NAVIGATING ENGLISH GRAMMAR
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Goals of the Book

When you think of studying English grammar, what ideas come to mind? *Mad Libs?* Learning parts of speech and punctuation? Diagramming sentences? Does the study of grammar interest you, or do you find it tedious and boring? Why do you study grammar? Because you have to? Because you want to?

There are as many different reasons to study grammar as there are ways to study it. We know, for example, that we need to study the grammar of another language in order to learn to speak it. But what about the grammar of your own native language? Is there any reason to study that? You’re probably familiar with the idea that we study English grammar to learn how to speak and write it “correctly.” But can we learn anything else from studying the grammar of our own native language? In fact, the study of your own grammatical system can be quite revealing and useful, and provides you with insights into how language, your own and others’, whether spoken or signed, actually works.

As you progress through this book you will discover the grammatical rules of English that you already know. We approach the study of language, and grammar more specifically, through inquiry rather than memorization and drills; you will discover, by analyzing your own linguistic system, the grammatical categories and principles of natural language. You will also find that the idea that some version of grammar is more “correct” than another has no basis in linguistic fact, and that all language varieties are equally valid grammatical systems worthy of study. The approach we take here therefore empowers you to challenge and question social perceptions of language (as “good” or “bad,” “lazy” or “sloppy”), perceptions that are often based on stereotypes about speakers, rather than on any deficiency in the language they speak.

This book is therefore not designed to teach you how to become better a writer, nor to teach you how to speak English “right.” The goal of this book is to provide you with tools to analyze the language you hear, speak, read, and write every day, in a variety of registers, genres, and styles, discovering the real grammatical categories and concepts that underlie your own unconscious knowledge of language. With an understanding of how language actually works, and a concise vocabulary to talk about it, you will be
equipped to make more informed decisions and choices about grammar and usage, and to tease out linguistic fact from linguistic fiction. You will be able to navigate the study of grammar in all its diverse incarnations.

**Organization of the Book**

Grammatical categories and concepts cannot be taught in isolation—nouns without adjectives or verbs without clauses—and each chapter (despite their simple titles) introduces concepts that we build on in subsequent chapters. For example, we introduce complements in Chapter 5 in the discussion of passive voice, and clauses in Chapter 6 in the analysis of the English verb system. We therefore recommend that chapters be studied in order. Each chapter also includes discussions of features of written language (punctuation, capitalization, and so on), language prescription and authority, language change and variation, and when relevant, connections to current syntactic theory.

Chapters 2–11 conclude with a Summary with important terms in bold. Each chapter also includes a set of exercises designed to help you practice applying the tools of analysis we introduce, by analyzing data, drawing tree diagrams, analyzing written text. Exercises also explore language change, variation, written versus oral language, and other more complex themes and concepts informed by syntactic theory. These topics are also explored in sidebars throughout the book, grouped into four categories. In *You Don’t Say!* we highlight differences between prescriptive and descriptive grammar; in *What About Other Languages?* we discuss differences between English and other languages; in *Things Ain’t What They Used to Be* we offer examples of language change; and *You Say Tomato* has additional examples of language variation.

In Chapter 1 we introduce different definitions of grammar, including descriptive grammar, the system of unconscious rules that allow us to produce and understand language, as well as prescriptive grammar, the rules of grammar we learn consciously, usually in school. We also introduce the fundamentals of grammar that we elaborate in later chapters, and how grammar is shaped by language change over time and by variation from speech community to speech community. Chapters 2–5 introduce the basic syntax and morphology of the lexical categories Noun and Verb, and how these categories combine with functional categories (nouns with Determiner, Quantifier, Numeral, and verbs with Auxiliary Verb and Modal) to form larger noun phrases and verb phrases. In Chapter 6, we introduce basic clause structure and provide you with the opportunity to practice linguistic inquiry in more depth by analyzing the syntactic properties of the English auxiliary verb system. Chapters 7–9 continue our exploration of syntactic categories, with the lexical categories Adjective, Adverb, and Preposition, and how the phrases headed by these categories (adjective phrases, adverb phrases, and prepositional phrases) function as complements and modifiers. Chapter 10 examines clause structure in more depth, introducing subordination and coordination, and exploring the different types of clause complements. Chapter 11 explores more complex clause structure. The chapter provides an overview of the distinctions between complements and modifiers, and introduces two additional types of modifiers, clause-initial and clause-final modifiers, and restrictive and nonrestrictive relative clauses.
This book grew out of our longtime experience teaching *The Structure of English*, a course on English descriptive grammar, but it is also influenced by other courses we teach, on language change and the history of English, linguistics in education, and generative syntactic theory. Our students in these classes have made an enormous contribution to this book, and it is shaped by their insights (sometimes about our oversights), comments, and feedback, and we are deeply indebted, first and foremost, to them. The K-12 teachers and students we have worked with over the years have also contributed to this book in countless ways, for which we are very grateful.

We are fortunate to be members of an academic community that supports scholarship that crosses rather than reinforces disciplinary boundaries. We have benefited from input from our colleagues in the English Department and in the Linguistics Program, and from our colleagues in Linguistics and Education around the country, who share our commitment to raising awareness of language. The Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at Western Washington University has also provided invaluable support with a grant to hire our indispensable assistant, Nick Cousino. We thank Nick for his careful proofreading and editing, and for his perpetual good humor.

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Our families have, as always, supported us through this project, and they have also contributed to it in countless other ways, providing data, grammaticality judgments, editorial advice, but most of all well-needed balance between home and work. Thanks, Hugh, Ella, Ivy, Jack, Shellane, Schuyler, and Julia!

Finally, we thank each other. Two heads are definitely better than one, but only when those two heads can collaborate compatibly and productively, as our two heads do.

Anne Lobeck and Kristin Denham
December 2012
Introduction

Humans have always been fascinated by language, and the study of language has always been a fundamental part of intellectual inquiry. In fact, the study of language forms the core of the social and behavioral sciences as well as the humanities, and is unique in crossing such interdisciplinary boundaries; we can study the psychology of language, how children acquire language and how speakers and signers process it and understand it; we can study the biology and neurology of language, and what it tells us about the organization of the brain; we can study language as a social tool, how we use it to express our identities as members of different social groups; we can study the language of literature and artistic expression.

We can also study the internal structure, or grammar, of language, which is what we will focus on in this book. Our goal is to help you discover some of the organizing principles of grammar, by studying how English works. This book is not a “how-to” book on “good English,” nor is it a comprehensive or precise description of English grammar. In fact, we use the term “English” broadly here; what we call a single
language is more accurately described as a (vast) collection of different varieties spoken by both native and non-native speakers around the globe. We will provide you with some tools to help you explore the structure of whatever variety of English you speak; you will become familiar with syntactic categories (parts of speech), heads and phrases, subordination, coordination, modification, and complementation. Our approach to grammatical structure is descriptive; we will explore and describe language data, data that reveals your intuitive knowledge of grammar. This scientific approach to the study of grammar will be different from the more familiar “school” approach, in which you learn grammar and usage rules with the goal of learning to speak and write “correctly.” Rather, what you learn here will provide you with important tools of critical analysis to make your own informed decisions about grammar and usage.

Along with our study of the structure of English, we will explore how language changes over time, and varies from place to place. We will explore public perceptions of grammar, including what constitutes a grammatical “error,” attitudes about “good” and “bad” language; notions of “standard” versus “non-standard” English, and more. This book will not only introduce you to the fundamentals of English sentence structure, but will also provide you with an important context for the study of grammar, its influence on other areas of modern thought, and the study of language more generally. In the course of navigating English grammar, we also think that you will find that the study of language is fascinating and often really fun.

What is English? Language Change and Variation

Before we tackle what we mean by grammar in more detail, we need to explore what we mean by English. It’s actually quite difficult to explain what English is once you think about it; English (like other languages) is a continuum of (many) different language varieties or dialects. According to recent surveys, English is the native language of 322 million people, and the second language of 120 million more (Weber, 1997; Comrie, 1998; Ethnologue, 2005). With upwards of 440 million speakers of English around the world, it’s no surprise that there may be varieties of English that sound familiar to you, and others that you have never heard before.

Here are a few examples of sentences from different varieties of English from both inside and outside the United States.

That’s me away. (“I’m going now.”) (Scots English)
That house looks a nice one. (Varieties of British English)
They went a-hunting yesterday. (Appalachian English)
We might should do that. (Varieties of Southern US English)
I asked him where does he work. (Indian English)
She’ll be right. (“Everything will be all right.”) (Australian English)

Complicating the notion of what we think of as “English” is that languages change, sometimes quite dramatically, over time. Any of you who have studied Old English (spoken around 445–1000 CE) for example, know that Old English looks very little like
What is Grammar and How Do We Study It?

Modern, or Present Day English. Yet, we still call Old English “English.” Consider this passage from the Old English poem Beowulf, written in about 700.

Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
Listen! We of the Spear-Danes in days of yore,
þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
Of those folk-kings, the glory have heard,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
How those noblemen brave-things did.
Oft Scyld Scefing scealþena þreatum,
Often Scyld, son of Scef, from enemy hosts,
monegum mægþum, meodosetla ofteah,
from many people, mead-benches took,
egsode eorlas.
terrorized warriors.

Middle English (spoken around 1100–1400) looks more like Present Day English, but is still clearly not what we would consider contemporary. Here is an excerpt from Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Wife of Bath’s Tale, from his famous Canterbury Tales written at the end of the fourteenth century.

Experience, though noon auctoritee
Experience, though no authority
Were in this world, is right ynoth for me
Were in this world, were good enough for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage;
To speak of woe that is in marriage;
For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,
For, masters, since I was twelve years of age,
Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,
Thanks be to God Who is for ever alive,
Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve –
Of husbands at church door have I had five –
If I so ofte myghte have ywedded bee –
If I could have been married so many times –
And alle were worthy men in hir degree.
And all were worthy men in their degree.

And Early Modern English (1500–1700), though much more familiar, is still a little different. Here is an excerpt from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. We may not need a translation anymore, but this 400-year-old version of English is still quite different from English spoken today.
To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to? 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;

We learn from studying language change and variation that not all of us speak the same variety or dialect of English, and whatever variety we do speak continues to change. As we will see as we progress through this book, all varieties, or dialects of English are worthy of investigation and can be explored using the tools of analysis we will introduce to you here. This is something of a departure from what you may have learned in school, namely that studying English grammar means learning a single set of rules in order to avoid errors. In fact, there is no such single set of hard and fast rules of English grammar, and languages are actually dynamic systems, constantly in flux. So an approach to English as a set of rules to memorize doesn’t tell you anything about how English actually works, nor do such rules accurately describe the grammar of the language.

What is Grammar? Prescriptive and Descriptive Grammar

When you hear the word grammar, what comes to mind? Over the years, we have asked countless students this question, and most agree that in school, the study of grammar is connected (often exclusively) to the study of writing. For them, grammar covers a broad range of rules, including punctuation rules (where to put commas and apostrophes, for example), vocabulary rules (use active verbs rather than be verbs; avoid “slang;” use “academic” vocabulary), spelling rules (don’t mix up they’re, their, and there or you’re and your), as well as other injunctions such as “Never start a sentence with because;” “Never end a sentence with a preposition;” “Don’t use first person;” “Don’t use passive voice;” “Avoid fragments;” “Use I instead of me and who instead of whom,” and so on.

You have also probably heard certain words or phrases labeled as “correct” or “incorrect” grammar, or as “proper” or “improper” grammar. You may even have heard certain words or phrases referred to as “good” or “bad” grammar, or even as “lazy” or “sloppy” grammar. For example, many of you are probably aware that I don’t know nobody is considered “bad grammar,” and that such dreaded “double negatives” should at all costs be avoided. There are probably other words or phrases (such as ain’t or I seen it) that you would put in the same category of “bad grammar,” and that you may have learned to avoid, especially in your writing.

This view of English grammar as “good” or “bad” has its roots in seventeenth-century England, when speaking and writing “correctly” came to be considered a key to social success, and a variety of English spoken in London came to be considered “standard.” Other dialects were therefore considered “non-standard,” and of lower
social prestige. This period saw the rise of English prescriptive grammar, rules that dictate how one should speak or write. It was during this period that rules such as “don’t end a sentence with a preposition,” and “don’t split infinitives” emerged, many of which were based on the grammar of Latin, the language of scholarship at the time. We explore the roots and legacy of prescriptive grammar and attempts to standardize English in a later section. For now, simply note that it was during this period that grammar began to be perceived as a collection of rules that could be followed or broken, and that certain forms and usage were perceived to have higher social value than others.

Prescriptive grammatical rules, the rules of how you should speak and write a language, according to some authority, are typically those you consciously learn in school (and outside it) from anyone you consider a language authority, and as the terms “good” and “bad” grammar illustrate, these rules have social, even moral, values attached to them. That said, not everyone agrees on what is considered “correct” or “incorrect;” different teachers may have corrected you for different things, and your parents and even your friends may have corrected you for yet other perceived errors. So there is some arbitrariness to the notion of “correct” or “good” grammar. There is also some arbitrariness to who (or whom!) we consider a language authority; although we might consider editors, professional writers, English teachers, and/or those in the news media authorities on correct grammar, almost anyone you ask has strong opinions about what they think is correct or incorrect, and almost everyone has grammar “pet peeves.” You may even have corrected others yourself!

Another important point about prescriptive grammar is that often, prescriptive rules are not rules of natural language (which is why we usually have to consciously learn them, and often forget to use them). Principles and rules of natural language underlie what we actually say, not what we “should” say, and are part of our unconscious knowledge of the language we acquire (under normal circumstances, children acquire their native language by about age five, effortlessly, and without instruction). In the following section we will explore some of the rules of natural language, to illustrate how they differ from other language rules that we consciously learn. (See Sobin 1999 for discussion of natural and “unnatural” language rules.)

Consider two well-known prescriptive rules, “don’t end a sentence with a preposition” and “use whom when questioning an object and who when questioning the subject.” According to these rules, you should avoid saying and writing sentences such as the following:

Who did you talk to?

Here, the sentence ends with the preposition to, and we have used who rather than whom. The prescriptively grammatical sentence is:

To whom did you talk?

While you may (or may not) be aware of these two prescriptive rules, most if not all of you would agree that you are more likely to say Who did you talk to? (and other similar sentences, such as Which flight are you leaving on? Who did you buy the present for?) in your
everyday speech, rather than *To whom did you talk?* (or *On which flight are you leaving? For whom did you buy the present?*). This evidence suggests that there is a difference between consciously learned prescriptive rules and the unconscious rules of your natural linguistic system. This linguistic system, or grammar, is revealed in the language of your everyday speech, and the rules that underlie this system are what linguists, language scientists, seek to discover and describe by studying linguistic data. This model of grammar is *descriptive* rather than prescriptive.

*Descriptive grammatical rules*, the set of unconscious rules that allow you to produce and understand a language, differ from the grammar rules you typically learn in school, and descriptive grammar and prescriptive grammar also differ in terms of what is considered *grammatical* and *ungrammatical*.

Any English speaker would say the following sentence is a possible sentence of English:

A dog bit the man.

But no English speaker would produce the following:

*Dog a the man bit.

The first sentence is a natural sentence of English, and is therefore, in terms of descriptive grammar, grammatical. The second sentence is not a possible sentence of English, and in terms of descriptive grammar, this sentence is ungrammatical (we use the linguists’ convention of marking descriptively ungrammatical sentences with *). This simple example illustrates two very important concepts. One is that (all) speakers and signers have intuitive knowledge of what constitutes a grammatical sentence of their language, and also, what does not. It also illustrates that prescriptive grammar and descriptive grammar differ in terms of what we mean by *grammatical* and *ungrammatical*.

Using descriptive grammar, *grammatical* refers to a possible sentence in the language, while *ungrammatical* refers to an impossible sentence in the language. Using prescriptive grammar, however, *grammatical* means conforming to rules of how one should speak or write (according to some authority), while *ungrammatical* means not conforming to rules of how one should speak or write (according to some authority).

Let’s continue to explore the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive grammar. The sentence below is a garden-variety English sentence, which is descriptively grammatical to any English speaker (whether or not they really eat bacon, eggs, or ketchup).

I eat bacon and eggs with ketchup.

We can form a question based on this sentence as follows.

What do you eat bacon and eggs with?

This sentence is descriptively grammatical but violates a prescriptive rule; recall that for some, ending a sentence with a preposition (in this case, *with*) is prescriptively ungrammatical. But now consider this sentence:

I eat bacon and eggs and ketchup.
When we try to form a question we get the following:

*What do you eat bacon and eggs and?

No English speaker would utter this sentence (hence the *), but why not? The source sentences look exactly the same; the only difference is that *ketchup* follows *with* in the first, and *and* in the second. It turns out that *with*, a preposition, functions quite differently from *and*, a conjunction, and the distinction between the two is part of our unconscious knowledge of English. Studying this unconscious knowledge, revealed in puzzles like this one, allows us to construct a model, or theory of descriptive grammar, a model that attempts to explain why we quite naturally produce grammatical sentences such as *What did you eat your bacon and eggs with?* but not ungrammatical ones like *What did you eat your bacon and eggs and?*

One final example. Consider the following sentence.

The cat chased the rat.

You can rearrange the words in this sentence in the following way:

The rat was chased by the cat.

The first sentence is in *active voice* and the second in *passive voice*, terms you may or may not be familiar with. In school, you are often taught to “Avoid passive voice” in your writing. Interestingly, many students we interview are aware of this rule but are unclear on what a passive sentence is (and hence unclear on what they’re supposed to avoid). Regardless of whether or not you are familiar with these terms, all native speakers of English know how to make an active sentence passive. What, for example, is the passive of the following sentence?

A Kenyan won the gold medal.

You may have come up with:

The gold medal was won by a Kenyan.

This example tells us once again that as a speaker of English, you know how words can be rearranged to create grammatical English sentences, such as questions (*Who did you talk to? What do you eat bacon and eggs with?*) and passive sentences (*The gold medal was won by a Kenyan*).

The two kinds of grammar we’ve outlined here, prescriptive and descriptive grammar, are based on different assumptions about language. The idea that we can discover the underlying principles and rules of natural language by studying it scientifically, the same way we study other natural phenomena, such as the solar system or photosynthesis, did not emerge in the way we know it now until the 1950s. Prescriptive English grammar, on the other hand, appeared as early as the fourteenth century. Below, we briefly discuss the origins of this prescriptive approach and the thinking of the time about language and grammar. We then sketch the historical shift in this thinking, and the different questions scholars
began to ask about grammar, questions which shape the scientific study of grammar as we know it today.

**Origins of Prescriptive Grammar**

Where did prescriptive grammar come from? Where did the idea of “Standard” English come from? Both ideas have their origins (as they do in many other countries that have proposed a “standard” language) in the belief that language variation can lead to misunderstanding. Such concerns about English emerge as early as the fourteenth century.

*At the langage of the Northunres and specialliche at York is so sharp slittyngge and frontyngge and vnshape, that we southern men may that langage vnnethe [= hardly] vnderstonde.* (John de Trevisa, 1385)

*Oure language is also so dyuerse in it selfe that the commen maner of spekynge in Englysshe of some contre can skante [= scarcely] be vnderstondid in som other contre of the same lond.* (Lydgate, 1530)

Dialects spoken in the North and West of England were stigmatized during this time, and Southern varieties of English, spoken in and around London by the upper classes, were perceived more favorably. In *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) George Puttenham proposes that respected men should not “follow the speech of a craftes man or carter, or other of the inferior sort, though he be inhabitant or bred in the best towne … for such persons doe abuse good speeches by strange accents or ill shapen soundes, and false ortographie.”

We see these language attitudes reflected in literature as well. Chaucer often used different Middle English dialects to express certain (usually comic) aspects of character; a speaker of a stigmatized Northern dialect, for example, may end up hoodwinking the gentleman with the more prestigious Southern speech. Shakespeare, writing during the sixteenth century, also often used dialect to express different favorable or unfavorable aspects of character.

Other factors led to Southern dialects becoming more highly valued. One of the earliest factors that set the process of standardizing English in motion was the printing press, brought to England in 1476 by the merchant William Caxton. Caxton set up shop in London, the center of commerce and education at the time, and printed far more books and distributed them far more widely than ever before. For practical reasons Caxton printed books in the East Midland dialect, the dialect (or collection of dialects) of London’s rising middle and upper classes, and the East Midland dialect became considered the “standard” dialect of English.

Latin, the language of the Christian church, was the language of scholarship in medieval England. As English inevitably began to compete with Latin as the language of commerce, literature, and scholarship, English was found sorely wanting, and was considered corrupt. Between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries scholars set out to “fix” and “improve” English, introducing spelling reforms, borrowing many Latin words into English, and attempting to codify its grammatical rules. Dictionaries also played a part in this process of standardization. Perhaps the most famous example is Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language*, completed in
1755. Although Johnson himself was aware of the futility of trying to fix meanings of words of a living language, his dictionary was nevertheless taken as authoritative, and others followed. In 1828 Noah Webster published *Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language*, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* first appeared in 1884 and continues to be the foremost authority on the English language today.

English grammarians attempted to establish a language academy, like those in France and Italy, which would codify and enforce this “improved” version of English. Scholars in the eighteenth century, which was often referred to as the Age of Reason, strove to find order and harmony in the natural (and divine, with Latin as the model of a perfect, divine language), and some extended this idea to grammar as well. Grammarians took it upon themselves to improve English by establishing the rules of English grammar, and attempting to enforce them to prevent future change. John Dryden supported an academy, as did Daniel Defoe (author of *Robinson Crusoe*), and Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver’s Travels*. Dryden’s *Defence of the Epilogue*, written in 1672, criticizes supposed grammatical errors, stating (quite unapologetically), “From [Ben] Jonson’s time to ours, it [English] has been in a continual declination.” By the publication of Samuel Johnson’s dictionary in 1755, the idea for an academy had died. (The idea for an English academy became fodder for political battles between Whigs and Tories, and was criticized by others who thought an academy was too authoritarian. John Adams’ proposal for an American academy met a similar fate.)

During this period, the idea arose that using the correct form of English was essential for social success. How-to books on English grammar began to appear, and to be used in schools. Here is a quote from the preface to Joseph Aickin’s *The English Grammar* (1693): “My Child: your Parents have desired me, to teach you the English-Tongue. For though you can speak English already; yet you are not an English Scholar, till you can read, write, and speak English truly.”

Although people were certainly aware of language change and variation, people also believed that in order to be socially accepted and admired, one had to adopt the linguistic practices of those who were accepted and admired. Thus emerged the “grammar anxiety” we still see today and which has its source in two central ideas: that we must speak and write correctly for social acceptance and advancement, and that language, or more specifically grammatical change and variation, can be overcome and controlled. Moreover, what came to be considered “Standard” English was not a specific dialect, but rather whatever language was associated with speakers with social prestige (the literate middle and upper classes in Southern England) at the time.

Although the idea of a standard, correct form of English continues to be widely accepted today, what is considered standard actually varies from speech community to speech community, and from the local to the national to the international level. Many of us have different ideas about what is considered Standard English (and we each have our own pet peeves), and teachers and others who are considered language authorities don’t always agree on what is considered standard, either. Today, with English spoken around the world, what speakers in Birmingham, Alabama consider standard is not the same as what speakers in Bangor, Maine do, and what is considered Standard English in New Zealand is different from what is considered Standard English in Australia, the United Kingdom, or in India.

What is considered Standard English not only varies from place to place but changes over time. To take an obvious example, what was considered Standard English in eighteenth-century England is hardly recognizable to us today. Linguist John
McWhorter (2012) offers examples of expressions from the nineteenth century that speakers considered “mistakes unworthy of polite company.” But these expressions seem just fine to us today. You were to say the two first people, not the first two people; a well-lit street, not well-lit; and the house is building, not the house is being built. And although many took Johnson’s dictionary as a definitive authority on English of the day, many modern dictionaries and grammar guides embrace language change (though many still do not). The Oxford English Dictionary is constantly adding new words and documenting changes in meaning of existing words.

Indeed, there is little consensus on exactly what Standard English is, and we will certainly not try to define it here. (We offer you the opportunity to explore some of the proposed definitions and descriptions of Standard English in the Exercises.) What we do know is what Standard English is not, namely it is not a single fixed and uniform variety of natural language. We also know that the labels “standard” and “non-standard” are based on social rather than linguistic criteria, and that we stigmatize the speech of groups we stigmatize, and value the speech of groups we accept and respect, just as people did centuries ago in England.

We return now to a more in depth investigation of descriptive grammar, which, unlike prescriptive grammar, is not based on rules we consciously learn in school or from studying grammar books, but rather on the unconscious rules we use to produce and understand language.

### The Components of Grammar

As we mentioned above, our knowledge of grammar includes knowledge of how to arrange words in sentences in patterns that we recognize as English. In other words, you know the rules of English syntax. But there is much more to syntax than word order, and syntax also interacts with other components of our linguistic system, as we’ll see below.

#### Syntax

One of the things you may have encountered in school are “parts of speech,” the different categories that words fall into, such as Noun, Verb, or Adjective. You might have learned that “a noun is a person, place, or thing,” and “a verb is an action or a state.” But these definitions don’t capture what we actually know about syntactic categories or parts of speech (nor do they provide us with tools of analysis to study language in more depth, as we discuss in a later section). To illustrate, consider the following nonsense sentence:

> The flonkish warziles blorked six yerkons.

Are there any nouns or verbs in this sentence? If so, what are they? You may have identified warziles and yerkons as nouns, even though you don’t know what these words mean (and whether each is a “person, place, or thing”). You may also have identified blorked as the verb, again, even though you don’t know whether it is an action or state. How did you do that? Though you may never have (consciously) learned what nouns and verbs are, as a speaker of a language you already know about syntactic categories...
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and how to recognize them, even though you may not know the terminology, or meta-language, we use to talk about them.

You know, for example, that *warziles* is a noun because of its (syntactic) position after *flonkish*, a word you may have analyzed as an adjective modifying *warziles*, and after *the*, a word that introduces nouns. You probably analyzed *blorked* as a verb because it follows the subject *the flonkish warziles*, and precedes the object, *six yerkons*. *Yerkons* itself is a noun, because it follows *six*, a word that precedes nouns, and also because *six yerkons* follows the verb, a position in which we often find nouns (or more specifically *noun phrases*, but more on that later).

You may have noticed that *the* and *six* in the sentence above are actual English words, and they provide important clues to the categories of the words that follow them (nouns). These words express grammatical information (here, of number and in the case of *the*, definiteness), and differ from words that express lexical information, such as nouns and verbs. In other words, we know that certain syntactic categories are functional, and others are lexical. Lexical categories (Noun, Verb, Adjective, and Adverb) express the main content, or meaning in a sentence. Functional categories (Pronoun, Determiner, Numeral, Conjunction, Auxiliary, and others) express grammatical information about definiteness, number, tense, gender, etc. (see Table 1.1). We will discuss the distinctions between lexical and functional categories in detail in the coming chapters.

Returning to our nonsense sentence, if we asked you to divide the sentence up into its two main parts, what would you do? You would probably do this in the following way:

The flonkish warziles / blorked six yerkons.

This suggests that you have intuitive knowledge of how words are grouped together in a sentence. We call those groups of words “phrases,” and the words that make them up are “constituents” of that phrase. What is the syntactic category (Noun, Verb, Adjective, etc.) of each of these phrases? The first phrase is a *noun phrase* because its main word, or *head*, is the noun *warziles*. The constituents of this noun phrase are *the,*...
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flonkish, and warziles. The other phrase is a verb phrase, whose head is blorked, a verb, and whose other constituent is six yerkons.

[The flonkish warziles] [blorked six yerkons].

You may have labeled the noun phrase (NP) and verb phrase (VP) above as the subject and the predicate, respectively. Subject and predicate are two possible grammatical functions of phrases.

[The flonkish warziles] [blorked six yerkons].

You can even divide the verb phrase up into two components, the verb blorked and its object, six yerkons. The phrases that follow verbs to complete their meaning are called complements, another possible grammatical function of phrases (in addition to subject and predicate).

[The flonkish warziles] [blorked [six yerkons]].

And just for the record, you also know how not to divide sentences in two; you would never do the following, for example.

*The flonkish / warziles blorked six yerkons.

Nor this:

*The flonkish warziles blorked six / yerkons.

That we can divide sentences up into parts that contain other parts tells us that sentence structure is not simply flat, made up of a linear strings of words, but hierarchical, with groups of words (phrases) that include other groups of words. Throughout the book we will use tree diagrams (also called phrase structure trees) as a convenient way to illustrate hierarchical structure. Here we diagram our nonsense sentence as an example.

As this tree diagram shows, the largest syntactic unit, the clause (CL), includes, or dominates, the subject noun phrase, or NP, and the predicate verb phrase, or VP. Each of these phrases in turn dominates other constituents.

In this brief analysis of a nonsense sentence we’ve discovered that our knowledge of syntax includes knowledge of syntactic categories (and the difference between lexical categories and functional ones), phrases, heads, constituents, and grammatical