

The Representation of English Articles in Prescriptive Grammars and the Implications for Language Education

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Perhaps no difference in the understanding of language is more significant than that between the descriptive and prescriptive approaches. Whereas descriptivists attempt to elucidate “the principles that govern the construction of words and sentences in ... language without recommending or condemning particular usage choices” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 2), the recommendation and condemnation of particular linguistic forms—whether pronunciation, word choice, or grammatical structure—is precisely the focus of prescriptivists. The descriptivist approach forms the foundation for the modern science of linguistics, while among nonlinguists—including not only the general public but also scholars and educators in other fields and language professionals such as writers, editors, translators, and public speakers—the prescriptive view holds sway.

This gap between the objective examination of language as it actually is used and valiative assertions about how language “should” be used has implications beyond the world of scholarship. In the mid-1990s, for example, a controversy erupted in the United States over the designation and status of the variety of English spoken by Americans of African ancestry, especially the descendents of slaves (Wolfram, 1998). When the school board of Oakland, California, adopted the term “Ebonics” to describe the language spoken by many of the district’s African-American students, a move intended to allow such students to receive the educational benefits offered to first-language speakers of non-English languages (Board of Education, n.d.), linguists largely supported the move (Linguistic Society of America, 1997) while political figures (Lewis, 1996) and commentators (such as Rowan, 1997) condemned it. The fires of this dispute were largely fueled by the conflicts over race and class endemic in American society, but it also reflected a profound disagreement over whether actual language use is something to be observed and recognized as it is or something that must be praised if “good” and criticized and corrected if “bad.”

An earlier, perhaps canonical public dispute between descriptivists and prescriptivists, mainly about written language, arose in the 1960s after the publication of *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Gove et al., 1961). While the dictionary’s editors saw their task as being “to state meanings in which words are in fact used, not to give editorial opinion on what their meanings should be” (p. 4a), *Webster’s Third* was attacked widely in the press for its inclusion—and therefore, the attackers believed, its tacit approval—of various words, meanings, and pronunciations that

the critics regarded as incorrect, illiterate, or otherwise “wrong.” The controversy revolved around not only competing views of whether dictionaries should be recorders or arbiters of usage but also, more fundamentally, the question of whether there exists a stratum of “proper” language that should be emulated above the level of actual usage.¹ While in English-language dictionary-making the descriptivists have remained dominant (due, in part, to the often arbitrary and idiosyncratic recommendations of prescriptivists and their subsequent inability to agree about the proper status of specific usages), the view that particular linguistic forms can be regarded as “correct” or “incorrect” regardless of actual usage continues to be widely held among nonlinguists.

Although attracting less public notice than the Ebonics and *Webster’s Third* controversies, another important arena for the descriptive-prescriptive divide is in second and foreign language education. As Rosamond Mitchell (2000) has noted, “[foreign language] grammar pedagogy has historically been based on prescriptive ‘standard language’ grammars, with an emphasis on ‘correct’ written usage, on sentence structure, and on morphology,” but a shift in recent decades in language education to “process and functional approaches to grammar” and an increasing focus on spoken language and the use of corpora of natural language use have raised the profile of descriptivist approaches. However, while the choice of a rigorously descriptivist approach can raise difficulties in any context—in lexicography, for example, the vast and constantly growing body of recorded language use is too large and diverse to yield definitive conclusions about meanings and usage in many cases even with the use of language processing and analysis software—the situation in the language classroom is particularly challenging for committed descriptivists. Beginning and intermediate students struggling to learn the unfamiliar forms of a foreign language cannot, in practice, be exposed to the full variety of actual usage, as they would quickly get bogged down in the details and fail to make progress. Rather, they must be told, for example, that the English word *often* is pronounced /ɑːfn/ and not /ɑːftn/, even though the latter pronunciation is not uncommon among native speakers, and that pronouns that are the objects of prepositions should be in the accusative case (*for Mary and me*), even though the nominative (*for Mary and I*) is also frequently used. This practical focus on prescriptive rules is reinforced by demands, from both students and institutions, for second-language education to concentrate on “standard” or “prestige” dialects. For various reasons, therefore, language teachers, even those who, in other contexts, support the ideal of linguistic descriptivism, must present the details of grammar and usage largely prescriptively. The issue that therefore arises for language teachers and those who train them is what grammatical forms to prescribe and how to explain those prescriptions.

Several types of prescription are possible. One is prescription based on the formal or semiformal usage of speakers and writers who follow the patterns of the dominant social, economic, or cultural group

¹ It should be noted that the English described even by *Webster’s Third* did not cover the full panoply of actual language use by speakers and writers of all social classes in all situations but, rather, was based on what its editors regarded as “good standard contemporary cultivated English” (Gove, 1961). Within this restricted sphere, however, the dictionary’s approach certainly falls on the descriptive side of the divide.

of the language's speakers. In the case of American English, for example, this would mean prescribing *I have been there before* or *I've been there before* but not *I been there before* (the last being common in many spoken dialects) and, in writing, *Could you wait for me?* rather than *Cud U w8 4 me?* (the latter used in text messaging). This type of prescription accounts for the vast majority of grammatical forms taught in foreign language classes; teachers know those forms because they acquired them unconsciously as children (in the case of teachers teaching their first language), because they learned them consciously when they themselves were students of the language (in the case of teachers teaching a second language), or because they are aware of them through continued exposure to the dominant versions of the language (in the case of both types of teachers).²

Another type of prescription is based on the grammatical rules taught in first-language writing classes at schools and universities and advocated more generally by writers, editors, and others interested in language use. Examples of such prescriptions in English would be the use of singular verbs with the subject *none*, as in *None of them was late*, and singular pronoun references to *every-* words, as in *Everyone brought his or her coat* (as opposed to the common, but sometimes frowned upon, *None of them were late* and *Everyone brought their coat*); the avoidance of phrases such as *free gift* or *very unique* (both common in native English but derided as being redundant, in the former case, or presenting a semantic contradiction between variability and absoluteness, in the latter); and either the use or the avoidance of the serial comma (that is, prescribing either *She bought some apples, pears, and oranges* or *She bought some apples, pears and oranges*, some prescriptivists insisting on the former usage and others on the latter). Because rules of this type often do not reflect actual usage even among speakers and writers of the dominant dialect, they are usually acquired by both native and nonnative language instructors through a conscious process from teachers and other people in positions of authority or from writing textbooks, usage manuals, and popular books and articles on language. (One interesting characteristic of such prescriptions is that their advocates often become emotionally attached to them and insist on their "correctness" regardless of contravening evidence either from usage or from other prescriptive authorities.)

Grammatical rules of this latter, "taught" type are, in turn, relatively easy to teach. Not only can the rules usually be explained in a few words, but, more importantly, the teachers can explain those rules easily because they themselves learned those rules through explicit explanations, which they can then reproduce to their students. Rules of the former type—that is, those based on dominant usage—are often easy for nonnative speakers to explain as well, as they also learned those rules consciously when they were students of the language. The difficulty that arises is in the case of native-speaker teachers trying to explain the rules

² A related issue, not considered in this paper but worthy of further investigation, is how teachers' attitudes toward dialect differences, particularly differences between British (or, more broadly, Commonwealth) English on the one hand and American English on the other, affect language education. The author has encountered many cases of a native English teacher insisting to students and colleagues that a particular form is incorrect when in fact it is standard in dialects of English other than that teacher's native one. Sometimes the teacher is simply not aware that the "incorrect" form is standard in other dialects, but often the teacher's attitude seems to be shaped by emotional, even nationalistic attitudes about certain dialects and their speakers.

that they have acquired unconsciously as children. Teachers who have had full training in applied linguistics or second-language teaching should have acquired a sufficient conscious grasp of their first language's grammar and the metalanguage necessary to explain it. As a practical matter, however, many native language teachers do not have such training, and when explaining grammar they must either fall back on unhelpful intuition-based explanations ("This sounds more natural," "This is what we usually say," etc.) or restrict their explanations to the prescriptive rules that they learned consciously in school and elsewhere. If a particular grammatical form is not covered by those prescriptive rules, their students must therefore learn the form either through imitation (possible in some instances, but certainly not in all) or imperfectly or not at all.

This paper examines an instance where the near-total neglect of an important component of English grammar from prescriptive grammars and usage books results in inadequate conscious grasp of that component by native-speaker English teachers and, consequently, inadequate acquisition of that component by learners of the language. That grammatical component is the system of English articles (*the*, *a/n*, and no article) and, more broadly, the category of definiteness. Despite the importance of articles and definiteness to English grammar—most English sentences contain noun phrases marked for either definiteness or indefiniteness, and article errors are one of the most common categories of mistakes made by English-language learners whose first languages do not have similar systems of articles and definiteness—most prescriptive accounts of English grammar and usage aimed at native English speakers treat articles only cursorily at best. As a result, native speakers of English who become language teachers often have difficulty teaching article usage adequately, and their students fail to acquire this important aspect of English grammar as well as they would if given better explanations.

Definiteness and Articles in English

The article system of English is admittedly complex. The sixth edition of *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (Hornby, 2000), for example, divides the usages of the definite article *the* into 10 senses, from

1 used to refer to sb/sth that has already been mentioned or is easily understood

to

10 (*spoken*) used, stressing *the*, to show that the person or thing referred to is famous or important

while *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2003) gives 16 senses and the sixth edition of *Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* (2003) uses 19. This semantic variety is further complicated by the arbitrariness of some expressions involving articles. Although the general rules for article use are the same in American and British English, for example, some individual expressions vary in their article usage between the two dialects, such as the synonymous *to be in the hospital* (American) and *to be in hospital* (British). Furthermore, while the use or omission of *the* with some categories of proper names is consistent, such as the use of *the* with the names of rivers and oceans (*the Amazon*, *the Pacific*)

but not those of lakes (*Lake Baikal*), other usages are dependent on particular lexical items, such as with the names of countries (*the Netherlands* and *the Ivory Coast* but *France* and *Japan*, not to mention *the Ukraine* before around 1991 and *Ukraine* thereafter).

A further complexity of English articles involves their interaction with the plurality and countability of the head nouns of their noun phrases. While *the* is used with singular countable, singular uncountable, and plural nouns, *a/an* is used only with singular countable nouns.³ Indefinite plural nouns, as well as indefinite uncountable nouns, are therefore marked for indefiniteness by the absence of an article (referred to as a “zero” or “null” article in some theoretical descriptions). But the absence of an article does not always indicate indefiniteness, as noun phrases with possessives (*my cat*; *the city’s sewers*) and certain determiners (*every tree*; *those tables*) are definite as well. (Full practical accounts of English article usage can be found in a number of books, including Brender 1989 and Higuchi 2003; a comprehensive theoretical treatment of definiteness in English and other languages appears in Lyons 1999.)

Despite the complexity of the English article system, the fundamental meaning of the definite article can be explained succinctly:

A speaker or writer uses *the* before a noun to indicate that he or she thinks that the listener or reader knows which particular thing is being referred to by that noun.

In other words, the statement *I found the book* in speech indicates that the speaker thinks that the listener knows which book the speaker is talking about, while *I found a book* indicates the opposite, i.e., that the speaker thinks that the listener does not (yet) know which book the speaker is referring to. Modern descriptive grammars of English express this rule similarly:

Use of the definite article ... indicates that I expect you to be able to identify the referent... (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 368)

The definite article *the* is used to mark the phrase it introduces as definite, i.e. as referring to something which can be identified uniquely in the contextual or general knowledge shared by the speaker and hearer. (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 265)

...definite denotes a referent (a thing in the real world denoted by a noun) which is known, familiar, or identified to the speaker and hearer. (Brinton, 2000, p. 110)

However phrased,⁴ this rule can explain a majority of article usages in English, and it also suggests

³ Noun countability is another example of an important component of English grammar that is mostly ignored by prescriptive grammars. The relationship between noun countability and the teaching of English as a second language may be investigated by the author in a future paper.

⁴ A small but significant difference in the phrasing of these definitions is between knowledge shared by the speaker and hearer and knowledge assumed by the speaker to be so shared. This writer believes that the latter phrasing is more accurate and enables the definition to explain a larger range of—though still not all—usages of *the*.

why articles are so difficult for many nonnative English speakers to use: In both speech and writing, the listener's or reader's knowledge, and therefore the speaker's or writer's assumptions about that knowledge, change constantly as the discourse proceeds, and speakers of languages that do not make a similar distinction require considerable practice to acquire the ability to make such judgments quickly and repeatedly—several times a sentence, sometimes. But the rule itself is simple, and it is not difficult to explain the rule and devise exercises to help students acquire it—as long as the teachers themselves are aware of the rule. But while the rule is explained well in descriptive grammars of English, it is, as shown in the following section, largely absent from the prescriptive accounts of English grammar that native speakers of English untrained in linguistics are much more likely to be familiar with.

Articles in Prescriptive Grammars of English

One characteristic of prescriptivists is that they tend to be conservative, that is, they advocate the avoidance of neologisms and promote the use of forms that are purported to have been mainstream in the past. Many currently asserted prescriptive rules themselves are quite old as well, having first appeared in grammar books or usage manuals a century or more ago. The rule prohibiting the use of split infinitives (*to quickly decide*), for example, dates at least to the mid-19th century, as does the rule against *like* being used as a conjunction (*Talk like a child does*) (Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, 1989). It may be enlightening, therefore, to examine first how articles have been treated in grammars of English over the past few centuries.

In the front matter to his landmark 1755 *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Samuel Johnson included his "A Grammar of the English Tongue." Though otherwise comprehensive, this grammar devoted less than half a page to articles (see *Figure*). Johnson's brief account shares with most later prescriptive grammars its interest in the choice of *a* or *an* before words beginning with consonant or vowel sounds, respectively. His comment that no article is used in indefinite contexts in the plural postulates something close to the null article of later theoretical accounts (Johnson, 1785):

In the senses in which we use *a* or *an* in the singular, we speak in the plural without an article; as *these are good books*.

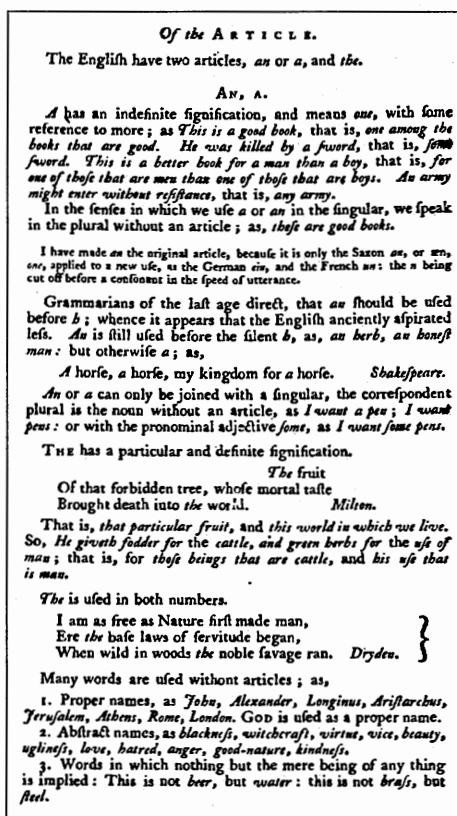


Figure. The entire section on articles from "A Grammar of the English Tongue" (Johnson, 1785).

Johnson's explanation of the difference between *a/an* and *the*, however, is quite inadequate:

A has an indefinite signification, and means *one*, with some reference to more....

The has a particular and definite signification.

These definitions, of course, fail to account for the effect of shared knowledge between the speaker and hearer on the choice of article; in the vast majority of contexts, they could not be used by a nonnative speaker to decide correctly which article to use.

Another 18th-century grammar, William Ward's *A Grammar of the English Language* (1767), treats articles more thoroughly and notes the effect of the discourse context on article choice:

The Definite Article gives Notice, that the Names to which it is prefixed denote Objects in such Circumstances as are not common to Objects of the same Sorts; as, *the books of Moses*.... And so any previous Knowledge of the Object, or Intention concerning it, **or particular Situation**, may ascertain it from others of the same Sort; as, *the book which you have read to day; the horse which you propose to ride to-morrow; the surface of the sea, &c*.... (pp. 40-41; boldface emphasis added)

In the following century, two American grammars captured even more perceptively the essence of the definite article. The lexicographer Noah Webster, in his *An Improved Grammar of the English Language* (1833), departed from the grammatical mainstream, both before and after, in objecting to the designation of *a/an* as "indefinite," calling it "the most definite word imaginable" (pp. 13-14). But his explanation of *the* does note the article's reference to shared knowledge:

The definitive *the* is employed before names, to limit their signification to one or more specific things of the kind, discriminated from others of the same kind. Hence **the person or thing is understood by the reader or hearer**; as, *the twelve Apostles, the laws of morality, the rules of good breeding*. (p. 15; boldface emphasis added)

As Webster's book was intended for use in education, there was at least the possibility that some students at that time—and future language teachers—became conscious of this aspect of article use.

A remarkable book published some two decades later covered the English articles in much greater depth. *The Grammar of English Grammars* by Gould Brown (1851) devoted over a thousand pages to every aspect of English grammar as then conceived, with particular attention paid to critical examinations of how each aspect had been treated by earlier grammarians. (In this respect, it was a prescriptive forerunner to *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, described below.) Gould's account of articles fills eight pages of tiny type (pp. 218-225) and is followed by several more pages of "Examples for Parsing" and "Improprieties for Correction." Much of his attention is devoted to examining the choice between *a* and *an*, arguing against other grammarians who had classified the articles as adjectives, and explaining such idiomatic distinctions as that between *a few of his adherents* and *few of his adherents*. Like Webster, though, he does capture the essence of *the*:

[The definite article] sometimes refers to a thing as having been previously mentioned; **sometimes presumes upon the hearer's familiarity with the thing**; and sometimes indicates a limitation which is made by subsequent words connected with the noun. (p. 220; boldface emphasis added)

But other 19th-century prescriptive grammars missed this key point entirely. For example, an 1884 school grammar by Calvin Patterson, an educator in Brooklyn, New York, has only the following to say about the meanings of *a/an* and *the*:

42. *A* rose means *any* rose. *An* apple means *any* apple.

43. *The* rose means *some particular* rose. *The* apples, *particular* apples....

47. *A*, *an*, and *the*, are used to limit the meaning of nouns, and are therefore **adjectives**. They are also called **articles**.

48. *A* and *an* are called **indefinite articles**, because they do not point out a particular object.

49. *The* is called the **definite article**, because it is used to point out a particular object or objects. (pp. 15-16; boldface emphasis in original)

The inadequacy of these definitions was probably clear even to Brooklyn schoolchildren at the time, as *a rose* in the statement *I picked a rose this morning* does indeed refer to a particular rose (though one known only to the speaker and not to the listener), and *The rose is a lovely flower*, when referring to roses in general, does not point out any particular object or objects.

An 1898 book, *Manual of English Grammar and Composition* by J. C. Nesfield, devotes nearly eighty pages to explanations of the parts of speech—nouns, adjectives, pronouns, etc.—but has only the following to say about the meanings of the articles:

“The” (short for *this*, *that*) is a Definite Demonstrative. “A” or “an” (short for *one*) is an Indefinite. (p. 28)

As these examples from the 18th and 19th centuries show, the essence of the definite article's meaning—that is, the indication that the following noun is thought by the speaker or writer to be known to the listener or reader—was understood and explained by some grammarians but apparently overlooked by others. Perhaps in Noah Webster's case the lexicographer had been alerted to this meaning through exposure to nonnative learners of English, as his book is unusual in mentioning in its preface the needs of “foreigners, as well as our own youth” (p. 4). Aside from Gould Brown's comprehensive coverage, however, none of the pre-20th-century grammars examined for this study treated articles with the care or detail their importance and complexity deserve.

In the first half of the 20th century, perhaps the most influential guide to English language use was H. W. Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926). Opinionated, entertaining, and decidedly prescriptive, this book covered, in dictionary format, a vast range of issues in English grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation, and its judgments came to influence writing and editing in English-

speaking countries for decades to come. But despite the book's wide scope—from distinguishing between *ablately* and *ablatively* to criticizing the overuse of zeugmatic expressions in theater reviews—its treatment of articles is limited to, once again, the choice between *a* and *an* plus several peripheral issues, including a lengthy treatment of the use of *the* with comparatives (*none the better, the more the merrier*, etc.). Nothing is said about the meaning or usage of *a/an* or *the* as articles.

Later in the same century, two comprehensive American usage books covered territory similar to Fowler but from opposite sides of the descriptive/prescriptive divide. *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1989), as befitting a book from the publisher of *Webster's Third*, examined a multitude of usage issues from two viewpoints, the judgments of earlier prescriptivists and the evidence of actual usage, nearly always giving a recommendation based on the usage evidence. In 1998, Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* covered similar territory but with a more prescriptivist bent. The contrast between the two can be seen in their assessments of the expression *very unique*: while Garner dismisses it as "slovenly" (p. 669), *Webster's* examines many citations of actual use, notes that *unique* is not always employed in an absolute sense, and concludes that those who forbid *very unique* are "clearly wrong" (p. 929). But the two books do have something in common: a nearly complete lack of any discussion of article usage in English other than, once again, the difference between *a* and *an*.

Descriptive linguistic accounts of English have treated articles thoroughly and adequately, and works aimed at nonnative learners of English also cover the articles well. Guides for teachers of English, such as Yule 1998, also do a good job at explaining not only the meanings and uses of the articles but also how they can be taught to language learners. But books and essays about English grammar and usage aimed at nonspecialist native English speakers—the very works that are most likely to be read by or to influence indirectly the conscious grammatical knowledge of future language teachers—are inadequate.

Implications for Second-Language Education

Two broad and contrasting categories of pedagogical methods are the transmissive and the imitative. In transmissive methods, knowledge possessed by the teacher or other expert is conveyed explicitly in the form of descriptions and explanations to the learners. In imitative methods, the learners are presented with a model of the desired skill and encouraged to acquire the ability to implement that skill by imitating the model. While these are not the only types of pedagogy—others include cooperative learning and learning through discovery—many of the trends in language pedagogy lean towards either learning through knowledge transfer or learning through imitation. In second-language writing education, for example, product- and genre-based approaches tend to emphasize the transfer of explicit knowledge, while process-based approaches focus more on imitative learning. Similarly, the teaching of grammar to teenage and adult learners has often been predominantly transmissive, while conversational skills have been seen as best acquired imitatively.

This dichotomy is reflected in the decision of whether to choose second-language teachers who are native or nonnative speakers of the taught language. Native speakers, it is thought, provide more authentic models for imitation, while nonnative speakers, especially those who have the same first language as their

students, are perceived as being more skilled at explaining the target language. In Japan, for example, these attitudes are reflected in the teaching of English to secondary school students, with grammar and vocabulary taught mainly through explanation in Japanese by native-Japanese teachers and conversation skills taught through English-only exercises led by native or near-native English speakers. While the question of whether such a division is either effective or desirable is interesting and deserves further discussion, for the purposes of the present study let it merely be pointed out that this division is, in many language-teaching situations, not even possible. In other words, both native and nonnative teachers are often expected to train their students in all language skills using whatever methods are most effective for their particular students.

In the case of grammar skills taught to teenage or adult learners, it seems unlikely that purely imitative teaching techniques are fully effective. Unless explicitly shown complex aspects of grammar, such as verb conjugations, noun declensions, and sentence structures, teenage and adult students are unlikely to acquire those skills correctly. In cases where explicit explanations are necessary, the conscious grammatical knowledge of the teachers then comes into question. As pointed out above, nonnative teachers often possess such knowledge because they acquired it themselves as students. Novice native instructors, however, unless they have advanced training in linguistics or related fields, are generally able to explain only those aspects of grammar that they themselves acquired consciously in school or elsewhere, in other words, the rules of prescriptive grammar, which represent only a small subset of the grammatical rules that second-language learners must acquire. This gap between the limited scope of prescriptive grammars to which most native speakers are exposed and the actual range of grammatical skills that second-language learners need is illustrated no better than in the case of English articles.

A curious characteristic of the English article system is that, despite the system's complexity, native speakers rarely disagree about article usage in actual contexts; a professional editor revising a text by a native-speaker English writer, for example, will often change the punctuation, spelling, word choice, and sentence structure but will rarely find reason to change the articles. (In contrast, article corrections are one of the most common category of changes made by native English-speaking editors to texts written by speakers of languages that lack similar article/definiteness systems.) This characteristic explains the short shrift given to articles in prescriptive grammars and usage manuals: Prescriptivists need to prescribe only when usage departs from their prescriptions, and matters of universal consensus (among native speakers, that is) can therefore be ignored. Even the most reactionary prescriptivists—those advocating the reinstatement of some supposedly ideal state of the language as used decades or even centuries earlier—are unlikely to latch onto articles in their arguments, as article usage has changed only very slowly in English. As a result, prescriptivist authors and teachers have largely ignored articles, and native English speakers whose explicit grammatical knowledge has come from such sources do not receive full explanations of the semantic differences among the articles. When such native speakers become second-language teachers without advanced training in descriptive grammar, they are unable to explain articles to their students effectively, thus delaying their students' acquisition of the article system.

One solution to this dilemma, of course, would be to require all native language teachers to receive

explicit training in grammar, but that is not always possible or even desirable in real-life situations. In universities, for example, where second-language teaching is often integrated with nonlanguage content, language teachers are often chosen more for their expertise in fields such as literature, business, or engineering. Other traits, such as classroom experience and interpersonal skills, also receive significant weight in hiring decisions. Requiring that all teachers be trained linguists would drastically reduce the pool of eligible teachers and, possibly, lower the overall level of education. Instead, faculty development efforts aimed at in-service teachers should include, as appropriate, more discussion of the principles and details of descriptive grammar and more exposure to practical methods for teaching those aspects which are usually understood by native speakers of the language only unconsciously.

To linguists and others who accept the validity of descriptive approaches to the study of language, the specific assertions made by prescriptivists—whether about dialect differences, as in the case of the Ebonics controversy, about word choice and meanings, as in the *Webster's Third* dispute, or about grammatical forms—are often, upon inspection, revealed to be arbitrary, biased, emotional, or simply ignorant. But it is important to recognize that descriptivists are in the minority and that the prescriptivist view—the notion that a “correct” language exists at least partly independent of actual usage—is dominant, not only in language education but in publishing, broadcasting, and many other fields. One consequence of this dominance is insufficient teaching of the English article system to students of English as a second language, but that dominance has other consequences. Further research is needed on how prescriptivist judgments are formed, fostered, and spread and on how those judgments affect not only language education but also actual language use and linguistic and social policies.

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