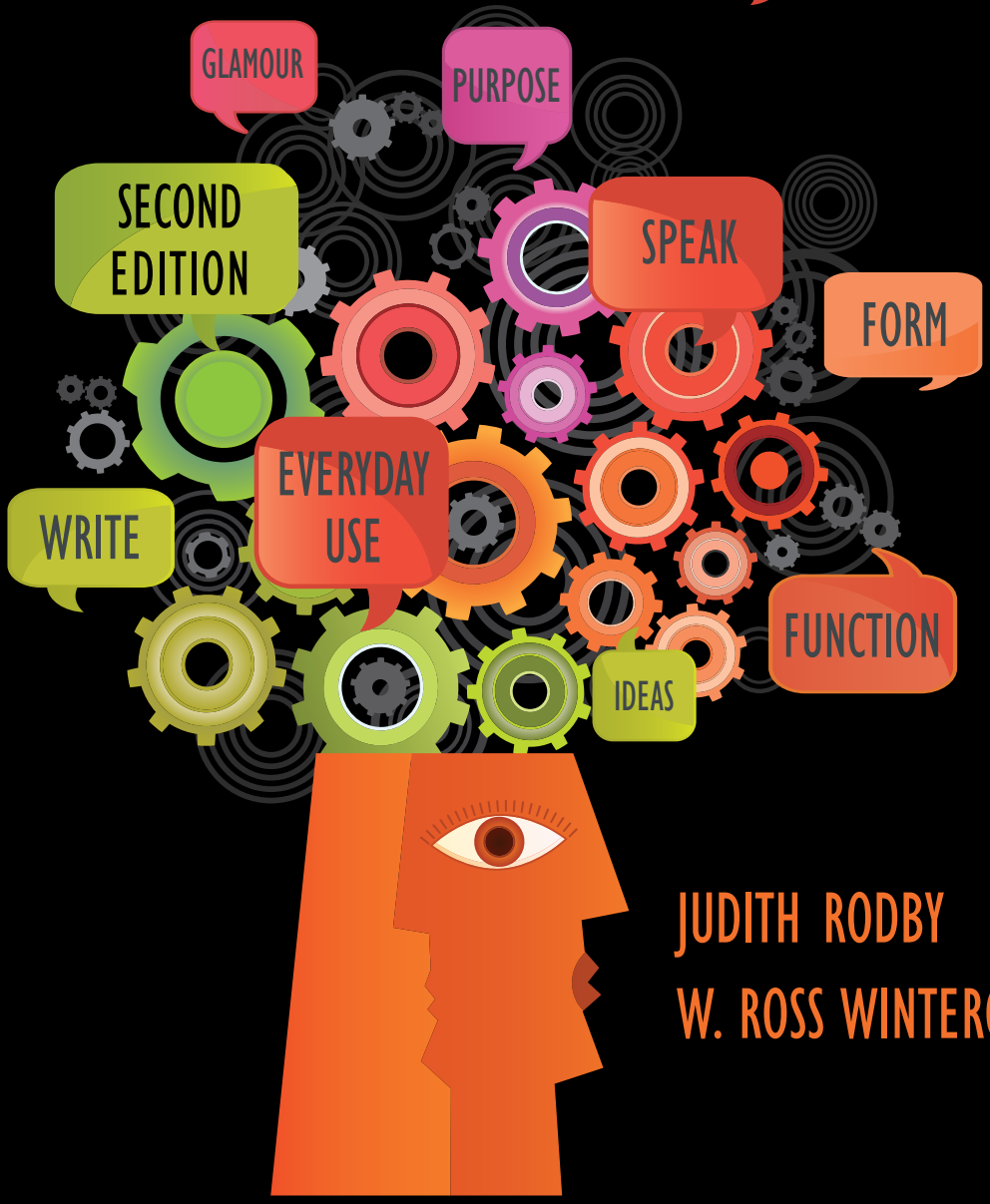
THE USES OF GRAMMAR



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Second Edition

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Parlor Press
Anderson, South Carolina
www.parlorpress.com

Parlor Press LLC, Anderson, South Carolina, USA

Printed in the United States of America

S A N: 2 5 4 - 8 8 7 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rodby, Judith.
The uses of grammar / Judith Rodby, W. Ross Winterowd. -- 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-60235-250-6 (pbk. : acid-free paper) -- ISBN 978-1-60235-251-3 (mobi) -- ISBN 978-1-60235-252-0 (Adobe eBook) -- ISBN 978-1-60235-253-7 (ePub)
1. Grammar, Comparative and general. 2. Linguistic analysis (Linguistics) I. Winterowd, W. Ross. II. Title.
P151.R69 2011
415--dc23

2011046788

1 2 3 4 5

Interior layout by Chelsie Messenger. Cover design by David Blakesley.
The first edition of this book was published by Oxford University Press.
Printed on acid-free paper.

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Preface

The Uses of Grammar is the result of a painstaking process of field-testing in the classroom, refinement on the basis of student feedback, further testing, and further refinement. The authors' goal was to create the ultimately teachable textbook—without sacrificing intellectual and scholarly integrity.

Forms, Functions, Uses

Three questions constitute the superstructure of this book. What are the *forms* in the grammar of American English? How do those forms *function* in that grammar? And how are those forms *used* in speaking and writing—for various audiences in diverse situations to achieve the desired purposes?

Features

We believe these features will make *The Uses of Grammar* effective and interesting:

- Boxed materials, including "Challenger" and "For Discussion" items, will stretch the students' understanding of the principles presented in the text and encourage classroom discussion of concepts.
- The examples illustrating principles and the items in the exercises throughout the text reflect real-life language use: quotations from celebrities, periodicals, literature, and a wide array of "everyday" language users.

- The Instructor's Manual accompanying *The Uses of Grammar* contains (1) an alternate table of contents, enabling instructors to base their courses on the traditional structure, moving from parts of speech to phrases, clauses, and sentences; (2) answer keys to all of the exercises in the book; and (3) some of the authors' ideas about teaching grammar.
- A companion website is available online (www.parlorpress.com/grammar). Its base consists of (1) additional exercises keyed to the sections of chapters in the book; (2) answer keys to these exercises; (3) a "chapter" on the system of punctuation; and (4) an extended discussion of English as a second language. The website will grow in response to adopters' feedback and the need to address issues regarding language and teaching that arise on occasion (e.g., issues about public figures' use of language).

Language Learning and English as a Second Language

One of the most important uses of grammar is understanding the processes whereby people learn languages. English as a second language (ESL) is an educational, social, and political problem. What are the most effective ways of teaching speakers of other languages to be fluent in English? What are the social consequences, particularly in the United States but also worldwide, of the inability to speak English? Should English be the official language of the United States?

The problems of ESL are implicit subjects throughout the chapters of this book, and Chapter 17 directly addresses ESL, as do materials at the companion website.

The Flexibility of This Book

The structure of *The Uses of Grammar* results from our many years of teaching undergraduate grammar courses, Judith Rodby at California State University–Chico and Ross Winterowd at University of Southern California. The traditional structure of grammar textbooks moves from the smallest unit to the largest: parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc.) through phrases and clauses to sentences. There are, of course, good reasons for preferring this structure—not the least of which is what we call "the grammarian's dilemma" or "the grammatical circle": you can't understand the whole without understanding the parts, and you can't understand the parts without understanding the whole. Our way out of this dilemma is the structure we have chosen for this book, but there is no reason in principle why students and teachers should not begin with an understanding of parts of speech and work upward, toward the structure (the syntax) of sentences. For this reason, we have provided an alternate table of contents in the Instructor's Manual.

An Attitude Toward Grammar

When mathematicians speak of the *elegance* of their subject, they are thinking about the underlying consistency and neatness, and about the fundamental simplicity of the field: from a handful of basic principles, mathematicians develop theories and equations that attempt to explain the nature of the universe.

Consider the elegance of grammar. The articles you read in the newspaper this morning, the novel by Dickens you enjoyed last week, the speech delivered by your senator on the Fourth of July, the instructions for operating your new computer—underlying these and all other uses of the English language are just eight basic patterns that make up sentences and the structures derived from sentences. One of our main goals in this book is to change attitudes toward grammar. It is not a dull, nit-picking subject; it is as elegant as mathematics or music.

The Ongoing Process

Some wise person said, "No piece of writing is ever finished. It's just abandoned." Or, to state the idea as a cliché, there's always room for improvement. We urge users of this book to contact us through the companion website with suggestions for revision. What should we delete? What should we add? What should we change to make the explanations clearer? What should we rearrange?

Acknowledgments

The suggestions of reviewers were a significant factor in our revisions and refinements of this book, and we express our sincere appreciation to Douglas Biber, Northern Arizona University; Daniel R. Davis, University of Michigan–Dearborn; William Gustafson, Southern Connecticut State University; Charles Hill, University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh; Paul Justice, San Diego State University; William Provost, University of Georgia; William Roberts, University of Massachusetts–Lowell; Lois Spitzer, University of Nebraska; and Beth Rapp Young, University of Central Florida.

We were particularly fortunate in working with the editor of the first edition published by Oxford University Press, Janet M. Beatty, whose commitment to the project was invaluable. Jan is a member of a professional group that is growing appreciably smaller: editors who are book people, committed to the art, ethics, and responsibilities of publishing.

We are indebted to David Blakesley at Parlor Press, who patiently and efficiently guided us in preparing this second edition for publication. We also want to thank Chelsie Messenger at Clemson University, who designed the interior of this edition, and Terra Williams, who proofed the final manuscript. Finally, we are delighted to have our book appear under the Parlor Press colophon.

Judith Rodby
W. Ross Winterowd

The Uses of Grammar

CHAPTER ONE
The Uses of Grammar

Chapter Preview

- Grammar describes a language in use. Grammars are made of rules that constitute the language (constitutive rules) and rules that attempt to regulate the language (prescriptive rules).
- The history of English grammar shows us how grammars have developed and how they have been used. In the eighteenth century, for example, grammars were used to try to purify and preserve English.
- Knowing grammar may help you to use English effectively. Grammar helps you to understand how language forms are used and why people think some language forms are right and others wrong.

What Is Grammar?

For the moment, we ask that you set aside all of your previous conceptions about grammar and follow our explanation of what "grammar" means in terms of this book. A grammar of a language (in this case, English) is a description of that language. This description does not make value judgments. For instance, grammar as a description of English would not state that the word *gentleman* is better or more elegant or more polite than the word *geezer*. Both *gentleman* and *geezer* are part of the grammar of English. The description would include both *Me and him ain't going to the game* and

He and I are not going to the game because both these sentences are part of the English language. In other words, grammar describes the *forms* of a language that are actually used by native speakers.

Grammar also explains how the forms of language function in units we call sentences. For example, in the sentence *The teacher was unhappy about the test*, the words *the* and *teacher* form a noun phrase that functions as a subject in the sentence.

Grammar (as usage) is to language as sociology is to any society it studies. Through sociology you learn the norms and customs of a given society and what is acceptable and unacceptable in behavior. Through grammar as usage, you learn what language is appropriate in given situations and what is inappropriate (or even taboo). Grammar as usage helps explain why sometimes the word *gentleman* is preferable to the word *guy*, why sometimes the sentence *I must leave immediately* is preferable to the sentence *I've got to go right now*, and why sometimes the reverse is the case.

Why Study Grammar?

There is at least one good reason for studying grammar. Knowledge of grammar can help one use language effectively. Grammar helps one to think about how language structures are used to get meaning across (and use of language is a major factor in an individual's success or failure in a career and in society).

For Discussion

As you work through this book, take time periodically to respond to this question: Are you aware of using grammar as you write? If so, what do you use, and when in your writing process do you apply any such tool? Does grammar help or hinder you? Does it get in the way because you are anxious about correctness or structure? As you write in a variety of contexts, take notes on what you actually do with and without grammar knowledge. Pay very close attention and note the specifics. You may be surprised by what you find.

History of the Uses of Grammar

Before we get into the detailed study of the grammar of English, it will be useful to

provide some historical context, and so we ask why various grammars have been written and how they have been used.

The Greeks and the Romans

Our story begins with the Greeks in the first century BCE, when the first grammars (i.e., grammar books) were written. The most famous of the Greek grammarians was Dionysius Thrax, who, using the works of Homer (*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*) as his standards, wrote *The Art of Grammar* to aid in the study of literature and to preserve the purity of the language. A momentous fact of history, the importance of which will become apparent, is that the Romans adopted and adapted the Greek grammar to their own language, Latin. We should also note that Dionysius wanted to *preserve* the Greek language, to keep it from change. We will see that this motive—preserving language—is an idea that occurs throughout history.

In their structure, Greek and Latin differed. For example, Greek had three ways to express number: singular (only one item), dual (two items), plural (more than two items). If this were the case in English, we would talk about *one dog* and *several dogs*, but we would need a different form for talking about two of them (*two doga*?). Like English, Latin had only singular and plural—and this is but one instance of the differences in the two languages. Clearly, then, using Greek grammar as the basis for Latin grammatical analysis involved a good deal of adjustment—even wrenching.

For Discussion

Do you think language is decaying? What is your evidence, pro or con?

At one time *disinterested* and *uninterested* conveyed different meanings. *Disinterested* meant "unbiased, without prejudice or prejudgment"; thus one would want a *disinterested* judge, but not an *uninterested* judge. Now many people use *disinterested* as a synonym for *uninterested*. Does this usage represent language decay? Why or why not?

Throughout the Middle Ages the works of Latin grammarians, based on the Greek analyses of language, were used to teach Latin in the schools. During the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, education to a great extent meant learning Latin and Latin grammar.

The Latin Influence on English Grammar

Now, in this brief history, we arrive at a watershed moment—the use of Latin grammar (which was based on Greek) to create grammars of English. In the eleventh century, Aelfric, abbot of Eynsham Monastery, wrote a Latin grammar and proposed that this work serve as the basis for a grammar of English. (Aelfric's English was, of course, Anglo-Saxon, which to us sounds like an utterly foreign language.) With Aelfric, the long tradition of basing English grammar on that of Latin began. Here is just one example.

In Latin, the form of the noun changes with the different functions in sentences, and this change in word forms according to function allows Latin to be more flexible in its syntax (sentence structure) than English. For example, both *canis hominem mordet* and *hominem canis mordet* mean dog bites man because *canis* is the subject form of the noun, and *hominem* is the object form of *homo*. But in English, *dog bites* man and *man bites dog* are exact opposites. (To express *man bites dog* in Latin, one would say *canem mordet homo* or *homo mordet canem*.)

In Latin, nouns have as many as six forms, depending on their use as subjects, objects, and so on. In short, Latin showed the function of nouns by changing their forms; English shows the function of nouns by their positions in the sentence.

Although there are many other examples of Latin influence on English grammar, perhaps the most important is the choice of the language use on which to base the grammar. Dionysius Thrax and other Greeks used the works of Homer as their basis; Roman grammarians used the works of Cicero and Virgil, who wrote in Latin. English grammars followed this tradition, basing their analyses and commentaries on the writings of established authors and the speech of educated classes.

The problem, of course, is that a grammar should analyze and describe all levels of usage. Here is an analogy. If a sociological study of the American people were based only on college graduates, we would have a false idea of the values and living conditions of the population. A grammatical study based only on literature and the usage of educated people gives a false picture of the English language.

In the eighteenth century, Robert Lowth and other grammarians who thought Latin was superior to English put much of their energy into what they believed was purifying and preserving the language, condemning usages like *It's me* and *Who is this for?* These usages, which the grammarians considered vulgar, are perfectly normal English, but they might not be appropriate in all situations.

The English literati had aspirations of standardizing and refining English. They also wanted to stop the language from changing. The essayist Jonathan Swift, for example, wrote that "it is better that a Language should not be wholly perfect than that it should be perpetually changing." One method of standardizing English was to try to make it systematic and to borrow the rules for the system from Latin.

Noah Webster: Grammar as a Description of Language

And now an American hero enters the scene: Noah Webster (1758-1843).

While he was teaching school in Goshen, New York, Webster became dissatisfied with available textbooks on language; he wanted instruction to reflect both the American version of English and American values. Thus, he set out to write *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, the three parts of which were a spelling book, a grammar book, and a collection of readings. (One indication of Webster's influence is the estimate that one hundred million copies of his spelling book were sold!)

Webster is most famous for his dictionary (indeed, "Webster" and "dictionary" are almost synonymous), in which he enunciated the then revolutionary principle that "grammar is formed on language, and not language on grammar." In other words, Webster was saying that a grammar should describe the language used, not dictate what *should* be used.

For Discussion: Political Correctness and Language Change

You know that some words and phrases are taboo. For example, in my vocabulary are words that I could not include in this discussion, for if I listed them, they would offend many readers and would adversely affect the sales of the book. Usually such taboo words have to do with sex or excretory functions, or they are blasphemous (showing lack of respect for God and other holies). Then there are other words that out of context seem perfectly acceptable—for instance, *fairy*. Editors of such publications as newspapers, magazines, and textbooks ban the use of this term because it connotes homosexuality in a derogatory way and thus might offend a group of readers. Editors suggest "elf" as a synonym. Hence the "tooth fairy," so common among children of an earlier generation, must become the "tooth elf," and "fairy tale" would, presumably, be replaced by "elf tale."

Scholar Diane Ravitch has compiled a list of terms that some people think are potentially offensive to groups of readers. Among these are

- *Adam and Eve*, to be replaced by "Eve and Adam," to demonstrate that males do not have precedence.
- *Chief Sitting Bull*, a relic of domination of Native Americans, should be replaced by the chief's actual name, Tatanka Iyotake.
- *Egghead*, to be replaced by "intellectual."
- *Insane*, to be replaced with "a person who has an emotional disorder or psychiatric illness."
- *Snowman* is sexist and should be replaced with "snowperson."

What do you think about this policing of language? Is it justified, or is it silly? Explain your attitude. Can you think of other words and phrases that have become politically incorrect?

During the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, a strange situation prevailed. While scholars were studying the evolution and actual use of languages, students in classrooms throughout America were being given a simplified version of grammar that evolved from the attitudes of the Latin grammarians.

Now in this brief history, we move forward from the nineteenth century to the twentieth and the coming of modern language studies.

Structuralism

Of great importance in the history of grammar was the coming of structuralism, starting with the publication in 1916 of *Course in General Linguistics*, by the Swiss scholar Ferdinand de Saussure, who made the important distinction between the language itself (*langue*) as a system and the individual use of that system (*parole*). Analogically, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is a complete "system" with its own unvarying structure. Performances of the symphony differ, however, according to the interpretations of various conductors—but they are, nonetheless, still "Beethoven's Ninth." You and I speak the same language (*langue*), English, but your individual use of that language (*parole*) is different from mine. The task of the structural linguist was to describe *la langue*. Here is the important point: native-born Americans speak the language (*la langue*), but each person has his or her own version of it (*parole*).

Compare *la langue* to the range and variety of foods available in a supermarket—everything from asparagus to zucchini. You and I shop in this supermarket, but each of us brings a personal assortment to the checkstand. Your basket contains tofu, but mine doesn't; mine contains a can of mackerel, but yours doesn't. We can compare *parole* to the array of items that each of us has chosen from the large selection in the supermarket.

The next momentous development was the adaptation of the theories of behavioral psychology for the study of grammar.

Behaviorism

Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949) incorporated behavioral (stimulus-response) psychology into his theory of language. Trying for empirical rigor, he excluded mental and conceptual categories from his work, considering only language phenomena that could be observed, thus eliminating from grammar the science of meaning, or semantics.

Behavioral psychology, now abandoned, had severe limitations as an explanation for human motives and actions, and the same limitations made the behavioral study of language less than satisfactory. For example, according to the behavioral model, children learn language through imitation. Little Jane hears Mama say, "Eat your spinach," and Jane tries to imitate that sentence. However, studies of language development clearly demonstrate that Jane is not merely imitating; she is developing a "grammar" in her brain and is using it to make sense of language and to begin to work with it. Mama says, "Eat your spinach," and Jane responds, "I *eated* my spinach." Jane has never heard Mama or anyone else use *eated* as the past form of *eat*, so something other than imitation is clearly going on in Jane's development of language. As we will several times point out in this book, it is obvious that humans have a genetically endowed "grammar" in their brains, just as they have a genetically endowed sense of sight.

In spite of the limitations of the theoretical framework he applied to language, Bloomfield did further the rigorous study of the structure of language.

The next development in our history has been the attempt to account for the "grammar in the brain," of which we just spoke. Thus, in the next section of this chapter, we turn to universal grammar.

For Discussion: Language as Stimulus-Response

Pause for just a moment to consider what it means to view language as mere stimulus-response. I utter the stimulus "Stop!" and you respond by stopping. So far, so good. Then I point to a building on the corner and say "apartment house." You observe the building: you see people coming and going, and you conclude that several families must live in this building and that, hence, a multifamily dwelling is an apartment house. However, overnight a transformation takes place. All of the residents of the building sign a document and pay money, and now the building is no longer an apartment house; it is a condominium. In other words, language has changed the nature of the building. How can one explain this change except through meanings? The building is constructed not only of steel and bricks, but also of words.

Can you think of other examples of ways language is far more than a matter of stimulus and response?

Transformational or Universal Grammar

A momentous revolution in the study of grammar came in 1957, when Noam Chomsky published *Syntactic Structures*—the beginning of transformational grammar,[1] which was a reaction against the structuralism represented by Bloomfield.

Chomsky's goal was to study linguistic competence, not individual performance. What is meant by "competence"? In transformational grammar, competence is really the grammar that you and I have in our heads. We are able to produce and understand language; therefore, we must have some kind of mental system for that language ability. A useful analogy (if not pushed too far) is the computer. To develop a computer that uses language as humans do, scientists must devise a set of rules (a program) that will allow the computer to do what HAL did in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, use language in the same way a human would. Anyone who has used a telephone knows that computers now can give canned, standard responses but cannot carry on conversations about the weather or the World Series. It must be the case that we humans have a built-in and inborn set of "rules" that allow us to use language. Discovering these rules is the

1 Several terms denote the grammatical revolution begun by Chomsky: transformational grammar, generative grammar, transformational-generative grammar, and universal grammar. We will use the term universal grammar, without attempting to sort out the distinctions implied by all four terms.

ultimate goal of transformational grammar. Chomsky and his followers are attempting to explain and describe human language ability.

Currently, linguists are working on "universal grammar," writing rules that represent language "principles" that seem to be innate and universal. For example, it would seem to be a principle that all languages have verbs. Linguists are also working on writing grammar rules that describe the "parameters" or particular rules for specific human languages such as English. Word order in sentences is an example of a parameter because word order differs from one language to another.

Three Views of Grammar

From this brief excursion, three views of grammar and its uses will become obvious:

1. Until about the mid-nineteenth century, the main concern of most grammarians was preserving and purifying the language. (The residue of this movement, still evident in some textbooks, was what might be called "traditional grammar.")
2. During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, linguists (actually, a fancy term for scholars of grammar and other aspects of language) began to provide descriptions of languages as people used them. (The result was descriptive grammar or, to use the jargon of the trade, "structural linguistics.")
3. By the mid-twentieth century, linguists had begun to focus on the mind's ability to produce language. (The result was the set of terms listed in footnote 1. All of these terms refer to an evolving body of theory.)

As you go through the chapters of *The Uses of Grammar*, you will find that they incorporate the insights gained from traditional grammar, from structural linguistics, and from transformational grammar. We think that you will make significant gains in both your understanding of the English language and your ability to use it effectively.

Using Grammar: Usage

Knowing grammar can help you use language more effectively: you will have words and terms, a metalanguage, that will help you talk about and analyze your own grammar use; you will have knowledge that will help you make choices about your use of language.

Grammar books (such as this one) usually contain two types of statements about the language. One type sets forth or describes what is—for example: