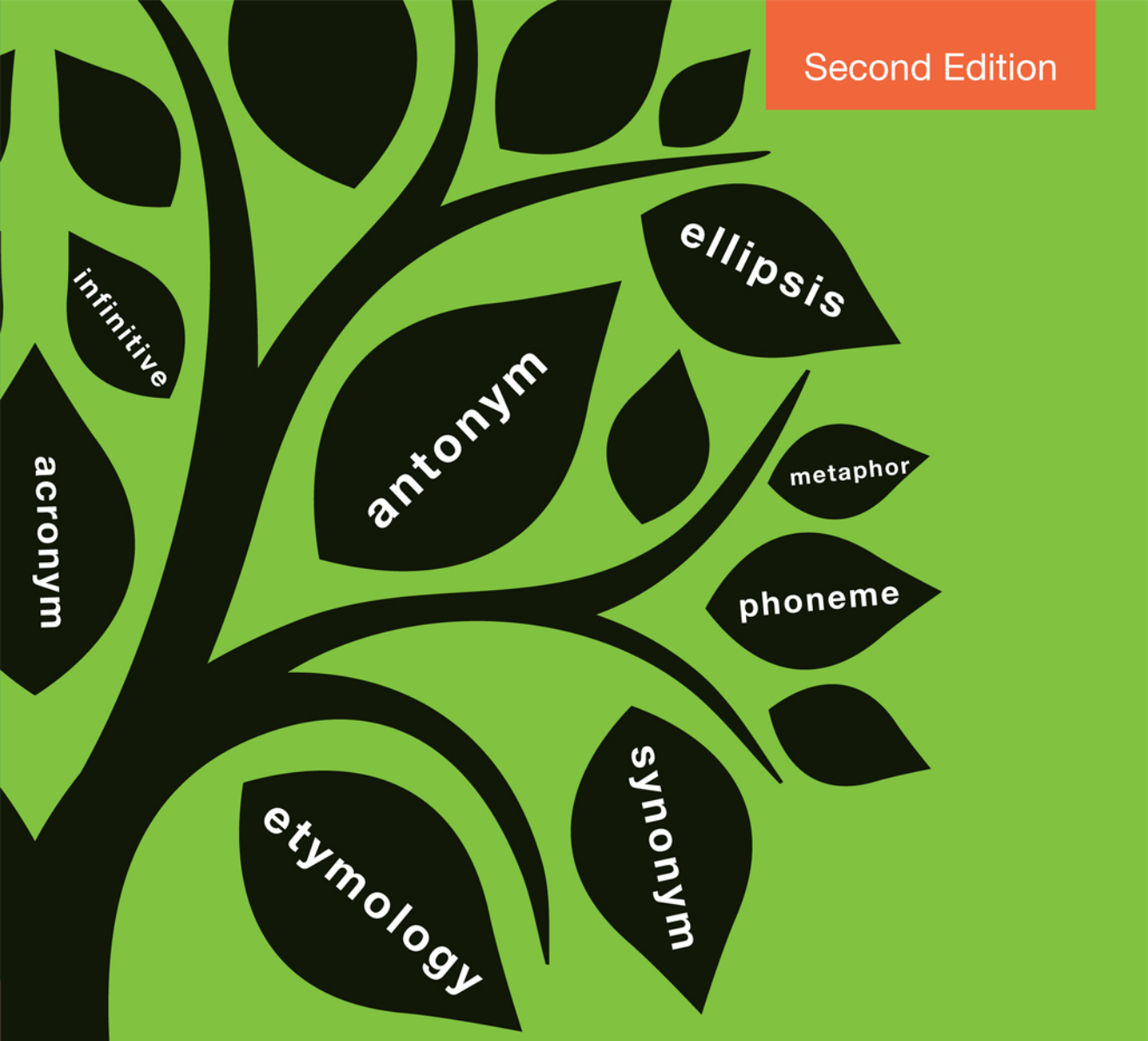

ENGLISH LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE FOR SECONDARY TEACHERS

Alison Ross

A David Fulton Book

COMPANION @ WEBSITE

English Language Knowledge for Secondary Teachers

If teachers are to develop their students' English language skills successfully it is vital that they overcome any existing lack of confidence and training in grammar and language concepts. *English Language Knowledge for Secondary Teachers* is an accessible book aiming to equip secondary teachers with the knowledge they need to teach language effectively. It clearly explains the essential concepts for language study, introduces the terminology needed for 'talking about language' and shows how this knowledge can be applied to the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

This new edition has been fully updated to take into account changes to the curriculum and developments in digital and new media language. Written by an experienced teacher and consultant, the book includes:

- all the grammar knowledge that a secondary teacher needs;
- contemporary language examples to which new teachers can relate;
- a companion website with numerous activities for use in the classroom linked to each chapter and supported by detailed commentaries to explain how these work in practice (www.routledge.com/cw/ross).

By making language teaching a fun and enjoyable experience, this text offers a refreshing resource for any secondary teacher daunted by the prospect of teaching grammar and language.

Alison Ross is an educational consultant, examiner and former English teacher and examiner.

English Language Knowledge for Secondary Teachers

Second Edition

Alison Ross

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CHAPTER

1 Introduction

The aim of this book is to provide secondary English teachers with the knowledge about language that they need and, perhaps, did not acquire during their own education. It covers the essential concepts for language study, introducing the terminology needed for 'talking about language' and shows how this knowledge can be applied to the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Using the website

There is a companion website for the book at www.routledge.com/cw/ross. For each concept or term introduced, there is an activity for teachers to use with students. The logo () indicates that there is an activity plus commentary. The abbreviations Y7+, Y12+, etc. suggest the year group for which the activity would be suitable. Of course, it may always be necessary to revise some concepts that were introduced in earlier years, hence the 'plus' sign.

The activities are numbered to match the chapter and the order in which they appear, so Activity 5.9 would be the ninth activity for Chapter 5. Most activities have a commentary, explaining the key teaching points. A link will take you from the activity to the commentary, and back to the activity if it would be useful to look at it again.

The book is divided into two main sections:

- **Section 1** – deals with grammar and the structure of language.
- **Section 2** – moves outside the scope of sentence structure to explore aspects of:
  - Phonology – the sounds of language and their effects;
  - Semantics – the ways words convey meanings via emotive and figurative language;
  - Discourse – the ways whole texts are organised;
  - Spoken language – some key differences in the organisation of speech; and
  - Electronic modes – the ways that new technologies have influenced language use.

The organisation of the book involved a common dilemma for teaching approaches:

'Where should I start?'

A 'top-down' approach emphasises the importance of the wider picture before studying smaller elements. It may be more effective to begin study of a Shakespeare play by watching a performance of the whole text. But perhaps important aspects of context need to be appreciated before this: the conventions of the dramatic genre, or the historical and social background. Close analysis of speeches and individual words comes later.

The decision to take a 'bottom-up' approach to language study in this book was not taken lightly. Although a focus on words and sentences runs the risk of being de-contextualised, there are some practical advantages in working up from the basic elements of language. The educational background of the readers of this book also influenced the decision. Many university degrees in English emphasise the study of literature rather than language. Although such courses involve the study of language in its wider aspects – genre, metaphor, rhetoric, and so on – finer details of grammar remain a source of uncertainty. This area is therefore tackled before the more familiar aspects.

The fact that the section on grammar is relatively long does not indicate that the *structure* of language is more important than other aspects of language in *use*, but rather that the grammatical terms and concepts are less familiar to readers under the age of fifty. The reasons for this 'gap' in knowledge are connected with the changes in educational policy over the last few decades. These are worth exploring.

Knowing about language or using language?

Debates about English education tend to focus on the relative merits of explicit grammar study versus exposure to a rich variety of language use. The most noticeable changes have been in attitudes to the role of grammar. Using an analogy, I would suggest that – trams are to transport policy what grammar is to educational policy. Both have moved in and out of favour in recent history. In the 1950s there was a system of trams or trolley buses in most cities. They were considered an efficient form of public transport. Then they seemed outdated and the whole system was dismantled. Around the turn of the century, the advantages of this mode of transport were recognised and tram systems were reintroduced. Some people complain about the expense and inconvenience. For others, trams have intrinsic value, but their role is important in the wider scheme of things: trams contribute to a more efficient and environmentally friendly transport system.

Changing attitudes to the role of grammar teaching have followed a similar path. From the eighteenth century until the 1960s, a formal approach to teaching the structures of language was accepted as the most effective way to teach English and foreign languages. By the 1970s, grammar study was seen as outdated and inefficient. These conclusions were based on research studies showing that explicit

teaching of grammar had little impact on the wider skills of language use (Wilkinson, 1971). It was replaced by a 'language in use' approach, where the emphasis was on exposure to various forms of language, without the need for the terminology to describe language. Later studies cast doubt on the validity of these conclusions (Tomlinson, 1994). After decades of teaching English without any explicit reference to grammar, the National Curriculum (1989, revised in 2000) caused another change in the ways English was taught in schools. The reinstatement of grammar – as with trams – has been welcomed by many with nostalgia for bygone days, when rules were fixed and order prevailed. However, this is not simply a return to the grammar teaching of the past. The contemporary, 'streamlined' approach to grammar no longer emphasises the value of 'naming of parts' for its own sake; grammar is now seen to have an unfulfilled potential for its contribution to the wider scheme of things. As the linguist David Crystal comments:

> *The principle was evident: one should not teach structures without showing children how these structures are used in real-life situations; and, conversely, one should not introduce children to the language of real-life situations without giving them some means of talking about it precisely. Structure and use should be seen as two sides of the same coin – a view which is present in the guidelines which led to the new British National Curriculum course on English. But the question remained; how exactly can these two domains be brought together?*
>
> *(Crystal, 1998)*

The situation at the time of writing is not clearly defined. The National Curriculum and National Literacy Strategy no longer have the official status of guidelines, but the new National Curriculum is not due to emerge until later in 2012. A full programme of study for English (maths and science) will not be ready until September 2014.

However, it is likely that broad principles will remain. The concept of language variation shapes the overall statement of aims for attainment. Pupils should become aware not only of the conventions of Standard English but also of the ways in which language varies according to the different types of use by: reading a variety of texts, writing for a range of purposes, and adapting their speech for different contexts.

The requirements for Language Structure emphasise the importance of knowledge about the way language works. 'Pupils should be taught the principles of sentence grammar and whole-text cohesion and use this knowledge in their writing.' This knowledge about language can be applied to pupils' use of language, using a division into three levels of language structure: Word, Sentence and Text.

- At *word level*, there are applications to spelling and vocabulary.
- At *sentence level*, applications to sentence construction, punctuation, and awareness of Standard English in the context of language variation and change.
- At *text level*, applications to skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

The organisation of the book follows this distinction between levels of language:

Section 1	
morphology	word level
word class	"
phrase	sentence level
clause	"
sentence	"
Section 2	
phonology	word level
semantics	"
discourse	text level

The teaching approaches used in the book aim to combine knowledge about language with skills in using language. Before outlining these it is necessary to clarify the definition of 'grammar' – the subject of Section 1.

What is grammar?

When David Crystal was invited to provide a definition of grammar that could be understood by a bright child, he offered this: 'Grammar is the way we make sentences.' This is delightfully simple, but it is necessary to be aware of some differences in the way the term 'grammar' is used and understood. For a word that is mentioned so often in debates about education, its meaning is surprisingly elusive.

This is partly because of the emotive associations that the word has acquired. The title of 'grammar school' for those pupils who passed the 11-plus examination suggested that grammar was the preserve – and even the major concern – of the educational elite. Feelings about other school subjects, such as Maths, Science, History and Geography, are generally neutral. Knowing about grammar is often a source of pride, embarrassment or even resentment. For some people, the study of grammar is connected with order and discipline. The Conservative politician Norman Tebbit once suggested that there was a correlation between the loss of grammar and crime rates.

The distinction between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to grammar is worth noting. The first grammar books in the eighteenth century aimed to codify the rules of the English language. The approach was **prescriptive**, assuming that there exists one 'correct' or 'proper' way of structuring sentences. The model used by these writers was the Latin language and some of the rules they proposed are still accepted without question today. A frequently mentioned rule is that you should never split an infinitive. Fowler perceptively comments:

> *The English-speaking world may be divided into (1) those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is; (2) those who do not know, but care very much; (3) those who know and condemn; (4) those who know and approve; (5) those who know and distinguish. Those who neither know nor care are the vast majority, and are a happy folk, to be envied by most of the minority classes.*
>
> *(Fowler, 1965)*

For those readers in group 2 – who do not know, but care very much – the infinitive is the base form of the verb, e.g. *to go*. A famous example of a split infinitive occurs in the introduction to *Star Trek*: 'to boldly go where no man has gone before'. The reason for saying that infinitives should not be split is based on Latin, where infinitives are single words (*vincere* – to conquer), so cannot be split. Many people challenge the assumption that what was true for Latin must also be true for English.

If a prescriptive approach functions rather like a guide to etiquette, a **descriptive** approach, as its name suggests, aims to describe the structures of language in more neutral terms. This involves awareness of language variation and change, in particular differences between speech and writing, formal and colloquial language, regional dialects and Standard English. Although a descriptive approach acknowledges that language may vary according to its context, Standard English is still 'prescribed' for public communication. The prescriptive approach, though diluted, is still apparent in attitudes to prestige of standard forms of language.

There is also some confusion between the terms '**syntax**' and '**grammar**'. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the structure of language, some make a slight distinction. The official website for the Department for Education and Science uses 'grammar' as the overall term, distinguishing between 'syntax' and 'morphology'.

> *Grammar is the study of the way language is organised, especially the rules which are used between words (syntax) and within words (morphology).*
>
> *(http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk)*

So, grammar – including syntax and morphology – may be defined as 'the way language is organised' or 'the way we make sentences'. In *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (Wales, 2001) grammar is explained as 'the study of form'. Others refer to the 'structure of words or sentences'. The metaphor of building, or construction, is common to all. But what sort of construction is a sentence?

What type of structure?

On the page, sentences may look like a linear, **two-dimensional** structure. However, it is misleading to regard language as individual words, linked one after another in a string. For example, if we want to find out what occurs before a verb and look at the order of individual words in these sentences, there is no apparent pattern:

Teenagers	*upset me.*	*teenagers*	*(noun)*
They	*upset me.*	*they*	*(pronoun)*

Their refusal to move	*upset me.*	*move*	*(verb)*
Swearing loudly	*upsets me.*	*loudly*	*(adverb)*
Leaving lights on	*upsets me.*	*on*	*(preposition)*

A more helpful analogy is a **three-dimensional** structure, such as one created from Lego building blocks. Although the smallest unit is a single brick – or word – larger forms, such as walls or roofs, can operate as elements in the structure. In language, these larger elements are phrases and clauses. The three-dimensional structure of language can be summarised as a hierarchy of levels:

TABLE 1.1 Levels of structure

One or more **morphemes**	combine to form	words.
One or more **words**	combine to form	phrases.
One or more **phrases**	combine to form	clauses.
One or more **clauses**	combine to form	sentences.
One or more **sentences**	combine to form	paragraphs and whole texts.

Section 1 moves up through these levels to sentence structure.

Another helpful analogy for the structure of language is the game Jenga, building a tower from wooden blocks. The object is to add, remove or replace pieces without destroying the overall structure. This is similar to the construction of sentences: a basic structure can be expanded by adding or substituting elements; more complex structures can be rearranged or simplified by removing elements. If essential elements are removed, the structure collapses.

In the simplest English structure, a single noun precedes a verb:

Teenagers upset me.

But other elements can take the place of a noun. In the examples above, the basic structure remains intact in all the changes.

The noun can be replaced by a pronoun:

They upset me.

Or by a noun phrase:

Their refusal to move upset me.

Or by a noun clause:

Leaving lights on upsets me.

The technical terms for these other elements all share the word 'noun', precisely because they have the same function in the structure (see Chapters 6, 7 and 8 on

phrase and clause structure). Thus the basic structure of noun + verb remains constant. This analogy with construction games forms the basis for the teaching approach to grammar used in Section 1.

Approach to teaching grammar

Perhaps the most important aspect of the teaching approach is that it is based on language users' intuitive awareness of what is – or is not – grammatical. The activities in the book provide examples that can be used in the classroom. These activities invite the reader to use their implicit understanding of structure to develop confidence in the use of explicit terminology.

In conjunction with this is the use of authentic examples of language use, wherever possible. These are taken from a variety of sources, including literary and non-literary genres, contemporary and older texts. This provides breadth of study, encouraging pupils' exploration of a diversity of styles and showing the flexibility of language use in a variety of contexts.

Another important aspect of the approach used is that it is based on interaction with texts, in the belief that people learn best when they are actively engaged. Many activities are 'playful', for the reasons, and in the ways, described by Crystal in his book *Language Play* (1998: 187):

1. Children are used to playing with language, and encounter language play all around them.
2. Language play chiefly involves manipulating language structures.
3. A major aim is to improve children's ability with language structures. Therefore:
4. We should make use of their abilities in language play…

The type of 'play' used in the activities can be compared to construction games, such as Jenga, mentioned above. This active manipulation of structures is also based on the fundamental principles of grammar analysis. The academic terms used are: substitution, deletion, insertion, transposition. These are 'basic' in the sense that they are fundamental to the system of grammatical classification. Luckily, they are also basic, in the sense of simple to understand. The concepts can be explained in more concrete terms and provide tools for pupils to use in direct, active exploration of grammatical concepts.

The four tests

TABLE 1.2 The four tests

Substitution	See if you can take out one part of the structure and replace it with another. If so, the substituted part must have a similar function.
Deletion	See if you can remove some parts of the structure. This will show whether these are optional, or essential, elements.
Insertion	See if you can add extra parts to the structure. This will also show that these are optional elements.
Transposition	See whether you can move some parts to other positions in the structure. This will show which are the movable elements.

The use of these four principles leads to the final important aspect of the approach.

Form v. function

This approach to grammar emphasises the **function** of words, phrases and clauses, as pupils develop understanding of the ways that parts of the structure operate in relation to each other.

As each term is introduced in Section 1, confidence is developed by exploration of its function. This focus on role – or function – is a more reliable way of understanding concepts such as 'noun', 'verb', 'adverb', 'subordinate clause', which may have been introduced earlier, using definitions based on their meaning or form.

Grammatical explanations based on **meaning** are a familiar memory for most people.

- A noun is a naming word.
- A verb is a doing/action word.
- An adjective is a describing word.

Sadly, these quick definitions only help with the most obvious examples; authentic language use rarely provides clear-cut, textbook examples. For example:

Which are the 'doing words' in this sentence?

There was a deafening scream as the Twister began its plunging descent.

It would be reasonable to say that the words '*deafening, scream, Twister, plunging, descent*' are 'doing' words, as they suggest actions. However, the verbs are '*was, began*', neither conveying much action.

Which are the 'describing words' in this sentence?

The drunk tottered into the alley, clutching a bottle of vodka under his raincoat.

There are no adjectives in this sentence, yet description is conveyed by nouns: 'drunk, alley, vodka, raincoat', or the verbs: 'tottered, clutching'.

Another approach is to define word classes by the **form** of words. For example, an adverb is a word that ends in *–ly*. This also works only for classic, textbook examples. This is because of the changing nature of the English language.

Unlike languages such as Latin, French, Spanish, modern English language no longer uses many inflections, ie. changing the form of words by adding suffixes. Pupils should be aware that the same 'letter-string' may function in different ways. For example, the form of the word *'light'* remains identical in the following sentences, but its role changes:

(See Chapter 5).

What word class is 'light'?

1. *This is a light suitcase.*
2. *I always travel light.*
3. *Have you got a light?*
4. *Light my fire.*

The approach in Section 1 explores the function of grammatical concepts by using the four tests outlined above. Their use is demonstrated briefly as a way of clarifying the role of word classes and consolidating the terminology.

Substitution shows that:

This is a lovely/nice suitcase.	*(functions as)*	*adjective*
I always travel carefully/wisely/cheaply.	*(functions as)*	*adverb*
Have you got any money/my book/a car?	*(functions as)*	*noun*
Extinguish/enjoy/report the fire.	*(functions as)*	*verb*

Deletion can be used to show if a word functions as an adjective or adverb, as these are usually optional extras. Nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc cannot be deleted. The following example shows which words can, and cannot, be deleted.

This is a (light) suitcase.	*adjective deleted*
I always travel (light).	*adverb deleted*
Have you got a light?	*noun cannot be deleted*
Light my fire.	*verb cannot be deleted*

NB. The word 'always' can also be deleted and therefore functions as an adjective or adverb. Substitution tests – *usually/rarely/often/never* – suggest it is an adverb, because of the *–ly* forms.

The other tests can be demonstrated in a further example:

My neighbours play music.

Insertion can be used as a test for adjectives and adverbs (see Chapter 5). One or more adjectives can be inserted before nouns.

	(*annoying young*)		(*vile modern*)	
My		neighbours play		music.

Adverbs can be inserted in a variety of positions: before or after verbs, at the beginning or end of sentences:

	(*often*)		(*loudly*)
The neighbours		play music.	

Adverbs can also be inserted before adjectives, or other adverbs:

This is an extremely light suitcase.
The neighbours very often play music loudly.

Transposition is a useful test for adverbs, or adverbial phrases or clauses. Adverbs can often be moved to other positions in the structure.

I travel light always.
I travel light when I go on holiday.

Often the neighbours loudly play music.
At weekends the neighbours play music loudly.

Summary

The approach to grammar teaching and learning in this book can be summarised as follows:

- It is descriptive, rather than prescriptive.
- It explores a variety of authentic language use.
- It is based on intuitive understanding.
- Language structure is seen as three-dimensional.
- It emphasises the role (or function) of elements of structure with meaning and form as subsidiary.
- It uses 'playful' activities based on four tests.

A final word on the debate about English education: whether knowing about structure or using language is more effective. The writer Phillip Pullman characterises the essential activity for children as being 'playful' with language.

> *Fooling about, playing with it, pushing it this way and that, turning it sideways, painting it different colours, looking at it from the back, putting one thing on top of another, asking silly questions, mixing things up, making absurd comparisons, discovering unexpected similarities, making pretty patterns, and all the time saying 'Supposing...I wonder...What if...'*
>
> *(www.guardian.co.uk, January 2005)*

Yet the activities he describes are surely explorations into the structure of language. I believe that there is no need to choose either structure or use. Playing with – or using language – is not distinct from learning about language, but a means of doing so.

The layout of the book

- A glossary of key terms is provided at the beginning of each section. These are highlighted in bold in the margin when they first occur.
- The margin provides cross-references to other chapters and pages in the book.
- Boxes highlight intriguing examples at the beginning of each section of the text.
- Activities are numbered and are usually followed by a commentary found at www.routledge.com/cw/ross. Please note that some activities require no commentary.
- References provide the author's surname and date, with full details in the bibliography at the end of the book.