

English Grammar Pedagogy

A Global Perspective

Barbara M. Birch



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BARBARA M. BIRCH



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Dedication

For my family

Preface

This book is intended for pre-service teachers, instructors, or students of grammar who want to understand the social setting for English as a global language, the latest thinking about grammatical theory, and new theories of how first and second languages are learned and taught. In particular, this book is aimed at those who intend to learn to speak and write a more formal form of English called Academic English (AE). This book is different from other grammar books because it takes as a fundamental premise that teaching and learning grammar cannot be isolated from the local, regional, and global sociocultural contexts in which the teaching and learning take place.

For instance, in this book the concept of World Englishes (WE) is the foundation for learning and teaching. World Englishes is an umbrella term for the wonderful diversity of spoken and written varieties of English. Within this diversity, more formal written Englishes share areas of agreement about forms and usages. Formal written Englishes are both internal and external to local or regional varieties. They are internal because when people speak of Jamaican English, they are referring to a continuum of varieties from informal speech with local vocabulary and structures to formal Jamaican writing which is probably indistinguishable from British English writing. When people speak of Filipino English, Ugandan English, or English as a lingua franca (ELF), similar continua exist. Everywhere, the local varieties of English are each a microcosm of a global situation with diverse spoken usages on one end of a spectrum and similar written usages on the other. Because of the consensus on the features of formal written usage at one end of the World Englishes spectrum, there appears to be a common external variety of Academic English.

Part I of this book begins by presenting different attitudes toward English as a global language and some challenges that learners of English share, no matter where they are in the world. This book adopts a theory of grammar that explains how the learning of one, two, or multiple languages occurs within sociocultural contexts, and how language learning affects cognition and identity. It takes as primary the idea that language is learned implicitly through interaction, but also explicitly through direct instruction, and that both of these routes can result in accuracy and fluency. The book also addresses pedagogy, with innovative as well as traditional suggestions that can be implemented in the classroom without embracing any particular methodology.

Part II is about the features of English that educated speakers consider the most likely and probable in Academic English. These features are called **consensus features**, not because everyone agrees with them but because their high likelihood and probability are shown by statistical studies. In any consensus there may be disagreements and lack of harmony among individual opinions and judgments, but overall there is some agreement and solidarity behind these norms of usage. Consensus is not unanimity. Part II is about the morphology, word formation, phrases, sentences, and discourse of Academic English.

Part III describes the flexible and fluid features of English that might be susceptible to change or modification over time. These features have been considered fragile, vulnerable, or breakable, but in this book the term **instability** is adopted as a cover term that includes both diverse forms and unstable forms. **Diverse forms** are the stable features that differ in the varieties of English, such as the presence or absence of forms of the verb *be* (*he is coming*, *he be coming*, *he coming*). **Unstable forms** are less firmly fixed; they are features that are used unpredictably or undependably in people's speech or writing, especially in the English as a lingua franca (ELF) setting, such as the presence or absence of verbal inflections. As it turns out, there is overlap between diverse forms and unstable forms. It goes without saying that the discussion in this book will just scratch the surface of this important issue, but there is an invitation for readers to consider their own diverse or unstable forms.

This book adopts both a meaning-oriented perspective and a message-oriented perspective; that is, quotes (with citations) are used for their meaning and relevance to a chapter topic as well as for a source of realistic examples of Academic English. All of the excerpts in the book were placed into a simple database or mini-corpus (without citations). The corpus for this book is a representative sample of Academic English, but not restricted to any subset of the population of writers that use AE. The writers of the excerpts represent many different points of view and backgrounds, but they are all successful AE

writers, although their work may have been subject to editing by someone else, just as my own writing is. At least one of the excerpts in the corpus is a translation, and a few reflect older written AE norms. Many of the examples in the book are drawn from the corpus.

Each chapter is followed by **Study, Discussion, and Essay Questions** and **Activities**, such as these examples:

Study, Discussion, and Essay Questions

Create a Language Notebook as a file or folder on a computer or a hard copy notebook. The Language Notebook will hold your answers to these questions, as assigned, as well as a glossary of new words in each chapter.

1. Start a glossary as part of your Language Notebook. Begin by adding these terms: consensus features, instability, diverse forms, unstable forms.
2. Based on the information in this preface, write a paragraph about how these concepts differ and how are they the same. The concepts are World Englishes (WE), Academic English (AE), and English as a lingua franca (ELF).

Activity

Study this short quote (Hockett, 1968, p. 95) using both a meaning-based and a message-based approach. What does it mean? What kind of English is it? Where might you find it? What linguistic features do you notice about the words, punctuation, and sentence structure? Put your understanding of the quote in your own words in your Language Notebook. Compare your answers with those of your classmates.

Is it possible that the brains of speakers and hearers coin [invent] and understand utterances on the basis of “abstract patterns” of some sort, extracted over the months and years of language-learning and language-use from actual utterances of similar shapes?

You will learn the answer to Hockett’s question by reading this book.

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Part I

Global Trends in English Grammar Pedagogy

Overall, Part I is meant to make a strong case for teachers' own preparation for teaching language, especially in the area of formal grammar. Chapter 1 begins with a look at the global context of English language instruction and a discussion of what issues in the global spread of English influence English language teachers and learners in their local settings. Academic English (AE) is not the native language of anyone; its features are so specialized and conventionalized that it is a different variety of English. Although some English speakers are privileged because their "native" language is similar to it, in fact everyone faces linguistic obstacles when it comes to learning to write and speak AE, in contrast to his or her colloquial varieties. Grammatical obstacles like proper word choice, accurate grammatical forms, and complex sentence patterns form a barrier between AE and colloquial varieties of English. Grammar teachers across the globe have the job of helping learners who want to overcome the linguistic barrier.

Chapter 2 presents a new theory of grammar, Construction Grammar, that has been emerging in recent years. Construction Grammar offers a way of reconciling first language acquisition and second or later language learning as similar cognitive and linguistic processes. In Chapter 3, some factors in second language acquisition theory are explored for their influence on identity, language awareness, interaction, feedback, with special attention to the psychological processes involved in language learning. Finally, Chapter 4 is about the best practices in grammar instruction, in light of new ideas of language learning and acquisition. Some of the recommendations are innovative and some are traditional practices that are taken off the storeroom shelf, dusted off, and brought back into the classroom.

Global Perspectives on English

1

It goes without saying that, in the real world, all users of English are equal partners in ELF (English as a Lingua Franca); in the classroom, we will expose learners to those forms and varieties of English which will empower them to meet the challenges of globalism and to resist the hegemony of one culture over another.

(Prodomou, 2008, p. xiii)

Prodomou's quote is a good introduction to a global perspective on English because it encapsulates three common ideas about what English is in the world today. First, there is the broad-based English that refers to a language used by many people the world over. This English has varieties that range from local to global, standard to non-standard, or halting to fluent. It has different users, mother-tongue monolinguals, second language learners, and bilingual and multilingual users. People use English for many purposes, from the integrative purposes of immigrants, refugees, and people who wish to participate actively in a globalized culture, to the instrumental purposes of entrepreneurs, students, and politicians who want to increase their social and economic capital through language learning. This broad concept of the English language is often called World Englishes (WE).

English as a Global Language

1. World Englishes (WE)
2. English as a lingua franca (ELF)
3. Academic English (AE)

The second idea about English has to do with English used as a *lingua franca* (ELF), which refers to a spoken variety of English used as a medium of communication among speakers of various levels of proficiency. For Prodomou (2008), any user of World Englishes can speak it as a *lingua franca* with others; for others, ELF is a more specialized concept. However, there is also a third concept of English in the quote: the forms and varieties within World Englishes that will empower learners to accomplish the professional or educational purposes they have set for themselves. This is the English of the classroom, Academic English (AE). This chapter is about these three concepts of English as a global language and some specific characteristics and challenges of Academic English.

English as a Global Language

English as a global phenomenon is described metaphorically in a number of different ways. It is part of a global system of language **constellations**. It is the result of processes of intentional **diffusion** as a form of imperialism and colonialism. It is a **place of resistance** to imperialism and colonialism. It is a set of concentric **circles** of multicultural speakers, and finally it is a language spoken at the **intersection** of different populations and purposes.

Constellations

English is a language of wider communication (LWC). Languages of wider communication are resources that allow speakers to communicate with people beyond their local context and setting. They are official languages like Mandarin in China, international languages like French or Arabic, or trade languages like Hiri Motu in Papua New Guinea. LWCs are at the center of linguistic constellations and galaxies with local languages clustered around them, and with regional dialects clustered around national languages.

The languages of the world together constitute a global system held together by multilingual people who can communicate with several language groups. The position of each language in this system may be characterized by its “communication value” (Q), the product of its prevalence and its centrality. Languages represent a very special class of economic goods: they are not only collective goods but also display network effects . . . The special characteristics of language, language

groups and their accumulated textual capital help to explain the dynamics of language acquisition, conservation, and abandonment.

(de Swaan, 1998, p. 63)

This dynamic system of languages was not intentionally created but is the result of many individual actions. People learn second and third languages (or not), speak and write languages, stop using languages, and neglect to teach their languages to their children. Their actions create a global system of languages held together by people who are positioned by their languages to interact with people in other positions. The way that people position themselves reveals the prevalence and centrality of a language in the constellation of languages.

An example that de Swaan gives is the position of Russian among former Soviet Union countries and satellites. Among the people of those regions, Russian was at the center as a LWC because, among multilingual people, Russian was the most frequently known. By de Swaan's reckoning, English is now the most central LWC, with the highest communication value and strategic importance because of its number of speakers and sociopolitical and economic importance. English also has a very high textual capital, which is a term for written or memorized texts that are part of the cultural capital or heritage produced by the users of that language in media, art, music, scholarship, and so on. More and more, the texts created by people across the globe are in English.

The constellation metaphor that applies to languages of the world can also describe World Englishes. It is a constellation of different spoken and written varieties with different communicative values, network effects, and textual capital that affect acquisition, conservation, and abandonment. In each English-speaking country there are national standard varieties as well as regional standards that differ in pronunciation and some grammatical patterns. There are a lot of differences between spoken English and formal written English, so many differences that a language barrier called *diglossia* has arisen. Diglossia is a social and cultural situation in which there are dual linguistic systems, one of which is learned at home and one of which is learned in school. AE is the learned variety with spelling rules, subject-verb agreement, and complete sentences; it is not the native language of anyone.

Diffusion and Resistance

Some people celebrate the spread of English into international contexts. The quote below from noted Italian-born American linguist Mario Pei shows that the