

Yes, but which grammar?

Dennis Freeborn, *A Course Book on English Grammar*, Macmillan Education, 1987, pp. 278, hardback £20.00, paperback £6.95

Review by David Crystal

I have to admit I'm puzzled about this book. Its opening statement is unequivocal: 'A reference grammar was published in 1985 which is likely to be the authority on its subject for many years' – referring to the grammar by Randolph Quirk, *et al* (reviewed in *ET4*) – '. . . and once you knew your way around it you would find it contained all that you needed to know about the grammar of English'. Slightly over-stated, perhaps, but basically I agree. The author continues: 'But to use a reference grammar . . . you have to know some grammar first'. Absolutely right. So what would you expect, from this orientation? Presumably an introductory account of the Quirk approach, interpreted and illustrated at the level the author has in mind?

But you don't get this. What you get is a framework of functional grammar according to the linguistic theorist Michael Halliday – an approach that was earlier called 'systemic grammar'. And the problem is that Halliday's terminology, analysis, and general aims differ from Quirk's in several respects. Halliday's is a general linguistic theory (a theory applicable to all languages), whereas Quirk's is an eclectic descriptive framework (applicable only to English, and using insights from a range of

different theories). The author occasionally draws attention to alternative ways of analysing and labelling, but after you've read this book, there is still a gap to be bridged to achieve access to the Quirk range of grammars (which are listed in full in the bibliography), and that gap you must bridge for yourself.

I'm puzzled, therefore. And it's a pity, because this book can usefully be read by anyone interested in putting English grammar across to the uninitiated. All teaching grammars need some kind of angle to make them appeal. Freeborn's main angle is to make all his examples, whether short or extended, *real*. He has taken instances from everyday varieties such as newspapers, commentaries, and cookbooks, and from many works of English literature, so that we can see grammar in action. It is easy to see the link between language structure and language in use.

Freeborn also draws attention to a major feature of the language which most grammars ignore – that the sentences of written language are essentially stylistic units, to be contrasted with the looser 'clause-complexes' typical of informal speech. On the other hand, the minor sentences of spoken English (such as *hello* and *taxi!*) don't get a very full treatment (presumably because they don't fit very well into the 'rank scale' provided by the theory).

I found Freeborn's style clear and readable. He provides the reader with an excellent balance between illustration and commentary. And there are some very well thought-out exercises. In short, it's the friendliest introduction to this brand of functional grammar that I've read. I just wish he'd written a different kind of book, that's all. □