

In word and deed

There's no need to be a grammarphobe, says **David Crystal**, it's just a matter of catching the meaning

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Reality television has brought a new word to our attention: the "makeover". Whether you are changing your home or your face, the results are invariably dramatic. But nothing matches the makeover that has taken place in the study of grammar in recent years.

Most people who did grammar in school have bad memories of it. They recall a dry, boring, irrelevant, learn-by-heart set of intellectual exercises. It's not like that now. Or, at least, it doesn't have to be. Grammar is one of the most exciting, creative, relevant subjects I know. It is sometimes described as the skeleton of a language, but it is much more than bones. It is the language's heartbeat, its nervous system, its intelligence. For without grammar, there can be no meaningful or effective communication.

Meaning and use – semantics and pragmatics, to use the modern terms – are at the heart of grammar. The chief reason we use language is to express meaning (in speaking and writing) and to understand other people's meaning (in listening and reading). It is also to choose the right kind of language to suit our intentions and to appreciate the effect conveyed by the linguistic choices made by others.

The key point is to appreciate that grammar relates to meaning and to see how it does that. It is sometimes thought that meaning is nothing to do with grammar – that it is "just in the vocabulary". But this is misleading. A word on its own conveys little meaning, as early child utterances show: "Push," says a two-year-old, and we can be nonplussed. Is this a request to be pushed, a proposal to do some pushing, a suggestion that something else be pushed, or what?

"Put the word into a sentence, and then we will know what you mean." That is what the two-year-old has to

learn, and it is the key principle behind all grammar. Only by using words in sentences are we able to make sense of them. That is what sentences are for. They are there, quite literally, to "make" – create – sense. And every tiny bit of a sentence – every adjective, relative clause, past tense, passive voice, indefinite article – helps create that sense. The task facing us all is to see how it's done.

That is what making sense of grammar is all about. It aims to show that every grammatical feature is there for a reason. The watchword is "Why?" Behind every piece of grammatical description there is an explanation. And it is when we start to look for explanations that grammar becomes really interesting, because then we are exploring the ways people think and feel. This of course, is why grammar is complex. Human beings are entities that express complex thoughts, making all kinds of subtle distinctions, and grammar exists to enable us to do just that.

So, where do we find our explanations? In two worlds – one semantic, the other pragmatic. In the semantic world, every time we encounter a grammatical feature, we need to ask: what meaning does it express?

In the pragmatic world, we need to ask: what effect does it convey? Some features convey an informal tone, others a formal tone. Some give an impression of elegant care, others of casual spontaneity. It is always a matter of choice.

Whether in school or society, speech or writing, we have in our heads a huge range of grammatical constructions, and it is up to us to choose which ones will work best to express what we want to say and to achieve the desired effect.

Grammar is the structural foundation of our ability to express ourselves. The

more we are aware of how it works, the more we can monitor the meaning and effectiveness of the way we and others use language. It can help foster precision, detect ambiguity, and exploit the richness of expression available in English. And it can help everyone – not only teachers of English, but teachers of anything, for all teaching is ultimately a matter of getting to grips with meaning.

To get from theory to practice, we need a bridge, and it is a bridge with two spans: description and explanation. The new edition of my *Rediscover Grammar* deals with the descriptive part of the exercise. *Making Sense of Grammar* deals with the explanatory part. We need both spans to complete our appreciation of English grammar, as we routinely cross the bridge in both directions.

If we are listening and reading, we begin with *description* and proceed to *explanation* (or D to E). We notice how someone else is using a grammatical feature, and want to explain its meaning and effect. If we are speaking and writing, we begin with *explanation* and proceed to *description* (E to D). We reflect on the meaning we want to convey the kind of effect we want to achieve, and then choose the features of grammar which will enable us to communicate our intentions effectively.

This two-way approach is reflected in its acronym: DEED. Once both spans of the DEED bridge are in place, then the core information we need to improve our grammatical abilities is available, ready to be put to active use. It's makeover time.

● David Crystal's *Making Sense of Grammar* and *Rediscover Grammar* are published by Longman, £10.99 each. Tel: 0800 579579