

Discussion Questions for Prescriptive Grammar

1. In the table below are pairs of prescriptive rules and descriptive counterparts. Underneath each pair of rules are three sentences. **PLACE A STAR NEXT TO THE SENTENCE OR SENTENCES WHICH WOULD BE UNGRAMMATICAL ACCORDING TO THE PRESCRIPTIVE RULE.** (All the sentences should be grammatical according to the descriptive rule.) Write “YES” or “NO” depending on whether you think you follow the prescriptive rule in your speech. The example with *slow/slowly* is adapted from the example in the APS book.

	Prescriptive Rule	Descriptive Rule
	Use of <i>slow</i> vs. <i>slowly</i> and similar pairs of adjectives vs. adverbs:	
E x a m p l e	“Use as an adjective a word which qualifies a noun. Use as an adverb a word which qualifies as a verb.” (Greever & Jones, <i>The Century Colle-giate Handbook</i> , 1924)	There is a certain overlap between the adjective and adverb classes, e.g. the adjective form <i>slow</i> may be used as either adjective or adverb. However, when the adjective form is used as an adverb, it must follow the verb; only the adverb form is allowed preceding a verb.
	a. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> You drive too slow! b. <input type="checkbox"/> He slowly negotiated the curves. c. <input type="checkbox"/> Please speak more slowly! Do you follow the prescriptive rule? NO	
1.	<i>Shall</i> is used as an auxiliary verb to express simple futurity with first person subjects; <i>will</i> is used as an auxiliary verb to express simple futurity with second and third person subjects.	<i>Will</i> is used as an auxiliary verb to express simple futurity with all subjects. Aside from rather formal legal contexts, <i>shall</i> is used to express futurity only with first person subjects in questions requesting agreement.
	a. <input type="checkbox"/> Shall I start talking now? b. <input type="checkbox"/> Will Helen light the candles? c. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I will give my presentation first. Do you follow the prescriptive rule? _____	
2.	The subjective form of the pronoun (<i>I, we, he, she, they</i>) is used as the subject of a verb, as a subjective complement, and as the subject of an understood clause; the objective form (<i>me, us, him, her, them</i>) is used only as an object of a verb or a preposition.	The subjective form of the pronoun (<i>I, we, he, she, they</i>) is used immediately preceding the verb; the objective form (<i>me, us, him, her, them</i>) is used elsewhere.
	a. <input type="checkbox"/> I bought the bicycle from him. b. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> He's taller than me. c. <input type="checkbox"/> Didn't you know that the caller was I? Do you follow the prescriptive rule? _____	

3.	<p><i>Each other</i> refers to a reciprocal action between two actors; <i>one another</i> refers to an action involving reciprocity among three or more</p>	<p>“There is no difference in the use of the two pronouns <i>each other</i> and <i>one another</i>. Although in prescriptive tradition, <i>each other</i> is sometimes preferred for reference to two and <i>one another</i> to more than two, this distinction seems to have little foundation in usage. There is, however, a stylistic difference between the two reciprocals in that <i>each other</i> is more common in informal style and <i>one another</i> in more formal contexts.” (Quirk et al, <i>A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language</i>, 1985)</p>
<p>a. ____ Clinton and Yeltsin congratulated each other. b. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The 24 mayoral candidates criticized each other’s proposals. c. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> She and I usually help one another. Do you follow the prescriptive rule? _____</p>		
4.	<p>“Different than: <i>Different from</i> is correct. <i>Than</i> is a conjunction. The idea of separation implied in <i>different</i> call for a preposition, rather than a word of comparison.” (Greever & Jones, <i>The Century Collegiate Handbook</i>, 1924)</p>	<p>“<i>Different from</i> and <i>different than</i> are both widely used ...” (<i>American Heritage Dictionary</i>); “<i>Different than</i> is a widely acceptable sequence when a clause (particularly an elliptical clause) follows.” (Quirk et al, <i>A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language</i>, 1985)</p>
<p>a. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> My childhood was different than yours. b. ____ The music was different from what I thought it would be. c. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The situation is much different than it was last year. Do you follow the prescriptive rule? _____</p>		
5.	<p>“Subjunctive forms (<i>be</i> instead of <i>am, are, is</i>; <i>were</i> instead of <i>was</i>, etc.) ... [are required] in the following instances: Condition contrary to fact, after <i>as if</i> or <i>as though</i>, indirect imperative, motions or resolutions.” (adapted from Woolley et al., <i>College Handbook of Composition</i>, 1958.)</p>	<p>“The <i>were</i>-subjunctive (or past subjunctive) is hypothetical or unreal in meaning, being used in adverbial clauses introduced by such conjunctions as <i>if, as if, as though, though</i>, and in nominal clauses after verbs like <i>wish</i> and <i>suppose</i>. ... The indicative form <i>was</i> is substituted in less formal style.” (Quirk et al, <i>A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language</i>, 1985)</p>
<p>a. ____ I feel as though I were helpless to do anything about the situation. b. ____ When I was young, I dreamed of owning a Ferrari. c. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If I was clever, I'd figure out how to get myself out of this mess. Do you follow the prescriptive rule? _____</p>		

2. Below is a list of usages which one or more prescriptivists have observed and objected to. State which of the traditional categories (**solecisms, barbarisms, improprieties**) the usage would all into and why prescriptivists find the usage unacceptable.

a. “In Washington you don’t talk with people; you ‘interact’ with them. When two individuals with opposing viewpoints meet, they ‘interface’. Just as a witness who prevaricates is said to be ‘stone-walling,’ so the vogue persists for other Watergate phrases—among them, ‘at this point in time’ as the long way of saying ‘now’.”

Barbarisms—buzzwords or bureaucratese for special effect or to show you are part of the “in group”.

b. “A San Francisco Examiner story was headlined: ‘Climber peaks inside volcano.’”

Impropriety—“peak” instead of “peek”, shows ignorance of correct spelling.

c. “We were always taught to say ‘drive slowly,’ yet our highways are cluttered with signs that say ‘Drive Slow.’”

Impropriety—grammar mistake (see first example in question #1).

d. Abigail Van Buren apologized for having written “from whence” because the word “whence” means “from what place, from what source, from what origin”.

Solecism—redundancy, since the word “whence” includes the notion “from”.

e. “a proposed thermal solid waste conversion facility” (= “incinerator”)

Barbarism—wordy, grandiose phrase to describe an object of humble function.

f. “To use ‘alternate’ as a synonym for ‘alternative’ is considered to be a sign of semiliteracy outside the USA. ... The two words really do have quite separate and distinct meanings: ‘alternate’ implies the taking of turns, and ‘alternative’ implies a choice.”

Impropriety—word misuse, loss of a useful distinction because the users fail to pay attention to the difference.

g. “... news media persons ... say ‘a million and a half dollars’ when they mean ‘one and a half million dollars’”

Solecism—the claim is that the first means \$1 million 50¢; an error in logic if one thinks about what the language really means.

3. Below is what the Jeremiah, John Simon, has to say about the word *nice* and about language change in general (*Paradigms Lost*, pp. 209-210). [NOTE: *Nice* comes from Latin *ne-scius* ‘ignorant, not-knowing’; in Old French, it meant ‘silly’ and was borrowed into Old English with that meaning; by the time of Middle English, it had take on the meaning ‘foolish’, later ‘shy’; the Modern English meaning comes from the latter meaning, i.e. ‘non-aggressive, accommodating’.—RGS]

“For consider that what some people are pleased to call linguistic evolution was almost always a matter of ignorance prevailing over knowledge. There is no valid reason, for example, for the word *nice* to have changed its meaning so many times—except ignorance of its exact definition.

Had the change never occurred, or had it been stopped at any intermediate stage, we would have had just as good a word as we have now and saved some people a heap of confusion along the way. But if *nice* means what it does today—and it has two principal meanings, one of them, as in ‘nice distinction,’ alas, obsolescent—let us, for heaven’s sake, keep it where it is, now that we have the means with which to hold it there.”

How might Linguists react to Simon’s view of language change?

Simon is clueless about language change and its causes; he seems to think there is some “meaning” affixed to a word separate from the way speakers use it.

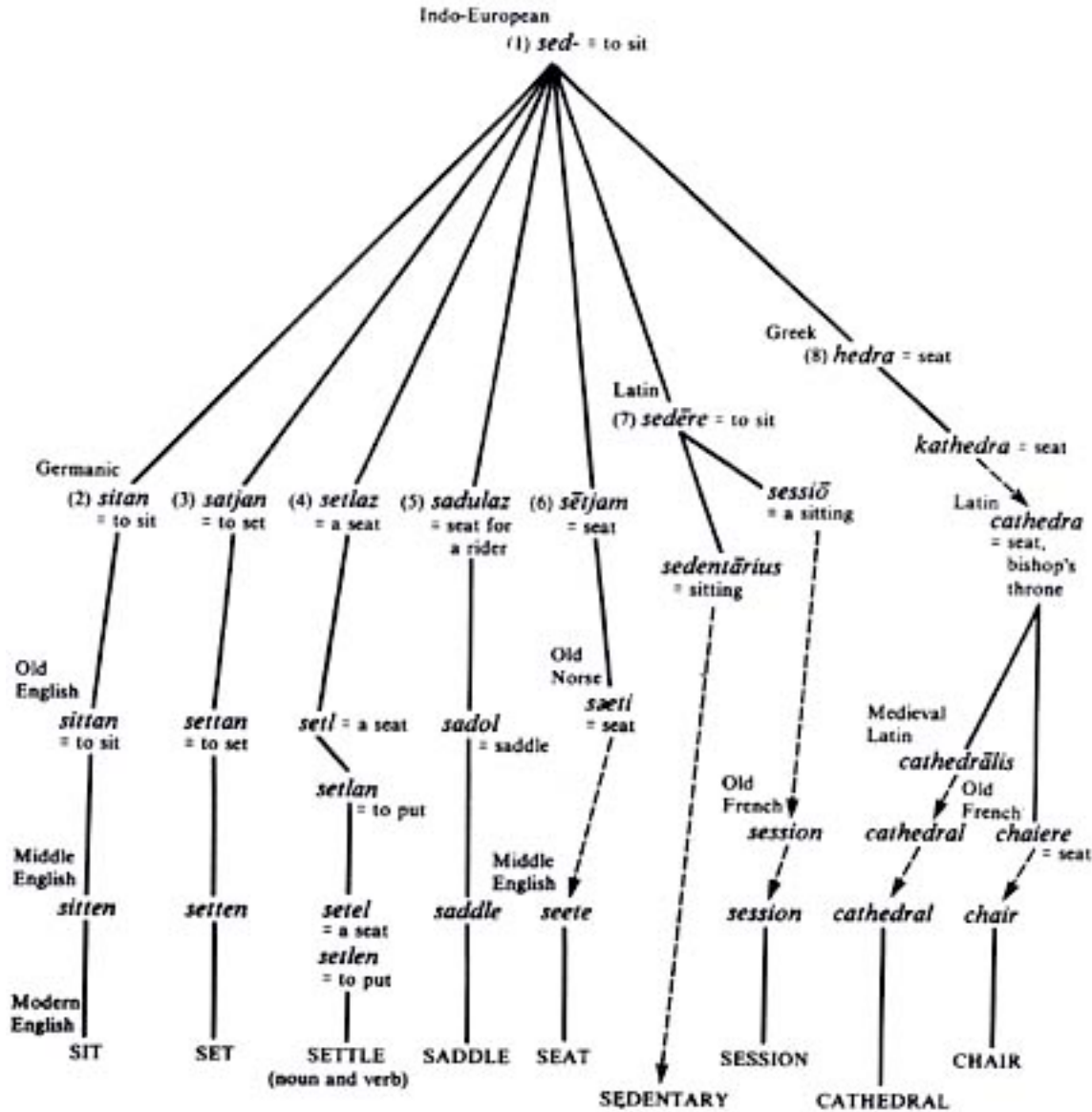
4. Here is another quote from John Simon (*Paradigms Lost*, pp. 205-206) about a putative solecism. Again, how might a Linguist respond to Simon’s diatribe?

“And if someone now says that ‘in George Eliot’s lesser novels, she is not completely in command’ is perfectly comprehensible even if it is ungrammatical, ‘she’ having no antecedent that is a substantive (*Eliot’s* is a modifier), I say, ‘Comprehensible, perhaps, but lopsided,’ for the civilized and orderly mind does not feel comfortable with that ‘she’ ... unless the sentence is restructured as ‘George Eliot, in her lesser novels, is not...’ or in some similar way. In fact, the fully literate ear can be thrown by this error in syntax; it may look for the antecedent of that ‘she’ elsewhere than in the preceding possessive case.”

Simon’s concept of grammatical categories is naive at best. He claims “Eliot’s” is a “modifier”, which is not a “category” in any case, but rather a function that a word of some category (adjective, adverb, noun) might play. “Eliot” is a NOUN in any system of grammar—here a noun with a possessive ‘s’ on it, but a noun nonetheless. A noun can ALWAYS be the “antecedent” to a pronoun when it comes earlier in the sentence than the pronoun. In short, Simon has cooked up a prescriptive rule that a noun marked as a genitive functions as a “modifier” rather than as a noun and hence cannot be referred to by a pronoun—a “rule” which is not now nor has it ever been part of English grammar.

5. Here are two “wordwatcher” accounts that include the word **cathedral**. The first is from Robert Clairborne, *Loose Cannons and Red Herrings*, Norton, 1988; the second (on the next page) is from Peter Davies, *Roots*, McGraw-Hill, 1981. (The latter book shows how various English words trace their histories back to their Indo-European origins.) How might a Linguist react to these two “wordwatcher” accounts?

cathedral. In Greek, *kathedra* means a chair; the term was later applied to the ceremonial chair or throne of a bishop. A cathedral church (later, simply cathedral) was thus the “seat” of a bishop. And when someone speaks *ex cathedra*, they’re assuming the authoritative (and perhaps somewhat pompous) matter of a bishop or other high dignitary. Some professors are fond of making *ex cathedra* statements.



Clairborne's little discussion would probably evoke the reaction, "Yeah, so tell us something." It takes one word in isolation and says where it comes from, followed by a couple of gratuitous remarks about other uses of the Latin word cathedra. The Davies diagram, on the other hand, puts the word 'cathedral' and the other Indo-European derivatives to which it is related into a linguistic and cultural context. Clairborne's isolated little story can be seen to be just a minor piece in a much larger picture.

6. Below is a list of "pet peeves" related to language usage which Abigail Van Buren ran in a column (*Los Angeles Times*, 7/15/92).

- a. Which, if any, of them do you share? What are some of your pet misusage peeves?
- b. Linguists can be prescriptivists, too, but one thing the study of linguistics should teach is that there are "lost causes" (usages which have worked their way into normal speech to the point where most people view them as completely normal) and there are usages which, if their undesirability is drawn to speakers' attention, the speakers would probably

see their error and change their ways. Which of these categories would the pet peeves below or ones that you might add fall into?

[Reactions to these usages is largely a matter of personal opinion—I don't suggest any "answers".]

- the most annoying speech irritant is all those “you knows”
- people who say, “I could care less” mean to convey that they care so little they could *not* care less
- people pronounce “jewelry” as “jool-ree” instead of “jool-uh-ree”
- “epitome” means a person or thing that is typical of, or possesses to a high degree, features of a whole class, *not* “the ultimate or height of”
- the word “arthritis” is correctly pronounced “arth-right-us”, *not* “arthur-ritis”
- the word “nauseous” is often misused in place of “nauseated”
- “where it’s at” is incorrect, “where it is” is correct
- why do most people pronounce “asterisk” as “ass-trick”
- “The confusion with ‘lie’ and ‘lay’ is still baffling to many.”¹
- “Prominent newscasters have said ‘most unique’ and ‘partially destroyed’. ‘Unique’ and ‘destroyed’ are absolute terms and cannot be qualified ...”
- “Please do not confuse ‘momento’ and ‘memento’. A momento is a unit of time (Spanish: ‘uno momento’). A memento is a souvenir, a memory.”
- “... the misplaced ‘only’ is a common gaffe. For example, the song “I Only have Eyes for You” is meant to say, “I have eyes for you only”.”
- “Never say, ‘It’s a true fact.’”
- “... for heaven’s sake, never say, ‘for heaven’s sakes’.”

7. If you are a native speaker of a language other than English, try to make a list of language usages that you or prescriptivists condemn in your language. Try to put them into the categories we have discussed—solecisms, barbarisms, improprieties—or the “lost causes” vs. “hopeful” types mentioned in the preceding question.

Again, an infinite number of possible answers, depending on language and personal judgments.

¹Of course Abby is guilty of a solecism herself here. It is not the “confusion” that is baffling to people, but the *distinction!* It is the *people* who are *confused*