# Singapore, grammar, and the teaching of 'internationally acceptable English'

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A consideration of the place of, and options for, explicitly teaching grammar to learners of English as an international language

THE FOLLOWING text develops the opening address given at a conference on the teaching of grammar at the Regional Language Centre (RELC) in Singapore in November 2003. The key issue of the conference was whether the English-language skills of Singaporean school leavers would be improved through a revival of explicit and formal grammar teaching in the Lion City's 21st-century classrooms. The paper addresses this issue in both current and historical terms, going back indeed, at the end, to the beginnings of Western-style grammar teaching among the Greeks. While doing this, however, it also considers the nature and role of what the Singaporean government takes to be the proper target for its future citizens: speaking and writing an internationally acceptable English.

## Good grammar, bad grammar

In the first decade of the 21st century, a key concern among EFL/ESL teachers and other language professionals is how to respond to, manage, and prepare students for the use of English on a global scale. But at the same time… Oops, hold on a moment. I just began a sentence with *but*, which in traditional terms is both bad grammar and poor style – even if the audience couldn't have guessed I was doing this when I spoke at the conference. But to tell the truth, I do things like that all the time, usually without a second thought, without even a tiny twinge of guilt – as do many educated English-speakers worldwide. Indeed, when I'm speaking I often don't know – usually don't even think about – where one sentence stops and another starts, or whether I am using 'proper' sentences at all. Anyway, begin again.

But wait. Is 'Anyway, begin again' a proper sentence? What is its precise grammatical status? Is it a direct command to myself (in which case it is a sentence, just as 'Run!' and 'Please go away' are sentences)? Or is it a so-called

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*sentence fragment*, reduced from something like 'I must therefore begin again'? – yet with no real certainty about the full sentence of which it might be a fragment. In traditional grammatical terms, both such a direct command to myself and sentence fragments in general have often been suspect, especially in a paper due to appear in the proceedings of a conference, in which 'good grammar' is of course of paramount concern.

To tell the truth, I do this sentence-fragment kind of thing all the time, especially when speaking off the cuff, which is what I was more or less doing when I gave the RELC presentation, even though I had copious notes to which I regularly referred. But of course I'm not doing that now: no ad-libbing; nothing off-the-cuff. Perhaps at the conference I should just have 'given a paper' (translation: '…should have read aloud a quantity of pre-printed prose'), or should have been more or less spontaneous, without even thinking of trying to achieve the same effect on paper, and then write a 'proper paper' for the proceedings, or any other outlet (like this one). That means of course that I would be doing one complex piece of work at the conference, another for the proceedings, and a third here – each employing slightly different grammar, and intended for different (but overlapping) audiences and/or readerships. That's a lot of work. No wonder people just write a traditional paper, read it (well or badly) to an audience ranging from the intrigued to the bored, then just hand it over for the proceedings.

In all seriousness, however, should we or shouldn't we (?'should not we', ?'should we not') begin sentences with conjunctions, whether in speech or writing? After all, the conference took place because using 'good grammar' is a hot on-going issue in Singapore, and the phrase 'good grammar' might well be regarded as covering such matters. We *can*, of course, put a conjunction first, and we often *do*, but *should* we? There is certainly a prescriptive, indeed a prohibitive, tradition which says we should not, and that I also should not use such short forms as *I'm* and *shouldn't* in what purports to be (more or less) formal speech and writing – or indeed (for some) in usage of any kind that seeks to 'good'. So, what to do? Or rather, what should one do? Should we or should we not start a sentence with a conjunction and/or use short forms in what people might reasonably expect to be formal speech

and writing? Finally, how does all this relate to the traditionally more prescriptive and currently more descriptive business of providing guidance on grammar – whether explicitly and directly, or implicitly and indirectly? And even more finally, how should I get on with the rest of *this* paper?

Alas, once we start on matters of good and bad grammar, and on analysing style, fresh issues keep coming up. For example, I just wrote *get on with the rest of this paper.* In traditional prescriptive teaching and in some manuals of grammar and style, the little verb *get* has been excoriated as a catch-all for lazy imprecise people. Yet consider the rich syntactic combinations in which *get* gets used: *get up in the morning, get down to work, get in before midnight, get out more in the evenings, get on in life, get off without a fine,* and even *get away with murder* (in grammar as in courts of law).

In grammatical and semantic terms, *get*-constructions like these are in fact far from lazy or simple-minded. They constitute a range of colloquialisms central to the everyday usage of millions of people native to English and from all social backgrounds. Is combining words like *get* and *put* with such postposed prepositions as *up* and *down* ultimately a good or a bad thing? Indeed, in strict grammatical terms, should such forms as *up* and *down* be called 'prepositions' at all when they are being used like this? After all, prepositions are supposedly *pre*-posed, and here the items are *post*-posed. Wouldn't it be better to call them *postpositions* in sentences like *He got up and went out*? Currently, though, they are usually called *adverbial particles* when they are postposed in this way, which suggests that they might usefully be called *prepositional particles* when preposed, and, logically, *particles* in general terms. But they aren't – which demonstrates that grammatical terminology in both its traditional and current form is far from consistent, and may not always be as clear and logical as we might have hoped.

One thing I know for sure: There was no such thing as an adverbial particle when Miss Anderson taught us grammar in my Glasgow secondary school in the mid-1950s, and no one talked at that time about prepositions or adverbial particles as elements in *phrasal verbs*. Indeed, way back then (and earlier) *nobody* talked about phrasal verbs. Later, when I visited Miss A in her retirement, I told her about a dictionary I was co-compiling with Beryl

Atkins: the first dictionary devoted to phrasal verbs (Collins 1974, with impressions into the 1990s, and there have been many others since). She was puzzled and intrigued, because she had no idea what a phrasal verb might be. Yet, well into retirement, she was as open as ever to new possibilities, despite the unyielding grammatical regime she had been constrained to teach us. So grammar teaching is not an unchanging monolith, and never has been.

Yet grammatical rules have often been presented as if written on tablets of stone, whereas in real life such 'rules' (strong statistical tendencies in certain contexts?) and the terminology that goes with them evolve in the same way as language and theories of language evolve. All of which leads me to the question(s): If we overtly teach grammar, *which* and *whose* and *what* historical period's grammar do we teach, and how much of it do we teach to whom at what point in their lives, and with what aims in mind? The matter is hardly simple, for teachers or students, and makes me think of the rhyme:

> The centipede was happy, quite
> Until a toad in fun
> Said, 'Pray, which leg comes after which?'
> This puzzled his head to such a pitch
> He lay distracted in a ditch
> Considering how to run.

Sad to say, there are quite a few grammatically-distracted centipedes in the world.

## An internationally acceptable English?

In many languages, grammar constitutes a domain so vast and subtle that few textbooks encompass it all, even if they are as comprehensive as, say, Quirk *et al*'s *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (Longman, 1985), Biber *et al*'s *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (1999), and Huddleston &. Pullum's *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002). In recent years, many scholars have been involved in such work, to everyone's advantage, and grammarians know more today about the syntax of the world's languages and the current world language than ever before. Some commentators assert that a universalized standardizing variety does not (yet) exist, but in my own view it has been in existence for several decades, and when the Singapore government urges its citizens to communicate fluently in an 'internationally acceptable English' it is referring to this variety.

However, in matters of grammar and style, as with many other things, it isn't easy to be global and local at one and the same time. But as Anne Pakir at the National University of Singapore might put it, we may yet succeed in being 'glocal' in English, moving appropriately from one domain to another, sometimes in the process blending and playing with both – even just for fun. Indeed, it is not so much a case of two demarcated levels of language as of a single vast phono-syntactic-semantic continuum within which (with greater or less ability and success) millions of people worldwide adjust (even fiddle with) their pronunciation, syntax, and vocabulary according to circumstance and need.

My preferred term for such a shared international usage has long been *World Standard English* (*WSE*). For me this usage manifestly exists in print, notably in such publications as the US-centered *TIME* magazine and the 'global newspaper' the *International Herald Tribune* on the one side and the UK-centred *Economist* and *Guardian* on the other. Although print is the keystone of such universalizing usage, it is also increasingly present in speech, notably among anchor people on BBC World and CNN International. The national and ethnic backgrounds of such presenters have become increasingly diverse in recent years, at the same time however as their on-camera styles have grown grammatically and rhetorically closer, apparently without any compulsion to be phonologically more homogen(e)ous.

To my knowledge, Singapore is the only English-using community that currently debates not only how to give its young people a safe entrée into WSE but also how to re-establish and re-vitalize explicitly-taught school-room grammar. It seems to me, however, that such a development may be more a consequence of, rather than a prerequisite for, Singapore's success in using English, as both its key national language and its 'window on the world' (to use a phrase long current in India). Apparently, Singaporeans have made such entrepreneurial, social, and economic progress that they can now afford the time to think of a 'world-class' grammar for their entire population, while simultaneously wagging a reproving finger at that controversial local entity known as 'Singlish'.

This reminds me of certain noble but conde-

scending ambitions in the UK a century ago. In the 1900s, the accent and usage of 'public' (that is, private upper- and middle-class) boys' schools and of British Army officers became an explicit speech target for upwardly mobile individuals and in the UK and its Empire, and for many educated learners in continental Europe. This target was notably extolled by the grammarian Henry Cecil Wyld and provided with its classical description by the phonetician Daniel Jones. During the First World War (when this accent was a major criterion for assessing a young man's 'officer potential'), Jones called it *Public School Pronunciation* (*PSP*), an accurate class-specific label which was however replaced in the 1920s by *Received Pronunciation* (*RP*), where *received* means 'socially accepted' (in upper- and middle-class terms). The accent came to be associated in particular with announcers and news readers on the new British Broadcasting Corporation (the BBC, 1927), and as a result has since then been known internationally as both *RP* and *BBC English*. In the first decade of the 21st century it continues to have immense (though genteelly receding) prestige. By mid-century, a style cent(e)red on the concept *General American* (*GA*) emerged as a world rival after the Second World War/World War II. In recent decades, GA has in many places outflanked RP, but even so the post-imperial prestige of Wyld's and Jones's construct remains considerable.

Grammar however is a different matter. Where UK, US, Australian, Canadian, and other national 'educated' accents of English vary, the grammar of printed, written, and especially formal spoken usage is remarkably uniform at local, national, and even indeed international levels, and it may be this relative sameness to which Singaporeans have been paying particular attention. After all, even the most polished of accents loses its value if the syntactic support is weak. 'Good grammar', for better or worse (and whatever precisely one means by this phrase), has therefore long been a defining component of being sophisticated and cosmopolitan in *any* language, and it is perhaps no surprise that opinion-shapers in Singapore have focused on, as it were, cleaning up local syntax. In the process, they have also sought to abolish or at least diminish the mixed home-grown vernacular known as *Singlish* which (though homely, comforting, and even fun) has no value internationally and is often incomprehensible to outsiders.

## Added value in the grammar class

Like the UK in 1904, Singapore in 2004 relies on its international strength in commerce and services. Of the city state's four official languages, Mandarin and English happen (obligingly) to be the two largest and most commercially useful languages on the planet, Mandarin in terms of numbers, English in terms of distribution. This state of affairs represents high good fortune for Singapore, and it is no surprise that its leaders wish to capitalize on it, setting aside the city state's long-established so-called 'Chinese dialects' in favour of Mandarin and its trendy, slangy, hybridized Singlish in favour of 'the real thing'.

Setting a high standard in the acquisition of such languages as English and Mandarin is understandable, admirable, ambitious, and pragmatic, with a dash of post-colonial and majority-ethnic sentiment. However, where the target to aim for in Mandarin is manifestly the Putonghua of Beijing, no one in Singapore or anywhere else can say in 2004 just *where* the best or even the most practical model for 'internationally acceptable English' can be found – apart from on the international airwaves, which the two pre-eminent English-using nations dominate. The middle-class residents of the Home Counties of the UK long ago lost their value as universal touchstones: many now speak with an 'Estuary' and not an RP accent.

Unlike French, 'internationally acceptable English' has no locality or academy whose pronouncements most people accept. Rather, the language is shared natively by Americans, Britons, Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders, the Irish, many South Africans, a range of people in Caribbean and other islands, and, as a lingua franca or second language, by (among others) India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and increasingly the European Union mainland. Some individuals and groups will defend, may even deify, their nation's English, but others will not, often asserting that many of their fellow citizens use the language 'badly' and 'should do better', while still others are by and large neutral. Manifestly, skill and range in the use of a language vary, and the output of many native and second-language users of English may to a greater or lesser extent fall short of sociocultural, professional, and international acceptability (however such things are assessed).

Indeed, even if Singapore has by, say, 2020 achieved considerable success in terms of 'an internationally acceptable English', it will be astonishing if by then it had succeeded in making a majority of its people polished performers in it. Such an achievement would be a first for any Anglophone territory – indeed, for any territory using any language of wider distribution. Fortunately for Singapore it does not have an enormous population, but even so, what would Singapore need to do in order to achieve anything at all close to such a goal? And what would an associated grammatical renaissance in the schools need to encourage?

Below are some sentences that may illustrate some of the key complexities that traditional grammar has never normally dealt with (although the use of italics, underlining, and/or capitalization may have helped writing and print get closer to spoken usage). Let us consider how the average native-speaking Anglophone might say the following sentences, with appropriate stress and intonation, and especially with the contrastive intonation implied by the italicized words:

1  They teach English *grammar* in Singapore.
2  *Why* do they teach English grammar in Singapore?
3  Why do they *teach* English grammar in Singapore?
4  Why do they teach *English* grammar in Singapore?
5  Why do they teach English *grammar* in Singapore?
6  Why do they teach English grammar in *Singapore*?
7  *Should* they teach English grammar in Singapore?
8  Will explicitly teaching English grammar in Singapore make any *difference*?

A considerable amount of grammar (etc.) is packed into these eight questions, but there is of course much more in them than most people think of as grammar. Most notable is contrastive stress, something that is just as structured and meaningful as conventional grammar. Query: Is such stress a part of grammar, and if it isn't should it be, or is it something else that is – or should be – linked with grammar, and therefore taught systematically to non-native learners? Contrastive stress is built on to the natural underlying stress-timed rhythm of English, and one might reasonably ask: Is that underlying pattern in any sense part of grammar? If it is, then Singaporean grammarians should presumably now pay attention to it for that reason alone. If it is *not*, how does (or should) it relate to grammar and to the use of such devices (in writing and print) as italics, underlining, and the capitalization of an entire word in a text? In my own view, basic stress in English is a matter of phonology, but contrastive stress is at least phonology plus semantics, with side-effects on the grammar of speech and on reading aloud.

Even if such matters as rhythm and stress are not part of (or usually associated with) grammar as the term is traditionally understood, surely (in aiming for an internationally acceptable English) teachers anywhere must in any case draw attention to such features, and where better than in a grammar class (where such exists), with its profound concern for structure and contrast? Indeed, if teachers do not draw attention to such matters alongside grammar, where *will* they draw attention to them, in order to show how the various aspects of language inter-operate? In the past of the West, when traditional grammar was king, such issues did not usually arise in class, largely because grammatical study was text-based and seldom linked with speech (especially the casual variety). Matters have however changed. We are now less inclined to give literacy pride of place over oracy, especially if our concern is an internationally acceptable *spoken* English. Ultimately, the rhythms and contrasts of speech are far more significant for smooth and successful global communication than, say, identifying misrelated participles and split infinitives on paper.

In teaching grammar (which, appropriately integrated into a general course in English, is to my mind a valuable thing to do), how do we decide its boundaries in relation, on one side, to pronunciation and conversation and, on the other, to phrases, sentences, paragraphs, essays, conversations, talks, and formal speeches? In effect we need to think (as traditional grammarians generally have not done) about a 'grammar of speech' as well as 'a grammar of writing', importantly including the contrast between formality and informality in both mediums. It is hardly enough to suppose (as has often happened in the past) that there is a great deal of grammar on the page but little in speech.

## Megacities, city states, and the origins of grammar

Within a broadly global, local, and glocal framework the world's very large cities have long been key areas of linguistic mingling and innovation. Prominent among such megacities is London, whose diverse inhabitants use some 350 languages *every day*. England has for centuries managed comfortably with a single language used more or less by all, but nowadays English co-occurs in many homes, especially in London, where another language dominates or gets equal time. Like London, New York is (and has long been) massively multilingual within an avowedly monolingual USA, which however has considerable verbal variety in Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, other major hubs, and many smaller places.

We live in an age of megacities whose local and migrant language profiles are so complex that their inhabitants need more care in terms of language rights and education than they will ever get, and need it more urgently than Singapore. The fact that the cities just mentioned are located in English-speaking nations with educated standard varieties has proved to be irrelevant in terms of the burdens that confront many immigrants and locals alike. To add to the complexities, the vast majority of people in such cities are not speakers of anything that can be called internationally acceptable at a prestige level. Paradoxically, any problems Singapore may have in terms of teaching and learning English grammar are easier to handle than the problems that currently beset, say, London and New York.

Singapore as a business hub is however intriguing in other ways. It is more like the city states of ancient Greece, or indeed a particular expatriate Greek city that is relevant to the theme of our conference. I am thinking of the city where the Western-style study and teaching of grammar was invented: in Alexandria, a Greek trading city on the coast of Egypt, named after Alexander the Great of Macedon. Grammar *invented?* That is surely an odd way to put it, and I should qualify my statement straight away. Alexandria wasn't the only place at the time where language was *studied*, but it *was* the place where (as far as we know) the first grammar book (or, more accurately, papyrus roll) was compiled in Greek: the prototype in fact of all later Western-style grammars. We even know the name of the man who wrote it:

Dionysius Thrax (Dionysius the Thracian, from northern Greece). Indeed, there is, it seems to me, an unbroken line from Dionysius in Alexandria to a conference on grammar in the sea port of Singapore in 2003.

Dionysius created his grammar to help people write polished ('internationally acceptable'?) Greek, at that time the up-market lingua franca of the Eastern Mediterranean. School-based grammar has never traditionally dealt with the casually acquired usage of family and community; instead, it has focused to such an extent on writing that the term *grammar* itself historically meant 'writing' (from Greek *gramma* a letter of the alphabet, from *graphein* 'to write'). The pupils of Dionysius could already *speak* the international language (perhaps with an Alexandrian accent and plenty of local slang), but they also needed to write it, learn its rhetoric, and engage not only in trade but also in oratory and *politics* (literally, the 'things in the city').

Dionysius is now largely forgotten, but the grammatical tradition he set in train passed from the Greeks to the Romans, from ancient Rome to the nation-states of Europe, then to the world at large. This is why, two millennia later, as a schoolboy in the port of Glasgow in Scotland, I was not taught the grammar of my everyday vernacular but an idealized grammar for writing in an English I would need if I hoped to become a competent upwardly-mobile British citizen. Teachers and others deplored the local dialect and the slang we used as lively youngsters: semi-officially discouraged despite raising the hint of an indulgent smile on the face of even the stoniest policy-maker. Most pupils emerged with a 'refined' veneer on a local usage that was in effect Glasgow 'Singlish'. Some learned to keep the two styles apart, one for homelier matters, the other for 'higher' things in a wider world: that is, Glasgow's internationally acceptable 'Singapore English'.

Alexandria, Singapore, Glasgow, London, New York, and many other cities and states have more in common linguistically than might at first be supposed, although in their specifics they differ. Singapore's city-wide national language lab is unique, hovering as it does on the edge of the native English-speaking world. Singapore's 'private' and 'low' use of English will be buttressed by the fact that it has a 'public' and 'higher' English for use in the world at large, alongside (and shading into) the 'lower'

homelier usage. Governments have always tended to deplore high/low dichotomies of this kind, but such divisions are common and hard to change, whether in London, Glasgow, New York, or any other cosmopolitan locale. Singapore is not alone in being linguistically complex, but *is* unique in having four official languages on the one hand and on the other a continuum of usage from low local to world-class. 'Enjoy,' as they intransitively put it in Jewish New York English – an 'error' that has beed adopted into internationally acceptable usage. ∎

[*Note* For more information on Dionysius Thrax and the history of grammar, see the entry *Grammar*, by Sidney Greenbaum, Dennis E. Baron, & Tom McArthur, in *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, 1992, pp. 446–450.]