

Descriptive versus Prescriptive Grammar

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Abstract

A descriptive grammar is a study of a language, its structure, and its rules as they are used in daily life by its speakers from all walks of life, including standard and nonstandard varieties. A prescriptive grammar, on the other hand, specifies how a language and its grammar rules should be used. A prescriptivist view of language implies a distinction between "good grammar" and "bad grammar," and its primary focus is on standard forms of grammar and syntactic constructions.

Main Text

Section 1: Framing the Issue

A definition of a descriptive grammar: A descriptive grammar is a study of a language, its structure, and its rules as they are used in daily life by its speakers from all walks of life, including standard and nonstandard varieties. That is, descriptive grammar describes the language, its structure, and the syntactic rules that govern sentence and phrase constructions (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990). A descriptive study of grammar is non-judgmental, and it does not have the goal of determining what represents good or bad language, correct or incorrect structures, or grammatical or ungrammatical forms (Leech, Deuchar, & Hoogenraad, 2006).

A descriptive grammar is typically studied by linguists, anthropologists, ethnographers, psychologists, or other researchers who seek to identify how the grammar of a language is actually used in various contexts and for various purposes. (Books that describe and present the grammar of any language are called reference grammars, or sometimes "a grammar" by non-specialists.) In this light, sentences such as *Him and me, we are neighbors* or *I don't know nothing* simply reflect how the language is used by its speakers. Among other considerations, a good descriptive grammar also takes into account cultural and social variables that, in many cases, determine how language is produced and understood. In an academic sense, a descriptive grammar of a language is a theory that has attempts to explain how a particular language works (Leech, Deuchar, & Hoogenraad, 2006). Anthropologically speaking, a descriptive grammar seeks to formulate syntactic rules that are based on the way a language is actually used for communication, but not what these rules should be.

A definition of a prescriptive grammar: A prescriptive grammar, on the other hand, specifies how a language should be used and what grammar rules should be followed. A prescriptivist view of language implies a distinction between "good grammar" and "bad grammar," and its primary focus is on standard forms of grammar and syntactic constructions. Among native speakers of practically any language, a prescriptivist approach to grammar often encompasses many ideas, opinions, and judgments about how and when grammar rules should be used. Thus, for example, the sentence *Him and me, we are neighbors* would be considered ungrammatical because it violates at least two grammar rules: (1)

object forms of pronouns "him and me" should not be used in the sentence-initial or subject-noun position, and (2) only one noun or noun phrase can play the role of the sentence subject, and in this case, "we" (Greenbaum, 1996). Prescriptive grammars supply the rules for using or not using (e.g., *ain't* or *nobody knows nothing*) specific grammar constructions.

To simplify the descriptive and prescriptive grammar dichotomy and their practical characteristics, most linguists or language hobbyists are likely to be descriptive grammarians who analyze and explain a language's uses while most practicing teachers probably work with prescriptive grammars (Andrews, 2006).

Examples of prescriptive grammar rules can be found in practically every guide to "good" language usage, grammar rule book, or grammar guide. The classical examples of prescriptive English grammar rules that seem to be broken more often than not include, for instance:

- A sentence (or a clause) should not end on a preposition (also called "stranded prepositions"), e.g., *This is what I came here for* or *Where are you going to?*
- Singular subject nouns (or pronouns) should have singular pronoun references, e.g., *Every student needs to open their books on page 20* or *Nobody did their homework*.
- In the subject position, the pronoun "who" should be used, and in the object position, "whom" is appropriate e.g., *I gave it to who I always give it* or *Who did you talk to?*
- With non-count nouns (e.g., *money, water, or equipment*), "little" or "less" should be used, and "few" or "fewer" is for countable nouns, e.g., *I work in a small office with less than 20 people* or *The crowd that comes here gets fewer and fewer every year*.

Many similar prescriptivist grammar rules are highly frequently broken by native and nonnative speakers of English alike (more on this below). That is, if prescriptive grammar rules are intended for language users from all walks of life, prescriptions can be less than useful if only a small minority of language users follow them. On the other hand, grammar descriptions and explanations are not without their own conundrums.

Section 2: Making the Case

The ongoing debate about the usage, usefulness, and purposes of prescriptive and descriptive grammars has been continuing since the early history of writing, literacy, and attempts at language standardization. As a scientific undertaking, descriptive grammars precede prescriptive grammars: a language needs to be carefully and thoroughly studied and described before any sort of prescriptions can be formulated. On the other hand, historically, language (e.g., spelling and pronunciation) and grammar prescriptions have been established and maintained by means of social hierarchy and class-based stratification, as well as by civic institutions that are endemic to all human societies.

In a narrow sense, prescriptive grammars can be seen as rules for standard and "proper" uses of language for language users to follow them. For example, a prescriptive grammar would dictate that the sentence *There's not enough chairs for everybody* should be corrected to state *There are not enough chairs for everyone*. Prescriptive grammars are often employed for teaching those who use nonstandard or nonnative language forms (Birch, 2005).

From a broader perspective, prescriptive grammars serve to establish the language standard, in accordance with the socio-linguistic norms of a society and with the overarching objective of achieving effective and normed communication. By and large, it is widely assumed that prescriptive grammars are conservative by their very nature and in their purpose, and thus are not easily given to language innovation and change.

Regardless of linguists' typically negative views of prescriptive grammar, developing descriptive grammars presents a number of challenges. For one thing, accurate descriptions of grammars employed in speech and writing is usually very difficult. For this reason, a descriptive grammar of real speech typically consist of approximations or, in some cases, compendia of exemplars. However, determining what represents a good exemplar is also fraught with complications: some syntactic constructions can be dialectal, regional, or both. Some can be generational or social. Identifying the boundaries between dialectal, regional, or other types of syntactic forms can also be highly subjective (Andrews, 2006).

Descriptive grammars are usually based on the grammaticality judgments or language uses of native speakers. This factor alone lends itself to a criticism that, in order to determine what represents grammatical (vs. an ungrammatical) constructions, descriptive grammarians first need to establish specifically who qualifies (or does not qualify) to make grammaticality judgments.

Furthermore, grammar descriptions almost always use the standard (and prescriptive grammars) as a point of departure. Variations in grammar constructions are typically examined as deviations from the standard, despite descriptive grammarians' claims that all varieties are considered to be equal and equally valid. In the final count, much of what grammar descriptions actually accomplish is rooted in grammar rules and structural grammar at least to an extent because explanatory grammars need to have some measure of social and linguistic validity (Cook, 2003).

Section 3: Pedagogical Implications

Prescriptive grammars can be largely seen as guiding principles of language style and standard usage socially accepted as norms of effective communication (Hinkel, 2004). By and large, prescriptive grammars dominate in schooling, teaching, testing and assessment, publishing, and editing. The uses of prescriptive grammars are closely interrelated with social and value judgments that can reflect a speaker's or a writer's social status, education levels, professional aspirations, and possibilities for social and economic mobility.

To put it simply, prescriptive grammars have the function of social class and status markers, as well as gate-keepers when it comes to standardized and language tests. As Richard Hudson once mentioned in one of his lectures, non-standard forms are hardly ever heard in university lectures or found in conference papers. That is, a very strong correlation exists between standard prescriptive grammar uses and higher education. A lack of adherence to a prescriptive grammar can – and often does – have social repercussions that are typically socially or opinion-based, much like the uses of good manners or rules of etiquette (Hinkel, 2003).

In language teaching, both prescriptive and descriptive grammars have an important role to play. Realistically speaking, to be rounded, effective, and practical, grammar teaching has to address both the prescribed rules of syntactic constructions to enable learners to succeed in education, employment, or other civic contexts where formal uses of prescriptive grammars are often preferred (if not required).

Using a prescriptive grammar that can provide learners the essential tools to analyze how language can be used for communication is a range of settings. For example, formal academic writing, reading, and taking tests requires the usage of prescribed and formal English grammar rules, but when chatting with friends, these are probably best avoided. Descriptive grammars are employed in casual and interactional communications.

In teaching English as a Foreign Language and outside English-speaking contexts, the knowledge of grammar prescriptions is one of the top requirements in the grammar-translation method of instruction. While many teachers who are trained in the communicative teaching method have all but abandoned grammar instruction, teaching English as a Foreign Language has continued to dominate in a great number of locations around the world. In such contexts, prescriptive grammars have continued and are likely to continue to dominate.

In addition to productive uses of language, grammar rules are also important in developing learners' receptive skills. Because practically all academic reading relies on prescriptive grammars and formal language, for many learners, for instance, it may be difficult to become proficient and fluent readers without a detailed familiarity with standard grammar rules. Learning to comprehend and analyze formal texts that pivot on prescriptive grammar rules is essential for developing effective reading skills in any type of schooling and education, from reading stories, novels, and poetry to biology and economics textbooks.

As has been reported in a large number of research publications, learning to read well by means of simply being exposed to written prose has been proven to be less than productive for most learners. On the other hand, however, developing grammar analysis skills and noticing how grammar rules affect the meaning and construction of the text can prove to be of greatest benefit when learning to read well in another language (Andrews, 2006; Birch 2005).

As many practicing teachers and language professionals have noted on many occasions, some examples of prescriptive grammar in fact sound very odd (e.g., *It was I who came to see you last night*). Some corpus data (see the work of Peter Trudgill) suggests that only 10% of English speakers employ prescriptive grammar rules in their daily communications (most belong in what is known as the "professional class"). On the other hand, the descriptive grammars that are employed by a large majority of language users to communicate can be perceived as inappropriate in circumstances that call for linguistic formality and formal register. It is important for language teachers and learners to be familiar with both prescriptive and descriptive grammars.

That is, using both types of grammars in pedagogy can help learners to develop the skills to differentiate and use appropriately the conventionalized prescriptive grammar expected in formal contexts where rules are predetermined by a formal – and somewhat rigid -- language register (that is, linguistic formality), or casual and conversational settings where a descriptive grammar variety is probably better suited. It is important, however, that language learners clearly recognize the distinctions between the two types of grammars and when the use of one or the other fits the context (Hinkel, 2003).

From the pragmatic perspective of everyday living, studying, working, making impressions, or merely dealing with people and language in all manner of places and settings, using both descriptive and prescriptive grammars is simply unavoidable.

Being familiar with and using prescriptive grammar rules enable language learners to function and succeed in a greatest range of settings and produce constructions that are accepted by most speakers of the language as the standard. For learners of English, for example, using standard and prescriptive grammar – rather than non-standard and conversational grammars – can open many educational, professional, and social doors. As has been mentioned earlier, non-standard and conversational grammar uses are often looked at judgmentally and prejudicially, linguistic reasons for such judgments notwithstanding. The rules of prescriptive grammar can certainly be optional if and when language users know what they are and when to deploy them.

While prescriptive grammar rules and standards have always resided in language teaching, language testing and assessment, grammar textbooks, and writing guidebooks, more recent and contemporary analyses of language corpora do away with prescriptions and collect and analyze grammar uses and data as they appear in real-life and in the language of its users. Although some of the materials in various language corpora are derived from published texts – and hence are based on prescriptive grammar rules, by and large, for those who are interested in descriptive grammars, at present, opportunities for becoming familiar with real-life descriptive grammars are practically limitless (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990).

SEE ALSO:

Grammar in Foreign and Second Language Classes, Grammar Teaching in Beginner and Advanced Level Classes, Grammar Translation Method, Teaching Grammar

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