

'If you want to know how a grammatical construction works, you use a grammar'

A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language

By Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik
Longman £39.50.

In the beginning was 'big Quirk'—otherwise known as the 1,100-page *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik, published by Longman in 1972. The following year there came forth 'little Quirk'—the abridged version, *A University Grammar of English*, by Quirk and Greenham. Now what are we to do? This new book, by the same grammarians, is nearly 1,800 pages. I suppose we must call it 'the bigger Quirk', thus allowing some leeway, in case the exhaustion currently affecting this prolific team turns out to be only temporary.

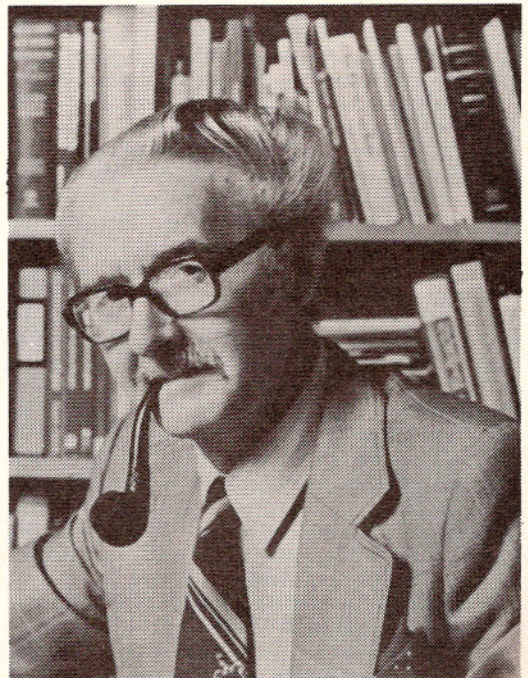
The new grammar is an awe-inspiring work, by any standards. The best description is to call it a 'reference grammar'—just as a dictionary can be called a 'reference lexicon'. If you want to know the meaning or use of a word, you look it up in a dictionary. Similarly, if you want to know how a grammatical construction works, or how it is used, you look it up in a grammar.

The problem, of course, is that you can't organise a grammar on a simple alphabetical principle (active voice, adjectives, adverbs, antecedents, apposition, articles. . .). Actives, for instance, need to be discussed along with passives: to have one under A and the other under P would be pointless. There's only one way round this problem: any grammar book has got to have an intelligible introduction, so that readers can find their way about the book before going into it in depth; and it has got to have a large index, to aid information retrieval on detailed points. This book has both. Its 17 detailed chapters and three appendices are followed by 113 pages of index (of which I must acknowledge myself to be the compiler), and preceded by two general chapters. Chapter One introduces the language in general, and grammar in particular. Chapter Two reviews the whole field, explaining concepts and categories—a much more systematic review, incidentally, than the corresponding chapter in the big Q. If you're new to the world of reference grammars, *don't* dip into this one without reading Chapter Two first.

Northern Europe has brought forth many grammatical handbooks (by Jespersen, Krusinga and others); but this latest grammar

far exceeds these earlier works in breadth and depth of detail. For instance, more attention is paid to differences between the main standard varieties of English—between speech and writing, in particular, but also between many constructions that are regionally or stylistically distinctive. For anyone who had the mind, it would be quite straightforward to use the index to pull out of the grammar the 300 or so differences between British and American English, or the 500 instances of formal and informal English, to see which parts of the language are most affected. It would have been impossible to find such things out previously: earlier grammars either ignored the fact that these differences existed, or buried the information deep inside their pages so that they were all but impossible to find.

The book is also immensely strong on examples of usages, and how they should be analysed. This is typical of the approach of these grammarians, who have made good use of the files of the Survey of English Usage at University College, London. There's nothing worse than a grammar based solely on the impressions or intuitions of an author—as is unfortunately all too common in popular paperbacks on usage. This grammar avoids that problem. In



Quirk: master-grammarian

particular, it contains several statistical observations, derived from various surveys. For instance, at one point, there's a table which tells you about the frequency of sentences of the type *because X happened, Y happened* and *Y happened, because X happened*. Which do you think is the more frequent pattern, and by how much? Stop here and think about it, before you read on. In fact, in two big surveys (one of speech, one of writing), 407 out of 425 such cases were of the latter type. I hadn't expected such a marked bias, and if I were teaching the language to foreigners, or discussing norms of style in a literature class, this information would be extremely helpful. Nuggets of this kind are spread throughout the grammar—more than in the previous books, but still far too thinly for my liking. I would have liked to see many more such tables.

So what are the main differences between the new book and the previous unabridged work? Most obviously, it is almost twice as long—for several reasons. Some topics are presented in much more detail (e.g. 'comment clauses', such as *you know*, were given only a page in the previous book—they have six pages here). Far more space is devoted to a discussion of divided usage (e.g. the modern use of *hopefully*, which upsets some people so). Recent perspectives in linguistic analysis are introduced. Literary scholars will be pleased to see that core grammatical issues are now clearly related to questions of style—particularly noticeable in the new final chapter, 'From Sentence to Text'. And in general, the authors are much more explicit about their assumptions, and more comprehensive in their citation of other approaches (there are over 700 bibliographical references). As a result, some topics which were treated in single chapters previously are in two chapters now—the verb, for instance. Because of the increase in size, special efforts have been made to aid information retrieval: there are more cross-references between sections, and there is the aforementioned index, five times the length of the previous one. The style is more leisurely, too. The book is aimed both at specialists and at others who want information about their language. The authors have therefore explained terms as they go along, in a discursive way. Rules are given in ordinary language, not in formulae; and there is a good balance between examples and commentary.

It is a remarkable achievement, the climax of over 20 years work by this team of grammarians. It is surprising that the book was written at all: it took five years to complete, during which time no two of the authors lived in the same place. It is a result of an enormous amount of correspondence, and two ferocious 'write-ins'. And after it was over, there was not a little agonising over the title. In the end, they chose 'comprehensive'—a good choice, for the book does indeed cover every important development in the description of English grammar in recent years. But don't be misled: the word does not mean 'complete'. There's still plenty left to be discovered about the facts of the language. We might well see a 'biggest Quirk' one day.