

Nelson English Usage

Digital resources for the Australian Curriculum

The grammar of the Australian Curriculum

A teacher reference

The word 'grammar' is used with several meanings. To a modern linguist, the word refers to an academic study of the way a language works, involving a descriptive account based on detailed observation of the principles that govern the construction of words, sentences and whole texts. Twenty-first century grammarians work with large computer databases of the language in use – both written and spoken.

To eighteenth and nineteenth century grammarians – and to many school teachers at that time – the word meant a set of rules that should be followed to ensure 'correct' English. Some of these rules were based on assumptions about how a language *should* work (on the model of Latin and Greek) rather than on observation of how English actually works. Generalising from this use of the word, people often use the word 'grammar' as a shorthand for 'language conventions' – spelling, punctuation, usage and so on. When adults complain about the lack of grammar teaching in schools, it is this use of the word 'grammar' that is intended: they are concerned that there is inadequate attention to the explicit teaching of all language conventions.

When politicians insisted that 'grammar' be included in the Australian Curriculum: English, they almost certainly meant that they wanted students to be explicitly taught what is 'correct': for example, subject-verb agreement, the use of the apostrophe, spelling rules and the difference between 'affect' and 'effect'. The notion of 'correctness' has been replaced in the ACARA documents with the idea of appropriateness: students need to learn to make the appropriate language choices according to audience, purpose and context. The Australian Curriculum: English calls this 'language-in-use'.

The Australian Curriculum: English also talks about 'language-as-system'. This presumably means an academic study of the way the English language works. There is a substantial body of knowledge about 'language-as-system' included in the content descriptors and elaborations of the Language strand. The ACARA document explains that it uses 'standard grammatical terminology within a contextual framework' to describe 'language-as-system'. What this effectively means is that the terminology is that of traditional (or Latinate) grammar - terms that have been used for centuries in schools, such as nouns, verbs, clauses and phrases. Some concepts are taken from systemic functional grammar, especially the concepts of cohesiveness and modality. The result is that the 'grammar' of the Australian Curriculum: English is unique - a combination of features from two different attempts to explain 'language-as-system'.