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**A COURSE BOOK  
IN  
ENGLISH GRAMMAR**

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# **A COURSE BOOK IN ENGLISH GRAMMAR**

**STANDARD ENGLISH AND THE DIALECTS**  
**Second Edition**

**Dennis Freeborn**



**MACMILLAN**

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Mark Tapley: 'but a Verb is a word as signifies to be, to do, or to suffer (which is all the grammar, and enough too, as ever as I was taught)'

Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844)

Books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry.

A book is made up of signs that speak of other signs, which in their turn speak of things. Without an eye to read them, a book contains signs that produce no concepts; therefore it is dumb.

Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (1983)

A child speaks his mother tongue properly, though he could never write out its grammar. But the grammarian is not the only one who knows the rules of the language; they are well known, albeit unconsciously, also to the child. The grammarian is merely the one who knows how and why the child knows the language.

Umberto Eco, *Reflections on 'The Name of the Rose'* (1985)

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# Symbols

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Symbols and abbreviations are useful because they save time and space in describing grammatical features.

## Word-classes (parts of speech)

n	noun
v	verb
adj	adjective
adv	adverb
pn	pronoun
p	preposition
cj	conjunction
scj	subordinating conjunction
ccj	coordinating conjunction

## Classes of phrase

NP	noun phrase
VP	verb phrase
AdjP	adjective phrase
AdvP	adverb phrase
PrepP	prepositional phrase
PossP	possessive phrase

## Classes of clause (form)

NCl	noun clause
PrepCl	prepositional clause
AdvCl	adverbial clause
NonfCl	nonfinite clause

**Classes of clause (function)**

MCl	main clause
SCl	subordinate clause
RelCl	relative clause

**Elements of NP structure**

Use lower-case letters:

d	determiner
m	modifier (= pre-modifier)
h	head word
q	qualifier (= post-modifier)

**Elements of VP structure**

aux	auxiliary verb
op-v	operator-verb
m	modal auxiliary verb
h	have as auxiliary
be-prog	<i>be</i> used to form progressive aspect
be-pass	<i>be</i> used to form passive voice
s-aux	semi-auxiliary verb
v	main (lexical) verb

**Elements of clause structure**

Use upper-case letters (capitals):

S	subject
P	predicator
C	complement
A	adverbial

**Kinds of complement**

O	object (complement) or Co
Od	direct object
Oi	indirect object
Ci	intensive (complement)
Ca	adverbial (complement)
pt	adverb particle (complement)

**Bracketing**

()	to mark phrases
[]	to mark clauses
{ }	to mark coordinated elements (words, phrases or clauses)



### **Phonetic transcription**

Square brackets are also used with symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet to indicate the pronunciation of spoken words and sounds, e.g. [æ], [ʃ].

### **Other symbols**

An asterisk \* is placed before a word or construction which is ungrammatical or unacceptable to make clear that it is not a usable expression.

A question mark ? placed before a word or construction queries its acceptability, which may differ from one person to another.

The sign Ø is used to mark the deletion (or ellipsis) of a word that is 'understood', e.g. *The food Ø I bought yesterday...* from *The food **that** I bought yesterday...*

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# Introduction to the second edition

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The nine chapters of the first edition have been thoroughly revised and enlarged. Chapter 1 is new, and presents what is intended to be an objective linguistic perspective on the perennial arguments over the social concepts of *good English* and *correct English*. Chapters 5 and 6 are new.

Chapter 5 adds a commentary on the vocabulary of English, introducing the concept of *core vocabulary* and describing the relationship of the principal etymological sources of English to our assessments of formal and informal vocabulary. Chapter 6 continues the examination of the texts used in chapter 5 to give a preliminary overview of the types of phrase in English. Chapter 8 in the first edition, 'Complex and Derived Clauses' has now been divided into two separate chapters: chapter 11 'Complex Clauses' and chapter 12 'Derived Clauses' in the course of revision. Similarly, the former final chapter 9 is now chapters 13 and 14, 'Sentences' and 'The grammar of texts and speech'.

## Dialectal grammar

The most important additions to this edition are the sections that describe those dialectal features of present-day English which differ from Standard English. If you accept the definition of the English language as 'the sum of all its dialects' (a concept discussed in chapter 1), then any grammar of English should include at least some reference to dialectal grammar. All the dialects of English are, by definition, 'mutually comprehensible' and belong to the same language. The differences between the dialects (and this includes Standard English, the 'prestige dialect') are very few compared with the vocabulary and grammar common to them all, but these differences clearly differentiate them and are especially marked in social attitudes. In England we identify speakers according to where they come from, or their educational attainment or their social class, in relation to how far they speak Standard English in the accent known as Received Pronunciation (RP).

The descriptions of dialectal grammar are general and confined mainly to variants in England. I believe that those forms of the language spoken daily by

millions of English speakers in England should be seen as legitimate and fully grammatical in their context of use, not as 'deviations' from the standard. This point of view in no way questions either the status of Standard English as the only acceptable *written* form of the language or the prime responsibility of schools to teach Standard English. To include descriptions of dialectal forms is not to advocate that they should be adopted, only that students of language should be able to recognise and describe them precisely in linguistic terms.

## Reference grammars

To use a reference grammar, you have to know what to look up; in other words, you have to know some grammar first. A determined student could sit down and read a reference grammar from beginning to end, but this would be unusual, and is not the best way to learn. *A Course Book in English Grammar* is a different kind of book. It is planned as a textbook, to be read and studied chapter by chapter. Its aim is to describe the grammar of English in relation to its main functions in communication, and to provide enough detailed description to be of practical use in the study of texts in English.

## Texts

The word *text* means any piece of writing, or transcription of speech, which is intended to communicate a message and a meaning. A scribbled note left on the table, 'Back at 2.20', is as much a text in this sense as a novel, a hire-purchase agreement or a sermon. It has a definite function, and its grammar is suited to that function.

An important part of the study of English is the reading, understanding and evaluation of texts, and a knowledge of the grammar of English is indispensable if this study is to be full and informed.

## Knowing grammar

In one sense of *to know* (*know*<sub>1</sub>) every speaker of English knows the grammar, because the grammar provides the rules for putting words into the right order so that our meaning is clear, and all speakers of English therefore must know the grammar in order to speak it. But in the sense of *to know about* (*know*<sub>2</sub>) those who know the grammar are those who have studied it in the way provided in textbooks and reference grammar books, and can talk and write about grammatical structure.

The book has been written with native speakers of English in mind, not students learning English as a foreign language, and so it makes use of a native speaker's knowledge (*know*<sub>1</sub>) of English, or that of an already fluent speaker of English. It does not therefore always provide comprehensive lists of features, and

sometimes asks you to apply what you know already (*know*<sub>1</sub>) in order to become aware (*know*<sub>2</sub>) at a conscious level. In this sense, parts of it are a kind of do-it-yourself manual, although I assume that teachers and lecturers will at all stages be commenting on, developing and criticising what the book has to say.

Neither does the book pretend to 'make grammar easy'. Even the simplest texts (see, for example, the infant reading primer extracts in chapter 2) contain features of grammar which might not appear in a short, over-simplified grammar book. I have had to select, and leave out lots of interesting problems concerned with the best way of describing the language.

## Models of language

You would find, if you explored the study of language (linguistics), several different 'models', or theories of language – ways of understanding and describing it: traditional grammar, systemic-functional grammar, transformational-generative grammar, relational grammar, generalized phrase-structure grammar, and so on, all of which are meaningless terms to non-specialists in linguistics.

Nevertheless, you have to choose a model in order to talk about the grammar even at the simplest level. To use the words *sentence*, *noun* or *word* is to begin to use a theory of language.

The model adopted in this course book is not new or original, but derives mostly from traditional and systemic-functional grammar, making choices between them when there is a difference. Systemic-functional grammar, as its name implies, is concerned to discover the 'network of systems' that relate grammar to the major functions of language. A recent presentation of this model is in Halliday's *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*.

An example of the differences to be found between two descriptive models is in the meaning given to the term *complement*. The dictionary meaning of the word is 'that which completes'. In traditional grammar it means the element in a certain type of clause which refers to the subject (*subject complement*) or the object (*object complement*). In the one-clause sentence,

Meanwhile life was hard.

*life* would be called the *subject* and *hard* the *subject complement* in the terms of traditional grammar. In the one-clause sentence,

They found life hard.

*life* would be called the *object* and *hard* the *object complement*.

In this book, however, the meaning of *complement* in a clause is applied to any element which 'completes' the grammar/meaning of the verb. There are therefore three kinds of clause complement, which are introduced in chapter 2, and described in detail in chapter 9.

## Traditional and new terms

I have tried to explain clearly what each term means as and when the need for it occurs, and have chosen the more familiar (traditional) terms wherever possible. But new and unfamiliar terms are necessary, for new and unfamiliar concepts, sometimes changing the scope of a familiar word (like *complement*) or introducing non-traditional terms (like *predicators in phase*). There has been a very positive development in our knowledge and understanding of the grammar of English in linguistic studies since the 1940s, which must be integrated with traditional descriptions.

As is said later in the book, no description of the grammar can be the only right one, and there are often alternative ways of describing the same feature. To keep the book to manageable proportions, such alternatives cannot always be described in detail, but they should be discussed rather than avoided wherever possible. In other words, students should be encouraged to think critically, and not to absorb passively.

## Using the book

I assume that other descriptive and reference grammars will be used by teachers and lecturers with their students, to supplement and clarify what this course book can only sometimes mention briefly.

I have tried to avoid making up examples to illustrate features of the grammar (though this has not always proved possible), and have drawn upon a variety of texts, literary and non-literary, written and spoken. This is because it is only in the study of 'authentic English' that a knowledge of the grammar can be put to use, and real texts are a challenge, sometimes producing good examples of what you are illustrating, but at the time throwing up interesting problems.

Activities are provided at every stage in each chapter. Teachers will make their own choice, and should modify and add to them according to the needs of their students. For instance, you should look in a variety of other texts for examples of features of the grammar which are being studied.

## Fuzzy edges

One important idea to stress is what is called in linguistic study the principle of **indeterminacy**, or 'fuzziness'. This means that we cannot always assign a clear, unambiguous descriptive label to a word, phrase or clause. For example, is *swimming* in *I like swimming* a noun or a verb?

The edges of the boundaries between categories are not necessarily clear, and there are often borderline cases. When this happens, no student should feel a sense of failure or frustration at not knowing the right answer (there may not be one), but should try to see the alternatives, and why there are alternatives – again thinking linguistically and critically.

## Concepts

There is, I believe, no short cut or easy way to understanding grammar which you can guarantee for every student. It demands the ability to conceptualise, and students have to make a breakthrough into conceptual thinking at some stage. For some this comes easily and early on; for others it remains a mystery and the penny never drops.

If you consult reference grammars, you will find that they differ from each other in terminology and explanatory description. The same concept may have two or more names. For example, what is called *noun phrase* in this book is also called *nominal group*, *subordinating conjunctions* are also *binders*, *coordinating conjunctions* are *listers*, and certain adverbs are *linkers*. The second terms in these pairs are short and clear, but because they are not used in most reference grammars, the traditional and more widely used terms have been used in this book.

Similarly, the same word, used in two descriptive grammars, may be found to have two different meanings, and writers have to define their own particular use of a technical term. An example which has been referred to is the term *complement*.

Another example is the word *complex*, which is used in related but distinct meanings in grammatical description:

- In its everyday meaning of *consisting of several parts, complicated*, with its related noun *complexity* referring to this meaning.
- As a term in the traditional system of classifying sentences – *simple, complex, compound* and *compound-complex*.
- As the head word in the series *word-complex, phrase-complex* and *clause-complex*, terms taken from functional grammar to mean coordinated words, phrases or clauses, used where single words, phrases or clauses also function.

The differences should be clear from the contexts in which *complex* and *complexity* are used. Ambiguity of this sort can be confusing, but to invent new terminology would be, I think, even more confusing, and unsuited to a course book which is based upon existing conventions of descriptive linguistics. I have tried to anticipate some of the learning problems, drawing upon my own experience of teaching grammar, and to chart a way which provides continuity in teaching.

Where do you start? The book begins with a chapter on the meanings of both *grammar* and *English*, and is a contribution to the socio-political argument about *good English* that underlies conflicting attitudes to Standard English and the regional and social dialects of England.

You may prefer to begin with chapter 2. Infants communicate whole meanings in their first ‘words’, and learn bit by bit to encode their meanings into clauses, which I take to be the basic grammatical unit which conveys whole meanings in the form of ‘propositions’. So chapter 2 contains an outline of the function and form of the clause. Successive chapters then look in more detail at words and phrases (constituents of clauses), before once more reaching the clause (chapter 9) and the complex combinations of clause patterns found in speech and writing (chapters 10–14).

## **Objectives**

One practical objective of the book is to provide students with the ‘tools of analysis’ with which they can study any text in English, and see how far the grammatical structure contributes to its distinctive style and meaning. Chapter 14 is therefore concerned to demonstrate how grammar forms an essential ingredient of style, by using extended extracts of literary and non-literary writing, and transcriptions of spoken English, just as chapter 7 makes extensive use of real newspaper headlines.

*Dennis Freeborn*

## **Commentary book**

A supplementary book in typescript published by the author is available for teachers and lecturers. The *Commentary Book* contains suggested answers to the questions in the **activities**, with a discussion of problems of analysis where appropriate. For details of the *Commentary Book* write to: Dennis Freeborn, PO Box 82, Easingwold, York YO6 3YY.