

# Reviews

## English Grammar Today

R. Carter, M. McCarthy, G. Mark, and A. O'Keefe

Cambridge University Press 2011, 645, pp., £19.95

ISBN 978 0 521 73175 1

## English Grammar Today Workbook

R. Carter, M. McCarthy, G. Mark, and A. O'Keefe

Cambridge University Press 2011, 241 pp., £9.00

ISBN 978 0 521 73176 8

Pack (book with CD-ROM and workbook) £26.00

ISBN 978 0 521 14987 7

Confronted by a chunk of English text, and attempting to infer its structure, an inquisitive Martian might note that it consists of sequences of words of different shapes and sizes, some similarly inflected, and all of them subject to greater or lesser constraints in terms of their order. Scrutiny of longer stretches of text would reveal a high frequency of occurrence of certain 'little words', around which cluster recurring word strings of varying degrees of fixedness. With the help of both a dictionary and a sociolinguist (of pragmatic bent), our Martian would discover that these polymorphous constructions map on to specific intentions, whose precise meanings are normally inferable only by reference to co-text and to context.

These interweaving and overlapping layers of syntax, morphology, collocation, and lexis, and of semantic and pragmatic meaning, are what we loosely bundle together under the name of grammar. But is there really such a thing, and if so, how do you identify and describe it? Take this sentence, for example, chosen at random from a story I happen to be reading.

My block was made of metal, like a giant shipping container.

What is the grammar here? 'X was made'? Or 'made of Y'? Or both: 'X was made of Y'? Or something more abstract: NP + verb 'to be' + past participle + 'of' + NP? Is this the same pattern as 'X was scared of Y' or 'X was told of Y'? And is it grammar or logic

that constrains the order of 'a giant shipping container' (cf. 'a shipping giant container')? Is it grammar or context that disambiguates 'like a giant shipping . . .'? What is the effect of placing 'like a giant shipping container' after 'my block', or at the beginning of the sentence, and are these effects part of the grammar?

And now compound these problems with those of the learner, who needs to know why, for example, the following is non-standard, and whether its problems are grammatical or lexical:

My block was made from metal, as a giant shipping's container.

Faced with so much slipperiness, the baffled learner needs some kind of guidance. As good as learner dictionaries now are (and most of them are very good), they provide only so much information of the type that might answer our putative learner's problems. In the end, some kind of grammar reference is indispensable.

But *what* kind? For a start, where should the boundaries be drawn? Specifically, how much lexical and phraseological information (those recurring word strings) should be included? And how should the information be organized: structurally, in terms of the forms that the learners will need to engage with (past progressive, passive, pronouns, etc.)? Or semantically, in terms of the meanings that they may want to express (possession, prediction, persuasion)? And how prescriptive should the grammar be? Should it accept only standard forms and caution against non-standard ones, or should it present usage as bald statistical facts, of the type: 'Usage X outnumbers usage Y by 20 to 1'? Finally, how much contextual and discursive information should be included, given that, as McCarthy (1998: 78) argues, 'discourse drives grammar, not the reverse'?

As it happens, McCarthy is one of the authors of a new learners' grammar, *English Grammar Today*. He shares with his co-authors a formidable expertise in the fields of grammar description, lexicography, discourse analysis, and corpus linguistics; expertise

that endows this project with impressive weight (not just figuratively, I might add!). As well as the 645-page grammar itself, there is a serviceable Workbook of exercises and an accompanying CD-ROM that contains not only all the book content but also 200 extra entries to boot. The text is liberally supplied with examples, many extending for more than a single sentence, and all of which are 'real', we are told (although I suspect some legitimate tidying up may have occurred), and which would presumably be within the comprehension range of an intermediate-level learner. The explanations themselves avoid excessive metalanguage and are clear and to the point. There is also a handy glossary at the back. The overall design is clean and attractive, with discreet use of icons and signposting; a useful feature of the Workbook is that its Key includes cross-references to the relevant sections in the grammar.

So, how has this impressive team approached the daunting task of packaging, for learners, the slippery, messy, elusive thing called grammar?

Wisely, perhaps, the authors have eschewed either a purely formal organization or a purely functional one, favouring the alphabetical model popularized by Swan (1980) and successfully emulated by both Leech (1989) and Broughton (1990). Thus, we find 'politeness', 'possession', 'prefer', and 'prefixes' all in bed together. There are almost 600 such entries, we are told, and, while this kind of organization assumes that users will know how to label what they are looking for, there is also an index just in case. Nevertheless, it is not as easy as it looks. Why, for example, did the index entry for 'phrasal verbs' direct me to the article on 'prepositional phrases', only to be told that phrasal verbs are filed under 'Verbs: multi-word verbs', the equivalent of two clicks on a website? More frustrating still, to answer the question 'Is I'm lovin' it! grammatical?', I drew blanks at each of these 'clicks': 'dynamic', 'stative', 'progressive', 'continuous', 'aspect', 'love', 'like', finally running the answer to ground in the entry 'Present simple or present continuous?' Why, I wonder, is this aspect distinction referenced only for present tenses? (But more on that one later.)

The range of topics covered in the 800 or so entries (including the 200 on the CD-ROM) is impressively broad and comprehensive, stretching the concept of grammar about as far as it will go. It includes not only entries on 'conventional' grammar (tenses, modality, clause types, phrase structure, and so on) but also a great deal of information about specific function words ('but', 'any', 'by', 'so', 'have', etc.), about high-frequency and easily confusable lexical items, such as 'come/go', 'make/do', 'been/gone', 'arise/

rise'; about pragmatics (greetings, requests, commands, politeness); about spelling and punctuation; about different registers and genres (such as taboo language, newspaper headlines, and text messages); and about different varieties, including a useful summary of the differences between British and American English. It is hard to imagine any questions that our Martian would not find an answer to in this colossal achievement.

As for prescriptivism, the authors are not coy about having adopted a normative stance: 'Learners of English should use the standard forms of the language in most situations' (p. 3). This is only to be expected since this is a pedagogic grammar, one that models the target language for the learner, rather than one that describes its infinite variety for the specialist. Modelling implies some consensus as to what is being modelled, consensus implies norms, and norms imply a degree of prescriptivism, although of the norm-describing, rather than the norm-enforcing kind, one would hope. Hence, the text is liberally sprinkled with warnings regarding non-standard usage, and typical learner errors are unequivocally proscribed (using the now standard typographical device of striking them out).

Nevertheless, some of these warnings and striking-out come across as a little too categorical at times: the frequent use of formulae such as 'we always ...' or 'we never ...' produces statements that, on occasions, are relatively easily refuted by corpus evidence. A little hedging ('generally', 'seldom', etc.) would have been both less incriminating and more accurate. For instance (with reference to the aforementioned multi-word verbs), we find: 'If the object is a personal pronoun ("me", "you", "him", "us", etc.), we always put the pronoun before the particle' (p. 547). Not true. Or, 'We don't use the continuous form with verbs of mental processes' (p. 417). Not true.

The problem is not so much that these statements are inaccurate (and, admittedly, the counter-examples are few and far between): it is that they are not explanatory. There is a *reason* that the pronoun is rarely given end-weight in phrasal verb constructions and that is because it seldom encodes new information. And the reason that continuous forms are less often used with mental process verbs is that states of knowledge tend not to be dynamic or evolving (a core meaning of progressive aspect): you either know something or you do not, you either understand something or you do not. What would it have cost to include explanations like these? Offering an insight into the reasons underlying the rules might better prepare users to deal with

'exceptions' (for example 'I'm lovin' it!'), as well as equipping them with the means to fine-tune their meanings in speaking and writing. After all, reasons—rather than rules—are what distinguish 'grammar as choice' from 'grammar as structure'. Grammar as structure rules out ill-formed sentences such as \*'I are loving it'. Grammar as choice, on the other hand, accepts that 'I love it' and 'I'm loving it' are not only well formed, but that both can occur and do occur (the former more often than the latter, for good reason) and that the choice of one or the other has different effects.

But it is only a *pedagogic* grammar, you protest. Language learners do not want choices; they want *rules*. Maybe. But to my mind 'pedagogic' implies something more than simply stating rules (that would be a *pedantic* grammar, perhaps). Pedagogic implies that the grammar is somehow learning oriented: a pedagogic grammar is one that the user not only consults but also can learn something from. As Larsen-Freeman (2003: 50) puts it

To my way of thinking, it is important for learners not only to know the rules, but also to know why they exist. I am not referring to how the language came to be; I am referring to what I call the 'reasons' underlying the rules.

As an instance of an explanatory approach, observe how Leech (op.cit.: 394, emphasis added) both mitigates the force of a rule and takes the time to add a reason:

Verbs not normally taking the Progressive.

Be careful with verbs of the kinds outlined in 3a–3f below. They usually do not have a Progressive form, *because they describe a state*.

A less pedantic and more pedagogic approach would have required, in *English Grammar Today*, separate entries on tense and aspect or at least on continuous and perfect aspect. Trying to deal with aspectual meaning when it is in combination with tense (as in the present continuous or the present perfect), and in the absence of any discussion of lexical aspect, results in the kind of awkwardness found in the treatment of the present perfect, to take just one example. When the present perfect simple and the present perfect continuous are contrasted (p. 417), we are told that the difference is one of completion (present perfect) versus incompleteness (present perfect continuous). But a few pages back (on p. 411), we were told that at least one use of the present perfect continuous is 'to talk about a finished activity in the recent past', i.e. completion. How, then, is the student to choose? Whether or not the activity is

completed does not seem to be a reliable guide. To compound matters, we are then told that 'sometimes we can use either form and the meaning is the same' (p. 417). But there is no explanation as to at what times and, specifically, with what kinds of verbs, this meaning difference is the same (or, more correctly, negligible). Again, this is a case of rules but no reasons.

And the rules are not always that reliable either, I'm afraid to say. The section on articles starts well but then falls into the trap of conflating specific reference with definite reference. So we get '*The* makes a noun specific' (p. 7). This blurs the fact that the specific/non-specific axis intersects with the definite/indefinite one, so that specific reference can be both definite and indefinite. Thus, 'A whale cannot breathe underwater' (=indefinite and non-specific, i.e. any member of the class 'whale'); 'Captain Ahab was killed by a whale' (=indefinite and specific, i.e. a particular whale, but not one known to both speaker and listener); 'The whale was called Moby-Dick' (=definite and specific, i.e. part of shared knowledge), and 'The whale is warm-blooded' (=definite and non-specific).

Another example: the section on conditionals adheres to the classic but contested (see, for example, Maule 1988) division into three structures (first, second, and third conditionals) rather than into two semantic groups (real and unreal). Oddly, the term 'real' is reserved for constructions where the tense in both clauses is the same (present + present, past + past, etc.). More oddly still, allowance is made for the fact that, in these 'real' conditional structures, 'we can also use modal verbs in the main clause' (p. 144). But, hang on, can't we also use modal verbs in the main clause of the first conditional (not to mention the second and third)? So, is 'If you wash, I'll dry' a real conditional or a first conditional? And does it actually matter?

Meanwhile, in this prolonged discussion of forms, the concept that is crucial in terms of classifying conditional sentences—i.e. the use of backshift to connote hypothetical meaning—gets sidelined. Compare this treatment with that of Broughton (op.cit.), for example, where a clear division is made between 'open' and 'hypothetical' conditions, with backshift highlighted in the case of the latter. It is elegant in its simplicity, and no mention is made of the trinity. Nor is there any need to. The two-way distinction gathers them all up, along with the mixed conditionals as well.

This may seem picky (and it is always easier to spot the holes in a fabric than to admire the overall

design), but conditional constructions—along with phrasal verbs, articles, and continuous and perfect aspect—are all areas that students regularly identify as being some of the most problematic in English grammar. It is a little disappointing, therefore, that, in these respects, and given its pedigree, this grammar is not a great deal more helpful than its predecessors.

To be fair, when the book is dealing with some of the less intractable areas of grammar (and this is by far the bulk of it), it is invariably clear, concise, and accurate. And often inspired. The section on the use of the passive, for example, is not only explanatory but also a model of concision. And an outstanding feature of this project is the wealth of detail on aspects of spoken language, including discourse markers, ellipsis, headers and tails, vague language, and that sort of thing, detail that no other student grammar has matched (and which, incidentally, might usefully be extracted and collated into a separate, potentially ground-breaking, book of its own). As just two instances of many, check out the section on adverbs as short responses ('Precisely!') (p. 43), and double negation with some reporting verbs (p. 313), as in 'He's not a teacher, I don't think'.

By way of a final test, let's return to our dummy student and his problems with the following:

My block was made from metal, as a giant shipping's container.

Let's see if the book under review can help. First up, the index directs us to an entry on the CD-ROM where the difference between 'made from' and 'made of' is neatly explained and exemplified. Under the entry for 'as', we do not have to look far to be told that 'we don't use *as* + noun to mean "similar to." We use *like* + noun' (p. 72). For the choice between 'shipping's container' or 'shipping container', the entry under 'possession' pointed out that 'we don't usually use the possessive 's for things' (p. 391). Result of research? 'My block was made of metal, like a giant shipping container.' All in all, a pretty good hit-rate, and not one that, I suspect, this book's competitors could better.

To conclude, there is a great deal to admire in this work and the authors and publishers deserve to be congratulated for what can only have been a massively complex undertaking. *English Grammar Today* sets a new standard in terms of the breadth and range of student grammars. Moreover, this project demonstrates—if there were any doubt—how effectively corpora can be put to the service of L2 learning. My residual gripes stem from the fact that, with a title like *English Grammar*

*Today*, I was expecting a slightly more innovative approach to some of the knottier problems in the pedagogic treatment of English grammar.

## References

- Broughton, G. 1990. *The Penguin English Grammar A-Z for Advanced Students*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. 2003. *Teaching Language: From Grammar to Grammaticing*. Boston, MA: Heinle.
- Leech, G. 1989. *An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Maule, D. 1988. "'Sorry, but if he comes, I go': Teaching conditionals'. *ELT Journal* 42/2: 117–23.
- McCarthy, M. 1998. *Spoken Language and Applied Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Swan, M. 1980. *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## The reviewer

Scott Thornbury teaches on an MATESOL program at The New School, New York. He is the author of a number of books on language and methodology, as well as series editor for the *Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers* (Cambridge University Press).

Email: [scott.thornbury@gmail.com](mailto:scott.thornbury@gmail.com)

doi:10.1093/elt/ccs002