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Review of *English grammar: prescriptive, descriptive, generative, performance* by Kathryn Riley and Frank Parker

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Kathryn Riley and Frank Parker, *English grammar: prescriptive, descriptive, generative, performance*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. 1998. Textbook pp. x + 324. US\$50, ISBN O 205 20025 7. Instructor's guide ISBN O 205 28647 X

Reviewed by Frank Bramlett, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Riley and Parker's *English Grammar* served as the text in a dual-level course that I teach called *The Structure of English*. I had not taught this particular class before, and I was very interested in this book because it presents a variety of approaches to grammar in highly accessible language. The book also appeals to me pedagogically because it assumes little or no background knowledge of linguistics generally or even grammar specifically on the students' part. Riley and Parker (R&P) divide the text by theme; that is, the book begins with prescriptive grammar, continues with descriptive grammar and generative grammar, and ends by looking at what R&P call 'performance grammar, composed of sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics; and discourse analysis.

The book opens with a brief overview of these four types of grammar, which effectively defines terms and sets a tone of discovery for students. The first section of the book, 'Prescriptive grammar', contains three chapters. Chapter 1 looks at the historical development of the study of grammar, starting with the Greeks and Romans, continuing with the Middle Ages and the importance of Latin, and leading up to the Renaissance, which witnesses a rise in the appreciation of vernaculars. Chapter 2, 'The prescriptive period', discusses notions of 'social regulation' and how the prevalent intellectual conceptions about society of the time directly affected attitudes about language. In particular, this chapter mentions Johnson's dictionary, Bishop Lowth's grammar, and the role of Defoe, Swift, et al., in the abortive attempts at establishing a language academy in England. The final chapter in this section lists and discusses a number of common prescriptive rules: 'Don't end a sentence with a preposition'; 'Don't split an infinitive'; and the dreaded 'Use nominative case after the verb *be*.'

The second section of the book examines various schools of descriptive grammar. This section is much longer than any of the other three sections, containing seven chapters. While this might be seen as an unbalanced approach, I think the authors are justified in this organization of chapters because of the amount of information they seem compelled to present. Specifically, this section defines parts of speech, as descriptive grammars are wont to do, but it also introduces Reed-Kellogg diagramming. (This system is fun, actually. I found myself relearning it after a twenty-year absence.) Interestingly, this section also provides a brief explanation of the paradigm shifts in grammar: the European school of structuralism (de Saussure) and the American structuralists (Bloomfield) are given a fair amount of press, as is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. This section also explains the core ideological schism between prescriptivism and descriptivism as it is articulated by Krapp - the notions of appropriacy, primacy of spoken language over written language, and the doctrine of usage: 'the grammarian has no more power of legislating the rules of grammar than the scientist has in the physical laws of nature' (Krapp quoted on p. 66).

Chomsky's theories are the heart and soul of the third section of the text. The first chapter of this section, chapter 11, serves as an overview of the development of standard theory, the revision to government and binding (GB) theory, and even a cursory mention of the minimalist program. In chapter 12, R&P investigate standard theory through the notions of underlying structure, transformation, tree diagrams, and derivations. The exercises that ask the students to show the derivations accomplish at least two goals. First, these problems help the students to understand the order in which

transformations must be applied to produce grammatically acceptable sentences. Second, the exercises give them practice with the affix-hopping transformation, which can be troublesome for less experienced students, for example, when contrasting active voice BE+ing verb forms with their passive voice counterparts.

While the exploration of generative syntax is mostly very good, the chapter on GB theory is problematic. Not only is the notion of 'government and binding' explained inadequately, many of the points that R&P make are obscure. For instance, in explaining WH-movement, the following example is used:

- (6) (a) US [[COMP] did you hit *who*]
 ↑
 (b) SS [[COMP *who*] did you hit *t*]

Although the authors define COMP as a complementizer and *t* as a trace, they do not clarify exactly how these notions work. Moreover, the notion of underlying structure (US) that was so carefully explained in the chapter on standard theory gets short shrift in the GB chapter. Even though the nature of the US in GB is very different from the kernel sentence in standard theory, R&P provide little guidance for students to understand these differences. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the GB chapter surfaces in the treatment of constraints. R&P discuss seven of them, e.g. the cycle constraint, the unit movement constraint, and the tensed S constraint, but there is no solid explanation of these constraints. For example, the trace constraint 'states that every moved constituent leaves a *co-indexed* trace (t_n)' (p. 211). The authors give an example of the trace, but fail to further explain the ramifications of this notion. In other words, they do not articulate the reason(s) why it is important that constituents leave a trace after they are moved.

In a fascinating final section, the authors break ranks with many of the popular grammar books, like Kolln, Veit, and Klammer & Schultz. R&P use the phrase *performance grammar* as an umbrella term to introduce nontraditional approaches to understanding language structure. The opening chapter, called 'Development of performance theories', revisits Chomsky's impact on linguistics as well as the 'disillusionment with generative grammar' felt by some applied researchers (p. 222). The final two chapters of the text investigate Labovian sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and discourse analysis.

R&P combine sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics into chapter 15, 'Sentence level phenomena in performance grammar'. This chapter first explores the notion of language variation, though the term itself is not used. While the authors point out that 'language use is sensitive to social variables such as ethnicity and class' (p. 235), and that this chapter examines 'some features that are characteristic of various nonstandard English dialects' (p. 235), the dialects from which these linguistic features come are not named, i.e. the authors do not identify those varieties of English from which they draw linguistic features to be discussed. This omission is poor judgement on their part, I think, because students will benefit from knowing those groups who rely heavily on these linguistic features.

The second half of the chapter examines psycholinguistics and focuses on processing, encoding, and decoding to illustrate the nature of this field. Specifically, the authors cite grammatical constructions

that increase processing difficulty: multiple negatives, passives, and heavy noun phrases in other than right-most position (p. 243).

Chapter 16, 'Discourse level phenomena in performance grammar', comprises 1. readability formulae, 2. schemata and scripts, 3. cohesion, 4. given/new structure, and 5. thematic roles of nouns. Since my own field of specialization is discourse analysis, I appreciated the opportunity to introduce my grammar students to these nontraditional grammatical notions. However, while this chapter serves as a relatively good introduction to discourse, I think that the authors could change the phrase discourse analysis to text analysis. In reality, R&P's discussion of discourse focuses on the grammatical elements of the text, not aspects of text production and distribution, nor the social environment in which the text was produced (Fairclough, 1992). Even though the authors circumvent this snag by using the term 'discourse level phenomena', I think students would be better served if a clearer distinction between text analysis and discourse analysis were maintained.

As far as usefulness for the teacher goes, R&P provide a glossary, an index, and answers to selected exercises. They also furnish an instructor's guide for this text, and it is quite good. Not only does this guide help frame the chapter topics succinctly, but it also provides extra background information to the teacher as well as tips on how to explain certain concepts. Like the textbook itself, the instructor's guide is weak when discussing GB theory, but the explanations of all the other chapters are well organized and clear.

Because of the obscure treatment of GB theory, I would either supplement that chapter with outside sources or omit it altogether from the syllabus. However, despite occasional (and sometimes glaring) typographical errors in the text, the exercises, and the answer key, R&P do a wonderful job of providing an interesting and useful overview of grammar in its very largest sense. Not only are the chapters full of exercises to reinforce learning, they also contain very helpful summaries and supplementary exercises, many of which provide a rich context for classroom discussion. The evaluations that my students wrote also seem to endorse the text: they like the presentation of the information, and they like the diagramming (mostly), but they certainly had a hard time with the GB chapter; even the graduate students murmured. I do not believe this text is appropriate for advanced linguistics majors because the scope is broad rather than deep, but it is particularly well suited for the beginning linguist as well as the non-major: those students specializing in English as a Second Language, English education (especially secondary education), professional and technical writing, English literature, and perhaps even foreign languages. I highly recommend this text to my colleagues whose student populations fall into these categories, and I certainly plan to use the book again next year.

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