

# When “steel meets steel”: grammar doesn’t need to be dull

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My younger son tells me that talking about language – especially grammar – is boring. But it doesn’t need to be. Especially if you are sneaky!



To illustrate, I decided to review Brown’s 14 grammatical morphemes while attending Ironfest, the annual festival of steel and stuff you can make with it, including swords, armour, steam engines, and tanks.

## What?

To recap, back in the 1960s and 1970s, clinical psychologist Roger Brown studied the grammatical development of three typically developing children of approximately 2 to 4 1/2 years of age. From these studies, he identified 14 grammatical morphemes, which he found could be measured reliably over time:

1. Present progressive -ing
2. Preposition in
3. Preposition on
4. Regular plural -s
5. Irregular past tense verbs (e.g. came, ran, sat, broke)
6. Regular possessive -s
7. Uncontractible copula (It is [X]. Yes, it is/was. There I am.)
8. Articles (a, the, an)
9. Past tense regular -ed
10. Regular third person -s (e.g. Dad eats.)
11. Irregular third person (does, has)
12. Uncontractible auxiliary (e.g. She was dancing.)
13. Contractible copula (He’s handsome.)
14. Contractible auxiliary (Dad’s yelling.)

So let’s get to it. Here’s how my review went down!

### 1. Present progressive -ing

The soldiers are **marching**.

### 2. Preposition in

Rapunzel is **in** the tower.



### 3. Preposition on

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The warships are floating **on** the water.

### 4. Regular plural -s

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The **queens** are smiling.





## 5. Irregular past tense verbs (e.g. came, ran, sat, broke)

The soldiers **held** their shields.





## 6. Regular possessive –s

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The falconer's peregrine falcon.





**7. Uncontractible copula (It is [X]. Yes, it is/was. There I am.)**

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Was the sun going down? Yes, **it was**.



## 8. Articles (a, the, an)

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A carriage is parked on **the** grass.





## 9. Past tense regular –ed

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The band played.



## 10. Regular third person –s (e.g. Dad eats.)

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The performer balances.





### 11. Irregular third person (does, has)

The man **has** a steam engine and **does** a lap of the showground.



## 12. Uncontractible auxiliary (e.g. She was dancing.)

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He **was** cycling.





### 13. Contractible copula (He's handsome.)

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He's scary.





#### 14. Contractible auxiliary (Dad's yelling.)

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The **wrestler's** jumping.





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Principal source: R. Brown, *A First Language: Early Stages*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1973).