

## From the Author

What you are about to read is a series of fictional conversations between two characters: Denis Lacroix, a student, and Paul Syme, the Grammar Geek. I hope you have as much pleasure reading these conversations as I had writing them.

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## Foreword from Denis Lacroix

Hello there. My name is Denis Lacroix. If you are reading this book, then you are probably enrolled in an English course at a college or a university. And, if you are like I was when I was your age, you probably do not get particularly excited when it comes to learning and studying that dreaded *g*-word. Can you guess what word I am talking about? I'll give you a hint: it has two syllables and rhymes with *hammer*. Yep, you guessed it – *grammar*. When I was a student, I always found learning grammar to be a boring, tedious task, made all the more boring by the complicated rules, confusing charts and lifeless examples in traditional grammar books. I put together this book keeping your need for something more fun and interesting in mind.

This grammar book, as you will see, is different from your typical grammar book in that it presents grammar through a dialogue between myself and a man known as the Grammar Geek. Contrary to what you might be thinking, the Grammar Geek wasn't a socially awkward, nerdy guy with glasses. His real name was Paul Syme and he was the most normal, down-to-earth person that you will ever meet. I met him back in the summer of 2010 while I was working as a waiter at the Banff Springs Hotel in Banff National Park, Alberta. I recorded our conversations with my cell phone so that I could listen to them again and again, thinking that one day I might even be able to publish them in the form of a book. Well how about that. *Le voilà!*

Like other books, it will instruct you in terms of the commonly taught grammatical forms: verbs, nouns, adjectives, determiners, pronouns, adverbs, and so on. Unlike other books, however, the goal is not only to instruct, but also to entertain. Yes, entertain! I hope that you emerge from this book having acquired a better understanding of English which will help you in your future pursuits, be them academic, professional or just personal. Perhaps maybe, just maybe, you will also emerge from these pages with a greater appreciation for English grammar and language in general.

Bonne lecture!  
Denis





## Lesson 1: Space and Time

### Scene

The Windsor Lounge, 3:00 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon. I had only been working in the area for a couple of months so my English was o.k. but still a bit rough around the edges, especially my accent (which thankfully you will not be able to hear). My shift was just beginning when I approached Mr. Syme's table.

**Denis:** Good afternoon Sir. How are you this afternoon?

**Customer:** I'm great, thanks. And how about yourself?

**Denis:** I am doing great too, thank you. Can I offer you something to drink?

**Customer:** You bet you can! Something cold and frothy please. Have you got anything on special today?

**Denis:** Yes, in fact we have our Big Rock Scottish Heavy Ale on promotion for four dollars a pint. If you are interested in trying Alberta craft beers, that is an excellent choice.

**Customer:** Sounds good to me. A pint of the Scottish Heavy Ale it is.

**Denis:** Excellent. One ale coming up.

**Customer:** You know, I can't get over how gorgeous the view of the Rockies is from here inside the lounge. The pictures on the Internet are nice but not nearly as breathtaking as the real thing. You must really enjoy working here.

**Denis:** Yes, I really do. This is my second summer at the hotel in fact. I would like to come back next summer too. This town is a great place to work and to meet people.

**Customer:** And judging by the average age of the staff around here, which I'd put at about 19 or 20, I'm guessing that it's a good place to... *ahem...* party?

**Denis:** Ha. Yes, it is good for that too. Occasionally...

**Customer:** You know, if I didn't know better, I'd say you weren't from around here. Is that a French accent that I detect?

**Denis:** Yes Sir, it is. I come from *la belle province*.

**Customer:** Quebec! Nice. So how the devil did you end up out in Banff if you don't mind me asking?

**Denis:** Oh I don't mind at all, people ask me that question all the time. In fact, I just finished Cegep last spring and will be starting university in the fall. I work here to make money and improve my English. There are a lot of Quebecers here as a matter of fact who do the same thing as me.

**Customer:** Well your English is already pretty advanced in my humble opinion. I think you should have said "I'm working" and "are doing" though.

**Denis:** Whoops. That sounds better, thanks. Actually, I am thankful for the opportunity to speak with customers like this and use English. My ultimate dream is to go to an English university to study which is why I need to improve. Plus, everybody is speaking English.

**Customer:** Careful there... everybody *speaks*.

**Denis:** Darn, there's another mistake. I feel pretty confident when I speak English but I know that I still have to look for my words and that I make mistakes from time to time. I had courses in school but I really learned English in two ways if you want the truth.

**Customer:** Oh yeah? Now I'm really curious. Which two ways?

**Denis:** The first way was by listening to music. All kinds of music: pop, punk, heavy metal, rock... everything except for country really. No matter how much I try to like it, I just can't. It just... um... how can I say it... *c'est tellement plate!*

**Customer:** Ha... yeah! It is pretty lame, I agree. Don't worry about offending me there... I am not much of a country fan myself. And the second?

**Denis:** By watching Hockey Night in Canada! I am a BIG Montreal Canadians fan. Since coming here to live and work, I am also becoming a fan of the Calgary Flames and Edmonton Oilers too.

**Customer:** Well I'll be darned. Who says rock music and hockey can't be instructive? You know, I always tell my students that you can learn little pointers in the classroom and from listening to music and watching television, but to learn a language you can't just passively absorb it: you also need to actively use it. For that reason, your decision to come here and immerse yourself in it was, in my humble opinion, an excellent idea.

**Denis:** I agree. But hey, wait a second. Did you just say your students? Are you a teacher?

**Customer:** Yes, as a matter of fact I am. I teach English at the University of Manitoba. I was attending a conference in Vancouver and am on my way back home.

**Denis:** Is your home in Winnipeg?

**Customer:** Yes, it is. St. Boniface to be exact.

**Denis:** Wow. St. Boniface. That is a very "Franco" community... does that mean that you speak French?

**Customer:** *Bien oui...* or as you Quebeckers are so fond of saying, *BEN-oui!*

**Denis:** Ha ha. I like your accent. So I guess if I have questions then you are the man that I should ask.

**Customer:** They don't call me the *Grammar Geek* for nothing!

**Denis:** The Grammar Geek? That is a funny nickname. How did you get that?

**Geek:** Well a couple of my colleagues started calling me that back when I first started teaching and it has stuck ever since. I think it had something to do with my obsession with grammar: normal people watched shows like *Breaking Bad* and *the Walking Dead* for the entertainment value. Not me though... I watched them to analyze the grammar. You don't get much geekier than that.

**Denis:** Ha ha, nope, that is definitely geeky. I guess there are worse pastimes and nicknames to have though.

**Geek:** Yeah. As a matter of fact, I had a rather temperamental colleague when I was teaching whom everyone referred to as the Grammar Grump. Then there was the Grammar Goon... but that's a story for another time.

**Denis:** Hmm. That sounds "intrigant".

**Geek:** Intriguing. So go ahead and shoot. What's on your mind?

**Denis:** Well I know that my verbs can be incorrect sometimes, like earlier for example, when I said *is speaking* instead of *speaks* and *I work* when I should have said *I'm working*. I know that sometimes I forget my 's' on words too.

**Geek:** You are not alone. Nouns and verbs are two areas which many English learners struggle with in fact.

**Denis:** Well I'm glad I am not alone. Do you have any conseil? Counsel?

**Geek:** Advice. Yes, I think that I do. Just remember this: nouns are, in Latin terms, *cum spatium*; that is, they represent space. Verbs are *cum tempore*: they represent time.

**Denis:** Spatium and tempore. I'm not sure I am following you.

**Geek:** Alright, let's forget the fancy Latin terms. Can you give me two beer mugs?

**Denis:** Okay, here you go.

**Geek:** Thanks. Now I'll place one of them in front of you like this. Then I'll put the other one beside it, like that. What are you looking at?

**Denis:** Two mugs?

**Geek:** Yes, you are right. You have just thought of the mugs in terms of *spatium*, or the physical space they occupy. Grammarians call that 'number'.

**Denis:** Number. Alright.



**Geek:** Now for the tempore. What is the difference between *I have a beer in the afternoon* and *I had a beer in the afternoon*?

**Denis:** In the first one you mean something like “in general” or “every day”. In the second one you mean that you had a beer in the afternoon yesterday.

**Geek:** Exactly. I just conceptualized the action of having a beer in terms of time, in this case present and past. This is what grammarians call ‘tense’.

**Denis:** Tense. I think I learned that word in high school. Number too. I am not sure that I see how these two terms can help me however.

**Geek:** The notion of space and time is fundamental to language. What makes mastering English so challenging, and at times frustrating, for French speakers is the fact that the two languages express these notions differently. In French, you can pluralize words like *devoir* or *information* and say *mes devoirs* or *les informations*. However in English, we can’t: we say *my homework* and *some information*, no *s*. Also, the sentence ‘J’étudie’ can be translated as *I study*, *I’m studying* or even *I have been studying* depending on the context. The future in English can be especially frustrating to learn due to the fact that it can be expressed in several different ways: *I will go tomorrow*, *I am going to go tomorrow*, *I go tomorrow*, *I am going tomorrow*, *I will be going tomorrow*, and *I will have gone tomorrow*.

**Denis:** Wow! That is a lot of different ways. Now I’m starting to see why I am so confused sometimes. But how can ‘I’ve been studying’ mean ‘J’étudie’?

**Geek:** Think about a sentence like ‘J’étudie depuis’ quatre heures. That is where you would say *I have been studying*.

**Denis:** Oh right. ‘I have been studying for four hours.’

**Geek:** Now, for a French speaker looking to master English, it is important to have a solid grasp of the different grammatical forms and the meanings that they evoke. English speakers like myself were fortunate to have learned these forms and meanings as young children and they remain stored up there in our unconscious minds, ready to be deployed if called upon. For us we don’t even have to think about it: our language just comes out naturally.

**Denis:** I am thinking that it sure would be nice to have the feeling that English speakers have; the feeling where the language just comes out naturally *and* correctly.

**Geek:** Indeed, fluently and accurately as ESL teachers like to say. I must say that you are already a fair distance along the path to mastery in both of those departments. However if you would like me to, I could give you a hand with moving you even further along on it.

**Denis:** Really? That would be great. How do you propose to do that?

**Geek:** By doing what comes naturally to me: teaching. How does this sound for a proposal? I'm in town for the next two weeks so why don't we meet here in the lounge every afternoon, around this time, and I can give you some lessons? We can go back over some basics and delve into some more intermediate and advanced notions too. I'm actually vacationing with my wife and kids and I was planning on coming down here every afternoon for some alone time anyway. I'll confess that I am a serious beer connoisseur so having a daily rendez-vous will give me a valid reason to come and sample the beer selection in here.

**Denis:** That sounds like a great idea. We have a pretty wide selection so you should be able to try something new each time. And I'll be a great student, you will see.

**Geek:** I don't doubt it! By the way, my name is Paul Syme. What's yours?

**Denis:** Denis Lacroix... or that's Dennis the Cross for you English people.

**Geek:** Ha ha. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Cross.

**Denis:** Nice to meet you too Mr. Syme. Hey, I guess that you must be thirsty so I will go and get the beer that you ordered.

**Geek:** My beer... in all my excitement I almost forgot! You had better get to work young man.

**Denis:** Yes, I agree... *au boulot!*