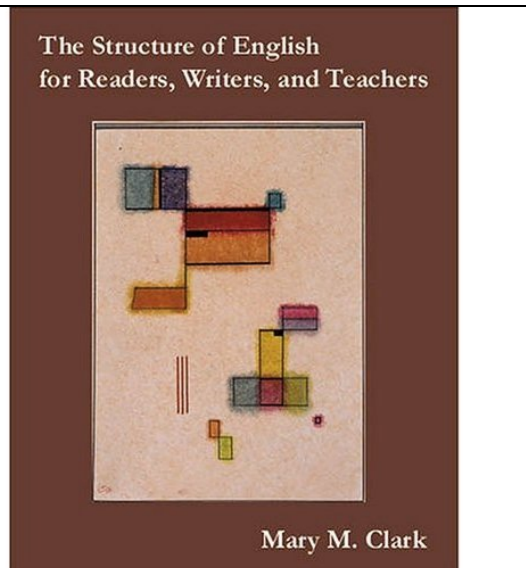




The Reading Matrix
Vol. 7, No. 1, April 2007

***The Structure of English for Readers, Writers, and Teachers* by Mary M. Clark (2003)**
Glen Allen, VI: College Publishing
Pp.v-vii + 313
ISBN: 0-9679121-4-8
Cost: \$64.95

Reviewed by Gayleen Mackereth



Goals: Mary M. Clark set out according to her own introduction, to write a book on English Grammar, to assist students, teachers and readers to improve their performance and also to give them a language of grammar to talk about the topic of grammar itself. The blurb of the book claims that it purports to be a survey of the vocabulary, spelling system, composition and dialect variation and language development of children. Nothing of the above prepares the reader for plunging into a book which is unashamedly English transformational grammar.

Level of Instruction: A casual reader with a considerable background in English or foreign language grammar would be able to read this book and further their knowledge of the structure of English, but it would be most suitable as a first year linguistics text for college or university students accompanied by lecturer input and feedback in the form of tutorials.

Content: The book begins with an Introduction explaining the layout of the book followed in Chapter Two by an historical overview of the origins of English vocabulary from the Proto-Indo-European language tree through Old English to Modern English. The “neutral” status of Old English words in common use, versus the more learned tone of vocabulary derived from Latin is mentioned and the system of affixation and suffixation of Latinate words is clearly set out.

With Chapter Three begins the discourse on grammar. Firstly, traditional grammatical categories are examined then further divided onto modern categories in which descriptors such as nouns and adjectives are divided into “Content Categories” which accept new words and compounds into English and others, such as intensifiers and subordinating conjunctions which are labelled “Functional Categories” and do not accept additions of new words or compounds into the language. A series of tables set out clearly the systems of affixation or suffixation of Content Categories and the chapter ends with a table of comparison of Traditional Grammatical Categories and so called Modern Categories. However, there are several points which seemed

likely to confuse students with little grammatical background--namely the minimal explanation of count and non-count nouns, the poor explanation of verbal auxiliaries, and the table of verbs which was very limited in the information supplied.

The following two chapters move away from grammar to discuss the pronunciation and spelling of English followed by a chapter on the Dictionary leading one to wonder why chapter three was positioned where it was.

In the former chapter, the differences between the symbols used by various dictionaries to represent pronunciation--on the one hand those of the American Heritage Dictionary and on the other, the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet are set out. The rest of the chapter is devoted to an examination of the spelling system of English with its long and short vowels. This is a useful guide, but like other sections of the book is not thorough enough to explain many of the idiosyncrasies of the English language. A short chapter follows which gives an overview of the layout and basis of classification of words in a dictionary.

Chapter Six is entitled "The Structure of Statements." This chapter describes the structure of the sentence in terms of its constituents, moving from a brief look back at early Subject + Predicate analysis to modern linguistic analysis dividing the sentence into its parts (Noun Phrase, Auxiliary, Verb Phrase). The brief mention of Preposition Phrases is too brief to be enlightening and only serves to confuse. The reader is then led on to the notion of 'Tree diagrams' to represent the structure of statements and some basic grammatical transformations are illustrated. Because all the sentences analyzed into tree diagrams are very short basic sentences, only one of which involves a pronoun instead of a noun to begin the Noun Phrase, the reader ends up confused when confronted with longer and more complex sentences illustrated by the author at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Seven delves deeper into the structure of phrases, namely the prepositional phrase, the verb phrase, the adjectival phrase, the adverb phrase and noun phrase, each of which is further broken down into its constituents by means of tree diagrams. Seven patterns of verb phrases are listed and a number of examples given to make the reader aware of the most common patterns of verb complements. Various tests are applied to determine the set position of various constituents within the sentence, for example, a way of distinguishing between prepositional phrases and phrasal verbs is given, showing that the location of a preposition is fixed, in a prepositional phrase, but can be moved to a number of positions in the case of phrasal verbs, e.g. "He sat on the bench" v "He turned the light on". As with previous chapters, each subsection is followed by one or more exercises requiring the reader to reflect on and apply the information in the material presented.

A knowledge of the structure of phrases and the types of complements accepted by various noun and verb phrases would be incomplete without understanding their meaning. The following chapter dealing with semantics is intended to clarify this aspect by the transformations possible within the phrase or sentence. This is a short chapter which mainly looks at verbs, the roles of participants in the action, and the function and categories of so-called "adverbials" which are modifiers of the verb or the auxiliary and not to be confused with an adverb itself. The reader is then asked to use tree diagrams to determine the syntactic position of various categories of

adverbials such as manner, degree, duration, attitude, and urged to try various positions in their own writing.

The following chapter on Tense, Aspect, Voice and Modality provides some useful tables and exercises to assist the reader to identify various verb forms (tenses) and active and passive voice; it then goes on to look at the structure of verb strings and the syntactic position and purpose of auxiliaries. Another table breaks down past, present, and future forms into further categories of Aspect showing how by combining modals and aspect markers it is possible to differentiate between past, present, and future uses within each time frame. In the exercises given the student is urged throughout to draw numerous tree diagrams to put into practice the points expounded.

Punctuation is the topic of Chapter Thirteen. It is a brief chapter on semi-colons, colons, and commas with no explanation of why these punctuation marks have been singled out and the rest of English punctuation ignored.

After examining the patterns of language for interrogatives, exclamations, and imperatives there follows a switch from transformational grammar with an interesting chapter on variation in English, especially non-standard American English but also some non-standard English dialectal forms. The author leads the reader into a consideration of how various writers have represented speech in literature and the authenticity of these renderings as shown by the selected readings in the Appendices.

Even more complex verb trees are constructed in the chapter which follows, with an examination of the functions of coordination and subordination within the sentence so that by the time one gets to Chapter Fourteen, you could almost hear the students shouting “No more tree diagrams!!” Although the tree diagram pattern is one of the accepted methods of teaching linguistics at college or university level, there are many who claim that the number of trees required to represent the diversity of English syntax is too great to be a totally satisfactory system.

Chapter Fourteen entitled “Presenting Information” deals with the use of co-ordination and parallel structure, and contains a list of some suggested stylistic transformations, then goes into a description of the so-called “T unit” as a means of analyzing text density. Coherence is dealt with fairly superficially and lacks such details as anaphoric reference which might have been included here.

The final chapter is on the long awaited acquisition of language by children and is a basic summary of stages passed through during this process. Plenty of exercises are provided referring to the examples provided in the Appendix. Then, suddenly, after exercise nineteen the book ends--no conclusion, no summary of salient points, just a full stop followed by the Appendices--in what seems to be a very unsatisfactory manner.

Strengths and Weaknesses: The book seems to try to be a transformational grammar and at the same time cover a number of other bases, hence the sometimes surprising ordering of the chapters, jumping between general interest and transformational grammar. One can only assume that this is intended as a textbook for Mary M. Clark’s classes, rather than for those targeted in the title.

The Appendices provide a few examples of literary excerpts and some examples of children's speech and writing; however the same passages are over-used as examples.

The layout of each chapter is clear. Each point is expounded as a numbered subsection (3.3, 3.3 etc) but the index fails to take this into account and refers only to page numbers making locating a particular paragraph more difficult. A useful adjunct could have been a glossary at the end. For example such terms as "tense hopping" and "epistemic modality" (not even in index) are difficult to grasp for a first time reader and, as they are located within the text and only infrequently mentioned, it is difficult to locate the particular point in the book again when wishing to refer back to it.

One of the strengths of the book is that almost every sub-section has an accompanying exercise or exercises asking the reader to put into practice the points being made. There is no lack of opportunities for application of knowledge; however, there is weakness too, for if one puts oneself in the place of a student tackling transformational grammar for the first time, there is frequent disparity between the examples used when propounding a topic and the examples given for the student to work on. Even the most highly motivated reader would be left in a state of frustration after attempting the exercises given unless able to check that his/her answers were correct, or unless undertaking a formal course where instruction and feedback were available.

I note that the publisher states that The Instructor's Manual may be requested by those purchasing the book, which could perhaps answer this criticism, but without seeing this manual I can only guess that answers might be provided.

Recommendations: As a course book with plenty of pre-made exercises, *The Structure of English for Readers, Writers, and Teachers* could be a useful choice for college classes provided adequate instruction and tutorials were available. For a first year university student studying linguistics this would be a useful book to keep in their library. For the ordinary harassed teacher or indeed writer, some of the information is useful, but it is not the type of book one would go back and dip into frequently. Only a small proportion of the book refers to children's writing and therefore it would not be a choice for elementary school teachers.

Recommended for first year students of linguistics with support.

Gayleen Mackereth has been teaching languages, French, German, Japanese and ESOL for many years. She was a Ministry of Education e-Fellow in 2004 investigating how students construct meaningful learning using IT in foreign language classrooms. She is the co-author of six books on Japanese life and culture and has presented at numerous conferences both in NZ and Overseas.