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English Grammar: Language as Human Behavior

Anita K. Barry

Third Edition

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Table of Contents

1. How Do We Study English Grammar?
Anita K. Barry **1**

2. Nouns and Noun Phrases
Anita K. Barry **15**

3. Verbs and Verb Phrases
Anita K. Barry **45**

4. Pronouns
Anita K. Barry **83**

5. Adjectives and Adverbs
Anita K. Barry **109**

6. Prepositions and Particles
Anita K. Barry **129**

7. Negation
Anita K. Barry **143**

8. Voice
Anita K. Barry **159**

9. Discourse Function
Anita K. Barry **175**

10. Combining Clauses into Sentences: Coordination
Anita K. Barry **201**

11. Combining Clauses into Sentences: Subordination
Anita K. Barry **213**

Index **243**

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HOW DO WE STUDY ENGLISH GRAMMAR?

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HOW DO WE STUDY ENGLISH GRAMMAR?

WHY DO PEOPLE DISAGREE ABOUT GRAMMAR?

Who Is the Authority?

We know how many of our rules of English grammar were handed down to us from the eighteenth-century grammarians, who based their decisions about right and wrong largely on logic, history, or comparison to Classical Latin and Classical Greek. For some people today, those rules are the final word about correct English. These people are often referred to as "grammatical purists." But most of us do not rely heavily on books that were written two hundred years ago to tell us about English today. Rather, we take a more practical view of language use and look for cues in our contemporary lives to guide us in the use of standard English. We look for models of what we regard as standard usage, and we consult contemporary sources, including teachers, editors, dictionaries, grammar handbooks, and online blogs and Websites. But we still find that getting answers is not so easy as it might seem at first. If we had an academy, perhaps the problem would be less troublesome. At least there would be a unique authority that everyone could consult, and differences of usage and opinions about usage might be resolved in a fixed and predictable way. But we do not have an academy, nor do we have any other special authority recognized by everyone as the last word on English usage. Instead, we have lots of different sources, and by *sources,* we mean real people who are faced with decisions just as the eighteenth-century grammarians were.

What Role Do Traditional Dictionaries Play?

Let's take a closer look, for example, at the task of publishing a dictionary of English. Suppose you decided to publish one. How would you decide what meanings and pronunciations of words to include? Would you rely on older uses? Would you rely on the judgments of a few well-educated and influential

scholars? Would you try to sample a wide range of people in different walks of life and list the most common usage? Would you rely only on written documents as sources of information? There are no right answers to these questions and, in fact, different dictionary makers have different answers to them, so that dictionaries themselves may differ in their purposes and their methods of making decisions. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary,* for example, attempts to reflect actual usage in neutral, descriptive terms, omitting designations such as *illiterate*. These values are articulated in the preface to the dictionary. In the words of the editor-in-chief, Philip Gove

> Accuracy in addition to requiring freedom from error and conformity to truth requires a dictionary to state meanings in which words are in fact used, not to give editorial opinion on what their meanings should be.[1]

About pronunciation, he says

> This edition shows as far as possible the pronunciations prevailing in general cultivated conversational usage, both informal and formal, throughout the English-speaking world. It does not attempt to dictate what that usage should be.[2]

Another widely used dictionary, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,* Third Edition, leans more toward representing educated speech only and relies on the judgments of a usage panel made up of writers, editors, and scholars, including professors of English and linguistics, and others who "occupy distinguished positions in law, diplomacy, government, business, science and technology, medicine, and the arts."[3]

Suppose you wanted to check the status of the word *ain't. Webster's Third International* tells us

> though disapproved by many and more common in less educated speech, used orally in most parts of the U.S. by many cultivated speakers esp. in the phrase *ain't I.*" (p. 45)

The American Heritage Dictionary, on the other hand, says

> The use of *ain't* . . . has a long history, but *ain't* has come to be regarded as a mark of illiteracy and has by now acquired such a stigma that it is beyond any possibility of rehabilitation. (p. 37, 3rd ed.)

If you want to use a dictionary as a guide to your own usage of *ain't,* or as a means of judging the usage of others, then you will have to decide which of these accounts to rely on. And, of course, there are other dictionaries on the market as well, each with its own approach to representing English. A more recent addition to the market is the *Encarta World English Dictionary,* associated with the Microsoft Corporation. Reflecting current technology, the editors gathered their data via e-mail from consultants in twenty countries. Among the words it defines are *nose stud* and *yadda yadda yadda*; it labels some words, such as *butch,* as offensive without defining them at all. Probably the most ambitious

and inclusive of all English-language dictionaries is still the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It began its data collection in the nineteenth century by collecting slips of paper from devoted volunteers who gathered word usage from their own reading. Now, in the twenty-first century, it draws from the "Oxford English Corpus," a massive computer database that allows the publishers to keep ongoing track of how words are used in context and to identify new developments in usage. Among the new word additions are *chillax, OMG, BFF,* and *tweetup*. As discouraging as it might be to those of us who want definitive answers, the reality is that there is no unique authority on our language, and looking up a word in "the dictionary" is a comfortable fiction. In reality, we are looking up a word in "a dictionary," and what appears in that dictionary is determined by the publisher's goals and sources of information. The same can be said for grammar books and style manuals.

DISCUSSION EXERCISES 1

1. Before 1961, Webster's dictionaries were more *prescriptive* in their approach to English usage, that is, more inclined to dictate correct usage. When the *Third International* announced its new policies in 1961, many people reacted with outrage. What do you think prompted this reaction? What do you think your own reaction might have been?
2. Which is standard English, *He has swam a mile* or *He has swum a mile*? What do you think the difference is in the way *Webster's* and *American Heritage* convey information about their use?
3. Which of the following do you think appear in the March 11, 2011, update of the *Oxford English Dictionary*?

   I heart ____, automagically, taquito, couch surf, singledom, interweb

Online Grammar Sources

In the twenty-first century, we see another wave of grammatical entrepreneurship, not unlike that which occurred in the eighteenth century, when ordinary people took it upon themselves to dictate correct usage. An online search of the topic "grammar" opens up an amazing world of heated, lively discussion about the English language in the form of blogs and Websites that dictate, debate, discuss, and argue about English grammar. The authors have a variety of backgrounds. There are journalists, editors, linguists, people with degrees in English, graduate students, and at least one life and relationship coach. They are largely self-appointed "experts" in English and approach their writing with the same range of goals and motives that we have seen in more traditional grammar authorities.

Some are “prescriptive,” and adhere closely to the rules of eighteenth-century grammar, offering instruction in terms of what is correct and what is not. GrammarBook.com (written by Jane Straus) falls into this category. In this blog we are told, for example, that “It could have been they” is better than “It could have been them.” Another blog, After Deadline (associated with the *New York Times*), written by Philip B. Corbett, is also concerned with identifying correct usage and style and contains discussions of whether you may split an infinitive or use the pronoun “they” to refer to a singular antecedent. Also in the more prescriptive vein is GrammarSlammer, produced by the organization English Plus and most likely aimed at people learning English as a second language.

Many other blogs are decidedly in the “descriptive” camp and are concerned with describing English as it is actually used and reject the absolute dictates of the past. Mignon Fogarty, also known as “Grammar Girl,” responds to readers’ questions about grammar and usage at grammar.quickanddirtytips.com. In one such posting, for example, a guest writer provides a thoughtful discussion of the choice between “than I” versus “than me.” Other blogs are more openly hostile to the prescriptive approach. At grammarphobia.com, by Patricia T. O’Connor and Stewart Kellerman,” the slogan is “Let Bygone Rules Be Gone.” And at Motivated Grammar, by Gabe Doyle, the slogan is “Prescriptivism must die!” Among the most populist grammar efforts is PainintheEnglish.com, which describes itself as a “forum for the gray areas of the English language.” Here readers post questions about English usage, other readers post answers, and you have the option of voting for the answer you like.

Now, more than ever, the general public has the means to participate in discussions of English grammar and usage, and so the conversation about English that has been in progress for centuries has become broader and more diverse. The Internet provides the means for people to broadcast their ideas widely and to encourage interaction with readers. For those seeking a single voice of authority, this can be a frustrating development. For those interested in discussion and debate about usage, it further enriches the landscape. No matter your aims, however, you cannot engage in this broader conversation without a background in the basics of grammatical description. Providing you with this background is one of the primary goals of this text.

Why Is There No One Standard?

Another reason we have difficulty fixing on just one “correct” English is that modern English is spoken all over the world by hundreds of millions of people, and so perceptions of correctness will vary, even among the most educated and influential. As English spreads, it develops different standards. Noah Webster succeeded in distinguishing an American standard from a British standard, an important step in the development of an American national identity. So now we recognize that there may be two acceptable ways to spell a word—*check* or

cheque, center or *centre,* for example. Similarly, there are two standard pronunciations for some words, such as *schedule* and *lieutenant.* Or it might be equally correct to say *the team is playing* (American English) or *the team are playing* (British English). British and American English are the two most influential standards around the world, but we must remember that each English-speaking country develops its own, so we should expect to find standard forms of English specific to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. English is now also used as one of the major languages in many countries of Africa and Asia and is developing standards specific to those areas as well. What was originally a language spoken by a few million people on one small island in Europe has now become a world language with many different varieties and with identities separate from either British or American English.

Why Do Languages Change?

To complicate the picture still further, we have to keep in mind that languages change over time, and along with changes in language come changes in judgments about language. That is, "correct English" is a moving target. What was considered correct a hundred years ago is not necessarily what is considered correct today. The eighteenth-century grammarians argued that English could be perfect and permanent if not for the laziness and carelessness of its users. For them, change was the equivalent of language decay. But modern linguists argue that change is inherent to all languages; without the flexibility to change, languages would not be able to serve the continuously evolving needs of the people who use them. If English had not been able to change, you would not have the words to talk about your thumb drive or a blog or a robocall or even a sitcom or an infomercial! Language users are receptive to the enrichment of added vocabulary, while they shed words that are no longer of use to them. When was the last time you heard someone talk about their *trousers* or *breeches* or their *icebox* and *phonograph*? Do you still sit on a *davenport* or keep your clothes in a *bureau*? And did you know that the most recent translation of the *New American Bible* eliminates the word *booty*?

In addition to shifts in vocabulary, there is an even more important facet of language change that we are all particularly sensitive to, and that is changes in our grammatical system. Grammatical systems are based on rules, or patterns. As people learn their language as children, they learn these patterns. For example, children learning English figure out that to make a noun plural, you have to add the suffix *-s,* or to express a past action, you must add the suffix *-ed* to a verb. But it is also true that there are exceptions to these patterns, sometimes because words remain unchanged from earlier times, when other patterns held, or sometimes because we borrow words into English from languages with different patterns. So, for example, *boy* fits the regular pattern for noun plurals (*boys*), while *man* and *crisis* do not (*men,* not *mans* and *crises,* not *crisises*). *Talk* fits the regular pattern for the past tense (*talked*), but *buy* does not (*bought,*

not *buyed*). Unlike words that fit the regular patterns, exceptions are hard to learn. We have to learn them one by one and we have to remember each one separately. We need to hear them frequently for the irregularity to become fixed in our memories. When we look at how English has evolved since its beginnings, we see that collectively in our use of the language we strive to eliminate the irregularities by changing them to fit the normal pattern. If you look at earlier forms of English, you will find that *shoes,* for example, used to be *shoon,* and *eyes* used to be *eyen*; *climbed* used to be *clomb,* and *helped* used to be *holp.* Although no one person decides to make a change, together over the years we have changed English a great deal, so that many more nouns and verbs now fit the regular pattern. What this tells us is that language users can detect patterns easily and, from a broad historical perspective, prefer to have words fall within the patterns rather than outside them.

Clearly then, some words that are considered standard at some point in the history of English will drop out and be replaced by their regularized counterparts. Most of us can accept that without difficulty; we don't expect even the most educated among us to sound like Chaucer or Shakespeare. But what some of us find hard to accept is that English continues to change. It is a dynamic, living system forever being shaped by the people who use it. The preference for regularity is no less compelling now than it was two hundred or more years ago, and people's linguistic behavior is no different from the way it has always been. Nevertheless, it is one thing to observe language change from a comfortable distance; it is quite another to experience it yourself. The first is often an interesting academic exercise, while the second can be disconcerting or even disturbing. Consider, for example, your reaction to someone who says *I knowed it.* Intellectually, we can register this as merely another example of regularization of the past tense. At the same time, for many of us it also signals lack of education. But as we know from observing the history of English, many regularized forms do take hold over time and come to be regarded as standard and educated.

How does that transition take place? How do we know when a newer form has replaced an older form? How do we know when it is no longer a stigma to use the newer form? Where's that academy when we need it? This is the source of grammar anxiety for many speakers of English. When a newer form is replacing an older form, they may both be used for a long time. It is only gradually that the older one will drop out. Meanwhile, we hear both being used. The ghosts of the eighteenth-century grammarians whisper to us that if there are two forms, one must be wrong. Our own experience tells us that regularized forms are stigmatized when they are first introduced. So we want to know when a word has achieved acceptability. (This could apply to grammatical constructions as well, as we will see later in the text.) But only our collective judgment determines that, so individually we often cannot get the immediate answers we seek. Should we say *dreamt* or *dreamed, lit* or *lighted, I have proven the theorem* or *I have proved the theorem*?

When we study the grammar of English, we have to take all of this into account: the absence of a unique authority, the variety of standards that exist

around the world today, and the fact that English is continuously evolving and so are judgments about usage. This makes the study of English grammar an exciting challenge, but not impossible. We need to focus our efforts so that we aren't trying to do everything at once. In this text, we focus on Standard American English. Even that, as we now know, is no simple exercise. We have to be flexible in our approach, attentive to the fact that we are talking about real people and not abstractions, and accepting of the idea that the answers to our questions may come in the form of thoughtful discussion rather than labels of "correct" and "incorrect."

Most importantly, however, we need to recognize that for all its variation and for all the indeterminacy in defining it, English is still English. People who speak it in all its varieties can understand one another, more or less, and share the same written language. English, like all languages, must meet the communication needs of the people who use it. That means no matter what variety of English we speak it at least must allow us to identify and make reference to things, to people, and to ideas. It must be able to describe actions and tell when they happened. It must allow us to give descriptions of things, people, and ideas. It must allow us to give information and to get information; to give orders; to express our feelings; to indicate relationships among things, people, and ideas; and to combine simpler ideas into more complex ideas. All forms of English meet these expectations and do so in similar ways. The rest of this text will concentrate on the common elements, using Standard American English as the focus of attention and the basis for comparison to other varieties.

WHAT ARE THE COMMON ELEMENTS OF ENGLISH?

The rest of this chapter will give you a brief overview of the common elements of grammatical structure in English, those overriding features shared by all varieties of the language regardless of their differences. Those features are *constituent structure,* the clustering of words together, and *rules and regularities,* patterns that manifest themselves at all levels of language structure.

Bear in mind that this is merely an overview, intended mainly to give you an idea of how we talk about grammatical structure and to introduce some of the terminology. Think of it as a warm-up exercise, as a way of transforming your intuitions and gut reactions into more formal analyses. For most students, this transition takes some time, and you may experience some initial discomfort with "talking grammar." You will surely see your comfort level increase as you gain more experience.

Constituent Structure

Let's explore further what we mean by *constituent structure.* When we hear English, it seems to us that words just come out one after the other, like beads on a string. But, as we will see when we begin to examine the language, sentences are organized so that some elements bear a special relationship to each other

that excludes others. For example, if you look at the sentence in (1) you will see that it consists of ten words.

(1) The excited child chased the new puppy around the garden.

But you will notice that some of these words seem to group together and may stand alone in conversation as an answer to a question about this event. For example

Who did it? *the excited child*
What did she chase? *the new puppy*
Where? *around the garden*
Around where? *the garden*
Did what? *chased the new puppy around the garden*

If you were asked to draw lines separating the parts of the sentence, you would probably insert them after *child, puppy,* and *garden.* We simply sense that certain words group together. Notice that there are other words that appear in sequence also, but they do not constitute a grouping. There is no question that could be answered *child chased the* or *excited puppy around.* Nor would we separate off those words together as groupings according to our intuitions. The groupings that hold together are called **constituents**. Constituents can be very short, like *rice* in sentence (2) or very long, like *because she knew that her life would be in danger if she revealed her sources to the FBI* in sentence (3).

(2) *Rice* is high in carbohydrates.
(3) The reporter refused to speak *because she knew that her life would be in danger if she revealed her sources to the FBI.*

Furthermore, you have already seen in sentence (1) that constituents can nest inside other constituents. In other words, constituents are arranged hierarchically as well as linearly. For example, the constituent we have identified in (3) contains constituents within it: *her life, in danger, her sources, to the FBI.* And *to the FBI* itself contains the constituent *the FBI.*

DISCUSSION EXERCISES 2

1. Identify some constituents in each of the following sentences. Judge what feels like a group to you and then see whether it could stand alone as an answer to a question in a conversation. Remember that constituents can nest inside larger ones.

   The bored students ignored the teacher's questions.

   She sobbed uncontrollably when the jury announced the verdict.

   The fact that the speaker showed up late annoyed many members of the club.

(*continued*)

Skiing in the Alps is my favorite vacation.
The baby crawled into the closet and fell asleep.

2. We might show how one constituent is included within another by using brackets, as in the following: [to[the FBI]]. Place brackets around the constituents of *the man in the white coat*.

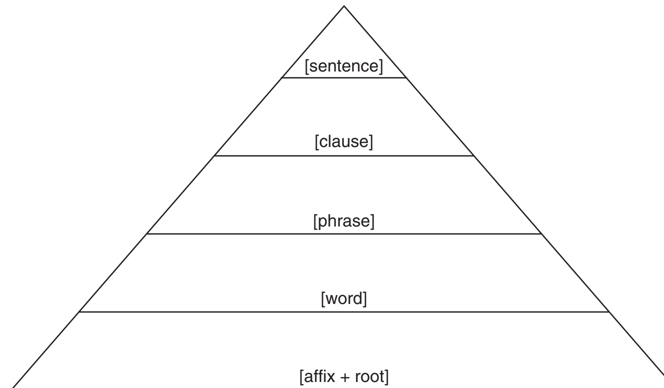
Constituents, or groupings, occur at many different levels of English, from the lowest level of the **root** and the **affix,** to the **word,** the **phrase,** the **clause,** and the **sentence.** In this text we will work our way from the lowest to the highest constituents. *Roots* and *affixes* (the more general term for prefixes and suffixes) are the components of words. For example, the word *cats* consists of the root *cat* and the suffix *-s;* the word *talked* consists of the root *talk* and the suffix *ed; redo* consists of the root *do* and the prefix *re-*.

The next level of grammatical structure, as we have already implied, is the *word,* the result of putting roots and affixes together. Some words are just roots; others are combinations of roots and affixes. Words fall into different categories depending on their meanings, their functions, and the kinds of affixes they have. We sometimes refer to these categories as **lexical categories, word classes,** or **parts of speech.** They have names that are familiar to most people: *noun, verb, adjective, adverb, pronoun, preposition, conjunction,* and *article* are some of the most common. Many of these word classes also have subcategories. You probably know the difference between a *common* noun like *boy* and a *proper* noun like *Bill.* You might also know the distinction between a *transitive* verb like *buy* and an *intransitive* verb like *laugh.* Do you know the difference between a relative and a reflexive pronoun? A gradable or nongradable adjective? If not, you soon will.

Words group together at the level of the **phrase.** A phrase has one part of speech at its core, called the **head** of the phrase. It gives the phrase its name, such as *noun phrase* or *verb phrase.* The phrase also includes all the other things that go with the head to form a group. If you look again at sentence (1) shown previously, you will see that all the constituents we identified happened to be phrases. For example, *the excited child* is a noun phrase, with the noun *child* as head; *chased the new puppy around the garden* is a verb phrase, with the verb *chased* as head; and *around the garden* is a prepositional phrase, with the preposition *around* as head.

Phrases may occur together to make larger groupings, of course. The combination of a noun phrase followed by a verb phrase has special status: it is called a **clause**. Clauses may then combine into a larger constituent called a **sentence**.

All forms of English operate at all of these levels simultaneously, which sometimes makes it difficult to talk about one level without talking about the others. The following diagram may help you to visualize the hierarchical structure of English that we have just described.



Rules and Regularities

Also common to all forms of English are rules that express patterns in the language. Rules may vary somewhat from one variety of English to the next, but most of them are shared, which is what gives the language its continuity. One kind of rule expresses the linear order in which elements must occur within their constituents. An example of such a rule is: "adjectives precede the nouns they modify." We all know that no one would say *I caught the ball red,* for example. We take that for granted, but we must keep in mind that this rule is one of the things that makes English different from, say, Spanish or French. Another kind of rule in English grammar expresses what elements can occupy the same constituent, that is, what elements are allowed to group together. Shared knowledge of the rules of acceptable grouping is what allows us to make the same judgments about what does and does not make up a constituent. Finally, there are rules for English that express relationships between elements, sometimes within one constituent, sometimes across constituents. We call these **agreement** or **cross-referencing** rules. One such rule for English is: "pronouns must agree in gender and number with their antecedents." You may not be familiar with the terminology, but if someone says *the girls hurt himself,* you know something is wrong!

DISCUSSION EXERCISES 3

Below are some sentences that violate the basic patterns of English in some way. Which type of rule is violated in each instance: linear order, grouping, or agreement?

This books is too difficult.

They waved the flag white.

She laughed the dog.

(*continued*)

My cousins lives in Los Angeles.
I walk school to.
The Mr. Smith owns the store.

English also has exceptions to its rules. There are parts of English that do not conform to regular patterns and do not lend themselves to generalization. We have already seen some examples of those: nouns that do not add the suffix -*s* to form the plural, verbs that do not add the suffix -*ed* to form the past tense. As we said earlier, sometimes these irregularities are holdovers from older patterns, and sometimes they are borrowed from other languages. They tend to be the least stable part of the language because people prefer regularity in their grammatical systems. They are the most interesting part of the language as well, because individuals approach the problems they present in different ways, giving rise to variation in usage.

A careful examination of English, from the lowest to the highest levels of grammatical organization is needed. There are different categories that make up each level and describe the rules for organizing them into acceptable patterns. A discussion about the people behind the rules: how do we react to the irregularities in our grammatical system? what happens when standard English is inefficient or doesn't allow us to express what we need to express? Observing people's language behavior gives us insight into how people organize a complex system of information in their minds and apply it in their everyday lives to communicate with others.

REFLECTIONS

1. What do you think people generally see as the purpose of a dictionary? Ask five or six people. Are their responses all the same?

2. If your child said *I gived it to her* would you offer a correction? What about if your child said *I dreamed I was a clown*? Do you give different feedback on *gived* and *dreamed*? If you do, what does that tell you about how the next generation of English speakers will view these two past tense verbs?

3. The verb *be* is highly irregular, yet it isn't particularly susceptible to regularization. Why do you think this is so?

4. Occasionally a regular verb becomes irregular. For example, it is thought that *dived* preceded *dove* and *pleaded* preceded *pled*. What explanation can you give for these occasional irregularizations?

NOTES

[1] *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (unabridged) (Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster 1986), p. 4a.

[2] Ibid.

[3] *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,* 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1992), p. vi.

GLOSSARY

affix: a part of a word attached to a root

agreement: a type of rule that requires certain grammatical elements to match in some respect; see also **subject-verb agreement**

clause: a combination of a noun phrase (subject) and a finite verb phrase (predicate)

constituent: words in a sequence that group together and function as a grammatical unit

cross-referencing rule: a grammatical rule that marks a relationship between two constituents

head: the main or core word in a phrase; in a phrase containing a relative clause, it is the noun phrase that the clause describes

lexical category: a class of words that have similar grammatical functions and forms, also known as a **word class** or a **part of speech**

phrase: a constituent consisting of a single word (the head of the phrase) and all its modifiers and additional required elements

prefix: an affix that attaches to the beginning of a root

root: that part of a word that carries the core meaning

sentence: a grammatical constituent consisting of one or more clauses

suffix: an affix that attaches to the end of a root

word: a combination of a root and all its affixes

NOUNS AND NOUN PHRASES

WHAT ARE NOUNS?

We will begin our discussion of English grammar with a close look at the lexical category **noun.** As with all other parts of speech, we will fold together our discussion of the two lowest levels of grammatical structure and discuss roots and affixes as part of our discussion of the word. Most of us recognize nouns by the traditional definition of their function: they name a person, place, thing, or idea. This is a reasonably useful definition, but it is not always sufficient to help us distinguish a noun from other parts of speech. A more reliable indicator of a lexical category is its **inflectional markings.** In English, these are typically (but not always) suffixes that attach to roots. For nouns, the inflectional markings indicate **number** and **possession.**

When we talk about the number of a noun, we mean that it is either singular (one) or plural (more than one). Singular nouns in English have no special marking, but plural nouns are typically marked with the inflectional suffix -*s* (or -*es*): *pencils, jars, glasses.* We know, of course, that not every noun fits this pattern. There is a group of nouns that change the vowel sound of the root to make the plural: *foot-feet, mouse-mice, woman-women.* Other irregular plurals do not fit any pattern, such as *oxen, children, deer.* All of these are holdovers from earlier forms of English that we now learn one by one. Another important category of irregular plurals contains those borrowed from other languages. Most of them are taken from Latin or Greek and tend to be more formal and less common than the Old English holdovers, such as *alumnus-alumni, criterion-criteria, phenomenon-phenomena, formula-formulae.* You are probably thinking that not everyone uses such singular and plural forms exactly the way we have described them. There is a lot of evidence that people are trying to bring them into the fold of the regular noun pattern. *Formulas* is fully standard and exists side-by-side with *formulae. Syllabuses* and *hippopotamuses* are already within the range of acceptability for most people.

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Others speak of *one criteria* and *one phenomena.* These are not considered to be standard English, but they are very common and they are showing up more and more often in respectable written sources such as newspapers and textbooks. (See Reflections 12.) If we say *one umbrella* and *one sofa,* why not *one criteria*? It is certainly likely that they will one day be considered the standard singulars, and when they are, *criterias* and *phenomenas* will probably follow. Meanwhile, if we want to stay within fully acceptable formal standard English, we need to overcome our instincts to think of them as singulars when we say them.

DISCUSSION EXERCISES 1

1. *Agenda* and *media* are historically plural forms, with singulars *agendum* and *medium*. What is the evidence that the plural forms have become accepted as singulars?
2. The plural of *fish* is historically *fish,* yet the regularized plural *fishes* has come into usage in recent times. Some people assign different meanings to the two plural forms; do you know what those two meanings are?
3. The use of *alumnus-alumni* has one other interesting complication. The words are derived from the Latin word meaning "student," and in Latin referred to male students. The corresponding female forms were *alumna* and *alumnae*. Would you object to naming the magazine for graduates of your college *The Alumnus*? That objection has been raised about the University of Michigan's *Michigan Alumnus*.
4. Why do you think the irregular plural *feet* has been more resistant to change than the irregular plural *syllabi*?

The other inflectional affix associated with nouns is the possessive. It also adds the suffix *-s,* separated from the noun root in writing with an apostrophe: *boy's, cat's, judge's.* Unlike the plural, the possessive form of nouns is completely regular. Even if the plural of the noun is irregular, its possessive fits the regular pattern: *men* for plural, but *man's* for possessive, for example. That is why we never hear any fluctuation in the use of the possessives and also why they are not very interesting as a subject of conversation. We do need to remember certain rules of spelling for possessives, and we must also keep in mind that the possessive and the plural can occur together in one word. Although there is some variation from one handbook to another, the general spelling rule is that we add *-'s* to make a noun possessive, regardless of whether it is singular or plural: *car's, man's, men's, children's, Charles's.* But if the plural noun ends in *-s,* you simply add an apostrophe to make it possessive: *the Smiths' garage, the boys' uniforms.*

In addition to inflectional markings, lexical categories also have **derivational affixes** that usually (but not always) turn one lexical category into another. For example, the derivational suffix *-ment* will turn a verb into a noun: *govern* → *government*. Some other derivational suffixes that mark words as nouns are *-er,* as in *dancer, singer, printer; -ion,* as in *election*; *-ity* as in *purity* and *sanity*. Inflectional suffixes can occur together with the derivational ones and always appear at the end of the word: *dancers, dancer's, dancers'*.

DISCUSSION EXERCISES 2

1. Give some other derivational suffixes that turn roots into nouns.
2. Which of the following words are nouns? *visualize, national, realization, sincerity, fruity, engineer, dentist, happy, fearless, fearlessness, truthful, occurrence*
3. Some noun roots can add derivational suffixes that do not change the part of speech. That is, the resulting word is still a noun, but with a somewhat altered meaning. What alteration in meaning is made by the suffix *-ette,* as in *kitchenette* and *cigarette*? What about the suffix *-ess,* as in *princess* and *actress*?

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON SUBCATEGORIES OF NOUNS?

We can use the various criteria we have already mentioned as guidelines for identifying a noun as distinct from some other part of speech, but we also know that the criteria do not constitute an absolute definition that we can apply to any noun. Nouns fall into subcategories with their own special characteristics and do not all fit exactly the same mold. For example, we are familiar with the distinction between **common nouns** and **proper nouns.** Common nouns are written with lowercase letters and refer to general categories: *girl, teacher, ball.* Proper nouns begin with capital letters and designate a specific noun: *Mary, California, Fifth Avenue.* There are many differences in how these two subclasses of nouns behave, but an obvious one is that common nouns occur often in their plural forms, while the use of the plural for proper nouns is highly restricted. Other subclasses of nouns are **concrete nouns** and **abstract nouns.** Concrete nouns are the ones we can visualize: *table, chair, flag, hairdresser.* Abstract ones are usually ideas or concepts with no clear visual image associated with them: *sincerity, construction, foolhardiness.* Again, the concrete nouns are more typical, in that they can be plural or possessive, and the abstract nouns are more limited in that respect. Nouns can also be divided into subclasses of **animate nouns** and **inanimate nouns.** Humans and animals fall into the first subcategory, while things fall into the second. Within the category of animate, we further divide nouns into

human nouns and **nonhuman nouns.** It may be useful to know this terminology when talking about the different kinds of nouns, but for the most part the difference in the behavior of these subcategories is based on meaning, so we have no trouble using them appropriately. For example, we wouldn't ordinarily have occasion to say "the rock smiled," and if we did, it would be recognized as a metaphorical use of language. Sometimes, though, certain grammatical choices depend on which subcategory a noun belongs to; if a noun is human, we refer to it as *he* or *she*; if it is nonhuman or inanimate, we refer to it as *it.* If we hear a noise and think a human is making it, we ask *who is making that noise*? If we think it is nonhuman, or inanimate, we ask *what is making that noise*?

DISCUSSION EXERCISES 3

1. Suppose your neighbors arrive with their brand new baby wrapped in a yellow blanket. What difficulty might you have, grammatically speaking, finding out from them the baby's name or age?
2. Can you think of any circumstances in which people treat inanimate nouns as if they were grammatically human? Why do you think they do that?
3. How do you treat your family pet grammatically, as human or nonhuman? Do you differentiate grammatically between animals in your home and those in the zoo or the jungle? What about insects?

An especially good example of subcategories, or subclasses, of nouns that have grammatical consequences are **count nouns** and **noncount nouns** (or **mass nouns**). Let's compare the noun *bean* to the noun *rice.* There are similarities in the things they refer to: both are foods, and both occur in small, cylindrical pellets. Yet grammatically, we don't treat them alike at all. Suppose you want to count beans. One bean, two beans, three beans. . . . But if you want to count rice, you can't do it directly. You must provide some linguistic boundary for rice, like *grain* or *piece.* Then you can count one grain of rice, two grains of rice. . . . Or you can put the rice in something and count that: one cup of rice, two cups of rice. . . . That is why we call *bean* a count noun and *rice* a noncount noun. What are the other differences between count and noncount nouns? (we use the conventional* to indicate something that is generally considered to be "un-English.")

Count Nouns	Noncount Nouns
have plural forms: *beans*	do not have plural forms: **rices*
may not stand alone in the singular: **Bean is good for you*	may stand alone in the singular: *Rice is good for you*
can occur with *a* or *an* *a bean*	cannot occur with *a* or *an* **a rice*

Standard English also requires some very interesting differences in expressing quantities:

(too) many beans	*(too) much rice*
(too) few beans	*(too) little rice*
more beans	*more rice*
fewer beans	*less rice*

If we look at the patterns for expressing quantities, we can understand why people stray from the standard English pattern. We have two nouns that are not essentially different in meaning, yet standard English requires that we learn whether each is count or noncount and then make the appropriate grammatical distinctions. From the point of view of the speaker, this is an unnecessary complication of the grammar. We do not gain any meaning distinction; we just have to do more work. If you observe people's usage of count and noncount nouns, you will see attempts to avoid unnecessary work. Instead of distinguishing between *many* and *few,* people will say *a lot of beans, a lot of rice.* This is considered standard (as long as you spell *a lot* as two words) but informal. Or people might use *much* and *little* for both: **too much beans, *too little beans.* Although these have not achieved standard acceptability, we can see the reason for their use: with no loss of meaning and no loss of a valuable distinction, people manage to make the overall system more predictable and less complicated, with *much* indicating a large quantity, and *little* indicating a small quantity.

The situation is even more interesting when we are comparing quantities. Notice here that they are the same for the greater amount: *more beans, more rice.* But once again, for the lesser amount, we have to choose different words according to the rules of standard English: *fewer* for count nouns, *less* for noncount. What would be wrong with a simpler pattern that uses the same word for both, comparable to *more*? That is exactly what speakers of English seem to be asking every time someone says *less calories* or *less restrictions* or *less any-other-count-noun.* How we treat the subcategories of count and noncount nouns is a very good example of how people collectively react to unnecessary burdens in their grammatical system. Without conscious agreement, there is movement towards a simpler, more regular pattern.

DISCUSSION EXERCISES 4

1. Which of the following nouns are count? Which are noncount? Use various grammatical tests to justify your decisions: *furniture, table, peace, student, sugar, university, greed*.
2. Some nouns in English can be both count and noncount, depending upon how they are used in a sentence. *Beer* is an example of such a noun: *two*

(*continued*)

beers, beer is a beverage. Show how each of these nouns can be either count or noncount: *space, coffee, chocolate, time*.

3. You might have noticed that we used the word *amount* in the paragraph before the Discussion Exercises to refer to both count and noncount nouns. If you are a grammatical purist, you might raise an objection to this usage. Traditionally, standard English has required that we speak of *amounts* of noncount nouns but *numbers* of count nouns: *the number of beans, the amount of rice*. What would you say is the status of this distinction? Is it nonstandard to use *amount* for both?
4. Is *taxes* a count or a noncount noun?

WHAT MAKES UP A NOUN PHRASE?

Nouns often occur with **modifiers** to form the constituent type known as a **noun phrase.** The noun is the core, or the head, of the phrase, and everything else in the constituent describes or identifies the noun in some way. For example, the phrase in (1) is a noun phrase; *errors* is the head noun and *serious* and *in translation* are modifiers of the head. Together they form a constituent.

(1) serious errors in translation

The descriptive modifiers of a noun are ordinarily adjectives, prepositional phrases, or relative clauses. Another type of modifier serves to identify rather than describe a noun. These modifiers are part of what we call the **determiner system.** The noun phrases in (2) illustrate the determiner system:

(2) <u>my second</u> marriage
<u>both his</u> wives
<u>the</u> divorce
<u>all her many</u> stepchildren

You can see three different elements of the determiner system in these examples: **determiners,** such as *my, his, the, her*; **predeterminers,** such as *both* and *all,* which precede determiners; and **postdeterminers,** such as *second* and *many,* which follow determiners. A noun phrase with all elements of the determiner system present, such as the last example in (2) looks like this schematically:

Noun Phrase = Predeterminer + Determiner + Postdeterminer + Noun

Of course, as we have already seen, it is not required that all the elements of the determiner system be present at the same time in a noun phrase. As you read further, you will recognize that the first noun phrase in (2) has no predeterminer, the second has no postdeterminer, and the third has only a determiner. In fact, nouns often appear as the sole element of their noun phrase, with no modifiers at all, such as *rice* in *Rice is a staple in China.* It may seem counterintuitive to call a