

Otto Jespersen: Collected English Writings

Essentials of English Grammar

Otto Jespersen

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COLLECTED ENGLISH WRITINGS

ESSENTIALS OF ENGLISH
GRAMMAR

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PREFACE

THE appearance of this book is due to urgent appeals from some English friends (among them Professors W. E. Collinson, G. C. Moore Smith, and R. A. Williams), who asked me to bring out a one-volume grammar embodying the principles explained in *The Philosophy of Grammar* and partly carried out in the four volumes of my *Modern English Grammar*. After some years of hesitation I have now made the attempt, but of course the responsibility for its shortcomings rests exclusively upon me. Parts of the manuscript have been submitted to various friends, to whose kind criticisms I owe a great debt of gratitude. I must mention Dr E. R. Edwards, who read nearly the whole of the manuscript; Professors C. A. Bodelsen and G. E. K. Brauholtz, Miss Isabel Fry, Dr G. E. Fuhrken, and Miss J. Young, Ph.D., who all of them read a greater or lesser number of chapters and communicated to me their remarks. Niels Haislund, M.A., assisted me in copying the manuscript, and gave me valuable assistance in reading the proofs. My heartfelt thanks to all these kind scholars!

To the student I may perhaps offer two pieces of advice: to read in general the examples before the rules, and, if he is not particularly interested in phonetics, to skip Chapters II-VI until he has finished the rest of the book.

I may be allowed here to repeat what I wrote in 1909 in the first volume of my bigger Grammar:

“It has been my endeavour in this work to represent English Grammar not as a set of stiff dogmatic precepts, according to which some things are correct and others absolutely wrong, but as something living and developing under continual fluctuations and undulations, something that is founded on the past and prepares the way for the future, something that is not always consistent or perfect, but progressing and perfectible—in one word, human.”

A detailed exposition of the reasons that have led me to

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deviate from much of what is usually found in English grammars, and some criticism of the views of other scholars, will be found in a paper on "The System of Grammar," which will be printed in a volume, "Linguistica: Selected Papers in English, French, and German," and will also be sold separately.¹

OTTO JESPERSEN

GENTOFTE, COPENHAGEN
January 1933

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ESSENTIALS OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

What is grammar?—Local and social dialects.—Spoken and written language.—Formulas and free expressions.—Expression, suppression, and impression.—Prescriptive, descriptive, explanatory, historical, appreciative grammar.—Purpose and plan of this grammar.

1.1. Grammar deals with the structure of languages, English grammar with the structure of English, French grammar with the structure of French, etc. Language consists of words, but the way in which these words are modified and joined together to express thoughts and feelings differs from one language to another.

English and French have many words in common but treat them in a totally different way. Take the word *excuse*, which is spelt in the same way in the two languages. But the pronunciation is different, the vowel in the last syllable of the French word being unknown in English. In English we make a difference in pronunciation between *to excuse* and *an excuse*, but no such difference is made in French. Still greater differences appear when we make up complete sentences. Compare, for instance, the following :

Excuse me.	Excusez-moi.
Don't excuse me.	Ne m'excusez pas.
Do you excuse her?	L'excusez-vous? or Est-ce que vous l'excusez?
We excuse her.	Nous l'excusons.
Let us excuse her.	Excusons-la.
We must excuse her.	Il faut l'excuser.
We shall excuse her.	Nous l'excuserons.
Shall we excuse her?	Est-ce que nous l'excuserons? etc., etc.

1.1. The grammar of each language constitutes a system of its own, each element of which stands in a certain relation to,

and is more or less dependent on, all the others. No linguistic system, however, is either completely rigid or perfectly harmonious, and we shall see in some of the subsequent chapters that there are loopholes and deficiencies in the English grammatical system.

Language is nothing but a set of human habits, the purpose of which is to give expression to thoughts and feelings, and especially to impart them to others. As with other habits it is not to be expected that they should be perfectly consistent. No one can speak exactly as everybody else or speak exactly in the same way under all circumstances and at all moments, hence a good deal of vacillation here and there. The divergencies would certainly be greater if it were not for the fact that the chief purpose of language is to make oneself understood by other members of the same community; this presupposes and brings about a more or less complete agreement on all essential points. The closer and more intimate the social life of a community is, the greater will be the concordance in speech between its members. In old times, when communication between various parts of the country was not easy and when the population was, on the whole, very stationary, a great many local **dialects** arose which differed very considerably from one another; the divergencies naturally became greater among the uneducated than among the educated and richer classes, as the latter moved more about and had more intercourse with people from other parts of the country. In recent times the enormously increased facilities of communication have to a great extent counteracted the tendency towards the splitting up of the language into dialects—class dialects and local dialects. In this grammar we must in many places call attention to various types of divergencies: geographical (English in the strictest sense with various sub-divisions, Scottish, Irish, American), and social (educated, colloquial, literary, poetical, on the one hand, and vulgar on the other). But it should be remembered that these strata cannot be strictly separated from, but are constantly influencing one another. Our chief concern will be with the normal speech of the educated class, what may be called Standard English, but we must remember that the speech even

of "standard speakers" varies a good deal according to circumstances and surroundings as well as to the mood of the moment. Nor must we imagine that people in their everyday speech arrange their thoughts in the same orderly way as when they write, let alone when they are engaged on literary work. Grammatical expressions have been formed in the course of centuries by innumerable generations of illiterate speakers, and even in the most elevated literary style we are obliged to conform to what has become, in this way, the general practice. Hence many established idioms which on closer inspection may appear to the trained thinker illogical or irrational. The influence of emotions, as distinct from orderly rational thinking, is conspicuous in many parts of grammar—see, for instance, the chapters on gender, on expanded tenses, and on *will* and *shall*.

1.1.3. In our so-called civilized life print plays such an important part that educated people are apt to forget that **language is primarily speech**, *i.e.* chiefly conversation (dialogue), while the written (and printed) word is only a kind of substitute—in many ways a most valuable, but in other respects a poor one—for the spoken and heard word. Many things that have vital importance in speech—stress, pitch, colour of the voice, thus especially those elements which give expression to emotions rather than to logical thinking—disappear in the comparatively rigid medium of writing, or are imperfectly rendered by such means as underlining (italicizing) and punctuation. What is called the life of language consists in oral intercourse with its continual give-and-take between speaker and hearer. It should also be always remembered that this linguistic intercourse takes place not in isolated words as we see them in dictionaries, but by means of connected communications, chiefly in the form of sentences, though not always such complete and well-arranged sentences as form the delight of logicians and rhetoricians. Such sentences are chiefly found in writing, but the enormous increase which has taken place during the last few centuries in education and reading has exercised a profound influence on grammar, even on that of everyday speech.

1.2₁. There is an important distinction between **formulas** (or formular units) and **free expressions**. Some things in language are of the formula character—that is to say, no one can change anything in them. A phrase like “How do you do?” is entirely different from such a phrase as “I gave the boy a lump of sugar.” In the former everything is fixed: you cannot even change the stress or make a pause between the words, and it is not natural to say, as in former times, “How does your father do?” or “How did you do?” The phrase is for all practical purposes one unchanged and unchangeable formula, the meaning of which is really independent of that of the separate words into which it may be analysed. But “I gave the boy sixpence” is of a totally different order. Here it is possible to stress any of the words and to make a pause, for instance, after “boy,” or to substitute “he” or “she” for “I,” “lent” for “gave,” “Tom” for “the boy,” etc. One may insert “never” or make other alterations. While in handling formulas memory is everything, free expressions involve another kind of mental activity; they have to be created in each case anew by the speaker, who inserts the words that fit the particular situation, and shapes and arranges them according to certain patterns. The words that make up the sentences are variable, but the type is fixed.

Now this distinction pervades all parts of grammar. Let us here take two examples only. To form the plural—that is, the expression of more than one—we have old formulas in the case of *men, feet, oxen* and a few other words, which are used so often in the plural that they are committed to memory at a very early age by each English-speaking child. But they are so irregular that they could not serve as patterns for new words. On the other hand, we have an *s*-ending in innumerable old words (*kings, princes, bishops, days, hours, etc.*), and this type is now so universal that it can be freely applied to all words except the few old irregular words. As soon as a new word comes into existence, no one hesitates about forming a plural in this way: *automobiles, kodaks, aeroplanes, hooligans, ions, stunts, etc.* In the sentence “He recovered his lost umbrella and had it recovered,” the first *recovered* is a formular unit, the second (with

a long vowel in the first syllable) is freely formed from *cover* in its ordinary meaning (4.6₂).

1.2₂. In all speech activity there are, further, three things to be distinguished, **expression**, **suppression**, and **impression**. Expression is what the speaker gives, suppression is what he does not give, though he might have given it, and impression is what the hearer receives. It is important to notice that an impression is often produced not only by what is said expressly, but also by what is suppressed. Suggestion is impression through suppression. Only bores want to express everything, but even bores find it impossible to express everything. Not only is the writer's art rightly said to consist largely in knowing what to leave in the inkstand, but in the most everyday remarks we suppress a great many things which it would be pedantic to say expressly. "Two third returns, Brighton," stands for something like: "Would you please sell me two third-class tickets from London to Brighton and back again, and I will pay you the usual fare for such tickets." Compound nouns state two terms, but say nothing of the way in which the relation between them is to be understood: *home life*, life at home; *home letters*, letters from home; *home journey*, journey (to) home; compare, further, *life boat*, *life insurance*, *life member*; *sunrise*, *sunworship*, *sunflower*, *sunburnt*, *Sunday*, *sun-bright*, etc.

As in the structure of compounds, so also in the structure of sentences much is left to the sympathetic imagination of the hearer, and what from the point of view of the trained thinker, or the pedantic schoolmaster, is only part of an utterance, is frequently the only thing said, and the only thing required to make the meaning clear to the hearer.

1.3. The chief object in teaching grammar today—especially that of a foreign language—would appear to be to give rules which must be obeyed if one wants to speak and write the language correctly—rules which as often as not seem quite arbitrary. Of greater value, however, than this **prescriptive** grammar is a purely **descriptive** grammar which, instead of serving as a guide to what should be said or written, aims at finding out what is actually said and written by the speakers of

the language investigated, and thus may lead to a scientific understanding of the rules followed instinctively by speakers and writers. Such a grammar should also be **explanatory**, giving, as far as this is possible, the reasons why the usage is such and such. These reasons may, according to circumstances, be phonetic or psychological, or in some cases both combined. Not infrequently the explanation will be found in an earlier stage of the same language: what in one period was a regular phenomenon may later become isolated and appear as an irregularity, an exception to what has now become the prevailing rule. Our grammar must therefore be **historical** to a certain extent. Finally, grammar may be **appreciative**, examining whether the rules obtained from the language in question are in every way clear (unambiguous, logical), expressive and easy, or whether in any one of these respects other forms or rules would have been preferable.

This book aims at giving a descriptive and, to some extent, explanatory and appreciative account of the grammatical system of Modern English, historical explanations being only given where this can be done without presupposing any detailed knowledge of Old English (OE., *i.e.* the language before A.D. 1000) or Middle English (ME., *i.e.* the language between 1000 and 1500) or any cognate language. Prescriptions as to correctness will be kept in the background, as the primary object of the book is not to teach English to foreigners, but to prepare for an intelligent understanding of the structure of a language which it is supposed that the reader knows already.

1.4. Grammatical rules have to be illustrated by **examples**. It has been endeavoured to give everywhere examples that are at once natural, characteristic, and as varied as possible. Many have been taken from everyday educated speech, while others have been chosen from the writings of well-known authors. It should be noted that in quotations from old books the spellings of the original editions have been retained; Shakespearian quotations are given in the spellings of the First Folio (1623), and Biblical quotations in the spelling of the Authorized Version (1611, abbreviated AV.), the only deviations being that the use

of capitals and of the letters *i, j, u, v* has been made to conform to modern usage.

Apart from the phonological part which deals with sounds, grammar is usually divided into two parts: **accidence**—also called morphology—*i.e.* the doctrine of all the forms (inflexions) of the language, and **syntax**, *i.e.* the doctrine of sentence structure and the use of the forms. This type of division has been disregarded in this book, which substitutes for it a division in the main according to the chief grammatical categories. In most of the chapters the forms have first been considered and then their use, but more stress has everywhere been laid on the latter than on the former. In this way it is thought that a clearer conception is gained of the whole system, as what really belongs together is thus brought closely together.

1.5. As the system in this book differs from that followed in most grammars, a few new **technical terms** have been found necessary, but they will offer no serious difficulty; in fact, they are far less numerous than the terminological novelties introduced in recent books on psychology and other sciences. On the other hand, we have been able to dispense with a great many of the learned terms that are often found abundantly in grammatical treatises and which really say nothing that cannot be expressed clearly in simple everyday language.