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Beyond the Basics: Transitive, Intransitive, Ditransitive and Ambitransitive Verbs

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

Here's a good laugh: Lori walks into the kitchen and says to Greg, "Make me a sandwich." Greg waives his hands wildly and replies, "Poof! You're a sandwich."

I know you all love a good grammar joke as much as I do. That one's worth at least a chuckle, right?

But, don't you wonder what makes that funny? And don't you wonder if the correct phrasing should be "Please make a sandwich for me"?

The answer lies, of course, in grammar. To understand whether "Make me a sandwich" is a correct way to ask someone to prepare a sandwich, you need to understand a little more about verbs, objects, and object complements.

Transitive and intransitive verbs

Transitive verbs are verbs that have a thing to receive the action — they take a direct object.

I wrote a grammar article.

I baked a cake.

I told a joke.

Intransitive verbs take only a subject and lack a direct object.

The grammar guide fell.

I cried.

You laughed.

This seems simple enough. So think about this sentence: *I baked for Valentine's Day yesterday.* Is *baked* transitive or intransitive?

If you answered intransitive, you're correct. This sentence lacks direct object; in other words *for Val-*



entine's Day aren't receiving the action of *baked*. In grammatical terms, *for Valentine's Day* is a prepositional phrase and *yesterday* is an adverb.

So, what about the sandwich joke? Is *me* a direct object? Is *please make a sandwich for me* the only correct phrasing?

Wait — to answer that one you need to know a little more about verbs.

Ditransitive verbs

Like transitive verbs, ditransitive verbs take a direct object, but they also take an indirect object. This indirect object always comes before the direct object, and it usually refers to someone who benefits from the action

Lori gave Greg a break.

Send your wife a card.

My husband brought me some flowers.

Get your assistant to help.

Show grammar nerds some love!

Most English verbs are neither purely transitive/ditransitive or in-

transitive. Instead, they are ambitransitive. They can act as any of these types of verbs depending on context.

The little boy broke the lamp.
(transitive)

My oven broke yesterday.
(intransitive)

She opened a new shoe store.
(transitive)

The store opened early today.
(intransitive)

I paid the mechanic.
(transitive)

We already paid.
(intransitive)

Still, wondering if *make me a sandwich* is correct? The answer is coming, after a little more grammar. . . .

Resultative verbs

Resultative verbs (sometimes called attributive ditransitive verbs) take a direct object and an object complement — a word or phrase

that describes how the direct object ends up.

He painted the barn red.

The jury found the defendant guilty.

Grammar jokes drive me crazy.

Okay, so here's where it gets interesting. *Make* can be a resultative verb.

Bad writing makes me mad.

My students make me proud.

But what does that do about the joke? Let's take a moment to switch from verbs to adjectives and nouns — then we will get to the answer.

Noun phrases as adjectives

So far, the examples of resultative verbs have all used an adjective as the object complement: *red, guilty, crazy, mad, and proud.*

But some resultative verbs can take noun phrases or adjectives as object complements.

Grammar jokes make me the happiest girl in the world.

So, what does that do to our question? If *make* can take *me* as an object complement, did Lori, grammatically speaking, ask Greg to turn her into a sandwich?

Now you're ready to learn the answer.

The answer

Yes — *make me a sandwich* is a grammatically correct way to ask someone to prepare you a meal. It is perfectly correct to use *make* as a ditransitive verb.

The humor in the jokes comes because *make* can function as a ditransitive or a resultative verb.

In the serious version, *make* functions as a ditransitive verb, *sandwich* functions as a direct object, and *me* functions as an indirect object.

In the funny version, *make* functions as a resultative verb, *sandwich* functions as an object complement, and *me* functions as a direct object.

Conclusion

While *make me a sandwich* is as grammatically correct as *make a sandwich for me*, it still highlights a potential problem. Because many verbs have different functions, they can create ambiguity in our writing.

Thus, check your sentence structure and word choices to make sure your meaning is clear.

All this grammar has made me really hungry. I'm off to make myself a sandwich.

Sources

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