

OXFORD ENGLISH

A Guide to the Language

COMPILED BY
I.C.B. DEAR



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PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

MANY books today, including most new reference books, are a celebration of the English language. There is much to celebrate because English has established itself as a lingua franca throughout the world, so that Chinese airline pilots overflying Eastern Siberia communicate with Soviet ground controllers in English—not a version easily understood, perhaps, by readers of this book but undeniably English.

One of the results of all this is that English-speaking people generally, and the British in particular, may like to regard the ascendancy and supremacy of their language not only as a God-given right but in some way as a national achievement, like winning a war. This would be quite wrong, and we should recognize that the truth is not that we have given our language to the world but that the world has taken it over for its own use and convenience. The reasons are part historical and part linguistic—as in the case of the supremacy of Latin in the Middle Ages—but the result is that we no longer have a proprietorial right to our language. English is no longer *our* language. A certain modesty about our relationship with the language seems appropriate for its native speakers, particularly at a time when other parts of the world—North America, India, and East Asia, for instance—are making the running so far as the future is concerned. An understanding of what has taken place can also enable us to find new uses and new pleasures in the enhancement of modern English grammar and usages by the incorporation of non-European imports, particularly American English, but also African, Caribbean, and Southern European, and even Japanese.

So what we have tried to achieve in *Oxford English* is to reflect the diversity of the English language, its international influence, and its flexibility, whether employed in the written word or the spoken word, in the language of literature or the language of science. It therefore seems appropriate that of the numerous original contributions to this book, the first should be *The Story of the English Language* and the last *Scientific Writing*, while in between the reader will find articles like *The Caribbean* and *Dr Johnson and the English Language* as well as useful extracts from a number of well-known Oxford reference books such as the *Companion to English Literature* and the *Concise Science Dictionary*. In

VI PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

short, not only is *Oxford English* a useful work of reference for the English language in all its aspects, but one for any English reader in any part of the world who is interested in its powers and how those powers can best be put to use.

Britain has ceased to be the guardian of its native tongue, which, like the sorcerer's apprentice, has easily outstripped its owner's powers. But as an important part of the new world-wide English-speaking community—of all tongues, nationalities, and races—we may find a compendium such as this book a vital means of keeping us in touch with our astonishing brain-child.

ROBIN DENNISTON

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS BOOK

a.	(ante) before	modE	modern English
abbrev.	abbreviation	modF	modern French
abl.	ablative (case)	MS	manuscript
Amer.	American	NEB	<i>The New English Bible</i> (Oxford and Cambridge, 1970)
attr.	attributed		
Aust.	Australian		
bk.	book	NY	New York
c.	(circa) around	obs.	obsolete
c.	century	ODWE	<i>The Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors</i> (Oxford, 1981)
ch.	chapter		
COD	<i>The Concise Oxford Dictionary</i> (edn. 7, Oxford, 1982)	OE	Old English
colloq.	colloquial	OED	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i> (Oxford, 1933) and its supple- mentary volumes, A-G (1972); H-N (1976); O-Scz (1982)
Dict.	Dictionary		
edn.	edition		
EETS	Early English Text Society		
esp.	especially		
et al.	(et alii) and others		
f.	from	OF	Old French
Fr.	French	ON	Old Norse
Ger.	German	orig.	originally
Gr.	Greek	p.	page
Hart's Rules	<i>Hart's Rules for Compositors and Readers</i> (edn. 39, Oxford, 1983)	pa.t.	past tense
		perf.	performed
		pl.	plate
		Port.	Portuguese
hist.	with historical reference	pt.	part
		pub.	published
It.	Italian	rev.	revised
Jap.	Japanese	Ser.	Series
l.	line	Sp.	Spanish
L.	Latin	TLS	<i>The Times Literary Supplement</i>
ME	Middle English		
medL	medieval Latin	tr.	translation of, translated by
MEU	H. W. Fowler, A <i>Dictionary of Modern English Usage</i> (edn. 2, revised by Sir Ernest Gowers, Oxford, 1965)	US	United States
		usu.	usually
		vol.	volume
		*	See entry for this word or name.

GRAMMATICAL TERMS

USED IN THIS BOOK

WHERE an example is partly in italics and partly in roman type, it is the words in roman that exemplify the term being defined.

absolute used independently of its customary grammatical relationship or construction, e.g. Weather permitting, *I will come*.

acronym a word formed from the initial letters of other words, e.g. *NATO*.

active applied to a verb whose subject is also the source of the action of the verb, e.g. *We saw him*; opposite of **passive**.

adjective a word that names an attribute, used to describe a noun or pronoun, e.g. *small child*, *it is small*.

adverb a word that modifies an adjective, verb, or another adverb, expressing a relation of place, time circumstance; manner, cause, degree, etc., e.g. *gently*, *accordingly*, *now*, *here*, *why*.

agent noun a noun denoting the doer of an action, e.g. *builder*.

agent suffix a suffix added to a verb to form an agent noun, e.g. *-er*.

agree to have the same grammatical number, gender, case, or person as another word.

analogy the formation of a word, derivative, or construction in imitation of an existing word or pattern.

animate denoting a living being.

antecedent a noun or phrase to which a relative pronoun refers back.

antepenultimate last but two.

antonym a word of contrary meaning to another.

apposition the placing of a word, especially a noun, syntactically parallel to another, e.g. *William the Conqueror*.

article *a/an* (indefinite article) or *the* (definite article).

attributive designating a noun, adjective, or phrase expressing an attribute, characteristically preceding the word it qualifies, e.g. *old* in *the old dog*; opposite of **predicative**.

auxiliary verb a verb used in forming tenses, moods, and voices of other verbs.

case the form (subjective, objective, or possessive) of a noun or pronoun, expressing relation to some other word.

clause a distinct part of a sentence including a subject (sometimes by implication) and predicate.

collective noun a singular noun denoting many individuals; see pp. 106 f.

xii GRAMMATICAL TERMS

collocation an expression consisting of two (or more) words frequently juxtaposed, especially adjective + noun.

comparative the form of an adjective or adverb expressing a higher degree of a quality, e.g. *braver*, *worse*.

comparison the differentiation of the **comparative** and **superlative** degrees from the positive (basic) form of an adjective or adverb.

complement a word or words necessary to complete a grammatical construction: the complement of a clause, e.g. *John is* (a) thoughtful (man), *Solitude makes John* thoughtful; of an adjective, e.g. *John is glad* of your help; of a preposition, e.g. *I thought of* John.

compound preposition a preposition made up of more than one word, e.g. *with regard to*.

concord agreement between words in gender, number, or person, e.g. *the girl who is here*, *you who are alive*, *Those men work*.

conditional designating (1) a clause which expresses a condition, or (2) a mood of the verb used in the consequential clause of a conditional sentence, e.g. (1) *If he had come*, (2) *I should have seen him*.

consonant (1) a speech sound in which breath is at least partly obstructed, combining with a vowel to form a syllable; (2) a letter usually used to represent (1); e.g. *ewe* is written with vowel + consonant + vowel, but is pronounced as consonant (y) + vowel (oo).

co-ordination the linking of two or more parts of a compound sentence that are equal in importance, e.g. *Adam delved and Eve span*.

correlative co-ordination co-ordination by means of pairs of corresponding words regularly used together, e.g. *either . . . or*.

countable designating a noun that refers in the singular to one and in the plural to more than one, and can be qualified by *a*, *one*, *every*, etc. and *many*, *two*, *three*, etc.; opposite of **mass (noun)**.

diminutive denoting a word describing a small, liked, or despised specimen of the thing denoted by the corresponding root word, e.g. *ringlet*, *Johnny*, *princeling*.

diphthong: see **digraph**, p. 66.

direct object the object that expresses the primary object of the action of the verb, e.g. *He sent a present to his son*.

disyllabic having two syllables.

double passive: see pp. 112 f.

elide to omit by **elision**.

elision the omission of a vowel or syllable in pronouncing, e.g. *let's*.

ellipsis the omission from a sentence of words needed to complete a construction or sense.

elliptical involving **ellipsis**.

feminine the gender proper to female beings.

finite designating (part of) a verb limited by person and number, e.g. *I am*, *He comes*.

formal designating the type of English used publicly for some serious purpose, either in writing or in public speeches.

future the tense of a verb referring to an event yet to happen: **simple future**, e.g. *I shall go*; **future in the past**, referring to an event that was yet to happen at a time prior to the time of speaking, e.g. *He said he would go*.

gerund the part of the verb which can be used like a noun, ending in *-ing*, e.g. *What is the use of my scolding him?*

govern (said of a verb or preposition) to have (a noun or pronoun, or a case) dependent on it.

group possessive: see p. 115.

hard designating a letter, chiefly *c* or *g*, that indicates a guttural sound, as in *cot* or *got*.

if-clause a clause introduced by *if*.

imperative the mood of a verb expressing command, e.g. *Come here!*

inanimate opposite of **animate**.

indirect object the person or thing affected by the action of the verb but not primarily acted upon, e.g. *I gave him the book*.

infinitive the basic form of a verb that does not indicate a particular tense or number or person; the **to-infinitive**, used with preceding *to*, e.g. *I want to know*; the **bare infinitive**, without preceding *to*, e.g. *Help me pack*.

inflexion a part of a word, usually a suffix, that expresses grammatical relationship, such as number, person, tense, etc.

informal designating the type of English used in private conversation, personal letters, and popular public communication.

intransitive designating a verb that does not take a direct object, e.g. *I must think*.

intrusive r: see pp. 241 f.

linking r: see pp. 240 f.

loan-word a word adopted by one language from another.

main clause the principal clause of a sentence.

masculine the gender proper to male beings.

mass noun a noun that refers to something regarded as grammatically indivisible, treated only as singular, and never qualified by *those, many, two, three*, etc.; opposite of **countable noun**.

modal relating to the **mood** of a verb; used to express mood.

mood form of a verb serving to indicate whether it is to express fact, command, permission, wish, etc.

monosyllabic having one syllable.

nominal designating a phrase or clause that is used like a noun, e.g.

What you need is a drink.

nonce-word a word coined for one occasion.

non-finite designating (a part of) a verb not limited by person and number, e.g. the infinitive, gerund, or participle.

non-restrictive: see p. 134.

noun a word used to denote a person, place, or thing.

noun phrase a phrase functioning within the sentence as a noun, e.g.

The one over there is mine.

object a noun or its equivalent governed by an active transitive verb, e.g. *I will take that one.*

objective the case of a pronoun typically used when the pronoun is the object of a verb or governed by a preposition, e.g. *me, him.*

paradigm the complete pattern of inflexion of a noun, verb, etc.

participle the part of a verb used like an adjective but retaining some verbal qualities (tense and government of an object) and also used to form compound verb forms: the **present participle** ends in *-ing*, the **past participle** of regular verbs in *-ed*, e.g. *While doing her work she had kept the baby amused.*

passive designating a form of the verb by which the verbal action is attributed to the person or thing to whom it is actually directed (i.e. the logical object is the grammatical subject), e.g. *He was seen by us*; opposite of **active**.

past a tense expressing past action or state, e.g. *I arrived yesterday.*

past perfect a tense expressing action already completed prior to the time of speaking, e.g. *I had arrived by then.*

pejorative disparaging, depreciatory.

penultimate last but one.

perfect a tense denoting completed action or action viewed in relation to the present, e.g. *I have finished now*; **perfect infinitive**, e.g. *He seems to have finished now.*

periphrasis a roundabout way of expressing something.

person one of the three classes of personal pronouns or verb-forms, denoting the person speaking (**first person**), the person spoken

- to (second person), and the person or thing spoken about (third person).
- phrasal verb** an expression consisting of a verb and an adverb (and preposition), e.g. *break down*, *look forward to*.
- phrase** a group of words without a predicate, functioning like an adjective, adverb, or noun.
- plural** denoting more than one.
- polysyllabic** having more than one syllable.
- possessive** the case of a noun or a pronoun indicating possession, e.g. *John's*; **possessive pronoun**, e.g. *my*, *his*.
- predicate** the part of a clause consisting of what is said of the subject, including verb + complement or object.
- predicative** designating (especially) an adjective that forms part or the whole of the predicate, e.g. *The dog is old*.
- prefix** a verbal element placed at the beginning of a word to qualify its meaning, e.g. *ex-*, *non-*.
- preposition** a word governing a noun or pronoun, expressing the relation of the latter to other words, e.g. *seated at the table*.
- prepositional phrase** a phrase consisting of a preposition and its complement, e.g. *I am surprised at your reaction*.
- present** a tense expressing action now going on or habitually performed in past and future, e.g. *He commutes daily*.
- pronoun** a word used instead of a noun to designate (without naming) a person or thing already known or indefinite, e.g. *I*, *you*, *he*, etc., *anyone*, *something*, etc.
- proper name** a name used to designate an individual person, animal, town, ship, etc.
- qualify** (of an adjective or adverb) to attribute some quality to (a noun or adjective/verb).
- reflexive** implying the subject's action on himself or itself; **reflexive pronoun**, e.g. *myself*, *yourself*, etc.
- relative**: see pp. 133 ff.
- restrictive**: see p. 134.
- semivowel** a sound intermediate between vowel and consonant, e.g. the sound of *y* and *w*.
- sentence adverb** an adverb that qualifies or comments on the whole sentence, not one of the elements in it, e.g. *Unfortunately, he missed his train*.
- simple future**: see **future**.
- singular** denoting a single person or thing.
- soft** designating a letter, chiefly *c* or *g*, that indicates a sibilant sound, as in *city* or *germ*.

split infinitive: see pp. 138 ff.

stem the essential part of a word to which inflexions and other suffixes are added, e.g. *unlimited*.

stress the especially heavy vocal emphasis falling on one (the **stressed**) syllable of a word more than on the others.

subject the element in a clause (usually a noun or its equivalent) about which something is predicated (the latter is the **predicate**).

subjective the case of a pronoun typically used when the pronoun is the subject of a clause.

subjunctive the mood of a verb denoting what is imagined, wished, or possible, e.g. *I insist that it be finished*.

subordinate clause a clause dependent on the main clause and functioning like a noun, adjective, or adverb within the sentence, e.g. *He said that you had gone*.

substitute verb the verb *do* used in place of another verb, e.g. '*He likes chocolate.*' 'Does he?'

suffix a verbal element added at the end of a word to form a derivative, e.g. *-ation*, *-ing*, *-itis*, *-ize*.

superlative the form of an adjective or adverb expressing the highest or a very high degree of a quality, e.g. *brave*, *worst*.

synonym a word identical in sense and use with another.

transitive designating a verb that takes a direct object, e.g. *I said nothing*.

unreal condition (especially in a **conditional** sentence) a condition which will not be or has not been fulfilled.

unstressed designating a word, syllable, or vowel not having stress.

variant a form of a word etc. that differs in spelling or pronunciation from another (often the main or usual) form.

verb a part of speech that predicates.

vowel (1) an open speech sound made without audible friction and capable of forming a syllable with or without a consonant; (2) a letter usually used to represent (1), e.g. *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*.

wh-question word a convenient term for the interrogative and relative words, most beginning with *wh*: *what*, *when*, *where*, *whether*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *how*.

CONTENTS

List of Contributors	ix
Abbreviations	xi
Grammatical Terms	xiii
 PART ONE The Written Word	 1
The Story of the English Language by <i>Dr Robert Burchfield</i>	3
Word Formation by <i>E. S. C. Weiner</i>	18
Vocabulary by <i>E. S. C. Weiner</i>	53
Grammar by <i>E. S. C. Weiner</i>	101
Principles of Punctuation by <i>E. S. C. Weiner</i>	156
General Abbreviations and Acronyms compiled by <i>I. C. B. Dear</i>	161
Foreign Words and Phrases compiled by <i>I. C. B. Dear</i>	172
Written Forms of Address by <i>Peter Wilby</i>	181
Words Commonly Misspelt by <i>E. S. C. Weiner</i>	201
Clichés and Modish and Inflated Diction by <i>E. S. C. Weiner</i>	213
Foreign Alphabets by <i>E. S. C. Weiner</i>	216
 PART TWO The Spoken Word	 225
Pronunciation by <i>E. S. C. Weiner</i>	227
English Overseas	270
The United States by <i>E. S. C. Weiner</i>	270
Canada by <i>E. S. C. Weiner</i>	271
Australia and New Zealand by <i>E. S. C. Weiner</i>	272
South Africa by <i>E. S. C. Weiner</i>	274
The Caribbean by <i>Dr Lise Winer</i>	275
India by <i>Professor Braj B. Kachru</i>	277
Hints on Speech-making and Toasts by <i>Robert Lawrence</i>	280
Verbal Forms of Address by <i>Audrey Whiting</i>	291
The Oral Tradition by <i>Leslie Shepard</i>	298
Slang by <i>John Simpson</i>	309

viii CONTENTS

PART THREE The Language of Literature	319
Everyday Quotations <i>compiled by I. C. B. Dear</i>	321
Everyday Proverbs and Phrases <i>compiled by I. C. B. Dear</i>	357
Everyday Classical Literature <i>compiled by I. C. B. Dear</i>	387
Famous Writers and their Works <i>compiled by I. C. B. Dear</i>	412
Literary and Poetic Terms <i>compiled by I. C. B. Dear</i>	511
Shakespeare and the English Language <i>by Professor Stanley Hussey</i>	527
Dr Johnson and the English Language <i>by Professor Pat Rogers</i>	535
Dickens and the English Language <i>by Dr Andrew Sanders</i>	544
PART FOUR The Language of Science, Technology, and Commerce	551
Scientific Writing <i>by Sir Peter Medawar</i>	553
Everyday Commercial and Legal Terms <i>compiled by I. C. B. Dear</i>	557
Everyday Computer Terms <i>by Michael Mabe</i>	587
Everyday Scientific and Medical Terms <i>compiled by I. C. B. Dear</i>	616
Weights and Measures	663
The Chemical Elements	667
Logic Symbols	668
Proof-Correction Marks	669
WORD INDEX	671
SUBJECT INDEX	700

THE CANON OF THE ENGLISH

PART ONE

THE WRITTEN WORD

1. Old English c. 450-1150

Old English language began as the language of Germanic tribes coming to Britain. It was a mixture of Old Norse, Old Dutch, and Old Frisian. The language was written in the Latin alphabet, but with many special characters and symbols. The first written Old English was the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which began in 892. It was written in a simple, direct style, and it was the first English text to be written in a single hand. The language was used for a variety of purposes, including law, history, and literature. It was the language of the common people, and it was the language of the church. It was the language of the king, and it was the language of the people.

2. Middle English c. 1150-1500

Middle English was the language of the middle class. It was a mixture of Old English and French. The language was written in the Latin alphabet, but with many special characters and symbols. The first written Middle English was the *Canterbury Tales*, which were written in the late 14th century. The language was used for a variety of purposes, including law, history, and literature. It was the language of the common people, and it was the language of the church. It was the language of the king, and it was the language of the people.

3. Modern English c. 1500-1800

Modern English was the language of the modern class. It was a mixture of Middle English and French. The language was written in the Latin alphabet, but with many special characters and symbols. The first written Modern English was the *Declaration of Sentiments*, which was written in 1776. The language was used for a variety of purposes, including law, history, and literature. It was the language of the common people, and it was the language of the church. It was the language of the king, and it was the language of the people.

4. Contemporary English c. 1800-1950

Contemporary English was the language of the contemporary class. It was a mixture of Modern English and French. The language was written in the Latin alphabet, but with many special characters and symbols. The first written Contemporary English was the *Declaration of Sentiments*, which was written in 1776. The language was used for a variety of purposes, including law, history, and literature. It was the language of the common people, and it was the language of the church. It was the language of the king, and it was the language of the people.

5. Postmodern English c. 1950-1990

Postmodern English was the language of the postmodern class. It was a mixture of Contemporary English and French. The language was written in the Latin alphabet, but with many special characters and symbols. The first written Postmodern English was the *Declaration of Sentiments*, which was written in 1776. The language was used for a variety of purposes, including law, history, and literature. It was the language of the common people, and it was the language of the church. It was the language of the king, and it was the language of the people.

PART ONE

THE WRITTEN WORD

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