

PAUL ROBERTS

ENGLISH SENTENCES

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PAUL ROBERTS

Professor of English
San Jose State College,
San Jose, California



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PREFACE

That which is new in this book derives mainly from the work of Professor Noam Chomsky and his collaborators at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Chomsky's transformational, or generative, grammar is certainly one of the major developments in linguistics in recent years. It is a development particularly interesting for students and teachers of English, since it goes a long way toward reconciling highly divergent views about English teaching — the linguistic and the traditional. Without losing sight of the valuable advances in linguistic science, Chomsky has been able to rehabilitate, and provide a theory for, many features of earlier language teaching. Though *English Sentences* contradicts very little of what is said in such books as my *Patterns of English*, it will, I believe, seem much more familiar than that book did to teachers and students used to more conventional books.

English Sentences is meant for, and addressed to, high school students. If other people find it useful and interesting, I shall be delighted, but it was not written for other people. In particular, it should not be taken as establishing the details of transformational grammar. I am most grateful to Professor Chomsky and also to Professor Robert Stockwell of the University of California for helping me understand transformation theory. But neither has read the manuscript, and neither has any responsibility for the contents. I have tried to be faithful to the material as I understand it, but I have no doubt made many mistakes, and I have made no attempt at a rigorous treatment.

I want to express my gratitude to Professor Archibald Hill of the University of Texas, who introduced me to transformational grammar by inviting me to the Texas Conference on Syntax in 1959 at Austin. I am grateful, as always, to Professor Donald H. Alden of San Jose State College, who read the manuscript and taught the material and made useful suggestions, to Professor Frederick B. Agard of Cornell University for valuable conversations on the subject, and to the members of the 1960 Seminar in Linguistics at San Jose State College for working out many of the details.

My greatest debt is to my wife for untiring aid and interest and encouragement and comfort.

PAUL ROBERTS

Rome, 1961

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1

WHAT IS GRAMMAR?

There are many ways of thinking about grammar, many senses in which the term is used. One way is this: grammar is something that produces the sentences of a language. This is what we shall mean by *grammar* in this book.

We may then ask, what do we mean by “something”? What sort of something? Well, the grammar might be a book or a series of books containing the rules for making the sentences of a language. An English grammar would be a set of rules for making English sentences. Or we might think of the “something” as a machine with the rules built into it. It is possible to conceive — it might even be possible to build — an electronic machine that, by following its rules, would come out with an English sentence every time it went through its operation and that never would produce a non-English sentence.

But there is another, and a more interesting, meaning that we can give to the “something” that produces English sentences. We can mean simply a speaker of English. If you speak English natively, you have built into you the rules of English grammar. In a sense, you *are* an English grammar. You possess, as an essential part of your being, a very complicated apparatus which enables you to produce infinitely many sentences, all English ones, including many that you have never specifically learned. Furthermore, by applying your rules, you can easily tell whether a sentence that you hear is a grammatical English sentence or not.

This may strike you as absurd. You may protest that you have never studied English grammar or that you have studied it without profit or understanding — in any case, that you know nothing about it. But it is perfectly easy to demonstrate that, if you speak

English natively, you know virtually all about English grammar, all its essential rules. For example, which of the following are grammatical English sentences and which are not?

1. Henry bought his mother some flowers.
2. Henry some flowers bought his mother.
3. He isn't very nice to me.
4. He are not to me very nice.
5. Those things don't trouble me at all.
6. Those thing to me are not of a troublesome.

Obviously, 1, 3, and 5 are grammatical English sentences, and 2, 4, and 6 are not.

Now, how do you know? You don't know because somebody told you. Nobody ever gave you the words "Those thing to me are not of a troublesome" and informed you that it was not an English sentence. You don't know by intuition. If it were intuition, it would presumably work just as well on Chinese as on English, but in fact whatever is working for you works only on English.

GRAMMATICALITY

What is working is your grammar. You reject sentences 2, 4, and 6 because they do not conform to the rules of English grammar as you know them. You know that *those* modifies plural nouns, not singulars, that an adjective like *troublesome* does not occur after *of a*, that such a prepositional phrase as *to me* comes more commonly after the verb than before it. What you may not know is how to talk about such matters. You may have a foggy understanding or none at all of such terms as *plural*, *adjective*, *prepositional phrase*, so that if someone asked you why sentence 6 is ungrammatical, you might not be able to explain very well. Nevertheless, you readily reject 6 as wrong, because it doesn't accord with the rules of English. You know the rules, whether you can describe them or not. Knowing them is what makes you a speaker of English. Now what about this sentence?

Horses that think for themselves smoke filter cigarettes.

Is that grammatical or not? Of course it is grammatical. It is also nonsensical: horses don't smoke cigarettes, filter-tipped or otherwise, and don't think for themselves either. But it is grammatical, conforming perfectly to the rules of English sentence structure. We see then that by *grammatical* we don't necessarily mean "meaningful" or "true." We can talk nonsense grammatically or lie grammatically and often do. Though the following are all nonsensical or untrue, they are all grammatical English sentences:

Dick Tracy is the President of the United States.

All Boy Scouts can swim six miles under water.

Nobody seems to have chorkled these crambons.

The earth is oblong.

Yet the following, though much more sensible, are ungrammatical:

Dick Tracy very brave character of comic strip.

Every Boy Scouts easy hike six miles.

Nobody seem this plants to have watering.

The earth almost round is.

THE STUDY OF GRAMMAR

We have said that all of us who speak English know English grammar, and you may ask, if that is so, why you are required to study it. What we are after now, of course, is not the knowledge that permits us to distinguish grammatical sentences from ungrammatical ones, but rather a conscious understanding of the system and the way it operates. Such an understanding has certain practical uses in the study of writing and other forms of communication. It permits, for example, more efficient discussion of punctuation and of the structures of written English. The sentences that we write are often more intricate and more bound by convention than those we speak. We have a greater chance in writing than in speech of losing our way and blundering, and the blunders of writing are preserved, whereas those of speech disappear on the echo.

To be sure, learning to describe the grammatical system is not the same thing as learning to write. Some people who have never studied grammar write very well, and some who have studied grammar intensively write poorly. We learn to write largely by reading and writing, by imitation and practice. Nevertheless, a conscious understanding of the grammatical system can be a help in the process of learning to write and for some students a considerable help.

However, the author of this book would not wish to recommend the study of grammar on practical grounds alone. Grammar is the heart of language, and language is the foremost of the features that make human beings human. We said earlier that every speaker of English *is* an English grammar. When you study English grammar, you inquire most intimately into yourself and the way you work. You will surely get most out of the study if you undertake it objectively, with a simple wish to understand what it is like, accepting any practical application as a kind of bonus.

We are sometimes told that grammar is dull but useful, a disagreeable medicine we take to cure our writing ills. It is better to look at it differently: properly approached, grammar is an absorbingly interesting study, and it may even do us some practical good.

EXERCISE 1

Some of the following sentences are grammatical and some are not. Number from 1 to 30 on a separate sheet of paper and write a **G** beside the number of a grammatical sentence and a **U** beside the number of an ungrammatical one. Some of the grammatical sentences are nonsense.

These are all reasonably clear-cut cases, and you shouldn't have much trouble in sorting them out. If the sentence is ungrammatical, you might consider to what extent you can explain what is wrong with it. Your teacher may wish to ask you to explain in order to determine your present knowledge of grammatical terms and categories.

1. There wasn't anybody in the room.
2. These young child to whom I spoke answered me insolently.
3. Nobody in his right mind are willing to do such a thing.
4. Frowning slightly, he went on stoking the furnace.
5. Margery seemed paying no attention to us.
6. She refused indignantly accompany him to the Junior Ball.
7. It was a very good example of what can happen when someone pours glue into a radiator.
8. He had bringed me a large glass of milk.
9. The next speaker, a writer of Western stories, humorously explain to us some of the problems he have to solve.
10. We had never in our lives known a Siamese cat that could speak more than three languages.
11. My Aunt Edith a very talented performer on the banjo.
12. Knowing perfectly well that Bradbury would never emerge from the swamp.
13. It was interesting to observe how quickly the children responded to humane treatment.
14. I have not understand exactly what you meant by that remark.
15. Square tennis rackets do not drink milk.
16. The machine we called David was an electronic device that could produce all the grammatical sentences of English and only those.
17. Never John speaks the simple truth.
18. John never speaks the simple truth.
19. John speaks the simple truth never.
20. Never does John speak the simple truth.
21. Only television producers have wings.
22. To whom you gave the map that shows where the money is buried?
23. Walks he to school every morning?
24. You should try to remember that even politicians have feelings.
25. It didn't seem to me to occur these events.
26. He picked up it and carefully put it away.
27. It just happens that he does be the best friend a boy ever had.
28. Fortune often smiles on those most indifferent to her.
29. Cleaning out his desk drawer, Lloyd came upon an old snowball that he had put there the previous winter.
30. We elected president of the senior class Al.

2 DIALECT DIFFERENCES

The sentences examined in Chapter 1 were clear examples of grammaticality or ungrammaticality. Virtually any speaker of English would call the grammatical ones grammatical and the others ungrammatical. But the line between grammaticality and ungrammaticality does not always appear so sharp. There are several borderline areas where we will not all agree which is which. What, for example, shall we say about the following sentences? Are they grammatical or are they not?

Henry brung his mother some flowers.

Seems like he don't like nobody.

Me and Eddie grabbed him and throwed him out.

I like mine better than youn.

Certainly there is some sense in which these are grammatical. They are produced by native speakers of English according to a built-in set of rules of English grammar. They are certainly more grammatical than the non-English sentences of Chapter 1. Compare these:

1. Henry brought his mother some flowers.
2. Henry brung his mother some flowers.
3. Henry some flowers his mother brought.

Sentence 3 is wrong absolutely. No native speaker of English, **no-matter** how uneducated, would ever say it. Sentence 3 would be used only by a foreigner in the process of learning English and not yet acquainted with some of its essential rules.

But what we have said about 3 does not apply to 2. Both 1 and 2 are produced normally by speakers of English, according to their systems. They are not non-English, as 3 is. Yet there is a difference.

Most of us, including many of us who customarily say 2, have a feeling that 1 is more correct, more grammatical. But we must ask, if 2 is not non-English, in what sense it is ungrammatical. If 1 is better, why is it better?

First, we must perceive that it is not a question of clarity. Sentences 1 and 2 are about equally clear and both are clearer than 3. If someone says either 1 or 2, you grasp the meaning in about the same amount of time. Second, there is nothing in the *sound* of the words *brought* and *brung* that makes one better than the other. There is no rule in English that all verbs, or all verbs of a certain class should end in *-ought* rather than *-ung* or that they should never end in *-ung*. For if there were, we should have to reject not only "He brung her a book" but also "She clung to her book." In short, there is nothing in the nature of language which leads us to prefer sentence 1 to sentence 2. The two sentences differ simply in that they represent separate *dialects*, or varieties, of English.

GRAMMAR 1 AND GRAMMAR 2

If we prefer sentence 1 to sentence 2, we do so simply because in some sense we prefer the people who say sentence 1 to those who say sentence 2. We associate sentence 1 with educated people and sentence 2 with uneducated people. Hearing sentence 2, we infer that the speaker is uneducated. Hearing sentence 1, we do not make this inference. But mark this well: educated people do not say sentence 1, "Henry brought his mother some flowers," because it is better than 2. Educated people say it, *and that makes it better*. That's all there is to it.

So we see that the sentences we listed at the beginning of this chapter are all, in a certain important sense, grammatical. They are all part of the grammar of a great many native speakers of English. But these people are for the most part not well educated and therefore not very influential. The grammar of the educated and influential differs in certain important respects, particularly in verb forms and pronouns, and the position of its users gives this