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The Dead Butler revisited: grammatical accuracy and clarity in the English Primary Curriculum 2013-14

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the grammatical description and advice contained in new National Curriculum documentation from 2013, focusing on Key Stages 1 and 2. It builds on previous analyses of deficiencies in the systems of grammar and the materials in earlier incarnations of the National Curriculum. It suggests that there have been advances in the accuracy with which grammar terms are used and illustrated, although there is still no coherent overall view of what grammar is, nor a fully consistent approach to describing language. In addition, the lack of any pedagogic guidance save the most basic suggests that knowledge about language may continue to be taught in a way which is incompatible with real understanding and more in line with prescriptivist approaches.

KEYWORDS

National Curriculum, primary, metalanguage, grammar, Key Stages 1-2

INTRODUCTION

The history of grammar teaching in England has been well described in several publications in recent years, notably in Hudson and Walmsley (2005). Most analyses concur that the period from the 1960s to the late 1980s saw the almost complete disappearance of formal grammatical instruction from the school curriculum in England; since that time grammatical instruction and knowledge have become increasingly prominent. Hudson and Walmsley describe this as a 'rebirth of grammar teaching' (2005, 1). However, this renaissance has not been without problems. In the first part of this article I survey the discussion around the various descriptions and prescriptions for grammar teaching between 1995 and 2010. I then consider the latest version of the National Curriculum, with a particular focus on Key Stages 1 and 2, and assess whether it addresses the issues raised about earlier official documentation. Finally I consider what remains to be done.

The most recent National Curriculum Framework Document (DfE 2014a) contains the latest iteration of statutory requirements for maintained schools in England; henceforth I refer to this as NCFD14. NCFD14 contains the English Programmes of Study: key stages 1 and 2; henceforth I refer to these as EPS13. From September 2015, the 2013 version will be used exclusively in English schools.

The 25-year back story to this latest attempt to delineate what children should be taught about grammar is one of considerable controversy in a number of areas: content (what should children know?); teacher knowledge (what should teachers know, and how much of it *do* they know?); teacher training (how? when?); the relationships between speech and writing and between writing and grammar instruction; the role of Standard English and non-Standard varieties; the language used in official documentation as a model for teachers and pupils; and competing claims about the suitability and coherence of different approaches to grammatical description, particularly the systemic functional perspective such as that adopted in Australia (Love and Humphrey 2012) and what is loosely termed 'traditional' terminology.

In the sections that follow I provide a brief overview of the most important elements of the debate over grammar in English state schools. Some of this debate deals with primary schools, some with

secondary schools, and some with both, but in many cases the points made are relevant across the sector.

Sealey provided an early critique of the official documentation as it then stood; her 1999 paper has in some ways become a model for later analyses. It focussed on a comparison of the National Curriculum for Primary English (NCPE) and the Initial Teacher Training National Curriculum for Primary English 1997 (ITT-NCPE). The latter specified that 'trainees must be taught...how to...teach grammar systematically' (cited in Sealey 1999, 86), but beyond this initial injunction there was very little information about how it was to be done, and the terminology trainees were expected to master was 'particularly idiosyncratic' (86). More seriously perhaps, Sealey described three central ways in which the findings of linguistic research were not sufficiently represented in the ITTCPE and other documents. There was a lack of recognition or awareness of the social aspects of language acquisition, particularly around the relationship between the Standard English promoted by official policy and the variants used by pupils. There was little acknowledgement of 'the non-consensual dimensions of language' (87). Finally, there was overall a mechanistic 'building block' perspective on language which took little account of more nuanced views of how it is created and used. Sealey also noted the tendency of these documents to break language into rule based elements which could be used conveniently if inaccurately in tests to ensure accountability and efficiency, and in a piercing assessment of the language of the documents concluded that 'the obligations placed on pupils [...] are recoverable as being applicable, ultimately, to the teachers rather than the pupils' (91).

Within the next six or seven years, there was considerable change in how the grammatical aspects of literacy were dealt with at curriculum level. The National Curriculum remained, but government introduced the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) as its preferred method of implementation, and produced a large amount of guidance and policy materials across the key stages. These included *The National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching* (DfEE, 1998a), *The National Literacy Strategy Literacy Training Pack* (DfEE, 1998b), *Grammar for Writing* (DfEE, 2000a), a series of *Grammar Fliers* (DfEE, 2000b), *English Department Training Materials* (DfEE, 2001a) and *Literacy Across the Curriculum* (DfEE, 2001b). However, the materials were of variable quality, and the title of a 2004 paper by Wasyl Cajkler could caustically describe their deficiencies as a 'maiming' of language. This analysis of KS2 and KS3 policy documents and training materials published from 1998 to 2002 examined the accuracy, consistency, clarity, and exemplification of the grammatical model(s) presented in the documents; it also included a critique of the language used by the document writers. The sheer volume of training materials, guides and policy documents available in the early 2000s, as described by Cajkler, suggests that grammar in the National Curriculum was then something of a work in progress, and this is reflected in his conclusions. He noted that while there had been gradual improvement in accuracy, many official documents contained examples or descriptions of language so inaccurate or inconsistent that they could not be used as a model by teachers; they were 'a patchwork of the good, the wrong and the imprecise' (13). In an appendix, Cajkler classified fewer than half the documents he examined as clear and reliable – the rest could be used only with caution or were deemed misleading.

Wales (2009) is concerned with a broader picture of developments in official policy on grammatical education than Cajkler, and focuses like Sealey 10 years earlier on the ways in which the 'official' grammar description of the National Curriculum and associated training documents fail to take account of modern linguistic theory. Four areas are singled out: word classification, phrase structure, the form-function relationship, and clause structure and supplements. Wales compares their treatment in traditional terminology with that of more recent linguistic approaches such as Huddleston and Pullum (2002). To take one example, Wales shows how phrase structure has in the last half century assumed for linguists a fundamental role in the way language is understood, and how the prepositional phrase in particular plays a crucial part in English clause and sentence structure. Wales finds 'NLS grammatical guidance ... in the main, parsimonious, or even dismissive, in its treatment of this phrase type' (530). Wales is at pains to show why this type of information needs

to be updated, and why it needs to be correct, within a larger defence of the role of linguistics in school education. She highlights the role of modern linguistics in investigating and describing standard and non-standard varieties of language, in accurately describing complex formal structures of formal text and providing a metalanguage with which they can be taught to children in the later stages of primary school, and producing teachers confident enough in their own linguistic knowledge to be able to help children effectively.

Clark (2010) and Paterson (2010) are also critical of the confused place of grammar in the English National Curriculum. Clark described the growing sense that teaching grammar in school had collapsed under a decade's worth of statutory guidance, instructions, advice and materials, which managed to be both bulky and inadequate on a number of levels (2010, 191). Clark suggests that the National Curriculum may need to implement a different system of linguistic description, and, although aware that such a move would cause considerable difficulty, she proposes systemic functional grammar (SFG) as the most suitable candidate for a model of language which could be 'inextricably linked with the curriculum for English as a whole ... would teach pupils to become critically literate [and] is publicly intelligible, personally formative and conceptually inclusive ... democratic, moral and technical' (198).

Paterson's detailed comparison of versions of the National Curriculum 12 years apart suggests that for KS3 and KS4 at least, later guidelines are not as clear as earlier ones; this is a serious charge in that it suggests the situation might have actually deteriorated after Cajkler's analysis in 2004. Paterson's main objection is that the description of language is underspecified: while 'a grasp of clearly defined terminology would benefit any pupil's understanding of grammar ... it is impossible to determine what metalinguistic knowledge [the Curriculum] expects pupils [...] to learn' (480). Interestingly, Paterson also suggests that one reason for the failure to provide an effective treatment of grammar in the 2011 National Curriculum might be the realisation by the Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) that teachers themselves hold negative perceptions about teaching grammar, as suggested by its own investigation into teachers' confidence, knowledge and practice (QCA 1998).

The period 1990-2010, then, saw a resurgence of grammar in the National Curriculum which was enshrined in both statute (the National Curriculum itself) and in a variety of non-statutory guidance and training materials such as those that formed part of the NLS. Many linguists and educators considered this foregrounding of grammar and metalinguistic knowledge a necessary adjustment to the school curriculum, and largely welcomed it in principle. As shown above, commentators such as Wales (2009) made a case for the advantages of linguistic knowledge in general and grammatical knowledge in particular. Hudson (1992) further elucidated nine benefits of this type of knowledge, which could: build children's linguistic self-respect; help teach Standard English; help improve children's linguistic performance (i.e. in writing and speaking but also reading); help when children came to learn other languages; increase linguistic and cultural tolerance; develop analytical thinking skills; help defend against linguistic exploitation; offer insight to and understanding of language problems such as dyslexia; and contribute in general to a deeper knowledge about language (Hudson 1992, 181-188). Many linguists had thus been critical of the loss of metalinguistic knowledge in the curriculum, and supportive of the idea of greater knowledge about language in primary and secondary schools; and linguists often contributed to the expert panels and other advisory bodies.

Parallel to the growing inclusion of grammar in the curriculum, however, several analyses appeared which described systematic weaknesses in the way this happened, accompanied by concerns in the wider community. These concerns revolve around recurring themes: the inadequacy of traditional descriptive terminology (e.g. Clark 2010); the poor quality of grammatical information and exemplification (e.g. Cajkler 2004); the lack of specificity (Paterson 2010); the contradictions in terminology, information and usage between the 'official' grammar and other documents and the overly prescriptive nature of the guidelines, where the language of the policy and training documents did not follow the prescriptions that were to be taught to children (Sealey 1999, Cajkler

2004); teachers' lack of knowledge and training (Cajkler and Hislam 2002, Paterson 2010); and the failure to reflect new developments in linguistics with regard to both technical analyses and the wider social aspects of language use and development (Sealey 1999, Wales 2009). There is also a long-running debate (e.g. Harris 1962, Myhill *et al.* 2012) over the extent to which explicit grammatical instruction can assist in children's development of writing skills, although this debate does not appear in NCFD14, which takes it for granted that the two are related.

Since 2010, there have been several further developments in the National Curriculum treatment of grammar, two of which are of particular interest. The first is the new National Curriculum Framework Document, introduced in 2013 and reissued in 2014. The current paper is most concerned with the description and classification of the grammar terms outlined in NCFD14, and will outline its strengths and weaknesses in light of the criticisms of earlier versions. The second development is the introduction of a statutory test of spelling, punctuation and grammar (henceforth the SPaG test) in the Year 6 SATs, first taken nationally in 2013. While a full analysis of the test is outside the scope of this paper, a washback effect (Alderson and Wall 1993) seems probable. Lefstein (2009) noted precisely how the aims of an approach to KAL – in this case, the rhetorical approach espoused in NLS materials – could be unintentionally 'subverted' even in the hands of a relatively skilled and willing teacher. Washback could well compound this: teachers may interpret their aim as less to do with genuine understanding of language and more to do with transmission of isolated KAL facts as assessed in the SPaG test.

Below I examine in detail the relevant sections of the NCFD14, particularly the English Programmes of Study Key Stages 1 and 2 (henceforth EPS13), and ask two questions: how is the grammar and KAL specification here different from earlier incarnations, and how well does it address the concerns raised over earlier versions?

EPS13: BACKGROUND

EPS13 describes what primary schools are statutorily required to teach children in a number of areas by year group (speaking, exceptionally, is dealt with in one section covering all year groups). For year 1, year 2, years 3-4 and years 5-6 (lower and upper KS2 respectively), EPS13 describes in detail what is expected in reading and writing. The section on writing for each group is broken down into transcription (at least in the early years), composition, and 'vocabulary, grammar and punctuation' (VGAP). Appendix 2 gives an account of the VGAP content to be introduced in each year, and also contains a non-statutory glossary of terms useful to teachers. I shall discuss these in detail later, but first I wish to examine claims in EPS13 about the nature and benefits of metalinguistic knowledge, and the way it presents itself as a document about grammar.

EPS13 acknowledges the distinction between linguistic knowledge and metalinguistic knowledge. It states that '[g]ood [reading] comprehension draws from linguistic knowledge (in particular of vocabulary and grammar) ... [and] effective composition ... requires ... wide knowledge of vocabulary and grammar' (DfE 2013, 5); it is hard to read these as referring to anything other than procedural, implicit knowledge. On the other hand, it is also made clear that this knowledge-of-doing is not enough and that metalinguistic knowledge is also required:

[Pupils] should be taught to use the elements of spelling, grammar, punctuation and 'language about language' listed... Throughout the programmes of study, teachers should teach pupils the vocabulary they need to discuss their reading, writing and spoken language. It is important that pupils learn the correct grammatical terms in English and that these terms are integrated within teaching. (5)

This insistence on metalinguistic knowledge is repeated in the Programme of Study (Writing – vocabulary, grammar and punctuation) for each of the four curriculum divisions. These focus primarily on what children should be taught to do (i.e. procedural knowledge), but add at all levels

that children should also ‘use the grammatical terminology in English Appendix 2 in discussing their writing’ (DfE 2013, 15 and *passim*). Here, for instance, is the description of what is expected in year 2:

Pupils should be taught to:

- develop their understanding of the concepts set out in English Appendix 2 by:
 - leaving spaces between words
 - joining words and joining clauses using and
 - beginning to punctuate sentences using a capital letter and a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark
 - using a capital letter for names of people, places, the days of the week, and the personal pronoun ‘I’
 - *learning the grammar for year 1 in English Appendix 2*
- *use the grammatical terminology in English Appendix 2 in discussing their writing.*
(DfE 2013, 15; my italics)

Thus far, metalanguage appears to be treated as a tool to enable children to discuss their reading and writing. This view is reinforced in the preamble to English Appendix 2: Vocabulary, grammar and punctuation:

The grammar of our first language is learnt naturally and implicitly through interactions with other speakers and from reading. Explicit knowledge of grammar is, however, very important, as it gives us more conscious control and choice in our language. Building this knowledge is best achieved through a focus on grammar within the teaching of reading, writing and speaking. Once pupils are familiar with a grammatical concept [for example ‘modal verb’], they should be encouraged to apply and explore this concept in the grammar of their own speech and writing and to note where it is used by others... (DfE 2013, 64)

As I read it, this extract contains three statements of what is presented as fact, one of which is accompanied by an injunction to teaching practice. The idea that children acquire grammar naturally through interaction is, I think, unexceptional if we define ‘grammar’ as the set of rules which dominate in the models we are exposed to. However, the same cannot be said for the idea that the best way to teach explicit grammatical knowledge is by embedding it in reading, writing and speaking, since while there is evidence that embedded grammatical terminology can assist with writing (e.g. Myhill *et al.* 2012), there is also evidence that some grammatical practice that is not embedded can be successful (see Andrews *et al.* 2006 for a review). The idea that ‘explicit knowledge of grammar ... gives us more conscious control and choice’ may conflate two ideas of what explicit knowledge is: to the extent that the language used in and appropriate to some formal genres may need to be taught, it may well be correct, but that is not to say that knowing grammatical terminology *per se* will improve our ability to write (an assertion for which there is no incontrovertible evidence).

The introduction to the Glossary does not mention the relationship between metalinguistic knowledge and the ‘knowing how’ of language, but provides useful insight into the way curricular knowledge is framed and suggests that the writers have taken on board lessons from earlier versions. First, there is a clear statement of the intention of the Glossary: it provides definitions of all the key terms used in the Programmes of Study, plus ‘others that might be useful. It is intended as an aid for teachers, not ... the body of knowledge that should be learnt by pupils’ (DfE 2013, 70). It does not set out to be comprehensive, and teachers are enjoined to use other reference works to supplement it. The Glossary acknowledges that learning to understand and use these terms can be demanding, since they form ‘a network of technical concepts that help to define each other ... [and because] ... the definition of one concept builds on other concepts that are equally technical’ (70). There is also recognition that ‘there are different schools of thought on grammar’ and that ‘the technical definition [in the Glossary] may be slightly different from the meaning that some teachers

may have learned at school or may have been using with their own pupils' (70). This is particularly interesting since it seems to hint at several of the criticisms raised by commentators such as Paterson and Clark, in particular the weaknesses of some traditional grammatical terminology and the 'metalinguage deficit' of English education in the preceding decades.

EPS13: CONTENT BY YEAR GROUP

The first point to note about the Programmes of Study is that they are radically specific. The metalanguage children should learn each year is spelled out precisely:

Year 1	letter, capital letter, word, singular, plural, sentence, punctuation, full stop, question mark, exclamation mark
Year 2	noun, noun phrase, statement, question, exclamation, command, compound, suffix, adjective, adverb, verb, tense (past, present), apostrophe, comma
Year 3	preposition, conjunction, word family, prefix, clause, subordinate clause, direct speech, consonant, consonant letter, vowel, vowel letter, inverted commas (or 'speech marks')
Year 4	determiner, pronoun, possessive pronoun, adverbial
Year 5	modal verb, relative pronoun, relative clause, parenthesis, bracket, dash, cohesion, ambiguity
Year 6	subject, object, active, passive, synonym, antonym, ellipsis, hyphen, colon, semi-colon, bullet points (DfE 2013, 65-69)

There are thus around 60 terms, although the exact number depends how one counts items like *tense*, *present tense* and *past tense*. While some (e.g. sentence, comma) have always been taught to children learning to write, and some (e.g. compound, cohesion) deal with word formation or text structure, there is a core of 'grammar words'. Arguably, one could delimit these thus:

noun, adjective, adverb, verb, conjunction, determiner, pronoun (relative, possessive), preposition; statement, question, exclamation, command; sentence, clause (subordinate, relative), noun phrase, subject, object, adverbial; tense (past, present), modal verb, active, passive, singular, plural (DfE 2013, 65-69)

These terms can be classified into four rough categories, although they are not presented in this way in the Programmes of Study. There are eight parts of speech including two types of pronoun; four terms relating to communicative function; six terms dealing with clauses, clause elements or phrases; and a mixed group of terms mostly related to verb features. It is a relatively conservative list clearly based on traditional descriptive terminology. The Glossary, intended for teachers, adds around 20 terms to the 30 or so for children:

article, conjunction (coordinating and subordinating); complement, head, main clause, modify/modifier, preposition phrase; auxiliary verb, continuous, future, infinitive, inflection, transitive and intransitive verb, participle, perfect, progressive, subjunctive, voice (DfE 2013, 70-88)

This set of terms raises several inter-related issues. Although the Programmes of Study leave no doubt what is to be learned, and thus directly address the charge of 'lack of specificity and terminology' (Paterson 2010, 477), we must still ask how well the terms are defined in the Glossary (cf. Cajkler 2004) in light of modern linguistic knowledge (cf. Wales 2009). And what other knowledge is required, for example of teachers, in order to be able to use these terms fluently in the way required by the National Curriculum, which asks teachers to 'construct exciting lessons [while]

these terms are integrated within teaching' (DfE 2013, 5)? To address first the issues of the accuracy and currency of the terminology, I will examine the treatment of several terms which link to form two separate conceptual networks: *main clause*, *subordinate clause* and *subordination* help to define *clause*; *verb*, *tense* and *perfect* help to define *verb*. These examples illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the Glossary.

In the extracts below, the layout follows that used in the Glossary; underlining represents hyperlinks within the Glossary; and bold type is used to represent elements underlined but not hyperlinked in the original. Where I refer to entries in the Glossary in my own discussion, these are italicised.

Conceptual network 1: the clause

This group of terms primarily includes *clause*, *main and subordinate clause*, *coordinating and subordinating conjunction*, and *subordination*.

clause	A clause is a special type of <u>phrase</u> whose <u>head</u> is a <u>verb</u> . Clauses can sometimes be complete sentences. Clauses may be <u>main</u> or <u>subordinate</u> . Traditionally, a clause had to have a <u>finite verb</u> , but most modern grammarians also recognise non-finite clauses.	<i>It was raining.</i> [single-clause sentence] <i>It was raining but we were indoors.</i> [two finite clauses] <i>If you are coming to the party, please let us know.</i> [finite subordinate clause inside a finite main clause] <i>Usha went upstairs to play on her computer.</i> [non-finite clause]
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(DfE 2013, 72)

The definition of *clause* is certainly 'modern', in that it identifies the clause as a phrase with verb as head. Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 50) agree that 'the head of a clause ... is realised by a VP', a perspective which allows us to view the clause as an element in a hierarchy and accords phrase its status as the fundamental organising principle of language. By contrast, Alexander (1988, 2) defines clause as 'a group of words consisting of a subject + finite verb ...'; similarly, Richards *et al.* (1992, 52-3) gloss clause as 'a group of words which ... contain a subject and a finite verb' and further specify that '[a] clause is different from a phrase ... [which] does not contain a finite verb' (53). The EPS Glossary explicitly acknowledges the difference between newer and older definitions of clause, and its examples illustrate the distinction clearly enough if not exhaustively.

Given that the user of this glossary may not be familiar with the concepts involved in understanding *clause*, it is worth following up those terms which are considered crucial parts of the conceptual network, i.e. those which are hyperlinked.

main clause	A <u>sentence</u> contains at least one <u>clause</u> which is not a <u>subordinate clause</u> ; such a clause is a main clause. A main clause may contain any number of subordinate clauses.	<i>It was raining but the sun was shining.</i> [two main clauses] <i>The man who wrote it told me that it was true.</i> [one main clause containing two subordinate clauses.] <i>She said, "It rained all day."</i> [one main clause containing another.]
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(DfE 2013, 77)

subordinate clause	A clause which is <u>subordinate</u> to some other part of the same <u>sentence</u> is a subordinate clause; for example, in <i>The</i>	<i>That's the street where Ben lives.</i> [<u>relative clause</u> ; modifies <i>street</i>] <i>He watched her as she disappeared.</i>
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<i>apple that I ate was sour</i> , the clause <i>that I ate</i> is subordinate to <i>apple</i> (which it <u>modifies</u>). Subordinate clauses contrast with <u>co-ordinate</u> clauses as in <i>It was sour but looked very tasty</i> . (Contrast: <u>main clause</u>)	[<u>adverbial</u>]; modifies <i>watched</i>] <i>What you said was very nice</i> . [acts as <u>subject</u> of <i>was</i>] <i>She noticed an hour had passed</i> . [acts as <u>object</u> of <i>noticed</i>] Not subordinate: <i>He shouted, "Look out!"</i>
However, clauses that are directly quoted as direct speech are not subordinate clauses.	(DfE 2013, 86)

The definitions are correct, but they are largely circular and not entirely helpful. *Main clause* is defined in the first place almost entirely by virtue of its not being a subordinate clause, so we must turn to *subordinate clause* to make sense of it. This is tautological ('a clause which is subordinate ... is a subordinate clause'). There are other elements which may confuse a reader without pre-existing knowledge of the terms: it is true that '[s]ubordinate clauses contrast with co-ordinate clauses' yet the following line ('Contrast: main clause') may not make it clear to the uninformed reader whether there are two or three types of clause, and how they are related. The Glossary entry for *subordinate* offers little clarification:

subordinate, subordination	Words or phrases are co-ordinated if they are linked as an equal pair by a co-ordinating <u>conjunction</u> (i.e. <i>and</i> , <i>but</i> , <i>or</i>).	<i>Susan and Amra met in a café</i> . [links the words <i>Susan</i> and <i>Amra</i> as an equal pair] <i>They talked and drank tea for an hour</i> . [links two clauses as an equal pair] <i>Susan got a bus but Amra walked</i> . [links two clauses as an equal pair]
...	The difference between co-ordination and <u>subordination</u> is that, in subordination, the two linked elements are not equal.	Not co-ordination: <i>They ate before they met</i> . [<i>before</i> introduces a subordinate clause]
		(DfE 2013, 85-6)

Here, unless the reader has remembered that a clause is a phrase with a verb as its head, he or she must look at the examples to see that coordination and subordination apply to clauses as well as words and phrases. More seriously, the notion of 'equal' is not explained at all. The idea that two elements might be equal appears to be easy to grasp and is probably easy to remember, but what does it truly mean? The reader may well ask in what way the clauses of 'Susan got a bus but Amra walked' are more or less equal than those of 'Susan got a bus whereas Amra walked.' Studies of teachers' understanding of grammar (e.g. Myhill 2000, Jeurrison 2012) have shown the persistence of axiomatic rules of thumb ('a noun is a naming word'; 'a verb is a doing word') which are easily passed on but only debatably true, and the idea of elements being equal seems a likely candidate to become such a simplified heuristic.

Conceptual network 2: the verb

This group of terms includes those related to tense, aspect (not itself in the glossary, although progressive, continuous and perfect are), voice and types of verb (auxiliary, modal) and distinctions like finite and non-finite.

verb	The surest way to identify verbs is by the ways they can be used: they can usually have a <u>tense</u> , either <u>present</u> or	<i>He lives in Birmingham</i> . [present tense] <i>The teacher wrote a song for the class</i> . [past tense]
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past (see also future). Verbs are sometimes called ‘doing words’ because many verbs name an action that someone does; while this can be a way of recognising verbs, it doesn’t distinguish verbs from nouns (which can also name actions). Moreover many verbs name states or feelings rather than actions. Verbs can be classified in various ways: for example, as auxiliary, or modal; as transitive or intransitive; and as states or events.

He likes chocolate. [present tense; not an action]

He knew my father. [past tense; not an action]

Not verbs:

- *The walk to Halina’s house will take an hour.* [noun]
- *All that surfing makes Morwenna so sleepy!* [noun]

(DfE 2013, 87)

This definition and the first four examples focus on what the reader might think a verb is – a doing word – and entries for *noun* and *adjective* reflect similar awareness of long-standing rules of thumb. It offers an alternative route to identification through the formal feature tense, although as *verb* is not linked to *finite* (which is only linked via entries for *clause* and *modal verb*), it is difficult to see how the definition enables the reader to recognise which words are verbs in a sentence such as ‘The walk to Halina’s house will take an hour.’ The entry for *tense* correctly uses the term in a formal sense, and well-chosen examples from English and Spanish make clear the distinction between tense and time; the entry for *future* also makes clear this distinction, showing that in English future meaning is carried by present tenses.

However, when we turn to *perfect* the examples are more confusing. ‘I had eaten lunch when you came. [past perfect; I wasn’t hungry when you came]’ (DfE 2013, 80) appears wrongly to preclude the possibility of the speaker still being hungry; similarly, ‘She has downloaded some songs. [present perfect; now she has some songs]’ (DfE 2013, 80) may leave the reader wondering whether a past simple form is not also acceptable. The reference to a ‘perfect tense’ (DfE 2013: 80) is also confusing, given the advice that ‘tense is the choice between present and past verbs (86), and the example for *participle* does not clarify: ‘He is walking to school. [present participle in a progressive]’ (79). These are not trivial points: the entry for *perfect* is deficient in definition, explanation and examples.

It is clear that the definitions of the Glossary are not entirely unproblematic. What is not clear is whether any document the length of the Glossary could provide comprehensive definitions of such complex and densely interlinked terms. The overall answer to my initial question about the EPS Glossary is that it is mostly accurate and as up-to-date as it needs to be. Certainly, the type of serious error which gives this paper its title – ‘the butler was dead’ being given as an example of a passive form (Cajkler 2004, 8) – is not apparent. For the most part the Glossary appears free of error, relatively coherent, and no more circular than is unavoidable. It also makes a serious effort to recognise and correct some common misconceptions. It is pleasing to see that the Programmes of Study have been compiled with input from those with both up-to-date, detailed knowledge of English grammatical terminology and due regard for accuracy; it is also instructive to compare the final and draft versions of some terms (e.g. *subjunctive*).

The Glossary amounts to a systematic revision of all previous versions, and has the advantage of being centralised: it is effectively the official ur-list of terminology. The scope of the Glossary makes this also problematic, however. The task of describing English grammar is particularly difficult unless one at least partially abandons the classical taxonomies and nomenclature (see, for example, Fries 1952), so there is no agreed description of English which is complete, accurate and manageable, much less one that can be compacted into fewer than 20 pages. Hence there remain areas where further information may be needed, such as the entry for *passive*, which notes the requirement for

the auxiliary *be* “or some other verb such as *get*” (DfE 2013, 79)¹, and the entry for *clause*, which cannot achieve the depth required in the space available.

The terminological descriptions in the Glossary could never be much more than a starting point, and given its parameters different versions would probably have no fewer defects unless they were made longer (e.g. a discussion of aspect might usefully clarify the entries for *verb* and *tense*). In these senses, and referring only to the mostly grammatical terms I have focused on, EPS13 is a serious improvement on its predecessors. It is also an improvement in its treatment of Standard English.

EPS13: STANDARD ENGLISH

EPS13 refers to Standard English (SE) throughout, and is quite clear about its importance; it baldly states that children ‘should be taught ... to use Standard English’ (EPS, 5) and that the ‘aim of the national curriculum is that everyone should be able to use Standard English as needed’ (85). In year 1 they should be using ‘some of the distinctive features of SE in their writing’ (15). By years 3-4 they should be able to display ‘some of the differences between Standard English and non-Standard English ... [for example, in writing dialogue for characters]’ (30). The entry for SE in the Glossary is clear enough, and appropriately notes that a variety is not an accent and that the differences between SE and other varieties are small. There is no real sense of stigma or ‘censoriousness’ (Sealey 1997, 87). Although the Glossary definition does not really move beyond the ‘unproblematic’ definition also noted by Sealey (89), this is possibly because of lack of space; it is worth bearing in mind the reality of prejudice towards non-SE varieties in the worlds of education and work (for a convincing and realistic discussion of this, see Cameron 2007, 104-113).

CONCLUSION

The grammatical content of NCFD14 is specific, consistent and largely accurate, and in these respects can be seen as an improvement over materials designed to accompany earlier versions of the National Curriculum. This is true even of the best of those materials such as the glossary which accompanied *Grammar For Writing* (DfEE, 2000a). However, the fact that EPS13 is more accurate and more specific than its predecessors does not mean it is without weakness, and in this concluding section I consider some of the most important of these.

The first issue is that EPS13 contains very little idea about how this content should be taught in class, beyond the injunction that it should be integrated into speaking, reading and writing. In one sense, this advice is good: much recent research suggests that integration or contextualisation of grammar helps avoid ‘the worst excesses of prescriptivism’ (Myhill 2010, 135). But if contextualisation is not defined and if teachers are not trained in it, ‘there is a danger of pseudo-integration, where separate, discrete grammar lessons are replaced by “mini” grammar lessons in the midst of something else’ (136).

Perhaps the National Curriculum is not the place for advice in how to contextualise grammar, but looking elsewhere one gets the sense that the quality of the EPS is not matched by available training materials. For example, applicants for teacher training are now required to pass the Literacy Test, but this does not examine candidates’ knowledge of grammatical terms. And the materials designed to support candidates are poor: the online *Glossary of Literacy Terms* is frequently wrong (examples abound, but describing ‘outside the door’ as an adverbial clause is typical [DfE 2014b, 6]). Primary teacher training is not required to contain any instruction in how to teach explicit grammar knowledge, and it seems unlikely that there is space in a crowded curriculum anyway. Wales (2009,

¹ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this example.

538) noted that provision of materials was inadequate without training, and this seems true today too.

As mentioned in the introduction, a full consideration of the SPaG test is outside the scope of this paper. However, one point about it is very relevant to the issue of training outlined above. This is that without effective training in *how* to teach KAL, schools may use the SPaG test as the closest thing there is to a guide to teaching the content. In other words, given a starting point (EPS13) and a closing point (the SPaG test), but with no real guidance as to what is to happen in between and with plenty of other pressures on curriculum time, lessons in KAL may be reduced to decontextualised naming of items simply because this is the type of knowledge that the SPaG test examines. If this happened, it would represent a lost opportunity.

I believe that Hudson and other commentators are right that knowing about how languages work can contribute to the development of higher level analytic skills, support inclusion and tolerance, and build self-respect, but teachers need more if the promise of such knowledge is to be met. My conclusion is that the Programmes of Study and Glossary of NCFD14 are improved in some respects; by themselves, however, they do not constitute all of what teachers will require. The content knowledge deficit reported in papers by Cajkler and Hislam (2002) and Paterson (2010) cannot be dealt with by a glossary, no matter how good. Similarly, teachers need both materials and training in their use, as well as training in wider issues such as integration. Where materials, training and content knowledge are lacking, this may very easily allow curriculum content to be treated as discrete items of 'fact', with none of the subtle rounding, and interpretation that makes investigating language such a profound tool for investigating oneself and society at large.

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