What Is Grammar?

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How to talk about grammar in the Writing Center

[Weird Al](...)

So you know about grammar...

Reflections on Video

-- How did you feel while you watched?

-- How does it relate to working in the Writing Center?

-- How might it not relate to working in the writing Center?

Table of Contents

-Why are we talking about grammar?

    (It's a common concern among clients)

-What is grammar?

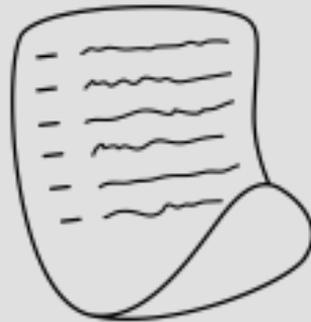   (According to consultants & According to clients)

-Definitions of grammar

    (Descriptive, Prescriptive, Rhetorical, & Functional)

-Now that we know...

    (Discussion of strategies & philosophy)

"I need help with my grammar!"

We hear this request all the time...

-What does this mean to you as a consultant?

-What do you think the student means?

-How do you find out? (And what is their typical response?)

What is grammar?

Commas

Sentence & Vocabulary

"Parts of Speech"

Worksheets & drilling exercises

Tests & success/failure

"Correct" or "Incorrect"

Others?

But what is grammar really?

Freeman, D., & Freeman Y. (2004). *Essential linguistics: What you need to know to teach reading, ESL, spelling, phonics, and grammar.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

"According to Weaver (1996):

The four meanings of "grammar":

1. grammar as a _description_ of syntactic structure; 2. grammar as _prescriptions_ for how to use structures and words; 3. grammar as _rhetorically effective_ use of syntactic structures; 4. grammar as the _functional command_ of sentence structure that enables us to comprehend and produce language" (Freeman & Freeman, 2004).

"Syntax" and "grammar" are used interchangeably in linguistics

Syntax: the organization of components in a sentence

Grammar is...

Descriptive Grammar:

The collection of underlying rules governing the way speakers *actually* use English (e.g. word order, clause construction, pluralization, etc.). These rules are often learned subconsciously. Native English speakers are always masters of these rules (rules will vary between varieties of English).

Correctness is determined socially and evolves as society change.

Examples:

I has a bad days yesterday.

The big red balloon. OR The red big balloon.

I, like, really had a good time yesterday at the movies. It was awesome. I'm totally going to see it again!

"I need help…"

When it's probably a *descriptive matter:*

The paper is written in English, but it…

    Sounds funny…

    Is hard to understand…

    Doesn't feel right…

    Doesn't make sense…

For a WRT 150 informative paper:

    "Noam Chomsky had a linguist. He make big changes in linguistics. Every man owe her a lot for work."

Grammar matters...

Descriptive grammar matters:

1. English varieties have their own underlying grammars and they're all correct.
2. Learning the English language either happens natively or foreignly.
   a. Native English: you learn these rules subconsciously
   b. English L2: you learn these very consciously...they must be taught.

Descriptive grammar matters:

1. Who controls *descriptive grammar?*
2. Who has to learn *descriptive grammar?*
3. Difference between *error* and *mistake.*
4. Language register and choosing a variety -- when do you know how to choose?

Grammar is...

Prescriptive Grammar:

The collection of cosmetic rules placed upon language use which separate those of social, academic, and linguistic "class." These rules must be taught, and the master of these rules comes from exposure (usually in school).

Correctness is determined by socially constructed institutions of social, political, or and/or academic power.

Examples:

"That is the sort of thing up with which I will not put!" -- Winston Churchill

She is in which department?

Which department is she in?

We invited Bob, Joe and Ken. OR We invited Bob, Joe, and Ken.

"I need help…"

When it's probably a *prescriptive matter:*

The paper is written in English, but it…

Sounds informal…

Isn't *correct*…

Doesn't feel *polished*…

For a WRT 150 informative paper:

"Noam Chomsky a linguist is the person many modern linguists owe their career to. And without him linguistics wouldn't have come as far as it has."

Grammar matters...

Prescriptive grammar matters:

1. Who controls *prescriptive* grammar?
   a. Media, Publishing Companies, Textbooks, Educational Institutions
2. Many of the *prescriptive* grammar rules are specific to editing, teaching, and presenting.
3. They are often associated with registers of English and rhetoric.

Prescriptive grammar matters:

1. As a consultant, you can always refer to the audience: "Would your professor mind if you used contractions in your paper?"
2. Who has to learn *prescriptive grammar*?
3. Difference between *error* and *mistake.*
4. You most likely won't notice *prescriptive* issues when you read a paper out loud.
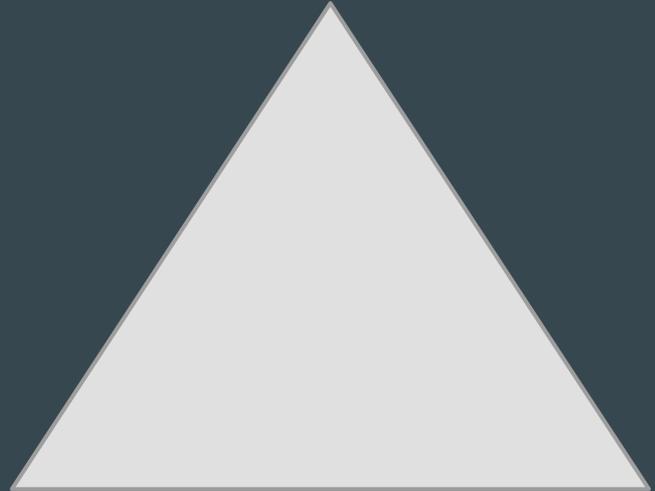
Grammar is...

Rhetorically Effective Grammar:

Syntactic structures that function for the purpose of informing, persuading, or motivating an audience in publication or in performance.

Correctness is determined by genre, audience, topic, discipline, etc.

*What is expected...

"I need help…"

When it's probably a *rhetorical:*

The paper is written in English, but it…

> Lacks support…
>
> Sounds informal…
>
> Is not convincing…
>
> Is repetitive…

For a WRT 150 informative paper:

> "Noam Chomsky was a linguist. He was very smart. He studied languages. Many other linguists owe him. He created linguistics."
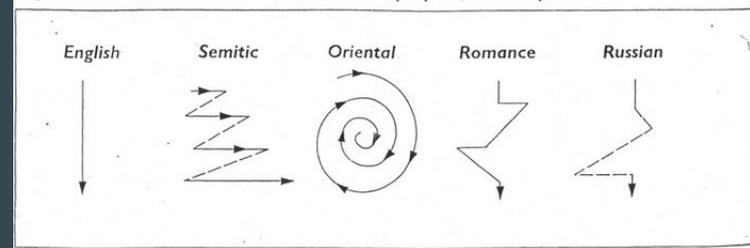
Grammar matters...

Rhetorically effective grammar matters:

1. Informative, Persuasive, Motivating
2. Many of the *rhetorical* grammar rules are specific to higher education and are an important component to assessment.
3. As a consultant, you can suggest that their paper "isn't effective enough yet." Or, you could respond as a reader and say, "I'm just one reader, but I wasn't convinced yet."

Rhetorically effective grammar matters:

1. Who controls *rhetorical grammar?*
2. Who has to learn *rhetorical grammar?*
3. Have you heard of "contrastive rhetoric"?

Figure 17.1. Patterns of Written Discourse (Kaplan, 1966:14).

English   Semitic   Oriental   Romance   Russian

Grammar is...

Functional Grammar:

The functional command of sentence structure that enables us to comprehend and produce language.

Functional grammar:

1. Comprised of the syntactic structures of language, which allow for language to be intelligible between communicators.
2. One must have functional command of language in order to be understood within a specific constraint)

Examples:

-Register

-Jargon

-Variety

-Discipline

This of it this way: Is the language doing what it's supposed to do?

"I need help…"

When it's probably a *functional:*

The paper is not written in English.

The paper is written in English, but it…

    But it does not relate to its audience.

    But it is incoherent.

    But it is off topic.

For a WRT 150 informative paper:

    "Noam Chomsky was my dude. He's, like, totally my hero. You should worship him too! I mean, like seriously, every f*&$-ing linguist owes that guy for everything."

Grammar matters...

Functional grammar matters:

1. Clarity, Intelligibility, Communication expectations
2. Functional grammar rules determine whether the communicator will be understood or accepted by their audience.
   a. Everyone wants to be understood...
   b. This kind of grammar is, perhaps, the broadest...
   c. Everyone wants to be understood?

Functional grammar matters:

1. Who has to learn *functional* grammar?
   a. Function depends on purpose
   b. Can it be learned subconsciously?
      i. what is the function?
      ii. What is your language background?
2. In a consultation, knowing about functional grammar might help you begin addressing grammar issues.
3. Talking about functionality of the language depends on the kind of paper, the audience, and language choice.

"I need help with my grammar!"

What is grammar?

"Will you just help me with grammar, please?"

How will you, as a writing consultant, find out hot to talk about grammar with a student?

How will you navigate such a loaded question?