

2001

Review of *English syntax: From word to discourse* by Lynn M. Berk

Frank Bramlett

University of Nebraska at Omaha, fbramlett@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/englishfacpub>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Bramlett, Frank, "Review of *English syntax: From word to discourse* by Lynn M. Berk" (2001). *English Faculty Publications*. 8.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/englishfacpub/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Book Review

***English syntax: From word to discourse.* By LYNN M. BERK. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. 286.**

Berk prefaces this book by stating that her 'overall approach is loosely discourse/functional' and that she tries 'to ensure that students learn the basics of English grammar but that at the same time they come to understand the richness and complexity of the system' (xv). In the main, B fulfills her promise by exploring a variety of grammatical concepts and the way many of those grammatical structures function discursively.

Ch. 1 explores the basic sentence structure of English. First, B looks at the nature of the subject and follows with a discussion of the nature of the predicate, including several semantic roles that subjects can play. Among others, B explores agent, experiencer, and instrument subjects. True to her word, B forays into discourse functions; she addresses 'topic' and how subjects often reflect 'what the discourse is about. Topics represent given information . . . [which] refers to information that the speaker assumes the hearer already knows' (23). B uses topic to create an excellent transition to predicate: 'A topic is not the topic until it is introduced into discourse, and the first mention of a potential topic often occurs in the predicate' (24). Similar to the noun, the predicate is analyzed through the lenses of traditional grammar (basic verb and objects), semantic roles of objects, and discourse functions. One particularly insightful section explores 'discourse functions of the indirect object'. Using the 'no-synonymy rule' as a starting point, B looks at the differences between an NP indirect object and a PP indirect object:

- (1) I taught my students Swedish.
- (2) I taught Swedish to my students.

B claims that 1 suggests successful completion of the act while 2 'is silent on the issue' (41). The closer the object is to the verb, B explains, the more likely the object will be affected by the verb, and this is why these two sentences are not perfectly synonymous.

B explores the verb phrase in Ch. 3; she discusses finite verbs, infinitives, participles, and modals/auxiliaries. I particularly like the way she describes epistemic and deontic modality. B also discusses questions in this chapter; she points out that speakers 'rarely ask questions by simply using rising question intonation at the end of a sentence' (153) and that when speakers do ask these kinds of questions, the question 'sometimes suggests incredulity rather than information seeking' (153). While this is often true, it is also true that this kind of question is used as a clarification request:

Grace: Helen is cooking dinner.
Will: Ellen is cooking dinner?
Grace: No, Helen is.

Will's question of Grace does indeed elicit information. Unfortunately, B omits mentioning this important communicative tool in conversation.

In discussing kinds of adjectives (Ch. 4), B notes that some adjectives intensify the meaning of a phrase while others soften meaning. Those that soften meaning B calls 'downtoners': My boss is sort of a jerk

(175). In discussing the discourse function of downtoners, B says that they 'soften the negative connotations of an uncomplimentary noun. . . . It is certainly better to have a boss that is sort of a jerk than a boss that is a real jerk' (175). A better explanation of downtoners in terms of discourse function, though, would encompass face-threatening acts and politeness; phrases like sort of and bit of and little bit comprise the hedge, which helps reduce the probability that a hearer will be offended by a speaker's statement.

In Ch. 5, B writes of clauses, focusing on subordination and coordination in order to elucidate the notion of recursivity. B also provides an especially well-constructed chart at the end of the chapter that encapsulates the major clause types and their functions as well as a list of example sentences for each type and function.

I would be remiss if I did not state clearly that B has written a highly informative book. Every page brims with useful examples of the concepts she discusses. She also frequently provides summarizing charts that help the reader review main concepts and examples of those concepts. Occasionally, B mentions the historical development of certain structures when she feels the reader would benefit from it. However, the book does not wholly meet the criteria that B sets up in the preface. The five chapters seem exceedingly long (each averages just over 55 pages). This, combined with the fact that there are no grammar exercises or discussion questions therein, suggests that the book would prove pedagogically unwieldy. Finally, B unevenly explores the discourse functions of grammatical forms; that linguistic forms can have multiple discourse functions has to be reiterated in a regular fashion, and this book would benefit from a more systematic treatment of notions of discourse. [FRANK BRAMLETT, University of Nebraska at Omaha.]