



Review of Crystal, David. 2017. *Making Sense: The Glamorous Story of English Grammar*. London: Profile Books. xvii + 281 pages. ISBN: 978-1-78125-602-2.

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The work of Crystal reviewed here is embedded, on the one hand, in the larger collection of books on issues dealing with the history and structure of the English language published by Profile Books since 2011¹ and, on the other, in the long-standing tradition of popularised books that Crystal has written over the years.² This is not the first time that Crystal has written a book on English grammar with an informative focus, as this volume complements others previously published (1996, 2004a and 2004b), the recently published monograph on the verb *to be* (2017) and a number of articles that can be found on his personal website (see note 2). The main aim of the book being reviewed is to describe the origins, exegesis and development of English grammar (mainly descriptive English grammar), and to explain common shibboleths and topics concerning this fascinating field of study from an everyday perspective. With a skilfully narrative style, the author combines the internal history of English grammar with the external and social events that have affected the language.

The title of the book, *Making Sense: The Glamorous Story of English Grammar*, was not randomly chosen, since in some of his previous works the author had already provided the reader with clues to decipher the meaning: “*Grammar is glamorous? For many people, that would be an impossible association of ideas, remembering a time when they were taught English grammar in school, trying to analyse complicated sentences into parts, and learning rules and terms whose purpose was never clear*” (Crystal, 2012: 73;³ our emphasis). According to Crystal, “[grammar is] the study of the way we compose our sentences, of how we say what we mean and of the *different effects we convey by varying the order of our words*. In short, *grammar shows us how we make sense*” (2012: 73; our emphasis). The author not only has presented the word *glamorous* in a positive light, but has also wisely played with the etymology of the word.⁴

This book is organised in 29 (short) chapters with a clear informative intent. Since the prose used by Crystal is intended to be understood by the general public, technical terms are clearly explained and illustrated.⁵ Some of these chapters, 16 in total, also contain what Crystal has termed *interludes* (very popular in some of his books), where remarkable facts are written in the form of short stories or anecdotes. At the beginning of the volume there is a prologue and a brief introduction, which is composed of two short stories (“Not knowing grammar: A student’s tale” and “Not knowing grammar: A child’s tale”), indicating the purpose of the book. These introductory apologues are particularly intriguing given that common topics around the subject of grammar are discussed. One important topic revolves around the idea of how grammar is crucial for making sense of the words that are used in communicative exchanges. Another discusses the results of the absence of English grammar in the National Curriculum by pointing out that “the consequences of this radical change of direction were long-lasting. When grammar began to re-emerge in schools in the 1900s – in Britain, as part of the National Curriculum – there was a widespread uncertainty among teachers about how to handle it, for the obvious reason that these teachers had never had any grammatical training themselves. That uncertainty continues today” (Crystal, 2017: xv). After the final chapter of the book, an epilogue, an index on teaching and testing (English grammar), the references and further readings are included, as well as a full list of illustration credits.

The first four chapters—Chapter 1 “First steps in grammar” (‘sentence’), Chapter 2 “Second steps: the big picture” (‘subject’ and ‘predicate’), Chapter 3 “Second steps: the small picture” (‘syntax’) and Chapter 4 “Third steps: combining big and small” (‘phrase’)—present the way in which children acquire grammar in their mother tongue in a reader friendly manner. At the end of the first chapter, an illuminating interlude on the main grammatical contributions of the ‘first grammarians’ is incorporated. Chapter 5 “Inside the words” (‘morphology’) follows the main arguments introduced in the previous chapters and offers a description of how word endings are used to express different grammatical relations (-s on nouns to express plurality or -ed on verbs to express past time). Some general remarks on the treatment of morphology within early English grammars are expressed since they tended to resemble Latin in their morphological descriptions. Thereafter, an interlude is added that deals with the first English grammarian known to date (William Bullokar and his *Pamphlet for Grammar*, published in 1586).

The following two chapters outline the basic constituents of the simple sentence and the functions that these elements can perform. Chapter 6 “Talking about mouses” (‘parts of speech (word classes)’) deals with the history of some irregular forms in English (focusing on verbs and nouns). The tendency throughout history to group words into classes (parts of speech) is also mentioned, from the first systems established by Plato, Aristotle or the Stoics to Dionysius Thrax of Alexandria and Priscian. Additionally, an interlude on *The Play Grammar, or, the Elements of Grammar Explained in Easy Games* (1848) by Julia Corner, a

grammar book for children, is provided. In Chapter 7 “What sentences do” (‘functions’), it is shown how sentences in English can be used for a number of communicative purposes (statements, questions, commands and exclamations – illocutionary force of sentences). An interlude then provides us with information concerning John Wallis’s *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae* (1653). Wallis is regarded as the first modern English grammarian and his approach to grammar attempts to depart from the Latin canon. His grammar, nevertheless, is written in Latin, as is evident by the title. Chapter 8 “Sentence building” (‘elements and roles’) outlines how sentences can be combined to describe the world around us. The author also sketches the structure of the sentence and the implementation of the elements from which the sentence is composed in terms of syntactic functions (i.e. subject, object, adverbial, complement) and semantic roles (i.e. agent, experiencer, etc.). An interlude is also offered on the intriguing story of Lord Macaulay.

Chapter 9 “Story time” (‘clause’) delineates how simple sentences are linked into more complex units: compound sentences (coordination by means of coordinators) and complex sentences (subordination by means of subordinators). Chapter 10 “Connecting” (‘connectives’) introduces ways of connecting *chunks of discourse* to communicate effectively. Therefore, terms like *connectivity*, *connection*, *coherence*, *cohesion* or *coordination* are discussed. According to the author, “[s]entences may be the building blocks of communication, but they are a means to an end, not an end in themselves” (Crystal, 2017: 77). An interlude on the acquisition and meaning conveyed in communication by passive and active structures is made available to the reader.

In Chapter 11 “Talking about grammar” (‘metalanguage’), the reasons why people do not use grammatical terms nowadays (except *word*, *sentence* and the like), as compared to the 19th century, are explained: “grammatical metalanguage is not a feature of home conversations” (Crystal, 2017: 87). In a short interlude different works are presented in which grammar terms are introduced to children. Chapter 12 “Up with which we will not put” (‘prescriptive’) presents the concept of *prescriptivism* and how it influenced 18th-century grammarians/speakers. Crystal assumes that prescriptions/proscriptions are nothing more than a personal choice. In fact, this is not the first time that Crystal expresses his own attitude on this point: “I don’t share the prescriptive attitude which was characteristic of his age, I can’t but be impressed by [Fowler’s] attention to linguistic detail [talking about Fowler’s *The Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926)]” (Crystal & Crystal, 2013: 361). In another interlude, Crystal comments on prescriptivism.⁶ Chapter 13 “Clarity and weight” (‘weight’) presents an introduction to the concept of *psycholinguistics* (the relation between language and the mind) in order to study how people process long strings of words and how this can lead to misinterpretation (e.g. the case of long subjects). It is suggested that difficulty in processing long strings of words can interfere with clarity in language. An interesting interlude follows about how the distribution of constituents according to their syntactic weight can certainly affect understanding. Chapter 14 “Clarity and order” (‘order’) opens

with the explanation of how children acquire connectors in order to tell stories in English. Additionally, this chapter explores the difficulties and problems that the use of connectors may trigger (order-of-mention > use of connectors).

Chapters 15 and 16 begin with an exploration of the interface of grammar with two other important branches of linguistics: semantics (meaning) and pragmatics (meaning in use). Chapter 15 “Grammar and meaning” (‘semantics’), including a considerable number of examples, provides an excellent introduction to what the author sees as the inexorable relation between meaning (the object of study of semantics) and grammar (grammar-meaning interface). An interlude on Mittins’ *A Grammar of Modern English* (1962) is appended: “Identifying the places in a sentence where ambiguities often arise is a major help towards avoiding them” (Crystal, 2017: 124). Chapter 16 “Grammar and effect” (‘pragmatics’) acknowledges the importance of pragmatics in the study of English grammar. As in many other chapters, examples are added: in this case, passive structures are scrutinised in relation to their pragmatic implications (for instance, the pragmatic effect of omitting the agent or internalised complement). Not included in this section of the book is a short chapter on the interface between grammar and phonology, which is a field of study that has been explored during the last few years.

Chapter 17 “Structure and use together” (‘two sides of a coin’) emphasises a recent change from the study of grammar *per se* to the study of the meaning which certain sentences might convey: “[w]e hear and see actual sentences, and study how they are constructed using whatever terminology we can muster. I call that the dimension of *structure*. And we hear and see the circumstances in which the sentences are used, feel their effect, and judge their appropriateness to the situation. I call that the dimension of *use*” (Crystal, 2017: 133; emphasis in the original). The consequences of a solely structure-oriented approach to grammar learning are exemplified in the field of ELT (English Language Teaching).⁷ There is an interlude that contains some remarks made by Jespersen, considered to be “the first descriptive grammarian” (Crystal, 2017: 139), in an article that he wrote to evaluate the study of grammar in his time (1910).⁸ Chapter 18 “A sense of style” (‘style’) evaluates how grammar is available in every circumstance found in life and the effects that each construction conveys (the interrelation between *structure* ~ *use* is not free but conditioned by style).

In the following section (chapters 19–26), some applications of grammar in real-life situations are examined. For instance, Chapter 19 “Grammar on the job” describes the way in which English grammar is a sign of identity in certain genres (e.g. legal English or religious English), and the reasons why grammar rules are broken on certain occasions (humorous purposes, for instance). In addition, samples from sport commentators are analysed. Chapter 20 “Explanations” discusses the importance of grammatical explanations (*syntactic argumentation*),⁹ such as the structure of binomials in English (e.g. *for and against*, *out and about*, *by and large*, etc.), which is used to illustrate the principal ideas that the chapter

conveys. Chapter 21 “Grammatical change — now” (‘corpus’) shows how grammar is an area of study tied to language change (language cannot be seen as a static object inasmuch as it is subjected to constant *variation* and *change*) and explores the invaluable contribution of corpus linguistics studies to the field. An interlude is annexed at the end of this (sub)section to explain the use of foreign plurals in the magazine *Punch*.¹⁰ Chapter 22 “Grammatical change — then” analyses some changes that have occurred throughout the history of the English language (Old English, Middle English and Early Modern English),¹¹ and an interlude on the use of *thou* vs. *you* is included to illustrate the main ideas of the chapter.

Chapter 23 “Into living memory (almost)” (‘hypercorrection’) further explains the intricacies of grammatical change by providing a number of examples, and discusses the way in which hypercorrection plays a major role in grammar. Crystal selects the grammatical form (nominative vs. accusative) of personal pronouns in certain positions of the sentence to illustrate the phenomenon of hypercorrection in English. In Chapter 24 “Going transatlantic”, the author reviews the different use of some varieties of English in grammar and how they influence each other. Special attention is paid to American and British English, and a number of differences are analysed in different domains (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, and prepositions). Crystal concludes that, through an analysis of the British (BrE) and American (AmE) versions of Harry Potter books, “[t]he grammatical changes are relatively few. And indeed, when we calculate all the points of grammatical difference between AmE and BrE, in all sources, we don’t get a large total” (2017: 201). An interlude, in the form of a picture, shows the influence of American English on other varieties of English from a humorous point of view.

In Chapter 25 “Going global” some examples (grammatical in nature) taken from the so-called ‘Word Englishes’ are dissected. The author very wisely explains the origin and causes of such examples (in most cases due to language contact with other dialects and languages). In the following interlude the different effects of the phenomenon of *reduplication* (i.e. repeating the same word more than once: *nice nice*, *bye-bye*, *small small*, etc.) on different varieties of English is analysed. Chapter 26 “Grammar online” shows the impact that the advent of the Internet has had on grammar. Crystal demonstrates how we can have access to a variety of nonstandard accents of English (something that proved to be very difficult before the World Wide Web era, unless one went abroad). In the last section of the chapter, the reader can also find a gamut of real examples containing grammatical constructions that were not permitted by language editors/printing houses (particular attention is given to cases of *syntactic blends*).¹²

Chapter 27 “Back from the grave” tries to briefly outline the development of descriptive English grammar as a field of study from the times of Jespersen to its culmination with Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik’s *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985).¹³ According to Aarts, “[t]he first large-scale modern grammars of English were Quirk et al.’s *A grammar of contemporary English* (1972) and *A comprehensive*

grammar of the English language (1985)” (2004: 365). It also offers some information about the role of grammar in British schools: “people had become totally fed up with the prescriptive approach to grammar that had dominated nineteenth-century schools. The signs had appeared early on, when the magazine satirists (such as *Punch*) and the literati (such as Dickens and Hazlitt) began to inveigh against it; and it was not long before the academics weighed in too” (Crystal, 2017: 218–219). In conjunction with the main ideas outlined in the previous chapter, Chapter 28 “Why the delay?” surveys some of the reasons why “[i]t wasn’t until the 1990s that most people became aware of the existence of descriptive grammar and schools began to take an active interest in it” (Crystal, 2017: 224).¹⁴ Crystal also sheds light on a number of issues stemming from what he calls the ‘neo-prescriptivist revival’. Important aspects of certain current usage guides are discussed and commented upon such as Heffer (2010), Humphrys (2004) or Truss (2003). A final interlude is attached to Chapter 28 on various aspects of prescriptivism in real communicative situations. Crystal concludes by stating: “I worry about the time and money spent trying to implement such unreal and self-contradictory prescriptions” (2017: 235). Our personal position is in line with Crystal’s view on this particular aspect in spite of the unfortunate comments made by Heffer (2015: xii–xiii). We also agree with Pullum’s observations when he states that “[Heffer] seems uninformed by any modern work on English grammar” (2010: 56).

Finally, Chapter 29 “A top ten for the future” provides the reader with ten basic tenets which, in the words of the author, “inform my view of the subject” (Crystal, 2017: 236). This constitutes a kind of personal manifesto towards the discipline: (1) grammatical change is inescapable, (2) grammatical variation is universal, (3) standard reference grammars are needed so that ‘supra-regional communication’ can be achieved, (4) nonstandard grammars are also crucial in a society as they can express “regional or cultural identity, nationally and internationally” (Crystal, 2017: 236), (5) standard and nonstandard reference grammars are not uniform (as they are prone to linguistic change), (6) standard and nonstandard grammars are inexorably intertwined, (7) a standard spoken English grammar is needed, (8) varieties of nonstandard English grammar have to be recognised, respected and learned, (9) the ‘New Englishes’ will set the basics to codify new regional standard reference grammars, as occurred with the already established British and American (standard) varieties, and (10) grammar is a linguistic system persistently related to other fields such as semantics and pragmatics (communicative power of grammar). Thus, this is perhaps one of the most intriguing chapters of the volume as it not only provides the reader with a summation of the main ideas discussed up to this point, but it also presents Crystal’s personal views about this captivating area of study.

In conclusion, it is probably the way in which Crystal approaches the complex field of English grammar to a general audience, always through a number of examples taken from everyday situations and explained with plain words for the lay reader, that constitutes one of the biggest strengths of this book. Furthermore, this book has definitely achieved the

objective of showing how grammar can be a glamorous field of study and how it is connected to our everyday life. The curious reader can find more detailed descriptions of modern English grammar in the works mentioned in note 13, and further information on the history of English grammar in different canonical books and research monographs in the field, such as Michael (1970), Padley (1976, 1985, 1988),¹⁵ Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2008) or Vorlat (1963, 1975), to mention but a few. All these references are more scholarly oriented. Therefore, terminological explanations may be needed for the inexperienced reader. Such clarification can be found in some well-informed dictionaries and glossaries such as Aarts, Chalker and Weiner (2014), Bauer (2004), Crystal (2008b), Leech (2006), Peters (2013) or Trask (1992).

By and large, Crystal's book constitutes an indispensable informational read for those who are interested in (the history of) English grammar without any previous knowledge in this complex field. The introduction of ideas and intricate concepts of the work are admirably clear, as well as the informative tone of this book, which is without a doubt of the highest calibre. Likewise, the book has also benefited from a list of commented bibliography (2017: 263–267) that provides the interested reader with additional information and references regarding the wide range of topics that are dealt with in the book.

NOTES

- 1 Three books have already been published, making the book of the present review the fourth: *The Story of English in 100 Words* (2011b), *Spell It Out. The Singular Story of English Spelling* (2012) and *Making a Point. The Pernickety Story of English Punctuation* (2015).
- 2 The full list of the author's published books is available at <http://www.davidcrystal.com/books-and-articles>.
- 3 The quotations provided are taken from the paperback edition consulted, rather than from the previously edited hardback version (2011).
- 4 According to *OED3*, the word *glamour* is “[a] corrupt form of [grammar]” (*s.v. glamour/glamor, n.*). The word *glamorous* is formed by the base *glamour* and the suffix *-ous* by a process of derivation.
- 5 Some technical terms pertaining to the general topic of the chapters are introduced at the end of the majority of chapters under the heading *keyword*. In this review, terminology is included in single inverted commas in the brackets next to the title of each chapter. In doing this, the reader knows which technical terms are discussed and introduced throughout the volume.
- 6 See Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2017) for a historical overview of English prescriptivism in England and America, including further references.
- 7 There are many grammars of English published today that show how certain structures are used in natural speech. Probably one of the most shining examples is Leech and Svartvik (2002). In the field of ELT, the most successful example is, to the best of our knowledge, the lengthy and

- informed grammar of Larsen-Freeman and Celce-Murcia (2015), which aims to prove, for instance, the interrelation among the notions of *form* (structure), *meaning* (semantics) and *use* (pragmatics), all of which have been fused to form the concept of *grammaring*. For further information on the concept of *grammaring* see Larsen-Freeman (2001a), and for an exhaustive overview of the field of grammar in language teaching see Larsen-Freeman (2001b, 2009), among others.
- 8 *Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* (1909–1949), published in 7 volumes, is probably Jespersen’s most excellent work: *Sounds and Spelling* (vol. 1), *Syntax* (first volume) (vol. 2), *Syntax* (second volume) (vol. 3), *Syntax* (third volume) (vol. 4), *Syntax* (fourth volume) (vol. 5), *Morphology* (vol. 6), and *Syntax* (fifth volume) (vol. 7). See Aarts (2016) for a historical sketch of Jespersen’s work on English grammar.
 - 9 See Aarts (forthcoming).
 - 10 Consult the research monographs by Aarts, Close, Leech and Wallis (2013), and Leech, Hundt, Mair and Smith (2009), where a number of case studies involving recent grammatical changes in English are examined.
 - 11 For changes in the grammar of English from Old English times, see for example Crystal (2005) or the recently published multi-volume monograph on the history of English edited by Brinton and Bergs (2017), with updated information and chapters elaborated by leading experts in the field.
 - 12 A more exhaustive treatment of the influence of the Internet (and technologies in general), with emphasis on the wider scope of language rather than grammar, can be found in Crystal (2004c, 2006, 2008a, 2011a).
 - 13 This probably constitutes the finest publication of the Survey of English Usage, based at University College London (UCL) (further information about this research unit is available in Crystal and Crystal [2013: 397–401] or its website: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/>). See Huddleston (1988) for a well-founded critical review of *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (CGEL). It is true, nonetheless, that other leading works in the field of English descriptive grammar have been published in the last decades, such as Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan (1999), Huddleston and Pullum et al. (2002), or Aarts, Bowie and Popova (forthcoming). The latter is not a grammar book in the traditional sense of the word, but a collection of different studies dealing with a number of issues on English grammar. For a review of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (CaGEL) see Aarts (2004), Crystal (2002), Culicover (2004) or Leech (2004), among others. A comprehensive coverage of English morphology, a field introduced in chapter 5 of the book reviewed here, can be found in Marchand (1969) or in the fully updated monograph by Bauer, Lieber and Plag (2013).
 - 14 Further information about the state of English grammar in schools in the UK can be found in *English Grammar in the UK: A Political History. Supplementary Material to Making Sense: The Glamorous Story of English Grammar* (document available at <http://www.davidcrystal.com/books-and-articles>).
 - 15 The focus of the first of these three works lies on Latin, while that of the other two lies on vernacular languages (Italian, Spanish, English, German and French). The main difference between the last two is that “[h]aving in my 1985 volume dealt with those authors who apply to

grammatical description some kind of theory, whether linguistic or pedagogical, I now turn to those works of the period 1500-1700 that are based on the description of usage, or on the dictates of a particular norm” (Padley, 1988: 1).

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