

## Personalising Systems

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I wonder if there is a general tendency to anthropomorphise aspects of a system to make it more easily understandable to children and in general to non-experts? I also wonder how far back in the history of education this personalizing tendency goes?

Perhaps an example of what I am talking about would be in order. In 1824 PUNCTUATION PERSONIFIED was published in London and here is one of its double page spreads:

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All the other main punctuation marks are personalised in the same sort of way. It is interesting that the Victorians seem to have felt they could make punctuation feel less arcane to children by "humanising" the system this way.

In a well warmed-up class you can use the punctuation system to get your students to do useful creative writing as laid out below

Pair students who are not sitting close to each other and tell them to stay seated where they are. Write up on the board a set of punctuation marks and diacritics and run through them, writing their names in English next to them.

Ask each student to decide what punctuation mark their partner is and to then write a one page letter to the partner as the chosen punctuation mark. E.g: (to a very vivid, noisy boy) "Dear Exclamation Mark"

The letter should explain the link between this person and the punctuation mark selected for them.

When most students have written a page, ask them to go over to their partner and exchange letters. Give them time to comment on the letters.

Grammar is another system the features of which can be given a human face.

If you have an intermediate class who are happy with the conventional grammar terminology then a good warm-up exercise has them choosing which grammar term they each feel like that day. The activity goes like this:

Write a scatter of grammar terms all over the board:

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Collective noun	present perfect	conjunction	preposition
Past tense	relative pronoun	verb	future perfect
Copula	the passive	adverb of manner	adjective
Personal pronoun	comparative	adverb	helping verb
	Past continuous		

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Ask each student to choose one they feel associated with at this moment from your list or outside it. Ask the students to get up and move around the room trying to find other people who have chosen the same term, but possibly for different reasons.

I very much like this exercise which uses grammar terms as a metaphor for a person's current mood- one morning I may be feeling anxious and achievement-driven and may choose to be the future perfect while another day I could feel very social, seeing my role as that of drawing people together, and could then opt to be a conjunction.....etc.

A classic member of this set of metaphorised exercises is designating students as words, morphemes and punctuation marks. Readers of this site may well already be acquainted with BECOMING A SENTENCE. Here's how it goes:

Tell your students what part of the utterance you have chosen they are to be e g:

- To student 1 "you're the pronoun SHE"
- To student 2 "You're the preposition IN"
- " "You're the verb LIVE"
- " "You're the morpheme s"
- " "You're London"
- " "You're a comma"
- " "You're a question mark"
- " "You're the helping verb DO"
- " "You're the negation NOT"

Tell the students to come to the front of the classroom

Loudly declaim the sentence and ask the students to take up their correct positions, from left to right, across the front of the room, facing the rest of the class.

The example sentence is: SHE LIVES IN LONDON, DOESN'T SHE?

Now ask the students to each say their bit; the punctuation marks mime their function.

Make sure the morpheme “s” cuddles up close to its verb, LIVE

Make sure that SHE runs from the head of the sentence to the end position.

Make sure the morpheme “s” runs to its second position in the sentence.

Make sure that DO, “s” and NOT huddle together and produce their contracted sounds.

Get your “actors” to recite the sentence until they have got it fluent.

This grammar teaching classic is of serious help in getting very kinaesthetically inclined students to understand word order, grammatical endings and syntax. These learners only really understand concepts when they do them.

This type of student understands third person “s” when they have been “s” physically.

You can present and practise the whole grammar system of English with BECOMING A SENTENCE, though it would be sad to do this as current methodology offers us so many alternative ways.

Let me take you back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Another example of anthromorphosis of an abstract system comes in the marvellous little book Flatland. The main two-dimensional Euclidean geometric forms are used to portray the Victorian class system. The circles are aristocrats, polygons are upper middle class, the hexagon and square are middle and lower middle class, while, at the bottom of the pile, you have narrow isosceles triangles which are the common soldier class.

I have found this a delicious text to share with strongly logically mathematically inclined students. you might find it fun to read for your enjoyment.

Can you, gentle reader, think of other intellectual systems that have been made more accessible through a process of personalisation? If so, why not write about them for this site?

So, for example, has anyone come up with a personalising way of making the periodic table more accessible and more memorisable?