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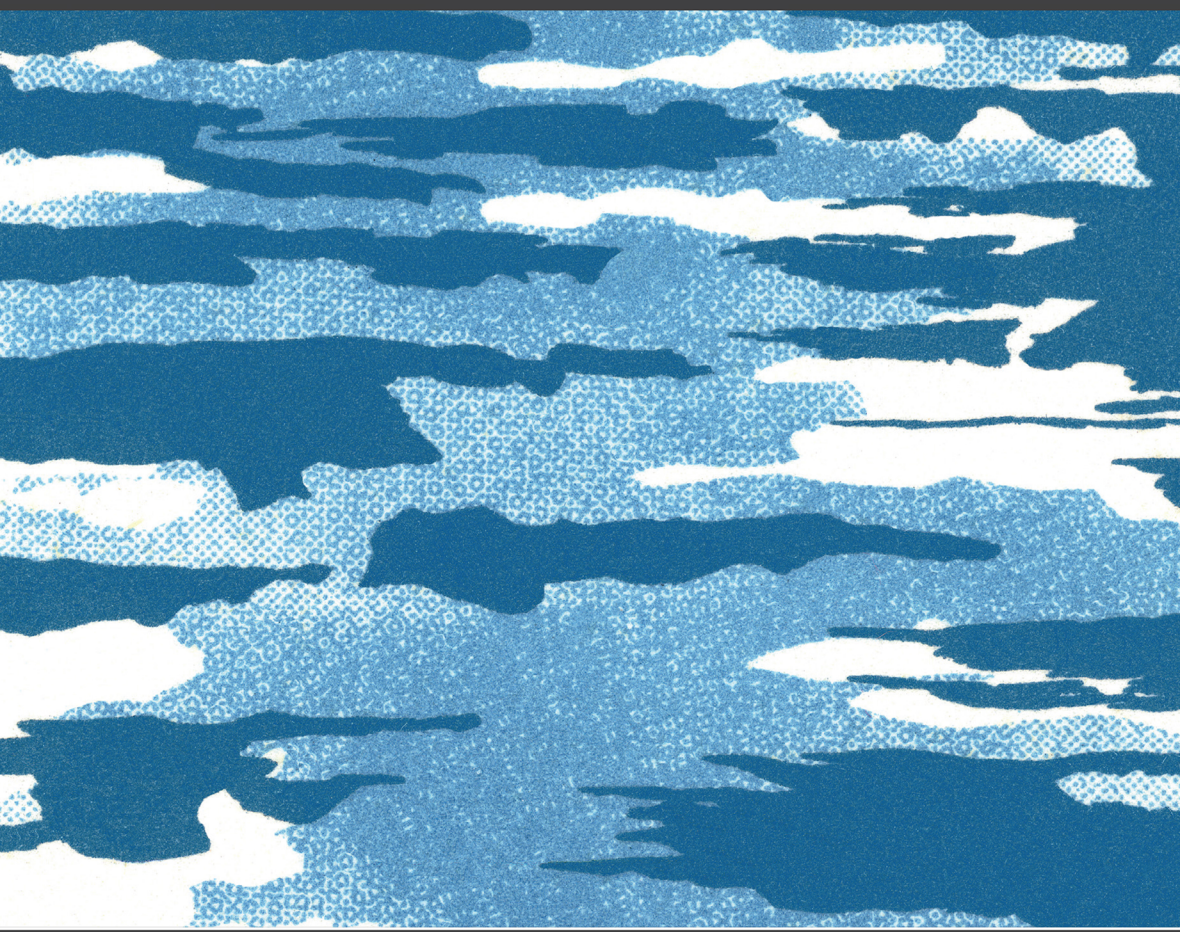
INNOVATIONS AND CHALLENGES IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Innovations and Challenges in Grammar



MICHAEL MCCARTHY

'*Innovations and Challenges in Grammar* is a thoughtful and engaging discussion of a topic that evokes strong reactions from all language users and language teachers. Everyone has an opinion about grammar and its role. In this book, Professor McCarthy takes the reader on a journey that contextualizes English grammar, both historically and contextually. In addition, in an easy to read manner, Professor McCarthy wrestles with many of the thorny aspects of English grammar and the role English plays in the world.'

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'Given the passions roused by competing notions of grammar down through the ages, writing a book such as this might be seen as a massive if not impossible challenge in itself. Professor McCarthy has more than risen to the challenge and the result is a book which is authoritative in both depth and breadth, and, as we have come to expect from him throughout his impressive career, an accessible thought provoking read.'

Martin Warren, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

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INNOVATIONS AND CHALLENGES IN GRAMMAR

Innovations and Challenges in Grammar traces the history of common understandings of what grammar is and where it came from to demonstrate how 'rules' are anything but fixed and immutable. In doing so, it deconstructs the notion of 'correctness' to show how grammar changes over time thereby exposing the social and historical forces that mould and change usage. The questions that this book grapples with are:

- Can we separate grammar from the other features of the language system and get a handle on it as an independent entity?
- Why should there be strikingly different notions and models of grammar? Are they (in) compatible?
- Which one or ones fit(s) best the needs of applied linguists if we assume that applied linguists address real-world problems through the lens of language? And which one(s) could make most sense to non-specialists?
- If grammar is not a fixed entity but a set of usage norms in constant flux, how can we persuade other professionals and the general public that this is a positive observation rather than a threat to civilised behaviour?

This book draws upon both historical and modern grammars from across the globe to provide a multi-layered picture of world grammar. It will be useful to teachers and researchers of English as a first and second language, though the inclusion of examples from and occasional references to other languages (French, Spanish, Malay, Swedish, Russian, Welsh, Burmese, Japanese) is intended to broaden the appeal to teachers and researchers of other languages. It will be of use to final-year undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students as well as secondary and tertiary level teachers and researchers in applied linguistics, second language acquisition and grammar pedagogy.

Michael McCarthy is Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics, University of Nottingham, Adjunct Professor of Applied Linguistics, University of Limerick, and Visiting Professor in Applied Linguistics at Newcastle University.

INNOVATIONS AND CHALLENGES IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Series Editor: Ken Hyland is Professor of Applied Linguistics in Education at the University of East Anglia and Visiting Professor in the School of Foreign Language Education, Jilin University, China.

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To the memory of Ron Carter

Friend and colleague

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CONTENTS

List of illustrations *xiii*
Preface *xiv*
Acknowledgements *xvii*

PART I
Where we came from **1**

1 Introduction 3

1.1 The first challenge: defining grammar 3
1.2 The challenge of a historical perspective 5
1.3 The lay perspective 5
1.4 English grammar and the ELT perspective 6
1.5 Innovation in grammar 8
1.6 Corpus linguistics 9
1.7 Varieties and variation 11
1.8 Technologies 12

2 Grammar: Where did it all come from? 13

2.1 Earliest origins 13
2.2. Greek and Latin grammars 14
2.3 Antiquity beyond Europe 18
2.4 The Middle Ages: the Modistae *and universal grammar 19*

2.5 English grammar: Bullokar 19
2.6 Universal grammar again: The Port-Royal *grammar 23*
2.7 Conclusion 23

3 Eras of change and innovation: The 18th and 19th century 25

3.1 Introduction 25
3.2 The 18th century: Enlightenment 26
3.3 The mid-18th century 28
3.4 Closing the century: the forgotten grammarians 31
3.5 The 19th century: new era, new grammars 32
3.6 Murray's grammar 33
3.7 Grammar and social class: William Cobbett 34
3.8 America: Goold Brown 35
3.9 Ending the century: Sweet and Nesfield 36
3.10 Culture and mindset 37
3.11 Conclusion 39
3.12 Challenges: a summary 41

PART II
Innovations and Challenges 43

4 Grammar and the public, grammar for ELT 45

4.1 Introduction 45
4.2 Grammar and the public: usage manuals and handbooks 46
4.3 The outsider's perspective: reference grammars and language learning 49
4.4 Grammar for English language teaching 53
4.5 Structuralism: linguistic science meets the science of language teaching 58
4.6 Berlitz, James Joyce and me 61
4.7 New technologies, great events 63

5 Innovation: Major new grammatical theories 66

5.1 Noam Chomsky and his grammar 66
5.2 Transformations 68
5.3 Competence and performance 69
5.4 Deep and surface structure 70
5.5 Acquisition of grammar 71
5.6 The plausibility of TG 71

5.7 Innovation in British grammar: J. R. Firth and the neo-Firthians 74
5.8 Halliday's grammar 77
5.9 The clause 79
5.10 Systems 81
5.11 Language and society 82
5.12 Halliday's enduring influence 83
5.13 Conclusion 83

6 Grammar as data: Corpus linguistics 85

6.1 Let the data speak 85
6.2 Grammar in corpora 87
6.3 Grammar and frequency 87
6.4 Concordance, pattern and meaning 90
6.5 Spoken and written grammar 94
6.6 The get*-passive: pattern and context 94*
6.7 Like *97*
6.8 Grammaticalisation and the evidence of spoken corpora 98
6.9 Grammaticalisation: You know *and* I think *100*
6.10 The significance of grammaticalisation 100
6.11 Emergent grammar 102
6.12 Conclusion 103

7 Grammar and discourse 107

7.1 Beyond the sentence 107
7.2 Discourse analysis and textual cohesion 108
7.3 Cohesion and speaking turns: conjunction 110
7.4 Ellipsis 113
7.5 Heads or tails? 114
7.6 Grammar in spoken and written discourse analysis 118
7.7 Special discourses, special grammars 119
7.8 Taking the turn 120
7.9 Grammar, discourse and co-construction 124
7.10 Conclusion 125

8 Grammar, language teaching and language learning 126

8.1 The canon 126
8.2 Make no mistake 130
8.3 Outside the black box: from grammar to grammaring 133

8.4 Staying outside the black box: Learners, grammaring and corpora 135
8.5 Conclusion 136

9 Grammar at large 137

9.1 Variety: standard and non-standard 137
9.2 Grammatical change 139
9.3 Americanisation 142
9.4 Grammar and moral panic 143
9.5 Conclusion: re-wilding the grammatical environment 145

References 149
Index 167

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

2.1 Exercises in Greek grammar (c.300 AD) 15
2.2 Title page of Bullokar's *Pamphlet for Grammar* 21
3.1 Title page of James Harris's *Hermes* (1773 edition) 30
3.2 Front cover of *Grammar-Land; or, grammar in fun for the children of Schoolroomshire* 40
4.1 Substitution table 55
4.2 Post-modification of nouns with *to*-infinitive clauses 58
5.1 Phrase structure tree-diagram 67
5.2 Grammar rank scale 78
5.3 Systemic choices: English demonstratives 81
6.1 Extract from concordance of *moment*, Spoken BNC2014 90
6.2 Extract from concordance of *for the moment*, Spoken BNC2014 91
6.3 Random sample concordance lines for future perfect simple form, Spoken BNC2014 92
9.1 'Grammatical benchmark' 138
9.2 Use of *whom* in written documents 1900–2000 141

Tables

5.1 Levels of lexis and grammar 76
6.1 Spoken BNC2014: Negative forms of third person singular present tense *be* 88
6.2 Top-ranking frequencies in writing and speaking 95
9.1 BrE recently observed PVs (adapted from McCarthy, 2019) 142

PREFACE

This book is a story of grammatical ideas and attitudes, of grammarians, grammars and grammar teaching and how they have evolved over many centuries. It is a personal account, from two perspectives, first from my career as an English language teacher and teacher-trainer, and second as a university academic teaching courses on grammar over the past 30 years. It is not an attempt to be comprehensive; it is not an encyclopaedia of grammar. It dips in and out of theoretical streams, weaves its way through grammars and grammar-teaching questions and pauses now and then for autobiographical musings. It aims to paint a picture of great variation in thinking, of the challenges that successive generations of grammarians have confronted and innovations in thought, technologies and practice over the centuries that have kept the study of grammar firmly on the front page of language study and language teaching.

The first chapters of the book embark on a historical journey, going as far back as we have any reliable knowledge of, as regards grammar. So much of modern applied linguistics is preoccupied with the very recent past at the expense of an understanding of how much we owe to history. Well-worn metaphors of standing on the shoulders of giants and reinventing the wheel seem apt when we deal with grammatical thinking. Some of the earliest grammars are organised around categories that are still with us today. That is not to say that there is nothing new under the grammatical sun. Nonetheless, when we examine the dusty books on library shelves it is apparent that many of the ideas underpinning present-day grammatical thinking are centuries – even millennia – old, although sometimes they could just be sketched out and not fully developed by our grammarian ancestors.

Another reason for looking at the grammars of the past is the fascination of an encounter with history and the pleasure of reading through volumes whose well-thumbed pages have yellowed, which brings you into intimate dialogue with some impressive intellects. I am fortunate in having the Cambridge University Library on my doorstep, with its vast collections of old and new books and the unfailing

atmosphere of scholarship in its reading room and at the quiet desks among the book stacks. There have I spent many hours chasing up references, settling into calm and unhurried reading of grammars old and new and books and articles about grammar and experiencing the joy of serendipity, discovering new sources of information and scholarship on the open shelves.

One dilemma facing me as I wrote this book was that grammar exists in all languages, but I know just a few, and only one at a native-speaker level. I do have enough French, Spanish, Swedish and Welsh and a smattering of Bahasa Malaysia to provide me with some understanding of their grammars. Nonetheless, I am trapped in an Anglocentric sphere that limits my ability to make generalisations in relation to other ways of wording the world, as well as having as my mother tongue a language that is over-supplied with scholarship. There is inevitably a whiff of linguistic hegemony in a book such as this one, written in English by an English-speaker and underpinned by English examples. The dominance of English globally has served the study of its grammar in ways unevenly advantageous to it. This is true, not least, in the area of corpus linguistics, where available software often facilitates the analysis of English while making it difficult to carry out grammatical analyses on other languages. My association with and supervision over the years of projects involving Welsh, Irish, Turkish and Burmese have led me to admire the undaunted spirits who have overcome technical obstacles when using software that breezes through English data only to stumble over the grammar of languages where phenomena such as mutations and particles play a significant role.

Another thread that I attempt to maintain in this book is the duty we have as applied linguists not to lock ourselves away in the echo-chambers of introverted academic discussion. Grammar belongs to everyone, and everyone seems to have an opinion about it. Sources of information on grammar range from complex, heavyweight academic tomes, which are largely inaccessible to the general public, through to popular usage manuals, course books and self-improvement books, as well as blogs, teaching videos and other forms of online communication. Then there are the grammatical moral panics that surface occasionally in the mass media of newspapers and broadcasting. None of these should be ignored in any applied linguistic account of grammar, and so I have tried to bring them in where appropriate and where I feel that they make a contribution to our understanding of public attitudes as opposed to what academics think about grammar. You, the reader, will judge whether this mix of ingredients amounts to a viable recipe for making sense of the world of grammar.

Every book has echoes of many voices, even though a single author's name might appear below the title. I have the luxury of more than 50 years of teaching grammar, thinking about it, reading up on it, getting research time to pursue projects and writing about it. But all this is worth little alongside the decades of discussions and exchanges with students, language teachers, colleagues and other academics and teachers in the 46 countries where I have been privileged either to live and work or to make professional visits since the mid-1960s. Recently, I have joined the circuit of speakers giving talks to local societies on issues concerning language and have the pleasure

(and occasional pain) of hearing opinions on grammar from across the broad spectra of age, social class and geographical, ethnic, educational and cultural background. I try to listen to and respect people's points of view, even if I sometimes disagree with them. After all, grammar belongs to everyone.

Among the people to whom I owe a great debt as regards the long-term genesis of this book, I would like to thank Carolina Amador Moreno, Graham Burton, Paula Buttery, Andrew Caines, Angela Chambers, Brian Clancy, David and Rachel Clark, Jane Evison, Fiona Farr, Miguel Fuster, Carmen Gregori-Signes, Michael Handford, Kieran Harrington, John Hawkins, Michael Hoey, Rebecca Hughes, Almut Koester, James Lantolf, Elena Malyuga, Geraldine Mark, Jeanne McCarten, Anne O'Keeffe, Randi Reppen, Antonia Sánchez Macarro, Helen Sandiford, Nick Saville, Hongyin Tao, Scott Thornbury, Elaine Vaughan, Mary Vaughn, Steve Walsh and all the members of the Facebook ® Language Observatory Group (LOG).

Four scholars – all sadly passed away – stand out as major influences on my thinking about language, my debt to whom is immeasurable: John Sinclair, David Brazil, Amorey Gethin and my colleague and co-author of more than 30 years, Ron Carter. This book is affectionately dedicated to Ron and his enduring memory.

Cambridge, 2020

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PART I

Where we came from