

Where Do English Grammar Rules Come From?

We present here ideas for a class that traces the origin of English grammar rules and critically reflects on the difference between precepts/models of language use and actual language use (practice). The class can vary in length depending on the elements taken into consideration by the teacher. The level of the class can be adjusted according to the (*gymnasium/gymnase*) audience.

Learning outcomes:

At the end of the class, the students will

- have a good understanding of the origin of English grammar rules and in what socio-historical context they were created;
- have had explored some of the original sources that presented grammar rules, which were then transmitted and are still prescribed in the present day;
- have reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of grammar rules (or language-related rules more generally), particularly with regard to discrepancies with actual language use, and possible discrimination based on language use;
- be able to analyse and interpret sets of linguistic and socio-historical data, with a particular focus on the effects of variables such as social class, education, and region;
- have developed the ability to present a brief case study related to grammar rules both orally and in written form.

Possible sources to be used:

- Jonathan Swift's *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712):
Full text: <https://jacklynch.net/Texts/proposal.html>
Image of the original (British Library): <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/jonathan-swifts-a-proposal-for-the-english-tongue>
- Robert Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar: With Critical Notes* (1762; 1794 edition):
Full text: <https://archive.org/details/ashortintroduc00lowtgoog/page/n8/mode/2up>
Image of the original (British Library): <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/a-short-introduction-to-english-grammar-by-robert-lowth>
- Grammar blogs (<https://feedly.com/i/top/grammar-blogs>) and language usage guides (see the following links for suggestions: <https://style.mla.org/what-is-a-usage-guide/>; <https://academic.oup.com/book/26792>)

Different class elements:

1. **Brainstorm element:** Invite the students to brainstorm about English grammar rules that they are familiar with (based on their experience as learners of English as a foreign language) and collect these rules (on a blackboard/whiteboard/etc.). Some of the rules that students may come up with are rules against the use of double negation, the split infinitive, preposition stranding, *would* in the if-sentence in conditional clauses, subject-verb concord, etc.

2. **Teacher element:** The teacher informs the students that the earliest English grammars were written and published during the late sixteenth century, e.g. William Bullokar's *Pamphlet for Grammar* (1586). These grammars were modelled on classical grammars, thus Latin and Greek, which had very clear rules. If one considers how different the structure of modern English is from Latin, it is not surprising to find that early English grammarians found it difficult to create English grammar rules. This can for instance be illustrated through the comparison of the descriptions of the subjunctive mood of the following two grammars:

- Early English Grammars: Gildon & Brightland (1711), Greenwood (1711)
- Fitting into the Latin model!
- [...] ils se seruent quelquefois des inflexions simples, pour marquer les affirmations modifiées. *Et si vereor*, pour, & *si verear*. Et c'est de ces dernières sortes d'inflexions, que les Grammairiens ont fait leur *Mode*, appelé *Subjonctif*.
(Lancelot & Arnauld, *Grammaire Générale et Raisonnée* 1660: 108)
- [...] they made use of simple Inflections, to express modify' d Affirmations, as, *et si vereor*, for *et si verear*; and 'tis of these latter sort of Inflections, that the Grammarians make their Mood call' d the Subjunctive.
(Brightland and Gildon, *A Grammar of the English Tongue* 1711: 103)

Question to the **students**: How do the two descriptions compare?

Teacher: In fact, many of the descriptions of English grammatical elements were translations from Latin, Greek, or other languages (as above). The English grammarians tried to fit English grammar into the classical models in the first instance, but gradually a development to view English grammar independently can be observed.

In the eighteenth century, some learned people like Jonathan Swift proposed the creation of an English Academy that would stop the English language from changing, and fix it.

[Some relevant information can be found here:

<https://www.englishforums.com/blog/historical-development-of-english-grammar/>]

3. **Group work (for a more advanced level of students):** Take a look at extracts or the entire *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712) by Jonathan Swift (see link above) and ask students to identify reasons that Swift gives for creating an English norm that does not change any longer. [For a set of questions related to this text, please contact Anita Auer (@ anita.auer@unil.ch).
4. **Teacher introduction and work in pairs:** An important person who is often associated with the codification of English grammar and the beginning of prescriptivism is Robert

Lowth (1710-1787), a well-known grammarian and Anglican Bishop. He wrote *A Short Introduction to English Grammar, with critical notes* (1762) that contains many grammatical definitions, grammar rules, and comments about language use.

→ Based on the original list of grammar rules created by the students (element 1), pick some of the rules and ask the students (in pairs) to look the rules up in Lowth's grammar (see link above), and to present them to the class later on. You can have a discussion about the presentation of the different rules. A distinction between descriptive, prescriptive, and normative rules could be made.

[For more concrete instructions, please contact Anita Auer @ anita.auer@unil.ch].

5. **Teacher:** Lowth's grammar was very influential in that other grammarians relied on his presentation of grammar rules when writing their own grammars. [If of interest, grammar rules in Lowth's grammar could be compared to those in other grammars. If you want more information on this, please contact Anita Auer @ anita.auer@unil.ch]. An important question to be discussed with the students here is also what kind of language was codified in the grammars. This is often reflected in the full titles of the grammars and the prefaces. Essentially, the language codified is that of the educated 'gentlemen' (elite) of London. These grammar rules are the basis for written Standard English as it is still largely used today. There are of course also different varieties of written English now (British English, American English, Australian English, etc.) with slightly different rules.
6. **Group work:** The students should reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of grammar rules, and present their ideas to the class (collect + and – points). They could consider environments/jobs where grammar rules are important, e.g. language teaching, editing, etc.
7. **Group work and/or discussion with the teacher:** Reflect on the differences between grammar rules and actual language use, e.g. song lyrics, computer-mediated communication, speaking. What effect do “standard language rules” have on writers/speakers of “non-standard” language? In this discussion, take into account variables such as education, social class, region, etc.
8. **Written/oral element:** As a further exercise, students could pick selected grammar rules and explore more recent English language usage guides and grammar blogs (see some links above) and critically discuss how grammar rules are presented. These case studies could be done in a written form and/or as presentation.
9. **Final element:** Brief summary of the development of English grammar rules from the sixteenth century to today and the value but also the challenges related to these rules.

Selected references:

Auer, Anita. 2012. Late Modern English Standardization. In Laurel Brinton & Alexander Bergs (eds.), *Historical Linguistics of English: An International Handbook*, pp. 939-951. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

- Locher, Miriam A. 2008. The rise of prescriptive grammars in the 18th century. In Miriam A. Locher & Jürg Strässler (eds.), *Standards and Norms in the English Language*, pp. 127-147. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Lukač, Morana. 2017. From usage guides to language blogs'. In Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade (ed.), *English Usage Guides: History, Advice, Attitudes*. Oxford: Oxford Academic.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198808206.003.0007>
- Tieken-Boon van Ostade Ingrid. 2006. Eighteenth-century prescriptivism and the norm of correctness. In Ans van Kemenade & Bettelou Los (eds.), *The Handbook of the History of English*, pp. 539-557. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid. 2011. *The Bishop's Grammar. Robert Lowth and the Rise of Prescriptivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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