Grammar: the rules of language

If you were asked what the meaningful units of language were called you would probably say 'words'. Look at the words in the following sentences:

> Bill hit Bob
> Bob hit Bill

Do the words mean the same thing in each sentence? Do the two sentences mean the same thing? Obviously the answer to the first question is 'yes' and the second 'no'. It follows then that the order in which the words occur has a bearing on the meaning of a sentence. The fact that we can interpret the two sentences correctly shows that we know something about word order which allows us to access that meaning. Knowing a language means more than knowing the words of a language; we need also to know how to put words together in a way which is both predictable and meaningful. The rules which govern how elements of language are put together are known as the **grammar** of the language.

Although this definition appears straightforward the term is used with a range of related but distinct meanings.

Traditional grammar

The origins of traditional grammar teaching lie in the application of forms of Latin grammar to English. A combination of the facts that English is grammatically quite different from Latin and that only the most formal and literary varieties of English were chosen for study meant that for most students traditional grammar was a pursuit with little or no relevance to their own use of English. Do you say:

> It was me

or

> It was I?

The traditional grammarian would be in no doubt, since the correct form in Latin would be the latter, even though most speakers would say the former and probably find the form 'It was I' affected and artificial.
Traditional grammars usually have a view of what is 'correct' usage and in this they represent a kind of **prescriptive grammar**.

Prescriptive grammar

As its name suggests, this form of grammar prescribes what it is permissible to say or write. Like traditional grammars, prescriptive grammars assume that there is a model of 'correct' English and their rules preclude the use of other (e.g. regional) forms. In fact, the rules of prescriptive grammars tend on the whole to *pro*scribe 'incorrect' forms. You quite probably learnt at least

some prescriptive rules of grammar when you were at school; for example, the rule which requires:

John and I went…

In preference to:

Me and John went…

Prescriptive grammars do not have to be based on archaic or artificial language forms. Nowadays they are usually based on **Standard English**, a variety familiar to most speakers. There is, however, still an assumption that one variety is superior to all others, a notion we shall look at a little more closely later in this unit.

Standard English is examined in detail a little later in this unit. For now a working definition of Standard English as 'the language of Radio 4 news' or even 'the language of this unit' will be adequate.

Descriptive grammar

This kind of grammar starts from the facts of a sample of language (maybe all the sentences of a variety such as 'Standard English' or 'Liverpool English') and tries to account for them by means of a comprehensive set of rules. A descriptive approach may be taken to any variety of a language, including regional and social dialects and the development language of young children.

A descriptive grammar of Standard English would have much in common with a prescriptive grammar in terms of its rules, but there would be important differences. Whereas a prescriptive grammar would describe a word or structure as 'correct' or 'incorrect', a descriptive grammar makes no such value judgements, simply stating whether a form belongs to the variety or not. The goal of descriptive grammars is to account for as much of the language variety as possible, whilst the tendency of prescriptive grammars is to concentrate on areas of the language which are in some way contentious and where a ruling is felt to be necessary. In practice a descriptive grammar may be used in a prescriptive way; for example, in foreign language textbooks.

Grammar and the speaker

At the beginning of this section I said that grammar was something which speakers of language need to know. There are actually two distinct kinds of grammatical knowledge. First there is *implicit knowledge*. This enables us, without reflection, to form sentences which our fellow speakers recognise as grammatical (i.e. which conform to the rules of our grammar). It also allows us to identify 'sentences' which are not grammatical. In addition to our implicit knowledge, we may also have *explicit knowledge*. If so, then when we hear an ungrammatical sentence we are able to describe the 'errors' and state which rules have been broken, probably with the use of technical terminology. The first kind of knowledge is acquired in the natural process of learning to speak; the second kind implies explicit teaching.

Activity 1.4 Using your implicit language knowledge

Which of the following sentences do you consider to be 'correct'?   Explain
your reasons; how much grammatical terminology do you need to use?

        (a)   John and I went to the shops.
        (b)   Me and John went to the shops.
        (c)   He came back with sweets for Helen and me.
        (d)   He came back with sweets for Helen and I.

Reflection

(a) and (c) are the 'correct' Standard English.   If you could state that much
then you have an implicit knowledge of (at least this part of) Standard English.

You may be able to explain your judgement by checking what the sentence
sounds like without the 'extra' word.

        (a)   I went to the shops.
        (b)   *Me[8] went to the shops.
        (c)   He came back with sweets for me.
        (d)   *He came back with sweets for I.

In this and later examples I use the convention of marking ungrammatical
items with a star*.
It is now immediately obvious that the starred sentences are not
'grammatical'.

Notice that *word* is a technical term which helps you talk about language (all
such terminology is known as *metalanguage*).   You don't need to know the
word *word* in order to speak and your use of it would be evidence of some
explicit language knowledge.   If you knew that the extra word was called a
noun or that *pronouns* functioning as objects then your explicit knowledge is
all the greater.

As implicit language knowledge is the foundation upon which more explicit
linguistic awareness is built, many of the activities in this unit will ask you to
use your own implicit language knowledge (sometimes known as **linguistic
intuition**) as a first stage of examining aspects of English grammar.   I hope
you will be able to shed any preconceptions of grammar that involve rote
learning of rules and see yourself rather as an active investigator of the forms
of language, with your own linguistic knowledge and intuition being your
richest source of evidence.   This brings me to another meaning of the word
grammar.

Grammar as psychological structures

All our definitions of the term grammar have so far referred to written descriptions of language patterns.   However, the term can be applied to those structures within the mind of a speaker which allow the formation and recognition of acceptable sentences.   Some forms of descriptive grammar have the description of these psychological rules as their goal and the term 'grammar' is often used ambiguously to refer to both the rules in the speaker's mind and the same rules written down.   There is plenty of evidence that these psychological grammars are real; how else can the consistency of language forms be explained? It also seems to be the case that our personal grammars are far more complex than any 'explicit' grammar yet written.   Every speaker has to learn the forms of their native language anew and one consequence of this is that the grammars of no two speakers will be exactly alike.   We each have a personal grammar.

Activity 1.5   Using your implicit language knowledge

Which of these sentences do you consider to be 'correct'? Can you explain why you find certain sentences unacceptable? Are there any you are uncertain about? Can you explain why?   Are there any which you might say yourself, even if you consider them to be incorrect?   Which kind of grammatical knowledge are you applying when you judge these sentences?

My aunt has measles.	Eat this with a left-handed bus.
If I'd have known that he'd still be alive.	This is the world we live in.
From whom is that letter?	That's the man who I saw yesterday
I didn't do nothing.	He climbed out of the window.
My aunt bucket measles.	He got off of the bus.
Who is that letter from?	

When you have done this activity for yourself, ask a friend to do it and share your conclusions – do you agree in every case?

Reflection

The list includes some sentences which most speakers of English would be happy with. One sentence is definitely grammatical but makes no sense, while one clearly does not follow the basic rules of sentence structure.   At least one follows a pattern used in many non-Standard varieties and so is grammatical within that variety.   Others you might feel are condemned by prescriptive grammar even though you feel comfortable saying them. Remember in such cases that usage changes over time and that even if you remember rules about 'who' and 'whom' and about prepositions at the end of sentences, the fact that almost everybody says *Who is it from?* is an important consideration.

You probably found that if you did this activity with a friend, even if you feel you speak the same variety of English, you did not agree on every point. This illustrates the fact that we all develop our own individual form of English (and explains why so many disputes arise over 'correctness'.

In this section we have seen that:

- Traditional and prescriptive grammar are principally concerned with supporting a particular (Standard) variety of the language.
- Descriptive grammar tries to view language objectively and to explain all its forms and often the judgements of native speakers too.
- All speakers possess their own grammar and employ grammatical rules automatically.
- For every utterance which you know implicitly to be grammatical there is an underlying linguistic structure which is susceptible to analysis and description.