At the hospital, there were two babies, Dr Lee and Dr Chai.
or
At the hospital, there were two babies, Dr Lee, and Dr Chai.

Students who behave rowdily should be sent for counselling.
or
Students, who behave rowdily, should be sent for counselling.

This refreshing and informative guide takes readers on a journey through English grammar, moving from morphemes to words, and on to phrases, clauses and sentences, ending with a look at the different ways in which sentences may be structured and punctuated. Lively, engaging, bite-sized exercises peppered throughout the book offer chances to apply newly acquired knowledge to common and much-debated issues in English grammar. In language as simple as possible, grammarians and teacher educators Norhaida Aman and Ludwig Tan explain how the grammar of English works, particularly in the classroom, media and workplace, so you'll never be persuaded to believe that students – all of them! – should be sent for counselling.

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NORHAIDA AMAN
LUDWIG TAN

THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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For our NIE and SUSS students,
both past and present,
who have been some of our best teachers

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Preface

The Nuts and Bolts of English Grammar has a simple aim: to explain how the grammar of English works, in language as simple as possible. Hence, it has been written with a wide audience in mind, including students of English, trainee teachers, and even the general reader – such as parents – who does not have a background in English grammar, yet wishes to know how it works.

In this book, we take you on a journey through English grammar, beginning with the nuts and bolts of the English language – the word, as well as units smaller than the word called "morphemes" – and progressing to phrases, clauses and, finally, sentences. Chapter 1 briefly discusses what "grammar" means and how grammarians study language. In Chapter 2, we examine word class and how we go about deciding what word class a word belongs to. In Chapters 3 and 4, we take a look at nouns and verbs, and how they may be expanded to form noun phrases and verb phrases. In Chapter 5, we explore how phrases may be combined in various ways to form clauses and sentences, and in Chapter 6, we look at the different ways in which sentences may be structured. We then move beyond the level of the sentence and look at the finer points of writing, such as subject-verb agreement in Chapter 7 and punctuation in Chapter 8.

When we began exploring the idea of writing a grammar book, we decided that it had to be easy enough to be read, from cover to cover, by someone with little or no background in English grammar. Yet, we also wanted it to meet the practical needs of students of grammar, as well as teachers and parents. We felt that, with almost 30 years of teaching experience between us, we were well placed to do this. As teachers of undergraduate students and trainee teachers, we have both accumulated a vast trove of grammar-related examples and puzzles, some of which have been incorporated into this book in the form of examples in the text. In addition, they may be found in the Grammar Detective puzzles,

which are short exercises that get you to apply what you've just learnt to common issues in English grammar. Instead of ramming technical terms – of which there are many in grammar! – down the reader's throat, we have tried to demystify them by breaking them down and explaining what they mean. To keep this book accessible to the general reader, we have deliberately kept this book fairly simple in its coverage, so it does not contain exhaustive lists of determiners, irregular verbs and suchlike. However, by the end of this book, you should have become sufficiently familiar with grammatical terms and concepts to be able to consult reference grammars such as *Practical English Usage* (by Michael Swan; Oxford University Press) and the *Cambridge Grammar of English* (by Ronald Carter & Michael McCarthy; Cambridge University Press).

Acknowledgements

Writing a book is never easy, and the gestation of this book was anything but smooth. This book has been two years in the making. During this time, we've been able to count on She-reen Wong, our excellent editor at Marshall Cavendish, for her infinite patience, especially when draft chapters were slow to appear. We've benefited greatly from her meticulous attention to detail and valuable insights into language and publishing, which have made our manuscript come to life, resulting in a book that is, we hope, better than it might otherwise have been. To her, we owe a huge debt of thanks and gratitude. We would also like to acknowledge the help given to us by Lee Mei Lin, especially when the book was at the proposal stage.

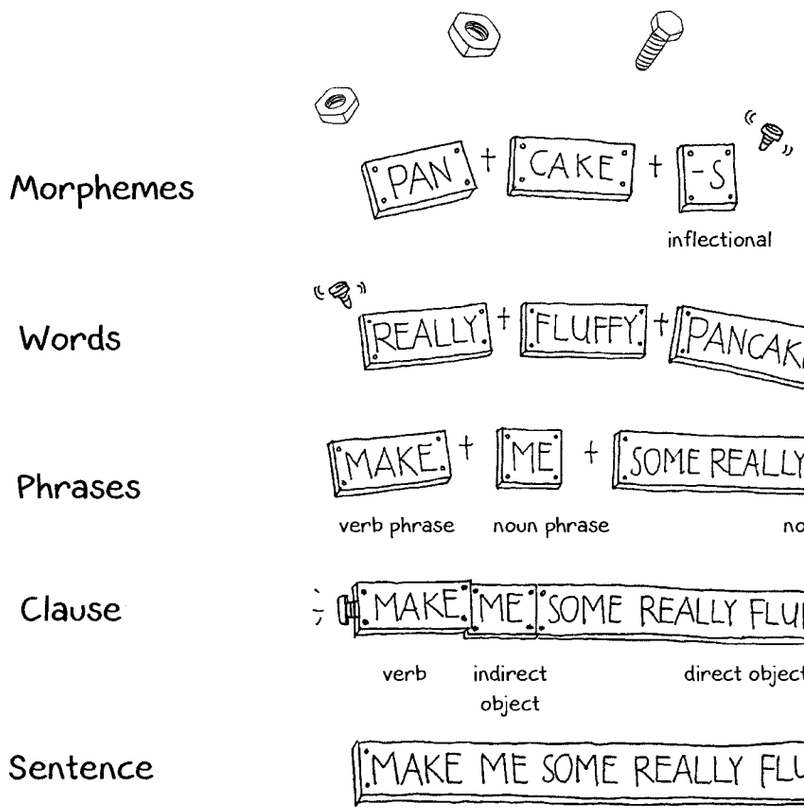
We would also like to thank our families for their support and patience during the past two years. Without them, this book would never have seen the light of day.

Norhaida Aman and Ludwig Tan
December 2017

About the Authors

Dr Norhaida Aman is lecturer and programme leader of English Language and Literature at the National Institute of Education, Singapore (NIE). She holds a PhD from the University of Delaware, USA. She is a linguist and teacher educator specialising in grammar and language acquisition; almost half of her life has been dedicated to teaching and serving current and future generations. She teaches grammar across all programmes at NIE, and also courses on language acquisition. Over the years, she has established strategic partnerships with various agencies: Ministry of Education, Singapore, local and international schools, government agencies and academics. These collaborations, together with her teaching and research interests, have allowed her to impact teacher education and pre-school education both locally and abroad.

Associate Professor Ludwig Tan is Vice Dean of the School of Arts & Social Sciences at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS). He holds a PhD and MPhil (Linguistics) from the University of Cambridge, and a BA (First-Class Honours) in English Language and Linguistics from Lancaster University, UK. A linguist and a trained teacher, he has worked as a teacher educator at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore, and served as a consultant to the Ministry of Education on its 2010 English Language Syllabus. At SUSS, he teaches courses on grammar, phonetics and Singapore English. He is a steering committee member of the Speak Good English Movement, and co-author, with Alvin Leong, of *English Grammar FAQs: 100 Questions Teachers and Students Frequently Ask* (McGraw-Hill, 2008).



Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered why we can say *Maria made the boy cry*, but not *Maria made the boy crying*?

Or why *Two coffees, please* is acceptable, but *Melvin loves coffees* is generally wrong?

Or why we say *It has been raining since ten*, even though we cannot ask *What did you say has been raining*?

These are some of the kinds of puzzles we will be examining in ***The Nuts and Bolts of English Grammar***. As the title suggests, the main purpose of this book is to help you understand what English grammar is and how it works. We hope you'll find this book useful, whether you've purchased it for a course or are simply curious about the ways in which English grammar functions.

What is Grammar?

The word *grammar* can be used in three different ways. Have a look at the following sentences and ask yourself what the word means in each one of them:

1. *The grammar of Tamil is very different from that of English.*
2. *I've just read Kevin's letter and his grammar is atrocious!*
3. *The linguists are writing a new reference grammar of English.*

You'll have noticed that, in each of the above sentences, the word *grammar* has a different sense, or meaning. In sentence 1, *grammar* refers to "the rules in a language for changing the form of words and joining them into sentences" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2005:675); in other words, Tamil and English are very different in how they string words together to form sentences. By contrast, the word *grammar* in sentence 2 refers to a person's command of the rules of a language – hence, we learn that Kevin's grammar isn't very good, meaning he probably puts words in the wrong order, or doesn't put an *-s* at the end of verbs and nouns when he needs to. Finally, sentence 3 tells us that linguists are putting together a reference work that lays out the rules of English grammar, just as a dictionary tries to record and explain all the words currently in use in a language.

Clearly, it's the sense in sentence 1 that this book is concerned with. We will, as we work through this book, be finding out how English combines parts of words such as stems and suffixes to form longer words, how words change their forms to show grammatical information such as tense and number, how words then combine with other words to form phrases, and how phrases are subsequently combined to form clauses and sentences, and larger units such as texts.

What Grammar is Not

If you've grown up in Singapore, you would probably have learnt at least two languages when you were in school. You may also have heard people make such claims like *English has grammar; Chinese doesn't*. However, this is based on the misconception that grammar involves only word endings or inflections such as *-s*, *-ed* and *-en*, which exist in English to

show grammatical information such as tense, aspect and number. (Do not worry about these terms for now as we will examine them in later chapters.) Rather, as we briefly saw above, grammar refers to the *structure* of a language. If indeed Chinese did not have any grammar, then how do its billions of speakers understand each other? Clearly, in Chinese there is a more or less fixed order of subject, verb, object, etc. In other words, it has structural rules that its speakers follow and observe, so that when they speak the language, they understand each other.

Similarly, you may have heard the claim that Singlish – or to give its technical name, Colloquial Singapore English (CSE) – has no grammar, or that it should be regarded simply as bad or ungrammatical English. However, imagine that you have a new neighbour who has recently moved to Singapore and is keen to fit in by learning the local lingo. You've taught him a few words of Singlish, and one day, feeling supremely confident, he asks you, *You already eat?* You'll probably think it sounds vaguely Singlish, but there's still something not quite right about it. Upon reflection, you realise he was right to leave *eat* unconjugated, or not marked for tense (e.g. into the past tense *ate*), but what he said sounded strange because he placed *already* before the verb *eat.* What this shows is that Singlish DOES have grammar – that is, it has rules governing where words are placed in a sentence. If Singlish didn't have grammar, then *Already you eat?* and *Eat you already?* would both be possible – but these are ungrammatical in Singlish.

Why Study Grammar?

If you have unpleasant memories of studying grammar in English class in primary and secondary school, you're not alone. Admittedly, grammar *can* be very dry, especially if you are or were studying it solely to pass exams.

However, it can be very fascinating and useful to explore and apply to authentic examples. In this book, we hope to make grammar both

interesting and practical by getting you to apply concepts that we've just discussed to real-life grammar puzzles, such as the ones that opened this chapter. Will this book help you to improve your grammar (that's the sense of the word illustrated in sentence 2 above), however? The answer is "probably", because if you've gained a better understanding of grammar by the time you reach the end of this book, you should be able to analyse your own sentences in ways you've never done before, and spot and avoid common grammatical errors.

Approaches to Studying Grammar

Before we begin delving into the study of grammar, let's take a look at two main ways in which grammar is studied by grammarians – that is, people who study the grammar of languages.

First, there are **prescriptive grammarians**, who see grammar rules as a code of behaviour to be followed by speakers. As the term implies, prescriptive grammarians *prescribe* grammar rules to users of the language, just as doctors prescribe medicine to patients. While some of these rules are indeed essential to the language, many of them are not in fact followed by normal speakers in normal situations, or have no grammatical basis. Prescriptive grammarians also tend to believe that new developments in a language are bad and lead to the decay of the language. They label speakers' use of language as either good or bad. The approach to language study that prescriptive grammarians follow is called *prescriptivism*.

By contrast, **descriptive grammarians** are primarily interested in describing how language is used by speakers of a language at any point in its history. They form rules of grammar by observing what real speakers of the language actually say. New developments in a language do not upset descriptive grammarians; in fact most of them find it exciting to study new patterns of usage in a language and do not lament that the language is going to the dogs. Descriptive grammarians label speakers' use

of language as either grammatical or ungrammatical, and the approach they follow is called *descriptivism*.

To illustrate the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammarians, let us take a look at the following sentences:

4. *Who did she send the letter to?*
5. *To whom did she send the letter?*
6. **Who she did send the letter to?*

Now, which sentence are you most likely to say? If you're like most people, you'd probably find sentence 4 the most natural. Sentence 5 might be acceptable to you if you heard or read it, but you would most probably not use it yourself. As for 6, this probably sounds very odd to you, and if you did hear it, you would wonder if the speaker was a learner of English.

Now, how about grammarians – what would they think of these sentences? Let's start with sentence 4: if you were to ask a descriptive grammarian, he or she would say that it is *grammatical* because it would be uttered by normal, fluent speakers in real life, such as yourself. However, a prescriptive grammarian would say that 4 is bad because the question ends with a preposition, and that *whom* should be used instead of *who* as the recipient is the object of the preposition. Hence, the prescriptive grammarian might offer sentence 5 as an alternative that is good – however, the descriptive grammarian would note that while it is not ungrammatical, it is very formal indeed, and more suitable in writing rather than speech. As for sentence 6, both prescriptive and descriptive grammarians would agree that it is ungrammatical as it does not follow the normal English **word order** – or order in which words appear in a sentence – and would not be uttered by a competent speaker of the language. Notice that it has been starred, or marked with an asterisk – in linguistics, this means that it is ungrammatical or poorly formed, and not that it is excellent!

Variation in English

You will probably have noticed that you don't speak the same way all the time – rather, you vary the way you speak depending on whom you're talking to and the situation you're in, most of the time without even realising it.

Our use of language may change according to situation – whether we are speaking or writing, what kind of text or conversation or speech we are producing, how formal or informal the event or text is, and whom we are talking to or being read by. This leads us to write or speak in a certain **register**, or very roughly, language style. The speaking style we use when catching up with friends would be very different from that used by a minister launching a major policy as both situations are polar opposites in terms of **formality**: a meet-up with friends is highly informal, whereas a ministerial launch event is usually highly formal. Accordingly, speakers in both situations would use very different **linguistic features**, such as vocabulary. For example, you and your friends might describe your meeting up as *awesome*, but the minister might describe the launch event as *splendid*. Register also very much depends on whether the communication is written or spoken. Writing is generally more formal than speaking – for example, the language in a press release at an event at which a minister announces a new policy will be a lot more formal and standard than the conversations journalists may have during the tea break.

Language can vary according to **language variety**. In Singapore, language choice may vary between Standard English – which is a formal, internationally understood variety of English – and Colloquial Singapore English, or to use the more familiar term, Singlish – which is mainly spoken among family and friends in informal situations.

Hence, when we encounter an instance of language use, apart from judging it merely as grammatical or ungrammatical, we should also consider the context in which it appears. For example, when we see Singlish in public signs, what makes this unusual is not that Singlish is ungrammatical, but because it is arguably out of place in a formal, official context where we would expect Standard English to be used

instead. Likewise, if a writer uses contractions such as *don't* and *can't* in a formal report, this may attract disapproval not because contractions are ungrammatical – they aren't – but because their use is primarily associated with informal contexts.

Overview of Grammar

In this book, we'll be looking at the nuts and bolts of English grammar such as roots and suffixes, before moving on to larger units such as clauses and sentences. Let's illustrate this with the following sentence:

7. *Make me some really fluffy pancakes!*

There are several levels at which we can analyse the utterance above. First, we can look at how words are formed: for example, the word *pancakes* has three parts, or three **morphemes**: the root words *pan* and *cake* and the plural suffix *-s*.

Next, we can then look at all the parts of a sentence at word level and ask ourselves what **word class** each word belongs to. So, *make* is a verb, *me* is a pronoun, *some* is a determiner, *really* is an adverb, *fluffy* is an adjective, and finally, *pancakes* is a noun.

Moving on, we can look at how words are combined to form **phrases**. In the above sentence we have the noun phrase *really fluffy pancakes*, which we understand to be about the noun *pancakes*. Additionally, the adjective phrase *really fluffy* (itself formed from the adjective *fluffy*, with the adverb *really* telling us how fluffy) describes what the pancakes are like.

The next level up is the **clause**, which is built around the verb: the verb tells us what is happening and who the participants are and what they're doing. Here, we have *make* as the verb, and we note that there are two participants mentioned: the direct object *really fluffy pancakes*, and the indirect object *me*, which is the recipient. So the clause has the structure: verb + indirect object + direct object.

Finally, we can look at the utterance above and ask ourselves what its **form** and **function** are. In terms of form – or what the utterance looks like – the utterance is an imperative, meaning that it has a verb and other parts of the clause, but no subject. In terms of function, however, it is a directive, i.e. its purpose is to direct someone to do something.

Conclusion

We began this chapter by looking at definitions of grammar and approaches to studying the grammar of languages – namely, the prescriptive and descriptive approaches. We also looked at how the use of English, and indeed any other language, varies according to context. Finally, we took a quick look at the kinds of grammatical analysis we will be engaging in later in this book.

Grammar Detective

Think back to your school days. Were you ever told by your teachers that it was wrong to begin sentences with conjunctions such as *and* and *because*? Do you still follow that rule, and do you think it's truly ungrammatical to begin a sentence with *and* or *because*? Do you think this rule is a descriptive or a prescriptive one?