

Grammatically Speaking

T. Leo Schmitt explores English grammar and answers your grammar quandaries.

Greetings,

I've been looking for information about how to explain the use of “up” in phrases like *hurry up*, *catch up*, and *pick him up*. What would you suggest?

Thanks,
Paul Williams
Raleigh, NC

Thank you for the great question, Paul. I appreciate this question because it is one that I was thinking about not too long ago. We often think that language is arbitrary—*A rose by any other name would smell as sweet*—, but, there are parts of language that are much more systematic than we think. Phrasal verbs are one example. Phrasal verbs combine a verb and a preposition to create a new meaning; *Catch up* and *catch out* have very different meanings. They are often very difficult for ESL learners to pick up. *Up* has an indexical meaning related to its prepositional meaning. Thus *up* is closely related to the upward direction. We tend to look at *up* as being a generally positive direction. (Shares, salaries, life expectancy, etc. go *up*—often the higher the better!) Not surprisingly, *up* in phrasal verbs often carries this connotation. Thus *hurry up* and *catch up* have a meaning that means reaching the desired level. It is also related to *up to snuff*, *up to par*, and *up to spec*, where a desired level is attained.

Pick him up is somewhat different. If it refers to a baby or animal, it has a literal meaning of an upward direction. If it is picking someone up at the airport, for example, it may mean to get someone “up” onto a form of transportation, such as a car. If it is picking someone up at a bar though, it could be seen as an extension of “up,” together with you. In this case of *pick him up*, we can see that the meaning of *up* has diverged into several different meanings and the preposition of phrasal verbs does not always have a nice clear-cut meaning. While phrasal verbs may follow general patterns, there are still plenty of anomalies.

Note that *up* also has a connotation of completeness for many phrasal verbs. *Eat up*, *clean up*, and *shoot up* all imply a sense of totality.

How can I explain better the conditions in class? I have a little problem when I explain third conditionals and then mixed conditionals. I was wondering if you'd mind helping me with this topic.

Thanks a bunch.

Christian Rodriguez
Guayaquil-Ecuador

Dear Christian,

Thank you for the question. Very briefly, - as conditionals can get very complex—many grammarians divide conditional sentences (usually starting with the subordinator *if*) into three types:

1st (also called the real conditional): If + subject + verb in present simple, subject verb in future (will + base form)

E.g. "If he goes, I will stay home."

2nd (also called the unreal conditional): If + subject + verb in simple past, subject + verb in conditional (would + base form)

E.g. "If he went to Akron, their football program would have been top 20,"

3rd: If + subject verb + in past perfect (had + past participle), subject + verb in conditional perfect (would have + past participle)

E.g. "...if he had gone to New Orleans, or Birmingham, I would not have gotten upset,"

The first conditional refers to possible events that might affect future plans. As such they are very useful in planning contingencies; making warnings, threats and conditional promises; making predictions; and setting conditions as well as other functions. One way to explain this to a class is to take out a coin and say "If it lands on heads, I will give you a pop quiz. If it lands on tails, we will work from the book." You could then encourage your class to come up with their own conditions for the coin flip. Follow up on this with other conditions like "If it is sunny tomorrow..." or "If someone can spell *indomitable*..."

The second conditional refers to very unlikely or impossible events. As such, they are useful for expressing problems and unlikely possibilities. They are also used for giving advice, such as "[What Would You Do If You Found A Bag Containing \\$18,000?](#)" Using advice strategies like this can be a good way to introduce the ideas of impossibility and unlikelihood to your class. You could try asking questions like "What would you do if you won the lottery?" (unlikely—sorry!) or "What would you do if you were a fish?" (impossible).

The third conditional is rare and refers to how past events might have turned out differently. It is used for discussing missed opportunities and speculating about history. I usually explain it to my students by noting that it refers to past events that cannot be changed until and unless someone invents a time machine. You could introduce this with questions about students: "Would have studied harder if you had known your last quiz would be this difficult?" Note that here the students did NOT know that the quiz would be difficult until after they saw it. This pattern can be emphasized with historical

hypotheticals like “What would have happened if the Chinese had colonized the Americas before the Europeans?”. You can then remind students that these events did not occur in this way. Perhaps you could start an interesting discussion on parallel universes or the nature of destiny. 😊

Mixed conditionals refer to mixing the 2nd and 3rd conditionals. It is possible to start a sentence with an impossible condition and then complete it with a present situation. (If + past perfect, would...) For example “If you had called the police, you would still have your money.” In this case, you want to consider how to present past events that still impact the present.

It is also possible to start a sentence with a past tense to indicate something that is currently true with a condition that has happened and now cannot be changed. (If + past, would have past participle) “If you didn’t work every day, you would have had time to spend with your family.” (You are still working.)

Note also that there seems to be a trend in spoken English toward this, eliminating the use of the past perfect in the third conditional. Thus we could easily hear “What would have happened if the Chinese had colonized the Americas before the Europeans?”

Dear Leo,

I have this sentence in the textbook I am using as the first conditional: “If Robert should invite you on the safari, you’ll need to buy a lot of equipment.”

This example is given to show that we can omit the [*if* and invert the subject and auxiliary]: “Should Robert invite you on a safari, you’ll need to buy a lot of equipment.”

I have searched in many grammar books on the use [*of should*] in the first conditional and could not find any reference to it. How can I teach this to my students without confusing them?

Thank you,
Mais Telfah
Saudi Arabia - Jeddah

Dear Mais,

Thank you for the question. I have briefly outlined the basic patterns of the conditional above. You mention one of the several alternative patterns. *Should* is used, as you say, by omitting the *if* and inverting the subject and the verb *should*. Note that the verb in the *if* clause does not need to use *should*. In your example you could also write the sentence “If Robert invites you on the safari, you’ll need to buy a lot of equipment.” Thus “If he goes, I will stay home” becomes “Should he go, I will stay home.” Note that this means that the verb reverts to its base form. I do not know if there is a good way to avoid confusing students about this rule. I would recommend first of all that the

students have a solid understanding of the first (real) conditional using *if*, as that is far more common in speech. Should you decide that your students are confident with the *if* clauses, you can then introduce the *should* clause. Corpus studies show that *should* is the most common of these “subject-operator inversions” for conditionals. Inversion like this is rare in conversation and fiction, but actually slightly more common than *if* clauses in news and academic writing. Thus should you be working in an English for Academic Purposes context, I would recommend you prepare students for being able to use and certainly understand this construction. I would also venture that the “should you” construction has a connotation of being somewhat less likely than the “if you + present tense,” but is still more possible than the “if you + past simple.”

Many corpus studies have demonstrated that different genres do employ different grammars. In the case of *should* inversion, you should probably decide based on your students’ needs and abilities. In general, I would recommend that teachers review what students ultimately plan to do with their language and what grammatical structures are most appropriate for their current and future needs. Best of luck.

Last Month’s Brain Teaser:

The following two sentences are grammatical. They both demonstrate the same exception to a general grammatical rule of English. What is that rule and what is the exception?

1. The Natchez Board of Aldermen last week voted unanimously to demolish the collapsed building at the corner of Martin Luther King Jr. and Franklin streets. (From “City to demolish collapsed building in downtown,” *The Natchez Democrat*.)
2. Authorities believe an escaped convict on work release ... is responsible for the blaze. (From “Investigators believe escaped convict set Roan Mountain fire,” www.tricities.com.)

The rule to which these sentences appear as exceptions is the rule that when a past participle is used as an adjective it should have passive meaning; in other words, the noun should have the role of “done-to” rather than “doer” with relation to the event denoted by the participle. This is the case in *broken window*, for example. In the examples above, by contrast, the noun has the role of “doer”: the building has collapsed, and the convict has escaped. Other similar examples include *fallen trees* and *elapsed time*.

Jeffrey Rasch
Denton, Texas

Excellent job, Jeffrey. That is exactly the answer I was looking for. You are right that in general, we expect adjectives derived from past participles to have a passive sense. This is connected to their uses in passive constructions. Thus the example you give, *broken*

Grammatically Speaking 4 TESOL Connections, January 2010

window, can easily be *the window that was broken* and this is the general grammatical rule. There are, however, a comparatively small number of adjectives derived from past participles such as the example you gave, where the sense is more of an agent or “doer,” so we say *the escaped convict* but NOT *the convict who was escaped*. Many thanks.

This Month’s Brain Teaser:

Look at the following two sentences. What traditional grammatical rule is being violated here?

1. “Some things your son will say may surprise you, but it is important that he knows you are listening and that you care about his feelings and his attitudes.” (From “Moms: Why it is Important to Talk to Your Son About Girls and Dating,” Associated Content.)
2. “If your horse decides to get excited and you want to demand that he lowers his head and calms down, then use this cue.” (From “Head Down / Calm Down / Demand Cue,” InfoHorse.com.)

The first correct answer will be published in the next column of Grammatically Speaking.

Please e-mail your responses to GrammaticallySpeaking@tesol.org.

*When writing to Grammatically Speaking, **please include your name and location (city and state, province, or country)**. If your question or response is selected for publication, your name and location will be printed unless you specify otherwise.*