

Cambridge Grammar of English, Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy, Cambridge University Press,

When I started teaching English, some twenty years ago, grammar was something of a taboo topic. In fact I think we shied away from using the term ‘grammar’ at all. During a teacher training seminar on writing, I remember asking how we might help pupils to use full stops accurately. The room fell suddenly silent. It was the educational equivalent of breaking wind in public. The answer, I seem to recall through my red-cheeked shame at having asked something so crass and utilitarian, was that if students read enough good literature, they would pick up punctuation for themselves. We returned to reading DH Lawrence.

Since then I’ve flirted periodically with grammar in the classroom, sometimes teaching it formally (“get out your exercise books and analyse these sentences”), sometimes in context (“let’s look at the way the writer uses language to create suspense”) and sometimes exploring language in everyday usage (“Got any other slang words for toilet?”)

It’s no exaggeration to say that for many of those twenty years, teachers of my generation have oscillated between shame, embarrassment, confusion and glee when we venture onto the fragile icy pond of grammar teaching.

That’s why this new grammar of English is so welcome and so liberating. It contains the grammar we see and hear around us. Not everyone is so accommodating. Writing in the Daily Telegraph, Dot Wordsworth lambastes the authors for their “permissive pages”, comparing the work to “a mangled frog left by the cat in the middle of the kitchen lino”. Here evidently is a critic whose views are never knowingly understated.

Her main complaint is that the professors behind the new grammar say “never before have we experienced as creative a phase in language as we are now in our age of modern media”. That’s how it feels to me – mostly – though I have to confess to a certain old-fangledness. Every time a pupil tells me in a lesson that an idea is “well good” or a rule “so not fair”, I flinch and fire off a volley of corrective phrases. I wince at the gr8-ing effect of text-messaging, but that’s because I insist that my own text messages contain semi-colons.

But I’m not sure I could ever clamber up onto the moral high ground by proclaiming that such a book will “relegate written English to a ghetto of self-expression”. I like the fact that this new grammar presents English in all its messiness and flux. The idea that it will somehow harm the youth of our nation or an admission of falling standards is cheap hysteria.

Pupils after all come to us with the bulk of their grammatical structures in place by an early age, perhaps as early as five or six. They aren’t the empty vessels of Grandgrind’s world. Our role is to shape and develop their language, to sharpen their spoken and written communication for a range of contexts and purposes, not to get them writing in the stilted archaisms of Macaulay, the language of a bygone age.

And there’s much in this book that will help them to communicate more effectively. I like the section on politeness (“I wondered if you’d help me out”) ignored by many

commentators. I like the comprehensive nature of the entries on tense and word order. But most of all I welcome the real-life entries which illuminate some current trends in spoken English. The authors quote the BBC reporter who says “I’m so not fit for this expedition” and the student who says “I was so not ready to take an exam that day”.

This is English as it is spoken by some (but not all) people, a cause for curiosity not prescription. The book isn’t a classroom primer that preaches a new standard form. Just as some of my most illuminating and lively English lessons have been spent comparing English and Australian slang (hint: give the “mystery bags” a miss next time you have a cooked breakfast), so I’m looking forward to my pupils’ exploring contemporary spoken English and comparing it with the structure and lexis of the language used by their friends, parents and grandparents.

I think they’ll enjoy investigating the difference between “made of, made with and made out of” and testing out the theories about “vague language” as in this example from the book:

“Between then a **like** nineteen eighty four I just spent the whole time, I mean for that **sort of** twelve year period or **whatever**, erm, I was just working with lots and lots and lots of different people.

I read this stuff but it doesn’t mean, you know, I have to, like, speak like that.

That’s the fallacy of the book’s critics, treating an English grammar book as if it’s a batch of untreated nuclear waste, deadly if it falls into the wrong hands. It is in fact precisely the kind of book I want to fall into my pupils’ hands, helping to compensate for a GCSE English qualification which at present doesn’t go far enough in helping them to write or speak in language that’s fit for purpose.

This book isn’t an enemy of standards or stringency: it’s a stepping stone towards creating more self-aware, confident and precise users of English. It’s just the kind of book teachers, pupils and possibly even newspaper columnists should read with open and inquisitive minds, or perhaps minds so not closed.

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