

# Form vs. Meaning : Case and Tense in English Grammar 1586–1801\*

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## **Introduction**

The starting point for my paper is John Wallis, whose English grammar (1st ed., 1653) I have been studying for a fairly long time (cf. Miyawaki 2001, 2004, 2005). Wallis's grammar has been praised by many modern commentators for liberating English from the yoke of Latin grammar (e.g., Funke 1941 : 38, 66 ; Poldauf 1948 : 80, 82 ; Padley 1985 : 191). His refusal to force the vernacular into the Latin mould finds its typical expression in his declaration that English nouns have neither gender nor case, and that English verbs have only two tenses, *present* and *past*, and no moods at all. When he denies gender, case, and mood to English, and recognises only two tenses, he is establishing the presence or absence of these grammatical categories purely on formal grounds ; i.e., there are only two tenses in English because verbs in English have only two morphologically distinct forms for tense ; e.g., *burn* and *burned*. Commentators have seen in Wallis a 'modern approach', not simply because he employs a formal criterion, but also because he applies it consistently throughout his treatment of all grammatical categories. The consistent application of criteria is certainly a virtue of modern scholarship.

Seeing the way Wallis deals with grammatical categories, I came to be interested in examining what kind of criteria other English grammarians employ, and how consistently they apply those criteria. In this paper, I propose to take up case and tense as representative categories of the noun and verb respectively, and examine the different ways in which these categories are treated in 50 English grammars published between 1586 and 1801 (see the list in the References). Alston's bibliography, Vol. I (1974 [1965]), which covers English grammars published before 1800, lists about 200 separate treatises, apart from different editions and unlocated works. Thus the 50 grammars under examination constitute a quarter of all the treatises potentially available for research. As for the criteria in dealing with case and tense, I broadly distinguish two sorts: *formal* criterion and *semantic* criterion. Since the terms *formal* and *semantic* are used in different ways by different linguists, I need to specify what I mean by them. I use the word *formal* quite straightforwardly, in the limited sense of *morphological*. On the other hand, I use the word *semantic* in a rather broad sense, covering syntactic as well as semantic functions and even extralinguistic notions like the division of time into *present*, *past*, and *future*. Thus if a grammarian says that English nouns have two cases because they have two morphologically distinct forms (e.g., *master* and *master's*), the grammarian is using a formal criterion. In contrast, if a grammarian says that the prepositional phrase *to the master* is a dative case in English because it is semantically or functionally equivalent to the Latin dative *magistrō*, the grammarian is employing a semantic criterion.

Logically speaking, formal and semantic criteria can be combined in

four ways in the treatment of case and tense (Table 1).

**Table 1 Four Combinations of Formal and Semantic Criteria (1)**

	CASE	TENSE
Type I	Semantic criterion	Semantic criterion
Type II	Formal criterion	Formal criterion
Type III	Formal criterion	Semantic criterion
Type IV	Semantic criterion	Formal criterion

In the first place, one can treat both case and tense in semantic terms. Secondly, one can deal with both case and tense in formal terms. Thirdly, one can apply a formal criterion to case, but a semantic criterion to tense. Fourthly, one can do the other way round, employing a semantic criterion for case, but a formal criterion for tense. I shall refer to these four combinations as Types I, II, III, and IV, respectively.

It should be noted, however, that not all grammarians are explicit about their criteria. Therefore, I deduce their criteria from their actual practice. As for the category of case, if a grammarian recognises only two or fewer cases, I take it that the grammarian is applying a formal criterion. On the other hand, if a grammarian recognises more than two cases, I presume that the grammarian is employing a semantic criterion. As for the category of tense, if a grammarian recognises only two tenses, I take it that the grammarian is applying a formal criterion. On the other hand, if a grammarian recognises more than two tenses, I presume that the grammarian is employing a semantic criterion. Thus the four types of criterial combinations I have proposed can be represented also in terms of the number of cases and tenses recognised by grammarians (Table 2).

**Table 2 Four Combinations of Formal and Semantic Criteria (2)**

	CASE	TENSE
Type I	3-6 cases	3-12 tenses
Type II	0-2 cases	2 tenses
Type III	0-2 cases	3-12 tenses
Type IV	3-6 cases	2 tenses

I will look at each of these types in some detail in the following sections.

### **Type I (Case : semantic criterion - Tense : semantic criterion)**

To Type I belong those grammarians who deal with both case and tense in semantic terms. Of the 50 grammatical treatises I have examined, 21 are of this type (Table 3).

**Table 3 Type I (Case : semantic criterion - Tense : semantic criterion) : 21 instances**

Year	Author	Case	Tense
1586	Bullokar	5	5
1617	Hume	6	5
1619	Gill	6	5
1646	Poole	6	5
1671	Lye	6	5
1700	Lane	6	5
1712	Maittaire	6	6
1728	Entick	6	5
1731	Duncan	6	6
1733	[Anon.] English Accidence	6	6
1735	Collyer	6	4
1737	Saxon	6	3
1748	Martin	6	6

Year	Author	Case	Tense
1751	Dilworth	6	6
1765	Ward	6	6
1772	Bayly	6	5
1775	Wynne	6	7
1785	Ussher	3	5
1795	Postlethwaite	4	12
1798	Sedger	3	9
1801	Dalton	3	12

Chronologically, this is the earliest type, including the first English grammar by William Bullokar (1586). Early English grammarians did not start from scratch, but had inherited the tradition of Latin grammar. Thus when they set themselves to the task of writing an English grammar, they had to respond to the Latin tradition in some way or other. Many grammarians adopted Latin grammar as the framework within which to describe English, and accordingly mapped onto their vernacular most of the categories as given in Latin grammar. It is obvious that, in so doing, they had to draw on semantic criteria, because English and Latin are fundamentally different in their overt formal structures.

To turn to the categories *case* and *tense*, the grammarians of this type recognise more or less the same number of these categories for English as found in Latin, on the grounds that one can find in English semantic or functional equivalents to the inflected case and tense forms of Latin. A typical way of treating case to be seen among these grammarians goes like this : 'Nouns have six cases, *nominative*, *genitive*, *dative*, *accusative*, *vocative*, and *ablative*. All these cases but the genitive are indicated either by the position of the noun in a sentence

or by a preposition before the noun'. Hence prepositions are often called 'signs of case'. As for the category of tense, a typical way of treating it goes like this : 'Verbs have five tenses, *present*, *imperfect*, *perfect*, *pluperfect*, and *future*. The present tense refers to the present time, and is indicated by the verb itself, e.g., *love*. The imperfect tense refers to an event that was going on in the past, and is indicated by the ending *-ed*, e.g., *loved*. The perfect tense refers to an event that was completed in the past, and is indicated by the auxiliary verb *have* and the past participle, e.g., *have loved*. The pluperfect tense refers to an event that had been completed before some other past event, and is indicated by the auxiliary verb *had* and the past participle, e.g., *had loved*. The future tense refers to the time to come, and is indicated by the auxiliary verb *shall* or *will* and the infinitive, e.g., *shall* or *will love*'. Hence auxiliary verbs like *have*, *shall*, *will* are often called 'signs of tense'.

Obviously, I am giving a rather oversimplified picture here. Not all the grammarians I have grouped into this type recognise the same six cases or the same five tenses. But all these grammarians at least have it in common that they recognise more than two cases for nouns and more than two tenses for verbs, i.e., more cases and tenses than are overtly marked by inflections.

### **Type II (Case : formal criterion - Tense : formal criterion)**

To Type II belong those grammarians who deal with both case and tense in formal terms. Of the 50 English grammarians under investigation, only 4 are of this type ; the paucity of instances may be emphasised (Table 4).

**Table 4 Type II (Case : formal criterion – Tense : formal criterion) : 4 instances**

Year	Author	Case	Tense
1653	Wallis	0	2
1693	Aickin	0	2
1761	Priestley	2	2
1777	Harrison	2	2

John Wallis (1653) is the first grammarian to react consciously against the then dominant practice of transferring almost all the categories of Latin grammar to English. He is quite explicit about his new approach : “I decided to employ a completely new method, which has its basis not, as is customary, in the structure of the Latin language but in the characteristic structure of our own” (Kemp’s translation 1972 : 111). Accordingly, Wallis’s criterion in establishing grammatical categories is whether they are overtly marked in the formal structure of the English language. Applying this criterion to the actually observed phenomena of English, he comes to the conclusion that “there is no reason at all for introducing a collection of cases, genders, moods and tenses which are artificial and wholly inappropriate, and for which there is no need and no basis in the language itself” (113). Wallis does not recognise any case at all, because nouns in English do not have any inflections for case. He does not regard even the *noun* + *-’s* form like *man’s* as a case, treating such forms as possessive adjectives. In like vein, Wallis recognises only two tenses, *present* and *past*, because verbs in English have only two morphologically distinct forms for tense ; e.g., *burn* and *burned*.

Joseph Priestley (1761) is also very clear about his formal criterion. He defines cases as “those changes in the terminations of nouns which

serve to express their relation to other words" (4), and accordingly recognises only two cases, *nominative* and *genitive* (e.g., *horse* and *horse's*). Similarly, he establishes the category of tense on the basis of the "changes of termination" (13) of verbs, and accordingly recognises only two tenses, *present* and *past* (e.g., *love* and *loved*). In the second edition (1768) of his grammar, Priestley adds an unequivocal statement of his formalism, where he says with regard to his denial of a future tense: "we have no more business with a *future tense* in our language, than we have with the whole system of Latin moods and tenses; because we have no **modification** of our verbs to correspond to it. [...] The only natural rule for the use of technical terms to express time, &c. is to apply them to distinguish the different **modifications** of words" (vii–viii; bold added for emphasis).

The other two grammars I have classified under this type are Aickin (1693) and Harrison (1777). Like Wallis, or presumably following Wallis, Aickin recognises no case for nouns and only two tenses for verbs. Harrison is similar to Priestley, recognising two cases and two tenses. Both Aickin's and Harrison's grammars are of such an elementary nature that they do not offer any theoretical justification for their treatment.

### **Type III (Case : formal criterion – Tense : semantic criterion)**

To Type III belong those grammarians who deal with case in formal terms, but tense in semantic terms. Of the 50 grammatical treatises I have investigated, 25 are of this type; this is the largest number among the four types (Table 5).

**Table 5 Type III (Case : formal criterion – Tense : semantic criterion) : 25 instances**

Year	Author	Case	Tense
1594	Greaves	0	6
1634	Butler	2	5
1640	Jonson	2	6
1654	Wharton	0	5
1685	Cooper	0	12
1688	Miege	1	6
1711	Gildon and Brightland	0	6
1711	Greenwood	1	6
1724	Jones	0	6
1737	Lowe	0	4
1746	Kirkby	0	6
1750	Fisher	1	3
1754	Farro	0	6
1754	Gough	0	3
1755	Johnson	1	6
1762	Buchanan	1	5
1762	Lowth	2	9
1763	Ash	2	5
1771	Fenning	2	6
1780	Williams	1	6
1784	Fell	2	6
1784	Webster	2	7
1788	Coote	2	6
1792	Fogg	2	12
1795	Murray	2	6

The practice of reducing the number of cases to two or less on formal grounds began very early, already with Paul Greaves (1594), the second English grammar after Bullokar's. Greaves denies the category

of case to English by not treating it at all. He was a follower of Petrus Ramus (1515–1572), and presumably had in mind Ramus’s formal definition of case as “a special termination of the noun” (Vorlat 1975 : 149). On the other hand, Greaves recognises six tenses for verbs, one present, three pasts, and two futures, though not all these tenses are overtly marked by inflections.

Charles Butler (1634) recognises two cases, *nominative* and *genitive* (e.g., *man* and *man’s*) on formal grounds, but when he addresses the category of tense, he does not hesitate at all in recognising the same five tenses for English as given in traditional Latin grammar. Similarly, Guy Miège (1688) defines case in formal terms : “[The] Distinction of Cases proceeds from the variable Termination of one and the same Noun” (33), and accordingly recognises only the genitive (e.g., *God’s*) for English. On the other hand, he does not confine the category of tense to the two morphologically differentiated forms of a single verb, but recognises as many as six tenses, adding that some of them are formed periphrastically, with the help of auxiliary verbs.

Thus the grammarians I have grouped into this type are not applying a single criterion consistently to both case and tense. However, about two-thirds of them seem to be aware that they are applying different criteria to case and tense. 15 out of the 25 grammarians of this type note, with varying degrees of emphasis, that, strictly speaking, English verbs have only two tenses, though, in the final analysis, they recognise five or six tenses. Dr Johnson (1755), for instance, clearly states : “Verbs have only two tenses inflected in their terminations, the present, and simple preterite ; the other tenses are compounded of the auxiliary verbs *have, shall, will, let, may, can,* and the infinitive

of the active or neuter verb” (b1v). It is interesting to notice that only two out of the 21 grammarians of Type I (i.e., those who apply a semantic criterion to both case and tense) are making this kind of concession. Thus it may be said that many of the grammarians of Type III are fairly aware of the distinction between form and meaning, and that they are deliberately choosing to adopt different criteria for case and tense, rather than blindly mingling formal and semantic criteria.

#### **Type IV (Case : semantic criterion – Tense : formal criterion)**

Type IV refers to the combination of a semantic treatment of case and a formal treatment of tense. Although this combination is certainly a logical possibility, yet none of the 50 English grammars under examination falls into this type. It may be recalled that the reverse combination, i.e., the combination of a formal treatment of case and a semantic treatment of tense (Type III), is represented by the largest number of instances. This asymmetry also suggests that many of those grammarians who deal with case in formal terms and tense in semantic terms have chosen to do so, rather than adopted different criteria haphazardly.

Michael (1970 : 515) remarks that “there was certainly no greater obstacle to grammatical advance than that persistent confusion between form and meaning which complicated the use of every category”. I admit some truth in Michael’s judgement, but if most of the grammarians before 1800 had been totally confused about the distinction between form and meaning, there could be one or two instances of what I call Type IV even among the limited number of treatises I have examined.

## Conclusion

The results of my research are represented in Table 6.

**Table 6 Four Types of the Treatment of Case and Tense**

	CASE	TENSE	Instances
Type I	Semantic criterion : 3-6 cases	Semantic criterion : 3-12 tenses	21
Type II	Formal criterion : 0-2 cases	Formal criterion : 2 tenses	4
Type III	Formal criterion : 0-2 cases	Semantic criterion : 3-12 tenses	25
Type IV	Semantic criterion : 3-6 cases	Formal criterion : 2 tenses	0

As I said at the outset, my starting point was John Wallis, who applied a formal criterion consistently to both case and tense. As many commentators have said that Wallis exerted a great influence on subsequent grammarians (cf. Kemp 1972 : 67-70), my initial expectation was that I would find a sizable number of grammarians who followed Wallis in their treatment of these grammatical categories. But, in fact, I was able to find only four instances of the Wallis type among the 50 grammarians under investigation. The other 46 grammarians are divided roughly evenly into Type I and Type III. I was not able to find any instance of Type IV. Each of the three types with varying numbers of instances seems to have its own rationale.

The grammarians of Type I are consistent in the application of their criteria, in the sense that they treat both case and tense in semantic terms. However, most of them are not clear about their own criteria, but rather it seems that they couldn't but draw on semantic criteria because they wanted to transfer virtually all Latin categories to English with few modifications. In fact, many of them are deliberately

adopting the Latin model because they want their English grammars to serve not only as such, but also as an introduction to the study of Latin grammar. For example, the aim of Joshua Poole's grammar (1646) is apparent in its very title : *The English Accidence : Or, a short, plaine, and easie way, for the more speedy attaining to the Latine tongue, by the help of the English*. I would call this attitude a 'pedagogical universalism'.

The grammarians of Type II are consistent in the application of a formal criterion to both case and tense. In particular, Wallis's and Priestley's methodological emphasis on the overt formal structure of English looks quite 'modern' and 'scientific'. In fact, one commentator has hailed Wallis as one of "the roots of modern structural descriptivism" (Constantinescu 1974 : 308). I do not think it is a coincidence that both Wallis and Priestley were not merely grammarians, but 'scientists' in the strict sense of the word ; Wallis was a mathematician, and Priestley was a chemist as well as a theologian. In the preface to his English grammar, Priestley declares : "*Grammar* may be compared to a treatise of *Natural Philosophy* [i.e., natural science] ; the one consisting of observations on the various changes, combinations, and mutual affections of words ; and the other of the parts of nature" (1761 : vi). Thus the formalism of Wallis and Priestley may be said to be based on a 'scientific empiricism'.

The grammarians of Type III are not consistent in the application of their criteria, in that they deal with case in formal terms, but tense in semantic terms. But, as I have already pointed out, it seems that many of them have deliberately chosen different criteria for these categories. Thus there may be some ways in which one can see their

choice of criteria as ‘coherent’, if not consistent. As I have said, many grammarians of this type explicitly admit that, strictly speaking, English verbs have only two tenses, *present* and *past*. This means that they are aware that if they applied a purely formal criterion, they could identify no more than two tenses. In their view, however, the extralinguistic notions of time and time-distinction are so integrally related to their conception of the verb that presumably they have found it necessary, or at least practical, to override the limitations imposed by the overt structure of verb forms and recognise as many tenses as they think the notional division of time demands. James Greenwood (1711), for example, admits that “in *English* [...] we have properly but Two [tenses]”, but prefers to define tense in semantic terms as “the distinguishing of a Thing *done*, from a Thing *not done*”, and goes on to say that “the natural and proper Number [of tenses] is three because all *Time* is either *past*, *present* or *to come*” (113). Greenwood then subdivides each of these three basic tenses into two in terms of the aspectual distinction between completion and incompleteness, thereby recognising six tenses altogether. Thus the rationale of this type of grammarians may be called a ‘practical eclecticism’.

The rationales for these types of treatment of case and tense are summarised in Table 7.

**Table 7 Rationales for Types I, II, and III**

Type	Rationale
Type I	pedagogical universalism
Type II	scientific empiricism
Type III	practical eclecticism

The treatment of grammatical categories such as case and tense by

English grammarians before 1800 has been described by a number of scholars. But they have tended to treat each category separately, and not to pay sufficient attention to whether each individual grammarian maintained a certain criterion throughout or applied different criteria to different categories. I have tried to help fill this gap by taking up case and tense as correlative parameters that indicate the different ways in which grammarians applied formal and/or semantic criteria to their description of grammatical categories in English.

\*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 21st Henry Sweet Society Colloquium, Jesus College, Oxford, 13–16 September 2004.

## REFERENCES

### Chronological List of the 50 English Grammars Examined

Year	Author	Title
1586	Bullockar, William.	<i>Pamphlet for Grammar. [Bref Grammar for English.]</i>
1594	Greaves, Paul.	<i>Grammatica Anglicana.</i>
1617	Hume, Alexander.	<i>Of the Orthographie and Congruitie of the Britan Tongue.</i>
1619	Gill, Alexander.	<i>Logonomia Anglica.</i>
1634	Butler, Charles.	<i>The English Grammar.</i>
1640	Jonson, Ben.	<i>The English Grammar.</i>
1646	Poole, Joshua.	<i>The English Accidence.</i>
1653	Wallis, John.	<i>Grammatica Lingua Anglicana.</i>
1654	Wharton, Jeremiah.	<i>The English Grammar.</i>
1671	Lye, Thomas.	<i>The Child's Delight.</i>

- 1685 Cooper, Christopher. *Grammatica Linguæ Anglicanæ.*
- 1688 Miege, Guy. *The English Grammar.*
- 1693 Aickin, Joseph. *The English Grammar.*
- 1700 Lane, A. *A Key to the Art of Letters.*
- 1711 Gildon, Ch. & J. Brightland. *A Grammar of the English Tongue.*
- 1711 Greenwood, James. *An Essay towards a Practical English Grammar.*
- 1712 Maittaire, Michael. *The English Grammar.*
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- 1735 Collyer, John. *The General Principles of Grammar.*
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