

Lives in language



Bas Aarts explains why the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen was such an influential grammarian of English.

Otto Jespersen 1860–1943

Did you know that many grammars of the English language were written by non-native speakers during the early twentieth century?

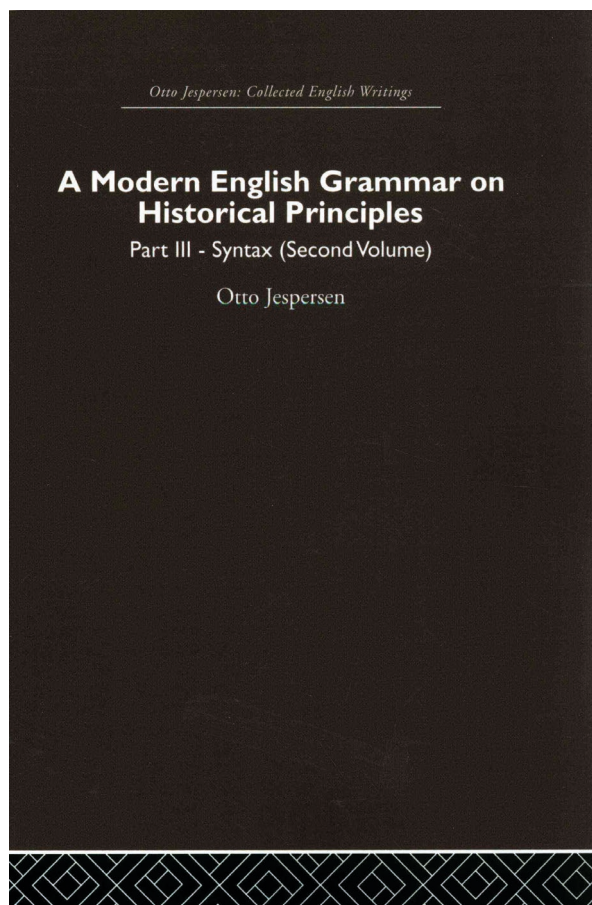
The best known grammars are Etsko Kruisinga's *A Handbook of Present-Day English* (1909-32), Hendrik Poutsma's *A Grammar of Late Modern English* (1904-29), and Otto Jespersen's *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* (1909-49).

What's remarkable about these grammars is that they are huge, and that they were published in several volumes. One reason for their bulkiness was that their authors used thousands of examples from literary texts to illustrate points of grammar. These days we would say that these works were corpus-based, i.e. based on large collections of texts called corpora. Just think how much work collecting these examples involved for the scholars who wrote these grammars. Not only did they have to trawl through countless works of literature published over a large span of time to find them, they also had to record the examples by copying them by hand onto slips of paper or by using a traditional typewriter. They then had to devise a sensible filing system to ensure that the data could be retrieved easily. This typically involved using old shoeboxes. And they had to do all this before

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they could begin writing the grammars themselves. In our computer age it's hard to imagine that collecting data could have been so time-consuming for scholars.

It is generally agreed that of all the grammarians mentioned above Jespersen was the greatest. He was born on 16 July 1860 in Randers, eastern Jutland, Denmark. As a student



Part III of Jespersen's encyclopedic work on English grammar.

he initially studied law at the University of Copenhagen, but got tired of this, and switched to the study of languages, especially English. He wrote his PhD in 1891 on the topic of English case. Jespersen had a stellar career: he became a Professor in 1893 at the tender age of 33, and held various prestigious appointments in the University of Copenhagen, including Rektor, until his retirement in 1925.

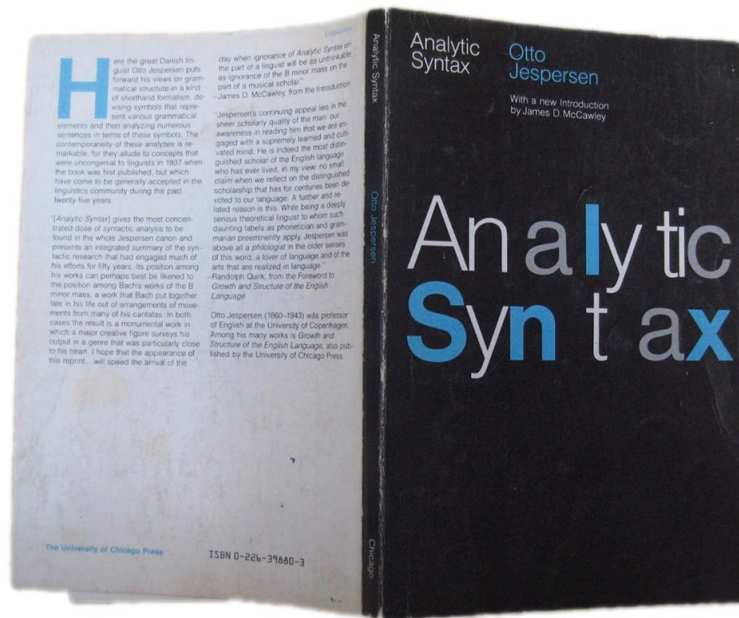
The translation of Jespersen's autobiography lists 823 publications, and among these A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles, published in seven volumes between 1909 and 1949, was to become his most famous work, along with Growth and Structure of the English Language (1905), The Philosophy of Grammar (1924) and Analytic Syntax (1937). Of the latter two Nelson Francis remarked that they "set forth the most extensive and original theory of universal grammar prior to the work of Chomsky and other generative grammarians of the last thirty years". Chomsky has expressed an appreciation of Jespersen's work on more than one occasion, as has James McCawley. Writing about Analytic Syntax, he says:

"Analytic Syntax gives the most concentrated dose of syntactic analysis to be found in the whole Jespersen canon and presents an integrated summary of the syntactic research that had engaged much of his efforts for 50 years. Its position among his works can perhaps best be likened to the position among Bach's works of the B minor mass, a work that Bach put together late in his life out of arrangements of movements from many of his cantatas. In both cases the result is monumental work in which a major creative figure surveys

his output in a genre that was particularly close to his heart."

Jespersen is admired by many linguists because – at a time when modern linguistics was only just emerging – he had deep insights into the workings of language in general, and grammar in particular. It is not uncommon to come across a 'new' insight about language these days without the author of this insight being aware that it has in fact already been discovered by Jespersen. We thus often find Jespersen's ideas re-emerging as reinvented wheels.

adverb. It cannot be a preposition here, so the reasoning goes, because there is no noun phrase following it. It was Jespersen who first suggested that 'before' is in fact a preposition in all three examples. What distinguishes these sentences is that 'before' is used transitively in the first two examples (taking a noun phrase and clause, respectively, as complements), and intransitively in the last example. In other words, in English we can have transitive and intransitive prepositions. This was a novel idea which treats prepositions



Jespersen's Analytic Syntax published in 1937.

As an example of one of Jespersen's insights, consider this set of sentences:

- I saw him before the meeting.
- I saw him before the meeting began.
- I've seen him before.

Most grammars analyse the 'before' in the first example as a preposition taking a noun phrase as its complement. In the second sentence 'before' is regarded as a subordinating conjunction, and in the third as a particle or

in a similar way to verbs, which can also be transitive and intransitive.

Jespersen was also known for his innovative grammatical terminology and his very clear grammatical annotation system, which elucidated the structure and meaning of sentences. Consider these sentences and their symbolic representations:

- He takes a glass – S V O
- He makes (digs) a hole – S V O'
- He washes himself – S V O (=S)

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The first sentence is a simple subject-verb-object structure. The second and third are similar, except that ‘O’ indicates an object that expresses a result, and ‘(=S)’ indicates that the object refers to the same person as the subject.

Here is a slightly more complicated example:

I believe that he is ill – S V O (3°
S₂ V P)

Initially this formula looks a bit forbidding, but it is actually quite straightforward. So how do we interpret it, bearing in mind that it is designed to represent the structure of the sentence grammatically? Looking at the sentence from left to right,

we first come across ‘I’, the subject. This is followed by the verb ‘believe’. We then we have a subordinate clause, ‘that he is ill’. This clause functions as the object of ‘believe’. It has a structure of its own, which is shown inside the brackets. Here the fact that the clause is subordinate and introduced by the conjunction ‘that’ is indicated by ‘3°’. The clause has its own subject, ‘he’ (indicated by ‘S₂’), a new verb, ‘is’, and what Jespersen calls a ‘predicative’ (indicated by ‘P’). The latter is an adjective phrase that ascribes a property to the subject, namely the property of ‘being ill’.

Jespersen’s great merit was his novel way of looking at grammar and making it accessible. His legacy can be traced in just about every English grammar book that has been published since he died. He was truly a great grammarian. ¶

Bas Aarts is Professor of English Linguistics and Director of the Survey of English Usage (SEU) at UCL. He has published widely on English grammar. He writes a blog for teachers of English (www.grammarianism.wordpress.com), and his team at the SEU has developed a website for teachers of English in primary and secondary schools to help them teach grammar (www.englishious.org).

Find out more

Books

Otto Jespersen (1937) *Analytic Syntax*, Levin and Munksgaard.

Otto Jespersen (1905) *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, Teubner.

Otto Jespersen (1995) *A Linguist’s Life: An English Translation of Otto Jespersen’s Autobiography with Notes, Photos and a Bibliography*, edited by Arne Juul, Hans F. Nielsen and Jørgen Eric Nielsen, Odense University Press.

Otto Jespersen (1924) *The Philosophy of Grammar*, Allen and Unwin.

Article

Winthrop Nelson Francis (1989) ‘Otto Jespersen as Grammarian’, in *Otto Jespersen: Facets of his Life and Work* edited by Arne Juul and Jans Frede Nielsen, John Benjamins.

James McCawley (1984) ‘Introduction’ in *Analytic Syntax* by Otto Jespersen, The University of Chicago Press.