

Dorothy Sedley

ANATOMY OF ENGLISH

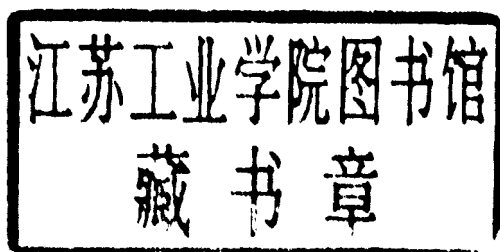
AN INTRODUCTION
TO THE STRUCTURE
OF STANDARD
AMERICAN ENGLISH

Anatomy of English

An Introduction to
the Structure of
Standard American English

DOROTHY SEDLEY

West Virginia University



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PREFACE

Anatomy of English began as a series of classroom activities at West Virginia University for a course called “The English Language,” which attracts not only English majors and prospective teachers of English, but journalism students and others who are interested in using language for pleasure as well as for profit. In addition, quite a few foreign-language majors, struck by the realization that they know more about the workings of Japanese or French than they know about their own native tongue, and even a smattering of international students who want to supplement what they have learned in their EFL or ESL courses, are prompted to enroll. All these students are seeking nontechnical information about the structure of English, not a course in linguistics or grammatical theory.

I was faced with the same problem encountered in teaching introductory material to laypersons in any discipline: how to simplify fundamental concepts and principles without distorting the facts. I wanted a book that is accurate yet readable, a book that is not filled with confusing “exceptions” yet does not give the false impression that systematicity is equivalent to complete and rigid regularity. I wanted instructional materials that manage to suggest the complexity of the grammatical system without *being* complex, materials that are simple without being simple-minded.

Over the years I have used many different texts, and I have read and rejected many more. Most of them try to cover too much ground—always a mistake in an introductory text. Many are not in fact introductory grammars of English, but introductory linguistics texts, intent on teaching about grammar in general, not about English as a unique system. Some have adequate exposition but insufficient or uninspired activities and exercises. Others are not only cluttered and confusing, but worst of all, they are dull. Exercises are repetitive, unimaginative, and simply boring. Because of endless, mechanical fill-in-the-blank monotony, even conscientious

students find it difficult to keep their minds on the principles supposedly being taught.

So I began writing materials of my own. According to students, the activities I created turned out to be not only instructive, but easy to use and interesting, if not exactly “fun.” Moreover, students began to tell me that their textbooks were superfluous, because working through the activities had taught them what they needed to know. Each semester I used more of these “Discovery Activities,” and finally I dispensed with textbooks altogether. After a while, however, I began to distribute handouts containing conclusions, comments, and summaries of class discussions, so that absentees could be assured that they had indeed grasped the point of the Activities. Moreover, two of my colleagues were now using the Activities, which were at that time not always as transparent as I now believe them to be, and even they sometimes asked for assurance.

The exposition in *Anatomy of English*, which evolved from this feedback, is not intended to be comprehensive or definitive, but rather to provide confirmation of the discoveries and to address some of the incidental questions that arise out of the Activities but are not resolved in or by their solution. I did not put an answer key in the book because I do not want to encourage the notion that filling the blanks with the “right” answers (that is, the ones the author has in mind) is the goal of any Discovery Activity (although I have prepared an *Instructor’s Manual* for *Anatomy of English* that suggests an appropriate range of responses). And I have limited the exposition purposely to encourage students to supplement the explanations with data from their own experience and to allow the dynamics of each new class to determine what needs to be discussed at greater length.

My students, along with those of six of my colleagues, have used successive revisions of *Anatomy of English* since the late 1970s. More recently, the book has been field-tested in classrooms outside my home institution. In written evaluations, students credit the book with making English grammar make sense, and even with making grammar interesting—no doubt because *Anatomy of English* does not just tell them the facts about English, but requires them to discover the facts for themselves. Unlike exercises in ordinary texts, which often require nothing more than simple recall or which ask learners to do nothing more challenging than “circle the prepositional phrases,” the approximately 85 Discovery Activities in *Anatomy of English* are designed so that students must work toward

discovery of grammatical facts, using what they already know about how the language works. These Activities are carefully constructed in incremental steps to lead to valid conclusions about English structure—conclusions that are then confirmed by the reading. Students like the fact that the exposition is kept brief and comes as reinforcement *after* they've attempted the problems.

Moreover, *Anatomy of English* does not overwhelm students with details they cannot absorb in a semester or are unlikely to find useful. It describes in detail only the most productive morphological processes and basic syntactic functions, and provides a very brief introduction to the sound system. Yet the open-ended Activities and the questions at the end of each chapter excite curiosity, so that students *want* to go beyond the bare fundamentals. I have found that the mere mention of matters that are beyond the scope of the book actually encourages my students to raise questions about those matters, even though the students know they may not fully understand the issues without further, more advanced, study. Thus, *Anatomy of English* allows for a good bit of classroom spontaneity and permits students to decide what topics they want to discuss, another feature that they have praised.

Among the most appreciated features of *Anatomy of English* is its reliance on observing syntactic and morphological behavior, rather than on definition alone, as a way of learning. Students are delighted to have such concrete criteria as inflectional potential and syntactic substitutability as yardsticks of class membership and grammatical function. But perhaps more than anything else, they're thankful that *Anatomy of English* is not overloaded with jargon. In general, I have adopted traditional terminology, even though I point out its shortcomings and report terminological differences among scholars. Most technical terms are redefined in the glossary, often with references sending the user back to relevant Discovery Activities, and important concepts are summarized at the end of each chapter.

Anatomy of English begins, as do most current books, by distinguishing between the constitutive rules of grammar and the prescriptive rules of usage. Instructors are divided, however, over what constitutes a beginning point for the study of the grammatical structure itself. I usually begin with the sound system (Chapter 9) and work through morphology and the structure of phrases (Chapters 2 through 6) to the syntax of larger structures (Chapters 7 and 8). But because colleagues have chosen to start with morphology, work through syntax, and study the sound system last, I arranged

the chapters accordingly. I think the book is flexible enough for either sequence. At one point I considered dropping the phonology chapter, but students—believe it or not—asked that it be retained.

Some time ago, at the request of students themselves, I added the chapters on spelling and using the dictionary, as well as the one covering the problems students encounter with the usage conventions of academic writing. Although the usage chapter departs somewhat from the avowed goal of description, I believe you will find it compatible in spirit and method with the rest of the book. I justify its inclusion on the grounds that students themselves asked for it. You may want to assign it as an optional supplement, perhaps only to those students who show the need.

In response to suggestions from colleagues, I recently added a chapter on the history of English as well as one on variation in contemporary English. Some students consider their own speech inferior to that of other people; some think their speech is not merely “correct,” but superior to that of others. For both groups, learning that variation is a linguistic fact and not something to be either smug about or ashamed of can be a liberating experience. I hope that everyone using *Anatomy of English* will not only agree, but will use the entire book to that end.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish I could say I did it all myself. Fortunately for the students and teachers who will use *Anatomy of English*, I’ve had help and advice not only from students and colleagues who have used the book, but also from the reviewers selected by St. Martin’s Press. Colleagues at West Virginia University who have used the book—Professors Rudy Almasy, Nick Evans, Pat Conner, Phyllis Morris, Margo Racin, and Beth Daniell—all provided valuable suggestions for improvement. Professor Daniell, now at Clemson, not only goaded me into publication but secured student evaluations at crucial points in the revision process, enabling me to correct weaknesses that my own students had not seen or were reluctant to point out. Professor R. Baird Shuman of University of Illinois, Urbana, tested the book for St. Martin’s and also offered excellent criticism. I also want to thank Wanella Huddleston of Western Kentucky University, Muriel Schulz of California State University—Fullerton, and Eugene Smith of the University of Washington; and special thanks to Professor Franklin Horowitz of Columbia University

Teachers College, who read the entire manuscript twice and not only submitted insightful suggestions but with unfailing tact and kindness kept me from making some embarrassing errors. My heartfelt appreciation to all of them.

TO THE STUDENT

If you were born and raised in the United States, you are in a very real sense already an expert in this subject. As a native speaker of English, you are expected to challenge every statement in the book and to test every conclusion against your own experience with the language. If you are a non-native speaker of English, perhaps you will feel reluctant to challenge the book, but you too will be able to use what you already know about English to learn even more. In short, all students using this text are expected to become active participants in their own course of instruction. Have fun!

Dorothy Sedley
West Virginia University

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