ENGLISH GRAMMAR



SECOND EDITION

THEORY AND USE

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UNIVERSITETSFORLAGET

English Grammar
Theory and Use

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English Grammar Theory and Use

Second Edition

Universitetsforlaget

© Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 2020
ISBN: 9788215051758
1. edition, 1. version, Universitetsforlaget, 2020
This edition is based on 2nd printed edition, Universitetsforlaget 2012, 4th printing 2018

Electronic facilitation: Universitetsforlaget
Cover design: Jorunn Småland
Prepress: Bøk Oslo AS

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Preface

This book is addressed to university and college students of English at the undergraduate level. For these students, grammar should not just be a tool in learning the language; it should also give insight into how the language works. As indicated by the title, our aim is to provide both practice and theoretical insight.

The present book is a revision of *English Grammar: Theory and Use*, first published in 1998. Since then, Stig Johansson has passed away. We are grateful to him for letting us re-use and revise the chapters in the first edition for which he was primarily responsible. These chapters as well as his invaluable impact on the original plan and content of the book clearly justify his continued place as a co-author.

This new edition has a slightly revised chapter organization, based on the order in which we have usually presented topics to our grammar students. The present chapter 16 incorporates some material from the original chapter 16, but pays more attention to aspects of language use such as formality, text type and genre.

Although our book cannot be placed within a particular theoretical camp, it reflects some central concerns in functional linguistic theory. One of these is the importance of lexis and the interplay between lexis and grammar (chapter 4). Another has to do with the use of grammatical structures in context. Throughout the book, we are concerned with the meaning and effect of grammatical choices. Ample illustrations are given of English in use, with examples drawn from a variety of texts and text types.

To increase the practical utility of the book, we frequently draw attention to differences between Norwegian and English that are likely to cause difficulties for Norwegian learners, and we provide a great deal of exercise material. A *Key to Exercises* is provided in a separate volume.

We are grateful to colleagues and students for constructive criticism of the previous edition of this book and to the publisher's consultant for comments on a draft of the revised version. This input has helped us greatly in our work, even if we have not been able to take all suggestions on board.

We hope that our book will satisfy the practical needs of university students of English and at the same time provide stimulation, and perhaps even enjoyment, for those who want to continue to explore the workings of the English language.

Oslo, October 2011
Hilde Hasselgård and Per Lysvåg

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1 Introduction

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1.11 Why study grammar?

1.1 What is grammar?

There are several answers to this question. Most people's idea of grammar will probably include elements of grammar instruction at school, such as correcting mistakes, drilling structures, and memorizing irregular verbs in a foreign language. We may also hear people say such things as 'the grammar of Russian is very difficult', or 'there is a lot of grammar in German'. The word *grammar* can mean different things to different people, partly depending on what they need it for. Let us take a look at how one dictionary defines *grammar*.

> **Grammar** is 1.1 the rules of a language, concerning the way in which you can put words together in order to make sentences. EG *I need some books to be able to look up the grammar … Is there enough grammar taught in schools? … I hear you've abandoned teaching grammar lessons.*
>
> 1.2 the way someone either obeys or does not obey the rules of grammar when they write or speak a language. EG *I'm constantly having to correct their grammar … take off a full point for any errors in grammar.*
>
> 2 A **grammar** is 2.1 a book that describes the rules of a language. EG … *an old French grammar.* 2.2 a theory that is intended to explain the rules of a language. EG *the theory of Case Grammar.*
>
> (From *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*)

According to the first definition in the dictionary entry (1.1), grammar rules are properties of a language, that is, the language is such that its elements must be combined according to certain patterns. Combinations that are in conflict with these rules will produce ungrammatical sentences (for instance **I is a expert* is not a correct English sentence because *I* cannot be com-

bined with *is*, and *a* cannot be combined with a word beginning with a vowel sound such as *expert*).

The second definition (1.2) suggests that the rules of language can be either obeyed or violated. We saw that the sentence **I is a expert* violates rules of English grammar, while all the other sentences on this page are formed according to those rules. (The * marks the structure as ungrammatical.)

The last definition (2.2), defining grammar as a theory of language, belongs to theoretical linguistics, and is not relevant to our grammar book. We do not aim to present any particular theory of language. The grammatical framework, as well as the terminology used, is relatively traditional, and draws on various sources with a view to giving a balanced presentation of the essentials of English grammar.

The book is thus concerned with 'the way in which you can put words together in order to make sentences' (definition 1.1). This is an area of **syntax**. Furthermore, we focus on the choice of linguistic forms in individual sentences (for example the choice of verb form, as shown above). Finally, we view grammar in a wider perspective, in seeing the grammar of a sentence as part of a larger text structure and as an important component in expressing meaning.

1.2 Prescriptive and descriptive grammar

All the dictionary definitions of *grammar* contain the word *rules*. Rules of grammar are of at least two different kinds: prescriptive and descriptive. A descriptive rule is an attempt to describe a feature of language use; it is a statement about how linguistic elements actually behave in a certain language. Prescriptive (or normative) rules, on the other hand, are rules formulated by grammarians and language teachers about how a language should be spoken or written. They are meant as advice on how to speak or write good English, or, in other words, as rules for linguistic behaviour. Prescriptive grammar is concerned with 'right' and 'wrong', and is often relatively conservative in its nature, that is, it does not usually welcome new developments in the language system. A prescriptive grammarian might say, for example, that example (1) below should be corrected to (2) because one should avoid ending a sentence with a preposition, and in addition use the form *whom* rather than *who* (because it is not the subject of the sentence). A descriptive grammarian would not say that (1) is 'wrong', but that it illustrates a construction which occurs quite commonly in present-day English, and which is less formal in style than (2).

1 Who did you give the money to?
2 To whom did you give the money?

Descriptive grammar is thus about working out the structure of language as it is used in speech and writing by its native speakers. There are rules for com-

bining linguistic elements that native speakers follow consciously or unconsciously when they speak or write, and these rules are what descriptive grammarians try to identify and formulate.

This book by and large takes a descriptive approach to grammar. However, since this is a book for learners of English, we sometimes make recommendations for language use. Learners, even at an advanced stage, are likely to make mistakes that no native speaker of a language would make, and which would be rejected according to prescriptive and descriptive rules alike. Besides, it is an important feature of linguistic competence to know the level of formality of some grammatical structures, as well as to know that certain ways of expressing oneself can raise eyebrows in some circles.

1.3 Knowing how vs. knowing about

'Knowing the grammar of a language' can mean at least two different things. You have to know the grammar of English in order to be able to speak it. Of course, this does not mean that everyone who can speak English has read grammar books and learnt all the rules in them by heart. Knowing a language means mastering the rules of that language, and this knowledge need not be conscious. As a matter of fact, it seldom is in people's first language, unless they have studied grammar at school. This leads us to the second way in which one can know the grammar of a language, which means being able to talk about linguistic structures and how the language is built up.

The analysis of language can be described as an attempt to create order out of chaos. It involves breaking down chunks of text into sentences, phrases, and words, which may in turn be assigned to categories and given names. Note that the naming of linguistic categories is only a tool for describing the structure of a language; it is not an aim in itself. However, we believe the description of the bits and pieces of language is a necessary step for understanding how these bits and pieces combine to express meaningful messages, so that we can 'know about' the workings of a language.

1.4 Grammar and meaning

An important issue in this book is the inseparability of grammar and meaning. The meaning of a sentence is made up by a combination of the words and the grammatical structures that are used. Let us look at some examples.

1 They found the cross-word puzzle easy.
2 They found the cross-word puzzle easily.

The only difference between (1) and (2) is the ending of the last word. This may seem to be merely a grammatical difference. But the two sentences have completely different meanings, namely, 'they did a cross-word puzzle and thought it was easy', and 'they were looking for the cross-word puzzle (e.g. in a paper) and found it without any great effort'.

3 I've been reading *Hamlet*.
4 I've read *Hamlet*.

Examples (3) and (4) have different verb phrases. This grammatical difference signals that the speaker of (3) has recently been reading (part of) the play, but is not likely to have finished it, whereas the speaker of (4) has read the whole play at some time in the past.

1.5 Grammar and vocabulary

Grammar and vocabulary are linked in many ways. This is particularly clear with verbs, which are associated with particular grammatical patterns (see further Chapter 4). A simple example is the choice between *say* and *tell*, which may mean the same, but which have different grammatical properties: with *tell* we need to mention the receiver of the message, for instance *them* in example (2). Furthermore, the choice between *manage* and *succeed* is also a choice of grammatical patterns, as shown in (3) and (4).

1 She *said* that they had no choice.
2 She *told* them that they had no choice.
3 I *managed to* persuade her.
4 I *succeeded in* persuading her.

Adjectives that mean the same may also differ in their grammatical behaviour, such as *happy* and *glad*: we can say *the girl was happy* and *the girl was glad*, but only *the happy girl* (not **the glad girl*). Some nouns occur only in singular form (such as *furniture*) while others occur only in plural form (such as *clothes*). This obviously has consequences for the ways in which these words can combine with other words, i.e. for the grammatical contexts they fit into.

1.6 Grammar and perspective

The same basic meaning can often be expressed in a number of different ways, involving different grammatical structures. Such grammatical choices often influence the way the hearer or reader interprets the sentence. For

example, it matters what a sentence begins and ends with, not only what it contains, as illustrated by (1) and (2). Word order can signal what the speaker or writer wants to focus on. Therefore the distinction between the active and passive voice is not just a grammatical difference, but one that can change the perspective of a message, as shown in (3) and (4). (See further **12.1.2** and **12.6**.)

1 In the kitchen Mama was wiping the cupboards.
2 Mama was wiping the cupboards in the kitchen.
3 'America', the most widely sung of the patriotic songs, was written by a New England Baptist clergyman, Samuel Francis Smith.
4 A New England Baptist clergyman, Samuel Francis Smith, wrote 'America', the most widely sung of the patriotic songs.

1.7 Grammar, register and style

Different genres of English, for example newspaper reports, poems, personal letters, political speeches, and informal conversations all have their typical features which make us recognize the genre. Some of these features are linked to the choice of words, while others are linked to grammar. For example, in (1) we recognize the newspaper style, because of its rather long and complex structures. This is different from the style of (2), a poem by Langston Hughes. Of the many features that mark the latter off from ordinary prose, we note the omission of *are* after *so* in lines 2 and 4, and the unusual placement of *beautiful* in the last two lines.

1 A magazine publisher is claiming £5 million compensation after being given drugs that he claims greatly increased his sex drive and sent him temporarily mad.

Richard Davis, 50, says two drugs he took to combat nasal congestion led to his bankruptcy. He claims that they caused him to make irrational business decisions, live an over-extravagant lifestyle and commit fraud and assault for which he was jailed.

(From *The Times*)

2 My people

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.