

Discovering English Grammar

Richard Veit



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*This book is dedicated
to anyone who ever drew a tree diagram
and found that a little elf within the brain
was kicking up its heels and exclaiming,
"Hey, this is fun!"*

To the Instructor

Discovering English Grammar is a textbook for college courses in the structure of the English language. I had several goals in mind as I wrote it.

To Teach a Transformational Approach to Syntax Transformational grammar is unquestionably the dominant school of modern linguistics. No other approach provides equivalent insights into the structure and workings of our language, nor does any other approach lend itself so successfully to undergraduate teaching.

To Provide Broad Coverage of the Major Constructions of the English Language Many textbooks, particularly those that teach transformational syntax, focus principally on the methodology of their approach, while examining a relatively few “interesting” constructions. In contrast, my purpose in this book is to offer a genuine survey of English grammatical structures. Methodological considerations have been made secondary to the goal of providing an understanding of the language itself.

To Offer Instruction That Is Clear to Undergraduates in the Liberal Arts and in Education Many students who lack technical facility have difficulty understanding advanced syntactic analysis, which can be quite complex and abstract. Accordingly, I have provided a “broad,” rather than a “narrow,” coverage of transformational syntax. When confronted with a conflict between complexity and clarity, I have always opted for clarity. I have eliminated many formalisms that are not necessary for students’ understanding of the language, and I have frequently chosen simpler, “classical” transformational analyses over more recent but more difficult ones.

To Teach Grammar as a Process of Discovery As its name implies, *Discovering English Grammar* does not teach grammatical information as received truth. Instead, it engages students as participants in an inductive search for the structure of the language. Students are asked to help discover the grammar of English by examining sentences and supplying hypotheses to account for them. In addition, the method of discovering grammar without relying on previous assumptions makes this book accessible to students who lack previous training in grammar.

To Arrange Material in a Pedagogically Useful Way Topics are not arranged according to a classification of constructions or parts of speech; instead, they are arranged in a practical teaching sequence. Simpler and more easily un-

derstood concepts precede more complicated ones. Concepts in later chapters build upon those in earlier chapters.

To Offer Frequent, Useful Exercises Exercises are frequent and located throughout the text, not just at the ends of chapters. They provide experiences that reinforce lessons taught in preceding sections, and they challenge students to make their own discoveries about English grammar. Students are impelled not just to know grammar but to *do* grammar.

To Stimulate Students I have treated grammar with the same attitude of intellectual excitement that I feel for the subject. I have attempted to treat my readers with respect and to make my writing clear, straightforward, and interesting.

To Prepare Future Teachers of Grammar For those users of this book who will teach grammar in the schools, the best preparation is a thorough understanding of the English language. Although the approach of this book is transformational, readers will be prepared to teach with whatever materials and methods are mandated by their school systems. I use widely accepted terminology throughout and include a chapter on teaching grammar in the schools.

To Prepare Students for More Advanced Syntactic Study For students who go on to more advanced work in linguistics, *Discovering English Grammar* offers the best preparation of all—a thorough familiarity with the structure of the language. Furthermore, the inductive method of this book instills a spirit of scientific inquiry that trains students to challenge hypotheses and to form new ones. Students who use this book will be well prepared to accommodate additional data and new theories and methods.

I would like to thank those who helped me, directly and indirectly, with this book. First, I owe a debt to the nuns of St. Joseph School who taught me grammar, these many years ago, with such energy and thoroughness. They gave me my first love for the subject, and they prepared me well for my subsequent linguistic study. Thanks, too, to David Hacker and Larry Martin, who initiated me into the joys of transformational grammar at the University of Iowa. I would also like to thank the friends and colleagues who gave invaluable advice and aid with this book, including Elizabeth Pearsall and John Clifford, University of North Carolina at Wilmington; Michael Knotts, East China Petroleum Institute (Dongying, People's Republic); Stephen H. Goldman, University of Kansas; Gordon J. Loberger, Murray State University, Kentucky; and Barbara Weaver, Ball State University, Indiana. To them all, my abiding thanks.

And with that sentence fragment, let the book begin.

Richard Veit

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1 Introduction

A writer's greatest pleasure is revealing to people things they knew but did not know they knew.

—Andy Rooney

The purpose of this book is to reveal to you something you already know. In fact, you not only know the subject, but you are an expert in it. If these sound like preposterous statements, I will give you one that will sound even more so: You, the reader of this book, know the grammar of English better than I know it—better, even, than any English teacher or professor of linguistics knows the grammar of English.

Those seemingly impossible statements are nevertheless completely true. Let me explain.

The word *grammar* is used in many different senses. Most people are familiar with *grammar* both as a subject they studied in grammar school (“A noun is the name of a person, place, or thing”) and as a kind of language etiquette (“Don’t say *ain’t*; it’s bad grammar”). Linguists use the word in a somewhat different sense, and that is the sense in which you are a grammar expert.

Grammar as we mean it is simply your language knowledge. Whatever your brain knows that allows you to use language we will call your grammar. Your grammar is what enables you to understand the very words you are now reading as well as to speak and write words and sentences of your own. You have had a grammar of English for as long as you have known English. This collected language knowledge is not a physical thing exactly. No surgeon can cut open the brain and say, “Aha! There’s the grammar!” Nevertheless, we sometimes find it helpful to think of a grammar as if it were a thing, perhaps a compartment in the mind where language knowledge is stored or even, if we want to compare the brain to a computer, as a program that runs language for us.

Your English grammar is certainly well developed. Most likely you have been using English for many years. Every day you produce and understand thousands of English sentences, and you do so effortlessly. You understand what others say to you, and they understand you. Clearly, you are an expert in English grammar.

Just as *grammar* is used in several senses, the word *know* can be used in different ways as well, and that is what allowed me to say that you “know” grammar better than I “know” it. Our brains have both conscious and subconscious knowledge, and I meant that you know grammar *subconsciously* better than I, or any other linguistics or English professor, know it *consciously*. Discovering consciously what we already know subconsciously about language is, in fact, the goal of this book and of all linguistic study.

Why Study Grammar?

The main reason we study grammar is that we human beings are curious and want to learn more about ourselves. Curiosity about what we are and what kind of world we inhabit has led humans to study such fields as psychology, biology, history, and linguistics. The study of how we create language can provide important insights into the nature of our minds and the way we think. It can help us understand better what it means to be human. In particular the discovery of how complex and yet elegant our grammars are will give us an appreciation of humanity’s achievement in creating this marvelous instrument. We can also appreciate our own individual achievements (which we accomplished rather effortlessly as small children) in mastering so formidable a task as learning the English language.

Grammar study also has some more immediately practical benefits, but I would discourage you from spending time on the subject if practical gain is your only goal, because you may be disappointed. People who decide to study grammar because they want to be better writers or because they want to speak a more standard dialect or because they have trouble with punctuation will find some – but not complete – help here. Because our language knowledge is mostly subconscious, not conscious, the best way to become a good writer or speaker is to read widely and practice often. A writing or speech course is likely to be at least as important as a grammar course for these purposes.

On the other hand, grammar study is not without practical benefits. We use some conscious knowledge about language when we speak and write, and conscious grammatical knowledge can help us to understand what we are doing and allow us to make some enlightened choices. Knowledge of grammar can also give us a tool for analyzing our writing and a vocabulary for discussing it.

Another practical goal that at least some readers of this book will have is to gain a background for teaching grammar in the schools. Chapter 18 considers questions concerning the goals and methods of teaching grammar to elementary and secondary students.

There is still one final reason for studying grammar, and that is that it can be a very exciting and even pleasurable activity. In each class I teach in the structure of the English language there are students (I hope a majority) who, like me, find it downright fun to study grammar. These include some students who had found grammar anything but fun in grade and high school where it was taught "the old way." I hope you are one of those who will share the joy this very exciting subject can bring.

Conscious and Subconscious Knowledge

English grammar is just one of many things you know subconsciously far better than you know consciously. When you walk up a flight of stairs, for example, you can do so without having to think about how to do it. You can climb stairs while carrying on a conversation, while composing a love sonnet, even while walking in your sleep. Although many hundreds of muscles are finely coordinated in the task of climbing stairs, you perform it errorlessly and even gracefully, and without any apparent mental effort. Yet if you or I were asked to describe how we climb stairs we would do it very inaccurately at best: "Let's see," we might say. "First you bring the right leg up and bend the knee. You point the toe up, shift your weight forward, and bring the sole down on the next step. Then . . ." Of course you would not have begun to describe which muscles you use when you bend the knee. Your description is a long way from capturing the directions your brain gives to your body as you move. The fact is that unless you are a highly trained physiologist, you do not "know" much about how you climb stairs. And yet in another sense you "know" how to do it quite well, since you do it all the time. Your conscious knowledge of the task cannot come close to matching what you know subconsciously.

Unfortunately no easy way has been discovered to move knowledge from the subconscious to the conscious part of the mind. If we want to know consciously how we climb stairs or regulate our heartbeats or create language or do any of a thousand other things we know subconsciously how to do, we have to work hard to discover them from the outside. If, for example, we wanted to know about stair-climbing, we would have to conduct meticulous studies of people climbing stairs. We would study slow-motion movies of the action, examine and perhaps dissect the human leg, and perform tests – and even then we would need to make guesses about how stair-climbing is accomplished.

Learning about language is even more difficult because there are no language muscles to examine. We cannot simply look within the brain to see how it works operate. We can't see the insides of the mind at all. What we have to go on in our study is almost entirely on the outside. The best we

can do is examine the language that we produce and then try to draw conclusions about how we produced it. Of course we can consult our intuitions and gut feelings about our language use, but intuitions are not always reliable guides to language, and we are wise to regard them skeptically.

Another obstacle to learning about language is that language is so much more complex than stair-climbing. Trying to describe just the structure of English (ignoring such other aspects of language as speech sounds and the creation of meaning) will take up this entire book, and even that will only introduce us to the subject. Linguists agree that we are just beginning to discover what language is about and that we will be learning more and more for centuries to come. Because we can gain conscious knowledge about our grammars only by examining what they produce (since we can't examine the grammars in our minds directly), it is at best a kind of enlightened speculation. Not all linguists make the same speculations, and there is much disagreement about what it is that we "know." You can easily see why you and I are far more expert in the subconscious knowledge of grammar than anyone is in the conscious knowledge of it.

How Does the Grammar Work?

Among the things that people disagree on is what the study of English grammar can show us. Surely it can examine the sentences we produce and classify their parts, calling this a noun, that a verb, and so on. But most modern linguists have a more ambitious goal than just describing the language we produce. They hope also to describe the way we produce it. In addition to showing you how the English language is constructed, this book will also consider how we *do* the constructing. It will try to gain some insights into what goes on in the mind when we create and understand English sentences. What is it that we know when we know language?

You can make a start at discovering what it is you know by considering your answers to some questions. Begin with this one:

How many English words do you know?

Although no one can give an exact answer, that is still a reasonable question. The words you either use or can recognize probably number in the tens of thousands. But what about this question:

How many English sentences do you know?

This one seems much less reasonable. You can't count the number of sentences you know because you hear and create new ones all the time. For example, there are many sentences on this page that you have never encountered before, and yet you have no difficulty understanding them. It may sur-

prise you to know that you frequently create entirely original sentences, sentences that are brand new to the English language. You could pause right now if you wanted and easily invent a perfectly clear English sentence that no human being living or dead has ever spoken or written or even thought of before. Even though there are a limited number of words that you know, you can put them together in an unlimited variety of ways.

The answer to the second question is that there are potentially an infinite number of sentences that we can know. Since our finite minds cannot store an infinite number of sentences, clearly we must have some means of creating sentences other than by pulling out the ones we want from a storage vault in the brain. We must have a way of creating them afresh by putting together their parts. The question this book is interested in is how we do it.

Clearly we don't throw words together at random. We would recognize only one of the following combinations of words as an English sentence:

He who laughs last laughs best.

Best laughs last laughs who he.

Best he last laughs laughs who.

Laughs who last best laughs he.

All but the first of these combinations are nonsentences. Since we are quite certain they are not products of our English grammar, we can label them as deviant or *ungrammatical*. The first sentence, on the other hand, is *grammatical*, and it surely didn't get that way by accident. How is it that we constantly create grammatical sentences like the first example and never produce gobbledygook like the other three?

The answer is that our subconscious knowledge must include some system, some set of principles for putting words together into sentences in a grammatical way. We can call these principles *grammatical rules* if we like, rules that we follow in order to create sentences, and these rules are an important component of our grammars. If our subconscious knowledge of English (which we are calling our English grammar) includes these rules, one goal in our quest for conscious knowledge about our language must be to discover what those rules might be.

This Book's Purpose

In this book we will try, then, to discover consciously the rules of our grammar, to create a model on paper of the grammar that exists in our minds. Although it is only a model of our grammar, we will use the term loosely enough to call it a *grammar* too. In that sense, this book aims to create a grammar of the English language.

How do we do it? Rather than guess what these rules are or accept on faith what others have said in the past, we can adopt a more scientific approach. A good start might be to try simply to describe some sentences that we produce. If we find some consistent feature in our descriptions, we can make a guess, or *hypothesis*, that the consistent feature represents a rule that speakers of English follow when they create sentences. We can then test the hypothesis on other sentences. If the rule works for them as well, we will say that our hypothesis is a good one, and we will keep the rule in our proposed grammar. If not, we will have to modify it or replace it with a better rule or abandon it altogether.

The procedure, then, that we will follow in this book is more like experimentation than the revelation of unquestioned facts. I intend the book to take you through a process of discovery. Rather than saying to you, "Behold the truth; accept and memorize it," I will say, "Let's see if this hypothesis accounts for what we do." This procedure will involve some trial and error. Each hypothesis we examine will be tentative, subject to later revision. Indeed, as we proceed in our investigation we will frequently revise some of the rules we proposed at an earlier stage.

You are invited to participate in this quest to understand the English language. Very likely you will think of some alternative explanations or better formulations of rules than I propose. Your instructor may provide additional hypotheses, and if you go on to take more advanced courses in syntax (the study of language structure), you will encounter still more alternatives for stating rules and still other theories about how language works.

Summary

To sum up these introductory remarks: A *grammar* is a person's subconscious language knowledge. You use your English grammar whenever you speak or write English or understand someone else's speech or writing. A grammar consists of principles or *rules* that allow you to create an infinite number of possible sentences out of a finite number of words. In this book the term *grammar* will also be used to describe the model on paper that we will construct of that mental grammar. That is the book's aim: to create a grammar or model of the rules we follow in using English. Actually, our investigation will be limited to one aspect of grammar, namely *syntax*, or the structure of language, the study of how words are put together in grammatical ways. Other aspects of language, such as how we form words or create sounds and meanings, are beyond the scope of this book.

2 Describing a Sentence

We humans are not the only species that engages in oral communication. Monkeys, like many other animals in the wild, communicate through a number of calls. A monkey community may have a dozen or more expressions for different communicative purposes—perhaps one call to signify danger on the ground (such as an approaching leopard), another to warn of danger from the air (a hawk), perhaps others to express anger or to attract a mate. One of many differences between their system of communication and ours, however, is that theirs consists of a limited set of fixed calls, while we can speak a limitless number of meaningful sentences. Monkeys cannot invent new expressions to suit their purposes the way we can.

Our language has this enormous range because it consists of parts that can be arranged in unlimited ways. The sentence that you are now reading is made up of two dozen familiar parts, or words, arranged in what is presumably a novel, original way. In the following list, four words are variously arranged to produce many different sentences:

- 1 No monkeys have words.
Monkeys have no words.
Have monkeys no words?
Have no monkeys words?
No words have monkeys.
Have no words, monkeys!

Some of these combinations are unusual, some are perhaps even silly, but they are all grammatical sentences, nonetheless. You can probably think of still more combinations of these four words that would constitute English sentences, but not every possible combination is grammatical. The following, for example, is clearly not English:

- 2 *Words monkeys have no.

Notice the asterisk () in the example. We will adopt this commonly used symbol to designate combinations of words that are **ungrammatical**. That is, we do not*