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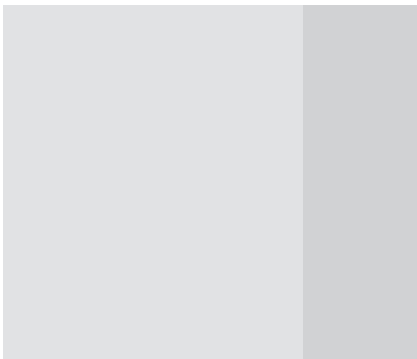
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Text

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Corpus

Development of this publication has made use of the Cambridge English Corpus (CEC). The CEC is a multi-billion word computer database of contemporary spoken and written English. It includes British English, American English and other varieties of English. It also includes the Cambridge Learner Corpus, developed in collaboration with Cambridge English Language Assessment. Cambridge University Press has built up the CEC to provide evidence about language use that helps to produce better language teaching materials.

Cambridge Dictionaries

Cambridge dictionaries are the world’s most widely used dictionaries for learners of English. The dictionaries are available in print and online at dictionary.cambridge.org. Copyright © Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission.

Thanks

Thanks, once again, to my always encouraging publishing team, Karen Momber and Jo Timerick at Cambridge University Press, and to Alison Sharpe for her scrupulous but good-humoured editing. Special thanks to the consultant editor, Anne O’Keeffe, for her insight and guidance. And thanks to the many (mainly anonymous) teachers who responded to questionnaires and supplied many of the questions – I hope the answers won’t disappoint!

Why I wrote this book

A glance at any website, discussion forum or social network shared by teachers of English suggests that teachers are constantly asking each other questions related to pedagogical grammar. These may simply be questions about terminology or categorization ('What's a clause?'; 'Is *like* a preposition?'), or they may seek to unravel subtle grammatical distinctions ('What's the difference between *for* and *since*?') or explain persistent learner errors ('Why is *She explained me it* wrong?'). Grammar reference books do not always satisfy the need for immediate answers, since these are seldom if ever organized according to the questions teachers ask, and often assume a degree of familiarity with terminology that many teachers do not have. (If you know the linguistic term you probably already know the answer!) This book is designed to fulfil this basic, everyday need, as well as being a book that I hope can be read for interest – and even pleasure – in its own right.

To choose the questions to include, I drew on my own experience as a teacher and teacher trainer and the many years I have spent talking to colleagues about language-related issues. I have also combed through social networks dedicated to language teaching, and have surveyed large numbers of teachers online. The resulting list does not claim to be exhaustive, but is intended to cover the main areas of pedagogical grammar that recur with some frequency in coursebooks, curricula and exams. Nor are the answers necessarily comprehensive: for the sake of clarity and brevity a lot of detail has had to be trimmed or left out altogether. But any serviceable pedagogical grammar reference should be able to fill in the gaps. This book aims to be a first port of call for teachers confronted by a grammar puzzle while planning lessons, reflecting on their teaching, grading assignments, or simply indulging a natural – and very professional – curiosity as to how language is structured and used.

For those readers wishing to follow up issues raised in the book, I would strongly recommend the following (and I hereby acknowledge my debt to their authors, while acknowledging that any errors in the text are mine alone):

Biber, D., Conrad, S. and Leech, G. (2002) *Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (2006) *Cambridge Grammar of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Collins COBUILD English Grammar (3rd edition: 2011). London: HarperCollins.

Cowan, R. (2008) *The Teacher's Grammar of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Downing, A. and Locke, P. (2005) *English Grammar: A University Course* (2nd edition). London: Routledge.

Swan, M. (2016) *Practical English Usage* (4th edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

For a textbook of tasks that explore English grammar for teaching purposes, I might suggest:

Thornbury, S. (2017) *About Language: Tasks for Teachers of English* (2nd edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Note: Words in **bold** in the text are defined in the Glossary at the end. Invented examples that are marked with an asterisk (*) are non-grammatical; genuine examples of learners' errors are not so marked.

Also, all references to a corpus are (unless otherwise stated) to the Cambridge English Corpus, for access to which I am extremely grateful.

A: General questions about grammar

What counts as grammar? And how is grammar learned? These, and related, issues really need to be addressed before we look at specific areas of grammar. So in this section we address some of these big questions.

-
- 1 What counts as grammar?**
 - 2 Does English have a lot of grammar?**
 - 3 What is prescriptive grammar?**
 - 4 Are British and American grammars really different?**
 - 5 Is there a difference between written and spoken grammar?**
 - 6 Is grammar learned in a set order?**
 - 7 How is grammar best taught?**
 - 8 What is the point of rules?**
 - 9 Is there grammar beyond the sentence?**
 - 10 Is there a core grammar?**
-

What are we talking about when we talk about grammar? For example, where does vocabulary end and grammar start? Does grammar stop at the sentence?

grammar /græmə/. *noun* 1 [U] (the study or use of) the rules about how words change their form and combine with words to make sentences. (*Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary*, 2005)

Traditionally, the way 'words change their form' is called *morphology*. In English, this includes the way **verbs** change from the present to the past (*walk* → *walked*) or **nouns** change from singular to plural (*dog* → *dogs*). The way that words 'combine with words to make sentences' is called *syntax*. Thus, the order of words that can go before a noun (*both the two small black dogs*) is governed by rules of **syntax**, just as the way that this **phrase** forms part of a sentence: *Both the two small black dogs ran away*. Compare this with the ungrammatical: **The both two black small dogs away ran*.

So grammar deals with the morphology and syntax of sentences. But there are some problems. Morphology also describes the way that words change and combine to make other words: *bull* + *dog* = *bulldog*; *run* + *-er* = *runner*; *run* + *out* + *of* = *run out of*. Not to mention idioms like *go to the dogs*, *a dog's breakfast*. So there's a fuzzy line between vocabulary (i.e. what you might find in a dictionary) and grammar.

Also, grammar extends beyond sentences. Consider: *The dogs ran away. I chased them*. Here *them* refers back to *the dogs* in the previous sentence – suggesting that there's also some fuzziness between grammar and what is called *discourse* (see 9).

Finally, a distinction needs to be made between grammar and usage: a sentence might be technically ungrammatical but commonly used, like *Long time no see*; or it may be grammatically feasible but highly unlikely, e.g. *?The dogs had been being walked*.

It's a common perception that the success of English as a global language owes a lot to the fact that it has very little grammar. Is this true?

Anyone who has studied Spanish or Turkish will be aware that in these languages there are many different forms of the **verb**. Likewise, German and Russian have many different forms of the **noun**. English is much simpler in these respects. Regular verbs have four forms in all: *walk*, *walked*, *walks*, and *walking*. Most nouns have just two: *dog* and *dogs*. (Three if we count *dog's*.) This is because English is not a highly inflected language: it does not have a lot of grammatical endings.

But this doesn't mean that English is grammar-light. If that were the case, then English-speakers would be somewhat limited in terms of the meanings they could express. And English learners would only rarely make mistakes!

Despite being minimally inflected, verbs in English employ a variety of **auxiliaries** to express different shades of meaning: *I have walked*, *I had been walking*, etc., which, in combination with changes in word order, distinguish between statements and questions: *Did you walk?* *Has the dog been walked?* Likewise, English uses a wide variety of **determiners** to identify the reference of nouns: *a dog*, *those dogs*, *no dog*, *a great many of their dogs*, etc. As with **auxiliary verbs**, there are tight restrictions on the order of these function words. In fact, what English lacks in **inflections**, it makes up in terms of **syntax**. In the absence of case markings, the difference between *The dog bit the man* and *The man bit the dog* depends entirely on word order.

Nevertheless, for the purposes of communicating in English as an international language, it's arguable that learners only need a relatively small subset of the grammatical potential of English. This is the argument that inspired the development of Basic English in the 1930s, and, more recently, Globish, both of which claim to have streamlined the grammar of English.

A doctor's prescription tells you what medicine you should take. In similar fashion, a prescriptive grammar tells you what you should say or write.

Most people associate *grammar* with the kinds of rules they were taught at school in classes called either English, or Language Arts. These are typically rules of 'correct usage' or 'good style'. They are invariably associated with educated or even prestigious varieties of the language, as opposed to colloquial language or, worse, slang. For example:

- Do not say: *You are taller than me*. Say: *You are taller than I*. *Than* is a **conjunction** and *I* is the **subject** of the (reduced) **clause**: *I am*.
- *None of us want to go* is incorrect. *None* is a singular **pronoun**, so *None of us wants to go*.
- Do not say: *I didn't say nothing*. Say: *I didn't say anything*. You can't use a double negative because two negatives make a positive.

Notice that these 'rules-as-regulations' make certain questionable claims. Why, for example, is *than* a **conjunction** and not a **preposition**? Who says that *none* is singular? Or they appeal to logic, as if language was modelled on mathematics. Notice, too, that the application of such rules often produces sentences that sound contrived and unusual.

A descriptive grammar, on the other hand, aims to describe language as it is actually used. To this end, descriptive grammarians draw on corpora (the plural of *corpus*), i.e. digitally-stored databases of attested language use. However, even descriptive grammarians have to make decisions as to what language is standard versus non-standard. While most teaching grammars would prefer *You are taller than me*, few would accept *I didn't say nothing*.

Also, learners are aware that language projects certain values: knowing 'good style' is part of learning the target language culture. So, there may be a place for judicious doses of the prescriptive medicine.

Are British and American grammars really different?

4

‘You say *tomayto* and I say *tomahto*.’ The two major varieties of English differ, of course, in their pronunciation. And in many of their word choices. But their grammar?

First of all, it needs to be emphasized that there are not two monolithic varieties of English, one on each side of the Atlantic Ocean. What is loosely classed as British English (BrE) includes a wide range of regional and social varieties, each distinguished by their own phonological, lexical and grammatical features. Similar variety characterizes American English (AmE). Speakers of both subscribe to the idea of there being a standard (even if they themselves don’t speak it), i.e. a widely distributed variety associated with education and broadcasting, and which serves as the model for teaching to English language learners.

So, how are these two standard varieties different, grammatically speaking? The main differences that might have implications for the teaching of English are the following:

- the AmE preference for the past simple over the present perfect with *just*, *already*, and *yet*, as in *Did you have brunch yet?* (AmE);
- the form of some past tense **verbs**, where AmE uses *-ed* for the past of *learn*, *spell*, *burn*, *dream*, etc. (cf. BrE *learnt*, *spelt*, *burnt*, *dreamt*), and where AmE has retained some irregular past tense forms such as *dove* (BrE *dived*) and *pled* (*pleaded*);
- *get* has two past **participles** in AmE, *got* and *gotten*, each with a different meaning: *I’ve got that book at home* [= I have it] v *I’ve just gotten a new book* [= I have acquired it];
- AmE prefers to use collective **nouns** (*the government*, *the team*) in the singular, whereas BrE allows *the government are...*;
- the disappearance, in AmE, of the forms *shall/shan’t* and their replacement with *will/won’t*.

Prescriptive grammarians (see 2) are also more insistent, in the US, on using the so-called subjunctive in certain constructions (see 69), and on not using *which* in restrictive clauses: *The rule which I just broke is ridiculous!*

Is there a difference between spoken and written grammar?

It used to be thought that the grammar of spoken language mirrored the grammar of written language. But does it?

Speaking, unlike most writing, happens spontaneously. This means planning and production are happening at the same time, and this constrains the degree of grammatical complexity that is feasible. Moreover, most speaking is interactive, and this is reflected in its construction. Here, for example, is an extract of naturally-occurring talk from the Cambridge English Corpus:

- 1 I was talking to somebody who was a vegetarian and they know I'm on this diet and that I've lost this weight and stuff and they said for them to go back to grease was what did them in.
- 2 Uh-huh. Well and our son can't eat grease period.
- 3 Oh.
- 4 He and grease just ...
- 5 Really?
- 6 He can't eat grease. Yeah.
- 7 We don't fry meat. I do ... I like my egg fried in butter and that's what we had tonight. I had eggs and ham and anyway I fried it in butter and I like that really well and uh that doesn't seem to bother me so I don't know what ...

Features of the spontaneity include a tendency to produce short sequences linked by the **conjunctions** *and*, *so*, *but* (Turns 1 and 7); to attach 'tails' to utterances (*period*, *Yeah*); the use of formulaic language (*so I don't know what*) and vague language (*and stuff*); incomplete utterances and false starts (Turns 4 and 7), and filled pauses (*uh*).

Arguably, these features are not common in written language; nor are some characteristics of written language much used in spoken language, which raises the question as to whether teaching only written grammar is the best preparation for speaking.

The assumption underlying most teaching syllabuses is that the order in which grammar items are taught is the order in which they are learned. But is this really true?

Traditionally, and to this day, the items in a grammar syllabus are typically sequenced in terms of *utility* and *difficulty*. The utility of an item is a measure of its likely usefulness for the learner: highly frequent structures like the present simple are clearly more useful than relatively rare structures like the third conditional.

An item's difficulty is calculated on the basis of its structural complexity – simple structures like the present simple are taught before more complex ones, like the present perfect continuous. Difficulty can also be conceptual: a concept like countability (as in *one dog, two dogs*) is considered easier than a concept like definiteness (*a dog v the dog*). Finally, an item might be more or less difficult according to whether it has a counterpart in the learner's first language (L1). A learner whose L1 doesn't have **auxiliary verbs** will find these difficult.

Underlying these principles is the assumption that the order in which items are taught will be reflected in the order in which they are learned.

However, research has since shown that learners seem to follow their own 'built-in syllabus' independently of their L1, and irrespective of the teaching order. So, all learners seem to master plural forms before the possessive 's (*the dog's breakfast*), and irregular verbs (*went, saw*) before regular ones (*worked, looked*). These findings challenge the view that teaching can directly influence learning.

More recently still, research has shown that the built-in syllabus varies according to the learner's L1. So learners who have no **articles** in their L1 (as in Russian) will acquire articles (*a, the*) later and in a different order than learners whose L1 has this feature.

So yes, there is a set order for grammar acquisition, but it is strongly influenced by the learner's L1.

The role of grammar in the curriculum is hotly debated. How it should be taught is equally contentious.

A grammar describes the rules of the language. It follows (so it was thought) that the best way to teach it is to explain these rules and then practise them. Such practice might typically involve translating sentences in and out of the target language. This is the kind of scholastic approach that dominated the teaching of classical languages, like Latin and Greek, and, to a certain extent persists in the teaching of modern languages. Many self-study courses and digital apps subscribe closely to this system.

A radically different approach attempts to simulate the natural way we learn our first language, by immersion in the processes of using language and thereby getting a feel for it. This more experiential approach rejects the explicit teaching of rules and the use of translation.

The characteristics of these two extremes can be summed up like this:

the scholastic approach	the natural approach
academic	experiential
explicit instruction	implicit learning
bilingual	monolingual
rule learning (deductive)	rule discovery (inductive)
focus on written language	focus on spoken language
focus on accuracy	focus on fluency

The history of language teaching has swung between these two extremes. Nowadays, there is a greater tolerance for features of both. So, for example, experiences of language in use might be combined with explicit instruction; giving rules might be combined with discovering them. The exact blend will depend on such factors as the learners' characteristics and the grammar item itself – some more complex items are more easily taught, while others are better simply picked up.

Rules are a useful aid to learning – but only if they are reliable. So many grammar rules seem unreliable because they have exceptions.

Grammar rules are not like road rules: they are not *regulations*, but more like *regularities*. That is, they describe the patterns and combinations that occur in real language use. Some rules are purely about form: *Use the indefinite article an before words that begin with a vowel sound*: an ice cream. Other rules relate specific forms to specific meanings: *We use the present simple with verbs like have, love, want, to talk about states*: I love ice cream.

But language is a living thing: these patterns change. For example, a pattern for asking questions that was common in Shakespeare's day is to invert the **verb** and the **subject**:

Parolles: Why think you so? (*All's Well That Ends Well*)

At the same time, a new pattern using **auxiliary verbs** was emerging:

Rosalind: Do you think so? (*As you Like it*)

Eventually, the new pattern prevailed. Exceptions to rules are often evidence that a change is taking place. Or that the rule has not yet been generalized to all cases, as in the case of irregular verbs.

Sometimes, the exceptions are not really exceptions at all, but evidence of a more general rule. For example, the rule about **state verbs** (above) cannot easily accommodate an example like *I'm loving it!* unless we change the rule so that it is more elastic. (See 55 for an explanation.)

The fact that rules are not 100% reliable does not mean they are useless, so long as we recognize that they are less regulations than 'rules of thumb'.