

An Idiosyncratic view of Grammar

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Language A La Carte

It is amazing how wonderfully the need to eat focuses the mind. For over 25 years I worked in business as a short-contract teacher. During that time, I developed an idiosyncratic view of language simply because, when language is required for a specific task to be performed within a finite time-frame, the accepted schematic of general English doesn't suit. It has to be 'teaching to objectives' at its most fundamental. The company situation dictates the length of course (sometimes as little as 30 hours). The situation chooses the students, not by linguistic ability but by the job they do. The course assessment is simply the performance of the employees in the real situation. If they do not perform adequately, *I* have failed. [Please note the '*I*'.] And if I fail, word goes around and I do not get another contract.

In this scenario teaching discrete language items along general lines does not achieve the course objectives in the time available. Instead, the language items essential for the task need to be identified and anything unnecessary discarded. Then, the remaining items can be brought together into a few fundamental interlinked modules illustrating a basic language pattern. Each module can be quickly presented as a learning entity, and most class time is spent on practice in work contexts (because the language is so chosen), not teaching. New language is introduced as an extension of a basic pattern, not as a new concept. Aide-memoirs in the form of jingles and acronyms are useful as prompts, especially for correction. It is more motivating to be reminded "2 Ss?", than to be told "Wrong!".

In the following series of articles I would like to share with you a few of these amalgams for you to munch on and swallow, or spit out as you wish.

As a taster, here's one of the simplest grammar points to present: active and passive.

Quite simply, if the subject you want to use does the verb, there is no BE.

I wrote a letter.

If the subject doesn't do the verb, we use BE.

A letter was written.

BE can be put into any tense required.

As BE is normally followed by an adjective, we use 'written', which is the adjective part of the verb - the past participle.

As an adjective, 'written' never changes.

That is all anyone needs to know, and we haven't mentioned the words 'active' or 'passive'. From now on, it is practice, practice, practice.

S	✓	BE
S	✗	BE

Language A La Carte 2

[For simplicity's sake I have hijacked some grammatical terminology for my own use. So, for example, a sentence is a meaningful group of words with a verb. It may, in strict linguistics, be a clause, but I don't trouble non-major students with such distinctions.]

Here is a simple yet fundamental rule which needs to be introduced very early in language learning, because so many other grammatical forms derive from it. It gets more useful the more advanced the language becomes.

The English Sentence

Every sentence has a verb. Every verb has a subject. The subject is always before the verb.

It appears obvious at first and, of course, it is; but it answers a lot of the 'why?' about English. In response to queries, I go back to basics to emphasise that the answer is not unique to the query.

Example 1

Apply the rule in questions.

Question		Answer
		<u>They live</u> in Seeb.
Do		<u>they live</u> in Seeb?
Where		<u>they live</u> ?

So: 'they live' doesn't change because the subject must always be before the verb.

DO is a device that means "Listen to me!" To make a question we simply add it, in a relevant form, to the beginning of the sentence.

To find information, we add a question word to the question formed with DO.

When the sentence has a modal or auxiliary verb, we substitute it for DO, but S ← V does not change.

This rule applies to all verbs (if you use HAVE rather than 'have got'). The only exception to it is BE - which is why it is easier to start with the present simple rather than BE. Several weeks of nothing but BE establishes bad habits in the students resulting in the persistent "He is go".

Example 12

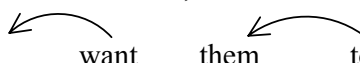
Consider: I want to go.



Here we have two sentences joined together; therefore there must be two verbs, which there are. Each verb must have a subject, which in this case is the same, and the subject must be before the verbs, which it is. [*Why is there only one 'I'?* See *Language A La Carte 3*.]

When the subjects are different, the rule solves this problem.

Consider: I want them to go.



Note; 'them to go' is the object of 'want', so we use the object pronoun.

Example 3

Sentences answering 'Why?':

I went to buy fish. [the same subject, not repeated]

I went because my wife wanted fish. [different subjects, different form]

or We went for my wife to buy fish. [Note: The meaning has changed.]

Language A La Carte 3

This rule is one of the most pervasive in English.

1 ~~2~~ one; never two

In English we dislike repetition. I tell the students we're lazy; it helps to fix it in their minds.

1. One 's' in the present simple:
(There must be one, but never two.)

A dolphin swims.

Dolphins swim.

Does a dolphin swim?

Dolphins don't swim.

One 'd' in the past simple:
(There must be one, but never two.)

The cars crashed.

Did the cars crash?

They didn't crash.

2. One negative:

I don't have brothers or sisters.

I have no brothers or sisters.

I have neither.

I don't have either.

I never wanted them.

I haven't ever wanted them.

No one understands.

3. No repetition:

This is the man **who** you saw ~~him~~.

Cancelling words prevents mistakes.

He wants to visit Musandam and ~~he wants~~
~~to~~ take photos. ['take', not 'takes']

4. One noun, then pronouns:

My son knows where **he** lives. **He** won't get lost.

Do you see the house with the beautiful garden. **It**'s mine. Do you like **it**?

5. One verb: [Every sentence has a verb.]

Before presenting this, students need to know the five parts of a verb.

present	past	past participle	present participle	infinitive
speak(s)	spoke	spoken	speaking	to speak

Only 'speak' and 'spoke' are actual verb forms; they are the only ones that can be used alone as a verb. Participles are adjectives, e.g. a broken window, running water. The present participle can also be a noun. Even Level 1 students can understand this.

I **speak**.

I **spoke**.

I **am** speaking (BE + adjective)

English **is** spoken worldwide. (BE + adjective)

So: 'I am go' is wrong because there are two present tense verbs, **am** and **go**.

Footnote: Predicates

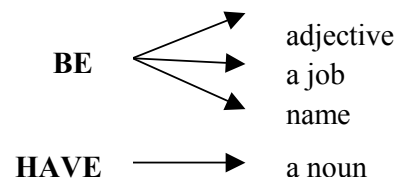
(Predicates are adjectives, i.e. more information about the noun.

This is Fatma. She is Omani.

She is 30. She is busy.

She is a manager. She is working.

She is good-looking. She is married.



Language A La Carte 4

Let's consider spelling. Spelling is important if students want their writing easily read. It is also important, as well, as an aid to pronunciation. Spelling and pronunciation go hand in hand. Regular spelling, and therefore regular pronunciation, applies to most of the high frequency words. So, knowing the regular words, the exceptions are easier for the students to pay attention to.

There was a news bulletin recently about a latter-day George Bernard Shaw, who proposed simplified spelling. One of his solutions was to remove all double letters. However, consider **hoping** and **hopping**. If we remove the second **p**, we must also change the vowel. The spelling often controls the vowel sound, and vice versa.

There are two basic vowel sounds:

- as in the alphabet A E I O U **long**
- as in short words can wet ink log but **short**

1. Of course, we put a silent 'e' on the end of a word to change the vowel sound from short to long.

hop hope us use can cane sit site

2. Now, take it a step further.

Long, 1 : Short, 2

If the vowel is long, it is followed by one consonant – **long 1**. If the vowel is short, it is followed by two consonants – **short 2**.

title little meter letter cubic cutter writer written

For example:

accommodation: acc (short,2) omm (short,2) od (long,1) a vowel before 'tion' is always long

This explains why, when we add to a word not ending in 'e', we double the letter to maintain the short vowel sound: **hoping** and **hopping**.

By the way, it doesn't have to be two of the same consonant.

chicken listen often

3. Now, take it yet another step. This applies to words ending in 'l'.

Short, 1 + 2 : Long, 2 + 1

One vowel is followed by two consonant. The vowel sound is short.

well sill full doll

Two vowels are followed by one consonant.

meal seal fuel tool

A combination of these rule applies to most one-syllabus words ending in any letter. Either there is an 'e' at the end of the word or a double vowel or a double consonant.

made maid boat vote fuel fuse meal mete
bask (short 2) door dock fuss beak best

These rules are not absolute, but common enough to make it a quick answer in the classroom.