

An Introduction to Grammar for Language Learners

Learning a foreign language is much easier when it is approached with a knowledge of language structure (“grammar”), but many students find grammar mystifying. This text explains points of grammar straightforwardly using examples from several widely studied languages, including English, so that students can see how the same principles work across different languages, and how the structures of different languages correspond both formally and functionally. The use of concrete examples makes grammar less abstract and easier to grasp, allowing students to relate what they are learning to knowledge that they already possess unconsciously; it simultaneously brings that knowledge up to a conscious level.

Don Ringe has been teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students for more than thirty years. In addition to historical linguistics and comparative Indo-European linguistics, he has taught a wide range of ancient and mediaeval languages. In 2012 he won the Ira Abrams Award for Distinguished Teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author or co-author of half a dozen linguistics books.

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An Introduction to Grammar for Language Learners

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for Joy Famularo

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I have dedicated this book to Joy Famularo, the high school English teacher who taught me how to write a coherent essay. It seems only fair to acknowledge that I owe a good deal of my academic success to her. Of course she should not be held responsible for any flaws in this book (or in anything else I've written); on the contrary, if it weren't for Mrs. Famularo, you probably wouldn't be able to read this at all.

How to Use This Book

This is an introduction to the universal principles of grammar, illustrated with examples from a variety of languages. It can be used in several different ways, depending on circumstances.

The book is organized as a textbook for a course in grammar, and it can be used that way. An undergraduate class can cover the book in a semester of twelve weeks or so; a class of secondary school students might require more time. But in either case the instructor **MUST** be thoroughly familiar with the material. It is not necessary to have some command of all the languages used here to exemplify the principles. However, the instructor needs to be thoroughly familiar with the principles of grammar and with their application in detail in English and at least one other language (not necessarily one of those used for examples in this book).

In addition, the instructor will find it necessary to provide further examples and construct further exercises. If the students are all preparing to study the same language, the additional material should illustrate the structure of that language, whether or not it is one of those employed here. The instructor might also wish, or even find it necessary, to explore some of the topics introduced in this book in greater detail.

Alternatively, this book can be used as a framework to construct a course in the grammar of a particular target language. The first twelve lessons introduce basic concepts that are expressed (one way or another) in every language and should be covered no matter what the target language is; Lesson 14, on the English verb, should also be covered as background for discussing the verb system of the target language. The other lessons have been constructed so that they can be used individually, depending on how relevant to the target language they are.¹ If the target language belongs to the Indo-European or the Semitic family, or if it is an east Asian or west African language with little or no

¹ I am grateful to Joe Eska for suggesting that the book be modularized.

inflection (like Mandarin), such an adaptation will be comparatively easy. If the language belongs to some other family or is typologically very different, more work will be involved, but I hope that the inclusion of Navajo will at least point the way toward what needs to be done. For many languages much more attention will need to be paid to inflection. I have deliberately introduced the inflectional systems of my sample languages only in a piecemeal fashion, because the details of inflection are always idiosyncratic, and too much detail would make this entry-level book too hard to use. If a single language is being targeted, that consideration does not apply, at least not to the same degree.

Finally, readers can use this book for self-study, either by itself or together with a grammar of a target language. The advantage is that one can proceed at one's own pace; the disadvantage is that one has to figure things out for oneself and provide one's own supplementary examples. Motivation will of course be crucial.

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