

1

Preliminaries

This is a book about the English language and how we might try to describe how it works. In the pages that follow we will attempt to discover how we can come to some understanding of the language if we go about that task using insights from modern linguistics. One consequence is that we may be forced to revise, perhaps even discard, some of the ideas we already have about English. However, we should find in the pages that follow a great wealth of ideas that will usefully replace them. It seems best then to begin our study of the language by making explicit certain concepts which underlie all that will follow.

1.1 Descriptivism and Prescriptivism

We will be focusing our attention on **standard** spoken English, the variety of the language we associate with people who speak the language natively and unself-consciously, people who are also likely to be educated at least to high-school level and be without any kind of strong regional accent.

We will also concentrate on the spoken language rather than on the written language. (As we will see too, the actual spoken variety to be discussed – although not exclusively – in the chapters that follow is a **rhotic** variety, i.e., one that pronounces the *rs* in words such as *car* and *cart*; it is also one that distinguishes between the vowel sounds in *cot* and *caught*.) What is important to remember is that when we turn our attention to how we speak the language we must try to listen to how English is actually spoken and not let any assumptions about how it should be spoken get in the way. Such assumptions may derive from the idea that spelling should be used as an infallible guide in the pronunciation of certain words, or from certain kinds of instruction that we may have had, e.g., attempts to make us pronounce *what* differently from *Watt*, or from a belief that there exists somewhere a fixed, unchanged, and unchangeable entity called the English language whose characteristics are well known.

In the pages that follow we will adopt a descriptive approach to language study rather than a prescriptive approach. A **descriptive** approach is one that attempts to describe actual language use, in our case the use of the language by the kind of speakers described above. A **prescriptive** approach is one that expresses a certain dissatisfaction with language use in general and even the language of such speakers. Those who take such an approach believe that no one can be trusted to use the language “correctly.” They believe that they know how the language works – usually like Greek or Latin; consequently, they constantly set out arbitrary rules and principles to make sure that “language standards” are upheld and that the language does not “decline.” While there is no reason to believe that either their descriptions or their standards are appropriate or that the language is in fact declining, prescriptivists do have a number of **shibboleths** that they refer to constantly and you should be aware of these. For many people the avoidance of these shibboleths comprises the whole purpose of the study of English grammar.

Prescriptivism is a fact about attitudes toward English; it cannot be ignored. Most highly edited formal prose actually conforms to the demands of prescriptivists. However, carrying over the same prescriptive usages into speech is likely to make a person sound either pompous or pretentious, or both. It is important, therefore, to understand the difference between descriptivism and prescriptivism. Our concern will not be with the kinds of matters mentioned in the exercises that follow except in so far as what we say in the pages that follow sheds light on various issues contained there. Our concern will be with trying to describe the language in all its complexity so that we can achieve some understanding of how it actually works. We will find that we need a variety of approaches and techniques and that the more we find out the more intriguing the problems associated with understanding become.

1.2 Exercises

1 Much attention is given in teaching grammar to discussions of sentences such as the following. This book is really not concerned with the issues they raise. However, since it is important to know how prescriptivists feel about them, you should examine each sentence closely in order to try to understand just what it is that prescriptivists say about it. You might also consider what descriptivists have to say about the same grammatical issues. The first three are done for you.

- (a) The mission of the USS *Enterprise* is to boldly go where no man has ever been before.

(Prescriptivists say that *to boldly go* is a “split infinitive,” i.e., the adverb *boldly* should not be placed between *to* and *go*, the marked infinitive in English. Change to *to go boldly*. Descriptivists point out that speakers of English often place adverbs in this position and that the prescriptivists’ rule comes from applying a rule of Latin to English: you cannot “split” Latin infinitives because they are single words, e.g., *ire* “to go.”)

- (b) I'm right, ain't I?
 (Prescriptivists say that *ain't* is not an English word no matter how frequently it is used. Change to *aren't I?* or *am I not?* Descriptivists point out that *ain't* has a long history in the language, is phonetically justified, has just as much validity as *aren't I?*, and *I aren't* is not possible.)
- (c) Hopefully, the weather will clear up tomorrow.
 (Prescriptivists say that *hopefully* cannot be used in this way as a sentence adverb (or disjunct) like *certainly* and *possibly*. Descriptivists point out that many native speakers do indeed use *hopefully* in this way.)
- (d) It's me who gets the blame for everything.
- (e) John and Sally love one another.
- (f) It was the most unique event in the history of the town.
- (g) You are taller than me.
- (h) Nobody said nothing.
- (i) Those kind of people get on my nerves.
- (j) If I was you, I would resign.
- (k) Everyone should bring their own lunch.
- (l) None of the guests have arrived yet.
- (m) He only had it for two days.
- (n) Who did you speak to at the time?
- (o) Finding the door unlocked, an opportunity to escape appeared at last.
- (p) Don't do it like he does it.
- (q) This one is different than that one.
- (r) Between you and I, he's crazy.
- (s) Try and do it soon.
- (t) When boarding, we remind you to move to the back of the vehicle.
- (u) This is a marker to our four friends whom are no longer with us.
- (v) He's going irregardless.
- (w) They interviewed the boy whom they thought had found it.
- (x) We open our meetings with a prayer because it helps us to make less stupid mistakes.
- (y) I suddenly felt very badly about it.
- (z) He seems to be quite disinterested these days.

- 2 Is there a "correct" pronunciation of each of the following words? If there is, why? Some of the issues related to the first three examples are indicated.

mischievous (Does the penultimate syllable have the vowel of *bit* or of *beet* and does the word rhyme with *devious*?), either (Does the first syllable have the vowel of *beet* or of *bite*?), asphalt (Does the word begin like *ass* or like *ash*?), diphthong, tomato, film, secretary, bath, clerk, shone, Arctic, comely, often, herb, athlete, ate, defence, dance, butter, soot, news

- 3 When a native speaker of English is said not to know his or her grammar, what actually does such a statement mean?