

about “Complex Sentences”

Complex Sentences originated in ‘notes’ I wrote for my students in a course I taught in the early 90s. Later, I reworked these notes and made them into a book, which I submitted, unsuccessfully for publication. As part of that submission, I wrote a quite lengthy ‘publication proposal’.

Below, as a sort of explanation of what *Complex Sentences* is, are some excerpts from that proposal.

I am posting *Complex Sentences* on this website mainly because when I began to write the Grammar and Meaning Notes to the paired stories I quickly realized that to do that efficiently I needed the Glossary and, in writing the glossary, I realized that it would be useful to be able to refer to certain parts of *Complex Sentences*.

As with the paired stories themselves and the other materials on this website, I retain the copyright to *Complex Sentences*, but allow anyone to use it, in whole or in part, for any non-commercial purpose.

- fl, 05.03.31

EXCERPTS FROM THE PUBLICATION PROPOSAL

EXCERPT 1

The purpose of *Complex Sentences* is to equip advanced ESL students and ESL teachers with an *explicit* understanding of complex sentence structure. An ‘explicit’ understanding is conscious and can be verbally communicated and defended. Understanding of this kind is very different from the *implicit* understanding that enables English speakers to produce grammatically accurate sentences — but which does not enable them to *describe* the structure of their sentences. Implicit understanding is universal among competent English speakers; explicit understanding is rare.

Explicit understanding is not of much practical value to native speakers, unless they happen to be English teachers. It is of enormous potential value to non-native speakers, however — and especially to the increasingly high percentage of non-native speakers for whom competence in *written* English is essential. Explicit understanding is crucial because, without it, non-native speakers cannot develop the editorial skills they need to reduce errors. At an advanced level, most errors in both writing and speech are ‘fossilized’: they have become habitual. The reduction of these fossilized errors requires explicit

understanding. Because they are habitual there is no possibility of their disappearing through the natural, subconscious processes of language acquisition. Those processes bring about implicit understanding in *first* language learners, but in adult second language learners they can only lead to a *flawed* understanding and these flaws — the fossilized errors — can only be reduced by theoretically informed analysis combined with conscientious self-monitoring.

EXCERPT 2

The integrating theme of *Complex Sentences* is the idea that it is possible to analyze all English sentences in terms of five 'sentence parts': subject, verb, object, complement, and adverbial. .

In a sense, of course, the idea of SVOCA analysis is nothing more than the ancient notion of 'sentence parsing', but it is a highly rigorous version and one that is informed by the theoretical refinement of recent linguistic theory. In particular, the idea of SVOCA analysis is based on an explicit, and illuminating distinction between the five sentence parts (represented by the letters S,V,O,C, and A) on the one hand, and on the other hand, the eight 'word classes' (traditionally known as 'parts of speech'), nouns, pronouns, articles, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions.

My own conviction of the importance of the idea of universal SVOCA analysis stems from my reading of the massive study of English grammar by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik published in 1985, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, and its predecessor, *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. Unfortunately, the insights of these books are not readily accessible to ESL students or to ESL instructors. In the first place, they contain enormous amounts of precious but intimidating detail. Secondly, their authors do not go out of their way to help their readers master the enormous amounts of terminology. This is not so much because of the intrinsic difficulty of the idea — although it does seem to be difficult for many people — as to the highly detailed and technical nature of the books. There is a shorter version of *Contemporary English* that is intended for native speaking students — *A University Grammar of English*. But this book too, is uncompromisingly technical and fails to give the fundamental idea of SVOCA analysis the prominence it should have in a book intended for beginning students of systematic English grammar.

As far as I know, there is no other book aimed either at non-native speaking learners or at their teachers which attempts to isolate the idea of SVOCA analysis and present it with sufficient care and patience to make it genuinely useful to non-specialists.

Clauses

Apart from the fundamental idea of SVOCA analysis there are several other topics discussed in *Complex Sentences* which, as far as I know, are not treated in any other textbook aimed at ESL students and their instructors. Most important, is the idea of a *clause*. In many pedagogical grammars, even serious and analytical ones like *Using and Understanding English Grammar*, by Betty Azar, clauses are discussed, if at all, only in passing — and often in a somewhat grudging way. In *Complex Sentences*, by contrast, the notion of a clause has a central importance. In fact, this idea has almost the same degree of importance as the idea of SVOCA analysis: Clauses are, by definition, what SVOCA analysis is applied to. In *Complex Sentences*, moreover, clauses are more theoretically fundamental than *sentences*; the latter are defined in terms of the former — a strategy that makes it possible to avoid the notorious difficulties of satisfactorily defining ‘sentence’.

Phrases

Competence in SVOCA analysis cannot be acquired without a clear understanding of the distinction between clauses and phrases. The distinction can be stated simply enough — as the distinction between grammatical groups of words that do and those that do not have verbs. It is not easy to put the distinction into practice, however, largely because, although clauses are more complex entities than phrases, they can be, and very often are, *contained* in phrases. Beginners in SVOCA analysis often find it very difficult to grasp this fact and their confusion presents a real barrier to progress...

Finite/Non-finite Distinction

One important reason for making a theoretically sound clause/phrase distinction is that it makes it easier to distinguish between finite and non-finite clauses. Non-finite clauses are clauses whose verb phrase does not contain a present or past tense form. They are often, loosely and misleadingly, referred to as ‘phrases’ in pedagogical grammars. This approach misleadingly and fatally obscures the scope of SVOCA analysis because it makes it inapplicable to the very high percentage of English sentences that contain non-finite clauses. With the exception of the *Collins Cobuild English Grammar*, a dictionary style reference grammar for students, no pedagogical grammar I know of uses the ‘finite/non-finite’ terminology.

Special Types of Clause

Most pedagogical review grammars — once again Azar’s *Understanding and Using English Grammar* is a good example — contain discussions of the three major clause types, adjective, noun, and adverbial. They do not generally deal with other less common but still important types such as comparative clauses, supplementive clauses, and comment clauses. All of these clause types are discussed in *Complex Sentences*.

Special Types of Sentence and the Theme/Focus Distinction

Complex Sentences includes discussions of four special sentence types: sentences with postponed noun clause subjects, existential sentences, cleft sentences, and pseudo-cleft sentences. Sentences with postponed noun clause subjects and existential sentences are often dealt with in pedagogical review grammars, but in **Complex Sentences** their treatment is made easier by the theoretical framework. Cleft and pseudo-cleft sentences are *not* generally treated in pedagogical review grammars, partly no doubt because the theoretical thinness of these books makes it difficult to describe these structures clearly and accurately. With the tool of SVOCA analysis in hand, however, these sentences can be efficiently described. Because structures of this kind are an essential part of the repertoire of any good writer, this discussion is valuable in itself. It also has the value of providing an introduction to the theme/focus distinction, another topic that is not generally discussed in pedagogical review grammars...

EXCERPT 3

Authentic English

Almost all the sentences in the exercises and many of the sentences in the text itself are pieces of ‘real English’ — sometimes slightly modified — taken from current newspapers and magazines...

[March, 2005: In the publication proposal, I went on to say that if my use of these sample sentences should prove to be a barrier to publication because of copyright concerns, substitute sentences having the same form but using different words could be written. It seems even less likely now than it did ten years ago that the publishers of the newspapers from which the sample sentences were taken — mainly the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and the *Globe and Mail* as I recall — would object to my using the sentences in the way I have. However, because of what I take to be the widespread concern about copyright infringement on the internet, I feel I should once again say that if there *were* any objection it would be easy to remove it simply by writing grammatically identical substitute sentences.]

EXCERPT 4

Copyright and the ‘Originality’ of the main text of *Complex Sentences*

As I have already said, the sources of all the main ideas and much of the detail in *Complex Sentences* are *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* and its predecessor *A Contemporary Grammar of English*.

I want to add here a note to the effect that even at the points where I follow one or another of these books quite closely there is no question whatsoever of copyright violation. I have scrupulously avoided taking even brief phrases verbatim. I have also made certain that there is no resemblance whatsoever between any of my examples and the examples used in the source books.

Moreover, at most points there is little similarity between the organization of the source books and the organization of *Complex Sentences*. Organizational divergence is ensured by the fact that the idea of SVOCA analysis, important as it is, is not emphasized very heavily in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* and, indeed, it often drops entirely from view. In *Complex Sentences* on the other hand, it is *the* organizational principle; it is regularly referred to throughout and all the exercises in the book are in one way or another intended to give practice in its use.

EXCERPT 5

Terminology

Whenever possible I have adopted the terminology of the source books. I have done this even when the terms are somewhat prickly ('finite/non-finite for example) or when they are potentially confusing (the distinction between 'complement' and 'verb complementation' for example). There is a good reason for this: The version of traditional grammatical terminology presented in the sources is definitive and will almost certainly remain so for a long time. Therefore, the terminology it uses, even if it is difficult, is likely to eventually become standard among serious students and scholars of English. In learning that terminology, readers of *Complex Sentences* will be acquiring a 'language' that is already useful — and one that may well become 'essential' in the future.