

Lecture 2. Notions of grammar

- Missing century in the study of grammar

Geoffrey Pullum: ... **almost everything most educated Americans believe about English grammar is wrong.**

- Goals:
 - to continue our introduction to the basic tenets of modern linguistics,
 - to disabuse you of some popular misconceptions about language.

- Grammar: prescriptive vs. descriptive

sci.lang FAQ: **3 Does linguistics tell people how to speak or write properly?**
No. Linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive.

Prescriptive grammar: Rules of proper usage distinguishing "good" grammar from "bad":

1. "Good": **He doesn't know.**
2. "Bad": **He don't know.**

Descriptive grammar: What native speakers know about their language in order to use it:

1. Grammatical: **He doesn't know.** (in standard written American English)
He don't know. (in many styles and dialects, e.g., AAVE)
2. Ungrammatical (regardless of dialect or style): ***He not know.**
***He known't.**
***Not know he.** E.g., do-support in questions

- Four levels of "Correctness":

(1) _____

- a. third-person singular /s/: "she goes," not "she go."
- b. no double negatives: "he didn't see anybody," not "he didn't see nobody."
- c. complete sentences

(2) _____

- a. "who/whom did you see"
- b. "Winston tastes good like/as a cigarette should"
- c. "the data is/are unreliable"
- d. "I disapprove of him/his doing it"
- e. "get it done as quick/quickly as possible"

(3) _____

- a. "between you and I"
- b. "me and Harry went downtown"
- c. "was" for "said"

(4) _____

- a. prohibition of dangling prepositions
- b. "I shall" vs. "you will"
- c. "It is I"
- d. prohibition on singular "their"
- e. prohibition of split infinitives

- "Correctness" in the world's languages:

- (1) Pidgins and creoles:
 - a. Haitian Creole (6+ million speakers in Haiti and New York City)
 - b. Tok Pisin (2 million speakers in Papua New Guinea)
 - c. Jamaican Creole or Patois (2 million speakers)
 - d. Palenquero (3,000 speakers in Colombia)
- (2) Unwritten languages:
 - a. Ilocano (5.3 million speakers, Philippines)
 - b. Chagga (800,000 speakers, Tanzania)
 - c. Buang (10,000 speakers, Papua New Guinea)
- (3) Written languages with no academies:
 - a. English (400 million speakers)
 - b. Marathi (65 million speakers)
- (4) Languages with academies:
 - a. French (109 million speakers; academy established 1635)
 - b. Spanish (266 million speakers; academy established 1713)
 - c. Hungarian (14.4 million speakers; academy established 1830)
 - d. Hebrew (2.7 million speakers; academy established 1953)
- (5) Languages codified to preserve an archaic form:
 - a. Latin
 - b. Old Church Slavonic
 - c. Sanskrit

- Linguistics has its roots in language preservation:
 - Panini, an Indian grammarian of the fifth or sixth century B.C.
 - The purpose of his grammar was to preserve knowledge of the language of the Hindu religious canon (Vedic Sanskrit).

Goals of grammarians were

1. to codify the principles of languages, so as to show the system beneath "the apparent chaos of usage"
2. to provide a means of settling disputes over usage
3. to "improve" the language by pointing out common errors

- Prescriptive agenda almost always has an aspect of social gatekeeping.

- A literal (and fatal) example of language as gatekeeper, Judges 12:

6 they said, "All right, say `Shibboleth.'" If he said, "Sibboleth," because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.

- "shibboleth" = an arbitrary linguistic marker that distinguishes one group from another.
- A 20th-century parallel to the Biblical shibboleth story took place in the Dominican Republic in 1937, when tens of thousands of Haitians were massacred on the basis of whether or not they could roll the /r/ in the Spanish word for "parsley."

- Why are most linguists reluctant to take the step from description to prescription?
 - is it a bit as if doctors were describing the medical conditions, but not prescribing any treatments?
 - A social or regional dialect is not a medical condition.
 - Language change is not "corruption" or "decay", but a natural and inevitable process.
 - Some language mavens sometimes invent rules: pseudo-correctness.
- Singular "their" and linguistics: Henry Churchyard, Steven Pinker
 - The use of "they" or "their" with an indefinite third person antecedent
- The grammar (and logic) of *quantifiers* like "every" is actually quite subtle and difficult to get right.
 - The ancient Greek (and Roman) logicians (and grammarians) couldn't get it right, nor could the logicians of Medieval Europe.
 - The first adequate quantificational logic: Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell.
 - The relationship between the grammar and the logic of quantificational expressions: topic of research to this day.
- Prescriptive rules exist independent of linguistic motivation: members of the language community who accept this rule will make **social judgments** based on it.
 - Not every pet peeve of the language mavens is an arbitrary prejudice.
 - Speakers and writers may use language badly.
 - There were tears strolling down their faces.*
 - That is a mute point.*
 - I may look calm, but beneath this cool exterior is a churning iceberg ready to explode!*
- How can we distinguish a mistake from normal speech or writing? By looking for a system behind the use:
 - one-time occurrence vs. systematic use by many writers and speakers.
- Linguists want to describe and explain normal (and good) language use.

Language vs. dialect

- **Non-linguists:**
 - Language** as "the **prestige dialect** of some language" (whether the user of the term acknowledges this or not).
 - Dialect** as "a **non-prestige dialect** of some language."
 - For linguists, **every utterance occurs in some (social and geographical) dialect.**
 - Nonstandard dialects: **less logical? simplified versions of the standard?**
 - The rules by which nonstandard dialects work are **often more logical or more complex.**
 - An example of **greater logic: hisself, theirselves**
 - An example of greater complexity: **double negative** (*I don't see nothing*).
- Many "standard" languages use double negatives, including French, Spanish, and Russian.

- **Attitudes toward language usage** as a kind of **fashion**:
 - **different speaking styles** – depending on the situation, audience, and purpose
 - **appropriate** in a given circumstance, rather than “better”
 - In formal settings, the prestige dialect is the right choice, but that doesn't make it inherently better as a form of language.
- why some linguistic feature is looked on as "improper"/low prestige
 - typically has to do with historical accident, & with real linguistic issues.
- The determination of what is grammatical or ungrammatical is based strictly on scientific observation.

Ebonics controversy

- The biggest recent battle in this area was the 1996 Ebonics debate.

The Oakland School Board passed a resolution, in which it did several things:

1. Recognition of AAVE.
2. Old methods don't work.
3. Encourage children to compare AAVE and SAE
4. Teachers must treat AAVE as a worthy possession rather than as evidence of carelessness and ignorance.
5. Teachers must understand the characteristics of AAVE.

The resolution was massively misunderstood by the media and the public. As a sociolinguist John Rickford put it,

“In the case at hand, the mainstream view was that Ebonics itself was street slang, and that Oakland teachers were going to teach in it, or allow students to talk or write in it instead of in English.”

This generated a firestorm of opposition. The linguists' reaction to the resolution and the controversy it generated was expressed in a unanimous resolution drafted by Rickford and adopted by the Linguistic Society of America.

Resolution On The Oakland "Ebonics" Issue Unanimously Adopted at the Annual Meeting of the

Linguistic Society of America

Chicago, Illinois January 3, 1997

Whereas there has been a great deal of discussion in the media and among the American public about the 18 December 1996 decision of the Oakland School Board to recognize the language variety spoken by many African American students and to take it into account in teaching Standard English, the Linguistic Society of America, as a society of scholars engaged in the scientific study of language, hereby resolves to make it known that:

1. The variety known as "Ebonics," "African American Vernacular English" (AAVE), and "Vernacular Black English" and by other names is systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties. In fact, all human linguistic systems -- spoken, signed, and written -- are fundamentally regular. The systematic and expressive nature of the grammar and pronunciation patterns of the African American vernacular has been established by numerous scientific studies over the past thirty years. Characterizations of Ebonics as "slang," "mutant," "lazy," "defective," "ungrammatical," or "broken English" are incorrect and demeaning.
2. The distinction between "languages" and "dialects" is usually made more on social and political grounds than on purely linguistic ones. For example, different varieties of Chinese are popularly regarded as "dialects," though their speakers cannot understand each other, but speakers of Swedish and Norwegian, which are regarded as separate "languages," generally understand each other. What is important from a linguistic and educational point of view is not whether AAVE is called a "language" or a "dialect" but rather that its systematicity be recognized.
3. As affirmed in the LSA Statement of Language Rights (June 1996), there are individual and group benefits to maintaining vernacular speech varieties and there are scientific and human advantages to linguistic diversity. For those living in the United States there are also benefits in acquiring Standard English and resources should be made available to all who aspire to mastery of Standard English. The Oakland School Board's commitment to helping students master Standard English is commendable.
4. There is evidence from Sweden, the US, and other countries that speakers of other varieties can be aided in their learning of the standard variety by pedagogical approaches which recognize the legitimacy of the other varieties of a language. From this perspective, the Oakland School Board's decision to recognize the vernacular of African American students in teaching them Standard English is linguistically and pedagogically sound.

The linguistic system behind every dialect and language is complex, creative, multi-level knowledge that we all have an instinct to acquire. More on that next time!