

Better Ways With Verbs

by JOHN PLATT

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Reviewed by ADAM BROWN

John Platt, Professor of Linguistics at Monash University, is well-known for his work on the English of Malaysia and Singapore (EMS) as well as new Englishes in general (e.g. Platt & Weber, 1980; Platt et al., 1984). This new book is, however, a departure from his previous publications as it is a more pedagogically oriented handbook for teachers and learners of English, rather than more theoretically oriented research for academics.

The book is divided into 49 chapters, each only two or three pages long. Each deals with a specific problem concerning verbs, which is introduced by means of a short dialogue. Each problem is then elaborated on by examining the EMS version(s) and standard English version(s), in terms not only of correctness but also of the difference in semantic interpretation of different versions. As one would expect of a sociolinguist of Platt's stature, there is discussion of variants between standard British, American and Australian English.

An obvious competitor to this book in the market is Hughes & Heah (1989) (H & H), which was reviewed in the last issue of this journal (Wijasuriya, 1989). It is easier to evaluate the usefulness of the present book by comparison to this rival.

There is an unconvincing look to many of the dialogues which introduce each chapter. They sound invented rather than observed real-life instances (as are most of the examples in H & H). Some, such as 1 below, come across as amusing, while others strike the reader as pedantic (2), if not positively smug (3).

1. (p.4)

Doris : I'm having a headache.
 Mary : You mean, you have a headache.
 Doris : Yes, that's what I mean. I'm having a very bad headache.
 Mary : But you can't say that!
 Doris (*aggressively*): Why not? It's my head. I should know.

2. (p.45)

Andrew : Can I drive your car, Dad?
 Father : Yes, I'm sure you can but you may not.

3. (p.104)

Doris : It's raining. I'm pleased we got up the bus.
 Ann : Don't you mean "got on"?
 Doris : Oh! Anyhow, we have to get down here. This is our stop.
 Ann : Don't you mean "We'll get off here"?
 Doris (*angrily*): You're always picking at me.
 Ann : It's really "picking on" - but never mind.

With the sole exception of Beng and Koon in ch.25, the characters in these dialogues all have English rather than Malaysian-Singaporean names (as in H & H), and you are left wondering whether these are meant to be EMS speakers, pedantic native speakers, or some combination. In contrast, H & H leave you in no doubt, by introducing each section with 'typical mistakes', in the style of Swan (1980).

Notwithstanding the contrived look of the introductory mini-dialogues, the chapters deal with common points relating to verb usage in EMS. However, although always on the topic of verbs, the points made are disparate, in that some refer to features of grammar (e.g. subject-verb concord: The committee wants/want it; ch.26), others with the semantics of specific vocabulary items (e.g. the

EMS meanings of follow, fetch, send, tell/ask, scold; chs.44-8), and others with confusions which seem to result from problems of pronunciation (e.g. *I'd/I'll like to go to Bali*; ch.8).

Since each chapter is so short, the explanation of points is sometimes inadequate, and in certain instances not very helpful from the TESL point of view. One such case is the discussion of will/would in ch.6. Platt states, quite correctly, that *would* is often used in sentences containing an unlikely condition (If I had a million dollars, I'd take you on a cruise; p.59). However, he also claims that this condition is often omitted, to be understood from the context, as in the following examples (p. 16-7)

4. I'd love to go for a cruise. (... if I had the money, the time, someone to go with me)
5. Would you like some more rice? (... if I offered it to you)
6. Would you help me with this problem? (... if I asked you)
7. Would you lend me fifty dollars? (... if I asked you for it)

It seems strange to claim that the above sentences contain implicit conditions. By saying sentence 5, one is thereby offering the listener rice - that is the function of the sentence. And one cannot claim that this is an unlikely condition. It would then be impossible to explain why the natural response to 5 is Yes, I would. From the teacher's point of view, it is much more helpful simply to label these as 'certain polite expressions' (as do H & H, p.156). The error which EMS speakers seem to make is in using *would* as a polite alternative to *will* in all sorts of constructions. The point is that *would* is a politeness marker in standard English only in offers and requests expressed in question form (Would you...) and in formulaic constructions such as *I would like...* Otherwise, some sort of condition is usually implied. In EMS, however, one encounters expressions of the kind illustrated in 8, which leaves native speakers wondering "if what?"

8. This shop would be closed tomorrow.

Certain of Platt's examples strike me as colloquial (and therefore inappropriate in writing and in some spoken contexts) rather than downright ungrammatical. I would take particular exception in this regard to the following "incorrect" sentences, which may be heard quite naturally in my own speech:

9. (p.42) I'm fed up with Bill. Waited for him all afternoon and he never came.
10. (p.60) Oh Mr.Janson, what a pity your wife isn't here! Would have liked to have met her.

In 10, Platt's discussion is of the alternatives *I would like/I would have liked*, although the additional problem of the use of the perfect in *to have met her* passes without comment.

The brevity of some of the explanations means that certain common examples and counter examples are missing. For instance, ch.36 deals with see/watch/look at, although idiomatic counter examples such as *I'm going to see a film/show* are not mentioned.

In ch.28, the incorrect use of prepositions after verbs is handled (e.g. discuss **about/*on*). Only six such problem verbs are listed, although this is a very pervasive feature of EMS. Particularly common, to my mind, is the use of *on* to mean 'on the subject of'. Occasionally this is grammatically required after a verb (e.g. focus on, elaborate on) but in the majority of cases no preposition is needed. I have seen *on* used with a wide variety of verbs, where a simple transitive use was called for (e.g. discuss, stress, emphasise, test, investigate, check, report).

H & H are generally more exhaustive in this respect. For instance, Platt's ch.24 deals with the difference in meaning of alternative verb complementation forms (I remembered to leave! leaving). Platt only discusses the verbs remember and forget, while H & H (p.114-6) list many other verbs which behave in a similar way (e.g. see, regret, need, try, stop, go on).

Having criticised some of Platt's discussions, I must also say that some of them hit the nail on the head. I especially like his explanation (ch.43) of bring/take. Grammar books typically describe the semantic difference as one of 'towards/away from the speaker'. However, this often leads to unsatisfactory and very complicated treatment of examples where the reference point is not the speaker but the hearer, or where the speaker will be at some time in the future. Platt, on the other hand, shifts the emphasis to 'arrival at/departure from a particular place'. *Bring* emphasises arrival; *take* departure.

In summary, Platt's book is rather different in nature from H & H. It deals with verbs (albeit widely differing aspects of verbs), while H & H discuss most linguistic areas. It uses (hypothetical and barely convincing) mini-dialogues, whereas H & H's examples are drawn from observed errors.

H & H also include plenty of practice exercises, absent in Platt. In short, Platt is suitable as a background reference book for teachers (and non-beginner learners) requiring detailed discussion on specific points of EMS usage of verbs. It is not a book which can be easily used by teachers as classroom material (unlike H & H).

References

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