

## Unit C6

# Exploring grammar in the language of children

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO DATA

This unit looks at grammar in the language of children, how it differs from that of mature language users, and how it changes as children get older. It follows on from the discussion of developing language in Unit B6. We focus on written language, particularly that of non-fiction, with the data being taken from the writing of a British male child, David, at various ages. It is important to recognise that the language of one child may not be representative of all children in a language group. To build up a more general picture, studies of much larger numbers of children are necessary. However, small scale explorations of the type you will conduct here are a useful starting point. They can also give a fascinating insight into the development of an individual child or form the basis for further comparative work.

The data in this unit are three complete narratives written during primary school. The first gives an account of an event during the previous weekend written when David was aged six years, six months. (The 'what I did at the weekend diary' is a familiar Monday morning activity in British primary schools.) The second and third were written after school trips; the first to a local railway museum (at age nine years, three months), and the second to a local historical building, Blakesley Hall (at age ten years, eleven months). The tasks are all quite similar, recounting actual events, so that the variations present can more safely be attributed to developing maturity as a writer rather than the effect of different types of writing.

Before working on this unit you should have read Unit B6.



#### Task C6.1

##### **Focus**

Read the first sample of David's writing below.

- What do you observe about the grammar used there?
- How does it differ from the grammar of a mature writer?
- What signs of a more mature writer do you find in this extract?

**Data**

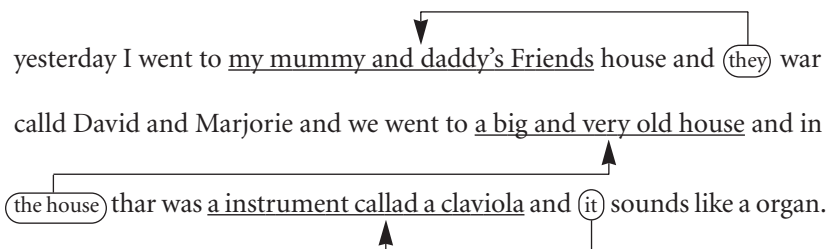
‘What I did at the weekend’, written at six years, six months.

yesterday I went to my mummy and daddy’s Friends house. and they war calld David and Marjorie. and we went to a big and very old house and in the house thar was a instrument callad a claviola and it sounds like a organ.

**Commentary**

Here are some of the things you might have observed:

- Perhaps the most obvious feature of grammar to note is that the text’s ‘sentences’ are rather different from those found in mature writing. While David shows some understanding that his writing needs to be divided into sentences using full stops, he does not use capital letters at the beginning of sentences, and begins sentences with unnecessary ‘and’s. The function of ‘and’ in each case appears to be simply to keep the discourse moving forward, a characteristic of narrative in speech.
- The only tenses used are simple: past and present. The interesting shift to present tense in the last clause may have been a consequence of David not having heard the claviola played during the visit; he was told by a guide that this was what it sounded like. Using a past simple would suggest that he had heard it played.
- There is only one relative clause, in ‘an instrument called a claviola’, and only one attempt to produce a complex noun phrase, in ‘my mummy and daddy’s Friends house’. This last example might be more characteristic of speech than writing, where a mature writer is more likely to ‘unpack’ the phrase than produce a complex possessive of this type.
- David attempts to make even this short text cohesive by linking the theme elements (see Unit A5.4) of main clauses with the rheme elements in the previous clause in:





## Task C6.2

### Focus

Read the next sample of David's writing below. (Corrections given in brackets have been added to make the text easier to understand.)

- What do you observe about the grammar of the sample below?
- What differences do you note between this and the first sample?
- How does it differ from the grammar of a mature writer?
- What signs of a more mature writer do you find in this extract?

### Data

'The railway museum', written at nine years, three months:

We got of the coach and put are [*our*] bags in a train that was about 45 year old. Then we whent to the visitors center and the guides told us a story about how they bult [*built*] railways and then then one of the guides took are [*our*] group to look around the museum.

First we went to a gards caradge [*guard's carriage*] and it had a big fire in the middle and the guide talked about the gards job. Then we whent in a 95 year old tram. After that craig [*moved*] a 1 ton wheel by pushing a bit sticing [*sticking*] out of the axle. Then we whent on the train robbed by the great train robbers. Then we whent to the train workshop were [*where*] they made and repaired trains and then we whent back to the train and had lunch on the train and then the guide showed us round the signal box and then he took us back to the visitors center and showed us some things he had got then we whent back to school.

### Commentary

Here are some of the things you might have observed.

- The writing now has sentences. Although there are still examples of 'and' functioning simply to move the discourse forward:

First we went to a gards caradge and it had a big fire in the middle . . .

most uses seem more clearly to be indicating chronological sequence with a meaning similar to 'then':

then we went back to the train and had lunch on the train . . .

David appears to have a greater range of ways of indicating time sequence, using 'First', 'then' and 'after that' in addition to 'and'. However, the last sentence closely resembles the text in the data in Task C6.1, with a series of clauses connected by 'and then' rather than 'and'.

- Past simple is the only tense used. David may, of course, have control of a greater variety of tenses but does not need to use them to achieve his purposes in this text.
- Perhaps the most striking difference is the greater number and type of subordinate clauses used. (See extract 6(b), Unit B6, for more on this.) In this short text he demonstrates that he can use a variety of relative clauses:

a train that was about 45 years old (non-defining)

the train workshop where they made and repaired trains (defining)

on the train robbed by the great train robbers (a 'reduced' relative equivalent to 'the train which was robbed')

nominal (or noun) clauses:

a story about how they built railways

and adverbial clauses:

Craig moved a 1 ton wheel by pushing a bit sticking out of the axle

- There is evidence of more complex noun phrases as in:

a 95 year old tram    a 1 ton wheel

- There is further evidence of cohesion produced in the text with, for example:

First we went to a garage and it had a big fire in the middle

However, this is not always unproblematic. In both:

Then we went to the visitors center and the guides told us a story about how they built railways

and

and then we went back to the train

the meaning of the underlined words is ambiguous. 'they' is presumably intended to mean something like 'people 45 years ago', but could refer to 'the

## Exploration

guides'. The closest referent to 'the train' is 'the train robbed by the great train robbers'; however, the reference is presumably to the '45 years old' train mentioned in the first line of the text.

- We might also note the preference for repetition rather than pronominal reference in:

and then we whent back to the train and had lunch on the train

where a mature writer might use

and then we whent back to the train and had lunch there

**Task C6.3****Focus**

Read this, the third text from David, written about one year and eight months after the previous one.

- Explore the text using the questions given before the previous text as a guide. Focus on the grammatical features highlighted in the two commentaries you have read so far, but note any other features of interest.

**Data**

'A visit to Blakesley Hall', written at ten years, eleven months:

On Friday, we whent to Blakesly Hall. Blakesly Hall is a Tudor house. When we got there, we went into a big barn. The barn had a very strange smell. After that, we went on a guided tour.

We started by going into a very small outdoor porch. It had the initials of the person who lived there. They where RS. That stood for Richard Smallbrook. Then, we walked into the great hall. The great hall is the room where everyone ate, including the servants (Richard was very rich), and that was also where they welcomed there [*their*] guests. Richard liked to show how rich he was by having very decrotive [*decorative*] furniture. He also had his initials carved on furniture like that. He had a cubord [*cupboard*] in the great hall to show that there was also a big fire that they used to heat the room. Servants would have to get up the chimney and clean it out (a petty horreble job)! After we had looked at the great hall, we went into the family palour [*parlour*].

The palour was the room where Richard and his familly would go after their meal. it was probably the room that they had spent the most on. It

has very ornate designs [*designs*] over the fireplace but they also had glass windows (the rest of the house also had glass windows). Some people took their windows out when they went on a journey. They took the glass with them because glass was rare and expensive.

Then, we went up the stairs to the top of the house. The stairs went in the pattern of  $\sqrt{\text{bottom}}^{\text{top}}$ . They lead onto a long hall called the long gallery. The long gallery was a hall that, on a rainy day, they would walk up and down to get some exercise. Houses with a long gallery would also mean that they wouldn't have to walk from bedroom to bedroom just to get to another bedroom! At one end there was a big box for spring sheets and linen. Next to it was a box for storing money and valuables [*valuables*]. This was called an armada box (I have no idea why). The long gallery had a sloping floor. Its shape was  $\sqrt{\quad}$ . It was sloping because of old age and because when Richard died, his daughter built [*built*] an extension and that had pulled it. (Don't forget this house is nearly five-hundred years old)! Before we went to the long gallery, we went to Richard's bedroom, also upstairs. It was also called "The Painted Chamber" because it has very ornate designs [*designs*] on the wall. After the long gallery we [*end; the writing was incomplete*]

## RESEARCH NOTE

Gathering data on children or vulnerable adults, as discussed below, needs to be undertaken with due care. If you are collecting spoken or written data from children, other than your own, you should ask permission from parents or guardians, and if you are collecting data in a school or other institutional setting, the head or principal should be consulted first. Similarly, when working with adults, it is good practice to tell them about the research and ask if they are willing to participate. For some types of research this can be problematic. If, for example, people are aware that they are being recorded or their writing will be analysed, they may change their behaviour. This phenomenon is so common that it has been given the name the 'observer's paradox'. You can get round the problem to some extent by giving only a vague explanation of why you are collecting data and then showing an example of the analysis later when it cannot affect behaviour. In writing up the results of research it is perfectly acceptable to acknowledge that the informants may have been influenced by the presence of the researcher, microphone etc.

## IDEAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Here are some suggestions on further research that you could do in the area of the grammar of children's developing language, and sources of information. We have focused on change over time in the writing of just one child. If you have access to child informants, here are some other investigations you could conduct:

## Exploration

- Gather samples of writing in response to the same task from groups of children of different ages. Compare grammar across the age groups.
- Gather samples of writing in response to the same task from groups of children of the same age but different levels of writing ability. (You may need help from a knowledgeable class teacher for this.) Compare grammar across the ability groups.
- At one particular stage of development, a child may display different degrees of maturity in writing different text types or genres. You could gather samples of different genres written by a small group of children: for example, you could compare fiction (such as a short story) with non-fiction (such as an account of a visit, or a letter to a penfriend).

In this unit we have been concerned only with children's written language. If you are interested in exploring children's *spoken* language, a useful starting point for ideas, data and references is the website of the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES): <http://childes.psy.cmu.edu>. The CHILDES project, directed from Harvard University by Brian MacWhinney with Catherine Snow provides an international database of child language for the study of first and second language acquisition. The website allows you to investigate a database of transcribed child language stored in text files, some with audio, using a set of computer software tools for searching and manipulate the database.

Although our interest here is in the language of children, you will have read in Unit B6 a brief report about research on language change in old age. Interesting work can be done on the grammatical characteristics of this change, particularly in those who are suffering from forms of dementia, in whom language change is most pronounced. If you have access to such informants, you could, for example, encourage them to give an oral history of some part of their lives. Your explorations could focus on how their language differs from that of mature, mentally unimpaired adults.