



## The study of grammar

J. H. Schutt

To cite this article: J. H. Schutt (1921) The study of grammar, English Studies, 3:1-6, 69-74, DOI: [10.1080/00138382108596417](https://doi.org/10.1080/00138382108596417)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00138382108596417>



Published online: 13 Aug 2008.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3



View related articles [↗](#)

an argument is provided by the fact that the commentators of the *Tale* generally agree in dating its composition before 1753, the year of Defoe's public shame. On the other hand it is quite possible that Section I of the *Tale* was written later than the other Sections, as it does not bear upon the story. Moreover, we know that Swift was employed upon the book at various intervals. For my own part, I rather incline to the latter theory.

## 5

The starting point in studying the relations between Swift and Defoe, should be — I hope I have been able to show as much — Swift's jibe in the *Tale*. Whether we shall have to advance from that date or go back upon it can only be decided after a careful and painstaking investigation of everything bearing on the question, which, for the time being, I must leave to others.

May 1921.

W. VAN MAANEN.

---

## The Study of Grammar.

The study of the living stage of modern languages has in the last decades undergone various changes, the importance of which, however, is still far from being generally recognized. The days when idiom was studied chiefly from a phrase-book may be said to be almost over and no competent teacher will advise his pupils now to learn the definitions of a book of synonyms by heart. Many of us know from personal experience to what deplorable results the old methods led and every intelligent student of languages understands that words and idioms are lifeless things except in their proper surroundings. The man who would become an authority on tropical vegetation has to do more than visit the palmhouse in Kew-gardens; he who wants to know the ins and outs of the idiom of a modern language has to go to the living source, that is to the country where the language is spoken and to the books written in it.

In the field of literature the advance is also considerable. There was a time when a "History of Literature" had to be got by heart in our secondary schools. Fortunately there are not many now who fail to see that all talk about literary products with which our pupils are not personally acquainted is worse than useless. Still I am convinced that too many students even now cram their heads full of names and facts which mean nothing to them. For once the fault is, I believe, not in the examinations. Many students do not know how to use their handbooks and far too often their Handbook of Literature and their reading are two things apart, so that, to take an extreme case, a student may be reading Wordsworth while studying the Middle Ages from his handbook.

Phonetics, too, to judge from experiences at examinations, is seldom studied in a scientific spirit. Often there seems to be no connection at all in the mind of the candidate between what he has learnt from his books and what he actually does himself. Many for instance are able to give a beautiful definition of a glottal stop without being able to recognize one. Others will tell you all about the partial devocalisation of the nasal in such words as *snake* or *smile* without ever having taken the trouble to find out

if in their own case practice and theory agree. All the same a tendency in the direction of a more profitable study of phonetics in which the student's own pronunciation is made the starting-point, is clearly noticeable.

When we come to the study of grammar there is much less reason to be satisfied. This is all the more remarkable as the scientific study of grammar has of late years made rapid progress. It is not so very long ago that a modern grammar was little else than a Latin grammar adapted to the requirements of some other language. One of the consequences of this was that writers were constantly compelled to have recourse to archaic English to illustrate their "rules", so that the student devoted his time and his energy to the study of obsolete forms and constructions, while such important subjects as the use of the definite tenses were dismissed in a few words and such a peculiarly English construction as that of *for* followed by a noun and an infinitive was not referred to at all. Judging from the fact that this last construction did not make its way into grammars until quite recently, one might come to the conclusion that it was a late development; in reality it is some hundreds of years old.

From all modern grammars students can learn the important lesson that the starting-point of grammatical studies ought to be the language itself as it is spoken and written at the present moment. Unfortunately the lesson is frequently lost and many students are at a loss what to do with the wealth of examples which they can find in their grammars. Yet the examples are in many respects the most important part of the book. They can teach the pupil — especially if the author has been wise enough not to make things easy for him by printing the important words in italics — to look for linguistic phenomena himself. For just as the study of botany is of little use, if it does not direct the student's attention to nature itself, the study of grammar is almost meaningless, if it does not make the student a close observer of the living language. The man who studies one grammar after another, but in whose mind there is only the vaguest connection between his books and the language he studies is like an astronomer who should never look at the stars. Yet that is how grammar is too often studied. The results are entirely disastrous. The most intelligent students, believing that the study of grammar leads nowhere, except to other grammars, feel inexpressibly bored and annoyed. Their feelings may be judged from what one of them said when he had to study a new book by a well-known grammarian: "When that man dies, I shall postpone all other amusement and attend his funeral."

How can this unfortunate state of affairs be altered? No doubt the best way of studying grammar would be for the pupil to make the grammar himself with the help of his teacher. For obvious reasons, however, this is no more practicable than for him to make his own Euclid. We shall therefore have to take the pupil through a grammar by way of preparation, always remembering the end we have in view and consequently laying great stress on the examples. But as soon as possible we shall tell our students to study carefully various texts taken from modern authors. It may perhaps be asked, if it is worth while to take grammar so seriously. It seems a sufficient answer to say that if it is worth while to study minutely the lives of insects or the habits of savages, the highest achievement of man, his speech, may also be worthy of some attention. But perhaps the more practically-minded want to be convinced of the usefulness of such studies. Now we have probably all had the experience that persons insufficiently acquainted with a foreign language not only miss beauties and subtleties which are obvious

to the more advanced student, but also discover them, where there are none. And let it be remembered that the flavour of a style depends on apparently trifling details, which a careful study of grammar can certainly help us to appreciate. It is only necessary to think of the subtle differences made in the tone or the meaning of a sentence by the use of a definite tense or an unusual word-order to prove this statement. I shall try to show in what follows how, in my opinion, a prose-text might be used for grammatical purposes. I have chosen for that purpose a page from Arnold Bennett's *Old Wives' Tale*.

1. They pressed their noses against the window of the show-room, and gazed down into the Square as perpendicularly as the projecting front of the shop would allow. 2. The show-room was over the millinery and silken half of the shop. 3. Over the woollen and shirting half were the drawing-room and the chief bedroom. 4. When in quest of articles of coquetry, you mounted from the shop by a curving stair, and your head gradually rose level with a large apartment having a mahogany counter in front of the window and along one side, yellow linoleum on the floor, many cardboard boxes, a magnificent hinged cheval glass, and two chairs. 5. The window-sill being lower than the counter, there was a gulf between the panes and the back of the counter, into which important articles such as scissors, pencils, chalk, and artificial flowers were continually disappearing: another proof of the architect's incompetence.

6. The girls could only press their noses against the window by kneeling on the counter, and this they were doing. 7. Constance's nose was snub, but agreeably so. 8. Sophia had a fine Roman nose; she was a beautiful creature, beautiful and handsome at the same time. 9. They were both of them rather like racehorses, quivering with delicate, sensitive, and luxuriant life; exquisite, enchanting proof of the circulation of the blood; innocent, artful, roguish, prim, gushing, ignorant, and miraculously wise. 10. Their ages were sixteen and fifteen; it is an epoch when, if one is frank, one must admit that one has nothing to learn: one has learnt simply everything in the previous six months. 11. "There she goes!" exclaimed Sophia. 12. Up the Square, from the corner of King Street, passed a woman in a new bonnet with pink strings, and a new blue dress that sloped at the shoulders and grew to a vast circumference at the hem. 13. Through the silent sunlit solitude of the Square (for it was Thursday afternoon and all the shops shut except the confectioner's and one chemist's) this bonnet and this dress floated northwards in search of romance, under the relentless eyes of Constance and Sophia.

14. Within them, somewhere, was the soul of Maggie, domestic servant at Baines's. 15. Maggie had been at the shop since before the creation of Constance and Sophia. 16. She lived seventeen hours of each day in an underground kitchen and larder, and the other seven in an attic, never going out except to chapel on Sunday evenings, and once a month on Thursday afternoons.

The student who wants to make this piece of prose the subject of a grammatical investigation has to ask himself the following questions:

1. Where am I reminded of what I learnt in my grammar?

2. Is what I see here in accordance with what my grammar taught or does it deviate from it?
3. How can I account for deviations from what is normal?
4. Is there anything remarkable about which my grammar is silent?

A rapid survey will convince the student that he can find many illustrations of his grammatical rules in our text. Here it may not be superfluous to remark that it is misleading to speak of rules being "applied". Mr. Bennett, of course, did not think of rules when he wrote; he only consulted his linguistic and artistic sense to find the most accurate and the most beautiful form in which to express his thoughts. To a certain extent this is what all his countrymen do every day and it is from a close observation of their speech and their writings that we come to the conclusion that in their language there are certain general tendencies at work, nearly always imperfectly carried out, which decide its grammatical structure. When we have realized with sufficient clearness what these tendencies are, we can try to lay down a rule, but we ought never to overlook the possibility of our rule being wrong and of new investigations disclosing the fact that what was supposed to be the exception is in reality the rule. This is exactly what happened with the rule given for the use of *shall* and *will* in reported statements. In Günther's *Manual* (first edition 1899) it is stated that the same auxiliary is used in reported statements as was used by the original speaker and Günther adds: "This rule is occasionally disregarded even by the best writers." Later investigations have shown that the supposed exceptions are in reality the rule.

To return to our text. The student will be reminded of certain sections of his grammar in the following sentences:

1. *Their noses*: Use of the possessive pronoun. Let the student try to remember what he learnt about the subject and then consult his grammar. — Account for the plural *noses*. In Kruisinga's *Handbook* § 789 it is stated that there is concord of number between the subject and the rest of the sentence. But compare: "*Nothing shall be said against our forefathers with their splendid digestions.*"

*would allow*. What is the exact meaning of *would* here? What are the various functions of *would* and in which of these functions is it used here? Probably the conclusion will be that *will* is used as an auxiliary of predication expressing volition. It will strike the student that volition is attributed to a lifeless thing and he will turn to his grammar for other examples. (Kruisinga, *Handbook*, II 202).

2 and 3.

*the millinery and silken half.*

*the woollen and shirting half.*

*Millinery* and *shirting* are nouns used attributively. As to how far such nouns have become adjectives see Kruisinga, or Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar, II*. The remarkable thing here is the use of the adjectives *silken* and *woollen*, for it is evident that they are meant to indicate *silk and woollen stuffs*. It would seem then that first the adjectives were converted into nouns and that then these converted nouns were used attributively. Now there is a noun *woollen*, frequently used as a plural and frequently used attributively, but a noun *silken* does not exist. The student will wonder why Bennett did not use the word *silk*. Was it because he strongly felt the adjectival function of the word or was he thinking of the *woollen* in the following sentence? Or did he feel that the word *silken* made the sentence more melodious? The last supposition would seem plausible, if we compare:

*the woollen and silk trades, the woollen and silk weavers*, both combinations occurring in Baines, *History of the Cotton Manufacture*, which, needless to say, is not a work of art.

4. *level*. Perhaps the student thinking of the noun *level* may wonder which was the original function of the word. An etymological dictionary will tell him that *level* was originally a noun. What, however, concerns the student of modern English is the question if *level* is treated as an ordinary adjective or if there is any hesitation noticeable in this respect. With the help of Kruisinga's *Handbook* § 703 he will probably come to the conclusion that *level* is in every respect treated as an ordinary adjective.

There are several other cases of nouns used attributively in our text. Let the student try to find them and let him consider each individual case carefully.

*a large apartment having a mahogany counter in front of the window.*  
Related or absolute participle and why?

*hinged*. Adjective or participle and why?

5. *The window-sill being lower than the counter*. An instance of an absolute participle. How do we know that *being* is a participle? What is the grammatical relation between this participial construction and the principal clause? Find examples of related participles in the text. Cp. also the independent adjunct in 4.

7. *so*. What rule? How can you account for the fact that *so* could be translated by *dat* in Dutch?

8. *she was a beautiful creature*.

Is *she* used in accordance with the rule?

10. What is the function of *one* here?

A general rule is applied to a special case, i. e. to the case of an imaginary speaker of fifteen or sixteen, with special reference to the two girls in our text.

Try if *people, we, you, they* would also be possible and if so, what difference it would make. Cp. *you* in 5.

*one has nothing to learn*.

Jespersen (*Grammar*, II, 15.851) says that the infinitive frequently has a passive meaning after *to have*. As an instance of this he mentions: "*he had a very hard task to perform*." Are you also of opinion that the infinitive is passive in meaning here? Would the passive infinitive be possible in this case? Account for the use of the active infinitive.

*simply*. Account for the place of this adverb.

13. *the confectioner's, chemist's*. Look at the preceding *shops* and comment on these genitives. Cp. 14. *Baines's*.

14. Account for the absence of the article before *domestic servant*.

16. *each day*. Why *each*? Would *every* be possible? What difference would it make?

*Sunday evenings, Thursday afternoons*.

Would the singular be possible? Would it make a difference?

So far I have not alluded to the tenses of the verb as used in our text. I have done so on purpose; for it is generally advisable in investigating the tenses in a piece of prose not to confine the attention to isolated sentences. Our text affords some interesting examples of the difference in meaning between definite and indefinite tenses. It will be found instructive to look at the following sentences:

1. 12. 13. The indefinite tenses are used because the duration is not insisted on.

3. Unlimited repetition is expressed by an indefinite tense. However *rose* hardly suggests action here. Its meaning is entirely subordinated to that of the predicative adjective *level* so that it begins to resemble a link-verb. (Cp. became.)

The definite tense is used in 5: *artificial flowers were continually disappearing*. The fundamental function of the definite tense is to express duration. How is it possible that we use the same forms, when we want to express frequent repetition? What remark could you make about the meaning of *continually* in this connection? Would it be possible to use the indefinite tense here and would it make any difference?

The definite tense in 6: *this they were doing* is used in its ordinary function. Compare this definite tense with the indefinite tense in 1. In 6 the attention is given to the girls for a moment as is evident from the description that follows.

It goes without saying that with these few remarks the subject is not exhausted. Several sentences for instance might be turned to profitable account for a lesson in sentence-analysis, especially 5 and 10. Enough has been said, I hope, to convince the reader that the study of grammar is the study of a living and wonderfully interesting organism, that consequently it need not be dull, provided the student is willing to use his own brains and brave enough to stick to his own opinion, until he is convinced that he was mistaken.

The Hague.

J. H. SCHUTT.

---

## The "Greeks" of Lincolnshire.

A curious group of toponymical postulants appears in the Itinerary of Antonine <sup>1)</sup> in the neighbourhood of Lindum Colonia. These are Lindum itself, Crococalana, Causennæ and Margitunum. Those writers who gratuitously assume that these place-names are Celtic and who then seek to explain them in accordance with that hypothesis immediately become involved in confusion. To explain *Lindum* in this way a leap to Ireland is necessitated <sup>2)</sup>. In order to make *Crococalana* appear British it has to be altered to *Crococalana* <sup>3)</sup> and this in spite of the facts that every one of the nineteen extant MSS. yields *-calana*, while the two that were lost after they had been edited yielded *-galana*. For *Causennæ* we must jump away to the Mediterranean.<sup>4)</sup>

<sup>1)</sup> 'Antonini Itinerarium', edd. Parthey & Pinder, 1848; Britannia, Itinera V, VI et VIII.

<sup>2)</sup> "Irish Linn (= *Linda*, liquid, and *Lind*, a pool), the *Λιδων* of Ptolemy, = Lindocolina (Bede, ii. 16)"; 'British Place-Names in their Historical Setting', by Edmund McClure, M.A., 1910, p. 16. *Lindum* is not explained either by Zeuss in his 'Grammatica Celtica'; or by Alfred Holder in his 'Alt-Celtischer Sprachschatz', 1896; or by Georges Dottin in his 'Manuel pour servir à l'Étude de l'Antiquité Celtique', 1906.

<sup>3)</sup> The scholars who are responsible for the Romano-British section of the Victoria History of the County of Nottingham print *Crococalana*, but give no reason for doing so; v. Vol. II, 1910, pp. 1-36: Roads 4-11.

<sup>4)</sup> V. 'C. I. L.', Vol. IV, No. 7689, — Bene: "... us C. f. Causo". Bene is in the Alpes Maritimes. It was anciently Augusta Bagiennorum.