Paul Georg Meyer et al.

Descriptive English Linguistics
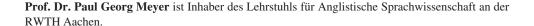
An Introduction

4th Edition

Paul Georg Meyer

Descriptive English Linguistics

An Introduction

Fourth, completely revised, supplemented and updated edition

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Preface to the fourth edition

This fourth edition of our linguistics textbook from the English Department of RWTH Aachen University, hitherto entitled *Synchronic English Linguistics*, includes many major revisions and additions.

Many disturbing factual and typographical errors could be corrected and many improvements of formulations carried out. Special thanks in this connection are owed to Judith Bündgens-Kosten, who gave innumerable valuable hints for improvement from her hands-on teaching experience.

In accordance with its new title, the book now contains a fully-fledged historical component: Not only was the chapter on language change (Ch. 3) supplemented by new subchapters (for the most part written by Timo Lothmann) on the history of the English language and linguistic changes that are still relevant for understanding the present-day language or differences between English and German. Historical remarks and cross references were added throughout the book where this seemed elucidating. In the same way, the contrastive component of the book was strengthened.

Wherever this seemed helpful, comparisons with structures in German and other languages were drawn. We hope that this helps fulfil the need for a textbook in courses covering both synchronic and diachronic linguistics and serving both bachelor and teacher training programmes.

Due these substantial additions, and in the interest of price stability, it was necessary to dispense with the former chapter on psycho-, neuro and biolinguistics in the printed version. This chapter will remain available at www.narr-studienbuecher.de .

For the first time, this book will be accompanied by an on-line component: in addition to the chapter mentioned above, an electronic glossary will be available which explains all technical terms used in the book, along with German equivalents if available and provides a wealth of additional explanations and examples. If this catches on, futher components will be added.

The authorial team also wishes to thank the many users who contributed suggestions that led to improvements, and the publishing house that made this new edition possible.

Aachen, July 2008
On behalf of the authorial team
Paul Georg Meyer

0 Introduction

0.1 What is linguistics?

Linguistics (*Linguistik, Sprachwissenschaft*) can be very simply and broadly defined as the systematic study of language in all its properties and in all its inter-relations with other human phenomena. People who are engaged in this kind of study usually call themselves **linguists**.

> ☙※ Note that the word *linguist* has a completely different meaning here from its most usual everyday meaning: Ordinary educated speakers of English, on hearing the word *linguist*, will expect such a person to be able to speak many different languages. A linguist in the technical, i.e. linguistic, sense of the word, however, does not necessarily need to speak many languages. Just as mathematicians do not necessarily have to be good at doing sums, linguists don't necessarily have to be good at languages, although in both cases, it must be said, the practical skill will be helpful.

The above 'definition' of linguistics is not shared by all linguists, maybe not even by most of them. Many linguists have very specific ideas of what linguistics is, what kind of study is a 'proper' occupation for a linguist, and what kind of study isn't. This introduction deliberately takes the broadest possible view, so as not to prejudice your decision about what you find interesting about language and worth studying, no matter whether some linguists call that kind of study 'linguistics' or not.

The first chapter will deal with the uncontroversial core area of linguistics, **grammar**. This area will be familiar to some of you from your language classes at school, but you will soon notice that the way linguists do grammar is somewhat different from the way it is done there. Emphasis is not so much on established knowledge and rules that can be learnt by heart, but on interesting generalisations and theoretical problems.

From grammar we proceed in chapter 2 to another core area of linguistics, the study of the sounds of language, **phonetics** and **phonology**.

Chapter 3 deals with the **history** of the English language and with different kinds of language **change**. We will primarily discuss changes that are observable in or relevant for present-day language.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the remaining core area of linguistics, the study of linguistic meaning, in particular, word meaning. This area, known as **semantics**, having been neglected by the most influential schools of linguistics during most of the 20th century, is now gaining more and more importance, although it is one of the most difficult subfields of linguistics.

Chapter 5 addresses an area which has been very much debated in linguistics, but not only in linguistics, during the last three decades or so. This is the study of language use in contexts, or: **pragmatics**. Some linguists, mainly interested in

formal aspects of grammar, have regarded pragmatics as lying outside the domain of linguistics 'proper'. Other linguists, however, have declared pragmatics to be the very core area of linguistics, on which the study of all other subfields should be based. Between these two extremes, many interesting observations can be made and theories have been constructed concerning the relationship between the system of language as it is laid down, e.g., in a grammar, and the use of language, as it is observed in real-life situations.

The next chapter, 6, is also concerned with language use, but concentrates on the fact that language is mainly used in texts and conversations. For the study of texts, a separate branch of linguistics has been establishing itself over the last three to four decades, **textlinguistics**, while the **analysis of conversation** has also attracted the attention of many linguists.

The last two chapters examine further aspects of language, which can only be studied on an interdisciplinary basis. Chapter 7 discusses certain phenomena and questions arising from the interaction of language and society, a branch of linguistics usually called **sociolinguistics**.

Chapter 8 is not a proper chapter in the sense that it deals comprehensively with one branch of linguistics. As it concludes the book, we call it an epilogue, and it raises the fundamental question of the species-specificity of human language.

In the appendix, you will find exercises (chapter 9), an extensive bibliography (chapter 10) and a subject and name index (chapter 11) which will help you find individual topics and technical terms.

0.2   Useful hints for the user

This textbook is intended to introduce you to English linguistics. For an introductory textbook, it contains an unusual amount of material, and we hope that doesn't deter you. The book may thus well accompany you throughout your studies in linguistics. Our objective is to help you get growing into true professionals of the English language and linguistics who enjoy doing linguistics and reflecting about language. This involves, i.a., the use of a professional language, that is linguistic terminology, and development of a professional attitude towards language and communication. This, above all, is what will distinguish you in your later professional life. Therefore, we place great emphasis on explaining the difficult and sometimes confusing terminology of linguistics, to eventually enable you to read technical linguistic literature (which is indispensable in studying linguistics), and we argue vehemently against unprofessional views and attitudes towards linguistic problems.

We think that a fruitful occupation with linguistics cannot be restricted to learning definitions (only half understood and quickly forgotten in the worst case). We want you to understand the concepts explained in this textbook, i.e.,

develop concepts of your own of linguistic phenomena, and see their usefulness and necessity for handling language professionally. For this purpose, it is important for you to develop a network interconnecting your knowledge in different branches of linguistics and integrating it with the rest of your knowledge. That's why, i.a., we frequently refer to languages other than English, primarily German, drawing on your native language competence. That is also why this book contains a huge amount of cross references between its different sections to help you find your own way in the maze of language and linguistics. Some important concepts are taken up in several places in the book, to show that they figure in various branches of linguistics, and to have you construct your own concept.

We also use a number of logos and other graphic devices which help you decide what is important for you at the moment and know what kind of information you are dealing with. These logos are explained in the following box, beginning with typographical conventions.

✍ All important technical terms which are explained in the text are printed in **bold** face, when they appear for the first time (with alternative terms for the same phenomenon and German equivalents following in brackets), and when they are used again, to mark a new topic or to add further explanations.

Bold italics are used in examples to draw attention to the phenomena under discussion.

Italics are used for sentences and individual words given or mentioned as examples. German equivalents for English terminology, wherever they exist and have a spelling that is different from the English term are also printed in italics. They are also used to mark other non-English expressions that are used as normal words in the text.

'Single quotation marks' mark explanations of meanings, but are also used for other purposes, say, to mark expressions that we think are not quite appropriate, but that we use because we don't know a better expression or because we think that this expression is better known and more comprehensible than the 'correct' expression ('scare quotes').

"Double quotes" are used to really quote, either from other authors, or from examples given in the text. Longer quotes from other authors are not put in "quotes", however, but presented in a separate indented paragraph in smaller print.

<u>Underlined</u> words are meant to be read with emphasis. Underlining is occasionally used for other purposes, too.

SMALL CAPITALS mark names of linguists mentioned in the text. These are also used *ad hoc* in some cases for other purposes.

The use of **abbreviations** is kept to a minimum. Basically, we only use abbreviations that are in general use in English, e.g. *e.g.* Abbreviations used in formal linguistic descriptions are explained *ad hoc*. The more important ones are listed in the index (➔ 11).

* We mostly use the asterisk as is customary in <u>synchronic</u> linguistics, i.e. to mark sound sequences, expressions or sentences that are not well-formed according to the rules of the language in question. The asterisk is also occasionally used for explanatory footnotes in tables. Note that in the literature on <u>historical</u> linguistics, the asterisk usually marks reconstructed, non-attested sounds, forms or words from extinct languages. We will also occasionally make use of this convention in this book, not without drawing attention to this fact.

? is occasionally used to indicate marginal acceptability of an expression.

Orientation aids:

Highlighted numbered boxed passages explain general theoretical concepts of linguistics whose scope goes beyond the questions discussed at the point where they are found.

→ We generally use this arrow to refer the reader to other sections of this introduction. References are to section numbers or to figure or box numbers only, not to page numbers. To find the page, please use the table of contents (p. X), the list of boxes (p. X), or the list of tables and figures (p. XVII).

☞ marks unnumbered boxes which are used to clarify points of terminology.

✍ boxes explain notations.

☝ is used to warn you against extra stupid frequently-made mistakes (FMM), folk linguistic superstitions, linguistic false friends and badly confused terminology.

📖 boxes contain suggestions for learning and practising activities you can engage in on the basis of what you've just read, on your own or in a tutorial.

➢ marks boxes and paragraphs that give historical linguistic background, with frequent cross references to Chapter 3.

◉ boxes contain additional information concerning a comparison with German or other languages.

△ marks boxes which deal with true or apparent exceptions to a regularity just mentioned.

⚑ marks passages containing elucidating extended examples, elaborate argumentations meant to serve as didactic examples of linguistic argumentation, or little case studies.

We use the signs •, –, and - in lists to indicate different degrees of importance.

• Important terminological dichotomies and categorial distinctions are indicated by this dot.

– The long hyphen is used for lists of important theses or observations.

- The short hyphen is used for lists of examples, steps in an argumentation, and similar items.

Further notational conventions are explained in highlighted boxes marked by ✍ wherever they are used.

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1 The core area of linguistics: grammar

1.1 Grammar in general

1.1.1 What kind of thing is grammar?

We will start out by explaining what we mean by the word *grammar*. For most of you, this word will probably refer to a kind of book, which you used when you learnt English at school, and which you will (hopefully) have on your book-shelves at home. Now you will have noticed that there are many such books, small ones, for use at schools, and large ones, for use at universities, and many different sizes in between. So it seems there is no <u>one</u> such thing as 'grammar'. Instead, we find many kinds of grammar<u>s</u>. It seems that 'grammar' in the singular is something beyond the different books that you may have on your shelves. It is something that the different books try to describe.

So we must say that the word *grammar* has at least two different meanings: In the sense you are most acquainted with, it means a kind of book which describes 'rules of grammar'. In the second sense, in which linguists usually use the word *grammar*, it means just these 'rules'. In this second sense, a **grammar** (*Grammatik*) is not something that you can touch or look at, but an abstract sys-tem that can be viewed from different angles: It can, among other things, be viewed as a psychological phenomenon: It can be said that a grammar is some-thing that people have in their heads.

1.1.1.1 Grammar as knowledge

People <u>know</u> their grammar, even if they've never gone to school. The vast ma-jority of the roughly 6,000 languages that are spoken in the world have never been written, and the vast majority of unwritten languages have never been de-scribed in a grammar book. Nevertheless all speakers of each of these languages have <u>a</u> grammar of that language in their heads. They simply know how to use their language. They automatically use the right word order, use the correct forms of words. Even if they make mistakes, they will know they've made a mistake when it is pointed out to them. And the grammar rules which they follow may be much more complicated than any rules of a language that any of us may know. So the first important thing we have to learn about 'grammar' is: A grammar of a language exists independently of its description in a grammar book.

It exists, first of all, in people's heads as a kind of **knowledge** as to <u>how</u> <u>to</u> use their own language. This is a very special kind of knowledge: a kind of knowl-edge which is usually not learnt at school, but in life. It is knowing how to do things. Just as you know how to walk, how to swim, how to drive, how to open a milk bottle (this may turn out to be the most difficult of all these), you also know how to speak, how to use your own language. So all this is knowing <u>how to</u>, not knowing <u>that</u>. Knowing <u>that</u> something is the case is typical of the kind of

knowledge that you learn at school or from books. You learn and then know that Goethe died in 1832 (or was it 1838?). You know that the present Queen of England is named Elizabeth and that Paris is the capital of France.

> 📖 Find other examples of things that you know-how-to and that you know-that!

In this sense of 'knowing that', you may also know a lot of things about English grammar: You may know, e.g., that subject, verb, object (SVO) is the normal word order in an English sentence. This means, in very simple terms, in a normal English sentence like:

> *The linguist shot the albatross*

the doer of an action, normally expressed by the subject of a sentence ("*the linguist*"), is mentioned before the action, normally expressed by the verb ("*shot*"), followed by the undergoer of an action, normally expressed by the object of a sentence ("*the albatross*"). (More on the notions of subject and object will be said in section → 1.2.1.2.) And yet, though you may have known this for a long time, you may have made mistakes, because of course you know that English word order is SVO, but sometimes forget how to implement this knowledge.

Linguists are primarily interested in people's knowing how to, not in people's knowing that. Grammar is knowledge of language in the sense of knowing how to use a language.

There is an important school of linguistics that particularly emphasises this basic idea that the object of linguistics is grammar in this sense, as knowledge in the sense of knowing how, as knowledge of native speakers of their language. This theory was first formulated by the famous linguist Noam CHOMSKY (1957) and has become known under the name **Generative Grammar** (*Generative Grammatik*). CHOMSKY says that it is the task of a grammatical description to describe "what the speaker of a language knows implicitly" (1972, 9) (→ Box 4; 1.2.2). Grammar as knowledge, however, is also invoked by **Construction Grammar**, a major alternative approach to Generative Grammar, that will also be presented in this introduction (→ 1.2.3).

Box 1: Mentalism vs. empiricism in linguistics

Approaches which concentrate on structures in the human mind as the primary object of linguistics are often called **mentalistic** approaches. Opposed to this would be an **empiricist** view which maintains that empirically gained linguistic data should be the object of linguistics. This view, e.g., is subscribed by many sociolinguists (→ chapter 7) and also by most corpus linguists (→ Box 3).

1.1.1.2 Grammar as a societal phenomenon

But grammar is not just individual knowledge. Grammars are also a societal phenomenon. Grammars can define **speech communities** (*Sprachgemeinschaften*).

> ☞ A speech community is a group of people sharing a certain amount of linguistic norms, such as in grammar, phonology, lexicon, etc., no matter whether they are laid down anywhere in writing or not, and using them in regular mutual interactions.

If language was just an individual phenomenon, it would be possible for individuals to have a private language not shared by anybody else. But what use could such a private language have? Everybody could use it to write their own private diaries, or to indulge in soliloquy. But language could not fulfil one of its most important functions, that is, communication. To fulfil this function, languages have to have grammars and vocabularies that are more than individual. Individual grammars in a speech community must be similar enough to make individual languages a tool for communication with others in that speech community. We shall return to speech communities and the social relevance of language in section → 7.1.1.

1.1.1.3 Discourse as a window to grammar

There is yet a third angle from which you can look at grammar in the linguistic sense. Discourse is the process in which language is used. We will come back to this in Chapter → 6. Grammar may be seen as an abstraction from people's linguistic behaviour in **discourse**. This is an important aspect of grammar that is often overlooked. The problem with grammar as a psychological phenomenon and grammar as a societal phenomenon is that it is not directly accessible. For all the progress made in psychological and neurological research in recent years, it is still very difficult to look into people's heads. You may ask people questions about what they think the rules of their language are, but the answers you get will often be very unsatisfactory. People's intuitions, people's true knowledge of language is not directly accessible to introspection and questioning. In the same way, grammar rules as a societal phenomenon are difficult to assess in their own right. Again, inculcated norms and attitudes may weigh more heavily than people's intuitions if you ask them what the rules of grammar in a certain community are. To put it briefly: People are not very reliable when asked to make **metalinguistic** statements and assessments, that is, statements about their language. The best you can get from ordinary native speakers of a language is statements or other language behaviour in their language. This is difficult enough to accomplish.

4

Box 2:   Object language vs. metalanguage

Linguists are bound to make metalinguistic statements all the time and are thus careful to distinguish between **metalanguage** and **object language** (*Metasprache, Objektsprache*). Metalanguage is the kind of language they use when they speak about language in contrast to the object language we all use when we speak about other things in the world. In principle, all expressions in a language can be used metalinguistically, i.e., when we speak about the linguistic expression, and not the thing it refers to. In this book, we use *italics* to indicate that an expression is used metalinguistically.

Thus, if we write "Butter melts in the sun", this is a true statement about real butter, if, however, we chose to write "*Butter* melts in the sun", this would be plain nonsense because the word *butter* does not melt in the sun (unless, perhaps, it is written in something that happens to melt in the sun). On the other hand, a statement such as "Butter has six letters" is plain nonsense because butter cannot have letters, whereas the sentence "*Butter* has six letters" is fine.

It can also be said that in the sentences without italics, we **use** the word *butter* to make an ordinary statement about butter, whereas in the other two cases, where *butter* is written in italics, we just **mention** the word *butter* to make a statement about that word. This is a distinction that is not always maintained in everyday discourse, but that is crucial when doing linguistics. Failure to maintain the use – mention distinction has often led to severe misunderstandings, as the distinction does not only apply to individual words, but also to sentences. Incidentally, it is, among other things, crucial for an understanding of irony and related phenomena (SPERBER / WILSON 1981).

With respect to empirical studies, the **observer's paradox** (*Beobachterparadoxon*) is an inherent problem when collecting linguistic data, e.g. the recording of samples of spoken language. It is the recording situation itself which is paradoxical: the observer wants to observe people as to how they behave normally, i.e. when they are unobserved. A result of this is that the recorded data is not as 'natural' as it could have been without somebody observing. For example, a person asked to tell a certain story will do so very differently, i.e. possibly more carefully when being confronted with a microphone or camera. The problem is not solved by hiding e.g. a tape recorder somewhere in a room where it is not detected by the prospective informants so that the observer can be physically absent. On the one hand, it might be difficult to obtain precisely the kind of data the observer is interested in – what if the structures I am studying simply do not occur in the material? Thus, the body of data collected in the observer's absence may lack representativeness and focus. On the other hand, even if the observer is present during surreptitious recording (which might ensure the right kind of output), his or her mere presence renders the communicative situation artificial and will most probably bias the output of the informant(s). What is more, there is always the possibility that the informants might – for various reasons – never have agreed to their utterances being recorded and analysed. This raises serious

ethical problems which cannot be ignored. Thus, minimising the effects of this dilemma should be a major aim of the observer who wants to collect reliable data.

Still, linguists have learnt to overcome these difficulties by employing methods of empirical research developed in the social sciences, so meanwhile we have a fair and ever-increasing amount of authentic language data available, samples of language behaviour, both spoken and written, much of it collected in huge computer-readable corpora.

Box 3:   Corpus linguistics

The term *corpus* is now almost exclusively used to refer to a large and structured collection of authentic written texts or transcribed speech provided in a machine-readable form and representative of the language or language variety in question. More generally, a corpus is any large collection of texts in whatever form.

Corpus linguistics (*Korpuslinguistik*) has become an expanding and extremely fruitful field of linguistic studies. It is certainly now the dominant paradigm for empirically oriented linguists. It can be said that the use of computer corpora has largely replaced more traditional ways of data-gathering. Corpus linguistics is not to be understood as a specific linguistic theory; but certain theories have more uses for corpus linguistics than others.

Corpus studies are used as an empirical basis for a wide range of topics within linguistics, including lexicography ($\rightarrow$ 4.0), all sorts of grammatical questions, language variation ($\rightarrow$ 7.6), historical linguistics ($\rightarrow$ Chapter 3), contrastive linguistics ($\rightarrow$ 1.4), translation theory, natural language processing, etc.

There are different types of corpora, varying in size, and composition and serving different purposes, e.g. the **British National Corpus** (BNC) (a contemporary British English 100-million-word corpus), the **American National Corpus** (ANC), and the **Helsinki Corpus** (a historical corpus). Although the bulk of available corpus data is still from written sources, corpora of oral language are increasingly being built.

One of the major objectives of corpus-based studies is to reveal typical patterns of use, replacing the traditional eliciting of judgements of grammaticality from native speakers. With the help of corpora we can examine the frequency distribution of syntactic patterns, lexical association patterns, the use and function of morphological characteristics, etc.

The most commonly used tool in corpus linguistics are **concordances** (*Konkordanzen*): A software program displays all occurrences of a selected word together with their immediate contextual environment. Concordances also facilitate the study of **collocations** (*Kollokationen*) ($\rightarrow$ 4.1.1).

But there is a problem with authentic language data. Look at the following example of a transcript of a real-life conversation (braces {} indicate breaks in the flow of speech):

The one {} one of the things I {} I'm told, {} I gather from Alec, {.} this morning, {u:m} that {uh} Oscar feels very sore about, {.} is, that he sees this {uh} as a breaking of the consortium...

When we speak and don't finish a sentence before we start a new one, as in the above example, we cannot say that this is what is stored in our heads, that is, it is not a rule of our grammar to speak with a lot of '*uh*s' and '*um*s' and other hesitation phenomena, or to keep leaving sentences unfinished. And it is not something that defines our speech community, either.

Box 4:   Competence vs. performance. *Langue* vs. *parole*

The difference between edited and authentic language, or between what is accepted as flawless speech in a speech community and what is actually spoken is the difference that CHOMSKY (1972, 9) had in mind when he distinguished between
- **competence** (*Kompetenz*), that is the know-how of the speakers of a language, and
- **performance** (*Performanz*), that is the actual use of language.

This distinction is a late 20th century reformulation of a distinction made in the early 20th century by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de SAUSSURE ([1]1916] 1965, 112), between
- *langue* and
- *parole*.

These are two terms taken over from French into international linguistic terminology which could be reformulated in English and German as the
- **system of language** (*Sprachsystem*) and the
- **use of language** (*Sprachgebrauch*).

Grammar, of course, cannot be directly read off the authentic data. But these data are our most reliable source of the grammar that people have in their heads and that is accepted in their speech communities. If we want to study grammar we want to look at competence, not performance. But performance, or discourse, is a window to competence. And discourse, as we shall see in section → 3.2, is also the most usual place where language change originates.

1.1.1.4 Written grammars

Grammars as they are written down in books may be of several kinds. Traditionally grammars were written in order to prescribe and teach the 'proper' use of a language to native and non-native speakers. Such grammars are therefore called prescriptive or pedagogical grammars. Linguists' grammars are different. Linguists are more interested in the way language is actually used and less in the way some people think they or other people should use language. Incidentally, such beliefs about language norms, often advocated by self-appointed experts

with great conviction, are often not in accordance with the same people's actual language usage (see below for examples).

Thus, while **prescriptive** grammars (*präskriptive Grammatiken*), and also **pedagogical** grammars (*Schulgrammatiken*) to a certain extent, lay down rules of correctness as to how language should be used, **descriptive** linguists' grammars (*deskriptive Grammatiken*) try to describe the facts of linguistic usage as they are. To give a few more concrete examples:

A prescriptive grammar might tell its users that

The man whom I saw

is correct English, while

The man who I saw

is incorrect, contrary to actual contemporary usage by the vast majority of English speakers and writers in the vast majority of cases. It is just because prescriptive grammarians of English happen to have noticed that English grammar has been changing in this point, and happen to have decided to stop this change. Descriptive grammars, on the other hand, might note that *whom* can be used in the sentence in question in formal written style, whereas informal speech prefers *who*, keeping the form *whom* only after prepositions, such as in

The man to whom I spoke,

where, however, in many cases informal speech prefers

The man I spoke to.

The latter example also raises another issue, one that prescriptive grammarians have fought a heroic battle about for centuries: so-called stranded prepositions, that is prepositions that are 'stranded' at the end of sentences or clauses, like the preposition *to* in the above example. (For more on the notion of preposition → 1.1.3.1). In this hopeless battle, prescriptive grammarians were probably influenced by the etymology (→ Box 30) of the word *preposition*: According to its Latin origin, a preposition is something that is <u>pre</u>-posed, that is, put before something else; so it seemed logically impossible to have a preposition alone at the end of a sentence. Descriptive linguists will only note that stranded prepositions are a very normal phenomenon not only in English, but also in other languages, including some varieties of German:

*Nachgestellte Präpositionen im Deutschen? Da will ich nichts **von** hören!*

They will then proceed to explain this phenomenon in their respective grammatical framework. In fact, stranded prepositions are so normal in English that even people fighting against them cannot help using them occasionally. It's like in the old schoolboys' joke about a teacher who used to say

"A preposition is not a proper word to end a sentence with".

Another pet issue of prescriptive grammarians is the so-called "split infinitive" (on infinitive clauses, → 1.1.3.4.7), as in the following example:

> *She decided **to gradually get** rid of the teddy-bears*
> (TRASK 1999, 246).

What is meant by *split infinitive* is the insertion of an adverb between *to* and the infinitival verb form. Now for various reasons, this insertion is very much within the logic of English grammar. If it wasn't, the construction would have been unlikely to arise at all. (On the notion of 'construction', see → 1.2.3.2). In the above example, there is actually no choice if you want to avoid misunderstandings:

> *She decided **gradually to get** rid of the teddy-bears*

has a different meaning because the **scope** of *gradually* is different, and in

> *She decided to get rid of the teddy-bears **gradually**,*

the scope of *decided* changes (see Box 5). For some inexplicable reason, prescriptivists have objected to constructions of this kind for centuries.

What is interesting to note about prescriptivism is that it seems to concentrate on banning certain ways of using language rather than actually giving advice to language users on how to use language. So, instead of being concerned with prescription, they indulge in proscription.

But to end this section on a conciliatory note: Writing prescriptive grammars can be a very useful occupation, and maybe linguists should pay more attention to the practice of writing prescriptive grammars for insecure language users and learners. But prescription should be based on description, and on a sound knowledge of grammatical facts and principles.

Box 5: Scope

Scope is an important and widely-used technical term in linguistics which is easy to comprehend but difficult to explain. Every language presumably has expressions that have, or as is often said, **take scope** (*Skopus*, *Reichweite*) over other expressions. Let us call such expressions **operators**. Taking scope means that other expressions, usually in the same sentence, are affected by the operation referred to by the operator. Usually the scope of an operator is the whole sentence, or what follows the operator in the sentence, or the sub-clause of which the operator is part (on *sentence* and *clause*, see Box 12).

In the above example, the critical operators are *decided* and *gradually*. The questions are: What exactly is the scope of the decision? How far does the scope of *gradually* extend? That means: What in the sentence is it that is decided, and what exactly is gradual?

In the formulation *"… to gradually get rid of …"*, *gradually* is inside the *to*-clause and can thus only take scope over this clause. So the "split" infinitive yields the intended meaning that not the decision is gradual, but the getting rid of the teddy bears. The scope of the decision is the whole *to*-clause.

If you put *gradually* outside the *to*-clause, as some prescriptivists would have it, *gradually* takes scope over the whole sentence, and so it would be the decision that is gradual. This, however, is obviously not the intended meaning.

If you put *gradually* at the end, as in the last example, which would also be acceptable to prescriptivists, it receives more weight because this is an unusual position for a small adverb. In consequence, the scope of *decided* is now the adverb *gradually* alone, which means that the decision to get rid of the teddy-bears must have been taken earlier, and that now the decision was taken to achieve this gradually. Again, this is not the intended meaning in the 'split in-finitive' sentence.

Scope is most often discussed in connection with negation (asking: What actually is negated in the sentence?). It also plays an important role in formal logic (→ 4.4).

♠ *scope* is also often used quite untechnically in this textbook.

1.1.1.5 Summary

We can thus see that *grammar* has a variety of different senses. As an abstract system it can refer to a psychological and societal phenomenon determining the use of language in discourse. As a book, it can refer to a prescriptive (normative), pedagogical, or descriptive account of the grammar of a language.

Having thus clarified from four different angles what kinds of things grammar can be, we present a very brief summary of all this in a diagram (Fig. 1) showing the interrelatedness of these different aspects of grammar. It shows how different approaches to linguistics have different concepts, or concentrate on different aspects, of grammar, and it shows how these different aspects are interrelated.

Individual competence, grammatical norms of a speech community and discourse all shape and influence each other. By using language in discourse, individuals show their individual competence. This competence, of course, cannot remain uninfluenced by the social norms that the speaker accepts as a member of a speech community: If a speaker keeps violating the linguistic norms, this will lead to communication difficulties to the point of miscomprehension or incomprehension. The norms of the speech community are largely shaped and maintained through discourse: By using norm-conforming language, speakers rehearse their knowledge of these norms; the correction of eventual errors, of course, also takes place through discourse. To reverse the circle, discourse not only maintains the norms, but is clearly also shaped by them. The grammatical norms, in turn, are nothing but the sum of individual competences, and they cannot persist if too many or too influential individuals no longer conform to them. Individual competence, in turn, is of course influenced by the use of language in discourse: by the feedback that people get in discourse to their use of language and by how people hear other members of the speech community use language. Discourse is the basis of all empirical study in linguistics; corpus linguistics (→ Box 3) is the best example of this.