1 Preliminaries

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1 The aim of this book

This book is a description of the grammar of modern Standard English, providing a detailed account of the principles governing the construction of English words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. To be more specific, we give a synchronic, descriptive grammar of general-purpose, present-day, international Standard English.

Synchronic versus diachronic description

A **synchronic** description of a language is a snapshot of it at one point in time, the opposite of a **diachronic** or historical account. English has a rich history going back over a millennium, but it is not the aim of this book to detail it. We include only a few notes on historical points of interest that will assist the reader to understand the present state of the language.

Of course, at any given moment English speakers with birthdates spread over about a century are alive, so the idea of English as it is on one particular day is a fiction: the English used today was learned by some speakers at the end of the twentieth century and by others near the beginning. But our practice will be to illustrate relevant points mainly with examples of use of the language taken from prose produced since the mid twentieth century. Examples from earlier periods are used only when particularly apposite quotations are available for a point on which the language has not subsequently changed. Wherever grammatical change has clearly occurred, our aim will be not to describe the evolutionary process but rather to describe the current state of the language.

Description versus prescription

Our aim is to **describe** and not **prescribe**: we outline and illustrate the principles that govern the construction of words and sentences in the present-day language without recommending or condemning particular usage choices. Although this book may be (and we certainly hope it will be) of use in helping the user decide how to phrase things, it is not designed as a style guide or a usage manual. We report that sentences of some types are now widely found and used, but we will not advise you to use them. We state that sentences of some types are seldom encountered, or that usage manuals or language columnists or language teachers recommend against them, or that some form of words is normally found only in informal style or, conversely, is limited to rather formal style, but we will not tell you that you should avoid them or otherwise make recommendations about how you should speak or write. Rather, this book offers a description of the context common to all such decisions: the linguistic system itself.

General-purpose versus special-purpose

We exclude from consideration what we refer to as **special-purpose** varieties of the language. Newspaper headlines, road signs, notices, and the like have their own special styles of abbreviation (*Man bites dog, arrested*; *EXIT ONLY THIS LANE*), and we do not provide a full treatment of the possibilities. Likewise, we do not provide a description of any special notations (chemical formulae, telephone numbers, email addresses) or of the special language found in poetry, heraldic descriptions, scientific works, chemical compound naming, computer jargon, mathematical proofs, etc. To some small extent there may be idiosyncratic grammatical patterns found in such areas, but we generally set them aside, avoiding complicated digressions about usages found within only a very narrow range of discourse.

Present-day English versus earlier stages

Modern English is generally defined by historians of English to be the English used from 1776 onwards. The recent part of the latter period (say, since the Second World War) can be called Present-day English. Linguistic changes have occurred in the grammar of English during the Modern English period, and even during the last half-century. Our central aim is to describe Present-day English in its standard form. This means, for example, that we treat the pronoun system as not containing a contrast between familiar and respectful 2nd person pronouns: the contrast between *thou* and *you* has been lost, and we do not mention *thou* in this grammar. Of course, this does not mean that people who use *thou* (actors in period plays, people addressing God in prayers, or Quakers who have retained the older usage) are making a mistake; but they are not using the general-purpose standard Present-day English described in this book.

Grammar versus other components

A **grammar** of a language describes the principles or rules governing the form and meaning of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. As such, it interacts with other components of a complete description: the **phonology** (covering the sound system), the **graphology** (the writing system: spelling and punctuation), the dictionary or **lexicon**, and the **semantics**.

Phonology and graphology do not receive attention in their own right here, but both have to be treated explicitly in the course of our description of inflection in Ch. 18 (we introduce the concepts that we will draw on in §3 of this chapter), and Ch. 20 deals with one aspect of the writing system in providing an outline account of the important system of punctuation.

A lexicon for a language deals with the vocabulary: it brings together information about the pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and grammatical properties of the **lexical items** – the words, and the items with special meanings that consist of more than one word, the idioms.

The study of conventional linguistic meaning is known as **semantics**. We take this to cut across the division between grammar and lexicon. That is, we distinguish between **lexical semantics**, which dictionaries cover, and **grammatical semantics**. Our account of grammatical meaning will be quite informal, but will distinguish between semantics (dealing with the meaning of sentences or words as determined by the language system itself) and **pragmatics** (which has to do with the use and interpretation of sentences

as used in particular contexts); an introduction to these and other concepts used in describing meaning is given in §5 of this chapter.

A grammar itself is divisible into two components, **syntax** and **morphology**. Syntax is concerned with the way words combine to form phrases, clauses, and sentences, while morphology deals with the formation of words. This division gives special prominence to the **word**, a unit which is also of major importance in the lexicon, the phonology and the graphology.

Standard versus non-standard

Perhaps the most subtle concept we have to rely on is the one that picks out the particular variety of Present-day English we describe, which we call Standard English. Briefly (for we will return to the topic below), we are describing the kind of English that is widely accepted in the countries of the world where English is the language of government, education, broadcasting, news publishing, entertainment, and other public discourse.

In a large number of countries (now running into scores), including some where most of the people have other languages as their first language, English is used for most printed books, magazines, newspapers, and public notices; for most radio and television broadcasting; for many or most film scripts, plays, poetry, and other literary art; for speeches, lectures, political addresses, proclamations, official ceremonies, advertisements, and other general announcements. In these countries there is a high degree of consensus about the appropriate variety of English to use. The consensus is confirmed by the decisions of broadcasting authorities about the kind of English that will be used for public information announcements, newscasts, commentaries to broadcasts of national events such as state funerals, and so on. It is confirmed by the writing found in magazines, newspapers, novels, and non-fiction books; by the editing and correcting that is done by the publishers of these; and by the way writers for the most part accept such editing and correcting of their work.

This is not to say that controversy cannot arise about points of grammar or usage. There is much dispute, and that is precisely the subject matter for prescriptive usage manuals. Nonetheless, the controversy about particular points stands out against a backdrop of remarkably widespread agreement about how sentences should be constructed for such purposes as publication, political communication, or government broadcasting. This widespread agreement defines what we are calling Standard English.

National versus international

Finally, we note that this book is not intended to promote any particular country's variety of Standard English as a norm; it is to apply internationally. English is the single most important language in the world, being the official or de facto language of the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and dozens of others, and being the lingua franca of the Internet. Many varieties of English are spoken around the world – from lectures in graduate schools in Holland to parliamentary proceedings in Papua New Guinea – but interestingly the vast majority of the variation lies in pronunciation and vocabulary. The number of differences in grammar between different varieties of Standard English is very

small indeed relative to the full range of syntactic constructions and morphological word-forms.

Nevertheless, there undoubtedly are differences of this kind that need to be noted. For example, the use of the verb *do* following an auxiliary verb, as in [%]*I'm not sure that I'll go, but I may do* is not found in American English, and conversely the past participle verb-form *gotten*, as in [%]*I've just gotten a new car*, is distinctively American. We use the symbol '[%]' to mark constructions or forms that are restricted to some dialect or dialects in this way.

The regional dialects of Standard English in the world today can be divided into two large families with regional and historical affinities. One contains standard educated Southern British English, henceforth abbreviated **BrE**, together with a variety of related dialects, including most of the varieties of English in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and most other places in the British Commonwealth. The second dialect family we will refer to as American English, henceforth **AmE** – it contains the dialects of the United States, Canada, and associated territories, from Hawaii and Alaska to eastern Canada.

2 Prescriptivism, tradition, and the justification of grammars

The topic of prescriptivism and its relation to the long tradition of English grammatical scholarship needs some further discussion if the basis of our work, and its relation to other contributions to the field, is to be properly understood. It relates to the issue of how the statements of a grammar are justified: what the support for a claimed grammatical statement might be.

2.1 Prescriptive and descriptive approaches: goals and coverage

The distinction between the prescriptive and descriptive approaches to grammar is often explained by saying that prescriptivists want to tell you how you **ought** to speak and write, while descriptivists want to tell you how people actually **do** speak and write. This does bring out the major difference between the two approaches: it is a difference in goals. However, it is something of an oversimplification, because writing a descriptive grammar in practice involves a fair amount of idealisation: we need to abstract away from the errors that people make, especially in speech (this point is taken up again in §3 below). In addition, it glosses over some significant differences between the kinds of works prescriptivists and descriptivists characteristically produce.

Differences in content

The basic difference in goals between prescriptive and descriptive works goes hand in hand with a striking difference in topics treated. The subject matters overlap, but many topics dealt with by prescriptive works find no place in a descriptive grammar, and some topics that must be treated in a descriptive grammar are universally ignored by prescriptive works.

The advice of prescriptivists is supplied in works of a type we will refer to as **usage manuals**. They are almost invariably arranged in the style of a dictionary, containing an

alphabetically arranged series of entries on topics where the issue of what is correct or acceptable is not altogether straightforward. In the first few pages of one usage manual we find entries on *abacus* (should the plural be *abaci*?), abbreviations (which ones are acceptable in formal writing?), *abdomen* (is the stress on the second syllable or the first?), *abduction* (how does it differ in meaning from *kidnapping*?), and so on. These points concern inflection, formal writing, pronunciation, and meaning, respectively, and on all of them a degree of variation and occasional uncertainty is encountered even among expert users of English. Not all of them would belong in a grammatical description. For example, our grammar does cover the plural of *abacus* (Ch. 18, §4.1.6), but it does not list abbreviations, or phonological topics like the placement of stress in English words, or lexical semantic topics like the distinction between *abduction* and *kidnapping*. These we take to be in the province of lexicon – matters for a dictionary rather than a grammar.

Usage manuals also give a great deal of attention to matters of style and effective expression that lie beyond the range of grammar as we understand it. Thus one prescriptive usage dictionary warns that *explore every avenue* is a tired cliché (and adds that it makes little sense, since exploration suggests a more challenging environment than an avenue); that the phrase *in this day and age* 'should be avoided at all costs'; that *circling round* is tautologous (one can only circle by going round) and thus should not be used; and so on. Whether or not one thinks these are good pieces of advice, we do not take them to fall within the realm of grammar. A sentence like *In this day and age one must circle round and explore every avenue* may be loaded with careworn verbiage, or it may even be arrant nonsense, but there is absolutely nothing **grammatically** wrong with it.

There are also topics in a descriptive grammar that are uniformly ignored by prescriptivists. These include the most salient and well-known principles of syntax. Prescriptive works tend to be highly selective, dealing only with points on which people make mistakes (or what are commonly thought to be mistakes). They would never supply, for example, the grammatically important information that determinatives like *the* and *a* precede the noun they are associated with (*the house*, not **house the*),[1] or that modal auxiliaries like *can* and *must* are disallowed in infinitival clauses (**I'd like to can swim* is ungrammatical), or that in subordinate interrogative clauses the interrogative element comes at the front (so we get *She asked what we needed*, not **She asked we needed what*). Native speakers never get these things wrong, so no advice is needed.

2.2 Disagreement between descriptivist and prescriptivist work

Although descriptive grammars and prescriptive usage manuals differ in the range of topics they treat, there is no reason in principle why they should not agree on what they say about the topics they both treat. The fact they do not is interesting. There are several reasons for the lack of agreement. We deal with three of them here: (a) the basis in personal taste of some prescriptivist writers' judgements; (b) the confusion of informality with ungrammaticality; and (c) certain invalid arguments sometimes appealed to by prescriptivists. These are extraneous features of prescriptive writing about language rather than inherent ones, and all three of them are less prevalent now than they were

[1] Throughout this book we use an asterisk to indicate that what follows is ungrammatical.

in the past. But older prescriptive works have exemplified them, and a few still do; their influence lingers on in the English-speaking educational world.

(a) Taste tyranny

Some prescriptivist works present rules that have no basis in the way the language is actually used by the majority of its native speakers, and are not even claimed to have any such basis – as though the manual-writer's own judgements of taste took precedence over those of any other speaker of the language. They expect all speakers to agree with their judgements, no matter what the facts of language use might show.

For example, one usage manual, discussing why it is (supposedly) incorrect to say *You need a driving instructor who you have confidence in*, states that 'The accusative *whom* is necessary with the preposition *in*, though *whom* is a word strangely shunned by most English people.' We take the implication to be that English people should not shun this word, since the writer (who is English) does not. But we are inclined to ask what grounds there could be for saying that *whom* is 'necessary' if most English people (or speakers of the English language) would avoid it.

The same book objects to *centre* (*a*)*round*, calling it incorrect, although 'probably more frequently used than the correct *centre on*'. Again, we wonder how *centre* (*a*)*round* can be determined to be incorrect in English if it is indeed more commonly used by English speakers than what is allegedly correct. The boundary would appear to have been drawn in the wrong place.

Prescriptive works instantiating this kind of aesthetic authoritarianism provide no answer to such obvious questions. They simply assert that grammar dictates things, without supporting their claim from evidence. The basis for the recommendations offered appears to lie in the writer's taste: the writer quoted above simply does not like to see *who* used where it is understood as the object of a preposition, and personally hates the expression *centre around*. What is going on here is a universalising of one person's taste, a demand that everyone should agree with it and conform to it.

The descriptivist view would be that when most speakers use a form that our grammar says is incorrect, there is at least a prima facie case that it is the grammar that is wrong, not the speakers. And indeed, even in the work just quoted we find the remark that '*Alright* is common, and may in time become normal', an acknowledgement that the language may change over time, and what begins as an isolated variant on a pattern may eventually become the new pattern. The descriptive grammarian will always adopt a stance of something more like this sort, thus making evidence relevant to the matter at hand. If what is involved were a matter of taste, all evidence would be beside the point. But under the descriptive viewpoint, grammar is not a matter of taste, nor of aesthetics.

This is not to say that the expression of personal aesthetic judgements is without utility. The writer of a book on usage might be someone famous for brilliant use of the language, someone eminently worthy of being followed in matters of taste and literary style. It might be very useful to have a compendium of such a person's preferences and recommendations, and very sensible for a less expert writer to follow the recommendations of an acknowledged master of the writer's craft (assuming such recommendations do reliably accord with the master's practice). All we are pointing out is that where the author of an authoritarian usage manual departs from recommendations that agree with the way most people use the language, prescriptivist and descriptivist

accounts will necessarily disagree. The authoritarian prescriptivist whose recommendations are out of step with the usage of others is at liberty to declare that they are in error and should change their ways; the descriptivist under the same circumstances will assume that it is precisely the constant features in the usage of the overwhelming majority that define what is grammatical in the contemporary language, and will judge the prescriptivist to be expressing an idiosyncratic opinion concerning how the language ought to be.

(b) Confusing informal style with ungrammaticality

It has been a common assumption of prescriptivists that only formal style is grammatically correct. The quotation about *whom* given above is representative of this view, for *whom* can be a marker of relatively formal style, being commonly replaced by *who* in informal style (see Ch. 5, §16.2.3, for a detailed account of the use of these two forms). There are two related points to be made here. The first is that it is important to distinguish between the two contrasts illustrated in the following pairs:

[1] i a. *It is clear whom they had in mind.* b. *It's clear who they had in mind.*
ii a. *Kim and I saw the accident.* b. !*Kim and me saw the accident.*

In [i], both versions belong to Standard English, with [a] somewhat formal, and [b] neutral or slightly informal. There is no difference in grammaticality. But in [ii], the [a] version is standard, the [b] version non-standard; we use the '!' symbol to mark a construction or form as ungrammatical in Standard English but grammatical in a non-standard dialect. Construction [iib] will be heard in the speech of speakers of dialects that have a different rule for case inflection of pronouns: they use the accusative forms (*me*, *him*, *her*, *us*, *them*) whenever the pronoun is coordinated. Standard English does not.

A common view in the prescriptivist tradition is that uses of *who* like [1ib] are not grammatically correct but are nevertheless 'sanctioned by usage'. For example, Fowler, one of the most influential prescriptivists of the twentieth century, wrote: 'The interrogative *who* is often used in talk where grammar demands *whom*, as in *Who did you hear that from?* No further defence than "colloquial" is needed for this.' This implies a dichotomy between 'talk' and 'grammar' that we reject. The standard language embraces a range of styles, from formal through neutral to informal. A satisfactory grammar must describe them all. It is not that formal style keeps to the rules and informal style departs from them; rather, formal and informal styles have partially different rules.

(c) Spurious external justifications

Prescriptive grammarians have frequently backed up their pronouncements with appeals to entirely extraneous considerations. Some older prescriptive grammars, for example, give evidence of relying on rules that would be better suited to the description of classical languages like Latin than to Present-day English. Consider, for example, the difference between the uses of accusative and nominative forms of the personal pronouns seen in:

[2] a. *It is I.* b. *It's me.*

With *who* and *whom* in [1i] we saw a construction where an accusative form was associated with relatively formal style. In [2], however, it is the sentence with the nominative

form *I* that belongs to (very) formal style, while accusative *me* is neutral or informal (again, see Ch. 5, §16.2.1 for a fuller description of the facts). Confusing informality with ungrammaticality again, a strong prescriptivist tradition says that only [2a] is grammatical. The accusative *me* is claimed to be the case of the direct object, as in *It hurt me*, but in [2] the noun phrase after the verb is a predicative complement. In Latin, predicative complements take nominative, the same case as the subject. An assumption is being made that English grammar too requires nominative case for predicative complements. Use of the accusative *me* is regarded as a departure from the rules of grammar.

The mistake here, of course, is to assume that what holds in Latin grammar has to hold for English. English grammar differs on innumerable points from Latin grammar; there is no reason in principle why the assignment of case to predicative complements should not be one of them. After all, English is very different from Latin with respect to case: the nominative–accusative contrast applies to only a handful of pronouns (rather than to the full class of nouns, as in Latin). The right way to describe the present situation in Standard English (unlike Latin) is that with the pronouns that have a nominative–accusative case distinction, the choice between the cases for a predicative complement noun phrase varies according to the style level: the nominative is noticeably formal, the accusative is more or less neutral and always used in informal contexts.

Another kind of illegitimate argument is based on analogy between one area of grammar and another. Consider yet another construction where there is variation between nominative and accusative forms of pronouns:

[3] a. *They invited me to lunch.* b. %*They invited my partner and I to lunch.*

The '%' symbol is again used to mark the [b] example as typically used by some speakers of Standard English but not others, though this time it is not a matter of regional variation. The status of the construction in [b] differs from that of *It's me*, which is undisputedly normal in informal use, and from that of !*Me and Kim saw her leave*, which is unquestionably non-standard. What is different is that examples like [b] are regularly used by a significant proportion of speakers of Standard English, and not generally thought by ordinary speakers to be non-standard; they pass unnoticed in broadcast speech all the time.

Prescriptivists, however, condemn the use illustrated by [3b], insisting that the 'correct' form is *They invited my partner and me to lunch.* And here again they seek to justify their claim that [3b] is ungrammatical by an implicit analogy, this time with other situations found in English, such as the example seen in [a]. In [a] the pronoun functions by itself as direct object of the verb and invariably appears in accusative case. What is different in [b] is that the direct object of the verb has the form of a coordination, not a single pronoun. Prescriptivists commonly take it for granted that this difference is irrelevant to case assignment. They argue that because we have an accusative in [a] we should also have an accusative in [b], so the nominative *I* is ungrammatical.

But why should we simply assume that the grammatical rules for case assignment cannot differentiate between a coordinated and a non-coordinated pronoun? As it happens, there is another place in English grammar where the rules are sensitive to this distinction – for virtually all speakers, not just some of them:

[4] a. *I don't know if you're eligible.* b. **I don't know if she and you're eligible.*

The sequence *you are* can be reduced to *you're* in [a], where *you* is subject, but not in [b], where the subject has the form of a coordination of pronouns. This shows us not only that a rule of English could apply differently to pronouns and coordinated pronouns, but that one rule actually does. If that is so, then a rule could likewise distinguish between [3a] and [3b]. The argument from analogy is illegitimate. Whether [3b] is treated as correct Standard English or not (a matter that we take up in Ch. 5, §16.2.2), it cannot be successfully argued to be incorrect simply by virtue of the analogy with [3a].

The claim that [1ib] (*It's clear who they had in mind*) is ungrammatical is supported by the same kind of analogical reasoning. In *They had me in mind*, we have accusative *me*, so it is assumed that the grammar likewise requires accusative *whom*. The assumption here is that the rules of case assignment are not sensitive to the difference in the position of the pronoun (after the verb for *me*, at the beginning of the clause for *who*), or to the difference between interrogative and personal pronouns. There is, however, no basis for assuming that the rules of grammar cannot make reference to such differences: the grammar of English could assign case to clause-initial and non-clause-initial pronouns, or to interrogative and non-interrogative pronouns, in slightly different ways.[2]

We should stress that not all prescriptive grammarians exhibit the shortcomings we have just catalogued – universalising taste judgements, confusing informality with ungrammaticality, citing spurious external justifications, and arguing from spurious analogies. There are usage manuals that are accurate in their understanding of the facts, clear-sighted in their attitudes towards usage trends, and useful in their recommendations; such books can be an enormous help to a writer. But the good prescriptive manuals respect a crucial tenet: that their criterion should always be the use of the standard language by its native speakers.

As we have said, to some extent good usage manuals go far beyond grammar into style, rhetoric, and communication, giving advice about which expressions are overused clichés, or fail to make their intended point, or are unintentionally ambiguous, or perpetuate an unfortunate malapropism, or any of a large number of other matters that lie beyond the scope of this book. But when it comes to points of grammar, the only legitimate basis for an absolute judgement of incorrectness in a usage manual is that what is being rejected is **not in the standard language**.

The aspects of some prescriptivist works that we have discussed illustrate ways in which those works let their users down. Where being ungrammatical is confused with merely being informal, there is a danger that the student of English will not be taught how to speak in a normal informal way, but will sound stilted and unnatural, like an inexpert reader reading something out from a book. And where analogies are used uncritically to predict grammatical properties, or Latin principles are taken to guarantee correct use of English, the user is simply being misled.

[2] A further type of invalid argument that falls under the present heading confuses grammar with logic. This is illustrated in the remarkably widespread but completely fallacious claim that non-standard [!] *I didn't see nobody* is intrinsically inferior to standard *I didn't see anybody* because the two negatives cancel each other out. We discuss this issue in Ch. 9, §6.2.