

Introduction to English Grammar: Week 1

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1 Standard English

Standard English is very difficult to define because there isn't anyone who actually speaks it. Huddleston and Pullum say that Standard American English (SAE) is generally found in newspapers and serious magazines. It has also been defined as the form of English used by educated, wealthy, or otherwise prestigious groups of people.

In many situations, however, speakers choose to not use SAE because it sounds pretentious or stuck-up. Because of that, SAE is almost never used exclusively. For example, interactions with my friend always look like this:

- (1) ME: "How are you doing, John?"
JOHN: "I'm doing well."

When the server at Perkins asks John how he is doing, though, the use of *well* seems pretentious.

1.1 Standard, non-standard, and ungrammatical

We will be focusing on what is generally accepted to be SAE in this course, however, there is an important distinction to be made before moving forward.

Non-standard: a local, regional, or social dialect of English that is constrained by rules but the rules are different from the standard or "prestige" variety. *Marked with a [!] in H&P.* For example:

- (2) [!] I done it myself.

Ungrammatical: a sentence or phrase that would not be produced by any native speaker of English. *Marked with a * in H&P.* For example:

- (3) * John gave Bill.

This is an important distinction to make, because generally people think of non-standard dialects as ungrammatical or "bad/corrupted/lazy/(insert negative adjective) English" when in fact there are clear rules and structure in these dialects.

The habitual *be* in African American Vernacular English is a good example of this. In AAVE, the use of the bare copula verb *be* indicates a habitual action or state, something that

SAE speakers use the adverbs *always* or *usually* to communicate. The use of *be* in this way is not found in SAE, though, and causes some SAE speakers to think that AAVE speakers are making grammatical mistakes. This is a real interaction between a black student and his teacher in a Los Angeles elementary school (Smitherman 2000:25).

- (4) TEACHER: Bobby, what does your mother do every day? (Teacher apparently wanted to call Bobby's parents.)

BOBBY: She be at home!

TEACHER: You mean, she *is* at home.

BOBBY: No, she ain't, 'cause she took my grandma to the hospital this morning.

TEACHER: You know what I meant. You are not supposed to say "she *be* at home." You are trying to say "she *is* at home."

BOBBY: Why are you trying to make me lie? She ain't at home!

1.2 Formal and informal style

The style of English used (formal or informal) is determined by the social context. Students writing emails to professors, probably more formal. Writing an email to your classmates, probably more informal. What are some more situations where formal English would be used? Informal?

2 Descriptive vs. prescriptive

2.1 Descriptive

Books describe language based on *actual* usage. How do good writers use English? How do supreme court justices use English?

2.2 Prescriptive

Books tell people *should* use English. Style guides and usage manuals like Strunk and White's.

Descriptivists don't have an "anything goes" approach to language, but we distinguish between standard and non-standard, grammatical and ungrammatical, and formal and informal language samples. To many prescriptivists, everything but formal SAE is "ungrammatical" or "bad." We understand that SAE is necessary to succeed in school and business, and use it in our own writing, but we don't think that it is better/more logical/clearer/(insert positive adjective) than any other dialect of English.

3 Grammatical terms and definitions

Some useful terms to learn.

Syntax: How words are put together to form sentences.

Morphology: How morphemes and roots are combined to form words. Morphemes are smaller than words but still have meaning. For example, *cats* is a word that is made up of the root *cat* + the plural morpheme (-s). Think of prefixes and suffixes.

Semantics: The meanings of words and phrases.

Forget the grammatical definitions for things like “nouns” and “past tense” that you learned in English class, because these are often not good enough. We will learn better ways to define the terms later.

- (5) Past tense example on p. 6.

4 Standard, non-standard, and ungrammatical English activity

Label the following sentences S (for standard), [!] (for non-standard) or * (for ungrammatical).

1. What is inside of the bag? (What is inside the bag?)
2. However, I did not to blame my classmate.
3. If he were younger, he could have won the fight.
4. You would know the reasons that why people should not make the mistake like this.
5. The American people have the constitutional right to be wrong!
6. When I came back to classroom, it was nearly to first class.
7. Get off of me. (Get off me.)
8. The bill will pass irregardless of the protest. (The bill will pass regardless of the protest.)

5 Exercises

1. Away ran the dog.
The dog ran away.
Away the dog ran.
2. a. It is not what you do, but the way that/in which you do it.