

It's a Case of Grammar!

Teacher Notes

Introduction: What is grammar?

As you might expect, there are differing views about what exactly grammar is. And there are different 'grammars' influenced by the person studying the language, what they're focusing on, and how they choose to describe it.

That might sound strange as we're often told (by our own teachers or by public figures or the media) that grammar is simply the 'rules of language', and is somehow therefore 'set'. But this is where we find different ways of thinking about grammar:

Older approaches use what's known as **prescriptive grammar**. This sees grammar as a set of rules dealing with the syntax and word structures of a language. It's **prescriptive** because it seeks to outline the language as certain people think it *should* be used - rules that must be obeyed!

The problem with this approach is that it only deals with how some people think language ought to be used, rather than how it actually is used. 'Incorrect' language then becomes demonised, with some people even linking 'bad' grammar to society's ills; sometimes even issues as serious as crime on the streets and a reason for poverty!

Prescriptive grammar ignores the fact that children live in a world where grammar exists in many forms: formal and informal, where they encounter texts (spoken and written) in Standard English as well as many other forms of dialects and Non-Standard English – where the so-called 'rules' are broken all the time.

Modern linguistics (the study of language) takes a slightly different approach, known as **descriptive grammar**. Linguists study all aspects of language to **describe**, rather than prescribe, how it's used.

Descriptive grammar refers to the structure of a language as it is actually used by speakers and writers. We need to remember that, as teachers, we are teaching a fairly complex subject area to primary school aged children and continually finding ways to make the connection between spoken grammar and written grammar in all its forms – including Standard English.

The linguist David Crystal summed up a way in which children can understand grammar:

'Grammar is the study of how we make sentences'

And in practical terms, this largely covers what we focus on with children, particularly in the primary phase. We also look at how grammar affects word structures, such as tenses or affixes. And we consider how grammar secures the cohesion of a whole text. But understanding sentences, playing with them, changing them and manipulating them to achieve particular effects, is the bread and butter of grammar learning.

When studying language, whether it's a professor of linguistics or a child in the classroom, we have common ways of talking and thinking about language. We look at 'chunks' of meaning, from the smallest to the biggest 'chunks':

WORDS

Words convey meaning, but this is often only clear when they work with other words. Groups of words working together, in grammatical terms, are called:

PHRASES

Phrases work together to form the next 'level up' when talking about sentences:

CLAUSES

A clause contains a subject and a verb so it contains a 'complete' idea. We can also then call it a simple sentence, so the next 'chunk' to study is:

SENTENCES

WORDS

elephant hopeful swimming bright me

In order to talk about language, describing its patterns and functions and effects, we need words to explain our meaning. So in when learning grammar we use specific terminology – words to talk about words. A good starting point is **word classes**. These are ways of grouping words according to the way they're used, or the 'job' they do in a sentence.

PHRASES

When more than one word does the same 'job' as a single word, we call it a phrase. Each individual word could still be put into a word class, but now we've 'moved up a level' to describe how they work as a group. We can talk about whole phrases 'acting' in the same way as single words:

Noun phrases are groups of words that together act as a noun

the friendly elephant a hopeful child my silver ring

Verb phrases (or verb chains) have more than one word acting as the verb

was jumping had been swimming will be going

Adjectival phrases consist of more than one word functioning as an adjective

clear, bright blue like the sky exceptionally tasty

Adverbial phrase is a 'broad' term that covers phrases functioning in several ways, for example adding detail about where, when, how or how often something takes place

quick as a flash in the field after midnight every Monday

CLAUSES

the friendly elephant was swimming in the lake

After phrase, the next size of 'chunk' is the clause. Clauses can be formed by a combination of several **elements**, known as:

subject, verb, object, complement and adverbial

While a phrase might just be one of those elements, such as the verb or the adverbial, a clause must have at least a **subject** (*the friendly elephant*) and a **verb** (*was swimming*).

A **main or independent clause** is one that makes sense just on its own. (We could also call it a simple sentence, but that's the next 'chunk' up.)

A **subordinate clause** doesn't make sense on its own because it's directly linked to a main clause. They usually use **subordinating conjunctions** or **relative pronouns** to add extra information.

SENTENCES

the friendly elephant was swimming in the lake
because it was a really hot day

The next 'chunk' or way of thinking about language is sentences. A main clause that can stand on its own can also be called a **simple sentence**. This is because a simple sentence means one that consists of just one clause.

A **compound sentence**, on the other hand, is made up of two or more **main** clauses. This means each clause could be a sentence on its own, but the author or speaker has chosen to join them together:

the friendly elephant swam **and** squirted its trunk **but** was still hot

Whereas a **complex sentence** contains one main clause, and one or more subordinate clauses that can't make sense on their own:

the friendly elephant swam in the lake **until the sun went down**

Often the subordinate clause can come before or after the main clause, and can even be 'dropped into' or embedded within the main clause:

the elephant, who was fed up of being hot and dusty, swam in the lake

Punctuation

Punctuation is the way we show grammatical boundaries and show the reader how to understand the text.

We use capital letters to show the start of a sentence. And we can mark the end of a complete idea (sentence) using a full stop. But we can also end it with a question mark or exclamation mark. This tells the reader the sentence has a particular function (i.e. a question, command or exclamation), and also gives them some indication of the expression or emotion they should read into it.

Within sentences, we use commas to separate chunks of meaning, for clarity and to make it easier to read.

Colons and semi-colons can be used to join sentences, to show a direct link between the information they contain.

Punctuation shows the reader how the information in a text is 'chunked up' to make sense. Those chunks will be words, phrases, clauses and sentences.

Summary

- Grammar is the study of how sentences are constructed to create meaning and effects on a reader.
- Words go together to make up phrases, which 'act' as different word classes
- Clauses are formed of different elements, but must have a verb and a subject
- Clauses are the basis of sentences. A simple sentence has one clause. Compound and complex sentences contain at least two clauses
- Punctuation clarifies grammatical boundaries between words, phrases, clauses and sentences and guides the reader's understanding