

# Prescriptive and Descriptive Grammar: Functions, Distinctions, and Pedagogical Relevance

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**Abstract.** This article examines the fundamental distinction between prescriptive and descriptive grammar and their respective roles in linguistic analysis and language education. Prescriptive grammar is primarily concerned with formulating norms and rules that define correct language use, whereas descriptive grammar aims to document and analyze how language is actually used by speakers in authentic communicative contexts. Drawing on a qualitative review of linguistic literature and representative language examples, the study outlines the objectives, advantages, and limitations of both grammatical approaches. The findings suggest that prescriptive and descriptive grammar should not be viewed as opposing frameworks but rather as complementary perspectives that together contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of language structure, variation, and change. In particular, the article emphasizes the importance of integrating both approaches in language teaching, as each serves distinct yet interconnected pedagogical functions. By clarifying their differences and areas of application, the study highlights the relevance of both grammatical traditions in linguistic theory and educational practice.

**Keywords:** *descriptive grammar, prescriptive grammar, grammatical occurrence, normative grammar, grammatical terminology*

## Introduction

Grammar constitutes the structural foundation through which speakers and writers convey meaning accurately and effectively. A deeper awareness of grammatical principles enables language users to monitor their own linguistic output, interpret the language of others more precisely, identify ambiguity, and make deliberate stylistic choices. Mastery of grammar thus supports clarity, precision, and expressive richness in communication. While grammatical accuracy is an essential component of effective language use, it is also important to recognise that grammar originates from common usage and represents a systematic formulation of patterns found in everyday speech.

In linguistic scholarship, grammar is commonly understood in two interrelated senses. First, it is defined as the systematic study and description of a language. Second, it refers to a set of rules and illustrative examples concerned with syntax and word structure, typically intended to facilitate language learning (Greenbaum, 1996). These definitions reflect both the analytical and pedagogical

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dimensions of grammar and provide a framework for distinguishing between different grammatical approaches.

One of the most significant distinctions in grammatical theory is that between prescriptive and descriptive grammar. Prescriptive grammar refers to a body of norms that regulate how a language should be used, rather than documenting how it is actually used by speakers. This approach, also known as normative grammar or prescriptivism, establishes standards of correctness and evaluates linguistic forms according to predefined rules. In contrast, descriptive grammar focuses on observing, recording, and analysing language as it naturally occurs in real communicative contexts.

As noted by linguists Ilse Depraetere and Chad Langford, prescriptive grammar is characterised by the formulation of strict rules that classify language use as either grammatical or ungrammatical, often offering guidance on what should be avoided while providing limited explanatory justification (Wiley Online Library, 2018). Similarly, prescriptive grammar has been defined as an approach that establishes norms of correct and incorrect usage and formulates rules that language users are expected to follow (Alisoy, 2023). For many language learners and non-specialists, the notion of “grammar rules” is closely associated with prescriptive principles, which dictate acceptable forms based on socially or institutionally accepted standards.

It is important to emphasise, however, that prescriptive rules do not reflect inherent linguistic value. No form of language is intrinsically good or bad; rather, prescriptive norms serve to align spoken and written language with conventional standards deemed appropriate in formal, educational, or professional contexts. Common examples of prescriptive rules include subject–verb agreement, appropriate use of count and non-count nouns, sentence capitalization, correct pronoun usage following the verb *to be*, and the application of the definite article with specific geographical names (Babayev, 2024; Hasanova, 2024). Such rules play a significant role in language instruction, particularly in contexts where standardised language use is required.

From an educational perspective, both prescriptive and descriptive grammar are indispensable. While prescriptive grammar provides learners with clear guidelines for standard usage, descriptive grammar offers insight into authentic language patterns and variation. Understanding the interaction between these approaches is therefore crucial for effective language teaching and linguistic analysis.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Approach**

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive research approach to examine the concepts of prescriptive and descriptive grammar and to analyse the relationship between them within linguistic theory and educational practice. Given the theoretical nature of the topic, the research does not involve the collection of primary empirical data. Instead, it relies on the systematic examination of existing scholarly literature and representative language examples.

### **Research Design**

The research is based on a conceptual and comparative design. Key definitions, theoretical principles, and underlying assumptions associated with prescriptive and descriptive grammar are identified, analysed, and compared. This design enables a detailed exploration of the ways in which the two approaches differ in terms of purpose, methodology, application, and influence on language use and language education.

### **Data Sources**

The data for this study were obtained from secondary sources, including:

- linguistics textbooks and reference grammars,
- peer-reviewed academic journal articles,
- scholarly books on grammar, syntax, and language pedagogy,
- reputable language usage guides and style manuals.

These sources were selected on the basis of their academic reliability, relevance to grammatical theory, and contribution to discussions surrounding language norms and actual usage.

### **Data Analysis**

The materials examined in this study were analysed through thematic analysis, a qualitative procedure suitable for conceptual research based on texts and illustrative examples. The analysis proceeded by identifying repeated patterns across the reviewed literature and examples, then organising them into interpretive categories. In particular, themes related to language norms, usage versus rule-making, authority and standardisation in grammar, and variation in real-life communication were coded and grouped. Language examples were then interpreted as practical evidence showing how prescriptive rules may diverge from descriptive observations of authentic usage. This approach enabled the study to connect theoretical claims about grammar with concrete instances of language in use.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Prescriptive grammar: norm-setting and its limitations**

A central feature of prescriptive grammar is that it makes an explicit value judgement about the “correctness” of an utterance. By design, prescriptive frameworks draw boundaries between “right” and “wrong” forms and provide regulatory guidance for language use. However, such regulation does not always explain why speakers use certain structures or how those structures function in communication. When prescriptive rules are treated as absolute and universal, prescriptive grammarians may promote an idealised (and sometimes artificial) version of grammar that is only weakly supported by evidence from actual language use.

At the same time, it is difficult—both socially and educationally—to avoid prescriptivism entirely. In many contexts, speakers and writers rely on normative expectations, and language communities often expect some form of legitimate authority. In education, for example, teachers require “reference points” that help learners internalise the target language and its grammar. Even when

instructors aim to foreground descriptive realities, implementing a purely descriptive approach can be pedagogically challenging, particularly in formal classrooms where assessment and standardisation are unavoidable.

### **Pedagogical prescriptivism and oversimplified rules**

One recurring issue in textbooks and classroom practice is the tendency to present grammar through simplified “either-or” rules that reduce complexity and minimise exceptions. This can support classroom efficiency, but it can also distort how grammar actually operates. A typical example is the claim that **“have”** and **“think”** are stative verbs and therefore cannot occur in continuous forms. In real usage, these verbs frequently appear in continuous aspect when their meanings shift:

- **“have”** in a non-possessive meaning: *I am having a difficult time doing this exercise.*
- **“think”** in a process meaning rather than opinion: *I am thinking about how to do the exercise.*

Such categorical rules may simplify instruction, yet they neglect a foundational linguistic reality: language contains regularities and irregularities, and grammatical patterns are sensitive to meaning, context, and pragmatic intent (Javid, 2023). In this sense, “pedagogical grammar” may offer clarity but risk sacrificing accuracy and explanatory depth.

### **Why prescriptive rules emerged and why they persist**

The study also highlights historical and sociocultural factors behind prescriptive traditions. During the 17th and 18th centuries, European scholars increasingly idealised the classical world, treating Latin (and to some extent Greek) as linguistically superior. Because Latin was primarily a written code and no longer undergoing natural spoken change, it appeared stable and “perfect.” As a result, many writers attempted—where possible—to model English grammar on Latin conventions, which helped generate and legitimise prescriptive rules in English.

It may seem surprising that rules misaligned with everyday usage continue to survive. However, several factors explain their endurance. First, prescriptive rules support a standard variety understood by the largest number of speakers, which can strengthen mutual intelligibility. This is particularly significant in contexts where dialects differ substantially (a situation sometimes illustrated with languages like German, where regional varieties may hinder comprehension). Second, a stable set of rules is indispensable for second-language learners: without guidelines, language learning would become disorganised and inconsistent. From this perspective, prescriptive norms serve a practical instructional purpose for teachers and learners (Rodney & Geoffrey, 2005).

Most importantly, prescriptive standards persist for social reasons. Nonstandard dialects are often stigmatised, and this stigma may restrict social mobility. Prescriptive norms can provide speakers of nonstandard varieties with access to the standard dialect used in education, institutions, and professional contexts—thereby functioning as a tool for participation and advancement. Nevertheless, these social evaluations are not linguistically objective: the belief that one dialect is inherently “better” than another is not supported by linguistic principles. From a strictly linguistic

standpoint, dialects are systematic and valid; negative attitudes toward nonstandard dialects reflect social prejudice rather than linguistic truth.

### **Descriptive grammar: documenting language as it is used**

In contrast, descriptive grammar is built on the observation that grammatical patterns should be derived from actual usage. Rather than labelling forms as right or wrong, descriptive analysis aims to provide an objective account of how words, phrases, clauses, and sentences are used in real contexts. Specialists working within this tradition focus on identifying underlying patterns of use, including variation across social groups, regions, and communicative settings.

This contrast can be illustrated through examples often condemned in standard rules. For instance, the expression “don’t know nothing” is widely criticised by prescriptivists because it contains a double negative. A descriptive perspective, however, would treat the construction as evidence of a systematic pattern within certain varieties of English. The descriptive claim is not that the form is “correct” in all contexts, but that it is grammatical within a particular dialect system, even if it is not recommended in standard formal writing (Alisoy, 2025).

Another example concerns everyday reductions and colloquial structures such as “I gonna want you” or “I gonna miss you”, which occur in natural speech despite being stigmatised or excluded from formal grammar instruction (Babayev, 2022). From a descriptive standpoint, such patterns are meaningful data: they reflect real-life communicative behaviour and can help explain language change, variation, and informal register norms.

### **A continuum rather than two opposing camps**

Although prescriptive and descriptive grammar are often presented as two competing schools, the findings suggest that they are better understood as a continuum. Even speakers and educators who value descriptive insights frequently rely on prescriptive norms in formal contexts, while many prescriptivists implicitly acknowledge usage realities when they permit variation.

The debate around split infinitives offers a clear illustration. Traditional prescriptivism often prohibits split infinitives, whereas descriptive perspectives accept them as long-established features of English usage (Javid, 2018). Consider:

- *She used to **secretly** admire him.*
- *You have to **really** watch him.*

A strict prescriptive revision would produce:

- *She used **secretly** to admire him.*
- *You **really** have to watch him.*

However, avoiding the split infinitive can sound stylistically awkward and may even shift emphasis. Compare:

- *You **really** have to watch him* (emphasis on the importance of watching).

- *You have to **really** watch him* (emphasis on watching closely).

Thus, the descriptive position is that grammatical choices cannot be evaluated purely through rigid “rules,” because meaning, emphasis, and naturalness also matter.

### **Descriptive rules, dialect systems, and standard varieties**

Descriptive grammar is developed by analysing how speakers use language and identifying the implicit rules they follow. Importantly, a single language may include multiple dialects, each governed by internally consistent grammatical principles that may differ from the rules of the standard variety (Greenbaum, 1996). Prescriptive grammar, by contrast, typically promotes one socially dominant variety—the prestige dialect, often associated with writing and institutional authority. Prescriptivists such as teachers and editors generally assume there is one correct model and many incorrect alternatives, with “correctness” aligned to the prestige standard (Chomsky, 2007).

### **Advantages, classroom implications, and illustrative cases**

Both approaches offer benefits and limitations. Prescriptive instruction can be particularly helpful for beginners and for contexts where learners require stable guidelines for formal communication. Clear rules may reduce ambiguity and confusion, especially in early stages of language learning. At the same time, descriptive awareness is crucial for developing communicative competence: learners encounter real speech that does not always match textbook rules, and they need tools to interpret variation appropriately.

Two frequently cited prescriptive issues can be used to illustrate this balance:

#### **1. Agreement with “there is/there are”**

In many teaching grammars, agreement is described in simplified terms: *there is* is used with singular noun phrases, and *there are* with plural noun phrases. In practice, learners and native speakers may vary, especially in speech, and instructors often need to explain both the standard rule and real-life patterns.

#### **2. Sentence-final prepositions**

A prescriptive rule commonly states: “Do not end a sentence with a preposition.” This yields a formal version such as:

- *With which friend did you go to the party?*
- *Which friend did you go to the party with?*

Whereas everyday usage typically prefers:

Here, the pedagogically effective solution is often to teach register sensitivity: the first form may be appropriate in very formal writing, while the second is natural in speech and informal writing.

In the context of increasing global multilingualism, grammar teaching benefits from presenting both what is expected in standard academic contexts and what is commonly used in real communication, so learners can make informed choices about register, appropriateness, and audience.

## Scientific novelty and practical significance

The scientific novelty of this article lies in its structured and explicit differentiation between prescriptive and descriptive grammar, demonstrating how prescriptive approaches establish norms of correctness while descriptive approaches explain grammar through authentic usage patterns. The study further clarifies how prescriptive grammar historically emerged and why it remains influential in educational and social contexts, including its connection to standardisation and social mobility. Ultimately, the article positions prescriptive and descriptive grammar as complementary perspectives that jointly contribute to a fuller understanding of language.

The practical significance of the study is its value for learners, teachers, and linguists seeking to navigate the relationship between grammatical rules and real-world usage. By highlighting the strengths and limitations of both approaches, it offers a foundation for more effective grammar instruction—one that supports standard accuracy while also preparing learners to interpret and use language as it is actually spoken and written in diverse contexts. In addition, the discussion underscores how access to standard norms may facilitate communication and social mobility, particularly in institutional settings (Huseyn & Babayev, 2025).

## Conclusion

This article has analysed the key distinctions and intersections between prescriptive and descriptive grammar, demonstrating that each approach serves a different—yet equally necessary—function in understanding and using language. Prescriptive grammar contributes to standardisation, offering norms that support clarity, consistency, and shared expectations, particularly in formal communication and educational settings. Descriptive grammar, by contrast, provides a systematic and non-judgmental account of how language is actually produced and interpreted by speakers, thereby capturing variation, contextual meaning, and ongoing linguistic change.

Taken together, these perspectives encourage a more balanced understanding of grammar. An exclusively prescriptive stance may lead to rigid rule-enforcement that overlooks authentic usage and the dynamic nature of language. Conversely, a purely descriptive stance—if applied without pedagogical guidance—may offer limited support for learners who require stable models for academic writing and institutional communication. The most productive position, therefore, is not to treat prescriptivism and descriptivism as competing ideologies, but to recognise them as complementary frameworks operating along a continuum.

The scientific conclusion of the study is that prescriptive and descriptive grammar are best understood as interdependent approaches: prescriptive grammar establishes conventional norms of “correct” usage, while descriptive grammar explains the patterns that emerge in real-life communication. Maintaining an informed balance between these approaches is particularly important in language teaching, where learners benefit from both (1) clear guidance for standard forms and (2) awareness of how grammar functions across registers, dialects, and communicative contexts. Finally, the article underscores that grammatical norms are not purely linguistic

phenomena; they are shaped by historical traditions and social **attitudes**, which influence how varieties of language are evaluated and taught.

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