

Mastering English



Mastering English

A Student's Workbook and Guide

by

Alex Klinge

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The inspiration for a book half way between a traditional student's workbook and a write-up of advanced study notes developed as I was teaching an MA grammar course in autumn 1996 at the Copenhagen Business School. The basic textbook for the course was *Mastering English. An advanced grammar for non-native and native speakers* by Carl Bache and Niels Davidsen-Nielsen in its manuscript stage.

Two things became increasingly clear to me during the course: when students try their hands at actual analyses themselves, they find descriptive grammar much more relevant and challenging; and students who needed accessible literature explaining and exploring points made in *Mastering English* were soon frustrated by the often arduous task of translating the framework of other grammars into the framework they were acquiring from *Mastering English*. With the current book I have sought to address both problems.

I would like to thank Barbara Dragsted and Lotte Brock, two patient students, for reading and commenting on my entire manuscript as it was conceived. In the process they prevented the worst excesses of a linguist carried away by interesting arguments, and more than once they confirmed that there are more ways to do a grammatical exercise than even the most seasoned grammarian could ever imagine. Thanks are also due to my colleagues Niels Davidsen-Nielsen, Helge Schwartz and Rita Lenstrup for valuable advice, and to Martin Aitken, a native speaker informant in the line of fire as soon as my own intuition could no longer be trusted. Christina Philp made up for my computer illiteracy in an hour of need, for which I am grateful.

Copenhagen Business School
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AK

Introduction

This book has been formulated to be used in conjunction with *Mastering English. An advanced grammar for non-native and native speakers (ME)* by Carl Bache and Niels Davidsen-Nielsen and to serve as a coursebook for university students of English. Since it is intended as a source of supplementary reading and exercise material for courses based on *ME*, it closely follows the descriptive progression and terminology of that grammar. Some exercises can be used directly against the background of *ME*, other exercises benefit from supplementary reading in this coursebook. It should be emphasized that it is not intended as an independent grammar and that it has not been formulated with anything near comprehensiveness in mind.

The aims of the present book are partly to raise awareness of the tools of language description employed in *ME*, and partly to help students recognise and analyse some central structures of English. Advanced students of English should not only be able to speak and write appropriate English, but also to speak and write appropriately *about* English. The coursebook addresses the need for academic proficiency by including explanatory and exploratory discussion of key areas of *ME*, and, where appropriate, exercises that inquire into the developing framework. No key has been provided to the exercises. A key would suggest that there is one correct answer to the exclusion of other answers, and as a consequence a key tends to discourage fruitful discussion.

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1. Preliminaries

1.1. What a grammar can do for you

On the basis of their experience most language teachers would probably subscribe to the proposition that no one can learn the grammar of English only by studying a course, students often show surprisingly limited insight into matters of grammar when questioned in class, and they seem to go on producing inappropriate or even incorrect grammar in essays and translations. This is only to be expected. All a grammar book can hope to do is to draw attention to some particular patterns of what is perceived to be the core grammar of standard English. It does this by providing a more or less explicit description of such patterns. In this way the grammar book can raise the reader's awareness of the patterns, and the new awareness can form a basis for further observation and generalisation.

It is particularly important for non-native readers of a comprehensive English grammar such as *ME* always to bear in mind that studying grammar is only a stepping-stone to understanding and learning English grammar. For example, the grammar book will probably say that certain verbs denoting states such as *WEIGH* and *COST* do not readily occur in a progressive verb group. The grammar would then correctly predict the systematic unacceptability of examples such as **The book is costing £25*. Nonetheless, in a news broadcast I overheard in the autumn of 1990 together with some native speakers of English the commentator said *The build-up in the Gulf is costing thousands of pounds a day*. The utterance was completely unremarkable to the native speakers, whereas as a non-native speaker I made a mental note of it because it deviated from what I had read in my grammar book. My grammar book was not wrong, but it simply could not make the fine distinctions that will capture the point that the particular utterance draws on a more general level of meaning associated with the progressive form. It would be impracticable for any grammar book to list all such possible utterances drawing on the general meaning. However, by providing me with an understanding of the core of the system, my grammar book had enabled me to make my own observations that would help me find the bounds of the system. Ultimately such observations will give me a very good idea of how the progressive is actually used as a resource by native speakers.

In a similar vein, I had learnt from my grammar that the everyday English noun *ADVICE*, meaning "recommendation", is uncountable, and that as a consequence it is not used with *an*, the indefinite article. Then one day I came

across the following sentence in a business letter *We received an advice from our bank this morning pertaining to your transfer for invoice No. 22-0262*. The unexpected combination of *an* and *advice* alerted me to the fact that this little deviation in grammar meant a deviation in meaning. The sentence was not about "recommendation", it was about *advice of payment*, meaning more or less "notice that payment had been made". Relative to overall communicative purposes grammar sometimes seems inconspicuous. Nevertheless, grammar is at the heart of the meaning-creating potential of a language.

By studying a grammar book we can understand the core of the grammar, and understanding the core of the system will enable us to make observations of what native speakers actually do with the grammatical resources at their disposal. Such observations form the basis of correct generalisations of the core system. It is a central purpose of this coursebook to aid the process of grammatical observation and generalisation on the basis of *ME*.

1.2. Some key concepts

A crucial and challenging part of understanding the grammar of English is understanding the abstract concepts of grammatical analysis. Very often students at first find the terminology employed in grammatical analysis unnecessarily technical and cumbersome. However, we need to remind ourselves that studying language is in some respects not unlike studying any other academic topic. Students who are confronted with the terminology of biochemistry or law similarly find it baffling. But they soon appreciate that an integral part of understanding biochemistry or law is understanding the concepts underlying the technical terminology. In contract law CONSIDERATION is a technical term whose legal meaning has to be learnt to understand the bargaining principle underlying the rules governing common law contracts. Similarly, in grammar ADVERBIAL is a technical term whose meaning has to be learnt to understand the structure of sentences. In this section I will briefly introduce some key concepts that are necessary to understand what grammar is and which are used in the framework of *ME*.

So far I have used the word form grammar to talk about two different things. In one sense grammar is to do with a conventional system of rules that allow native speakers to produce and interpret English sentences. In this sense grammar refers to *the grammar of English*. As we have seen above, the grammar of English is the sum of resources that allow a native speaker to string words together into coherent, acceptable sentences of English. The observable manifestation of the resources is in the structure of sentences produced by speakers of English. The other way I have used grammar refers to the content of a grammar book. The content of a grammar book is *a*

grammar of English The two uses of grammar are easily confused. The important point here is that the grammar of English is an object of description. The object of description is independent of its description and will not be altered by it. In this slightly idealised perspective the grammar of English is not in itself open to discussion, but the way we observe it or capture it in our description is open to discussion, as we shall have plenty of opportunity to see. A similar duality of meaning applies in the other main branches of linguistics on which *ME* draws. **Syntax** and **morphology** are used both about the structures of English sentences and words and about descriptions capturing those structures, and **semantics** is used both about the meaning of English and about descriptions capturing that meaning.

ME is a grammar of English which contains a description of the main aspects of the grammar of English. In order to produce that description the two authors had to construct a **framework of description** with some tools of analysis which provide ways of understanding the grammar of English. The framework they have constructed differs to varying degrees from other frameworks describing the same object. In other words, a grammar of English such as *ME* only constitutes one way of looking at and understanding the grammar of English. Just like any other framework of description *ME* has limited descriptive scope and does not exhaustively describe all possible aspects of English grammar. For instance in *ME* you will search in vain for answers to questions such as why *The young man who I spoke to*, *The young man to whom I spoke*, and *The young man that I spoke to* are grammatical, but **The young man to that I spoke* ungrammatical, or why *must* is taken to be the present tense and not the past tense.

When we talk about the grammar of English, we are referring to merely one element of the English language. Obviously no one can speak or write English using grammar alone. In order to speak English we need English words on which the rules of grammar can operate. The stock of words in a language is technically known as the **lexicon**. By extension, the units of language found in the lexicon are called **lexemes**, or **lexical items** rather than words. We need this technical terminology because if we consider the sentences *They saw her leave the house* and *She was seen leaving the house*, we want to be able to say that *saw* and *seen* are two different forms, but that at the same time they are the same word. We bring this out by saying that they are two different **word forms** of the same underlying lexeme. A third possible form of the lexeme would of course be *sees*. To the extent that this is possible, we shall follow *ME*'s notation and use upper case letters for lexemes and lower case italicized letters for word forms

The lexicon together with grammar are the bricks and mortar that go into building acceptable English sentences. This raises the question of how we draw

the line between grammar and the lexicon. We have a good notion of what constitutes a prototypical instance of a word of English. The forms *sing* and *woman* are clearly two such prototypical words. We can also easily apply the rules of grammar and turn the two words into the sentence *The woman sings*. It would appear that the rules of grammar force us to choose a given order of the two words, **Sings the woman* would not be an English sentence, and the rules force us to add an *-s* to *sing*, **The woman sing* would not be an English sentence. The horizontal ordering of the elements is what we call the **syntax** of the sentence, the *-s*-ending is an inflectional morpheme.

When we talk about syntax, we are referring to a sentence in terms of the horizontal relations between the words in it. This is a **syntagmatic** perspective, about which we shall have plenty to say in the following chapters. On a slightly more abstract level we can also think of a sentence in terms of some vertical relations. If we say that the sentence *The woman sings* consists of three syntagmatically related items, we would have a range of substitutional choices for each of these items and still retain the same syntagmatic ordering. I could substitute *a* for *the*, *man* for *woman* and *left* for *sings*, and I would then have the sentence *A man left*. When we talk about the substitutional relationships between *a* and *the*, between *man* and *woman* and between *sing* and *left*, we take a **paradigmatic** perspective on the sentence. The paradigmatic, substitutional perspective is a very important tool when we try to make sense of grammar.

Syntax and inflectional morphology are easily recognised as part of grammar. But what about *the*, the definite article, in the above sentence? Is *the* a word on a par with *sing* or is *the* a piece of grammar on a par with *-s*? *The* clearly resembles prototypical words in that it is a separate orthographic unit. The fact that in many other languages the item corresponding with the definite article is in fact an inflectional ending may be an indication that *the* may not be a prototypical word, but it is not evidence. Traditionally we say that *sing* is a **content word** or **lexical word** because it has substantial meaning content in itself, and we say that *the* is a **function word** or **grammatical word** because it has relatively little meaning content other than the content it acquires through the function that it performs in a sentence.

1.3. Four features of grammaticality

In order to be able to identify a dividing line between what belongs to grammar and grammatical words, we can point to some general features of what it means when we say that something is grammatical.

(a) *Open versus closed classes*

Grammatical words are in closed word classes, which resist new members, lexical words are in open word classes, which readily accept new members. It is extremely difficult to introduce a new preposition, say *INDER*, into the English language, but no problem at all to introduce new nouns such as *COUCH POTATO* or *INTRANET*. The fact that grammatical words are in stable closed classes means that we can list all the grammatical words that are available in a given position in a sentence. Items of language that compete for the same syntagmatic position in a sentence are said to be in paradigmatic opposition. If we take the simple construction *the foot*, we can exhaustively list the items that we can insert instead of *the*: {*a, my, his, her, our, their, n's, one, this, that, which, what, any, each, no*} *foot*. *n's* stands for the genitive of any noun. Collectively these forms are usually called determiners, and they share the feature that they say something general about the mode of existence of whatever the following noun refers to. It would not similarly be possible for us to list all the items that could be inserted instead of *foot*, because, since it is a lexical word the possibilities are innumerable, cf. *the {eyes, hair, arm, future, ...}*. Note that inflectional morphology is similar to grammatical words in that it is relatively slow to change, and inflectional morphemes are also very often in small closed classes of morphemes in paradigmatic opposition. In the sentence *George likes flowers*, *like* is a lexical word from the open class of verbs, whereas the inflectional morpheme *-s* is in a closed substitutional relationship with the inflectional morpheme *-ed*. *-s* signals the present tense *-ed* signals the past tense.

(b) *Generality of meaning*

Inflectional morphemes and grammatical words serve to express abstract functions or relations which tend to be almost meaningless in themselves. Even highly abstract lexical words seem to have much more meaning content than inflectional morphemes and grammatical words. So the abstract lexical words *HAPPINESS* and *EVOLUTION* are more meaningful on their own than for instance *THE* or the present tense *-s*. The generality of meaning is often mirrored in simplicity of form. Grammatical words are rarely composed of more than one or two syllables.

(c) *Functional dependency*

Inflectional morphemes and grammatical words depend on syntagmatic relations with lexical words. It is not surprising that inflectional morphemes depend on lexical words to which they can attach. Similarly, in the clearest instances grammatical words cannot occur alone either. The constructions *I bought the* and *John must tomorrow* do not count as acceptable sentences

because their syntax is incomplete. They would require the insertion of a noun, such as *canary*, and a verb, such as *leave*, respectively. In some contexts grammatical words even behave like inflectional morphemes by merging with other grammatical words or lexical words, a process known as *cliticisation*. Here are some examples: *I'll help you*, *It's stopped raining*, *She'd like to go now*, *The boy didn't understand the question*. Note that some apparently similar words have very different status. Thus in the two sentences *The guards have received three alarm calls*. *They now have three options to reply* we first encounter *have* as a grammatical word which is functionally dependent on *received*, and we then encounter *have* as an independent lexical word. Although the two forms of *have* are historically related, they are treated as different lexemes belonging to different subclasses under the general word class of verbs. We shall return to subclasses again below.

As a final point about functional dependency, it should be noted that pronouns, such as *HE*, *THEM* and *IT*, combine features of grammatical words and lexical words. On their own they complete syntax just like nouns, i.e. they are syntactically independent. However, they usually depend on lexical words in the text for their interpretation. In other words, the sentences *She gave the boy a sandwich*. *It was delicious* are clearly syntactically complete. However, in isolation the first sentence is semantically incomplete because we need to know who *she* refers to, and the *it* in the second sentence clearly depends on *a sandwich* in the first sentence for its interpretation.

(d) *The modifier and the modified*

Inflectional morphemes and grammatical words say something about the lexical words on which they are functionally dependent. Again this is obvious in the case of inflectional morphemes. The plural *-s* in *cars* modifies the lexeme *CAR* by signalling *more than one [car]*. But grammatical words mostly also play the part of the modifier. Above we saw that *the* in *the foot* determines what *foot* refers to. Similarly in *They have received the good news*, *have* modifies the temporal location of the situation denoted by the lexeme *RECEIVE*.

1.4. Exercises

1. Distinguish in your own words between *grammar* and *lexicon*.
2. Explain what is meant by *lexeme* and *word form* on the basis of the below sentence.

She was known to be a relatively tolerant woman.

3. Identify features of grammar in the below sentence and illustrate the importance of the syntagmatic organisation and provide some possible paradigmatic substitutions.

The girl hurt the dog.

4. On the basis of the below sentences discuss which features of *may* should be considered grammatical and which features should be considered lexical.
- (a) The applicant may change her mind.
 - (b) David may leave early, and so may Linda.
 - (c) The following solution might help us both.

2. The sentence

2.1. The nature of a sentence

In the previous chapter I said that the grammar of a language is a conventional system of rules that allow a speaker of the language to produce and interpret sentences of the language. If we look at the majority of grammar books, descriptions of grammar focus on words and sentences as the places where those rules apply. Another possible approach has gained some ground over the past few decades in the form of the functional perspective, where the description of grammar is organized according to the communicative uses to which words and sentences are put. In either case words and sentences remain central objects in grammatical description.

There are two aspects of words and sentences that grammars seek to capture. The first is inflection of words in terms of morphology, and the second is the organization of sentences in terms of syntax. Anyone who has done Latin grammar will be familiar with the complex relationships between gender and the declension of nouns and adjectives and the system of nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, dative and ablative cases. Such a wealth of grammatical distinctions observed in the morphology of words naturally results in a descriptive focus on words and their systems of inflection. However, English is rather different from Latin in that English only expresses two truly systematic cases: the unmarked subjective case and the genitive case, and it has no grammaticalized productive gender distinction in its nouns and adjectives. Only in pronouns, a closed class of grammatical words, do we find systematic gender distinction and a third case, referred to in *ME* as the objective case. *she* and *he* are the subjective case, and *her* and *him* are the objective case. Note that while English may not have a formal gender distinction in its nouns, it does have notional or semantic gender, which accounts for the unacceptability of **The girl looked at himself in the mirror*.

The fact that inflectional endings expressing case and gender are so relatively few in English has meant that modern English grammars tend to put more emphasis on the way that sentences organize the words they contain in terms of syntax rather than on the morphology of the words themselves. Words, lexical as well as grammatical, constitute the minimal formal objects of syntactic analysis. The rules that apply below the level of the word are rules of morphology, not syntax. Sentences constitute the maximal formal objects of syntactic analysis. Syntactic analysis is to do with the grammatical rules that organize words into the independent meaningful units we call sentences. As soon as we