

chapter 1

Generative Grammar

WORKBOOK EXERCISES

WBE1. PRESCRIPTIVE RULES

[Critical Thinking; Basic]

Part 1: All of the sentences below are prescriptively “wrong” according to many so-called language experts. Can you identify what’s supposed to be wrong with them (i.e., what prescriptive rule do they violate?). If you’re not familiar with prescriptive rules you may have to search around on the Web a bit to figure this out, but if you’ve been trained to write in the American or British University tradition, most (or many) of these should stand out as “poor grammar” or “poor style”. Certainly, Microsoft Word’s grammar-checking program is flagging many of these sentences as I write them!

- a) What did you put the present in?
- b) She’s smarter than him.
- c) To boldly go where no one has gone before!
- d) He walks too slow.
- e) Hopefully, the weather will turn sunny soon.
- f) I found out something which will disturb you greatly.
- g) Who did you see?
- h) I can’t hardly sleep.
- i) 10 items or less [*a sign above a register in the grocery store*]
- j) My view of grammar is different than yours.

- k) I will not enjoy it.
- l) If I was a linguist, then I wouldn't have to study prescriptive rules.
- m) The homework wasn't done completely.
- n) All of the linguists at the conference congratulated each other.
- o) Me and John are going to the movies later.
- p) I want to learn a new language like French.

Part 2: Consider each of the sentences above and evaluate whether or not they are really unacceptable for you. Try to ignore what you were taught in school was right and focus instead on whether you might actually utter one of these sentences, or if you'd actually blink if you heard one of them produced by someone else. Listen to your inner voice rather than relying on what you have learned is "correct".

WBE2. SCIENTIFIC METHOD PRACTICE¹

[Critical Thinking Practice; Basic]

Background: One particular kind of question in English is called a "Yes/No question". These questions can typically be answered with either *Yes*, *No*, or *Maybe*. The standard strategy for forming *Yes/No* questions is to change the order of the words at the beginning of the sentence from the equivalent statement:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| a) Grizelda hasn't eaten anything. | <i>Statement</i> |
| b) Hasn't Grizelda eaten anything? | <i>Yes/No question</i> |

With this background about *Yes/No* and declarative sentences in mind, consider the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Yes/No questions are formed by moving the second word in the equivalent statement to the front.

Now look at the following sentences:

- | | |
|--|------------------------|
| c) Bilbo will eat chocolate-covered sausage. | <i>Statement</i> |
| d) Will Bilbo eat chocolate-covered sausage? | <i>Yes/No question</i> |

Question 1: Are sentences (c) and (d) consistent with hypothesis 1? (Pay careful attention to the wording of the hypothesis!)

Now consider the next two sentences

- | | |
|---|------------------------|
| e) The old hobbit will eat the chocolate-covered sausage. | <i>Statement</i> |
| f) Will the old hobbit eat the chocolate-covered sausage? | <i>Yes/No question</i> |

Question 2: Are sentences (e) and (f) consistent with hypothesis 1?

Question 3: Instead of (f), what sentence does hypothesis 1 actually predict to be the grammatical *Yes/No* question equivalent to (e)?

¹ Loosely based on an exercise in Carnie (2011).

Question 4: Try to come up with a hypothesis that accounts for the grammaticality of (e). (Hint #1: words such as *will* are called *auxiliaries*. Hint #2: use as much of the language in hypothesis 1 as you can, making only minimal changes.)

WBE3. USING CORPORA FOR DOING SYNTACTIC RESEARCH

[Critical Thinking Practice; Basic]

Make sure you read the discussion of *blow up* in section 3.2 of chapter 1 before attempting this question. Consider the phrase *blow off*. In colloquial American English, this sequence has two² usages with quite different meanings.

- a) The leaves blew off the sidewalk.
- b) I blew off doing my homework.

In (a) *blow* means “(to move) in a burst of air”. The *off* is actually a preposition that is tied to the noun phrase *the sidewalk*. The other meaning, in (b), is the colloquial expression *blow off* meaning “didn’t do”, “ignored responsibilities”, or “didn’t show up” in some circumstances. Phrases like *blow off* or *blow up* often allow two orders of the object and the particle (*off* or *up*): *I blew up the building* and *I blew the building up*.

Now consider the following sentences:

- c) Sean blew me off.
- d) Sean blew off me.

Question 1: What meaning(s) does sentence (c) have? Are they different from sentence (d)? Is sentence (d) even grammatical in your dialect?

Question 2: Now you get to use Google to investigate the frequency of phrases like (c–d) to see if their relative frequencies correspond to the availability of meanings. We’re going to use a tool called *ngrams* produced by Google. Ngrams represent the frequency of strings in Google’s collection of published books. The numbers are going to be very small, but we can get a picture of the distribution of these constructions.

- 1) Go to <http://books.google.com/ngrams>
- 2) In the search box type the following terms, one by one.
 - i) blow me off
 - ii) blow off me
- 3) Note down the percentage of hits for each of these in the year 2000.

Question 3: Is there a correspondence between the numbers you got above and your judgments of grammaticality and meaning?

Question 4: Now just do a regular search for “blow off me” (be sure to include the quotation marks “ ” to insure that google searches for the words in exactly that order.) Do

² It can also have a third, sexually charged, meaning. I emphatically want you to ignore that possibility here.

any of the results have the “didn’t bother to show up” meaning? What does this tell you about the structure of sentence (d)?

WBE4: SEMANTIC VS SYNTACTIC JUDGEMENTS

[Application of Knowledge; Basic]

Each of the following sentences might be considered to be ungrammatical, unacceptable, or just odd. For each sentence, indicate whether the ungrammaticality or oddness has to do with syntax (form) or semantics (meaning) or both.

- a) The chocolate-covered sausage sincerely wanted her mother-in-law to leave.
- b) What do you wonder who chased?
- c) Cat the dog the bark at.
- d) Andrew is a professor and not a professor.
- e) Danced makes me to have tired.

WBE5: I-LANGUAGE VS. E-LANGUAGE

[Application of knowledge; Intermediate]

What follows are a bunch of statements about French. Try to determine if they are about i-language or e-language or both.

- a) French is spoken in many countries in Africa
- b) When Maggie was learning French, she had trouble getting the gender of nouns.
- c) In Canada, road signs are in both French and English.
- d) French pronominal objects appear before the participle.
- e) Suzette, although a fluent speaker of Parisian French, has a lot of trouble understanding people from Montreal.

ANSWERS

WBE1. PRESCRIPTIVE RULES

Part 1:

- a) This sentence ends in a preposition. Prescriptively it should be *In(to) what did you put the present?*
- b) The complement of a comparative is supposed to be in the nominative case. Prescriptively, this should be *She’s smarter than he*. The reasoning is that the sentence is really a shortening of *She’s smarter than he is*.
- c) This sentence has a split infinitive (*to boldly go*). Prescriptively, this should be *to go boldly where no man has gone before*.
- d) *Slow* is an adjective, not an adverb, but here it modifies a verb. The prescriptively correct form is *He walks too slowly*.

- e) The adverb *hopefully* is supposed to only mean “in a hopeful manner”; the weather is unlikely to be hopeful. Prescriptively it should be *I hope that the weather will turn sunny soon*.
- f) The string of words that follows something is a restrictive relative clause and should be introduced by *that*. An alternate non-restrictive meaning could be forced by inserting a comma before the *which*. Prescriptively this should be *I found out something that will disturb you greatly*.
- g) *Who* represents the object of the verb *see*, so should be in the accusative form *whom* (i.e., *Whom did you see?*).
- h) This one is hard for American speakers to spot. *Hardly* is a negative adverb, so this is seen as a case of double negation. In prescriptive terms it should be *I can hardly sleep*.
- i) *Less* is supposed to be used with mass nouns (nouns like *water* or *air*) and *item* is not a mass noun, so prescriptively this should be 10 items or fewer.
- j) The prescriptively correct form is *different from*. *Than* is supposed to be a conjunction rather than a preposition, and so can't be used to connect an adjective with a pronoun. So prescriptively this should be *My view of grammar is different from yours*.
- k) At least in prescriptive British English, the correct future auxiliary that is used with first-person subjects (i.e., *I, we*) is *shall*, not *will*. So, this is prescriptively *I shall not enjoy it*.
- l) When the word *if* marks a counterfactual conditional (i.e., it is used to describe a state of being that isn't actually true), then the verb should be in its subjunctive form. So, this sentence would be *If I were a linguist, then I wouldn't have to study prescriptive rules*.
- m) Prescriptive grammarians tell us to avoid passives. Sentence (m) is a passive. The active form of this would be something like *You didn't complete the homework efficiently*.
- n) According to prescriptive grammar *each other* is only supposed to be used when there are two participants, so “proper” grammar would have this as *All of the linguists at the conference congratulated one another*.
- o) *Me* is the accusative form of the pronoun, so it's supposed to be used only in object positions or after a preposition. In this sentence, the pronoun is in the subject position so it's supposed to be the nominative *I*. The order of the noun *John* and the pronoun is also reversed from prescriptive order. The “correct” form for this sentence is *John and I are going to the movies later*.
- p) The conjunction *like* is supposed to mean “similar to” rather than “as an example”. So, the prescriptive interpretation of this sentence is one where the speaker wants to learn a language that's similar to French, but not French itself. Prescriptively, if you intend an “as an example” meaning you're supposed to use *such as* instead of *like*: *I want to learn a new language, such as French*.

Part 2: The answer to this part of the question will be a personal one. You might truly find some of these sentences unacceptable, but others you might be surprised are judged “wrong” at all. Personally, I find my inner voice balks a bit at (d), (f), and (l). However, the rest sound like things I might say every day. This said, from a

descriptive point of view, you will find that native speakers of English will all utter sentences like these “ungrammatical” ones. In many cases, they’re probably far more common in actual speech and writing than the “correct” forms. So, if we’re being scientists, we’re going to want to concentrate on what people actually do rather than on what so-called experts tell us to do.

WBE2. SCIENTIFIC METHOD PRACTICE

Question 1: Sentence (d) is predicted by the hypothesis: The first word in the declarative/statement form is the second word in the *yes/no* question, and vice versa.

Question 2: Sentence (f), however, is not predicted: it is the fourth word of sentence (e) that appears first in the question.

Question 3: Hypothesis 1 predicts that the *yes/no* question form of sentence (9) would be **Old the hobbit will eat the magic beans*. The second word (*old*) is inverted with the first (*the*).

Question 4: Hypothesis 2 should be something like “*Yes/no* questions are formed by moving the auxiliary of the equivalent declarative sentence to the front” or “*Yes/no* questions are formed by reversing the positions of the subject and the auxiliary.” Your wording may vary.

WB3. USING CORPORA FOR DOING SYNTACTIC RESEARCH

Question 1: For me, sentence (d) is only grammatical with a lot of context (see the sentences in answer to Question 4 below), but to the extent it’s okay, it has to mean that Sean puffed air across him. Sentence (c) by contrast is completely grammatical and can mean either “Sean didn’t show up for their meeting” or “Sean used a puff of air to clear all the dust off of him”.

Question 2: Because of the way Google and search engines like it work, the exact numbers for this experiment will vary from day to day. But the general pattern of effect should be found no matter when the experiment is done. Here are the results I got on June 4th, 2019. The numbers are not exact, as Google only offers an approximation once the numbers get large enough.

- | | |
|-----------------|--------------------|
| i) blow me off | 0000007474% ngrams |
| ii) blow off me | no valid ngrams |

The fact that (ii) doesn’t even show up in the database is telling.

Question 3: There seems to be a correspondence between our judgments of meaning and the statistics here. The form most English speakers either find ungrammatical or consider to have a very limited and non-idiomatic meaning, i.e. (iv), is absent from the google books database.

Question 4: On June 10, 2019, the top hits were:

- e) Time to let the stink blow off me.
- f) ... doing blow off me.

Example (e) clearly has the “puff of air” meaning. I’ve edited the context for (f), because some readers may find the original tweet offensive, but in this case blow is not being used as a verb, but as a noun referring to the drug cocaine. In neither case does it have the “didn’t show up” reading.

What does this mean for us as syntacticians? Sometimes corpora can be used to verify judgments we have about structure. But the statistics don’t get at one important fact about the sentences above: The rare form is restricted in meaning as well.

WBE4. SEMANTIC VS. SYNTACTIC JUDGMENTS

- a) Semantically odd. Sausages don’t have mothers-in-law (among other strange things about this sentence).
- b) This is semantically hard to understand, but it’s probably due to a syntactic effect. English doesn’t typically allow you to have multiply displaced questions words like what and who.
- c) Syntactic. The order of the words is clearly wrong.
- d) Semantically strange. This is a contradiction. Andrew can’t both be professor and not a professor at the same time. (Although I’m not always doing syntax in real life!)
- e) There are a couple of syntactic peculiarities here. Danced is either a past tense or a past participle and shouldn’t appear as the subject of the sentence (we might expect dancing instead). In English (but not in many other languages), you don’t “have tired”; you “are tired”. Finally, make typically doesn’t take a non-finite clause (marked by the *to*). We expect something more like dancing makes me tired. Note that the sentence is perfectly comprehensible and meaningful, even though it’s not a sentence that any native speaker of English would ever utter.

WBE5. I-LANGUAGE VS. E-LANGUAGE

This exercise is pretty tricky. That’s because e-languages can’t exist without a population of people who have the i-language, and people’s i-language exists because they are exposed to the e-language by their parents or caregivers. So, I’ve couched my answers in terms of probability, rather than absolutes. If you got a different answer, it doesn’t mean you were wrong.

- a) Primarily e-language. We are talking about how a particular code is spoken in various places, by many people. We’re talking about the thing outside the human consciousness.
- b) This is primarily i-language. We are talking about Maggie’s internal thought processes.
- c) This is primarily e-language. We’re talking about the use of language on signs rather than in the mind of a speaker.

- d) This one is tricky and there are arguments that it could be either i-language or e-language. If a syntactician said this, then they probably were talking about the internal grammar of a speaker. But if anyone else said it, they were probably talking about a collective agreement of French speakers about the order of words.
- e) I think this is primarily i-language. We're talking about Suzette's mental ability to understand certain accents.