

Preface

When English speakers begin to learn other languages they often find themselves being taught via methods that assume they have a basic knowledge of English grammar.

Some of us, however, have come through a school system that taught little or nothing of the way our language is structured. We recognise when things “sound right” or “sound wrong” but we cannot say why. We now want to study a second language, to read it or speak it or both, and we are non-plussed when the teacher says, “In German the verb comes at the end of the clause”, or “That’s the indirect object.”

I hope this little book will fill a gap and give you the basics, whether you want to learn another language or not, and if you do, whether your aimed-for second language is Spanish, Anindilyakwa, New Testament Greek, Swahili or anything else.

Don’t forget that many languages don’t have direct equivalents of all our classes of words or all our grammatical structures. Some systems of grammar are simpler than the English system, some are more complex, and some are simply different.

Intro

How do we identify and classify words and groups of words? Whatever the language, it's a matter of function.

When people want to speak, they need ways of . . .

- indicating things and people
- talking about actions
- describing things
- describing actions
- showing how things relate to other things
- joining sections of speech

In English we call these words . . .

nouns and pronouns
 verbs
 adjectives
 adverbs

 prepositions
 conjunctions

Quite often there is overlap. Words don't always fit neatly into the categories we think they should be in. Sometimes a group of words performs the function of one word, and some words have more than one function. But by and large the outlines in this booklet cover most situations. As you go through it you will find new meanings for some common English words – which simply indicates that grammar has its jargon just like any other field of study.

Verbs

Verbs are the **doing, being, having** words. Their basic forms are the forms you find in the dictionary, and you can put **to** in front.

to eat to write to sing

The “to” form is called the infinitive. It’s the one they used to tell us not to split.

Verbs can be

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| one word | <i>He finished the work yesterday.
I have the tools you want.
This tea is awful!</i> |
| two words | <i>Sam is coming. (or Sam’s coming)
Sam is not coming.
He was running round in circles.
Have you started yet?</i> |
| three words | <i>I’ll be seeing them later. (will be seeing)
That chapter has been printed already.
She will have finished by then.</i> |
| more than
three | <i>By September they will have been living
here for two years.</i> |

Verbs and their subjects

Every finite verb has what is called a **subject**. That's the person or thing that does the action. It will be a noun or a pronoun, and in an English statement it comes before the verb. To find the subject of a verb, therefore, you simply need to ask yourself **Who?** or **What?** before the verb. Whodunnit! In the examples that follow, the subjects are circled and the verbs are underlined.

- In 1987 they left the city.
- Graham drives a vintage Holden.
- I think the train arrives at three.

In questions we either reverse the order:

- Is she here?
- Were you sick this morning?

or divide the verb into two parts, separated by the noun or pronoun that is the subject.

- Did they go home?
- Do the Johnsons live here?
- Can she do it?
- Was the cat sleeping on your bed again?