

English Grammar and Linguistics

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Commonplaces of grammaticality can be problematic themselves, because they are sometimes based upon faulty or antiquated linguistics. As Geoffrey Pullum, one of the foremost of present-day linguists and grammarians has observed, most of us have grown up with rules of grammar which go back at least as far as the American Civil War (Northwestern Lecture). They themselves are based on the prescriptive grammar worked out by Samuel Johnson for his dictionary; because nobody had previously analyzed English grammar, and because it seemed to make sense, he applied to English the rules of Latin grammar. The difficulties with both circumstances should be clear: English has certainly changed as a language since the mid-19th-century, and Latin grammar isn't always appropriate for English, which has affinities with Latin, but is basically a Germanic language. The fact that conscientious teachers keep flagging some of the same grammatical "errors" suggests that at least some of them are simply a normal usage appropriate to English (notoriously, split infinitives).

Pullum, together with Rodney Huddleston (and in collaboration with a host of international scholars), has worked out a *descriptive* grammar, based not upon instructions of what English *ought* to be like, but upon copious analysis of how English *is* written and spoken by competent and skilled users of the language. Much of this analysis is based upon huge computerized databanks of texts. Here is what Pullum and Huddleston have to say about their approach to grammar:

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 inexperienced 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.

The stipulations of incorrectness that will be genuinely useful to the student are those about what is actually not found in the standard language, particularly with respect to features widely recognized as characteristic of some definitely non-standard dialect. And in that case evidence from use of Standard English by the people who speak and writing it every day will show that it is not regularly used, which means that prescriptive and descriptive accounts will not be in conflict, for evidence from use of the language is exactly what is relied upon by descriptive grammars (*Cambridge Grammar* 10-11).

Besides the confusion caused by the late development of *any* English grammatical analysis, English is further confused by its profusion of dialects. Dialects are not by definition ungrammatical, though any speaker of any dialect may use that dialect ungrammatically; dialects simply have their own variations in grammar and vocabulary on more common linguistic patterns. Standard American English is, in linguistic terms, a dialect, as are any number of regional branches world-wide. What makes SAE “standard” in the US (for its certainly not standard in, say, Australia or Wales or

Yorkshire) involves the number and power of its users, just as Edited American English—which nobody really speaks except at conferences and sometimes in classrooms—predominates in academic circles but certainly not at a race track. Distinctions among dialect use are often a matter of the level of formality or informality of the occasion; learning to negotiate those levels appropriately requires cultivation of a consciousness of social and cultural occasions for speaking or writing. Teachers can help students to perceive and discern among these levels first by being well-informed themselves, then by modeling explicitly appropriate levels of language use.

Geoffrey K. Pullum, Lecture, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, April [20], 2003.

The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language, Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).