

## The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (LOGSWE)

A long time ago in an English department far far away – well, not so far, really, seeing as University College is only just round the corner – the linguistic counterpart to Obi Wan Kenobi planned a Great Survey of the English grammatical universe. The authors of LOGSWE – for so I have to call it, being short on articulatory energy, and following the principle that a grammar cannot be a success unless it has a convenient acronym – acknowledge their debt to Randolph Quirk in their introduction. It could not be otherwise. Quirk lurks, at least in spirit, in these pages, as well as more manifestly in his foreword. And what a fine millennial tribute to his 1960 initiative this book has proved to be.

As a novice Jedi knight in those days – Jedi you appreciate stood for Junior English Department Investigator, and we were not a little upset when George Lucas borrowed the word without acknowledgement – I worked on the Quirk Survey for a while, and learned the principle on which this book is based. That English grammar has two sides: structure and use. Knowing what the structures of English grammar are is only one side of the coin. You have to know how they are used, and who uses them, and how much. Only in this way can grammar become relevant and real

Of course, back in the early 60s, people were still finding their feet after getting rid of the shackles of prescriptive grammar. After 250 years of being told that there is only one way to speak and write, the opportunity to discover the true structural realities of the language was amazingly liberating. For the first time, people began to look at a wide range of spoken and written varieties – registers as LOGSWE calls them. Getting hold of the written texts wasn't so hard. Getting good examples of the full range of spontaneous speech was a real pain. But full of the force, were we

Yet naughty young Jedi knights also were we, in those days. Knowing that it was virtually impossible to go into Obi Wan's office at certain times without having your every word surreptitiously recorded, and knowing that his eyebrows would be triggered by the use of an unusual grammatical construction, I could never resist training myself to use a rare grammatical feature assiduously whenever I was called in for a discussion. The perfect progressive passive, for example, (illustrated by 'have been being sold') was a case in point. Occurring probably once in every, I don't know, several billion words, I developed a paternal attitude towards this construction, and thought it deserved a higher profile in Survey results. So there were conversations like this: 'How are you, Dave?', asks Randolph. 'Oh fine', says I, casually, 'I've just been being persuaded to look for a new flat.' Up would go the eyebrows. 'By my flatmate', I would add, just to make sure he appreciated the passive. 'We've been being overcharged, you see – by the landlord.' Important to keep your face straight – and not to overdo it

Did I succeed in single-handedly changing the course of English grammar? LOGSWE persuades me that I did. One has to be patient. From no mention of this construction at all in the first Quirk et al compendium – the 1972 GCE (Grammar of Contemporary English), it was actually listed along with the other verb phrase constructions in the second – the 1985 CGEL (Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language), but disappointingly described as being of ‘extreme’ ‘rarity’. Now LOGSWE, with an unprecedented corpus coverage, and although not actually mentioning the construction, does go so far as to say, after dealing with the common verb patterns, ‘All other combinations of aspect and voice are generally rare.’ There: ‘generally’, much better than ‘extreme’. I value that word, and claim personal responsibility for it. Longman have evidently recognized my contribution, moreover, by setting my name in larger type than those of the authors, in their publicity brochure

But in those early years of descriptive grammar, there was only so much time and energy available. In Quirk’s case, 24 hours a day, and inexhaustible energy – but even that was not enough to present a full picture of structure and use. We had no computers. Everything was on slips of paper. So inevitably, the focus grew on capturing the range of structures in as much detail as possible, to devising a better description of the facts, and inventing ways of transcribing the dynamics of everyday conversation. There was little time to pay proper attention to making genre comparisons. The 1972 grammar – falling within the well-established purely Anglo-Saxon school of grammatical authorship – you know, the one begun by Jespersen, Zandvoort, and others – with its names of Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik – Leech the only pure Anglo-Saxon there, Quirk being Manx – and continued I see in LOGSWE with Johansson, and – I do not know, but Finegan’s ancestors must have come from the ol’ country, sure ‘n all – that grammar, with the best will in the world, was strong on structure, but very weak on use. It was the same with the 1985 grammar – certainly much more information about use in there, but those of us who had been salivating in the wings, if not the index, waiting for statistical charts and data about who and where and how much were disappointed. Examining the very fine index to that book, and you will be guided to a few such places – but they are few. Would we have to wait another 13 years for the use side of the coin, we thought

Well, yes, and it has proved to be 14. But it has been worth waiting for. For it shows for the first time the true potential of corpus-based work on English grammar. Weighing in at 1.97 kg, it is in fact surprisingly lighter than the 2.4 kg of CGEL, but it nonetheless packs in a vast amount of descriptive detail, with some 6000 points of lexical or grammatical import identified in the two indexes. For those who say, English has no grammar, tell them that: there is 2 kilos of grammar in English. And this, of course, is only the beginning. With just four registers given the treatment here – CONV, FICT, NEWS, ACAD – an anagram, incidentally, of FACT WAD CONVINCES - there is plenty more that can be done. And, I have no doubt, will be.

This book is appropriately published now, as a Longman millennial event (though either two years late or two years early, depending on your point of view). It looks backwards and forwards. It is a fitting climax of 40 years of grammatical excellence, and a trail-blazer of a book, which will be used as a model by future grammarians for probably the next 40. May the force indeed be with it.