Understanding English Grammar

by

TONY T.N. HUNG

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

What Is Grammar?

This book is about English grammar. We hope that, at the end of it, you will get a better understanding of how English grammar works, and that your own ability to use it will also be improved. But first, what do we mean by '**grammar**'?

We all know what words are. Here are a number of words from English:

> *met she*
> *yesterday*
> *her friend*

On their own, one at a time, words tell us very little. But here is the most powerful feature of all human languages -- we can *combine* words to make **sentences**, which can tell us a lot more**.** For example, we can combine the above words to make strings of words like the following:

1. She met her friend yesterday
2. Yesterday she met her friend
3. She yesterday met her friend
4. She met yesterday her friend, etc.

They all seem to mean something more than the words do on their own.   Now, the important question is this: are the results always acceptable or **grammatical**?

QUESTION 1:
Which of the above combinations (1-4) are acceptable or grammatical in English?

Answer:

[NB. When you see a double line like this, do not proceed further until you've answered the question.]

Most of you will have found only two of the four sentences above to be acceptable in English:

1.   She met her friend yesterday

2. Yesterday she met her friend
3. * She yesterday met her friend
4. * She met yesterday her friend

[NB. From now on we'll use an asterisk * to indicate that a sentence is **unacceptable** or **ungrammatical**.]

QUESTION 2:
Can you say what is wrong with sentences 3-4 above?

ANSWER:

At this point some of you may be thinking to yourselves: Isn't the **meaning** of sentences 3-4 just as clear as in 1-2? May be so. But here is the important point: in English (as in any other language), it is *not* enough just to put words together to make meaning. To put it simply:

There are only certain ways in which words can be put together to form acceptable or 'grammatical' sentences.

Other ways of putting words together (as in 3-4) are 'ungrammatical'. That is the first thing that we need to know about grammar.

Let's check this out further and compare how words are put together in another language, Chinese. We'll stick to the same combinations of words given in sentences 1-4. Try replacing each English word with an equivalent Chinese word, look at the results and mark each sentence below with a ☐ or * to show whether it is grammatical or ungrammatical *in Chinese:*

1. ___She met her friend yesterday (Chinese: 她碰到了她朋友昨天)

2. ___Yesterday she met her friend (Chinese: 昨天她碰到了她朋友)

3. ___She yesterday met her friend (Chinese: 她昨天碰到了她朋友)

4. ___She met yesterday her friend (Chinese: 她碰到了昨天她朋友)

What you have discovered about the above sentences will have led you to a second, equally important conclusion:

Different languages have *different* ways of putting words together.

Our next step is to try and see if we can describe these differences. Our purpose is not to write detailed 'grammars' of English and Chinese, but to become more sharply aware that there are systematic differences between them, and to avoid making the mistake that what works in Chinese will work in English.

QUESTION 3:

Compare the Chinese and English sentences in 1-4 in terms of which combinations are grammatical or ungrammatical. What differences do you find?

English:

Chinese:

QUESTION 4:

Now take each of the following sets of words, and try to combine them into sentences in both English and Chinese. Write out both the grammatical and ungrammatical combinations in each language:

1. *our teacher, left, the classroom, suddenly*
2. *I, bought, a house, last year*
3. *He, opened, the window, with a screwdriver*

	ENGLISH	CHINESE
GRAMMA-TICAL:	1. _____	_____
	2. _____	_____
	3. _____	_____
UNGRAM-MATICAL:	1. _____	_____
	2. _____	_____
	3. _____	_____

Compare the grammatical and ungrammatical combinations in English and Chinese in the above examples. Try to think about them not as isolated examples, but as a group of data illustrating a particular *pattern* (or patterns) in the two languages. [NB. A 'pattern' is a *regular* 'behaviour' or way of doing things: e.g. in Hong Kong, you observe that all cars drive on the left side of the road, and that in mainland China, they drive on the right side. These are patterns.]

Try to describe these patterns in as clear and simple a way as you can. Don't worry if you don't have the technical vocabulary. All you need are basic, familiar terms like 'subject', 'verb', and 'object'. To start off, you can say something like this:

> In both English and Chinese, the subject regularly comes before the verb, and the verb regularly comes before the object.

(For instance, the subject 'I' comes before the verb 'bought', which comes before the object 'a house', in both English and Chinese.) Did you notice that particular pattern?

QUESTION 5:
Now go on to describe any other similarities or differences that you can find between English and Chinese grammar in the above examples.

SIMILARITIES:

DIFFERENCES:

Summary

In this brief Introduction, you have seen that grammar is about the way the words of a language are put together to make sentences.

This is not as simple as it may seem – we can't simply put words together in a way that (we think) makes sense. The words have to be put together according to the 'rules' of grammar – and these 'rules' differ from language to language. What works in Chinese may not work in English!

In the rest of this book, we will try to discover what some of these rules are in English. 'Rules' in grammar are not rules made up by somebody to be obeyed by everybody else. These are just 'descriptions' or 'generalisations' of how the language works, how words are put together to form sentences in the language. They are patterns which you can discover for yourself (with a little help), and this book will help you to do that.