

CARL BACHE. *Essentials of Mastering English: A concise grammar*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000. Pp. xii + 328.

Reviewed by JOHN G. BORDIE

1. Description

Essentials of Mastering English is a more accessible and short version of the author's predecessor grammar. This version is intended for undergraduate native and non-native students of English (p. v) and for the teacher of English at all levels (back cover). Its recommended loci of use are universities, business schools, and teachers' training colleges. The author states 'the present text is less detailed and more open in its treatment of difficult topics'. The guiding principle for the present grammar, as for its earlier version, is 'a rigorous form/function distinction at all levels of analysis' (p. v). This principle is combined with constituent analysis in Part I to provide an introduction to basic grammatical terms and concepts needed for the description of English sentences. Part II describes several syntactic and semantic characteristics of English: constituent order, situation types, participant roles, voice, polarity, concord, and complex sentences. Part III presents major group types – verbals, nominal, pronominals, adjectivals, and adverbials – with respect to their use and internal constituency. An appendix presents tips on pronunciation and spelling. The last segments of the text are a short bibliography, a lengthy glossary, a subject index, and a word index. Exercises and analyses as well as updated versions of the glossary are to be made available on the internet at <<http://visl.hum.sdu.dk>> in the near future. These were not checked by the reviewer.

1.1. Topic Coverage.

The range of topics is essentially that of instructional consensus regarding material appropriate for second or third year of university level study. This coverage conforms to current practice at school year levels 14 and 15 although there is substantial variation with respect to depth of presentation. Almost any teacher at the levels designated by the author would find the coverage relevant and informative. The

content presented is fundamental to an understanding of the range of English likely to be encountered in a university setting. The examples provided are pertinent to and illustrative of the analytic process used. Bache's concise grammar is a handy and valuable book for the instructor's shelf.

2. Limitations

Unfortunately, that is where this book is likely to stay because there are severe limitations to the usability of the text itself. If we deconstruct the book, a number of problems surface. Among them are the objective of grammatical mastery, comprehensibility of the text language itself, the typographic and stylistic conventions, the choice of a basic language sample with its usage requirements, and a thread of misogyny and academic angst.

2.1. Audience Suitability

The text is viewed as a simplified introduction to English grammar appropriate for 'undergraduate native and non-native students of English and for the teacher of English at all levels'. It is thus both a classroom textbook and a reference work. Most textbooks at this level provide a variety of examples and a moderate amount of exercise activity so the student may gain some sense of the active 'doing' of analysis rather than experiencing only the passive experience of reading the text. A series of internet exercises have been promised but there is no teacher's text nor is there a descriptive plan for instruction and expansion of the material. This limits the successful use of the textbook to situations where the students are always keen and the teachers always knowledgeable. The usefulness of the text to teachers 'at all levels' is exaggerated. The content coverage of 'Essentials' assumes a familiarity with a specific type of analytic procedure and an understanding of the basic processes of language analysis. Only a teacher of English in a unified and sequenced course of English study would find the text appropriate. Most teachers would be hard-pressed to use the textbook in an English as a foreign language grammar course. Teachers in teacher-training colleges whose task is to teach the art of teaching grammar rather than the

content of the grammar would find the text of no help. A citation sentence is apt: 'Grammar is undoubtedly relevant, but equally relevant are recent approaches to language learning' (p.63).

2.2. Stylistic Complexity

The text is intended for native and *non-native* (my emphasis) students according to Bache. Native students will probably have relatively little difficulty with the language used in the text. Non-native students will struggle with complex explanatory sentences possessing more than 25 words. One can find sentences of more than 50 words on many pages: for instance, page 4 has a 68 word specimen as does p. 6. Numerous sentences of more than 50 words can be found within a page or two of each other. Most non-native English speaking students having TOEFL scores in the 400s and higher find their sentence comprehension flags if the sentences are longer than 10 or 12 words. It is somewhat difficult to expect students to comprehend explanations which are ten to twelve times longer than the short sentences used to exemplify the point. FOG readability scores for 'Essentials' are much higher than those usually found appropriate for such materials. Bache's students will have to be prepared to dedicate as much time to the complexity of his writing style as to his explanations.

2.3. Language Base

It is nowhere stated what the source sample is for the language model. Many of the examples illustrate British usage patterns and there are a number of American usage examples but there is no coverage of Canadian usage, Australian usage, Caribbean usage, or South Asian usage. Sufficient divergence from the model in 'Essentials' exists for these varieties of English to warrant some illustration and discussion. There are 20 usage comments applicable to British English and 15 similar comments for American English but little attention is given to the large English speaking population elsewhere. The appendix on spelling and pronunciation is a brief sketch which also does little to provide insights into British English or American English pronunciation conventions or spelling.

2.3.1. Register

Although there are very few comments about the several registers of English, there are numerous examples of the 'La plume de ma tante' variety which usually exist only in grammar textbooks: 'That Helen left the party so early had bothered Jack and Jill immensely' (p. 4); 'This well you can draw water from' (p. 35); 'In excellent fettle, in the pink or blue of boyish good health during their absence, Marmaduke sickened dramatically within a few hours of their return' (p. 71), etc. Differences among formal, standard, and colloquial usage are occasionally mentioned but no attention is given as to when or how such differences are utilized.

2.3.2. Spoken or Written Language

Additionally, although a grammar properly relates to the written language, there is inconsistency in 'Essentials' as to whether an explanation provided applies to the written or the spoken form of the language. Examples of this are: '... we cannot say **Both his hair was rumpled and he wore a raincoat over his pyjamas*' (p. 40) where the material can easily be said in standard spoken register but not written in formal register; similarly '**She with diligence* has completed the play' (p. 27); 'Your sister-in-law, she's an excellent pianist', etc. It is not clear also how pronunciation of nuclear stress relates to the written language. There is no explanation of how stress is to be derived from the written form itself nor whether such stress is inevitable. This is particularly problematic in the chapters concerned with emphasis, volition, and modal use.

3. *Typographic Stylistic*

A major difficulty in the text is the handling of the typographic style. Parentheses – (), square brackets – [], curly brackets – {}, subscript abbreviations – xx_{qq}, superscript abbreviations – xx^{qq}, numbers modified by letters – 8_q, numbers modified by accent – 8', punctuation marks in parentheses – (?), punctuation marks at sentence head – (?) and ?, and single quotes for non-quotations occur in profusion throughout the text. The meanings of such items are

commonly undefined, and when defined are frequently redefined in several other locations: for {}, see pp. 17 and 174; for 'x', see pp. 38, 48, 93; for * and ?, see pp. 12, 27, and 110.

3.1. Parenthetics

The use of parentheses is exceedingly troublesome. Sentences with more than sixteen parentheses are quite common. Frequently parenthetical usage is accompanied by the overuse of 'e.g.' which can be found both within the parentheses and external to them. See, for instance, the last sentence on p. 198. The author has proof read his material remarkably well but his use of parentheses is slippery for him also: cf. p. 3 l.7, p. 35 l.2, p. 167 l.37. This reviewer is not fond of footnotes or marginalia. However they would be far more effective than the use of punctuation graphics for the material being presented in this text. The typographic style is akin to trying to read material through badly smeared spectacles.

3.2. Section Numbering

We must also consider the organizational stylistic; in particular, the enumeration of headings is erratic. Sections follow the order [1.1.1.i] in one part; [1.1.i (boldface) 1.1.i (plain text)] in a second part; [1.1.1.A.i] [1.1.1.A.a] in a third part. Yet other sequences are [1.1.1.A.i] followed within the same section by a repetition of this sequence at least three more times. See in particular section 15.3.4 where the task of threading the components is greater than that faced by Theseus.

4. *World View*

A final problem is the world view of the author. Example sentences are provided to illustrate each of the grammatical points. Illustrative of the descriptive comment, relevant, and clearly understandable, they also provide a world view which is somewhat misogynist and perhaps reflective of a frustrating academic setting.

1. Daphne had enjoyed the illicit character of our relationship p. 15;
2. Ursula chuckled hoarsely at her own expletive p. 28;
3. Fortunately, Iris was not swept up in Women's Liberation movement p. 29;
4. She stupidly tried to steer me off the subject of money p. 29;
5. That woman might attack you p. 150;
6. If the movement is to preserve its appeal, [radical feminism] must realize that the ideological climate has changed p. 174;
7. However beautiful a woman she is, she does not fool me p. 174;
8. Stuart married that boring goodie-goodie wife of his p. 205.
9. French women are famous for their sensuality p. 29;
10. ... quivering dusky maidens p. 242;
11. Actually, the Staff elected Miss Johnson dean p. 10
12. I fully agree we ought to get rid of the vice-dean p. 28;
13. By the time he left the Dean's room the painful erosion of his self-respect was almost complete p. 33;
14. She herself interviewed with hurtful disdain the student I had turned down p. 70;
15. Enough has been said above about the implications of the Faculty's announcement for the future of our Ph. D. programme p. 83;
16. The students were amused/annoyed/embarrassed by my dirty jokes p. 88;
17. What enemies he has have left the department p. 106;
18. ... professors keen to take early retirement p.158 & p. 237;
19. Teachers who work overtime must be very idealistic p. 159;
20. Whoever fails to attend the meeting will be fired p. 217;
21. Your book has its flaws. Nevertheless, we're going to publish it.

5. Conclusion.

The book shows ample evidence of extensive work in condensing and simplifying more extensively constructed material. The example sentences are usually clear and relevant to the explanatory comments provided. The glossary is particularly helpful to beginning students. But the use of the text is limited because it provides little practice for

the particular topics examined. The language used in the text is so convoluted and self-focused as to cause problems for non-native students and non-native teachers of English. The organizational structure of the presentation is idiosyncratic with the latter portions of Part 3 giving the impression of an instructional potpourri created when the writer discovered page space was more limited than required by the exposition. The text is usable, of course, but probably only as a reference work and then only by long-experienced practitioners.

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