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**BOOK REVIEW**

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BOOK REVIEW of CALUDE, ANDREEA S. & BAUER, LAURIE 2022.  
MYSTERIES OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR. ABINGDON, OXFORD: ROUTLEDGE  
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Perhaps this book should not be reviewed by a linguist. After all, it was not written for linguists. But then again maybe it should since a linguist might take issue with areas of the book and that is interesting in itself. There are many places in Calude and Bauer's book where linguists are noted to differ as to their analysis of the facts. So a reviewer is at liberty to disagree with their review of these disagreements.

So let's start with the notion of a mystery since that is what this book is about. In general there are perhaps two kinds of mysteries, those for which there is, as yet, no explanation and those for which there cannot or perhaps should not be an explanation. There are many of the former in science and many of the latter in religious practice. This book is about the former, but science mysteries themselves have two aspects: There are the phenomena themselves and then there are the questions about such phenomena to which the answers remain a mystery. Bauer and Calude take turns in walking around and through a selection of such mysteries usually not solving them. Just as well because then they would no longer be mysteries.

The peregrinations each embarks on are engaging because the two authors each have their own approaches, their own styles, their own stories, analogies and metaphors and it was obviously not their intention to harmonize them. So we get to see how different linguists might tackle these mysteries. Each chapter is a case study with little explicit crosstalk among chapters, and each chapter is short so it is a book that can be put down and then picked up later without having lost the thread. So to the selected mysteries.

Chapter 1 is an introduction and briefly discusses linguistic variation, prescriptive and descriptive grammar, and sources of evidence including a rejection of linguistic intuition as evidence, preferring usage evidence from large corpora. The chapter then tackles the notion that there can be multiple answers to a question using

the analogy of anti-Brexit sentiments and the multiple reasons why people might have voted the way they did. It finishes with the question of why there are mysteries in grammar. On the one hand they cannot be mysteries to native speakers since native speakers do not stop themselves in mid-sentence while they are trying to sort out a grammatical mystery. On the other hand linguists may not understand how they do it. As the authors put it, 'there is a fascinating intellectual puzzle here: what is going on, and how must the mind work to deal with the complexities of our language?' (p.9).

Chapter 2 is concerned with what a language makes it necessary to say and what it leaves open. The leading example is the requirement in some languages to use evidentials, linguistic devices which require a speaker to indicate how they came by a particular item of knowledge. Languages contain many such features, even though you can, of course, still say virtually anything you might want to say in any language. This chapter also deals with things that are semantically odd vs grammatically odd. I can say, perfectly grammatically 'Rose green tusks clamber into their rhinos' bed.' It is for a psychiatrist or a literary critic, but not a grammarian, to make judgements on such sentences. However there are areas where the grammar and the meanings of verbs predetermine significant aspects of the grammatical structure, the transitivity of a verb such as 'lie' for example. The chapter concludes with a brief coverage of what is now called 'formulaic language', forms of words which, in particular contexts, are predicable. Open a meeting with 'I declare the meeting open.' Address a judge with, 'As your honour pleases.' Such utterances and idioms like them are stored in the memory of speakers and uttered at the appropriate time.

Chapter 3 deals with prepositions and it illustrates how idiomatic many prepositions are in the way that they pattern with nouns. So often, if you don't know better, you could think of three or four prepositions which might fit in a particular position, but only one is used. Classic case, *getting preposition public transport*. We get on the bus, a plane, a train but not a taxi. Why not into a bus? Prepositions are a small closed set and they are tricky for non-native speakers. Other languages may use different prepositions for catching the bus. And, of course, you may not catch a bus at all. *Attrapé un bus??*

Chapter 4 deals with one of the perennial prescriptive norms, the double negative showing that double negatives have been used not only to cancel each other out, but also to emphasise the negative as is also still the case in a number of English dialects. Chapter 5 shows that definite articles in English have a variety of uses both obligatory and optional. Chapter 6 deals with countability in nouns and, among other things, the changes currently taking place with quantifiers like *few*. *Few* has, in the past, been used with count nouns such as *cow*. *There are fewer cows in the paddock*. But it is now common for a number of cows to be preceded by *less*. *There are less cows in the paddock*. Some nouns are both countable and mass nouns in different contexts. Again the key items examined are a closed set of quantifiers. Chapter 7 is about the present perfect aspect and its use. There are many uses; some of them pragmatically determined. As in previous chapters, and throughout the book, evidence is taken from corpora.

Chapter 8 is about comparatives and superlatives, again a closed set of choices. The possibility of their use depends on whether or not an adjective is gradable. Electric vehicles cannot be more or less electric. In one excursion Bauer notes that, 'if more of

the people are reliable than otherwise, we can say that we have more reliable people in the room, and our statement is ambiguous: are there more people or are they more reliable? How often are we really in doubt?' (p.63). This has nothing to do with comparison as such but with syntactic ambiguity. Admittedly this ambiguity would not exist were it not for comparatives having both an *-er* suffix instantiation as well as a *more* instantiation.

Bauer provides some guidelines as to usage and then notes, '(t)he trouble with all these guidelines is that they do not add up to a definite answer in any particular case. We can say that some forms are more likely (or likelier) in some contexts than others, that some forms are commoner (or more common) than others, but we cannot say either that one form is definitely right and another definitely wrong (even in a particular environment), or that we know why a given form has arisen.' (p.68). So does this mean that there remains a mystery in this area or that the mystery is solved? If there is no definitive answer, maybe that is an answer in itself.

Chapter 9 includes an excursion into the history of progressive aspect which leads on to a discussion of different aspectual properties of verbs and their patterning with progressive aspect. Again linguists seem to be uncertain. 'Why the progressive turns up in the expression of both politeness and disapproval remains a bit of a mystery. Yet it does, and the good news is that proficient speakers of the language have no trouble identifying the appropriate contexts for each use.' (p. 78). Indeed.

Chapter 10 involves a taxonomy of adjectives and various exceptions to the generalisations. As with the previous chapter the insecurities of grammarians are fortunately not matched by those of native speakers. Again there is evidence for analyses taken from corpora and an excursion into historical data.

Chapter 11 ventures into the area of standardisation. What is a standard and what a non-standard grammatical property. In this case the feature is doubling of the verb *be* as in *I think that what it is is that the world is changing very, very rapidly..* The chapter begins with an account of cleft constructions and then looks at various ways to account for the double *be*.

Chapter 12 covers grammatical gender, again a closed morphological system which differs from language to language and has many oddities, including that grammatical gender and biological sex are two different things. English does not have morphological gender but it does have some pronouns which have gender built in, *he* and *she* and maybe *it*. The use of this closed set is again various.

Chapter 13 deals with relative pronouns, again a closed set, and the way they are sometimes repeated. It uses terms such as *island* and *gap* but does not explain in any detail the theoretical basis for their use. It does offer an opinion on this theoretical basis in indicating that '(t)he literature on relative clauses is dense and full of jargon, but the experimental studies are typically easier to follow, despite the fact that they often adopt a formal (generative) and thus highly technical view of relative clauses.' (p. 120/121). One wonders how this comment might be received by the linguists involved.

Chapter 14 covers number in English: singular or plural, when and where they are used as well as questions of concord; how subjects agree with verbs as regards their number.

Chapter 15 concerns subordinate clauses appearing to be main clauses, the choice starting example being *Because I'm worth it*. The question is whether, when a one-clause sentence starts with a capital letter on a subordinating conjunction and ends in a full stop it is a main or subordinate clause. This seems to be a question of language use rather than of grammar as such. Copywriters regularly perform tricks such as this. They are often objectionable and not just grammatically. *Who says you are worth it? I do. 'Nuff said.*

Chapter 16 deals with another closed set, pronouns, and their case. English does not have case inflection but there are agreement relations between pronouns and their antecedents as there were in chapter 14 with agreements for number. Here again matters are complex and a range of variations are available and used.

Chapter 17, the last substantive chapter, deals with how English expresses possession and what might pass for possessive case with what are termed genitives, in English *s'* or *'s*. As with gender, which in some languages is an inflection, these are not really gender inflections since they attach not to nouns but to noun phrases, e.g. in *my neighbour who lives two doors up's car*. The *'s* attaches to, *my neighbor who lives two doors up*. It looks like it attaches to *up* but *up* is a preposition and prepositions do not take case. The ways in which a grammar might express possession and what exactly possession might be are canvassed.

So what might one make of this book? The stated readership is that it is 'for a non-specialist public, for English users and speakers, for advanced learners of English as a second or foreign language, for language enthusiasts and grammar fanatics – for anyone with an interest in and curiosity about language' (p.8). However, the book does require a secondary school understanding of grammar even though grammar is no longer part of most secondary school English syllabuses. So it is perhaps of most interest to those who went to secondary school when it was. Those readers will also find a quick refresher course in the glossary at the conclusion of the book, although there are many terms in the book with which a non-linguist might be unfamiliar that are not glossed, e.g. *formulaic language, lexicon, priming, Rosch prototype, generative*. (The book also has an index.)

But what might a linguist make of this book? The reviewer has the following observations to make. Many chapters begin with an analogy. For example, Chapter 4 suggests that a parallel between American laws relating to adultery being different from state to state and regional dialect variation. Chapter 10 begins with humans' propensity to classify things and how what in one classification may be a food item would not be in that of another culture. Chapter 14 suggests an analogy between matching dress items and agreement properties in morpho-syntax. It's an open question how such analogues might influence the thinking of a lay reader.

There are occasions when the text becomes quite prescriptive in tone as the following excerpts suggest: 'we may be getting rid of some of the worst excesses but bureaucratic language can always be relied upon to come up with questionable usages.' (p. 35); 'There are two places where some people seem to have invented new rules which are not historically justified.' (p. 108); 'Another place where there has long been confusion between *I* and *me*' (p. 146).; 'the speech of the misguided or uneducated' (p. 99).

There are places where a distinction between native speaker learners and second or foreign language learners seems not to be maintained: 'Phrasal verbs are not just challenging for learners, but also for linguists because they present analysis problems.' (p. 26). 'The problem arises in choosing which pronoun to use in which function.' (p. 144). Even Shakespeare appears to have had problems with language learning. 'Shakespeare was confused as to what set of pronouns to use under such circumstances'. (p. 146).

There are some engaging stream of consciousness trips over the landscape, including incursions into the linguistic past, into the grammars of other languages and child language acquisition. These are interesting but sometimes problematic as when there is reference to '(b)ack in simpler times' (p. 154) and 'it seems we may be less likely to tie ourselves in knots this way than our great(-great)-grandparents.' (p.34).

The treatment of grammatical phenomena is centrally taxonomic. 'The question is, what should they be classified as?' (p. 134). This leads to a hunt for exceptions and they are, of course, found. As is shown in the use of data from corpora, the distinction between a language and how it is used is not consistently maintained.

Many of the mysteries that are canvassed in this volume may be the result of Bresnan's observation 'that it is easier for us to look something up than to compute it' (Bresnan 1981: 14). The large number of restricted collocations which prepositions are involved in are, for example, likely to result from this mental capacity.

### References

Bresnan, J. (1981). A realistic transformational grammar. In M. Halle, Bresnan, J. & Miller, G. (Eds.) *Linguistic theory and psychological reality*. (pp.1-59). MIT Press.