



From words to grammar

Discovering English Usage

Roger Berry

ROUTLEDGE


From Words to Grammar

From Words to Grammar is a different introduction to grammar for students. Taking a word-based approach to grammar, this innovative book introduces the subject through the analysis of over a hundred of the most commonly used English words.

Each unit focuses on a different word class, using an analysis of specific words which includes:

- an introduction to the grammar of each word;
- examples of real world usage featuring that word;
- exercises with answers.

This unique approach not only introduces students to grammar but also provides them with an understanding of how grammar works in everyday English. Written by an experienced teacher and author, *From Words to Grammar* is ideal for all students of English Language.

Roger Berry is the former Head of English at Lingnan University in Hong Kong and has authored four books on English grammar, including *English Grammar: A Resource Book for Students* (2012).

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Discovering English Usage

Roger Berry

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Introduction

This book is based on a growing belief among linguists that the grammar of English is much more closely connected to its lexis, or vocabulary, than originally thought. In other words, in addition to learning grammar top-down, i.e. learning the general rules of grammar and applying them to the lexical units systematically, we need to be aware of how individual words work and build up from there. In this way, the book deals with important areas of grammar that general introductions to English grammar do not cover; for example, the behaviour of the individual modal auxiliaries, or of aspect adverbs such as *yet*, *already* and *still*.

The book is divided into twelve chapters, each one dealing with an important area of grammar built around different word classes or sub-classes: nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc. Each chapter starts with a general introduction; this is then followed by a number of sections dealing with the grammar of individual words. After a brief description, there is one activity (occasionally two) based on a set of authentic examples of how the word is used in English.

One hundred and seventeen words are included. One factor in selection is their frequency in English; for example, *of*, *to*, *in*, *that* and *it* are all in the top ten most frequent words in English. Another factor is representativity; words have been chosen as representatives of their class; for example nouns, even if they are not frequent. A third factor is whether a word can be used grammatically in more than one way. An apparently simple word such as *there*, for example, has two distinct uses, which students are very often not aware of. Indeed, one thing that emerges from the activities is how many words have complex grammar, some of them belonging to several word classes (see Chapters 11 and 12 in particular).

The book is aimed at undergraduate students of English as an academic study, and trainee teachers on postgraduate courses. It is not intended for learners of English wishing to 'brush up' their grammar; the activities would largely be too advanced, and the terminology that allows generalisations to be made would not be appropriate.

The aims of the book are to:

- help students understand the importance of words in grammar;
- give a different 'bottom-up' perspective on English grammar;
- fill in gaps in knowledge of particular words;
- create an awareness of how grammar works for future application (see in particular the techniques for analysing concordance lines below).

The examples in the activities are based on concordance lines: pieces of text extracted from a vast corpus of English texts (both spoken and written). These have been chosen because:

- they expose students to real examples of usage (albeit decontextualised) compared to the simple examples that predominate in grammar books;
- they do not avoid the awkward uses that grammars sometimes ignore;
- they are generally representative of the frequency of the different uses of words.

For students who have not used concordance lines before, there is an introduction to their use following this Introduction.

How to use the book

The methodology is basically deductive; practice is preceded by precept. However, it is possible to reverse this procedure: to expose students to the concordance lines first and let them reach their own conclusions before comparing them with the account at the start of each section. It is also feasible to use the book for self-study outside of class; the answers to activities are supplied at the end of the book.

Classes or individual students are free to work through the book systematically, chapter by chapter (in any order), or to dip at whim into individual sections.

Some sections require a knowledge of the meanings of the words. These are given where they are related to the different grammatical uses, but in other cases students may need recourse to a good dictionary.

Conventions used in the book

In the main text:

- **bold** is used for terms that are explained in the glossary;
- inverted commas are used to introduce terms that are explained in the text;
- meanings are also given in inverted commas;
- examples are given in *italics*;
- * indicates an ungrammatical form;
- ? indicates a dubious form;
- – (in examples and concordance lines) indicates a different speaker.

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Introducing concordance lines

If you haven't seen or used concordance lines before – and even if you have – they can seem a little strange; the text is cut in strange places at the beginning and end (in some books in the middle of a word – but not here), and unknown words are scattered throughout. But after some basic explanations and experience they will become familiar.

Selecting and adapting concordance lines

Concordance lines are taken from a corpus (plural 'corpora') – that is, a large collection of texts that are stored electronically. The basic procedure in searching a corpus (using a concordance programme such as Wordsmith) is called KWIC: 'keyword in context'. This will find as many examples as you want of the word (or string of words) that you are interested in (the keyword), surrounded by as much as you want of its context. For some words, e.g. conjunctions, a long context is necessary. The lines are usually presented with the keyword in the centre. However, in this book, while the keyword is in bold, it is not centred; it may be found close to the beginning or end of the line in order to show the context that is necessary.

For the purpose of this book the searches involved 50 or 100 examples of the keywords. These were then thinned out using the criteria mentioned below, while attempting to retain the representative nature of the lines.

Several techniques were applied to make the lines easier to work with:

- Lengthy phrases that were not necessary to understanding the meaning or the grammar were replaced by dots ...; these were also used at the start and end of lines to show that the sentence was incomplete.
- Hesitations and repetitions in spoken text were deleted, and basic punctuation (e.g. question marks) was inserted.
- Lengthy noun phrases that were essential to the grammar of the line were replaced by pronouns placed in square brackets [].

Most of the sets of line in the activities were 'right-sorted'; that is, ordered alphabetically according to the word to the right of the keyword. This can make analysis slightly simpler. Sometimes left-sorting is appropriate, to see, for example if a noun is preceded by one of the articles (*a/an* or *the*).

Lines that did not make any sense, dealt with unpleasant topics, did not have a full grammatical structure or had obscure cultural allusions were omitted.

Techniques for dealing with concordance lines

(Note: words in bold below are covered in the glossary)

Here are some suggestions for ways of analysing concordance lines:

1. *Look at the words around the keyword.* For example, is there an **object noun phrase** following a **verb**? (This would make it **transitive** – but beware: **objects** do not always follow **verbs** directly.) Sometimes an important clue may be several words away from the keyword. What is the relationship between these words and the keyword? Do they ‘go together’ in some way? This is by far the most important technique. (See Activity A.)
2. *Try replacing the keyword with a synonym.* Sometimes the form of words does not reveal their true grammatical nature. For example, most verbs (those which are **regular**, plus some which are not) do not distinguish between the form of the **past tense** and that of the **-ed participle**, and some **irregular** verbs do not distinguish these from the **infinitive** or **present tense** form. (See Activity B.) Replacing the keyword with a word which is used in the same way and which makes more distinctions can help to disambiguate. For example, replacing *that* with *which* can show that it is a **relative pronoun**.
3. *Add some little words.* Expanding a sentence by adding a part of the verb *be* and a pronoun can help to reveal if a verb form is a **past tense** or an **-ed participle**. (See Activity C.)
4. *Try moving words around.* Seeing if a word can be moved to different positions in a sentence can be a test of its grammatical status. **Adverbs**, for instance, are particularly free in their placement and this can be a good way of identifying them. (See Activity D.)
5. *Work out the meaning and relate this to the grammar.* There are many examples in this book of words whose meaning and grammar are interconnected. If the grammar changes so does the meaning, and vice versa. So by identifying a different meaning, you may be able to discern a parallel grammatical difference in cases where it is not so obvious. (See Activity E.)
6. *Change the form of the keyword.* This can provide valuable information about the grammar and meaning of a word. Turning a **noun**, for example, into a **plural** tells us whether it is countable (**‘count’**) or not. Often the meaning of a **noun** is associated with its **count** status (see Chapter 1). (See Activity F.)
7. *Do not be distracted by unknown words.* This is not really a technique for discovering the grammar of words, but it is an important factor when trying to do so, especially with concordance lines, since they should not be simplified to exclude difficult vocabulary. (See Activity G.)

More than one technique may be useful in dealing with a particular set of lines. Indeed, these techniques can be applied to any text, not just concordance lines.

Sample introductory exercises

Activity A

Technique 1: look at the words around the keyword.

Question: how is after being used on these lines?

Hint: look especially at the words following after.

1. The best colour seems to happen **after** a warm, still Indian summer.
2. The shark was simply **after** a free meal.
3. Wrapped up in the everyday business of looking **after** her newborn baby, Belinda felt fine.
4. All charges listed in this leaflet may be subject to change **after** publication.
5. We may need to treat your tummy with something else **after** that.
6. Yes, **after** we had given up all intention of going there, we arrived.

Comment

Directly following *after* on lines 1, 2 and 3 there is a group of words (*a warm, still Indian summer / a free meal / her newborn baby*) that we call a **noun phrase**. In 4 and 5 there is a single word following (*publication, that*) which can be regarded as equivalent to a **noun phrase**. Afterwards there is a full stop or a comma; so, we can group the use of *after* on lines 1 to 5 under the same heading. (We call it a **preposition** here; see Chapter 5 for more on the use of **prepositions**.) Line 6 is different; the following words begin with *we* and then a **verb** (*had given*); this is called a **clause** rather than a **noun phrase**, and the name for words that introduce clauses is **conjunction** (see Chapter 12). The terms are not important at the moment, so long as you can identify the different ways in which *after* is used.

Activity B

Technique 2: replace the keyword with a synonym.

Question: what are the different meanings of after on the above lines?

Hint: replace after with following. Where does it change the meaning or not make sense?

Comment

Following is not possible on line 6; it cannot be used as a **conjunction** and this supports the conclusion reached in Activity A. However, it also fails to work on line 2 (because *after* has a different meaning here: 'seeking'), and on line 3 because there is a strong relationship with the preceding word *looking*. *Look after* is an idiomatic expression (meaning 'take care of') called a **prepositional verb** (see Chapter 9).

Activity C

Technique 3: add some little words.

Question: what forms of the verb set are shown on the lines below? Set is a very irregular verb; the form 'set' can represent the infinitive, present tense, past tense and -ed participle.

Hint: see if the lines can be expanded by placing which or it and a form of the verb be in front of set.

1. The firm said... the bionauts **set** a new world record...
2. ... something which if **set** in a contemporary context...
3. From a crest above the hut we watched the sun **set** on a line of peaks...
4. The science-fiction thriller topped the record **set** nearly a year ago...

Comment

On lines 1 and 3 nothing can be done as *set* represents the **past tense**. (If it was the **present tense**, the form would be *sets*.)

On lines 2 (...*if it is set*...) and 4 (...*which was set*...) expansion is possible. This shows that *set* is an **-ed participle** and that the sentence is **passive** in meaning. It also indicates that the verb *set* is **transitive** (see Chapter 7).

Activity D

Technique 4: try moving words around

*Question: what is the relationship between *turn* and the word following it?*

*Hint: on this line decide whether the short word following the three examples of *turn* can be moved elsewhere.*

Turn down the heating when not required. Use natural light whenever possible. **Turn off** unwanted lights. **Turn off** machinery when not in use.

Comment

In each case the word can be moved:

Turn the heating **down** when not required. **Turn** unwanted lights **off**. **Turn** machinery **off** when not in use.

This is sufficient to identify *turn down* and *turn on* as a particular type of verb: as **phrasal verbs**. (See Chapter 9 for more on this, in particular for cases where movement is not possible.)

Activity E

Technique 5: change the form of the keyword

*Question: What is the meaning of *memory* on these lines? With **nouns** that can be both **count** and **noncount** but with different meanings (see Chapter 1), one way to identify the meaning is to turn a **singular** form into a **plural** (and make any other changes if necessary, e.g. changing the **verb** form). *Memory* has two distinct meanings. In one it refers to the human faculty for remembering things; in the other it refers to the actual things we remember.*

*Hint: try to turn *memory* into the plural without changing the meaning.*

1. It causes them to suffer temporary lapses of **memory**...
2. ...the Atari VCS is just a fond **memory**.
3. In her **memory** the classes contributed towards the purchase of class equipment...
4. You all gave us a day to remember and a **memory** we'll never forget.
5. Has it ever been, in your **memory**, postponed or cancelled...?
6. It seemed pretty arty but some scenes stick in the **memory**.

Comment

Pluralising *memory* only makes sense on lines 2 (*they are just fond memories*) and 4 (*memories we'll never forget*). The presence of *a* on both lines is another useful clue (see Technique 1).

Activity F

Technique 6: work out the meaning and relate this to the grammar.

Question: what kind of noun is *customs* on these lines? *Customs* has two distinct grammatical possibilities. In one it is the **plural** of *custom*, meaning a 'habit' or 'tradition'. In the other it is a noun that only occurs in the plural; it refers to the control we go through when entering a country. (See Chapter 1 for more on this.)

Hint: Use the context of the keyword to help you guess the meaning of *customs* on the lines below, e.g. 'go through customs'.

1. ...most of its laws and many of its **customs** are about social harmony.
2. ...we use that information when we go through various **customs** and border points.
3. ...this revenue from **customs** duties and agricultural levies was hardly buoyant.
4. ...why do we have to go through **customs** anyway?
5. His knowledge encompassed...the Norman Conquest and Chinese marriage **customs**...
6. ...different actors are used to reflect local culture and **customs**.
7. ...these are likely to include increased **customs** controls...
8. Chris Luby by day is a **customs** and excise inspector...
9. ...humour may depend deeply on cultural knowledge...**customs**, music, literature, and so on.
10. I was also in agony and consequently limped out of **customs** to greet my mum.

Comment

On lines 1, 5, 6 and 9 it is the **plural** of *custom*. On lines 2, 3, 4, 7, 8 and 10 it is the non-singular **noun** *customs*.

Activity G

Technique 7: do not be distracted by unknown words

Question: What is the grammar of this sentence? Look again at this sentence from Activity F about the word *customs*. There are several words that you are perhaps unfamiliar with, underlined below:

...*this revenue from **customs** duties and agricultural levies was hardly buoyant.*

But the grammar is not hard to work out. You can tell that *revenue* is a **noun** because it is preceded by *this*, and that *customs duties* and *agricultural levies* are **noun phrases** because of the **plurals** and because they are joined by *and*; so *customs* here 'goes with' *duties*. The grammar of this sentence is a long **subject** (*this revenue from customs duties and agricultural levies*) followed by a form of the verb *be* and an **adjective** phrase (*hardly buoyant*). You may also need to check the meaning of *revenue* ('income') and *duty* (here a kind of tax) to work out that the sentence is about money and therefore *customs* here has the non-singular meaning.

Further work with concordance lines

If you find the activities in this book useful in your study of English grammar, it is possible to find and work on concordance lines on your own.

Most corpora are unfortunately not public; they have been built up by, and are the property of, publishers who use them to inform the dictionaries and grammars that they publish. Nowadays such corpora extend to more than a billion words. Other smaller corpora are part of research projects and equally are not accessible.

One exception to this is the British National Corpus (BNC), which was designed to be a national resource, and to which access can be purchased. It is the source of the concordance lines in this book. It is composed of texts totalling over 100 million words from all genres of English, in particular spoken as well as written. Another resource that is commercially available is Collins Cobuild Wordbanks Online, which is composed of 57 million words. It is part of the larger Bank of English (650 million words).

The best freely accessible source of concordance lines is the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which consists of 450 million words. It has a very simple user interface and can be found at corpus.byu.edu/coca/.

COCA, the BNC and other corpora mentioned above are 'generalised' corpora, which means they aim to include examples of 'everything'. Many other corpora are 'specialised', in that they focus on one particular type or genre of English, usually with a research purpose in mind. If you are interested in a particular type of English (e.g. business communication) it is possible to make your own corpus.

Of course, corpora are not only used for extracting concordance lines. One other common exploitation, to which an occasional reference is made in the chapters below, is frequency lists: which words are most common in texts. Other more refined analyses are possible, for example to do with collocation: whether words go together with one another more often than one would statistically expect. In this way more than just the grammar of English can be studied.

Chapter 1

Nouns

1.0 Introduction

Nouns are the most numerous **word class** in English, but individually they tend not to be as frequent as the grammatical (or ‘function’) word classes, such as **prepositions** and **determiners**. The most common nouns, *time* and *people*, are the 76th and 80th most frequent words in English, according to one frequency list (and that is without discounting their occasional use as verbs). Nouns have a number of interesting features which are not dealt with here: the distinction between **singular** and **plural** (sometimes formed irregularly), the (Saxon) **genitive** and their formation with certain derivational endings (such as *-tion* or *-ment*).

A number of important factors are focussed on in the activities below. By far the most important is whether the noun is ‘**count**’ or ‘**noncount**’. Thus, certain nouns can be ‘counted’ grammatically in the sense that they can be preceded by *a/an* or *one, two* or any other numeral. A typical count noun would be *car*: *a car, two cars*. Noncount nouns cannot be ‘counted’. For example, *advice*: you cannot say **an advice* or **two advices* (though you can use a counting expression: *two pieces of advice*; here *piece* is the count noun).

Many nouns can be both count and noncount, often with little change in meaning (other than referring to a mass of something or an individual item), e.g. *string/a string, divorce/a divorce*. In other cases we regard one form as the basic and the other as derived from it by a process of ‘**conversion**’, with a predictable difference in meaning. Thus, *a dog* (count) can become *dog* (noncount) to refer to the meat. This process is systematic since it applies to other animals and their meat.

However, in many cases the difference between the count and noncount meanings, though there is a relationship, is neither predictable nor systematic. A good example is *room*. As a count noun it refers to a unit of a building; as a noncount noun it means ‘space’. They could almost be treated as different lexical items.

The choice of determiners is also influenced by the count status of a noun. Thus, *much* is restricted to noncount nouns and *many* to count (plural) nouns. *Little* and *few* are similarly constrained. *The*, unlike *a/an*, can be used with both types of noun, however, as can *this* and *that*. *Some* is usually used with noncount nouns to refer to a vague quantity (*some money*) and count nouns in the plural to refer to a vague number (*some people*), but it can also be used with count singular nouns to indicate something or someone unknown:

Some student was looking for you.

Another feature of nouns is that some only occur in the plural form. *Trousers* and *binoculars* are good examples; we cannot say **a trouser/binocular*. These are sometimes called

plural nouns. However, in many such cases, there is a singular form but with a very different meaning, which may in turn have its own plural. Thus *arms* can either be a distinct plural noun meaning ‘weapons’, or the plural of *arm*, meaning ‘limbs’.

This factor may combine with the count status of a noun. Thus, *glass* can either be a noncount noun referring to the substance, or a count noun referring to the item we drink from. (The relationship is not predictable because a *glass* does not refer to anything made of glass, such as a window; indeed, a ‘glass’ may be made of plastic.) However, *glasses* can either be the plural of a *glass* or a distinct plural noun meaning ‘spectacles’.

A third factor focussed on below is the sub-class of ‘**collective nouns**’. Certain singular count nouns can take a plural verb form (if they are the subject) when they are regarded as referring to a group of individuals. For example:

The government have decided...

The alternative with a singular verb form is possible, if the speaker/writer wishes to convey the idea a single body:

The government has decided...

With such nouns a plural form is possible of course: *The governments have agreed...*

A final feature of nouns, very different from the different sub-classes identified above, is their function in **noun phrases**. Nouns are typically thought of as the **head** of noun phrases; for example, a *profitable business*. But very often they function as a **premodifier**, in front of a head noun: a *business student*. In this case the distinction between count and noncount will not be formally marked by an accompanying determiner, for example; however, the meaning is usually the noncount one. This will be relevant in some of the exercises below.

The nouns selected below are not necessarily the most frequent, but they are representative of the important factors outlined above.

1.1 wood

As explained above in 1.0, many nouns can be both count and noncount with a difference in meaning. Sometimes this difference is predictable, but sometimes it is not; in these cases the count and noncount versions of such words seem to refer to separate lexical ideas. This is certainly the case with *wood*. As a count noun it refers to a collection of trees, smaller than a forest; for example:

We camped in a small wood at the side of the road.

As a noncount noun it means the material obtained from trees used for building, for making fires, etc.:

Different types of wood burn differently.

Activity 1.1

Look at these lines and decide whether *wood* is a:

- a. count noun
- b. noncount noun.