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## **PRESCRIPTIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR: A DILEMMA**

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**MEDAYLIN B. ACRAMAN**

The problem of the correctness of certain grammatical forms has caused a lot of disagreements and arguments between the prescriptive grammarians and the descriptive linguists. These two groups are at loggerheads about what is considered good and bad grammar. Good grammar is usually associated with prescriptive grammar while bad grammar is with descriptive grammar.

To a prescriptivist, good grammar is that which follows a set of rules, as in the rule that one should avoid ending a sentence with a preposition. An example is the sentence: "Who did you give the letter to?" which clearly breaks the rule. It is appropriate then to liken prescriptive grammar to rules of grammatical etiquette, so that we can say that bad grammar' is similar to bad manners. It refers to something you might want to avoid doing if only to convey a good impression in a particular situation (Leech, 1977). Example, it is considered bad manners to make noise while sipping one's soup but to the descriptivist this action is something that occurs rather often.

The prescriptive grammarians believe that there is just one correct form of the language which everyone should use. Although they recognize the fact that many do not speak the correct form of the language, they feel nonetheless that any other form is considered bad grammar. They insist upon complete rigidity of rules and fail to recognize that an individual uses language which is appropriate to the situation.

On the other hand, descriptive grammar is concerned with describing how the language is used rather than how it should be used. It is interested in writing grammar that accounts for the

way people actually use language. To a descriptive grammarian what matters is that people are communicating effectively with the language, following their own rules, irregardless of whether the rules are not universally approved.

Descriptive grammar adheres to the belief that there are many varieties of any language. For instance, we hear different varieties of English such as: American English, British English, Indian English, Filipino English and others Non-standard English may be appropriate, depending on the person using it and on the shift of topic. In other words, there is no single standard English. Any language is as good as the people that use it. The English that is used by the Americans is different from that used in the Philippines and the English that is used in formal written communication is in some ways different from the English used in informal conversation.

Moreover, it is important to know that each language is unique and has its own set of rules different from others. Probably, one language may be similar to another, but may follow different grammatical rules. The mistake of a traditional grammar is in its trying to describe English in the context or framework of Latin. For example, the prescriptive rule that "It is I" is right and "It is me" is wrong comes from assuming that the distinction between I and me must be the same as the distinction between ego and me in Latin. But in actual usage, "It is me" is frequently used in conversation. This suggests that, at all times, we should avoid preconceptions about the form which grammatical rules will take in a given language or language variety. Instead, we can find out what these rules are by observing the way people speak or write in different situations.

To see the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammar, formal and informal English have to be defined, Formal English refers to the type of language we use publicly for some serious purpose; for example, in official reports, business letters and regulations. It is nearly always written, but exceptionally, it is used in speech as in formal public speeches. On the other hand, informal English or colloquial English is the language of private conversation and of personal letters. It is the

first type of language that a native speaker becomes familiar with because it is generally easier to understand formal English. It is often used in public communication. Roughly, formal English is associated with prescriptive and informal with descriptive grammar.

Now, let us look at some problems in usage which arise due to some misconceptions about standard English. Many experts hold that standard English allows one correct form that can never change. Thus, learners of English are faced with the problem of when they should or should not follow the rules or what rules to follow. The following are some examples of prescriptive rules and sentences which are frequently used in actual conversation.

In sentences with the copula *Be*, personal pronouns are used to take the subject form in formal English even in verbphrase position. Here is the classical example of "*I and Me*."

Who is at the door? To the prescriptivist, the answer is: It is I or This is she. However, this usage is now changing even in formal English and, in informal English, the objective form of the pronoun is definitely preferred as in the answer to the question, "Who is there?" It's me or This is her.

Some people follow the rigid rule and insist on the use of "I" even as a conjoined direct object or a conjoined object of a preposition.

Examples: This is between you and I.

Between you and I, he's a fool.

However, 'This is between you and me' and 'Between you and me, he's a fool' may become colloquially acceptable as they occur with increasing frequency.

Another prescriptive rule is that which refers to indefinite pronouns (ex. somebody, someone, anybody, anyone..., body, no one) which require singular verbs. The use of a plural pronoun such as "their" to refer back to the following singular compound is acceptable in informal usage.



1. Do not end a sentence with a clause or with a preposition as in: ...the job I am applying for
2. Use a comparative construction in comparing two things:  
I bought the less expensive of the shirts.
3. Use shall with first person singular pronoun and will with the other person to express futurity:  
I shall go with you after my class.
4. Do not begin a sentence with a coordinator such as and or but as in: But she was not able to come because she was sick.  
In actual usage, we hear people say: "...the job I am applying for" and very rarely do we hear: "the job for which I am applying" or "I bought the least expensive..." and "I will go with you after my class."

Another very important rule to remember is that when rules are applied in every case, the result can be awkward and very much unEnglish as in: "For what is it?" is not acceptable variant of "What is it for?" "May the better man win" is abnormal and unidiomatic in comparison with "May the best man win."

Another problem of usage deals with pronouns with ellipsis: the prescriptive rule says that when constructing ellipsis, the correct form to use is the one which would be appropriate if omitted words were restored as in:

"Who sent the money?" "I". When the ellipsis is restored, it could be: "Who sent the money?" "I did."

Also, many of the grammatical problems which confront many learners of English is writing deal with ellipsis. It is difficult to draw the line between prescriptive and descriptive grammar. Some of the rules on ellipsis are: A sentence with ellipsis is acceptable only if the same sentence is acceptable after the deleted words are restored. The words which are deleted in the ellipsis must duplicate words occurring elsewhere in the context. Here is an example of these rules:

The University can, and will always, be proud of its graduates.

Version with deleted elements restored:

The University can be proud of its graduates, and always

will be proud of its graduates.

And here are two examples which violate the rule:

The University has and always will be proud of its graduates.

They are revising the book more thoroughly than it has ever been.

The fault is clear when we try to insert the underlined words in the spaces. To make the resulting sentences grammatical, we should have to insert *been* instead of *be*, and *revised* instead of *revising*. Another mismatch of ellipsis which causes a lot of problems to learners of English are the *Dangling Non-finite clauses* or the *Dangling participles*. The prescriptive rule says that: An adverbial non-finite clause which has no overt subject is understood to have a subject identical to that of the main clause to which it belongs. On this basis, the sentence: "Leaning over the window, a dirty urchin caught my attention," implies that a dirty urchin was leaning over the window, which surely the writer did not mean.

In the sentence, "Walking up the hill, the view of the lake is beautiful," there is no sensible way of explaining this sentence according to the given rule. But it can be interpreted by "stretching rule" so that the understood subject of the infinitive is the implied agent or doer of the action (seeing) described in the main clause. In scientific writing, passive sentences which are interpreted in this way do not seem to be awkward, as in: "Using the new method, more accurate results are expected."

There are also cases where the dangling clause is idiomatically accepted as a sentence adverbial, and where its subject is identified with the subject of the main clause, but with the speaker of the whole sentence, as in:

To make the long story short, the thief was caught by the police.

Considering the time he spent for his paper, the grade he got was very frustrating.

In the above sentences, few people would object to the kind of unattached clause.

Acquisition of the grammatical system of a language remains one of the most important components of communicative competence. It is the means through which linguistic knowledge is ultimately achieved. An inadequate knowledge of grammar would lead to a serious limitation on the capacity for communication. However, as teachers of the English language, we should make every effort to gain a complete understanding of the grammatical points, including variations and exceptions so that we can judge how much of this totality maybe presented to our students. We should not regard the rules as absolute. This by no means, suggests that we, including the students, should be deprived of these grammatical generalizations or rules. But we should see these rules as less than absolute, not only because of the temporal factor of language change, but, even more importantly, because they are hypothesized at a high level of generality.

The prescriptive grammar rules we have seen in the discussion should not be binding on either the speaker or writer (user) of English. But as teachers, we should emphasize to keep these rules in formal writing for the following reasons: First, we might offend principles of good style, like dangling modifiers causing ambiguity; second, our students may produce an inappropriate usage and, thirdly, we might offend in the sense of breaking a rule of etiquette which some people regard as important.

In conclusion, the teachers of English should remember that there are no hard and fast rules about usage. One's usage is always relative as to place, time, situation and social conditions. We should remember Hymes' (1972) distinction between social roles and psychological attitudes of the participants in a conversation toward each other (student to teacher, student to student...), the place and time of the communication act and the activity being discussed will determine to a large extent the form, the tone and appropriateness of any oral or written message.

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