

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PRESCRIPTIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMARS : CONTEXTS OF USE

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Abstract

A descriptive grammar sets out to language, syntactic structures and its rules as they occur in real life situation. It takes in to consideration both standard and nonstandard varieties. On the other hand prescriptive grammar explains how a language and its grammar should be used correctly. Prescriptivism is concerned with distinction of correct grammar and incorrect grammar. Though both take different approach they are used for various purposes in academic and non-academic fields as language and linguistics intersperse with other branches like anthropology, etc.,. When it comes to pedagogy the awareness of both will help the learners to perform accordingly depending on the context. For example prescriptivism is a standard followed in many recruitment tests and academic exams. But learners cannot talk as if they are reading from an invisible book during natural conversations in English. Hence it becomes necessary for the learners to learn Descriptive grammar as it explains the affective aspect of grammar and that speakers make meaning through a variety of choices in vocabulary, grammar.

Keywords: Descriptive grammar, Prescriptive grammar, vocabulary, context of use.

Descriptive grammar sets out to study language categories and various structures and identifies rules based upon how actual language takes place in real life situations. That is, descriptive grammar describes the language, its structure, and the syntactic rules that govern sentence and phrase constructions (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990). A descriptive study of grammar is non-judgmental, and it does not have the goal of determining what represents good or bad language, correct or incorrect structures, or grammatical or ungrammatical forms (Leech, Deuchar, & Hoogenraad, 2006).

David Crystal makes an interesting observation: "The prescriptive grammarians went out of their way to invent as many rules as possible which might distinguish polite from impolite speech. They didn't find very many--just a few dozen, a tiny number compared with all the thousands of rules of grammar that operate in English. But these rules were propounded with maximum authority and severity, and given plausibility by the claim that they were going to help people to be clear and precise. As a result, generations of schoolchildren would be taught them, and confused by them." (David Crystal 2006)

Linguists, anthropologists, ethnographers, psychologists, or other researchers use descriptive approaches to grammar because they are interested to know the way language functions as a part of the human life in the society. In this respect Descriptive grammar does not simply deny the existence of certain forms like double negatives as in the example: *He knows nothing*. And even forms like *Him and me, we live in the same apartment* are completely accepted because Descriptive grammar sees grammar as a result of socio-cultural manifestation.

According to Leech, Deuchar, & Hoogenraad (2006), academically talking, Descriptive grammar is a theory and it endeavors to find out how language works. Descriptive grammar seeks to formulate syntactic rules on the basis of actual usage of language in the society and not the other way around as in the case of prescriptive grammar where rules are performed on the basis of intuition.

Prescriptive Grammar is concerned about using standard forms of language and in order to impose that accuracy of grammaticality prescriptivism endorses the distinction of correct grammar and incorrect grammar. Among all language speakers in the world native speakers of respective languages endeavor to perpetuate the idea of standard language through their ideas and linguistic judgements as to what should be used and what should be avoided. Again drawing on Greenbaum (1996), the utterance *Him and me, we are neighbors* is ungrammatical according to prescriptive grammatical rules because it says the pronouns "him and me" should not use in the initial position. Prescriptive grammar offers rules about what should be used and what should be avoided.

As Andrews (2006) notes that teachers are most likely to use prescriptive grammar for their teaching purposes and linguists tend to be descriptive grammarians to study the language as it is in the society. "There has always been a tension between the descriptive and prescriptive functions of grammar. Currently, descriptive grammar is dominant among theorists, but prescriptive grammar is taught in the schools and exercises a range of social effects." (Ann Bodine 1998)

Examples of prescriptive grammar rules are to be found practically in almost all the reference books on good usage of English language until recently. The typical examples of prescriptive English grammar rules, for instance:

- A sentence can not end with a preposition ; often called "stranded prepositions"
e.g., Who are you talking to?
- Singular subject nouns can have only singular pronoun references.
e.g., Every employ needs to go through their year book.
- "who" should be used only in the subject position and if it comes in the object position, "whom" should be used .But nowadays "whom" has become somewhat archaic.
e.g., Who did you see there?
- "little" or "less" should be used with uncountable nouns and "few" or "fewer" should be used for countable nouns.
e.g., There are less than 30 students in the class/

But in normal practice majority of prescriptive rules tend to be broken by both native and non-native speakers. This is an indication very few people are likely to follow prescriptive rules, so to speak. It is a never ending academic debate about the usefulness, and purposes of prescriptive and descriptive grammars among academic and non-academic circles. But one thing is obvious that descriptivism is completely based on the scientific outlook that one has to study the language thoroughly before offering any kind of descriptions about such language. Only then prescriptions about such language can come. The other side of the coin is that issues of spelling, pronunciation and grammar rules have been in the protection and nourishment of those people who belonged to higher strata of the societal hierarchy.

Prescriptive grammar rules are the rules which dictate language users to use proper forms. For example prescriptive grammar asks the revision of a sentence like: *There is five restaurants in the city should be There are five restaurants in the city.* According Birch (2005), prescriptive grammars are taught those who are from non-native backgrounds to teach standard forms.

On a large scale prescriptive grammar serve the purpose of establishing the language norms in line with socio-linguistic standards of the society with an underlying intention of norm driven communication in societies. Prescriptive grammar by virtue of its very approach it does not allow for any variation and innovation.

Notwithstanding the reservations about prescriptivism in grammar there are lot of difficulties in conceptualizing descriptive grammar. One chief concern is that defining the applications of grammars in spoken and written language is difficult to define. For this very reason in descriptive grammatical approach there are often approximations. But then deciding upon the variations is problematic because there are again questions raised about the difference among dialectal, regional etc., Drawing on Andrews (2006), it is difficult to demarcate the boundaries among regional, dialectal.

Descriptive judgements about language mostly come from native speakers of the language. This fact the descriptivism is a product of native speakers of English, descriptive grammar have been subjected to lot of criticism on the grounds of linguistic hegemony.

In addition to that, grammar descriptions almost always use the standard (and prescriptive grammars) as a point of departure. Variations in grammar constructions are viewed as deviations from the standard despite many linguists claim that certain deviations are quite normal and should be considered equally valid. Cook (2003) considers that any explanatory grammar assumes some kind of social and linguistic support where as normal descriptions of grammar are embedded in the grammar rules and structural tenets of grammar.

It will be useful here to compare and contrast both descriptive and prescriptive approaches which will throw some light on relative benefits and shortcomings.

Comparing prescriptive and descriptive grammars Donald G. Ellis (1999) comments that "All languages adhere to syntactical rules of one sort or another, but the rigidity of these rules is greater in some languages. It is very important to distinguish between the syntactical rules that govern a language and the rules that a culture imposes on its language. This is the distinction between descriptive grammar and prescriptive grammar. Descriptive grammars are essentially scientific theories that attempt to explain how language works. The goal of the

descriptivist is to simply state how language actually works. People spoke long before there were linguists around to uncover the rules of speaking. The intent of descriptive grammar is to posit explanations for the facts of language use, and there is no assumption of correctness or appropriateness. Prescriptive grammars, on the other hand, are the stuff of high school English teachers. They 'prescribe,' like medicine for what ails you, how you 'ought' to speak."

Obviously the ability to identify the most prominent differences between prescriptive and descriptive grammars will go a long way to help students gain confidence to speak in English especially because descriptive approaches do not set out rules that should be followed at any cost rather it takes the role of offering suggestions in that it guides language speakers as to which structure is most frequent and which is a questionable usage. If teachers can identify some frequent and most common differences between prescriptive and descriptive grammar they can themselves prepare materials for the classes.

Prescriptive grammar at the very outset perpetuates the fear of committing an error. But descriptive grammar enables learners to understand variation across predominantly identifiable groups and they don't deny the existence of any form or structure that doesn't hold sway in main stream language.

Moreover if speakers speak according prescriptive rules they will find themselves pedantic and unnatural. Adherence to fixed patterns in order to obey prescribed rules speakers often fail to maintain to flow of conversation. Descriptive approaches are close to the findings of spoken corpora. The intention of the speaker may not be realized because of prescriptive restraints on the mind where as Descriptive allows for grammar to be emergent and context sensitive. Speakers have freedom to express their ideas freely. For example many contractions and ellipses are ungrammatical when observed through prescriptive glasses : "Where are you going to?" is usually contracted to "Where to?" in some contexts.

Prescriptive grammars do not have explanation for such phenomena as ellipsis, left dislocation where topic phrase is fronted for the purpose orientation, tails which typical use end slot after an utterance etc.,

Descriptive allows for complete descriptions of existing language items and also show flexibility towards addition of newer descriptions. In fact Latin grammar was forcefully imposed upon English language and idiolectal differences can be explained through descriptive grammar but not in prescriptive grammar. Descriptive grammar is not without some reservations in spite of its familiarity as Guy Cook remarks : "[W]hile there is force in descriptivist arguments, there are also valid reservations to be made about them:

1. To talk about a language at all, there must be some preexisting notion of what does and does not count as an example. Descriptivists may accept, as instances, some examples of dialectal forms which hard-line prescriptivists would exclude, but there are always others--from another language for example--which they reject. Thus, they are drawing the boundary around a language in a different place, not abandoning the notion of boundaries altogether.
2. In deciding what does count as an example of the language, linguists often base their decisions upon native speaker use or judgment. This, however, simply shifts the criterion away from what is said to the person who says it. It also runs the danger of becoming circular, i.e. native speakers provide valid examples of the language; valid examples of the language are provided by native speakers.
3. Despite descriptivist insistence on the equality of all varieties, it is nevertheless the standard which is most often used in their analyses while other varieties are described as departures from it.
4. If linguists are concerned with describing and explaining facts about language, then the widespread belief in prescriptivism, and the effect of this belief on language use, is itself a fact about language which needs describing and explaining.5. Paradoxically, to advocate description and outlaw prescription is itself prescriptive."

Grammatical choice is a very important fact in the process of meaning making. Most of the prescriptive grammars are based on individual intuitions. Descriptive grammars have evidence of data behind them.

Prescriptive is based upon traditional approach and hence treated as unscientific. But Descriptive grammars are flexible and are based upon scientifically collected data and is a part of branch of Linguistic sciences. Prescriptivism overloads the memory of learners and affect their smooth and pause less speech. Grammar as it emerges in various contexts can be explained by taking context into considerations.

Most of the descriptive grammars try to differentiate between written language and spoken language. But prescriptivism is only concerned about giving rules and precepts. Nowadays there is clear shift from traditional prescriptive grammar to Descriptive grammars among academic circles and commercial language teaching centers where spoken skills have lot of priority.

Irrespective of relative merits and demerits of both descriptive and prescriptive grammar there is always a hazy line which dictates what approach should be used and in what context.

Pedagogical Usefulness:

Hinkel (2004) remarks that prescriptive grammars works as guiding principles of standards of languages which have gained acceptance in the society. Mostly, prescriptive grammars hold sway in schooling, teaching, testing and assessment. The uses of prescriptive grammars underpin social and value statements that reveal, to some extent, the social status, level of education . professional affiliation. Such reflection should not be taken as absolute because many factors influence the way one writes or speaks.

To say in simple terms, prescriptive grammars assume the responsibility of attributing social status markers along with their original function of protecting the standards of the language. Prescriptive grammar are useful standardized language tests. As Richard Hudson remarked, . non-standard forms are not be heard in university lectures or found in conference papers. That is to say a strong bond does exist between standard prescriptive grammar uses and higher education. Hinkel (2003), emphasized that inability to conform to prescriptive grammar rules are often considered a lack of good manners or etiquette.

In the area of English language teaching, both prescriptive and descriptive grammars have an have respective roles to assume. In an academic setting , knowledge of prescriptive grammar rules have priority because all academic texts typically tend to use standard syntactic structures. Moreover along with education , prescriptive grammars will help one to succeed in fields like employment and other such contexts where standard forms are preferred.

Using a prescriptive grammar that can provide learners the essential tools to analyze how language can be used for communication is a range of settings. Academic writing, reading, and taking tests demands the ability to use prescribed and formal English grammar rules. On the other hand descriptive grammar is useful in contexts where building relations through interpersonal skills and everyday conversations .Usage of prescriptive rules in inappropriate and informal contexts sounds boring and odd. Descriptive grammars should be preferred in informal communication to give that conversational style to natural real-time conversations.

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