

Wonderful grammar is something to be celebrated

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■ Education secretary Michael Gove, who has been testing our children's grasp of English.

Picture: LUCY TAYLOR

What a pity that some people in this country think grammar is something to get worried or indignant about. Grammar is a magnificent and exciting and wonderful thing. To see it reduced to the mundane level of letters complaining that people say "sat" rather than "sitting" is depressing. So is Mr Gove testing our children by instructing them to "complete the sentence below using either I or me: My team and ___ are playing next week". Obviously he thinks the "correct" answer is "I", which I agree is not wrong; but it's certainly not so common there as the equally correct "me".

All languages and dialects have their own special grammars. Over the millennia, human minds and societies have produced a range of amazing grammatical phenomena. I wonder if Mr Gove knows that many languages have two different pronouns corresponding to English 'we'? This is very sensible, because 'we' is ambiguous. If I tell you that 'we've got great tickets for Carrow Road for Saturday' you might get excited until it turns out that the 'we' is me and my wife,

and not me and you. (Mr Gove would mark me down for that last sentence.)

And what about verbs? English verbs are not particularly interesting. If you start from the basic form "move", you can use the grammatical endings we call morphemes to produce the forms moving, moved, and moves (except in Norfolk, where we don't even trouble ourselves about the latter). And that's it.

But in other languages there are verb morphemes which do all sorts of fascinating things. In the Californian language Pomo, there's a grammatical affix *f* which means "with the side of a long object". It would be rather fun, I think, to be able to say "I *f*moved it" in English.

And many languages have morphemes we call evidentials. These are compulsorily attached to verbs to show what your evidence is for saying something. They mean things like "I know because someone told me" or "I saw it" or "I assume". In the Amazonian language Tariana, "Wes irida di-manika-mahka" means 'Wes played football (we heard him)' whereas "Wes irida di-manika-nihka" means 'Wes played football (we infer that from visual evidence eg his boots are dirty)'.

If Mr Gove was speaking Tariana, he would never be able to just say "'my team and me are playing' is wrong". People would accuse him of using bad grammar, and want to know what his evidence was.