

Chapter 1

What Is Grammar?

Abstract This chapter is an overview of what grammar is. We examine what exactly “rules” of grammar consist of and consider these “rules” from two perspectives: prescriptive and descriptive. Throughout the chapter, you will exercise your knowledge as a native or highly proficient non-native speaker of English—knowledge that you may only have had until now, implicitly.

Keywords prescriptive grammar • descriptive grammar

Introduction

“When I think of grammar, I think of word usage—which, of course, everyone butchers.”
“I despise grammar. I find the rules trite and boring.”
“Grammar (and its enforcers) need to loosen up and enjoy life more! Grammar makes my stomach churn.”

These comments will strike a chord with many users of this textbook. The term *grammar* does not bring pleasant memories to the minds of many people. Instead, grammar frequently brings to mind tedious lessons with endless drills, repetition, and other generally mindless practice, focused on mostly obscure rules of how people are supposed to write and speak. For native speakers of any given language, grammar often represents to them the great “mystery” of language, known only to language specialists or those of older generations, the ones who really know what is “right.” Many feel that grammar is something that they were never taught and therefore “don’t know.” Because “bad” grammar is often attributed to people’s misuse of language, there is often a sense of resentment or frustration with the notion of grammar.

1.1 Section 1: Grammarians and Grammar

The idea that grammar is a set of rules, often seen as arbitrary or unrealistic, is only one narrow view of grammar. Such a view is based on the belief that grammar:

- must be explicitly taught;
- is absolute and fixed, a target or goal that speakers need attain in order to be “good” speakers or writers of the language;
- is inherently difficult and confusing, its mysteries apparent only to teachers, language mavens, or linguists.

People who follow this approach to grammar are called traditional or “prescriptive” grammarians.

Discovery Activity 1: Making Decisions on Grammaticality

Look at the sentences below.

1. Based on your opinion, label each sentence as **G** for grammatical, **N** for ungrammatical, and **?** for “not sure” or “don’t know.”
2. For those sentences you labeled as **N**, identify the element or elements that you think are ungrammatical and explain why you think they are ungrammatical. For those sentences you labeled as **?**, discuss why you are unsure.
 - (a) _____ She had less problems with the move to a new school than she thought she would.
 - (b) _____ She lays in bed all day whenever she gets a migraine headache.
 - (c) _____ My sister Alice, who is older than me, still lives at home.
 - (d) _____ Everyone needs to buy their books before the first day of class.

Discussion: Discovery Activity 1

In all of these sentences, there is a difference between casual English and formal English. In formal English, particularly when written, there are rules that speakers are taught that must be followed in order for sentences to be considered “correct.”

Sentence a

Few, according to prescriptive grammarians, should be used only with nouns we can count, such as apples, pens, or days, while *less* should be used with nouns we can’t count, such as math, water, or beauty. According to this rule, the sentence should be *She had fewer problems with the move to the new school than she thought she would* (see Chap. 3).

Sentence b

Lie and *lay* are two different verbs. *Lie* is a verb that is not followed by an object, while *lay* is a verb that is followed by an object. Compare these two sentences:

Cats lie on beds.	lie = resting or sleeping
Cats lay mice on beds.	lay = put

Another way to differentiate these two similar verbs is to describe *lay* as an action verb and *lie* as a non-action verb. According to the rule, *lie* doesn't take an object but *lay* does, therefore, Sentence b in formal English needs to be rewritten as:

She **lies** in bed all day whenever she gets a migraine headache.

Adding to the confusion between *lie* and *lay* is the fact that the past tense form of *lie* is *lay*.

Yesterday she **lay** in bed all day long.

A tip to remember how to distinguish *lay* and *lie* is to ask yourself whether or not the verb *put* can be substituted as in: *Cats put mice on beds* but not **Cats put on beds*.¹

Sentence c

There is a grammar rule that dictates *I* needs to be used here, not *me*, because *than* compares two nouns in subject position as in:

My sister Alice, who is older than **I**, still lives at home.

Nevertheless, for most speakers of American English, *I* after *than* sounds stilted or affected, especially in spoken English and in informal written contexts, such as e-mail or personal correspondence.

Sentence d

Here the discussion of which pronoun to refer back to *everyone* has long been a subject of controversy. Traditional grammarians for centuries have argued that the singular male possessive pronoun is the grammatically correct form because words such as *anyone* or *anybody* are singular, even though they refer to plural conceptualizations of people. The use of "his" after such pronouns as *anyone* or *everybody* is an artificial construct of traditional grammarians, derived from early English grammarians who wrote the first grammars based on "logical" Latin. Guided by the "logic" of Latin, they concluded that since *-one* and *-body* are singular and since a male pronoun would encompass reference to all persons, *his* was the "logical" or "correct" choice.

While such an argument may be true of Latin and other languages such as Spanish or German, there is no basis for this in English. In Spanish, all nouns are either masculine or feminine. In the case of Latin or German, all nouns are masculine, feminine, or neuter. The plural form, when reference is made to both sexes, has traditionally been the male plural form in these languages, although changes in modern languages include using both the male and female plural forms when referring to mixed groups.

English, in contrast, does not classify nouns according to gender, except in a few instances where they clearly refer to a specific sex, such as *girl* or *father*. Moreover,

¹Note: An asterisk * before a sentence indicates an ungrammatical sentence.

in plural form, English pronouns are all gender neutral (*we, our, ours, you, your, yours, they, their, theirs*).

Thus, although grammarians have insisted that speakers use “his” for centuries, the tendency has been to use the plural pronoun form *their* and to avoid any reference to gender.

In the last several decades, it has become generally unacceptable in American English to use the singular male pronoun after such words as *each, everyone, and somebody*. It has become more and more acceptable, even in formal writing, to use the plural *they*. Many newspapers, such as the *Washington Post*, now accept *they* after indefinite pronouns; Facebook allows people to choose *they* as their preferred pronoun; and in 2015, the American Dialect Society chose *they* as the gender-neutral singular pronoun.

Alternatively, to avoid the issue altogether, grammar books and style guides generally recommend using plural nouns and pronouns and finding other ways to avoid the issue. Instead of *Everyone needs his book*, the sentence can be reworded as *All students need their books*. Another strategy is the use of *a* instead of *his* as in: *Everyone needs a book*.

1.2 Section 2: Language and Change

Discovery Activity 1 and the discussion that followed highlight the differences between how people actually express themselves and how language mavens say they should. Moreover, even among so-called language experts there is not uniform agreement as to what is “correct” or acceptable. One reason for such controversy is the nature of language: Language is a living, fluid entity that changes in response to changes in society. For example, the change in women’s status is reflected in changes in acceptable pronoun reference, as illustrated in Sentence d. Societal changes can also be seen in the new words adopted into the language; just think of the enormous number of new words related to computers and the Internet that have entered languages around the world.

Frequently, changes in grammatical use or even new word adoption are considered “degeneration” or “degradation” of the language. Some countries have official language academies charged with maintaining the “purity” and “integrity” of the language. In France, for instance, L’Académie française has been the arbiter of the French language for several centuries. Upset by the increasingly Anglicization of French (i.e., the adoption of English words into French, particularly in the sciences and technology), the French government passed a law in the mid-1990s essentially outlawing the adoption of foreign words into French and requiring instead the use of newly created or adapted French words.

Yet even with such an academy dictating proper usage, the French language spoken in the mid-20th century is different from that spoken at the beginning of the 21st century. Language change is an indicator of the viability and vitality of a

language. A language that does not change does not have any living native speakers, as in the case of Latin or Sanskrit.

While American English has no equivalent academy acting as “protector of the language,” there are numerous manuals of style, language mavens, and others weighing in on the grammaticality of a form or the acceptability of new words and usage. Since there is no single official arbiter of American English, there is often disagreement among the various experts, particularly in areas that many regard as involving the finer or “more obscure” points of grammar. Discovery Activity 2 will help expand our discussion of grammaticality.

Discovery Activity 2: More Decisions on Grammaticality

Look at the sentences below.

1. Based on your opinion, label each sentence as **G** for grammatical, **N** for ungrammatical, and **?** for “not sure” or “don’t know.”
2. For those sentences you labeled as **N**, identify the element or elements that you think are ungrammatical and explain why you think they are ungrammatical. For those sentences you labeled as **?**, discuss why you are unsure.
 - (a) _____ Jackie says she don’t know if they can come.
 - (b) _____ I’m not going to do nothing about that missing part.
 - (c) _____ We sure don’t have any problems with the phone company.
 - (d) _____ Shoppers are used to standing on long lines at this store.

Discussion: Discovery Activity 2

Before you look at the discussion of Discovery Activity 2, think about your initial reactions to each of these four sentences. Were any of your reactions different from your reactions to the sentences in Discovery Activity 1? If so, how and why? If you are a non-native speaker of English, ask a native speaker to complete this activity. Compare your responses. If they are different, think about why this might be so.

Sentences a and b

For many native speakers of American English, these two sentences represent forms of non-standard English and are considered markers of low socioeconomic and/or marginalized social status. In other words, these are *stigmatized* language forms that are recognizable to the general population as “incorrect” American English in both spoken and written forms. This is in contrast to the examples in Discovery Activity 1, where even highly educated speakers produce such sentences, except in the most formal contexts.

Sentences c and d

These two sentences, in contrast to Sentences a and b, represent regional variations in the United States that speakers from other parts of the country find unusual or curious. Outside the New York City metropolitan area, most people stand *in line*, not *on line*. Outside most of the southern part of the United States, most speakers do not use *sure don't*. Neither Sentences c nor d, however, carries the stigmatizing effect that Sentences a and b do.

Discovery Activity 2 illustrates some further differences in the concept of grammar; that is, that there are structures or forms that most users of a language recognize as “standard.” Standard language users may not be able to articulate the rules and usages, but they can recognize what is and is not acceptable and can generally point to the reason why. For example, standard language users may not know the rule, “Use third person *-s* in singular present tense verbs,” but they do know that *he* or *she* uses *doesn't* and not *don't*. The difference between the sentences in Discovery Activity 1 and those in Discovery Activity 2 is that e Sentences a and b in Activity 2 are clearly recognized by the majority of speakers as incorrect Standard American English.

Teachers of ESL/EFL learners need to recognize that learners of English often produce sentences such as a and b in Discovery Activity 2 not necessarily because they are speakers of non-standard English, but because they have not yet mastered the standard forms. Even if students have been consistently introduced to and practiced the standard forms, it generally takes a significant period of time to master these forms.

1.3 Section 3: Linguists and Grammar

Linguists have a very different approach to the concept of grammar in comparison to traditional (prescriptive) grammarians. From the linguist's point of view, grammar is not a collection of rules—often obscure, arcane, and often illogical—that must be taught, but rather a set of blueprints that guides speakers in producing comprehensible and predictable language. Every language, including its dialects or variants, is systematic and orderly. Languages and their variations are rule-governed structures and therefore “grammatical.” In other words, all languages consist of patterns, or “grammars,” that make sense of the features of a given language.

Consider the following string of words. How many sentences can you come up with using these words and only these words?

the came girl baskets home with

Most native speakers, using only their intuitive knowledge of grammar, will come up with this sentence:

The girl came home with baskets.

Some native speakers may come up with this less common but still recognizably English variation:

The girl with baskets came home.

What native speakers do is use their innate knowledge of grammar to put this seemingly random string of words into a comprehensible sentence. Any other combination of words would produce sentences that would sound strange to English speakers because they would not be grammatical; that is, they would not fit the blueprint of how words are combined in English to make sentences.

While this is true for native speakers, ESL/EFL learners need to learn explicitly which words fit together in a string according to the rules or patterns of English. For them, their intuitive knowledge is valid for their own native language, which uses patterns different from, and often contrary to, English.

1.3.1 Language Is Rule-Governed

What does “rule-governed” mean?

Children, as part of the process of acquiring their native language, learn without formal instruction what belongs with what in order to form coherent, intelligible, and meaningful sentences. They learn the grammar of their language and, with this grammar, they can create an unlimited number of new and original sentences. Even when the sentence elements are new and unique, ones that native speakers have never before seen, they can use and adapt them according to the patterns of their language. This is what is meant when linguists say languages are rule-governed, systematic, and organized or *grammatical*.

Consider this excerpt from *Jabberwocky* by Lewis Carroll:

Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!

The poem is famous for consisting of nonsense words mixed in with regular English words. What makes the poem so vivid and effective in many respects is the ability of the author to evoke images based on the grammatical knowledge of the native or highly proficient non-native speaker. *Jabberwock*, for instance, is preceded by *the*. In English, this *the*, known as a definite article, precedes a noun. Both that clue and the fact that *Jabberwock* is capitalized tell us that this nonsense

word is a noun, specifically a proper noun or a name noun similar to *Chicago* or *Italy*.

Now let's look at the word *Jubjub*. Like *Jabberwock*, this word is capitalized and preceded by *the*. However, we know intuitively that *Jubjub* does not have the same sentence function as *Jabberwock*. Why is this so?

After *Jubjub* we see the word *bird*. *Bird* is a noun, specifically a noun that names a thing; in this case, a thing that flies and has wings and a beak. From the position of the word *Jubjub* before *bird*, we know that *Jubjub* is describing something about *bird*. Since *Jubjub* is written with a capital *J*, we can guess that it is telling us specifically what kind of bird is being referred to. In other words, *Jubjub* is functioning as a descriptive word, or adjective, before the noun *bird*, similar to *Siberian* as in *Siberian tiger*.

Similarly, we can guess that *frumious* is another adjective, describing something about the proper noun *Bandersnatch*. The sentence position of *frumious* before *Bandersnatch* is one clue. A different type of clue telling us something about *frumious* is the ending *-ous*. This is an ending that is found in other English words that describe nouns, such as *famous*, *gorgeous*, *voluptuous*, *egregious*, and *pretentious*.

Because native and highly proficient non-native speakers of English know the “grammar” of English, they can understand and appreciate this poem without ever before having seen such words as *Jabberwocky* or *frumious* and without necessarily knowing the terms *noun* or *adjective*. Few speakers are conscious of which “grammar” rules they are applying or using to understand this poem.

Since languages differ in the types and applications of rules, however, ESL/EFL learners need to learn the new patterns of the language they are studying. They need to begin by becoming aware that there *are* differences in how languages are patterned, and then work toward being able to subconsciously produce the new language without explicit reference to rules.

In Discovery Activity 3, you will have the chance to see how much you already know about English grammar.

Discovery Activity 3: More on Jabberwocky Excerpts

Here are more excerpts from Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*. Using your previous analysis and the discussion as a starting point:

1. What conclusions can you draw about the italicized words?
2. Explain why you reached the conclusions you did.

And, as in *uffish* thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffing through the *tulgey* wood,
And burred as it came!

One two! One two! And through and through
 The *vorpal* blade went *snicker-snack!*
 [Carroll, L. (1871). *Through the looking glass and what Alice found there*. Available
 online at: <http://www.jabberwocky.com/carroll/jabber/jabberwocky.html>]

Discussion: Discovery Activity 3

You may not have been able to explain exactly why you came to the conclusions you did regarding the different italicized words in this activity; nevertheless, you were probably able to give some description as to the functions of the words. This ability is part of your knowledge of the underlying patterns, or grammar, of English.

Based on sentence position and endings, you probably concluded that *uffish*, *tulgey*, and *vorpal* are descriptive words (adjectives) describing the nouns following them; *-ish*, *-y*, and *-al* are common adjective endings. (In Chap. 2 we will examine word endings in more detail.)

-ish	-y	-al
waspish	smelly	logical
smallish	rainy	biographical
standoffish	crazy	nautical
greenish	jumpy	educational

Although *snicker-snack* is not recognizable as an adverb based on its word ending, its sentence position identifies it as such. It comes after the verb *went* and is describing something about the verb. We can also say that the alliteration of the sounds of the word easily bring to mind a sound such as a sword might make.

Discovery Activity 3 demonstrates that there are two very different conceptions of *grammar*. One school of thought views grammar as a set of rules that must be learned to use language “correctly.” Users of language who do not adhere to the rules are using an “inferior” or “sloppy” form of the language. The correct rules must often be explicitly learned and practiced, and may at times be contrary to what even highly educated native speakers use in formal language contexts. This is the **prescriptive** school of grammar, and the school that traditional grammarians follow.

Another school sees grammar as a blueprint of language guiding speakers in how to string together symbols, sounds, and words to make coherent, meaningful sentences. This type of grammar knowledge is intuitive and reflects the innate ability of speakers to learn and use their native language. Children do not memorize rules as they learn to speak. What they learn are the rules or patterns governing their

language. It is this grammar that allows language users to create and understand an unlimited number of new and original sentences.

No language has only one grammar; each language has subsets of grammar, generally referred to as dialects. These subsets are often considered sub-standard forms, yet they are just as rule-governed as the standard variety. This is the **de-****scriptive** school of thought, and the school that linguists follow. A more in-depth look at the two different schools of thought follows.

What are some examples of the differences between prescriptive and descriptive grammar?

1.4 Section 4: Prescriptive Grammar and Descriptive Grammar

1.4.1 Prescriptive Grammar

Prescriptive grammar is the grammar taught in school, discussed in newspaper and magazine columns on language and on various social media, or mandated by language academies such as those found in Spain or France. Prescriptive grammar tells people how they should say something, what words they should use, when they need to make a specific choice, and why they should do so. At times, prescriptive grammar rules are overextended to the point that speakers *hypercorrect*, that is, they apply the grammatical rules in situations where they should not.

Take, for instance, the use of the pronouns *I* and *me*. For many years, English teachers in the United States railed against the incorrect use of *me*, the object pronoun, in subject position as in:

**Me* and John are going to the store.

or

*John and *me* are going to the store.

**Me* and Sue had lunch.

or

*Sue and *me* had lunch.

There is a prescriptive grammar rule in English specifying that pronouns in subject position must be subject pronouns (*I, you, we, he, she, it, they*). According to this rule, speakers' use of *me* in these sentences is incorrect because *me* is the first person *object* pronoun. *Me* in these sentences is in *subject* position, and the subject pronoun *I* should follow any other noun subject or subject pronoun. From a prescriptive point of view, these sentences should be:

John and *I* are going to the store.

Sue and *I* had lunch.

In the last several decades, many native speakers, attempting to avoid the incorrect use of *me*, hypercorrect the use of *me* by substituting *I*, even in cases where *me* is called for because it is in object position. Consider the following samples of actual speech:

They couldn't have raised the necessary funding without input *from John* and *I*, even coming in at the last minute as we did.

John and *I* are objects of the preposition *from*. The prescriptive grammar rule requires the use of *me* and not *I*.

He really shouldn't have been put into that class, but *between you* and *I*, the principal didn't have any other choice.

You and *I* are also the objects of the preposition *between*, and *me*, rather than *I*, must be used.

The driver gave *the boys* and *I* directions on how to find the back entrance to the restaurant.

The boys and *I* are the objects of the verb *give*, so here *me* is the correct choice, not *I*.

What we see in these example sentences is a difference in prescriptive grammar rules and descriptive grammar rules. Prescriptive rules (sometimes referred to as usage rules) are those rules that explain what users of a language are *supposed* to do. To summarize, prescriptive rules are rules that:

- are taught in formal school settings.
- often require conscious effort to remember and apply.
- may be learned incompletely or insufficiently, leading to hypercorrection as we saw in our last three example sentences.

Change is vital to a living language. As the substitution of *I* for *me* in the object position becomes increasingly widespread, it may well become an accepted language form in the future, except perhaps for the most formal of contexts.

How is the difference between who and whom related to prescriptive grammar versus descriptive grammar?

1.4.1.1 Who Versus Whom

An example of a change that has become widespread and accepted is the loss of the distinction between *who* and *whom*. Most native speakers of English do not make this distinction consistently, if at all. A prescriptive grammar rule maintains that *whom* is the object form of *who* as in:

The author, whom I met last year, signed several copies of the text.
For Whom the Bell Tolls was written in 1940 by Ernest Hemingway.

In the first sentence, *whom* is the object of the verb *met*. In the second sentence, it is the object of the preposition *for*.

For many (if not most) speakers of American English, the rules governing the use of *whom* seem bothersome, and require attention and effort because *whom* is usually reserved for formal edited writing and not used in informal speech. In spoken and written English, native speakers commonly produce such sentences as:

Who did you see last night at the movies?

The person *who* you need to talk to is not here right now.

From the perspective of prescriptive grammar, the correct form in both of these sentences is *whom*, not *who*, because *whom* is functioning as an object and not as a subject. In the first sentence, *who* is the object of the verb *see*. In the second sentence, *who* is the object of *you need to talk to*. From a prescriptive perspective, these sentences should be:

Whom did you see last night at the movies?

The person *whom* you need to talk is not here right now.

The distinction between *who* and *whom* is a prescriptive grammar rule requiring conscious attention and effort and is frequently incorrectly applied. Speakers, in an effort to use “correct” grammar, produce sentences such as these:

(*Waitress to customer*): *Whom* ordered the steak rare?

The references of all applicants *whom* will be walking clients’ dogs will be checked.

In both sentences, the correct form is *who*, not *whom*, because they are in subject position before the verb phrases *ordered* and *will be walking*.

Learners of English who have begun their study of the language in their home countries are often more aware of the difference in use between *who* and *whom* because their instruction has been more prescriptive. Moreover, since their exposure is frequently limited to classroom instruction, they may have had less exposure to more informal forms of English.

How much emphasis needs to be placed on the distinction between who and whom in the ESL/EFL classroom?

There are several factors to consider in answering this question. For example, are the students preparing to take certain exams that test knowledge of prescriptive rules? If the answer is yes, then the ESL/EFL teachers must place more emphasis on this distinction than if the answer is no. Additionally, how much does not observing this distinction between *who* and *whom* interfere with understanding? Since native speakers routinely do not observe this distinction, the answer is very little. As we will see in later chapters, there are more serious learning issues that do interfere with comprehension on which ESL/EFL teachers need to focus.

1.4.2 *Descriptive Grammar*

In contrast to prescriptive grammar, descriptive grammar describes how adult native speakers actually use their language. Unlike prescriptive grammar, descriptive grammar does not say “this is right” or “this is wrong.” Instead, descriptive grammar focuses on understanding how language is organized into meaningful, systematic patterns, which are generally below the level of conscious awareness of most speakers. By understanding the patterns of English, ESL/EFL teachers can help their students in learning the language learning process.

Some people think that descriptive grammar means saying that everything is right and nothing is wrong. What we must consider is the purpose for which a speaker is using language. If a person is at a white-collar job interview or sending in a college application, using stigmatized language forms is inappropriate. On the other hand, if the person is among a group of peers, using a different variety of language is part of in-group acceptance and identity. This is not to say that there should be no grammar rulebooks, manuals of style, or standards of usage; on the contrary, there is a need for standards, especially in formal language contexts and when we are teaching English to non-native speakers. What ESL/EFL teachers must do is develop an awareness among their students as they become more proficient that there are variations of prescriptive grammar rules, some of which are more acceptable in certain contexts than others.

Why do I, as an ESL/EFL teacher, need to know the difference between prescriptive grammar and descriptive grammar?

ESL/EFL teachers need to understand what learners need to know to learn English. The needs of these learners are very different from those of native speakers. Native speakers and the textbooks geared to them focus on prescriptive grammar. ESL/EFL learners, on the other hand, need to learn structures and forms that native speakers know as part of their innate knowledge of English.

ESL/EFL teachers must also consider why students are learning the language, which errors are more serious than others, and on which aspects of grammar to focus. In this text, we will be focusing on the grammatical rules and grammatical structures that ESL/EFL learners need to learn to communicate in English.

Why do I need to know grammar?

For teachers of ESL/EFL learners, a knowledge of how English works is essential, that is, an understanding of grammar, especially from the *descriptive* perspective. Teachers need to be able to talk about how sentences are constructed, about the types of words and word groups that make up sentences, and about the functions of these words and word groups within sentences and in larger contexts.

With this knowledge, teachers can help their students understand the language and know what their students need to learn. Without knowing the essential components or the complexities of the language in question, it is difficult to understand what learners actually need to know in order to learn English.

What do you mean by the “complexities of language?”

The next two Discovery Activities introduce a few of the structures and forms that we will discuss in greater detail throughout the book. These are examples of the complexities that native speakers know intuitively that ESL/EFL learners need to learn explicitly. After you have finished Discovery Activity 4, check your answers with those found at the end of the chapter in the section labeled Answer Key.

Discovery Activity 4: Verbs

Look at the following sentences.

1. Find the verbs and underline them.
2. How would you explain the verbs in these sentences to an English learner?
 - (a) Many people don't like meat.
 - (b) Do you drive to New York regularly?
 - (c) She's lived in the country since last year.
 - (d) I'm about to buy a new car.
 - (e) The flight is leaving in the next 20 min.

After you have checked your answers to Discovery Activity 4, try Discovery Activity 5. Think about how you would explain the italicized words to an ESL/EFL student. Discuss your answers with your classmates; then compare your responses with those found in the Answer Key.

Discovery Activity 5: Other Parts of Speech

Look at the following sentences. Consider how you would explain the italicized words in these sentences to a learner of English.

- (a) The child painted a *big, beautiful, wooden* box. **versus** The child painted a *wooden beautiful big* box.
- (b) *The* pencil I have doesn't have *an* eraser.
- (c) That is a *stone* fence.
- (d) Mary drove *fast* but stopped *quickly* at the red light.

This concludes the chapter and our introduction to grammar.

1.5 Summary

Linguists Versus Grammarians

A linguist's definition of grammar is:

- a system or the “blueprints” for creating language
- the shared rules (patterns) in native speakers’ minds that allow them to generate unique utterances; native speakers’ shared mental rules
- that there are different grammars shared by different groups of speakers; because all languages and variations are systematic in their generation of utterance, all grammars are viewed as valid
- descriptive

A grammarian's definition of grammar is:

- the written rules governing when to use which forms or structures
- something you follow in order to use the language correctly
- one particular variety of grammar is considered the “standard”
- prescriptive

A linguist's purpose in examining grammar is to:

- understand the mental or subconscious rules shared by different groups of native speakers. These rules are learned as part of the process of growing up as a native speaker of a given language.
- describe the system and blueprints.
- understand the shared elements (rules) that make variations still belong to one language versus another different language; that is, what makes English not German or Chinese.
- learn which variations are used by which groups and in which situations.
- understand which variations are less acceptable or stigmatized in which situations and why.
- learn which changes are taking place and why.

A grammarian's purpose in examining grammar is to:

- focus on discrete items and specific rules of use (“usage rules”).
- determine what word, phrase, or construction is or is not correct according to a particular usage or style book or person (usually self-appointed “language mavens” or “language gurus”).
- determine grammar “rules,” which must often be taught. These rules often exist on a continuum of acceptability because language changes and some usage or style books or language gurus are more reluctant to accept change than others.
- debate what must be used when and why based on what a particular usage or style book or person determines is correct.

Standard American English

- is that which most style and usage books and speakers recognize as “correct.” There is no language academy or formal government institution decreeing or legislating “correctness” for American English.
 - exists on a continuum of “correctness.” Not all style and usage books and not all “language gurus” agree on what is “correct” because language changes. Some grammarians are slower to accept change than others.
 - The English that is taught to non-native speakers is recognized as Standard American English because the grammar, for the most part, reflects formally educated native speakers’ shared rules.
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1.6 Practice Activities

Activity 1: New Words

Many words enter the English language. Can you find at least five words that are relatively recent additions to English? Discuss how they entered the language and whether they are considered standard or slang words (e.g., the use of the words *Internet* and *app* have become common parlance).

To take another example, the popular Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling made *muggle* a commonly accepted term designating ordinary people without special magical powers. Although there was such a word in the English language prior to the publication of the first Harry Potter book, it was an obscure term with very different meanings. The new meaning of *muggle* came about through literary means.

Activity 2: Language Intuition

1. Look at the following list of nonsense words and English words. Create five sentences using all of these words (and no other additional words) in each sentence.

mishiffen a drinking keg gwisers some were stoshly frionized

2. Ask at least two other people (e.g., a friend or family member) to make up one to two sentences using these words.
 - They must use all of the words in each sentence.
 - When they finish writing the sentences, ask them if they can tell you why they wrote the sentences as they did.
3. Compare your sentences with those you collected.
 - How many sentences were the same?
 - How many were different?
 - Were there any sentences that surprised you or that you found unusual? Why or why not?
4. Bring your sentences, the sentences your friends or family members wrote, and their comments to class. Compare these with those other classmates gathered.
5. What insights did you gain into the idea of “language as a system” or “language as a set of blueprints”?

Activity 3: Nouns

Look at the following sentence:

Some mishiffen gwisers were stoshly drinking a frionized keg.

- Which two words refer to things (nouns)?
- What clues are there to help you decide which words refer to things (nouns)?
- Which words do you think are describing the things (nouns) in this sentence?

Activity 4: Prescriptive Grammar

1. Come up with 5–10 sentences you consider to be “incorrect” grammar, for example, using *ain’t* instead of *isn’t* as in **She ain’t on time.*
 - Share this list with at least three other native or near-native speakers of English.
 - Ask them to tell you which sentences they find incorrect and why.
 - Bring the results to class, and discuss how your friends’ or family members’ evaluations compared to your own and why.
2. Compare your list to your classmates’ lists.
 - Do the lists include errors such as the sentences below made by ESL/EFL learners? Discuss why or why not.
 - (a) **She no like pancakes.*
 - (b) **She go when?*
 - (c) **She move to farm last year.*

Activity 5: Gender and Pronoun References

Write a reflective essay on the following situation. Use the questions below to guide your thoughts.

As a teacher you have conscientiously taught the use of the singular possessive pronoun in such sentences as *Everyone needs to bring his or her book to class tomorrow* or *Anyone who wants his or her grades can come to my office on Friday.* Several students come to you with the situations below:

- Student A was watching a movie. The student notices that everyone in the movie said such phrases as *Someone has to share their room* or *No one goes out without paying their parents* and asks you why they are using these forms.
 - Student B shows you some pages from an English novel. In one part the author has written *If each and every person had his or her way, there would be chaos.* In another part the same author has written: *Her mother called, “Someone has left their bag at our house.”*
1. How might you explain the differences to them? Consider the differences between prescriptive and descriptive grammar and language change. Take into consideration any standardized testing your students might need to take.
 2. How might you deal with issues related to prescriptive versus descriptive grammar?
 3. What differences, if any, do you see in addressing this issue when teaching ESL versus EFL learners?
 4. What changes (if any) would you make in your teaching? Justify your decision.

1.7 Answer Key

Discussion: Discovery Activity 4

- (a) Many people don't like meat.

In English, to form a present tense negative sentence, we need to use what is commonly called an *auxiliary* or *helping* verb, in this case *do* (see Chap. 5). In many languages, in contrast, a negative sentence is formed by adding a negative word:

	Affirmative	Negative
Spanish	Tú caminas. (You walk.)	Tú no caminas. (You do not walk.)
German	Ich laufe. (I walk.)	Ich laufe nicht . (I do not walk.)
Chinese	Ni xi huan. (You like it.)	Ni bu xi huan. (You do not like it.)

- (b) Do you drive to New York?

In English, to form a question in present tense, we need to use what is commonly called an *auxiliary* or *helping* verb, in this case *do* (see Chap. 5). In many languages, questions are formed by inverting the subject and the verb:

	Affirmative Statement	Question
Spanish	Tú estudias. (You study.)	Estudias tú? (Do you study?)
German	Du studierst. (You study.)	Studierst du? (Do you study?)

In other languages, a word is added at the end of a sentence to indicate that it is a question:

	Affirmative Statement	Question
Chinese	Ni xi huan. (You like it.)	Ni xi huan ma ? (Do you like it?)

- (c) She's lived in the country since last year.

She's **lived** is a contraction for she *has lived*. This is a verb form that refers to indefinite time or time in the recent past. We will see exactly what this means in Chap. 6 when we examine time, tense, and aspect.

- (d) I'm about to buy a new car.

Compare these two sentences:

- (a) I am hot.
- (b) I am about to leave.

If you ask yourself whether the verb *am* in Sentence a refers to the same time as the verb *am* in Sentence b, you will note that it doesn't. The time referred to in the two sentences is different because of the phrase *about to*. This phrase changes the time of present tense *am* to indicate that an immediate future action is taking place (see Chap. 5).

- (e) The flight is leaving in the next 20 minutes.
Normally, we would say that *is leaving* refers to something happening now. However, as in Sentence d, the addition of a phrase, *in the next 20 minutes*, changes the time reference to the immediate future (see Chap. 6).

Discussion: Discovery Activity 5

- The child painted a *big, beautiful, wooden* box.
Adjectives (descriptive words) follow a certain order when there is more than one. Saying *The child painted a wooden, beautiful, big box* sounds awkward to native and highly proficient native speakers because it does not follow normal English word order for multiple adjectives. (See Chap. 4.)
- The* pencil I have doesn't have *an* eraser.
The and *an* are used before nouns. *The* refers to a specific object; *an* refers to an unspecified object and is used before a vowel sound as in *eraser, orange, ink, and apple*. Many languages do not have determiners. ESL/EFL learners whose native languages do not have determiners experience difficulties both in remembering to use *the* and *a/n* and in choosing between *the* and *a/n*.
- That is a *stone* fence.
In English we often use two nouns together. The first noun describes something about the second noun. We can say *stone fence, wooden fence, iron fence, or garden fence* and each time describe a different type of fence. (See Chap. 3.)
- Mary drove *fast* but stopped *quickly* at the red light.
Quickly describes the action word (verb) in the sentence. Such words are generally labeled adverbs (see Chap. 4). *Quickly* belongs to the subcategory of adverbs often called "manner adverbs" because they describe how something is done. They often, but not always, end in *-ly*:

happily angrily jokingly sadly loudly

Fast is an example of a manner adverb that does not end in *-ly*. Less proficient ESL/EFL learners find it confusing that we can say *Mary stopped quickly*, but not **Mary stopped fastly*. *Fast* is also an example of a word that has the same form as an adjective and as an adverb. (See Chap. 4.)