

Introduction

Grammar is the study of how words combine to form sentences. The following is a well-formed, ‘grammatical’ sentence:

[1] John has been ill.

Speakers of English can produce and understand a sentence like this without ever thinking about its grammar. Conversely, no speaker of English would ever produce a sentence like this:

[2] *!ill John been has.

This is an ill-formed, ‘ungrammatical’ sentence. But can you say why?

The study of grammar provides us with the terminology we need to talk about language in an informed way. It enables us to analyse and to describe our own use of language, as well as that of other people. In writing, a knowledge of grammar enables us to evaluate the choices that are available to us during composition.

Grammar rules

Many people think of English grammar in terms of traditional rules, such as Never split an infinitive; Never end a sentence with a preposition. Specifically, these are **prescriptive** rules. They tell us nothing about how English is really used in everyday life. In fact, native speakers of English regularly split infinitives (*to **actually** consider*) and sentences often end with a preposition (*Dr Brown is the man I’ll vote **for**.*).

¹ An asterisk is used throughout this book to indicate ungrammatical or incorrect examples, which are used to illustrate a point.

Prescriptive grammar reached its peak in the nineteenth century. In the twenty-first century, grammarians adopt a more **descriptive** approach. In the descriptive approach, the rules of grammar – the ones that concern us in this book – are the rules that we obey every time we speak, even if we are completely unaware of what they are. For instance, when we say *John has been ill*, we obey many grammar rules, including rules about:

- 1 Where to place the subject *John* – before the verb (▶see [1.2](#))
- 2 Subject–verb agreement – *John has*, not *John have* (▶see [1.3](#))
- 3 Verb forms – *been*, not *being* (▶see [2.3.1](#))

These are descriptive rules. The task of the modern grammarian is to discover and then to describe the rules by which a language actually works. In order to do this, grammarians now use computer technology to help them analyse very large collections of naturally occurring language, taken from a wide variety of sources, including conversations, lectures, broadcasts, newspapers, magazines, letters and books.

Standard English

Standard English is the variety of English which carries the greatest social prestige in a speech community. In Britain, there is a standard British English, in the United States, there is a standard American English, in Australia, a standard Australian English, and so on. In each country, the national standard is that variety which is used in public institutions, including government, education, the judiciary and the media. It is used on national television and radio, and in newspapers, books and magazines. The standard variety is the only variety which has a standardized spelling. As a result, the national standard has the widest currency as a means of communication, in contrast with regional varieties, which have a more limited currency.

The following sentence is an example of standard English:

I was ill last week.

The following sentence is non-standard:

I were ill last week.

The non-standard past-tense construction *I were* is commonly used in several regional varieties, especially in parts of England. Regional varieties are associated with particular regions. The standard variety is not geographically bound in the same way.

Using standard English involves making choices of grammar, vocabulary and spelling. It has nothing to do with accent. The sentence *I was ill last week* is standard English whether it is spoken with a Birmingham accent, a Glasgow accent, a Cockney accent, a Newcastle accent, or any other of the many accents in Britain today. Similarly, standard American English (sometimes called ‘General American’) is used throughout the United States, from San Francisco to New York, from New Orleans to the Great Lakes. In both countries, the standard variety co-exists with a very large number of regional varieties. In fact, most educated people use both their own regional variety and the standard variety, and they can switch effortlessly between the two. They speak both varieties with the same accent.

No variety of English – including standard English – is inherently better or worse than any other. However, the standard variety is the one that has the greatest value in social terms as a means of communication, especially for public and professional communication. The notion of standard English is especially important to learners of the language. Because of its high social value, learners are justifiably anxious to ensure that the English they learn is standard English.

English as a world language

Conservative estimates put the total number of English speakers throughout the world at around 800 million. English is the mother tongue of an estimated 350 million people in the countries listed overleaf.

In addition to these countries, English is an official language, or has special status, in over sixty countries worldwide, including Cameroon, Ghana, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Pakistan, the Philippines and Singapore. This means that English is used in these countries in many public functions, including government, the judiciary, the press and broadcasting. Even in countries where it has no official status, such as China

Approximate number of
mother-tongue English
speakers, in millions

United States	216
Great Britain	53
Canada	17
Australia	14
New Zealand	4
Ireland	3.5
South Africa	2

and Japan, English has a central place in school curricula, because its value in international communication and trade is unquestioned.

The spread of English around the world was one of the most significant linguistic developments of the twentieth century. That century also witnessed another important development: the decline of British English and the rise of American English as the dominant variety.

British English and American English

Linguistic influence follows closely on political and economic influence. For several centuries, British English was the dominant variety throughout the world, because Britain was the centre of a vast empire that straddled the globe. In the twentieth century, political power shifted dramatically away from Britain, and the United States is now both politically and economically the most powerful country in the world. It is not surprising then that American English has become the dominant variety, although the traditional influence of British English remains strong. In recent years, the worldwide influence of American English has been greatly strength-

ened by the mass media and the entertainment industry. American news channels such as CNN and NBC are transmitted around the world by satellite, and American films and television shows are seen on every continent. The language of the Internet is overwhelmingly American English.

The differences between American English and British English are for the most part fairly superficial. Perhaps the most familiar differences are in vocabulary:

British English	American English
autumn	fall
film	movie
flat	apartment
holiday	vacation
lift	elevator
nappy	diaper
number plate	license plate
petrol	gas
post code	zip code
rubbish	trash
shop	store
tap	faucet
taxi	cab
trainers	sneakers

Some of the American English words on this list – particularly *apartment*, *cab* and *store* – are slowly being assimilated into British English. No doubt this trend will continue. International communication and travel tend to smooth the differences between national varieties, in favour of the dominant variety.

In the spoken language, there are very noticeable differences in stress between American English and British English. For instance, American speakers generally stress the final syllable in *adult*, while British speakers stress the first syllable: *adult*. Other stress differences include:

British English	American English
<i>address</i>	<i>address</i>
<i>ballet</i>	<i>ballet</i>
<i>cigarette</i>	<i>cigarette</i>
<i>debris</i>	<i>debris</i>
<i>garage</i>	<i>garage</i>
<i>laboratory</i>	<i>laboratory</i>
<i>magazine</i>	<i>magazine</i>

Finally, spelling differences include:

British English	American English
<i>cheque</i>	<i>check</i>
<i>humour</i>	<i>humor</i>
<i>pyjamas</i>	<i>pajamas</i>
<i>theatre</i>	<i>theater</i>
<i>tyre</i>	<i>tire</i>

For more on spelling differences, ►see 5.13.

The grammatical differences between American English and British English are far less obvious. They tend to be localised in very specific areas of grammar. Some differences may be observed in the use of prepositions (►see 2.8). Americans say *ten after twelve*, while Britons say *ten past twelve*. Americans say *in back of the house*, Britons say *behind the house*. In the choice of verb forms, too, we can see some systematic differences. American English tends to prefer the regular form of a verb when a choice is available, for example, *burned* in favour of *burnt*, *learned* in favour of *learnt* (►see 2.3.8).

Despite their differences, American English and British English, as well as all the other national varieties – Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, Indian, and so on – share a very extensive common core of vocabulary, spelling and grammar. It is this common core that makes them mutually intelligible. In this book, we are concerned with the core grammatical features of English, and especially with the core features of the two major varieties, American English and British English.

Grammatical variation across national varieties of English is currently the subject of a major research project, the International Corpus of English (ICE), which is being coordinated by the Survey of English Usage, University College London. For more information, see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/>.

Many of the citations in this grammar are taken from the British component of ICE (ICE-GB), and from parts of the American component (ICE-USA). In some cases, the originals have been shortened for illustrative purposes. Omissions are indicated by [. . .].

The grammatical hierarchy

The building blocks of grammar are sentences, clauses, phrases and words. These four units constitute what is called the grammatical hierarchy. We can represent the hierarchy schematically as shown overleaf.

SENTENCES

– consist of one or more:

CLAUSES

– consist of one or more:

PHRASES

– consist of one or more:

WORDS

In Chapter 1, we look at sentences in terms of their sentence ‘elements’ – subject, verb, object, etc. In Chapter 2 we turn our attention to the lower end of the hierarchy, and consider how words are classified into word classes. The following two chapters look at phrases and clauses respectively.

Sentences are at the top of the grammatical hierarchy, so they are often the largest units to be considered in a grammar book. However, in this book we also look briefly at some of the devices that are available for joining sentences to other sentences, and for organising them in continuous discourse. These topics are discussed later in the book ►[see 4.11](#).

Words are at the bottom of the hierarchy, and for that reason some grammar books treat them as the smallest units in a language. However, the internal structure of a word can often play an important role. For instance, when we add the inflection *-er* to the adjective *old*, we create the comparative adjective *older*. In Chapter 5, we look at the internal structure of words, and especially at prefixes and suffixes. We also look at some of the methods that are available for creating new words, including ‘blending’ – combining parts of words, such as ‘*cam*’ (from *camera*) and ‘*corder*’ (from *recorder*), to create the new word *camcorder*. Chapter 5 concludes by looking at English spelling. It offers general rules for spelling, and discusses some common spelling problems – words like *affect* and *effect* which are easily and regularly confused with each other in writing.