# THE PLAYFUL STORY
## OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

by David Crystal

What do you think grammar is all about? It usually brings to mind nouns and verbs, subjects and objects, and the like. Grammar for most people is solely a matter of being able to identify parts of speech (and maybe draw a circle around them) and to parse a sentence. It's a topic that is often felt to be dull, artificial, and purposeless. But it doesn't have to be. It can be made relevant, exciting, and fun.

## Drive your grammar

If I went to a driving school, I would expect the instructor to point out the various parts of a car - the accelerator, brake pedal, and so on - in my initial lessons. I might be tested: 'Which is the brake pedal?', 'Which is the indicator?' I might be grilled on the Highway Code. If I answered all those questions correctly, I would be somewhat taken aback if I was then told: 'Right. You can drive now'.

Everyone knows that driving involves a great deal more, involving other skills, such as developing a sense of safe speed and a sensitivity to other road users. Above all, I need to answer the questions: Why do you want to drive? What do you want to use your car for? Where do you want to go in it? The thrill of driving comes partly from knowing that there are exciting places you can drive to.

I hope the analogy with grammar teaching is obvious. Traditional methods taught only the linguistic equivalents of the brake pedal, and tested them. If we can do that, then we are told we have 'learned grammar'. But of course we have hardly begun. We need to know, to continue the metaphor, what we want to use grammar for, where the interesting grammatical roads are, where we want to drive our grammar to. That is where the excitement lies. And to illustrate how this is done, I will tell you a story.

## Poppy's story

This is about Poppy, aged nearly ten, whom I met after giving a talk at an arts festival. I was sitting in a cafe area, and nearby was a teacher with a group of children who had come to a reading event put on by the festival. They were all clutching their favourite books. The teacher recognized me and invited me over to talk to the children 'about grammar'. I wondered what on earth I should do!

I asked one of them, Poppy, why she wanted to know about grammar. She was silent. So I asked her what she wanted to do most of all in her English work. 'I want to write like Terry Pratchett', she said shyly, showing me her copy of The Carpet People. 'Would you like to do that now?' I asked her, and she nodded vigorously.

We had a look at his book. 'Do you know about adjectives and nouns?' I asked her. She certainly did. She'd been drawing circles around them for ages! And she gave me some examples. A round table. A red car. The other kids chipped in too, and we soon had a sentence with several adjectives before the noun.

I added one of my own. Would this be a good way to start a story? 'The old ruined house stood on the hillside'. They agreed it would. Then I asked Poppy: 'Which would be the better way to start the story: "The old ruined house stood on the hillside" or "The house, old, ruined, stood on the hillside".' 'Ooh', she said, 'the second one'. 'Why?' I asked her. 'It sounds creepier', she said. And indeed, everyone who hears those two

sentences would affirm that putting the adjectives after the noun adds a note of atmosphere or drama that wasn't there before. All the children in the group agreed about that.

Now let's look at Terry's book', I said. And within a few pages we found 'He saw the gleam of 10,000 eyes, green, red, and white'. Poppy loved that sentence. 'Let's rewrite Terry, I suggested: "He saw the gleam of 1000 green, red, and white eyes".' 'It's not so creepy', she said. 'So', I suggested, 'if you want to write like Terry, this is one of the things you can do. Put your adjectives after the noun. Go on, try it'. And she did, straight away creating a splendidly creepy sentence with her eyes shining.

Learning about grammar, for Poppy, was beginning to be fun. Of course, the story doesn't stop there. Poppy has to learn not to overdo it. She mustn't put every adjective sequence in a story after the noun! There needs to be balance. But seeing the potential of what English grammar allows you to do is the first step. And what Poppy learned about adjective position she could apply to every other feature of grammar in English.

### Playing with language

Note that to achieve such an outcome, grammar has to be placed in a wider context. We've begun to talk about the *meaning* of sentences now, and their stylistic *effect*. In a word, we've begun to play with the language. Language *play* happens when we take the normal use of language and do something different with it. Poppy knew the rule about adjectives going before nouns in English - she'd begun to learn it before she was two. Now she was learning that you can play with the rule to make special effects.

Language play isn't just rhymes, riddles, jokes, and puns. It's one of the most basic functions of language. Everybody enjoys playing with language, in some shape or form. For some, it's crossword puzzles; for others, it's Scrabble. Putting on silly voices is language play. So is inventing funny names for things. We see it in advertising, where the slogans might play with spelling: remember 'Beanz Means Heinz'? We see it in the writing of poets, novelists, and other authors. Some play mainly with vocabulary, some with punctuation, some with pronunciation, some with spelling, and some - as we've seen - with grammar.

It starts very early, with the playful manipulations we use in babytalk and games with infants such as 'round and round the garden'. It continues with nursery rhymes and the stories we tell with characters that have funny names. It develops in school with innumerable joke exchanges ('Knock, knock...'). And it never finishes. Whether it's Shakespeare or Joyce, Pratchett or Rowling, Pinter or Stoppard, there are always new horizons of linguistic originality to be explored and enjoyed. We are all Poppys, really.