

# Logic can put eager learners on the wrong track

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I have written before about grammatical rules, and how we all speak according to a set of rules of grammar which we learn, without being taught them, as small children. We were clever enough, as all human beings are, to analyse the language we heard spoken around us, work out what its rules were, and start using them ourselves – without any conscious awareness of what we were doing.

As far as English is concerned, these rules are nothing to do with the non-existent so-called rules that certain English language “experts” want to foist on us, such as: “You shouldn’t end a sentence with a preposition”, and “The word ‘between’ can only be used of two entities, otherwise it should be ‘among’.”

The existence of the real rules I’m talking about can very clearly be seen by observing the way in which small children acquire them as they are learning their language or languages. Linguistic scientists who are experts on child-language acquisition point out that when small children are first learning to speak English, they employ irregular past-tense forms correctly: they say “Mummy went” and “Daddy fell down”.

Later on, they start getting things



■ Children learn the rules of grammar as they go along.

wrong. They begin to say things like “Mummy goed” and “Daddy falled down”. These are fascinating mistakes because they show that children have now worked out what the rule is for the formation of past-tense verbs.

The rule is not totally straightforward: you take the basic form of the verb and add to it one of three suffixes: -ed, as in wanted; -t as in walked (pronounced walkt); and -d as in filled (pronounced filld) – with the suffix being determined by what the final consonant of the basic word form is.

But, having learnt this rule, children then very reasonably start applying it to all verbs: if the present tense is hit, then

the past tense must be hitted. This is wrong of course, but it does show that they have learnt the rule entirely correctly.

It is only later that children then reach a third stage, where they realise that, although the rule for past-tense formation is as they have correctly analysed it, there are also exceptions: there are irregular verbs which you can only use correctly by learning and remembering them individually.

Chronological sequences in children’s language development such as went > goed > went tell us a lot about how human infants acquire their mother tongue.