

ESSENTIALS OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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Essentials of English grammar by William Dwight Whitney

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WILLIAM DWIGHT WHITNEY

**ESSENTIALS OF
ENGLISH
GRAMMAR**

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ESSENTIALS
OF
ENGLISH GRAMMAR.

FOR THE USE OF SCHOOLS.

BY

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P R E F A C E .

IN preparing the present work, my intention has been to make it fulfil strictly the promise of its title. I have endeavored to put before the learner those matters which are of most essential consequence to him, those which will best serve him as preparation for further and deeper knowledge of his own language, for the study of other languages, and for that of language in general. That the leading object of the study of English grammar is to teach the correct use of English is, in my view, an error, and one which is gradually becoming removed, giving way to the sounder opinion that grammar is the reflective study of language, for a variety of purposes, of which correctness in writing is only one, and a secondary or subordinate one—by no means unimportant, but best attained when sought indirectly. It should be a pervading element in the whole school and home training of the young, to make them use their own tongue with accuracy and force; and, along with any special drilling directed to this end, some of the rudimentary distinctions and rules of grammar are conveniently taught; but that is not the study of grammar, and it will not bear the intrusion of much formal grammar without being spoiled for its own ends. It is constant use and practice, under never-failing watch and correction, that makes good writers and speakers; the application of direct authority is the most efficient correc-

tive. Grammar has its part to contribute, but rather in the higher than in the lower stages of the work. One must be a somewhat reflective user of language to amend even here and there a point by grammatical reasons; and no one ever changed from a bad speaker to a good one by applying the rules of grammar to what he said.

To teach English grammar to an English speaker is, as it seems to me, to take advantage of the fact that the pupil knows the facts of the language, in order to turn his attention to the underlying principles and relations, to the philosophy of language as illustrated in his own use of it, in a more effective manner than is otherwise possible. Foreign languages are generally acquired in an "artificial" way, the facts coming ticketed with certain grammatical labels which the scholar learns as if they were part of the facts themselves; and the grammar part is apt to remain long a wholly artificial system to him. Almost every one can remember the time when it first began to dawn upon his mind that the familiar terms and distinctions of grammar really meant something. But this is partly because children are (and with good reason) set to learning foreign languages before their reflective powers are enough developed to make such things intelligible to them. If the pupil is bright enough, his Latin grammar comes by degrees to be to him something more than a heap of dry bones; and then he gets the benefit, in its application by analogy to other languages, his own included, of the hard work he has done upon it. A real understanding of grammar, however, he can get sooner and more surely in connection with his own tongue than anywhere else, if his attention is first directed to that which most needs to be learned, unencumbered with burdensome detail, and if a clear method is followed, with abundance of illustration.

English grammar can in this way be made to pay back, with interest, the debt which it owes to Latin. It must be for practical use to show how far the endeavor to reach these ends is successful, in the work here put forth.

I have wished to give the main facts of the English language just as they are in themselves, not importing into them anything that belongs to other languages. With this in view, certain subjects have been treated in a somewhat new way, but one which will, I hope, commend itself to general approval by its reasonableness. The ordinary method with gender in nouns, for example, which was really an imposition upon English of a system of distinctions belonging elsewhere, has been abandoned in favor of one that is both truer and far simpler. The sharp distinction, again, of the verb-phrases or compound forms from the real verb-forms seems to me a matter of no small importance, if the study of the construction of sentences is to be made a reality.

It has been my constant endeavor to bear in mind the true position of the grammarian, as stated in the introductory chapter — that he is simply a recorder and arranger of the usages of language, and in no manner or degree a law-giver; hardly even an arbiter or critic. Certainly, an elementary work is no place for dragging forward to attention matters of disputed usage, nor are elementary pupils the persons before whom to discuss nice and difficult points. Where reference has been made to any such subjects, it has been in order simply to set forth the facts of usage, as fairly and briefly as possible, or to state the principles that should govern the case.

Many grammars, of course, have been consulted in the preparation of this, and valuable hints have been derived from one and another. But I do not feel that I

need acknowledge particular obligation to any excepting the great thesaurus of Mätzner (Berlin, 1873-5: there is an English version, but it is hardly to be used), to which I have constantly referred; especially drawing upon its rich stores of citations illustrating almost every conceivable point of English usage, for the benefit of the parsing exercises which are appended to the various chapters. In the body of the work, I have preferred to use almost exclusively illustrations made off-hand, because such seemed to me more desirable: the more familiar and every-day the exemplifications of principles, the better; and the pupil should be led to form them for himself as much as possible.

I have also for the most part avoided the use of set rules, lest they should come to be applied mechanically. In studying the grammar of one's own language, the true end is not attained unless such a real understanding is gained by the scholar that he can state in his own language the principle involved; and he should be made, or helped, to do so.

My thanks are due to several eminent scholars, among my colleagues and elsewhere, who have been kind enough to give me the benefit of their counsel during the progress of my work.

W. D. W.

YALE COLLEGE, NEW HAVEN, CONN.,
January, 1877.

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