A Course Book in English Grammar

Standard English and the Dialects

Second Edition

Dennis Freeborn

A COURSE BOOK
IN
ENGLISH GRAMMAR

Titles in the *Studies in English Language* series

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Dennis Freeborn

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Mark Tapley: 'but a Werb is a word as signifies to be, to do, or to suffer (which is all the grammar, and enough too, as ever as I wos taught)'

Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844)

Books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry.

A book is made up of signs that speak of other signs, which in their turn speak of things. Without an eye to read them, a book contains signs that produce no concepts; therefore it is dumb.

Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (1983)

A child speaks his mother tongue properly, though he could never write out its grammar. But the grammarian is not the only one who knows the rules of the language; they are well known, albeit unconsciously, also to the child. The grammarian is merely the one who knows how and why the child knows the language.

Umberto Eco, *Reflections on 'The Name of the Rose'* (1985)

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Symbols

Symbols and abbreviations are useful because they save time and space in describing grammatical features.

Word-classes (parts of speech)

n	noun
v	verb
adj	adjective
adv	adverb
pn	pronoun
p	preposition
cj	conjunction
scj	subordinating conjunction
ccj	coordinating conjunction

Classes of phrase

NP	noun phrase
VP	verb phrase
AdjP	adjective phrase
AdvP	adverb phrase
PrepP	prepositional phrase
PossP	possessive phrase

Classes of clause (form)

NCl	noun clause
PrepCl	prepositional clause
AdvCl	adverbial clause
NonfCl	nonfinite clause

Classes of clause (function)

MCl	main clause
SCl	subordinate clause
RelCl	relative clause

Elements of NP structure

Use lower-case letters:

d	determiner
m	modifier (= pre-modifier)
h	head word
q	qualifier (= post-modifier)

Elements of VP structure

aux	auxiliary verb
op-v	operator-verb
m	modal auxiliary verb
h	have as auxiliary
be-prog	*be* used to form progressive aspect
be-pass	*be* used to form passive voice
s-aux	semi-auxiliary verb
v	main (lexical) verb

Elements of clause structure

Use upper-case letters (capitals):

S	subject
P	predicator
C	complement
A	adverbial

Kinds of complement

O	object (complement) or Co
Od	direct object
Oi	indirect object
Ci	intensive (complement)
Ca	adverbial (complement)
pt	adverb particle (complement)

Bracketing

()	to mark phrases
[]	to mark clauses
⟨⟩	to mark coordinated elements (words, phrases or clauses)

Phonetic transcription

Square brackets are also used with symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet to indicate the pronounciation of spoken words and sounds, e.g. [æ], [ʃ].

Other symbols

An asterisk * is placed before a word or construction which is ungrammatical or unacceptable to make clear that it is not a usable expression.

A question mark ? placed before a word or construction queries its acceptability, which may differ from one person to another.

The sign Ø is used to mark the deletion (or ellipsis) of a word that is 'understood', e.g. *The food Ø I bought yesterday...* from *The food **that** I bought yesterday....*

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Introduction to the second edition

The nine chapters of the first edition have been thoroughly revised and enlarged. Chapter 1 is new, and presents what is intended to be an objective linguistic perspective on the perennial arguments over the social concepts of *good English* and *correct English*. Chapters 5 and 6 are new.

Chapter 5 adds a commentary on the vocabulary of English, introducing the concept of *core vocabulary* and describing the relationship of the principal etymological sources of English to our assessments of formal and informal vocabulary. Chapter 6 continues the examination of the texts used in chapter 5 to give a preliminary overview of the types of phrase in English. Chapter 8 in the first edition, 'Complex and Derived Clauses' has now been divided into two separate chapters: chapter 11 'Complex Clauses' and chapter 12 'Derived Clauses' in the course of revision. Similarly, the former final chapter 9 is now chapters 13 and 14, 'Sentences' and 'The grammar of texts and speech'.

Dialectal grammar

The most important additions to this edition are the sections that describe those dialectal features of present-day English which differ from Standard English. If you accept the definition of the English language as 'the sum of all its dialects' (a concept discussed in chapter 1), then any grammar of English should include at least some reference to dialectal grammar. All the dialects of English are, by definition, 'mutually comprehensible' and belong to the same language. The differences between the dialects (and this includes Standard English, the 'prestige dialect') are very few compared with the vocabulary and grammar common to them all, but these differences clearly differentiate them and are especially marked in social attitudes. In England we identify speakers according to where they come from, or their educational attainment or their social class, in relation to how far they speak Standard English in the accent known as Received Pronunciation (RP).

The descriptions of dialectal grammar are general and confined mainly to variants in England. I believe that those forms of the language spoken daily by

millions of English speakers in England should be seen as legitimate and fully grammatical in their context of use, not as 'deviations' from the standard. This point of view in no way questions either the status of Standard English as the only acceptable *written* form of the language or the prime responsibility of schools to teach Standard English. To include descriptions of dialectal forms is not to advocate that they should be adopted, only that students of language should be able to recognise and describe them precisely in linguistic terms.

Reference grammars

To use a reference grammar, you have to know what to look up; in other words, you have to know some grammar first. A determined student could sit down and read a reference grammar from beginning to end, but this would be unusual, and is not the best way to learn. *A Course Book in English Grammar* is a different kind of book. It is planned as a textbook, to be read and studied chapter by chapter. Its aim is to describe the grammar of English in relation to its main functions in communication, and to provide enough detailed description to be of practical use in the study of texts in English.

Texts

The word *text* means any piece of writing, or transcription of speech, which is intended to communicate a message and a meaning. A scribbled note left on the table, 'Back at 2.20', is as much a text in this sense as a novel, a hire-purchase agreement or a sermon. It has a definite function, and its grammar is suited to that function.

An important part of the study of English is the reading, understanding and evaluation of texts, and a knowledge of the grammar of English is indispensable if this study is to be full and informed.

Knowing grammar

In one sense of *to know* ($know_1$) every speaker of English knows the grammar, because the grammar provides the rules for putting words into the right order so that our meaning is clear, and all speakers of English therefore must know the grammar in order to speak it. But in the sense of *to know about* ($know_2$) those who know the grammar are those who have studied it in the way provided in textbooks and reference grammar books, and can talk and write about grammatical structure.

The book has been written with native speakers of English in mind, not students learning English as a foreign language, and so it makes use of a native speaker's knowledge ($know_1$) of English, or that of an already fluent speaker of English. It does not therefore always provide comprehensive lists of features, and

sometimes asks you to apply what you know already (*know*$_1$) in order to become aware (*know*$_2$) at a conscious level. In this sense, parts of it are a kind of do-it-yourself manual, although I assume that teachers and lecturers will at all stages be commenting on, developing and criticising what the book has to say.

Neither does the book pretend to 'make grammar easy'. Even the simplest texts (see, for example, the infant reading primer extracts in chapter 2) contain features of grammar which might not appear in a short, over-simplified grammar book. I have had to select, and leave out lots of interesting problems concerned with the best way of describing the language.

Models of language

You would find, if you explored the study of language (linguistics), several different 'models', or theories of language – ways of understanding and describing it: traditional grammar, systemic-functional grammar, transformational-generative grammar, relational grammar, generalized phrase-structure grammar, and so on, all of which are meaningless terms to non-specialists in linguistics.

Nevertheless, you have to choose a model in order to talk about the grammar even at the simplest level. To use the words *sentence, noun* or *word* is to begin to use a theory of language.

The model adopted in this course book is not new or original, but derives mostly from traditional and systemic-functional grammar, making choices between them when there is a difference. Systemic-functional grammar, as its name implies, is concerned to discover the 'network of systems' that relate grammar to the major functions of language. A recent presentation of this model is in Halliday's *An Introduction to Functional Grammar.*

An example of the differences to be found between two descriptive models is in the meaning given to the term *complement.* The dictionary meaning of the word is 'that which completes'. In traditional grammar it means the element in a certain type of clause which refers to the subject (*subject complement*) or the object (*object complement*). In the one-clause sentence,

Meanwhile life was hard.

life would be called the *subject* and *hard* the *subject complement* in the terms of traditional grammar. In the one-clause sentence,

They found life hard.

life would be called the *object* and *hard* the *object complement.*

In this book, however, the meaning of *complement* in a clause is applied to any element which 'completes' the grammar/meaning of the verb. There are therefore three kinds of clause complement, which are introduced in chapter 2, and described in detail in chapter 9.

Traditional and new terms

I have tried to explain clearly what each term means as and when the need for it occurs, and have chosen the more familiar (traditional) terms wherever possible. But new and unfamiliar terms are necessary, for new and unfamiliar concepts, sometimes changing the scope of a familiar word (like *complement*) or introducing non-traditional terms (like *predicators in phase*). There has been a very positive development in our knowledge and understanding of the grammar of English in linguistic studies since the 1940s, which must be integrated with traditional descriptions.

As is said later in the book, no description of the grammar can be the only right one, and there are often alternative ways of describing the same feature. To keep the book to manageable proportions, such alternatives cannot always be described in detail, but they should be discussed rather than avoided wherever possible. In other words, students should be encouraged to think critically, and not to absorb passively.

Using the book

I assume that other descriptive and reference grammars will be used by teachers and lecturers with their students, to supplement and clarify what this course book can only sometimes mention briefly.

I have tried to avoid making up examples to illustrate features of the grammar (though this has not always proved possible), and have drawn upon a variety of texts, literary and non-literary, written and spoken. This is because it is only in the study of 'authentic English' that a knowledge of the grammar can be put to use, and real texts are a challenge, sometimes producing good examples of what you are illustrating, but at the time throwing up interesting problems.

Activities are provided at every stage in each chapter. Teachers will make their own choice, and should modify and add to them according to the needs of their students. For instance, you should look in a variety of other texts for examples of features of the grammar which are being studied.

Fuzzy edges

One important idea to stress is what is called in linguistic study the principle of **indeterminacy**, or 'fuzziness'. This means that we cannot always assign a clear, unambiguous descriptive label to a word, phrase or clause. For example, is *swimming* in *I like swimming* a noun or a verb?

The edges of the boundaries between categories are not necessarily clear, and there are often borderline cases. When this happens, no student should feel a sense of failure or frustration at not knowing the right answer (there may not be one), but should try to see the alternatives, and why there are alternatives – again thinking linguistically and critically.

Concepts

There is, I believe, no short cut or easy way to understanding grammar which you can guarantee for every student. It demands the ability to conceptualise, and students have to make a breakthrough into conceptual thinking at some stage. For some this comes easily and early on; for others it remains a mystery and the penny never drops.

If you consult reference grammars, you will find that they differ from each other in terminology and explanatory description. The same concept may have two or more names. For example, what is called *noun phrase* in this book is also called *nominal group, subordinating conjunctions* are also *binders, coordinating conjunctions* are *listers,* and certain adverbs are *linkers.* The second terms in these pairs are short and clear, but because they are not used in most reference grammars, the traditional and more widely used terms have been used in this book.

Similarly, the same word, used in two descriptive grammars, may be found to have two different meanings, and writers have to define their own particular use of a technical term. An example which has been referred to is the term *complement.*

Another example is the word *complex,* which is used in related but distinct meanings in grammatical description:

- In its everyday meaning of *consisting of several parts, complicated,* with its related noun *complexity* referring to this meaning.
- As a term in the traditional system of classifying sentences – *simple, complex, compound* and *compound-complex.*
- As the head word in the series *word-complex, phrase-complex* and *clause-complex,* terms taken from functional grammar to mean coordinated words, phrases or clauses, used where single words, phrases or clauses also function.

The differences should be clear from the contexts in which *complex* and *complexity* are used. Ambiguity of this sort can be confusing, but to invent new terminology would be, I think, even more confusing, and unsuited to a course book which is based upon existing conventions of descriptive linguistics. I have tried to anticipate some of the learning problems, drawing upon my own experience of teaching grammar, and to chart a way which provides continuity in teaching.

Where do you start? The book begins with a chapter on the meanings of both *grammar* and *English,* and is a contribution to the socio-political argument about *good English* that underlies conflicting attitudes to Standard English and the regional and social dialects of England.

You may prefer to begin with chapter 2. Infants communicate whole meanings in their first 'words', and learn bit by bit to encode their meanings into clauses, which I take to be the basic grammatical unit which conveys whole meanings in the form of 'propositions'. So chapter 2 contains an outline of the function and form of the clause. Successive chapters then look in more detail at words and phrases (constituents of clauses), before once more reaching the clause (chapter 9) and the complex combinations of clause patterns found in speech and writing (chapters 10–14).

Objectives

One practical objective of the book is to provide students with the 'tools of analysis' with which they can study any text in English, and see how far the grammatical structure contributes to its distinctive style and meaning. Chapter 14 is therefore concerned to demonstrate how grammar forms an essential ingredient of style, by using extended extracts of literary and non-literary writing, and transcriptions of spoken English, just as chapter 7 makes extensive use of real newspaper headlines.

Dennis Freeborn

Commentary book

A supplementary book in typescript published by the author is available for teachers and lecturers. The *Commentary Book* contains suggested answers to the questions in the **activities**, with a discussion of problems of analysis where appropriate. For details of the *Commentary Book* write to: Dennis Freeborn, PO Box 82, Easingwold, York YO6 3YY.

I. Standard English and the English language

A course book in English grammar should make clear what is understood by *English* and *grammar* in its title, because we use each of the two words to refer to different ideas about the nature of the English language.

I.I The meanings of *grammar* and *English*

I.I.I *'Grammar is "correct" English'*

One common use of the word *grammar* implies the idea of *correctness* – the study of grammar should teach how we ought to speak and write. This meaning of *grammar* goes back at least to the eighteenth century:

> The principal design of a Grammar of any Language is to teach us to express ourselves with propriety in that Language, and to be able to judge of every phrase and form of construction, whether it be right or not.
>
> (Robert Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, 1762)

and was still current in, for instance, 1993 in references to 'grammatically correct Standard English' in one of a series of revisions of the English component of the National Curriculum. The phrase is ambiguous, but a popular interpretation is that Standard English is the only 'grammatically correct' variety of the language, and that by definition the regional dialects are 'grammatically incorrect'.

I.I.2 *'Standard English is the English language'*

From this point of view **Standard English** (StE) is referred to as *correct English, good English* or *the Queen's English*. Nonstandard varieties of English are *incorrect*, or *bad English*. Those who take this point of view have a **model of language** in mind in which StE is the English language, and they will often strongly deplore the use of nonstandard forms. Using nonstandard forms of the language is, however, quite different from writing poorly constructed or ungrammatical English.

Speakers of Standard English can use English just as 'badly' as anyone else: they can write unclear prose, use words ambiguously, and so on.
(*English for Ages 5 to 16*, Department of Education and Science, June 1989)

These two meanings of *grammar* and *English*, in sections 1.1.1 and 1.1.2, are not the meanings which this book is trying to explore.

1.1.3 *'The English language consists of all its dialects'*

I have written this book in StE because it is the accepted and expected convention to use StE for writing. Whether or not it is written in 'good' StE is for a reader to judge – is it clear, unambiguous and so on?

The book describes the grammar of both standard and dialectal English because the model of language which underlies it defines the English language as 'the sum of all its dialects'. A complete study of the grammar of the English language today would include not only the varieties of the standard language, written and spoken, in England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, the United States, Australia, and so on (that is, all those countries in which English is either a national or important second language) but also all their regional dialects as well.

By definition, dialects of a language are 'mutually comprehensible' – that is, speakers of one dialect can communicate with speakers of any other. Even if there are difficulties when you first hear a speaker of an unfamiliar dialect, you are able to 'tune in' relatively quickly. You cannot do this with the speaker of an unfamiliar foreign language. Therefore, if we take the view that the English language consists of all its dialects, we have to classify StE also as a dialect in the linguistic sense. This does not affect the importance of StE as the medium for almost all written English:

Standard English is usually analysed by linguists as a *dialect* of English. On purely linguistic grounds, it is not inherently superior to other *nonstandard dialects* of English, but it clearly has social prestige. This is partly because of the purposes it now serves: it is the expected language in the education system and other social institutions (such as the courts and business), in almost all published writing, and it has spread far beyond its historical base in Britain and is used as an *international language* in many parts of the world. Nonstandard dialects of English are *regional dialects*: that is, they are relatively restricted in their geographical spread. Standard English used to be restricted in this way: if we look at Standard English as an *historical dialect*, then we find that 200 years ago it had a much smaller number of speakers in England, and had nothing like the geographical spread it has nowadays. Standard English is also a *social dialect*: its use is a marker of social group membership, and the relationship between standard and nonstandard dialects and social class in Britain is particularly strong.

Although Standard English is not inherently superior to other dialects of English, it is nevertheless true that, because of its long use especially in writing for academic and administrative purposes, the *vocabulary* and to some extent the *sentence syntax* have been greatly elaborated. Nonstandard dialects have the potential to be so developed, but for social and historical reasons they have not been.

(*English for Ages 5 to 16*, DES, June 1989)

So StE is, in linguistic terms, a dialect of the English language, but for practical purposes, when we talk about the 'dialects' we are referring to the regional dialects and excluding StE. This is everyday 'common sense' usage. So StE in England is used as the **reference dialect**, and most of this book sets out to describe the grammar of StE. But an important part of the book consists of those sections which describe the most common differences to be heard in regional (mainly English) dialectal grammars, using authentic examples recorded within the last twenty-five years.

It is because the differences in vocabulary and grammar between StE and the dialects are relatively few that they are 'mutually comprehensible'. These small differences, however, are matters of great concern to those whose beliefs in correct English are prescriptive, and people judge each other in social terms on the evidence of, for example, someone's use of *hisself* rather than *himself.*

In addition, StE as a **social dialect** may be spoken in the **accent** known as **Received Pronunciation (RP)**, popularly called 'BBC English' – or with a pronunciation marked by regional vowels, consonants and intonation. Sometimes RP is mistakenly referred to as 'Standard English', which confuses pronunciation with grammar, and it may be informally described as 'a good accent', but this is, of course, a personal judgement, not a linguistic fact. Remember that in studying language, we use *accent* to refer to pronunciation, and *dialect* to refer to *grammar* and *vocabulary.*

1.1.4 *Descriptive and prescriptive grammar*

We use StE as a reference dialect to describe nonstandard grammar by **contrastive analysis**. For example, if the StE form is *himself*, then the common dialectal form *hisself* can be objectively described in contrast in this way:

StE and some of the dialects use the **object pronouns** *him* and *them + self/selves*, while other dialects use the **possessive pronouns** *his* and *their + self/selves* to form the **3rd person reflexive pronouns**:

StE	**dialectal English**
himself/themselves	*hisself/theirselves*

StE is the inconsistent dialect, however, because it requires the **possessive pronouns** in the 1st person ***myself*** and ***ourselves***, and the 2nd person ***yourself*** and ***yourselves.*** (The difference between object and possessive pronoun is not marked in ***her*** when forming *herself*, and is obscured between *it* and *its* when forming *itself.*)

StE	**dialectal English**
myself/ourselves	*myself/ourselves*
yourself/yourselves	*yourself/yourselves*
himself/themselves	*hisself/theirselves*
herself/themselves	*herself/theirselves*
itself/ themselves	*itself/theirselves*

However, no judgement as to which is correct is implied in this **descriptive** method of discussing the grammar of standard and nonstandard English. It differs from

the **prescriptive** method implicit in the notion of grammar as correct English, which would assert that *himself* is right and *hisself* wrong.

In practice, prescriptive statements about language use tend to be lists of 'pet hates' – aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar which people have been brought up or taught to believe are wrong, or else new usages which are unfamiliar and perhaps threatening to their sense of order. They often rationalize their responses as a defence of 'the integrity of the language', as these recent quotations show:

- ... these **assaults** on the English language... (1984)
- Prince Charles stressed that Britain had produced the worlds most successful language but as its use in the media and theatres showed, it had become **impoverished**, **sloppy** and **limited**. (1989)
- Perhaps McDonalds would stop **polluting** the usage of the English language by removing the word 'Trash' from its bin notices... (1990)
- I am writing to report a severe outbreak of a most **contagious disease** which is threatening to **subvert** the English language unless remedial measures are taken as a matter of urgency. I refer to the **misuse** and **over-use** of the phrase 'in terms' of... (1992)
- It is the English **degradation** of city speech, the **lazy indifference** to what is said that is so **odious**. (1993)

1.2 Shibboleths

Although the study of grammar is concerned with the form of words and sentences, not pronunciation, the prescriptive attitude criticizes accent as much as grammar, so let us start with a look at some attitudes to accents and their social consequences, beginning with a short historical episode:

> Jephthah then mustered all the men of Gilead and fought Ephraim, and the Gileadites defeated them. The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan and held them against Ephraim. When any Ephraimite who had escaped begged leave to cross, the men of Gilead asked him, 'Are you an Ephraimite?', and if he said, 'No', they would retort, 'Say Shibboleth'. He would say 'Sibboleth', and because he could not pronounce the word properly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of Jordan. At that time forty-two thousand men of Ephraim lost their lives.
>
> (*New English Bible*, 1970)

This short story from Israelite history is recorded in the Old Testament in the Book of Judges, chapter 12. The Gileadites said *Shibboleth* in their dialect and the Ephraimites *Sibboleth* in theirs. Clearly they spoke dialects of the same language, since the same word was pronounced with only a slight variation in the initial consonant – [ʃ] or [s].

Another famous story in which a man's accent gives away his identity is in the New Testament, St Matthew's Gospel, chapter 26, although we are not told which features of his pronunciation marked him out:

Meanwhile Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard when a serving-maid accosted him and said, 'You were there too with Jesus the Galilean.' Peter denied it in face of them all. 'I do not know what you mean', he said. He then went out to the gateway, where another girl, seeing him, said to the people there, 'This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.' Once again he denied it, saying with an oath, 'I do not know the man'. Shortly afterwards the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Surely you are another of them; **your accent gives you away**!'

(*New English Bible*, 1961)

1.2.1 *Shibboleths in pronunciation*

The Old Testament story has given the English language the word *shibboleth*, which meant *stream in flood* in the original Hebrew, but which now means in English:

- A word or sound which a person is unable to pronounce correctly; a word used as a test for detecting foreigners, or persons from another district, by their pronunciation.
- A peculiarity of pronunciation or accent indicative of a person's origin.

Examples of the uses of the word are given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

- They had a Shibboleth to discover them, he who pronounced *Brot* and *Cawse* for *Bread* and *Cheese* had his head lopt off. (Cleveland, *Rustick Rampant*, 1658)
- *R* was a Shiboleth unto him, which he could not easily pronounce. (Fuller's *Worthies*, 1661)
- The commonalty of Northumberland are remarkably distinguished by a kind of *shibboleth* or *whurle*, being a peculiar way of pronouncing the letter *R*. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1797)
- To that sanctimonious jargon, which was his shibboleth, was opposed another jargon, not less absurd. (Macaulay's *History of England*, 1849)

Activity 1.1

List and discuss features of pronunciation in use today which are shibboleths.

The consequences of pronouncing a word in a way that is unfamiliar to another person, or using certain words or phrases, can be a disadvantage socially, depending upon the speaker's and listener's social status. Think of the relationship between teacher and pupil, employer and employee, parent and child, and so on. Which one in those pairs is likely to comment unfavourably on the other's use of language?

If differences in other people's pronunciation of English are described as 'peculiarities', as in 'a peculiar way of pronouncing the letter *R*' above, this may simply mean that the differences are *exclusive* to those people – they are the only

ones who use that pronunciation. But the word *peculiar* has also come to mean *strange*, or *odd*, so that the pronunciation may be thought to be *abnormal*. Regional dialects in a late nineteenth-century grammar book were referred to in this way,

> Distinct and separate errors of pronunciation are peculiar to each dialect, beside which one dialect often contains some of the peculiarities of another.

The word which gives away the underlying attitude of the writer is *errors* rather than *peculiarities*. It asserts that there is a right way to pronounce English. Within this point of view, the belief in 'correct' or 'good' English is created. Varieties of language use not recognised as 'good English' are thought of as corrupted versions of the language, used by people too lazy to learn and use it properly, who give offence by their refusal to conform. Here is Henry Alford, the Dean of Canterbury, writing in 1864:

> There is an offensive vulgarism, most common in the Midland counties, but found more or less everywhere: giving what should be the sound of the *u* in certain words, as if it were *oo*: calling Tuesday, *Toosday*; 'duty', *dooty*. And this is not from incapacity to utter the sound; but it arises from defective education, or from gross carelessness. (*The Queen's English*, 1864)

Notice the assumptions that underlie this statement:

- That his own pronunciation of *Tuesday* as [tjuzdɛɪ] is implicit in the spelling. He doesn't think it necessary to spell it as he pronounces it, with an interpolated [j], *Tyoosday*, to contrast it with the dialectal pronunciation.
- That not pronouncing words as he does is *offensive*, so the speaker is guilty of a social misdemeanour.
- That his pronounciation is *correct* – this is shown by his use of *should be*.
- That the pronunciation of the name of the letter ⟨u⟩ as [ju] determines its pronunciation in certain words.
- That those who say [tuzdɛɪ] are either uneducated or careless.

Activity 1.2

Are the Dean's assumptions acceptable?

It is interesting to examine the language of those who make confident assertions about 'good English' and the ways in which they refer to 'bad English' and to the people who use it. Here are some examples from the past and present:

- The **depraved Language of common People**, and **the noble refin'd expressions** of the Gentry... (1708)
- There are some **Abuses** among us of great Consequence...
  The great **Depravity** of our Taste...
  The continual **Corruption** of our English Tongue...
  Words and Phrases that are **offensive** to good Sense...
  Barbarous Mutilations of Vowels and Syllables... (Jonathan Swift, 1710)
- The powerful influence of **evil habits of speech** contracted in the home and street... (*The Teaching of English in England*, 1919)

- I have been forced to **endure** the following **abominations** on BBC TV... **sloppiness** in BBC spoken English . . .
- The increasing **debasement** of our language by those too **ignorant** or **slovenly** to care about it...
- Is he content to leave the language to the **depredation** of those who have no desire to discriminate or who, worse, deliberately promote linguistic **degradation**... (letters to newspapers, 1984)

An expression of personal opinion, 'I don't like this pronunciation', is inflated into a general statement in terms of moral condemnation and indignation – 'How dare they say it like that!'

1.2.2 *Shibboleths in vocabulary and grammar*

Activity 1.3

Read the following short texts and discuss your response to the attitudes to language use which they demonstrate.

1

(*A daughter wants to be allowed to read some of the books in her father's collection*)

'Now can I read your books?'

'Have you not learned yet,' he crossly replied, 'the distinction between *can* and *may*? I dare say you *can* read my books, just about. But I've told you before and I'm telling you now, You... *may*... not.' And that was that. I never did read his books.

(Jill Tweedie's autobiography *Eating Children*, Viking, 1993)

2

(*A journalist is writing about the retirement of the football manager Brian Clough*)

Yes, he would be returning to the City ground. 'I've got to come back to get me Inkspots tapes.' (David Lacey, *Guardian*, 3 May 1993)

3

(*Jeremy Paxman, a television presenter, is replying to critical remarks about himself made by Dave Beck – 'That principle makes him unfit to sweep the gutter he obviously lives in.'*)

'So Mr Beck made two basic mistakes – he got his facts wrong and he ended a sentence with a preposition.'

(Stephen Goodwin, *Independent*, 13 October 1990)

4

(From the examiners' report on a GCSE examination, on 'standards of written expression')

Many candidates used forms such as 'would of', and 'could of', instead of 'would have', and 'could have'.

Commentary on activity I.3

1 The father assumes that *can* and *may* each have a single, fixed meaning, *to have the ability to* (*can*) and *to have permission to* (*may*). This is not so. Both words are verbs which belong to the set called **modals**, most of which have more than one meaning. The meanings of *can* and *may* 'overlap', and they are used to mean both *to have permission*, and *to be possible*. For more on modal verbs, see section 8.5.

2 The journalist wanted to reproduce Brian Clough's dialectal accent in writing *me Inkspots tapes*. Written as ⟨me⟩, the pronunciation [mɪ] for [maɪ] looks like a grammatical error, but it is a normal **reduction** of the vowel of *my* when the word is unstressed. Everyone does it, but the effect of manipulating the spelling is to draw attention to Brian Clough's accent. It is an example of how features of pronunciation and grammar can overlap.

3 'You must not end a sentence with a preposition' is one of a small number of artificial 'rules' which have no basis in language use, but which were at one time imposed as rules of good writing. This one dates back to the end of the seventeenth century, and is derived from the literal meaning of the word *preposition*. It was taken from the Latin, in which *pre-* meant *before* – therefore a word which should come <u>before</u> another one cannot come at the end of a sentence. We can rewrite the relevant part of Dave Beck's statement as:

> ...the gutter **in which** he obviously lives.

which has connotations of **formal** language. To make it less formal, we can say:

> ...the gutter **which** he obviously lives **in**

In this construction we call *in* a **deferred preposition**. It conforms to conventions of grammar based upon what people actually say, and simply marks a difference of style. We have to use a deferred preposition if we choose *that* as the relative pronoun:

> ...the gutter **that** he obviously lives **in**

because we don't say:

> *...the gutter **in that** he obviously lives

4 The spellings *could of* and *would of* are very common and need to be corrected to *could have* and *would have*. There is no argument over this. But it is worth asking why such spellings regularly occur. To show their origin in speech, we would write *could've* and *would've*, but in formal writing such abbreviations are usually not acceptable. Children who write *could of* are in fact demonstrating the accuracy of their hearing and applying good principles of phonics to their spelling. It is one more example of confusion between pronunciation, spelling and grammar.

1.3 Rules of grammar

1.3.1 *Rules in descriptive grammar*

A *rule* in descriptive grammar is not invented and imposed by linguists in the cause of good English, but 'an observed regularity' in the language. For example, it is a rule of StE and many dialects that verbs in the present tense take the suffix *-s* to agree with a 3rd person singular subject: *I, you, we, they* ***take***, but *he, she, it* ***takes***. In East Anglia, dialect speakers say *he, she, it* ***take***. In other dialects, the *-s* inflection is applied to all forms of the present tense – *I, you, he, she, it, we, they* ***takes***.

This meaning of *rule* as *an observed regularity* is a technical term in language study. When it is used to describe the grammar of a language or dialect it does not imply that any authority has invented those rules. This kind of linguistic rule differs from those referred to in the commentary on activity 1.3 as 'artificial'. There are only a few of these artificial rules and people use them as criteria for 'good English'. Some of the best-known are described in the next section. We can call this a **proscriptive** attitude to language use.

1.3.2 *Proscriptive rules – 'what you may not do'*

A typical example of the proscriptive approach to language use can be found in a nineteenth-century textbook called *A Manual of our Mother Tongue* in a section called 'A Collection of Examples of Bad Grammar':

> All, or nearly all, the principal points in regard to which it is possible to go wrong are exemplified in this collection.

Then follow 173 sentences, each of which is said to contain an example of 'bad grammar'.

Activity 1.4

The 'Collection of Examples of Bad Grammar' appears to claim that you can learn to write 'good English' by avoiding 173 ways of going wrong. What do you think?

Activity 1.5

Some examples from the collection can be found in D. Freeborn, P. French and D. Langford, *Varieties of English*, 2nd edn, 1993, pp. 9–10. Here are some more:

(i) Identify and describe the 'bad grammar' in each sentence.

(ii) Discuss whether you think each example is in fact ungrammatical.

(iii) Read the versions corrected by the author of the textbook, and discuss whether his corrections are correct or necessary.

The 'right answers' are printed at the end of this chapter

1 He is stronger than me.
2 Pour the water in the bucket.
3 That was the most unkindest cut of all. (*Shakespeare*)
4 I have heard those sort of arguments fifty times over.
5 A man may see a metaphor or an allegory in a picture as well as read them in a description.
6 Whether he be the man or no, I cannot tell.
7 This is the man whom I saw was to blame.
8 Neither of these writers can be called true poets.
9 Between you and I, this is not right.
10 Who can this letter be from?
11 Going into the garden, the grass wetted my feet.
12 They were both fond of one another.

This method of teaching students how to write is no longer in fashion, but a few of the proscriptive rules are still being taught and used as markers of good writing. For example:

1.3.2.1 'YOU MAY NOT SPLIT THE INFINITIVE'

> In the old days our rulers were educated men, like the present Lord Stockton, who knew a split infinitive when they saw one...
>
> (Gavin Ewart, *Guardian*, 19 December 1985)

The 'split infinitive' is described and discussed in section 3.5.4.

1.3.2.2 'YOU MAY NOT BEGIN A SENTENCE WITH *HOPEFULLY*'

> Hundreds of creeping misuses of the English language – including 'hopefully' as a synonym for 'it is to be hoped'... are outlawed or discouraged in a new Oxford dictionary.
>
> (John Ezard, *Guardian*, 8 March 1979)

This use of *hopefully* as a **sentence adverb** is discussed in section 3.5.3.

1.3.2.3 'YOU MAY NOT BEGIN A SENTENCE WITH *AND* OR *BUT*'

> ...I noticed that a lot of the sentences and even paragraphs began with And or But. My English teacher would hit the roof if I started a sentence that way, and

it would be at least one thousand lines and a skipped playtime if I started a paragraph with those two words...

(Jennifer P, aged 11, *Guardian*, 20 December 1990)

This is discussed in section 4.3.1 on **coordinating conjunctions**.

1.3.2.4 'YOU MUST USE *UNTIL*, NOT *TILL*'

This proscription is perhaps not very common, but it is known that some teachers quite wrongly think that *till* is an abbreviation of *until* and say it should not be used. Historically, *till* is the older and original form, coming from Old Norse *til* into northern Old English. The form *until* is a later compound of Old Norse *und* (meaning *as far as*) + *till*, and originated in northern Middle English. (This information is in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.)

1.4 Teaching spoken Standard English

It is generally accepted that all pupils and students should learn to write StE, but the question whether they should also be required to speak StE in school or college is more controversial. The debate over this cannot be solved by a knowledge of linguistics, because it involves social and political issues. However, it should be useful to examine transcripts of some 'class conversation' in a Yorkshire primary school recorded in the 1970s. The teacher was very successful in getting a large proportion of her fourth-year class through the '11-plus', as the selective examination was then called. One of her teaching methods was to spend a whole lesson period in which every child in the class was expected to say something to the whole class. They were encouraged to ask questions of each other and to correct what they heard as well as comment on it. This 'conversation' went on while they were busy with their other tasks – writing or drawing, and so on.

In the course of two or three hours of recording only a dozen examples of 'class correction' in fact occurred, but they throw an interesting light on the kinds of features of speech, vocabulary and grammar that the teacher thought needed correction. It is clear from the recording that all the children spoke in the local accent, and used dialectal lexical and grammatical forms.

Activity 1.6

Read the transcripts and discuss those items that were corrected either by the teacher or by other pupils.

P = pupil; T = teacher.

The sign = in the transcripts marks 'latched' utterances, the second of which follows immediately after the first with no pause. The sign (.) marks a very short break in the speech, a micropause. Figures in brackets, e.g. (2.0), mark pauses in seconds.

1		
P	well I an't* really bothered=	*pronounced [æːnt]
T	=I am not	
P	I am not really bothered...	

2	
P	I think that the mountaineer that was climbing the cove=
T	=the mountaineer (.) ?
P	<u>who</u> was climbing the cove must have had a marvellous view...

3	
P1	Philip did you manage to take a photograph?
P2	yes I did but I don't think it will come out David because I imagine it was going that fast=
P3 and P4	<u>so</u> fast=
P2	= <u>so</u> fast but it might come out

4	
P1	...to think that after such a short time the calf was stood there drinking
Chorus	standing
P1	standing there drinking...

5	
P1	when I had a cat it went hunting last night
T	did you say when I had a cat?...
P1	yes
T	well that's a funny beginning to that sentence
P2	do you have it now?
P1	no
P3	well it couldn't have gone hunting last night could it Irene?
P1	I meant it <u>used</u> to go hunting
T	yes

6	
P1	where did the priest used to stand?
	(5.0)
P2	don't know [mɪ'sɛlf]
P3	perhaps it was on top of the steps
T	yes
P4	you shouldn't say [mɪ'sɛlf] you should say ['maɪsɛlf]
T	yes you should

7	
P1	Diane tell us what you are painting
P2	I am painting a piece of cupressus
P1	describe it to us