



## Prescriptive Grammar in Spoken English and Its Role in the Classroom

### ไวยากรณ์บัญญัติในภาษาอังกฤษแบบภาษาพูดและบทบาทในชั้นเรียน

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#### ABSTRACT

This article mainly discusses the use of prescriptive grammar in spoken English and its role in classrooms. The use of English, especially a spoken one, is continually changing through time and space. The use of English in one community can be entirely different from another community. As a result, it is hard to figure out which English should be considered standard and which forms should be taught in schools. Consequently, prescriptive grammar is believed to be a crucial part in promoting Standard English. In the view of prescriptive grammar, some linguistic features are considered incorrect or inappropriate. Also, many school teachers in English-speaking countries are required to encourage students to use the standard form of language while refraining from eradicating their dialects. Students should know how Standard English rules work and how they are different from their dialects. More importantly, students should be able to use both standard and non-standard English in appropriate situations and appropriate time.

**Keywords:** Prescriptive Grammar, Descriptive Grammar, Standard and Non-standard English

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความชิ้นนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ที่จะนำเสนอแนวคิดเรื่องบทบาทของไวยากรณ์บัญญัติ (Prescriptive Grammar) ในการพูดภาษาอังกฤษและการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในห้องเรียน เนื่องจากรูปแบบการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ โดยเฉพาะภาษาพูดนั้นจะมีการเปลี่ยนแปลงอย่างต่อเนื่องตามกาลเวลา ภาษาอังกฤษในชุมชนหนึ่งอาจมีความแตกต่างอย่างสิ้นเชิงกับภาษาอังกฤษในอีกชุมชนหนึ่ง ดังนั้นจึงไม่ใช่เรื่องง่ายนักที่จะชี้วัดว่าภาษาอังกฤษแบบใดเป็นภาษาอังกฤษมาตรฐาน (Standard English) และควรนำไปใช้สอนในสถานศึกษา ด้วยเหตุนี้ จึงมีความเชื่อว่าไวยากรณ์บัญญัติเป็นส่วนสำคัญในการส่งเสริมภาษาอังกฤษมาตรฐาน ซึ่งในมุมมองของไวยากรณ์บัญญัติ รูปแบบภาษาบางอย่างถูกพิจารณาว่าเป็นรูปแบบที่ไม่ถูกต้องและไม่เหมาะสม นอกจากนี้ อาจารย์ในประเทศที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาหลักจะพยายามกระตุ้นให้นักเรียนใช้ภาษาอังกฤษมาตรฐาน แต่ในขณะเดียวกัน ก็ต้องหลีกเลี่ยงที่จะจำกัดภาษาท้องถิ่นของนักเรียนด้วย โดยสรุปแล้ว นักเรียนควรรู้ว่ากฎเกณฑ์ของภาษาอังกฤษมาตรฐานเป็นอย่างไรและรู้ความแตกต่างระหว่างภาษาอังกฤษมาตรฐานกับภาษาท้องถิ่น แต่สิ่งสำคัญที่สุดก็คือ นักเรียนต้องสามารถใช้ภาษาอังกฤษทั้งสองแบบได้อย่างถูกต้องและเหมาะสมตามกาลเทศะ

**คำสำคัญ:** ไวยากรณ์บัญญัติ, ไวยากรณ์พรรณนา, ภาษาอังกฤษมาตรฐานและไม่มาตรฐาน

### Introduction

English is one of the major world languages that has been widely used by many people all over the world. Certainly, the use of English has changed regionally and socially. The use of English in one community can be completely different from another community. Consequently, there have been debates about

which English is considered standard or correct usage or which forms should be taught in schools. Precisely, English seems to be continually changing through time and space. Because of those factors mentioned above, prescriptive grammar is said to be an important part in promoting Standard English



nowadays. In this paper, we focus on the notion of prescriptive grammar of spoken English, the use of spoken English, and the role of prescriptive grammar in the classroom.

### **What Is Meant by Prescriptive Grammar?**

If we want to know what prescriptive grammar is, we need to understand the distinction between *prescriptive grammar* and *descriptive grammar*. Descriptive grammar or description involves observing and recording what language is actually like. Linguists or grammarians are expected to refrain from making judgements about the language data that they analyze. In contrast, prescriptive grammar or prescription involves telling people what language should be like; how they ought to use a language; what is correct and what is incorrect (Finegan, n.d.). Thus, prescriptive grammar is required in order to raise Standard English and encourage people to use the correct forms of language.

Before we examine how prescriptive grammar is used in spoken language, we

should draw attention to the fact that there is much great variability in spoken language than there is in written language. This is because spoken language varies regionally according to the social status of speakers and situational contexts (Milroy & Milroy, 1985, p. 54). Consequently, spoken language is linguistically changing in many ways. For example, there are linguistic changes in phonology and grammar which originate in spoken forms rather than in written ones. Thus, the problem that rapidly comes after this change concerns which forms of spoken English should be taught in schools. Milroy & Milroy (1985, p. 9) point out that the teaching of grammar has been in decline and experts in linguistics have been blamed for the decline in grammar teaching. They are aware that some students get in universities to study English with a vague idea of basic grammatical terminology. That is the reason why good grammar teaching and prescriptive grammar are needed in education.



### **Distinctions between Spoken and Written Language**

Milroy & Milroy (1985, p. 59), state that the norms of spoken English grammar have not been effectively standardized. This is because in the past the norms of spoken English have not been totally described as the norms of written English have been.

According to O'Donnell & Todd (1980, p. 3), we can make the distinction between spoken and written language by the way we perceive the medium. Precisely, we perceive spoken language by auditory medium which involves sound, tone of voice and intonation. In contrast, we perceive written language by print medium. That is the reason why written language is much more uniform than is spoken language. Obviously, written language is written or printed on paper so it cannot easily be changed. On the other hand, spoken language travels through the air and its quality relies on the speaker's competence. Thus, spoken language is easily changed by many factors. In order to make this claim even

clearer, we should look at the distinction between 'singular' and 'plural' in speech and writing (O'Donnell & Todd, 1980, p. 3).

1) Speech Singular: cat, dog, horse

Plural: /s/ in cats

/z/ in dogs

/Iz/ in horses

2) Writing Plural: <-s> in cats,

dogs, horses

<-es> in matches

From the example above, we can see that speech and writing are totally different in the way of making distinction between singular and plural. Clearly, writing is perceived by the eye while speech is produced verbally and received by the ear.

In addition, Milroy & Milroy (1985, p. 61) have an interesting example that illustrates the difference between speech and writing: *He only died yesterday*. There is an ambiguity in this sentence because of the adverb *only*. This sentence could mean 'All that he did yesterday was die' but it really means 'It was only yesterday that he died.' However, there



would not be any ambiguity when this sentence is produced in speech. This is because we will know what it is really meant by the social context and mutual knowledge of the speakers. Also, stress and intonation will make the meaning clear. On the contrary, writing lacks stress and intonation. Hence, this sentence can be incorrectly understood when it is presented in writing.

Besides, we usually find people say *'It's me'* instead of *'It is I'*. According to Czerniewska (1981, p. 167), it is correct to say or write *It is I* but it would be strange if we say or write *It is me*. In real life, *It's me* is very common and natural in spoken form but why don't we say *It is me*? Obviously, it has something to do with spoken and written norms.

### **Prescriptive Grammar in Spoken English**

In this section, we examine some linguistic features which are considered to be incorrect in speech and the forms that are considered to be standard in the view of

prescriptive grammar.

First, double negative is considered incorrect or substandard in English. Let's look at the examples of the double negative pattern from Hudson (1992, p. 44).

1. We weren't doing nothing.
2. We were doing nothing.
3. We can't see nothing.
4. We can see nothing.

From the four sentences above, we can see that (1) and (3) have double negatives. Prescriptive grammarians would consider them incorrect. This is because double negatives violate logic and two negatives make a positive. Conversely, those two sentences might be correct in some dialects and perhaps some students who come from a non-standard dialect community use this kind of sentence regularly and naturally in daily life. Hence, the problem is how we can teach Standard English to students who use non-standard dialects without upsetting them. What Hudson (1992, p. 43) suggests is that we should spend most class time on studying



the students' own language. We can use the sentences above and let them explore the non-standard rules for using *nothing*. Then, the class should come up with the rule for their dialect: "Rule: 'Nothing' is fine after a negative verb, but not after a positive one."

Hudson (1992, p. 45) also points out that the students will generalize to other words like *nobody* or *no* and they can apply the same rule to these words as well. He calls these words '*N-words*.' Then, we should make the comparison between Standard English sentences and non-standard ones which he calls '*Town*.'

*Town*

*We weren't doing nothing.*

*We don't want nothing.*

*We didn't buy no sweets.*

*Standard*

*We weren't doing anything.*

*We don't want anything.*

*We didn't buy any sweets.*

After the students have explored these sentences, they might know where Town

uses an *N-word* and Standard uses what he calls an *A-word* (*anything, any, anyone*). After that, they might be able to write another rule for Standard and for Town.

*Rule for Standard: A-words are fine after a negative verb, but not after a positive one.*

*Rule for Town: N-words are fine after a negative verb, but not after a positive one.*

Therefore, the students would know how the rule works for both Standard and Town. Hudson (1992, p. 47) also concludes that there is no point to say anything about double negatives. We cannot tell them not to use non-standard but what we should do is to teach them about non-standard and to make them aware of its structure. We can help them to realize that Standard English is not an enemy to non-standard but an addition to it.

Another main difference between standard and non-standard English is the use of 'subject-verb agreement.' Compare the uses of subject-verb agreement in East Anglia and in Standard English (Cheshire & Milroy, 1993, p. 16).

**Table 1:** The uses of subject-verb agreement in East Anglia and in Standard English

East Anglia	Standard English
I love	I love
You love	You love
He, she, it love	He, she, it loves
We love	We love
They love	They love

From the table above, we can see that some dialects, such as that of East Anglia, make no distinction in the present tense. There is no –s added to the verb for the third-person singular.

To teach students who come from these non-standard communities, Hudson (1992, p. 130) demonstrates the lesson that would help students to be aware of standard and non-standard uses of subject-verb agreement. What he suggests is that, first of all, we select any verb, for example *love*, and ask students what the present-tense form is in their dialects. Some dialects have only one present-tense form which is either *love* or *loves*. If their dialects have two different

present-tense forms, we should ask them to explain the difference between those two forms. Then, we should explore the rules with the class. The purpose of this lesson is to compare the rules of Standard English and those of non-standard dialects. Hudson (1992, p. 132) also suggests that the discussion should cover the irregular verbs such as *BE* and then let the class make comparison between Standard English and their dialects. Consequently, they should come up with the rules of both standard and non-standard dialects and they will be aware of the different uses of both forms of English.

Another rule of prescriptive grammar is ‘never use a preposition to end a sentence’



which sounds ridiculous to modern linguists these days. This rule in fact was established in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century and it has still survived in the present day in some grammar books (Kline, 2001). However, Kline (2001) argues that some sentences might be awkward if we strictly follow this rule. For instance, *What are you talking about?* could be simply converted to *About what are you talking?* which is too clumsy to use. On the other hand, some sentences can be used in both ways. For example, we can say *the drawer I keep my files in* or *the drawer in which I keep my files* (Kline, 2001). Both of them are grammatically correct but the former is better in speech while the latter is more appropriate in writing or formal style.

In addition, another example of non-standard form that we usually find in casual speech is *ain't* such as *I ain't done it* (*I haven't done it*). *Ain't* has developed through natural phonetic changes from *have*

*not*, *has not*, *is not* and *are not* as well as the contracted forms *haven't*, *hasn't*, *isn't* and *aren't* (Cheshire & Milroy, 1993, p. 11). Nowadays *ain't* is commonly found in non-standard speech and songs. Cheshire & Milroy (1993, p. 11) also mention that *ain't* merely represents a further phonetic contraction which is not used by people whose speech has been deeply influenced by written norms.

From the examples of non-standard features mentioned above, we can see that some prescriptive rules are quite ridiculous and impractical to use. Some rules contradict the use of English in real life. However, we can choose the forms of English that are appropriate in particular situation. For instance, we can use standard form in the formal situations and use non-standard form in the casual situations. Undoubtedly, schools play a vital role in encouraging students to use particular forms in particular situation.





### **The Role of Prescriptive Grammar in the Classroom**

To raise standard and encourage students to use Standard English, schools have become an integral part of promoting Standard English and teaching students to talk properly. Besides, prescriptive grammar has already been the pedagogical norm in most schools (Battistella, 2005, p. 47). However, there are some impediments to the teaching of Standard English in schools. Hudson (2000) illustrates the problem of grammar teaching in UK schools (except in Scotland). There was the debate about the teaching of grammar in schools which was divided into three alternatives. Some wanted prescriptive grammar teaching, some teachers argued for no grammar teaching at all and some wanted descriptive grammar teaching and the result was that the descriptive grammar won. He also suggests that the students should be taught Standard English and when to use it and students should be introduced to some features of spoken Standard English and be

taught to use them in the right situation and at the right time.

According to Mercer & Maybin (1981), there have been different policy approaches to language teaching in British schools. One of them was the elimination of non-standard dialects. This approach sounds impractical and dangerous to language teaching. Trying to eliminate non-standard dialects seems to be a wrong way of promoting Standard English. As we know, many students are from communities that use non-standard dialects and they have been surrounded by their dialects since they were born. Thus, their dialects are strongly embedded in their minds and lives and regarded as their identity. Trying to eradicate their non-standard dialects is like trying to eradicate their identity.

Hence, what we should do is to teach students both forms of English and encourage them to use Standard form where appropriate. Also, Offner (1995) states that we should expose the students to a variety of forms and make



sure that they are aware of the different situations and they can use each form in the suitable situations and circumstances. Adger (2005) also suggests that ‘dialect awareness’ should be introduced in school curriculum. One of the reasons is that we are now living in a multicultural world. Students should be exposed to many varieties of English in order that they will be ready to face the real world in which languages are changing geographically and socially.

In short, it would be a good idea to teach students many forms of language rather than trying to eliminate non-standard forms. Thus, students will be able to use many forms of language where appropriate and they will know when to use standard or non-standard language effectively and successfully.

### **Dialects and the Speech Community**

As we know, English is changing regionally and socially throughout the world. Therefore, we have to bear in mind that each

community has the different use of English depending on social status, education of the speakers and so on. Their uses of English can be different in terms of grammar, vocabulary or syntax. These kinds of English are generally regarded as dialect. Some people regard it as deviant or substandard and inferior to Standard English. Nevertheless, some people argue that dialect is more energetic or livelier than Standard English (O’Donnell & Todd, 1980, p. 17). However, when we teach grammar to students in schools, we have to accept the fact that each child has different English backgrounds and some might come from the communities that use non-standard dialects. Thus, how can we deal with this problem and how can we teach Standard English successfully and efficiently?

In this section, we discuss the attitudes towards non-standard dialects and speech community which are believed to be an obstacle to standardization.



First of all, we have to understand that non-standard dialect is not about accent. Accent is just the different ways people pronounce a language. A Standard English sentence can be pronounced in many ways depending on the speakers' community (Mugglestone, 1995, p. 58). On the contrary, O'Donnell & Todd (1980, p. 17) state that a dialect can be commonly described in terms of three distinct strata: the sound system, the vocabulary and the grammar.

In addition, it is quite hard to teach Standard English to students who come from communities that use non-standard dialects. Sutcliffe (1981, p. 115) explored English language produced by black students in British schools and concludes that most black students want the ability to produce Standard English for some purposes such as examinations. However, he argues that it is quite essential to wait until the students reach a certain stage of their development.

What is more, while schools are trying to promote standard language and encouraging

students to speak correct forms of English, some students try to speak non-standard forms so that they can be accepted by their friends who use non-standard English. Cheshire & Milroy (1993, p. 20) demonstrate peer group pressures on language that can affect variation in the use of non-standard forms of English. Naturally, adolescents want to be passionately accepted by their friends and they care about the way they present themselves so that they can be in the group. This also affects the way they use language. Cheshire & Milroy (1993, p. 20) also point out that young adolescents who are closely involved with peer group that use non-standard language might have strong feelings against using Standard English. This is because they want to be like other kids and they do not want to be teased by their schoolmates. However, it is likely to be just a temporary behavior like other teenage fashions that would be forgotten when they grow up (Cheshire & Milroy, 1993, p. 21).

When we look back at the teaching of



English to Thai students, we may realize that promoting Standard English should not be that difficult. The reason is that most Thai students don't use English in daily life, whether standard or non-standard. Thus, it may be easier for the English-language teachers to teach them Standard English. Furthermore, Schmidt & McCreary (1977) claim that many non-native English speakers did better in the test concerning the prescriptive rules than the native ones. This is because non-native speakers studied English as a foreign language. They are unlikely to be exposed to the non-standard dialects in their everyday life. This conclusion can be applied to the case of most Thai students who do well in the grammar tests, but are unaware of the non-standard forms. Therefore, it might be more beneficial to let students be aware of the use of non-standard language in order that they can understand it when they happen to be among the non-standard English speakers.

### **Conclusion**

We have discussed the notion of prescriptive grammar of spoken English and the role of standardization in schools. However, we cannot stop language from being changed and we cannot make everyone use the standard form of English and ignore their dialects which identify their identity. According to Hudson (1992, p. 39), "Standard English is just one dialect among many." This claim is sound and reasonable enough to make us realize that Standard English is not different from any other non-standard English. Obviously, the reason why Standard English is considered to be a correct and polite form is that it is used by the rich and powerful (Hudson, 1992, p. 39). Also, Haas (1982, p. 10) points out that *It ain't no good* is not worse than *It isn't any good* or *It is no good*. The only reason why the latter is acceptable is the social prestige of those who use them. We have also discussed grammar teaching to Thai students who are not regularly



exposed to non-standard dialects. Thus, it would not be an uphill task for teachers to teach them the standard form of English. However, letting them be aware of the use of non-standard language is advisable.

Therefore, what we should do is not trying to eradicate non-standard dialects but

we should try to teach students to know how Standard English rules work and how they are different from other dialects. Also, the most important thing is that students should be able to use both standard and non-standard English in appropriate situations and appropriate time.

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