New Standards in a Glorious Grammar

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Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum (eds)
The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language
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I have read many excellent accounts of the English language over the years, but this recent publication by Cambridge University Press is by far the most impressive. In fact, I would say The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language is one of the most superb works of academic scholarship ever to appear on the English linguistics scene. The editors, Rodney Huddleston (Research Consultant, University of Queensland) and Geoffrey K. Pullum (Professor of Linguistics, University of California, Santa Cruz), are leading authorities in this field; so too are their thirteen co-authors. This was a magnificent team effort, spanning more than ten years. Together these linguists have produced a monumental work that offers easily the most comprehensive and thought-provoking treatment of English grammar to date. Nothing rivals this work, with respect to breadth, depth and consistency of coverage.

Those who want to be advised on usage, however, beware. This is not a style guide or a usage manual; in other words, it doesn’t recommend or condemn. The book necessarily adopts the descriptive format of modern-day linguistics rather than the more traditional prescriptive approach. This is not to say that The Cambridge Grammar will not benefit your language skills. If you are a native speaker of English, being made to think about your language in a scientific way is very different from the sort of unconscious knowledge you receive as a speaker of the language. As the editors have also argued, paying attention to issues of English structure and seeing how others construct sentences is certainly helpful when it comes to constructing your own. For a rich, well-informed and immensely readable account of English structure, you can do no better than this.

What makes The Cambridge Grammar unique is its ability to draw on the insights and achievements of both traditional grammar and theoretical linguistics. In this regard, the editors have fulfilled their aim. Here is a work that successfully ‘bridge[s] the large gap between traditional grammar and the partial descriptions of English grammar proposed by those working in the field of linguistics’. The twenty chapters cover not only the principles of English sentence structure, with separate chapters on topics like negation, communicative
structure (the way speakers and writers go about packaging their message), deictic and anaphoric expressions (such as temporal and locative expressions now, yesterday, here, there and personal pronouns), but also in-depth treatments of morphology and word formation. Also included — readers will be pleased to note — is a chapter on punctuation. The accounts in each of these chapters are based on a vast array of different source material: dictionaries and other grammars, computer-searchable text collections such as the Wall Street Journal Corpus, the World Wide Web, various corpora of English (including the Australian Corpus of English) and, of course, the native speaker intuitions of the authors themselves, and others they have consulted. It is a superbly structured book with an impressive bibliography, a list of further reading, and both a lexical and conceptual index.

It is an indispensable reference work, not just for linguistic specialists but anybody with an interest in the grammatical issues of English. Admittedly, some will find it more complex and detailed than they require. There is much more in the way of syntactic argumentation than normally appears in a grammar book. The authors are meticulous in providing discussion of grammatical concepts, especially where these concepts are new and where they are introducing innovative terminology (such as ‘hollow clauses’ and ‘supplementation’).

Some readers might find it disturbing when their cherished categories are rejected or modified, for there are many instances where the work departs from traditional accounts. However, the authors are always careful to include an elegant and detailed discussion to persuade readers that tradition in this instance has been wrong-headed. For example, the distinction between before as a preposition (before the movie), adverb (I saw the movie before) and subordinating conjunction (before the movie ended) has been abandoned. In this treatment, before belongs to a single category of preposition: on each occasion it takes a different type of complement (noun phrase, zero or clause).

Furthermore, the traditional classification of subordinate clauses into noun clause, adjective clause and adverbial clause has also been rejected. The authors show that this is a mistaken and unhelpful analysis of these clauses: noun clauses don’t behave like nouns, adjective clauses share virtually none of the properties of adjectives, and many adverb clauses aren’t in fact clauses at all. And, whereas traditional grammar often blurs the distinction between grammar and meaning, this work distinguishes strictly between grammatical concepts and semantic ones. Gone are those traditional definitions based on meaning; in other words, notional descriptions like ‘a noun is the name of a person, place or thing’. It’s easy to demonstrate how inadequate these are. Compare the strings my love of grammar and I love grammar. Both instances of love express the same emotion of ‘fondness, deep attachment’ (as opposed to ‘hatred’); yet one is a noun (although not a person, place or thing) and one is a verb (although not an action). Clearly, semantics is not much help here. As this work shows, the relationship between form and meaning is much more complex.

Occasionally, the authors allow multiple analyses. This may come as a surprise to those who are used to grammars where analytical choices with respect to, say, word classes or grammatical relations are presented as given. For example, in Chapter 13, two different structures are offered for the comparative construction Bob is as generous as Liz — Liz is either the subject of a reduced clause (Bob is as generous as Liz is) or the complement noun phrase of as. After four pages of discussion, the authors conclude there is no compelling evidence one way or another. This sort of attention to theoretical detail sets new standards for reference grammars. Indeed, this work would also serve as an excellent text for any student of syntactic theory.

In short, The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language offers the most outstanding account of present-day English grammar that is available. I cannot recommend it highly enough.