

*Dictionary of Grammar*, 1994, reprint 1995, 256 pp. ISBN 1 85471 702 2. London: Claremont Books. Price 99p.

This dictionary, like the other volumes in the Pocket Reference Library series, has a wide target audience in mind. The blurb on the back cover immodestly describes it as "invaluable for all writers of English". The other claim is more realistic: the dictionary is indeed, as the cover suggests, "simple and easy to use". Its format allows it to deal with specific aspects of grammar as well as broad categories in alphabetical arrangement, and there is generally good cross-referencing. For instance, one can start at **noun** and find references to sub-categories, or at a sub-category such as **mass noun**, where one will be referred to **uncountable noun**, the alternative term. On the whole the entries are succinct and in plain English.

In what follows, a few entries are used to comment in more detail on the merits (as well as weak points) of the dictionary. The first entry to be discussed is the one on **abbreviations**. It reads as follows:

**abbreviations** are shortened forms of words usually used as a space-saving technique and becomingly increasingly common in modern usage. They cause problems with regard to punctuation. The common question asked is whether the letters of an abbreviation should be separated by full stops. In modern usage the tendency is to omit full stops from abbreviations. This is most true of abbreviations involving initial capital letters, as in TUC, BBC, EEC and USA. In such cases full stops should definitely not be used if one or some of the initial letters do not belong to a full word. Thus television is abbreviated to TV and educationally subnormal to ESN.

There are usually no full stops in abbreviations involving the first and last letters of a word (contractions) Dr, Mr, Rd, St, but this is a matter of taste.

**Abbreviations** involving the first few letters of a word, as in 'Prof' (Professor) are the most likely to have full stops, as in 'Feb.' (February) but again this is now a matter of taste.

These are mostly formed by adding lower-case s, as in Drs, JPs, TVs. Note the absence of apostrophes. *See also ACRONYMS.*

As can be seen, simple, clear guidelines are given. But the approach is not prescriptive: words like "tendency" and the reference to "a matter of taste" in discussing whether contractions should have a full stop or not, acknowledge that there are different practices.

Another aspect which makes it easy to use, is that the entries are discursive. The style adopted is interactive taking account of the readers' likely needs. As we can see illustrated in this entry, questions which are likely to come from users and/or necessary explanations sought by them are skilfully

woven into the text. In this entry, assumed questions seem to be *why abbreviations are increasingly being used* and *how abbreviations should be punctuated*. Advice is economically offered.

The fact that the abbreviations given are mainly drawn from Europe should not present a problem: the principles emerge clearly.

Another aspect which is helpful to the user is that a distinctive category, such as short forms, is dealt with in a separate paragraph. A later entry **acronyms** defines the differences between acronyms and abbreviations as the cross-referencing usefully points out.

One deficiency is that certain aspects, such as how to write and punctuate the abbreviations of university degrees and initials of personal names, are not addressed in the entry. There is also a serious printing error that the proof-reader did not detect. In the final paragraph, "These" should be replaced by "Plurals" for the sentence to make sense.

We turn to another entry to explore the usefulness of the definitions of grammatical terms that are offered. Most of the items are effectively described and are well-illustrated by means of examples. However, some crucial entries are not very valuable. Let us consider the case of number agreement or concord:

**number agreement** or **concord** refers to the fact that grammatical units should agree in terms of number. Thus a singular subject is followed by a singular verb, as in 'The girl likes flowers', 'He hates work' and 'She was carrying a suitcase'. Similarly a plural subject should be followed by a plural verb, as in 'They have many problems', 'The men work hard' and 'The girls are training hard'.

This very basic discussion of an aspect which is notoriously problematic will not offer much help. It ignores common problems such as whether to use a singular or plural verb with *a number* (a number of people was/were there) or the considerations which determine whether collective (group) nouns like *government* should be followed by a singular or plural verb. The clearer and more usefully detailed accounts provided by Weiner (1983) and Leech and Svartvik (1994) give a more useful overview of this complex area.

By contrast, the entry on adverbs is rather detailed. It gives more categories than the comprehensive *Communicative Grammar of English* (Leech and Svartvik 1994), and seems to focus on information rather than matters of use or usage. Although the entry (if one includes that on adverbial clauses) stretches over 6 pages, it pays no attention to practical problems such as the order in which adverbs are used in sentences.

On occasion, the information given is inaccurate. **Complement** is described as being "the equivalent of an 'object' in a clause with a copula or linking verb". Here it would also have been useful to have a cross-reference to **linking verb**. Even if that had been done, however, the two paragraphs would

still not provide a clear definition of **complement**. A further instance of ambiguity or confusion in the use of terms can be seen in the unmarked overlap between the entries for **multi-sentence**, **complex sentence** and **compound sentence**. This is another instance where cross-referencing would have been useful.

Another criticism is that examples are not always given to illustrate points made. The entry under **split infinitive**, for example, would have benefited greatly from an illustration of the kind of clumsy sentence that could result from "slavish adherence to the rule". Unlike Weiner (1983), this dictionary does not point out that an infinitive should be split on occasion to avoid ambiguity. It does, however, point out that split infinitives are increasingly a feature of modern usage.

One final carp: there are entries on rather obscure items such as **meiosis** and **zeugma**.

**meiosis** is a figure of speech using understatement to emphasize the size or importance of something, as in 'He's a decent enough bloke' and 'He's a rather decent tennis player'.

**zeugma** is a figure of speech which uses a single word to apply to two words which are not appropriate to each other, as in 'We collected our coats and our baby', 'She left the building and her job', and 'She left in a taxi and a fit of hysterics'. **Zeugma** is similar to **BATHOS**.

The better aspects of the dictionary deserve some attention. The sections on punctuation, for example, are generally good. The advice given is practical and relevant, reflecting a dynamic view of language use. The entry on the apostrophe can stand for the others.

**apostrophe**<sup>2</sup> is a form of punctuation that is mainly used to indicate possession. Many spelling errors centre on the position of the apostrophe in relation to *s*.

Possessive nouns are usually formed by adding '*s*' to the singular noun, as in 'the girl's mother', and 'Peter's car'; by adding an apostrophe to plural nouns that end in *s*, as in 'all the teachers' cars'; by adding '*s*' to irregular plural nouns that do not end in *s*, as in 'women's shoes'.

In the possessive form of a name or singular noun that ends in *s*, *x* or *z*, the apostrophe may or may not be followed by *s*. In words of one syllable the final *s* is usually added, as in 'James's house', 'the fox's lair', 'Roz's dress'. The final *s* is most frequently omitted in names, particularly in names of three or more syllables, as in 'Euripides' plays'. In many cases the presence or absence of final *s* is a matter of convention.

The apostrophe is also used to indicate omitted letters in contracted forms of words, as in 'can't' and 'you've'. They are sometimes used to

indicate missing century numbers in dates, as in 'the '60s and '70s', but are not used at the end of decades, etc, as in '1960s', not '1960's'.

Generally apostrophes are no longer used to indicate omitted letters in shortened forms that are in common use, as in 'phone' and 'flu'.

Apostrophes are often omitted wrongly in modern usage, particularly in the media and by advertisers, as in 'womens hairdressers', 'childrens helpings'. In addition, apostrophes are frequently added erroneously (as in 'Potato's for sale' and 'Beware of the dog's'). This is partly because people are unsure about when and when not to use them and partly because of a modern tendency to punctuate as little as possible.

Here the general tendency to use less punctuation is clearly explained, with useful insights into the way the media and the use of computers has affected usage.

The merits of the dictionary (given its purpose) far outweigh its deficiencies. However, some skilful editing and adaptation could bring it far closer to deserving the publisher's claim that it is "invaluable for all writers".

## References

- Leech, G. and J. Svartvik. 1994. *A Communicative Grammar of English*. London: Longman.  
Weiner, E.S.C. 1983. *The Oxford Guide to English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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