



Book Reviews

My grammar and I (or should that be 'me?') (book review)

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Reviewed by Barry Tomalin

Barry Tomalin

ORCID 0000-0002-7192-0301 ✉ barrytomalin@aol.com
Glasgow Caledonian University London, UK

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What is the correct linguistic use of English and how does it affect both native speakers and learners of English as a second or foreign language? *My Grammar and I* covers common problems met by users and how to deal with them, providing a useful resource for language teachers and language learners alike. The book covers five areas where errors due to misunderstandings occur plus an introduction featuring a brief history of English grammar. Apart from the history of English grammar the key topics are, spelling and confusables, parts of speech, sentence structure, punctuation and a final section on elements of style. The book also contains examples of confusion, often highly amusing, and includes a regular *Swot's Corner* providing more information about the history of grammar and other topics and *Smart Alec*, offering advice as to usage. This is an excellent resource for teachers of English and advanced students, presented clearly and with humour. According the authors, the use of grammar as a system of teaching language has varied over generations but the influence of an Oxford professor, Robert Lowth, author of *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, is still influential. According to *Swot's Corner*, when grammar was a required subject in US schools in the 19th century, teachers complained they were as ignorant of grammar as their students. However, as the authors point out, the user's correct or incorrect use of grammar can influence how others perceive them especially in a professional role, such as seeking a job.

The first chapter examines common spelling mistakes and words that are often confused. It also mentions two key influences on the spelling and function of words in Samuel Johnson's

(British) English dictionary published in 1756 and Noah Webster's (American) English Dictionary published in 1828. The difference between the spelling of key words in British English and American English persists to this day. Webster took the British English spellings of words like *centre*, *colour* and *advise* and changed them to *center*, *color* and *advise*. The problem teachers in British universities often face is that when foreign students write up their research in end of module exams or dissertations, their computers often automatically select an American typeface leading to spelling errors in what should be a text in British English but which often goes uncorrected by the students. Other parts of the first chapter examine words that are often confused, such as *stationery* and *stationary*, prefixes and suffixes, where to use capital letters and the use of vowels.

Chapter 2 of *My Grammar and I* examines parts of speech. Like all the chapters in the book, it uses popular phrases and rhymes which native speakers learned as children and which can still be very useful for teaching learners of English as a second or foreign language whether they are schoolchildren or adults. They include sentences or rhymes which can be taught in class and used by learners to help them remember the right way to speak and write in English. Listing the eight parts of speech, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunction and interjection, they include a rhyme to help students remember:

'Every name is called a NOUN, As field and fountain, street and town. In place of noun the PRONOUN stands, as he and her can clap their hands.'

This is just part of one of lots of good ways of recognising linguistic grammatical concepts. Chapter 2 also covers the use of definite and indefinite articles, how to choose determiners correctly, how to distinguish between singular and plural nouns, e.g., *die* (singular) and *dice* (plural). However, note that when we say *roll the dice*, there may be only one die to roll. The chapter goes on to deal with pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, comparatives, conjunctions, prepositions and interjections, all with helpful and often amusing examples of how they are used which teachers can employ in the EFL classroom.

Chapter 3 explores sentence structure, focusing on the structures of sentences in English, the role of subject and object, how to express agreement, major and minor clauses and the use of phrases. All are dealt with lightness and humour with memorable examples which can be used in language classes. The authors identify four kinds of sentence:

Declarative: *I saw you do that.*

Interrogative: *Did you do that?*

Imperative: *Don't even think of that.*

Exclamative: *How boring that was!*

They also cite the longest sentence in English literature (4,391 words) spoken by Molly Bloom in *Ulysses* by James Joyce.

Chapter 4 is about punctuation, which even native speakers may get wrong. The chapter deals with the use of full stops, commas, question marks, exclamation marks, colons and semicolons, dashes, hyphens, quotations and finally, apostrophes and possessive apostrophes. Commas are often a big issue, and the book offers seventeen places where a comma can be inserted with examples to illustrate each place. A good but rather simple

example might be this one: '*We spent most of our time sitting on the back porch watching the cows playing Scrabble and reading.*' Obviously, we need a comma after cows, because the cows were not playing Scrabble. Once again, a useful example to use in intermediate and advanced classes to improve ability in using English.

The final Chapter 5, entitled *Odds and Sods*, in other words, areas the book hasn't dealt with, covers issues of style like excessive wordiness and the use of double negatives followed by a bibliography for future reference. One of the interesting stylistic issues raised in the chapter is the use of the double negative, *not bad*, which could mean it needs to be better or it is quite good. *Not bad* said with a rising intonation at the end tends to mean it needs improvement whereas *not bad* with a falling intonation and stress on *bad* normally means *quite good*. The end of the book tells the story of an English professor who told his class that in English a double negative can be a positive whereas in countries like Russia a double negative is still a negative.

In summary, *My Grammar and I* is learned but absorbing, relatively short at under 200 pages in a smaller paperback format, and an informative survey of English grammar. It contains valuable information on English usage with rhymes to help memorise concepts and examples of practical language tips on usage, which teachers can use in the classroom. It also contains valuable and interesting information on the historical development of grammar and its role in society which will be an additional incentive to satisfaction in the language learning process. I recommend it to teachers and lecturers teaching English grammar who feel a need to make their sessions more lively and more interactive and more involving for their students.

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ORCID 0000-0002-7192-0301 ✉ barrytomalin@aol.com
Glasgow Caledonian University London, UK