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GRAMMAR DEFINITION

The following Definition of Grammar was taken from the "Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage" by Bergen and Cornelia Evans, published by Random House, New York in 1957. (It is not a complete Dictionary and would require another larger dictionary for full word clearing. But it gives American usages of words and phrases, which could be important as Dianetics and Scientology are written in American English.)

It was sent to me by an SHSBC Student who found its definition of Grammar was very helpful to other students.

This definition also tells you why some college or school texts are so ghastly hard to read - they are not in standard English. It also tells you why, in 1950, the head of the English Department in an American University hailed Dianetics Modern Science of Mental Health as marking a new era of scientific writing. One reason is that it was written by a writer, not a professor. The other was that it was written in the English that was in use.

But read the definition:

GRAMMAR

GRAMMAR is a systematic description of the ways in which words are used in a particular language. The grammarian groups words that behave similarly into classes and then draws up rules stating how each class of words behaves. What classes are set up and how the rules are phrased is a matter of convenience. A grammarian is free to classify his material in any way that seems reasonable to him. But he is never free to say that certain forms of speech are unacceptable merely because there is no place for them in the system he has designed.

THE CLASSES

Most grammarians are interested in a number of languages. As a rule they set up classes that are useful in handling many languages but that may have very little meaning for a particular language. For example, the distinction between the dative him and the accusative him is important in the Indo-European languages generally. But in a grammar designed solely to teach English, this distinction does not have to be made. Similarly, there is an etymological or historical difference between the English gerund in -ing and the participle in -ing. But it is sometimes impossible to say whether a given word is a gerund or a participle; for example, in journeys end in lovers meeting. For this reason, some grammarians prefer to handle these forms together under one name, such as "participle" or "-ing".

The familiar terms of classical grammar are defined in this dictionary for the convenience of persons who need to use these concepts. But a much simpler classification, based on the structure of present-day English, is employed in all the discussions of usage.

THE RULES

In order to say how words are used, the grammarian must examine large quantities of spoken and written English. He will find some constructions used so consistently that the exceptions have to be classed as errors. But he will also find competing, and even contradictory, constructions, which appear too often to be called mistakes. He must then see whether one of these expressions is used by one kind of person and not by another or in one kind of situation and not in another. If he can find no difference of this sort he accepts the two constructions as interchangeable. In this way he assembles a body of information on how English words are used that may also show differences, such as those between one locality and another, or between spoken and written English, or between literary and illiterate speech. Studies of this kind are called "scientific" or "descriptive" grammars. This is a relatively new approach to the problems of language and the information brought to light in this way is sometimes surprising.

The first English grammarians, writing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, did not attempt to describe the English of their day. On the contrary, they were attempting to "improve" English and they demanded Latin constructions which were not characteristic of English. They objected to the expression I am mistaken, because if translated into Latin this would mean I am misunderstood. They claimed that unloose must mean tie, because un is a Latin negative. They objected to the "double negative" which was good Old English, and also good Greek, but not good Latin.

These eighteenth century rules of prescriptive grammar have been repeated in school books for two hundred years. They are the rules for a curious, Latinized English that has never been spoken and is seldom used in literature, but that is now highly respected in some places, principally in scientific writing. It should be recognized that these rules were not designed to "preserve" English, or keep it "pure". They were designed to create a language which would be "better" simply because it was more like Latin. Dryden, writing in the seventeenth century, said: "I am often put to a stand in considering whether what I write be the idiom of the tongue or false grammar and nonsense, couched beneath that specious name of Anglicism, and have no other way to clear my doubts but by translating my English into Latin and thereby trying what sense the words will bear in a more stable language." One result of this double translation was that Dryden went through his earlier works and rewrote all the sentences that had originally ended in a preposition or adverb. A generation later, Swift complained that the English of his day "offends against every part of grammar." Certainly this is blaming the foot because it doesn't fit the shoe!

Because some people would like to write the language of the textbooks, the entries in this dictionary not only tell what standing a given construction has in current English but also explain how the rules of the prescriptive grammarian would apply, wherever the rules and standard practice differ. But in such cases the rules are never simple, and the person who has to use this type of English may feel that it would be easier to follow Dryden's example and write in Latin first.

THIS BOOK

The grammar entries in this book are designed for persons who speak standard English but who may be confused about certain isolated points. The entries are arranged so that the answer to a particular problem can be found in the least possible time. But anyone who wishes to make a systematic study of English grammar, using this book, can do so by starting with the entry parts of speech and following the references to more and more detailed discussions of each concept.

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