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IN TOUCH WITH TEACHERS

THE ENGLISH VERB

An exploration of Structure and Meaning

Michael Lewis

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About this book

This book is about *exploring* the English verb, not explaining it. The difference is important. "Explaining" assumes one person knows, and the other does not. It suggests a one-way process, which starts from a place decided by the person who knows. "Exploring" suggests the possibility of going wrong, the need to re-trace our steps, a process of guessing, checking and discovering together. Some of our guesses are right, and others wrong. The emphasis is on a dynamic and co-operative process. That is, I hope, the emphasis of this book.

So often "explaining grammar" is a waste of time, which confuses rather than helps. I hope teachers will be influenced by this book to change the emphasis of work that they do with their students from explaining to exploring.

Printing conventions

In this book *have* is used to mean the word *have; (have)* is used to mean any form of that verb - i.e. *has, have, had, having.*

Occasionally, examples are discussed which are not natural or correct English. In all cases these are preceded by a *. Any example not preceded by * is well-formed, natural English.

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A number of other grammars of English are referred to in the text, but mention of them is not intended to act as a recommendation. By far the most useful book for classroom use and for teachers seems to me to be Michael Swan's *Practical English Usage, Oxford University Press,* which discusses an enormous number of problems not referred to in this book. It is an unfailingly helpful reference.

I am grateful to Linda Griffiths for typing much of the manuscript accurately and quickly.

I am also grateful to Punch Publications for allowing me to use a number of cartoons. The captions to these say a great deal about the real nature of grammar very economically.

Michael Lewis

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Some questions discussed in this book

Do all uses of the present simple — those referring to Now *(I swear it wasn't me)* and always *(Wood floats on water)* — have something important in common? ***Yes***

Are *I lived there for 30 years* and *I was living there for 30 years* both possible, correct English? ***Yes***

Is there a future tense in English? ***No***

Is it possible to use *will* with reference to past time? ***Yes***

Is there a general, easy-to-understand difference between *shall* and *will* in modern English? ***Yes***

Is it possible to use the past simple with reference to the present? ***Yes***

Is the present perfect used for actions in the "recent" past? ***No***

Is the auxiliary verb (do) an irregularity in English? ***No***

Is *would* the conditional in English? ***No***

Does every passive sentence have a natural active equivalent? ***No***

Is the central structure and meaning of the English verb relatively simple and very regular? ***Yes***

All of these and many other similar questions are asked and answered in this book. So, too, are many questions about teaching the English verb.

Is grammar an important part of language teaching? ***Yes***

Do simplified grammar rules help? ***No***

Is grammar difficult? ***No***

Is grammar hard work or fun? ***Both!***

Should teachers explain more or less? ***Less***

1. Introduction

This is not a conventional grammar book. It is intended mostly for teachers who are teaching English as a foreign language, and also for students who have been confused by teachers, textbooks or other grammar books.

It is not a comprehensive grammar: the second part of the book discusses the basic structure of English verbs. It examines, chapter by chapter, the important basic "building bricks" of the English verb. Again, it does not cover all possible verb forms. It does, however, discuss the important underlying ideas of English verbs in detail.

The first part of the book is quite different, and different from most other grammar books. It is about attitudes to grammar — what grammar is, what it can and cannot explain, and how it can be of use in language teaching. For many readers not only will the format of the book be unusual, but also many of the ideas which are discussed. The reader is asked to approach the book with an open mind. Some of the ideas may seem new, strange, and unhelpful. It is important that the reader understands a complete idea before rejecting it as wrong, useless for the classroom, or before raising questions about examples which seem superficially not to fit. The basic structure of the English verb is not particularly complicated. Nor is it full of exceptions. If approached in the right way, there is only a small number of ideas which need to be understood. These are, however, ideas which many readers will not have met before. They are "difficult" only in the sense that they may be unfamiliar to the reader.

What is "a grammar of English"?

The term "a grammar" is used in several different ways. The differences are important. To a linguist (in this book this word is used to mean 'a student of language, a language scientist' not 'a person who speaks several languages') it means a *description* of a language.

The linguist who wishes to produce "a grammar of English", would gather together an enormous number of examples of English, and then arrange these in some way to show how the language is used. Nowadays, linguists would gather examples of both spoken and written English. Some readers will be familiar with the recent (1985) publication *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. This is a descriptive grammar. It draws on an enormous range of examples, sorts and classifies them, and then describes them.

In making such a grammar, linguists are never concerned to reject examples of the language as it is really used. They are not trying to tell us how the language should be used, but to describe how it *is* used. Such a grammar is descriptive, not prescriptive. A grammar of this kind will be

"good", if the examples are chosen from a very wide range of sources, and if they are clearly and correctly sorted and described. This work is a long way from the language classroom. The descriptive grammarian would include examples such as *It weren't him what did it.* If the example exists, it is included, and described. An example such as that just given, would probably be described as non-standard, uneducated, but the simple distinction between right and wrong is not helpful for the descriptive grammarian.

Any good descriptive grammar will be very large. Often the descriptions will be complicated and technical. They will not be of much use to the average student of English as a foreign language. They are, however, often the basis for the second kind of grammar — a pedagogic, or teaching, grammar. This is the kind of book with which foreign language students are very familiar. For most students 'a grammar' means a reference book which can be used when they are in doubt about English usage. The book will tell them whether a particular form is possible or not. It will also frequently include explanations of why forms are, or are not, possible. There are many differences between the two kinds of grammar — a pedagogic grammar will usually be much smaller, and easier to use. Many *possible* English sentences will be excluded. The book will, to some extent, artificially simplify the language. There are, however, two more important differences. Firstly, the purpose of the descriptions in the linguist's grammar will, as far as possible, be accuracy. A description can be long, technical, and complicated. Such grammars can be, and usually are, as difficult to use as a technical book on any other subject. The purpose of the descriptions, explanations and "rules" in a pedagogic grammar, is very different. Here, a compromise is necessary between accuracy and accessibility. There is no point in giving descriptions to students which are perfectly accurate, but which they cannot understand. On the other hand, if accessibility is given too great importance, students will understand, but what they understand will not be true!

Unfortunately, teachers sometimes forget the important distinction made above. They treat the descriptions, explanations, and "rules" of a pedagogic grammar as if they were general, and completely accurate, descriptions of the language. This sometimes means they think certain sentences are not possible, when in fact they are quite natural English. More seriously, it means that they create in the students' minds a catalogue of different uses of a particular form, where each example of one use is an "exception" to the others.

A teachers' grammar of the English verb

This book is not a linguists' grammar, nor is it a students' grammar. It is like a linguists' grammar in that the emphasis is initially on collecting and classifying a wide range of natural examples. Whether the classification is useful for a student is, initially, a very secondary consideration. It is very important for the reader to understand the first question this book attempts to answer is how English verb forms work. No attention at all is paid at first to how the language should be taught to students. In the early discussion of examples the reader must not think *My students will never understand this* — that is not the first intention of the book. The first intention is to ensure that teachers understand how the main building blocks of the English verb work. Certain parts of the book (Chapter 2 and Chapter 21) consider questions of teaching methodology, and the classroom implications of the

rest of the book. One of the main sources of confusion, however, for most students, is the fact that teachers have been so keen to worry about how to explain to their students, that they have not always given enough attention to understanding, at a very deep level, the really fundamental problems of English.

This book is intended to be a *teachers'* grammar of the English verb. It tries to do three things:

to ensure teachers understand the basic structure of the English verb
to change teachers' attitudes to (English) grammar
to change teachers' attitudes to grammar teaching.

Three kinds of "grammar"

A glance at any pedagogic grammar will show that it contains information of different kinds. Unfortunately, this is often not obvious to the student, or even the teacher. We may list three different kinds of information as follows:

1. Facts

The simplest kind of information contained in the grammar is straightforward factual information. A typical example from Thomson and Martinet, *A Practical English Grammar* is the following:

> Twelve nouns ending in**-f** or **-fe,** drop the **-f** or **-fe** and add **-ves.**
> These nouns are *wife, life, knife, wolf, self, calf, shelf, leaf, loaf, thief, sheaf, half.*

There are three points to note — this is a matter of *fact* ; it is *non-generative* ; and it attempts to be *comprehensive.*

By *fact,* we mean that the information given is generally accepted by all native speakers of English (some people may want to qualify that into *almost all native speakers...,* or qualify it with, for example, *speakers of British English.)* Anyone who wishes to avoid a red mark on an essay needs to write *wives,* not **wifes.* (It is a convention throughout this book that if an expression is preceded by * it is not a well-formed English expression.)

The information is *non-generative* in the sense that if you know *wife/wives,* it does not help you in any way to know if other words will follow the same pattern or not: *safe/safes, self/selves.* However important, or unimportant, a particular piece of information may be in a particular context, each bit needs to be learnt separately. From the point of view of the historical development of English, some factual information of this kind can be explained. From the point of view of the contemporary language student, however, this kind of information is to be learnt, but there is nothing to understand.

Many grammar books dealing with points of this kind aim at being *comprehensive.* In the example above the authors positively state *Twelve nouns.....* It is immediately obvious that some of the words are considerably more important to the foreign language learner than others; most students will need *-selves,* but few will need *wolves* or *sheaves.* The writer of such a grammar faces a difficulty — why should some examples be included, and others excluded? Usually, therefore, most writers try to be comprehensive. The difficulty then is that students learn a small amount of useful information hidden in a pile of comparatively useless material.

One of the best examples of this problem, which most teachers will recognise, is the lists of irregular verbs which occur in grammar books or textbooks. Only about a hundred are frequent in modern English. Altogether there are rather less than two hundred such verbs. It is easy to believe that many students are sure that there are thousands!

Teachers need to recognise that this factual information, frequently contained in a grammar book, is in one sense mis-placed there. Of course anyone who wishes to speak English accurately needs to know this information. But it is more similar to vocabulary than to the kind of "grammar" discussed below. Knowing the forms *take/took/taken* does not help the student learn other verbs. In many ways the irregular forms belong more in the dictionary, or lexicon, than in the grammar book. Grammar, from a teaching point of view, tries to help students by showing patterns, similarities and contrasts, which reduce the amount of material to be memorised. This factual kind of grammar, while important in its own way, is different in that it does not reduce the memory-load.

A similar problem arises with fixed expressions in the language, such as *How do you do.* A complete knowledge of English apart from this expression would not allow the prediction of this sentence as a greeting used by both speakers when meeting for the first time in fairly formal circumstances. Such expressions, which need to be learnt, need a home. But shall we put them in the dictionary, or in the grammar book? We often think of a dictionary as defining *words.* We need to extend this idea slightly to the idea of a lexicon, which defines words, or fixed groups of words, such as *How do you do.* Quite a number of items traditionally found in pedagogic grammars as exceptions, are fixed, non-generative expressions, whose natural home is the lexicon rather than the grammar book. *How do you do* belongs in the lexicon, but *What do you do?* which helps us to generate sentences like *What do you make?* and *How did you do it?* belong in the grammar.

2. Patterns

The second kind of grammar at which we look is generative. It helps reduce the memory load for the student. There is a pattern which can be perceived and understood:

> *You can speak French, can't you.*
> *You have been there before, haven't you.*
> *He has taken his test, hasn't he.*
> *You shouldn't have done that, should you.*
> *She was expecting Peter at the time, wasn't she.*

Students may either find the pattern for themselves by considering a sufficiently large range of examples, or they may be given the pattern in a formulation such as:

> Positive sentence — negative tag; negative sentence — positive tag.
> Use the same auxiliary in the tag.
> Use the appropriate pronoun.

(In fact, the rule stated here is unclear, incomplete, and inadequate in a number of ways. A better description of tags is given in Chapter 19). The point here is only that it is possible for students to discover, or be presented with, a pattern which is generative.

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Anyone who learns a language beyond the stage of memorising a few words and phrases, will need either an implicit or explicit perception of patterns. There have been many methodological arguments about how such patterns are best taught. For our purposes at the moment, however, the important point is that this kind of grammar is, in one sense, more important than the factual information discussed above. With patterns, there is something to understand, as well as something to learn. This kind of grammar can also be *mis*understood.

Unfortunately, language does not divide neatly into generative and non-generative items. The possibility exists of lexical items which appear to conflict with a generative pattern, and of what we may call 'linguistic fossils'. The Lord's Prayer provides an example of the latter: *Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...*

There does not seem much point in including *art* and *thy* in modern paradigms. Any student who comes across the Lord's Prayer, however, will come across both of these otherwise obsolete forms, and, more surprisingly still, the use of the pronoun *which* to relate to a person, *Father.*

The normal rule, from a generative point of view, is "*who* with persons, *which* with other nouns." This is complete and comprehensive for generative purposes. The "exception" is a linguistic fossil. Sometimes, such items worry teachers. The simplest solution is to regard such items as belonging to the lexicon rather than the grammar book.

3. Primary semantic distinctions

Languages make certain basic distinctions, which recur again and again with different words, structures, etc. The distinctions are often dichotomies — they divide an area of meaning into *two* parts. We have just met, for example, the difference between personal and impersonal. This distinction is important in English, in examples such as *who/which, (s)he/it, somebody/something* etc, but notice, for example, in English it is not important in the plural, where *they* is either personal or impersonal.

These great divisions are essentially semantic; they are concerned with *meaning.* Contrary to what we sometimes think, these divisions are not the same from language to language, nor are they always as easy to define in a few words as the personal/impersonal distinction. All the same, because they are deeply associated with meaning, students will have to 'learn' them. In this case, however, 'learn' will not mean 'memorise'; the whole emphasis will now be on *understanding,* either implicitly or explicitly.

Some people believe that understanding these areas is a question of exposure to the language, and of the student slowly building up an implicit understanding of the distinctions. Other people, and perhaps most language teachers, believe that understanding can be helped by explicit statements about the distinctions. Everyone is agreed, however, that such problems as the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns, progressive and non-progressive verb forms, the meaning and use of perfect verb forms, are not things which students can be 'told' in the way they were given information about *wife/wives.*

All contemporary language teaching methodology is cyclical rather than linear. Everyone understands that there is no sense in saying *They've done the present perfect,* if what the teacher means is that students have met the *form* of the present perfect and are familiar with *one* of its uses. Students will have to meet a wide range of examples, contrast the structure with

various other structures, listen to various explanations, etc. before they in any way understand the use of the present perfect, and its difference from, for example, the present simple, or the past simple.

Almost all of the general difficulties of this kind, which the foreign student will face, are to do with the basic structure of the verb. This book is concerned only with these basic distinctions. It is concerned to build up a picture of the meaning which can be associated with each feature of the basic structure of the English verb.

Matters of fact and of pattern are not ignored because they are unimportant. Anyone who wants a comprehensive knowldege of English will need to know this information too. But many language teachers have never themselves had the opportunity to consider the deep, underlying distinctions which are central to English. These distinctions, of which, perhaps surprisingly, there are not very many, are the subject of the second part of this book.

Teachers' attitudes to grammar

This book has a second important objective, which may be divided into two parts. Firstly, to lead teachers away from some of the mistaken and unhelpful attitudes which they sometimes have towards grammar. Secondly, to establish the corresponding helpful attitudes.

Many children beginning a foreign language at school find it exciting and fun. Sadly, after studying the language for a while, many find it one of the less attractive subjects of the school timetable. There is some research evidence that if the children themselves are asked which bit of the language lesson they like least, they usually reply "Grammar!". But grammar is supposed to help students!

We have already seen that some grammar is no more than factual information — in no way intimidating or difficult for students. Patterns can be fun to look for, stimulating and obviously useful. Again, there is nothing that need be intimidating or unpopular about patterns. The general divisions of the language are difficult, and some students will be confused, indeed perhaps *most* students will be confused, and will take time to build up a picture of these important points. But providing a relaxed approach is taken by the teacher, so students do not feel that they should understand immediately, there is nothing frightening about these points. As long as the teacher remembers, and makes clear to the class, that grammar *describes* the language, there is no reason for it to be unpopular at all. Why, then, is it so unpopular? The answer must be because it is badly taught so frequently. How can teachers approach it more constructively?

Firstly, teachers can separate the different kinds of grammar we have already discussed. They can make this separation in their own minds, and try to communicate it to their students by the way they present and discuss different parts of the language.

This means asking students to learn things which can simply be learnt. This sort of grammar does not need to be explained or discussed.

Most young people enjoy looking for patterns, providing they are given the possibility of discovering for themselves. Some discovery methods are discussed in Chapter 21.

Most importantly, however, teachers must have in their minds clearly that certain problems are more general, and recur more frequently, than others. These problems are both more important and more difficult. It will

take a long time for students to have a clear understanding of them and, it is even possible for students to learn to speak and use English well, without being able to give an *explicit* description of the problem. Few native speakers could make any attempt at all at explaining the difference between the past simple and the present perfect. Teachers must, therefore, avoid expecting students to "understand" these large problems too quickly. Too often, teachers over-simplify these problems which creates additional problems later.

Most student grammars, and textbook syllabuses, are based on a catalogue approach to grammar. Different points are covered one by one in separate paragraphs or units. Each paragraph is independent of the others. There are two difficulties which result from this. Firstly, students are given the impression that they are attempting an impossible task; as soon as they have finished one paragraph, or one use of a verb form, they are presented with another, and another, and another. . . . Rarely, if ever, do they see the parts they are learning as coming together to form a coherent whole. Not surprisingly, such a catalogue approach, giving an impression of impossibility, de-motivates students. The second problem is that each paragraph is, in a way, an exception to the previous paragraph. Students may, for example, learn that the present continuous is used for an action going on at the moment of speaking (this is a dangerous half-truth, see Chapter 12), and then they learn that the present continuous can also be used for the future. Nobody takes time to explain that there is a reason for this, and that indeed the two uses are fundamentally the same (see Chapters 12 and 17). This "catalogue and exceptions" approach must depress students. Instead of encouraging a feeling of progress as they learn more language, it gives them a feeling that the task is becoming more and more impossible.

Too often this attitude is reinforced by teachers who make remarks such as *Oh, English is a very illogical language, English is full of irregularities.* The student is left with the impression that he is trying to understand a jigsaw puzzle where some of the pieces change shape, some pieces are missing, some pieces are broken, and, when you have got the whole picture, it is difficult to see what it is!

This book argues that teachers must make a clear distinction, first of all in their own minds, between language where the emphasis is on the *learning,* and language where the emphasis is on *understanding* deep, and perhaps new, semantic ideas. They should then set out to encourage in their students the idea that the big, underlying, problems of English are understandable, discoverable, *not* impossible to understand, and, above all, not intimidating, but fun to explore. Instead of emphasising a catalogue of different uses, from time to time teachers will need to look for *similarity* in things which are apparently different, such as the uses of the present continuous mentioned above.

This book will have succeeded if it gives teachers themselves a clearer insight into the most important building bricks which make up the basic structure of the English verb, and, equally importantly, if it encourages them to believe that they must change their approach to grammar in the classroom. Instead of being the least popular, rather frightening part of the language lesson, grammar can become intellectually stimulating, educationally valuable, and enjoyable.

Before establishing a new basis for the approach to grammar, however, it is necessary to look at some of the myths and misunderstandings which cause confusion at the moment.

2. Grammar in the classroom

It is important to remember that language teaching is a means to an end. The main objective is to change the students' behaviour, not the teachers'; language learning is more important than language teaching.

There have always been arguments about the best way to teach languages. At one time explanation followed by example and practice was considered the "obvious" way to do things; at another time students were presented with examples and simply expected to follow the model, without explanation. Much modern thinking suggests that breaking the language down into small, separate pieces may not be the best way. Whatever method is adopted, however, students inevitably ask their teacher *Is . . . also possible?, Why can/can't I say. . . ?* Teachers cannot avoid the fact that exploring and understanding patterns and important semantic distinctions is part of language learning. Often, however, the way they answer these questions is counter-productive. It is easy to confuse, instead of helping the student. Efficient language learning must reflect the nature of language, and the nature of learning.

Language is many things — a habit, a skill, a system, a means of communication, but above all it is a dynamic integrated whole. If teaching chops the language up into small pieces, what is being taught is no longer really language.

Learning is a natural process, and not a process which can be shortcut or hurried very much. In many ways, students show that they understand these two ideas. The early stages of learning, where they are encouraged to listen, where much of the work is oral, and where the approach to language and to learning are both natural, are usually popular. Students are usually much less positive towards classroom activities which dissect the language, produce artificial "rules", or hurry the learning process too much.

In many ways language teachers are the worst possible people to teach languages. They are unusual, because they succeeded in learning languages themselves! It is important to remember that for every student who has learnt a language well enough to become a teacher of that language, hundreds of students have "failed". Not only have they failed to learn the language, but often the experience has been negative and anti-educational. Language teachers sometimes say *This is all right — I understood/enjoyed it.* This does not mean that many more students failed to understand it. Too much explanation given too quickly can confuse instead of helping. The result may even be worse than that — it may make students feel they can *never* understand.

An example from a quite different field may help the reader to understand. How do you react to this?:

$\frac{3}{4} \div \frac{1}{8}$

For many people their immediate reaction is *I can't do maths,* or *I hated fractions; I never understood them.* In many British schools, students were taught the "rule".

To divide fractions, invert and multiply.

If we apply that to the example above we get:

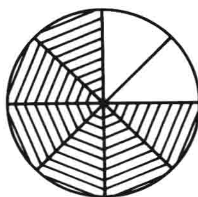
$$\frac{3}{4} \times 8 = 6$$

which is the correct answer. The strange, and unfortunate thing is that many students could apply this rule to a set of examples, get the right answers, but still not understand fractions. What was the point of the rule? Has it helped students to do the exercise? — probably. Does it help them to understand the underlying problem? — certainly not. If the teacher saved time at all, it was only at the expense of the students' understanding. It made students feel maths was "impossible", not something for them, and even something unreal.

Look now at the following problem:

A cake is cut into eight equal pieces. Somebody has eaten a quarter of the cake. How many pieces are left?

Most students find this question so easy they can do it in their heads. A few find a diagram helps:



The interesting thing is that the problem is exactly the same as the one which intimidates so many people when it is put in symbols, and done using a strange "rule".

The same problem may be put in three ways:

The cake problem described above.

In words: *How many* $\frac{1}{8}$ *ths are there in* $\frac{3}{4}$?

In symbols: $\frac{3}{4} \div \frac{1}{8}$

A few people, who are "good at maths" find the last of these the easiest. For them, the answer is "obvious", and they cannot see why anybody else finds it difficult. For many people the same question in words is much easier, but easiest of all is the same problem expressed practically — the cake problem. There is a reason for this — the cake problem is a natural problem — one which we can understand on the basis of our experience. The same problem expressed in symbols seems completely artificial. What does the problem mean? Why does anybody want to know the answer to it? Turning it into symbols makes it more difficult but, for most people, the biggest problem of all is to understand the "rule". By accident, the teacher has changed the activity, and made it more difficult. Instead of trying to understand and answer the problem, students are trying to understand the rule which is supposed to help!

Many language practices are equally artificial:

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