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WHO DECIDES WHAT IS CORRECT? AUTHORITY, USAGE, AND THE EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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Abstract: The notion of **"correctness" in English grammar** has long been shaped by prescriptive traditions; however, contemporary linguistic reality increasingly challenges this authority. This study investigates **the tension between prescriptive grammar rules and actual language usage**, focusing on how authority is constructed and negotiated in modern English. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, the research analyzes examples from spoken corpora, digital communication, and educational materials. Particular attention is paid to frequently contested forms and their functional role in real-life communication.

The findings reveal **that grammatical norms are not fixed but evolve dynamically through usage**, influenced by social, technological, and cultural factors. (McCulloch, 2019) Moreover, the data indicate that speakers often prioritize communicative efficiency and contextual appropriateness over strict adherence to formal rules. This tendency is especially evident in informal and digital contexts, where language innovation is more rapid and widely accepted.

The study argues that **linguistic authority is gradually shifting from institutional rule-makers to language users themselves**, reflecting a broader democratization of language. It also highlights the growing gap between prescribed standards and authentic usage in everyday communication. The paper concludes by suggesting a **more flexible, usage-based approach to grammar** in both linguistic theory and language education, emphasizing the need to reconcile normative frameworks with real-world linguistic practices.

Keywords: prescriptive grammar, descriptive linguistics, language change, English usage, linguistic authority, standard English.

Аннотация: Понятие «правильности» в английской грамматике на протяжении длительного времени формировалось под влиянием прескриптивных традиций, однако современная языковая реальность всё чаще ставит под сомнение их авторитет. В данной работе рассматривается противоречие между предписываемыми грамматическими нормами и фактическим употреблением языка, с акцентом на то, каким образом формируется и переосмысливается языковая норма в современном английском языке.

Исследование выполнено в рамках **качественно-описательного подхода** и основано на анализе примеров из разговорных корпусов, цифровой коммуникации и учебных материалов. Особое внимание уделяется спорным грамматическим формам и их функциональной роли в реальном общении.

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Результаты показывают, что **грамматические нормы не являются фиксированными, а динамически изменяются в процессе использования** под влиянием социальных, технологических и культурных факторов (McCulloch, 2019). Кроме того, было установлено, что носители языка часто отдают **приоритет коммуникативной эффективности и уместности в конкретном контексте,** а не строгому соблюдению формальных правил. Эта тенденция особенно ярко проявляется в неформальной и цифровой коммуникации, где языковые инновации распространяются значительно быстрее.

В работе обосновывается, что **языковой авторитет постепенно смещается от институциональных нормотворцев к самим пользователям языка**, что отражает более широкий **процесс демократизации языка**. Также подчёркивается растущий **разрыв между предписанными стандартами и реальным употреблением языка** в повседневной коммуникации. В заключение предлагается рассматривать грамматику с более гибкой, ориентированной на употребление точки зрения как в лингвистической теории, так и в практике преподавания, с учётом необходимости согласования нормативных моделей с реальными языковыми практиками.

Ключевые слова: прескриптивная грамматика, дескриптивная лингвистика, языковые изменения, употребление английского языка, языковой авторитет, стандартный английский язык

Introduction

The concept of **grammatical correctness** has traditionally been governed by prescriptive norms established by grammarians, educators, and authoritative institutions (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). These norms have long served as the foundation for defining what is considered "proper" English, being systematically codified in grammar textbooks, style guides, and educational curricula. Such an approach has historically aimed to ensure stability, clarity, and uniformity in language use, particularly in formal contexts such as academic writing, official communication, and public discourse. As a result, prescriptive grammar has played a crucial role not only in regulating linguistic behavior but also in shaping societal perceptions of linguistic competence and correctness.

However, in recent decades, this **traditional understanding of grammatical authority** has come under increasing scrutiny. The rapid development of digital communication technologies, including social media platforms, messaging applications, and online forums, has significantly transformed the ways in which English is used in everyday interaction (McCulloch, 2019). These environments encourage brevity, immediacy, and creativity, often resulting in the widespread use of non-standard forms, simplified structures, and innovative expressions. At the same time, the global spread of English has led to the emergence of diverse linguistic varieties, commonly referred to as World Englishes (Crystal, 2003), each reflecting unique cultural and communicative needs. Consequently, the idea of a single, fixed standard of correctness is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

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One of the central issues in modern English linguistics, therefore, is the growing **discrepancy between prescriptive grammar and actual language use**. While traditional grammar rules emphasize stability and uniformity, real-life communication is characterized by variability, flexibility, and constant adaptation to context. Speakers frequently deviate from established norms not due to a lack of competence, but as a strategic choice aimed at achieving communicative efficiency, expressing identity, or adapting to specific social situations (Labov, 1972). This divergence raises a fundamental and complex question: *who ultimately determines what is considered **"correct" in English**—the institutions that prescribe the rules, or the speakers who actively shape the language through usage*?

Although previous studies (e.g., Crystal, 2003; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002) have extensively examined the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to grammar, there remains a lack of consensus regarding how linguistic authority should be conceptualized in contemporary contexts. In particular, insufficient attention has been paid to the role of digital communication and global linguistic diversity in redefining grammatical norms. Moreover, existing research often treats prescriptive and descriptive perspectives as opposing frameworks, rather than exploring their potential interaction and coexistence. This gap highlights the need for a more nuanced and integrative reassessment of grammatical norms in modern English.

Against this background, the present study seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate by examining the relationship between grammatical authority and actual language usage. It aims to move beyond a purely theoretical discussion and to provide a more context-sensitive understanding of how correctness is negotiated in real communicative practices.

Aim   of   the   study: To analyze the relationship between grammatical authority and actual language usage in modern English.

Objectives:
1.   To examine the role of prescriptive grammar in defining correctness
2.   To analyze examples of real-life English usage that diverge from standard norms
3.   To explore how linguistic authority is shifting in contemporary contexts

Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative-descriptive research design**, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of language use in naturally occurring contexts and provides a flexible framework for interpreting linguistic variation. Such an approach is particularly suitable for investigating the relationship between prescriptive grammatical norms and actual usage, as it prioritizes meaning, function, and context over purely formal structures (Labov, 1972).

The data for the study were collected from **three primary sources**, each selected to represent a distinct domain of language use. First, spoken language corpora, including samples of informal conversational English, were examined in order to capture authentic,

spontaneous speech patterns. These data provide valuable insight into how speakers use language in real-time communication, often revealing forms that diverge from standardized norms. Second, digital communication platforms, such as social media posts, online forums, and messaging exchanges, were analyzed (McCulloch, 2019). These contexts are particularly significant due to their role in accelerating language change and encouraging innovative and non-standard forms. Third, educational materials, including grammar textbooks and teaching resources, were reviewed to identify prescriptive rules and recommended standards of correctness that are typically presented to learners (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

A **purposive sampling method** was employed to ensure that the selected data were relevant to the research objectives. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the study focused on illustrative and functionally significant examples of grammatical variation. Particular attention was given to frequently debated forms, such as the use of **"ain't," double negatives** (*e.g., "I don't know nothing")*, and informal contractions, as these structures often occupy a contested position between correctness and acceptability (Trudgill, 1999).

The analytical procedure involved a **systematic comparison between prescriptive rules and actual usage patterns** observed in the collected data. The data were first organized into thematic categories reflecting different types of divergence from standard grammar, including morphological variation, syntactic simplification, and pragmatic adaptation. Each example was then analyzed in terms of its frequency, contextual appropriateness, and communicative function, with special emphasis on how meaning is maintained or enhanced despite deviation from formal norms.

To ensure the validity of the analysis, data from multiple sources were triangulated, allowing for cross-contextual comparison and a more comprehensive understanding of usage patterns. Reliability was addressed through consistent application of analytical criteria across all data sets. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the qualitative nature of the study and the use of purposive sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a robust framework for examining the dynamic interplay between grammatical authority and real-life language use.

Results

The analysis revealed several significant patterns that illustrate the **complex relationship between prescriptive grammatical norms and actual language usage** across different communicative contexts. These patterns not only highlight the frequency of deviation from standardized rules but also demonstrate the functional and context-sensitive nature of such variations (Labov, 1972).

Frequent Divergence from Prescriptive Norms

The data clearly indicate that forms traditionally labeled as incorrect or non-standard are not only present but widely used in both spoken language and informal digital communication. Among the most prominent examples are double negatives (e.g., *"I don't*

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know nothing"), non-standard verb forms, and the use of items such as *"ain't."* (Trudgill, 1999). Rather than appearing as isolated or accidental deviations, these forms occur systematically and with notable regularity.

Importantly, their usage does not typically result in communicative breakdown. On the contrary, such structures often serve to reinforce meaning, add emphasis, or reflect the speaker's identity and social background. This suggests that the notion of "incorrectness" is, to a considerable extent, socially constructed and does not necessarily correspond to communicative inefficiency (Labov, 1972).

Context-Dependent Acceptability

Another key finding of the study is that the acceptability of **non-standard forms is highly dependent on context.** In informal settings, particularly in peer-to-peer communication, deviations from prescriptive norms are not only tolerated but often expected. In such environments, speakers tend to prioritize clarity, speed, and interpersonal connection over strict adherence to grammatical rules.

For example, simplified structures, contractions, and ellipsis are frequently employed to facilitate rapid interaction. In contrast, in more formal contexts—such as academic writing or professional communication—there remains a stronger expectation to conform to standardized norms (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). This demonstrates that grammatical correctness is not absolute but varies according to situational, social, and communicative factors.

Influence of Digital Communication

The findings also highlight the significant role of digital communication in **accelerating linguistic change**. Online platforms, including social media, messaging applications, and forums, create environments in which language is produced and consumed rapidly, often under constraints of time and space (McCulloch, 2019). As a result, users tend to adopt abbreviated forms, simplified syntax, and innovative expressions.

These digital practices not only reflect but also actively shape emerging linguistic norms. Features such as intentional misspellings, unconventional punctuation, and hybrid forms combining written and spoken language characteristics have become increasingly common. Over time, many of these features gain wider acceptance and may eventually influence broader patterns of language use beyond digital contexts.

Persistence of Prescriptive Norms in Education

Despite the widespread variation observed in actual language use, educational systems continue to uphold **prescriptive grammar** as the primary standard of correctness (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Textbooks, curricula, and assessment practices consistently emphasize rule-based accuracy, often presenting language as a fixed and stable system.

This creates a noticeable **gap between what learners are taught and what they encounter in real-life communication.** Students may develop a strong awareness of formal rules but remain unprepared for the variability and flexibility of authentic language

use. As a result, they may perceive non-standard forms as entirely incorrect, rather than understanding their contextual appropriateness.

This tension suggests the need for a more balanced pedagogical approach that acknowledges both the importance of standard grammar and the reality of linguistic variation.

Discussion

The findings of the present study strongly suggest that **grammatical correctness should not be viewed as a fixed or absolute concep**t, but rather as a **socially constructed and context-dependent phenomenon**. While prescriptive grammar continues to provide a standardized framework that facilitates clarity and mutual intelligibility—particularly in formal and institutional settings—it does not fully capture the inherently dynamic and adaptive nature of language as it is used in real communicative practices. In this sense, correctness appears to be less a matter of strict rule adherence and more a function of appropriateness within a given social and communicative context (Leech (2014).

The widespread and systematic use of non-standard forms observed in the data further indicates that language users themselves play an active and decisive role in shaping grammatical norms. Rather than passively following externally imposed rules, speakers continuously negotiate meaning, adjust linguistic forms, and contribute to the evolution of the language. This observation **aligns closely with the principles of descriptive linguistics**, as outlined by scholars such as Labov (1972) and Trudgill (1999), who emphasize the importance of analyzing language as it is actually used rather than as it is prescribed. From this perspective, so-called "deviations" from standard grammar can be reinterpreted as legitimate variations that serve specific communicative, social, or stylistic functions.

Furthermore, the influence of digital communication has significantly accelerated these processes of linguistic change and negotiation. Online environments provide a space in which traditional norms are often relaxed, allowing users to experiment with grammar, vocabulary, and style in ways that would be less acceptable in formal contexts. This has contributed to what may be described as a democratization of language, where authority is no longer concentrated in the hands of institutions such as academies, publishers, or educational systems, but is increasingly distributed among the users themselves. As a result, grammatical norms are becoming more fluid, flexible, and responsive to the needs of contemporary communication.

However, this shift towards a more usage-based and decentralized model of linguistic authority also presents significant challenges, particularly in the field of language education. Teachers and curriculum designers are faced with the complex task of **balancing two potentially conflicting goals:** on the one hand, the need to equip learners with a solid command of standard grammar, which remains essential for academic and professional success; on the other hand, the necessity of preparing learners for authentic communication, where variability and non-standard forms are common. A strictly

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prescriptive approach, which prioritizes rule memorization and error correction, may therefore be insufficient in addressing the realities of modern language use.

In light of these considerations, it becomes increasingly important to adopt a more integrative pedagogical framework that acknowledges both the value of standardization and the legitimacy of variation. Such an approach would not seek to replace prescriptive norms entirely, but rather to contextualize them within a broader understanding of language as a living and evolving system. By doing so, it may be possible to bridge **the gap between theoretical models of correctness and the practical demands of real-world communication.**

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the **authority of standard grammar in English is undergoing a profound and ongoing transformation**. While prescriptive norms continue to play an important role in maintaining clarity, consistency, and mutual intelligibility—particularly in formal, academic, and institutional contexts—they are increasingly being challenged by patterns of actual language use shaped by social interaction, technological innovation, and global communication practices. This tension reflects a broader shift in how grammatical correctness is understood and negotiated in contemporary English.

The findings of the study suggest that the concept of correctness should no longer be viewed as fixed, universal, or absolute. Instead, it should be reconsidered as **flexible, dynamic, and context-sensitive,** reflecting the realities of how language functions in everyday communication. In this regard, linguistic authority can no longer be attributed exclusively to traditional institutions such as grammarians, educational systems, or publishing bodies. Rather, it is increasingly co-constructed by language users themselves, whose communicative needs, social identities, and interactional contexts actively shape and redefine grammatical norms.

Importantly, this shift carries both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, it calls for a more integrative understanding of grammar that bridges the gap between prescriptive and descriptive approaches, recognizing the value of both stability and variation within the linguistic system. From a practical standpoint, particularly in the field of language education, it highlights the need to reconsider current teaching methodologies. Educators are encouraged to move beyond rigid rule-based instruction and to incorporate a more usage-oriented perspective that prepares learners for the diversity and variability of real-world communication.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the ongoing discussion of English as a global language, where multiple varieties coexist and interact. In such contexts, strict adherence to a single standard may be less relevant than the ability to communicate effectively across different linguistic and cultural settings.

Future research should therefore explore in greater detail how these **shifts in linguistic authority influence language teaching, assessment practices, and curriculum design,** especially in multilingual and international environments where

English functions as a lingua franca. Additionally, further empirical studies are needed to examine how learners perceive and navigate the relationship between prescribed norms and actual usage in their own communicative experiences.

In conclusion, the evolving nature of grammatical correctness underscores the need to view language not as a static system of rules, but as a living, adaptive, and socially embedded phenomenon that continues to develop in response to the changing needs of its users.

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