

# Jonson, Ben: The English Grammar

(1640)

Ema Vyroubalova (Trinity College Dublin)

Domain: Grammar. Genre: Instructional / reference. Country: England.

It is uncertain when Jonson started the work on his *English Grammar* (1641). But he refers to its presumably complete manuscript among the works lost when a fire broke out in his lodgings in November 1623. In “An execration upon Vulcan” (included in *The Underwood*) Jonson laments the destruction of the *Grammar’s* manuscript:

Was there made English, with a Grammar too,  
To teach some that their nurses could not do,  
The purity of language. (171)

Jonson rewrote the volume sometime after 1623, though the exact timeframe remains uncertain. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson believed that he returned to the project only in the 1630s and, according to David Riggs, *The English Grammar* might have even been the final work to come from the author’s pen (346). More recently, Derek Britton has argued that the rewriting commenced “shortly after the loss of the original, probably in 1624” (333), citing as reasons Jonson’s better health in this period, his likely desire to recreate the lost work while he still remembered the original, and the usefulness of the grammar to a position Jonson held at Gresham College in 1624. Jonson’s most recent biographer, Ian Donaldson, also supports the earlier composition theory (369).

The full title of *The English Grammar* informs the reader that the book engages with contemporary living language and that the intended readership includes foreign learners of English: “The English Grammar made by Ben Jonson for the benefit of all strangers, out of his observation of the English language

now spoken, and in use.” In the Preface Jonson adds that “the profit of Grammar” is “honourable to ourselves” and that his *Grammar* helps demonstrate the adequacy of English as “we show the copy of it [English] and matchableness with other tongues” (309). The *Grammar* consists of two books: the first deals with what Jonson labels “etymology” but in modern linguistic terms would be subsumed under phonetics and morphology. It is subdivided into twenty-two chapters dedicated to the individual lexical categories (e.g. nouns, adjectives, and verbs), their components (e.g. letters, vowels, and consonants), and their variable forms (e.g. comparisons, declensions, and conjugations). The second book deals with syntax and is subdivided into nine chapters, according to syntactic functions of the specific lexical categories (e.g. “Of the Syntax of One Noun with Another”).

The grammarians and rhetoricians Jonson invokes as his sources range from ancients like Varro and Quintilian to the more contemporary figures like Petrus Ramus and Thomas Smith. Jonson’s incorporation of these authorities into the *Grammar* takes the form of Latin quotations, embedded in his own explicatory Latin glosses, placed on the pages facing the English text which they comment on. In addition to frequent comparisons between English and Latin, the chapters also draw on examples of grammatical usage in Greek, Hebrew, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Anglo-Saxon, and Welsh. Jonson further deploys 118 quotations from twelve English authors, including Chaucer, Gower, and Thomas More, to illustrate his points about English phonetics, morphology, and syntax. The emphasis on backing theoretical discussion up with examples from real texts sets the volume apart from other early modern treatments of grammar. As David Riggs points out, “One has to go into the eighteenth century before finding anyone systematically giving quotations to illustrate grammatical patterns” (347).

The tone is largely scholarly and descriptive, although Jonson's personal opinions sometimes find their way in, as in this brief nationalistically tinged rant against the letter "Q":

Q is a letter we might very well spare in our alphabet, if we would but use the serviceable *k* as he should be, and restore him to the reputation he had with our forefathers. For the English Saxons knew not this halting *q*, with her waiting-woman *u* after her ... [t]ill custom, under the excuse of expressing enfranchised words with us, entreated her into our language. (345)

Jonson's creative flair for personification also occasionally emerges in his descriptions of letters and grammatical categories. "R is the dog's letter and hurreth in the sound" (345). "H" is not "the queen mother of consonants, yet she is the life and quickening of them" (351). And the first conjugation is "the common inn to lodge every strange and foreign guest" (370).

For modern literary scholars *The English Grammar* is valuable foremost as a record of Jonson's own erudition. The frequent use of examples from Hebrew throughout the text, for instance, may suggest that Jonson remained at the Westminster School until the upper form because this language was covered only in the most advanced stages of the curriculum (although it is also possible that he learnt it later through other means). For those studying the history of English, the text provides insights into the state of the language in the seventeenth century. It has proved particularly useful for reconstructions of early modern English pronunciation. The *Grammar* remained unfinished at the time of Jonson's death in 1637. *The English Grammar* was first published posthumously in the third volume of the second folio of 1640/41.

Works Cited:

Britton, Derek. "The Dating of Jonson's English Grammar". *Notes and Queries* 49.3 (2002): 331-334.

Donaldson, Ian. *Ben Jonson: A Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Jonson, Ben. *The English Grammar (From the Works)*, 1640. Menston, Yorkshire: Scolar Press, 1972.

Jonson, Ben. *The English Grammar. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*. Eds. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Jonson, Ben. *The Underwood*. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson. Eds. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Riggs, David. *Ben Jonson: A Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1