

Book Review

The Nuts and Bolts of English Grammar. Norhaida Aman and Ludwig Tan. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2018. 198 pp. ISBN: 978-981-47-7139-9 (pbk).

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This book aims to present the basics of English grammar in a straightforward, user-friendly manner. Not only has great effort been expended to ensure that all the explanations and example sentences are clear and simple, but there are plenty of exercises (with suggested answers at the back of the book), there is some extra material in clearly-marked boxes labeled ‘Grammar Detective’ designed to encourage students to think a bit further about certain issues, and there are even some cartoons interspersed throughout the text to ensure it is bright and cheerful. The aim is not just to provide students with material that might enable them to pass their exams on grammar but also to enhance their awareness of grammatical structure and thereby help to improve the clarity and effectiveness of their writing.

The book deals with English grammar starting with the basic building blocks, morphemes and words, and then progressing to larger concepts such as phrases, clauses and sentence structure. Altogether, there are eight chapters: after the introductory chapter explaining the difference between descriptive and prescriptive grammar and discussing variation in English, there are chapters on word classes, nouns and noun phrases, verbs and verb phrases, clauses and sentence types, variations in sentence types, subject-verb agreement, and finally punctuation.

Grammar is, of course, a highly complex subject, but this book does an admirable job in presenting it as clearly and as simply as possible, using straightforward, non-technical language and illustrating all the points with lots of examples. One might raise questions with a few issues: for example, on page 28, it is claimed that pronoun substitution can be used to identify *cycling* as a noun in the sentence ‘I love cycling’, but surely *it* substitutes for a noun phrase, not a noun, and on the basis of pronoun substitution, *book* in ‘I like the red book’ would fail to be identified as a noun; on page 34, *last* is labeled both under Ordinal Numbers and also under Other Determiners – surely it should be one or the other; and on page 162, in ‘The committee’s decision is unanimous’, the head noun controlling the singular verb is identified as *committee*, but the head noun in the subject of this sentence is *decision*, not *committee*. But these are minor quibbles in what is generally an exceptionally clear explanation of the basics of English grammar.

Attempts have been made to ensure the coverage is up to date and does not adhere to old-fashioned ideas that no longer apply (if they ever did!) For example: on page 164, while it is stated that traditionally *none of the girls* should be associated with a singular verb, it is acknowledged that, at least in informal contexts, sentences such as ‘None the girls have arrived’ often occur; and on page 188, it is stated that, although conservative speakers of English might continue to believe that *email* is uncountable, in reality its use as a countable noun is so widespread that there is no point in trying to insist that it is uncountable. One might suggest that there could have been a few more acknowledgements of current usage that may deviate from traditional grammar. For instance: on page 97, ‘I shall go home now’ is offered as a normal sentence, whereas nowadays *shall* actually generally only occurs in interrogatives (‘Shall I go home now?’); and on page 75, it is stated that *whom* is the normal object relative pronoun, and it might have been useful to state that, in fact, in

modern English, *whom* actually almost never occurs. However, if this book is primarily intended for students in Singapore, it might be acknowledged that adherence to traditional forms is probably not such a bad idea, as encouraging students to produce sentences like ‘I like the man who you introduced’ (with *who* instead of *whom*) might invite censorship from traditionally-minded teachers, so it may be helpful to insist that students use *whom* in this kind of sentence.

In contrast with these occasional instances of adherence to traditional forms, there are a few uses of more modern sentence structures that might be questioned. For example, on page 83 it is stated that the following use of a stative verb in the progressive form is acceptable: ‘I felt fine this morning, but I am having a terrible headache now.’ I suspect this would probably not be accepted by most speakers in the UK, but maybe it is nowadays normal usage in places such as Singapore? If so, maybe it is fine to include it. Perhaps it represents one of the ways that English is currently undergoing change, in which case its inclusion is fine.

In summary, this book does a splendid job in presenting the grammar of English in a clear, simple manner. While one might quibble about a few things here and there, in reality such issues are minor, and overall the coverage is exceptionally authoritative and impressively sound. Whether it will really succeed in its stated aim of appealing to the general reader by making the study of grammar interesting and fun is somewhat doubtful, as it is probably not possible to achieve this. But it will undoubtedly be valued by many readers, even if the majority of them will probably read it in order to pass their exams, and not because of a thirst for knowledge.