Alan McConnell - Duff

Grammar by Michael Swan

■ ABSTRACT

A brief outline is given of the contents, as described by the chapter headings. The review concludes with an assessment of the importance of this book as a reference work, both for professional use and for personal interest.

KEY WORDS: *review, grammar, world languages, spoken and written*

■ IZVLEČEK

Slovnica Michaela Swana

V knjižni oceni je kritiško predstavljena *Slovnica*, ki jo je napisal Michael Swan. Vsebina je na kratko orisana pod naslovi posameznih razdelkov. Na koncu knjižne ocene je poudarjen pomen te knjige kot strokovnega priročnika, bodisi za poklicno rabo ali osebno zanimanje.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: *ocena, slovnica, svetovni jeziki, govorjeni in pisni*
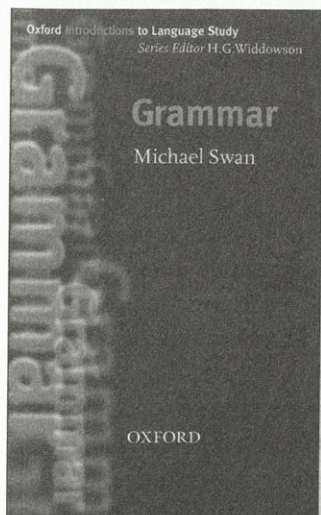
Swan, Michael. 2005. *Grammar. Oxford Introductions to Language Study.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Obseg: 130 str. formata 13 cm x 20 cm
ISBN 0-19-437241-3
Cena: 3.671 SIT [15,32 EUR]

Language is what distinguishes us as human beings. It is our greatest cognitive achievement, and the foundation of all our other achievements.

Michael Swan

The reputation which Michael Swan has built up over the years as an author of text books and guides to English usage is truly well-deserved. Many readers will surely be familiar with his indispensable, ever-useful, by now classic work *Practical English Usage* (recently reissued in a fully revised third edition). Now he has added to his impressive list of achievements a welcome new work with the simple title *Grammar*.

PREDSTAVITVE, MNENJA IN OCENE

Well aware that the title itself might be off-putting, the author, with his characteristic directness, introduces the work with the challenging words: "If grammar is dull, as it often is, the problem may be one of focus." He then goes on to clarify, with a short passage which is worth quoting in full:

Students commonly learn about such phenomena as pronouns or relative clauses, or study the strange ways in which the foreign languages organize their grammatical affairs, without gaining very much sense of why languages should have these features. It is rather as if one studied, say, a dragonfly purely by looking at small parts of the insect through a microscope. A better approach, surely, would be to start with a view of the dragonfly as a whole, and to see how the parts contribute to the systems that enable the creature to develop, maintain its physical integrity, move about, and reproduce. In this perspective a certain amount of detail, introduced judiciously, might well prove to be illustrative and illuminating rather than tedious and baffling. So it is with language.

This leads us into the book itself, the purpose of which is to ask, and attempt to answer, some "rather simple-looking questions". Such as: What is grammar? Why does it get so complicated? What are the different ways in which the world's languages exploit it? etc. These questions are then dealt with by the author in eight succinct chapters in Section 1 *Survey*. In Section 2 *Readings*, comparable questions are raised in selected texts drawn from works by, for instance, David Crystal, Bertrand Russell, Noam Chomsky, John McWhorter, and others. Section 3 *References* provides a valuable guide to recommended further reading, with the author's indication of level of difficulty. The book concludes with Section 4 *Glossary*, containing brief explanations of frequently used terms, e.g. *determiner*, *discourse marker*, *modifier*, *peripheral grammar*, etc.

This might sound like a "weighty tome". Far from it – the book is a compact 130 pages, the distillation of the author's considerable experience and proof of his much-valued ability to explain even the most complex matters in plain language, with a judicious choice of examples. The scope of the book can be clearly seen from the chapter headings in Section 1 *Survey*:

1 What Is Grammar?, 2 From simplicity to complexity: word classes and structures , 3 Grammar in the world's languages, 4 Grammar and vocabulary, 5 Grammar in spoken and written text, 6 Grammar and language change, 7 Grammar in society: "correctness" and standardization, 8 Grammar in the head.

As a starting point for his enquiry into the question of What is grammar? ("the kind of question that seems easy to answer until someone asks it"), the author suggests that: "The best way to understand grammar, what it does and why it is necessary, is in fact to try to imagine language without it". He then goes on to show, by reference to several languages – including Russian, Latin

and Japanese – that the essential elements of (any) grammar are: ordering, inflection and the use of *function words*.

This is followed by a stimulating chapter on the evolution and change of language, in which he points to the importance of understanding the past in order to appreciate the present state of language. "One of the factors contributing to linguistic complexity is history. As languages develop, phonetic changes alter and erode words ... The consequence is that all languages have their grammatical junk-rooms containing worn-out apparatus and old-fashioned tools that have been replaced." Yet, as he rightly notes, when the older linguistic signalling devices are retained alongside new ones, communication is "more resistant to breakdown" (p. 31).

As in *Practical English Usage*, so too in *Grammar* Michael Swan gives welcome prominence to the differences – especially in register – between the spoken and the written language. He is also adept at spotting the potential causes of errors and explaining how they (might) arise. For instance (p. 34): "Syntax, as well as morphology, can be specific to a word. The English verb *suggest* can be followed by an *-ing form* ("I suggest leaving now") but not an infinitive (*"I suggest to leave now"); the converse is true of *expect*. *Rely* needs a preposition before an object ("I can rely on you"); *trust* does not ("I can trust you")." This leads naturally on to a discussion of what he describes as *selectional idioms*, i.e. the wording we instinctively or conventionally prefer to express meanings.

"There are many possible options, for example, for apologizing in English for keeping somebody waiting. We could perfectly well say "I'm sorry I made you wait"; "Forgive me for the delay". But it happens that we normally say "(I'm) sorry to keep you waiting"; this expression is a part of idiomatic English in a way that the others are not. Selectional idioms of this kind occur in all languages, and they cause serious problems for those foreign learners who aim to approach native-speaker competence. Such learners not only have to know the grammar and vocabulary of the language they are studying, but also a whole inventory of preferred formulae corresponding to the most common recurrent meanings and situations." (p.37)

Comparable matters are further dealt with, from a slightly different perspective, in ch. *7 Grammar and society*, which covers standard language, dialect forms, descriptive and prescriptive rules, and alternative usage. A thought-provoking introduction on "What do we mean by *incorrect*?" – what is a mistake? – leads on to an examination of rules as opposed to usage. Why, for instance, are *contractions* (I've, don't, etc.) freely used in speech, yet rarely in formal writing? Can *they* be used in a singular sense? To this the author responds with vigour:

"An equally invalid prescriptive rule (to the one condemning the split infinitive) condemns singular *they/them/their* (as in "If somebody phones, tell

PREDSTAVITVE, MNENJA IN OCENE

them I'm out") on the spurious logical grounds that *they* is plural. This is simply inaccurate. *They* (like *you*) has a singular as well as plural function: it has been used for centuries for singular indefinite reference, and an accurate account of English grammar must take note of this." (p. 67)

The book concludes with a selection of brief (not more than one page) texts for further reading, to which the author adds his own discussion questions. To take just one example, a text by Bertrand Russell (Text 4, p. 85): *Text* – "The proposition "Socrates is a man" is no doubt equivalent to "Socrates is human", but it is not the very same proposition. The "is" of Socrates is human expresses the relation of subject and predicate; the "is" of "Socrates is a man" expresses identity. *Author's questions*: · Do you agree that "is" has different functions in "Socrates is a man" and "Socrates is human"? Do you know a language which has different equivalents of English "is", depending on the exact meaning?

In his Preface to *Grammar*, Henry Widdowson provides a succinct explanation of the purpose of this series:

"What justification might there be for a series of introductions to language study? After all, linguistics is already well served with introductory texts: expositions and explanations which are comprehensive, authoritative, and excellent in their way. Generally speaking, however, their way is the essentially academic one of providing a detailed initiation into the discipline of linguistics, and they *tend to be lengthy and technical* (my emphasis): appropriately so, given their purpose. But they can be quite daunting to the novice. ...these surveys are written in the belief that there must be an alternative to a technical account on the one hand and an idiot's guide on the other if linguistics is to be made relevant to people in the wider world."

Michael Swan's book majestically meets all these criteria. It certainly is not "lengthy and technical", yet it does not take short-cuts or speak down to the reader. Quite the contrary, it offers the reader a concise – never pompous, always engaging – explanation of what he describes as the "endlessly fascinating subject of grammar". The reader will surely share his fascination, and also his determination to examine not only what should be, but also what is:

"The best way to understand how a language works is surely to look at how it works, not at how it used to work."

Note: In addition to being an author, Michael Swan is also a translator. In 2005, he was awarded the prestigious Stephen Spender Prize for a translation of the German poet Rilke.