INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Introduction to English Language

N. F. Blake and Jean Moorhead

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First published 1993 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 978-0-333-57303-7 ISBN 978-1-349-22869-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-22869-0

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

Copy-edited and typeset by Povey-Edmondson
Okehampton and Rochdale, England

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Acknowledgements

The authors and publishers gratefully acknowledge permission to reproduce material from the following works:

BBC Enterprises Ltd for a recipe from *Delia Smith's Complete Cookery Course*, BBC Books.

British Broadcasting Corporation, The Mental Health Foundation and Anthony Clare for his appeal on behalf of The Mental Health Foundation on Radio 4, 3 February 1991.

Carnell Ltd for 'How to talk to your cat' advertisement.

Casio Electronics Co. Ltd for 'Rap-1' advertisement.

Rosica Colin Ltd on behalf of the author for an extract from *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* by Alan Sillitoe, copyright © Alan Sillitoe 1959, 1987.

Faber & Faber Ltd and Harcourt Brace & Company for an excerpt from *The Spire* by William Golding. Copyright © 1964, renewed 1992, by William Golding.

Little, Brown & Company (UK) Ltd for extracts from *Cooking for Special Occasions*, by Mrs Cozens.

Newspaper Publishing plc for material from *The Independent*, October 1991; 'Sacked preacher to reclaim citadel of the Lord' by David Nicholson-Lord, *The Independent*, February 1992; and "'Kidneys for sale' business may open', *The Independent*, 30 January 1989.

Peugeot Talbot for 'The perfect car for anyone between 50 and 70' advertisement.

Syndication International Ltd for 'Kidney dealer rumpus', *Daily Mirror*, 30 January 1989.

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Introduction

Imagine the two sentences '*E were right gormless* and *He was absolutely stupid*. What would you say about them? You might say that both of them are English and both mean more or less the same thing. You might also say that people react to these sentences in different ways. The second represents 'Standard English',* that variety of English used in writing and by educated people, whereas the first occurs only in the speech of some people and would be considered by many as 'non-standard'. As speakers of the language we recognise that there are differences in these two sentences and we make assumptions about speakers according to the way they speak, just as we make certain assumptions about people from the way they dress. But what are these differences and how can they be described? To start with, we can see that '*E* in the first sentence corresponds to *He* in the second; this is a difference in spelling which represents a difference in pronunciation because *h* may be dropped at the beginning of a word. There is a difference in the second word between *were* and *was* even though both have the same person (*H*)e who is being discussed. This could be said to be a difference in grammar, for some speakers of English would use *were* only after a word like *They*, meaning 'more than one'. Finally, the expression *right gormless* could be said to mean the same as *absolutely stupid*, though the words are different so that here we are dealing with a difference in vocabulary.

These two sentences differ in pronunciation (sounds, which in writing have to be represented by the spellings), grammar (the relationship between words) and vocabulary (the choice of words). All these features are present in any sentence in English. But if we want to describe these features in any detail and compare them with those in other sentences, we need to refer to the various categories and elements that go to make up pronunciation/writing, grammar, and vocabulary. This is what we do in Chapter 1,

*Remember to consult the Glossary of Linguistic Terms (p. 159) for terms you are not familiar with.

Describing the Structure and Sounds of English. There we outline the make-up of an English sentence, what elements occur in it and in what orders we expect to find them, as well as the various sounds used in English. Before we can describe how English is used or acquired, we need to have some means of talking about these elements, which means learning some of the technical words to describe the grammar and the sounds of language. *Grammar* is a word that tends to frighten some people, but that is partly because it is often connected with good grammar and speaking properly. From the two sentences quoted in the last paragraph, you will have seen that every sentence in English has grammar no matter whether it is called 'standard' or 'non-standard'. For us grammar is simply the means of describing how a language works and the terms that are necessary to undertake a description of any variety of language. You could not talk about clothes unless you know what is meant by *shirt*, *skirt*, *blouse* and *trousers*, but to know the meaning of these words does not imply you think a blouse is better than a shirt; these words simply provide you with the means of talking about different forms of clothing. The same applies to the words which are used to talk about grammar: they enable you to talk about different varieties of language in a sensible and an intelligible way.

Just as there are different ways of talking and writing about clothes and fashion, so there are different ways of approaching the grammar of language. Grammar has been a subject of debate and investigation from the time of the Greeks in the sixth century BC. The terminology which they and after them the Romans developed remained the principal way of discussing the grammar of English till the twentieth century and is sometimes referred to as 'traditional grammar'. Any grammatical terminology you learn before you are sixteen will almost certainly be a form of traditional grammar. In the twentieth century different types of grammar and associated terminologies have been put forward by linguistic researchers, but these have not been very helpful in dealing with language in use. It is not our intention to teach you different grammatical terminologies; we want you to learn the terminology of one grammar to enable you to discuss such topics as language acquisition and historical change in English. As the only terminology you are likely to be familiar with, if you know any at all, is that of traditional grammar, we have decided in Chapter 1 to present a terminology which is a modified and up-dated form of traditional grammar. If you want a more advanced grammar and terminology,

you will find references to books you could use in the Suggestions for Further Reading on p. 170. But the terminology we put forward in Chapter 1 is concerned solely with the constituent parts of a sentence and the sounds of English.

When you have a grasp of the make-up of an English sentence and the sounds of English it is possible to approach Chapters 2–4 in a more informed way. These deal with Language Acquisition, Language Change, and Language Variety and the Social Context. Chapter 4 is slightly different from Chapters 2 and 3, which is why it comes at the end. Earlier we referred to standard and non-standard English, and many people regard Standard English as correct English. It is certainly the variety which is taught to foreign learners of English and, in its written form, it represents the form which is found in most types of writing – school text-books, government documents, newspapers and literature. But Standard English is only one variety among the many varieties of English, though it has acquired a special position among these varieties because it is used as the medium for education in England. This role of Standard English encourages some people to regard non-standard speakers as being uneducated and often by a further unwarranted extension as being unintelligent. But students of language should regard all varieties of English as equivalent vehicles of communication, even though within society generally different prejudices and attitudes may be attached to particular varieties. Because of the position of Standard English it is often taken subconsciously as a norm in discussions of language acquisition, change and varieties. Thus discussions of past forms of English are based on a comparison between that form and modern Standard English. Similarly, in discussions of language acquisition, it may be assumed that a child is moving towards the acquisition of the elements of Standard English rather than of another variety. Discussions of language varieties will frequently involve comparisons between a given variety and Standard English. Because of the limits on the size of this book, we follow this general procedure here. But in discussions of language and the social context we look at attitudes towards different varieties of English, and this means knowing something about those varieties and about the structure of society. Whereas Chapters 2 and 3 often compare one variety of language with the standard, Chapter 4 on Language Variety and the Social Context matches linguistic performance to social structure and is consequently of a rather different nature.

Language study, however, is more than simply understanding how the elements within a sentence are made up and ordered. Sentences have to be joined together to produce a text, whether written or spoken, in order to put across a point of view, persuade someone else to do what you want, or for whatever purpose the text is intended. Language is used for communication. It is addressed to a specific audience and therefore falls into a particular type or genre. An obituary is a different genre from a romantic novel, and a writer will adjust his or her English to meet what he or she considers the requirement of each. Hence in Chapter 5 we look at English beyond the sentence, at English as discourse directed towards particular communicative goals. To have a good command of English it is not sufficient to know the parts of a sentence, and equally to study English language fully one needs to look at the choices one makes to achieve one's communicative ends. *Gormless* and *stupid* may mean the same thing, but we would use them on different occasions according to who our audience was, where we were speaking, and what effect we were trying to achieve. To study how others have adapted their language to particular genres and goals should enable you to use your own language in similar ways.

One of the exciting aspects of language study is that since language is all around us, anyone can study it. Does your father use different language from your mother? Do you use language to irritate or exclude your parents? If you do, what language do you use, and why? Chapter 6 looks at ways in which you can organise language research, for the best way to find out how language works is to conduct your own research. But it is necessary to have some framework in which to carry out your investigation: how to decide on a project, how to collect data, how to interpret it, and how to set out your results.

It has been said that language is power, and a knowledge of how language works may well increase your self-confidence in using it. But studying language is fun because of the uses to which it is put and it is important because language will be with you and surround you all your life. Enjoy it.