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S.H.BURTON

MASTERING ENGLISH GRAMMAR

S. H. BURTON

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MACMILLAN

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PREFACE

This book is an exploration of the behaviour of English words in English sentences. All the grammatical terms and concepts necessary to a thorough understanding of the simple sentence are first explained and illustrated, for the simple sentence is the bedrock on which fluent, accurate and elegant English expression is based.

Later, the more intricate structures of double, multiple, and complex sentences are examined. Those sentences are enlargements of the simple sentence and they are well made when they conform to its basic patterns.

I must emphasise that Chapter 12 *is* what it is called: a chapter for reference. It supplies information about grammatical terms that you may need to look up; and it gathers together the facts that are treated at length and in the course of discussion throughout the rest of the book. A source of quick reference is useful, but it is a back-up to, not a substitute for, the expositions given elsewhere.

Grammar cannot explain everything. The English language is living, changing, flexible. Some of its nimble improvisations defy precise explanations. Yet that seems no sound argument for rejecting the very considerable help that grammar can give. I believe that this grammar book will help you as you use the language.

S. H. BURTON

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WHAT IS GRAMMAR?

1.1 LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Every day of our lives we send spoken or written messages to other people, and every day we receive spoken or written messages from other people. These two activities occupy a lot of our time at home, in our social life outside the family, and at work.

Simply because we are human beings who live and work with other human beings, communication (message sending and receiving) plays an inescapable and all-important part in our lives.

It is possible to communicate without using words. We can shake our head instead of saying, 'No'. We can smile instead of saying, 'I am pleased'. We can frown instead of saying, 'I don't like that'. Yet, though we all make use of non-verbal signs, the fact remains that messages without words are strictly limited in their scope, totally inadequate to serve any but the simplest purposes. We could not get through a day's living with any satisfaction or success if we were able to communicate only by means of nods, smiles, frowns, gestures and grunts.

If we could not send and receive spoken and written messages we should be cut off from our fellow human beings. Communication above the most primitive level depends upon the use of language.

1.2 MAKING SENSE

In the course of a single day we need to exchange messages of many different kinds with many different people. To do that successfully, we have to know a lot of words and we have to be able to choose the right words to suit each separate message: efficient communication requires a large vocabulary.

However, using language is not just a matter of knowing words and knowing which words to use. Our ability to make ourselves understood

in any language, whether it is our native language or a foreign language, depends on two things:

- First, we have to know the words that will express whatever it is we are trying to express.
- Second, we have to know how words behave in the particular language we are trying to use.

Knowing the words is vital, of course; but knowing the words is not much use *on its own*. For example, we may know the French words for a message that we are trying to send in French, but no French person will be able to understand us if the words of our message do not behave in the ways that the French language requires.

That is true of every language. If we are speaking or writing German, we must make our words behave in the ways of the German language. Russian words must behave in Russian ways, English words in English ways, and so on.

Every language has its own special ways of making words behave. If the words of any message, spoken or written, do not behave in the ways required by that language, the message cannot make sense.

1.3 GRAMMAR AND SENSE

As we have just seen, every language has its own particular ways of making words behave.

- The particular kinds of word behaviour that a particular language demands are what we call the *grammar* of that language.

So, when we say that English grammar is different from French grammar, that is simply another way of saying that the behaviour of words in the English language is different from the behaviour of words in the French language.

English speakers learning French must learn to recognise and copy the word behaviour of the French language. That is to say, they must learn, and learn how to use, French grammar. French speakers learning English must learn to recognise and copy the word behaviour of the English language. That is to say, they must learn, and learn how to use, English grammar.

Because the grammars of the two languages are different, it is no use trying to make English behave like French, or French behave like English. Neither language can work with any grammar but its own; and we cannot make ourselves understood in either language if we use the wrong grammar.

Whether we are speaking or writing in a foreign language *or in our own language*, our use of words must obey the grammatical rules of that

language. Correct grammar is not the icing on the language cake. It is part of the cake itself. It is an essential ingredient of efficient communication.

- **When grammar breaks down, sense breaks down.**

PHRASES AND SENTENCES

2.1 WORD GROUPS

Very young children use single words when they speak, but they soon outgrow that inefficient way of communicating. They learn how to make themselves understood by using words in groups. The response that they get from other people teaches them which of the word groups they are using make sense and which do not. In this way they progress, learning language skills by trial and error until they can frame word groups that make complete sense.

- Words are the building blocks of language. Until we can build words up into meaningful groups and make meaningful connections between one group of words and another, we cannot use language efficiently.
- The study of grammar is essentially the study of how words behave in groups. Grammar explains the relationships between one word and another and the relationships between one group of words and another.

2.2 PHRASES

Not all word groups make *complete* sense. Here are some examples of word groups that do not:

during her holiday
after my twenty-first birthday
considering his injury
in that street
beneath the foundations

Each of those word groups makes *some* sense. No English-speaking person would dismiss any of them as nonsense, but in every case the meaning is incomplete. None of them can stand alone.

- Word groups such as those are *phrases*.

Although a phrase cannot make complete sense on its own, it can be used as part of a word group that does make complete sense. Like this:

- 1 Our neighbour wrote several postcards *during her holiday*.
- 2 I was given a pay rise *after my twenty-first birthday*.
- 3 *Considering his injury*, he played a remarkable game.
- 4 We saw two empty houses *in that street*.
- 5 The ground shifted *beneath the foundations*.

Phrases play a very important part in our use of language, and we shall study their grammatical function in detail later. For the moment, it is sufficient to be able to recognise a phrase and to understand how it differs from a sentence.

2.3 SENTENCES

In Section 2.2 we saw that a phrase can be added to another word group with the result that the *incomplete* sense of the phrase becomes part of the *complete* sense of the larger word group. Like this:

- 1 OUR NEIGHBOUR WROTE SEVERAL POSTCARDS *during her holiday*.
- 2 I WAS GIVEN A PAY RISE *after my twenty-first birthday*.
- 3 *Considering his injury*, HE PLAYED A REMARKABLE GAME.
- 4 WE SAW TWO EMPTY HOUSES *in that street*.
- 5 THE GROUND SHIFTED *beneath the foundations*.

Notice this very important fact. The word groups (in capitals) to which the phrases (in italics) have been added do not need the phrases in the way that the phrases need them. The phrases *add* something to the meaning of the word groups to which they are joined, but they do not *complete* their meaning.

The word groups in capitals can stand alone. They make complete sense without the help of the phrases:

OUR NEIGHBOUR WROTE SEVERAL POSTCARDS.
 I WAS GIVEN A PAY RISE.
 HE PLAYED A REMARKABLE GAME.
 WE SAW TWO EMPTY HOUSES.
 THE GROUND SHIFTED.

Word groups such as these are *sentences*.

REMEMBER

- A sentence is a group of words that makes complete sense.
- It can stand on its own without needing any additional words to complete its meaning.

- It is an independent, self-contained, completely understandable utterance.

Test 1

Answers on page 160.

Which of the following word groups are sentences and which are phrases?

- 1 The old man sat down.
- 2 In his comfortable armchair.
- 3 He was tired.
- 4 After his walk.
- 5 He switched on his radio.
- 6 Then he lit his pipe.
- 7 With a match.
- 8 The music on the radio soothed him.
- 9 He forgot his pipe.
- 10 It went out.
- 11 He slept.
- 12 For nearly an hour.
- 13 At last.
- 14 The telephone woke him.

Test 2

Suggested answers on page 160. When you have written your answers compare them with my suggestions, just to make sure that you are on the right lines.

Use each of these phrases as part of a sentence.

Example

Phrase by early morning

Sentence By early morning the fog had cleared.

- 1 at the end of the street
- 2 after dark
- 3 in turns
- 4 through a silly mistake
- 5 by violent means
- 6 judging by the results
- 7 without permission
- 8 for the present

2.4 FOUR KINDS OF SENTENCES

All sentences make complete sense on their own, but not all sentences do the same kind of work.

Consider these four sentences:

- 1 We have enough coal for this winter.
- 2 Are you sure?
- 3 Look in the cellar.
- 4 What a lot you have bought!

Sentence 1 makes a *statement*.

Sentence 2 asks a *question*.

Sentence 3 gives a *command*.

Sentence 4 utters an *exclamation*.

Sentences can perform four different functions: make statements, ask questions; give commands; utter exclamations.

Test 3

Answers on page 160.

Classify each of the following sentences according to the work that it does (statement; question; command; exclamation).

- 1 Tests are a good way of revising.
- 2 We have to answer the questions.
- 3 Did you pass the examination?
- 4 Rule a line under that heading.
- 5 The paper was difficult.
- 6 It was a brute!
- 7 That book helped me a lot.
- 8 Who recommended it?
- 9 I read about it in the paper.
- 10 The local bookshop ordered it for me.

Test 4

Suggested answers (for comparison with yours) on page 160.

Write four sentences on each of the following topics: sewing; cooking; reading. Your sentences must be in this order: (i) a statement; (ii) a question; (iii) a command; (iv) an exclamation.

Example

Topic bicycles

Sentence (i) That model has ten gears. (statement)