

Book Review

Essential English Grammar and Syntactic Analysis (by Daniel Egbe)

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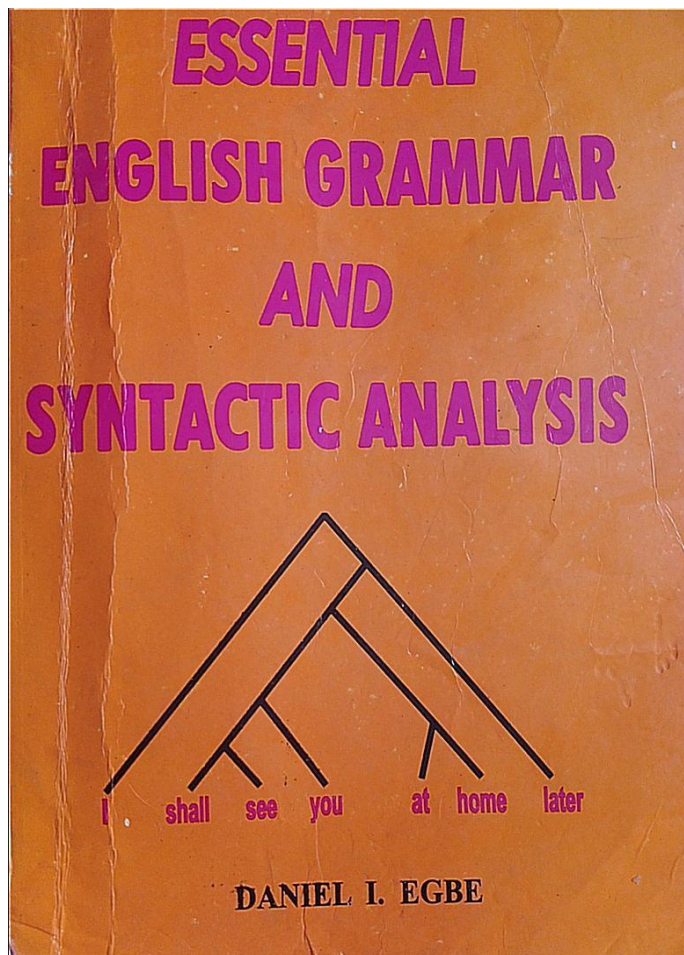
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With the book *Essential English Grammar and Syntactic Analysis*, Daniel Egbe simultaneously accomplishes three pivotal objectives: (1) he indicates the scope of grammar and syntactic analysis; (2) he highlights the relevance of grammatical frameworks as a background study to syntactic analysis; and (3) he simplifies the methods and procedures for carrying out syntactic analysis. From a vantage point of a syntactician, Egbe's book fleshes out the symbiotic relationship(s) between grammar and syntactic analysis, emphasizing that the former deals with the study of the relationship between words in a sentence, while the latter maps out practical operationalization of grammatical theories.



Across nine chapters, Egbe projects an intricate engagement with English grammar and syntax. Some topics in English Grammar that receives attention in the book include, “Major Terms and Concepts in English Grammar”, “Tools for Syntactic Analysis”, “Lexical Analysis, Phrasal/Clause Analysis” etc. Broadly, the book is sectioned into three parts – Part 1, 2, and 3 – with the subheadings “Principles and Methods, Tools, Terms and Concepts”, “Sentence Constituents” and “Sentence Constituents Structures” respectively. The author ensures ease of transition in each part by building on the preceding one. From Part 3 of the book, the syntactic analysis is situated within three grammatical frameworks.

More profoundly, *Essential English Grammar and Syntactic Analysis* contributes to the longstanding scholarly arguments about English grammar and syntactic analysis as well as the strengths and flaws of different grammatical schools. Egbe reinforces conversations by Nigerian grammarians and syntax scholars by positing that the study of grammar starts from the classical Greek era, where traditional grammar had its provenance (Aremo, 1995; Bamgbose, 1990; Tomori, 1977; Yusuf & Oyebade, 1991). In a similar manner, it argues that disparate theories of grammar come into existence because of the flaws of the pre-existing ones (for example, modern grammar replaced the heavily item-based traditional grammar).

In a quite unique way, Egbe puts forward that various grammatical leanings are not rigidly distinct as usually portrayed in scholarly write-ups. Rather, since a grammar of natural language must necessarily have its organization, operational laws and objectives, the English sentence structure has only been represented in different ways by different grammars. In line with this, he asserts, “We have indicated in Chapter 1, the scope of this book can allow only 3 of these grammars – Traditional/Modern Grammar, Structural Grammar, and [Transformational] Generative Grammar.” (p. 185)

The third part of the book, made up of 3 chapters (Chapters 6, 7, and 9), exemplifies the peculiarities of the three aforementioned approaches and improvements of knowledge about the internal layering of the English sentence. Chapter 7 dwells largely on traditional/modern grammar. It opens with a short history about this school of grammar and depicts why it tilts largely towards prescriptivism or conventions of correctness. According to Egbe, “what is known as Traditional/Classical Grammar emanated from the search by Plato and his followers in fields that we now call Philosophy for a universal truth” (p. 185), which they believed lay behind language (i.e., the Greek language). Thus, they held firm that, “the Greek language is the ideal language, a universal language with universally correct and acceptable logic of language for all other people to use” (p. 186). Plato and Aristotle, alongside their proponents, identify what is now known as parts of speech, especially nouns, verbs, and conjunctions. Much later, Dionysius Thrax delineated the Greek language parts of speech into eight, namely: noun, verb, particle, article, pronoun, preposition, adverb, and conjunctions in his seminal work (*The Art of Grammar*). Thrax and his contemporaries majorly modeled the tradition of correctness around the works of great writers (Kuntner, 2019).

With classical grammar well-grounded as far back as the 1st century B.C., Egbe further documents that the terminologies and methodologies for analyzing written text were already widely used and believed to be the pervasively acceptable logic of language use for humans. And if there is a universal logic of correctness in language use, it is expedient that it is adhered to. Hence, the Romans built upon the imprints of the Greeks as seen in the writings of Marcus Varro. In essence, some of the modifications Latin Classical grammar effects include the following: replacing articles with interjections, introducing a declension system for nouns and a conjugation system for verbs. Given these formidable foundations in the two abovementioned classical languages, other languages are compelled to follow these guidelines, particularly as depicted in the so-called universal grammar. As a result, “Early English grammarians imposed Latin grammatical features where meaning is centered on a system of inflections upon English grammar where meaning is based on word order” (p. 190).

In the 1930/40s, American structuralists offered counterarguments to alter the status quo. Due to their stance, the focus of how to study language is remapped. And 3 features took center stage: descriptivism as opposed to prescriptivism, reduction (or complete removal) of notion-based description of language, and examination of the English sentence in relation to its subject-verb-object word order rather than its logic of universal grammar.

Daniel Egbe cited that Ferdinand de Saussure, a prominent structuralist, published a seminal book in 1916 titled *Linguistique General*. And, right from the mid-1930s, structuralism became well known in America, receiving commensurate recognition because it offered an opportunity to study unfamiliar languages – the American-Indian languages included. Importantly, “the method of the structuralists [helped linguists] to study a language they did



not understand [by living] among the native speakers of the language, collect primary linguistic data, and painstakingly identify the structural relationships among the words in each sentence” (p. 221). Still in the penultimate chapter, the author precisely hints at the method in which structuralist framework is executed at the levels of phonology, morphology and word classes. He inches further by examining the central scope of structuralism to syntactic analysis (i.e., Immediate Constituent Analysis [ICA]) and afterwards uses the “Bottom-up Analysis” model to project the inner intricacies of various grammatical units within the structure of the English sentences. Notably, the point here is that a sentence is not just a group of words arranged in a one-way order; therein are structural relationships that link the words in it together, and these are what the ICA is modeled to depict. The Immediate Constituent Analysis explanation in the book is carefully grouped into two: (a) Type 1, which uses L-shaped symbols “_ | ” and “ |_” for separating constituents in its syntactic analysis. The farther the relationship between words, the larger the lines; and (b) Type 2, which uses a box-diagram approach. Often, the various constituents of the sentence are cut correspondingly as they form immediate constituents of a sentence with the first cut, “A-Cut,” being obligatory for all sentences. Egbe chronicles the guidelines for the cuts as follows:

- “A Cut =====> Subject + Predicate
- B Cut =====> Verb + Object
- C Cut =====> Verb + Complement
- D Cut =====> Noun Phrase + Prep. Phrase Post Modifier
- E Cut =====> Preposition + Complement
- F Cut =====> Adjective + Noun
- G Cut =====> Auxiliary + Main Verb
- H Cut =====> Determiner + Noun” (p. 228)

The last chapter focuses on another grammatical theory that emerged with the publication of Noam Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures*. Daniel Egbe, while paraphrasing Chomsky, posits that the central focus of every language scholar is to study the intuitions of native speakers about their language (Chomsky, 1957). He therefore sums up the goals of Transformational Generative Grammar to include the following points:

- 1) to find out the specific nature of the grammar of natural language
- 2) to study native speakers’ intuitions about their language
- 3) to account for their ability to make all and only the grammatical sentences of his language
- 4) to find out how they are able to make and interpret an infinite number of novel sentences from limited linguistic data they are exposed to
- 5) to set up a grammar that will generate all and only the grammatical sentences of a language.

Chomsky published another groundbreaking work, *Aspects of the Theory of Grammar*, which built on the former. With this work, the grammatical mechanisms for this model of grammar are identified as syntactic component, semantic component, and phonological component. The syntactic component is concerned with generating deeper structures that flow into both phonological and semantic components. And included in the syntactic components are categorial or phrase structure rules, the lexicon, and lexical insertion rules. All these apparatuses work as generative tools for creating deep strings or structures. Afterwards, transformational rules are applied to produce a surface structure (Chomsky, 1965).

In particular, the chapter exhaustively expounds deep structure devices as represented by phrase structure rules, phrase makers/tree diagrams, and the description of the constituent structures of sentences on the surface level, or what Egbe calls “Top Bottom Analysis” (p. 261). Other grammatical schools mentioned in passing in the book are “Systemic Functional Grammar, Montague Grammar, Case Grammar, Tagmemic Grammar, Relational Grammar, Stratificational Grammar, Government and Binding Theory, Generalized Phrase Structure, and Minimalist Approach” (p. 194).

Overall, *Essential English Grammar and Syntactic Analysis* is a thorough exposition not only of English grammar but also of the general vocation of syntactic analysis. It functions as a mediating repository, which offers a soft landing, particularly between budding Nigerian language scholars and abstract linguistic theories. Egbe’s personal experience both as a researcher and a teacher of English grammar adds vitality to the book’s outline. All core grammatical concepts are broken down in simple and accessible diction. It is noteworthy to assert that this book is targeted at both linguists and general lovers of language, as the author gives a large proportion of the book to examples and illustrations – ranging from simple



sentence structure to complex ones – to drive home his points. In addition to that, there are numerous exercises to examine the reader's understanding. The book will serve as a relevant resource for any lover of language study.

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