

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

Substance and Technique

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The English Language

The Grammatical System

This section of the text contains a description of the major aspects of English grammar, an overview of the grammatical features of English that teachers of English to speakers of other languages must be familiar with. The information is presented in two parts: (1) a general description, in quite traditional terms, of the devices that signal grammatical relationships in English; and (2) a discussion of the grammatical arrangements characteristic of English sentences and the relationships that sentences have to each other. This second section draws more heavily on insights from modern linguistic study.

Grammatical Signals

In a sentence each word or phrase plays some special grammatical role or function in conveying the message of the sentence. In order to speak English one must be able to recognize the function of each sentence element. The English language signals some of these functions through the use of several syntactic devices. Below are listed seven major syntactic devices of English with examples of each type. Inflectional endings (-s plurals, for example), derivational affixes (prefixes and suffixes), and word stress belong to that part of the grammar which is often referred to as morphology, or the forms of words. The other signals operate over larger units of the language and are gener-

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ally designated as belonging to syntax or, more simply, as syntactic features. We will refer to both kinds of items as grammatical features of English.

Examples of English Grammatical Signals

1. Inflection

Plural of nouns: nuts, squirrels, branches

Past tense of verbs: walked, lived, wanted

2. Structure or Function Words

Articles: the, a/an

Prepositions: of, to, by, for

3. Word Order

Lexical item: chocolate milk; milk chocolate

Functional item: He is. Is he?

Where is he? I know where he is.

4. Derivation or Word Formation

The wire acted as a magnet.

They had magnetized the wire.

The magnetic wire attracted pieces of metal.

They had to demagnetize the wire.

5. Concord or Agreement

The student reads a lot. The students read a lot.

This man; these men.

6. Government

I gave him the book.

He gave me the book.

7. Stress and Intonation

What will you do thén? (after that) I'll go downtown.

What will you dó then? (instead of that) I'll go downtown.

Her son is nineteen.

Her son is nineteen?

Let us now look in some detail at the devices that signal various functions within English sentences.

1. Inflection

Modern English has relatively few inflectional endings, but they are used often. (The term *inflection* is used here in its grammatical sense and refers to a change in the form of a word to indicate different grammatical relationships; this should not be confused with its meaning of alteration in the pitch or the tone of the voice.) Grammarians classify these inflections in various ways; for our purposes we will specify eight inflections of English.

Plural of nouns: nuts, squirrels, branches

Possessive of nouns: cat's, man's, boss's

Third-person singular (present tense) of verbs: eats,
runs, watches

Past tense of verbs: walked, lived, wanted

Past participle of verbs: asked, driven, meant

Present participle of verbs: reading, studying

Comparative of adjectives and adverbs: prettier, slower

Superlative of adjectives and adverbs: prettiest, slowest

A peculiarity of English grammar is that what appears to be one -s suffix operates to signal plurality in nouns, possession in nouns, and third-person singular present tense in verbs. The potential confusion caused by such a similarity in signals, however, is balanced in the language learning process by the ease with which the pronunciation of these three inflections is taught because their pronunciation is determined by a phonological rule. This rule is discussed in the chapter on the sound system.

Below are examples of the three kinds of -s suffixes.

-S SUFFIXES*Plural of Nouns*

book	books
bird	birds
church	churches

Possessive of Nouns

singular	cat	cat's
	writer	writer's
	boss	boss's
plural	cats	cats'
	writers	writers'
	bosses	bosses'

Third-Person Singular Present Tense of Verbs

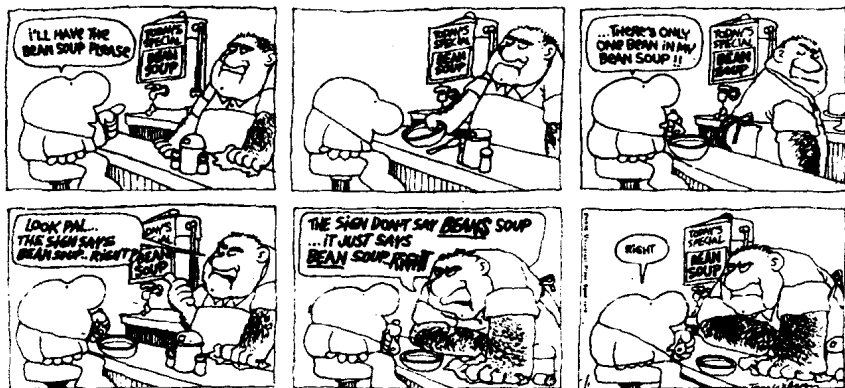
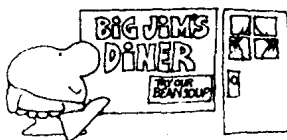
stop	stops
live	lives
wash	washes

Irregular nouns such as *man*, *foot*, *tooth* do not form the plural in the same manner as regular nouns, although they follow the same rule for forming the possessive. The varying plurals of irregular nouns (*man*, *men*; *foot*, *feet*; *tooth*, *teeth*) often involve an inflectional change of another kind, an internal vowel change (technically called *umlaut*) which is characteristic of the Germanic family of languages. The plurals of these nouns must be learned as separate, irregular forms. Fortunately, they are few; but because they are used frequently, they should be learned as soon as possible.

Just as the *-s* suffix designates three functions (plurals of nouns, possessives of nouns, and third-person present tense of verbs), so the *-ed* suffix serves as a sign of the past tense (*added*, *cleaned*, *washed*) and the past participle of regular verbs (*has added*, *had cleaned*, *is washed*). A phonological rule for the pronunciation of the *-ed* suffix operates in a fashion similar to that of the *-s* suffix. (See the chapter on the sound system for a detailed description of this phonological rule.)

ZIGGY...

BY TOM WILSON



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The past form of some irregular verbs in English, like the plurals of some irregular nouns, involves an internal inflectional change (technically referred to as *ablaut*): *eat, ate; drive, drove*. The past participle of many of these irregular verbs is formed by the addition of the suffix *-en* instead of *-ed*: *eaten, driven*. The past tense and past participle of others are formed by the addition of *-t*: *meant, left, brought*.

The present participle of verbs (*-ing* form) is used in several ways. Teamed with the auxiliary verb *be* it becomes the progressive verb phrase.

The cat is watching the bird.

The bird was eating a worm.

It may substitute for an adjective.

Cats are fascinating creatures.

Purring cats are happy cats.

Or it may replace a noun, in which case it is called a gerund.

Flying is fun.

Writing letters can sometimes be a chore.

Most adjectives and adverbs of one or two syllables form their comparative and superlative by adding the inflectional endings *-er* and *-est*.

slow	slower	slowest
pretty	prettier	prettiest

Adjectives and adverbs of more than two syllables generally employ the function words *more* and *most* instead of inflectional endings for the comparative and superlative.

important	more important	most important
beautiful	more beautiful	most beautiful

It should be noted that words like *simple* and *gentle* remain two-syllable words even after adding the inflectional endings: *simpler*, *simplest*; *gentler*, *gentlest*. Also, some two-syllable words do not generally employ the inflectional endings for comparison: *content*, *more content*, *most content*.

2. Structure Words

Words in English can be thought of as being of two types: content words or structure words. Structure words like *the*, *did*, *of*, *but*, and *because* form the framework on which we hang content words like *boy*, *leave*, *work*, *aspiration*, etc. Examples of the most frequently occurring types of structure words are the following:

- articles (the, a/an)
- prepositions (in, on, at, to, by)
- auxiliary verbs (be, do, have; can, may, might)
- coordinating conjunctions (and, or, but)
- subordinating conjunctions (because, if, although)
- interrogative pronouns (when, where, why, who, what)
- relative pronouns (who, whom, which, that)
- complementizer (that)

Structure words sometimes join smaller structures together into larger units.

They damaged the leg *of* the table.

Conjunctions like *but* join full sentences or parts of sentences.

They worked hard, *but* they enjoyed every minute of it.

The couple were young *but* mature.

Subordinating conjunctions like *because* connect a subordinate idea to the main idea, thereby producing a complex sentence.

They left *because* they couldn't wait any longer.

At other times, structure words act as markers of a particular grammatical class of words, e.g., *the* is a marker of nouns.

The dog barked.

In addition, the article *the* is often a sequence signal; that is, it refers to something which has been previously mentioned.

A young boy was at the door. *The* boy left before I got there.

Some structure words are used to signal specific grammatical constructions, as a form of *do* signals a question.

Did the onions make him cry?

Sometimes a certain structure word can be used instead of another syntactic device to express the same function.

Structure word: the tail *of* the dog

Inflection: the dog's tail

Structure word: gave the book *to* them

Word order: gave them the book

As can be deduced from these examples, structure words must be taught with the grammatical structure in which they appear, but content words can be rather freely substituted in many kinds of structures. This contrast between content and structure words is best exemplified in an exercise based on Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky'.

'Twas brillig and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.

Because the content words consist of nonsensical lexical items, there is little semantic information offered by these lines. However, the structure is clear.

'Twas ——— and the ——— -y ——— -s
Did ——— and ——— in the ———.

It is easy for an English speaker to select appropriate content words with which to fill the blanks because the structure words clearly indicate what grammatical constructions are present. One person's rendition of the lines might be this:

It was rainy and the slippery toads
Did hop and tumble in the pool.

In addition to this functional characteristic, there are other characteristics that distinguish structure words from content words:

1. Structure words tend to have little or no lexical meaning; their meaning is derived mainly from the function they serve.
2. There are few distinguishing forms that set them apart from other words. On the other hand, content words of the noun category, for example, have such formal characteristics as the *-ness* or *-ance* suffix (*kindness, compliance*); adjectives the *-ish* or *-ic* suffix (*childish, politic*); verbs the *-ize* suffix or the *en-* prefix (*magnetize, enlarge*).
3. They make up a relatively small class of words; most of the words in the dictionary are not structure words but nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.
4. They belong to a closed class; for example, we do not add to this class by borrowing from other languages or by invention, as we do with content words.
5. These words individually are used frequently; a page of English, for example, contains numerous repetitions of words like *the, in, that*, or the auxiliary verb *be*.
6. They are usually unstressed in spoken language; this makes them difficult for non-native speakers to identify.

We will discuss the content words, the principal vocabulary component of English, in a later section; but it should be remem-

bered that the two kinds of words can never be divorced from each other; each plays an essential role in communication.

3. *Word Order*

Some languages have more flexibility than others in the order in which words can occur. English is a language in which word order is relatively fixed; changes in the order of words often produce contrasts in meaning and in grammatical function.

The arm chair is damaged.

The chair arm is damaged.

He has finished the work.

Has he finished the work?

Paint that box.

Box that paint.

Only the child cried.

The only child cried.

The child only cried.

Sometimes a change in the order of content words is accompanied by other structural changes.

I gave a pencil to John.

I gave John a pencil.

I asked a question of Mary.

I asked Mary a question.

Placing the indirect objects (*John, Mary*) before the direct objects (*pencil, question*) in these sentences requires deleting the preposition (*to, of*).

If I had owned a yacht . . .

Had I owned a yacht . . .

I had owned a yacht.

The inversion of subject and verb (*I had* to *had I*) signals a conditional clause, semantically (although not stylistically).

equivalent to an *if* clause. The third sentence, without inversion, contains no conditional meaning. It is, in fact, a simple statement.

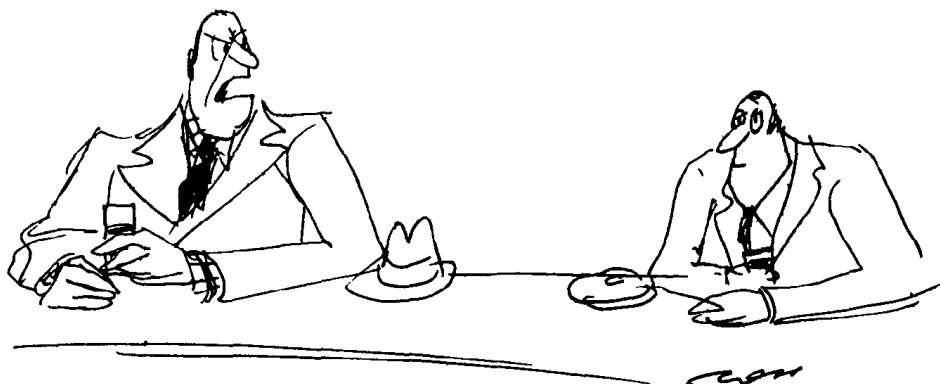
4. Derivation or Word Formation

English, like many languages, forms new words by the addition of prefixes and suffixes: *like, likeable; kind, kindness; nation, national; critic, criticism; agree, disagree; rich, enrich*. Sometimes prefixes and suffixes are used in combination.

kind	kindness	unkindness
nation	national	international
light	lighten	enlighten

Acquaintance with the most frequently occurring, the most productive, derivational affixes (both prefixes and suffixes) is an effective means of increasing vocabulary. It is also an aid in identifying the functional use of a word. For example, the suffix *-ize* signals a verb: *realize, criticize, capitalize*. The suffix *-tion*, on the other hand, is characteristic of a noun: *action, condition, preparation*. The prefix *en-* often produces a verb: *enrage, enlarge, entitle*.

When more than one affix appears on a word, the order in which they are added should be pointed out so the constituent parts of words are identified.



"'Hopefullywise'! Did I understand you to say 'hopefullywise'?"

Drawing by Ross © 1975
The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

enlighten = en + lighten (not enlight + en)
 disgraceful = disgrace + ful (not dis + graceful)
 ungraceful = un + graceful (not ungrace + ful)

Below is a chart that illustrates some of the most frequently used derivational affixes. Note that these can be added only to content words. Note also that the choice of affix is arbitrary, e.g., *realize* becomes *realization* (not *realizement*).

Examples of Derivational Forms

I. <i>Verb</i>	<i>Adjective</i>	<i>Noun</i>
act	active	activity action
despair	desperate	desperation
defy	defiant	defiance
depend	dependent	dependence
impeach	impeachable	impeachment
II. <i>Noun</i>	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Adjective</i>
horror	horrify	horrible
peace	pacify	peaceful
(pacifism)		pacific
alphabet	alphabetize	alphabetical
form	formalize	formal
(formality)		formalistic
courage	encourage	courageous
III. <i>Adjective</i>	<i>Noun</i>	<i>Verb</i>
clear	clearness clarity clarification	clarify
humid	humidity	humidify
civil	civility civilization	civilize
dark	darkness	darken
IV. <i>Verb</i>	<i>Noun</i>	<i>Adjective</i>
avenge	vengeance	vengeful

5. Concord or Agreement

The grammatical device of concord, i.e., agreement of words that bear grammatical relationships, occurs very frequently in English. For example, there is agreement of subject and verb in the present tense.

He	}	eats everything.	I	}	eat everything.
She			We		
It			You		
			They		

The most widely divergent forms that demonstrate agreement of subject and verb occur with the present and past tenses of the verb *be*.

I am happy.	He	}	is happy.	We	}	are happy.
	She			You		
	It			They		
	I	}	was happy.	We	}	were happy.
	He			You		
	She			They		
	It					

Concord or agreement is also indicated in the singular and plural forms of demonstrative adjectives.

<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
this book	these books
that letter	those letters

The relative pronoun (except *that*) agrees with its antecedent, i.e., *who* is used with persons and *which* is used in other cases.

the woman who	the box which
the man who	the classes which
the editors who	

The relative pronoun *that* can, under certain circumstances, replace either *who* or *which*, thereby obviating the necessity for any agreement choice.