

## Review of “Oxford Modern English Grammar”

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<b>Author</b>	Bas Aarts
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### Reviewed by Brett Reynolds

The “Oxford Modern English Grammar” (hereafter OMEG) by Bas Aarts is both a grammar of modern English and a thoroughly modern presentation of English grammar. In the conservative world of English-language teaching (ELT), it is this last point that will either make or break most decisions to adopt or avoid it. Teachers who find fault with current-traditional grammar, as typified by the Azar series (e.g. Azar & Hagen, 2009), or who are just looking for a more modern view of English grammar will benefit from OMEG, but others may be put off by its many innovations, useful and logical though they may be.

It is not as radical a departure as some; there is much that will be familiar here to English-language teachers, but there will also be numerous surprises. OMEG’s analytical and terminological framework largely follows those of two much larger comprehensive grammars: Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik’s “Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language” (1985) and Huddleston and Pullum’s “Cambridge Grammar of the English Language” (2002; hereafter CGEL). If you are already familiar with either of these grammars (or Huddleston & Pullum’s smaller “A Student’s Introduction to English Grammar,” 2005; hereafter SIEG), you will find helpful the “notes and further reading” section, which briefly identifies areas where OMEG’s approach differs.

OMEG is a concise reference grammar, not a textbook, and it is written for “anyone who is interested in English grammar” (p. xv), not specifically for English-language teachers, and certainly not for typical English-language learners. As such, it will lack much of the useful apparatus of ELT grammars; in particular it makes no mention of common errors and includes no teaching tips or exercises. What it lacks in teaching support, though, it makes up for in analytical rigor and terminological consistency.

OMEG begins with an overview chapter laying out the approach and terminology. This is equally essential for those planning to study the text in sequence and those merely expecting to dip in later for the occasional reference. Readers coming from an ELT background will sometimes find that familiar terms assume different meanings (e.g. PHRASE can refer to a single word, not just groups of words) and some unfamiliar terms are introduced (e.g. CONTENT CLAUSE). Inevitably, the grammar is heavy on terminology, but Aarts does a good job of introducing and explaining terms, often starting with easier but less precise definitions and then revisiting the terms in more depth later. Nevertheless, readers without a background in grammar may well soon feel over-

whelmed. A glossary would have been helpful. (While it is not strictly part of the book, Aarts has also published a related app called “The interactive grammar of English,” which is available from the iTunes store and will assist greatly in consolidating the material from OMEG.)

There are three sections that make up the core of the book: “Form and function,” “Phrase and clause patterns,” and “Grammar and meaning.” The first begins with morphology: how words are put together. Next the WORD CLASSES (and corresponding phrasal classes) are introduced, and finally the GRAMMATICAL FUNCTIONS and SEMANTIC ROLES these perform in larger constructions are laid out. At this point in the book, the focus is on listing and defining rather than explaining how constituents go together, although there is necessarily some of that. The list of functions is mercifully brief, dealing with, for example, CGEL’s eight or so sub-types of adjuncts simply as ADJUNCT.<sup>1</sup>

The next section begins with a chapter that explains how these functions go together in phrases, with particular emphasis on noun phrases and verb phrases. This is followed by three chapters on clauses: “Clause types and negation,” “Finite subordinate clauses,” and “Non-finite and verbless subordinate clauses.” This whole section will likely be of particular value to teachers, who are often more focused on “tenses” than with clause types.

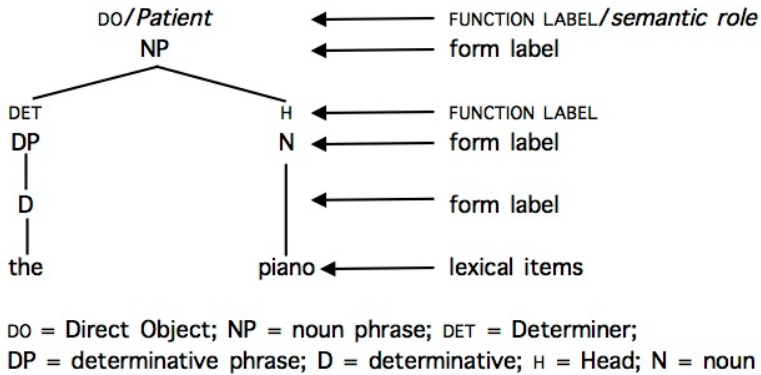
The final section is more familiar ground, breaking out what is often lumped together as “tenses” into chapters on tense and aspect, mood, and information packaging. This final section includes passive voice, which will be familiar to most teachers, but addresses many other features that we could usefully pay more attention to: leftward and rightward movement, inversion, and clefting. More importantly, it focuses on what motivates our grammatical choices.

The book ends with appendices, notes, sources of examples, and references, little of which will be of interest to the average English-language teacher. There are, however, two very useful indexes, one conceptual and one lexical. These greatly facilitate OMEG’s use as a reference.

In the sections described, OMEG’s analysis and terminology differ from traditional grammars in many respects and even differ from more modern ELT approaches like that in “The Grammar Book” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). One difference that is disproportionately important in relation to its small size is OMEG’s consistence in keeping classes and functions distinct. Most grammars clearly distinguish between, say, the function of COMPLEMENT (the underlined words in 1) and the classes of ADJECTIVE/ADJECTIVE PHRASE (1a) and NOUN/NOUN PHRASE (1b).

- (1) (a) it was very nice (b) it was a success

Unfortunately, they often confuse class and function, for example, by saying that most subjects are usually nouns and so all subjects must function as nouns. This is like saying that most nurses are women, therefore, any man working as a nurse is “functioning as a woman,” clearly an absurdity. OMEG dispenses with this kind of confusion, allowing, for instance, clauses to function as subjects without presenting them as nouns in drag. Similarly, where many ELT grammars confusingly force the single term DETERMINER into double duty, explicitly as a class term and covertly as a function term (e.g. Parrott, 2010, pp. 25 vs 295), OMEG helpfully uses DETERMINATIVE for the class and DETERMINER for the function. In fact, in the tree diagrams, Aarts adopts the extremely helpful convention of including both function and form labels, as in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1: Syntax tree showing both form and function, reproduced from OMEG (p. 108)**

Unfortunately, although some English teachers will be familiar with “determiner,” few will have run across “determinative,” and there is nothing explaining why this change is needed (though needed it is). Other innovations are similarly presented largely without comment. Auxiliary verbs are treated as heads with lexical verbs as their complements rather than the other way around. This is unremarkable in linguistics, but rare-to-unheard-of in ELT. Another change is in the way words like *before* and *since* are treated. In ELT grammars (and elsewhere), they are adverbs (e.g. *I’ve seen that before*), prepositions (e.g. *I’ll be there before 9:00*), and subordinating conjunctions (e.g. *I had it before you did*). In OMEG, these are all prepositions all the time because prepositions don’t have to take NP objects. This analysis is partly due to Bain (1863, p. 64) and was developed by Jespersen (1924), but despite its age and pedigree, it has been ignored within ELT. SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTION is reserved for the words *that*, *whether*, *if*, and *for* (e.g. *He asked that you be there*).

The lack of explanation about and argument for certain analytical choices is partially because they are not particularly novel in linguistics, but mostly because that is not the kind of book this is. If you wish to understand more about the innovations, you should refer to the notes and further reading, but be warned: these often refer to quite academic texts. Another option is to consult SEIG, which has an approach very similar to OMEG’s, but presents much more argument.

Sadly, there are no readily available ELT materials that adopt OMEG’s system; so teachers using it will need to be adept in translating between two (or more) paradigms or will need to develop their own materials. Because of this, OMEG is unlikely to find a large market among ELT teachers. This is a shame because ELT has too long ignored developments in linguistics, and explanations and presentations like those in OMEG are interesting and potentially pedagogically useful.

In sum, it’s a good grammar, a very good grammar. The writing is clear, the analysis lucid and consistent, and the structure well matched to the contents. The main issue is audience. Experienced teachers who can come to it with an open mind are likely to find the modern approach to familiar concepts intriguing, but may want more explanation. Those undertaking formal grammar studies for the first time could also benefit from the book, if it is used as part of a course that points out the differences between its approach and the standard ELT line. OMEG isn’t suitable as a teacher’s only frame of reference for grammar though. The current-traditional paradigm is much too pervasive.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Confusingly, Table 4.1 appears to be a complete list of all the functions: “In English we distinguish the grammatical functions listed in Table 4.1.” Nevertheless, it omits a number of functions at the phrase level, which are listed on page 11 and again in Table 5.1.

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