

ANOTHER FRUSTRATING GRAMMAR?

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First impressions

I hope that a somewhat personal introduction will make an appropriate beginning here. As a seasoned learner and teacher of English and English grammar, I have always wondered why various schools and academic programmes insist on teaching grammar while the organisers are (or should be) well aware of the fact that this enterprise soon wins students' justified dislike. Also, it seems a hopeless exercise to try to teach grammar since years later when one inadvertently runs into former students, they start reminiscing about their academic years, and never fail to mention the bad grades they got as well as the humiliation they were subjected to, and, unfortunately, it turns out that for them, English grammar amounts to no more than that. Whether Anita Barry's textbook would affect students in the same way I cannot tell, but I have the feeling that it is less frustrating than other textbooks since students are invited to say what they think about what is commonly meant by grammar; in other words, they can have their say about the otherwise frustrating enterprise academics call grammar and linguistic study. The reason why this is so is because this book was designed to introduce students who are native speakers of American English to the basic grammatical phenomena and problems of their language in the hope that they have strong intuitions as well as value judgments about the different varieties of their mother tongue and its use in various social contexts. Barry's book, then, concentrates on the social aspects of grammar; i.e., how grammar appears in ordinary discourse. Ardent sociolinguists usually criticise (non-socio-) linguists and grammarians on the grounds that instead of going out to the so-called field and listening to how people really communicate with each other they describe and analyse their own, individual language, and the outcome of such an exercise is a good-for-nothing abstract grammar. However, this book also illustrates that any social approach to language cannot operate without the results of "armchair linguistics": there is no analysis and discussion of usage without the concepts and terminology of (traditional) descriptive grammar.

Organisation of the textbook

Professor Barry's commitment basically determines the structure of the book, which follows the usual descriptive textbook practice of discussing grammatical phenomena and analytical problems organised around the parts of speech/word classes. So this textbook, too, has separate chapters on nouns, verbs, adjectives/adverbs, prepositions, compound and complex sentences. Each chapter, which also follows current textbook practice in that they give only the bare essentials of what I think would reasonably be called grammar, concentrates on varieties of a particular grammatical phenomenon. For instance, the previous sentence started with the noun phrase, *each chapter*, and in some varieties the singular personal pronoun *it* should be used to refer back to it, in others the plural pronoun *they*; the

textbook focuses on socially rather than grammatically motivated choices such as the choice between *it* and *they*. To give another example, in the relevant chapters irregular nouns and verb forms receive (in my opinion) a disproportionate amount of attention, so that in the *Discussion exercises* section students could contemplate and comment on the use and choice of such forms and, only occasionally, on the workings of grammar. To mention another specific point, in the chapter entitled *Pronouns* two pages are devoted to the discussion of the gender/number/case-choice of personal pronouns, which is not a particularly important aspect of English grammar. The motivation is clear: this is also a favourite exercise ground for purists so it will serve an excellent topic for discussion in class. After studying this book, students will be familiar with the problems of usage and the prejudices which surround pronoun choice but they will not be able to distinguish between pronouns, nouns, noun phrases and determiners. It is not clear, just to mention another small point, what is pronominal about the *my*-series of words. The author suggests that the *my*-words (*my*, *your*, *his*, etc.) fall into the determiner system but are pronouns along with the *mine*-series, in other words, no clear distinctive features are offered for determiners and pronouns. Also, only the subjective, objective and possessive relative pronouns are enumerated, which implicitly suggests that no other grammatical functions can be expressed by them. Again, the reason is clear: there are no linguistically or socially motivated choices with the other relatives. In any case, Professor Barry carefully presents such variables, i.e., forms that exist in parallel, and invites students to discuss the social standing and appropriateness of the competing structures, and possibly the motivation for using them. The purpose of these exercises is clear: to develop students' awareness of their own native tongue, and possibly to enhance their linguistic tolerance. Personally, I do not see what the outcome of such discussions might be. Partly, because the majority of the usage problems in the exercises are absolutely unfamiliar to me (since I am not a native speaker, and have been educated in British English), partly, because the text does not build on any of the possible findings in later chapters. These questions might be resolved by studying the *Instructor's manual*, to which, unfortunately, I have not got access.

General criticism

Anita Barry's enterprise does not stand out as an individual approach: from the point of view of a thorough descriptive grammar this book has little to offer; it follows the usual practice of the nineties and early two-thousands in that descriptive grammar is only considered good as long as it does not hurt, and this little will certainly not hurt anybody. Textbooks of different persuasions all abstain from teaching grammar proper. For instance, college textbooks teaching the basics of some type of generative syntax also show the same pattern of organisation. Only so much – or rather, so little – descriptive grammar and data are presented as is absolutely necessary to step forward to educationally (and ideologically) more meaty areas: theoretical syntax or, in this case, diverse sociolinguistic speculations and discussions. I should think that a more thorough descriptive grammatical knowledge would be necessary for developments which ultimately rest on the analytical procedures and findings of grammar proper. Despite these critical remarks, however, it must be mentioned that the author keeps an open mind about the controversial statements and data of English grammatical analyses. Though the presentation of descriptive grammar is intelligent and critical in some places, no general analytical/classificatory principles emerge. Another point which I find problematic is some terminology, though my problems may again be related to a different background. The following terms seem to be characteristic of this book only: the terms *truncated* vs. *full passive* are used to describe a passive clause with or without a *by*-phrase.

The *auxiliary* category of other grammars is called *helping verbs*, which are divided into auxiliaries and modals. As mentioned above, the pronoun category is not clearly defined while the term *complement* is used only to refer to subject and object complement. The adjective-adverb homomorphs of other grammars have the peculiar name *flat adverbs*.

Exercises

There are three types of exercises: 1) discussion exercises, 2) problem exercises, and 3) reflections. Discussion exercises are distributed throughout each chapter of the book and are designed for group or class work. Problem exercises, which are planned to be extra-class tasks, purport to practice and consolidate the descriptive facts, rules and findings as well as the results of the discussions of a chapter. Reflections are open-ended questions, which are intended to get students to think about language in real life settings.

Summary

To summarise: in the hands of a competent, devoted teacher, a native speaker of American English, this book can help students to articulate and refine their views of their native English language, but they certainly will not be well-versed in English grammar. Students will be able to intelligently comment on the different variables of their native language and make educated comments on different usages. However, this course will not enable them to parse or analyse complex linguistic structures, which, in my opinion, would be necessary for translators, interpreters, editors; in short, in jobs where language is the main concern.

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