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REVIEW

Having fun with words while taking them seriously

Geert Booij, *The Grammar of Words. An Introduction to Linguistic Morphology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xvi + 353, Paperback, £24.99, ISBN 9780199691838.

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This is the third edition, revised and updated as well as greatly embellished with a number of additional attractive features, of a book first published in 2005. This fact alone speaks volumes for the book's immense popularity amongst its target readership primarily composed of students with no specialist knowledge about its subject matter. As part of the series "Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics," of which there already are over a score of widely appreciated titles on the market, the book is true to the stated objective of the series which is to cater to "second and third-year undergraduate, and postgraduate university students" who "have completed a first-year introductory course in general linguistics."

Presented in 6 parts, entitled "What is linguistic morphology," "Word-formation," "Inflection," "Interfaces," "Morphology and mind," and "Conclusions" respectively, the book walks the reader through the basic notions of morphology. The language used, as well as the informal, often conversational style of discourse adopted to conduct discussion make the book extremely user-friendly. Each chapter is rounded off with a summary. This is followed by a set of 10 questions, designed to test the reader's comprehension of the discussion in the chapter, but also to goad them into indulging in some problem-solving on their own, an activity destined to whet their intellectual appetite and arouse interest in the field. The questions are duly answered at the end of the book in a separate section, so that the reader may judge their own performance. At the end of each of the chapters, the reader is also given some useful tips for further reading, should their curiosity be sufficiently aroused. At the end of Chapter 1, there is a brief section entitled "Resources for morphology" where the reader is directed to important sources of additional information that include Linguist List, the websites of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and Ethnologue and so forth, important journals in the field and some introductory textbooks and classic handbooks. The book has, in addition, a 27-page long glossary of technical terms used throughout and a list of bibliographical references, 18 pages long.

Why the rather unusual turn of phrase "grammar of words," as it figures prominently in the very title of the book? The concluding words in the summary to the final chapter provide a pithy answer: "[...] the grammar of words and the grammar of sentences are intertwined in many ways!" (p. 295). Earlier on, in this same chapter, the author, who is Professor Emeritus at the University of Leiden, draws attention to the fact that the notion "word" plays a central role

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in the whole book, emphasizing that he has sought to build on the everyday, commonsensical idea of a word in order to work his way towards a more precise, technical sense of the term, encountering and discarding in the process highly tempting, but ultimately unhelpful explanations such as equating "[t]he word [with] its orthographic sense in a language with an alphabetical script, defined as a sequence of letters not interrupted by spaces [. . .]" (p. 283). And he recalls Bloomfield's classic definition of the word as a "minimum free form" (Bloomfield, 1933: 178), thus highlighting its capacity to stand by itself – the one quality that allows it to function as a sentence-substitute under certain circumstances. This definition, though helpful in most cases, is not, as Bloomfield himself recognized later on, a hundred per cent fool-proof. (Incidentally, there is no mention of this great work in the References, presumably due to oversight; but, to complicate matters, on p. 284, the work is erroneously referred to as dated 1935.)

As a matter of fact, the idea that words and sentences have a lot more to do with each other than may strike someone at first glimpse is driven home right from the very beginning when Booij notes: "morphology [. . .] serves to get a better understanding of the nature of linguistic rules and the internal organization of the grammar of natural languages" (pp. 23–24). The author conveys the idea that, in many ways, the two are as related to each other as microcosm is to macrocosm. Both contain the key to their enormous creative potential, one in virtue of its readiness to take any number of affixes (consider, for instance, *Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis*, believed to have been invented out of the blue by a certain Everett M. Smith in 1935 and claimed by the Oxford English Dictionary (online) to be "a word invented in imitation of polysyllabic medical terms, alleged to mean 'a lung disease caused by the inhalation of very fine sand and ash dust (mostly volcanic silica ash dust)' but occurring only as an instance of a very long word" and the other by its endless capacity to take in additional clauses recursively, making the very idea of the longest sentence in any language impossible to be realized in actual practice.

The parallel between the structure of words and the structure of sentences becomes even more apparent as one turns to the paradigmatic aspect of morphology which accounts for derivational processes of word-formation, including neologisms and other newfangled curiosities such as *undownloading* and *selfie* (chosen as the word of the year 2013 by the Oxford dictionaries). Even as the sentence *John adores his grandchildren* has the internal structure (John [adores ⟨his {grand children} ⟩]), so too does the complex word *undocumented*, whose internal structure (un [document + -ed]) captures its unique derivational history in a way ([un + document] – ed) does not.

The Grammar of Words is an introductory textbook that covers all the major issues in linguistic morphology and does so in a style that is at once lighthearted and easy to comprehend. Many of the illustrative examples that are widely used in the book are taken from English, but the range of other world languages it draws from (some 70 or so in all, listed in an alphabetically ordered Language Index at the end) is truly impressive and conducive to fomenting a highly needed awareness of the multifarious possibilities of word-formation among languages as well as of the fact that, despite all differences, all languages possess highly complex, but equally rule-governed morphologies – an essential ingredient of the training of future professional linguists.

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