

Level 5

Vocabulary and style

Among the requirements of the National Curriculum at level 5 is that pupils should be able to:

show through discussion an awareness of a writer's choice of particular words and phrases and the effect on the reader; e.g. recognise puns, word-play, unconventional spellings

...

show in discussion the ability to recognise variations in vocabulary according to purpose, topic and audience and whether language is spoken or written ...; e.g. discuss the use of slang in dialogue and narrative in a published text and in their own writing and comment on its appropriateness.

This kind of sensitivity to what I shall call 'style' is of course one of the main goals of English teaching, and no doubt the National Curriculum is reflecting not only best practice, but normal practice. Nevertheless I think I may be able to offer you a new perspective on this extraordinarily complex phenomenon.

The National Curriculum focuses on vocabulary as a marker of style ('variations in vocabulary according to purpose, topic and audience and whether language is spoken or written'). As I explained in chapter 2, linguists generally see vocabulary as part of grammar, and to many of us the boundary between vocabulary and general rules is anything but clear. In principle, then, a book on grammar ought to have something coherent to say about vocabulary. The trouble with vocabulary, though, is that it is messy by nature: rich in detail and complexity but poor in generalities. The best one can do is to

select one little corner of the jungle and hope that by showing its structure one can throw light on other parts as well.

I shan't even try to define 'style', since there are already quite enough competing definitions. Instead I propose to focus on just two phenomena which might reasonably be covered by this term. One is the way in which the choice of words shows what kind of person is speaking, and the other is the way in which it shows the source of authority for the content of the words. As we shall see, these phenomena are closely connected.

For the pupils I have a question about a longish text, so I shall leave this question till I introduce the text. But for you I have a straightforward question: what is the meaning of the word APPARENTLY?

A lesson for you

Here are some sentences containing APPARENTLY:

- (1a) He apparently missed his train.
- (1b) It's snowing in Scotland, apparently.
- (1c) Apparently you have to apply through the local post-office.

In asking for the meaning of APPARENTLY I am asking what contribution this word makes to the meaning of a sentence containing it; that is, what difference does the presence of APPARENTLY make? Well, let's compare the sentences in which it is present with their equivalents where it is absent:

- (2a) Fred missed his train.
- (2b) It's snowing in Scotland.
- (2c) You have to apply through the local post-office.

Let us first make another comparison, between (2a) and the same sentence with JUST added:

(3) Fred just missed his train.

The addition of *just* modifies the description of the event described; as we all know, there is a difference between simply missing one's train, and just missing it. It is easy to imagine an event which could accurately be described by (2a) but not by (3) – if he missed it by three hours, for instance. Similarly, if we add *ONCE* or *DELIBERATELY* we change the definition of the event by making it more precise.

Returning to *APPARENTLY*, you will notice that its effect on the sentence's meaning is quite different. Instead of changing the definition of the event being described, it changes the speaker's role in speaking. Suppose we hear (2a), without *APPARENTLY*; what conclusion do we draw? Under normal circumstances (excluding jokes, novels, etc.) we assume that the speaker vouches for the truth of what is said; that is, that Fred missed his train. But (1a), containing *APPARENTLY*, tells us that the speaker believes that Fred missed his train, but is quoting someone else's authority for it. So if it turned out that Fred didn't in fact miss his train, (2a) would count as a lie, but (1a) wouldn't.

On the other hand, *APPARENTLY* doesn't simply mean that the speaker has heard someone reporting what follows. Suppose little Ann tells her mother that the Tooth Fairy left some money where she had left the tooth that had fallen out, the mother wouldn't report this to the father as *Apparently the Tooth Fairy left Ann some money for her tooth*. This choice of words would imply that she herself believed the report. So if I say (1a), I am telling you that I believe Fred missed his train, but that I only have someone else's word for it. Because of this I can't then deny the report by adding *but I don't believe it*.

The 'meaning' of *APPARENTLY*, then, can be defined along the following lines: the speaker of a sentence containing *APPARENTLY* does not vouch personally for the truth of the sentence, but does accept it as true on the basis of information supplied by others.

What other means does English provide for expressing this kind of meaning? The list is surprisingly long and varied,

and includes: *ACCORDING TO*, *SAY*, *SEEM*, *PRESUMABLY* and tag questions (which you will remember from the lesson at level 3). Here are some example sentences:

- (4a) According to Bill, Fred missed his train.
- (4b) Bill says Fred missed his train.
- (4c) Fred seems to have missed his train.
- (4d) Presumably Fred missed his train.
- (4e) Fred missed his train, did he?
- (4f) Fred missed his train, didn't he?

I am not suggesting that these sentences all express the same meaning; far from it. But they are similar in that they all contain the words *Fred . . . missed his train*, and that in every case these words express the notion 'that Fred missed his train', but without actually telling us, on the speaker's authority, that this is so, in the way that the bald statement *Fred missed his train* does.

This little study highlights one of the important contributions of recent work in linguistics, which has been to distinguish various radically different kinds of 'meaning' – the meaning of *APPARENTLY* being radically different from that of a word like *RECENTLY*. But it also shows us something important (though obvious) about the meaning of an ordinary statement: in the absence of a word such as *APPARENTLY* (or some contextual clues such as the opening *Have you heard the one about . . . ?*), the speaker does vouch for the truth of what is said. In other words, the speaker is also 'the authority' (for the message).

A lesson for the pupils

I have chosen a text that might be read by a pupil at level 5, *The Finding* by Nina Bawden (1987: 48):

'Six years old is too young for a key,' Laura grumbled out loud. *She* hadn't been given a key until she was ten. 'Bob is such a sensible boy,' her mother had said when Laura had pointed this out, as if

Laura had not been sensible at that age, and Laura felt the unfairness burn hotly inside her. Mum was always on about things being fair, but she wasn't fair herself, was she? It wasn't fair to make her keep a secret from Alex, particularly when it was something so interesting. It was making her tell a lie in a way, Laura thought indignantly, turning her into a cheat and a liar!

My question for your class is: does the narrator think that Laura's mother behaved unfairly?

What is particularly interesting about this passage is the way in which the authority for what is said varies between the narrator and Laura, and how these changes are marked. At some points the narrator herself is the authority, but at others the authority is Laura. This is clearly so where Laura's own words are quoted directly, but it is sometimes the case even where the narrator is the speaker. Even though the narrator's words include *Mum ... wasn't fair*, it is vitally important that the reader should realise that this isn't part of the story, but just what Laura thinks. This is of course the answer to my question, but what matters is the evidence for the answer.

Here is the passage presented as a sort of dramatic dialogue, with the speaker and authority indicated:

SPEAKER	AUTHORITY	TEXT
1 Laura	Laura	'Six years old is too young for a key.'
2 Narrator	Narrator	Laura grumbled out loud.
3 Narrator	Laura	<i>She</i> hadn't been given a key until she was ten.
4 Mother	Mother	'Bob is such a sensible boy.'
5 Narrator	Narrator	her mother had said when Laura had pointed this out,
6 Narrator	Laura	as if Laura had not been sensible at that age,
7 Narrator	Narrator	and Laura felt the unfairness burn hotly inside her.
8 Narrator	Laura	<i>Mum was always on about</i> things being fair, but she <i>wasn't</i> fair her-

self, *was she?* It *wasn't* fair to make her keep a secret from Alex, particularly when it was something so interesting. It was making her tell a lie *in a way*,

9 Narrator	Narrator	Laura thought indignantly,
10 Narrator	Laura	turning her into a cheat and a liar!

Every one of the changes in authority or speaker is marked in some way by the choice of language, but some of the clues are very subtle. In order to answer my question the class have to pick up the clues in part 8, so let's concentrate on them. I have highlighted the clues that I noticed.

The general strategy is to present what is said as Laura's words, not the narrator's, without actually claiming that Laura said or even thought literally these words. The narrator is still the speaker (unlike the passages between speech marks), as we can see from the choice of tenses: past tense throughout part 8. But she is speaking, as it were, on behalf of Laura. The clues to this are as follows:

(a) the word *Mum*, which is stylistically wrong for the narrator (compare *her mother* in 5). It is also used here as a proper noun (like *Laura*), as you can see from the absence of any word like *her* before it; when used in this way it generally means 'my mother', which makes sense in the mouth of Laura but not of the narrator.

(b) the expression *was always on about*, which suggests a teenage speaker rather than a mature writer. This expression can be broken down into two parts: the complex dictionary-word BE ON ABOUT (as in *My dad's on about my homework again*) and the exaggerated use of ALWAYS (as in *My dad is always telling me off*).

(c) the tag question *was she?*, which indicates an interactive dialogue (in which the speaker is actually talking to herself), rather than part of the narrative. As you can probably see, this kind of tag question is used to share the authority for the statement with the hearer.

(d) the expression *in a way*, a marker of tentativeness

which is common in speech but not in writing, and therefore suggests Laura talking (to herself) rather than Nina Bawden writing as a narrator.

It is tempting to include *wasn't*, which occurs twice, as a clue, on the grounds that a shortened form like this (containing an apostrophe to show the absence of a vowel!) is more appropriate to spontaneous speech than to the narrative part of a novel. However 6, which also comes on Laura's authority, contains *had not* rather than the expected *hadn't*; and the next sentence after my extract is *She couldn't see Alex at first*, which is clearly part of the narrative rather than Laura's thoughts. We therefore have to resist the temptation.

As I said earlier, I know that close reading of texts is already part of many English lessons, so this activity as such may already be familiar to you. What is new is the analytical apparatus that an explicit study of grammar provides – notions like 'tag question' and 'dictionary-word', plus the ability to break down complex expressions into simpler parts (as I did with *was always on about*). Another change is that the descriptive approach of modern grammar allows colloquial expressions (such as BE ON ABOUT, IN A WAY, tag questions, shortened auxiliary verbs) to be accepted and discussed objectively, as objects of interest on the same footing as parts of the written standard language.

It would be easy to apply this kind of analysis to other material, though the passage I chose is probably unusually rich in its structure. Advertisements often pretend to put words into the mouths of people other than the advertiser, and would provide ample opportunity for analysing the clues to the purported speaker's identity.

Another useful activity would be the production of material by the class. You could imagine some event such as an accident in the canteen, and get the class to provide a number of different reports of it, each suited to a different speaker: the school secretary, the cleaner who had to deal with the mess, a junior child, a senior child, a teacher, the school newspaper, the local newspaper, a radio reporter, etc. Some of the reports will naturally be spoken, others written, and the class should consider the different kinds of clues available in the two

mediums. Having done enough of this, you could increase the difficulty of the task by separating speaker from authority: how would a child report a report from the secretary? This may be beyond the ability of most of the class, but any members of the class with a feel for acting could have a field day.

Theoretical synopsis

From a grammarian's point of view the discussion in this chapter has been all over the place, jumping from simple dictionary-words to tag questions to shortened forms, and from purely stylistic matters (such as the choice between MUM and MOTHER) to questions about meaning (such as the meaning of APPARENTLY). And yet there has been a consistent theme running through the chapter: our choice of words is not determined entirely by the events and situations we want to describe.

For example, consider all the variations on the simple sentence *Fred missed his train* that we reviewed. These all described the same event, and indeed they all described it in precisely the same way, giving just the same amount of detail about it; and yet they varied enormously in their meaning. At the most general level the meaning differences involved the triangular relation between the speaker, this event and the authority for the truth or otherwise of the event. This kind of meaning does not fit at all comfortably with the popular view that meaning is simply a matter of providing names for people, things and events in the world. Instead, we see that many sentences tell us something about the speaker at the same time that they tell us something about the rest of the world.

It is hard to justify a line between this kind of meaning and what is generally seen as matters of dialect or register, most of which also serve the purpose of giving information about the speaker over and above the 'basic content' of the sentence. For example, the choice between MUM and MOTHER tells us something about how the speaker wants us to see them, or

about how the speaker views the situation of which the speaking is a part; and similarly for the choice between BE ON ABOUT and GRUMBLE ABOUT. These choices are not made by looking at the person or event being described – is she a mum or a mother? is that an example of going on or of grumbling? – but rather by deciding what the total information package conveyed by the sentence should contain. In other words, what do we want to say about ourselves as well as about the things being described?

To a grammarian, then, there seems to be little point in dividing the contents of the grammar into neat compartments bearing labels like ‘grammatical information’, ‘meaning’, ‘dialect’, ‘register’, ‘style’. What really matters is that when we learn a language we have to learn how to use all the words and other patterns (syntactic constructions, intonation patterns and so on). And learning how to use a pattern involves learning not only how to combine it with other patterns but what information we convey to hearers by using it. Although the territory of grammar has traditionally been restricted largely to matters of how to combine patterns, the modern emphasis on ‘mentalism’ (which I described in chapter 2) means that grammar, as the study of linguistic knowledge, includes far more than you might expect.

Level 6

Subjects, verbs and dialects

My text for the next lesson is the following collection of extracts from the National Curriculum:

[Pupils should be able to] show in discussion an awareness of grammatical differences between spoken Standard English and a non-standard variety; e.g. take note of different ways in which tense and person are marked in the verb ‘to be’ after listening to recordings or participating in classroom improvisations.

Pupils should be given the opportunity to consider:
– any grammatical differences between the speech of the area and spoken Standard English, e.g. in verb forms, pronoun use, prepositions.

[Pupils should] demonstrate, through discussion and in their writing, grammatical differences between spoken and written English; e.g. in a group, identify some of the differences between the language used in a tape recording of someone talking and a piece of writing by the same person.

All these extracts have something to do with the difference between non-standard and standard English, and since verb-forms receive special attention in the National Curriculum we shall follow suit.

This unit can be seen as a continuation of chapter 3, ‘What is Standard English?’, where I distinguished between Standard English as a dialect similar to all other dialects, and Standard English as a large collection of registers. All the differences with which we shall be concerned now are matters of dialect, simply different ways of saying the same thing. The main aim of the chapter will therefore be two-fold. First, we must