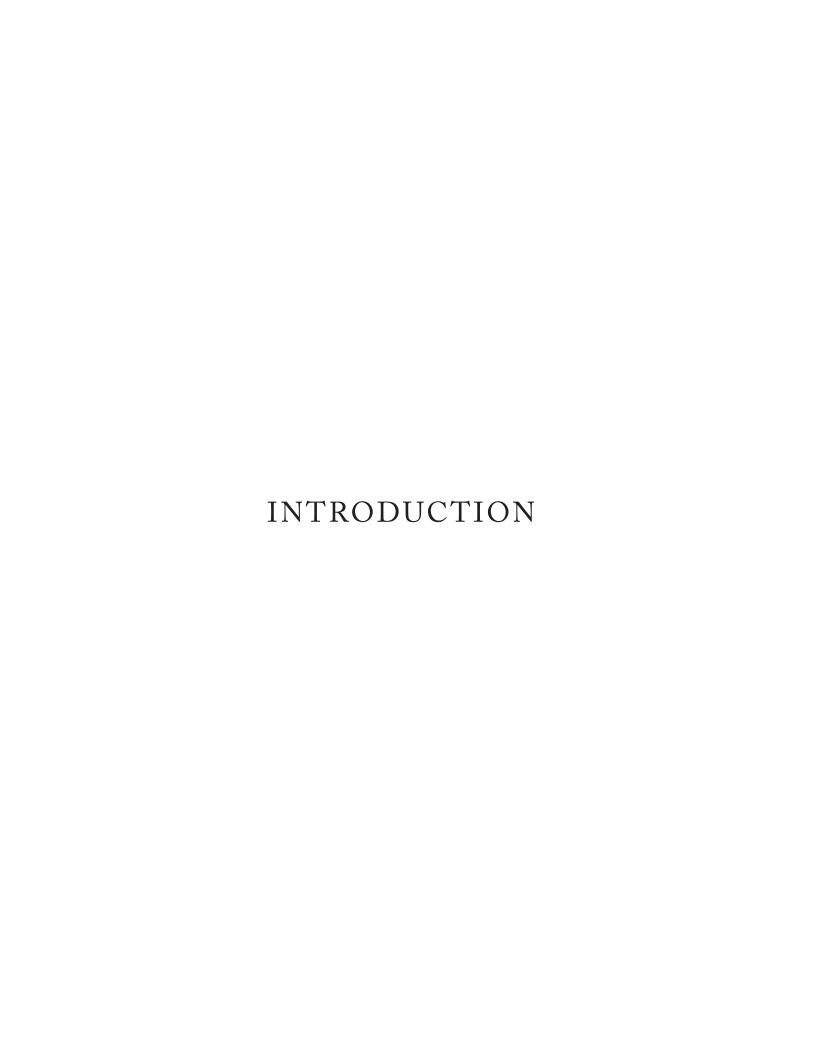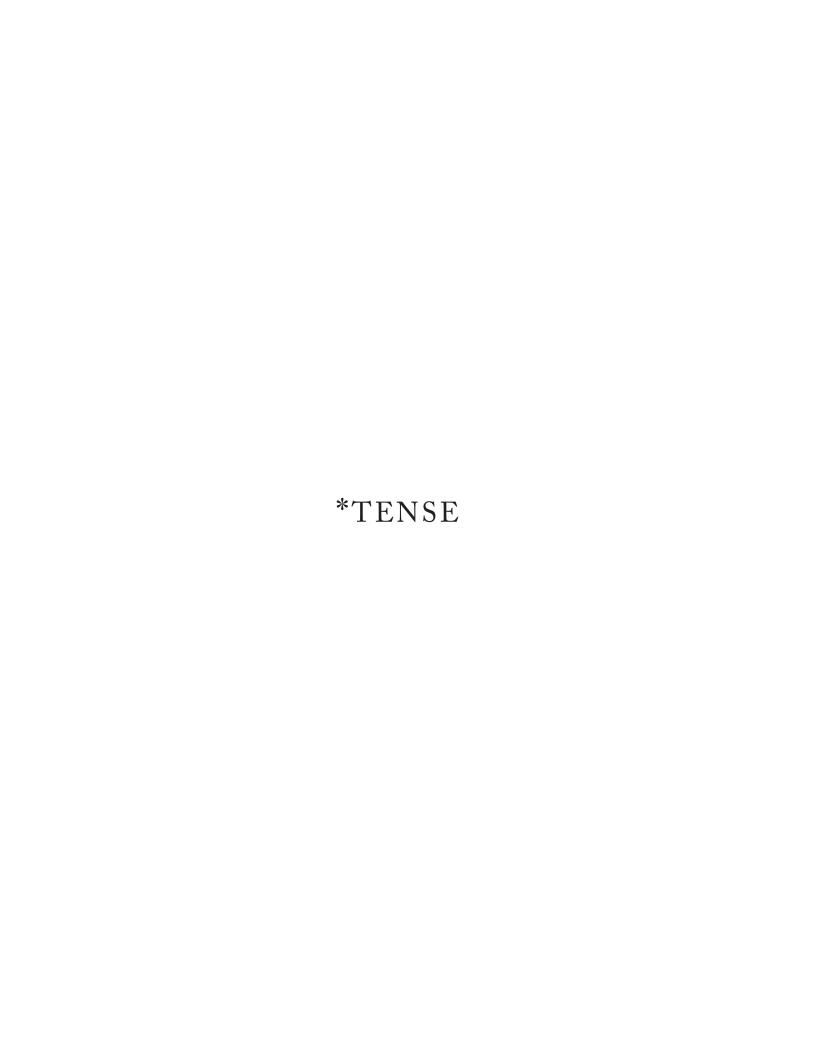# *A NEW ENGLISH
GRAMMAR

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INTRODUCTION

There is a proof in set theory showing that the set of natural numbers, though it is infinite, is nonetheless smaller than the infinite set of real numbers. You can count one-by-one as high as you like, you never need to stop, but between each rung of your number-ladder is another infinity of fractional differences. Might the same be said of sentences? It is a premise of transformational grammar that the number of correct sentences to be made by applying the existing rules to the available vocabulary is infinite. But if you understand each one of those correct sentences to have a limitless number of incorrect, ungrammatical counterparts—generated by a misplaced preposition, a confusion of tenses, a disagreement of number—surely that second set is larger. There are infinite ways to get it right, but even more ways to get it wrong.

The linguists' symbol for a faulty sentence (or clause or phrase or word-form) is an asterisk: *_He had had gone_. That asterisk is not used to call out a mistake in the wild, but to indicate an example that has, in its wrongness, in its breach of usage and of the rules that codify usage, something to teach us. _Study this_, says the asterisk, _but do not talk this way_. The choice of that stylized six-pointed star nonetheless suggests—if you allow it to signify beyond the linguists' formalisms—that there is more to the story. Asterisks qualify: a claim that comes with an asterisk may be taken back elsewhere. Or they complicate: there is an aside, or a second thought, waiting at the bottom of the page. The symbol also has a technical use in the field of conversational analysis, where it denotes an instance of what is called "conversational repair." Such repair is something speakers do all the time, and grammar accounts for only a subset of the possible

reasons; we might get a date wrong, or find a better word, or mispell, *misspell, something in a text message. The asterisk signifies that what comes next is a revision in real time, going back to a previous utterance to fix it.

What if we did not go back, but went forward? Not, that is, corrected the mistake, or flagged it for study, or for shame, but proceeded as though it were no mistake—as though it were meaningful, and implied rules that might be trusted in language at large? Or even, as though it were the revelation, or the birth, of a new language? That would be to treat the counterexample as a counterfactual, a small, subjunctive gesture toward a different world, different because a linguistic glitch here is idiomatic there. The asterisk invites a step forward into that world. It is the first star of that new sky. From that new vantage, the vantage of a new English grammar, what could we see about the world we used to live in? What would have to change, about our beliefs, our customs, our politics, for the new sentence to be correct? Why ever was it not? Perfectly correct sentences have the power to make new worlds, even infinite new worlds, and perhaps, in a small way, every correct sentence does just that. But there are more infinities open to us.

*TENSE

Traditional grammar usually presents English as having a future tense, namely the form using the auxiliary verb *will*. There are two directions in which one could object to this analysis. First, the auxiliary *will* has a number of other uses. Second, there are many instances of future time reference where it is not necessary to use the auxiliary *will*, but where rather the so-called present tense suffices. In some subordinate clauses, the auxiliary *will* with reference to future time is excluded, even if it would be required in a main clause. So, in a main clause:

1a.   *It will rain tomorrow.*
1b.   **It rains tomorrow.*

But in a subordinate clause, depending on the main:

2a.   *If it rains tomorrow, we will get wet.*
2b.   **If it will rain tomorrow, we will get wet.*

On the other hand, in conditional (or *if*) clauses that do not refer to a specific time, *will* with a modal meaning (expressing necessity or probability) is permitted, e.g., *if he will go swimming in dangerous waters, he will drown*. Thus it is clear that in such subordinate clauses, future time reference uses of *will*, which are excluded, are grammatically distinct from modal uses of *will*, which are allowed. These examples therefore suggest (but do not, of course, prove) that English does have a future tense, and hence a structural capacity to distinguish between what will happen, what might happen, and what we want to happen, even if speakers themselves cannot.

If it will rain tomorrow, then
today it will rain, without a doubt,
which does not prove the contrary

though we can always pray it will:
will rain tomorrow, that's to say,
as sure as anything under the sun

it will, and in the meantime we'll
keep tossing the basin into the air.
Someone will will the water to rain.

Grammatical compositionality is the principle that the meaning of an expression is determined by the meaning of its parts and their method of composition. The *formes supercomposées* in French are dependent on exploiting the possibilities of compositionality one step further than is done in English, where *he had had gone* is not possible. Even in French, however, the compositionality is not recursive:

1.   *il avait eu rassemblé*
2.   **il avait eu eu rassemblé*

This is one way in which constructions such as the pluperfect *had* differ from periphrastic constructions like English *to be about to*, *to have just*, which can be combined recursively to give formally impeccable combinations (*I was about to about to about to about to go*), even if it is difficult to compute their meanings or find a self-respecting use for them.

He had had gone. The door slammed twice.
Thinking again? Or doubling down?
It slammed again when we said it again.

Most of our doors swing out and in,
though sometimes it takes a little push.
Others are one-way, interior valves.

Then there are doors that only open
once, and can never be shut again.
May we come and go as we please O please.

In distinguishing between the grammatical status of states and occurrences, the first contrast is between static and dynamic situations. States exist or obtain, while occurrences happen or take place. Occurrences involve change, while states do not. States have no internal temporal structure: they are the same throughout their history. The distinction between the two main types of situation is reflected linguistically in the difference between the simple present and the progressive aspect. The simple present combines freely with states but not with occurrences.

1a.	*The flag was red.*	[state]
1b.	*The flag is red.*	[state]
2a.	*She married Tom.*	[occurrence]
2b.	**She marries Tom.*	[occurrence]

While [1b] is the present time counterpart of [1a], [2b] resists a comparable interpretation—it can hardly be used for an event that is actually taking place at the time of speaking. The progressive aspect, using the auxiliary *be* to express an ongoing action or situation, does not normally occur with expressions denoting states:

3.	*He is playing tennis.*	[occurrence]
4.	**The flag is being red.*	[state]

The flag is being red again.
Red with anger, there's reason to fear,
unless it's only saying stop

and frisk with me in the meadows, friend,
or blushing, wrapped around itself
to hide somebody's nakedness.

Look how it waves away our concerns.
It's only red like the poor are being
poor, not like the rich are rich.

Achievements are conceived of as punctual, i.e., as being instantaneous, occurring at a point in time, whereas processes—like states—are conceived of as durative, as having duration. The two kinds of process, accomplishments and activities, are distinguished by the fact that the former are telic: they have an inherent terminal point beyond which they cannot continue. Activities (and states) are atelic. Writing or reading some particular letter or note, walking some specific distance (*We walked six kilometers*) or to some specific destination (*We walked to the post office*) are accomplishments. Once we have covered six kilometers, the situation of our walking six kilometers is necessarily terminated: we can carry on walking (for that is an activity), but not walking six kilometers.

Both kinds of processes occur freely with progressive aspect, whereas punctual achievements tend to resist it:

1a.	*I was <u>working</u>.*	[activity]
1b.	*I was <u>writing a novel</u>.*	[accomplishment]
1c.	**I was <u>recognizing her</u>.*	[achievement]

A complication arises with verbs like *die*.

I was recognizing her, and then
there must have been a change of light.
I had to start all over again.

I had to start all over again,
both of us holding perfectly still,
but was that a smile, and if so, whose?

I was so close!—If only I'd glimpsed
the telltale scar that marks where we
were amputated, and from what.

Verbs like *die* behave as achievement expressions, and therefore—unlike accomplishments and activities—they do not readily occur with aspectual verbs like *begin* or *finish*. Compare *He finished painting the house last week* (accomplishment) and **He finished dying last week* (achievement). Nevertheless, such verbs occur quite freely in the progressive: *He was dying*. This usage of course has a durative rather than a punctual interpretation, and we will therefore refer to situations expressed by *die* and the like as "extendable achievements," in contrast to "strict achievements."

The admissibility and interpretation of expressions of duration differentiate among the three kinds of dynamic situation, achievement (which is punctual), activity (which is indefinitely extended), and accomplishment (which has duration, but is limited by other factors).

1a.   **He reached the summit for an hour.*   [achievement]
1b.   **He was dying for an hour.*   [extendable achievement]
1c.   *He played tennis for an hour / *in an hour.*   [activity]
1d.   *He walked a mile in an hour /*
       *for an hour.   [accomplishment]
2a.   *It took him an hour to reach the summit / die.* [achievement]
2b.   **It took him an hour to play tennis.*   [activity]
2c.   *It took him an hour to walk a mile.*   [accomplishment]

The grammar is indifferent as to whether hurry or delay is to be preferred.

He was dying for an hour,
then he died. He was dying
for an hour of not dying,

it didn't matter to him which.
He was dying for an hour,
one special hour, hours ago,

he'd know it again if it came again.
He was dying for an hour,
dying to do it again, and again.