

Alternative Views of English Grammar

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What good is a definition that I cannot understand? What happens when a student of English as a foreign language seeks a straight answer, but gets an idiomatic response? Why is it that sometimes the silliest of answers is actually the best? Consider the question, "What is a 'second' of time? One answer is, "it's equal to the length of time it takes a beam of light travelling through a vacuum to go 186,300 miles." This just might be too scientific and as such unintelligible to a learner. A second answer might be, "Just a second. I need to finish up this sentence. Then I'll be with you." This is of course a reference to the 'idiomatic' second, which might be five minutes long or more. This is likewise not helpful to understanding. A third answer might be, "Carefully, count 1, 2, 3, 4... and say "elephant" between each number. That is how long each second is." A simple, but effective explanation is sometimes the best.

My point here is that understanding and teaching need to match. So when I encountered an older English textbook, Modern English Handbook (Gorrell and Laird, 1956), which clearly explained how the 'Simple Present Tense' had ceased to function as such about 300 years ago, I began to look more seriously for Alternate explanations of English grammar. Appendix A is an excerpt from their book. Three hundred and fifty years ago as we stood at the barbeque tending the steaks we would say, "I cook steak" in reference to our current activity. Today we say, "I am cooking steak." Thus, to retain the name, but not the function, is wrong, misleading, confusing. The verb form that we refer to as 'The Simple Present Tense,' does not refer to the 'present,' and is anything but 'simple.' However, it is easy to criticize, and I was determined not to do so until I

had an alternate explanation which was at least functionally correct. This has taken the better part of eighteen years teaching ESL, EFL, and ESP in Canada, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

If I was to ignore the current grammar, I had to consider carefully what I thought 'grammar' was, in order to comprehend how it might be reconfigured. I found one very useful grammatical structure in the 'Positive to Negative to Question' transformations required in English. A second set of constructs, Surface form, Underlying form, and Elision, added to my ability to view English grammar in new ways. Let's consider the first of these systems, the positive to negative to question transformations.

BE communications:

I am a teacher. → I am not a teacher. → Am I a teacher?

He is a teacher → He is not a teacher. → Is he a teacher?

They are teachers. → They are not teachers. → Are they teachers?

DO communications:

I work at HCT. → I do not work at HCT. → Do I work at HCT?

He works at HCT. → He does not work at HCT → Does he work at HCT?

They work at HCT. → They do not work at HCT. → Do they work at HCT?

HAVE communications:

I have worked at HCT. → I have not worked at HCT. → Have I worked at HCT?

He has worked at HCT. → He has not worked at HCT. → Has he worked at HCT?

They have worked at HCT. → They have not worked at HCT. → Have they worked at HCT?

Figure 1. Looking at the sets of transformations we use to differentiate positive statements from negative ones and questions, we can see two variations on the system employed for the BE 'auxiliary' verbs.

Looking at the set of all possible patterns of how we make the change from positive to negative and question reveals three sets of patterns. A sample of these is presented in Figure 1. where we clearly see that BE 'auxiliary' verbs utilize one set of transformations, DO 'auxiliary'

verbs clearly use a variation on this system, and HAVE 'auxiliary' verbs use yet another variation on this system.

The verbs, 'BE, DO, and HAVE' have been recognized as 'different' from all the other verbs for as far back as I can find reference. I am over sixty years old now, and can still remember my elementary school lessons in English grammar. We learned that 'BE, DO, and HAVE' were 'Primary verbs,' and all other verbs were 'Secondary verbs.' Since that time the 'primary' verbs have become 'auxiliary' verbs (Sinclair, John. 1993) or 'helping' verbs (English Club.com. 2011) (see Figure 2). 'Modal' helping verbs have entered the literature, and 'secondary' verbs have become 'main verbs. Also, 'modal' helping verbs are now part of the explanation of English grammar. Modals are sometimes called 'Conditionals,' but they were never called 'verbs' in the 1950's. I will deal with this topic more thoroughly, later. I decided to look more closely at the older definitions.

Forms of Helping Verbs

All helping verbs are used with a main verb (either expressed or understood*). There are 2 groups of helping verbs:

Primary helping verbs, used mainly to change the tense or voice of the main verb, and in making questions and negatives.

Modal helping verbs, used to change the "mood" of the main verb.

Figure 2. English Club.com define 'helping verbs' which were previously termed, 'auxiliary' verbs. 'Main' verbs were previously called 'Secondary' verbs. And 'Modal' helping verbs were non-existent in the literature of the 1950's.

One problem that my Arabic students revealed to me was that they did not understand that 'am, are, & is' were three forms of the BE verb and had identical functions in sentences. They read them as three different verbs, just as 'work, play and eat' are three different words. Furthermore they could not find any 'meaning' for these words due to the lack of use of an

‘existence’ verb in communications referring to the present in Arabic (pers. obs. 2003). To assist them I developed a ‘matching’ explanation. I used the ‘Family’ concept and explained that ‘am, is & are’ were members of the same family. They had the same meaning, but were paired with different groups: singular and plural, first, second and third person. I drew up a PowerPoint slide (see Figure 3.) which presented the BE ‘present’ primary verbs one by one in the order used in older grammar books, but almost never found in today’s texts which tend to break the whole into several disconnected parts. This input had a positive effect on student performance, so I extended this to a series of slides presenting the negative and question patterns. To help my students correct problems they had differentiating ‘me, my & I,’ I added more slides presenting

I	<u>am</u>	Ahmed.
You	<u>are</u>	Hamad.
He	<u>is</u>	Farris.
She	<u>is</u>	Sultana.
It	<u>is</u>	a camel.
Ahmed	<u>is</u>	a teacher.
The teacher	<u>is</u>	Mansour.
We	<u>are</u>	friends.
You	<u>are</u>	sisters.
They	<u>are</u>	Saeed and Ali.
Ahmed and Ali	<u>are</u>	brothers.
The teachers	<u>are</u>	Obaid and Adel.

Figure 3. By presenting a list of typical subjects representing first, second and third person singular and plural together with their BE primary verb pairs, and by placing them in meaningful communications, it becomes clear that these words function to differentiate the ‘Person’ group and to ‘glue’ the other words together in a very open ‘contextual’ relationship.

the ‘possessive determinersⁱⁱⁱ’ and ‘object pronouns. The argument against using the accepted term ‘possessive adjective’ is easy to understand when you see that all these words replace ‘the’

in a simple table such as Figure 3 presents. The only argument supporting the use of the term is that these words precede a noun. But they function in a similar manner to words like ‘the, this, some,’ and ‘a.’ This is a small alteration on the current grammar, but an important one in that it follows the logic that names must be descriptive of function.

When it came time to do the same for the second ‘Family’ DO, I resorted to the concepts of ‘Surface form, Underlying form & Elision.’ Most ESL texts, if they attempt to explain the grammar at all, refer to ‘inserting’ the auxiliary verb ‘do’ or in the case of the third person singular ‘does,’ to form the negative, emphatic, or question. It seemed easier to ‘elide’ the ‘do’ or ‘does’ in the one positive form than to insert it three times to form the others. And while ‘do’ is elided for all ‘Persons,’ both singular and plural, in the third person singular, the ‘s’ or ‘es’ of ‘does’ is suffixed


I	<i>do</i>	work
You	<i>do</i>	study
He	<i>does</i>	talk s
She	<i>does</i>	ride s
It	<i>does</i>	go es
Ahmed	<i>does</i>	fli es
The teacher	<i>does</i>	teach es
		
We	<i>do</i>	walk
You	<i>do</i>	walk
They	<i>do</i>	walk
Ahmed and Ali	<i>do</i>	walk
The teachers	<i>do</i>	walk

Figure 4. Looking at the list of DO primary verbs together with their ‘person’ pairs, it is easy to see that we elide the primary verb and suffix the ‘s’ or ‘es’ ending of ‘does’ onto the secondary verb. This is further verified by looking at the ‘past’ tense situation where ‘ed’ is suffixed onto the secondary verb [instead of ‘id’ because so many verbs end in ‘e’ and there is so little difference in their sounds].

onto the ‘secondary’ verb following it. So while the ‘surface; form looks like, “I work at HCT.” and “He works at HCT.” the ‘underlying’ form reads as, “I do work at HCT.” and “He does work at

HCT.” This transformation is required in English with all secondary verbs except the BE Family secondary verbs, which cannot follow DO as a primary verb. We elide the primary DO verb in the positive and further suffix the ‘s’ or ‘es’ of ‘does’ onto the secondary verb to preserve the sense of the third person singular. Further to this we can look at the case for the ‘Past’ tense and see that ‘did,’ the primary verb for DO signifying the past tense is elided and ‘d’ or ‘ed’ is suffixed onto the secondary verb in all persons (see Figures 4 & 5).

I	<i>did</i>		walk ed
You	<i>did</i>		walk ed
He	<i>did</i>		walk ed
She	<i>did</i>		walk ed
It	<i>did</i>		walk ed
Ahmed	<i>did</i>		walk ed
The teacher	<i>did</i>	⇒	walk ed
We	<i>did</i>		walk ed
You	<i>did</i>		walk ed
They	<i>did</i>		walk ed
Ahmed and Ali	<i>did</i>		walk ed
The teachers	<i>did</i>		walk ed

Figure 5. If we elide the word ‘did’ and suffix the last part as ‘ed’ instead of ‘id’ we have again supported the idea that we can explain English grammar in this way.

The HAVE Family follows a similar transformation pattern to the BE Family, but requires what is currently called the ‘past participle’ form of the secondary verb to follow it. ‘Have,’ as a primary verb, presents a problem to students in that it is hard to differentiate, “I have a car.” from , “I have been with Ali.” Students want to negate both sentences with, “I have not...” But the first is negated as, “I do not have...” and the second as, “I have not been...” It is this difference which allows us to see the boundary between the grammar of DO communications and HAVE

communications. This is the root of why these ‘verbs’ have always been recognized as being different from ordinary (secondary) verbs.

Their function is so different from the secondary verbs that I suggest they be termed, ‘Dimensions.’ BE, DO, and HAVE are the three ‘Dimensions’ of English. They represent Context, Action, and Temporal Relationship communications respectively. All sentences fall within at least one of these Dimensions. But this can only be seen if we look at positive, negative and question forms together. When we break the system apart as the books today tend to do, the system is invisible.

Figure 6 presents an overview of English verbs illustrating the altered view of the English verb system. It presents the three Dimensions, verb Families, the primary verbs and secondary verbs as well as the irregular and regular verb groups.

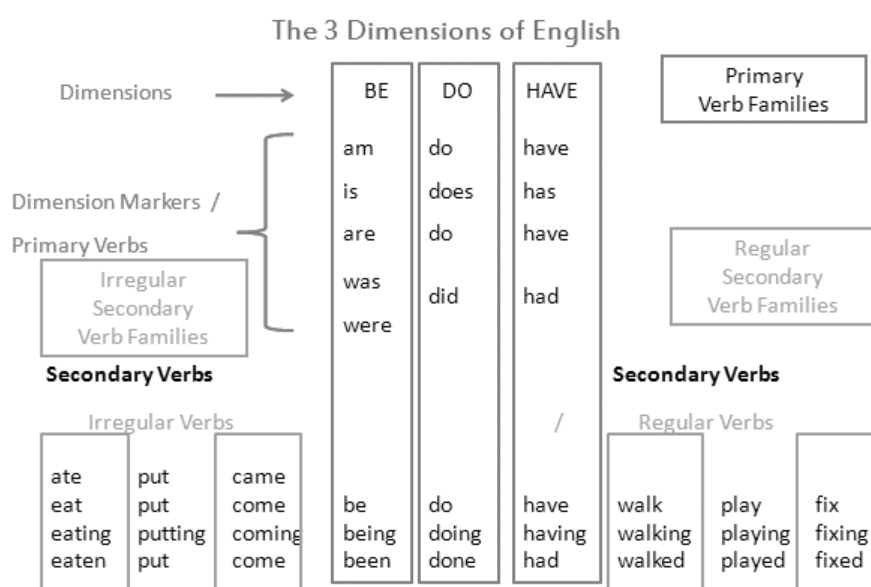


Figure 6. The Three Dimensions of English grammar shows the Primary verbs which are unique to the three Families. The Secondary verbs are further divided into the Irregular and Regular verb groups. While the Secondary verb list would extend both left and right, it would only extend to about 110 verb Families to the left (Irregular verbs) but would extend into the thousands to the right.

Another alternate view of the verb system is the reference to ‘time.’ By naming a verb form, ‘The Simple Present Tense,’ we direct or focus attention on ‘the present.’ But it is widely

accepted that this verb form does not necessarily refer to the present any more than it does to the past or future. “I drive a car.” is not about the ‘present’ the same way that ‘I am driving a car.’ is. How do we explain this to our students? An alternate view holds that the verb forms currently called the Simple Present actually only ‘acknowledge’ time. Just as I might wave to a friend across the street to acknowledge him (I do not have time to stop and chat), these verb forms acknowledge time, and not only time, but ‘space’ as well. The span of time acknowledged depends on other words in the communication. “I am hungry.” would only encompass a few hours in its scope. “He is my teacher.” encompasses a much longer time frame, and, “The sky is blue.” spans eons. The communication, “I drive a car.” assumes or presupposes that this activity has taken place in the past, otherwise the statement would read, “Now, I drive a car.” And it also presumes that this activity will also take place in the future, as much as the future can be presumed. Figure 7. Illustrates this altered view of ‘time.’ Of course the past tense primary verbs refer to the past. But what this means is that after the subject has been established, there is a binary choice to make as regards time. The ‘past tense form’ excludes the present, but the ‘open or general form’ allows us to specify the time more precisely with other words. Thus, “I drive a car.” can be modified to, “I drive car every weekend.” or any other time reference that refers to more than a single instance of time. For this we need to use the ‘ing’ form as in, “I am driving a car to the dance tonight.” The ‘ing’ verb form can only refer to a single instance of an activity. That instance may be several days or months long. It may occur in the future or past (with use of a past tense primary BE verb), but it will always only refer to a single instance of activity. So, “I am dancing this year.” ties a year of dance sessions into one instance. This view is at odds with the current view. Is it wrong?

I next consider the ‘modal’ or conditional. Today’s explanations of grammar include ‘modal helping verbs.’ The sentence “I can drive a car.” is an example of a sentence containing a ‘modal helping verb.’ This again serves to muddy the waters more than to clarify the grammar. ‘modals’ or ‘conditionals’ are not helping verbs or verbs of any sort. They function to place a ‘condition’ on a single verb, the secondary verb that follows immediately.

To understand these words and how they fit into English grammar is extremely difficult if you start from the ‘Simple Present Tense,’ simply because you have begun with a false concept. If, however, you begin with a list of typical ‘subjects,’ and the three Dimensions as shown in Figure 7, the following can be understood.

Alternate Views of English Grammar II			
The 3 Dimensions and Conditionals / Modals			
Subjects	Conditionals	Completion	
		BE & HAVE	
I			
You			a teacher
He	shall		happy
She	should	be	in Paris
It	will		working
Ahmed	would	/	worked to death
The teacher	can		
We	could	have	been a teacher
You	may		done my duty
They	must		worked here before
Ali and Ahmed	might		
The teachers			

Figure 7. The relationship between Dimensions and Conditionals can only be understood from a perspective that does not start with “The Simple Present Tense.” Through the Dimension concept, the relationship can be seen to be quite logical.

- 1) There must be a ‘reality’ before there can be a ‘conditional’ reality. So even though the modal appears before the Dimension, the Dimension is paramount; it must ‘be’ in order for a conditional reality to exist. But we can have both.

- 2) While we can have both a real environment and a conditional environment (as expressed with the BE dimension primary verbs), we cannot have both a real action and a conditional action occurring in the same place at the same time. Thus the 'modals' or 'conditionals' – as I prefer to name them – (more explanation later on this) actually replace the DO Dimension primary verbs in a simple sentence.
- 3) We cannot have, "He can drives a car." The 's' of 'drives' would derive from suffixation of the 's' from 'does.' But that would indicate a 'real' action. So we replace the DO primary verbs when we use a conditional [this has been the basis for calling these words 'modal verbs,']. Conditionals automatically remove all grammatical transformations from the following verb, simply because there is no need to. The statement is conditional.
- 4) We can certainly have a conditional temporal relationship between events, situations and actions. Both, "I have been in Rome." and "I should have been in Rome." are fine. So I use two cardboard posters when teaching the 'conditionals.' One has the DO primary verbs on one side and the conditionals on the other. The other simply has the conditionals on it for insertion before the BE or HAVE primary verbs.

Just as we have prepositions and clause markers – or connectors – which operate at different levels, so too we have conditionals which operate at the single verb level and at the clause level. 'If' operates to connect whole ideas or clauses. It is the master 'conditional;' the joker in the deck. We can have both in the same sentence, "If I could fly..." for example. In fact, 'if' is an opposite of a conditional. It opens the door to anything, it does not limit or place a condition on things. It creates a relationship between two clauses, just as the words, 'since, when,' and 'while' do. These are called 'subordinate conjunctions,' to differentiate them from the 'conjunctions: 'or, and, but.'" I see no reason to separate 'if' from the other subordinate conjunctions, other than to create a bit more smoke for the mirrors to reflect.

To sum up then, it is this individual's position that English could be taught much more efficiently by adopting a rational, logic-based grammar rather than continuing to employ a system based on a concept that has been non-functional for 300 years plus. We need to alter our perspective only slightly to achieve this. But the ramifications for teaching/learning are enormous.

Instead of teaching all the grammar patterns in the first unit of the book, as is the case in most ESL books today, we would adopt a format similar to the one adopted by the authors of English Please (Harrison, R. 1994), in which the first book is almost entirely devoted to the teaching of the patterns for BE. This is followed by the DO patterns in Book 2 and could be followed later with the HAVE patterns, though first students need to work on differentiating when to use BE and when to use DO, so a mixed format book would be appropriate. Positive, negative and question forms need to be taught simultaneously. The 'WH' questions are an extension of yes/no questions. And yes – at the core – pattern practice is required, more in EFL, somewhat in ESL and hardly at all in L1 situations, but still it must be there. Language is systematic, otherwise we have chaos. These letters on this page are not randomly chosen, nor are the grammatical patterns required for serious communication. The question is – do we want to continue to explain our language using a concept that underwent a significant change in its function some 300 years ago, or do we want to accept that we need to reconfigure the way we explain it? I suggest that there are numerous small changes that can be made which would eliminate much of the confusion without resorting to a complete rewrite. I suggest that these changes would result in a better 'match' between the student of English as an additional language and the teaching of it.

APPENDIX A

30-3 Present tense

Simple present

I prove

I prove the theorem this way.

I go to class at eight.

Often called the simple present, but not usually used for this purpose. Used most commonly to indicate a customary action.

Familiarity breeds contempt.

Antonio is a good man.

Often used for generalizations.

He cudgels his brains, fills reams of paper with strange marks, and proves the binomial theorem.

Used sometimes as the so-called historical present.

Progressive or continuous

I am proving

I am trying to help you.

I am living in Eastwood.

Uncommon in English until the eighteenth century, progressive verbs are now probably the most common for expressing the simple present.

What are you doing now? I am going to college.

Particularly suited to actions begun in the past and continuing into the present.

Robert Gorrell & Laird, C. (1956). Modern English Handbook, 2nd Edition.

Prentice-Hall Inc. Englewood Cliffs, NJ. p. 358

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<http://webcast.streamlogics.com/audience/auditorium/index.asp?> (October, 2010)

ⁱ I use the term 'auxiliary' here because it is the accepted term in the current grammar. Later in the paper I will show that this is not a useful name for this category of verbs and will replace it with another.

ⁱⁱ The term 'possessive determiner' replaces the term 'possessive adjective' as per many linguistic texts. John Sinclair's *Collins Cobuild Student's Grammar* is one ESL text that agrees with them.