1 The Study of Grammar

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following:

- Give a comprehensive definition of grammar.
- Understand the difference between a prescriptive and a descriptive approach to the study of grammar.
- Appreciate that, if taken seriously, a descriptive approach to the study of grammar requires us to look at grammatical features beyond those associated with Standard English.
- Understand that the grammatical features of young developing children, of children and adults with language disorders and of speakers of non-standard dialects are as worthy of study as the grammatical features of Standard English, and can be used as a pedagogical tool to illuminate the grammatical features of Standard English.

1.1 What is Grammar?

As with most questions in linguistics, the answer to this question varies depending on who you ask. For most linguists, **grammar** is the study of two main disciplines: **morphology** and **syntax**. Morphologists study the internal structure of words and the organising principles that govern this structure. In morphology, words are analysed in terms of their smallest meaningful parts known as **morphemes**. For example, it is of interest to morphologists that while *daughter* is a single morpheme, the word *teacher* contains two morphemes (the verb *teach* and the nominalising **suffix** *–er*). Morphologists are also interested in the different **prefixes** that can express negative meanings in English. The following prefixes serve to convey the opposite meaning of the **adjectives** and **verbs** to which they are added: *un*happy, *dis*similar, *de*mystify, *in*digestible, *a*synchronous, *non*compliant, *mis*understand, *im*moral. Morphologists examine why a prefix like *a–* conveys a negative meaning in only some of the words to which it is added. So while *a–* in *a*synchronous has the meaning 'not', the same prefix in words such as *a*theist and *a*moral has the meaning 'without'. The distribution of morphemes in a language,

the meanings they express and the morphological processes that generate new words and word-forms are integral to the study of morphology. This aspect of grammar will be addressed in detail in Chapter 2.

For most linguists, grammar includes the study of syntax in addition to morphology. In no language in the world can words appear in sentences in a random or unpredictable order. With some exceptions (e.g. the location of **adverbs** in sentences in English), there is always a particular order on the occurrence of words. This order is examined in syntax. Linguists who work in syntax are interested in why *She appreciates all his many talents* is a grammatical sentence in English, while the sentence *She appreciates his many all talents* is not. Clearly, the difference relates to the order of the **determiners** *all, his* and *many* that appear before the **noun** *talents*. The reason why one order of these determiners is acceptable in English while another order is not is an issue of fundamental importance to the study of syntax. Also, as native speakers of English we know intuitively that adjectives must precede nouns in **noun phrases** (*old house, empty space*). However, a different syntactic pattern is found in French, where certain adjectives can precede nouns in noun phrases (*jolie femme* 'pretty woman') while other adjectives follow nouns in noun phrases (*chat noir* 'black cat'). These differences in word order between languages are revealing for workers in syntax who want to understand the syntactic principles that motivate them. Most of the chapters in this volume are concerned with the study of syntax.

Thus far, I have used the expression 'most linguists' when describing how linguists define the field of grammar. This is because one prominent linguist, **Noam Chomsky**, adopts a very different definition of grammar. It is Chomsky's aim to characterise the body of knowledge which speakers have about their **native language** and which allows them to produce any of its infinitely many well-formed sentences. According to Chomsky, this knowledge takes the form of a **generative grammar** which is divisible into three linguistic components: **phonology**, syntax and **semantics**. This is how Chomsky defines a generative grammar in his book *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*:

> [A] generative grammar must be a system of rules that can iterate to generate an indefinitely large number of structures. This system of rules can be analysed into the three major components of a generative grammar: the syntactic, phonological, and semantic components. (Chomsky, 1965: 15–16)

Chomsky's primary concern is with the syntactic component of the grammar. This component specifies in an abstract way the different structures that can be sentences in a language. Certain structures are permissible by the syntactic rules of the language and could be sentences of the language in principle – even if no-one has ever used these sentences – while other structures violate these rules and cannot be sentences of the language. Each permissible sentence structure has a corresponding phonetic form – after all, most sentences must be expressed in spoken communication at some point. It is the phonological component of the

grammar that determines the phonetic form of a sentence. Finally, each permissible sentence structure must be capable of expressing meaning and being understood and interpreted by hearers. It is the semantic component of the grammar that determines the semantic interpretation of a sentence. Chomsky's proposals for a generative grammar are beyond the scope of this volume. However, an excellent examination of generative grammar can be found in Carnie (2013) to which interested readers are referred.

It is also worthwhile to consider the responses of people other than academic linguists to the question at the start of this section. For many people, grammar conjures up memories of lessons at school during which teachers introduced **word classes** like nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs and pupils were taught how to identify **prepositions** and **conjunctions** in sentences. More often than not, these lessons also encouraged the use of correct grammar and emphasised the need to avoid bad, 'sloppy' or incorrect grammar. This **prescriptive approach** to the study of grammar is still very much alive today. It is evident, for example, in the responses of students who study **linguistics** for the first time at university and discover that they will not be taught rules for the correct use of grammar. It is also evident in complaints that are made to newspapers and broadcasters about the use of grammar by reporters, journalists and presenters. These prescriptive attitudes to grammar will be examined further in the next section. For school-age learners of foreign languages, the study of grammar might mean the rote learning of verbs which have irregular **past tense** forms and which may cause problems in a written exam if they are not committed to memory. For adult learners of foreign languages, grammar may mean acquaintance with a few simple grammatical forms that may facilitate ordering food in restaurants during a holiday. For individuals with **language disorders**, grammar may mean the loss of 'small words' like *the, he* and *of* – linguists call these words **function words** – which link parts of a sentence together and which permit the expression of comprehensible utterances. For each of these groups of people, grammar raises different, but equally important, issues and concerns. Some of these uses of grammar will be addressed further throughout the book.

The main points in this section are summarised below.

KEY POINTS WHAT IS GRAMMAR?

- Most linguists define grammar as the study of morphology and syntax. An influential linguist called Noam Chomsky adopts a different definition of grammar. Chomsky's generative grammar contains phonology and semantics in addition to syntax.
- Morphology is the study of the internal structure of words. Morphologists analyse words in terms of their smallest meaningful parts known as morphemes.
- Syntax is the study of sentence structure. In all natural languages, words occur in a certain order within sentences. For example, in English a subject noun or pronoun occurs before the verb in a declarative sentence (e.g. *The boy likes chocolate*).

- Grammar is not just of interest to academic linguists. It is a feature of almost every pupil's formal education either through English grammar lessons or the learning of foreign languages. These early experiences of grammar are often couched in prescriptive terms about correct and incorrect uses of grammar. Grammar is also significant to people with language disorders where its impairment represents a significant barrier to effective communication.

1.2 Prescriptive and Descriptive Approaches to Grammar

It is not just the content or scope of grammar that elicits different responses from linguists to the question at the start of this chapter. Linguists are also divided on the approach that should be taken to the study of this content. For some linguists, grammar should be studied from within a prescriptive perspective. The goals of a prescriptive approach to grammar are to institute standards of good or correct grammar and to legislate against bad or incorrect grammar. These standards stipulate norms which all speakers of the language should strive to uphold both in their own linguistic practices and through censorship of grammatical forms which deviate from these standards. **Prescriptive grammarians** can often be strong advocates for grammatical correctness in media organisations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), in schools and universities, and in a range of other public institutions. Their calls for certain standards of grammar to be upheld are often accompanied by laments about how language and society in general are in a state of deterioration. The solution to this deterioration as far as grammar is concerned is to establish 'grammar departments' in media organisations and to increase monitoring of the use of grammar. All these elements of a prescriptive approach to grammar (as well as **pronunciation** and word meaning) are evident in the following articles from two British newspapers, the *Mail Online* and *The Guardian*:

Don't rely on us for good grammar, says the BBC: Broadcaster is no longer the bastion of correct English, its 'style chief' admits

The BBC is no longer the 'bastion' of correct English on radio and television, one of its editors has admitted. Thousands of viewers and listeners now complain to the corporation every year saying its once-high standards of grammar and pronunciation have slipped.

Ian Jolly, who is the BBC newsroom's 'style editor', conceded his presenters and reporters repeatedly make basic errors, such as confusing the word 'historic' with 'historical' and using the term 'chair' when they mean 'chairman' or 'chairwoman'. Following recent criticisms that presenters are also mispronouncing the letter 'H', he called on the BBC's senior management to prioritise efforts to make the corporation a linguistic 'standard bearer' once more.

Appearing on Radio 4's Feedback, he said: 'There are thousands of people who get in touch with us every year because of our output on radio and television and on the internet. So they do care. And the thing that people often point out is that they look to the BBC to uphold standards. So I do think that we used to be a standard bearer in these matters. Whether that's the case now I'm not so sure. I would love to see someone at the top of the BBC take up the challenge and put the emphasis back on the quality of our language so we can once again be a leader for the people who look to us. They think the BBC is the bastion and I would like to see us back at that position.'

Mr Jolly was asked to respond to a string of complaints received in the past week by Feedback. One listener, Stuart Grist, contacted the programme to complain about BBC reports into the resignations of Fiona Woolf and Baroness Butler-Sloss from the Government's sex abuse inquiry. He said: 'The other day it was reported that the child abuse enquiry had lost two chairs. Today we were told that two chairs had stepped down. Whatever next, "chairs found legless"? Or worse, "two chairs table motions"?'

Mr Jolly agreed it was incorrect to describe somebody as a 'chair' rather than a 'chairman' or 'chairwoman'. He added: 'I think it's one of the side effects of what we like to call political correctness. But I don't really see the need for it and we don't advocate using it. We think if a man's a chairman, he's a chairman. A woman's a chairwoman. If you know the gender of a person then there are quite good options there.'

Another listener complained about the repeated confusion of the word 'historic', which should be used to describe an important event, and 'historical', which simply means an event took place in the past. He said newspapers, police forces and even the judiciary have also made the same error, adding: 'So it is one of those phrases that has seeped into our consciousness. We never used to use it and now we are not sure which it should be and tend to get it wrong.'

Mr Jolly said he 'occasionally' tells off presenters for making grammatical mistakes, but said listeners and viewers should be more understanding of errors that creep into live broadcasts. He said: 'The BBC produces hundreds of hours of broadcasting every day, much of it live. Not every word is perfect. We would be concerned if writers were getting things wrong. I think we have to allow staff a little bit of leeway in the live broadcasting that makes up so much of our output.'

Last month, the BBC was criticised by the Queen's English Society for allowing presenters including Sara Cox and Radio 1 DJ Nick Grimshaw to say 'haitch' instead of 'aitch' when referring to the letter 'H'. It said such mistakes marked the beginning of a 'slippery slope', but the BBC said it was proud of the 'range of voices' across its programmes.

(Alasdair Glennie, *Mail Online*, 10 November 2014)
Daily Mail

Mind your language, critics warn BBC: Mistakes prompt a demand for grammar to be policed

The BBC is being urged to appoint a language chief by critics who claim that its reputation as a bastion of the Queen's English is fading fast. They claim that presenters and correspondents on both television and radio routinely misuse words, make grammatical mistakes and use colloquialisms in place of standard English.

Sir Michael Lyons, chair of the BBC Trust, will receive an open letter tomorrow calling for a 'democratic airing' of the proposals, which advocate the creation of a new post to scrutinise 'the syntax, vocabulary and style' of thousands of staff heard on the air. Although the BBC has a department dedicated to pronunciation, it has no equivalent for vocabulary or grammar.

Among the signatories are Professor Chris Woodhead, the former chief inspector of schools, Lord Charles Guthrie, the former chief of the defence staff, and MP Ann Widdecombe. 'We do so because language deeply affects all branches of society,' says the letter. Widdecombe argued that the way in which language was used by broadcasters had a huge impact on society. 'I think promoting the proper use of language is important. Whereas the BBC is better than most, even it is starting to get a bit slack,' she said. 'Mass communication has a tremendous effect.'

She and others want managers at the BBC to consider the suggestion by Ian Bruton-Simmonds, a member of the Queen's English Society, that it appoint a head of grammar. Under the proposals, 100 unpaid 'monitors' working from home would note grammatical slips or badly chosen vocabulary. The checkers would then report to a central adviser, who would write to broadcasters outlining what was said and what should have been said. …

It is likely to be a tough battle. A BBC spokeswoman admitted there was no regular monitoring of correspondents. 'Grammar guidance is currently available to our staff on the corporation's intranet,' she said. 'It is only there for guidance; there are no set rules on grammar.' …

(Anushka Asthana and Vanessa Thorpe, *The Guardian*, 28 October 2007)

A prescriptive stance to grammar is often motivated by a range of attitudes about language users. Many of these attitudes are negative, and even pernicious, in nature. Prescriptivism may mask an intolerance of **dialects** other than **Standard English**. The speakers of these dialects often belong to social classes

and ethnic groups or live in geographical areas which are negatively evaluated by the defenders of Standard English. A prescriptive approach to grammar may also stem from a sense of nostalgia about the past and a refusal to accept that language evolves and changes over time. The authors of the above article in *The Guardian* reflect this concern when they describe the view of individuals who oppose the policing of grammar:

> 'Language evolves and we should evolve with it,' said Adam Jacot de Boinod, author of The Meaning of Tingo, which highlights the weaknesses of English by listing foreign words for which there is no English equivalent. He said once people reached 40, they often felt nostalgic for what they were taught as children – and if the call for a language adviser was simply 'to be pedantic and yesteryear', he would oppose it. (Anushka Asthana and Vanessa Thorpe, *The Guardian*, 28 October 2007)

The roots of prescriptivism can also be traced to attitudes about the educational background of speakers, with correct grammatical usage associated with well-educated speakers (and, by implication, incorrect grammatical usage associated with a lack of education). That this association is a central motivation for a prescriptivist stance towards grammar is also evident in *The Guardian* article. The extract below from this article reports the comments of one of the signatories of the open letter to the chairman of the BBC Trust:

> According to signatory James Cochrane, whose book Between You and I, A Little Book of Bad English has an introduction by the broadcaster John Humphrys, one man who never makes mistakes. 'You do not hear them on the Terry Wogan show because he is a well-educated man of a certain age,' argued Cochrane. He said he was supporting the campaign because 'the BBC ought to be a defender of good English'. (Anushka Asthana and Vanessa Thorpe, *The Guardian*, 28 October 2007)

The title of Cochrane's book – *Between You and I, A Little Book of Bad English* – invites an examination of one further motivation for a prescriptive approach to the study of grammar. This is an intolerance of the influence of other languages on English or, more precisely, all other languages with the exception of **Latin**. The title of Cochrane's book contains a grammatical form that is unacceptable to prescriptive grammarians. This is the use of the **subject pronoun** 'I' instead of the **object pronoun** 'me' after the preposition 'between'. The so-called prescriptively correct form – 'Between you and me' – is based on a Latin grammatical rule which requires the use of the **accusative case** after the Latin preposition *inter* ('between'). For prescriptive grammarians, it is the failure to comply with this grammatical rule in Latin which marks out 'Between you and I' as incorrect. Latin represents a linguistic gold standard which English must attempt to emulate. It is the same deference to Latin which leads to the rejection of *stadiums* and *funguses* as plural forms of the nouns *stadium* and *fungus*. The somewhat arbitrary

application to English of Latin grammatical rules for the formation of plural nouns leads prescriptive grammarians to prohibit forms which many speakers of English consider to be acceptable and use routinely in both spoken and written language:

Nouns ending in –a
formula → formulae (prescriptively correct)
formula → formulas (prescriptively incorrect)

Nouns ending in –us
cactus → cacti (prescriptively correct)
cactus → cactuses (prescriptively incorrect)

Nouns ending in –um
curriculum → curricula (prescriptively correct)
curriculum → curriculums (prescriptively incorrect)

It should be noted that the rejection of a prescriptive approach to the study of grammar does not thereby commit one to the claim that there are not more or less appropriate grammatical forms to use in certain **contexts**. Clearly, formal writing in an academic assignment, for example, requires the use of grammatical forms in Standard English. So while speakers may say 'I seen him last week' in a conversation with friends, they are generally well advised to write 'I saw him last week' in the context of an essay. The context-appropriate use of grammar should not be confused with a prescriptive approach to grammar – linguists can subscribe to the former *at the same time* as they reject the latter. Prescriptivism in grammar transcends the context-appropriate use of grammar in that a prescriptivist would reject the use of a form like 'I seen him last week' even in spoken language. Such a form, prescriptivists argue, uses the **past participle** (*seen*) rather than the past tense (*saw*) and is unacceptable in all linguistic contexts, including spoken and written language. It will be assumed throughout this book that grammar can be used more or less context-appropriately even as a prescriptive approach to the study of grammar should be rejected.

The consequences of a prescriptive stance to language and grammar will now be illustrated in the case of African American Vernacular English.

SPECIAL TOPIC 1.1 AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH

A prescriptive attitude to grammar, and language in general, can have particularly serious consequences for certain groups of speakers. This is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the pervasive, negative attitudes that have surrounded, and in many cases continue to surround, the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). The extent of the marginalisation and disadvantage that speakers of AAVE experience is vividly articulated by Annie Blair, the mother

of two children who attended the Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in a prosperous, mostly white suburb of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Annie recalls:

> "Um my kids was tested and was tested and was put into special ed classes and I felt like that they were not getting educated and was not treated equally and – I felt like that shouldn't be a barrier because of the language to stop them from being educated." (Source: *'Do you speak American?'*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2005)

Asheen was one of the black boys who attended the school. Some 25 years later, he recalls how teachers perceived the use of AAVE:

> "They sort of felt like we were unteachable in a sense, I would feel. So it kind of made them go towards other students more and gave them a little bit more help than they would give us." (Source: *'Do you speak American?'*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2005)

Ruth Zweifler, coordinator of the Student Advocacy Center, a non-profit community organisation, was unable to get school administrators to acknowledge the detriment that these children were experiencing on account of their use of AAVE. She recalls:

> "There were maybe twenty-four black, poor black children in a sea of affluent white families. And they really were having a very hard time." (Source: *'Do you speak American?'*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2005)

Zweifler's organisation filed a lawsuit. During the trial that followed in June 1979, a federal judge, Judge Joiner, acknowledged formally that AAVE represented a significant barrier to academic achievement and success, and that the school district had been insensitive to the linguistic background of the vast majority of African American students in the district. In his decision, Judge Joiner remarked: 'A language barrier develops when teachers, in helping the child switch from the home (black English) language to standard English, refuse to admit the existence of a language that is the acceptable way of talking in his local community'. The judge also defined 'black English' as a 'language system' that contained 'aspects of Southern dialect' and was 'used largely by black people in casual conversation and informal talk'. This landmark ruling was influential in changing many of the negative perceptions of AAVE that existed among educators and school administrators. Some of the grammatical features of AAVE will be examined in Chapter 3.

The alternative to a prescriptive approach to the study of grammar is a **descriptive approach**. **Descriptive grammarians** examine the grammatical forms that speakers *actually* use, rather than the grammatical forms which prescriptivists

believe speakers *should* or *ought to* use. It is of interest to descriptive grammarians, for example, that the sentence 'I seen him last week' is used by speakers of **Belfast English** as well as by speakers of other dialects. The variation in grammatical forms in accordance with the social class, ethnic background, geographical region, age and gender of speakers is an important phenomenon requiring explanation according to descriptive grammarians, and should not be viewed as a subversion of prescriptive rules of correct grammar. For descriptive grammarians, Standard English is merely one dialect among many dialects of English, and its grammatical features have no stronger claim to correctness than the grammatical features of other dialects. Normative concepts such as 'correct' and 'incorrect' grammar have no place in the study of grammar where the aim is to give account of grammatical forms in actual use. The following examples of grammatical usage are of interest to descriptive grammarians:

(1) Who are you going to the party with?
(2) I done my homework last night.
(3) He wanted to really annoy her.
(4) Are youse going to the pub later?
(5) I couldn't get none nowhere.
(6) He's just gotten married.
(7) We as adults, as mainstream society, as Americans have really done bad by these little kids.
(8) He's going to the shop for to buy some milk.
(9) You was there, wasn't you?
(10) I've already chose my meal.

According to prescriptive grammarians, each of the above sentences contains a prohibited grammatical form. The sentence in (1) violates the prescriptive dictum that a sentence should never end in a preposition. The past participle (*done*) is used instead of the past tense (*did*) in the sentence in (2). The sentence in (3) splits the **infinitive** with the adverb *really*. The non-standard **pronoun** *youse* in the sentence in (4) is used of more than one addressee, while the sentence in (5) employs **multiple negation** (*not … none nowhere*). The sentence in (6) uses a non-standard past participle, while the sentence in (7) does not use the suffix *–ly* on the adverb *bad*. The sentence in (8) is noteworthy on account of the use of the 'for–to' infinitive. In (9), a singular verb (*was*) is used in place of the plural form *were*. Finally, the sentence in (10) uses a past tense verb (*chose*) in place of a past participle (*chosen*).

Descriptive grammarians take a quite different view of the sentences in (1) to (10) above. These sentences are not examples of bad or incorrect grammar. Rather, they exemplify the wide variation in grammar that exists in varieties and dialects other than Standard British English. The sentences in (6) and (7) are examples of **American English**, while the 'for–to' infinitive in (8) is a feature of **Northern Irish English**. Many of the grammatical features in (1) to (10)