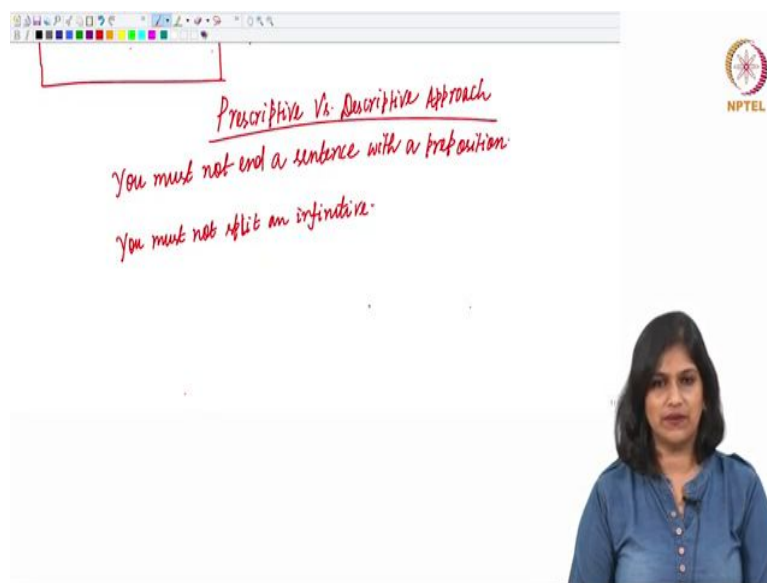


**Appreciating Linguistics: A typological approach**  
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**Lecture - 36**  
**Prescriptive vs Descriptive approach**

Hi, hello everyone. Welcome to this session of our course Appreciating Linguistics: A typological approach.

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So, this was the story of agreement and I have given you a question to find out what are the other possible agreements that you may encounter in the structure of any grammar of any language. Though our discussion is primarily in English, I want you to think about whether similar things are available in English or not and then if there is any difference, how are we going to account for the differences.

All the time I have been thinking about prescriptive descriptive approach, prescriptive versus descriptive approach. Now, let us formally try to understand what is the prescriptive approach and why we need the descriptive approach at all.

This is the prescriptive versus descriptive approach. So, what is the prescriptive approach first? What are the very rigid and strict rules that you have been taught when you were

learning English, maybe as a second language at the school. All of you might remember there was, if at all you remember what a preposition is, what is an infinitival or what is an infinitive.

Let us start with the preposition. Generally it is believed that the sentences should not end with a preposition. If I write the rule here, then it is like a mandatory thing that you have to follow all the time. So, rule number 1 you must not end a sentence with a preposition. This is one strong rule that you have. Then the second strong sort of mandatory rule that you might have learned when you were there in school. It should be you must not split an infinitive. So, these are the 2 rules, these are mandatory things that we generally learn when we are at school.

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The slide content is as follows:

**AGREEMENT**

gadi chal rahi hai  
vehicle run rahi hai  
'The vehicle is running.'

truck chal rahi hai  
-mac

John loves his dog.

Subj - Verb } agreement  
Noun - pronoun } agreement

Gender } agreement  
Number  
Person  
Voice  
Tense  
gender

Gender }  
Biological  
Grammatical

Masculine  
(el) sol (the sun)  
-muni (la) muna (the moon) } Spanish

What are the other forms of agreement found in the structure of a given language?

Agreement that we were talking about, generally this is like the basic rule which has been set by the traditional grammarians.

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Prescriptive Vs. Descriptive Approach

✓ You must not end a sentence with a preposition.  
e.g. Which journal was your article published in?  
vs.  
In which journal is your article published?

✗ You must not split an infinitive.  
e.g. to boldly say that vs. to say that boldly

Constituent Analysis

NPTEL

But that does not work in the similar manner all the time. If we try to understand what is prescriptive grammar, then obviously, it is a set of rules that has been prescribed by the grammarians. I will just give you an example of two very stern, rigid, and strict rules that most of you must have studied when you learned English as a second language. First, you never end a sentence with a preposition ok. It is like a thumb rule. No sentence should be ended with a preposition. However, in the modern day use or in the contemporary time, you see I am giving you 2 examples here, look at this board.

When you ask me a question, let us say I am an academician and I have to publish papers and you ask me, which journal was your article published in? That is one way of asking. The other way of asking is in which journal is your article published? Is there any way by which you think the first sentence is ungrammatical? Does it seem so, or is not? It is not acceptable. I was talking about ungrammaticality and unacceptability, what do you think this is unacceptable or ungrammatical?

The prescriptive grammarians will say the first sentence is ungrammatical. Why it is ungrammatical? Because it ends with a preposition in. But if you check, there is absolutely no harm in ending the sentence like this. That is why should it be a problem? Though I am not a native speaker of English, but when you are saying, which journal was your article published in? I am absolutely fine with that. Though the second one is definitely more grammatically

correct for sure. For me, as a linguist, both the constructions are grammatically correct and they are acceptable. So, in which journal is your article published?

So, though prescriptively the rule has been laid that you must not end a sentence with a preposition, I find there is absolutely no harm in doing so. If you follow the prescriptive approach, the first sentence is ungrammatical. But if you follow the descriptive approach because you have the data and the native speakers they do speak like this. Then there is no harm in the usage of the construction given in the first sentence.

Now, let us come to the second example or the second sentence, second commandment if I can say or the second rule I can say is you must not split an infinitive. What is an infinitive? When the verb occurs with a to, to go, to do, to dance, to sleep. These are the infinitival constructions or infinitive constructions.

Let us look at the example given over here on the board, to boldly say that. Let us say I am giving you a construction it needs a lot of courage to boldly say that. So, to boldly say that, would be an ungrammatical or kind of a weird construction for a lot of prescriptive grammarians, rather they would prefer to say it in this way to say that boldly. To and say, the infinitive will never be split. So, when you said to boldly say, you are basically splitting the infinitive and you are inserting an adverb to it. Boldly is an adverb and you split the infinitive, to is here, say is there and boldly has been fitted in.

However, if you follow the prescriptive rules they would say no; this is not the way you need to write, rather you should say, to say that boldly, but those who have been watching Star Trek, obviously, with no Captain Cooks like. When it is related to the native speakers intuition, there is absolutely no problem in splitting the infinitive. So, the rule that has been stated you must not split an infinitive is baseless in that sense. A lot of native speakers would agree that such a kind of a construction there is absolutely no harm in it. These are just 2 simple instances that I can cite when I say yes splitting the infinitive is not a bad idea at all, you can do that as and when it is necessary.

So, my question for you would be can you think about or can you find out some more examples of both these rules which are stated here, not standing true. That means, you

definitely can end a sentence with a preposition and you also can split an infinitive. In both the cases you can do that if there is such a situation if there is a permission in the situation.

Again, as I always say every time I discuss a phenomenon, I expect you to find out if these kind of constructions are possible in your language or do you think this is or the languages that you know apart from your first language or your mother language you can also use these types of constructions, you can split an infinitive, you also can end a sentence with a preposition. So, find out and then let me know about it.

These are the rules which have been prescribed by grammarians. The concern here is that these are the rules which have been set for English, but it is not necessary that and generally in the 18th century, the 18th century grammarians have made some remarkable contribution to enrich the grammar system of English.

The influential grammarians in the 18th century claimed that English should be spoken in this way; this is the only way or this is like a language purist's view. Let us say you need to speak English, any kind of deviation here and there, it is going to be considered as a non-standard way of speaking. But our concern here is that, how would you find out or why would you say that the prescriptive rule that you are setting, it is going to work for all the languages in the world.

It may not work for Latin, it may not work for Greek, it may not work for Hindi, it may not work for Chinese or Japanese. We should not blindly follow a particular rule which is for English is also going to be for other languages. That would be a prescriptive approach if you blindly follow rules and you are trying to extend it or you are trying to fit all the languages into that set pattern. That is the purist approach or the or the prescriptive approach.

However, in the modern study of linguistics, a lot of things have changed. People are not really rigid about certain prescriptive rules. That is how we got the descriptive approach of grammar studies. And what happens in the descriptive approach? We generally play around with the data set that you have in hand. So, what do the linguists do? They believe that the set of rules which are set for English may not be useful for other European languages, and it

could be absolutely different for the non-related languages like Japanese or Chinese or Mandarin. It could be very different for all these Sino Tibetan or Tibeto Burman languages.

It started from the linguists who were trying to describe the structure of the native languages, primarily in North America, towards the end of the 19th century. The entire 18th century predominantly the grammarians were prescriptive in approach. The situation changed towards the end of the 19th century when linguists tried to study some native American languages, where they did find that there is a huge structural difference as far as English and these languages are concerned.

They tried to analyze the categories and they tried to let people know that or they could actually understand that the categories and rules which were appropriate for a language like English or a language like Latin do not fit to the native American languages. Then what is the way out? What should they do? That does not mean that the data should change to fit a particular theory, not really. The theory should make it flexible enough to include or to incorporate or to explain all possible natural language data available in the surrounding.

So, what the linguists did, those who are studying the native languages of North America? They try to adopt a different approach; and what is that approach? The approach that they adopted was the descriptive approach. What did they do through this approach? They did some analysis on the basis of the samples of language data that they have collected. They were interested to describe the grammatical system of these native American languages and then they collected some data and the samples were analyzed following a different approach and this approach is the descriptive approach.

They were trying to understand whether a particular rule which has been prescribed for English, if it does not work then how we are going to tweak or how we are going to make the rule flexible or make the theory flexible, so that it can also be used to incorporate data from the other languages in the world. So, this is what we call the descriptive approach.

The rule has to change on the basis of the structure of the language, not the other way round. The structure of the language should not be changed just to satisfy the rule, not really. The

rule should be flexible enough so that we can actually include data from various kinds of languages. So, that was about the prescriptive and descriptive approach.

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The image shows a whiteboard with handwritten notes in red ink. At the top, it says "Constituent Analysis" with the example sentence "An old man brought a dog to the wedding." Below this, the sentence is broken down into nested parentheses: "(An old man) (brought a dog) (to the wedding)". To the left, there is a note "I love my country" with a bracket under "my country". In the center, it says "Structural Analysis" and "Descriptive approach (Test-frame)". To the right, there is a test frame "I heard a \_\_\_\_\_ yesterday" with "Cry news story" written below it. Above this test frame, there is a list of items: "car", "dog", "child", "radio", "donkey", with arrows pointing to the blank space in the test frame. The text "makes a lot of noise" is written to the right of the test frame. In the bottom right corner of the whiteboard, there is a small logo for NPTEL. A woman with dark hair, wearing a blue shirt, is visible in the bottom right corner of the video frame.

As I mentioned before, there are a couple of other things that you need to understand when you are thinking about syntax or you are thinking about linguistics for that matter. Considering this is a basic level linguistics course, my concern for you would be to understand these two things, one is the structural analysis, the other one is the constituent analysis. The descriptive approach is primarily based on the structural approach. When I say structural analysis, I am primarily focusing on the descriptive approach. We have to find out certain patterns or certain styles or certain categories which you will call as test frames.

When it is a test frame, you have to find out a lot of data, a lot of sentences and then you have to fit certain kind of words and phrases into it. Let us take an example that you will have discussed. I am writing the and then I am writing there is some gap here. I am writing makes a lot of noise. That is an example Yule has given. The other example I heard a dash yesterday. This is basically a test frame.

In this frame, you can add a lot of things, you can rewrite the car makes a lot of noise, the child makes a lot of noise, the donkey makes a lot of noise, the dog makes a lot of noise or

the radio makes a lot of noise, all of them can be fit into it. So, you can say car, you can say dog, you can say child, you can say radio, you can say donkey. All of them can be used.

So, in this frame you can actually insert a lot of other words, but you cannot say I heard a car yesterday. You cannot do that. Car does not fit into this frame. Some other grammatical category has to be added over here. So, when you say I heard a cry yesterday, you can call it I heard a story. SBut remember, this and this, these are all nouns, generally the common nouns.

So, in this frame here and this is the frame, this is the frame, you can actually add a lot of nouns and which nouns? The common nouns. But can you say the kassie makes a lot of noise, you cannot because kassie is a proper noun and it would not allow any definite article before that. You cannot say the Sunday makes a lot of noise, you cannot really do that. It does not make much sense. You cannot say a the dog. Double definiteness marker is not allowed. So, this is a test frame that you need to understand when you are trying to figure out what the structural analysis of a sentence, would be. Like that we can create different kinds of frames and we can fit in the possible constructions that you think would be suitable for this particular frame.

With this understanding, let us move to the constituent analysis. What is a constituent? When you are thinking about the descriptive analysis or the descriptive approach, then to understand syntax you also need to find out when you are trying to arrange the words, do they follow a certain pattern? The answer is yes. Within that certain pattern, can you have the subunits when you say I love my friend, so, in this case, my friend actually appears to be a unit. So, that would be known as a constituent, but you cannot say I love my friend love my. Does it sound to be a unit? Not really. So, this is just a simple construction I am writing. Let us say I love my country. I do love my country.

So, in this construction, there are 4 words and the words have been organized in a certain pattern. There is the subject, there is the verb, there is a preposition here and there is a noun here. So, this is S, V and O, I love my country. In such a simple construction you see my and country they can be considered as a unit, but love and my cannot be considered as a unit. But love my country together can be considered as a unit.



So, our focus here should be to identify what are the units that we figure out that we can identify in any given construction. When the sentence is a little longer, it is a little tricky to find out the constituents, but then just remember what is a constituent? There is a technique employed in the descriptive approach to show how small units or small constituents or small components in a sentence can go together to form large constituents.

I hope you understood. In descriptive analysis, we put small units or small constituents one by one to create or to form bigger constituents or the bigger structures. Smaller structures being kept together result in the bigger structures. So, how to identify these constituents? That is a question that you need to ask yourself. I just gave you a clue which is that when you read or when you try to author the sentence or speak or write the sentence, you can actually identify there are certain units which can go together, there are certain units which cannot go together.

So, now let us take an example of a sentence, an old man brought a dog to the wedding. Even when I read this statement, you must have noticed I said an old man, that is one unit, brought a dog. I read it as a unit. Let us see whether we can actually put it in the constituent category or not, and then to the wedding. Automatically the way I speak also gives you some idea what the constituents could be or what are the units which can go together. Now let us do the analysis.

Let us start from the first phrase or the first segment. What is the subject? The subject is an old man. Here you see an old and man 3 of them they can come together to frame a constituent. So, an old man, I think old man could also be a constituent here. Old and man together can be a constituent, an old man can be a constituent, a and dog together can be a constituent, brought a dog can be a constituent, the wedding can be a constituent and to the wedding can also be a constituent.

And the wedding is a small constituent. The wedding is a meaning constituent, when it is added with to it created a bigger constituent to the wedding and when to the wedding is added with a dog it actually created another bigger constituent, brought a dog to the wedding created another bigger constituent. So, the small units together are actually creating bigger units.

So, these would be known as constituents. There are more syntax-bound rules. We will discuss it later, but as of now, my suggestion for you would be to understand a constituent in the simplest method or in the simplest manner. When you speak, when you read or when you write, if you are intuitively considering something as a unit then count it as a constituent, and sometimes the smaller constituents are put together to create bigger constituents.

So, this is how generally languages work in case of descriptive analysis of grammar. These are not related to the prescriptive analysis as such. Primarily we are going to focus on the descriptive approach as far as our discipline is concerned. Linguistics believes mostly or mainly in the descriptive approach of language. We try to stay away from the puritanism or we try to stay away as much as possible from the prescriptive rules, though they are important to a certain point to begin with, but after that you have to make your rules as flexible as possible so that all the variants or all the variations that you encounter, when you study a language should be incorporated or should be explained using those set of rules.

With this, I would stop the pre-discussions on syntax and now since you understood what is prescriptive grammar, what is descriptive grammar, what is structural analysis, what is a constituent, how constituent analysis works, plus what are the basic grammatical categories that you may encounter in syntax. I hope it will be a little easier for you to understand syntax as a technical discipline in linguistics. In the next session, I will talk about some syntactic rules, very basic level fundamental rules of syntax and eventually we will move to syntactic typology.

Thank you.

Keywords: infinitive, structural analysis, constituent analysis, constituent category, test frame