

A Basic Grammar of Modern English

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Preface

This book is designed for those students whose primary interest is learning about the structures of written English rather than the methodology of a particular grammatical model. Consequently, there are no discussions of the goals of the traditionalists, structuralists, tagmemists, stratificationists, generative-transformationalists, Neo-Firthians, or others who have made important contributions to the study of language during this century. Each chapter describes some aspect of English, and the discussions are drawn eclectically from various grammatical models.

The book includes topics ranging from simple sentence structures to the more complex. It begins with the Subject-Verb-Object structure and proceeds to show how it may be expanded with optional adverbials, auxiliary verbs, and various kinds of modifiers. Finally, such structures as noun clauses, gerund and infinitive phrases, and compound constructions are considered. In addition to providing descriptions of these structures, the book tries to explain why we use them and why one arrangement may be better than another. Although the length of

the book has been deliberately kept short, the most important structures in English are included, most of them in some detail.

It is assumed that the users of this book have a dual interest: to learn about English sentence structure and to acquire enough knowledge to enable them to apply this material. Some will be interested in studying grammar as an aid to understanding literature and as a tool for analyzing style. Others will study it for its applications to their writing or to the teaching of reading and composition. Still others who are planning to study linguistics as a discipline in itself need an understanding of the structure of English as background for more advanced work. Throughout, it is assumed that the readers have a dual interest, not just a desire to learn grammar for itself.

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1

Basic Sentence Elements

To the average person, no single element of language is more noticeable than the word. When confronted with a mumbling speaker or poor acoustic conditions, we react with, "I couldn't understand a word." We do not say, "I couldn't understand a sentence," or comment on the unintelligibility of the phrases, clauses, or syllables.

There are various reasons for our being more conscious of words than of other elements of language. In our own speech and writing, we sometimes grope for words, or we wonder whether we are using a given term properly. We never experience a mental block for an entire sentence the way we do for a word, nor do we look sentences up in a dictionary. If we play scrabble or work a crossword puzzle, we find ourselves again searching for words, not for sentences or clauses.

We are also aware of the words that other people use. As we try to listen to a speaker talk about *epenthesis*, *metathesis*, and *apocope*, we realize that our unfamiliarity with the words is a hindrance to understanding the lecture. At other times we may notice that someone is using terms different from those we normally use, for example calling a

carbonated beverage a bottle of *pop* when we use some other name, such as *soda*, *soft drink*, or *cold drink*.

Or we may question the appropriateness of a given word for some occasion. We would not be very sympathetic if we told a widow that we were sorry her husband had *croaked*. Some words do not belong to casual conversations about trivial subjects (*felicitous*, *salutary*, *enigmatic*, *multifarious*); others are more appropriate for conversation than for formal writing (*tacky*, *a dump*, *awful*, *flakey*, *tickled*, *to goof*). If a person has had too much to drink, we may refer to him or her as being *inebriated*, *intoxicated*, *drunk*, *plastered*, *polluted*, *soused*, and so on. These terms do not differ in meaning, but their use is restricted to appropriate contexts. Words stand out when they are either too stiff or too casual for the occasion.

Such examples as these are familiar to all of us, and they tend to make us think that language is nothing more than words. Yet there are other times when we discover that just a knowledge of words is not enough. For example, we recognize such words as *kangaroo*, *tourist*, and *chase* as having meanings that can be stated in a dictionary. When combined, these words take on additional meanings, depending upon how they relate to one another:

1.1 The tourist chased the kangaroo.

1.2 The kangaroo chased the tourist.

The arrangement shows whether the tourist or the kangaroo performed the act and which one was affected by it. Since we normally use words in sentences rather than by themselves, sentence structure is as important to language as words are.

For another example, every child in kindergarten knows the meanings of *I*, *me*, and *myself*; it is, therefore, not unfamiliarity with the meanings of these words that causes many adults to hesitate over the following choice:

1.3a There was no one there but Constance and *me*.

b There was no one there but Constance and *I*.

c There was no one there but Constance and *myself*.

In this particular instance, careful speakers and writers use the first version, *Constance and me*, since *me* is object of the preposition *but*; in others they select one of the other options:

1.4 He knew that Constance and *I* were responsible.

1.5 I bought it for Constance and *myself*.

They select *I* in 1.4 because it is a subject and *myself* in 1.5 because *I* precedes it in the same clause. It is the sentence structure that deter-

mines which pronoun (*I*, *me*, or *myself*) we use, not the meanings of words.

Further dependence upon sentence structure can be illustrated with the choice of *who* and *whom*. Some people settle for *who* at all times, but others wish to use *whom* according to the principles followed by careful writers. For certain sentences there is no real problem:

1.6 *Who* drew this delightful picture of me?

1.7 *Whom* did they nominate for president?

Others may be more confusing:

1.8a *Who* did they say opened that can of worms?

b *Whom* did they say opened that can of worms?

1.9a *Who* do you think she saw?

b *Whom* do you think she saw?

In 1.8, *who* is the standard form because it is the subject of *opened*; in 1.9 it is *whom*, the object of *saw*. As with the choice of *I*, *me*, and *myself*, that of *who* and *whom* is governed solely by the structure of the sentence, not by the meaning of the word.

Instead of concerning ourselves with our own usage, we may want to consider someone else's style. Hemingway's writing is frequently referred to as "simple" and "straightforward." These adjectives certainly seem appropriate for the following passage from his short story "The Battler":

He felt of his knee. The pants were torn and the skin was barked. His hands were scraped and there were sand and cinders driven up under his nails. He went over to the edge of the track down the little slope to the water and washed his hands. He washed them carefully in the cold water, getting the dirt out from the nails. He squatted down and bathed his knee.

Joseph Conrad, on the other hand, is often spoken of as writing in a style that is more "complex," as illustrated by the following paragraph from *The Secret Sharer*:

It must be explained here that my cabin had the form of the capital letter L the door being within the angle and opening into the short part of the letter. A couch was to the left, the bed-place to the right; my writing-desk and the chronometers' table faced the door. But any one opening it, unless he stepped right inside, had no view of what I call the long (or vertical) part of the letter. It contained some lockers surmounted by a bookcase; and a few

clothes, a thick jacket or two, caps, oilskin coat, and such like, hung on hooks. There was at the bottom of that part a door opening into my bath-room, which could be entered also directly from the saloon. But that way was never used.

We easily recognize a difference between the styles of Hemingway and Conrad. We could probably identify untitled samples of their work, and we recognize imitations written by other people. We notice short, commonplace words in the Hemingway passage, but those by Conrad are not especially difficult. In addition to length, the sentences by Conrad seem more "complex" than those by Hemingway. To comment specifically on our reactions to these styles, we need to be able to talk about participial phrases, relative clauses, extraposed clauses, and the like. We shall return to these passages in Chapter 12.

Questions of usage (*who* or *whom*) and style are basically dependent upon sentence structure, not vocabulary. In this book we shall, therefore, be concerned with learning to analyze English sentences so that we can speak intelligently about them.

SUBJECTS AND PREDICATES

There are several ways in which words may relate to one another in a sentence. One of these is compounding: *bread and butter, a knife or a fork, not Rachel but Eloise*. Or we may use certain words to modify others, as when we add adjectives to *a tree* to tell what kind it is: *a tall tree, a stately tree*. Sometimes we let words cluster together in a phrase: *over the house, near the highway, beside Judy*. All of these relationships are found frequently, but one occurs more often than any of the others: the subject and predicate relationship. Because it is found in every sentence, we are starting our study with it.

There have been several definitions suggested for the subject, but none of them are very satisfactory. At times the subject is the one that performs an action, as shown by the italicized words below:

1.10 *The repairman* knocked.

1.11 *A woman* ran.

1.12 *Those people* laughed.

But in other sentences the subject is the receiver of the action:

1.13 *The curtain* tore.

1.14 *The glass* broke.

At other times it is the person or thing that is described:

1.15 *Larry* looked bored.

1.16 *Your cousins* resemble each other.

In still other sentences it is difficult to state how the subject relates to the predicate in meaning:

1.17 *It* is snowing.

1.18 *Carol* is likely to be late.

1.19 *The medicine* was hard to swallow.

In 1.17 *it* has no real meaning. In 1.18 we are not saying that *Carol* is likely; rather, it is the entire proposition *that Carol will be late* that is likely. Similarly, we are not saying that the medicine was hard in 1.19. Any attempt to define the subject on the basis of meaning is frustrating.

Some people have suggested that we can recognize subjects by asking "Who?" or "What?" as in these sentences:

1.20a *Sandra* jumped.

b *Who* jumped?

1.21a *The mattress* fell.

b *What* fell?

To follow this test, we have to know what the subject is from the start, because an alternate direction would be, "Replace the subject with *who* or *what*." Not only must we have already recognized the subject before we perform this operation; we have to know whether it names a human or not because we use *who* for humans and *what* for nonhumans. We knew, for example, to use *who* in 1.20 and *what* in 1.21.

The most useful means of learning to recognize subjects is through examples. With only the twelve sentences we have examined so far (1.10–1.21), you should have no difficulty finding the subjects in the following sentences:

1.22 *This shirt* shrank.

1.23 *His houses* burned.

1.24 *A man* laughed.

1.25 *Lucy* groaned.

Wherever possible, we will avoid definitions and use examples instead.

The words following the subject are called the ***predicate***, as shown by the italicized words below:

1.26 *Harriet coughed.*

1.27 *The car crashed.*

A predicate may consist of just a verb, as in these sentences (*coughed* and *crashed*), but there is usually more, as we shall see in the sections that follow.

In examining subjects and predicates, we should notice three features of their combination. First, we are not free to arrange them in any order that we choose. The subject normally precedes the predicate:

1.28a The flower drooped.

b *Drooped the flower.

The asterisk means that 1.28b is not a possible English sentence. Although we may find similar sentences in earlier poetry, for present-day English 1.28b is not possible. In later chapters we will see that this order is sometimes altered, such as in questions and a few other structures. However, we recognize the usual position for the subject as that before the predicate.

Second, when the verb is in the present tense, it often changes in form, depending upon whether the subject is singular or plural:

1.29a Your shoe *squeaks*.

b Your shoes *squeak*.

When the singular *shoe* is the subject, the verb ends in *-s*: *squeaks*. For the plural *shoes*, there is no ending on the verb. Agreement of subject and verb in English is usually restricted to the present tense. In the past there is no change:

1.30a Your shoe *squeaked*.

b Your shoes *squeaked*.

One verb is exceptional in that it shows agreement in both present and past tense. This is the verb *to be*, which has the present-tense forms *am*, *is*, and *are* and the past forms *was* and *were*:

1.31a I *am* here.

b The package *is* here.

c The packages *are* here.

d The package *was* here.

e The packages *were* here.

In the past tense we distinguish between *was* and *were*, according to whether the subject is singular or plural.

In addition to word order and subject-verb agreement, we recognize restrictions on which subjects may occur with certain verbs. For example, sentences 1.32–1.34 are possible, but 1.35–1.37 are not:

- 1.32 The referee yelled.
- 1.33 A diver yelled.
- 1.34 We yelled.
- 1.35 *The cup yelled.
- 1.36 *The geranium yelled.
- 1.37 *The worm yelled.

Only names of humans or a few animals may be the subject of *yell*. Some verbs permit only subjects that are concrete (*fall*, *jump*); others take subjects pertaining to time (*elapse*); and there are those that have still further restrictions.

DIRECT OBJECTS

Most of the sentences examined so far have contained only a verb in the predicate. There are other sentences that are not complete with just a verb:

- 1.38a *The woodcarver shut.
- 1.39a *Herbie insulted.
- 1.40a *The hammer hit.

Something else is needed:

- 1.38b The woodcarver shut *the door*.
- 1.39b Herbie insulted *the passengers*.
- 1.40b The hammer hit *the woman*.

The structure following the verb in each of these sentences is called a **direct object**. The predicate in each case consists of the verb and whatever follows it: *shut the door*, *insulted the passengers*, *hit the woman*.

The direct object is sometimes defined as the receiver of the action or the person or thing directly affected by it. For some sentences this definition is acceptable:

- 1.41 Tom chased *me*.
- 1.42 The teacher slapped *the student*.
- 1.43 Lucille threw *the eraser*.

For other sentences the object neither receives action nor is affected in any way:

- 1.44 Charles missed *the plane*.
- 1.45 The witch saw *the moon*.

1.46 Beth turned *the corner*.

1.47 The moths ate *a hole* in my coat.

Nothing happened to the plane, moon, or corner in 1.44–1.46, nor in 1.47 do we mean that the moths were stupid enough to eat a hole instead of woolen fabric.

It has been suggested that the question words *what* and *whom* be used to locate direct objects:

1.48a Mark nodded his head.

b Mark nodded *what*?

1.49a Eloise cursed Thalia.

b Eloise cursed *whom*?

To perform this exercise correctly, one must have already located the direct object and classified it as human or nonhuman. We did not say, “Mark nodded *whom*?” or “Eloise cursed *what*?”

Through examples and a few observations, most people find that objects are as easy to recognize as subjects and verbs. To illustrate the value of the use of examples, you should try to find the direct objects in these sentences:

1.50 Henry swatted the fly.

1.51 The cook murdered his assistant.

1.52 Your son neglected his homework.

1.53 Ann waved her arm.

The objects are, of course, *the fly*, *his assistant*, *his homework*, and *her arm*.

Normally the subject precedes the verb and the direct object follows it, as in the following sentences:

1.54 The salesman shoved the customer.

1.55 The customer shoved the salesman.

We instantly recognize a difference in meaning if we interchange positions. This word order of **Subject–Verb–Object** is the most frequent in English. It is often abbreviated **SVO**.

Whenever we read or hear sentences in which this basic order is not maintained, we try to impose such an arrangement because word order is the only means we have in Modern English for indicating whether a noun is subject or object. We can illustrate our mental rearrangement of sentences by the following groups of words that do not conform to the basic pattern: