The strengths and weaknesses of simplicity

Review of Birger Andersen, *Basic English Grammar*, 3rd ed. Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur, 2018, 228 pp., ISBN: 978-87-593-3204-7

Kim Ebensgaard Jensen, University of Copenhagen

1. Introduction

Birger Andersen's *Basic English Grammar* (henceforth, BEG) is the third edition of a descriptive grammar of English marketed as a coursebook for business colleges, business schools, colleges of education, and universities, as well as a textbook for self-tutored readers.

2. Synopsis

BEG contains sixteen sections, most of which subsume a number of subsections. It is divided into three thematic parts: 'Part I: Understanding Sentence Analysis', 'Part II: The Major Word Classes', and 'Part III: Usage Problems'. Moreover, there is a rather short general introduction to the book as such which introduces the reader to the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive grammar. The remainder of the introduction is devoted to convincing the reader that grammatical analysis is useful. The reader is also introduced to the notion of Standard English, Andersen making clear that BEG focuses on British English.

2.1 Syntactic analysis

The first part of the book introduces the sentence analysis system used in the book; considerable space, however, is also devoted to discussing a range of syntactic structural types.

In section two, 'Sentence analysis', Andersen discusses the validity of the notional, the structural, and the formal definitions of sentences, pointing out that all three definitions are unproblematic. In this section, basic notions such as words, phrases, clauses, and sentences are introduced as are several categories pertaining to clauses and sentences.

The third section, 'Basic clause structure', addresses clause-level constituents and the role they play in clauses. Using the sentence *The bank has closed our deposit account*, Andersen introduces the movement, substitution, expansion, and subtraction tests as ways to identify constituents. Then the distinction between form and function is applied at constituent level. Building on this, Andersen introduces his sentence analysis system and lists the basic form and function labels.

Section four, 'Clause functions', introduces and discusses constituent functions, starting with the verb. In discussing how to identify verbs in clauses, Andersen rejects a number of formal-morphological and semantic approaches and proposes that "perhaps the best way to identify a verb is to look for words that belong to the word class verbs" (p. 42). The section further deals with subjects, direct objects, subject complements, object complements, indirect objects, and adverbials.

The following section, 'Phrase structure', covers phrase types and goes into detail with the structural make-up of phrase structures. As an example, the subsection on verb phrases discusses the distinction between auxiliaries and main verbs and covers auxiliary verb types in terms of functionality and auxiliary verb order constraints.

Section six, 'Subordinate clauses', goes into detail with subclauses (including dangling participles). After an overview of subclause types, which also introduces their form labels, the section moves on to covering finite and non-finite subordinate clauses in substantial detail.

The seventh and eighth sections are entitled 'Peripheral clauses' and 'Coordination' respectively and are both considerably short. The former covers tag-questions, parenthetic clauses and sentential relative clauses, while the latter consists mainly of examples of syntactic analysis of

different types of coordination.

2.2 Parts-of-speech

Having discussed syntactic clausal and phrasal syntactic structures in Part I, Andersen moves on to discussing parts-of-speech, or word classes, in the second part.

Sections nine, 'Nouns', ten, 'Verbs', eleven, 'Adjectives', and twelve, 'Adverbs', are similarly organized. Each section opens with a subsection discussing how to define the word class in question. This is followed by a short section on derivational morphology. Then follow subsections devoted to various categories associated with the word class. For instance, among the topics covered in the section on nouns are countability, reference, collective nouns, concrete nouns, abstract nouns and the genitive, while the section on verbs covers, among other things, auxiliary types, modality, tense and aspect.

The final section, 'Pronouns', deviates from the other sections in Part II: rather than first discussing definition strategies, then morphology and then different subclasses, a subsection is devoted to each pronoun type (personal, possessive, reflexive, demonstrative, reciprocal, interrogative, relative and indefinite pronouns), every subsection discussing morphological, syntactic, and functional features relevant to the pronoun type in question.

2.3 Usage

The third part covers areas of usage that are challenging to many learners of English – namely, subject-verb concord, constituent order configurations and punctuation.

Section fourteen, 'Subject-verb agreement', essentially lists types of subject that may cause problems in connection with subject-verb agreement, such as singular nouns ending in -*s* (including proper nouns and nouns that refer to fields of study, diseases, and games as well as nouns whose plural and singular forms are identical and end in -*s*). This section also addresses quantity phrases, collective nouns, coordinated nouns, pronouns, and anticipatory subjects.

The next section, 'Constituent order', covers the following phenomena which involve non-canonical word orders: front-focus, end-weight, full and partial inversion, adverbial and placement.

The final section, 'Punctuation', focuses on uses of commas, semi-colons, colons and dashes, listing ways in which they are supposed to be used, while steering away from addressing common incorrect ways in which they are used.

3. Evaluation and discussion

BEG evolves around syntactic analysis, and the descriptions of grammatical phenomena throughout the book are linked to the BEG-system of syntactic analysis. This generates a strong sense of coherence throughout the volume, and discussions of grammatical phenomena do not seem disconnected from the syntactic representations of these phenomena. This, of course, all hinges on whether or not one likes the BEG-system. Fortunately, the BEG-system is fairly traditional and not too idiosyncratic. It is based on syntactic functions and may, at least in the perspective of the Danish educational system, easily be framed as an expansion of the function-based sentence analysis system that students are familiar with.

3.1 Simplicity and target readership

BEG's major strength is the clear, succinct and very simple language in which it is written. No mystifying expressions are used, and the vocabulary is generally accessible. Thus, BEG is a particularly well-suited book for untutored readers. Readers who are simply looking to understand the basic structural features of English grammar should find it very useful. Likewise, people who have been admitted into an English degree program at university level who do not feel that their secondary level education has prepared them enough should find BEG useful in preparing them to be

able to follow first semester courses in English grammar at university level before their courses actually start.

BEG seems like a very light read, which makes the ground it actually covers all the more impressive. That said, another reason why the volume is so accessible is that, while it covers a lot of ground, it does not go into complex territory, and there are virtually no discussions of substance in it. I think it may be because BEG, while its blurb claims that the book is suitable for introductory courses at business colleges, colleges of education, business schools and universities, is primarily aimed at business college and business school students. I think BEG is at an appropriate level for business college, business school, and colleges of education, as students under programs at such institutions do not need a very deep and scientific understanding of English grammar.

I do not think, however, that BEG is substantial enough content-wise for students already enrolled in English degree programs at university level. The reason is that students of English at Danish universities need an understanding of English grammar that is deep and substantial enough that they can apply it, not just in their own language production, but also in linguistic analysis in connection with BA- and MA-electives as well as BA- and MA-projects and, of course, their future careers in which an extremely high level of proficiency in, and knowledge of, English grammar is typically expected.

Consider, for instance, Andersen's definition of a suffix as "a string of letters or a single letter put at the end of a word, often with the effect of turning that word from one word class into another" (p. 135). To someone who is only expected to know that a suffix is the same thing as an ending, this formulation is excellent: it is clear, succinct, and neatly gets the point across. Anyone reading this should now know that a suffix is an ending. However, to a reader who is required to have a deeper knowledge of suffixation and is expected to be able to apply it in analysis, description, and explanation, this definition is insufficient[1]. I would recommend BEG as preparatory reading, but I would not recommend it as a BA-level coursebook in an English degree program.

3.2 Tiers and trees

While BEG makes use of what Andersen calls *the* sentence tree (pp. 39, 62, 114) to show general hierarchical relations between constituents at different levels, the actual analyses in the volume are presented in a tier-based format. In tier-based analyses, constituent labels are rendered in a tier underneath the sentence itself. Here is an example of such an analysis from BEG (p. 55):

Fig. 1: A BEG-style tier-based analysis

The supplier	*has sent*	*the buyer*	*a new document*
S:NP	V:VP	IO:NP	DO:NP

Tier-based analysis is indeed very appealing in its simplicity. One advantage here is that it can easily be seen as an extension of the type of sentence analysis that Danish students should be used to from their primary and secondary education. Here, symbols representing constituent functions are inserted in a tier underneath the sentence itself. The sentence in Figure 1 would look like this:

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[1] One might also argue that it is misleading to define suffixes in terms of letters, as this gives the impression that suffixation only occurs in writing.

Fig. 2: Symbol-based sentence analysis

The supplier	has sent	the buyer	a new document
X	○	□	Δ

The pedagogical appeal is clear: all you need to do is replace the symbols with letters and then add a specification of the form type, and you are good to go. This allows for a seamless transition from a system with which the students are familiar to the new system with which they must become familiar.

Despite its appeal, tier-based analyses only work well at main clause level. As soon as one has to take into account subordinate levels, tier-based analyses quickly become difficult to decipher. Consider for instance, BEG's analysis of *The documents having been completed, we will send them immediately* (p. 112) which goes down to subclause level:

Fig. 3: BEG-style analysis of sentence with one embedded clause

The documents	*having been completed,*	*we*	*will send*	*them*	*immediately*
S:NP	*V:VP*				
A:ACl (Cling)		*S:NP*	*V:VP*	*DO:NP*	*A:AjP*

We need to introduce a second tier now, already making the analysis a bit more difficult to follow. Now imagine being asked to analyze a sentence with several embedded clauses such as the following:

Fig. 4: BEG-style analysis of sentence with multiple embedded clauses

The documents	*having been completed,*	*we*	*will send*	*them*	*immediately*	*so*	*you*	*can sign*	*them*	*before*	*they*	*are submitted*
											conj S:NP	V:VP
S:NP	*V:VP*						conj S:NP	V:VP	DO:NP			A:ACl
A:ACl (Cling)		S:NP	V:VP	DO:NP	A:AjP					A:ACl		

The analysis in Figure 4 is not easy to decipher. As you can imagine, tier-based analyses only become increasingly complicated when the number of embedded clauses increases.

I have not yet discussed how BEG handles sentences analyzed down to word level. If one wants to analyze down to word level, one must switch to a table layout like this analysis (p. 115):

Fig. 5: Word-level analysis in a table-formatted tier-based analysis

We	*regret*	*however*	*that*	*we*	*are*	*at*	*present*	*unable*	*to*	*deliver*	*the*	*model*	*you*	*ordered*
													H:Prn	Mv
													S:NP	V:VP
									IM	Mv	Det	H:N	DO:RelCl	
									V:VP		DO:NP			
						H:Pr	PC:NP	H:Adj	POM:ModCl					
			conj	S:NP	V:VP	A:PP		SC:AjP						
S:NP	V:VP	A:AvP	DO:NCl											

In my opinion, Figure 5 is well-nigh indecipherable. To me, this degree of complexity overshadows the pedagogical attraction of tier-based analyses at main clause level. Moreover, I find it problematic

that it is necessary to switch formats when analyzing down to word level. This strikes me as unpedagogical, because one must handle two different layout format which threatens the consistency that novice students of grammar desperately need.

It would have been preferable if BEG had stuck to one tier-based layout. However, I would argue that tree diagrams are much more suitable for syntactic analysis than tier-based analysis. Trees visualize the structure and relations of hypotaxis and parataxis relatively intuitively. For the sake of comparison, here are tree-based versions of the analyses seen in Figures 4 and 5; both analyses go down to word level[2]:

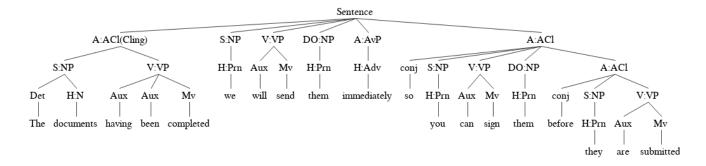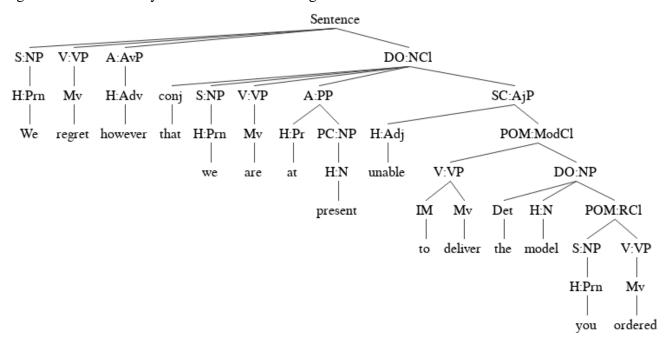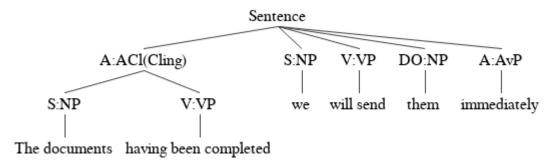Fig. 6: Tree-based analysis of the sentence in Figure 4

Fig. 7: Tree-based analysis of the sentence in Figure 5

Unlike the tier-formats in BEG, it is not necessary to switch to a different representational format if the analysis does not go all the way down to word level, as seen in the following figure:

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[2] The trees were drawn using Eisenbach & Eisenbach (2015), which – with a little training – is very easy to use.

Fig. 8: Clause-level tree-based analysis of the sentence in Figure 5

Perhaps tree-based analyses using the BEG-system should look a bit different from the ones I have made, such that the analysis can come across even more precise. For instance, one might perhaps want to include 'MCl' for 'main clause' underneath the 'Sentence' node. Such details notwithstanding, the sentence analysis system itself is in no way compromised, and tree diagrams would arguably make BEG-style sentence analyses easier to decipher, giving a better feel for the hierarchical structure of a sentence.

Ultimately, I think the BEG-system would be better off had Andersen used tree diagrams or at least shown some examples of actual tree-based analysis. Granted, if all the analyses were rendered as tree diagrams, the book would be considerably longer and more expensive, which might not be desirable for the targeted readership. However, just one section added to the book illustrating, akin to what is seen in Hjulmand & Schwarz (2017) for example, how tree diagrams can be applied within the BEG-system would be extremely helpful, I think.

4. Concluding remarks

Accessible yet packed with more information than one might expect, the third edition BEG is very easy to read and conveys in a seamless manner what is admittedly complex information within a field that many students fear due to what Dienhart (2004: 13) calls a negative education. BEG neatly covers the bases of English grammar in the perspective of English syntax. This is its major strength, but it is also its major weakness. How can that make sense? Well, whether it is a strength or a weakness depends on who the reader is. BEG is unsuitable for students of English at university level, as it lacks the substance and academic stimulation that this readership requires. However, BEG is very suitable for students at business schools, business colleges, and colleges of education who take introductory courses in English grammar, as it lives up to the required level at such institutions and thus provides students within such programs with suitable insights into English grammar and syntax. The third edition of Birger Andersen's *Basic English Grammar* is warmly recommended to teachers and students within business English degree programs at business schools and business colleges as well as in educational degree programs that prepare graduates for teaching English at the level of primary Education. Lastly, untutored readers should find the book very useful and insightful as well.

References

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