

Academic Article

English Intransitives with Objects: An Elusive Grammar Point in Grammar Books

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Abstract

Some English intransitive verbs, such as *live*, *smile*, *die*, and *dream*, can actually take an object. A survey of many EFL grammar books at the advanced level found the lack of coverage of this grammar point amongst most of those grammar books. Moreover, an examination of those grammar books that deal with it found the lack of a clear description of this class of verbs. These show a gap between linguistic literature and EFL grammar books. To address this gap, this article argues for the need for the inclusion of a precise description of this verb class in grammar books. Capitalizing on data from a corpus and an online dictionary, this article also seeks to present a clear pedagogical account of these intransitive verbs that is in line with contemporary issues in grammar pedagogy. The account could serve as a model for the presentation of this elusive grammar point in teaching materials.

Keywords: *Intransitive verbs, Cognate object constructions, Pedagogical grammar, Grammar books*

Received: March 21, 2021 **Revised** May 31, 2021 **Accepted** June 2, 2021

Introduction

When one looks over the content of EFL grammar books, one will find that they generally adhere to a strict separation between intransitive and transitive verbs. However, some English intransitive verbs are idiosyncratic in the sense that they can actually take an object. The construction in which intransitive verbs can take an object is known as the cognate object construction. Given this idiosyncrasy, this grammar point might be excluded from learners' grammar books.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it aims to survey popular EFL grammar books to find out whether they include the cognate object construction, and – if it is presented at all – how it is presented. Second, this article aims to argue that this topic should be covered in grammar books and explained in line with contemporary issues in applied linguistics literature. Overall, this article attempts to bridge the gap between linguistic research and learners' grammar books. The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The

description of this construction is given in the next section. After that, a survey of selected popular grammar books with regard to the construction under investigation is provided. It is found that this construction is largely ignored. The article then argues in favour of incorporating this construction in grammar books, showing how it can be presented in conformity with current issues in applied linguistics. The final section is a conclusion.

Delineating English Cognate Object Constructions

Before delving into the survey, it is necessary to delineate this less common type of English construction. The cognate object construction (henceforth COC) has been dealt with in major grammar reference books, and it has also generated considerable attention and discussion in linguistic literature. Well-known studies on English COCs include Höche (2009), Jones (1988), Macfarland (1995), and Massam (1990). In this section, the COC is initially explored through major English grammar reference books. Details that might not be obvious or available in these reference books are subsequently expanded upon with some discussions from linguistic literature, so as to paint a clearer picture of the COC.

English reference grammars that deal with COCs are Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985) and Huddleston & Pullum (2002), of which the description of this topic will be presented here respectively. Examples given in (1) are taken from *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* by Quirk et al. (1985, p. 750):

- 1 a They fought a clean fight.
- b He breathed his last breath.
- c He died a miserable death.

All examples in (1) contains what is universally called a “cognate object.” According to Quirk et al. (1985, p. 750):

A cognate object ... refers to an event indicated by the verb.... In this type of object, the noun head is semantically and often morphologically related to the verb. The object can therefore not be considered a participant. Its semantic function is to repeat, wholly or partially, the meaning of the verb. Most cognate objects tend to convey a rather orotund style. The noun is generally modified. The verb and the object are then equivalent to the verb and a corresponding adverbial:

They fought *a clean* fight. They fought *cleanly*.

In Huddleston and Pullum’s reference work *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, a similar description is offered as follows:

Implied manner: the cognate object construction

- a. *She fought a heroic fight.* b. *He died a long and agonising death.*

A cognate object is one where the head noun is a nominalisation of the verb: *fight* and *death* are nominalisations of the verbs *fight* and *die*. As the head noun itself is already implied by the verb it does not normally occur on its own: **He died a death*. Rather, the noun is modified in some way, as by the adjectives in these examples. And these adjectives typically describe the process expressed in the clause and thus have the same kind of function as a manner adverb. Thus [example (a)] means essentially the same as *She fought heroically*; [example (b)] likewise describes the manner of his dying but in this case there is no adverb *longly* available to express the same meaning in a manner adjunct.

(Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 673)

From these reference grammars, English COCs can be summarized as having the following attributes in (2):

- 2 a It contains a noun phrase that is basically a nominalization of its verb stem or at least has
- a a related meaning to that of its verb – the so-called cognate object (for example, *die – death, live – life, sing – song*).
 - b The head noun usually requires an adjective as its modifier.
 - c Semantically, the adjective of a head noun is construed as congruent with the derived manner adverb, which modifies the (intransitive) verb.

Considering the descriptions given in the reference books and the summary given above, there are a few points to elaborate here. First, regarding points (a) and (b), it should be pointed out that there are two types of object in COCs. For most verbs, they only allow derived nominalizations as their cognate objects. In this case, they are real cognate objects. However, a few verbs can collocate with a wider range of nouns provided that those nouns are hyponymic members of their cognate objects. The verb *sing* is a case in point: the cognate object *song* can be replaced by other nouns (i.e., by non-cognate objects). Consider the contrast in the sentences below:

- | | |
|--|-----------------------|
| 3 a He died a *(horrible) death. | (real cognate object) |
| b He danced an *(amazing) dance. | (real cognate object) |
| 4 a *He died a (horrible) assassination/suicide. | (non-cognate object) |
| b He danced a jig/a tango/a waltz. | (non-cognate object) |
| 5 He sang a hymn/karaoke. | (non-cognate object) |

As seen here, *die* belongs to the type of verb that restricts its choice of object only to real cognate object (as in (3a) and (4a)), while *dance* can take a wider range of nouns as its object (as in (3b) and (4b)). In (4b) the words *jig*, *tango*, and *waltz* are all hyponyms of dance (i.e., they all refer to types of dance), hence their compatibility with the verb. In contrast, in (4a) the words *assassination* and *suicide* both refer to types of killing, not types of death. In other words, they are not a derived nominalization of the verb *die*; they are therefore unacceptable. Also note that real cognate objects must be modified by an adjective or other types of modifier, otherwise COCs would be unacceptable, as illustrated by the examples in (3). There is no point in simply duplicating the meaning of the verb. Thus, the modifiers are needed to provide informative information for the sentences. The modifiers in (3) specify a particular kind of death and dance. As for non-cognate objects, modification of the object is just optional, as in *He sang a (beautiful) hymn*. Without an adjective, the object is still adequately informative as it inherently specifies a subtype of his singing. Note that this explanation will be necessary when it comes to providing a pedagogical account.

Second, it must be noted that point (c) in the summary is not a defining characteristic of COCs. As seen from their quotation above, Huddleston and Pullum themselves admit that “there is no adverb *longly* available to express the same meaning in a manner adjunct,” as they refer to their own example “*He died a long and agonising death.*” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 673). Similarly, the interpretation involving a manner adverb is not obtainable in a sentence such as *Joe lives a life of drudgery*. Thus, the semantic relationship that must hold between the verb and the cognate object would be better accounted for by the above-mentioned idea that the cognate object specifies a type/subtype of the action or event denoted by the verb. In order to identify a particular type of action/event, modification of the object is then necessary.

Third, regarding the verbs that can occur in COCs, Kim & Lim (2012) selected 17 intransitive verbs that were the most frequently mentioned in the literature, and then performed a corpus analysis, using the data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Of all the 12,282 tokens they found from the corpus, only ten verbs appeared in their data, and they are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1. *Frequencies of the Verbs in COCs from COCA*

verb	live	sing	smile	die	dream	laugh	dance	sleep	grin	sigh
frequency	6899	3371	639	529	238	199	120	86	77	28

(adapted from Kim and Lee, 2012, p. 42)

In their corpus search, *live*, *sing*, and *smile* re the top three verbs with the highest frequencies. Surprisingly, Kim and Lee did not include the verb *fight* in their list, although it is also one of the most frequently mentioned

verbs in the literature, and in fact, it occurs in both Quirk et al.'s and Huddleston and Pullum's reference books. Note that amongst these verbs, four of them can also collocate with non-cognate objects, namely *sing*, *dream*, *dance*, and *fight*. Recall that non-cognate objects need not have any modification.

Since the COC presents a marked construction, it is perhaps a good idea to further validate the frequency of these verbs. The source that is most relevant to EFL learners is definitely a good learner's dictionary; presumably, anything with low or infrequent usage is unlikely to appear in a learner's dictionary. With the list of verbs from Kim and Lim (plus the verb *fight*), instances of cognate objects with these 11 verbs were searched for through the online version of *Oxford Learner's Dictionary (OLD)*.

After careful scrutiny in the dictionary entries, 10 of the 11 verbs were found to be used with cognate objects, with *sigh* being the odd one out (i.e., the entry of *sigh* showed no instances of the COC). In *OLD* entries, the label transitive is indicated if these verbs are followed by objects, and in most cases, the verbs and their objects are clearly spelled out in words with examples provided, as illustrated below.¹

6 fight

[intransitive, transitive] to take part in a war or battle against an enemy

- to **fight a war/battle**
- *The country fought several wars against its neighbours.*

7 smile

[transitive, no passive] **smile something** to give a smile of a particular type

- to *smile a small smile*
- *She smiled a smile of dry amusement.*

The fact that almost all of these verbs (except *sigh*) appear in *OLD* entries clearly mirrors the list of verbs provided by Kim and Lim. Note that *sigh* has the lowest frequency on their list. Given all the information presented here, it would be useful for pedagogic use to group these verbs together. Hence, here is a list of verbs frequently found in COCs: *live*, *sing*, *smile*, *die*, *dream*, *laugh*, *sleep*, *grin*, *dance*, *fight*².

¹ The examples of the verbs *dream*, *laugh*, and *sleep* in COCs are not provided in their verb entries, but they can be found in their respective noun entries.

² As mentioned earlier, the verb *fight* is also one of the most frequently cited verbs in the literature; therefore, it is included in the table. Additionally, unlike *sigh*, examples of *fight* with cognate objects can be found in *OLD*.

Survey of COCs in Grammar books

To examine the coverage of the COC in EFL teaching materials, a survey of well-known EFL grammar books was conducted. Following the survey, treatments of the COC in these publications (if present) were explored. Altogether, 12 books were selected for scrutiny, with publication dates ranging from 2008 to 2019. Note that the survey only covered books at the advanced level (either CEFR level C1 or C1/C2). Being a marked construction, the COC is highly unlikely to appear at lower levels. The table below shows whether the COC is covered in each book. The books are grouped by publisher. A tick indicates that this grammatical point is present, and a cross indicates its absence.

Table 2. *Survey Results of the Coverage of COCs in Learners' Grammar Books*

Book title	Coverage of COCs
Oxford University Press	
1 Oxford Practice Grammar: Advanced (2019)	✓
2 Oxford English Grammar Course: Advanced (2011)	×
3 Elements of Success 4 (2016)	×
Cambridge University Press	
4 Advanced Grammar in Use (2013)	×
5 Active Grammar Level 3 (2011)	✓
Pearson/Longman	
6 Understanding and Using English Grammar (2016)	×
7 MyGrammarLab: Advanced (2012)	×
8 Next Generation Grammar 4 (2013)	×
9 Focus on Grammar 5 (2012)	×
Macmillan	
10 Macmillan English Grammar in Context: Advanced (2008)	×
11 Destination: Grammar and Vocabulary C1&C2 (2008)	×
Collins	
12 Work on your Grammar: Advanced (2013)	×

Of all 12 books, only 2 books deal with COCs: *Oxford Practice Grammar: Advanced* and *Active Grammar Level 3*. The following is how the COC is treated in these two books.

In *Active Grammar Level 3* (p. 125):

Some verbs, e.g. *go*, *cry*, *walk* and *live*, are normally intransitive but can have objects in idioms and fixed collocations.

<i>go the extra mile</i>	<i>die a death</i>
<i>go the whole hog</i>	<i>run / walk / swim, etc (+a distance)</i>
<i>walk a dog</i>	<i>speak a language</i>
<i>live (a) life</i>	<i>want / live / sleep (+ a time)</i>

*When I ask her for help, she always **goes the extra mile** and does more than she needs to.*

*I **walk my dog** every evening.*

In *Oxford Practice Grammar: Advanced* (p. 6):

There are some verbs, such as *die* or *smile*, that we usually use without an object [1] but which can also be used with one particular object [2].

1. Miss Reynolds **smiled** and said she was quite certain that none of us would ever **die**.
2. Nina **smiled** her bright smile. She seemed unconcerned that she might **die** a painful death.

Others include: *dance*, *dream*, *laugh*, *live*, *sigh*.

In *Active Grammar*, verbs that can occur in COCs are simply treated in the same way as other verbs (i.e., as intransitives followed by different types of noun). Notice that some of the nouns that follow these verbs are not cognate objects in the sense that is described above, and some are used as set phrases. Furthermore, no other explanation is given, nor are there any examples to illustrate how the verbs *die* and *live* are used in sentences. In *Oxford Practice Grammar*, a very short description of this grammar point is given, along with examples of verbs and sample sentences. However, no explanation is offered with respect to the object of these verbs.

The survey here makes one thing very clear: there is a gap between linguistic literature and EFL grammar books. Corpus-based studies such as Höche (2009) and Kim & Lee (2012) have shown how COCs are used in actuality. Despite this, a preponderance of grammar books fails to take on board the insights from linguistic literature, including those from the most authoritative and influential descriptive English grammars (Quirk et al., 1985; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Perhaps, grammar book writers consider it a peripheral structure that is not worth mentioning, but a good learner's dictionary like *OLD* seems to prove otherwise. Even books that touch on COCs fail to pinpoint the exact attributes of the construction. Due to this gap, EFL learners could have

difficulty recognizing COCs. In fact, according to Park (2008) and Min (2013), Korean learners of English rejected the grammaticality of English COCs.³ This indicated that the learners were unacquainted with this construction.

Towards a More Adequate Description of COCs in Grammar books

Linguistic literature has long shown that English does not make a sharp distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs. In between there are classes of verbs that blur the boundary; among them are verbs that occur in COCs. However, the findings in the survey clearly suggest a lack of interest in the description of COCs among grammar book writers. To prevent confusion on the part of learners, it is then necessary to bring to their attention this class of intransitive verbs (specifically at the advanced level). To offer an adequate description, the following issues are taken into consideration.

First, as mentioned earlier, most grammar books seem to disregard important insights from linguistic literature. This is unfortunate because linguistic research, especially corpus-informed research can provide grammar books with a wealth of useful information that can in turn contribute to learners' mastering grammar (Meunier & Reppen, 2015). One clear insight that has emerged from corpus linguistic research involves the intimate interplay between lexis and grammar. Given this interplay, Römer (2005, p. 140) argued that "if we are aiming at more adequate descriptions of language phenomena, we need a truly lexical grammar" approach, whereby lexis plays a significant part in grammar. To this end, Römer (2005) also argued for a corpus-informed approach to pedagogical language descriptions. Given the interaction between words and grammar, Tognini-Bonelli (2001, p. 33) also remarked that corpus-driven grammar "shows very clearly that any grammatical structure restricts the lexis that occurs in it." This is certainly true for COCs. The corpus data (presented in the second section) can help identify a handful of verbs that are most frequent in COCs. The list of verbs would help learners better recognize COCs. Indeed, as Römer (2005) argues, adopting a corpus-informed approach alongside a lexical grammar approach proves to be a boon for grammar books. See also McCarthy (2015) for the same line of argument regarding grammar instruction. In a nutshell, grammar book writers can benefit a great deal from corpus-informed studies.

Second, as VanPatten, Williams, & Rott (2004) stressed, establishing connections between form and meaning has a pivotal role in language acquisition. Establishing this connection should be relatively straightforward for a pedagogical account of COCs. Simply put, the description must emphasize the idea that a few intransitive verbs can take an object only if it provides informative information specifying the type or subtype of the event/action denoted by the verb. Equally important is the description that includes both acceptable

³ In Park's research, there were mixed results regarding the grammaticality of English COCs amongst the learners. Some of the sentences are judged grammatical, while others are not.

and unacceptable sentences to show a complete contrast between those that are informative and those that are not.

Third, given the space constraint in many books, writers and editors understandably need to be selective as to what grammar points to include (or exclude) in their books. However, recall from the previous section that research has shown that L2 learners of English fail to accept the grammaticality of COCs. Therefore, this grammar point, which has been proven to cause confusion among learners, should be worthy of attention. Furthermore, there are studies on L2 learner writing that show that the ability to use certain complex grammatical structures correlate with learners' successful exam results and progress across different levels of L2 development (see McCarthy (2015) and citations therein). In connection with this, McCarthy argues that a good and progressive grammar syllabus should, among other things, enable learners "to communicate at a more sophisticated level" (2015, p. 90). Clearly, knowledge of COCs can be an instance that helps learners progress from intermediate to advanced level of proficiency. Indeed, good grammar books should seek to help learners expand their grammatical repertoire. Moreover, in actuality, many EFL grammar books already supply learners with a number of lists; accordingly, it would do them no harm to learn just another small list of verbs. Regarding the space constraint in books, it will become clear below that an account of COCs would not actually need too much space, nor would it require much elaboration. Considering all these issues, then incorporating COCs in grammar books should not be problematic, and in fact it rightly deserves due attention. What follows is a simplified pedagogical grammar for teaching COCs that is based on the principles discussed above.

A few intransitive verbs can be transitive when they take a cognate object. A cognate object is an object that wholly or partially repeats the meaning of its verb. There are two types of cognate object: (1) the real cognate object and (2) the non-cognate object. The real cognate object has the noun form of its verb (such as *die* – *death*, *live* – *life*, *sleep* – *sleep*). The non-cognate object can be any noun whose meaning is included in that of its verb (such as *dance* – *tango*, *waltz*, *sing* – *anthem*, *hymn*). Note that real cognate objects must be modified (usually by an adjective), otherwise they are unacceptable; non-cognate objects may or may not have a modifier.

Real cognate objects:

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| a She lives a <i>life that everyone envies</i> . | (Not: She lives a life.) |
| b The children danced a <i>traditional</i> dance. | (Not: The children danced a dance.) |
| c He died a <i>horrible</i> death. | (Not: He died a death.) |

Non-cognate objects:

- | |
|--|
| a She ran a (<i>good</i>) race/marathon. |
| b They danced a (<i>beautiful</i>) tango/waltz. |
| c He died a (<i>horrible</i>) assassination/suicide. (Incorrect) |

In this sentence pattern (known as **cognate object construction**), the intransitive verb can have an object because the object gives an important meaning to the verb: it specifies the type or subtype of action/event described by the verb. For example, *dance a dance* is meaningless; *dance a tango* and *dance a traditional dance* are meaningful. Notice that *assassination* and *suicide* cannot be cognate objects because they refer to types of killing, not types of death. Below is a list of verbs that often occur in cognate object constructions.

live, *sing, smile, die, *dream, laugh, sleep, *dance, *fight, *run⁴

The verbs marked with an asterisk can take either a real cognate object or a non-cognate object. (such as *fight a heroic fight* and *fight a war*).

Conclusion

English verbs do not always fall into discrete categories as either transitive or intransitive verbs, verbs in COCs being a case in point. The survey of grammar books in this article has revealed that most books completely disregard this grammar point, and those dealing with it fail to provide a clear description. Marginalization of the topic or failure to include it can cause confusion among EFL learners, especially in grasping when intransitive verbs can be used transitively. For this reason, this article has attempted a pedagogical account of English COCs. In doing so, the account adopts three main principles for pedagogical grammar description currently in the ascendancy: use of corpus-informed data, the lexical grammar approach, and emphasis on form-meaning connections. The resultant account of COCs presents a simple but adequate model in which the most frequent verbs used in COCs are identified, and learners are exposed to both form and meaning of the construction. It is an account that can be easily incorporated in grammar materials.

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⁴ In Park's research, there were mixed results regarding the grammaticality of English COCs amongst the learners. Some of the sentences are judged grammatical, while others are not.

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Appendix: List of EFL grammar books

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