

Book Reviews

McCarthy's field guide to grammar (a review)

Original work by Michael McCarthy published by Chambers 2021

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Article history Received January 9, 2022 | Revised February 24, 2022 | Accepted March 14, 2022

Conflicts of interest The author declared no conflicts of interest

Research funding No funding was reported for this research

doi 10.22363/2521-442X-2022-6-1-86-88

For citation Tomalin, B. (2022). McCarthy's field guide to grammar (a review). *Training, Language and Culture*, 6(1), 86-88.



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A popular guest editor of *Training, Language and Culture* and author of the best-selling *Cambridge Grammar of English*, Linguist and Professor Michael McCarthy is an excellent guide to many of the issues researchers and writers have to face when using the English language and especially when preparing academic papers. The *Field Guide to Grammar* addresses a number of grammatical features which regularly confuse learners and language users. Items are presented in alphabetical order from A to Z and with an index at the end for ease of reference. The author also includes a glossary of basic grammar terminology, including what we mean by word classes, phrases, clauses, cases, transitive and intransitive verbs, active and passive voice, main and subordinate clauses and sentences. So, a guide of real value to teachers of English, not just for researchers and writers. And indeed, so is one of the items McCarthy discusses in the book. Used as a way of introducing a conclusion or summing up, especially in spoken presentations and interviews, it is the equivalent of *well* and can also be used to introduce a new topic as in 'So, let's explore what the book contains'.

What exactly is a *Field Guide* and how is it different from a more traditional grammar? McCarthy has spent years as part of his work doing field work, examining books, articles, broadcasts and conversations and

noting down how the English language is actually used in daily life. In doing so he has noted the difference between grammar as we learn it from books in school and at university and popular usage, as the language is used in real life. After explaining the differences, as a leading grammarian he is able to advise on whether we should stick to conventional grammar or accept the popular usage. Throughout the book he gives examples from his field work of how the language is being used, including 'field notes' labelled with the initials *fn*.

Grammar divides into two main areas, prescriptive grammar and descriptive grammar. Prescriptive grammar tells you what you ought to say and write and is found in grammars and textbooks. Descriptive grammar is about what people actually say and write, which may not conform to the rules we learn about and observe in prescriptive grammar. Two of the features that have affected our use of English grammar are the globalisation of English as a lingua franca which means the language changes according to the national community using it and also changes in language usage and register (choosing a style appropriate to the context). The English language has always been open to loan words from different language communities. So, for example, we use many words from other English-speaking countries, such as India, Nigeria, South Africa, Australia and so

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on. The key influence on British English has been American English, the language as it is used in social media and movies and TV networks introducing major changes in usage into British English. One import is the placing of prepositions after a vowel. Instead of *wait* you often hear the US form, *wait up*, especially among younger users.

We have adopted the word *guys* as a unisex casual way of greeting people as in *'Hey, you guys. How are you doing?'*, instead of *'Hello everybody, how are you?'* You'll hear or read the expressions *double down on*, meaning 'to emphasise something and do more of it' in politics and especially on broadcast and social media. Nowadays, instead of *contacting* people we *reach out* to them and we *roll out* new products and projects rather than *market* them or *spread the word* about them.

What I didn't know was that many expressions used in American English were actually introduced from Britain but are no longer part of current British English. For example, when we say *Monday to Friday*, in America they say *Monday through Friday* which was what the British used to say in the 18th century.

The American English expression *real good* (*really good* in British English) comes from Scottish English and the common American English valediction *enjoy* rather than *enjoy yourself* now appears to be equally popular in both countries. Also, in spoken English American pronunciation has affected the way speakers of British English talk, particularly word stress. McCarthy gives a number of examples where British English speech puts the stress on the second syllable of a two-syllable word where American English puts the stress on the first syllable, e.g. (UK) *Bagh'dad* but (US)

'Baghdad. He goes on to say that many Brits (British English speakers) get mildly annoyed by Americanisms as they are called as an amusing cartoon illustrates. The author's advice is say or write what comes naturally but be aware that some British readers, especially the older generation, may get annoyed.

A number of McCarthy's observations concern punctuation. For example, when in practice do you need hyphens? McCarthy takes the example of compound adjectives, when two words are placed together to create an adjective as in a two-syllable word above. However, if I make a sentence like *'Many words are formed of two syllables'*, no hyphen is needed.

As a result of social media and communication via Tik Tok and Instagram, to name just two, abbreviations are now much more common, as in *LOL* (laugh out loud), *IMHO* (in my humble opinion), *TBH* (to be honest) and one I use a lot in emails – *BTW* (by the way). McCarthy's advice in this matter? Maybe we should be careful not to use *TBH* and *IMHO* in more formal situations.

Spelling can cause problems between British and American English, particularly whether some words should have a *-c* or an *-s*. Good examples cited by McCarthy are *defence* (UK) and *defense* (US), *offense* (US) and *offence* (UK). Sometimes, the use of the American English spelling rather than the British English spelling seems to be down to the computer, which selects the US English spelling by default (my conclusion not McCarthy's). But it is always important to double check the typing if you are writing in British English. A similar problem occurs with the endings *our* (British English) and *or* (American English) as in *labour* (UK) and *labor* (US). What is important is to recognise which 'language' you are writing in, UK or US English, and check the spelling accordingly.

A key problem, even for fluent non-native speakers, is usage. What do people actually say in different situations? One issue that McCarthy deals with is how English speakers express vagueness. Words like *whatever* as in *'What shall we do? We can go to the cinema or whatever'*, meaning 'something like that'. Once again US and UK English come together. Another example is the phrase *bits and pieces*, as in *'I'm going to buy some bits and pieces at the supermarket. You know, fruit and vegetables and stuff'*. The words *and stuff* as an informal equivalent for *etc.* (etcetera) is now in common use but, as McCarthy advises, check that the expression is appropriate to the situation and the level of formality.

Business jargon plays a big part in changes in English usage. A cartoon in the book dramatises the situation when a young couple discuss their holiday. The man's partner is using international business expressions to describe the holiday plans. In the cartoon the man looks very confused as he hears, *'Going forward I'll keep you across some blue-sky thinking I've been doing about our vacation this year, so we can diarize the best weeks and leverage the potential low season offers'*. In other words, *'As things develop I'll make sure I tell you about some original ideas I've had about our holiday this year so we can put the best weeks to travel in our diaries and take advantage of the low season offers'*. *Low season* means the period outside the main

part of the year when most people go on holiday and is a time when hotel prices etc. are lower. High season is the peak of the holiday season.

So punctuation, Americanisms vs. Britishisms, differences in language usage and especially the difference between formal grammar and informal grammatical changes linked to the situation you are in, as well as confusions between words and phrases, make the *Field Guide to Grammar* an essential, practical and enjoyable guide to how English is changing and how to adapt. If you are an English language teacher, researcher or writer use it to check the English you are using suits the situation and expresses clearly what you want to say. Above all, enjoy!

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