



Doing Grammar in Modern Times

Nearly every college introduction to grammar begins with a section distinguishing prescriptive and descriptive approaches to the study of grammar. In the most general terms, grammar **prescription** is concerned with what is right and what is wrong, or what is correct and what is incorrect, with respect to language form. In this way of thinking about language, sentences like *He don't mean no harm* are “incorrect” because they violate some rules of grammar, specifically the prohibition of multiple or double negatives and the requirement of subject–verb agreement (*he don't* → *he doesn't*). Obviously such an approach may result in a list of rules that one might choose to follow in order to stay within the bounds of “Standard English.”

On the other hand, grammar **description** attempts to describe what people actually do in language without evaluations of correctness. The fact of the matter is that many speakers of English do use multiple negation, and many speakers do generate subject verb pairings of the *he don't*, *she don't*, and *it don't* type.

It is often said of language description that it is objective (as opposed to subjective) and that this kind of objectivity in description is achievable through application of the scientific method to language study. In fact, linguistics is frequently defined as “the scientific study of language.” Objectivity in language observation can be difficult to achieve, however, since language is so fundamental to that which defines us as humans and since the use of specific language forms is so intimately connected to our social identities. It is rarely the case that deviations from the prescriptive rules we may know can ever be simply observed without triggering some personal stirrings. Still, as heuristic constructs, prescription and description may and should be kept distinct.

LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION: SLIPPING STANDARDS?

It is a curious phenomenon that upon learning the two general modes of language study, description and prescription, students of grammar and linguistics assume that acknowledgment of a descriptive approach precludes the need or reality of a prescriptive approach—as if recognition that people actually use multiple negation necessarily means that double negation must be acceptable in all contexts of language use; nothing could be further from the truth.

One of the major objectives of college-level study of grammar and linguistics is to develop a more sophisticated notion of language. Obviously such sophistication is possible only if students move beyond precepts of what one is supposed to do and begin to observe what people really do. Consider for instance a biologist who observes two cells dividing under a microscope but also notices something to have occurred in that division that they never witnessed before. That observer wouldn't be a very good biologist if they simply rejected the new observation as "incorrect." Similarly, simply dismissing any deviation from an idealized standard English as "incorrect" hardly gets to the heart of the nature of English (or any language) and certainly doesn't put a person in a position to make important and informed choices about language arts curricula, methods or approaches to teaching English, creative writing, linguistic study, and so forth. In other words, weighing language description against language prescription makes a person a better language practitioner, no matter what the purpose for learning grammar or linguistics is.

WHAT DOES GRAMMAR EVEN MEAN NOW?

As one develops a more sophisticated notion of language, particularly in terms of understanding prescriptive versus descriptive modes of language study, it becomes apparent that the term "grammar" itself has different meanings. From a prescriptive point of view, grammar refers to the set of rules that seeks to achieve good standard English. However, there are several complications concerning the notion of a "standard English" or any grammar of that variety.

First, it is important to recognize that there is no single, agreed upon standard English, and consequently, as one looks through different grammar books, one finds different rules. For example, traditionally sentences of the type *each student must bring their permission slip on Monday* have been condemned by grammarians. The problem is one of agreement; since *their* refers to *each student* and since *their* is plural and *each student* is singular, they do not agree in number. In fact, it is still easy to find grammar "authorities" condemning that use. However, increasingly one finds books that admit the use of *their* in such contexts.

Second, when talking about standard English, what do we mean? A standard for writing English? A standard for speaking English? In fact, if we were to accept the notion of a standard English for writing and speaking, we would have to understand that we would be dealing with very different grammatical apparatuses to regulate each medium. No one speaks like a book and no one writes completely in the way they speak; strictly speaking, neither is logically possible since the two media, speech and writing, are largely irreconcilable. For instance, people don't normally say "period" at the end of a sentence, or "semicolon," or "question mark," although they can and might do so for humor

or emphasis: *I'm not going. Period!* Conversely, the written language is notoriously understaffed to express affectations such as sarcasm. (This lack of symbols for emotive language is one reason that emoticons, or emojis, have been so useful in media such as email and social networking, which rely on the written word but often with an immediacy or casualness akin to spoken genres.)

Along these lines, it should be noted that most grammars are designed to regulate writing. While there are certain uses of English in the spoken medium that would be viewed as offenses against the standard (cf. *he don't*), most usage that would violate the principles of good writing go unnoticed in speech. For example, in standard writing practice, one is taught to avoid the “impersonal you,” as in *You can hardly afford to take a family vacation with gas prices so high.* (The standard would advise some other kind of construction, such as the impersonal *one*: *One can hardly afford...*) Yet even very accomplished writers use the impersonal *you* in speech to no great censure.

Third, it is not, as might be expected, that grammars of the standard tell you what to do; in fact, they just as often, or perhaps even more often, tell you what NOT to do. It is not a coincidence, then, that such grammars have been called “Mosaic grammars” because, like Moses’ Ten Commandments, they strive to regulate behavior through a series of “Thou shalt not...” formulas. Consider how frequently, for example, standard grammars contain summary charts of the “Do’s” and “Don’ts” of grammar (and how frequently the “Don’ts” list is longer!). Even when one is asked to state a grammar rule from memory, it is most likely that person will state one of the many grammar injunctions such as “Don’t end a sentence with a preposition” or “Don’t start a sentence with a conjunction.”

Finally, and this may be the most surprising fact of all, there is no agreed upon method for determining what is “grammatical” from a prescriptive view, and in fact we see different criteria applied by different grammarians arriving at different judgments all the time. For instance, we have already seen the rule about the use of *their*, a rule that is not absolute but variable and allowing for choice. Sometimes prescriptive grammar rules give the impression of being based on sound logical principles, such as the rule that proscribes “double negatives” because they would cancel one another out. Of course, in certain situations this is sort of true, as in *I'm not unhappy* where the negative *not* cancels the negative prefix *un-*. But in most cases, no such cancellation takes place: *I don't have none* does not mean “I have some.” Even in the case of *I'm not unhappy*, there is no true reversal since the sentence does not necessarily mean “I’m happy.” Although language is largely systematic, it is not a system like numbers. Therefore glib applications of logic to language might sell a prescriptive rule but ultimately fall short of explaining the facts of language.

In other cases, a grammarian may make an appeal to conventions and histories of “usage” in order to recommend what people should do. While such an approach may seem quite democratic on the surface, the history of such appeals shows anything but egalitarianism. Historically, most forms selected as grammatically correct have been based on their use by the best speakers, the best writers, the best-educated segments of society, and so on. I’m sure it won’t be too surprising to know that these “bests” did not include the working classes, people of color, women, or people from any disempowered segment of English-speaking society. It is then particularly under the criterion of “usage” that grammatical prescriptions and proscriptions reveal some of their greatest arbitrariness. However, as arbitrary as grammar rules might be from a linguistic point of view, they are certainly not arbitrary from a social or historical perspective!

In other moments, grammarians pushed to justify their strictures may resort to the last bastion of authority: *ipse dixit* justifications. *Ipse dixit* is basically the “because I said so” defense. These types of justifications often take the form of “Do X because it is more ‘elegant/preferable/acceptable/etc.’” These kinds of justifications are circular and subjective; after all, how does one establish what is “elegant” or “preferable” without reference to the author’s own sense of propriety, aesthetics, or tastes?

Again, these various grammar-writing justifications are ultimately linguistically arbitrary, and it should seem odd that language users would abdicate their right to question and criticize those who make and enforce laws of language use. However, instead of employing the kind of healthy debate and skepticism that we would direct toward other laws meant to govern us, people seem all too ready to accept grammatical strictures and even to suffer under them in some cases. If legislators in the United States and many other countries were to institute laws that were seen as arbitrary and socially unjust, they would face public outcry, denunciation, and perhaps even revolt. Grammar writers do not face the same public scrutiny even in the face of arbitrariness and outright social injustice. Given such a passive attitude toward language governance, it behooves us to ask why we are so accepting of grammar rules that essentially deny our rights to the languages and dialects we *really* speak.

THE MONOLITH FALLACY

The idea that there is one true language or one true language form is old. Most religions and mythological systems have accounts of the first person or persons to whom the “original language” is ascribed. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is Adam who is credited with creating the first language:

Genesis 2:19 And out of the ground, the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

Continuing in the Judeo-Christian tradition, apparently this single language continued until after the great flood that wiped out almost all of humanity, save Noah and his family:

Genesis 6:7 And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.

Genesis 6:8 But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.

The result of having one family survive the flood was a single language, and even a single way of speech (perhaps a single dialect):

Genesis 11:1 And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.

The descendants of Noah then decided to reinforce their oneness by building a tower that would reach the heavens, a single structure that would transcend earthly existence:

Genesis 11:4 And they said, Go to, let us build a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

However, God saw too much power and unrestrained behavior as a result of their sameness, linguistic and otherwise:

Genesis 11:6 And the Lord said Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

Thus as a means of restraining their potential, God “confounded” their language.

Genesis 11:7 Go to, let us go down and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.

The story of Noah is a good example of the belief that somehow, somewhere, at some time language in the past was more unified, and the metaphor of the single structure of Babel achieves two seemingly contradictory goals. On the one hand, its destruction is a penalty for the sins of humankind and imposes restraint on those very tendencies that may have caused God to have killed off humans from the Earth in the first place. Thus, diversity across languages and dialects is a constant reminder of our propensity toward sin. Ultimately, Babel reminds us about differences in language and that the inability to adhere to a single true form of language is due to our own moral shortcomings in some way.

On the other hand, the story of Noah and Babel offers a theoretical possibility of a linguistic sameness that existed in the dim past and a transcendence of humankind from the apparent conditions of this world. The contradiction is of course the desire for a state of language sameness that got us into trouble in the first place. That contradiction is resolvable since it was not linguistic unity and the potential of humankind per se that caused God’s displeasure, but rather the inability of humans to restrain themselves despite such power (apparently there could be things one could achieve with the power of unity of language that wouldn’t be offensive to God). Still, moments of linguistic unity like in the Garden of Eden or among the postdiluvian descendants of Noah are presented, at least for a time, as times of moral innocence, an innocence that is disrupted by humankind’s propensity for wickedness.

That link between moral innocence and language unity has been reinscribed in several ways throughout history and among different peoples. Yule (2010) gives two accounts whereby children, who presumably have moral innocence like the first of humankind, were isolated from their speech communities in order to determine the original language. In one account passed down from the Greek historian Herodotus, the seventh-century Egyptian king Psammatichus attempted to discover

the original language by having two children raised by a shepherd with no exposure to language in order to see what language the children would spontaneously use. They were reported to have uttered the Phrygian word *bekos*, meaning “bread.” The children established, at least for Psammatichus, that Phrygian must be the original language of humans.¹

Within the Christian tradition, a similar experiment was attempted by James IV of Scotland. James’s linguistically isolated subjects (again two children) were reported to have spontaneously spoken Hebrew—an exceedingly convenient outcome, particularly in a Judeo-Christian culture! The sad truth is that children raised without exposure to language actually acquire little to no language at all. Still, the belief in and search for the original, unified language of human innocence has been strong in many cultures and belief systems throughout history. Language prescription may be, at least in some sense, our modern search for language unity, and perhaps therefore moral rectitude.

Even today, most speakers/writers have the mistaken belief that English in the past was more unified and somehow more correct. The belief persists that English has atrophied by our inattention to correctness and that those speaking varieties furthest from the good old Standard are the worst offenders to this perceived historical correctness. Those speakers are accused of laziness, stupidity, and sometimes even more nefarious transgressions. However, for as much as we know of the history of languages and the history of English, there has never been a period of unity, and the notion of sameness through correctness, as we now think of it, is a rather modern construct.

As we have seen, a descriptive grammar on the other hand is an approach to studying language that takes into account how people really use language. Obviously such an approach is espoused by those working in the linguistic sciences since linguistics seeks to discover the nature of language in one way or another—either as a cognitive entity, a social phenomenon, or something else. Again, notions of “right” versus “wrong” are not part of the descriptive approach in linguistics.

Still, both our cultural belief in and desire for language unity and correctness are strong, and the very idea that there may be some way of thinking about language outside of the prescriptive paradigm strongly challenges those beliefs and desires. But again, it is very important to remember that prescription and description do different things; one is not absolutely better than the other. It is one’s purpose or aim in studying language that will lead to the most appropriate approach or view.

A NOTE ON THE PRESCRIPTIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE APPROACHES FOR FUTURE TEACHERS

It may be falsely believed that teachers, especially English teachers, would have little use for language description since their job is to teach literacy in standard English. However, teachers especially stand to gain a lot by descriptive language experience. First, many students come to school speaking varieties of English that are structurally quite different from standard English. If a teacher is not sensitive to that variation, they can actually work as an agent to disenfranchise underrepresented student populations from school. Even some of the most well-intentioned comments can alienate linguisti-

¹ George Yule, *The Study of Language*, 7th ed. (Cambridge UP, 2020).

cally diverse students. Imagine for instance a teacher saying, “we don’t talk that way in school.” The teacher, although quite unintentionally, is giving the student the message that they do not belong in the school environment. The aggregation of such comments over many years may encourage dropping out; the correlation between those who speak socially stigmatized dialects of English and drop-out rates among those same populations is probably not a coincidence. And in fact, a teacher who is well trained to understand the linguistically arbitrary nature of Standard English will be more effective in understanding that no single variety of English is really better than another; in other words, that teacher is equipped to teach Standard English as a rhetorical option, not as a moral imperative.

Furthermore, if a teacher is going to be effective in teaching students Standard English, they have to start from the structures that the students know. Students who generate sentences like *he don’t* are not making an error in their (variety of) English. We don’t teach that student *he doesn’t* because it is absolutely right; we teach it because it is another variety of English that they can learn, and learning it allows that student more choices about language. *He doesn’t* may well be rhetorically more effective in some contexts—but *he don’t* is just as effective in others. In other words, it is not the job of the English teacher to eradicate language variation but instead to teach students how and why language varies, and to show them how to move among different varieties as a source of communicative power.

EXERCISES

A. While the distinction between language prescription and distinction seems straightforward, it requires some conscious thought if a person is to become aware of it naturally. Below you will find 10 statements. Identify each of them as being prescriptive or descriptive in tone and expectation.

1. Do not use *different than* but instead *different from*, as in *My new school is different ~~than~~ from my old one in several ways.*
2. *Bring* is used for conveyance toward the speaker and *take* is used for movement away from the speaker. (Hint: Many speakers of English say sentences like *I have to bring these books back to the library* even though the speaker is not at the library when they say it.)
3. Some speakers of English use the form *ain’t* both as a copulative verb as in *He **ain’t** from Illinois* and as the auxiliary verb in the perfect construction as in *I **ain’t** seen him in many years.*
4. An independent clause should follow a semi-colon in writing.
5. Dialects of English in virtually every English-speaking country tolerate some degree of multiple negation, as in *We’re not giving no donations to nobody.*
6. Wherever you can delete the word *that*, you should do so, as in *The Franklin Company has announced ~~that~~ its CEO will be stepping down from office next winter.*
7. There are varieties of English in which possessor nouns are not marked for possession as in *My daddy job is in the City.*
8. One should not start a sentence with a conjunction.
9. In contexts where the locational force of the utterance is clear, forms of the copulative verb *be* may be unexpressed, as in *Where you at?*

10. *Spoke* is the simple past form of the verb and therefore should be used only as a finite verb in the past. It should not be used after the auxiliary *have*, as in *Timothy has spoke spoken to his boss and can't get any days off*.

B. A problem of prescription is that it gives the impression of invariability, the idea that everyone uses prescribed forms, especially in formal contexts. Consider the following passages, all taken from university-press-published books (so we can't say that the writing is "informal" or so wrong that it wasn't accepted for publication!). In each, the author is not adhering to one of the prescriptive rules listed in A. What prescriptive rule in A above does the author seem not to be following?

1. "Is Globalization today really different than globalization a hundred years ago?"

(Michael D. Bordo et al., NBER Working Paper No. 7195, June 1999)

2. "The world of the city and that of the kampung were indeed clearly different but they were not so divided. Becak (rickshaw) could then bring people to plazas, and kampung was accessible by any two-wheel vehicle." (p. 272)

(Robbie Peters, *Surabaya, 1945–2010: Neighbourhood, State and Economy in Indonesia's City of Struggle* [NUS Press, 2013])

3. "The subsequent history of the area shows that Ethelwulf's primary motive was not to enrich himself, for only two estates..." (p. 120).

(H.P.R. Finberg, *The Formation of English 550–1042* [Paladin Books, 1976])

4. "But William of Poitiers then goes on to make a virtue out of necessity, and says..." (p. 149).

(T.A. Dorey, "William of Poitiers: 'Gesta Guillelmi Ducis,'" *Latin Biography*, edited by T.A. Dorey [Basic Books, 1967], 139–55)

C. Locate a favorite scene of yours from a movie or television show in which two or more people are having a conversation. Now attempt to transcribe into written English just two minutes of that conversation. What sorts of things about the conversation do not come across in writing?

Now, while speaking with friends or family, attempt to speak in only grammatically correct, full sentences. Even after a very short time, what was their reaction? Was it easy for you to maintain that mode of speaking? Would speaking in that way really be appropriate or effective for all situations?

Based on the kinds of experiments carried out above, is it possible or desirable for spoken and written language to be identical? To which medium does grammar prescription seem more applicable?

D. In your answer to C, you probably realized that writing and speaking generally have different domains and that at least for the two tasks described, the rules of prescription seemed more applicable to writing, rather than friendly conversation. However, not *all* writing requires a formal, prescriptive style and not *all* speaking is informal and prescriptively unregulated. Consider the following writing and speaking contexts. Which do you think call for more formality and attention to prescriptive rules? Why?

1. At work, speaking about a project you are directing with the regional manager, whom you are meeting for the first time
2. Talking to your mother about your sister's new boyfriend in the car
3. Writing a note for your husband/wife/partner explaining why you will be late
4. A term paper written in a university history class on the fall of Rome
5. An email to your boss regarding your willingness to work overtime
6. A social network comment on your best friend's page
7. Speaking to the customer service agent at the post office
8. Giving a lecture to a university class
9. Asking directions from a stranger at a baseball game
10. Writing comments in a customer satisfaction survey online