

Structural
Essentials of English

H. Whitehall

Harold Whitehall

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

S T R U C T U R A L

E S S E N T I A L S

O F E N G L I S H

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO LTD
6 & 7 CLIFFORD STREET LONDON W 1
THIBAUT HOUSE THIBAUT SQUARE CAPE TOWN
605-611 LONSDALE STREET MELBOURNE C 1

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO INC
55 FIFTH AVENUE NEW YORK 3

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO
20 CRANFIELD ROAD TORONTO 16

ORIENT LONGMANS PRIVATE LTD
CALCUTTA BOMBAY MADRAS
DELHI HYDERABAD DACCA

Copyright, 1951, by Harold Whitehall

Copyright, 1954. © 1956, by Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by mimeograph or any other means, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This edition first published 1958

Printed in Great Britain by
Lowe and Brydone (Printers) Limited, London, N.W. 10

Foreword

This book has very simple purposes: to describe the general structural design of English and to focus against it those special difficulties commonly encountered when we are learning to write the language. Intended primarily for teachers and students of English Composition, it may serve other readers—particularly those interested in literary exegesis—as a succinct, elementary, linguistic introduction to English syntax. I should hasten to add, however, that the book was not written with my fellow linguists in mind, that certain distributional methods fruitful in technical linguistics are not used here, and that pedagogical simplicity rather than linguistic consistency determined the inductive approach to the subject matter.

Modern structural linguistics has been compared in method with field physics, quantum mechanics, discrete mathematics, and Gestalt psychology. Its success in discovering fundamental descriptive units that can be isolated by rigid analytical procedures has made it the envy of the other social sciences if, sometimes, the despair of the humanities. One must admit that linguistics involves a somewhat specialized manner of thinking about the process and system of language, and that its terminology and working symbolism are little known at present either to the general public or to the public for whom this book is particularly intended. Preoccupied with the theory of their subject, or with the structural description of *spoken* languages, or with the oral-aural teaching of *spoken*

languages, the linguists themselves have, for the most part, shown little interest in the application of their methods and results to that most important area of language pedagogy—the course in English composition. Yet it is exactly here that precision and simplicity of linguistic description are most urgently needed, most immediately and widely useful. The task of educational adaptation, however, is not an easy one. A bridge of explanation between the old and the new, between the traditional and linguistic approaches to composition teaching, must be erected very cautiously and carefully. This book, although not constituting such a bridge in its entirety, is intended to provide some essential caissons, piers, and arches.

I am greatly indebted to many predecessors, and particularly to Sweet, Jespersen, Trnka, Kruisinga, de Groot, and Hjelmslev. I owe an obvious and very special debt to Bloomfield, Fries, Nida, Trager and Smith, Pike, Lotz, Jakobson, Harris, Twaddell, Hill, and my colleagues of the Indiana University Linguistics Seminar. As far as possible, however, I have tried to re-examine each problem from my own standpoint and in my own experiential terms, and I have not hesitated to modify, curtail, expand, revamp, or replace the prior explanations of others whenever my thinking or the demands of pedagogical expediency suggested change. There is danger here, of course—danger that the blend of old and new, linguistic terminology with traditional part-of-speech labels, synchronism with a dash of diachronism, of a treatment sometimes too obvious, sometimes too involved, sometimes too compressed, sometimes too diffuse may in the long run please nobody. My experience with two limited preliminary mimeographed editions of the book in the classroom and on television indicates that the result is at least practical.

And now, as Chaucer says (*Hous of Fame* II, 148 ff.):

Thou goost hoom to the hous anoon,
And, also domb as any stoon,
Thou sittest at another boke,
Til fully daswed is thy loke.

HAROLD WHITEHALL

Bloomington, Indiana



Contents

1	Writing and speech	1
2	Word-groups	8
3	Sentences	29
4	Modification and shift of emphasis	41
5	Connectives	53
6	The verb and its helpers	78
7	Word forms I	90
8	Word forms II: Substitution	97
9	Word forms III: Selection	106
10	The system of punctuation	119
11	Spelling and pronunciation	134
12	Word-formation	141
	Appendix	147

1.1 All of us have a grammar. The fact that we use and understand English in daily affairs means that we use and understand, for the most part unconsciously, the major grammatical patterns of our language. Yet because of the effects of education, many of us have come to think of a relatively formal written English and its reflection among those who "speak by the book" as the only genuine English, and to consider its grammar as the only acceptable English grammar. That is by no means true. The basic form of present-day American English is the patterned, rhythmical, and segmented code of voice signals called *speech*—speech as used in everyday conversation by highly educated people (*cultivated speech*), by the general run of our population (*common speech*), or by some rural persons in such geographically isolated areas as the Ozark Plateau, the Appalachian Mountains, or the woodland areas of northern New England (*folk speech*). From the code of speech, the language of formal writing is something of an abstraction, differing in details of grammar and vocabulary and lacking clear indication of the bodily gestures and meaningful qualities of the voice which accompany ordinary conversation. Thus, serious written English may be regarded as a rather artificial dialect of our language. To acquire

that dialect, the would-be writer needs to know a good deal about its structural details, and particularly about those in which it differs from the less formal varieties of speech.

1.2 Even a moment's reflection will show that the spoken American language is backed by expressive features lacking in the written language: the rise or fall of the voice at the ends of phrases and sentences; the application of vocal loudness to this or that word or part of a word; the use of gesture; the meaningful rasp or liquidity, shouting or muting, drawling or clipping, whining or breaking, melody or whispering imparted to the quality of the voice. Written English, lacking clear indication of such features, must be so managed that it compensates for what it lacks. It must be more carefully organized than speech in order to overcome its communicative deficiencies as compared with speech. In speech, we safeguard meaning by the use of intonation, stress, gesture, and voice qualities. In writing, we must deal with our medium in such a way that the meaning cannot possibly be misunderstood. In the absence of an actual hearer capable of interrupting and demanding further explanation, a clear writer is always conscious of "a reader over his shoulder." All this despite the fact that writing, being permanent, as compared with speech, which is evanescent, allows not only reading but also rereading.

1.3 Nor is this all. If written English is somewhat abstract, somewhat artificial, it is also generalized—national, not geographically or socially limited in scope. We must realize that comparatively few of us make use in our day-to-day affairs of a generalized spoken American English that is at all comparable with it. Such a language—a Received Standard Spoken English—exists, but not for the most part in this country where the practical need for it is slight. It exists in England, where

the practical need for it is great. In England, many people still start their linguistic careers speaking one or another of the regional dialects, dialects so different from each other in vocabulary and grammar, so quilt-crazy in their distribution, that they form real barriers to generalized, national communication. Yet, in a modern, democratic country, general communication is a necessity. For that reason, Englishmen are willing to accept the notion both of a generalized spoken and a generalized written form of expression on a level above the dialects, and are willing to make the effort of learning them in school and elsewhere. We would be equally willing if our everyday speech happened to resemble this specimen from the English county of Lancaster:

"Nay! my heart misgi'es me! There's summat abeawt this neet's wark as is noan jannock. Look thee here! Yon chap's noan t' first sheep theaw's lifted tax-free fro't' mooar, an' aw've niver been one to worrit abeawt it, that aw hav'nt. But toneet, someheaw, it's noan t'same. There's summat beawn't 'appen—aw con feel it i' my booans. This een, an unconny wind wor burrin' i't'ling, an' not a cleawd i't' sky; an' whin aw went deawn to' t'well for watter, t'bats wor flyin' reawn it in a widdershins ring. Mark my words, there's mooar to coom."

1.4 In the United States, our language situation is quite different. Ours is probably the only country on earth in which three thousand miles of travel will bring no difficulty of spoken communication. We do have, of course, regional and social differences of language. The speech of Maine does not coincide in all points with that of Texas, nor the speech of Georgia with that of Minnesota. The speech of cultivated people in urban centers is not precisely that of the general mass of our citizens, nor that of rural residents of limited education in geographically secluded areas. Yet, unless we

deliberately choose to emphasize disparities for social or other reasons, our regional and social speech differences create no great barriers to the free exchange of opinions and ideas. They consist of flavoring rather than substance. '

1.5 Precisely for that reason, pressures for the adoption of a generalized national spoken American English comparable in acceptance and prestige with Received Standard Spoken British have proved largely unavailing. In American life, one may use cultivated or common speech Southern, cultivated or common speech Northeastern, or cultivated or common speech North Middle Western without encountering any great practical disadvantage. Our standards of speech are mainly regional standards, and most of us, in actual fact, speak some kind of a patois in which one or another of the cultivated or common speech regional varieties of American English blends quite happily with elements absorbed from reading and the educational process. We are very fortunate in this—fortunate that American historical and sociological conditions have removed difficulties of spoken communication found in most other parts of the world.

1.6 In a lesser sense, however, our good fortune is something of a misfortune. Because an American can understand other Americans no matter what regional or social class they come from, he is apt to underestimate the necessity for a generalized and abstract written American English. Because he finds no pressing reason for standardizing his speech, he is likely to misunderstand the necessity for standardizing his writing. He would like to write as he speaks. Moreover, the differences between the various regional and social varieties of American speech, being slight, are often of so subtle a nature that he tends to find difficulty in discriminating them. Slight as they are, when transferred to writing they

are sufficient to make a reader pause, to induce a momentary feeling of unfamiliarity, to interrupt his consideration of the *matter* of expression by unwittingly calling attention to the *manner* of expression. Outside frankly literary writing (particularly the writing of poetry), such pauses, such unfamiliarities, such interruptions will hinder rather than help the writer's communicative purpose. If writing must be generalized, it must be generalized with a good reason: to speak with a local accent is not disadvantageous; to write serious prose with a local accent definitely is.

1.7 The moral of all this is clear. To gain command of serious written English is to acquire, quite deliberately, an abstract and generalized variety of the language differing by nature and purpose from any social or regional variety whatsoever. It is to sacrifice the local for the general, the spontaneous for the permanent. It is to bring to the study of written American English something of the perspective we normally reserve for the study of foreign languages. It is to master a set of grammatical and vocabulary patterns not because they are "correct" but because experience has proved them efficient in the communicative activity of writing.

1.8 The word "correct" is deliberately introduced here. The clear distinctions between spoken and written language mentioned in the paragraphs above have been all too often masked by the pernicious doctrine of "correctness." Perhaps that is to be expected. Without the flexible medium of language, a human society in human terms would be impossible. Without language, there could be no continuous record of experience, no diversification of labor, no great social institutions—the humanity of man could never have been achieved. But social activities breed social rituals and social judgments. Because language is *the* basic social instrument, it has inevitably acquired social attitudes so

complex and variegated that they have often been allowed to obscure its primary communicative function. For far too many of us, knowledge of language is confused with knowledge of judgments on language that are socially acceptable. Education in the English language has become, for the most part, education in linguistic niceties—a poor substitute for that real linguistic education which ought to show us the major and minor patterns of our language, the way in which they interlock in function, the ways in which they can be manipulated for effective expression. As a result, the instrument of communication which should be every man's servant has become most men's master. This need not be so. Our self-confidence is immediately bolstered, our attitudes towards the study of writing techniques tremendously improved, once we realize that the difficulties of writing English do not spring from faulty nurture, restricted intelligence, or beyond-the-tracks environment but from the necessary change-over from one kind of English to another—that they are neither unpardonable nor irremediable.

1.9 Such is the milieu of the written English with which this little book is concerned. No matter what irrationalities surround the details and the perspectives by which English is normally viewed, the fact that it has so admirably served and is still serving the needs of many fine writers guarantees that it is neither an impossible nor an unworthy instrument of human expression. Let us admit that all languages, spoken or written, are man-made things, that their weaknesses as well as their strengths are implicit in their human origin. Let us admit that the world has never known either a faultless language nor one constructed on what to us seems a strictly logical system. The proper approach to written English is first to understand what the medium is; then to concede its limitations and to use its strengths to the best possible effect. Every communicative medium

has a set of resistances that the communicator must overcome. Marble is hard; paint relatively unmanageable; music barely descriptive. No small part of any kind of composition is contributed directly by tensions set up between the craftsman's demands on his medium on the one hand and its inherent resistances on the other. To this, the science, craft, and art of expression in written American English is no exception. .

2 Word-groups

2.1 The grammatical description of any language is made scientifically possible by isolating certain recurrent units of expression and examining their distribution in contexts. The largest of these units are sentences, which can be decomposed into smaller constituent units: first *word-groups*,¹ then the affixes and combining forms entering into the formation of words, and finally the significant speech-sounds (*phonemes*) of the language. Normally, we would first isolate the smallest units (the phonemes) and their written representations and then work up gradually to the sentence units. With written English, however, it is advantageous to reverse this procedure and to start by isolating and classifying the word-groups. Because of the nature of the English language, which, on the one hand, uses word-groups as the main sentence constituents, and, on the other, uses certain word-group types as sentences, the word-group has become our main structural unit of expression—the brick with which we build up edifices of discourse.

¹ This rather clumsy term is used in this book to avoid the traditional distinction between phrase and clause (i.e., dependent subject-predicate word-group).

2.2 In written English, a word-group is a cluster of two or more words which functions either independently or in a longer sequence of statement as a grammatical unit. Thus, the word-group *I was foolish* can function as an independent grammatical unit in the sentence *I was foolish(.)*, but it functions as the *complement* in the more extended sentence *He said I was foolish*. Similarly, six constituent word-groups are embodied in the first part of my last sentence: *The word-group I was foolish can function as an independent grammatical unit in the sentence I was foolish*. In spoken English, word-groups are marked off either as independent utterances (spoken sentences) or grammatically significant segments of utterances by various combinations of what have been called *configurational features*: (1) rise or fall in voice *loudness*; (2) rise or fall in voice *tone*; (3) *interruption* of the normal transition between one speech-sound and the next. According to the ways in which they are used and constituted, two main types of English word-groups can be distinguished: *headed* (endocentric) and *non-headed* (exocentric).²

2.3 *Headed groups* have this peculiarity: all the grammatical functions open to them as groups can also be exercised by one expression within them. They are, so to speak, expansions of this expression, called the *head* of the group, and it is possible to substitute the head for the group or the group for the head within the same grammatical frame (i.e., in the same context) without causing any formal dislocation of the overall grammatical structure. For instance, in *Fresh fruit is good(.)*, the headed word-group *fresh fruit* serves as subject; in *I like fresh fruit(.)*, it serves as complement. If we substitute the head expression *fruit* for *fresh fruit* in

² Since the appearance of Bloomfield's remarkable book *Language*, the parenthesized expressions have been rather commonly used by linguists, at least in this country.

either case, the grammatical frame *subject, verb, complement* will remain formally undisturbed:

{ *Fresh fruit* is good.
 { *Fruit* is good.
 { I like *fresh fruit*.
 { I like *fruit*.

Similarly:

{ *All this nice fresh fruit* is good.
 { *Fruit* is good.
 { *Singing songs* is fun.
 { *Singing* is fun.
 { I like *singing songs*.
 { I like *singing*.
 { *Singing Mary songs* is fun.
 { *Singing* is fun.

In these sets of examples, the head expressions *fruit* and *singing* are freely substitutable grammatically for the word-groups of which they are constituents. In both cases, then, the italicized word-groups are *headed groups*.

2.4 Non-headed groups, unlike headed groups, can enter into grammatical constructions not open to any single expression within them. No word within the group can substitute for the entire group and make sense, nor can the entire group substitute within the same surrounding context for any one of its constituent parts. Such groups are quite literally non-headed:

I saw a book of poems.
A book of poems is what *I saw*.

In these sentences, neither *I* nor *saw* is substitutable for *I saw*, and neither *of* nor *poems* can replace *of poems*. To attempt such substitutions would have these results:

I—a book—poems.
—Saw a book of—

Alternatively:

I saw saw a book of of poems.

I I saw a book of poems poems.

Thus a non-headed group has grammatical functions quite distinct from those of any of its constituent expressions. It may be regarded as representing a chemical combination of its elements, whereas the headed group represents a mechanical combination. Or, to use a linguistic and more appropriate analogy, the non-headed group parallels a word built up with the help of affixes (12.5), while a headed group parallels a compound word (12.4).

2.5 In English, as in most languages, there are many kinds of word-groups classifiable as *headed*. The exact number depends partly upon the exhaustiveness of our analysis and partly upon whether we wish to include the so-called subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns within the groups they link, or to leave them outside. Since simplicity of analysis is one of our purposes here, it will suffice to be only reasonably exhaustive and to examine the four kinds of headed word-groups that are of basic importance to English grammar and most frequent in occurrence. The first and second, which have the head expression at the end, may be called *tail-head* constructions; the third and fourth, which have their head expressions at the front, may be called *head-tail* constructions. Of the tail-head constructions, the first, already illustrated in 2.3 above, consists of a noun head (i.e., a final word capable of immediately following *the, my, each*) preceded by one, two, or several modifiers (i.e., words in the same group capable of preceding the head):

fresh fruit

nice fresh fruit

the nice fresh fruit

all the very nice fresh fruit

the fruit