploring, and invite you to bring your own experience to the study of these books while at the same time learning from the experiences of others. We encourage you to observe, value and understand your own experience, and to evaluate and integrate relevant external practice and knowledge into your own internal evolving model of effective teaching and learning.

*Adrian Underhill*

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## Introduction to *Uncovering Grammar*

*Out of the slimy mud of words, out of the sleet and hail of verbal imprecisions...  
There spring the perfect order of speech, and the beauty of incantation. (T.S. Eliot)*

This is a book about grammar, but not so much a book about how to teach grammar as a book about how grammar is learned. There is a difference. I can teach you the subjunctive in Spanish – its forms and rules of use – and I can even do it with flair, humour, brilliance and insight. But this is no guarantee that you are going to learn it. You may remember me, the teacher, and the circumstances of the lesson. You may even remember some facts about the subjunctive itself. Traces of that memory of those facts may get you through the end-of-year exam. But, placed in a situation of real language use, can you access the subjunctive? Unlikely.

As second language learners we've all had that experience: fumbling an order for coffee in Portuguese or a timetable enquiry in Chinese. (After six years of school French I recently ordered a beer in a French café and got two, thanks to a poorly installed article system!) And yet a great deal of teaching carries on as if these language embarrassments were simply freak occurrences and still assumes that *I teach, you learn*.

This book takes a different line. It looks at grammar not as an 'out there' body of language facts that have to be forced into the learner like stuffing into a chicken. Rather it assumes that grammar is a kind of organic process that, in the right conditions, grows of its own accord and in its own mysterious way. The key to success – and the indispensable role of the teacher – is providing those conditions.

So, this is a book about grammar, but definitely not about *covering* grammar in the traditional sense of 'Today's Tuesday so we're going to do the present perfect'. Nor is it a book primarily about *discovering* grammar – by means of language awareness activities, although awareness-raising certainly comes into it. Nor is it a book about *recovering* grammar – from where it has allegedly been side-lined by the so-called communicative approach. Rather, it is a book about *uncovering* grammar – letting the grammar out, placing one's trust in the emergent properties of language.

In Chapter 1 we take a look at the role grammar plays in 'perfecting' language, and I will argue that grammar is better considered as a dynamic *process* – for which we lack an adequate verb in English, although attempts have been made to supply one. In Chapter 2 I will suggest some activity types that may activate the 'grammaring' process.

Grammar processing ability may be acquired simply by hanging out with speakers of the language and wanting to sound like them. However, few learners have the time nor the motivation to trust to nature like this. Instead, they look to teachers to help them along and to cut corners. In Chapter 3 we look at ways that teachers can intervene in the acquisition of process grammar, and, specifically, at the role of feedback and attention.

In Chapter 4 I put the case for regarding grammar as an emergent process. Such a view calls for a rethink of classroom instruction. This does not invalidate the role of the teacher: on the contrary, the teacher plays a key role in the process of grammaring – but it is a role more facilitative than pedantic, more reactive than pre-emptive. In Chapter 5 we take a wider look at the implications of a process grammar view and conclude with some hints as to how a product approach to grammar and a process approach might be merged.

In Part 2 you will find a number of photocopiable worksheets, with suggestions as to how they may be used, in order to put into practice some of the ideas in the book. But, remember, your best resource is yourself and your learners – and the interaction between you. Make discourse your resource: nothing more is needed in order to free the grammar.

## Part 1 Uncovering Grammar

### Chapter 1 Grammar as process

Is grammar a *thing* or is it something that *happens*? This chapter will argue that maybe it is a bit of both. When we describe language, as in the *grammar of English*, grammar is more noun-like than verb-like. It is a body of facts about the language: 'The present perfect is formed by the auxiliary *have* plus the past participle', etc. On the other hand, when we *use* language in real communication, grammar manifests itself in ways that seem to have little to do with the conscious application of these linguistic facts. Grammar seems to be more like a process, whereby shades of meaning are mapped on to basic ideas. It is a process for which we need a verb – something like *grammaring*. The verb-ness of grammar, then, is the subject of this chapter: grammar as a *doing* word.

### Grammar, grammars and grammaring

According to this dictionary definition<sup>1</sup>, there are at least two senses of the word *grammar*. Language teaching is generally concerned with the former – uncountable – meaning of grammar. That is, grammar as a system of rules (or patterns) which describe the formation of a language's sentences. (But note that this definition will be reworked in Chapter 4, to take into account the *learner's* grammar.)

**grammar** /'græmə/ n 1 [U] (the study and use of ) rules by which words change their forms and are combined into sentences: *I find German grammar very difficult.* | *You must try to improve your grammar.*  
2 [C] a book which teaches these rules: *This is the best Italian grammar I've seen.*

You'll note that, according to the dictionary definition here, grammar in both its senses is a *noun*: a grammar, your grammar, etc. Nevertheless, the focus of this first chapter is to argue that grammar is in fact a *verb*. Or, at least, that there should be a verb *to grammar*, to go along with the noun *grammar*. Just as there is a verb *to rain* to go along with the noun *rain*. Or *to walk* and *a walk*.

In other words, grammar is not simply a thing. It is also something that you *do*. Or (as we shall be arguing later) something that – in certain conditions – *happens*.

To use an analogy: an omelette is the product of a (relatively simple but skilful) process involving the beating and frying of eggs. The process and the product are clearly two quite different things, and we could call one *making an omelette* (or even '*omeletting*') and the other *an omelette*. Similarly, the grammar that a linguist might identify in a statement like *If I'd known you were coming, I would have baked a cake* or *Mary had a little lamb* is the result of a process – in this case an invisible mental one. Again, we need to maintain a distinction between the product and its processes of creation.

To take the analogy one step further: to someone who had never seen an omelette being made, it might be difficult to infer the process from the product. They would be seriously mistaken if they thought that making an omelette was simply a case of taking a lot of little bits of omelette and sticking them together. So, too, with grammar. What you see and how it came to be that way are two quite different things. It would be naïve to suppose that the fluid production of a sentence like *If I'd known you were coming, I would have baked a cake* results from the cumulative sticking together of individual words or even of individual grammatical structures. The same goes for the way we learn languages in the first place. Inferring the process of language acquisition from its product (grammar) is

like inferring the process of ‘omeletting’ from the omelette. Or, for that matter, inferring the chicken from the egg.

Yet a basic assumption behind a great deal of language teaching is exactly that: if you teach the product, the process will take care of itself. ‘This is an omelette. I cut it in bits. You can see what it looks like from the inside. OK. Are you ready? Now make one!’ This is what I call the ‘Humpty Dumpty Fallacy’. Just to remind you:

All the King’s horses and all the King’s men  
Couldn’t put Humpty together again.

The language teaching equivalent is: I, the teacher, will cut the language into lots of little pieces – called *grammar* – so that you, the learner, will be able to reassemble them in real communication. Thus: conjunction *if* + subject pronoun + past perfect (consisting of past auxiliary *had* + past participle), followed by nominal *that*-clause, consisting of... etc, etc. What happens, of course, is that learners take these little bits of grammar description and try to stick them together, and then wonder why they can’t produce sentences like *If I’d known you were coming, I would have baked a cake*. It ignores the fact that the product and the process are two quite different things – that there is *grammar* and there is *grammaring*, and the latter is not easily inferable from the former. In short, a description of used language is not the same as language being used.

So, whereas *grammar* (uncountable) is the rules that describe language, and a *grammar* (countable) is a book containing these descriptions, both these meanings represent a product view of grammar. What this chapter – indeed this book – will argue, is that we need to combine this with a *process* view of grammar. In short, we need new metaphors for grammar.

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### Discovery activity

Here are some more metaphors that have been used about *grammar*. What assumptions underly them? How useful could they be?

- 1 Grammar is the *glue* that holds language together.
- 2 Grammar is the *engine* that drives language.
- 3 Grammar is a *map* of the language.
- 4 Grammar is *hard-wired* in the brain.
- 5 Grammar is both *particles* and *waves*.
- 6 Grammar is the *highway code* of language.

Can you add any others?

---

### Commentary ■ ■ ■

Most teachers I have done this task with make reference to the cohesive and structural nature of grammar. Grammar is language’s *glue, mortar, bones, building blocks, foundations*, etc, suggesting that without it the language falls apart or collapses. Such teachers view the teaching of grammar as an essential, often preliminary, stage: ‘It’s the structure on which you hang the rest of the language.’ The image of grammar as a machine, or an *engine*, generating language, is a suggestive one and attests to grammar’s creative and productive function. One teacher compared grammar to the body’s DNA: ‘It carries the code of language so that an infinite number of sentences can be produced and understood.’ Others see grammar as a set of rules or prescriptions (*a map, guide book, highway code*). Such metaphors lend themselves to a prescriptive view of language teaching: ‘It’s what you should know if you want to speak correctly.’

Teachers and coursebook writers commonly talk about grammar as a series of *items* or *points*: an ‘atomic particle’ view of language. Such a view is ideal if you have to parcel the language up for teaching purposes. A different set of metaphors derives from the patterned and interconnected nature of grammar: that it ripples through the language in *waves*, or that it is a *network*. One teacher likened grammar to the *Dance of Shiva*: ‘the image of the god’s rhythmic activity as the source of all movement in the cosmos – and in language’. As we shall see in Chapter 4, this metaphor fits comfortably with a view of grammar as a complex, adaptive and emergent phenomenon. ■

## Grammar in action

Let’s have a look at a bit of language in action. Here is an exchange between two people having breakfast together. Your job is to identify the grammar.

- A Coffee?  
B Please.  
A Milk? Sugar?  
B No milk. One sugar.  
Thanks.  
A Toast?  
B No thanks.  
A Juice?  
B Mmm.

Not much grammar, is there? At least, not much grammar of a conventional kind. There are no verbs, for a start, so there are no verb endings (*works, worked, working*), a feature of grammar we commonly associate with highly inflected languages such as Spanish or Turkish. (This area of grammar is known as *morphology* – literally, the study of forms.) And, in the dialogue, each person’s utterances (you can hardly call them sentences) are one word, at the most two words, long. So there is not much of the grammar of word order either – what is called *syntax*. In other words, there is little or no grammar of the morphological or syntactical kind. In fact, this exchange operates almost entirely on the word (or what is called *lexical*) level.

(Of course, intonation has an important part to play too. Consider the difference in meaning between *Juice* 🗣️ and *Juice* 🗣️.)

It would seem, therefore, that for certain kinds of communication, grammar takes a back seat. Later on we will look at why this is so. But first, let’s see what happens when we put the grammar back in. Compare this exchange with the first one:

- A Would you like some of this coffee?  
B Yes, I would like some of that coffee, please.  
A Do you take milk? Do you take sugar?  
B I don’t take milk. But I will take one sugar, thanks.  
A Would you like some of this toast?  
B I’d prefer not to have any of that toast, thanks.  
A Can I offer you some of this juice?  
B Yes, I would like some of that juice.

Does this strike you as unnecessarily wordy and even pedantic? In fact, it’s the sort of conversation you might find in an old-fashioned coursebook. Not only do the speakers seem excessively polite, but B’s answers, in particular, seem repetitive and redundant. Moreover, they often seem to be using words where, in real life, a gesture would do the

job just as well. It's as if the conversation were taking place between two excessively polite and partially-sighted people. As we shall see, there is a close connection between grammar and formality, on the one hand, and between grammar and context, on the other.

## Language without grammar

But before we look more closely at how grammar relates to context factors, let's go back to 'grammarless' language. We said that, for certain kinds of communication, grammar seems to be almost redundant. But for what kinds of communication? Well, consider the following. Why are they all light on grammar?

- 1 NO PARKING
- 2 THREE SHARE LOTTERY FORTUNE
- 3 'Tickets, please.'
- 4 'Annie, Sunday then. See you there. Tell Jack. Tom.'

Like the *Coffee? Please* conversation, all of these short texts are very thin on grammar. We will take each in turn and show how they support a view of language and of language learning that sees grammar as a process – or, to be more precise, a linguistic procedure for dealing with *distance*.

### 1 NO PARKING

There are clearly strong practical reasons for keeping this message as short as possible. 'You are kindly requested not to park here' would occupy too much space on a sign to be visible at any distance. (Although I once saw a road sign in New York that read 'Don't even THINK of parking here!') The de-grammared nature of public signs and notices does mean that at times they are unintentionally ambiguous, as in these examples:

SLOW CHILDREN CROSSING

DOOR ALARMED

HUMP

Ambiguities like these suggest that operating on the purely lexical (word) level may have its problems. In the days when people still sent telegrams (which are good examples of language that has been pared of its grammar), the potential for ambiguity was often exploited. Cary Grant is alleged to have found, on his agent's desk, a telegram from a reporter that asked HOW OLD CARY GRANT? Not wishing his age to be divulged, he telegraphed back OLD CARY GRANT OK, HOW YOU?

### 2 THREE SHARE LOTTERY FORTUNE

This is recognizably a newspaper headline, and headlines, like road signs, are highly constrained by the need to pack a lot of meaning into the shortest possible space. THREE PEOPLE HAVE EACH WON A SHARE OF A FORTUNE IN THE NATIONAL LOTTERY is more grammatical but it doubles the length of the headline, without adding anything that couldn't have been inferred, or that won't be dealt with in the story that follows. Typically, the first sentence of the story itself is the grammatical version of the headline, in which the meaning is 'unpacked' for the reader:

**SURFER SURVIVES WHITE POINTER SHARK ATTACK**

A South Australian teenager has been attacked by a white pointer shark - and lived to tell the tale. Student Jason Bates, 17, suffered only minor cuts...

*Adelaide Advertiser*

Headlines, by virtue of being 'de-grammared', are also subject to different readings<sup>2</sup>:

**AIR FORCE CONSIDERS DROPPING SOME NEW WEAPONS**

**JERK INJURES NECK, WINS AWARD**

**CITY'S FIRST MAYOR TO BE BORN IN CUBA**

**DEFENDANT'S SPEECH ENDS IN LONG SENTENCE**

**WOMAN OFF TO JAIL FOR SEX WITH BOYS**

But these are the exceptions. Normally, as with road signs, the reader doesn't have too much trouble 'unpacking' headlines. The words that have been taken out (such as articles and auxiliary verbs) carry little in the way of what is called 'propositional meaning'. Propositions (ie the main ideas) are typically encoded in nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. Grammatical words, on the other hand, function to knit the propositions (ie the main ideas) together. When nouns are left out of headlines (as, for instance 'people' in THREE SHARE LOTTERY FORTUNE) the reader's common sense fills in the gap. The writer of the headline assumes a level of shared knowledge about lotteries that makes it unnecessary to spell out the details. Only a reader unfamiliar with what lotteries are and who wins them would be wondering 'Three what? Retired postmen? Sheep dogs?'

**Discovery activity**

What is missing from these headlines? What knowledge does the writer assume is shared?

**TWO DIE AS MOB ATTACKS JAPANESE TOUR GROUP**

**ETON BOY EXPELLED AFTER MAY DAY PROTEST**

**MEN NOW LIVING FIVE YEARS LONGER**

**COCKROACH CAPABLE OF FEELING PAIN, SAYS STUDY**

**GAME PARK ANIMALS KILLED 'FOR FUN'**

### Commentary ■ ■ ■

An expanded version of each of these headlines would include the missing articles (*a mob, an Eton boy, the cockroach*, etc) as well as the auxiliary verbs and the verb *to be* (*men now are living... an Eton boy has been expelled... the cockroach is capable...*). Also some 'taken-for-granted' content words and clause elements have been left out (*two people die... Men are now living five years longer than they used to...*). Notice that, in these last two examples, the writer is assuming shared knowledge: that tour groups consist of people, and that average life expectancies are often compared with past averages. An alternative, but less likely, reading might be that *men are now living five years longer than women*, so the headline is not entirely unambiguous. The final headline is ambiguous, since it is not clear whether *killed* forms part of an active or a passive verb phrase. However, if it is an active verb it is in the past, suggesting a reference to a specific incident, which somehow seems unlikely. (Compare GAME PARK ANIMALS KILL 'FOR FUN': the use of the present sets up an expectation that the article is a report of a scientific study.) ■

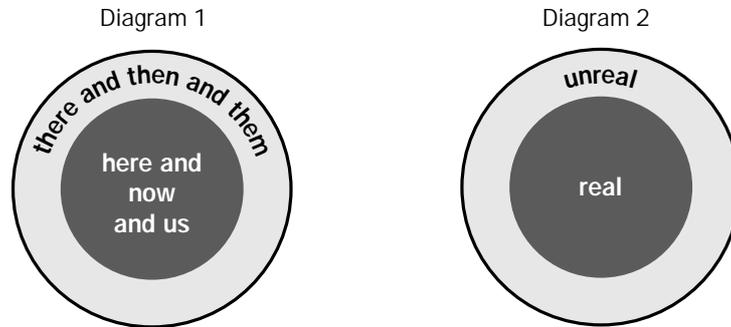
### 3 'Tickets, please'

Because a lot of language use takes place in fairly routine and predictable situations, we are used to assuming a high degree of shared knowledge with other speakers. This in turn means that there is little need to be very explicit. It explains why ticket collectors can get away with requests like 'Tickets, please' or even 'Tickets'. Passengers on buses or trains are already in a context which primes them to fill in the gaps ('Can you show me your tickets, please?'). It is unlikely that they would fill the gap with 'Have you seen my tickets?' or 'What is the French for tickets?', inferences that might be quite plausible in different contexts.

By the same token, passengers on a bus would be hard pressed to make sense of the ticket collector saying 'scalpel', whereas an assistant surgeon in an operating theatre would be able to make perfect sense of it. In other words, the context creates shared expectations that reduce the need for language, and for grammar in particular. Just as we saw with the *Coffee? Please* conversation, when speakers are referring to things that are in the immediate physical context, words, intonation and gesture are often enough to convey meanings precisely and unambiguously.

When the references contained in the propositions extend beyond the immediate context, however, lexical language becomes less effective. This is where we need to start enlisting grammar. Imagine, for example, the surgeon has left the scalpel at home, and phones home for it. 'Scalpel!' will no longer do. It makes too many assumptions regarding the state of the listener's shared knowledge. (It also will come across as rather impolite if the person who answers the phone is not a close family member or friend: more on politeness later.) The surgeon will need to flesh the message out along the lines of 'Can you bring the scalpel I left next to the clock on the mantelpiece over to the hospital fairly quickly?' And, if no one is at home and the surgeon has to leave a message on the answerphone, the message will be more complicated still.

We can illustrate these contextual layers quite simply like this:



*Diagram 1*

As we move from the immediate space-time context to the distant space-time context, we create the need for more grammar.

*Diagram 2*

There is another kind of distance: the difference between the real and the unreal.

Imagine the surgeon never had a scalpel but wants to express the wish for one: *If only I had a scalpel... If I had a scalpel I would...*

Hypothetical (or unreal) meaning creates a kind of cognitive distance and requires more grammar work. The two kinds of context (space-time and reality) can, of course, be combined: *He wished he'd had a scalpel yesterday...*

We can thus draw a simple rule-of-thumb: the more context, the more shared knowledge, and hence the less need for grammar. The bigger the knowledge 'gap', the more need for grammar. A good example of how this works in practice is in the exchanges between air traffic controllers and pilots, examples of which are given in an article by Mell<sup>3</sup>.

Normally, these exchanges are of a very routine and linguistically simple nature:

Pilot: Paris. Good afternoon. Jetset 762. Level 370. On course Deauville.

Despite the physical distance separating speaker and listener, the knowledge gap is very narrow: the content and form of the message are both extremely predictable. It is only in the event of a problem that the language leaps up several notches in terms of complexity, as this example demonstrates:

Pilot: I've got an emergency. Short on fuel and I'm steering to the beacon on 112.3, and I've been told to tune on to the IFR to get me to an airfield. I have less than 15 minutes fuel supply, sir.

Compare this with the following account, in which an air stewardess who attempted to break up a brawl on a flight, adds both temporal/spatial and hypothetical distance to her account:

I was terrified ... The threat was that they were going to get that black gentleman and, if I was not there, they would have gone over and a fight would have broken out. I was worried if the windows would be kicked out, the aircraft damaged, and if we had had a fight, we had not got the facilities to stop it and there might be injuries to the passengers and other crew members.

London Evening Standard

There's so much grammar in this text that it overflows!

#### 4 'Annie, Sunday then. See you there. Tell Jack. Tom.'

This started life as a written message – possibly an e-mail. On its own, its meaning is difficult to unpack: where, for example, is *there?* Tell Jack what? Clearly, the message is part of a sequence of messages – the *then* in *Sunday then* (meaning *in that case*) suggests some kind of reference to Annie's previous message. Shared knowledge between reader and writer is high. Moreover, no time is lost in formalities (such as *Dear Annie... please be so kind as to tell Jack... etc*), suggesting that writer and reader share the same social space – they are familiar, if not family. In other words, there is no social distance. This suggests another role for grammar. Compare, for example, this e-mail message I received while writing this book:

Dear Professor Thornbury,

My name is Naraporn Chan-Ocha from Bangkok, Thailand. I'm a committee member of IATEFL and have been asked to liaise with the plenary speakers at IATEFL Dublin. At the conference, I'll make sure somebody accompanies you to your plenary session. We will also arrange for some participants to have lunch with you at the Burlington Hotel in the Waterloo on Thursday 30 March. Please let us know if there's anything we can do to help.

Sincerely yours,

Naraporn Chan-Ocha

Notice how grammaticized this text is – a count of the verb phrases alone suggests there is a lot more 'grammar' in this text than in the breakfast conversation on page 3. Look at this sentence for example (the verb phrases are underlined): *Please let us know if there's anything we can do to help.* We can therefore draw another rule-of-thumb: the greater the social gap, the greater the need for grammar. (Note that a 'social gap' is not necessarily one of 'rank', but also one of familiarity.)

The highly elliptic (ie reduced) nature of talk among friends is used for stylistic effect in this advert.

|                         |                              |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| 'I'm off,' she said.    | 'Fraid so,' she said.        |
| 'Don't go,' I said.     | 'Thought so,' I said.        |
| 'I must,' she said.     | 'Guess who?' she said.       |
| 'Where to?' I said.     | 'Don't say,' I said.         |
| 'Not far,' she said.    | 'I must,' she said.          |
| 'Let's talk,' I said.   | 'OK,' I said.                |
| 'No time,' she said.    | 'Your friend,' she said.     |
| 'Someone else?' I said. | 'My Vauxhall Astra!' I said. |

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#### Discovery activity

Here are some alternative ways of expressing a common function: making a request. Put them in order of grammatical complexity. Does this order reflect their degree of politeness?

*Do you think you could open the door?*  
*Open the door.*

Would you mind opening the door?  
 I wonder if you would be so kind as to open the door?  
 Can you open the door?  
 The door!

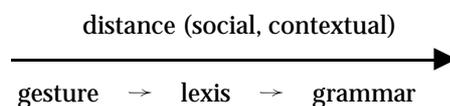
**Commentary ■ ■ ■**

Most teachers I have done this task with agree that there is a fairly close correlation between degree of grammatical complexity and politeness – although perhaps *formality* would be a better expression, especially since this captures the *formal* complexity of the language. As some teachers have pointed out, non-verbal factors, such as gesture, voice-setting and intonation can make a huge difference in terms of whether the message is read as being polite or downright rude. As can the choice of vocabulary (compare: *I wonder if you would be so kind as to open the frigging door?*). Moreover, stylistic choices are very fluid and resist tight categorizations. ■

Nevertheless, it is probably fair to say that in general social distance is signalled by the use of so-called remote forms – such as the past tense (*I was wondering if you could ...*). This is especially the case in English, which does not have a distinction between *you* (formal) and *you* (familiar), such as the French *tu/vous* or the German *du/Sie*. This raises the question: given that in most classrooms – especially in adult EFL and ESL classrooms – there is not a great deal of social gap, and therefore little need to use highly elaborated polite language, what kind of activities might provide practice of ‘social distance grammar’? Presumably the same question faces the teacher of French, when it comes to practising *vous* or the German teacher wishing to practise *Sie* forms. There would seem to be a strong case for role playing, ie setting up situations in the class in which the use of such forms would be required.

**Grammar and distance**

We have looked at four examples of de-grammared language: it’s time to make some general observations. We have established a relation between grammar and social distance and expressed it in the form of a rule-of-thumb: the greater the social gap, the greater the need for grammar. Now, remember rule-of-thumb number 1? The bigger the knowledge gap, the more grammar. (Remember *Scalpel!* versus *Can you bring me that little sharp knife-like thing I use for doing appendectomies and which I left on the mantelpiece...* etc.) It is only a short step to collapse the two rules-of-thumb into a mega-rule – something like ‘The greater the gap, the more the grammar’. The relation can be represented something like this:



Moreover, the movement from lexis to grammar is not simply a case of replacing one system with another one. It is more a case of mapping grammar on to words – a process that has been called *grammaticization*.

## Grammaticization

Take the case of the passive. In the absence of context information, a basic proposition such as

bite man dog

is ambiguous: does it mean the man bit the dog, or the dog bit the man? Of course, common sense suggests the latter: dogs bite men more than the other way round. Word order (or syntax) helps resolve the ambiguity:

dog bite man

Subjects of sentences typically take the first slot in the sentence (in most languages) and the subject is normally the agent (the *do-er*). Objects, on the other hand, come later in the order of things. The object is the goal of the verbal process (the *done-to*). Even without all the grammar in place, there is a natural tendency to interpret this as 'The dog bit (or bites) the man'.

But word order is not always reliable. What about:

The dog was bitten by a man.

Now the basic proposition is fully grammaticized, and the subject is no longer the agent of the action. Grammatical processes have converted the basic proposition 'dog bite man' into a passive construction in which the man, not the dog, is the agent. But why should we want to do this? What is wrong with simply saying 'A man bit the dog?'

Well, consider these two invented stories. Which would be the most appropriate middle of the story, a) or b)?

- 1 The dog and the cat had a disastrous day.
  - a) A man bit the dog.
  - b) The dog was bitten by a man.And the cat fell down a well.
- 2 Drug-crazed hooligans broke into my flat yesterday.
  - a) A man bit the dog.
  - b) The dog was bitten by a man.And someone set fire to the curtains.

Far-fetched as these contexts might appear, it should be clear that the choice of the passive is not arbitrary, but that it is a choice influenced by the speaker's idea of who or what is the topic. In (1) the dog and the cat are the topics of the story, and it is more logical, therefore, to given them the topic position (ie subject position) in the sentence, hence 'The dog was bitten by a man'. In (2), however, the dog is incidental to the story, whose topic is the drug-crazed hooligans, hence 'A man bit the dog'. You can perhaps see the relation between topicalization and passive more clearly in a real example:

A 44-year-old Lincolnshire man was cut free from his car after it had plunged down a steep embankment into trees after a collision with a lorry.

The accident happened at 8.35am yesterday on the A15 northbound carriageway at Barton, one mile from the Humber Bridge.

Rush hour traffic ground to a halt causing severe delays, after a Suzuki Jeep was in collision with a heavy goods vehicle and trailer.

The driver of the car was trapped by his legs for 20 minutes until Humberside Fire Brigade freed him.

→ He was taken to Hull Royal Infirmary by ambulance.

After being treated for concussion and minor head and facial injuries, he was detained in hospital for observation.

The Grimsby Evening Telegraph

Notice that the sentence marked by an arrow puts the man, not the ambulance, in topic position, although it was the ambulance that 'performed' the action. But the ambulance is only incidental to the story which, right from the start, focuses on the man.

Turning a sequence of words into the passive, then, involves grammaticizing these words – a process for which we need a verb 'to grammar', since it is not so much a case of adding a 'thing' as performing a kind of operation on these words – *grammaring*, in short.

The passive is a good example of how words get grammared, but it is not the only one. Grammaring involves tagging words not only for agency (ie passivization), but for such concepts as

- number – eg by the use of plural endings: *dog – dogs*
- time – by means of tense distinctions such as *she phones, she phoned*
- aspect – that is, whether an action is viewed as being somehow extended or repeated (*she phoned* versus *she was phoning*, for example), or whether it is connected to the moment of utterance or detached from it (*she has phoned* versus *she phoned*).

What's more, grammaring can

- make statements into questions
- negate statements
- nuance a statement according to the speaker's commitment to its likelihood (*she will phone* versus *she may phone*)
- mark relations of classification versus relations of possession (*the dog food* versus *the dog's food*), classification versus identification (*a policeman* versus *the policeman*) and mass versus unit (*egg* versus *an egg*)

and a whole host of other shades of meaning. Without grammar, conveying these subtleties would require considerable lexical ingenuity.

### Discovery activity

Take a basic set of propositions: how many ways can you 'grammar' them?

PRINCESS      KISS      FROG

### Commentary ■ ■ ■

Here are some possible realizations of that set of propositions:

*The princess kisses the frog.*

*The princess was kissing the frog.*

*A princess and a frog kissed.*

*Has the princess been kissed by a frog?*

*A princess had been kissing a frog.*

*Princesses will have been kissed by frogs.*  
*Princesses and frogs may have been kissing.*  
*It was a princess who was kissed by the frog.*  
*What the frog did was kiss the princess.*  
*Princess, kiss the frog!*

and so on.

Try again with a slightly more complicated set:

WIZARD    DRAGON    PRINCE    OFFER ■

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### Discovery activity

Here is a text that has been de-grammared. That is, many of the words and endings that encode grammatical meaning have been stripped away, leaving the basic nouns, verbs and adjectives. What kind of meanings have been lost, and what kinds of ambiguity result?

50 person – injure – circus elephant – monkey – attack – gang – extortionist – beat up – master

extortionist – demand 15,000 taka (\$400 U.S.) – owner – start – beat – refuse

elephant – monkey – jump – rescue – injure – serious – one – gang leader – onlooker – hurt – flee – panic

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### Commentary ■ ■ ■

Here is the original text:

At least 50 persons were injured when a circus elephant and several monkeys attacked a gang of extortionists who were beating up their master... The extortionists demanded 15,000 taka (\$400 U.S.) from the owner and started beating him when he refused. The elephants and monkeys jumped to the rescue, injuring seriously one of the gang leaders, while onlookers were hurt when they fled in panic.

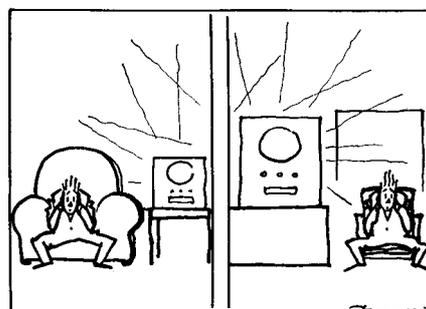
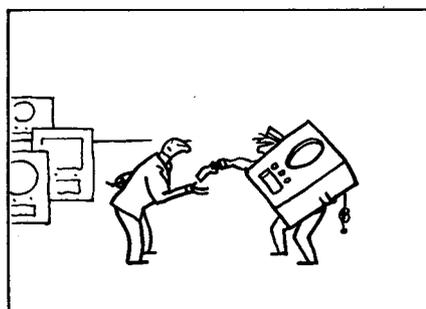
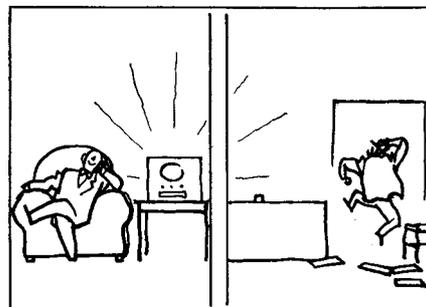
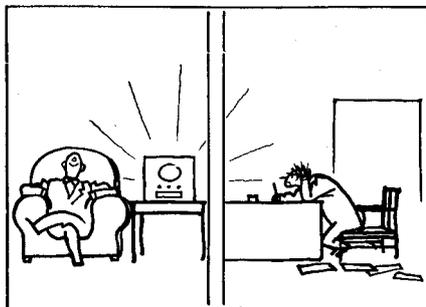
*The Times of India*

You may have found the ‘story’ quite difficult to reconstruct. Despite having a fairly clear idea of the different ‘characters’ involved, the relationships between them are blurred when you take away the grammar. Moreover the sequence of events is obscure, and this is not helped by the fact that the story does not fit into any commonly occurring narrative frame.■

If grammaring is a process of ‘adding grammar’ to propositions that are expressed lexically, what kind of activities might provide useful practice for this skill? One idea is simply to provide learners with the words and ask them to add the grammar – an activity type that used to be quite standard but has largely disappeared from ELT materials. There is an example on the next page<sup>4</sup>.

Here is another activity that involves turning words into grammar, suggested by Adrian Underhill. It uses pictures and the Silent Way approach. Put a picture on the board and invite students to identify vocabulary they know and to write it on the board around the picture. Add, teach, correct new vocabulary as you go, if desired. Then ask students to make any sentence joining any two words in a way that remains true to what can be seen in the picture. Correct and practise as required. Join some to make extended sentences.

### 8. An Odd Revenge



every evening  
 from seven o'clock till  
 midnight  
 the music lover  
 to sit  
 leaning back  
 comfortably  
 the armchair  
 to listen  
 to be fond of  
 the radio set  
 to switch on  
 to increase the volume  
 to make too much noise  
 to think only of oneself  
 selfish  
 the neighbour  
 the flat  
 next door

the thin wall  
 separated by  
 to wish to work  
 not to be able to  
 concentrate  
 the study  
 the writing table  
 foolish  
 to try hard  
 to find  
 impossible  
 to be at one's wit's end  
 unable  
 because of  
 one Tuesday evening  
 he cannot stand it any  
 longer

to take one's revenge  
 to get one's own back  
 to leave  
 in a rage  
 the radio shop  
 to buy  
 the most powerful  
 to drown  
 to blare  
 neither of the two  
 to stop up one's ears  
 the result  
 unexpected  
 not to hear anything  
 at all  
 to fail  
 ridiculous

## Summary

In this chapter I used the following as examples of language that was primarily lexical and only minimally grammaticized:

- 1 NO PARKING
- 2 THREE SHARE LOTTERY FORTUNE
- 3 'Tickets, please.'
- 4 'Annie, Sunday then. See you there. Tell Jack. Tom.'

I put the case that the 'de-caffeinated' nature of these texts is possible only because the writer/speaker and reader/listener share a great deal of common knowledge. This shared knowledge makes the fine-tuning associated with grammatical meaning fairly redundant. Knowledge is shared if it can be retrieved from the immediate context (both in space and in time), or if it can be retrieved by reference to common experience. (*Tickets, please* is what you'd expect a ticket collector to say.) On the other hand, grammar is enlisted wherever there is a distance to overcome – either in context, knowledge, or in social relations. This suggests a basic rule: the greater the distance, the more the need for grammar.

In the next chapter we will see how this *grammar = distance* formula relates to the way grammar is acquired, in both first and second language acquisition. This view of grammar as a process – something we *do* linguistically, when faced by distance – is known as grammaticizing, a rather clumsy word that was invented to make up for the fact that, in English, there is no verb *to grammar*. So, how is it we learn to grammar?

## References

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- 4 Fleming, G. and Fougasse 1961 *Guided Composition for Students of English*. London: University of London Press