



**Department of Spanish Studies, General Linguistics and Literature Theory
University of Alicante**

Undergraduate level

LINGUISTICS 8806

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Task Sheet 8

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PART I. BEGINNING LINGUISTICS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

KEY TOPIC(S):

- **Prescription vs. Description.**

1. Read this extract from the lecture notes on rules of language by a University of California Professor in Linguistics (downloadable from <http://www.linguistics.ucla.edu/people/schlenker/LING1-06-LN-1A.pdf>), and then answer the questions on it.

To know a language is to have in principle the ability to utter and understand infinitely many new sentences. How is this possible? The key is that speakers know (a finite number of) *rules*, which can be applied repeatedly to produce an infinite number of sentences. *All spoken language is in this sense governed by rules*; in this respect there is *no difference* between what is considered ‘good English’ and what is considered ‘bad English’ – they each follow rules, though they may be different ones. We will distinguish two uses of the notion of ‘rule’: for prescriptive vs. for descriptive purposes. *Prescriptive rules* are intended to teach people how they *should* speak or write *according to some pre-determined (arbitrary) standard*. They are of dubious origin, have no linguistic justification, and have no relevance for the linguist, who is solely interested in *describing* and understanding the rules that speakers *do in fact follow* (=descriptive rules).

Question 1. How far do you think this passage expresses the personal opinion of the author and how far is an objective statement? Give reasons for your answer.



Question 2. In the sentence, 'The key is that speakers know (a finite number of) *rules*, which can be applied repeatedly to produce an infinite number of sentences', why is the word *rules* emphasised?

Question 3. Do you agree with the views expressed in the text? Why?

2. Read the following examples and comment on them (downloadable from <http://www.linguistics.ucla.edu/people/schlenker/LING1-06-LN-1A.pdf>):

Some Prescriptive Rules of English [C. Phillips, University of Maryland]

- (8) *Don't* split infinitives!
a. Do not say: I wanted to carefully explain to her why the decision was made.
b. Say: I wanted to explain to her carefully why the decision was made.
- (9) Don't use double negation!
a. Do not say: I didn't do nothing.
b. Say: I didn't do anything.
- (10) Don't end a sentence with a preposition!
a. Do not say: A preposition is not a good word to end a sentence with.
b. Say: A preposition is not a good word with which to end a sentence.
- (11) Don't use *who* in place of *whom*!
a. Do not say: Who did you talk to?
b. Say: Whom did you talk to?

Some of these rules stem from an attempt to make English look like Latin. Thus in Latin an infinitive, being a single word, could never be split. But of course from this it does not follow that the same should hold of English, where 'to explain' is made of two words, not one.

Descriptive grammar has as its goal to *describe* what the native speakers of a language do (verbally) when they speak their language (the meaning of the word "grammar" as used in this course).

Prescriptive grammar categorizes certain language uses as acceptable or



unacceptable according to a standard form of the language (the meaning of “grammar” normally intended in English classes).

An example:

Use of <i>slow</i> vs. <i>slowly</i> and similar pairs of adjectives vs. adverbs (“adjective form” here refers to the word without <i>-ly</i> , “adverb form” refers to the word with <i>-ly</i>):	
Descriptive rule	Prescriptive rule
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. (Adapted from Quirk, et al. <i>A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language</i> , 1985)	“Use as an adjective a word which qualifies a noun. Use as an adverb a word which qualifies a verb.” (Greever & Jones, <i>The Century Collegiate Handbook</i> , 1924)
You drive too <u>slow</u> ! (conforms to <i>descriptive</i> account but violates <i>prescriptive</i> rule)	
You drive too <u>slowly</u> ! (conforms to both <i>descriptive</i> and <i>prescriptive</i> accounts)	
He <u>slowly</u> negotiated the curves! (conforms to both <i>descriptive</i> and <i>prescriptive</i> accounts)	
*He <u>slow</u> negotiated the curves! (violates both <i>descriptive</i> and <i>prescriptive</i> accounts)	

◆ Relativity of Prescriptive Rules:

What is considered grammatically proper depends on historical circumstances that have nothing to do with purely linguistic or logical considerations. For instance, in contemporary French double negation is considered to be ‘proper’, while single negation is considered ‘sloppy’ – the opposite pattern from the one we find in English:

(12) Contemporary French

a. Il ne mange rien

He NOT eats nothing

‘He doesn’t eat anything’

Prestige Dialect

a. Il mange rien

He eats nothing

‘He doesn’t eat anything’

Spoken Language

‘Double negation’, or ‘negative agreement’ [also called ‘negative concord’] is a feature of BEV [Black English Vernacular], as well as other varieties of English.



3. Match the following terms with the definitions below (<http://www.cus.cam.ac.uk/~cjp16/learnsupp/svdespres.pdf>):

Descriptive approach Prescriptive approach

GRAMMAR

- a description of a language
- what native speakers know intuitively about their language
- how to use language 'well'
- a set of instructions on how a language is to be used

Descriptive approach Prescriptive approach

RULE

- an observed regularity
- a principle which must be applied

Descriptive approach Prescriptive approach

STANDARD
LANGUAGE or
NORM

- the language which is to be adopted in official documents and which is imposed on a group (often a nation or group of nations) through the educational system
- a linguistic variant which (mainly for political and economic reasons) has come to be regarded as the variant which it is desirable to emulate

Descriptive approach Prescriptive approach

CORRECTNESS

- acceptability to a native speaker
- conformity with the standard language



3. Why has the *gerundio de posteridad* been ‘proscribed’?

4. Who uses the *norma culta*?

Extract 3

Bien le puedes enbjar; bien puedes enbjarle; no las fatigues; no me lo digas, se dize propiamente: enpero Bien puedesle enviar; no fatigheslas; no me digaslo; no digasmelo, ni no digaslome, no se puede dezir, como ni tanpoco lo que dizen algunos inadvertidos ó no Castellanos, comenzando por estos enclíticos la rrazon: te vas? me voi, se va, que es intolerable, sino como es el uso propio: vaste? voime, vase, vanse; quede esto advertido para todos. (Gonzalo Correas, Arte de la lengua española castellana, 1625)

1. Today, *¿te vas?*, etc., are standard and regarded as ‘correct’. *¿Vaste?*, etc., though still used in some regions (e.g. the north of Spain), are considered old-fashioned. How did *¿te vas?*, etc., become ‘correct’?