

## Grammar Reference Book Analysis: Summary and Synthesis of Prepositions in five Grammar Reference Books

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Prepositions are difficult to learn and teach, however they are prominent and salient for using English. In light of their importance, I will focus on prepositions as a point of grammatical usage in this paper. The paper provides a summary and synthesis of prepositions as presented in five different grammar reference books.

### **Prepositions in the classroom**

The teaching and learning of prepositions may be difficult, but teachers do not have to make related grammar classes dull, boring and unmotivational. Traditional styles of grammar teaching may have incorporated a transmission model of education, which was reductionist in nature, and based on behavioral psychology. On the other hand, the teaching of grammar can be based on a transactional model, which is constructivist in nature, and based on behavioral psychology (Weaver, 1996). This change from transmission to transactional models of teaching is probably seen most evidently recently in the surging popularity of communicative-type classrooms. Interestingly, Fortune (1998), has pointed out that the increasing popularity of communicative-type classrooms has lead to an increase in the popularity of grammar practice books. Why has this apparent anomaly occurred? It has happened because the increasing popu-

larity of communicative-type classrooms has led to a decrease in the emphasis on grammar in class. There has been an increase in the popularity of grammar practice books to fill the gaps in learners' knowledge. Along with the grammar practice books there has been a surge in the number of grammar reference books aimed at teachers in various contexts. These grammar reference books aimed at teachers are the basis of the following paper.

### Summary and synthesis

This paper is divided into two main sections; first, a summary and, second, a synthesis of prepositions as dealt with in five different grammar books: Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's (1983) *The Grammar Book*, Quirk and Greenbaum's (1973) *A Concise Grammar of Contemporary English*, Swan's (1980) *Practical Modern English*, Huddleston's (1984) *Introduction to the Grammar of English*, and Stageberg's (1965) *An Introduction to English Grammar*.

In writing this paper I had in mind the description of a workshop which examined, "teaching less grammar, but teaching it more efficiently and in ways that would have more impact ..." (Weaver, 1996:183). However, ultimately this paper is not on grammar itself, rather it focuses on comparing and evaluating grammar reference books. The purpose is to demonstrate how to use the tools of grammatical analysis. At the outset I must acknowledge that each of these books is different. The differences are illustrated in the different authors' styles, intended audiences, the year published, theoretical bases, purposes, designs and organizations. This paper has been influenced by Fortune's (1998) survey review of grammar practice books which focused on: the audience intended, the quality of pedagogic grammar, the quality and variety of activities, the under-

lying theories, the approaches to learning, the use of tests (if any), and the design. Also influence is acknowledged from a publication seminar I attended conducted by Dr. Sandra McKay (1998) who noted that the three central concerns in publication are the author, the audience and the text.

### Summary

#### **Book one: Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's (1983) *The grammar book***

This impressively large, white book could have alternatively been named the ESL/EFL teacher's grammar bible. Here the word bible is used in Webster's (1990:147) sense, "a publication that is preeminent especially in authoritative-ness." This definition is very appropriate for this book. Not unlike the other more famous bible, which is a collection of books, this grammar book consists of a collection of chapters, thirty seven to be exact, and it also includes an appendix, index of names, index of languages and language groups, index of words and phrases, and an index of topics. In other words, this is the most comprehensive grammar book out of the five examined in this paper. The chapters have been conveniently organized according to relevant topics for ESL/EFL teachers in training. Unlike some other grammar books, this book presents the information in a clear and easy to follow way.

As an introduction, the authors have divided lexical categories into two major groups: open and closed. Open lexical categories are represented by the major parts of speech, for example, nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives. Closed lexical categories are represented by the other parts of speech, for example, determiners, intensifiers, prepositions and auxiliary verbs. The closed lexical category contains fewer items than the open lexical category and they do not

really add or discard items. Items in the closed lexical category are frequently said to have a grammatical and a lexical function. Therefore, prepositions may be perceived as incorporating grammatical and lexical relationships. This is a much more comprehensive view of prepositions when compared to another more limited definition, which refers to them as words that join nouns, pronouns and gerunds by a grammatical relationship to other words. They are also viewed as function words, or words that have minimal meaning on their own, but show grammatical meaning (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992).

One of the chapters, nineteen, is titled prepositions and it will be the focus of this summary. This chapter, like the others, is divided into four main sections: grammatical description, teaching suggestions, exercises, and bibliography. The grammatical description is the most extensive, as it covers about twelve pages of the fifteen pages in the chapter. The grammatical description incorporates: introduction: why prepositions are problematic; a closer look at the structure of prepositional phrases including deletion of prepositions; lexical idiosyncracies of prepositions including incorporation, co-occurrence with verbs and adjectives, prepositions that co-occur, lexical compounding, frequency; functions of the preposition "at"; semantic case functions; reviewing semantically related case functions together; other meanings of prepositions; frequent sources of error; variation in the use of prepositions; prepositional phrases that function like clauses; and conclusion. I will examine each of these more closely in turn.

The introduction: why prepositions are problematic, states that a survey of ESL/EFL teachers found that prepositions are the second most difficult grammar problem, after articles, for their students. Of relevance to a Japanese lan-

guage context, is the fact that Japanese has postpositions rather than prepositions. A closer look at the structure of prepositional phrases, examines the basic structure of prepositional phrases, that is  $PP = P NP$ , or a prepositional phrase is made up of a preposition plus a noun phrase, and exceptions to this. For instance, deletion of prepositions occurs sometimes, and at other times it must be deleted. Lexical idiosyncracies of prepositions, includes incorporation, where certain prepositions might be molded into verbs, resulting in a shorter sentence giving more information. Co-occurrence with verbs and adjectives, states that many verbs and adjectives occur with a solitary preposition only. Prepositions that co-occur, suggests that certain prepositions should be taught as co-occurring sets, for example, from ... to (for ranges of distance, time and degree). Lexical compounding, occurs when prepositions form verb compounds, for example, out ... , over ... , and under ... . As for frequency, the nine most commonly occurring prepositions are: *at*, *by*, *for*, *from*, *in*, *of*, *on*, *to*, and *with*. However, they all have multiple meanings and functions. As an example, the many functions of the preposition “at” are presented, and are narrowed down to seven main uses. Semantic case functions examines a description of prepositions as being caselike, or representing a relationship between people and objects, not between space, time, degree, etc. Reviewing semantically related case functions together outlines that often two or more case functions can be reviewed in sets. In this section of the book, four examples of this technique follow. Other meanings of prepositions outlines that as well as case functions, there are other usual meanings like relationships of space, time, degree, and other concepts, that might include idiomatic usages. A list of twenty prepositions classified in terms of space, time, and degree is provided in the text, as well as a chart of prepositions of position and direction. Frequent sources of error outlines six major causes of error, which include for example, spatial

meanings of *in*, *on* and *at*. Variation in the use of prepositions states that there are many times where more than one preposition could be appropriately used in a particular context. Teachers and students should be aware of this, and later the variations can be focussed on as input. Prepositional phrases that function like clauses explains how some prepositional phrases might be understood more clearly by transferring them into clauses. The conclusion restates the underlying idea that prepositions are difficult for learners of English. However, this chapter suggests some ways of going about teaching this difficult part of grammar. Learners usually have three major problems in regards to prepositions: first, using an incorrect preposition, second, not using a necessary preposition, and third, using an unnecessary preposition.

Teaching suggestions suggests conducting a survey to understand which prepositions your students need work on most. Spatial meanings and case functions should be taught first, if possible. Other suggestions include using diagrams, contrasts, cloze passages, and teaching related prepositions in the same exercise. Exercises allows teachers to do two things: first, test their understanding of what has been presented, and second, test their ability to apply what they know. The bibliography is divided into two parts: first, references, and second, suggestions for further reading, one of which is Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), which is the next book to be examined.

**Book two: Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) *A Concise Grammar of Contemporary English***

This relatively smaller, red book is a condensed version of a larger volume by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1972) *A Grammar of Contempo-*

*rary English*. The smaller version under examination here contains fourteen chapters, three appendixes, a bibliography and an index. One of the chapters, chapter six, is titled prepositions and prepositional phrases. It is divided up into five major sections: place relations; time relations; other relations chiefly as adjunct; as disjunct; as complementation of verb or adjective.

In the introduction to this chapter, prepositions are defined as expressing a relationship between two things, one of which is a prepositional complement. Place and time are the most recognizable of the relational meanings of prepositions. Descriptions of prepositional phrases, postposed prepositions, simple and complex prepositions, prepositions and prepositional adverbs, and syntactic functions of prepositional phrases follow in the text.

In the next section, there is a description of one of the major types of relational meanings of prepositions: place. When prepositions are used for describing place, they refer to dimensional properties. This could involve dimensionless, one-dimensional, two-dimensional, or three-dimensional objects. This section includes descriptions of positive and negative position and direction; relative position and destination; passages; direction; orientation; resultative and pervasive meaning; seven senses of over; verbs containing prepositional meaning; and metaphorical or abstract use of place positions.

The next section examines another major prepositional meaning: time relations. This is divided up into: time when: *at, on, in*; duration: *for, in, from, before, after, since, and until/till*; *between, by, and up to*; and absence of prepositions of time.

The next section examines prepositional phrases chiefly as adjuncts. This section is divided into two major parts: cause~purpose and means~agentive. Cause~purpose is further divided into: cause, reason, motive; purpose, intended destination; recipient, goal, target; source, origin. Means~agentive is further divided into: manner; means, instrument; instrument, agentive; stimulus; accompaniment; support, opposition; and prepositional phrases chiefly as postmodifier, for example "having": *of, with, without*. The following sub-section deals with prepositional phrases chiefly as disjuncts or conjuncts. This is divided into concession; reference; exception; and negative condition. The final sub-section deals with prepositional phrases chiefly as complementation of verb or adjective. This is further divided into: subject matter; ingredient, material; respect, standard; reaction; and modification of prepositional phrases.

At the end of this chapter, a brief biographical note is provided, suggesting some further reading.

### **Book three: Swan (1980) *Practical Modern English***

This blue grammar book is about the same size as the previously summarized book above. Swan organized this book in a dictionary form which some people like and some hate. So unlike the two previously summarized books, this book does not have any chapters. Rather the section on prepositions can be found alphabetically in the book, as can individual entries of prepositions. The section on prepositions is divided up into many sub-sections, including: prepositions: general; after particular words and expressions; before particular words and expressions; expressions without prepositions; prepositions at the end of clauses; prepositions with infinitives; prepositions before conjunctions; preposi-



tions and adverb particles; prepositional verbs and phrasal verbs. Each of these sections provides examples of expressions which usually cause problems for learners and they sometimes give examples of typical mistakes.

The introduction acknowledges the difficulty of learning to use prepositions appropriately. Most have different functions, some have similar uses, many nouns, verbs, and adjectives are used with certain prepositions, and there are not many rules to guide selection. Positioning in a sentence is another problem, as well as the difference between prepositions and adverb particles, and using prepositions with conjunctions.

#### **Book four: Huddleston (1984) *Introduction to the Grammar of English***

This book was written as an introductory textbook and its' coverage of prepositions is relatively brief compared to the three previously examined books. Prepositions do not even warrant an individual chapter, rather they share a chapter, chapter eight, which covers both adverbs and prepositions. The introduction states that usually prepositions are adpositions, but they can also be postpositions. Prepositions usually come before the complement, and postpositions follow the complement. Adpositions are defined as: central members describe spatial relationships; often they show semantic and/or grammatical functions; usually not indicating inflectional contrasts; heading phrases functioning as dependents of verbs, nouns and adjectives; typically have a noun phrase complement.

Members of the closed preposition class have three properties: inflection; complementation; modification; and function. At the end of this chapter, there

are five exercises covering: adverbs; adverbs versus adjectives; complementation of prepositions; adverbial phrases and prepositional phrases; and prepositions and participles. There is no bibliographical information at the end of this chapter.

**Book five: Stageberg (1965) *An Introduction to English Grammar***

Again in this introductory book, like the last one reviewed above, prepositions do not warrant a chapter to themselves. Rather they share a chapter, chapter thirteen, titled Parts of Speech: Structure Classes, with Qualifiers and Determiners. Structure classes are parts-of-speech classes. Structure classes are also small, with the biggest one being prepositions which have about fifty members only. Section B of chapter thirteen is titled Prepositions. The introduction starts with definitions of prepositions and prepositional phrases. A set of the nine most frequently used prepositions is presented and this is the same set presented by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983) earlier. However Stageberg (1965) goes further to limit this set to a group of the three most frequently used: of, in and to. The rest of this section consists of five exercises using prepositions. The strong influence of stress in pronunciation is seen in these exercises, as three of the five exercises require the reader to focus on stress marks of prepositions. The other two exercises concentrate on identifying firstly, -ing prepositions and -ing verbs and secondly, compound prepositions. There are very brief explanations and definitions in this section, as in the rest of the book. In fact, the focus of this section seems to aim at getting the reader actively involved in completing exercises, not so much in defining points of grammar. At the end of this section there is no bibliographical information.

## Synthesis

Had I used Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's (1983) *The Grammar Book* when I first started teaching EFL in Japan, I am sure my learners and myself would have had an easier experience traversing the English grammar minefield. However, I must admit that my first impression of this book was very daunting - it seemed so immense. With time, I learnt that this was only one of its' many positive features - it is immense, wide-ranging and full of relevant information. It is the one grammar reference book I would like to take with me to a remote Pacific island with the task of teaching the natives English. I would have no hesitation in recommending this book to a teaching colleague looking for a comprehensive yet accessible grammar reference book. After all this was the targeted audience the authors had in mind when writing it: this book was intended as an ESL/EFL teacher's course book. The book has two aims: to provide a reference book, and to provide a course textbook for ESL/EFL teachers in training. This accounts for its' relevance to my colleagues and myself - we are perfect targets for its' intended audience. The practicality of the book is further shown in its' two purposes: to give future ESL/EFL teachers a more comprehensive knowledge of grammar, and to give practical applications for classrooms. It certainly achieves these practical purposes, with its general user-friendliness, clear layout and organization.

The book has a wide-ranging theoretical base, which encompasses generative-transformational, structural, traditional and case grammars. The authors view the acquisition of language as acquisition of forms and meanings of structures, and also how to use these structures within context, like pragmatic usage. One of the main focuses of the book is to encourage future ESL/EFL teachers to

expand their knowledge of grammar, and linguistic analysis.

This book was published in 1983, which makes it one of the more modern books reviewed here. In this regard it seems to fill the gap that was left by a lot of earlier grammar books which did not focus on ESL/EFL teachers in training as their audience. The well-organized structure is displayed in the prepositions chapter which is divided into an extensive grammatical description, useful teaching suggestions, exercises which test reader comprehension, and an extensive bibliography. In short, it is the most comprehensive grammar book for the intended audience: ESL/EFL teachers in training. How did the authors achieve this? It has a lot to do what Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman do in their day-to-day work. As these two authors are teacher-educators and researchers, they write in a much more practical style than a pure linguist or grammarian might be inclined to write.

This latter style seems to be typified by Quirk and Greenbaum's (1973) *A Concise Grammar of Contemporary English*. This book seems very archaic and somewhat antiquated after becoming familiar with the easy to use book written by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman. Quirk and Greenbaum's book on the other hand is not so user-friendly, in fact, its presentation and organization may be off-putting to many people. This may be due partly to the fact that it was published in 1973, which is now thirty years ago and a lot of research in ESL/EFL has occurred during this time and has not been incorporated into this book. The book is based on a traditional grammar theoretical base. Having said all this, it does however possess positive attributes. These include that it does seem to fulfill one of its major aims, which is to provide a shortened version of *A Grammar of Contemporary English* by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik

(1973). For those requiring extra information, easy reference can be made to the larger volume, as they both share the same organizational base. The index can be tricky to use at first, but after some time, it is very useful as it functions as a type of dictionary for the words used in the book, as well as indicating where they are positioned. In the preface, mention is made several times to the writing of this book with students needs in mind. Although I can understand it is a very good short reference book to a comprehensive collection of grammar, I feel the only students who might be compelled to consult this book would be students with a very high level of English.

In contrast to this book is Swan's (1980) *Practical English Usage*. This book is a useful reference book for intermediate to advanced learners and for teachers. The book has been organized like a dictionary so it is very easy to use. All that is required is to look up the entry alphabetically. This book includes information from simple points to advanced problems. There are over six hundred entries which are typically troublesome for ESL/EFL learners. The book is based on modern British English, however it does contain some examples of American English. The theoretical base of this book is modern neo-traditional grammar. Swan acknowledges limitations by stating that this book is a reference book, not a systematic course in grammar. Swan even acknowledges Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik's (1973) *A Grammar of Contemporary English* as an excellent reference and aid in writing this book. Overall, Swan's book is a very easy to use reference book of English grammar.

Huddleston's (1984) *Introduction to the Grammar of English* is like Swan's (1980) book above, in that they are both based on modern neo-traditional grammar. This books' section on prepositions is very brief: it only takes up about

three and a half pages. It seems very textual and not so user-friendly. The intended audience for this book is learners at the tertiary level, especially those enrolled in introductory English grammar courses. However, I found this book to be a little dry for my EFL tertiary level learners. It seems too technical and doesn't offer any teaching suggestions for the classroom. As mentioned before, the coverage of prepositions is too brief and uninspiring.

Last but not least, Stageberg's (1965) *An Introduction to English Grammar* is theoretically based mainly on structural grammar, but borrows also from transformational and traditional grammar. Stageberg acknowledges that this is one volume only and is therefore limited in scope. The introduction is very good, although brief, but it gives helpful teaching suggestions for using the books' exercises in the classroom, for example preteaching, questioning, transcription practice, drawing diagrams, justifying answers and completing exercises. There is also insightful advice in the introduction to let learners explore the exceptions to grammar rules and if they are numerous, refine the rule. The structural linguistics influence is particularly seen in the various exercises, especially in the section on prepositions, where stress marks are emphasised.

### **Conclusion**

Each of these five grammar books is useful in some sense. However, they have all been written by different authors, for different audiences and for different purposes. Although there is no perfect grammar book, we should ideally try to find one or some that match our purposes. My purpose, which is finding a book that will help me to teach grammar in a Japanese EFL classroom is best matched to one of the books reviewed here: Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's

(1983) *The Grammar Book*. While the other four books will always be good grammar reference books, none of these are as user-friendly. I have no problem with describing this book using a definite article to convey its' authoritativeness as *the* grammar book.

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