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A “huge book”.

Spoken and written English: a grammar for advanced learners¹

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Introduction

The role of grammar in today's language teaching, with its primary focus on communicative ability in a mass-education context, is unclear. While the existence of grammar as *the* backbone of any language is nowhere denied – how could it? – grammar is also, from a pedagogical perspective, a backbone of much contention. As noted by Louis Kelly in his *25 Centuries of Language Teaching* (1969:34), this is not a new situation: “Since the beginning of language teaching the manner of learning the syntax and flexions of language has been disputed.” In the past hundred years or so, the assumed benefits of the grammar book as a tool for language learning have frequently been called into question. More than half a century ago, Harold E. Palmer (1939:xxx) commented – without necessarily agreeing – on the increasingly low status of grammars in language teaching: “We hear it frequently stated that the day of the grammar-book is past.”

The impact of the “communicative movement” on language pedagogy in the 1980s did little to boost the idea that grammar and grammars are indispensable to the teaching of languages. More recently, however, the notion that they might after all have an important part to play, especially in the context of form-focused teaching (cf. Ellis 1990, Doughty & Williams 1998), has made its way back into discussions about how best to teach and learn languages. Tonkyn's (1994:1) assertion of a “grammar revival” can be seen as symptomatic of the rekindled interest in pedagogical grammar in the 1990s (cf. Bygate et al. 1994; Odlin 1994). Whether, outside the circles of applied linguists and language-teaching theorists, grammar had ever disappeared – or come back – is a different matter.

Despite the theoretical turmoil that has long surrounded grammar teaching, new grammars keep coming at a steady pace. The market, at

¹ This is a review article on Carter, Ronald & Michael McCarthy. *Cambridge Grammar of English. A Comprehensive Guide. Spoken and Written English. Grammar and Usage*. Cambridge University Press 2006. x + 973 pp. Paperback. ISBN 0-521-58846-4. Price £ 24.50. (Also available with CD-ROM, price: £ 29.95.)

least for English grammars, seems insatiable. One of the latest – and in many ways most notable – arrivals is the *Cambridge Grammar of English (CGE)* by Ronald Carter & Michael McCarthy, published in 2006. Length alone – close to a thousand pages – makes it stand out from its rivals, i.e. apart from purely scholarly grammars.² The authors themselves refer to it as “a huge book” (p. v). Besides being a hefty tome, it is of interest in many other ways – not only as a grammar of English.

A green grammar: readership and scope

Grammars come in many shapes and colours. As to the latter aspect, the dominant colour of *CGE* is green, perhaps fittingly so in these days of increasing awareness of global warming and related inconvenient truths. This applies not only to the book’s cover; on the inside, cross references, many headings and occasionally whole pages appear in a lighter shade of green. In examples, too, green is used to help focus the reader’s attention on some specific grammatical unit, often together with bold type and/or underlining to mark some other unit(s). In *She walks the dog every morning* (p. 506), exemplifying different meanings of “verbs with and without an object”, *the dog* is in green (marking the object), *walks* in bold (marking the verb) and *She* underlined (marking the subject/agent), leaving *every morning* “unmarked”, i.e. in ordinary italics. For the most part, this rather elaborate marking works out well for the reader; at times, however, it can be somewhat confusing to the eye, especially since the use of, e.g., green versus bold is not always readily transparent.

As regards intended readership, *CGE* is rather less explicit than, in particular, English learners’ dictionaries, which today, almost without exception, use the term “advanced learner” as part of their titles (cf. Ohlander 2003:160). However, buried in a section – more or less obligatory in this kind of grammar – on “Descriptive versus prescriptive approach”, the book is described as “a pedagogical grammar ... written primarily for advanced learners of English” (p. 6). At the same time, it is a grammar that mirrors developments in linguistics during the last few decades. In this sense, it may also be regarded as a partly scholarly grammar – or, rather, as a pedagogical grammar with a distinctly scholarly attitude.

Recent years have seen an upsurge of interest in spoken language. This, above all, is reflected in the consistent and detailed attention paid to spoken English throughout *CGE*, as indicated in its subtitle. Other present-day linguistic concerns brought to the fore include pragmatics and discourse analysis, text linguistics and information packaging, semantic and lexical perspectives, and also the specific ESP domain of

² Cf. Quirk et al. (1985): 1779 pages; Biber et al. (1999): 1204 pages; Huddleston & Pullum (2002): 1842 pages.

academic English.

Even though variation of different types (spoken versus written, informal versus formal language, standard versus non-standard usage, etc.) is assigned a prominent role in *CGE*, it is “a grammar of standard British English” (p. 4). Among other standard Englishes, said to “differ only minimally as far as grammar is concerned” (p. 5), only North American English grammar is attended to, in a special appendix. This, to my mind, is rather a pity in a grammar the length of *CGE*: awareness of some characteristics of other standard Englishes would seem to be well justified in these days of global English. Take the use of verb aspect in Indian English, as exemplified in *I have worked there in 1960* and *Mohan is having two houses* (Platt, Weber & Ho 1984:71f.). Though perhaps minimal from a quantitative, “whole-grammar” perspective, such deviations from standard British and American English may help globalize learners’ horizon of English.

Corpus data

The use of a corpus, i.e. a collection of authentic text in computer-readable form, is by now a well-established way of obtaining representative data for linguistic purposes; to produce an English dictionary today without access to corpus data would be unthinkable. Grammars, too, have increasingly moved in the direction of using corpora to ensure a firm basis for linguistic description, not least concerning different types of variation. A case in point is Biber et al. (1999); *CGE* is another.

The corpus of English drawn on by the authors of *CGE* was the Cambridge International Corpus (CIC), giving access to more than 700 million words of English text from a wide variety of sources (p. 11). By far the larger part of the material consisted of written English. However, there was also a special sub-corpus of spoken English, the CANCODE (Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English) corpus: “five million words of naturally-occurring, ... spoken English, recorded in everyday situations” (p. 11). Examples from this corpus form the basis of the detailed account of spoken English provided in *CGE*.

The use of corpus data in *CGE* means, among other things, that there is ample and reliable frequency information about forms and constructions in different types and registers of English (cf. also Biber et al. 1999:4). For example, not unexpectedly, the words *yeah* and *know* (due to the ubiquitous spoken discourse marker *you know*) figure prominently among the spoken, but are absent from the written top twenty English words (p. 12); *no one* is considerably more frequent than its synonym *nobody* in written English, whereas the opposite holds for spoken English (p. 14). As stressed by the authors, “information about frequency is important, especially for learners of a language” (p. 16). Knowing roughly when and where a certain form or construction is

appropriate is a vital part of everyday communicative competence. Some fifty years ago, it is sometimes said, Swedish students going to an English-speaking country tended to sound like books. Today, by contrast, their written English often reveals a lack of awareness of the differences between spoken and written English as regards degree of formality, etc. Here, a grammar like *CGE* should serve as a useful consciousness-raiser.

A corpus can be used in many different ways by linguists and grammar writers. Carter & McCarthy are very clear on how they see the role of the corpus in *CGE*: “It is our strong view that language corpora ... can afford considerable benefits for language teaching but the pedagogic process should be informed by the corpus, not driven or controlled by it” (p. 12). In other words, pedagogical considerations – not the corpus, however authentic its data – should be in the driver’s seat. Occasionally, however, the authors of *CGE* seem to have succumbed to the temptation of including corpus information that may be of considerable linguistic interest but where the pedagogical point is rather less clear. For example, in the special appendix on “Word clusters and grammar” (i.e. collocations in a liberal interpretation of the term), there are lists of two-word, three-word, etc., clusters in spoken and written texts, including examples of the following purely linear, unstructured kind: *and I, of the, it was a, you know the*. The pedagogical implications of such specimens are not obvious, as opposed to the traditional observation that grammatically structured, recurrent word combinations – phrases and idioms – play important roles in linguistic communication at large.

Structure, special features

As pointed out by the authors, “*CGE* is organised differently from other contemporary books on the grammar of English” (p. 16). This is, to a large extent, due to the book’s focus on spoken English, which shows up early on in *CGE*: apart from a highly readable introductory chapter on the general philosophy underlying *CGE* and a lengthy section headed “From word to grammar: an A–Z” (see further below), the first three grammar chapters proper are devoted to spoken English. These are followed by two chapters on grammar in relation to discourse, dealing with text linguistics and speaker turns, and a chapter on academic English, in itself a special feature of *CGE*. Only then – i.e. after a long delay, from a more traditional point of view – has the time come for what most people would see as the core of grammar: word classes, phrase classes, word formation, sentences and clauses, complements and adjuncts, etc., accounted for in sixteen chapters (some 300 pages). The point of departure in these chapters is basically formal/structural. By contrast, the next three chapters are centred around “Time” (present, past, future), even though they deal with, among other things, formal

devices like tense and aspect. The shift towards a more semantic/functional perspective is even more obvious in the following six chapters, where – under the ”communicative” heading of ”Notions and functions” – we find chapters titled ”Modality”, ”Speech acts”, ”Questions”, ”Negation”, ”Condition”, and ”Comparison”, closely associated with grammatical celebrities like modal auxiliaries, different clause types (declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives), auxiliary *do*, conditional conjunctions and sentences, comparatives and superlatives, etc. However, a number of other expressions are also included here, such as the use of *likely* and *seem* to express modality (p. 673) and the use of *the same*, *similar* and *like* to express comparison (pp. 767f.). Thus, the conventional demarcation between grammar and lexis is often blurred. The last three chapters treat various aspects of ”Information packaging”, especially the use of word order and the active–passive voice for focusing elements in a sentence/utterance, where notions like ”theme/topic”, ”rheme/comment” and ”endweight” play key roles (p. 778); the very last chapter in the book deals with the intricacies of reported speech (a well-known problem area for learners with first languages lacking the distinction between direct and indirect speech).

Altogether, *CGE* consists of some 35 chapters, taking up 824 pages.³ There are also nine appendices (pp. 825–889), covering such diverse topics as different kinds of ”word clusters” (cf. above); punctuation and spelling rules; numbers, how to tell the time and units of measurement; nationalities, countries and regions. Further, as noted above, there is an appendix summarizing the main differences between North American and British English grammar. Another provides a table of irregular verbs, from which, mysteriously, a number of common verbs – like *learn*, *lie*, *spell*, *spit* and *split* – are conspicuously absent; likewise, alternative forms are often missing and no mention is made of common non-standard uses of forms (like *lay* for *lie*, as in Bob Dylan’s song *Lay Lady Lay*). On the whole, this appendix would be well served by a major revision.

Besides the Index,⁴ there is an extensive Glossary, providing rough-and-ready definitions and exemplification of terms used in the book. Among these are to be found not only familiar troublemakers like ”complement” and ”determiner” (cf. below), but also more exotic-sounding notions, such as ”endophora” and ”exophora”, as well as ”preposition stranding” and ”pseudo-intransitive” verbs, well known to linguists but not usually to learners, whether advanced or not.

As part of the authors’ ambition to promote awareness of correctness

³ Curiously, page numbers are consistently omitted in *CGE*’s various tables of contents; nor are chapters numbered. The practicality of this is doubtful.

⁴ The Index, incidentally, is far from exhaustive. In particular, individual nouns (like *scissors* and *sheep*) are usually not included, as opposed to individual verbs and adverbs (like *consist* and *conversely*).

issues, there are, interspersed in the body of the text, a number of useful notes on “usage classics”, like split infinitives, double negatives, *I* versus *me*, *who* versus *whom*, etc. Carter & McCarthy rightly stress that learners need to be “aware of the social importance which attaches to certain prescriptive rules while at the same time being aware of the way in which English is used by real speakers and writers of the language” (p. 6). This, needless to say, applies no less to teachers of English.

In connection with split infinitives (e.g., *To boldly go where no man has gone before*, of *Star Trek* fame), traditionally considered one of the worst sins of commission in the English language (cf., e.g., Ohlander 1999), *CGE* (p. 596) gives the following carefully worded account: “Many language purists believe that split infinitives are wrong or bad style. ... In fact, in spoken English split infinitives are very common and pass unnoticed, though they are often thought inappropriate in writing.” It might have been added that today, despite its traditional aura of illegitimacy, split infinitives are by no means rare in high-quality writing, where the former stigma seems to have lost most of its stranglehold. Still, of course, it may be wise to caution learners to watch out in their own written production since there are still some (over)sensitive people out there. Here, readers would have benefited from relevant corpus data concerning the use, in both spoken and written English, of this controversial construction.

From a learner’s point of view, a valuable feature of *CGE* is the inclusion of explicit warnings with regard to “common areas of potential error” (p. 16). For example, in connection with the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns, thorny ground for most learners, teachers of English in Sweden (and elsewhere) will be pleased to find well-worn items like *advice*, *furniture*, *knowledge*, *money*, and *news* singled out for special attention, providing “examples of singular non-count nouns [that] are count nouns in many other languages” (p. 340). Some other members of this group may appear less familiar from a Swedish-English perspective, e.g. *music*, *rubbish* and *safety*. Warnings are frequently spiced with examples of erroneous sentences, duly marked as such but unthinkable in a pedagogical grammar not long ago, such as *How are your knowledges of the British jail system?* (p. 341), *They were disappointed by that we couldn’t come* (p. 462) and *I can Italian* (p. 640). This may be characterized as an implicitly contrastive approach, naturally less precise than that employed in, e.g., traditional, explicitly contrastive school grammars, where a target language like English is consistently contrasted with the learner’s first language. Obviously, such an implicitly contrastive approach cannot hope to cover all potential, contrastively grounded errors in today’s increasingly multilingual classrooms, but it is certainly a useful compromise, bearing out many teachers’ experience that, depending

on first language, some parts of English grammar may be more difficult for some learners to come to grips with than others (cf. Ljung & Ohlander 1993). Tense provides a relevant example, not least the distinction between the past simple and the present perfect, missing from many languages – or being used differently from English. Consequently, warnings are in order, to the effect that the present perfect is not (but cf. above: Indian English) used with definite time reference (a rule which, basically, happens to apply to Swedish as well as English): *My grandfather has died about four weeks ago, When I was a lad, I have lived on a farm* (p. 609). Another area where “multicontrastive awareness” (cf. Ohlander 2001) on the part of teachers is called for is the use of the articles, e.g. when it comes to generic reference (e.g., the ungrammaticalness of *The foxes have long bushy tails* and *The art is long; the life is short* with a general meaning). Here, however, *CGE* is a bit of a letdown, although duly noting, for countables, that “[p]lural count nouns ... are used without determiners when a general meaning is indicated” (p. 336). In my view, this area of potential error deserves a more unified, focused treatment, considering the problems it tends to cause students of English, almost regardless of first language.

Word grammar

Time was, not all that long ago, when lexical aspects of linguistic theory were widely regarded as a fairly trivial matter. Those days now seem *so* last century (to use *so* in a way mostly associated with younger speakers, according to *CGE*'s “A–Z”, p. 141). Today, the role of individual words (“lexical items”) in the syntactic machinery is seen as pivotal by many linguists. From a pedagogical perspective, of course, words have never gone out of fashion, even though the actual teaching of vocabulary has been much discussed. In particular, the lexis-grammar interface has remained in focus at least since the publication of the first edition of A. S. Hornby's *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* in the 1940s (cf. Cowie 1999). Before that, Harold E. Palmer, had pointed the way in *A Grammar of English Words* (1938). In his Introduction (p. iii), Palmer presents his work as follows:

like a dictionary it is a collection of words in alphabetical order, but unlike a dictionary it gives the grammar of each word in detail; it is a *grammar of words*. ... It is a manual of the usage of those English words that have been found by experience to constitute the bulk of learning-effort on the part of the student of English as foreign language.⁵

Palmer's presentation of his word grammar could also be applied to the

⁵ Cf also Palmer's (1939:xxviiiff.) insightful discussion of the relationship between “the grammar and the dictionary”.

extensive “A-Z” section in *CGE*, which accounts for the grammatical behaviour of frequent, often polysemous, everyday words that are “known to be difficult for learners of English and often lead to errors” (p. 21). It should also be noted that *CGE*, like many other present-day grammars, provides a good deal of information on (groups of) lexical items in other parts of the book, often in the form of extensive lists of words that behave in a grammatically similar way, e.g. different types of phrasal and prepositional verbs (pp. 432ff.).

The “A-Z” contains about 120 words, most of them belonging to closed word classes like adverbs (*here, still*, etc.), conjunctions (*although, as*, etc.), prepositions and prepositional phrases (*about, after all*, etc.), pronouns and determiners (*all, each, every*). A number of common verbs (*allow, bring/take, mean*, etc.) and a few nouns (*person, thing, stuff*) are also included. Incidentally, the examples just given are also to be found in Palmer’s pioneering work, which also covers a great many words not included in *CGE*’s “A-Z”. Further, despite the fact that interest in discourse analysis as well as spoken language is usually claimed to be a fairly recent phenomenon in linguistics, various functions of the adverb *well* as a discourse marker are accounted for in Palmer’s word grammar; this also goes for the interjection *oh*. These words are also included in *CGE*’s “A-Z”, as are a number of other words functioning as discourse markers, especially in spoken English, e.g. *anyway* and *Okay/OK* (the latter also increasingly common in spoken Swedish as a sort of feedback signal, favoured by younger speakers at the expense of “native” expressions like *jaha* or *jaså*). Certain predominantly spoken uses of the word *like* could also be mentioned here as examples of the many useful observations on spoken present-day English included in the “A-Z”, as well as in *CGE* at large. One such use is exemplified in *It was a shattering, frightening experience like* (p. 101), where *like* in end position is roughly equivalent to Swedish *liksom*, or even *typ*, making a statement sound less assertive. Another function is found in the following example: *So this bloke came up to me and I’m like ‘Go away, I don’t want to dance.’* (p. 102); the phrase *I’m like*, “very commonly used (particularly among younger speakers) as a marker of reported speech”, corresponds more or less exactly to younger speakers’ use of the phrase *jag ba* in informal spoken Swedish.

Hard-core grammarians may object that the “A-Z” tends to blur the distinction between grammar proper and purely lexical information.⁶ Then again, it can be argued that this may be quite practical in a pedagogical grammar, like the inclusion of grammatical information in learners’ dictionaries. To be sure, *CGE*’s “A-Z” is something of a ragbag, where it is not always easy to see the rationale behind what is included

⁶ Cf., e.g., the extremely non-grammatical warning “not [to] confuse the spelling of *quite* with the adjective *quiet*” (p. 130).

and what is not.⁷ Still, the “A–Z” comes out as an accessible reference section, a shortcut to the grammatical profiles of a number of individual words and expressions, many of them angled towards spoken English, *the* special feature of *CGE*.

Spoken English

It has often been pointed out that grammatical descriptions suffer from a “written bias” (cf. Huddleston & Pullum 2002:11ff.). This is also Carter & McCarthy’s view: “Accordingly, the spoken language has been downgraded and has come to be regarded as relatively inferior to written manifestations” (p. 9). Palmer’s early effort to redress the balance in *A Grammar of Spoken English* (1st ed. 1924) today reads most like a curiosity, with its use of phonetic transcription, instead of ordinary script, in examples, etc.; also, Palmer’s definition of spoken English differed from that of today’s linguists.⁸

According to Carter & McCarthy, *CGE* “is unique in the attention devoted to spoken language” (p. 16). True, spoken English figures prominently in the title of Biber et al. (1999) but the spoken-grammar perspective is more consistently present in *CGE*. Spoken grammar is the exclusive domain of three early chapters, and aspects of spoken grammar turn up in many other parts of the book as well. These chapters collectively serve as an excellent introduction, with a fair share of in-depth analysis, to typical features of spoken English.

The axiomatic points of departure, from which most of what is characteristic of spoken grammar can be derived, are that spoken language (1) “happens in real time and is typically unplanned”; (2) “is most typically face to face”; and (3) “reflect[s] the immediate social and interpersonal situation” (p. 164). The chapters on spoken English in *CGE* cover a wide range of phenomena. A good deal of space is devoted to pragmatic markers (pp. 208ff.), among which are to be found discourse markers (the speaker’s “meta-comment” concerning the ongoing discourse: *anyway, you know*, etc.), stance markers (the speaker’s attitude to the message: *fortunately, to tell you the truth*, etc.), and hedges (downtoning assertiveness: *like, kind of*, etc.). Swearing and greetings, other ingredients of face-to-face communication, are also attended to. For example, tips are generously shared with the swearing-minded learner about the correct use of “taboo intensifiers” (like the “F-word”):

⁷ This applies to headwords as well as to the information provided under them; for instance, *an own goal* could well have been mentioned as an exception to the ordinary grammar of *own* (p. 125).

⁸ Cf. Palmer (1939:xxxiii): “... the term *Spoken English* should be taken to mean ‘that variety of English which is generally used by educated people (more specifically in the South of England) in the course of ordinary conversation or when writing letters to intimate friends’.”

“Unlike *shit*, *fuck* and *bugger*, *bloody* is not used on its own as an interjection”, as exemplified in: “*Oh fuck! I forgot to post that letter* (or: *Oh shit/bugger!* But not: *Oh bloody!*)” (p. 227); that swearing is serious grammatical business should escape no one. As regards greetings and farewells, handy scales of formality are offered (pp. 227f.): for example, the least formal greeting is *Hiya* (less formal than a simple *Hi*), the least formal way of leave-taking *Ta-ta* (less formal than *Cheers* and *See you*). All this – and a great deal more – is useful stuff, with obvious sociolinguistic relevance.

From a more strictly grammatical perspective, spoken grammar – not only that of English – may be seen as governed by a general economy principle along Gricean lines (“Don’t say more than you have to”), inherent in the speech situation. One manifestation of this is the well-known phenomenon of ellipsis, assigned a fundamental role in *CGE*. Elliptical constructions of various types (not restricted to spoken language, of course) are to be found in many grammatical contexts. For instance, under the heading of “Situational ellipsis”, we find examples like the following, where certain clause elements are understood rather than explicitly stated (p. 181): *Didn’t know that film was on tonight, Sounds good to me*. The effect is often especially drastic in interrogatives, where subjects and/or auxiliaries are often omitted (pp. 182f.): *Started yet?*, *The dog bothering you?*, *Anybody want soup?*⁹ Constructions like these have long been used in written dialogues by writers of fiction. Carter & McCarthy have done a good job bringing out, also by their choice of examples, the communicative efficiency and terse expressiveness of these spoken variants.

The typically unplanned, partly improvised nature of real-time spoken language is readily apparent in sentences like *Your sister, is she coming too?* (p. 194), another familiar construction type usually frowned upon in, e.g., academic writing but extremely common in spontaneous spoken English, as well as in many other languages. The structure is usually referred to by linguists as “left dislocation”, a term replaced by “header” in *CGE* (p. 193). A closely related type of construction, equally typical of spoken language, is to be found in sentences like *They’re incredibly nice, our neighbours* (p. 195). These structures involve “tails” – “right dislocation” in theoretical lingo – and are “similar to headers, in that items are placed outside the ... clause structure” (p. 194).

The use of question tags, “serv[ing] to engage the listener and invite convergence with the speaker” (p. 197), also belongs among the greatest hits of spoken English. The non-standard form *immit*, increasingly

⁹ The last type of example, it may be added, is of special interest: cf. the contrast between, e.g., *She likes/liked it* and the interrogative *She like it?* (= *Does/Did she like it?*), where the form *like*, seemingly ungrammatical, may signal either present or past tense.

common among younger speakers in recent years, is included in two examples in *CGE*, but only as an equivalent of *isn't it?* (as in *That's great innit?*). Its extended (even more non-standard) use as a generalized, invariant tag (like, e.g., *right*), as in *We need to decide about that now innit?* (= *don't we/right?*) is not mentioned.¹⁰

As will have appeared, *CGE* provides a wealth of interesting information on a variety of topics in spoken English, efficiently illustrated by large numbers of occasionally very long extracts of spoken language, often in the form of interactive exchanges. At the same time, Carter & McCarthy's exposition raises the question of how big the grammatical differences really are between spoken and written English. From a pedagogical point of view, this translates into: How much spoken English grammar is it necessary to actually teach?

According to *CGE*, the gap between spoken and written English has been closing in recent years: "there is considerable overlap and there is an increasing range of forms appearing in informal written texts which previously were only considered acceptable in speech" (p. 168); the two modes "are not sharply divided but exist on a continuum" (p. 164), where there is room for hybrids.¹¹ In particular, "it is important to remember that the majority of grammatical items and structures are equally at home in speech and writing" (p. 167). Therefore, it could be argued, the emphasis on informal face-to-face communication in *CGE*'s account of spoken English grammar does not present the full picture. On the other hand, it is such discourse that best displays the clearest differences between the extremes of the spoken-written continuum.

So how much spoken grammar should be brought up in teaching – or in a learner-oriented grammar like *CGE*? To what extent can the features of spoken grammar – undeniably of great linguistic interest – be expected to take care of themselves in pedagogical practice? Carter & McCarthy are well aware of the basic issue:

Some people argue that learners of English should not be presented with details of how native speakers speak. The position taken in this book is that such an approach would disadvantage learners. This book presents information about spoken grammar because it is important for learners to observe and understand how and why speakers speak as they do. To describe these features does not mean that learners of English have to speak like native speakers. *CGE* presents the data so that teachers and learners can make their own informed choices. (p. 10)

¹⁰ See, e.g., <http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices/yourvoice/conversation3.shtml>

¹¹ For example, email and chatroom communication constitute "a new and distinct mode of written-spoken English", where, e.g., ellipsis plays a crucial role (p. 239).

This, to my mind, is a wise attitude. It promotes the kind of language awareness – especially concerning “appropriacy” to context (social and textual) – that is often talked about in communicatively oriented curricula but tends to get lost on the way, despite the emphasis laid, e.g. in a country like Sweden, on spoken communication. Of course, reading or being taught about the typical features of spoken English is not enough. Being exposed to large amounts of authentic speech is imperative. However, the kind of information presented in *CGE*, with its abundance of corpus-based examples, should provide the background knowledge required to make such exposure a more active enterprise, where – ideally – noticing and reflecting on the input would lead to more “informed choices” among learners.

“Ordinary” grammar: terminology and other matters

Despite its emphasis on spoken English, much the larger part of *CGE* is devoted to what may be called “ordinary” grammar, common to both written and spoken English (cf. above). i.e. word and phrase classes, syntactic functions (subject, object, modifier, etc.), clause types, and so on. It takes some 300 pages for *CGE* to come to what most grammars start out with: an introductory chapter on word (and phrase) classes. This is an unconventional, even eccentric, ordering of the stuff that grammar is made of. Whether, from a learner’s point of view, this is a good move is not self-evident. This question should be seen in the wider context of the book’s overall organization, to which I shall return in the next section.

Given *CGE*’s length, it need hardly be pointed out that it covers a lot of grammatical ground. Further, despite its practical, pedagogical aims, *CGE* does not shy away from employing current grammatical terminology familiar from scholarly grammars. In fact, in order to benefit the most from *CGE*, the learners making up its intended readership will need to be fairly well versed in the terminological paraphernalia of present-day English grammar and linguistics, from adjuncts and backshift to *wh*-clefts and zero article. Such a prerequisite, however, is currently well beyond, e.g., the vast majority of Swedish first-term students of English at university level. Having studied English at school for some ten years or so, most of them would clearly qualify as advanced learners of English. Nonetheless, in spite of the Glossary, few of them would be able to penetrate the following concise formulation of the relationship between sentences like *It is believed that Johnny hates jazz* and *Johnny is believed to hate jazz*: “The use of a raised subject as an alternative to anticipatory *it*, similarly, enables the writer/speaker to make a less direct commitment to a proposition” (p. 283). To be sure, the examples supplied will mostly

get the message across in a more implicit way, but there is no doubt that *CGE* makes demanding – although in many ways rewarding – reading. It should, after all, be seen and read not only as a practical guide to English grammar and usage, but also as an introduction to a more theoretical approach to grammar. For example, with regard to pragmatics, a special chapter presents speech acts in considerable detail, introducing central notions like “commissives” (p. 680) and “performative” verbs (p. 707). But it also provides more down-to-earth recommendations as to the use of the word *please* (p. 713). This mixture of theory and practice is very much at the heart of *CGE*. It also invites discussion about the book’s use and definitions of terms. Only a few cases can be brought up here.

In my experience, two basic notions in English grammar stand out as especially resistant to teaching: determiners and complements. For example: Are determiners a word class or a syntactic function? What is the relationship between complements and objects?

As regards determiners, the Glossary in *CGE* is rather noncommittal: “Item which indicates the kind of reference a noun phrase has” (p. 900), e.g. the articles as well as quantifiers like *some* and *every*. Elsewhere, in the body of the text, we are specifically told that determiners make up a separate word class (p. 296). In other places, however, this seemingly clear statement is obscured and, occasionally, implicitly contradicted, especially in connection with the relationship between determiners and premodifiers (cf. pp. 299, 323ff., 353ff.).¹²

Admittedly, it may take some close reading to spot the inconsistencies just pointed to. On the other hand, students rightly expect a grammar like *CGE* – aimed at learners rather than linguists – to be unambiguously clear concerning basic grammatical notions. To be fair, however, *CGE* is not the only grammar to be vague on determiners.¹³

The term “complement” presents a similar case. Now, as regards “verb complementation”, *CGE* specifically states (e.g., pp. 496f., 504f.) that this notion involves, among other things, objects of transitive verbs.

¹² The following formulations will most likely add to the confusion: “The possessive determiners have the following forms as pronouns” (p. 358); “There are two classes of possessive pronoun: possessive determiners and possessive pronouns” (p. 382). But pronouns are claimed to be one word class, determiners another (cf., e.g., pp. 295, 375).

¹³ Incidentally, genitives like *Jim’s* are included as one type of determiner (p. 353; cf. also p. 361), on the grounds that it serves the same syntactic and semantic function as possessives like *my*, *your*; etc; the logic of this, it would seem, is impeccable. In that case, however, the following conclusion would be inescapable: if determiners make up a word class, it would have to be an open, not a closed one, considering the virtually unlimited number of genitives formed from nouns, an open word class if any. Interestingly, such a conclusion would challenge the way determiners are usually construed in English grammars.

When it comes to “complement”, however, the picture is less clear-cut. As far as I have been able to find out (cf. pp. 496ff. on complementation, objects and complements), *CGE* fails to state clearly that “complement” should be seen as a superordinate term in relation to “predicative complement”, “object”, certain obligatory adverbials, etc.; in short, objects are a type of complement. Again, many other grammars of English demonstrate the same lack of terminological clarity on this point, troubling students.

Another terminological infelicity relates to the notion of “embedded clause”, in *CGE* defined as “dependent clauses which function as constituents of phrases”, “most typically relative clauses”, as in *Two people I know* (p. 564). This notion is, in *CGE*, explicitly contrasted to “subordinate clause”, both notions being classified as different types of “dependent clause” (p. 553; cf. p. 564). In other words, embedded clauses are not to be seen as subordinate clauses. Of course, technical terms may be used and defined in any number of ways, but the “technical” conclusion here, i.e. that relative clauses are not subordinate clauses, is paradoxical and runs counter to well-established usage (cf., e.g., Biber et al. 1999:192, 135f.; Huddleston & Pullum 2002:949). In any case, even advanced students of English grammar are likely to find *CGE*’s basic classification and presentation of subclauses rather confusing.

On the less theoretical side, which may be more important to those readers above all in need of a reliable reference work on English grammar, *CGE* provides an abundance of detailed, up-to-date information not only on ordinary standard (British) English, but also on more informal and specific usage in various contexts. For example, in connection with the competition between the *be*-passive and the *get*-passive, it is noted that the latter tends to be used more often (though not exclusively) “when a situation is judged to be problematic in some way: *Well actually I got sacked because ...*” (p. 800). In the chapter on “Speech representation”, the construction type, involving the verb *say*, exemplified in *They said to leave at once* is presented as a kind of indirect imperative (cf. *They said that X should leave at once*) used “in informal spoken contexts” (p. 807). With regard to inverted word order in reporting clauses, as in *This is certainly someone the city wants to celebrate, said a spokesman for the city council*, this is said to “occur primarily in literary writing and journalism”, being “very rare in informal speech” (p. 817); the same goes, a fortiori, for inversion in initial reporting clauses, as in *Says a spokesman cagily: Pamela is away on holiday at the moment*, which “does occur in written journalism” (p. 818). Examples of useful information along similar lines, taken from all parts of *CGE*, could easily be multiplied.

Naturally, any reviewer of any grammar will find certain things missing. Not even a book the length of *CGE* can hope to illuminate each

and every corner of English grammar. Some gaps have already been touched on. A few more absent friends, relating to nouns and noun phrases, may deserve mention here.

In the chapter on “Word structure and word formation”, nothing is said about the increasingly frequent – but, to many learners, exotic – type of compounding exemplified by examples like *systems analyst* and *materials development*, with the initial element in the plural.¹⁴ In connection with generic reference (cf. pp. 336, 364), no mention is made of the possibility of using either the definite or indefinite article with countable singular nouns in examples like *The/A leopard is a dangerous animal*. Far more puzzling, however, is the absence of irregular plurals like *children*, *men* and *women*, as well as *feet*, *teeth* and *mice*. Two examples of irregular plural, *oxen* and *alumni*, are mentioned in passing, it being merely noted that “[s]ome nouns have irregular plurals” (p. 298; cf. p. 473). The plural *geese* is also mentioned, along with the irregular forms *hung*, *further* and *advice*, as “examples of inflection through vowel or consonant change” (p. 473).¹⁵ There is no list of irregular plurals; they do not appear in the Index.¹⁶ Plurals of the type *calves*, *knives* and *thieves* are stashed away in the appendix on spelling (p. 855). Further, although a fair amount of space is devoted to zero plurals like *aircraft* and *salmon*, as well as to “bipartite nouns” like *jeans* and *scissors*, good old plural-onlies like *people* and *police* (and, of course, *cattle*) seem to have gone up in smoke. Curiouser and curiouser, indeed.¹⁷

Nitpicking? Hardly. The omissions just pointed to all concern well-known, basic items of English grammar. Are they too elementary for advanced learners? Surely not. So the most likely explanation, it would appear, is that they simply got lost somewhere along the line. At the same time, the attentive reader may sense a certain lack of interest in elementary grammar, such as basic morphology, in *CGE*. The gaps in the appendix on irregular verbs have already been mentioned. Another example: with regard to regular plural formation, the main rule is not exactly highlighted, occurring only as part of a small subsection in the introductory chapter on word classes and phrase classes: “The most

¹⁴ The compound *sports centre* is given as an example in another chapter (p. 320), but without any comment.

¹⁵ Incidentally, *advice* (from *advise*: “verb to noun”) as an example of “inflection” is incorrect.

¹⁶ Nor, incidentally, have I been able to find anything – apart from *policeman* versus *policewoman* (p. 349) – about the controversial gender aspect of the use of *man* and *mankind* with reference to human beings in general. In the Glossary, *gender* is defined only as a grammatical notion.

¹⁷ The only sign of *people* that I have been able to locate is in the “A–Z” section, where it is stated that the noun *person* “has two plural forms”, one of which – “the more widely used” – is *people* (p. 126).

common plural form is *-(e)s*. For example, *cats –cats, wish–wishes*” (p. 298; cf. p. 473). More specific information is relegated to the appendix on spelling at the end of the book (p. 855). A unified account is lacking. This is not an isolated case but related to the overall organization of *CGE*.

Organization: a question of user-friendliness

All writers of grammars are faced with a dilemma concerning the organization of their description: Should form/structure or function/meaning serve as its basis? For example, should verb forms be accounted for under the heading of “tense(s)” or under that of “time”? As already noted, *CGE*, like many other grammars, employs a double-barrelled approach. Some chapters are word- and phrase-class based, others on notions and functions like “comparison” and “condition”. One consequence of such a mixed approach is that a fair amount of overlap and repetition is inevitable, as the authors of *CGE* seem well aware of: “we make much use of cross references” (p. 16).

Quirk et al.’s (1985) monumental scholarly work, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, is famous – some would say notorious – for its cyclical treatment of its material: the same grammatical entity is dealt with over and over again, albeit in different contexts, in different parts of the book. In my view, *CGE* suffers from the same kind of organizational problem. However, since – in contrast to Quirk et al. (1985) – the book is primarily aimed at learners rather than a scholarly readership, the problem is aggravated. Much as I appreciate many features of *CGE*, I cannot honestly say, despite its cross references and Index, that I find it easy to find my way in. The main reason is that things that may reasonably be regarded as closely related aspects of the same grammatical phenomenon tend to be treated in many different places, often wide apart. Examples of this have already been given. Some more are provided below.

Comparative and superlative forms are first presented in the chapter on “Adjectives and adjective phrases” (p. 439). Here the reader is referred to one of the last chapters in the book, viz. “Comparison” (as a semantic notion), where basically the same information is repeated, together with some additional information on comparative and superlative forms, including irregular adjectives (*bad, good*, etc.), not previously mentioned. Another example concerns relative pronouns, first dealt with in the chapter on pronouns (pp. 386f.), then in a later chapter on clause combination (pp. 567ff.), giving partly the same information concerning choice of pronouns, etc. There are many more examples of a similar kind, involving structures (modal verbs, the passive, tag questions, etc.) as well as individual items (like *absolutely* and *appear*).

Now, while I agree with Carter & McCarthy that “[i]t is rarely possible to say everything that needs to be said about an item in one place in the book” (p. 17), I feel that the amount of overlap in *CGE* (contributing to the book’s length) is a bit over the top. Certainly, a linguist may well, despite the frequent sense of *dějã vu*, appreciate the exploration of a grammatical item from a variety of semantic and functional viewpoints, even if presented in chapters and sections wide apart. For a learner, however, using *CGE* chiefly as a reference work, the situation is different: what may be experienced as a clash between scholarly and pedagogical perspectives threatens to put user-friendliness at risk.

However, even though many learners, not accustomed to the study of grammar as a systematic, intellectually demanding pursuit, may – for structural and other reasons – find parts of *CGE* quite a challenge, there are also many good things to be noted from a pedagogical perspective. For example, the brief introductory overviews opening each chapter provide excellent and accessible thumbnail sketches of complex grammatical areas. The choice of corpus-inspired examples may also be mentioned as one of the strong points of *CGE*. Personally, I am also rather fond of the book’s style of presentation, where discussion and argumentation are accorded more space than is usual in grammatical handbooks, hopefully impacting on the all too common, biased view of grammar as merely a fixed set of rules and regulations.

Concluding remarks

Primarily aimed at advanced learners, *CGE* represents, in many ways, an innovative and refreshing approach to English grammar. With its persistent focus on spoken as well as written language, on pragmatics and text linguistics as well as “core” grammar, it gives a vivid picture of today’s (British) English. Drawing on insights from corpus linguistics, e.g. findings on the relative frequency of grammatical items, its broad canvas captures both standard and non-standard usage in a variety of social and stylistic contexts, with a wealth of interesting observations and relevant examples. Despite its lack of information on other varieties than British and American English, *CGE* may lay claim to being a “comprehensive guide” – although not a complete one – to spoken and written English grammar and usage. It may also be seen as a continuation of the rapprochement between grammar and lexis that has long been a characteristic feature of, especially, learners’ dictionaries.

There is, indeed, much to praise in *CGE*. What may be perceived as its dual purpose – i.e. to provide a linguistically sophisticated introduction to English grammar as well as serving as a practical learner’s handbook – is in itself laudable. It is rather in the execution of its bold ambitions

that I have certain doubts. The balance between *CGE*'s theoretical and practical aims strikes me as somewhat uneasy, possibly affecting its accessibility to learners without a good deal of prior familiarity with English grammar viewed as a coherent system. In this connection, its overly cyclical organization, with an excessive degree of overlap, may well cause learners to miss the overall picture of a certain grammatical phenomenon. While linguistically justified, this kind of organization has its pedagogical drawbacks. For this reason, I would hesitate to use *CGE* as a course book for first-term university students of English in a country like Sweden.¹⁸

Nonetheless, despite my reservations on certain points, *CGE* is definitely a welcome – and original – instalment in the never-ending story of English grammar, not least because of the attention paid to spoken English. Though not always a user-friendly grammar, its wide scope should contribute substantially to learners' – and teachers' – practical knowledge of English, as well as promoting their awareness of its resources as a communicative system.

But whatever happened to *people* and *police, women* and *children* – and to *mice* and *men*?

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¹⁸ This, it might be argued with some justification, can hardly be blamed on *CGE* alone. After some ten years of English instruction at school, as well as wide exposure to English in everyday life, Swedish students entering university, though good at English on several counts, often lack even a basic grasp of English grammar as a structured system, no wonder in view of (among other things) the fact that in recent years it has become increasingly rare for them to have their own grammar books. This state of affairs, whatever its causes, would merit a full discussion in its own right.

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