

Some so-called 'rules' are just made to be broken

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

"So aren't there any rules?" someone has asked me. They were referring to my writing in these columns that there's no reason why you shouldn't end a sentence with a preposition – "She's someone I'm very fond of" is a perfectly good, grammatical English sentence.

And to my maintaining that there's no reason why you shouldn't begin a sentence with a conjunction like "and" or "but" – as in the case of this sentence, which is also perfectly grammatical.

And that there's no reason why you shouldn't say "The man who I saw" – it doesn't have to be "whom".

But "we were always taught", people say, that there were these rules. Yes, we were always taught these things. But what we were taught was wrong.

There's a very good reason why $2 \times 2 = 5$ is incorrect. But there's no reason why putting a preposition at the end of a sentence in English is "wrong".

This is just a "rule" which someone who had no authority to do so invented.

But, yes, there really are rules – lots of them, and they're rather strict. We were just not "always taught" these at school, because by the time we were four years old we knew them already.



■ Young people instinctively learn the correct order of words in sentences says Peter Trudgill.

Picture: LIBRARY

Here's a very strict rule of English grammar: always put an adjective before a noun, not after it.

It's right to say "the big house" and wrong to say "the house big". People learning English as a foreign language are "always taught" that, but no one taught us this rule – we worked it out for ourselves, without realising we were doing so, as small children.

And we figured out all the other rules about English adjectives too – like how it's correct to say "the big new white house" and not "the white new big house".

Here's another rule: stative verbs should not be used with the progressive aspect. You didn't realise you knew that? Well, all it means is that it's right to say "I know him well", and wrong to say "I am knowing him well", which would be breaking a real rule of English grammar.

People learning English as a foreign language have trouble with that one.

Rules can vary between one dialect and another too.

In the Norfolk dialect, it's wrong to say "He was a-hitten it" and right to say "He was a-hitten on it". And no one taught us that either.