

<b>Headline</b>	Back to grammar - but who will teach the teachers?		
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## Back to grammar - but who will teach the teachers?

**By Janadas Devan**  
**On Words**

HERE is a confession: I have forgotten more than half the grammar I learnt in school. What I do remember I owe mostly to a Primary Five teacher, the gentle and persuasive Mrs Ernest Lau of Anglo-Chinese School, the best teacher I had in school. She taught me the basics - tenses, subject-verb agreement, pronoun-verb antecedents, and so on - and they have stuck.



But I've forgotten most of the more complicated rules and distinctions that I learnt later in school. If I am asked now, for example, to distinguish between direct objects and indirect ones, I would fumble. The distinction between predicate adjectives and predicate nominatives is an even greater mystery. Define a ditransitive verb. Well, I could eons ago, but I've clean forgotten now. How about an absolute phrase or the nominative absolute? Don't know.

Well, how about something simpler - finite and non-finite verbs? That I can manage: Finite verbs can stand by themselves as the main verbs of sentences ('I kicked the ball'); non-finite verbs can't ('The punctured ball...'). But as for the various non-finite or verbal forms - infinitives, gerunds and participles - well, ah...

I used to believe it didn't quite matter how much grammar I knew. After all, how many distinguished grammarians are also distinguished writers? H. W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* and Ernest Gower's *Plain Words*, for example, are still, decades after their publication, the indispensable bibles on questions of correct usage. But look up any anthology of great English prose. I have yet to come across one that includes an essay by either Fowler or Gower.

The playwright Bernard Shaw, I thought, was correct to argue that one didn't really need a detailed knowledge of grammar to be able to write well. If one is sufficiently inward with the language, one would know, intuitively, which are the correct forms and which aren't.

I learnt only in my late 20s, trying to learn a foreign language, that this was not altogether true. There I would be still splashing about in the lower ooze of basic

Latin conjugations - amo, amas, amat; video, vides, videt; and so on - while my wife would be zipping along translating Horace and goodness knows what else. She did better for two reasons: One, she had a natural gift for learning languages that I didn't possess; and two, she had a superior grasp of grammar.

Why should this be written this way and not that, I would ask her of a Latin phrase. 'Because it is in the nominative case, not the accusative,' she would explain.

'Tell me again, what's the difference,' I would ask.

'Don't you know grammar?'

'Well, Bernard Shaw used to say...'

'I've news for you - you are no Bernard Shaw in Latin. Eat your peas; learn the grammar.'

And that is precisely the point - precious few of us are Bernard Shaws in any language, let alone a foreign one. This is a point of especial relevance in Singapore where English is not the first language of most English-speakers.

Those of us who are sufficiently inward with the language can indeed be expected to speak and write it grammatically even if we don't know its grammatical rules. But for the vast majority of us who speak some other language better than English, a knowledge of grammar would probably be of considerable help.

I don't need to be intimately acquainted with English verbal forms to be able to write a decent English sentence; but I do need to know about Latin cases if I ever hope to gain a rudimentary grasp of Latin. Similarly, since English is not the native tongue of most Singaporeans, our schools would probably get better results if they taught the language consciously and deliberately, with considerable attention paid to grammar.

It is no use teaching English as though Singapore were filled with potential Bernard Shaws, all able to speak and write it with grammatically-innocent intuitive ease.

A letter writer in yesterday's Forum Page, Mrs Padmini Kesavapany, made a similar point in arguing for the importance of grammar. 'Grammar is vital in the teaching of a language that, for most of us, is not our mother tongue,' she said.

Professor Koh Tai Ann, the new head of the Speak Good English Movement, went further in an interview with Straits Times deputy editor Felix Soh in last week's Sunday Times, arguing that the downgrading of grammar in the 1980s was one reason why Singlish has taken root: 'In the 1980s up to the early 1990s, just when a second generation of English teachers was being trained, there was a fad in the teaching of English called the 'communicative approach',' she explained, 'where grammar and the correction of mistakes was de-emphasised, where the focus was on encouraging fluency. Grammar as such was not taught in the belief that it would be inhibiting.'

'Both teaching methodology and the curriculum reflected this approach. Teacher trainees were even told it was all right to use Singlish if it enabled them to relate to and communicate better with their pupils. Then, came a realisation that Singlish was becoming very widespread.'

Students didn't know enough English grammar to be able to tell when a formation borrowed from some other language was inappropriate in English. 'Hence, the dynamic and creative nature of Singlish, which is constantly borrowing words from the languages around us, or creating new form,' Prof Koh said.

Teaching grammar is one way to make students conscious again. In Singapore, grammar would be nothing less than a consciousness-raising tool. But the trouble is we may not have enough consciousness-raisers among us. The late Mrs Lau, my teacher, belonged to a generation that learnt grammar from young. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes* - who are going to teach the teachers now?

The Speak Good English Movement has a massive task before it.