PRESCRIPTIVISM VS. DESCRIPTIVISM
Prescriptivism

- The rules prescribed onto a language from an authority
- What are some ‘authorities’?
Prescriptivism

- The rules prescribed onto a language from an authority
- What are some ‘authorities’?
  - Dictionaries
  - Grammar books
  - Grammarians, teachers, etc…
  - ‘Hooked on Phonics’ and other sources
  - Cultural Convention (?)
Exercise 1

- Read the sentence and determine whether it violates a prescriptive rule.
- If it does, determine what part of the sentence is responsible for the violation.
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1. What did you ask about?
2. She’s not no fool.
3. The person who you like is over there.
4. We were hoping to have you over for dinner.
5. Sara hopes to quickly finish her chemistry homework so that she can return to her novel.
1. What did you ask about?
   - stranded preposition

2. She’s not no fool.
   - contraction, double negative

3. The person who you like is over there.
   - ‘who’ cannot be used in object position; should be ‘whom’

4. We were hoping to have you over for dinner.

5. Sara hopes to quickly finish her chemistry homework so that she can return to her novel.
   - split infinitive
Descriptivism
Describe how a language *is* (not how it *ought to be*)
Descriptivism

- Describe how a language is (not how it ought to be)
- Formulate rules that match language usage (rather than trying to get use to match rules)
Descriptivism

- Describe how a language is *(not how it ought to be)*
- Formulate rules that match language usage *(rather than trying to get use to match rules)*
- Rules based on speakers’ usage *(rather than from authorities)*
Descriptivism Cont.

- The way people actually use language is important to understanding the way our linguistic system works.
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The job of a descriptivist: objectively analyze and describe how language is actually used by a group of people in a speech community.
Descriptivism Cont.

- The way people actually use language is important to understanding the way our linguistic system works.
- The job of a descriptivist: objectively analyze and describe how language is actually used by a group of people in a speech community.
- Descriptive grammarians focus on how all sorts of people in all sorts of environments, usually in more casual, everyday settings, communicate.
What questions are important to a descriptivist?
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- Why do people use language the way they do?
- How do people construct language the way they do?
- Are there patterns we can find? What can these patterns tell us about language? Can we generalize these patterns within/across languages?
- What can we learn about cognition from linguistic utterances?
Prescription vs. Description (example)

- I have fewer than you. vs I have less than you.

- I have *fewer* than you. vs I have *less* than you.

- A descriptive grammarian would state that both statements are equally valid, as long as the receiver of the message can understand the meaning behind the statement.
Prescription vs. Description (example)

- I have fewer than you. vs I have less than you.
- A descriptive grammarian would state that both statements are equally valid, as long as the receiver of the message can understand the meaning behind the statement.
- A prescriptive grammarian, on the other hand, would analyze the rules and conventions behind the statements made and determine which statement is correct or otherwise preferable according to those rules.
  - fewer is only to be used when discussing countable things, while less is used for singular mass nouns.
Descriptivism Practice

- Multiple Modals (case study)
- Modals are words like *can*, *might*, and *should* that appear before verbs and express properties like possibility, permission, ability, and obligation
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- Multiple Modals (case study)
- Modals are words like *can*, *might*, and *should* that appear before verbs and express properties like possibility, permission, ability, and obligation
- Examples:
  - We *can* go up there next Saturday.
  - I think we *should* go to the party.
  - No one *would* notice that but Anne.
  - We *might* want to agree with that.
Multiple Modals

- Multiple modals are used in many varieties of English in the Southern United States
- Di Paolo (1989): Texas's Dawson County and Rusk County
- Examples:
  - This thing here I *might should* turn over to Ann.
  - I *may could* at the bowling alley.
  - Well, once we get under way, it *shouldn't ought to* take us very long.
Data set 1:

- This thing here I might should turn over to Ann.
- You know, if you drank a half a drink, you might ought to go home and sleep it off.
- We might can go up there next Saturday.
- I may could at the bowling alley.
- Sorry, we don't carry them anymore, but you know, you may might can get one right over there.

What pattern(s) can you find?
Multiple Modals Cont.

- Data set 1:
  - This thing here I *might should* turn over to Ann.
  - You know, if you drank a half a drink, you *might ought to* go home and sleep it off.
  - We *might can* go up there next Saturday.
  - I *may could* at the bowling alley.
  - Sorry, we don't carry them anymore, but you know, you *may might can* get one right over there.

- What pattern(s) can you find?
  - ‘*might’/ ‘*may’ come before other modals
  - ‘*may’ comes before ‘*might’
  - There can be more than 2 modals in a row
Data set 2:
- Heather, should you might find a seat somewhere?
- Would you might wanna wait til the 8 o'clock flight when it's cheaper?
- Could you might go to the store for me?

What pattern(s) can you find?
Data set 2:

Heather, **should you might** find a seat somewhere?

Would you **might** wanna wait til the 8 o'clock flight when it's cheaper?

Could you **might** go to the store for me?

What pattern(s) can you find?

Questions are different from declarative sentences: might comes **after** the first modal.
Discussion

- What would a prescriptive grammarian say about these utterances?
- What would a descriptive grammarian say about these utterances?
Assignment 2

- Due Sept. 20th
- Try to think like a descriptive grammarian!
  - You’ll be asked to find patterns given a set of data and to make generalizations about the language given this data