

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 language mavens. 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 each 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 grocery store sign]
- 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) John hasn't eaten anything. *Statement*
- b) Hasn't John eaten anything? *Yes/No question*

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 follow sentences:

- c) Bilbo will eat chocolate-covered sausage. *Statement*
- d) Will Bilbo eat chocolate-covered sausage? *Yes/No question*

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. *Statement*
- f) Will the old hobbit eat the chocolate-covered sausage? *Yes/No question*

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

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)?

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 him off.
- d) Sean blew off him.

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[®] or a similar search engine to investigate the frequency of phrases like (a–d) to see if their relative frequencies correspond to the availability of meanings. Perform the following steps:

- 1) Go to Google.com[®] or a similar search engine.
- 2) Click on “advanced search” (you may have to click on the “gear” icon at the top right).
- 3) In the box labeled “This exact wording or phrase” type in the following phrases, then hit “search”. (Using the normal search function won’t work. You need to use the “exact wording” option.)
 - i) “blow the guy off”
 - ii) “blow off the guy”

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

- iii) “blow him off”
- iv) “blow off him”
- 4) Note down the number of hits for each search. (In Google[®], this number appears at the top of the search results right under the search bar.)
- 5) Next, calculate the percentages of (i) vs. (ii) (*Blow the guy off* vs. *blow off the guy*). To do this take each number, divide it by the total number of hits of (i) and (ii) summed together, then multiply the result by 100.
- 6) Next calculate the percentages of (iii) vs. (iv).

Is there is a big difference between the percentage of examples like (iv) and the percentage of examples like (ii)?

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

Question 4: Look at the first few pages of your search results for “blow off him”. Do any of these have the “didn’t bother to show up” meaning? What does this tell you about the structure of sentence (d)?

WBE4. SEMANTIC VS. SYNTACTIC JUDGMENTS

[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.

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* (*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 should be *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 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 *Y/N* 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.

WBE3. 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 10, 2011. The numbers are not exact, as Google only offers an approximation once the numbers get large enough.

i) “blow the guy off”	12100	31.1% (of i + ii)
ii) “blow off the guy”	26800	68.9% (of i + ii)
iii) “blow him off”	3,330,000	90.2% (of iii + iv)
iv) “blow off him”	363,000	9.8% (of iii + iv)

You’ll notice that one of these numbers is very different from the others. Although there is a clear difference between the statistical frequency of (i) and (ii), the form with the pronoun *him* following the *off* (iv) is significantly less frequent than that where it precedes *off* (iii). Furthermore, note that the percentages are in the reverse proportion to those of (i) and (ii): “off + N” order is more frequent with a full noun, but the reverse order (pronoun + off) is far more frequent when we have a pronoun instead of a noun phrase like “the guy”.

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 also the statistically rarest in the giant corpus known as the Web.

Question 4: The first three most relevant/popular hits I got were the following:

- e) As he walks up the stairs in the giant mansion, his thin linen clothes blow off him in a stiff breeze.³
- f) The skunk sprayed Bill with its strongest scent. Bill’s mother had to hang Bill on the clothesline for a week to let the smell blow off him.⁴
- g) Watching Warren’s skin blow off him like an unzipped windbreaker in a brutal, gale-force breeze was just... ewww.⁵

Clearly all of these examples intend the meaning where there is air blowing around. This suggests clearly that *blow off him* is always interpreted where the “off” is a preposition that takes an object noun (i.e., [blow [off him]]). The fourth most important hit I got, (h), does have the “ignore” idiomatic meaning, but the *him* is actually the subject of an embedded gerundive clause, suggesting that this is a different animal from (e–g) above.

- h) I would just blow off [him saying he likes you for now].⁶

The rest of the hits on the first page have the “puff of air” meaning seen in sentences (e–f), and a quick skim of the rest of the pages of hits shows that sentence (h) is an anomaly.

³ <http://blogs.philadelphiaweekly.com/music/2011/06/01/countdown-to-r-kelly-the-man-plays-the-mann-in-33-days/>.

⁴ <http://www.pittsfordschools.org/webpages/rzogby/files/pecos%20bill.pdf>.

⁵ <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,237965,00.html>.

⁶ <http://uk.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20110513125104AATHGmN>.

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.