

The Martian Moment – How the Exact Word Came To Be

A Note from the Founder

What is the Exact Word and where did it come from? Born of a “Eureka” moment, my realization that English is a binary language changed everything.

Summary

The story of “how” follows. If you do not want a longer read, leave the “Martian Moment” at this summary; otherwise, of course, the longer story follows. In order to teach a night-school class to practical and very bright adults with no interest in academic theory but keen desire to write well, earn a high-school diploma, or move forward to college, I needed a solution for “the problem of English.” “Pretending” to be a Martian to create a *tabula rosa*, a clean slate in my mind, allowed me the discovery that English exceptions do not have to exist. The exceptions do exist because English does not fit its model, Latin languages, but for that misfit, no one is to blame. And why not? The history of the English language, contained on this website in “The Monks’ Moment,” will explain how 40 or 50 monks traveled to the British Isles and changed the shape of our lives for 1500 years by interpreting oral English as a Latin language. Because English does not fit this model, myriad exceptions have bedeviled English speakers ever since.

Over fifteen books have followed that moment, as have workshops, facilitating, coaching, and some remarkable outcomes from our small company, the Exact Word. The patent we have for our methods essentially means that formalizing language as a binary system changes how we describe the connection between thought and English. Stay tuned or read on, or both.

Progression/Since The Eureka Moment

Having spent hundreds, maybe thousands, of hours studying grammar, from 8th grade or earlier through undergraduate and graduate classrooms, and then linguistics, I felt I had the right to ask a couple of questions about the premise and logic of English grammar. Something had to be amiss.

I already knew, from this considerable language study, that Noam Chomsky, an MIT professor, gave the 20th century a new direction by identifying patterns in a “deep structure,” as he called it, in the English language. And I knew that Chomsky and later linguists had long sought a solution to the “prescriptive nature of English grammar – correctness – needed a clearer countering system, a “descriptive” model which fit English without having exceptions. I had read the Language Arts and language-structure writers – in approximately 1940s and 50s, from Paul DeFries to Dr. William Strunk to Albert Upton and Noam Chomsky – who asserted that grammar research had showed little or no correlation between learning grammar and writing well. Yes, something was amiss and the logical solutions apparently couldn’t help me. Something, somehow was missing.

Naturally, I had a couple of questions. Where did our grammar “come from?” And who? Clearly, try as they might, the grammarians and linguists had not yet solved the problem in a way

useful to me. Yet, they had *defined* the problem beautifully. The next idea that came to me: look somewhere else. The history of English, philosophy - Aristotle defining the meaning of meaning for example - and social scientists began to cast some light. The history of English illuminated the “where and who” considerably. Ah ha again! Forty or fifty monks directed by a pope were the “who.” Latin languages were the “where” English grammar came from. See *The Monks’ Moment*. But what happened?

I had a teaching day-job, enrolled in graduate school at night and on the weekends. I sought a linguistics masters degree. And I took a night job teaching English to adults.

A professor at *The American University*, Dr. Fox, made a life-long impression in the opening line of the first class I took with him by saying, “You know everything you need to know about English because you speak it.”

And we speak languages, very easily, very early in life. Why so easily? Why not later? We start as a kind of genius and then we lose it? But that can’t be. A thread of thought had begun to form. Throughout, I had the notion that, as language geniuses before age 5, we should have some of that genius, if dormant, still available to tap as adults. I wanted to find a simplicity which I felt governed English and which I believed remains in every adult speaker of English. Most importantly, a hypothesis formed itself into a belief which grew into a discovery.

I had read metaphysics and epistemology searching for language clues; and I had struggled with two Romance languages, and subsequently linguistics, searching for that simplicity which I also wanted to take to those adults in that night school class: humans share something fundamental about language itself, not just English.

Meanwhile, I knew that I did not have the nerve to try, with a straight face to convince a single soul that the eight parts of speech could help anyone write well automatically, or, in any way, go much beyond passing grammar tests.

I started to feel a little excitement. Science took me further. The brain and how it produces language began to make sense. Not the science alone, but science in combination with the history of language, the history of humans, the miracle that language exists at all. To this day no one knows with final certainty why we have language at all, or how.

However, those in the field have made some very interesting progress: the brain structures shared by all human beings *may be the same*, despite the era, geographic location, culture, or language family. In a *Natural History Magazine* article, “Reinventions of Human Language,” May, 1991, Jared Diamond supports Mr. Chomsky’s idea that, beyond English, a universal grammar exists, a monogenesis. Diamond discusses Derick Bickerton’s 1970s study of Hawaiian pidgin expanding into a creole and creating its own grammar.

Pidgin means two languages spoken side-by-side by peoples knowing only one of the two. Initially, the two sets of speakers begin to share vocabulary, some from one language, some from the other. The developing creole becomes a third entity, a

language “thing” which develops its own grammar, which would logically, and apparently, combine the two different languages and their cultures. Chomsky and Bickerton say no, a real *third* evolves, a grammar somehow different or with different aspects than the two side-by-side. *Even without English influence, the “apparently logical” combination of the two languages involves the word-order trait of English, outside of the adjacent languages’ two grammars. So much for “apparent logic.”*

”That they did indeed create it, rather than somehow borrowing grammar from the language of Chinese laborers or English plantation owners, is clear from the many features of Hawaiian creole that differ from English or from the workers’ languages. The same is true for Neo-Melanesian: its vocabulary is largely English, but its grammar has many features that English lacks.

I don’t want to exaggerate the grammatical similarities among creoles by implying that they’re all essentially the same.... But many similarities remain, particularly among those creoles quickly arising from early-stage pidgins. How did each creole’s children come so quickly to agree on a grammar, and why did the children of different creoles tend to reinvent the same grammatical features again and again?

...Again, creoles happen to resemble English in placing subject, verb, and object in that order, but borrowing from English can’t be the explanation, because creoles derived from languages with a different word order still use the subject-verb-object order.

These similarities among creoles seem instead likely to stem from a genetic blueprint that the human brain possesses for learning language during childhood.

Hence, Chomsky reasoned that we are born with a “universal grammar” already wired into our brains to give us a spectrum of grammatical models encompassing the range of grammars in actual languages. This prewired universal grammar would be like a set of switches, each with various alternative positions.

Jared Diamond
From "Reinventions of Human Languages"
Natural History Magazine, May 1991

Significantly, then, Chomsky and Bickerton both spoke, if indirectly, to the "genius" in the brain or a pre-wired function starting by at least age three of every language speaker.

Hypothetically, then, I agreed with Mr. Chomsky. Clearly, language pattern creates the common denominators which every speaker of a given language must use to communicate in that language. To speak a language at all, the speakers have to share the same patterning in that language. I figured that as children we felt or sensed or absorbed the underlying patterns and then "swirled" vocabulary into those spots just as a Romance-language child would learn the patterned endings for given words' uses along with their vocabulary meanings.

So I sought a solution with an unusual, perhaps desperate, method. If I pretended I were a Martian who had come to earth to learn English - but could take no books to Mars to teach English to my fellow Martians - maybe I could create John Locke's *tabula rosa*, or blank slate, in my mind to see English with new eyes. My mental conversation as the "Martian" took approximately this path.

The first logical step seemed to be to identify the "operating system" elements. What basic units create meaning? Good idea. Answer: eight parts of speech. Great!! I'll learn the smallest first, save the largest until last, then party a lot until I go home. Great idea; great plan; great theory.

First words: interjections. They include:

Ah!	Oh!
Wow!	Well!
Gee!	Gosh!

One down, seven word types (parts-of-speech) left. A breeze! Good news: nothing hard here. Pronouns: under one hundred as noun substitutes and also adjectives. What's an adjective? "It" modifies a person, place or thing, the noun definition. Hmm. Okay. How many nouns, then, does English have? 16-17,000 common nouns alone. (In just the "Collegiate-Level" dictionary.) Yikes. Back to small categories. What's the next smallest category? I see three types of conjunction (conjunctive, subjunctive, and coordinating - well, correlative too); learn those and only four word types remain, preposition, verb, pronoun, adverb. Not too bad.

But the earthling grammar books which I had open before me allowed me to look at English through the eyes of their authors. The conjunctions lists, in every single book, listed a few and then said "etcetera" at the bottom of the list. *But none of the books listed the same words; each book had at least one or two that the others didn't. How could that be?* When I wanted to know *all* of the conjunctions, no one of the books had them. Uh oh. I, the Martian, had suspected quite early that

this quick-list-of-word-types idea might have a pitfall; it all looked too easy. And sure enough. Why, I asked myself, don't these books list *all* of the elements of any operating system? Why the "etceteras?" I could find no clear answer.

And then I thought, both as earthling and Martian, this same bewilderment must bedevil school kids too. Hmm. No wonder English grammar seems unsettling. And what, I wondered, caused this mess? Did some idiot along the line just "come-up-with" what looked like a possible explanation for English and then quit mid-stream, perhaps?

[Note from the present: the books still only list "some" of the common particles including the conjunctions, prepositions, and articles because, until now, in the *Exact Word's* patented system, *no one has ever listed* all the word types in separate files, a mammoth task which no one ever saw a reason to do. I'll tell you that "mammoth" fit the task. Before computer data bases, we looked through three dictionaries with highlighters to find them all. Remember, every dictionary word lists its possible uses, i.e., "still:" noun, verb, adjective, adverb, conjunction, thus requiring us as researchers (3 of us) to *read every part of speech for every word*. No wonder we stuck-with the collegiate levels of 150K words instead of the full 750K.]

"Well, what about a definition, then?" both the Martian and I asked. A conjunction introduces a clause. Wait, the operating elements do not include clauses. And, come to think about the eight-parts-of-speech, they don't list "phrase" in the eight either. What's up here? What about that definition? A clause is a group of words with a subject and a verb. I found *verb* in the eight parts of speech, but I did not find *subject* or *groups of words*. And then, what about the fact that verbs can "become nouns." An action "becomes" a person, place, or thing?" There seems to be a "you should just know factor operating here." Hmm

With a *sinking* sense of discovery, I repeated these steps with prepositions which introduce phrases and which contain objects. Clause, phrase, subject, object, verbs becoming nouns, and no groups of words identified on the operating elements list.

The idea of "partying" before returning "home" to Mars quickly vanished; my "Martian" heart sank right alongside the earthling heart with the reinforced realization that we have a mess, somehow, in English with no apparent simplicity no matter how much genius may be dormant or how much genius we may have as children.

What had I overlooked?

How can English possibly have an evasive simplicity, evasive for how many centuries?

And then a memory struck me: Wait!!! The term, "groups of words," had applied to both clause and phrase! How can both have the same definition? Groups of words. AHHA!!!

This was the Martian moment! Bidden, yes. Expected? No. A sudden insight, a paradigm shift, a obviousness which fell together with a thunderclap of clarity.

The linguistics systems, plus Mr. Chomsky's beliefs about the brain and all the history and science and discovery that I had read, and Dr. Robert Fox at American University, had prepared me for this moment.

I felt as though "lightning" had struck me between the eyes. Martian no longer, but not the earthling as I was, I have seen English with new eyes evermore.

And, I thought, then let's assume that simplicity, lies, unconscious, not dormant, in the mind that governs our speech, in patterns that every language has to have. But what patterns? Groups of words? Apparently we *do* have a brain operating system of word order. Again, for example, the word "still," which "becomes" different meanings when it changes part-of-speech? But what "makes it" change part-of-speech in the first place? Ah ha! again: a language trait called "fixed-word order." Fixed-word order means that the *order is fixed, not words*. English does not have words which inflect, one by one, for meaning and word relationships as in most other languages. It does have a globally rare trait: that the placement of words changes their meaning and thereby their part-of-speech label. Does that mean, then, that part-of-speech *follows placement*? I stilled the engine. Verb meaning of "still," to end movement. Still, I ran the still. Conjunction "still," meaning yet. And noun "still," meaning distillery. Thus, if we mean "distillery," we must *place "still" in a "noun placement," and etcetera for the rest of still's meanings*. Conversely from thinking, speaking, and writing, if we read "still," then we "create" or "call-up" its meaning by *its placement and only its placement because all English words have at least 2-5 meanings and often many more*.

And the groups of words. That's what English has; *fixed order of groups of words as though they were single words*, as Mr. Chomsky says, "with finite rules for infinite combinations." In other languages where one word has one meaning, and the endings on each single word identify that meaning's relationships to other words, then groups of words *cannot create meaning by (inflected) endings*. For example, What she said influenced what he did. The "subject-noun" in that sentence is a group of words, "what she said." English has no endings to "tell" the listener or reader what is the "subject." And certainly, "what she said" *is not "the name of a person, place, or thing."* ("Or idea" a later grammatical "rule" clarified. Good clarification, but slippery.) The dictionary of course cannot list "ideas" like "what she said." The English speaker must know that groups of words can "sit" in "noun," or better, "Nounness," places.

Clauses: groups of words with subject-verb placeholders for the "subjects" which may be filled with groups of words, Nested. Thus, I determined much later, giving the "subject" a new name *for what it does or means would help a lot*. Thus, the term, "*Doer*," was born in my mind as a logical, clear label for the "*subject's*" purpose - the *Doer* does something and thereby an event, or mental image of an event, becomes visual, graphic. Could English really work that simply? "Let's hope so," I thought.

Phrases: groups of words without the subject and verb combination. And they may contain Nested groups of words. And we have two types of clause and two types of phrase. Yee ha! and

Ah ha!!! Let's hope the simplicity holds. Now, let's look at the meanings they create, the Martian still with me and I thought. Hmm.

We have in English, indeed, a language of enormous, remarkable simplicity which supports thoughts of vast sophistication. I hope that the *Exact Word* experience points you toward discovery of the simplicity in English and its usefulness to you. Having a system both for correct grammatical forms, for writing masterfully, as which as perspicacious critical thinking which can give you both lifetime confidence and new horizons. Commanding the combinations of groups of words possible in English will certainly give you access to the structure of expressed thought as a wonderfully satisfying prospect. The "Martian moment" had quite an outcome, became a system, earned a patent, now lives as "the *Exact Word*;" and, so it will, I hope, for you have long life, real benefit, and genuine pleasure.

Witness what these folks say.

Written language ranks among the great inventions of humanity...As children, we learn language by hearing and imitating the words *soft* or *wet* while touching things that have those qualities. By speaking to others, we learn that "I want apple" is understood more quickly than "Apple want I" and so learn something important about a basic pattern of English sentences. When we learn to write, we again encounter patterns to master. Grammar, then, is no more than the study of how language has been used in the past and a guide to its use in the future.

S.I. Hayakawa

From *The One Minute Grammarian* by Morton S. Freeman

Language is so clearly a blessing and a curse that we hardly know what to think of it, any more than we know what to think of its sole possessors, human beings. We start learning it the day we're born, and never learn it completely. No one knows where it comes from, no one can explain the meaning of meaning, or define a sentence, or even say what a word is. But somehow it has to be mastered, because so much – perhaps everything – depends on it...Communicating well with others is essential to our happiness, but we can't quite get it right...The political order depends on open, truthful communications, but where are they? Do truth and speech have anything in common? A heavy sense of how difficult language is causes shyness, stammering, stage fright, page fright (the inability to read), and pen fright (the inability to write). Why must we be judged by the way we wag our tongues?

Robert C. Pinckert

Best wishes,

B. Stuckey, Founder, the *Exact Word*

Arlington, Virginia

August, 1992 and January, 2012.