

Review

Geoffrey Leech. *An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage*. London: Edward Arnold, 1989. xxii + 575 pp. Paperback.

As indicated in the title, the book is arranged alphabetically, in dictionary style, and the wide range of entries make grammar more accessible than the conventional grammar book. For instance, one can easily locate the following: ordinary words such as *every*, *nothing*, *yesterday*, etc.; grammatical terms, for example, *modal auxiliary*, *passive*, *nonfinite clause*, etc.; and entries that address the functional mode of language, examples being *apologies*, *invitations*, *thanking people*, *giving directions*, etc. There are lots of cross-references in the book and the author states that these should enable the user to benefit from the book without necessarily being familiar with many grammatical terms. Leech claims that the grammar is not prescriptive but strictly descriptive, and that where differences in opinion between native speakers occur, they are pointed out without giving rules of thumb. Throughout the book, both British and American spelling, pronunciation and usage are given. The book also offers general information on topics such as *letter-writing* and *geographical names*. Other entries show how English is spoken and written; *intonation*, *stress*, and *spelling* are cases in point. The book ends with a list of irregular verbs.

Leech uses tables mainly for syntactic illustrations, and cartoons to create social contexts in which some utterances can be made. The usage of prepositions, some grammatical structures and abstract concepts of time (as contained in words such as ago, since, before, while, during, etc.) is also illustrated by making use of, inter alia, cartoons. Although in language learning and teaching both grammatical items and functional realisations should be treated in parallel (Harmer 1983), Brumfit (1980) maintains that there is always the problem of cultural stereotypes being imposed on students (quoted in Harmer 1983). In his book Leech provides contexts for the functions which he treats, addressing such categories of communicative competence as appropriacy, occurrence, and feasibility (Harmer 1983). It is interesting to note that theorists and critics do not always agree on how best to contextualise language usage in a way that is free of cultural bias; it is generally agreed, though, that linguists should identify real-life situations in the communicative approach to language (Harmer 1983).

Like dictionaries and other language usage books that are designed for reference purposes, Leech has an introductory section on how to use his book. However, this section, presented under the titles 'How to use this book' and 'Detailed explanations', may not necessarily enjoy the full attention it deserves, especially because 'investigations into users' language needs and reference skills [show] that it cannot be taken for granted that learners are prepared to study all the relevant introductory sections and to refer to the tables of codes' (Lemmens 1986:11). Yet one of the strengths of this book lies in the fact that whereas most reference works are used mainly for decoding activities (reading, especially), Leech's book has the advantage of also encouraging the encoding of information.

Leech acknowledges that 'it is not possible to write about grammar without using some grammatical terms'. Look, at for example, his illustration of agreeing and disagreeing in English.

(With positive) Yes + subject + auxiliary/BE.

(With negative) No + subject auxiliary/BE + n't

Although he also says that the ‘explanations in this book avoid difficult grammatical terms,’ he offers cross-references as a way out of being entangled in highly technical jargon. However, since ‘grammar should not be presented in such a condensed form that frequent reference to explanatory notes elsewhere’ (Lemmens 1986:100) is required, one cannot help the feeling that while the author succeeds in making grammar more accessible to the user, the strength of the book ultimately rests on the user’s willingness to use cross-references to elucidate some facts or information.

The book is not without cultural bias. There are traces of typical English culture in the way some characters are dressed (e.g. policeman’s uniform, p 191), the use of the pound sign (although the dollar sign is also used) and the conventions used in the example of *letter-writing*. NASA’s achievements have also been acknowledged in the American flag held by the astronaut (p 123).

Leech indeed tries not to be prescriptive in his presentation of the English grammar. A case in point is his discussion of reference to the sexes in English, in which he makes obviously non-committal statements. It is at such points as illustrated below that Leech lets the user of his book decide on the style or usage of their choice:

- 3b But there is a problem where English has no neutral word.
 E.g. he/she = ? chairman/chairwoman = ?
- 3c In the past, English has used the male pronoun to refer to
 both sexes.
 E.g. *Everyone* thinks *he* is right, so no one will admit that *he*
 is wrong.
 (he = ‘he or she’)
 Men have lived on earth for more than a million years.
 (*men* = ‘men and women’)
- 3d But nowadays, many people (especially women) dislike this.
 They prefer:
 (a) to use *or* (i.e. *he or she* instead of *he*.)
 (b) to use a new word (i.e. a new pronoun *s/he*, for *he/she*;

or *chairperson*, for *chairman*).

(c) the use the plural *they* for the singular <in speech> [see he and she].

[SEE HE AND SHE 2, and MAN 2, for further examples and discussion.]

- 3e The problem is: (a) *he or she* is sometimes awkward, and (b) not everyone likes new words! (c) In exams, using the plural instead of the singular is considered <incorrect> .

- 4 *Is there an answer to the problem?*

There is no 'correct' choice. So we suggest that you:

(A) Avoid the problem where you can, i.e. by using neutral words like *they*, *person* and *human being*.

(B) Otherwise, choose the form that you like best!

In conclusion, Leech's efforts to integrate syntax, semantics and communicative competence in language learning and teaching are laudable. His book will be invaluable to both teachers and students of the English language.

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