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Reviewed by Martha Kruse, University of Nebraska at Kearney

The first sentence of the preface identifies the intended audience of this book as pre-service teachers, credentialed instructors, and other readers interested in the structure and functions of English. Thus this text is an obvious candidate for use in courses devoted to the explicit teaching of grammar or in language arts pedagogy classes. Yet Williams’ text is also a useful resource for college writing instructors. *The Teacher’s Grammar Book* offers provocative insights into such issues as error, the causes of writer’s block, resistance to Standard English, and the influences of popular culture upon the reading and writing abilities of contemporary students. Though the chapters feature numerous exercises, this text does not replace the grammar/usage handbooks that already abound. The reader will not find lists of irregular verb forms or instructions for punctuating dialogue. Instead, Williams’ book historicizes the prevailing approaches to grammar instruction—traditional (prescriptive), phrase-structure, transformational-generative, and cognitive—and demonstrates how the fundamental assumptions of each are realized in grammatical
schemata. The final chapter deals briefly with the grammars of Black Vernacular English and Chicano English, presenting each dialect as a rule-governed sociolinguistic system.

Because grammatical principles are invoked most frequently in discussions of error, Williams includes extensive notes on usage and appropriateness conditions throughout the text. These sections foreground most emphatically not only the blurred but necessary distinctions between issues of grammar, usage, and mechanics but also the connections between grammatical theory and the instructor’s reaction to deviations from conventional usage. Confronted with a statement such as “Me and my father didn’t get along,” the prescriptive grammarian will attribute the construction to carelessness, illogical thinking, or a chink in the venerable distinctions between subjective and objective cases of pronouns. Adherents of phrase-structure grammar, on the other hand, regard such a sentence as grammatical (because native speakers produce such utterances regularly) but nonstandard. Along with the instructor’s responses to departures from Standard English, her preferred theory of grammar may also shape, however subtly, her very perception of her role within the classroom. The transformational-generativist might, according to Williams, consider herself the facilitator of her students’ efforts to translate their linguistic competence into acceptable performance. The cognitive grammarian engages his students with print in hopes of creating or strengthening certain neural pathways in the brain’s cellular structure. These connections between grammatical theory and writers’ composing behaviors elevate The Teacher’s Grammar Book above texts that fail to address discursive concerns beyond the level of individual sentences.

The first three chapters of Williams’ book describe the approaches to grammar that lend themselves to overt classroom instruction: traditional grammar, phrase-structure grammar, and transformational-generative grammar. Bearing in mind that separate volumes have been devoted to each approach, the reader cannot expect The Teacher’s Grammar Book to offer comprehensive explanations of each one. Instructors planning to use the text to explicitly teach the grammatical principles within should be prepared to provide extensive supplementation. But readers who work through even a few exercises in each chapter quickly discover that the approaches Williams describes are not merely three avenues to the same destination. Grappling with such assertions as “Nouns are labels we use to classify the world and our experience in it” (14) could create a new empathy among teachers and students who struggle to make use of traditional, meaning-based descriptions of the parts of speech. Likewise,
teachers unfamiliar with the AUX of phrase-structure grammar or the T-Agent Deletion rule of Chomskyan theory are likely to derive intellectual pleasure from focusing upon the norms of language rather than usage errors.

Of the three approaches dominating language study, Williams concludes that phrase-structure grammar, with its emphasis upon attested rather than potential utterances, is the most useful for teachers. The limitations of traditional prescriptive grammar have been thoroughly disclosed elsewhere, and Williams’ book cites the research which concludes that explicit, decontextualized instruction in grammar does not transfer to improved reading or writing skills. And Williams perceives serious problems with Chomsky’s unverifiable proposition that speakers move from deep to surface structure through discrete transformations from mentalese. Cognitive grammar, which contributes illustrations of neurons, axons, and dendrites to the already familiar schema of Reed-Kellogg diagrams and phrase-structure trees, draws upon phrase-structure grammar to describe the regularities of English sentence construction. Teachers who agree that phrase-structure grammar offers the most accessible descriptions of English syntax will find in the chapter devoted to cognitive grammar a powerful argument that “grammar is nothing more than a system for describing the patterns of regularity that are inherent in language” (232). Instructors interested in childhood influences upon other cognitive and linguistic processes will find Jane Healy’s Endangered Minds: Why Children Don’t Think and What We Can Do About It (1990) compelling reading.

While the first three chapters of Williams’ text provide brief accounts of the theoretical and philosophical bases of traditional, phrase-structure, and transformational-generative grammar before turning to the exercises, it is in the fourth and fifth chapters that the balance shifts from exercises to exposition. Earlier in the text, Williams ponders the reasons for and effects of language change, noting in his chapter over phrase-structure grammar that the use of the subjunctive in polite requests has succumbed to a general decline in civility among speakers in densely populated cities (84). While some readers may consider this topic a matter of pragmatics rather than grammar, others may wish that Williams had also discussed the use of the subjunctive mood to express necessity or obligation, a situation which flusters many ESL students who ask about the unconjugated verb in sentences like “It is important that you be here.”

The final two chapters of the text, which examine the principles of cognitive grammar and the existence of nonstandard dialects, reprise the
now conventional wisdom that students become proficient readers and writers through early, extensive, and meaningful engagements with print. In Chapter 3, “Transformational-Generative Grammar,” Williams explains how teachers’ efforts to align students’ linguistic performance with the level of their innate competence have yielded to notions that video and print literacies share equal value, along with “the dominant social forces that celebrate ignorance and deride intelligence, that glamorize mediocrity and mock excellence” (152). Williams continues in this vein in the final two chapters of the book, speculating that students from print-impoeverished backgrounds have not developed the neural pathways that support reading and writing competence. The notion of linguistic impoverishment returns in the final chapter, “Dialects,” where Williams emphasizes the difference between dialect and slang, concluding that students often perform poorly in the academy not because of dialectical interference but because of a restricted verbal code that subverts effective communication of thought.

Not all instructors will find Williams’ assertions persuasive. His insistence that the instrumental benefits of mastering Standard English prevail over students’ right to their own language may strike some readers as insensitive. And removed from the context of the entire text, the author’s indictments of popular culture may appear no less regressive than the prescriptive grammarian’s complaints against a populace that fails to observe the linguistic habits of the educated elite. But the appearance of such topics in a grammar book simply illustrates the impossibility of segmenting language into discrete components. Read in its entirety, The Teacher’s Grammar Book is likely to (re)stimulate the reader’s interest not only in English syntax but in the intricacies of language, composing, and thought.

Kearney, Nebraska

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Reviewed by Jon Boe, University of California–Davis

Writing out of personal experience, keeping a journal, the revision process, peer response group, free writing, portfolios, and sentence