Dragons that Won’t Be Slain:
English Grammar Models and How They Got That Way

An Overview of Grammar and Grammars

“So, tell me. What do you do for a living?”
“I’m a teacher.”
“Oh, really? Where do you teach?”
“At the local college.”
“How nice! What do you teach?”
“Uh, text analysis.”
“Text analysis? What is that?”
“It’s the study of the structure and meanings of texts.”
“Oh? Seriously now. What do you teach?”
“Well, uh, English.”
“English! Oh my god! I better watch my grammar!”

And that’s the way such conversations typically go. ‘Teaching English’ becomes ‘teaching grammar,’ and ‘teaching grammar’ means correcting others, or more precisely punishing the unsuspecting for using a wrong word, putting a modifier in the wrong place, or messing up a subject and its verb (whatever those two items are!). Visions of a Miss Thistlebottom and her grammar hobgoblins or of Dr. Syntax or Mrs. Grundy and their admonitions to ‘Sit up straight! Speak clearly and directly!’ arise seemingly from nowhere. Eerie.

These negative and somewhat mixed-up views tell those of us who really find all language a pleasure to study that perhaps the most appropriate way to start a survey of English grammars is to try to define the term grammar. It’s also, by the way, one of the more controversial ways to plunge into such a study
because the term grammar is hotly debated in academic circles and generally misapplied or variously applied by everyone else! As a term grammar is much like style, tone, or even language: everyone has heard it, virtually everyone has a definition for it, everyone feels a bit unsure about it, and, frequently, no one really wants to abandon his or her understanding no matter what.

Unfortunately, individual definitions may overlap but not coincide or may coincide but not express the same ideas. The introductory dialogue hints at these conflicting definitions and their complex meanings. Grammarian Constance Weaver, for instance, notes that most people see grammar as a utilitarian item: a means to know how to use a language correctly. It's from this understanding that grammar gets its pejorative nature. The forms that these 'dictates on correctness' take, however, is more rightly called usage or linguistic etiquette.

Usages really are sanctioned styles, language varieties deemed—by whom we're often not sure—suitable to defined situations or contexts. Several other basic (that is, generally understood) attitudes toward grammar define it as the following:

- A complete structural pattern of a language,
- An objective and systematic description of a language,
- A partial description of a language based on purist or pedagogical objectives,
• An authoritative book that, when memorized, shows writers how to eliminate those pesky little lapses called errors in their prose and, consequently, makes their written work perfect—or at least communicative.

Quite a list. Defined as structure, grammar seems to equal the skeleton of language, the frame on which meaning, nuance, style, and diversity rest. Yet as soon as one comes up with this analogy for grammar it breaks down. Our common sense urges us to believe that the structure of a sentence by itself can't equal meaning nor can sentence form express all the subtleties speakers inculcate in their discourses and writers see in their texts. Even words and structure together can't convey the full significance of utterances or texts. Surely meaning or style or diversity has to influence structure, as well. But just what is the nature of this connection, and, more to the point of this discussion, how do we speakers and writers of English exploit that connection so we can write better and maybe even faster?

Much the same concern arises when we pause over the other definitions of grammar. For example, what exactly makes a description objective or systematic? Isn't objectivity influenced by the observer, and aren't systems always subject to revision? Lawyers know, for instance, that testimony from on-site witnesses is
notoriously wrong. For another example, are systems never revised or rethought? If you think not, you should take a look at computer programs where systems are constantly being revised. Moreover, while striving for a ‘partial description’ seems a sensible goal because language is so complex, doing such an analysis just for teachers or writers or critics limits the outcome too much. A partial description doesn’t help people understand language in general or use the language that they speak to write any better. And since language ability is a primary quality of being human, we all want to know more about it.

Trying to narrow definitions or limit analyses also doesn’t help. Think about the problems faced by those who translate texts from one language to another, from one medium to another (such as written fiction to film), or from one venue (such as scientific research) to another (such as popularized explanations of science). How does a restrictive definition or analysis help these language users capture meaning subtleties better? Such singular approaches don’t tell writers and editors how to manipulate language to emphasize or de-emphasize ideas. Nor do they reveal in any meaningful way the multifarious relationships and abstractions that are language. Or, more immediate to most English speakers is the question which book will be the authoritative work on grammar? For instance, probably the most extensive ‘grammar’ book for English
is *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* by linguists Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik, whose credentials for writing such a book are, indeed, impressive. At nearly 2,000 pages, *A Comprehensive Grammar* is encyclopedic; unfortunately, it is neither exhaustive nor reflective of American English, decidedly the most important contemporary version of English. For instance, *A Comprehensive Grammar* spent about six pages discussing subjunctive mood; Wayne Harsh wrote an extensive study on just the subjunctive titled *The Subjunctive in English*. James Frances went Harsh one better. He wrote a 160-page book on just the semantics of subjunctive mood (*The Semantics of the English Subjunctive*). Each of these is surely a more comprehensive discussion than *A Comprehensive Grammar's* half-dozen pages!

But, let's return to definitions of *grammar*. Neither language specialists nor everyday speakers have one true, indisputable, and unchanging explication of *grammar*. And it's beginning to look as if we'll have to dig further for some sense to this way of studying language. If we turn to language professionals, we find that even linguists can't settle on just one definition. They point out that *grammar* has been defined many other ways and that many of these definitions have both confused and changed people's view of the term. For example, the intuitive knowledge that humans have of the language they speak is called
grammar. This capacity for language isn't taught, memorized, or otherwise learned; no one steals into our cribs when our parents are asleep and gives us 'grammar' lessons that teach us how to speak or understand language. Grammar just happens. In fact, by age five we have internalized the grammar of our first language(s) but not the grammar lesson most parents insist that their children learn: to say “please” and “thank you.” As language users, every human being masters abilities to understand and to produce all and only the sentences of the first language(s) each of us is reared in. We each acquire this first or native language without any direct instruction, fill-in-the-blank tests, final examinations, or parental clout. And, what's even more amazing, is that, if we are reared in a home where more than one language is regularly spoken, we will acquire the languages spoken there at the same rate as we would if only one language were spoken in the home.

Yet another definition of grammar is a method of describing a language at given periods of its history. Historical studies, usually called diachronic investigations, can be truly fascinating if we just remember that events don't make history. People make history. People grow up, study, live, and die in communities; these communities become cultures when someone comes along and begins to identify a community's behavior patterns, beliefs, institutions,
prejudices, arts, and quirks. All too frequently, as most of us know, the beliefs, prejudices, peculiarities, and other aspects of one culture are both transmitted to subsequent generations of that culture and, as you’ll see in the following chapters, are adopted by and altered a bit by other cultures. Ideas and approaches regarding how to live, how to communicate, and how to interact with others sometimes reappear with strange permutations. Even misinterpretations and flawed application—that is, flat out errors in thinking—can reappear many years later as truisms. For instance, Bishop Robert Lowth (1710-1787), applying the algebraic principle of multiplying two negative numbers to produce a positive number, reasoned that two negatives in a sentence as producing a positive meaning.¹ We now hear this rule of grammar drilled into us as a mark of eloquence and sophistication, although for most of our history we have used multiple negation. In short, not only can history be a biased recollection of what people did and thought, it can leave rather subjective judgments with all of us. And the best way to decide if we want to stay loyal to a belief or system is to find out how it came about, how it has changed, and what it offers us as language users today. The history of grammar is interesting if we

¹Noah Webster, the self-anointed standard-bearer of propriety and elegance in American English remarks that “in polite and classical language, two negatives destroy the negation and express an affirmative. . .. In popular language, two negatives are used for a negation, according to the practice of the ancient Greeks and the modern French.” Philosophical and Practical Grammar,
remember that it's filled with cultural assumptions, biases, idiosyncrasies, and a few sound judgments. Knowing who said what about what puts grammar into perspective rather quickly!

Some people divide grammar even more by arguing that there's a basic grammar for a language and a grammar for the literature of a language. Language grammar includes its descriptions, rules, formats, and usage boundaries, a literary grammar lists the rules, formats, and usage restrictions particular to fiction and poetry. Literary grammars include stipulations such as nouns and their articles/modifiers can be written as articles/modifiers and verbs.

As Suzette H. Elgin (1973) notes, this rule explains how readers of poet e.e. cummings (1923) can easily understand that the lines

...he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men(both little and small)

Cared for anyone not at all

they sowed their isn't they reaped their same... (117)

have meaning. This type of stipulation, however, works just as well for non-

1807, p. 191-91.
literary texts.

Thus, one might ask, why have a literary grammar? Writing compendious literary grammars, after all, would be a daunting task even if the grammarian left out different poets' eccentricities. What's more, a literary grammar might or might not explain much at all about everyday styles or help to guide writers or editors toward more readable texts. In other words, although fascinating, literary grammars would repeat much about language already found in surveys of language structure and meaning and could have limited common practicality. Nonetheless, they are a topic worth additional attention.

But even that's not all grammar can be. *Grammar* can also be considered formal systems or models developed by language scholars (e.g., linguists) to explain a language. Several versions of these systems are surveyed in this book, including those labeled traditional, structural, transformational-generative, case, X-bar, and functional. ‘Surveying English grammar models' actually means presenting the accumulation of terms, rules, and methods for analyzing how language is used. It means distinguishing between *applied models* and *theories* of language. These models and theories, like so many things in our lives, are debated, changed, disregarded, misunderstood, misapplied, revered, and, sometimes, even ignored.
Before we get really lost, let's look at one more sense of grammar, a sense that may help clear up some of the questions about what grammar is and why people find it both horrifying and fascinating. Perhaps the most profitable way of looking at the term grammar is to return to an earlier definition and refine it. Consider the definition of grammar as sentence structure or, in more technical terms, as a branch of linguistic study intermediate between phonology (the study of sound) and semantics (the study of meaning). Grammar, thus, includes morphology (the study of word forms), syntax (the study of ways words are linked together), the interaction of morphology and syntax, and the relative acceptability and appropriateness of the strings that this interaction builds. (Quite a mouthful!) Try conceiving of this definition this way:

![Elements of a language](image)

**Figure 1.1: Language Elements**
In fact, this definition or view of grammar as the study of sentence structure, is one of the most widely held opinions; hence, it is fundamental to the following discussions of grammar models. Notice that defining grammar this way does not strictly equate grammar and sentence structure. Nor does it mean every model or theory's proponents agree that a sentence is a definable form in speaking or that a sentence is expressly a string between a capital letter and a period in writing.

Holding this general definition of grammar in mind through the following discussions helps explain why grammar is a study of the possible structures of a language and why some proposed explanations of and arguments for generalities about these structures aren't as favored or as understandable as others. In brief, some grammar models meet the requirements of a study of English better than others depending on the criteria used to judge the study's evidence, reasoning, and conclusions.

What other generalizations are reasonable before we can undertake a serious examination of the different ways grammarians study grammar? First of all, it's worth remembering that defining individual terms is an important step in making sense of language structure for language specialists and for folks interested in language. Two generally ignored positions tend to make
understanding grammatical definitions more challenging. On the one hand, all humans have language; therefore, each of us is a ‘language specialist’ in that we can create and manipulate words, clauses, and utterances. Many people assume that since they use language everyday they should automatically know what all the terms used for describing that language mean. And, what’s worse, native speakers of a language assume that if they don’t know what a term means it’s because the term is vague, confusing, or inaccurate or because they, as speakers and writers, are grammatically deficient. Neither presumed cause accurately fits the situation. If using the language meant an individual should naturally know the names and definitions of the parts, then anyone who drives a car should automatically know what a carburetor, flywheel, rocker arm, or alternator is. Or if a language user intuitively knew all the terms for describing a language unit, someone who eats should intuitively know all the terms for mastication, digestion, and evacuation. Most of us have to learn such terms and analyze how the functions associated with those terms interact.

On the other hand, people who study language professionally need a jargon for their field even though that field is as commonplace as language. Much the same is true for other professionals when you think about it. Physicists evaluate how energy and matter, the physical properties of the natural world,
interact. Chemists investigate elements, mixtures, and compounds. And botanists study plant morphology and, among other topics, sexual preferences; that is, phenomena happening all around us. Anthropologists study cultures and relics. These disciplines and many others have professional jargon that helps them accurately label and describe primarily for others in the field what they're doing. The same is true of those who study language as a discipline. Grammarians, for instance, will use the term *subjunctive* because they know other professionals in this discipline grasp this jargon term.

Yet, just like anthropologists or biologists, different language professionals vary in how they limit or apply the jargon they use. In other words, a term used by a linguist may not have the identical meaning it has when used by an editor. That is, even though each professional is employing a term in an effort to speak to other professionals in the field, the sub-disciplines ascribe to slightly different ways of defining the term. It is the same way with professional jargon in scientific disciplines. Physicists, chemists, botanists, anthropologists, and linguists all use the term *morphology* in their disciplines; and in each discipline the term generally indicates structure. Yet each field adds its particular emphasis to this general definition, and individuals within a field shade the definition to fit their data and hypotheses. What’s more, definitions
change, sometimes rather dramatically, over time. Consider, for instance, that the unit Aristotle defined as an *atom* only superficially resembles what contemporary chemists call an atom.

These situations—specialized terms for everyday processes, professional jargon for common phenomena, and individualized and historically adapted terms—confound those who are new to or unfamiliar with grammar study. One way to resolve these seeming contradictions is to equate a study of language structure, or grammar, with a study of being human, or psychology. We all live these studies; now it's time to understand more about how to discuss, evaluate, and marvel at how we live.

Overview of Dragons That Won’t Be Slain

This survey gives its readers

- A brief history of *grammar* centering on the ways theorists have seen grammar as a part of what it means to be human;
- A review of the primary definitions and applications each grammar model favors;
- A series of exercises that readers can work to test their understanding of the grammar models; and
- A discussion, at times irreverent and at times all too serious, of just what
all these grammar models can do.

The last point may seem a strange one to bring up—or maybe an all too obvious one, depending on what readers already think about grammar. It arises from a question that Suzette Elgin (1975) asks in print2 and countless language students ask every time they find themselves studying grammar: So What? While some people find this question impertinent, many of us find the question intriguing because it mixes the philosophical and theoretical with the practical and demands the best of both approaches. What's more, if we take the question seriously, it's a very challenging question to answer. That's why the last section of this text goes into some of the reasons that students of literature, language and literature teachers, writers, editors, and everyday readers gain from understanding the ways linguists and other professional interpreters of language study view the elements that make up grammar.

Rather than explore the So What? question fully in this introduction, consider just one current debate that you may have an easier time understanding because you know more about grammar and its various models. In late 1996, the

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2In the chapter “So What?” Elgin proposes that students need to understand the basics of transformational grammars so they can understand subsequent explanations of language, so they can better evaluate lexical and structural ambiguities, and so they can better understand themselves as language users. Other reasons, however, also exist for studying grammar seriously, ones that have practical as well as linguistic implications.
Oakland [California] Board of Education approved a resolution directing the Superintendent of the public school system to immediately devise and implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their primary language for the combined purpose of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language whether it is known as ‘Ebonics,’ ‘African Language Systems,’ ‘Pan-African Communication Behaviors’ or other description, and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills. . . (cited in USA Today, 6 January 1997, 12A).

The primary issue, in a nutshell, is whether Ebonics, a word created from blending the words ebony and phonics, is a language or a dialect of English. How do you decide which Ebonics is (or could be) if you don't know a fair amount about grammar and about how various grammar models define language and parse its elements? The ‘So What?’ of this issue exceeds academic arguments. If, through a careful application of grammatical principles, you determine Ebonics is a language, what does it mean for the individuals who speak it? What does it mean for funding—or abolishing, as Californians have voted to do—bilingual programs in public schools, especially when money is in short supply? If,
however, you determine Ebonics is not a language but a dialect, what does that mean for the individuals who speak it? Does it justify the argument that Ebonics cannot be used in academic discourse? What, moreover, does such a widespread dialect mean for the future of American English?

Finding out what others have said and written about grammar and understanding the debates about grammar models seem sensible methods for deciding such complicated issues as the one posed above. So, let's get started!