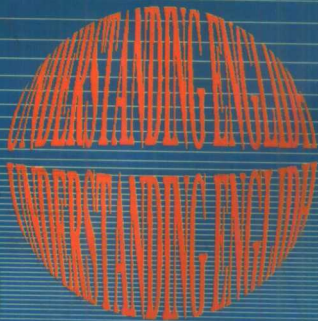
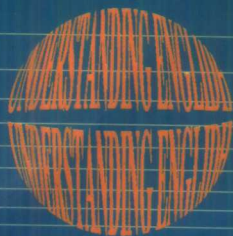


# 懂 英 语

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# UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH

Eugene A. Nida 著  
胡壮麟 黄 倩 译



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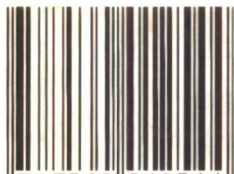
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# UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH

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## 吸其精华 弃其糟粕 Preface

This book on *Understanding English* has been prepared primarily for students and technicians interested in being able to read more rewardingly various books and articles on science and technology. It is assumed that such people have studied English for some time, have a relatively good vocabulary, and possess adequate dictionaries but still have difficulty putting words together in such a way as to understand precisely what a text is designed to communicate. As a result, readers tend to skim a text and end up with a general impression of content but without an accurate understanding of specific meaning, and hence they are unable to use the insights to a significant advantage in their own work.

There are a number of reasons why people have difficulty in determining the meaning of combinations of words, even when the meanings of isolated words seem to be quite evident. One reason for this is that the teaching of English usually focuses on the structure of grammar rather than on the functions of grammar. Many explanations about the structure of English grammar are often misleading because the terminology comes almost directly from the way in which Greek and Roman grammarians described the Greek and Latin languages, but such terminology and insights simply do not fit English. Furthermore, grammar rules are taught to be memorized rather than to be used as tools for understanding texts.

The focus of this book is on the meaningful relations between words, phrases, and clauses, not on their structures. The approach

is consistently semantic, but it has been necessary to use certain traditional terms for formal classes of words, e. g. **nouns, verbs, participles, infinitives, prepositions**, etc., and for some structures, e. g. **subjects, predicates, equational sentences**, etc., so that the explanations of meaningful relations between kinds of words and structures will build on what people are already familiar with. For example, most people recognize the formal differences between **John's death** (a possessive proper name plus a noun) and **John died** (a proper name and a past tense verb). But they do not always realize that the semantic relations between the constituents of these two phrases are essentially the same: the referent of the first word undergoes or experiences the second, that is, "1 experiences 2". Furthermore, in the phrase **John's death** the so-called possessive form **John's** is not at all a matter of possession.

This focus on the meaningful relations between words began for me in the writing of *A Synopsis of English Syntax*. I also benefited greatly from Fries' emphasis on the semantic aspects of grammar (1940, 1952). This approach has continued and has been extended in my work in helping translators in some 200 different languages to prepare translations of both religious and secular texts for which the source texts have consisted of German, French, Spanish, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Without a doubt, the greatest number of mistakes made by translators reflect a failure to comprehend the meaningful relations between words in source texts. In general, translators have relatively few problems with the meanings of specific terms because most translators have quite adequate dictionaries. But they do not sense the meaningful relations between words, and accordingly, they tend to translate more or less word for word, without realizing the distortions of meaning in the receptor or target languages.

Discussions with students about the meanings of English texts have also convinced me that one of the major sources of misunderstanding is an incapacity to sense the meaningful relations between words. At the same time, it is encouraging to note how quickly people catch on to the idea of determining the semantic connections between words if they recognize the semantic classes of words and not merely their formal structures.

A number of recent publications have been especially helpful in suggesting ways to deal with the semantic relations between words. Perhaps the most important have been McCawley's two volumes on *The Syntactic Phenomena of English* (1988). Wierzbicka's volume *The Semantics of Grammar* (1988) has also been very useful, and Fillmore's publication on case (1967) has proven particularly important. For treatments of lexical semantics, I am certainly indebted to Makkai's *Idiom Structure in English* (1972) and to Lakoff's insights in figurative language (1980, with Mark Turner, and 1989, with Mark Johnson). The volume *Linguistics for Students of Literature* by Traugott and Pratt (1980) contains two very practical chapters on syntax and semantics that can be quite useful for persons wanting to explore more fully the problems of the semantic relations between words. The functional approach to language by Halliday and Hasan (1976, 1985) has been significant in shifting the focus of language from structure to usage, in which semantic factors play an increasingly important role.

As will be readily recognized, this approach to English syntax is essentially cognitive and in many ways reflects the creative orientation of Langacker (1987, 1991a, and 1991b) in his publications on the foundations of cognitive grammar, although his terminology is not employed. In certain aspects this volume on *Understanding*



*English* goes somewhat further than Langacker in that it employs quite different terminology in referring to syntactic structures in contrast with semantic relations between structures.

This book on *Understanding English* should not be regarded as a grammar of English, although it does deal with a number of the most common constructions. It is simply an attempt to help people grasp more readily and accurately the meaningful relations between words. Furthermore, the emphasis is on mastering the skills for relating words and phrases to one another, rather than attempting to define structures and their relations to one another. Because of the practical purposes of this volume, it has been necessary to combine two levels of terminology: a traditional level so that readers would recognize certain structures, e. g. **nouns, infinitives, subjects, objects**, and relatively new terms to talk about relations between words and phrases, e. g. **doers, causers, affectees, benefactees, createes**, etc., but in each case the usage of these terms is carefully explained. And in all discussions of meaningful relations the focus is on the relation between words, not the particular roles of separate terms. Accordingly, the role of doers is always treated in terms of an entity and an activity. And in determining the proper semantic relations, the focus is always on the context, whether immediate or extended and whether situational or cultural.

In the early chapters English phrases are studied with little or no accompanying contexts in order to highlight the role of contexts and the degree of ambiguity that is often present when a context is missing or misleading. Later chapters introduce more contextual clues.

*Understanding English* has three introductory chapters on the roles of language, the semantics of words, and an introduction to

English grammar. These chapters are followed by ten chapters dealing with the semantic relations in a series of increasingly more complex constructions: possessive constructions, noun-noun phrases, adjective-noun phrases, expressions containing adverbs, noun phrases with *of*, noun phrases with preposed active participles, noun phrases with passive participles, verb phrases, and sentences. Even though the constructions are identified with terms for formal features, the emphasis is on the semantic classes.

In addition to descriptions of the various types of semantic relations for each of these major syntactic classes, there are numerous examples taken primarily from a data base representing actual usage by writers on science and technology. A high percentage of the data base comes from *Science News*, a weekly bulletin covering a wide range of important scientific developments. Most chapters also contain additional sets of phrases for supplementary use by teachers or by students.

I have greatly appreciated comments on earlier drafts of this material from Johannes P. Louw and Ernst Wendland. My editorial colleague, Karen Munson, has been particularly helpful. I am, however, especially indebted to Professor Zhuanglin Hu of Peking University for his insightful collaboration in the production of this book.

Eugene A. Nida

## Chapter 1

# The Roles of Language

In order to understand a language, it is necessary to realize what a language does and how it carries out its functions. This first chapter discusses the roles of languages, while Chapters 2-13 are concerned with the means employed in English to perform these functions. The Preface mentions various theories of language in relation to the particular approach used in this volume for understanding complex phrases. But even before discussing the functions of languages, it is essential to consider some of those special features of languages that make them so indispensable to daily life, including their relation to culture, their openness to change, and some of their universal characteristics.

First, languages are not only part of their respective cultures; they are the necessary means for any complex human interaction. Words, in fact, only have meaning in terms of the particular culture in which they are used and to which they belong, and they can only be defined on the basis of how they are used. For example, dictionaries normally define the meaning of **run** in relation to the movement of animate beings as “relatively fast movement in space employing the limbs in such a way that for alternating moments no foot is touching the supporting surface”. This definition is satisfactory for two-legged and four-legged creatures, but is entirely inadequate in the case of such expressions as **the spider ran across the table**, **the crab ran along the beach**, **the snake ran across the lawn**. So dictio-

nary makers need to consider more carefully just how speakers actually use their language and to construct definitions on the basis of the total range of contexts in which particular words may occur. In fact, definitions must be based on a combination of words and contexts.

Second, both cultures and languages are subject to constant change. New words are coined, old words change in meaning, grammar is constantly being modified, and new patterns of discourse are developed, e.g. rap poetry. Who could have imagined a few years ago that the term **gay** would become so specialized in meaning as to be used primarily to designate homosexuals? Or who would have thought that social and political leaders would be saying **for you and I**, and even **the boss told you and I to leave by tomorrow**? Such a grammatical change is really not strange, when one considers that **we** is completely ambiguous as to whether addressees are included or not. With the increasingly common **you and I**, the English language in America is developing a contrast between inclusive and exclusive first person plural, in which **we** will be used more and more as exclusive, that is, referring only to the speaker and his associates and excluding the audience, and **you and I** will include the audience.

All languages undergo continuous change, but not necessarily at the same rate. What seems to govern the rate of change is the density of communication. Languages that are in constant use by millions of people are much more likely to change rapidly than small languages spoken by relatively isolated societies. Compare, for example, the rapid changes in English in comparison with Icelandic. Most English speakers have a hard time reading the fourteenth century *Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer, while most Icelandic speakers have little or no trouble reading Icelandic legends written 400 years

earlier. Or consider the relatively few changes from Classical to Modern Greek in comparison with what has happened in the development of modern French from Latin. But even for languages spoken by millions of people, the greatest number of changes are likely to take place in the centers of political power and commerce, e. g. London, Tokyo, Moscow, rather than in outlying areas.

Third, all languages are open systems with fuzzy boundaries to the meanings of words, fuzzy rules for grammatical constructions, and fuzzy principles for the organization of discourses. Even common words for objects have uncertain limits. For example, in popular usage how thick does a **thread** have to be before it is called a **string**? Or how thick is a **string** before it is called a **cord**? Or even a rope? No one really knows. There is a rule that the auxiliary **ought** must be followed by an infinitive with **to**, but one frequently hears **he oughtn't do it**, rather than **he ought not to do it**. In a sense, languages are both nonlinear and linear systems. Structuralists insist that a language such as English is a linear system in which rules control all that can be said and that the order of words is rule governed. But functionalists view languages as essentially nonlinear and subject to innumerable analogical pressures and to all kinds of unpredictable changes. Some minor linguistic turbulence at one point in the system can have unsuspected consequences, e. g. the historical shift in vowel qualities in English. Consider also the orthographic monstrosity of writing **debt** with a **b**, even though it was borrowed from French **dette**. The **b** was inserted merely because some Latinists knew that the word had originally come from Latin **debitus**.

Natural languages are not like mathematical and logical languages, in which words and signs presumably have only one meaning. The words of natural languages may increase or decrease in

range of usage and are subject to all kinds of linguistic and cultural pressures. Natural language is the language of poetry and song, of daydreaming and verbal doodling, and of creative solutions to age-old problems. Any theory of linguistics that neglects these aspects of language can only produce a stunted and distorted view of language.

Fourth, all languages exhibit a number of different levels of usage, usually as many as five levels or registers (Joos, 1962): frozen (used especially in ritual ceremonies and religious liturgies), formal (among people who either do not know one another or are in circumstances in which anonymity is preferred), informal (among people who know one another quite well), casual (among people who know each other well and who are in an informal setting, e.g. good friends at a picnic), and intimate (the language within a family).

This interpersonal use of the different levels of language is not necessarily reciprocal. For example, the department head in an office may call secretaries by their first names, but secretaries normally speak to or refer to their bosses by using the last name with a title. The violation of this rule often leads to suspicions about people being overly friendly. Some commercial enterprises, however, are entirely informal, and everyone uses first names in a completely reciprocal manner as the result of a distinct goal of expressing meaningful camaraderie. In most European universities students and staff use titles when addressing professors, but in many universities in Australia and especially in universities on the west coast of the United States first names and even nicknames are commonly used in a reciprocal manner.

In addition to different levels of the same language, there are also sociolinguistic dialects based on economic, educational, and social status. This is particularly true in societies in which there are

considerable differences in occupation and social rank, e. g. **serviette** vs. **napkin** (the latter being upper-class British usage, despite the presumed superiority of the French borrowing). There may also be special occupational jargons involving primarily words, not grammar, e. g. the language of hospitals, computer centers, military establishments, criminal gangs, academic societies, religious orders, and medicine men (often called "shamen"). In fact, testing new applicants for positions in specialized professions usually involves assessing competence in the specialized vocabulary of the profession or discipline. Within a language there may also be geographical dialects, based on distinctive pronunciation, vocabulary, and even grammatical usage, but there are also sociolinguistic dialects depending on ethnic backgrounds, economic advantages, and educational opportunities.

A student of language must also reckon with the fact that each speaker not only has a distinctive quality of voice (a voice print as distinctive as a finger print), but also tends to employ certain idiosyncratic word combinations and distinctive frequencies of rhetorical devices. The authenticity of documents can often be determined, not only by distinctive features of handwriting, but also by the manner and frequency of grammatical features, e. g. participial constructions, embedded parenthetical comments, and noun-plus-pronoun topic combinations, e. g. **Jim, he's such a nut.**

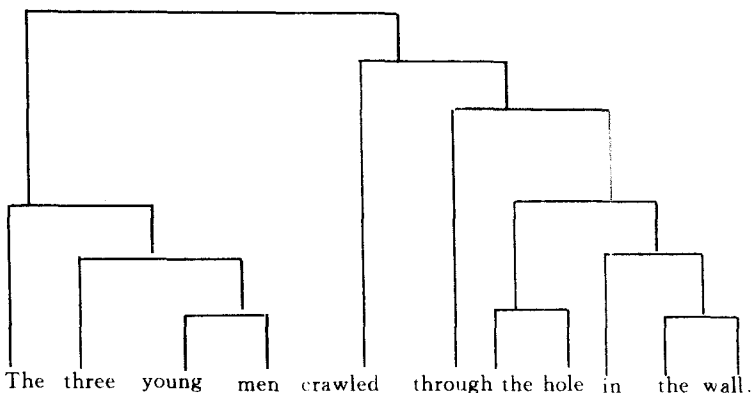
Fifth, despite the fact that languages seem to be so different from one another, there are a number of universal features, which not only point to a presumed single source and development of human language but also guarantee the possibility of relevant translation and interpretation. All languages distinguish in various ways what is selected to talk about and what is said about the selected

“subject”. Some linguists distinguish between the “logical subject”, the “psychological subject”, and the “grammatical subject”, although these overlap and split in many contexts. When the focus is on the logical or semantic roles, then such terms as “doer”, “actor”, or “agent” are used, and since this book focuses on the semantic relations, this type of vocabulary will generally be employed. When, however, the focus is on the psychological relations in terms of communication theory, the tendency is to use such terms as “topic” and “comment” or “theme” and “rheme”. The phrases “grammatical subject” or “grammatical predicate” are used when the focus is on the formal relation between a noun phrase and a verb phrase in a sentence or clause.

All languages have a number of structural classes, usually identified by such terms as nouns, verbs, pronouns, adjectives, etc., but they also have a number of semantic classes, e.g. entities, activities, states, processes, characteristics, links. And although these semantic classes often parallel formal classes, they are not identical. For example, the semantic relation in **John’s arrival** and **John arrived** is in both cases a relation of “1 does 2.” Furthermore, in a phrase such as **good dancer**, the attributive **good** qualifies the activity component in **dancer**, not the entity component. The adjective **good** does not qualify the character of the person, but only the proficiency of the action.

In addition, all languages organize words, phrases, and sentences into various levels of structure, and short phrases or sentences can often be analyzed in terms of two elements at a time (so-called “binary relations”). Note, for example, how in the following sentence words are not like beads on a string, but are grouped into different levels of hierarchical structure:





This type of analysis may be useful for short phrases and sentences, but becomes untenable for long structures and especially confusing when there is considerable shifting in typical word order. To understand a language, however, it is essential to determine what words go together and how they relate meaningfully to each other. For understanding the meaning of a sentence in a foreign language, it is more important to understand the semantic classes and the relations between these classes than to identify merely the grammatical structures. Native speakers of a language generally understand quite clearly the semantic relations between words even when they are at a loss to describe the formal parts of a sentence.

All languages also specify or narrow the reference by the process of addition. For example, the word **trees** may refer to billions of individual entities, but the addition of **oak** to **trees** in the phrase **oak trees** greatly restricts the range of reference of **trees**. Similarly, the addition of **white** in **white oak trees** even further restricts the range of reference of **trees**. And finally an expression such as **the three white oak trees growing in my back yard** uniquely restricts the refer-