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The English Verb

Second Edition

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Preface

This book is, in effect, a second revised version of *A Linguistic Study of the English Verb*, published in 1965; the first revision appeared as *The English Verb* in 1974. There has been considerable rewriting and reorganization of all the chapters, except the last (now 11 instead of 9), but the major changes are in the treatment of voice (Ch. 5), of HAVE (8.2) and, above all, of the modals, which are now discussed in two chapters (6 and 7) instead on one. The analysis of the modals is based on my *Modality and the English Modals* (1979), though the presentation is different.

Like its predecessors it is intended both for students of linguistics and for all who are interested in the description of modern English.

University of Reading
January 1987

F. R. P.

Pronunciation table

CONSONANTS				VOWELS	
VOICELESS		VOICED			
/p/	**p**ig	/b/	**b**ig	/iː/	sh**ee**p
/t/	**t**en	/d/	**d**en	/ɪ/	sh**i**p
/k/	**c**ot	/g/	**g**ot	/e/	b**e**d
/f/	**f**at	/v/	**v**at	/æ/	b**a**d
/θ/	**th**in	/ð/	**th**en	/ɑː/	c**a**lm
/s/	**s**oon	/z/	**z**ero	/ɒ/	p**o**t
/ʃ/	**sh**ip	/ʒ/	plea**s**ure	/ɔː/	c**au**ght
/tʃ/	**ch**eap	/dʒ/	**j**eep	/ʊ/	p**u**t
/h/	**h**ot	/m/	**m**um	/uː/	b**oo**t
		/n/	**n**un	/ʌ/	c**u**t
		/ŋ/	sa**ng**	/ɜː/	b**ir**d
		/l/	**l**ed	/ə/	**a**bove
		/r/	**r**ed	/eɪ/	d**ay**
		/j/	**y**et	/əʊ/	c**oa**l
		/w/	**w**et	/aɪ/	l**ie**
				/aʊ/	n**ow**
				/ɔɪ/	b**oy**
				/ɪə'/	h**ere**
				/eə'/	th**ere**
				/ʊə'/	p**oor**
				/eɪə'/	pl**ayer**
				/əʊə'/	l**ower**
				/aɪə'/	t**ire**
				/aʊə'/	t**ower**
				/ɔɪə'/	employ**er**

Quirk et al. 1985

Contents

much closer to Chinese than it is to Latin, or at least this is true as long as we are thinking about *words*. If we ask how many different forms of the verb there are in Latin, the answer will be over a hundred, and the same is true for classical Arabic. For English, on the other hand, there are at most only five forms: the verb 'to take' has only *take, takes, taking, took* and *taken*. But this contrast is misleading because it is in terms of single-word forms. For if the verbal forms of English are taken to include such multi-word forms as *is taking, has been taking, may have taken*, etc, there are possibly over a hundred forms of the English verb.

More important, and more difficult for the learner, is the nature of the information carried by the verbal forms. Speakers of European languages expect that their verbs will tell them something about time; and that there will be at least a future, a present and a past tense referring to a future, a present and a past time. But there is no natural law that the verb in a language shall be concerned with time. There are languages in which time relations are not marked at all, and there are languages in which the verb is concerned with spatial rather than temporal relations. Even in languages where time seems to be dealt with in the verb, it is not always a simple matter of present, past and future; English does not handle present, past and future as a trio in the category of tense (3.2.1). More troublesome is the variety of other features indirectly associated with time that are indicated by the verb. In English, for instance, the verb may indicate that an action took place in a period preceding, but continuing right up to, the present moment, as well as simply in the past. In other languages, such as the Slavonic languages, what is important is whether or not the action has been completed. *I read a book last night* will be translated into Russian in two different ways, depending upon whether or not I finished the book.

1.1 General considerations

It is not the aim of this book to raise or to answer questions of linguistic theory for their own sake, though it contains a considerable amount of discussion that is of theoretical relevance. Any book of this kind must, moreover, make assumptions about its subject – that we can, for instance, usefully identify the verb and that statements about the meaning of linguistic items are themselves meaningful. Some general comments, however, on the linguistic standpoint and the basic concepts are appropriate

1.1.1 Grammatical description

This is a (partial) descriptive grammar of English. Its aim, that is to say, is simply to describe the facts of English It will not make recommendations about the ways in which English should be spoken or written; it will not suggest, for instance, that *If I was rich* is incorrect and should be replaced by *If I were rich*, or that *You can leave now* should be corrected to *You may leave now*.

Many grammars and handbooks written over the last two centuries and some that are still in use in parts of the world contain normative or prescriptive rules such as those that condemn split infinitives, recommend the use of *whom* or reject *It's me* as ungrammatical. There is no place for any of these in this book. Yet that is not to say that there are no rules in English. On the contrary, there are rules such as the one that requires *The boys are coming* rather than **The boys is coming*. But these are descriptive rules, based on the observable facts of the language (and there may be some variation according to matters such as dialect or style).

There is, then, no clash between description and correctness provided that it is clearly understood precisely what kind of English is being described. One variety that is referred to is 'standard English', or more strictly, 'standard British English'. This is to some degree a fiction, because different people have different views about what is standard. But the advent of radio and television means that there is fairly general agreement (and, curiously, where there are objections to 'incorrect' speech on the mass media, they more often relate to the prescriptive rules mentioned earlier, not to more legitimate descriptive differences).

Inevitably, the material for this book is what the author believes is standard, or what he believes he uses when he speaks standard English, though some of the examples are taken from recorded texts (especially in Chs 6 and 7).

Even this, however, will not produce a precise account of what is and what is not grammatical in English. For there are forms that are marginal; native speakers are not always clear about what they could or could not say For instance, there is some doubt about the status of:

He would have been being examined.

Many people would accept this, but only just, yet it is marked as 'wanting' in one well-known description of English (Palmer and Blandford 1939: 131).

An examination of actual texts may establish that some

dubious forms actually occur, but a grammar cannot reasonably be based on such texts alone. Apart from the fact that some forms may, quite by accident, not occur unless the corpus is vast (perhaps even infinite), it will also be the case that some of the forms that occur will be rejected not only by the investigator but even by the original speaker (or writer) as slips of the tongue or mistakes. Inevitably, some judgments have to be made, and it will not be surprising or undesirable if the judgments of the reader of this book are not always the same as those of the writer.

In general, then, most of the forms presented here for exemplification are accepted as grammatical. Others, however, are less straightforward and conventions are required to indicate their status:

[i] Forms that are ungrammatical are marked with an asterisk:

**He has could been there.*

[ii] Forms that are doubtful are marked with a question mark:

?He could have been being examined.

[iii] Forms that are grammatical, but not under the interpretation required in the analysis, are marked with an exclamation mark. For instance, all the following are possible:

He began talking.
He began to talk.
He stopped talking.
!He stopped to talk.

The section in which these are discussed (9.3.1) is concerned with the constructions associated with catenatives, and whereas *talking* and *to talk* can be used in a particular (catenative) construction with BEGIN, only *talking* can occur with STOP in that construction; the last sentence, though quite grammatical, is of a different construction and irrelevant to the argument.

1.1.2 Speech and writing

It is a reasonable question to ask of a linguist whether he is attempting to describe the spoken or the written language. With a few exceptions most grammarians until fairly recently have been concerned almost exclusively with the written language and their works are often superbly illustrated by copious examples from English literature (*eg* Jespersen 1909–49). This concentration on the written language has sometimes been associated with the assumption that speech is inferior, because it is ephemeral rather than permanent, and because it is often ungrammati-

cal or corrupt. Not surprisingly, perhaps, there has also been a reaction to this point of view; there have been linguists who have taken the opposite view and argued that only speech is language.

It is easy to show at the level of the sound and writing systems of the language, the phonology and the graphology, that spoken and written languages are very different. Apart from the fact that they are in different media, one in sound and the other in marks upon paper, there is often no one-to-one correspondence between the units of one and the units of the other, at least in the case of languages that have a long tradition of writing. It is not simply that there are such words as *cough*, *tough*, etc in which there seems to be no relation between the spelling and the pronunciation. The differences go deeper than that. In English there are only five vowels in the writing, but it would be difficult to analyse the sound system in any way that would reduce the number of vowels to less than six. Equally important is the fact that in speech there are the features of stress and intonation, which have only to a very limited degree counterparts in the written language. In this respect the reverse of the traditional belief is true: writing is a poor representation of speech.

Even the grammar of the spoken language is different from the grammar of the written. In the written language the form *has* is irregular, for **haves* is to be expected, whereas *does* is quite regular as seen from comparing *go/goes*: in the spoken language both are irregular, since they are [hæz] and [dʌz] instead of *[hævz] and *[du:z]. Conversely there is in speech a perfectly regular negative form of *am*, which is, however, used only in questions, exactly analogous to the negative forms of *can* and *shall*. The negative forms differ from the positive in that (i) the vowel is [ɑ:] instead of [æ], and (ii) the last consonant of the positive form is missing:

can [kæn]	*can't* [kɑ:nt]
am [æm]	*aren't* [ɑ:nt]
shall [ʃæl]	*shan't* [ʃɑ:nt]

Yet although there is no problem about writing *can't I?* and *shan't I?* there is hesitation about the written form for the negative of *am*; the only possible representation seems to be *aren't I?* (not **an't I?*), but this looks more like the negative of *are*.

However, for the purposes of this book the distinction is not particularly important. We are not concerned with phonology except incidentally, while morphology is dealt with in Chapter II. For the rest of the grammatical analysis (which is mainly syntactic) the differences between speech and writing are smaller (or, perhaps, one should say that there are greater correlations

between the two). In particular, the writing conventions of the language, the orthography, can be used to identify the forms of the spoken language. It will, naturally, not be an accurate indication of the phonology or (to a lesser degree) of the morphology, but it will indicate fairly accurately most of the grammatical structure that we are concerned with. Indeed it is no coincidence that the term grammar is derived from the Greek word meaning 'to write', for an essential part of writing is that it reflects the grammatical system of the language.

It is, therefore, reasonable to claim that this is essentially a study of the spoken form of the language, yet at the same time to use the written form to identify the words and sentences that we are talking about. One work on the English verb (Joos 1964) used as its source material the transcript of a trial. This was essentially the analysis of the spoken form of English, yet the text available was wholly in written form. It need hardly be added that the reader will find the orthographic form of the examples easier to read than if they had been in a phonetic script. This is not simply a matter of familiarity, but also reflects the fact that a phonetic script supplies details that are unnecessary for the grammatical analysis.

It could be argued, however, that the orthography is defective in that it does not mark stress and intonation. This is a just criticism since stress and intonation are clearly grammatical; and there are other prosodic features that are left unstated. But these features are grammatical in two different senses. In the first place they often correlate with grammatical features that belong to the written language. For instance there is a distinction between:

I didn't do it because it was difficult.
I didn't do it, because it was difficult.

The first sentence means that I did it, but not because it was difficult, the second that I did not do it, because it was difficult. What is negated is *because it was difficult* in the first, *I did it* in the second. The comma indicates this in the written form. In speech the distinction is made even clearer by the use of appropriate intonation (probably a single fall-rise intonation in the first, but two intonation tunes in the second, a rise and then a fall). Secondly, however, intonation involves grammatical issues of a different kind. Statements and questions are normally regarded as grammatically different, and distinguished as declaratives and interrogatives respectively in, for instance, *I shall come tomorrow* and *Shall I come tomorrow?*, but the status of