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Promising Practices from the Field

Sociogrammar: An Ethical Approach to Teaching Grammar

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What is Sociogrammar?

If you're a language teacher or consider yourself a 'language nerd,' I'm going to bet that you love grammar. But even if you don't love grammar yet, you might come to love it after reading about *sociogrammar*. Sociogrammar is an approach to teaching grammar that delves into grammatical structures while celebrating linguistic diversity and uncovering the sociopolitical factors that determine which languages, dialects, and grammatical structures are deemed

and Spanish and the versions that we're taught are 'correct.' The rules associated with the 'correct' version are called *prescriptive grammar rules* because this language usage is prescribed to us.

While prescriptive grammar rules are still taught in schools and often go unquestioned, linguistic research has demonstrated that the 'correct' versions (on the right) are not linguistically superior. Consider example

Table 1. Examples of common prescriptive grammar rules

Ex.	'Prescriptively incorrect' usages	The prescribed version
1	Jane and me went swimming.	Jane and I went swimming.
2	This is between you and I.	This is between you and me.
3	I can't get no satisfaction.	I can't get any satisfaction.
4	<i>Dijistes eso.</i> 'You said that.'	<i>Dijiste eso.</i> 'You said that.'
5	<i>Habían muchos estudiantes.</i> 'There were many students.'	<i>Había muchos estudiantes.</i> 'There was many students.'

prestigious and which are denigrated in our society. This approach involves (1) eschewing a prescriptivist view of grammar and adopting a descriptivist view instead, and (2) teaching students about the sociopolitical factors that determine which forms are deemed prestigious and which are denigrated.

Prescriptive vs. Descriptive Grammar

Were you ever told that certain things you said were 'wrong'? Table 1 presents some examples from English

#1. The rationale for saying *Jane and I went swimming* rather than *Jane and me went swimming* is that we are 'supposed' to use subject pronouns for grammatical subjects. *I* is a subject pronoun and *me* is an object pronoun. Also, [*Jane and me*] is a conjoined noun phrase, and in example #1 this conjoined noun phrase is the grammatical subject of *went swimming*. Yet, English speakers commonly treat pronouns in conjoined noun phrases differently than pronouns that occur alone. Many English speakers say *and I* regardless of whether *and I* is the grammatical subject of a sentence. This is illustrated by example #2. We often hear things like, *this is between Gabriel and I* even though in this context the conjoined noun phrase [*Gabriel and I*] is not a grammatical subject but instead is the object of the preposition *between*.

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Example #3 *I can't get no satisfaction* is the title of a famous song by the Rolling Stones. The prescriptive rule here is “don't use double negatives.” Objections to using double negatives in English can be found in the writings of grammarians in the 1700's, who argued that double negatives cancel each other out, thereby resulting in an affirmative rather than a negative (Tieken-Boon Van Ostade, 1982). But did you ever think that *I can't get no satisfaction* meant *I can get satisfaction*? I bet not. Furthermore, double negatives are common in other languages, such as Spanish and French; *no quiero nada* ‘I don't want nothing’ means ‘I don't want anything,’ which further bolsters the argument that there is nothing illogical about this grammatical structure.

The Spanish examples in Table 1 also illustrate that the ‘correct’ versions are not more logical or superior to the ‘incorrect’ ones. In fact, in the case of the final -s in second-person singular preterit verb forms like *dijistes*, *comistes*, *caístes*, the supposedly ‘incorrect’ usage is more logical. In other tenses, verb conjugations for the second-person singular *tú* (‘you’) end in s: simple present *dices*, imperfective past *decías*, future *dirás*, conditional *dirías*, present subjunctive *digas*, imperfect subjunctive *dijeras*. The preterit is the outlier. Language users, including children, are pattern-seekers, so when we find a strong pattern, we apply it (Baker, 2022; Bybee, 2010). *Dijistes* follows the pattern, which makes the prescriptively ‘incorrect’ usage very logical. Yet, it is still considered ‘incorrect.’ Ultimately, our cognitive drive to detect and reproduce grammatical patterns is more powerful than textbooks and rules that try to control how we speak. Languages change and it is common for irregular forms to eventually conform to the strong pattern (e.g., *dreamed* is now more frequent than *dreamt* in American English (Bybee, 2015, p. 65)).

The second Spanish example involves the presentative verb *haber* ‘there is/there are.’ Unlike most verbs in Spanish, *haber* is *not supposed* to agree with the noun phrase that it presents. Compare the verb *comer* ‘to eat’ and *haber*. We say *ellos comen* ‘they eat.’ When the subject is *ellos* ‘they,’ a plural subject, the verb ends in -n. This is a strong pattern and applies across verbs and verb forms (e.g., *irán*, *bailaron* ‘they will go, they danced,’ etc.). By contrast, when we say *había muchos niños* ‘there were many children,’ the prescriptive rule is

not to treat ‘many children’ as the subject, but as the object. Since Spanish verb endings agree with subjects, but not objects, there's no need to make *haber* agree with *los niños*; there's no need to add the n. But just as we saw with -s, humans notice grammatical patterns and follow them and, in this case, many say *habían muchos niños*, treating *muchos niños* as the subject. And since grammatical patterns emerge from the minds of speakers, why should we try to stamp them out?

We have seen that what people say—even if it is prescriptively ‘incorrect’—is logical and follows grammatical patterns. The linguist's goal is to understand, discover and *describe* those patterns. This is what we mean by *descriptive grammar*. We describe rather than prescribe grammar and we attempt to explain it. To summarize, the discussion of prescriptive grammar leaves us with important take-aways:

- ✿ The supposedly ‘incorrect’ version is just as logical as the ‘correct’ one!
- ✿ Debates over how to talk have been going on for a long time.
- ✿ Dictionaries (and spellcheckers!) are not neutral. Some words are excluded because they are associated with people who are marginalized in society.
- ✿ Prescribing rules often fails because grammatical patterns emerge from actual language use, not from textbooks. Thus, we understand grammar best by describing rather than prescribing it.

If prescriptively ‘incorrect’ grammatical patterns are as linguistically valid, complex, and logical as their prescriptively ‘correct’ counterparts, where do the rules come from and why do they exist? It is often difficult to find the source of prescriptive rules; however, for some there is evidence that influential, self-appointed authorities imposed the rules. Consider the prescriptivist rule banning the use of prepositions at the end of a sentence. According to this rule, we are supposed to say (and write) “This is the book about which I was telling you” instead of “This is the book I was telling you about,” even though the second version sounds better to English speakers. Yáñez-Bouza (2006) writes that “John Dryden [1631-1700] appears to have been the first writer to attack the use of endplaced prepositions, probably as a result of applying the rules of Latin syntax.” But why apply

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the rules of Latin to English, a Germanic language? The answer likely has to do with prestige. Latin grammar was seen as prestigious, as was following its patterns.

Linguistic Prestige

Following prescriptive rules reinforces what Potowski and Shin (2024) call the Cycle of Linguistic Prestige (Figure 1). Think of groups of people that are considered prestigious in any given society. Who are they? Do they tend to be wealthier people—people who live in particular places or geographical settings—or people who represent a particular race or ethnicity? Think of those people and the way they talk, and you're likely thinking of the so-called 'standard.' People who have power in society are the ones whose language is included in dictionaries and grammar books, and their variety is taught and used in schools, courts, and other places where people employ formal language (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006). In other words, prestige is connected to a particular social group and then their way of talking ends up being the standard. The standard is then included in dictionaries and grammar books and is taught in schools. The result is a cycle; the people who are considered prestigious also have the most access to school and are the most exposed to that variety of language.

In addition to the prestige that gets attached to dialects, entire languages can be associated with more vs. less prestige in multilingual communities, and as with dialects, prestige is linked to groups who have more power in society. As Kahane (1986, p. 495) writes, "In literate societies, one of the primary motivations for acquiring the prestige language is its identification with education, which transfers to it the values of a class symbol." Both dialects and languages can accrue prestige and this process is linked to power structures in society at large and within subgroups of societies.

Linguistic Prestige, Linguistic Purism, and Bilingualism

Although there is a growing recognition that bilingualism brings with it cognitive and social benefits (Bialystok et al., 2012; Ikizer & Ramírez-Esparza, 2018), bilingualisms like example #6, are commonly rejected.

#6 *El gringo vino para Nuevo México y comenzó cambiando todo.* "The gringo came to New Mexico and started changing everything."

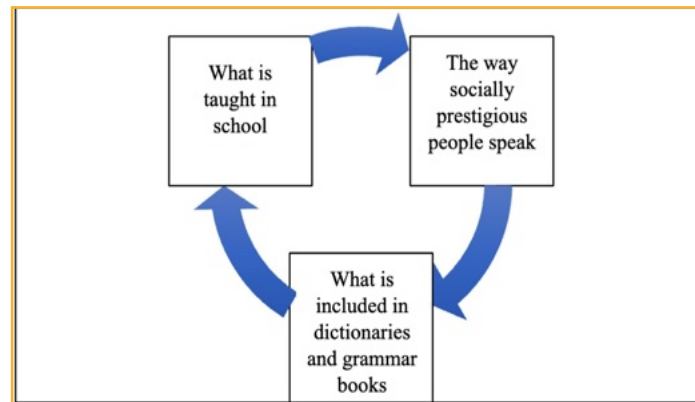
Example #6 illustrates a Spanish-English bilingual's use of a gerund *cambiando* 'changing' where monolingual Spanish speakers would generally use a + the infinitive *cambiar*.

Usages that buck the trends of monolingual speakers tend to be marginalized and rejected. Linguistic purism—the rejection of linguistic elements perceived as 'foreign' or unacceptable—permeates many societies (Langer & Nesse, 2012). Yet, *there is no such thing as a pure or homogeneous language.* Spanish has

been in contact with other languages since its birth, and such contact continues. But while words and usages that came into the language a long time ago are currently accepted (e.g., *almohada* from Arabic), newer contact phenomena, as in #6, tend to be rejected. But using an infinitive is not superior to using a gerund. When people reject the gerund, they are really rejecting what they perceive to be a foreign intrusion into a pure form of Spanish. Moreover, the notion that a pure language exists goes hand in hand with ideologies that strive for "pure" or homogeneous societies (Irvine & Gal, 2000), ideologies that have historically been used to marginalize, oppress, and even eradicate groups of people.

One issue that arises in communities where bilingualisms are rejected is that younger people, who are often the most bilingual, end up feeling insecure about their language abilities. For example, Tseng (2021) found that "imposed deficit identities derived from ideologies of language purity [and] proficiency... stigmatized

Figure 1. The Cycle of Linguistic Prestige (adapted from Potowski & Shin, 2024)



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later-generation heritage speakers, leading to language insecurity and avoidance.” In other words, when bilingualisms are rejected, bilinguals may feel insecure about their language use, which ultimately may contribute to more language loss in communities undergoing language shift (Ravindranath Abtahian & McDonough Quinn, 2017). An example can be seen among speakers of Indigenous languages in the Southwest. Professor Tiffany Lee (2009) interviewed 20 Navajo teenagers from high schools on the Navajo Nation and analyzed reflection essays written by college students who were either Navajo or Pueblo. She found that while the students expressed pride in their Indigenous language, they also “revealed expressions of embarrassment for their own limited Native-language ability.” Critical language pedagogy scholars argue that a translanguaging approach—where the bilingual student’s full linguistic repertoire is respected and included in the classroom (García & Li, 2014)—can empower students and promote maintenance of the heritage or minoritized language (e.g., Prada, 2022). In this article, we focus specifically on teaching grammar and argue that the sociogrammar approach is a way to teach grammar while respecting and celebrating linguistic variation and diversity.

Towards a Sociogrammar Approach

In this article I have provided evidence that ‘non-standard’ ways of talking—including language use that reflects bilingualism—are equally valid and complex as the ‘standard.’ But what does this mean for language teaching and, in particular, for teaching grammar? One important take-away is that *it is unethical to only teach the standard variety and to only accept usages that follow prescriptivist norms*. Why? Because doing so reinforces power structures that deny the legitimacy of minoritized groups (Alim, 2005). So, what do we do instead? A sociogrammar approach seeks to add, rather than replace, linguistic knowledge. As Glenn Martínez (2003) writes: “If our students walk into the class saying *haiga* and walk out saying *haya*, there has been, in my estimation, no value added. However, if they walk in saying *haiga* and walk out saying either *haya* or *haiga* and having the ability to defend their use of *haiga* if and when **they** see fit, then there has been value added.” The same applies to *ain’t/ isn’t* and other prescriptive rules. The point is to empower students to make their own choices about how and when to employ different language usages

and styles (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Leeman, 2005). The sociogrammar approach, outlined in Shin and Hudgens Henderson (2017) and implemented in Potowski and Shin’s (2024) book *Gramática española: Variación social*, aims to teach Spanish grammar while celebrating linguistic diversity and variation, and recognizing sociopolitical and sociohistorical factors that determine which forms are deemed prestigious and which are denigrated. The curriculum begins with an introduction to sociolinguistics, language ideologies, and linguistic bias. It is only after students understand the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammar and the cycle of linguistic prestige that grammatical structures should be taught. This way, all structures are presented in the context of the social factors that determine whether they are deemed prestigious or not. For each structure, the standard and usages that differ from that standard in natural speech are presented, as are the reasons underpinning which usage is considered standard—including racism, classism, sexism, and monolingualism.

While this may seem like a lot to accomplish, the sociogrammar approach has been shown to change students’ beliefs and language attitudes, resulting in views that are more accepting of linguistic (and therefore human) diversity. Shin and Hudgens Henderson (2017) measured students’ grammar skills, understanding of sociolinguistics, and their language attitudes, and found dramatic changes after implementing a sociogrammar curriculum. Some students remarked that they grew more confident about their own use of their home language, while others said that they learned to recognize their own linguistic bias and adopted new ways of thinking about linguistic variation. When we teach grammar, we can – and we should – simultaneously promote and celebrate linguistic diversity.

This essay is part of a series produced by UNM’s Lobo Language Acquisition Lab for Soleado in an effort to celebrate bilingualism in New Mexico and across the United States. Other articles in this series include (Forrest, Fall 2022), (Tankersley, Summer 2023), and Shin et al. (Winter 2024, coming soon).

References for this article can be found at dlenm.org/Soleado.