

*Article by Mary M. McDonald*

## **Too Easy Grammar:**

### **The History of Easy Basic English Grammars**

Most writers ponder over sentence structure, word choice, and grammar for quite awhile no matter what they are writing. From my vantage points (as Writing Center and WAC director and grammar instructor at a large urban university), though, this pondering does not happen often enough. While writers see complexity, many student writers are gripped by a perception that such choices are simple. Here are some examples.

In grammar class, future English teachers remark that they dislike the analytic thinking required; they are English majors because they love to read. In a class on composition teaching, some are astonished by grammatical mistakes in their papers, not even recognizing the kinds of errors.

The same perception occurs in Writing Center tutorials: basic writing students think grammatical mistakes mean a lack of elementary skills. They ask whether they missed everything in third grade.

Juniors and seniors come in from Writing Across the Curriculum classes; on their papers professors note that they should have completed the “simple” grammatical corrections. The students look puzzled that these corrections take more time than they thought. Some students fight with tutors, telling them they like the way they phrased a

particular sentence (even when it contains a grammatical mistake like a missing referent or dangling modifier). Grammar poses a contradiction to those teaching writing. On the one hand, individuals have the perception that grammar is simple and easy. On the other, they confront challenges where grammar can be strikingly complex.

How did it come to pass that so many students and professors think the descriptive grammar of written English is easy, when most writers know that ease and precision in writing is usually a complex matter, one that includes discerning an audience's needs alongside nestling English grammar, syntax, and vocabulary comfortably together?

Most of us who teach the descriptive grammar of written English know that a variety of analytical tasks are involved—tasks very different from the fluid thinking involved in writing a first draft or the integration of various resources into a research paper. Many of these analytical tasks are somewhat simple, but they vary depending on what part of grammar is being considered, and, in English, the sheer volume of what to know can be overwhelming. Nevertheless, we confront an entrenched idea of the simplicity of grammar at a time when teaching grammar is a high priority due to a variety of standardized tests across many states and the nation.

Historically speaking, texts that tout the terms easy or simple concentrate on parts of speech, and anything that can't be considered one of those parts of speech is lost gradually. That is not to say that simplifying the grammar of written English is a bad thing. Writers like Martha Kolln, Brock Haussamen, and Cindy Vitto have addressed this complexity very well in their books Understanding English Grammar, Grammar Alive!, and Grammar by Diagram, respectively. It is important, however, to look at the

history of “easy” in the basic grammar book to see the changes that have influenced us to this day.

In his book The War Against Grammar, David Mulroy writes that the first simplification of English grammar arose from a great need—he cites the influence of Erasmus ridiculing scholars who made grammar esoteric and thereby inaccessible, futile for teaching students the classical authors (53-55). What did help students learn was the simplified grammar written by William Lily modeled on Donatus’ text that emphasized parts of speech. Mulroy claims that the greatest English writers were fed on this text. However, they were also fed by the practice in imitation, translating complicated sentences back and forth between English and Latin.

If grammar in Lily’s day was too complex to be taught until simplified, today it is simplified in such a way that its nuances are lost. Using the work of scholars Ian Michael, Linda A. Mitchell, Gerald A. Padley, Ivan Poldauf, and Emma Vorlat to understand the history of English grammars, I examined English grammar texts (from R.C. Alston’s bibliography), isolated those with the concept of “easy” in the title and visited rare book libraries. I found that the easy grammar text appears in the late 1700s and in our times: it does not appear to the same degree in the 1800s. Its appearance is linked to the goals instructors have of helping students obtain employment, just as Lily focused his simple grammar on the learning of classical texts. This focusing of a text on a goal of employment (both in the 1700s and today)—instead of on the goal of preparing students to read rich Latin literature—created the perception that students now have: the idea that grammar is easy comes from a parts of speech emphasis that occluded practice in syntax and the reading of complex writing. In the nineteenth

century, accuracy, not simplicity, was valued and “easy” grammars disappear and parsing books take their place. Our goal of teaching descriptive grammar can be accomplished with “easy” grammars if we—as do Kolln, Haussamen and others—augment them by emphasizing the need for practice, the understanding of form versus function, and complex models.

### Early Grammar Texts: Simplifying the Complex

As early as 1605, Francis Bacon identified the genre of popular grammars, as opposed to theoretical ones. Popular grammars were for the "speedy attainment of language" (Padley, Latin 155). Tomasso Campanella (1638), another respected Latin grammarian, also separated grammars into civilis, resting on the authority of the best authors; and philosophica, based on reason (Padley, Latin 161). According to Murray Cohen, whether a student in the 1700s learned by the practical or philosophical grammar was a question of social standing. The poor often received the practical, the rich the philosophical (68).

Practical English grammars were fashioned after three sets of authorities: ultimately the Greek and Latin grammarians such as Donatus, Priscian, and Varro (Donatus especially had great influence); more locally the Latin text writers Lily, Linacre, and others; and finally the English grammarians Lowth, Ash, Priestly and few others (Padley, Trends 3). Authors of easy basic grammar texts had their own knowledge of the standardized classics and sought to condense more famous grammars of English. Their key ideas about language shaped how they presented grammar. Easy for them meant a focusing on words, not on the interconnections among meaning in syntax,

words, and audience. That these grammars were only mildly different from each other can be understood as follows, according to Ian Michael:

The hardening of categories, the increasing autonomy of logic and rhetoric, and the lack of any science of language, forced on grammar a preoccupation with classification and analysis of words alone. Once logic and rhetoric were conceived as disciplines distinct from grammar, fresh patterns of interaction were unlikely. Grammar was doomed to be trivial: a necessary descriptive procedure in the elementary study of a foreign tongue, but irrelevant, sterile and dull when applied to a vernacular. (490)

He says that grammars in the 1700s were marked by “crass stability with constant internal restlessness and change” (517).

Three other cultural phenomena shaped our current day exercise-filled grammars. Authors of practical or reduced grammars were not grammarians (Vorlat: 10), but usually concerned teachers reacting to the painful learning process, first of Latin and later English. Easy basic grammar authors defended the vernacular as a speedy means of learning Latin (Poole 1646; Johnson 1765) and as presenting the “beauty of the English tongue” (Anonymous 1733; Sedger 1798). The cultural belief that Latin was grammar (Michael 492) halted any innovations beyond those within the Latin framework, of which there are many. This belief also coincides with the concept of a universal grammar: knowing one grammar prepared a person to learn them all. Hence, making a vernacular grammar easy (when there is only one grammar) means ignoring the differences between English (a word-order language) and Latin (a case-ending

language). The pragmatic text writers assumed they could do no more than adapt or reorganize the above sources. As Staniford (1797) claimed, "the subject of grammar affords little or no room for originality." Other authors like Bingham (1785) and Fenning (1771) clearly admit that there is nothing new in their texts; they are simply Lowth rearranged for specific readers. Ash (1774) wrote Grammatical Institutes solely as an introduction to Lowth.

Secondly, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English was believed to have no grammatical structure since it was the vernacular (Padley, Trends 170). Basic text grammarians opposed this belief; Dearborne (1795) claimed that "despite learned men's beliefs, English can be reduced to rules" and that "incompetencies are due to a lack of simplicity." Ash (1774) also stated this position.

Thirdly, the pressing need for "easy" texts encouraged the growth of this genre. Newbery, known as a publisher of children's books, wrote Grammar Made Easy (1746), Chronology Made Familiar and Easy (1747), Geography Made Easy (1793), Logic Made Familiar and Easy (1777), and Poetry Made Familiar and Easy (1748). Staniford (1797) also wrote Arithmetic Made Easy and Bookkeeping Made Easy. Students of that day were women and "the self-taught." Much like our self-help books (some pocket-sized too), easy introductions to more learned subjects provided some transition for a changing populace. However, readers of these texts had a greater need to learn many languages rather than to write English (Poldauf 77). Ease and simplicity were also sanctioned by Lowth causing a trend that we see again today.

The approach that students have about grammar being a matter of word classes alone comes from these easy grammars: Padley writes that English grammarians' "humanistic" Latin-derived notions of grammar as a word classification scheme caused them to create grammatical classifications for things that were really semantic, like the distinction between the words shall and will (Trends 150).

These concerned teacher-text writers were not afraid to confront current pedagogy, but their linguistic hands were tied by the Latin framework. Let us examine the two mainstays they used—Lily and Lowth—for an even closer look at this genre.

#### Staples of the Easy English Grammar: Lily and Lowth

The foundation of William Lily's grammar, A Short Introduction (1509), rests on Linacre's De Structura which was "the most erudite Latin grammatical work of its date in England" (Padley, Latin 23). Three things established Lily's grammar as a standard reference for over two hundred years: Lily's being a pupil of Linacre, his position as Headmaster of St. Paul's, and the royal sanction his text enjoyed (Barbour 488). John Colet, Dean of St. Paul's, collaborated with Lily in writing an introduction to the grammar which is seen in the first fifty pages of the text. Padley (Latin) says Lily's rule-based approach to Latin "contributed perhaps more than any other factor to the belief that Latin consisted of an inviolable set of rules with an existence independent of anything actually written in the language" (147). Lily, in Vorlat's terms, "lays the foundation for grammars of the vernacular in English" (8).

Lily held sway for two hundred years by official decree: Lowth's influence can still be seen in today's texts, over two hundred years later. Cohen refers to Lowth (1762) as

“the most cited, most praised, and most imitated grammar of mid-century” (83). As Dennis Baron explains, Lowth framed himself as an authority who provided rules and examples against which to check correctness: “he sees the grammar book as the highest of linguistic authorities and he dispenses with judgments on the structure of English ex cathedra, without recourse to any justification based on reason, analogy, the historical development of the language, or even other grammarians” (142). Lowth cannot be seen outside of his historical context, however. As Linda A. Mitchell writes, “[Lowth] comes after a century of discussion about universal language, and reaps the benefits of his predecessors. His grammar book is a result of many decades of successes and failures, of experimentation and controversy by those who came before him” (130).

Well aware of the language issues of his day, Lowth based his text, A Short Introduction to English Grammar, on tenets of universal grammar, patterns from “good authors,” and specific philosophical grammars (Gleason 69-70). Lowth’s discriminating use of universal grammar gives him further credibility. Instructors were referred to Harris’ text Hermes, or a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Universal Grammar (1751) and to Wilkins for philosophical questions.

What made Lowth's theory-driven text eminently reducible was his dogmatic application of the principles he chose to follow. Initially, he cites the need for his text by listing errors of such notable authors as Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Addison, and Dryden—even the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer were not spared. Placing logic above usage, but still affirming common patterns in classic authors, Lowth formed rules and “endowed them with all the authority he could muster” (Gleason 70).

The combination of his language and literature scholarship earned for him the position of language authority. When he truncated theory in deference to easy and simplicity (Lowth xiv), he was respected for doing so and imitated. Mitchell argues that the use of universal grammar “gave impetus to the codification and standardization of the English language and a kind of prescriptivism that we see to this day” (131).

Basic easy grammars were displaced by parsing books and grammars emphasizing “correctness.” Parsing books first appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century and remained very popular throughout the first half of the twentieth century (Gleason 73). As “correctness” became a higher standard, grammars became increasingly more detailed and were not called “simple” or “easy” anymore. Allen notes that school grammars took on a new goal of increasing social status (51) succeeding the earlier goal of language learning.

#### An Example of When “Easy” Causes Distortion

As an example of how confusing the word-class-based easy basic grammar texts are to describe English, let us examine how the subjunctive mood is treated in the early easy texts through the 1700s and up to today. The subjunctive does not fit a word class because it is a semantic category.

<u>Text Title and Year</u>	<u>Definition of the Subjunctive</u>	<u>Emphasis: Word Class, Syntax, Semantics</u>
<u>Bref Grammar for English</u> 1586  (earliest surviving printed grammar of English)	Always has a conjunction set before nominative case and depends on other verbs in sentences whether it comes before or after it	Word class emphasis on which words identify the use of the subjunctive

<p><u>The English Grammar . . . Being the Easiest, Quickest, and Most Authentic Method . . .</u> 1693</p>	<p>“Subjunctive and Optative are the same with the Indicative, only they have conjunctions and adverbs adjoined to them”</p>	<p>Word class emphasis on which words identify the use of the subjunctive</p>
<p><u>The English Accidence</u>1733</p>	<p>“Optative,” “wish,” “subjoined to a conjunction, adjective, or an interrogative becoming indefinite”</p>	<p>Word class emphasis on which words identify the use of the subjunctive</p>
<p><u>English Grammar Reformed to a Small Compass and Easy Method</u> 1738</p>	<p>“Moods are expressed by auxiliary signs”</p>	<p>Word class emphasis on which words identify the use of the subjunctive</p>
<p><u>A New Grammar: Being the Most Easy Guide . . .</u> 1750 (35 editions to 1800)</p>	<p>“The English tongue doesn’t have any moods.” “Use helping verbs to express other Times of Verbs.”</p>	<p>Word class emphasis on which words identify the use of the subjunctive</p>
<p><u>The First, Easy Rudiments of Grammar</u> 1765</p>	<p>“subjoined to some verb that went before, or some conjunction”; models given; “in this we express Desire or Wish”</p>	<p>Word class and semantics</p>
<p><u>A New Introduction to English Grammar: in the Simplest and Easiest Method Possible</u> 1766</p>	<p>No definition, just examples</p>	
<p><u>A New Grammar of the English Language; or An Easy Introduction . . .</u> 1771</p>	<p>No moods because there are no endings to identify them, but auxiliary verbs make use of 5 moods. Subjunctive is a condition by way of supposition (“if”).</p>	<p>Word class emphasis</p>
<p><u>The Practical Grammar: or, An Easy Way to Understand English</u> 1774</p>	<p>Explains use of verbs without labels; no mention of the subjunctive</p>	
<p><u>The Young Lady’s Accidence; or, A Short and</u></p>	<p>The word “if” denotes</p>	<p>Word class emphasis</p>

<u>Easy Introduction to English Grammar</u> 1785	subjunctive	
<u>A Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar</u> 1786	“expresses the action or being as possible or impossible, fit or unfit, doubtful or uncertain” “for the most part it depends on some other verb or has an auxiliary coming before it”	Both word class and semantics
<u>A Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar</u> 1797	“drops the personal terminations in the 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> persons of the present and perfect tense and the 2 <sup>nd</sup> person of other tenses and is known by its being Conditional, having <u>if</u> , <u>though</u> , or some other conjunction before it”	Both word class and semantics
<u>A Short but Comprehensive Grammar, Rendered Easy and Simple . . .</u> 1797	“expresses action in a doubtful manner and has a conjunction commonly placed before it. . . also expresses power, will, inclination, obligation of doing an action”	Semantics before word class
<u>English Grammar Made Easy to the Teacher and Pupil</u> 1822 (12 <sup>th</sup> ed)	“represents a thing under a condition, supposition, or contingency, expressed or understood, and by another verb; as ‘If he were good’”	Semantics emphasis along with a word class emphasis
<u>English Grammar Simplified</u> 1946	“an action or state supposed or imagined”	Semantics emphasis

In a study of grammar texts from 1784 to 1944, authors Henry L. Smith, Kathleen Dugdale, B.F. Steele, and R.S. McElhinney found that the percentage of pages given to the subjunctive over this period of time in English grammar texts ranged from 32

percent to 1 percent; after 1918, they found that mood was “scarcely mentioned” (67-68).

Time Period	1784-1824	1825-1865	1865-1905	1905-1935	All
Percent of pages on mood	32	42	15	1	15

## Conclusion

Grammar can be made too easy when its presentation concentrates solely on parts of speech. The history of “easy” basic grammars is linked in the 1700s and today to the goal of helping a wide array of students obtain employment. While a noble goal, this emphasis excluded complicated syntax and semantic overlays that could have been addressed through practice (such as sentence combining or imitation) or excellent models of writing. Teaching students about the history of grammar can help them grow in accepting its complexities. The myriad of decisions that need to be made in writing needs to be welcomed as writers welcome the chance to communicate effectively with their intended audiences.

## Works Cited

### Primary Sources

Aicken, John. The English Grammar . . . Being the Easiest, Quickest, and Most Authentic Method of Teaching It by Rules and Pictures. 1693. Menston: England: Scholars Press, 1967.

Ash, John. Grammatical Institutes; or, an Easy Introduction to Dr. Lowth's English Grammar, Designed for the Use of Schools. 1763. Leeds, England: Scholars Press, 1967.

Bingham, Caleb. The Young Lady's Accidence: or, A Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar. 1785. Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1981.

Bullokar, William. Bref Grammar for English. 1586. Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977.

Carter, John. A Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar. Ipswich: G. Jermyn, 1797.

Comley, John. English Grammar Made Easy to the Teacher and Pupil. Philadelphia: Kimber and Sharpless, 1822.

Dearborn, Benjamin. The Colombian Grammar or, an Essay for Reducing a Grammatical Knowledge. . . . Boston: Samual Hall, 1795.

The English Accidence, Being the Grounds of Our Mother Tongue: or, a Plaine and Easy Introduction to an English Grammar. 1733. Leeds, England: Scholars Press, 1967.

- Fenning, Daniel. A New Grammar of the English Language; or An Easy Introduction to the Art of Speaking and Writing English with Propriety and Correctness: The Whole Laid Down in the Most Plain and Familiar Manner. . . . 1771. Menston, England: Scholars Press,
- Fisher, Ann. A New Grammar: Being the Most Easy Guide to Speaking and Writing the English Language Properly and Correctly. 1750. Menston, Scholars Press, 1968.
- Houghton, John. A New Introduction to English Grammar: In the Simplest and Easiest Method Possible. Salop: J. Cotton and J. Eddowes, 1766.
- Irish, Frank. Grammar and Analysis Made Easy and Attractive by Diagrams. Antwerp: Eclectic Press, 1884.
- J., G. An Easy Introduction to the English Language. Bristol: The Author, 1796.
- Johnson, Samuel. The First Easy Rudiments of Grammar, Applied to the English Tongue. New York: J. Holt, 1765.
- Lowe, Solomon. English Grammar Reformed into a Small Compass and Easy Method for. . . . London: The Author, 1737.
- Lowth, Robert. A Short Introduction to English Grammar. London: J. Hughes, 1762.
- Newbery, John. Grammar Made Familiar and Easy to Young Gentlemen, Ladies. . . . London: The Author, 1746.
- Poole, Joshua. The English Accidence: or, a Short, Plaine, and Easie Way, for the More Speedy Attainment of the Latine Tongue by the Help of English. 1646. Leeds, England: Scholar Press, 1967.

Sedger, John. The Structure of the English Language: Exhibiting an Easy and Familiar Method of Acquiring a Grammatical Knowledge of its Constituent Parts. 1798. Menston, England: Scolars Press, 1970.

A Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar. London: J. Buckland, C. Dilly, and A. Cleugh, 1786.

Smetham, Thomas. The Practical Grammar: or, An Easy Way to Understand English. London: J. Cooke, 1774.

Stanisford, Daniel. A Short but Comprehensive Grammar, Rendered Simple and Easy. Boston: Manning and Loring, 1797.

## Works Cited

### Secondary Sources

- Alson, R.C. A Bibliography of the English Language from the Invention of Printing to the Year 1800. Ilkey: Janus Press, 1974.
- Baron, Dennis E. Grammar and Good Taste. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.
- Barbour, F.A. "The History of English Grammar Teaching." Educational Review 12 (1896): 487-507.
- Cohen, Murray. Sensible Words: Linguistic Practice in England 1640-1785. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.
- Gleason, H.A., Jr. Linguistics and English Grammar. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.
- Michael, Ian. English Grammatical Categories and the Tradition to 1800. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Mulroy, David. The War Against Grammar. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2003.
- Mitchell, Linda A. Grammar Wars. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2001.
- Padley, G.A. Grammatical Theory in Western Europe 1500-1700: The Latin Tradition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- . Grammatical Theory in Western Europe 1500-1700: Trends in the Vernacular Grammar I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Poldauf, I. "On the History of Some Problems of English Grammars before 1800." Prague Studies in English 45 (1948): 1-322.

Salmon, Vivian. The Study of Language in Seventeenth Century England.

Amsterdam: John Benjamins B. V., 1979.

Smith, Henry L., Kathleen Dugdale, B.F. Steele, and R.S. McElhinney. One

Hundred Fifty Years of Grammar Textbooks. Bloomington, IN:

Bulletin of the School of Education, Indiana University. Vol. 22 (1946).

Vitto, Cindy. Grammar by Diagram. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Orchard Park, NY: Broadview

Press, 2006.

Vorlat, Emma. The Development of English Grammatical Theory 1586-1737

with Special Reference to the Theory of Parts of Speech. Louvain:

Leuven University Press, 1975.