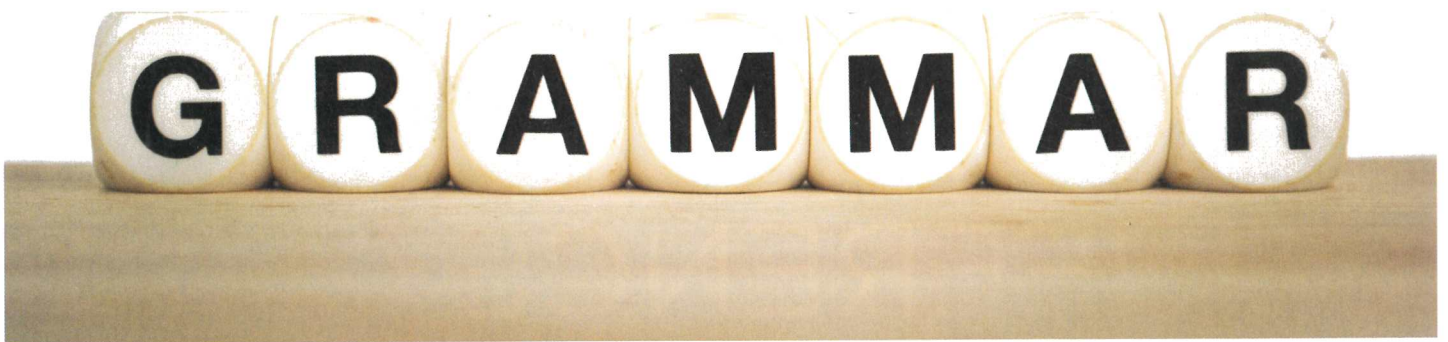


# Proper, No-Nonsense English Grammar



Author and journalist **Harry Ritchie**, appealing to NATE members for help with his new book on English grammar, argues against ‘traditional’ grammar, and for more awareness of our own innate grammatical knowledge.

You know what we need to teach our kids? Grammar. Proper, no-nonsense English grammar.

No, no, come back. Please. You’ve got me wrong. I really am not a fan of Michael Gove. Quite the opposite.

I mean, I’m sure Michael Gove and many others – gentlemen, usually, of a certain age and a certain redness of facial hue – would agree wholeheartedly with that first paragraph; but they and I are referring to two entirely different subjects. As it does for most people, for those traditional types, ‘grammar’ refers to the ‘correct’ use of our language, the ‘proper’ meanings of often ‘misused’ words, the right spelling, punctuation and even pronunciation.

#### **Made-up grammar**

What I mean by grammar is quite different – I’m talking about grammar in its linguistic sense. This consists of two different kinds of operation – syntax, the way words work together to produce coherent sentences, and morphology, the way words can change form to add or alter meaning, like adding an ‘s’ to a noun to make a plural in English.

There is a tiny, teensy amount of what linguists call grammar in the strictures of traditional ‘grammar’ teaching, which actually is mostly about literary etiquette. When traditionalists have happened on actual grammar, they have concocted a handful of counter-intuitive rules (‘It is I’, ‘taller than he’, never use a preposition to end a sentence with...). However, all their few grammatical regulations are actually just made up – like the no-final-preposition rule, invented by John Dryden, or the ban on split infinitives, created by a clergyman called Henry Alford in 1864.

We need to completely jettison all the traditionalists’ guff – not just all of their invented strictures but all their crazily elitist attitudes about language – and replace that with the teaching of actual English grammar – the real, linguistically enlightened stuff which is taught to hapless foreigners who try to learn English as a foreign language but which is never explained to us clueless native speakers.

### We are all experts

I was brought up on the traditional codswallop so I found out about the existence of English's real grammar by accident, when I was being trained to teach English as a foreign language. The training was brief and rubbish, the EFL school one of those rip-off joints, but it was enough to reveal the real conventions and structures governing our language. There are well over three thousand of these regulations, and some of them can be quite fiendishly difficult, but even so, learning about them was a unique experience, because I already knew all of them intimately; it was like reading up on string theory with a sense of happy recognition ('ah, the Calabi-Yau shapes, of course...').

### “We know all our language's rules without knowing we know them.”

Take one of the grammatical regulations in English that EFL students find most bewilderingly complicated – our sequencing of different kinds of adjective. As almost all of us English speakers don't know, we put our opinion adjectives first, then size, then age, shape, colour, origin, material and finally purpose. That's why we wouldn't talk about 'an old little lady' or a 'French excellent restaurant' or a 'red big bus'. But we would describe something as, say, a 'beautiful old round blue Chinese porcelain mixing bowl': try putting those adjectives in a different order and you'll come unstuck.

Even the most complex rules like these that I was 'learning' were ones I already used with Nobel-winning expertise – as do you and indeed every schoolchild above the age of... (pick a very small number). The three functions of the present perfect, the second conditional, the verbs that take gerunds and/or infinitives, the sequencing of adjectives: no matter how arcane or abstruse they get, no matter how baffling to EFL students, we know all our language's rules without knowing we know them.

Which is one very good explanation for why they have never been taught to us natives. And indeed why teaching this already mastered language to our children may seem pointless and just daft.

But – and it's a huge, ginormous but – I reckon there are many very important reasons to teach real English grammar, and as a core part of the curriculum. For a start, surely there's an arguable virtue in explaining how our own language actually works. But leave that aside for a moment: much more than that, making any child, any native speaker, consciously aware of their Nobel-winning expertise at their use of even the basics – English's two present tenses, so worrying to folk like the French who have only one – is a genuinely inspiring, genuinely revelatory experience, one which replaces the vague sense of inadequacy or shame about our 'incorrect' 'grammar' with the revelation of our astounding linguistic cleverness.

Their language's grammar being the one subject all children have mastered, this would be teaching to experts, so it can move to the super-advanced level and easily beyond, to include proper linguistic points. For example, a quick outline of English's irregular past-tense verbs (break/broke, bear/bore, etc) could



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lead to a discussion about this being an ancient form dating back at least to the Bronze Age and the Proto-Indo-Europeans whose language is the ancestor of just about every language from Iceland to the Himalayas.

#### The grammar of non-standard English

That same topic could also lead to a lesson about variant forms, the past-tense irregulars being sometimes different in standard and non-standard English: for example, in most non-standard dialects, the verb 'go' declines as 'go/went/went', as opposed to standard's more irregular 'go/went/gone'. 'I have went to the shops' is a perfectly valid sentence, an example of non-standard's grammar at work: not an inadequate version of standard's, but actually one that tends to be slightly more regular and refined than standard's. (Another obvious example of the latter would be non-standard's 'youse' as a second-person plural where standard has the same potentially confusing form as the singular.)

So a prime objective of a linguistically enlightened grammar course would be the justification and validation of non-standard English – the language which children have learned at home and with their

friends, and which they are still given to understand is somehow inadequate or just wrong. ‘They have went’, ‘them books’, ‘I never seen nuffink’, even glo’al stops: there is nothing wrong with any of them. And it’s about time someone told them. (Granted, this doesn’t apply to middle-class, standard-speaking kids, just non-standard speakers – so only 85 % of them, then.)

Their English is perfect but we also need to teach our non-standard-speaking children that that’s not how the world sees it. Some radical academic linguists dream of an alternative – but pragmatically, as things stand, only standard English is acceptable, not only within the education system but beyond the school or college gates, in any official context – in fact in any middle-class context. Be it exam paper, office report, jokey email or casual conversation, let slip an ‘I done’ or a ‘nuffink’ at your peril. So non-standard speakers should be given the chance to learn standard – not as a foreign language but as a different variety. It’s not too arduous a task, actually, because there are only a dozen or so important structures, such as the past tense irregulars or the way ‘to be’ declines, where non-standard differs from the official Queen’s version of English. Which isn’t better. Just a bit different at times.

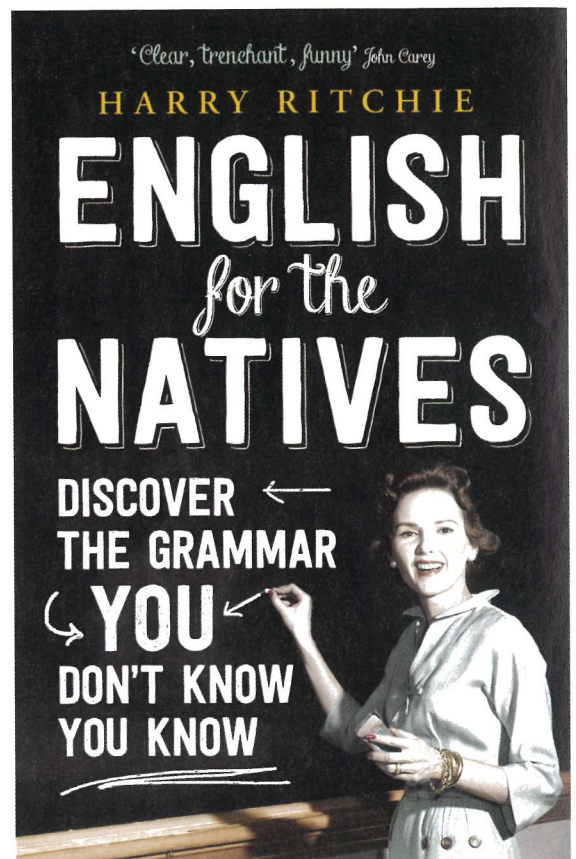
“Teachers are beset by old-school eedjits shouting for a return to proper correctitudes.”

#### Abandoned by linguistics?

At the moment kids have to negotiate this socially fraught, intellectually barren terrain by intuition – to infer the need to switch to standard and to intuit what the ‘correct’ forms are. Come to think of it, not just kids: teachers too – you chaps and anyone teaching anything, caught as you all are in the middle of a muddle, effectively abandoned by linguistics (an academic discipline which on the whole hasn’t bothered to engage with the outside world), beset by old-school eedjits shouting for a return to proper correctitudes, and uneasily aware that such condemnations are ignoring the vibrancy of the living language.

I must now add that I write all of this as an outsider – I am a freelance writer with a background in literary journalism and absolutely no experience as a teacher of English or any other subject beyond my TELF summer job several decades ago. So I’m uneasily aware that I may well not know what I’m talking about. If so, my apologies and hearty congratulations.

But from what I’ve gathered, and despite a few individual initiatives from university linguistic departments, I don’t think that this kind of English grammar is being taught. It also seems to me that the



basic precepts of linguistics have not been assimilated – for instance, that all native speakers are equally expert and all varieties of a language are equally valid. In fact, in many ways, I don’t think too much has changed in the teaching of English grammar since the days of black and white. Or before black and white...

#### An appeal for help

So now to the final paragraph and, oddly, not a ringing conclusion but a heartfelt plea for help. I’d like to tackle the issue of English grammar teaching in our schools in the book I’m toiling away at – and I would very, very much appreciate any input. Have I got this right? Or hopelessly wrong? What are your own experiences and attitudes about this whole business? Do, please, write to me at [ritchie.harry@gmail.com](mailto:ritchie.harry@gmail.com).

#### Harry Ritchie

is a writer and journalist whose most recent book is *English for the Natives: Discover the Grammar You Don't Know You Know*, published in paperback by John Murray (£8.99)