THE STUDENT'S GRAMMAR OF ENGLISH

Jan A. van Ek & Nico J. Robat

The Student's Grammar of English

Jan A. van Ek and Nico J. Robat

Basil Blackwell

First published 1984
Reprinted 1985
Basil Blackwell Limited
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, England

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Ek, J.A. van
The student's grammar of English.
1. English language—Text-books for
foreign speakers
I. Title II. Robat, Nico J.
428.2'4 PE1128

ISBN 0-631-90050-0
ISBN 0-631-90060-8 Pbk

Typeset in Lasercomp Apollo 645/665, Optima 722/732
by Santype International Ltd., Salisbury, Wilts.

Printed in Great Britain by Bell and Bain Ltd., Glasgow

The Student's Grammar of English

Preface

As the title indicates, our grammar is meant for students, more specifically for university students and students in teacher training establishments specializing in English at undergraduate level.

To serve the needs of this target group our grammar:

a gives a systematic introduction to grammatical analysis, presupposing no previous skills in this respect and defining categories with a high degree of explicitness;

b provides a comprehensive self-sufficient survey of the major phenomena of English grammatical usage;

c provides a sufficient basis for further work in English grammar, particularly with more advanced descriptive grammars.

In order to reach these objectives, we have aimed at descriptive accuracy within a pedagogical approach.

Descriptive accuracy means that the grammar must be based on a consistent and sufficiently explicit model and be comprehensive enough for students specializing in English.

The pedagogical approach involves:

a building up step by step the descriptive apparatus needed to deal with English grammatical usage;

b providing the simplest possible criteria for using this apparatus efficiently and confidently;

c providing memorizable and explicit definitions of the major categories;

d promoting not only a knowledge of grammatical phenomena, but a knowledge based on the understanding of categorization procedures;

e selecting the grammatical phenomena on the basis of their relevance to the competent handling of English structure.

In seeking to fulfil these requirements we had numerous sources to draw inspiration from, including our own experience in teaching English grammar. However, we had no direct models. Indeed, had that been the case, yet another grammar would hardly have been necessary. In terms of comprehensiveness and pedagogical orientation R. W. Zandvoort's *A Handbook of English Grammar* came closest to what we had in mind. To these features, together with its high scholarly standard and 'manageable' size (although not all students would agree on this!), it undoubtedly owed its unprecedented popularity – it dominated the field of English pedagogical grammar for over 30 years. However, Zandvoort's *Handbook* was meant for a generation of stu-

dents who specialized in English having already acquired the basic grammatical skills. Also, its linguistic approach was still largely that of the parts-of-speech model, which served as the foundation for such monumental works as those by Poutsma, Jespersen and Kruisinga, but which has meanwhile been superseded by models of wider scope.

Yet Zandvoort's *Handbook* is a major source of inspiration for the present grammar, as is, in a different way, the *Grammar of Contemporary English* by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (to be referred to as GCE). Not only is GCE the richest source of information available on present-day English usage, it also offers a model of grammatical description which, while clearly related to the great tradition of scholarly grammars, is sufficiently inspired by recent developments in theoretical linguistics to appeal to the present generation of students of English grammar.

What we have attempted to do in the present grammar is to apply the overall model of GCE to a pedagogical grammar with the comprehensiveness of Zandvoort's *Handbook*. The result is simultaneously a course book and a reference book. Despite its methodological hazards, this combination has proved its worth in countless students' handbooks.

Our grammar takes clause structure, and the syntactic functions of the elements within it, as the basis for its grammatical model. It deals with phrases and word-classes in terms of their various syntactic functions. It is, therefore, a linguistic grammar and not a communicative grammar. We believe that, in spite of the increasing communicative orientation of language teaching and learning, insight into the linguistic system of a language is indispensable to all those who are or may become professionally concerned with it. We might have added a chapter on communicative functions and their realizations. However, such a chapter could not have achieved the comprehensiveness of the present chapters (and limitations were imposed even on these – particularly Chapters 9 and 11 – by the need to keep the book within a manageable size). Knowledge of communicative grammar is becoming more and more necessary to a student of English; but the subject has such scope and importance that it requires a separate volume rather than a single chapter.

If our indebtedness to Zandvoort's *Handbook* and to GCE is apparent throughout our book, there are, we trust, enough features to distinguish it as an original contribution in the field of pedagogical–descriptive grammar. Our combined aims of descriptive and pedagogical adequacy required certain significant adaptations of the model used in GCE, certain changes in the terminology, and in particular considerably greater explicitness in the definition of grammatical categories than has been customary so far. They also required a thorough reconsideration of the scope of coverage, the balance between the various subjects, and the depth of treatment most suitable for a book of

this kind. In composing the various chapters we have drawn upon a variety of sources including original work carried out by ourselves and our students. Totally unoriginal is the system of textual division (chapters, sections, headings, numbering), which we adopted *in toto* from GCE, simply because it seemed to us to be the most adequate one. The 'facts of English usage', it will be obvious, are to be found in many publications; their selection and presentation as well as, in several cases, their systematization, are our own. The examples we have made up ourselves. Thanks to intensive scrutiny by native speakers of English, particularly Alexandra Gaylord, we trust that even though they are not authentic, they may not be found unrealistic. If some of them echo too closely illustrations given elsewhere, this is due to the trick of memory that we, like all those who have taught grammar for many years, are subject to.

In spite of intensive pre-publication trialling, this edition will have the inevitable faults of first editions. We should be very grateful if users would point them out to us.

Jan A. van Ek
Nico J. Robat

Acknowledgements

We have benefited greatly by the feedback received over the last few years from staff and students of the Department of English at the University of Groningen, who have patiently tried out successive drafts of the various chapters notwithstanding the constant introduction of bewildering modifications that only made sense when later chapters appeared. We should also like to thank those students who took part in our seminars on 'cohesion', whose enthusiastic and imaginative collaboration did so much to give Chapter 11 its present shape. Thanks are also due to the administrative staff of our department, who again and again rose to the occasion when another 'final' draft had to be made ready for distribution to the students. Last but not least we owe a debt of gratitude to those on the staff of Basil Blackwell, and particularly to Mary Shields, who have done so much to give our book its present form.

The authors and publisher are grateful to Jonathan Cape Ltd and to Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich for permission to reproduce the extract on p. 445, from *Yesterday's Spy* by Len Deighton.

Works referred to

(The dates are those of the editions used by the authors.)

Aarts, F. and Aarts, J., *English Syntactic Structures*, Oxford and New York 1982.

Christophersen, P. and Sandved, A. O., *An Advanced English Grammar*, London 1969.

Close, R. A., *A Reference Grammar for Students of English*, London 1975.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD) 6th edn, London 1976.

van Ek, J. A., *Four Complementary Structures of Predication in Contemporary British English*, Groningen 1966.

Halliday, M. A. K. and Hasan, R., *Cohesion in English*, English Language Series 9, London 1976.

Hornby, A. S., *A Guide to Patterns and Usage in English*, London 1975.

Kruisinga, E., *A Handbook of Present-Day English*, vol. II, 3rd edn, Utrecht 1922, 5th edn, Utrecht 1932.

Leech, G. N., *Meaning and the English Verb*, London 1971.

Leech, G. N. and Svartvik, J., *A Communicative Grammar of English*, London 1975.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE), London 1978.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (OALDCE), London 1974.

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. N. and Svartvik, J., *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, London 1972.

Twaddell, W. F., *The English Verb Auxiliaries* 2nd edn, Providence, R.I. 1968.

Wood, F. T., *Current English Usage*, London 1963.

Zandvoort, R. W., *A Handbook of English Grammar*, London 1975.

Abbreviations and symbols

COD	*Concise Oxford Dictionary*
GCE	*A Grammar of Contemporary English*
LDOCE	*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*
OALDCE	*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*
AmE	American English
BrE	British English
sb.	somebody
sth.	something
*	ungrammatical and/or otherwise unacceptable
∅	zero; (as in '∅ pronoun': absence of pronoun)
`	stress mark
ˇ	tone contour: fall-rise

Contents

1
Simple sentence

Contents

1.1 Sentences

Our grammar is essentially a *sentence grammar*. The SENTENCE is the largest linguistic unit whose structure can be described in terms of regular patterns and deviations from them.

In written texts sentences can be easily identified. They are strings of words beginning with a capital letter and separated from other strings by sentence-final marks of punctuation (. ! ?).

In connected speech the identification of sentences is much more difficult and sometimes impossible. Often, it is true, the beginning and end of a sentence are clearly signalled by the intonation. Frequently, however, such signals are not clear enough to make definite identification possible. This becomes apparent when we try to record speech in writing. Taking down one and the same utterance in writing, two people may do this in different ways:

> We had brussels sprouts last night, and I hate them.
> We had brussels sprouts last night. And I hate them.

Nevertheless, it is convenient to describe language in terms of sentence structure. Even if it may not always be possible to split up spoken utterances into sentences with clearly defined boundaries, speech, too, is composed of units which are combined in accordance with the kind of rules that also determine the form of sentences in writing.

1.2 Subject and predicate

The sentence *John smiled* consists of two parts, *John* and *smiled*, each with its own role. *John* refers to a person who performs a certain action, and *smiled* says what action that person performs. Now *John smiled* is an exceptionally short sentence. Usually a sentence contains more words, particularly to say what action is performed: *John quickly cleared the table*. In grammatical terms we say that both in *John smiled* and in *John quickly cleared the table* the form *John* is the SENTENCE ELEMENT that fulfils the function of SUBJECT and that the rest of the sentence, which says what *John* does (*smiled; quickly cleared the table*), is the PREDICATE.

Note that the term 'predicate' does not itself refer to the function of a sentence element. It is used here as a convenient term to denote that part of a sentence which expresses such things as 'what action the subject performs' (see also 1.10). This may be expressed by just one sentence element – as in *John smiled* – or by more than one sentence element – as in *John quickly|cleared|the table.*

1.3 Sentence elements within the predicate

Normally predicates in SIMPLE SENTENCES (sentences with only one subject–predicate structure; see also 2.1) contain one sentence element whose function may be referred to as that of PREDICATOR. This is the element which consists of words belonging to the word-class of VERBS. In *John smiled, smiled* is a verb and fulfils the function of predicator. In *John quickly cleared the table* it is *cleared* which fulfils this function. Often the predicator contains more than one verb: *John would have smiled.* Here *would, have* and *smiled* are verbs, and together they fulfil the function of predicator.

1.4 One of the main characteristics of verbs is that they are capable of expressing TENSE. This means that they have different forms which may express whether what is said in a sentence refers to the past or to the present:

John *was* smiling just now.
John *is* smiling now.

We *needed* a lot of eggs for that recipe.
We *need* a lot of eggs for that recipe.

In addition, the large majority of verbs have a form ending in *-ing* (*smiling; being; raining*), a form in *-s* (*he smiles; it rains*), a special form used after *have* (*he has smiled; I have found it*), and a form used after *to* (*he didn't want to smile; it was difficult to find the book; I'd like to be with you tomorrow*). See also 5.3.

Verbs are either AUXILIARY VERBS (or AUXILIARIES) or LEXICAL VERBS. Auxiliaries ('helping verbs') are typically used together with other verbs. Lexical verbs do not require the presence of other verbs, and, if combined with auxiliaries, always follow them.

The following sentence contains only a lexical verb:

We all *speak* English.

In the following sentence the first three verbs are auxiliaries and the last verb is a lexical verb:

It *may have been found.*

Semantically, lexical verbs may be broadly characterized as denoting *events* (1)–(2), or *states* (3) (see 5.18):

The sailor *hoisted* the flag. (1)
The taxi *arrived* at ten sharp. (2)
The picture *hangs* in the chapel. (3)

1.5 The lexical verb plays an important part in the composition of a predicate since it determines whether or not sentence elements other than the predicator have to be present in order to make a sentence grammatical. A verb such as *smile* can be used by itself (with or without auxiliaries), while verbs such as *clear* and *put* need further completion:

John smiled.
*John put.
*John cleared.

Within the class of verbs needing further completion there are various subclasses. A verb such as *find* needs only one element to complete a sentence:

John found *a dollar bill.*

With *put* one complementary element is not sufficient:

*John put *the bottle.*
*John put *on the table.*
John put *the bottle/on the table.*

1.6 Sentence elements that complete a lexical verb in the way illustrated above are said to function as *complements*. They are *obligatory* elements, i.e. they cannot be left out without making the sentence ungrammatical or changing the meaning of the lexical verb:

John quickly cleared the table. →	
*John quickly cleared.	(ungrammatical)
John put the bottle on the table. →	
*John put.	(ungrammatical)
John wouldn't move his car. →	
John wouldn't move.	(different meaning of lexical verb)

1.7 A predicate may also contain elements that can be left out without making the sentence ungrammatical or changing the meaning of the lexical verb: *optional* elements. Such elements are said to function as ADVERBIALS (for a fuller definition, not only covering adverbials included in the predicate, see 1.16). In *John quickly cleared the table, quickly* is such an optional element and functions as adverbial.

1.8 Subject, predicator, complement and adverbial are the names of the main functions that sentence elements may fulfil. Strictly speaking, when analysing a sentence, we should always say that 'sentence element X functions as Y', e.g. *John* in *John smiled* 'functions as subject' and *smiled* 'functions as predicator'. In practice, we tend to use a

simpler formulation, saying that *John* 'is' the subject and that *smiled* 'is' the predicator. This simpler formulation will be used frequently in this grammar, too.

Subject

1.9 syntactic characteristics

The subject has various syntactic characteristics:

a In STATEMENTS the subject precedes the predicator:

Then John smiled.

b In YES/NO QUESTIONS (i.e. questions that may be answered by *yes* or *no*) the subject follows the first word of the predicator:

Did John smile?
Was John smiling?

c In TAGS (see 2.15), the subject is repeated in the form of a PERSONAL PRONOUN (*I, you, he, she, it, we, they*):

John smiled, *didn't he*?

d The subject may determine the form of the first word of the predicator (a phenomenon called CONCORD):

You *smile* – John *smiles*
Were you smiling? – *Was* John smiling?

1.10 semantic relations with the predicate

In 1.2 it was said that the function of subject was fulfilled by the sentence element that referred to the person *performing* a certain action. That this is by no means always the case is shown by the following sentences where the subject (*John*) *undergoes* the action or is *affected* by it:

John was hit by a motor-car.
John received a medal.

Moreover, the predicate may not express an action at all:

John was ill.
John failed his driving test.

In the following sentence we see that the function of subject may also be fulfilled by elements not referring to persons:

This car has excellent road-holding qualities.

The element fulfilling the function of subject may even have no meaning at all, in which case we refer to it as FORMAL SUBJECT (in this case 'empty *it*'):

It poured the whole day.
It's the fourth of March.

It will be clear from the examples that between subject and predicate many different semantic relations are possible. The same is true of semantic relations between other sentence elements. This is why we prefer to use, as far as possible, purely syntactic criteria when identifying sentence elements and their functions. The most important criteria for the identification of the subject were given in 1.9.

1.11 form

The function of subject may be fulfilled by a single word or by a group of words:

John smiled. (4)
It is Thursday. (5)
Butter is expensive nowadays. (6)
This car has excellent road-holding qualities. (7)
Our son of eighteen left the country yesterday. (8)

Structures such as the ones in (4)–(8), whether single words or groups of words, which can typically function as subject in a simple sentence, are called NOUN PHRASES. This term recognizes the fact that these structures typically contain as their most important word, or HEAD, a word belonging to the word-class of NOUNS or that of PRONOUNS.

1.12 NOUNS are words that have the following characteristics:

a They typically follow, or may follow, words that belong to the word-class of DETERMINERS (*the*, *a/an*, *this*, *my*, *every*, *such*, etc.; see 3.37):

the *war*
this *fortune*
such *butter*
our *John*

b They may distinguish NUMBER, i.e. they may have different forms to refer to one single specimen – the SINGULAR form – and to more than one specimen – the PLURAL form (for exceptions, see 3.23–27):

the *war* – these *wars*
this *fortune* – these *fortunes*
one *child* – two *children*