

# Readers in Eighteenth-Century Teaching Grammars<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In the present study I will examine how audience was represented in the title pages and prefaces of twenty-five *teaching* grammars of English. This group of grammar books advocated for a wide audience by covering both schooling and private instruction. An analysis of the discourse of the title pages and prefaces in these English grammars, both of them paratextual elements (Genette 1997), has revealed relevant and fruitful, since these elements present the main text to the reader, thus influencing on its reception. The paratext of eighteenth-century English grammars still remains relatively unexplored, so the research on the prefatory material of these books reported on in this study is timely and will aid to shed light on the intended readership of these books.

**Keywords:** readers, audience, eighteenth-century English grammars, paratext, preface, title page.

## 1. Introduction

During the eighteenth-century, readers were fuelled by “the impetus toward self-improvement through the acquisition of knowledge”, which increased the demand for educational materials (Finkelstein & McCleery 2005: 112-13). These materials were produced for both public education —being educated with other children in school— and private education —being educated at home. Actually, “publication records indicate that instructional books were far better sellers than children’s fiction” (Grenby 2011: 135). English grammar books were also imbued with this impetus and both instructional forms were catered for by the *teaching* grammars, that is, English grammars appealing to a wide audience: anyone who wanted “to learn the language or improve their mastery in it” (Vorlat 2007: 500).

In the present study I will examine who this audience was and how they were represented in the prefatory paratext. The paratext, also known as the threshold to a text, is particularly relevant in this analysis because it comprises those elements that enable “a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public” (Genette 1997: 1). Although Genette’s theory applies mainly to fiction, its validity extends to nonfiction texts since “[t]heir basic function is no different from paratexts in fiction: namely, to persuade people to buy and read the book and to try to influence the way it is received” (Berger 2004: 32). Research on the paratext of eighteenth-century English grammars has been carried out only recently (e.g. Watts 1999; Auer 2008; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008; Rodríguez-Álvarez & Rodríguez-Gil forth.), though their main focus has not been on the

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readers of these books. The present paper will contribute to the studies on this field through the analysis of the most common types of prefatory material in eighteenth-century English grammars: the title page and the preface (Watts 1995: 150).

## 2. Corpus description

The corpus **under** analysis has been retrieved from the *Eighteenth-Century English Grammars* database (ECEG), an online resource conveying annotated bibliographic information of eighteenth-century English grammars and their writers, according to twenty-one fields (Yáñez-Bouza & Rodríguez-Gil 2003). Two of these fields have been used as delimiting parameters to retrieve the corpus under study. The first one is the type of work in which a particular grammar was included. Our corpus includes only the traditional, stand-alone English grammar books. The other field is target audience, and more particularly instruction. In our corpus we have only considered those grammars coded as being directed at a mixed audience, that is at both institutional and private use. Bound by these parameters, the result of our query has yielded twenty-five grammars, listed in Table 1.

<b>Author</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Title</b>
Dyche, Thomas	1720	<i>A Practical Grammar of the English Tongue</i>
Saxon, Samuel	1737	<i>The English Schollar's [sic] Assistant</i>
Anonymous	1745	<i>An Easy Introduction to the English Language</i>
Gough, John and Gough, James	1754	<i>A Practical Grammar of the English Tongue</i>
Martin, Benjamin	1754	<i>An Introduction to the English Language and Learning</i>
Buchanan, James	1762	<i>The British Grammar</i>
Lowth, Robert	1762	<i>A Short Introduction to English Grammar</i>
Buchanan, James	1767	<i>A Regular English Syntax</i>
Bell, John	1769	<i>A Concise and Comprehensive System of English Grammar</i>
Hodgson, Isaac	1770	<i>A Practical English Grammar</i>
Fenning, Daniel	1771	<i>A New Grammar of the English Language</i>
Wood, James	1777	<i>Grammatical Institutions, or a Practical English Grammar</i>
Curtis, Abel	1779	<i>A Compend [sic] of English Grammar</i>
Anonymous	1779	<i>The Only True Guide to English Grammar</i>
Corbet, John	1784	<i>A Concise System of English Grammar</i>
Fell, John	1784	<i>An Essay towards an English Grammar</i>
Knowles, John	1785	<i>Principles of English Grammar</i>
Coote, Charles	1788	<i>Elements of the Grammar of the English Language</i>
Pape, Daniel	1790	<i>A Key to English Grammar</i>
Fogg, Peter Walkden	1792	<i>Elementa Anglicana</i>
Dearborn, Benjamin	1795	<i>The Columbian Grammar</i>
Staniford, Daniel	1797	<i>A Short but Comprehensive Grammar</i>
Burr, Jonathan	1797	<i>A Compendium of English grammar</i>
Fenn, Ellenor	1798a	<i>Parsing Lessons for Young Children</i>

Table 1: Corpus of eighteenth century teaching grammars of English under analysis<sup>2</sup>

Table 1 evinces that male authors clearly outnumber female writers with twenty (87%) and one (4%) representatives respectively; only two (c.9%) authors remain anonymous.<sup>3</sup> Twenty-one (91%) different writers produced one teaching grammar each, while two (c.9%) authors wrote four of these items, namely the grammarian and lexicographer James Buchanan (fl.1753-1773) and the educationalist and children's writer Ellenor Fenn (1744-1813).<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Analysis

In the compiled corpus, audience is represented in the title pages of twenty teaching grammars of English and in the prefaces of twenty-one of these works. If we break down these data, we find that four (16%) grammars included an appeal to audience in their title pages only, while five (20%) of them addressed their readers only in the preface. Sixteen (64%) of these teaching grammars, however, used both the title pages and the prefaces to their works to arouse a sympathetic response in prospect readers.

In terms of chronological distribution, all authors writing their books up to the end of the 1750s appealed to potential readers in both the title pages and the prefaces of their grammar books, as shown in Figure 2. The preface was the preferred prefatory material for such appeal during the next three decades, up to the 1780s. It was only at the turn of the century, in the 1790s, that the tip was balanced in favour of title pages.

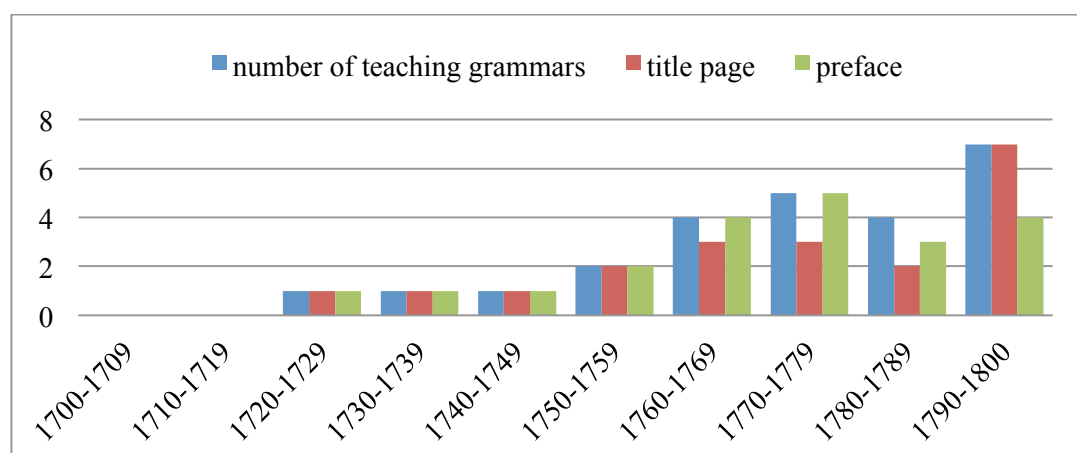


Figure 2: audience in the title pages and prefaces of eighteenth-century teaching grammars of English

#### 3.1. Title-pages

Genette (1997) makes a distinction between the addressee of the text, the reader, and the addressee of the title, the general public. The former is “a person who reads the book *in toto*”,

<sup>2</sup> Full details of the eighteenth-century primary sources can be found in the online version of ECEG.

<sup>3</sup> Alston comments on *The Only True Guide to English Grammar* (1779): “A note inserted in the Philadelphia copy attributes the work to John Mead Ray, but I have not been able to substantiate this” (1965: I, no.365).

<sup>4</sup> These figures in terms of gender and correlation between number of authors and number of grammars concur with the overall trends of eighteenth-century English grammar writers (see Rodríguez-Gil, in prep.).

the latter not only includes people who read the book, at least partially, but also “who participate in its dissemination and therefore in its ‘reception’” (Genette 1997: 75). Title pages served thus an advertising function. In other words, identifying addressees on the title pages was, in fact, a marketing hook to attract a wide audience that might, potentially and hopefully, contribute to the spread and/or promotion of the book.

The nature of the information about the target audience ranged from vague hints to more specific and direct statements in the subtitles of the books. Twelve out of twenty grammarians appealed to specific groups of potential addressees. As expected in English grammars intended for teaching, some of them noted the book’s utility for teachers, schoolmasters or tutors: “Adapted to the use of school, and private tutors” (Knowles 1785); others its value for pupils: “adapted to the capacities of children, and such as are only English scholars” (*The Only True Guide to English Grammar* 1779); and still others for both teachers and pupils: “for the help of the learner. And for a further assistance to teachers” (Saxon 1737). As these teaching grammars were also intended for private teaching, we find appeals to parents and families in, for instance, both of Fenn’s works (1798a, 1798b). Foreigners were also targeted at, like in the title page of *An easy Introduction* (1745) which reads: “for the use of young gentlemen, ladies, and foreigners”. This group of readers constituted an attractive and important share in the market since, by moving to England, they had “to adjust to a new language and culture” and “conform to the mother tongue” (Mitchell 2001: 137) to prove “their loyalty and patriotism to their new home” (Mitchell 2001: 135).

Three other types of information were conveyed in the title pages of these books. Ten of twenty grammar writers pinpointed age in their titles. Some authors only addressed children, like Fenn (1798a), who wrote one of her grammars particularly for young children. For his part, Daniel Staniford (1766-1820) adapted his book “to the capacity of the youth” (1797). Five of twenty grammar writers identified gender. Daniel Pape (1756/7-1807) was the only author to address a male audience solely: “a boy, with a tolerable capacity [...] of some use to gentlemen, who have not had a liberal education” (1790). The remaining authors appealed to both a male and female audience, like Buchanan (1767), who wrote his work “For the use of [...] of private young gentlemen and ladies”. Two authors referred to the geographical scope of their works. The Scottish writer, Buchanan (1762), published his work in London “[f]or the use of the schools of Great Britain and Ireland”. The American author Benjamin Dearborn (1755-1838) (1795) printed his grammar in Boston “for American youth of both sexes”.

### 3.2. Prefaces

Eighteenth-century English grammar books shared an ‘institutionalised’ discourse (Watts 1999: 43) in their prefaces with a shared repertoire of major common topics, among which, “the actual audience of these books [was] another essential part in the description of the scope of the school grammars” (Rodríguez Álvarez & Rodríguez Gil forth.). Twenty-one grammars in our corpus included a preface in their works and supplied information, additional in many cases, about the addressee of the text, delimiting thus the book’s scope.

Among those grammars including prefaces, seven of them (33%) narrowed down the reading public to the actual readers the author had in mind, and fourteen (67%) widened the target audience. Daniel Fenning’s (1715-1771) work is in the former group. The title of his book reads: “for the use, not only of schools, but of private gentlemen” (Fenning 1771: title page), but in its preface he admitted that his grammar was “intended chiefly for the use of English Schools” (Fenning 1771: ix). Fenn (1798a) addressed both parents and teachers in the title of her work, but in the preface we can only find references to young ladies and mothers teaching their children at home: “to assist young Ladies in their attempts to teach their children” (Fenn 1798a: [iii]). By addressing solely a female audience, Fenn followed the steps

of Ellin Devis (1746-1820) (1775), the first grammar writer directing a stand-alone grammar book “solely and specifically” at a female audience (Percy 2003: 49).<sup>5</sup> The reason behind was that ladies were then regarded as “elementary readers” and “second-class readers” (Percy 2003: 49).

As already said, fourteen of the grammars under analysis broadened the intended readership in their prefaces. Five of them did so simply because no information on audience was conveyed in the title pages of their works. The remaining nine grammars widened the information in terms of instructional mode, age, gender and specific purposes their work might serve. Four of these grammars designed their books for school use mainly, albeit they also pointed out their worth as self-study guides. For instance, while Benjamin Martin (bap. 1705, d.1782) hinted at scholars in the title, he also advised it for private instruction in the preface: “adapted to the public Use of Schools, but also to the private Use of young Gentlemen and Ladies in Families” (1754: xxii). Seven grammar writers extended the age group of potential readers in their prefaces. The anonymous author of *The Only True Guide* compiled his work “to enable children to understand the true nature of the English language, and also such grown persons as have not acquired foreign languages” (1779: 6), while in the title page of this work the author only referred to children. Two other authors targeted particularly at adult people in their English grammars. John Gough (1720-1791) & James Gough (1712-1780) referred to them as: “adult Persons of either Sex” (1754: vii) and Buchanan as: “grown Persons” (1767: [vi]). Five grammarians specified or broadened gender groups in the prefaces to their books. John Corbet (fl. 1784), for example, included no information on gender in the title page, while in the preface he addressed “Young Gentleman, Ladies, &c.” (1784: vi). Two specific purposes were accounted for in the prefaces of these teaching grammars of English: business and foreigners. Buchanan (1767: xviii) pointed out the need to learn English for those intended for trade: “Youth who are to be put to Trades [...] ought by all means to learn to write their own Language correctly”. Samuel Saxon (fl. 1737) and John Fell (1735-1797) explicitly addressed foreigners in the prefaces of their works. The former recommended his grammar for boys and girls, young ladies and foreigners (Saxon 1737: iv); the latter expressed his desire that “this book may be useful to those foreigners that wish to learn the English tongue” (Fell 1784: xiii).

#### 4. Conclusions

The analysis of the prefatory material in nonfiction texts has proved fruitful. The information retrieved from the title pages and prefaces of the teaching grammars of English has shed light on the intended readership of these books.

The authors of these grammars had a genuine interest in contributing to the growth of children’s books, but not only. They also, or mainly, wanted to profit from the sales of their books in a “sector where the real money was to be made” (Immel 2010: 742). They thus intended to reach as wide an audience as possible.

As instructional books, they typically addressed both schools and private use. In addition, information regarding age and gender frequently occurred through the repetition of words like “children”, “youth”, “ladies and gentlemen” or “both sexes”. Besides, references to specific purposes and geographical location appeared sparingly either on titles or, more commonly, in the prefaces of these books, widening even more the intended reading public.

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<sup>5</sup> Percy (forth.) has recently rediscovered *The Young Ladies Guide to the Knowledge of the English Tongue* (1715), which precedes Devis’s work in addressing a female readership solely.

In sum, the authors of eighteenth-century teaching grammars of English addressed “all who wish to acquire a critical, as well as grammatical knowledge of the English language”.

To conclude, gaining an understanding of the target readership of eighteenth-century teaching grammars of English will contribute to get a clearer picture of the whole process of book production and reception. More general studies on the reading public of eighteenth-century English grammars would allow for comparing and contrasting the results in this small-scale research with those from a wider corpus of eighteenth-century English grammars, but that will be a project for the future.

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