

Essex Language Conference for Teachers 2013: Motivating young learners

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Can Grammar be Fun?
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1 Introduction - Some puzzles

Grammar? Fun??

Puzzles:

"Why is it like that? What's the pattern here?"

"But not all students like puzzles, though."

Some aspects of language learning will be a tedious challenge to some groups of students no matter what (just like chemistry, computer programming, accountancy, ...).

But we all like puzzles, provided we have a chance of solving them

I haven't a clue what he's on about

Preamble — Prototypical language puzzle (UK only!)

1. Enigmatic rebuke? (9) <Ans: 'crossword' = 'cross + word'>
2. Bemused crowd around Ross — it's a real puzzle! (9) <Ans: 'crossword' = 'ross' inside anag. of 'crowd'>

Misleading clues:

3. Make it act in a disaster movie. (8)

Natural parsing:

Make it act [in [a [disaster movie]]]

Clue parsing:

(Make "it act in" a disaster) = [movie] <i.e. anag. of it act in' = 'Titanic'>

Cryptic clue with anagrams etc (type 2, 3) — for grammar fans?

Clue type 1 — more to do with meaning. Better for poets?

2 Entertaining English

So how does language fit in?

Why knowing English might be useful for modern language learning
(...not to mention teaching English)

2.1 English verbs

Puzzling (and entertaining) aspects of English verbs and their meanings/usages

- causing things to happen
- alternate ways of getting things places
- we've got to hand it to you
- cannibal sentences

Causatives

Causative alternation — Children's versions:

[Watching magician] *He disappeared the green one!*

[Child's sister about to touch moth] *She's gonna die it! She's gonna make it die!*

[Mixing playdough] *Salt clings it together*

Adult English:

*The chocolate **melted***

*Harriet **melted** the chocolate*

*The ball **rolled** down the hill*

*Harriet **rolled** the ball down the hill*

Locative alternation

Locative alternation — Children's versions:

[Of bear-shaped salt-cellar] *Can I fill some salt into the bear?*

I'm gonna cover a screen over me.

Mommy I poured you! With water!

Adult English:

Tom loaded books onto the cart
Tom loaded the cart with books

Dick sprinkled sugar onto the cake
Dick sprinkled the cake with sugar

Cf

OK — *Harriet filled the cup (with tea)*

OK — *Harriet poured the tea (into the cup)*

Dative alternation

Dative alternation — Children's versions:

Don't say me that!

Adult English:

Harriet gave a bone to Fido ~ Harriet gave Fido a bone

Tom told/tweeted the story to Dick ~ Tom told/tweeted Dick the story

Subtle contrasts:

Harriet slid the note to Dick ~ Harriet slid Dick the note

BUT

Harriet pushed the box to Dick ⇒ **Harriet pushed Dick the box*

<'*' means "ungrammatical, unacceptable sentence">

Cf

OK — *Harriet pushed the box*

ODD! — *Harriet slid the note*

Cannibal sentences

The cannibals boiled the missionary ...

The cannibals boiled the missionary an egg

The evil witch baked Hansel and Gretel¹ ...

The evil witch baked Hansel and Gretel a chocolate cake

Related types:

Josef Stalin sent Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn ...

... to a GULag

... a box of chocolates

Lady Chatterly had Mellors ... prune the roses

Getting ready – it's easy!

This type of jelly is very hard ... to make set without lots of gelatin

The Advanced Driving Test is easy ... to fail if you don't concentrate

Getting ready – it's easy!

Cf

It's hard to make this type of jelly

To make this type of jelly is hard

It's easy to fail the ADT

The chickens are ready to eat

– *They're ravenous, in fact*

– *We'll have them with rice and Hoisin sauce*

... into the back of the net

Harriet kicked the ball into the back of the net

The toy boat floated under the bridge

Tom somersaulted out of the room

Dick fought/elbowed/pushed/inveigled/bribed/... his way to the front of the queue

¹http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/hansel_and_gretel_get_baked/

[Task: translate these groups of verbs into your own language(s).

How many have exact translation equivalents for all of their uses?

What grammar structures are required to translate such expressions?]

- **All** of these constructions pose serious difficulties for some groups of learners of English.
- **All** of these constructions will give weird, misleading or ungrammatical results if translated into many or most other languages (especially European ones).
- Hence, **all** of these constructions are likely to derail language learners.

2.2 Some single entendres

Childhood innocence

Truant girl missed school for sex

Yes, but why is it ambiguous?

What The Papers Didn't Mean To Say

EIGHTH ARMY PUSH BOTTLES UP GERMANS

English loves to use words as the 'wrong' part of speech:

- verbs used as noun ('push')
- nouns used as verbs ('to bottle')
- prepositions used as meaningless particles ('to bottle UP')

Other European languages tend to be much less free about shifting word category

<So how **do** you translate 'a push' or 'to bottle (up)' into your language(s)?>

3 Conclusions

- Language (including English) is full of puzzling phenomena, some of which fit into some kind of pattern
- The patterns differ from language to language
- This can sometimes interfere with language acquisition, but it can also make the whole business more interesting and entertaining, if you know what to look for