Chapter 1: Introduction to Grammar

Grammar is used to refer to a number of different things: it can be used to refer to books that contain descriptions of the structure of a language; it can be used to refer to the knowledge that a native speaker has of his or her language and to descriptions of that knowledge; it can be used to refer to a set of rules developed to control certain aspects of the usage of native speakers; and it can be use to refer to a set of rules typically taught in school about "appropriate usage" and about writing.

We're concerned with three of these kinds of grammars: *descriptive grammar* which has as its goal a description of the usage of native speakers of a language; *prescriptive grammar* which has as its goal to control the usage of native speakers of a language; and *school grammar* which is primarily the simplified subset of prescriptive grammar taught in school.

Descriptive Grammar

As described above, descriptive grammar attempts to describe the usage of native speakers. Descriptive grammar assumes that the only authority for what is exists in a language is what its native speakers accept and understand as part of their language. A speaker who says "I ain't doing nothing," intending to say just that, has produced a sentence which is grammatical in the dialect and register in which he or she is speaking. This utterance is "grammatical" (i.e., produced by the grammar of a native speaker) for speakers of several different dialects of English and appropriate in different registers for those dialects.

A descriptive grammar therefore will specify many rules for structures in which no native speaker will ever produce anything except a single form, for example, rules like (1) - (3) below.

- 1. In English, the article precedes the noun and any adjectives modifying the noun.
 - a. The short people moved.
 - b. *Short the people moved.¹
 - c. *Short people the move.
- 2. In English, demonstratives agree in number with the nouns they modify: *that* and *this* go with singulars; *those* and *these* go with plurals.
 - a. That dog is surprisingly fond of these bones.
 - b. *Those dog is surprisingly fond of this bones.
- 3. Use only one question word at the beginning of an English sentence.
 - a. Who said what?
 - b. *Who what said?
 - c. *What who said?

¹ before a sentence means the sentence is ungrammatical in the sense that the sentence is not produced by the grammar of a native speaker of English; ? before a sentence means the sentences is questionable – it sounds weird, but not as bad as a *'d sentence; % before a sentences means that some speakers would accept a sentence while others would not.

A descriptive grammar will also specify rules which allow variation in structures which speakers use variably. What does that mean? (4) is an example of a rule that varies in different contexts:

Speakers of more or less standard dialects of American English

- 4. typically use objective pronouns after copular verbs;
 - a. That is me.
 - b. It's him.
 - c. The guy in the front row with the red hat is him.
- 5. use subject case pronouns after copular verbs with very short subjects in formal contexts;
 - a. %That is I.
 - b. %It is he.
 - c. ?That guy in the front row with the red hat is he.

Prescriptive Grammar

Prescriptive grammars, on the other hand, assume the existence of better authorities than the usage and judgment of native speakers. People who write prescriptive grammars adduce better language users (educated speakers, high-class speakers, great writers), better languages (usually Latin) and better information systems (mathematics or predicate calculus) as authorities for preferring one usage over another. Prescriptive rules exist only to express a preference for one structure or usage or linguistic item over another. A prescriptive grammar will not contain rules that tell you to put articles before nouns, rather than after, because no native speakers of English put articles after nouns. Prescriptive rules are reserved for places where speakers have choices and they exist to limit those choices. For example, consider this discussion from Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*.

6. **preposition at end.** It was once a cherished superstition that prepositions must be kept true to their name and placed before the word they govern in spite of the incurable English instinct for putting them late ('They are the fittest timber to make great politics of,' said Bacon; and 'What are you hitting me for?' says the modern schoolboy). 'A sentence ending in a preposition is an inelegant sentence' represents what used to be a very general belief, and it is not yet dead. One of its chief supports is the fact that Dryden, an acknowledged master of English prose, went through all his prefaces contriving away the final prepositions that he had been guilty of in his first editions. It is interesting to find Ruskin almost reversing this procedure. In the text of the Seven Lamps there is a solitary final preposition to be found and no more; but in the later footnotes they are not avoided (Any more wasted words...I never heard of./Men whose occupation for the next fifty years would be the knocking down every beautiful building they could lay their hands on). Dryden's earlier practice shows him following the English instinct; his later shows him sophisticated with deliberate latinism: 'I am often put to a stand in considering whether what I write be the idiom of the tongue, ... and have no other way to clear my doubts but by translating my

English into Latin'. The natural inference from this would be: you cannot put a preposition (roughly speaking) later than its word in Latin, and therefore you must not do so in English. Gibbon improved upon the doctrine, and, observing that prepositions and adverbs are not always easily distinguished, kept on the safe side by not ending sentences with *on, over, under,* or the like, when they would have been adverbs.

The fact is that the remarkable freedom enjoyed by English in putting its prepositions late and omitting its relatives is an important element in the flexibility of the language. The power of saying A state of dejection such as they are absolute strangers to instead of A state of dejection of an intensity to which they are absolute strangers, or People worth talking to instead of People with whom it is worthwhile to talk, is not one to be lightly surrendered. But the Dryden-Gibbon tradition has remained in being, and even now immense pains are sometimes expended in changing spontaneous into artificial English. That depends on what they are cut with is not improved by conversion into That depends on with what they are cut; and too often the lust for sophistication, once blooded, becomes uncontrollable, and ends with, That depends on the answer to the question as to with what they are cut. Those who lay down the universal principle that final prepositions are 'inelegant' are unconsciously trying to deprive the English language of a valuable idiomatic resource, which has been used freely by all our greatest writers except those whose instinct for English idiom has been overpowered by notions of correctness derived from Latin standards. The legitimacy of the prepositional ending in literary English must be uncompromisingly maintained; in respect of elegance or inelegance, every example must be judged not by any arbitrary rule, but on its own merits, according to the impression it makes on the feeling of educated English readers. (473-4)

Notice that Fowler said that Dryden in revising himself did not ask "What sounds good in English?", instead he very explicitly changed his writing so it existed as a pseudo-translation of Latin (an odd thing to do unless you really believe in the superiority of Latin). Fowler distinguishes between style and grammar much more effectively than most prescriptivists. He is arguing in favor of (or against) different usages because of what he perceives their stylistic effect to be – he is not claiming that ending a sentence with a preposition (or avoiding ending a sentence with a preposition) is "ungrammatical". He is expressing a stylistic preference. There has been a long tradition in prescriptivism to claim that those things which the prescriptivists dislike are ungrammatical. (7) suggests that split infinitives or verb phrases are somehow wrong; the data suggests that not only do English speakers prefer to split infinitives sometimes, sometimes they actually must.

- 7. "Avoid separating the parts of a verb phrase or the parts of an infinitive." (H. Ramsay Fowler, *The Little, Brown Handbook:* 242)
- a. Our five-year mission is to boldly go where no one has gone before.
- b. Our five-year mission is to go boldly where no one has gone before.
- c. To only read the first chapter, and not answer the questions, would be a waste of time.
- d. ?*Only to read the first chapter, and not answer the questions, would be a waste of time.
- e. To read only the first chapter, and not answer the questions, would be a waste of time.
- ((e) means something different from (c))

One of the most important things about prescriptive grammarians or various stylists is that their rules must sit on top of an adequate descriptive grammar. Why? Descriptive grammar tells us what a preposition or an infinitive is. If you don't know what an infinitive is, how can you interpret (7) above? Nothing in prescriptive grammar defines infinitives.

It is descriptive grammar that notes that speakers have choices in certain constructions about where the preposition can appear. The prescriptivist comes in and asserts that only one of the choices is "correct", but the existence of the choices and the structure that sits beside them can only be found by competent observation and description of native speaker usage.

Prescriptive rules are a set of social and sometimes more narrowly aesthetic rules about linguistic structure – they are not, contrary to way they are often presented – rules of language. The degree to which a speaker or writer abides by these rules may affect how his or her audience judges the work or the author of it. A failure to abide by the rules may suggest to an audience that the speaker/writer is unfamiliar with these rules (which can be associated with intellectual, scholastic or social success), while abiding by them may suggest to an audience that the speaker/writer is pompous and overly formal.

School Grammar

Within prescriptive and descriptive grammar is a subset of (usually highly oversimplified) rules which are explicitly taught in school. These will include things like definitions of word categories (nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc.) and the very explicit prescriptive rules like the "don't end a sentence in a preposition" rule discussed above. These rules are found in textbooks and other materials used in schools from elementary school to college. They include statements like "A verb is an action word" (a definition which we will find woefully inadequate when we start actually working with verbs), and rules like

- 8. "Use the subjective case for all parts of compound subjects and for subject complements." (H. Ramsay Fowler, *The Little, Brown Handbook*:162)
 - a. That's her.
 - b. That's she.
 - c. The best person for the job would be me.
 - d. *The best person for the job would be I.

Compare this with the rule (4) above and the data listed with (4) and (8), it should be clear that there is a substantial problem with it. It appears unfortunately to press English speakers and writers to produce things which sound absolutely horrible to the English ear.

What does all this mean?

Now that we've distinguished between descriptive, prescriptive and school grammars, what should we do about it? We can see that prescriptive grammars can assert things that simply aren't true and that school grammars oversimplify. Does this mean schools shouldn't teach students any prescriptive rules? Probably not. There are still many people who believe fervently that the degree to which a writer plays by the prescriptive rules (especially in technical or formal writing) is a direct reflection of the writer's intelligence or education. Students will, in all probability, have to deal with such people. If schools do nothing else, they should teach students strategies to avoid producing sentences which obey prescriptive rules while violating descriptive ones (like 6d above).

Moreover, certain rules must be inherently prescriptive – the rules that are specific to writing. Since nobody is a native speaker of writing, those aspects of writing which are not present in speech (in particular punctuation and spelling) have no independent authority other than the prescriptive conventions we as a society have developed. In other words, nobody can call upon his or her native intuitions about spelling or punctuation and nobody's intuitions about them reflect the social groups to which they belong. Spelling and punctuation are consciously constructed conventions that run off the structure of the language, but are not part of the that structure.

What it means is that schools should teach the facts about English fairly carefully. It means teaching should distinguish carefully among features of all dialects of English and features of only certain dialects and the social rules of prescriptive grammar and the rules specific to writing.

Suggestions for further reading

There is obviously a lot more to be said on this subject. If you want to learn more about it, try

Finegan, Edward. Attitudes Toward English Usage: The History of War of Words Bolinger, D.L. Language, the Loaded Weapon: The Use and Abuse of Language Today