What is language? Or “English”?

How would you show someone what language (or “English”) is?

Baker (2001)

What do we mean when we talk about a grammar of a particular language?
Prescriptive Grammar

- Typically states what people *should and should not do* with a language
- ...according to some “authority”
- It *prescribes*

Descriptive Grammar

- Describes what people *actually do* with language
- Explaining how the language system works
- It *describes*

Some Prescriptive Rules of English

- *Don’t* split infinitives
- *Don’t* use double negation
- *Don’t* end a sentence with a preposition
- *Don’t* use *who* in place of *whom*
- *Don’t* misuse *hopefully*
  - E.g. “Hopefully he will arrive tomorrow.”

Some Descriptive Rules of English

- The subject precedes the verb, the object follows the verb
  - “The goblin stole the child.”
  - **“Stole the child the goblin.”**
- Auxiliary verbs precede the subject in questions
  - “What has she done?”
  - **“What she has done?”**
- Form the plural of a noun by adding ‘-s’
  - goblin --> goblins

Mental Grammar

- The knowledge that is stored in a speaker’s head about his/her language
- Words and word order patterns (*syntax*)
- Sounds and sound patterns (*phonology*)
- Ways of constructing meanings (*semantics*)
- Ways of constructing words (*morphology*)
- Most of this knowledge is *unconscious*
  (cf. vision, walking)

Mental Grammar

- All speakers have a systematic mental grammar
- Low prestige speech is also systematic
  - “I ain’t done nothing”
  - “Done ain’t I nothing”
  - “Nothing I done ain’t.”
Where do prescriptive rules come from?

- "Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration." - Samuel Johnson, 1775

- "If we allow standards to slip to a stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy...at school...all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards there's no imperative to stay out of crime." - Government Official, 1985

Where do prescriptive rules come from?

- Rules adopted into English from Latin
- Rules adopted from mathematics
- Speech patterns imposed by speakers with high social prestige
- Word choices of older generation
- Attempts to improve clarity, avoid ambiguity

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Latin Influence

Split Infinitives

To boldly go where no man has gone before.

To go boldly where no man has gone before.

I want to quickly read the newspaper.

I want quickly to read the newspaper.

English infinitive = 2 words, to + verb stem
Split Infinitives

“.”

To boldly go where no man has gone before.

“I want to quickly read the newspaper.”

“…”

English infinitive = 2 words, as a verb stem

Infinitives in Romance languages = 1 word

comere to eat Latin
andare to go Italian
estar to be Spanish
danser to dance French

(Bishop Robert Lowth, 1762,
A Short Grammar of the English Language)

Which sounds more natural?

I hope unexpectedly to win the prize.
I hope to unexpectedly win the prize.
I hope to win unexpectedly the prize.

Prescriptive rules are effortful to follow

The English-speaking world may be divided into

(1) those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is
(2) those who do not know, but care very much
(3) those who know and condemn
(4) those who know and approve
(5) those who know and distinguish

Those who neither know nor care are the vast majority, and are a happy folk, to be envied.

- H. W. Fowler, Dictionary of Modern English Usage

Sentence-final Prepositions

“What did the president talk about?”
“About what did the president talk?”
“Who did you sit with?”
“With whom did you sit?”

Sentence-final Prepositions

The bed had not been slept in
vs. In the bed had not been slept.

Something to talk about
vs. About something to talk

What are you looking for?
vs. For what are you looking?
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Double Negatives

**English**

a. “I didn’t see nothing.”

b. “He didn’t never say nothing like that.”

Mathematicians may object, but ...

**Spanish**

“No vi nada.”

Not saw-I nothing.

**French**

“Il n’a jamais dit cela.”

He hasn’t never said that.

Not saw-I nothing.

The case of ain’t

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1700s</th>
<th>Later (some dialects)</th>
<th>Today</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>ain’t</td>
<td>ain’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>aren’t</td>
<td>ain’t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>isn’t</td>
<td>ain’t</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Norms of Socially Dominant Group

- US: white, northern, wealthy class
- UK: southern upper-class English
- Latin America: Castilian Spanish (past)
- Brazil: European Portuguese (past)
- Ireland & US: British English (past)
- ...marker of social identification/allegiance

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Hopefully…

• “The Jamaicans entered the bobsled competition hopefully and optimistically”
• “Hopefully the Jamaicans will win the gold medal in the bobsled competition”
  = the speaker hopes

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Adverb Placement

• Students who seek advice from their TA often can improve their grades
• Students who often seek advice from their TA can improve their grades
• Students who seek advice from their TA can often improve their grades

Adverb Placement

• He only juggled five crystals.
• He juggled only five crystals.

Status of Prescriptive Grammar

• Individuals can consciously choose whether or not to follow it
• Can substantially affect how an audience judges a speaker or writer
• Sometimes aids clarity, sometimes not
• Typically associated with sociol prestige and education
• No scientific basis for its prestige

Where might descriptive rules come from?

• Saying what ‘makes sense’?
• Saying what is easily understandable?
• …or it’s just the way that English (French, Swahili, Ojibwa…) works
What makes sense?

The millionaire bought the museum a painting.

What makes sense?

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.
‘Twas brillig and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

What makes things easily understandable?

The subject precedes the object (in English)
“The fox bit the boy.”
“The boy bit the fox.”

Absent in German - case markers show subject and object
“Der Fuchs hat den Junge gebissen.”
“The fox-nom has the boy-acc bitten.
“Den Junge hat der Fuchs gebissen.”
“The boy-acc has the fox-nom bitten.

What makes things easily understandable?

The object follows the verb
“I know that the goblin stole the child.”
“I know that the goblin the child stole.”

The verb agrees with the subject
“Hoggle likes Sarah.”
“Hoggle like Sarah.”

What makes things easily understandable?

This one is... This one is even...
big ______
sad ______
sexy ______
black ______
delightful ______
cerulean ______

Descriptive rules just are

- Most descriptive rules do not aid clarity or comprehension
  ...they are just the way they are

- Most descriptive rules are not included in standard grammar books
  ...and they don’t need to be
Variation in Descriptive Rules Across Languages

- Some descriptive facts about languages are idiosyncratic
- Others come up again and again

Pronoun Interpretation

- Restrictions...
  While Sarah was on her quest, she ate a peach. Sarah ate a peach while she was on her quest.
  While she was on her quest, Sarah ate a peach. *She ate a peach while Sarah was on her quest.
  (While on her quest, Sarah ate a peach.)

Question Formation

- All languages have a way of turning statements into questions, and they do it in just 1 of 2 ways
  - Declarative: Sarah ate a peach a moment ago.
    - Option A: What did Sarah eat a moment ago?
    - Option B: Sarah ate what a moment ago?
  - Unattested: Sarah ate a moment ago what?
    (No language uniformly moves the wh-word to the end)

Some or Any?

- Yesterday, the goblins didn’t steal ____ children.
- Yesterday, the goblins did steal ______ children.
- Hoggle rescued Sarah after ___ fireys teased her.
- Hoggle rescued Sarah before ____ fireys teased her.
- One crystal had _____ dreams in it.
- Only one crystal had _____ dreams in it.
- Every goblin who stole ___ children got ale.
- Every goblin who stole children got ___ ale.

Other Negative Polarity Items in English

- ever
- give a flying f**k
- give a sh*t
- budge an inch
- a damn thing
- worth a red cent

The Status of Descriptive Rules

- Not a personal choice whether or not to follow it – it’s automatic
- Doesn’t require explicit teaching (for children, at least)
- Social prestige is irrelevant
- “Ungrammatical” is different from “Incomprehensible”
Ungrammatical vs. Incomprehensible

Ungrammatical, but comprehensible:
““The king donated the museum a priceless heirloom.”

Incomprehensible, but grammatical:
“The goblin who the king who the girl conquered snarled at ran away.”
(Conforms to the descriptive rules of grammar.)