

What is grammar?

The word **grammar** has several meanings. Some people use **grammar** to refer to the way standard language is used, and condemn non-standard usages as ‘ungrammatical’. But most linguists use **grammar** to mean the way in which words are changed in form and put together to make meaningful sentences. Grammar can be subdivided into **morphology** and **syntax**.

Morphology

Morphology is to do with the actual form or structure of words, and the different patterns of these word-forms. In English, for instance, we distinguish between the singular and plural forms of some words, such as *book* as opposed to *books*, and between the present and past tenses of verbs, such as *I love*, *I loved*, *I shall love* and so on.



Syntax

Syntax is to do with relationships between words. Thus in a sentence such as *Jill loves Jack*, *Jill* is ‘doing the action’ of the verb *loves* and is therefore the ‘subject’ of the sentence, whereas *Jack* is ‘receiving the action’ of the verb and is therefore the ‘object’ of the sentence. The order that words are placed in is very important in English. If we put *Jill* in place of *Jack* then the meaning of the sentence would change.

How has English grammar changed?

The grammar of English has changed greatly since **Old English** times. Word order was less important then, because many more relationships between words were marked by special endings, known as **inflections**, attached to words. A few such inflections remain in English today, such as the -’s ending (which expresses the idea of ‘belong to’) and the -s ending (which expresses the idea of ‘more than one’). These endings can be added to words like *pig*: *pig’s*, *pigs*.