

TAKING CARE OF THE SENSE

'Put your ideas into words', says the by-line of the *Longman Essential Activator* - and in so doing, asserts the pivotal role of grammar, alongside vocabulary, in the language learner's encounter with meaning.

The reason, of course, is that 'ideas' are rarely capable of being encapsulated in a single word. Yet the popular impression is to the contrary. Most people think that a word - a single, isolated word - is the unit which conveys a meaning. 'If you don't know the meaning of a word, look it up in a dictionary,' they (we) say. But it is easy to demonstrate that a word, by itself, can convey very little of an intended meaning, as the following experiment shows. Say exactly what I mean, when I use this word:

table

If words 'contain' meaning, you now know what I mean. But of course you do not. You do not even know whether the meaning I have in mind is a **piece of furniture** or **list of numbers, facts, or information** or one of the several other possible senses of this word (such as the **reservation** sense highlighted in the *Longman Essential Activator* - **book a table at a restaurant**: see the Word Bank at **Restaurants**). And even if you opted for a **piece of furniture**, on some such ground as intuitive frequency, you still are not much further forward in accessing what I mean. Is the table I have in mind the subject of some action, or the recipient of some action, or the location of some action, or what?

The task is unreal, then, you might say. No one should be expected to derive a meaning of this kind from a single word. Provide a context. Put the word into a sentence, and then we will be able to say what you meant. After all, that is what a good dictionary does: it gives illustrative sentences, showing how the various senses of a word are distinguished in practice.

Indeed: put the word into a sentence. Put the lexicon inside the grammar. Or, to phrase this more precisely: you cannot expect to be able to put your ideas into words if you do not consider the interaction between these words and the properties of the sentence within

which they are to appear. If you want what you say to 'make sense', then you need to look to the sentence. That is what sentences are for: they are there to 'make sense'. "Look after the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves," said Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. But this tells only half the truth. It needs to be supplemented, as in: 'Look after the sentence, and the senses will take care of themselves'.

To follow up the above example: the potential senses residing in such words as **table** are given their realization through their co-location (linguists might talk about 'colligation' here) within a particular grammatical frame. If you use **table** as object of the verb **book**, then you automatically select the restaurant sense: **Do we need to book a table?** If you use it as subject of the verb **wobble**, you automatically select the furniture sense: **The table wobbled.** That is what I mean by 'the senses will take care of themselves'. **Wobble** 'chooses' the furniture sense. **Book** 'chooses' the restaurant sense. (The dictum, of course, is only a guideline, not a prescription. Many verbs are ambiguous, as in **I'm looking at the table**, which could mean either a piece of furniture or a list of figures.)

ACTIVATING GRAMMAR

That is why it was a good idea to have a section on grammar in the *Longman Essential Activator*. A dictionary concerned with language production, more than any other type of dictionary, is presenting the user with the task of 'making sense'. Put your ideas into words? It sounds so easy. But the words have to be put into sentences for this to happen. And the sentences into monologues and dialogues. It is a long linguistic road that any *Activator* dictionary has to travel. It cannot stop with wordlists. It has to enter the real world of linguistic (which means sociolinguistic) interaction - which, incidentally, is why the *Longman Essential Activator*, like its mother dictionary, the *Longman Language Activator*, devotes so much space to real communicative settings.

But putting a section on grammar into an *Activator* dictionary cannot be done by simply slimming down

some standard account. The language needs a radical stylistic overhaul. Here is a typical piece of traditional grammatical exposition, taken from the beginning of the chapter on 'Active and Passive' in my *Rediscover Grammar* (p. 88):

The action expressed by the clause can be viewed in either of two ways:

The dog saw the cat. The cat was seen by the dog.

This kind of contrast is referred to as *voice*. The first type of construction is known as the **active voice**. The second, which is far less common, is the **passive voice**.

This is a long way from the kind of exposition appropriate to the needs of an *Activator* dictionary. Most noticeably, the style is itself passive - **can be viewed, is referred to, is known as**. Such a style is totally de-activating, in fact. The whole point of the passive is to eliminate the focus on the grammatical subject - to bury it at the end of the sentence, or maybe not even mention it at all, as in the three examples just given. Who 'is viewing the action of the clause in either of two ways'? Who 'is referring to this kind of contrast as voice'? Who 'knows the first type of construction as the active voice'? We are not told. The text is impersonal, objective. We assume it is 'anyone'. It does not matter who.

But in an *Activator* dictionary, the situation is reversed. The whole approach emphasizes the individual, the subjective, the real decision-making involved. The focus is totally on the human subject - the user of the dictionary. Now it does matter who. And so the style must immediately become active and personal, as can be seen in the section on 'Active and Passive' in the *Longman Essential Activator* (p. 925), both in the introductory paragraph and in its subsequent recommendations:

In the sentence *The dog chased the cat*, the verb (*chased*) is active. If you turn it around, and say *The cat was chased by the dog*, the verb (*was chased*) is passive. You form the passive by using the verb *be* and the past participle of the verb...

WHEN TO USE AN ACTIVE VERB

You use an active verb when you want to say that the subject of a sentence does something. For example: *She opened the window.*

This 'pedagogical imperative' style is made more tentative in tone when a set of options are involved, as in the section on modal verbs (p. 922):

If you want to say whether someone is able to carry out an action, use *can* ...

If you want to say that something is possible, use *can* or *may* ...

Sometimes it is advisory, as in the section on statements and questions (p. 912):

Make sure that the main verb is in its basic form. (p.912)

This style comes close to the one we associate with recipes and other instructional manuals. And indeed, the very opening page of the 'How to Use' section at the front of the *Longman Essential Activator* is reminiscent of the way BBC Radio 2 presenter Jimmy Young used to introduce the recipes in his daily cookery spot: 'This - is what - you do'.

Drawing attention to what the user already knows is another critical element of an *Activator* expository style. For example, it is an important feature of the account given of the articles *a* and *the*:

If you use *the* with a noun that you have not mentioned before, you are actually saying to your listener 'you know which one I mean'. This is usually because there is only one example of the noun in the situation, or you have only one such example in your mind. That is why it is 'definite'.

Letting users know what is likely to happen as a consequence of what they say is also important. For example, in talking about rhetorical questions, where no answer is expected (p. 913), the text adds the parenthetic remark:

Of course, your listener may still give you an answer, whether you like it or not!

Finally, an important feature of any *Activator* grammar is to ensure that the examples are ones which are likely to have some relevance to the kinds of things that users might actually want to say. This is the principle used in guiding the selection of the vocabulary presented in the *Longman Essential Activator*, after all; and it should underlie the grammar section too. Sentences of the type **The dog chased the cat** are pretty useless, from a pragmatic point of view. How often would a learner actually need to say such a thing? They are what I have elsewhere called 'postilion sentences' - a name which echoes the archetypal example **The postilion has been struck by lightning** in phrasebooks for foreign learners of English. Real, plausible, relevant examples are crucial - and many of the examples in the grammar section of the *Longman Essential Activator* were supplied by the dictionary team, using the corpus to guarantee naturalness.

In another famous quotation from *Alice*, Humpty Dumpty observes that, when he uses a word, he gives it any meaning he wants. Alice objects: "The question is ... whether you *can* make a word mean so many different things." And Humpty ripostes: "The question is ... which is to be master - that's all." To make words do your bidding; that is the goal of an *Activator* dictionary. And for this we need vocabulary - and grammar.

REFERENCES

Crystal, David. *Rediscover Grammar*, Longman, 1996. Revised edition.

Crystal, David. Postilion sentences. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy* 11, (1), 79-90, 1995.