

## TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR TO SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

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### ABSTRACT

This paper suggests an approach to teaching a course in the English language to students who already know it. It views language users as problem solvers and focuses on the decisions speakers of English need to make in order to keep their language simple enough to be an efficient tool for communication yet expressive enough to communicate what they need to communicate.

### 1. Introduction

Many linguists who have appointments in English departments are called upon from time to time to teach an undergraduate course in the structure of the English language. In some respects, this is a curious assignment. The students who enroll already know the language. They tend to be among the more literate of undergraduates, often English majors with a working knowledge of the language and no particular curiosity about linguistics and linguistic concepts. Many of them will have had no prior experience with linguistics. What is it that they want from a course like this, and what is it that we want them to gain? These may not be easy questions to answer, but it is essential to come to some common understanding of goals and objectives if the course is to succeed on any level. This author's experience with such a course revealed that students come into it with two recognizable goals: to make sure they know what is and what isn't Standard English, and to gather the tools to teach grammar themselves should they be called upon to do so in the future. These are respectable goals, but in trying to reach them we can easily fall into the trap of creating an exercise in nothing but linguistic etiquette and a great deal of tedious labelling of constructions. The danger is that we perpetuate the myth that grammar is dull, even dreary, and at best an obligatory rite of passage into the world of the educated.

What, then, are our options? One alternative is to view this course as an opportunity to teach people something about how a language system works and to help them observe how people react to the system in their attempt to make use of it to communicate. The focus of the course becomes human behavior rather than an abstract system. Along the way they find out what they need to know about standard and nonstandard usage, and they learn to label constructions, but the heart of the matter is what people are doing linguistically and why. The goal is a better understanding of human behavior, one which leads to interest, tolerance, and respect

rather than the smugness which comes from learning which forms happen to be socially acceptable at a given time in history and what names to give them.

The remainder of this paper is a discussion of some ways one might attempt to meet this goal, a means of approaching the study of English grammar which requires students to become thoughtful as well as knowledgeable.

## 2. Laying the Foundation

Before launching into a detailed examination of grammatical constructions, students need to have some general understanding of the most basic principles of communication. It is a given for linguists, but not for the majority of undergraduate English majors, that human languages exist in a state of tension between two conflicting requirements: that they be rich enough to express everything human beings need to express and that they be simple enough to be a reasonably efficient tool for communication. No language ever quite reaches a balance between these two requirements; there is ongoing readjustment to balance complexity against expressive power. Standard English, the officially sanctioned grammar, the grammar of the educated, is not exempt from this tension. It has been frozen in place, relatively speaking, by external factors, which to some creates the illusion that it has achieved optimum balance. But in fact language users are continually faced with the task of reacting to the tension which exists in our language, and we make decisions about how to do this. In other words, language users are problem solvers: we react to parts of the grammar, enriching where we perceive enrichment is needed, simplifying where the grammar is excessively complicated, and making choices where the grammar presents us with a conflict. Some of the nonstandard choices language users make become part of the standard language and some do not. We can inform our students of the present state of affairs with respect to that distinction. But the more important point to make is that we are all engaged in similar problem-solving processes in using our language, motivated by the same needs. An understanding of these needs and processes is the real tool students need in order to have a functional, ongoing understanding of the English language, one which survives long after they have forgotten the distinction between a gerundive and a participial phrase.

## 3. Simplification Processes

As noted above, desire for efficiency is one of the primary factors motivating linguistic choices people make. Thus, if a simpler way can be found to express some piece of meaning, chances are good that some language users will avail themselves of it. One set of expressions vulnerable to simplification are those which exhibit redundancy, the repetition of the same piece of information. The simplification which

takes place, naturally, is 'redundancy reduction'. Consider, for example, subject-verb agreement in English. Standard grammar requires that verbs be marked to agree with their subjects in the present tense. But, since the subject carries all the necessary information, the information on the verb is redundant and therefore vulnerable to elimination. We frequently find, in the interest of economy, that one uniform verb is chosen throughout the paradigm, giving us sentences like *they was happy*, *it don't matter* and, from Black English, *she work for my mother*. Another example of redundancy reduction is the case of the contrary-to-fact subjunctive in sentences like *if it were raining now, we would all get wet*. Since the hypothetical or contrary-to-fact meaning of the sentence is conveyed by the use of *if* and the modal *would*, there is no independent function for the special verb-form *were*, and we often find the more regular *was* in its place. Redundancy reduction is apparent also in the elimination of the auxiliary in the present perfect tense. Thus, where the standard language requires *I have done it*, *we have been there*, *they have seen it*, we also find the nonstandard usage *I done it*, *we been there*, *they seen it*. Again, meaning is unhampered. The auxiliary carries information already expressed in the subject, the past participle tells us the aspect is perfect, and the absence of the auxiliary ONLY in the present tense insures that this meaning persists when the auxiliary itself is eliminated. A final example of redundancy reduction can be seen in the nonstandard use of reflexive pronouns such as *themselves* and *ourselves*. Again, we have duplication of information in the standard forms *themselves* and *ourselves*, where plurality is redundantly expressed. A uniform ending for reflexive pronouns simplifies the system without affecting the expressive power of the language.

Reflexive pronouns can also serve as an illustration of another kind of simplification which language users resort to: 'paradigm regularization'. For various historical reasons, some paradigms form an irregular pattern, of which the reflexives are a good example. In the first and second person, the first element of the reflexive is a possessive pronoun (*myself*, *yourself*), while in the third person it is an object pronoun (*himself*, *herself*, *themselves*). That is, the third person forms are irregularities, complicating the grammar in a non-productive way, and are excellent candidates for regularization. Thus, we find in both writing and speech the nonstandard, but regular, forms *hissself* and *theirselves*. Another class of Standard English error which we might attribute to paradigm regularization is the use of the past tense for the past participle in the perfect tenses, as in *I wouldn't have did it*, *I have went there*. For most verbs in the English language, the past tense and the past participle are the same: *I talked*, *I have talked*; *they left*, *they have left*. Many language users simplify the system by using the past tense for both where the Standard requires different forms: another instance in which the grammar is simplified with no disturbance of the message to be transmitted.

In addition to redundancy reduction and paradigm regularization, there is a third way in which language users seek to achieve a maximally economical grammar, which we will call 'system extension'. All language users operate under a broad set of principles about how their language works; system extension occurs when these overriding principles are applied in cases in which Standard English does not permit them to operate. The most striking example of this is in the use of subject and object pronouns. It is well known that English evolved from a case-marking system with relatively free word order to a system without case-marking in which word order is our primary means of conveying grammatical function. Thus, in Modern English we normally look for the subject noun phrase before the verb and the object noun phrase following the verb. That is one of the overriding principles of the grammar, and we must pay close attention to word order if we are to understand and communicate meaning. But our pronoun system operates under an earlier set of principles governing the organization of grammar. Here, in some cases at least, form matters more than order. For example, in predicate-nominal constructions, where the postverbal pronoun names or defines the subject, standard grammar requires subject pronouns, as in *it is I*, *this is she*. But many users of English are uncomfortable with this situation, since we normally expect pronouns after the verb to have their object forms. The result is that many of us use object forms in this construction: *it is me*, *this is her*, extending the word-order principle to this part of the grammar. Others, assuming that subject pronouns are appropriate only in initial position, violate Standard English by ignoring function and using object pronouns as the second element in conjoined subjects: *Bill and me are good friends*. And still others, in an attempt to maintain the Standard in conjoined expressions, hypercorrect in expressions like *between you and I* and *give it to he and she*, which require object pronouns. The same problem arises for the use of the relative pronouns *who* and *whom*. This situation is particularly problematic because all relative pronouns precede their verbs, regardless of function: *this is the woman who left*; *this is the woman whom I invited*. Used to relying on word order for information about grammatical function, speakers of English find the distinction between these two pronouns exceedingly difficult. What we see from this discussion of pronoun use is that language users must react in some way to a part of their grammar which conflicts with how they see their language functioning overall. Another brief example of choices which can be traced to our reliance on word order involves subject-verb agreement. The force of the system tells us that the verb normally is made to agree with the noun phrase which immediately precedes it. In those cases where the grammatical subject appears at some distance from the verb and some other noun phrase is closer, it frequently happens, especially in speaking, that the closer noun phrase governs the agreement, as in *each of the numbers are odd*.

All of the examples we have examined so far have had their roots in the need for speakers to simplify their grammar. We now turn to those examples in which speakers may deviate from the rules of Standard English in an attempt to enrich the expressive equipment their language provides them with.

#### 4. Enrichment Processes

In some cases, language users resort to nonstandard forms because the standard grammar simply does not provide them with what they need in order to convey what they want to convey. The classic example of such a gap is the absence of the contraction *\*amn't*, a comfortable, colloquial contraction analogous to *isn't* and *aren't*. In tag questions such as *I'm intelligent, \_\_\_\_\_ I?*, the speaker has the option of using *am I not?*, which is too formal for most occasions; *aren't I?*, which violates standard rules of person-number agreement; and *ain't I?*, which is universally stigmatized. Here is a case where the grammar provides no optimum choice and we either sacrifice something or resort to another linguistic form entirely to avoid the dilemma. Another such gap in English to which language users must respond is the absence of a gender-neutral human pronoun: *one person should not make another person the center of \_\_\_\_\_ life*. Standard grammar resolves the problem by assigning this function to the masculine singular pronoun. But the masculine meaning of the pronoun is not easily suppressed and many language users find it objectionable as a gender-neutral pronoun. Another possible solution is to use both masculine and feminine pronouns simultaneously (*he/she*), which is excessively cumbersome for many. A more widespread solution, although still considered nonstandard by many, is to use the third person plural pronouns (*they, them, their*), which are gender-neutral. The Standard grammar sacrifices agreement in gender; the non-standard sacrifices agreement in number. Both are attempts to resolve a problem presented by a gap in an imperfect grammar which does not provide a straightforward means for people to say what they mean.

In addition to the 'gap-filling' described above, there is another way in which language users resort to nonstandard ways to increase the expressive power of their language; 'introduction of redundancy' as a means of insuring that important, meaningful messages are adequately transmitted. Multiple negation is a good example of this. It is safe to assume that negation is an extremely important element in human communication, and it is reasonable to assume that language users might want to insure its accurate transmission by having the negating element occur more than once in a message. This is precisely what multiple negation does. Clearly, we CAN do without it, as the standard language does, but given its importance we can also see why some speakers would choose to use it. Another example of nonstandard usage which provides redundancy where users deem it desirable is in deictic expressions such as *this here book* and *that there radio*, where location with respect to the speaker is sufficiently important to warrant repetition. A third

example which comes to mind under the category of increasing the expressive power of the language by introducing redundancy is the use of the double subject construction as in *my boyfriend, he gave me a ring*. This construction, extremely common in the spoken language, serves the function of introducing and establishing a topic for discussion, a function not as well served by the simple subject-predicate construction of Standard English.

The approach advocated here for teaching English grammar to speakers of English is one which focuses on what people are doing when they use the language. It is taken as given that names of parts of speech and constructions will be taught and that students will learn to identify and describe sentence structures. But what is central to the course is the notion that language users share certain linguistic needs and the same repertoire of strategies for meeting those needs. The English-speaking world is not divided into Standard and Nonstandard speakers, where the latter make random errors because they are less linguistically capable. Rather, we are all engaged in the ongoing task of balancing the efficiency of our language against its expressive power.

One final practical suggestion: in order for students to learn that using language is problem-solving, they need to observe it in action. The appendix contains two exercises which can help them to do this. These exercises will train them to listen and will introduce them on a practical level to the notion that we all make frequent linguistic choices based on our need to communicate effectively.

## APPENDIX

## Exercise #1

Instructions: Find an example of each of the items listed below. The exact quotation for each must be given, as well as the date you heard or saw it and the source. Quotations may come from any reasonably reliable source of Standard English: newspapers, books, magazines, T.V., radio, instructors, etc.

- 1) A contrary-to-fact statement without a subjunctive.
- 2) *Can* used to express permission.
- 3) A multiply negated sentence.
- 4) *Neither-nor* (or *either-or*) with plural verb agreement.
- 5) *Aren't I?* used as a tag question.
- 6) Singular verb agreement with *there* and a plural noun.
- 7) An object pronoun used where the rules require a subject pronoun.
- 8) A subject pronoun used where the rules require an object pronoun.
- 9) Confusion of a past participle and a past tense.
- 10) *They* (*them*, *their*) used as a gender-indefinite pronoun.
- 11) Use of *who* where the rules require *whom*.

## Exercise #2

Instructions: This exercise is designed to give us a sense of the grammatical judgments of users of Standard English in our local speech community. Give the questionnaire to ten adults whom you regard as knowledgeable in the use of Standard English. Tabulate the results and submit. Give a summary of the comments at the end of the questionnaires.

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Instructions: Circle the choice which you think is correct.

- 1)    a) Each of the students have a pencil.  
      b) Each of the students has a pencil.
- 2)    a) If the river were deeper, we could take the boat.  
      b) If the river was deeper, we could take the boat.
- 3)    a) Everyone should mind his own business.  
      b) Everyone should mind their own business.
- 4)    a) Can I leave the room now?  
      b) May I leave the room now?
- 5)    a) There's several people waiting to see you.  
      b) There're several people waiting to see you.
- 6)    a) I interviewed the woman whom you recommended.  
      b) I interviewed the woman who you recommended.
- 7)    a) This is just between you and I.  
      b) This is just between you and me.
- 8)    a) Neither he nor I is going.  
      b) Neither he nor I am going.  
      c) Neither he nor I are going.
- 9)    a) I'm intelligent, aren't I?  
      b) I'm intelligent, ain't I?  
      c) I'm intelligent, am I not?
- 10)   a) They didn't excuse themself.  
      b) They didn't excuse themselves.  
      c) They didn't excuse theirself.  
      d) They didn't excuse theirselves.

Are there any you aren't sure about? Explain.