

Is Grammar Important?

My Opinion on the Importance and Fundamentals of Grammar

There are innumerable and various opinions about grammar out there. Many people don't like it at all and will tell you that it was more about suffering through rather than learning it in school. There are people who see it as a necessary evil in language learning - something to be studied and understood, but never enjoyed. Then, there are people like me who find grammar not only important, but also endlessly interesting and enjoyable. I will, in this post, try to convince you that grammar isn't just torture for schoolchildren but is, rather, a fundamental part of language learning, whether you speak one language or five, as well as a fun and interesting subject of study.

Important Grammar Fundamentals

A knowledge of grammar, first and foremost, lays a solid foundation for language use and understanding. As someone who has studied several languages, some more successfully than others, I have come to realize just how important it is to learn about grammar. As an example, I have studied both Italian and Portuguese for roughly the same amount of time but in two very different ways. I studied Italian formally for five semesters in university. They were your typical language classes with textbooks, worksheets, copious notes, presentations, and exams. We learned verb tenses and sentence structure alongside vocabulary words. I continue to practice it through language apps to keep from losing it.

My study of Portuguese, however, besides one semester in university, has been entirely through speaking and listening to my husband's family. I have learned a lot of vocabulary, but my knowledge of grammar, particularly verb tenses and conjugation, is sorely lacking. I find myself unable to say what I want because I lack the grammatical structure to put my vocabulary into. The trouble is that neither my husband nor his family can really explain the grammar to me. They are native speakers, but they haven't really studied their own grammar. They know it, but they can't explain it, which is something that, I would guess, is the case for most people, particularly but not exclusively those who speak only one language.

We Don't Know What We Know

When we speak only one language, there isn't truly a need to learn grammar past school. When we learn a language from the time we're an infant, we learn and understand grammar intuitively; if someone asks us to explain why we say certain things or speak in certain ways, it is hard to explain because we never explicitly learned it and don't know what we know. I find that it is when we start to study a language other than our own that we realize the importance of grammar. In my own experience, learning a foreign language has taught me English grammar better than studying English grammar ever did. One of the books I used to study for an Italian test was actually English Grammar for Students of Italian, and it was a remarkably helpful resource.

Grammar Fun

So grammar is important, yes, but it is also a remarkably interesting subject of study. There are lively debates that rage about particular grammatical issues, such as the Oxford comma, split infinitives, conjunctions at the beginning of sentences, and prepositions at the end of sentences. Ask any grammarian or English teacher, and you're likely to hear a very strong opinion for one side or the other.

Oxford Comma

The only one of these particular topics that I have a firm opinion about is the Oxford comma: I believe it is fundamental. The Oxford comma, sometimes called the Serial comma, is a comma between the penultimate item in a series and the conjunction. It may seem a small thing, but when we look at an example we can see that the difference in meaning it causes illustrates its necessity:

I love my parents, Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy.

In this example, without the Oxford comma, it sounds like Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy are my parents. Using the Oxford comma here provides clarity and avoids any misunderstandings:

I love my parents, Jane Austen, and Thomas Hardy.

There are many good memes on the subject; if you want a laugh, I'd suggest searching for "Oxford comma" in your preferred search engine and see what comes up.

Order of Adjectives

Another interesting topic in English grammar is the order of adjectives. If I were to say "The blue big box is in the corner", it would sound wrong. It is perfectly comprehensible, but it isn't the way we normally hear or say it. So what happened? The two adjectives describing the box, 'blue' and 'big', are out of order. A native English speaker would always say "The big blue box is in the corner", but most of them wouldn't be able to tell you why. As I mentioned above, when learning English, or any other language, from infancy, we learn rules and patterns of the language without realizing that they are, in fact, rules and patterns. This is one of those things. In English, the order of adjectives is always as follows: opinion, size, age, shape, color, origin, material, purpose. It is a rule that we don't tend to break, even in casual conversation. For example, we would never say "The old big brown round dish", it would be "the big old round brown dish". This is another fun topic to search online if you want more examples.

Plural-Only Nouns

The last interesting grammar topic I'll mention is that of plural-only words. There are words in English that have no singular form, even though many of them are words for singular things. 'Glasses', 'pants', 'trousers', or 'scissors'. They are each a singular item, but they all take the plural form, and thus take plural verbs and pronouns. The reason for this is that the items are one, but are generally made up of two parts: pants have two legs, scissors have two blades, and glasses have two lenses. This becomes a problem particularly when learning English as a foreign language. My husband, a native speaker of Portuguese, used to say things like "a pants" or "underwears", and it always made me laugh because it does make sense, even if it is incorrect.

I have only scratched the surface of all that can be found in grammar. Hopefully, I have been able to convince you of not only the necessity but also the interest and fun of it. It provides a strong foundation for other parts of language, such as vocabulary, to build upon, but it is also a fascinating, seemingly endless source of debate and interesting facts.