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possessive  
adverb  
negation  
*adverb*

# A Semantic Approach to English Grammar

R. M. W. Dixon

complement

PASSIVE

*tense and aspect*

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## A Semantic Approach to English Grammar

*Second Edition*

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**R. M. W. Dixon**

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## How to read this book

This book is, of course, designed to be read from first to last page. But other strategies are possible.

Some of Part A (at least Chapter 1) should be read before Part B. Some of Part B (at least §3.3 and §3.4) should be read before Part C. Within Part B, Chapter 3 should be read first but Chapters 4, 5 and 6 could be covered in any order. Within Part C, the chapters can be read in any order.

A reader familiar with the details of English grammar may prefer to skim over Chapter 2. Note though that §2.7, on complement clauses (which contains some original analysis), should be read before Chapter 7, on complement clauses.

Chapters 4–6 go through every semantic type associated with the class Verb. It is not necessary to study these in detail before looking at some of the discussions of grammatical topics in Part III.

## Preface

When I first became interested in linguistics, in 1961, it was with the idea that it should be possible to put forward the kind of description and explanation which is attempted in this book.

I was thinking about the meanings of words and how their grammatical properties should be a function of those meanings. I thought: there really ought to be a discipline, perhaps called linguistics, which deals with such things. Then I found that there actually was a subject called linguistics. It was not immediately obvious that linguists at the time were interested in the interrelation between meaning and grammar. Nevertheless, I settled down—in a state of some excitement—to study the principles of linguistics. This was at the University of Edinburgh, under the fine tutelage of Michael Halliday and Angus McIntosh.

It seemed to me that if I wished properly to understand the methodology and theory of linguistics, I should try applying it to description of a previously undescribed language. So I went on my first year of fieldwork in North Queensland (in 1963–4) studying Dyirbal. After that I struggled for a while to find a framework in which to present the description of Dyirbal. I decided that the facts of the language were difficult enough to explain without the added impediment of an opaque jargon, and settled for a straightforward description in terms of the categories that linguists have evolved over two thousand years. After publishing long grammars of Dyirbal (1972) and Yidj (1977b)—plus shorter grammars of three other Australian languages that were on the brink of extinction—I wrote a grammar of Boumaa Fijian (1988) and, most recently, a comprehensive description of Jarawara, a language of the Arawá family, spoken deep in the Amazonian jungle of Brazil (2004a). For all of these endeavours—and for typological enquiries on topics including ergativity (1979, 1994) and adjectives (1977a, 2004b)—I followed the time-tested framework of what has recently come to be called basic linguistic theory.

Occasionally during the 1970s and intensively since the 1980s, I have also worked on my native language, English, leading to the first edition of this book (1991) and now this enlarged and revised edition. There are three new

---

chapters: 7, on Tense and Aspect, 10, on Nominalisation and Possession, and 12, on Adverbs and Negation. Also added are §1.5, on Clitics, and §3.2.1, on Comparison of Adjectives. Chapter 2 has been revised and expanded in a number of places; in §2.1, I mention the new 3rd person singular human (non-sex-differentiated) pronoun *they*, and its reflexive *themselves*.

This is not a full grammar of English, or even an exhaustive account of certain topics in the grammar of English. It attempts to put forward a semantically oriented framework for grammatical analysis, and to indicate how this framework can be applied. Many detailed studies could be undertaken, building up from the groundwork I have tried to provide.

Over the past thirty or forty years I have read many descriptions of English and of other languages and have learnt something from all of them. I have studied many accounts of bits of English in terms of ‘formal theories’—which, like all fashions, bloom and fade with such regularity—and have learnt, in different ways, from that. Formal theories impose a straitjacket on a language: the formal theory states that every language has X, where is X in this language? In contrast, basic linguistic theory seeks to describe a language in its own terms, within a general typological framework. Language is not neat and symmetrical; it is neither necessary nor desirable to pretend that it is, or to insist that everything should be accounted for at every level.

I have benefited from contact with many scholars—through reading their works, correspondence and discussion; the list is too long to include here. This book was greatly helped by the four semesters during which I taught the ‘Advanced Syntax’ course at the Australian National University, in 1980, 1983, 1986 and 1988. I owe a debt to the students taking these courses—for the ideas they shared, for their scepticism and criticism, and for their opinions about what they would and wouldn’t say, and why.

A number of people provided most helpful comments on a draft of the first edition of this book. Thanks are due to Bernard Comrie, Lysbeth Ford, Rodney Huddleston, Timothy Shopen, Anna Wierzbicka and the late James McCawley. A number of scholars sent in helpful comments on the first edition. These include Kim Yun Kyung, who translated the first eight chapters for a Korean edition (Kim 1995). Kate Burridge, Stig Johansson, Gerhard Leitner and Per Lysvåg provided most useful comments on some or all of the three new chapters. Alexandra Aikhenvald read

through the whole draft (old and new chapters) and made the most pertinent and helpful comments.

Of all the people I have read and talked to, the late Dwight Bolinger stands out, as someone who has approached the sorts of questions which I consider interesting, in ways that are stimulating and provocative. He found time in a busy schedule (in 1989) to read parts of this book and, of course, provided the most pertinent counter-examples and further generalisations. He also offered a comment that encouraged me more than anything anyone else said: ‘After going through Part B (Chapters 3–6) I can appreciate the heroic proportions of your undertaking. It is a conquest of the linguistic wilderness, backpacking your way through—the only way to do what other descriptions, conducted at 20,000 feet using a camera without a focus, have failed to do. The job will take a while, but this is a fine beginning.’

*Research Centre for Linguistic Typology,  
La Trobe University, Melbourne  
October 2004*

# List of abbreviations

## For grammatical functions

A	transitive subject
S	intransitive subject
O	transitive object
CS	copula subject
CC	copula complement

## Other

NP	noun phrase
VP	verb phrase

## In Chapter 12, for adverb positioning

### *For sentential adverbs*

A	After the first word of the auxiliary. If there is no auxiliary then immediately before the verb unless the verb is copula <i>be</i> , in which case it follows the copula.
F	As final element in the clause.
I	As initial element in the clause.

### *For manner adverbs*

V	Immediately before the verb.
O	Immediately after the verb, or verb-plus-object if there is an object.