

Making sense: The glamorous history of English grammar (a review)

Original work by David Crystal published by Profile Books 2017

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Books by David Crystal are always a pleasure to read. One of the world's leading scholars, writers and broadcasters on language and linguistics, he manages to be informative and entertaining at the same time. He is able to make complicated concepts appear relatively simple by writing about them in a natural and uncomplicated way, and when he writes, you feel that he is talking to you personally. That's the gift of *Making Sense*, grammatical concepts genuinely made simple and yes, at times, maybe even glamorous. It is part of a series which includes *The Story of English in 100 Words*, *Spell It Out: The Singular Story of English Spelling* and *Making a Point: The Pernickety Story of English Punctuation* (you can see Crystal's way of having fun with words in these titles).

I can't think of anyone who wouldn't learn from this, but it is especially useful for language and linguistics students, researchers and teachers.

Engagingly and expertly written, it is excellent for readers learning about grammar and getting up to date on trends in analysis and usage. Grammar is how we link words to express meaning. And we do that by forming sentences. Many people associate meaning with vocabulary, but in fact the sentence provides the context as Crystal demonstrates using the verb 'charge'. A word like 'charge' is polysemous. It has more than one meaning. In the examples below, it can refer to money, energy and military. It is the grammatical formation of the sentence which sets the context to allow us to determine which meaning of 'charge' is being used.

The theatre charged for the tickets (money).

The cavalry charged along the valley (military).

I charged the battery in my phone (energy).

'That's what sentences are for', writes Crystal, 'to

make sense of words. And that is what every grammatical construction is for – from the largest sentence patterns to the smallest word inflections: they are there to help us, literally, to make-construct-create-sense.’ As he goes on to say, using the fictional creation of novelist Edgar Rice Burroughs, Tarzan, *‘If all we ever wanted to say was at the level of ‘Me’, ‘Jane’, ‘you’, Tarzan’ grammar would be easy’.*

Making Sense follows three broad themes. The first is the child’s acquisition of grammar from its first words to putting words together to introducing word order. The second is the explanation of grammatical terms; their origin, history and usage and how they have changed throughout history. The third is an explanation of the history of grammar and grammarians from the Greeks to Chomsky and beyond. These are not presented as solid chunks of information at one go but introduced gradually as appropriate over twenty-eight short chapters.

The twenty-ninth chapter contains an epilogue, an appendix for teaching and testing and references for further reading.

Crystal’s earliest academic interests and research were in child language acquisition and development, and he uses a young child’s first steps in speaking, moving from sounds, to single words, then to words with verbs and adjectives

and then to the recognition and gradual mastery of word order and then to tense recognition. By the time he or she gets to five and starts going to ‘big school’ (primary school), it’s ‘*grammar game over*’ as Crystal puts it.

However, he goes on to say, that isn’t quite the case as by the time they get to school, children may still have problems with word formation (for example, irregular verbs) and have not yet encountered more complicated constructions to do with things like passives and conditionals and adverbial phrases. Also, as Crystal points out, there is a big difference between speaking and reading and writing. Up till the time they reach primary school (age 5 in the UK), they have mainly spoken, listened or been read to. They haven’t on the whole had to read lengths of text on their own or write sentences. So, a whole new world of grammatical learning is now in front of them.

The second feature running through the book is the explanation of grammatical terms. These are highlighted under the title KEYWORD. Each keyword or key phrase has a definition, a history and a sense of how it is used in the teaching of language. What is obvious is that different grammatical terms have made their appearance at different times in history and that there have been significant changes in attitudes to grammar, its analysis and teaching, especially in the 20th century. Up until that time a prescriptive approach

to grammar prevailed with the Latin tradition as the leading approach.

Grammar started with the Greeks and was developed by the Romans, and the Latin prescriptive approach dominated the writing about and teaching of grammar until the twentieth century when it was replaced by what is known as the descriptive approach, pioneered among others by the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen. The prescriptive approach, learning and applying strict rules of language, made the difference between correct and incorrect language, although usage may have been very different.

Crystal cites the position of the preposition NEVER to be placed at the end of the sentence and apparently introduced into English by the poet John Dryden in the 18th century. Instead of saying *'the man I was talking to'* he insisted we should say *'the man to whom I was talking'*, and the rule stuck no matter how clumsy it often sounded. Popular usage remained different, however, leading to the immortal remark by Sir Winston Churchill that it was *'The sort of English up with which I will not put!'*

By the 1970s, the study of grammatical form was increasingly replaced by the study of usage and expression, and formal grammar was less and less taught in schools, at the cost of correct language

communication, as some complained. However, other factors have also affected the use of languages, particularly English, especially American English, and global Englishes as well as the emerging language of the Internet, as Crystal points out, devoting a chapter to each. One example of grammar change is the move from stative verbs, e.g. *'I love it'* to a more immediate sense using the continuous form, e.g. the McDonald's slogan, *'I'm loving it'*.

The third broad theme of *Making Sense* is the codifiers, the scholars who made grammar happen, coined the terms and parsed the sentences. This is done largely through 'Interludes' – stories, often illustrated, which offer one or two page vignettes of changing attitudes to grammar over the ages and brief lives of key grammarians, such as John Wallis (1616-1703), the first English grammarian, who saw the need for English to be studied independently of the Latin grammatical tradition. Although he wrote his *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae (Grammar of the English Language)* in Latin, he was clear that, *'English in common with nearly all modern languages differs enormously in syntax from Greek and Latin (the main reason that in English we do not distinguish different cases). Few people recognise this when describing our language and other modern languages and consequently, the task is usually made more complicated than it need be'*. As Crystal observes, *'This could have been written by*

any twentieth-century linguist, but for over 300 years his linguistic insight was ignored'.

Lighter-hearted interludes deal with grammatical confusions, one of which in English is known as the dangling participle, a phrase added to the beginning or end of a sentence, unintentionally leaving the reader amused and probably confused as well.

'Erected to the Memory of George Baker Drowned in the Thames by his Fellow Directors.'

Crystal concludes *Making Sense* with what he describes as *'a kind of manifesto for the linguistic approach to grammar'*. In summary, his ten key principles are:

1. Grammatical change is normal and unstoppable.
2. Grammatical variation is normal and universal.
3. A highly diversified society needs a standard grammar to facilitate intelligent supra-national communication.
4. A highly diversified society needs non-standard

grammar to enable expression of regional or cultural identity.

5. Neither standard nor non-standard grammar is homogeneous. Both change according to the medium of communication.

6. There is an intimate relationship between standard and non-standard grammar.

7. Everyone who receives a school education needs to learn to read and write standard grammar.

8. Everyone who receives a school education needs to learn about varieties of non-standard grammar.

9. As English becomes an increasingly global language, we need to reappraise the concept of a single standard grammar and recognise 'regional standards'.

10. Grammar must never be studied apart from other properties of language, such as semantics and pragmatics, that contribute to meaningful communication. *'In a word'*, concludes Crystal, *'they give grammar its glamour.'*