

GRAMMAR TO GET THINGS DONE

A Practical Guide for Teachers Anchored in Real-World Usage



Darren Crovitz and Michelle D. Devereaux

NCTE

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Grammar to Get Things Done

Grammar to Get Things Done offers a fresh lens on grammar and grammar instruction, designed for middle and secondary pre-service and in-service English teachers. It shows how form, function, and use can help teachers move away from decontextualized grammar instruction (such as worksheets and exercises emphasizing rule-following and memorizing conventional definitions) and begin considering grammar in applied contexts of everyday use.

Modules (organized by units) succinctly explain common grammatical concepts. These modules help English teachers gain confidence in their own understanding while positioning grammar instruction as an opportunity to discuss, analyze, and produce language for real purposes in the world. An important feature of the text is attention to both the history of and current attitudes about grammar through a sociocultural lens, with ideas for teachers to bring discussions of language-as-power into their own classrooms.

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Preface

In *Grammar to Get Things Done*, we bring a fresh approach to grammar and grammar instruction for middle and secondary English teachers. We use form, function, and use to help teachers consider grammar in the applied contexts of everyday language use. Focusing on 25 of the most common grammatical concepts, this book helps English teachers gain confidence in their own understanding while positioning grammar instruction as an opportunity to discuss, analyze, and produce language for real purposes. In addition, we explore both the history of and current attitudes toward grammar through a sociocultural lens, with ideas for teachers to bring discussions of language-as-power into their own classrooms.

Grammar to Get Things Done is organized into four chapters. Chapter 1 begins with an introduction to conventional definitions of grammar, mechanics, and usage, followed by an overview of the history of English language grammar instruction and a look at understanding grammar from prescriptive, descriptive, and rhetorical perspectives. Chapter 2 focuses on the interrelationship of language, power, culture, society, and identity, examining conventional attitudes about “correct” language use, raising questions about the implications of Standard English assumptions, and discussing concepts of formal and informal English, English dialects, and the troubling consequences of moralizing language use. Chapter 3 addresses how to incorporate grammar concepts into a wider curriculum. Chapter 4 features 25 sections, each devoted to a particular grammar concept: what the concept is (i.e., its form), how the concept works in our language (i.e., its function), and how we use it in the world (i.e., its use). These sections are anchored by a number of applied scenarios—practical student-focused experiments dealing with how each grammatical concept works to get things done.

What's Special about this Book?

An Emphasis on Real-World Use: Rather than defining a grammar rule and then offering exercises to reinforce that rule (the format of many grammar books), we focus on a concept's form, function, and use. We follow this explanation with scenarios that place each concept in "real world" situations designed to reveal grammar's immediate utility: in influencing others, shaping events, achieving a specific purpose, and otherwise getting things done with words. Grammar is often viewed as a dry and boring subject by teachers and students alike, even though we all manipulate grammatical constructions hundreds of times a day to make our way in the world.

Power, Society, and Identity: Few texts discuss the implications of teaching Standard English grammar in the secondary English classroom when many high school students do not speak Standard English at home or in their community. This book explicitly discusses how teachers can integrate the sociolinguistic implications of power, society, and identity in tandem with grammar instruction. Additionally, we offer specific ideas on how to begin and sustain these conversations with secondary English students.

Grammar Within Thematic Units: Grammar can and should fit within wider thematic units. We provide specific guidance for considering how the meaning and use of specific concepts can fit within a larger theme-driven curriculum.

Note: Words in **bold type** refer to sections in Chapter 4; pages for relevant sections can be found in the Table of Contents.

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This project is, in the end, about helping students. Thank you to the students in Sherrye's and Sheryl's classes who experimented with these approaches and provided feedback. Thanks also to the many preservice English teachers who worked through earlier versions of these scenarios in our methods courses. In particular, we would like to thank Delisa Mulkey, Ashley Baldwin Kelsey, and Asher Kelsey for their efforts.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When Michelle taught her first high school class, she fit the stereotype of the uptight English teacher obsessed with correct grammar use. Though her teacher pens were full of purple and green ink instead of red, the result was the same: her students' papers marked with every error she could find. That, she thought, was good grammar instruction. After all, that was how her own teachers had taught grammar so many years earlier: identify the mistakes in student writing relentlessly and follow that with worksheets, lots of worksheets, to hammer home correct usage.

Experience is a persuasive guide. For years, Michelle continued to mark up her students' papers. She passed out stacks of grammar worksheets in the hope that her students would finally put that comma after the introductory adverbial clause. Strangely, while her students dutifully completed these stand-alone exercises, their own writing never seemed to show much improvement. They continued to make the same grammatical mistakes they'd always made. On some level, Michelle was aware of a disconnect here. Why couldn't her students transfer the lessons of a worksheet to their own spontaneous writing? She heard other teachers complain about students as lazy or careless. Was that it, or was she missing something important? Assigning those photocopied grammar worksheets felt like teaching and fit comfortably with the conventional expectations of an English classroom. But it was hard for her to ignore the obvious. Her students didn't seem to be actually learning anything.

Eventually, Michelle heard about teachers exploring different ways to teach grammar and help their students write better sentences, passages, and papers. While trying out new approaches seemed sensible, she was reluctant. After all, what if her students asked a question that she couldn't answer? There was so much about grammar that she didn't know. And so, fear and tradition kept the bleeding papers and the worksheets front and center for many years, until Michelle really started learning what grammar is and how it really works.

Defining Grammar

As a rookie teacher sharing resources with her colleagues, Michelle found that many veteran teachers' writing rubrics had the acronym "GUM" at the bottom, for Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics. She was confused by this acronym. Wasn't grammar just the rules and expectations for comma placement, sentence structure, verb choice, those lovely parts of speech, and the like? There were entire books—she had to buy them in college—that told her the rules of grammar. Why did these teachers differentiate between grammar, usage, and mechanics, and for that matter, what did these words even mean?

Grammar

"Grammar" has a far simpler definition than Michelle's college grammar books led her to believe. At its most basic, grammar is "a description of language structure" (Kolln & Gray, 2013, p. 1), a map of the innate understandings of language forms that all native speakers possess. You will never hear a first-language English speaker say "Red the on had shirt a student" because such an utterance is not grammatical, meaning that it doesn't fit the underlying map in our minds for how English is used. What speakers will say ("The student had on a red shirt," "The student had a red shirt on") may vary for different reasons, but it will always be understandable. All developmentally normal first-language speakers have grammatical structures hard-wired into their brains; researchers have found that even before children are born, they are differentiating the particular rhythms of their mother's language (Kolln & Gray, 2013). By eighteen months of age, children have already identified predictable patterns (that is, they're picking up the grammar) of their first language and have begun to use them regularly. In English, these patterns include subject-verb ("Kitty run"), verb-object ("Find Mommy"), and noun-modifier ("Hotdog allgone") (Curzan & Adams, 2012, p. 322).

We discuss various American English dialects later in Chapter 2, but it's worth mentioning a point here on which all linguists agree: all dialects are grammatical (Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2007; Charity Hudley & Mallison, 2011; Green, 2007; Labov, 1972; Redd & Webb, 2005; Simpkins & Simpkins, 1981; Wheeler & Swords,

2006). That is, all dialects follow rules that every first-language speaker can understand.¹ “Him and me went to the store” will be received in different ways according to the expectations of the listener, but the meaning of the sentence will rarely be in doubt. It’s as understandable as “He and I went to the store,” and that makes it grammatical.

Crazy as it may sound, grammar is really about understanding, not about “correctness.”

Usage

In our experience, usage is what most people mean when they use the overarching term grammar. “Usage” can be understood as the arbitrary rules of language that have been deemed correct by mainstream groups. We think Sledd (1996) provides a helpful explanation:

The study of usage is the study of approved choices among socially graded synonyms. I ain’t got none means “I don’t have any” or “I have none.” All three sentences are equally clear; all are governed by stable rules of grammar; but ain’t and multiple negatives are in some quarters socially disapproved. When we teach correct usage, we teach linguistic manners of the privileged. Correct usage is usage that observes those constantly changing manners.

(p. 59, italics in original)

What is considered “correct” changes across time and place. Many English teachers will pounce quickly when students use double negatives (“I don’t got no cooties”), but there was a time when such usage was acceptable, as the examples below illustrate:

Ther nas no man nowher so virtuous ... (Chaucer, “The Friar’s Tale”)

I never was nor never will be. (Shakespeare, Richard III)

Not until the printing of Robert Lowth’s infamous (and we use “infamous” purposefully here) 1762 book *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* did the double negative attain its current frowned-upon status. Sayeth Lowth, “Two Negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an Affirmative” (as cited in Schuster, 2003, p. 60), managing in one sentence to condemn a popular usage while also spawning a now-common grammar meme (When you say “I don’t got no cooties” it actually means you do have cooties!!). Languages evolve, and when they do, what counts as correct changes as well.

Lowth’s argument against the double negative—that two negatives make a positive

—is a long-standing fallacy, one we often hear when talking with teachers about grammar and American English dialects. Turns out that many modern languages (such as Spanish, Portuguese, and French) employ double negatives, and we're pretty sure that when French speakers say, "Je ne sais pas" [literally, "I don't know nothing"] they don't actually mean "I know." Triple negatives reinforce the silliness of these bogus language prescriptions. When a Southern English speaker says, "Jimmy don't know nothing noways," does that speaker really mean that Jimmy does know something ... but not at all? Of course not. The intended meaning of the statement is clear to any native listener, and superimposing the rules of one discipline (math) onto another (language) produces absurdity rather than clarity. With matters of communication, the rules of logic often don't apply.

Our point here is that usage rules are arbitrary, dictated and elaborated in the college textbooks Michelle bought and in innumerable style guides on bookstore shelves. People are quick to ascribe a moral dimension to language use: your use of "incorrect" or "bad" grammar must indicate something deficient in your upbringing, your culture, your soul. But these judgments and the rules they arise from rest upon shaky ground. Today's acceptable usage is tomorrow's faux pas.

That said, we are not arguing against the use of a standardized language. Far from it. We think a standardized language is vital, as it provides everyone a means for common communication. Bottom line, grammar and usage are two different aspects of language study. It's helpful to remind ourselves that usage invokes a set of rules that changes according to mainstream beliefs and practices, and that these beliefs and practices are often then (mis)labeled as "correct grammar" and put into books to be studied and applied. These "rules" about correctness are not set in stone but change according to the whims of dominant social forces.

Mechanics

"Mechanics" simply refers to the technicalities of writing: conventions such as spelling, capitalization, and basic punctuation. Many people group mechanics with usage, which is perhaps understandable. As with usage, the rules of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation change according to time and place. For example, Lowth capitalizes both "negative" and "affirmative" in the sentence we cited earlier, a move that would be considered incorrect by today's standards. Travel to England or

Australia, and you'll find that English spellings differ according to place and culture (such as colour and color, aeroplane and airplane, draught and draft, and theatre and theater). The concept of mechanics is bounded by a small list of writing technicalities, similar to the restraints found in usage. One major difference, however, is that mechanics is a concept that only applies to written language. Take heart in knowing that not even the worst grammar snob can judge what you say for non-standard spelling, capitalization, or punctuation.

A Very Short History of Grammar and Usage in the English Language

We live in a time of digital technologies and tools that have transformed how we communicate. New modes of writing (email, instant messaging, texting, tweeting) and communicating (emojis, vines) have, however, come with an accompanying set of reactionary worries. The general fear, really a kind of “moral panic” (Thompson, 1998), is that these new developments are a corrupting influence on conventional literacy: each time a student uses “LOL” or “gr8t” or “i m ritn 2 u” in an essay, it’s sad evidence of a slow decline toward language chaos. At the risk of overgeneralizing, many folks with these concerns seem to see themselves as lonely defenders of linguistic purity, protecting classic standards of correctness against a looming, ungrammatical horde (we talk a bit more about this perspective in Chapter 2). Sometimes this struggle will include an homage to the supposed educational rigor of yesteryear and a plea for back-to-basics, no-nonsense grammar instruction. Through such a lens, it’s easy to imagine an unadulterated, stable, and consistent history of English grammar and usage stretching back across the centuries, with rules and conventions long-established if not inscribed in stone, all of it now under threat from modern sloppiness.

This version of English grammar history is, however, an illusion. The truth is a lot more complex. Turns out that language standards have always been in flux, changing across time and place, and buffeted by powerful forces of self-interest and control, and people have bemoaned the gradual but constant fall of the English language since such a thing existed.

To understand where the peculiar love of deconstructing sentences and parsing the language into questionably definitive parts of speech came from, we have to go all the way back to 100 B.C.E. Greece, which is where Dionysius of Thrace wrote the first grammar book based on written rather than spoken language (Lindemann, 2001). Before this text, thinkers such as Aristotle and the Stoics saw grammar primarily as a way to better understand speech, while also accepting that language was a product of human nature and, therefore, susceptible to imperfection and anomalies (Weaver, 1996). However, as the centuries marched on, Dionysius’ first grammar book became the basis for Latin grammar texts, which in turn heavily influenced the creation of

English grammar books. Oddly enough, many traditional guides used in teaching twentieth-century American schoolchildren employed the same strategies of Dionysius' book: memorization of definitions, the use of literary models, and the parsing of language into parts of speech (Lindemann, 2001).

By the Middle Ages, grammar had taken on a moral dimension in Europe. The predominant social institution of the time, the Roman Catholic Church, deemed any change in language “emblematic of the human condition since the fall of grace in the Garden of Eden” (Lindemann, 2001, p. 75). Since language change reflected man's innate sinfulness, it followed that rigid rules of language correctness (of course, reflecting the rules of Latin, which reflected the rules of Greek) were necessary to curtail this degraded condition. The connection between morality and the English language still permeates many aspects of modern communication, as we discuss in further detail in Chapter 2.

The medieval Church dictated access to literacy, largely reserving it for the aristocracy and the clergy. The printing press, the Protestant Reformation, the Renaissance, and a growing middle class, however, brought about larger numbers of people who could read and write. Many notable authors of the late 1600s and early 1700s (such as John Evelyn, John Dryden, Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison, and Jonathan Swift) bemoaned what they saw as a decline of the English language since literacy had been made available to “the common man.” Two of the most famous essays from that time period—*Essays Upon Projects* by Defoe in 1697 and *Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue* by Swift in 1712—signaled the beginning of centuries of work to “correct and improve English” (Schuster, 2003, p. 50).

The 1700s saw a boom in the grammar book market. According to Ian Michael (1970, as cited in Schuster, 2003) only 32 grammar books were published in the 1600s. Between 1701 and 1750, about the same number were published, and then the market took off. Between 1751 and 1760, 25 English grammar books appeared, and in the following decade, 30 more were published. The medieval idea that English should follow the conventions of Latin—that language hallowed by antiquity and longevity, and thus (wrongly) considered a model for imitation—remained a fundamental assumption in these new texts. We're still dealing with the fallout from this mistaken belief. For example, whenever a grammar busybody corrects your split infinitive (arguing that “my homework is to carefully read this chapter” should be corrected to

something like “my homework is to read carefully this chapter”²) we have those long-dead, Latin-biased scholars to thank. In Latin, it’s impossible to split an infinitive (as infinitives are one word in that language). Likewise, the admonition that you should never end a sentence with a preposition also dates back to antiquity as you simply can’t do that in Latin either. You may not be surprised to learn that these early grammarians were often driven by a desire to preserve the quality of English against what they perceived as degraded common usage: the eighteenth-century version of textspeak and tweets had language purists extremely worried back then too. Convinced of their own righteousness, some of the most zealous actually rewrote the work of Shakespeare, Milton, and other canonical writers to improve grammatical quality.

It is important to mention that Lowth’s book (mentioned previously) came to be seen as a seminal grammar work during the 1700s, shaping the form and function of grammar guides for centuries to come. In addition to the questionable assumption that the best way to learn English is to study errors, memorize definitions, and deconstruct sentences and passages, Lowth’s text has problems still perpetuated by language pundits today:

1. Lowth doesn’t discuss or even note the intuitive grammatical knowledge of native language speakers.
2. He uses definitions that do not accurately define grammatical terms or explain them in ways that truly help students understand concepts.
3. He manufactures rules—for grammar, usage, composition, and punctuation—that educated writers and speakers did not observe.

(Schuster, 2003, p. 15)

These moral and rigid interpretations of the English language soon found their way to North America. “Correct” speaking and writing became both evidence of and a path toward an ordered life and soul, an idea referenced in the Massachusetts “Old Deluder Satan Law” of 1647, which mandated that American colonial communities establish grammar schools such that young people could learn to read holy scripture and so keep the devil at bay (Spring, 1997). Along with the implied moral dimension of language use, grammar instruction in the United States is woven from other presumptive threads. An emphasis on classical forms of correctness (again based on Latin and Greek) is one, which translated to a tradition of rule-following through prescriptive drilling, memory exercises, and analyses of texts (both exemplary and faulty). These historical forces are the DNA of what Edgar Schuster calls “traditional school grammar,”³ which, to a large extent, lives on in today’s classrooms.

A Very Short History of Modern Grammar Instruction

Broadly speaking, “traditional school grammar” (TSG) is a set of assumptions about how grammar usage is best learned rather than a specific course of study. Through the 20th century, the latest intellectual fads pushed and pulled language and literacy instruction in different directions, sometimes emphasizing the student as learner (progressivism), sometimes emphasizing “scientific efficiency” in the model of the industrial assembly line (Applebee, 1974). But by and large, TSG remained the governing approach to grammar in the classroom through the 1960s, whereupon literacy theory, research, and instruction began to shift.

Mina Shaughnessy’s groundbreaking book *Errors and Expectations* (1977) called into question what might be called the “deficit view” of language errors: the belief that written mistakes represented a student’s failure to apply discrete rules. In contrast, Shaughnessy argues that errors are developmentally normal and are, in fact, necessary in order to grow. Errors are a sign of learners experimenting with language and striving to make meaning with words. By talking with students about what they are trying to do when they make errors, teachers can provide contextual constructive assistance that is likely more helpful than a worksheet of error-correction exercises and rule drills. Shaughnessy’s work coincided with fruitful movements in writing studies—expressivism, cognitive theory approaches, and stage-based processes of writing—that emphasized individual writers’ moves, thoughts, and intentions more so than whether or not they applied established or standardized language rules.

These new developments in writing instruction, however, were generally limited to post-secondary classrooms. In most K-12 classrooms, it wasn’t Shaughnessy’s work that changed the course of grammar instruction, but a research study conducted by Roland J. Harris in 1963, which reported that grammar instruction can have a “harmful effect” on students’ writing (Kolln, 1996). From that study forward, grammar instruction has never really recovered as a subject in the secondary English classroom. The grammar instruction referred to in Harris’s study (and the Elley study of 1976) is based on traditional “drill and kill” methods—a decontextualized, rote-memorization, worksheet-driven approach void of context or real-world application. This is grammar instruction that Robert Lowth himself would likely have celebrated.

By 1986, traditional school grammar again found itself squarely in the crosshairs of

a meta-analysis of research (a meta-analysis is essentially a study about what a lot of other studies seem to indicate as a whole). Hillocks' work called out isolated grammar instruction as largely useless, suggesting that it could detract from student learning by taking up instructional time that would otherwise be more effectively spent on other activities. As later scholars have pointed out, Hillocks does not condemn grammar instruction as a whole, only what he calls "traditional school grammar" (p. 133), though this distinction seems to have been obscured over the years (Kolln, 1996). In the last few decades, "teaching grammar in context" has become the new normal for English teachers, and studies have demonstrated the positive effects of such instruction (Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2013; Myhill, Jones, Watson, & Lines, 2013). But despite some noteworthy texts anchored in this approach,⁴ just how to teach grammar in context in the English Language Arts classroom remains unclear for many.

It might be reasonable to suppose that "grammar in context" implies that grammar study arises from students' own experiences: from their lives, speech acts, everyday writing, and observations. But the phrase is often enacted more narrowly in the classroom to mean something like "grammar as it happens to appear in whatever text we're studying in the curriculum." Novels, poems, articles, and plays can offer obvious examples of grammar in use (or misuse: as we've seen, self-styled grammarians from ages past didn't hesitate to chastise famous writers), but we've seen limited success in interpreting "grammar in context" this way. Certainly, grammar concepts can be identified in classroom readings and subsequently discussed, analyzed, and practiced. When the terrain of language study is limited to an outside or assigned text, however, "context" doesn't usually mean "deeply connected to my own life." Grammar remains distant and usually perplexing to most students; teachers, often on unsteady ground themselves, step tentatively in such territory.

Approaches to Grammar: Prescriptive, Descriptive, and Rhetorical

Approaches to understanding grammar as a concept come in many varieties. Linguists speak of “grammars” and differentiate between generative grammar, relational grammar, functional grammar, rhetorical grammar, transformational grammar, and a number of others. For our purposes, we’ll limit the discussion to prescriptive, descriptive, and rhetorical grammars here, as these are terms that (a) most preservice teachers will hear during their college careers and (b) are most relevant to grammar instruction in schools.

Prescriptive and Descriptive Grammars

The labels “prescriptive” and “descriptive” for grammar originate in the world of linguistics and describe different ways to approach the study of language. We can approach language prescriptively, through the authoritative lens of grammar books that dictate correct usage. Or, we can look at language descriptively, examining how people actually use language in their lives.⁵

Prescriptive grammar is exactly what it sounds like: prescribed language use. Advocates of prescriptive grammar place priority on the correct use of Standard American English (SAE), as defined in current authoritative texts such as grammar and style books. Not surprisingly, those who see themselves as prescriptivists are often distressed by the general state of language misuse and insistent about students learning and using “correct” SAE grammar. It’s easy to caricature these folks as back-to-basics language scolds and “grammar nazis,” but in their defense, prescriptivists would likely argue that their focus on correct language use is more about practical and professional benefit to students rather than judgment.

In comparison, descriptive grammar describes; it’s a description of how speakers and writers actually use language in everyday ways. A descriptivist is interested in how we shift our language in particular contexts and in determining the unique conventions we follow in different communication situations. As with prescriptivists, the stereotype of the descriptivist is an exaggeration: the “anything goes” freewheeling language egalitarian, content to let students speak and write without

regard for standards or norms. It's more accurate to say that descriptivists recognize the cultural dominance and importance of SAE while also seeking to recognize, understand, and leverage their students' different dialects.

Maybe you're already positioning yourself as a prescriptivist or a descriptivist when it comes to grammar instruction (or maybe you're somewhere in between). These labels can be slippery if not deceptive, however, with the all-too-common implication that how we use language in day-to-day situations is an incorrect, incomplete, or corrupted version of the "pure" usage defined in official language guides. As Tchudi and Thomas (1996) remind us, "any grammar can be used as a scientific description of how language functions [descriptive], and any grammar can be turned into a set of laws or shibboleths about how people ought to talk or write [prescriptive]" (p. 47). In the most basic sense, all grammars are equal. But in the United States, cultural and political forces have established one particular dialect—the aforementioned Standard American English—as the arbitrary norm for correctness. There's nothing inherently "better" about SAE; it contains no moral superiority except that which we've decided, culturally, to assign it. The grammars of African American English, Appalachian English, Cajun English, or any other dialect could just as easily serve as the normative benchmark for how to communicate, as they do in particular communities and contexts. To muddy the water even further, Tchudi and Thomas argue that some aspects of language are both prescriptive and descriptive, such as words functioning as different parts of speech, the subject-verb-object pattern of most sentences, and the fact that sentences typically contain both subjects and predicates. Despite these relevant similarities, the difference between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to grammar instruction can be stark in the classroom.

As we've seen, prescriptive grammar has dominated English classrooms: think of all the standardized worksheets Michelle was given as a student and that she, in turn, gave to her own students. Almost universally, these worksheets promote a right/wrong paradigm of language often associated with prescriptive assumptions: either your language choice is correct or incorrect (as usage books and similar authorities have defined what is right and wrong).

Descriptive grammar, meanwhile, has had many proponents through the years but has only recently found its way into classrooms in the United States. Descriptive grammar approaches encourage students to analyze both their own and others' language use in order to identify patterns and rules. This understanding is then used

comparatively to help students gain a better grasp on the analogous conventions of SAE. Assignments that take a descriptive grammar approach might ask students to research language use in their communities, record how their family and neighbors speak and write, analyze this language-in-use for patterns and conventions, and then compare their findings with other dialects (including SAE).