

# We'd say it better with a theme effort

If grammar were a rigid set of rules, how would language change? But don't take it too lightly, advises **Annabelle Lukin**

**S**MS (short message service) or text messaging has become the latest whipping boy for language commentators pronouncing on the decline of English. The speed and casualness of SMS communication is said to be killing grammar and wreaking all manner of havoc with punctuation.

These sorts of claims reinforce the widespread view of grammar as a set of rules, with grammarians being like parking inspectors, ready to write you out a ticket for even the most minor infringement.

Although many language commentators happily don the uniform and are quick to police language use, this view of grammar as a set of rules to be obeyed is misconceived. If grammar were rules, how could language change?

Grammar is more helpfully understood as a self-extending system that, like matter and energy, changes according to the forces that act on it and through it. Grammar links us to the past while allowing us to adapt to new futures.

You might think this the rantings of a grammophile. But consider that any time you say or write



anything, an enormous number of grammatical choices must be made. There is never only one way to “mean”.

The child who says, “The milk spilled”, rather than “I spilled the milk”, has already learned that different grammatical choices construe the world in different ways.

When the creative power of grammar is acknowledged, grammarians are no longer relegated to patrolling the boundaries of “acceptable” language use. Instead, their role becomes a combination of the cartographer and the oceanographer, mapping the limits of real-life language use and tracking the currents of language change.

SMS is a new mode of communication, with its own set of cultural expectations. It is the job of grammar to meet and shape those expectations. SMS is not ungrammatical or agrammatical, just an

as yet uncharted exchange of meanings. At least part of its structure comes from being a form of communication intermediate between speech and writing — that is, it is spoken language exchanged through a written mode.

This is not the “anything goes” view of grammar. I have been a language teacher for many different kinds of students. I know the

problems created by the lack of teaching about grammar in our schools. I have been constantly dismayed, though not surprised, by how little students can explain about the nature of language.

If students know anything, it is typically rules of thumb that are wrong, simplistic or focus too narrowly on points of grammar or punctuation available to the naked

eye. Meanwhile, a whole range of deeply significant systems of grammatical choice remain submerged by widespread public ignorance and the failure of education systems to take language seriously as an object of study.

Take for instance the grammatical system of theme, which is about how a speaker or writer signals what is salient in the flow of

information as a piece of language unfolds. In English, theme is expressed by the element that is put first in a clause. Within a single clause, the choice is not all that important: what matters is how you make these decisions across a whole stretch of text.

Almost a decade ago, the University of Sydney's Geoff Williams showed that upper primary school

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students could not only learn the grammatical concept of theme but also apply it to their writing to produce much more effective and coherent texts.

Recently I was demonstrating this principle with masters students, all of whom are involved in writing many different kinds of texts — for work, academic and creative purposes. For most, this fundamental grammatical tool for creating cohesive and coherent texts had never before been brought to their attention.

“Death of grammar” pronouncements are part of the problem, not a step towards an answer. They stifle the debates we ought to be having, including discussions on the central role of language in creating the conditions for democracy, peace and war.

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