



SECOND EDITION

ANNE LOBECK and KRISTIN DENHAM

NAVIGATING ENGLISH GRAMMAR

A Guide to Analyzing Real Language

WILEY Blackwell

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To our moms, Isabelle Lobeck and Rachel Denham

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Preface

Goals of the Book

When you think of studying English grammar, what comes to your 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 or sign it. But what about the grammar of a language you already speak? 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 a language? In fact, the study of this dynamic system can be quite revealing and useful and provides 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 users already know, though they may not be aware of them. We approach the study of language and grammar through inquiry; you will discover, by analyzing your own and others' linguistic systems, the grammatical categories and principles of 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 encourages

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 use.

This book is not designed to teach you how to become a better writer, nor is it designed to teach you how to speak English “correctly.” The goal of this book is to provide you with tools to analyze the language you use every day, in a variety of registers, genres, and styles, discovering the categories and concepts that underlie users’ 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.

Changes and Revisions to the Second Edition

In this second edition, we have made significant changes to the way in which we approach language “data,” the language examples used to illustrate grammatical terms and concepts. Rather than marginalizing variation in English to boxed sections in the text, we integrate examples of this variation throughout and show how this variation informs the description of English as an ever-changing linguistic system. We label the varieties of English we draw from (and acknowledge that there are many others not represented here) in an effort to recognize the communities who use them and to decenter the so-called “mainstream” varieties of English that are typically taken as the norm in discussions of grammatical structure. For this same reason, we focus on spoken rather than written English. That said, we acknowledge that we are two senior, white, tenured university professors, writing a college textbook in an edited written English that reproduces many of the norms we strive to decenter. We realize our approach here is only a first step in making the study of English, and the way we write and teach about it, more inclusive.

Other changes to the second edition include a **References** section at the end of the book (rather than citing references chapter by chapter). Almost all the **exercises** at the end of each chapter are revised, and each chapter includes new and updated **text excerpts** by a diverse set of authors in each practice section. We have also significantly revised the **boxed material** in each chapter to address related topics of interest. Boxes no longer focus exclusively on language variation and change, as examples of both make up the examples discussed throughout the text. As in the first edition, each

chapter includes a **summary** with important terms in bold. Throughout, we introduce **basic phrase structure rules** and **tree diagrams** to provide accessible graphic representations of language structure.

Chapter Organization and Other Changes

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. We therefore recommend that chapters be studied in order. We provide chapter overviews below, where we also highlight changes and revisions in this second edition.

Note: We approach the grammar of English descriptively here, with an eye toward not just description but explanation. We therefore strike a balance between **basic syntactic structure** and **syntactic theory**, introducing the reader not just to the structure of English but also to *why* English has the structure it does. Some of the theoretical concepts we introduce (in accessible and useful ways) include movement, ellipsis, proform substitution, and null (unpronounced) heads and phrases, among others. We believe this is one of the strengths of this book, as it underscores the approach to grammatical analysis through inquiry rather than memorization, and it provides accessible insights into the study of language beyond basic sentence analysis. Readers are then prepared to pursue further study of grammar more deeply if they wish to.

Chapter 1: This chapter provides an overview of the primarily descriptive approach to grammar we take in this book, using tools of scientific inquiry to learn about how language works. We also discuss prescriptivism (rules of grammar prescribed by language authorities) and Standard Language Ideology in some depth, including the origins of these perspectives on language and their relevance to the study of grammar today. Rather than taking a binary approach to description versus prescription, we show that we learn from both, about grammatical structure, language change and variation, and the origins of the language attitudes that still shape how we judge and value language(s) and users of those languages today.

Chapters 2–5: These chapters investigate the basic semantics, morphology, and syntax of English noun phrases and verb phrases and include discussion of examples from a range of varieties of English to illustrate grammatical concepts, including (but not limited to) variation in inflectional morphology. Both Chapters 4 and 5 on verbs and verb phrases, respectively, are substantially revised to highlight variation in English verb

morphology and in the tense and aspect system, including verb strings with null auxiliaries, and variation in subject–verb agreement.

Chapter 6: This chapter is significantly revised and streamlined to focus more on the structure of the independent clause rather than on theoretical aspects of the English verb string (as in the first edition). We focus on grammatical functions of subjects, complements (in this chapter, direct objects), and predicates and on basic evidence for the Tense position (subject–auxiliary inversion, tag question formation and negation). The chapter provides students with the tools to diagram independent clauses, including those with the complex verb strings discussed in Chapter 5, and prepares students to move on to complementation, subordination, and coordination in subsequent chapters.

Chapters 7–9: These chapters are each updated with new examples and exercises and introduce students to the basic semantics, morphology, and syntax of adjective phrases, adverb phrases, and prepositional phrases (and particles) and how these phrases function as modifiers and complements. These chapters introduce a range of different complements, including subjective complements, objects of prepositions, and indirect objects. We also show how the theoretical concept of syntactic movement (Passive, Indirect Object Movement, Particle Shift) can be used as a tool to distinguish among different complements.

Chapter 10: This chapter is significantly revised to focus first on coordination and then on subordination, acquainting students with the structure of more complex clauses. The section on different types of subordinate clause complements, complementizers, and PRO subjects of infinitival clauses is revised to be more accessible.

Chapter 11: This chapter is the most significantly revised of all the chapters in the book, and it now connects more seamlessly with Chapter 10. From the discussion of subordinate clause complements in Chapter 10, we move on in this chapter to explore subordinate clause modifiers, namely restrictive and nonrestrictive relative clauses. From there, we investigate a range of other nonrestrictive modifiers, what we call “movable modifiers.”

Chapter 12: This completely new chapter provides an overview of the book, pulling together concepts, terms, and tools introduced in earlier chapters. We briefly review syntactic categories and phrases, the functions of those phrases as complements and modifiers, and subordination and coordination. The chapter is designed as a capstone, revisiting familiar concepts but concluding with a set of challenging exercises that encourage students to apply the tools they have learned to explore and analyze language.

Acknowledgments

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.

We also thank each other. Two heads are definitely better than one, especially when those two heads collaborate as compatibly and productively as our two heads do.

Anne Lobeck and Kristin Denham
December 2023

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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

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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; and 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 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 neither 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 helps reveal some of our intuitive knowledge of grammar. That said, because “English” is a dynamic, changing system, we cannot attempt to provide any kind of comprehensive set of rules or principles that define it (nor could we, even if we wanted to!). 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, we hope that 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 explore how language changes over time and varies from community to community. We’ll show that although social value may be attached to one way of using language over another, the scientific study of language reveals that all language varieties are equally expressive, and all are rule-governed systems. Our focus here is on oral language, though what we say here about grammar, as a linguistic system, applies to any language, signed or oral. All language users have intuitive knowledge of language, and all languages can be studied scientifically in the way we discuss here. This book will therefore not only introduce you to the structure of English 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 *Ethnologue*, as of 2023, English has more speakers than any other language in the world, when factoring in not only native speakers but also those who speak English in addition to other languages.

With nearly 1.5 billion speakers of English around the world (about 15% of the world's population), it's no surprise that there may be varieties of English that sound familiar to you, and others that you have never encountered before. Here are a few examples of sentences from varieties of English from both inside and outside the United States.

That's me away. (Scots English)

That house looks a nice one. (varieties of British English)

I asked him where does he work. (Indian English)

She'll be right. (Australian English)

He be working. (African American English)

We might should do that. (varieties of Southern US English)

They went a-fishin' yesterday. (Appalachian 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 modern, or Present Day English. Yet, we still call Old English "English." Consider these lines 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,

Peodcyninga, Prym gefrunon,
Of those folk-kings, the glory have heard,

hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
How those noblemen brave-things did.

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 ynogh 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;

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?

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, namely, that studying English grammar means learning a single set of rules in order to avoid errors. An approach to English as a set of rules to memorize doesn't tell you very much about how English actually works, nor do such rules accurately describe the grammar of the language.

Throughout the exploration of the grammar of English in this book, we will draw examples (or "data") from a range of varieties of American English to illustrate grammatical features and concepts. Our goal is two-fold: one is to highlight the diverse ways in which English speakers use language, and another is to highlight the principles that are common to all varieties. This approach to the study of language in turn sheds light on how (all) languages work.

What is 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 seems to be connected to the study of writing. “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 *whom* instead of *who*;” 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, you may have heard that *I don’t know nobody* is considered by some to be “bad grammar” or that such “double negatives” should be avoided. There are other words or phrases (such as *ain’t* or *I seen it*) that are often put in the same category of “bad grammar,” and that you may have been taught to avoid, in your writing, but also in your speech. This view of grammar, as a set of rules *prescribed* by some authority (maybe your teachers, parents, or even your friends) as the rules we should follow for social success, is called **prescriptive grammar**. As we’ll see below, prescriptive grammar is different from **descriptive grammar**, though these two ways of approaching grammar also overlap in important ways.

Prescriptive grammar is very much a part of our cultural view of English, but where did this idea come from? What are some of the consequences of thinking of English grammar this way?

Prescriptive grammar

The 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.” This period saw the rise of English prescriptive grammar, rules that dictate how one *should* speak or write, according to the language authorities of the time. It was during this period that rules such as “don’t end a sentence with a preposition” and “don’t split infinitives” emerged, some of which were based on the grammar of Latin, the language of scholarship (and prestige) at the time.

One reason that language prescription, and the related notion of creating a “standard” language, arises is the belief that language variation can lead to misunderstanding. But interestingly, we often understand very well those whose language we claim is unclear or hard to understand based on our social perceptions of the speaker(s), those who don’t “talk like us.” Such concerns emerge as early as the fourteenth century. (Note that you can likely understand these excerpts even though they also look very different from the English you use!)

Al the longage of the Northumres and speicialliche at York is so sharp slittyng and frontyng and vnshape, that we southern men may that longage vnnethe [= hardly] vnderstonde. (John de Trevisa, 1385)

Oure language is also so dyuerse in it selfe that the comen maner of spekyng 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 spech 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 dialects of southern England 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] Jonsons 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 Aikin’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 in the larger society, one had to adopt the linguistic practices of those who were accepted and admired. Thus emerged the “grammar anxiety” (related to “linguistic insecurity,” see Labov, 1972 and subsequent work) 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 grammatical change and variation should be overcome and controlled.

By studying prescriptivism and the language attitudes that underpin it, we can gain insights not only into how English changed and varied over time but also into the sources of our current language attitudes. Curzan (2014, p. 24) proposes the following four categories of prescriptive rules, which reflect the themes we've discussed so far:

- *Standardizing prescriptivism*: rules/judgments that aim to promote and enforce standardization and “standard” usage.
- *Stylistic prescriptivism*: rules/judgments that aim to differentiate among (often fine) points of style within standard usage.
- *Restorative prescriptivism*: rules/judgments that aim to restore earlier, but now relatively obsolete, usage and/or turn to older forms to purify usage.
- *Politically responsive prescriptivism*: rules/judgments that aim to promote inclusive, nondiscriminatory, politically correct, and/or politically expedient usage.

You can probably think of examples that fit into each of these categories, though your examples might also vary, depending on the variety of English you speak, your educational background, and other factors. It's also important to note that prescriptivism is not uniformly negative and discriminatory; it also includes, for example, politically responsive prescriptivism that can promote positive social change, such as moves toward more inclusive, gender-neutral language (pronouns or names for professions, for example), or the addition of new words or phrases to replace terms that may be discriminatory or marginalizing.

Curzan's categories reflect the connection between prescriptivism and language standardization; in fact, prescriptivism is defined in terms of standard language. But, as mentioned above, what came to be considered “standard” English was not actually 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 unified, single correct form of English continues to be widely accepted today, what is considered standard still actually varies from speech community to speech community. 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 or Jamaica is different from what is considered Standard English in Australia, the United Kingdom, or India.

Though no actual single standard English exists, the *idea* that there is a right/better and wrong/worse way to use English is very much entrenched in our social attitudes about language. *Standard Language Ideology* (SLI) underpins