A lively discussion about syntax, grammar, and punctuation - with Lyn Stone

Triple R Teaching Podcast #220

I always tell people one of the best parts of my job is being able to ask experts to sit down and talk with me about a topic and they say yes! I admit this was kind of a self-indulgent episode because I had lots of questions I wanted to ask Lyn after reading the wonderful second edition of her book, *Language for Life*, and she indulged me. I hope you enjoy this conversation.

I do want to say that my office is in the kitchen, and on this particular summer night my oldest had made a Swiss cake roll which looked pretty amazing, and all the kids were having their turn having a bite so there was a lot of kitchen noise. Sorry about that. I took out as much as I could, but that's just life when you have six kids.

With that, I know you're going to enjoy this episode. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome back, Lyn!

Lyn Stone:

Thank you! I'm delighted to be here.

Anna Geiger:

I'm so excited to have you back to the podcast. Today we're going to talk about your wonderful second edition of *Language for Life*.

Before we get into that, could you give a brief introduction to yourself?

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, it's very hard to have a title because I do lots and lots of things, but mostly my job and my entire career has been about asking and answering two big questions - how are words built and how do we remember them? I like that summary. I came up with that fairly recently, and I think that summarizes everything.

I'm a linguist, and an author, and a school coach, and I run a practice as well. For most of my career, I've been a practitioner working with children and adults that have had difficulty acquiring literacy for whatever reason. So yeah, that's it in a nutshell.

Anna Geiger:

Can you remind us where you're based right now?

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, I'm based just south of Melbourne in Australia, but I'm Scottish, which accounts for the accent that you're hearing right now.

I do a lot of traveling, so I spend quite a bit of time in what we call the Northern Hemisphere, that's where you are, and also in the United Kingdom. For some reason, Ireland has gone through the roof with its interest in the science of learning.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, it's very exciting!

Lyn Stone:

It's brilliant. There are some very, very talented key players over there. I go there, too, quite a bit.

So my base is Australia, but my family is in the United Kingdom, and a lot of friends are in the United States and Canada.

Anna Geiger:

Yes, and I've always enjoyed seeing you whenever I get to, usually twice a year lately when you go to Plain Talk and The Reading League. That's been really fun for me.

Lyn Stone:

It's the double whammy.

Anna Geiger:

A couple of weeks ago, I was at a conference and I was talking to someone who said, "I'm teaching upper grades, seventh grade and eighth grade English, and I never really learned about grammar in school. I'm really struggling to understand it."

I said, look at *Language for Life* by Lyn Stone because it will walk you through it. I told her about how you make all the parts of speech different kinds of people, and how she'll love the story and it will help her, and it will also help her students. She was glad to know there was a resource out there.

I think your book is very unique in that. For one thing, who knew you could make grammar entertaining? I could have told you that because I love grammar, but not too many people do.

So let's start by talking about what is syntax/grammar? Because I know they're not exactly the same thing, but what are they, and why bother teaching them?

Lyn Stone:

Well, there are two ways of looking at, again, words. It always comes back to words. Grammar basically is a foundational system. Grammar is an overarching framework of a language. Grammar is about the rules and the conventions and the structures of language written and spoken that ensure that we are clear and that we get our communicative purpose over.

So that's grammar; it's a sort of overarching the rules and conventions of what you can do and what you can't do with words.

Syntax focuses specifically on the arrangement of words within utterances. The way I look at syntax is it's like a busy town, all of these words working together and they all have jobs, relationships, dramas, rules, and so on. And they're specific to the grammar of that language. I hope that makes it a little bit clearer.

Teaching them is essential because what we need to do is empower students to know how to get their communicative purpose over, firstly in speech, but also in writing. Syntax and grammar study helps to build a meta-language that teacher and students can share so that they can have feedback, so that they can build on foundations and become more and more sophisticated users of words.

Anna Geiger:

So you can't have one without the other. In other words, grammar and syntax have to go together.

Lyn Stone:

Of course, yes, they go together. And knowledge about those two areas is really helpful for teachers because a lot of the time teachers are spending time feeding back to students, "Put it this way," or "The reason that didn't work is..." That's grammar and syntax.

Anna Geiger:

And if we don't understand the rules ourselves, it's hard to put that into language.

Teachers hear a lot about how it's not useful to teach parts of speech in isolation or to do isolated worksheets. What does that mean, and what do you recommend instead?

Lyn Stone:

Well, I've got two answers to what it means.

I spend a lot of time coaching schools, and so I always report back on what I observe. A lot of the time now, we've got these resources out there that give teachers decks of PowerPoint slides, right? On those slides, often you'll see a word study section having a vocabulary word, so there's our target word. Maybe it's the word "fight," and we're going to study that word. "The word 'fight' is a verb."

Well, actually, the word "fight "is not a verb unless you have a context. Parts of speech are very context-dependent. So assigning some abstract category to a word in isolation is a real problem because if I say, "I'm going to the fight tonight," well, now it's a noun. It's that context that does that.

Teaching words in isolation and teaching parts of speech in isolation is really difficult.

The other one is that if we just rote-learn the definition of parts of speech… This is the other isolation part of my answer. Say you say, "An adjective is a blah, blah word. It's a describing word," and you don't show how that happens… "An adjective is a describing word. Here are some adjectives: green, big, small." But you don't make reference to their relationship with nouns and other words in an utterance, then it's kind of pointless.

We don't want learning of definitions of parts of speech. What we want is language in use.

My recommendation is always, always place these words into context and show how they relate to one another. That's far more productive and it gives students more independence when it comes to language use.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, so the important thing is understanding the function of the words. The definitions are important, but not if we don't understand how they how the words work together.

Lyn Stone:

Absolutely. A lot of time and energy can be spent on rote-learning a definition and then never improving. What we want is children's linguistic output to continue to improve.

Anna Geiger:

You have a really wonderful way of looking at parts of speech. How did you come up with that, by the way?

Lyn Stone:

Well, I work in a practice where I have students who have disorders of literacy, and language developmental disorders a lot of the time, and they have barriers to learning. So I have to find ways of making what is very complex... I have ways of making that stick, whether it be spelling, whether it be grammar, whether it be syntax.

And so to personify these parts of speech, I found children sitting up and going, “Tell me more.” It's like a soap opera, right?

So that's how it all started, and I kept finding not just engagement, but also transfer. Learning took place when I personified these things, and so I can continue to develop that over my career.

Anna Geiger:

Well, we'll make people get the book to find the whole story, but give us just a few of them so people who are listening can know what I'm talking about.

Lyn Stone:

Well, I'll take even a bigger step back before I introduce the personalities. If you really think about it, all of the words that we have do about three major things, right? There are three major categories that we can split words into.

The first category is the subject and verb category. You don't have a complete utterance unless you've got those. In any language, humans, when they talk to one another, talk about things and they talk about the “be, do, have” of things. You can't just go around saying, “Things,” and you can't just go around saying, “Be, do, have.” You've got to combine those and then you can communicate. That's how humans communicate.

We've got that upper tier, that level, but we don't just go around doing that. We go around also modifying those things. That's where the adjectives and the adverbs come in, and then what we like to do is connect those bits up. That's where our connectors, prepositions and conjunctions, come in.

Those are the three major categories. It's that simple. They'll all fall into something like that.

I'm not talking about interjections. Interjections have different behavior within that grand scheme. They are different word categories, and they don't really need a lot of help, if you like. Interjections are very fancy.

When I talk about nouns and verbs, I talk about the nouns being the royal family, syntactic royalty. They're the ones that have servants; they have words that will only serve them. Those are adjectives and prepositions. They have pronouns and determiners.

They've got this entourage of verbs that I call the movers and shakers. They're the ones that get things done. It's like the prime minister or the head of state rather than the head of government. Those are the verbs. They communicate about that "be, do, have." They get the stuff done.

So that's what I mean when I personify them. I had this wonderful illustrator actually in Ukraine…

Anna Geiger:

She's really, really good, I've got to say.

Lyn Stone:

She drew the most brilliant pictures for this, so it serves to embed those concepts and show how they relate to one another.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, I love it. I absolutely love it. I highly recommend getting the book just to learn about that because that will captivate the teacher and the students as well.

We won't go into all the specifics, obviously, but in the book you do show how to, not necessarily diagram sentences, but mark them up. Can you talk about why you do that, and how you introduce that? How does that fit in the lesson?

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, it's systematic and explicit. That's the first thing. We need to start simple, and we need to explain to students exactly what we want them to do with a gradual release model. That's what it's all based on.

We build this diagramming framework, one lexical category by one, starting with nouns, then going on to verbs, and showing how they relate to one another.

Once that's done, we've got a complete sentence and then we can talk about subject, verb, and object using that simple diagram. We put circles around nouns, circles around determiners, and circles around pronouns because they all have similar behavior, in that category.

We put lines underneath verbs, and we show how the nouns relate to the verbs with subscript arrows.

It's very, very simple. We do it very systematically, explicitly, and slowly as we need to.

Then our modifiers go in brackets, because brackets we already know contain additional information that can be taken away or put back in.

Then our connectors just have double headed arrows over them to show that they connect to something.

That's it! We don't use color. Color is fiddly when you're getting students, little kids, to change their pencils and so on.

Anna Geiger:

It takes time.

Lyn Stone:

These diagrams are quite simple, but bear a lot of information and a lot of embedding of these relationships and structures.

Anna Geiger:

When you teach the diagramming, is that when you're having them construct sentences? Then can you maybe help me understand a little bit how you use it within a lesson?

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, so we'll start with a sentence. I actually have an anchor sentence that goes, “My big green dragon slowly ate the teacher on a bridge.”

I say to students, “By the end of these lessons, you're going to be able to tell me what part of speech every single one of those words is, but not just that. You're going to show me how they work with one another. I'm going to show you how to do that. First of all, let's talk about nouns,” and we do the story of nouns and so on.

“In this sentence, there are some nouns. I want you to put a circle around them,” and we do and we practice that. I do lots of “I do's,” lots of “we do's” and then some “you do's.” We start that way.

We have example passages as well. I really like birds, so I've taken birds as my sort of knowledge-building topic. I give them an example passage and it has birds in it, and I go, “Circle all the nouns in there as well.”

We build like that, lesson by lesson, until “My big green dragon slowly ate the teacher on a bridge” is completely parsed and diagrammed.

Then I say, “Add a conjunction.” They add a conjunction and carry that sentence on. Yeah, it's a lovely thing.

Anna Geiger:

How does this help? I know part of it is to get that shared language so that when you want them to improve their writing, you can tell them what to do and they understand you. What other purposes are there to being able to identify the parts of speech within a sentence?

Lyn Stone:

Well, it's not the be all and end all. I want to say that to begin with.

The reason I put this together is because I need to help teachers understand those bits as well, because a lot of teachers, like the person that you were talking to at the beginning, say that they weren't taught this at school.

All of my work in spelling and everything that I do, as well as grammar and syntax, is to do with increasing teacher knowledge so that then they can communicate it to their students. There's a dual purpose.

So that's the one thing. It's a shared meta-language and it's an embedding of concepts, not just for students, but for teachers as well.

Then we can offer feedback, then we can become more sophisticated, then we can do things like sentence fragments, which again, have been really effective ways of teaching students how to construct cohesive coherent sentences. We can use all of that meta-language to very, as a sort of shorthand, to very, very quickly show things like sentence fragments, sentence combining, making cohesive paragraphs and so on.

It's about increasing that ability for compositional fluency and compositional fluency is the business of school. We need students to be compositionally fluent. That's my contribution to it, if you like.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

Also, like you said, the book does very well at teaching this information to teachers and even someone who might be a good writer, a good communicator, may not be able to break it down. If we can't break it down, we can't teach it.

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, just because you know grammar and can use grammar doesn't mean you can teach grammar.

I've thought about this a lot with populations of children that really need very, very high-quality input. I hope that it's imparting that to teachers and their students.

Anna Geiger:

So I know that you can really get into the weeds with grammar, especially for people who love it, like you love it and I love it. But we know that not everything teachers know is needful for students or necessary for students to know, so how can teachers know the difference? Do you have any examples that can help us figure that out?

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, what I always want when I'm training teachers is for their knowledge to be deeper and broader than their students' knowledge wherever possible, and especially when it comes to teaching difficult concepts like spelling or grammar. That's why I'm careful in my publications and in my training to point out that this is teacher knowledge, and this is the information I recommend that you impart to students. That's also why I develop scripted resources and scope and sequence documents to support that training.

It's things like phrase structure trees, an example in *Language for Life*. I have phrase structure trees in there, which are some fairly complex linguistic applications. I do say phrase structure trees and the use

of etymonline is for adults. This is for teachers to broaden and deepen their knowledge. You don't really need to go that far with students. I try to be clear as I can about that.

Anna Geiger:

Okay, so we've talked some general things about grammar and the point of learning it. We've talked about your personification of parts of speech as well as using the sentence diagramming or marking up.

Now, I asked if you could let me be a little self-indulgent to talk about some things that I thought were really interesting in your book that I hadn't really thought about. We have a little list, and we'll just kind of go through them.

One of them was, first of all, I honestly had never really heard about determiners. I just thought of "a, an, the," and those three as articles, but you expanded those and call them determiners. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Lyn Stone:

Well, I'd like to say that I didn't coin the term determiners. It's not it's not my coinage, but I think teachers should know because the way I describe determiners is I call them noun heralds.

Going back to the metaphor of the royal family, a herald was used to come out, before the monarch and go, "Look busy, there's a noun coming! There's a monarch coming!" That's what noun heralds do. They tell the reader to get ready or the listener to get ready for a noun. It's a part and parcel of comprehension.

It's not me that feels it's useful to kind of lump those terms together, if you like, into a single category, but it's standard linguistic practice based, again, on behavior and relationships. So yes, we stop at "the, and, a" and call them articles, but that's a subset. There are dozens of other words that have precisely the same relationship with nouns and the same behavior, which is why linguists call them determiners. They go, "There's a noun coming!"

There's no point in dreaming up lots of separate categories when actually the behavior and the relationships are the same for all determiners, like number words, quantifiers, and demonstrative pronouns. "That dog" is different from "six dogs," but they're doing the same thing.

The one thing that you can tell about determiners… I know that there's an approach that says determiners are a special kind of adjective, but they're not! You can put standard adjectives between determiners and nouns, therefore, they're not the same thing. If you have that rule about that order, you have a different category there, and that category is determiners.

And you know what? Children don't have any problem understanding that as soon as you've drawn a circle around your determiner, a circle around your "nine," and then unite them with a superscript arrow that might be jumping over five, six, or seven adjectives. I don't recommend five, six, or seven adjectives, but you can see that relationship. It's really, really easy to do.

Anna Geiger:

And it really simplifies things when you group all of these things into one category.

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, absolutely.

Anna Geiger:

Very interesting. I had never thought about that before.

Lyn Stone:

That's what linguistics does!

Anna Geiger:

Another thing you talked about, and you were saying before with the "be, do, have." I think a lot of times when we're introducing verbs, especially to littles, we might say, "It's the do. It's the action." How do you help students understand the different purposes of verbs? Do you do that from the very beginning? This I find tricky in terms of how to say it and how to introduce it.

Lyn Stone:

Yeah. My favorite way of doing it is using Richard the pug. That's not actually in the book; I didn't print a picture of a pug. But what I do is I show a picture of a cute little pug dog, and I say, "His name is Richard, and he's got his nose in some roses."

I go, "Here's the sentence, ready? Richard smells the roses."

They can clearly see that Richard is involved in the act of taking information through his nasal cavity. "Richard smells the roses. What's he doing? He's smelling the roses, right? There we have a doing verb. Fabulous."

Now, let's get Richard again, but this time there's somebody next to him holding their nose and making a kind of disgusted face. The sentence this time is, "Richard smells funny."

"We don't know what Richard's been doing. We can *infer* what Richard's been doing, but actually the verb in that sentence is showing how he's being. He's being funny-smelling because he's rolled in something disgusting. That is a being verb. Here are some more being verbs. Richard *is* nice. Richard *looks* brilliant today. Richard *feels* rough. There's lots to do with your senses with being verbs."

We do lots and lots of that and all with Richard the pug.

Anna Geiger:

I love how you started with the same word used in two different ways.

Lyn Stone:

It's context dependent!

Anna Geiger:

The difference between phrases and clauses, I think that's something a lot of adults don't really understand or may have forgotten. What's the difference? Why is that important for kids to know, and do you have any tips for teaching that?

Lyn Stone:

Well, I'd like to put my hand up and say that when I wrote the first edition of Language for Life, I had forgotten the difference between phrases and clauses because it didn't come up a lot in my professional life, even though it probably should have. We live and learn. No one was born perfect. Therefore, it's probably quite widespread, not knowing the difference.

What I do is I recommend that once the parts of speech and their roles and relationships are somewhat understood, we can then apply that to larger linguistic units, phrases and clauses. Basically, a phrase is a unit in a sentence that functions as a whole within that larger construction. A phrase can be one word or it can be a large group of words.

But the thing about a phrase is it will never contain a subject and a verb. Once you've got a noun and a verb, you have a clause. That's the difference. Clauses don't have to be complete sentences, but they contain a noun and a verb. Whereas phrases can have one or the other or neither, but can't contain both. Once you've done that, you've got a clause.

The best way to teach that I've outlined that in the chapter on phrases and clauses. I recommend teaching that *after* we've done the parts of speech and really nail what all of that is.

Anna Geiger:

Now you talked about, I can't quite remember, but I have this in my notes. I can't remember what it was, but you can remind me. You had a Batman/Superman analogy for independent and dependent clauses. Can you remind me what that was all about?

Lyn Stone:

Yeah. So Batman is dependent on his equipment. He's got all the gadgets, right? There's a dependency there, so that's a dependent clause.

Whereas with Superman it all comes from within. He's got the magic powers from within, and he sort of independently does all these incredible things. That's an independent clause.

Actually, I'm not sure I came up with that. I think a teacher talked about that in a professional development, and I'm really sorry, teacher, if you're out there and it was you.

Anna Geiger:

They can leave a comment.

Lyn Stone:

I did say, "Oh, I'm stealing that!" And so I have.

Anna Geiger:

I think the thing for teachers to remember is that the dependent clause has the word "than" or "which" or something at the beginning, so that if you took it off all by itself, it would not be a complete sentence.

Lyn Stone:

Well, the thing about this is, this is coordination and subordination, and they're really interesting linguistic devices. Really interesting. They have rules around them as well.

For instance, if you have a subordinate conjunction beginning a subordinate clause, you can take that whole clause and put it at the beginning of the sentence *or* at the end. There's this movability, whereas independent clauses don't do that. “I went to the house, and I opened the door.” You can't go, “And I opened the door, I went to the house.” You can't say, “But I went to the house because I was tired.” I can go, “Because I was tired, I went to the house.”

That's simple already. There are rules around coordination and subordination, and we use coordination and subordination to emphasize things. If we want to place a subordinate clause at the beginning, what we're drawing our readers attention to is that clause. There's that flexibility. That's why subordination is important in writing.

Whereas if we want to cohere, we can use coordinating conjunctions, and we coordinate our information.

The real purpose in writing to coordination and subordination is really interesting.

Anna Geiger:

I think so often when kids’ writing is messy or confusing, not messy as in handwriting, but just a mess… If we don't have that language to understand what's wrong… If we can't look at it ourselves and say, “Oh, that's because they have this dependent clause in the wrong place.” Or “This should be a dependent clause.” Or “This is a run-on.” But when we understand that and we've taught that language to our students, that's where that becomes useful.

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, again, sentence combining and sentence fragments, they're really good ways of teaching high-quality, sophisticated writing. I know that there are a lot of people in very dire need of that.

I talk to education academics a lot and they do sort of despair that sometimes the students that are coming through no longer know how to write, which makes it very difficult for them to respond to what they're learning.

Anna Geiger:

Okay, we're going to move on now to this kind of interesting topic, this idea that grammar and punctuation rules may not always be fixed.

You can always have a conversation with someone who's very bothered by something shifting. For example, I know someone who's very bothered when people say, “It's me,” because it should be, “It is I” grammatically. Or that we're starting to phase out the use of “whom.” We've been working on that for a long time. That has bothered me sometimes. I just get a little twitch when I hear it used incorrectly based on what I learned.

But you talk in the book about how we can be in a position to argue, but sometimes not. Could you explain what this is all about, and how this applies to both grammar and punctuation rules? When do we have flexibility?

Lyn Stone:

Well, again, the overarching statement is that language changes by use. The people vote and they vote with their faith.

The only problem is, language and what's grammatical and ungrammatical in a language is fairly fixed over one lifetime. So the older you get, and the harder you've worked on your language... It's called your idiolect, it's like your individual linguistic fingerprint. The older you get, the harder you've worked on this, the more offensive it is when people are accepting transgressions of the rules that you've built up and lived by.

But it always happens. It happens slowly. It's fairly fixed over a lifetime, but change is inevitable.

New constructions can be argued by the sheer weight of their use and often are. For instance, right now, there's this habit of verbing nouns, of taking a noun and making it into a verb. “I'll text you later.” “She friended me on Facebook.” You know, that sort of thing. “He’s tasked with that.”

Some people, they twitch at that too, but you know what? There's nothing you can do to stop it. Nothing you can do to stop it.

However, there are other concepts, like we have a subject, verb, object order, that don’t really change much. “The cat sat on the mat,” not “The cat on the mat sat.” That's fairly fixed and won't change where there are other language usage changes and there's nothing we can do. It’s the same with commas. It’s the same with apostrophes.

What we try to do when we communicate is disambiguate. We try to make sure we're not ambiguous. We need to be clear and state what we mean. Punctuation helps with that. But when it doesn't, like in most cases of apostrophe, it starts to phase out. That's what's happening with apostrophe.

Anna Geiger:

Tell me a little bit more about that.

Lyn Stone:

Well, as you can see, if you just walk around any greengrocer or any place where people are writing signs, the adults basically don't really know how to use apostrophes as a possessive mark. Apostrophe-S is actually a suffix. It's a suffix. But adults often panic when they see an S and they go, “There's got to be an apostrophe there somewhere!” and they put it there.

Then that makes people who've spent all this time polishing up their idiolect and they know how to use apostrophes, it makes them a bit sad and kind of sniffy, right?

Unfortunately, are very few instances where an apostrophe-S will make it less ambiguous. There are some instances, but we have a digital world where there's a lot of written communication now. It's going to go. Apostrophe-S as a suffix is going to go.

Anna Geiger:

Is it seriously? Oh dear, that bothers me.

Lyn Stone:

In the end, know what the person meant, and that's the point of communication.

Anna Geiger:

Okay, but should we still correct it in students' writing?

Lyn Stone:

That depends. I mean, yeah, I think students in this day and age should still know because here's the other thing about language. Whether you like it or not, you're going to be judged on your linguistic output.

So if you want to adopt a formal register in your written language, you should know about the suffix apostrophe-S. You should. You don't want to make mistakes there because you don't want to be misjudged. It's one of the things that humans do. We judge language. So there's that.

So while we're waiting for it to become obsolete, I think it's still a good idea to teach it, but teach it as a suffix. It's not punctuation.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that was a really eye-opening thing for me in the book that helped a lot.

One thing you wrote, in terms of punctuation things that are changing, you talked about not using a comma before a conjunction before a second independent clause. For example, “He meant to take a right turn, but he got distracted.”

I've been noticing that in a lot of what I read that comma isn't there, and that really gives me a twitch because I was taught to put that comma in before the second independent clause.

You were saying that that's kind of one of those in a position to argue things. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, look, there's a scale of propriety, right? Commas can be optional, but it's on a scale. So if you're separating items in a list, for instance, and you don't put commas there, yeah, I'm going to twitch too.

Because what I want is for my writer to help my reader. That's why we write. We help the reader to understand our thoughts. That's the point. We're not trying to make it harder for them.

Commas will make it easier, therefore if you put a comma before that clause beginning with “but,” you might be really emphasizing that there is a huge pause there. You might really want to draw attention to that second section.

As Oscar Wilde once said, I’ll paraphrase what he said, but he talked about being very busy one morning. He said that one day, he spent the whole morning putting a comma in and the whole afternoon taking it out.

There's a scale of propriety, but yes, there's an optional part. The rule of thumb is, does it help your reader?

Anna Geiger:

That really very helpful, versus am I following the rule that I learned in sixth grade English class?

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, think about your reader, not your teacher.

Unless your teacher is your reader, and then *definitely* think about your teacher.

Anna Geiger:

Very good, very good!

That was another thing you mentioned. You said we can use a comma splice instead of a semicolon. There was a really funny quote in there, something like, "I use semicolons so people know I went to college."

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, was it Bill Bryson that said that? Or maybe it was Kurt Vonnegut. Oh, I can't remember!

Anyway. Yeah, look, it's your prerogative. If you want people to know you went to college, semicolon your head off, it's totally fine.

I'm fond of reminding students that we have formal and informal registers. If you want to be more powerful in that relationship and gather sort of your prowess and put it on display, then being formal using semicolons is great device.

You can overdo it, though, and end up looking like Hyacinth Bucket. She hyper-corrects her speech and probably her writing as well. But it's a TV show, so it's speech, and she just ends up looking more awkward and more uneducated much of the time.

We have to be careful about what the register is.

Yeah, semicolons are nice, but again, I wrote the first edition of *Language for Life* with no semicolons deliberately to prove a point that you can.

Anna Geiger:

Oh, interesting.

You talk about, I honestly never knew the difference, but I thought this just was an interesting tidbit, the difference between an en dash and an em dash. Could you explain that, please?

Lyn Stone:

Well, the letter N traditionally takes up half the space of the letter M, so it's short dash and a long dash. What's happened in punctuation is that they've taken on specific roles.

I think a really interesting snippet about that is that when you get AI to write something, especially Chat GPT, they are so in love with em dashes. They'll put em dashes instead of parentheses, instead of commas, and so on.

Anna Geiger:

I've actually noticed that, yes. It kind of bugs me.

Lyn Stone:

It gives away its AI status right there. They use em dashes like they're going out of fashion.

I've listed all of the things that em dashes do in the book and all of the things that en dashes do, and they are slightly different.

But yeah, watch out. If you don't want to look like AI, your em dashes need to be severely limited.

Anna Geiger:

Good tip. Who knew we'd be talking about that a year ago?

Another thing I've learned from you is that there are a lot of letters that are not actually graphemes, like letter combinations that you might think would be graphemes. That was through a course I took on your website. I don't remember which one.

When I wrote my own book I had a list of graphemes. As I went through the book multiple times before it went to publish, I'm like, "Hang on, can I just please change a few more things?" And it was always to take out more graphemes because you can never find a list anywhere where you can really know for sure.

One example would be that you said that TT is not a grapheme for T. Can you explain why? I mean, there's a lot more there and I would encourage people to check out your courses, but just that one thing I'd like to talk about. Why is a double letter not a grapheme?

Lyn Stone:

Firstly, can I say congratulations on your book?

Anna Geiger:

Oh, thank you.

Lyn Stone:

Huge, huge congratulations. That's a milestone. That's amazing. Wow.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you very much.

Lyn Stone:

It's really impressive.

But look, here's the thing. When you get consecutive identical letters, and the reason we're talking about this is because I have a morphology section in *Language for Life*, and this illustrates it really well.

When you have consecutive identical letters, remember that language is economical. It's not there to confuse written language and the writing system. It's not there to confuse people. It's actually there to boost comprehension. Comprehension is baked right in to written language.

Because phonics is very, very popular, the temptation is to say that all letter sequences represent a sound and that's a problem because we've got a morphophonemic language so it's morphemes as well.

If we take, for instance, double T, and say this is a spelling for the sound /t/, we are missing the fact that in many cases we actually have what's called an assimilated prefix. We've got AD denoting “to” or “towards.”

Say we have the word “attune,” that's the first word I could think. Oh no, let's do “attract,” that's a really good one.

You could say the word “attract” is made up of these graphemes and one of those graphemes is a double T. Or you can say we have a base TRACT, which denotes pulling, dragging, and if we put the prefix AD, towards, then we show that we're pulling something towards, right? That's what “attract” is.

The thing is, in speech, it's really hard to go /d/ /t/ consecutively, so what speech has done is it's merged those two sounds. What the orthography does is that it shows that merger by turning the D into a T. So we've got AD, plus the base, TRACT, and when we put them together, the AD becomes an AT.

That is really, really worthwhile to tell students. It's not that suddenly you've got a double letter. It's that you have a morphemic boundary.

From that, then you can build all sorts of other words and know when the double letter is there and when it's not because of that knowledge of how it actually works.

Also, if we're saying that double letters are graphemes, we are giving students like 20 more graphemes to learn with no context. You know that students aren't going to be able to do that. There's a population of students that just will not be able to do that. So that's my argument.

Anna Geiger:

You're talking a little bit of assimilated prefixes there, and I think there's a lot of really helpful work around writing word sums to help kids see how the morphemes come together, like in the word “attract,” for example.

Do you recommend doing the original prefix versus the assimilated prefix in the word sum and why? Instead of saying AT plus TRACT, it would be AD plus TRACT?

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, I do recommend that because what that gives us is a really large family.

What that gives us is the concept that the rewrite arrow in a word sum doesn't mean equals; it means these are the changes you need to make so that we have that word in present day English. We have that entire word. It summarizes a lot of how the writing system works, so I really do recommend that.

And it's not just about prefix assimilation. When you use that system, you can also show how bases will change around their borders to fit their suffixes, like why we do Y to I.

It's really, really useful, and it can be done systematically. It can be done explicitly and, because it's linguistically accurate, it has a lot of very wide application.

Anna Geiger:

We'll talk about one more question, and that's also about morphology.

You said that there's no shame in declaring that the complete word is the base, which I found super interesting and comforting for teachers who are trying to work with morphology. There's always lots of noise around saying you're doing it wrong.

For example, if someone wanted to teach their students to do a word sum with the word “musical,” they might do MUSIC plus AL, even though MUSIC is actually two morphemes, MUSE plus IC.

But you said there's no shame. Can you explain that a little bit?

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, look, I love that example with “musical,” I think that's really good.

When we break words down into those morphemic categories, it can be intimidating because there are lots and lots of bound bases, bases that only make sense in English words if they have a prefix or a suffix or another base. They're called bound bases, and they're hard to spot, and they're a bit scary.

Prefixes and suffixes are also bound morphemes. They don't sit on their own. They've got to be bound to something, right? So that can get scary really, really quickly.

So why not have MUSIC, and then we can add the adjective forming suffix AL? There's no shame in that at all.

If you want to drill down further, things like etymonline will show you what “music” contains in terms of its morphemes, so you can drill down even more.

My favorite example is “happy.” I love that word. There's nothing wrong with saying HAPPY is a base, because it is. It's a base. It contains one meaning and it's great, and we can we can toggle Y to I when adding suffixes, so it explains lots about the writing system.

But there's an Easter egg in the word “happy”! I like students to discover that Easter egg with me as well and teachers to discover that. That's if we break “happy” down further, we can see that it contains the base HAP and that denotes chance or fortune and the suffix Y. So from HAP, we can apply that to “hapless,” “happen,” “haphazard,” and so on.

But if the focus is Y to I, then there is no harm on keeping HAPPY as the base. No harm. No shame. It's fine. We can build that as well.

Anna Geiger:

I appreciate that you have an open mind towards morphology with the understanding that there are different ways to approach this work with words.

What would you say is the most important thing for teachers to keep in mind as they're learning about morphology and word sums and all of that?

Lyn Stone:

It is a life journey. It's an unconstrained skill. You keep learning new things about it. If you get enjoyment out of that by not being pilloried every time you make a word sum… “No, you did *that*?!”

Anna Geiger:

Yes, I've experienced that, but go ahead.

Lyn Stone:

Yeah, it can happen because people get very passionate about getting it right. But if we relax a little and understand that this is something that we're continuing to learn, it's unconstrained.

There are some formal ways of doing it, but just to even be interested enough, I think, is a huge joy and doesn't need to be a nightmare.

I would encourage teachers to realize that none of us were born perfect.

Anna Geiger:

And still haven't achieved it.

Lyn Stone:

Yeah.

Anna Geiger:

Your book is, I think, a gift to teachers and students and I highly, highly, highly recommend *Language for Life* and your other books as well, but this is my new favorite.

Lyn Stone:

Oh, thank you.

Anna Geiger:

I do enjoy all your courses as well.

I think in the works you have *Writing for Life*. Can you tell us a little bit about that? Is that still a project?

Lyn Stone:

It's still a project. It's a course, so you can do that writing course. There's quite a lot of grammar in that too, grammar and syntax.

Yes, the accompanying book is written, but for Lyn Stone "is written" means it's all there in my head.

Anna Geiger:
Oh, no! Ha!

Lyn Stone:

So there's a tangible course now, but the book will be bright yellow, so it's like a rainbow when you've got the collection. It's still… I haven't got a date for that yet.

I'm actually updating *Spelling for Life* right now. That's going into its third edition because there are parts of that I really, really want to change and make more sophisticated and make a little bit more up to date and perhaps politically correct as well. That's next.

Then I've got to redo *Reading for Life*, so there's a lot.

Anna Geiger:

Well, you are good example of how we keep learning and updating as we go, and that's shown in your books.

Thank you so much for taking time to sit down with me. I look forward to seeing you again in person, hopefully in the next year or so, and learning more from you. I always learn more things and have more things to think about.

Lyn Stone:

Well, I love it when I start a presentation, and I look up and you're in the front row reading.

Anna Geiger:

Yes, I know I was doing it the last time, and you came right down next to me and said, "What are you reading right now?" I hate to bother people right before they're starting a presentation, but...

Lyn Stone:

Oh, no, it's never a bother with you, Anna. Thank you so much for having me on the show!

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much for listening. You can find the show notes for this episode, including links to all of Lyn's books, as well as her website and courses, at themeasuredmom.com/episode220. Talk to you next time!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, themeasuredmom.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.