
Using your language knowledge

Read the following text. What language knowledge do you need to have in order to be able to understand it? Think about:

- how you decipher the printed words
- how you make sense of sentences
- what you know about the 'ingredients' of a story
- what you notice about the vocabulary used
- how the text makes you use the 'world' knowledge you already have.

I first started to act at the age of three. We were a very poor family and it was my mother's idea to have me help out with her many outstanding bills. She wrote the script and directed the action. The cue to begin my performance was a ring at the front door. Grasping my small hand, my mother rushed down the three flights of stairs from our small flat and hid behind the front door as I opened it. The unsuspecting third member of the cast – the rent collector – was standing there as I delivered my first lines: 'Mummy's out', I said, and slammed the door in his face.

From *What's it all about?* Michael Caine

Reflection

How is it that you are able to translate some small black marks on a sheet on paper into comprehension and amusement? Obviously a lot is going on.

1. You can recognise individual **letters**. You know all the possible **speech sounds** the letters can represent and know how to put these together into words. Some of the **words** you recognise by sight. You also notice that the **spelling** is correct (or at least you would if it wasn't). You know all the **words**, including some which are made from smaller units (e.g. *unsuspecting*). You know that some words carry more than just a straightforward meaning – you will know the convention in this kind of story that the character called the rent collector is more than likely to be an adversary.
2. You recognise that all the **sentences** are correctly formed (or again, at least you would know if they weren't). What you know about **word order** tells you that *The unsuspecting third member of the cast* and *the rent collector* are the same person. It also tells you that in the sentence that begins *grasping my hand*, it is the author's mother who is doing the grasping, while your knowledge of **pronouns** tells you that the same person wrote the script. A lot of your understanding at this level depends on your ability to recognise words' membership of

classes like **noun** and **verb**. Your recognition of the **inflexions** of **tense** is the means by which you know that the story happened in the past.

3. You probably recognise that the **text** follows the conventional pattern of **story**. **Characters** are introduced and the **setting** is sketched in. A **problem** is stated (or at least implied) and a **resolution** reached. How far were you into the text before you realised that it was a story; what were the clues that told you this? You also recognise the **vocabulary** of the theatre (*script, cue, performance* etc.) and your knowledge of the wider world helps you recognise the **irony** of portraying this episode in such grandiose terms. Your knowledge about the author himself will probably influence the way in which you understand the story too. Finally, you recognise that the whole story is written in a kind of language which is known as **Standard English** and you would immediately be able to spot any words or structures which broke the rules of that variety.

You may not have known any of the terminology used in the last three paragraphs, but that doesn't stop you using all this language knowledge, any more than not knowing the anatomical names for the bones in your fingers would stop you from playing the piano.¹ Any user of English knows *implicitly* a bewildering array of rules about all aspects of language. You know how to speak 'correct' English in a way which matches the demands of any context. You notice whenever people use English which is 'incorrect' or inappropriate. So why do you need a unit like this?

You may well feel confident of your ability to discuss and explain some of the knowledge indicated in paragraphs 1,2 and 3 – you have **explicit knowledge** of the sounds associated with letters, for example, and can talk about that knowledge. On the other hand, much of what you know will be in the form of **implicit knowledge**.