Chapter 1: Review, Practice, and Explore

1 Onomatopoeia and Arbitrariness

One of Hockett's design features of language is *arbitrariness*. Arbitrary signs or symbols have no connection to what they represent. In language, the connection between words and meanings is arbitrary, which is illustrated by the fact that different languages have different words for the same concept ('horse' is *cheval* in French and *Pferd* in German). What about onomatopoeia? Think about words like *buzz* and *woof*. Is the connection between these words arbitrary or not? Look up some examples from other languages. What do such examples tell you about onomatopoeia and arbitrariness?

Answers will vary. Though the connection between sound and meaning is not entirely arbitrary with onomatopoeia, it does vary across languages, demonstrating that it's not completely imitative. For example:

Japanese dog bark – wan wan
Japanese cow moo – mou mou
Japanese sound of pouring rain – zaa zaa

2 Sign Systems

Investigate some of the different sign systems that we use other than language. Examples are traffic signs, Morse code, and the hand signals referees and umpires make at sports events. These systems can sometimes be quite complex. What design features do they have, and how are they similar to or different from the human language system?

Answers will vary.

3 Prairie Dog Language

Researcher Con Slobodchikoff of Northern Arizona University has studied prairie dogs for more than twenty years and concluded that their communication system has many of the same features as human language. According to Slobodchikoff (1998), prairie dogs have different barks ("nouns") for different predators, and they combine these "words" with other sounds, or "modifiers," that indicate size, color, and other features. He also claims that prairie dogs coin new "words" by assigning new barks to new objects or animals in their environment. Prairie dogs, he argues, have words for coyotes, skunks, and badgers, as well as for such nonpredators as deer, elk, and cows, and even for "the man with the yellow coat." Investigate Slobodchikoff’s work on prairie dogs and determine which of Hockett’s design features prairie dogs seem to possess and which they don’t.

Answers will vary.

4 Animal Communication Systems

Investigate the communication system of a species other than one belonging to the primates. Much research exists on the systems used by dolphins and whales, different varieties of birds, bees,
wolves, and other canines, and so forth. Discuss which of the design features the system exhibits and how it is similar to and/or different from human language.

Answers will vary.

5 Primate Experiments

Conduct some research on the attempts to teach primates communication systems, and discuss the ways in which they challenge Hockett’s design features. The most debate centers on whether primates can recombine symbols to create new expressions (duality of patterning) and whether they can acquire the system from other primates. Here are the primary primates with the names of the primary researchers: Washoe (Gardner, Fouts), Nim Chimpsey (Terrace), Kanzi (Savage-Rumbaugh), Koko (Patterson), Lana (Rumbaugh), and Sarah (Premack).

Answers will vary.

6 What Do You Mean by Grammar?

As we’ve pointed out in the chapter, the term grammar has many meanings. Explain the distinct meanings of grammar in the following five sentences. If you can think of others, discuss them as well. You may use a dictionary if you like, but do not rely on it alone.

I better watch my grammar around you!

Please proofread your paper for grammar and style.

I’m taking a class on Spanish grammar.

There have been three grammars written on the language Quechua.

Our innate capacity for the grammar of a language is quite amazing.

“I better watch my grammar around you!”

This refers to the prescriptively correct use of words, sentences, and pronunciations, for example, avoiding double negatives and using stigmatized forms such as ain’t.

“Please proofread your paper for grammar and style.”

This refers to grammar as the standards of written language, including punctuation and organization.

“I’m taking a class on Spanish grammar.”

This probably refers to the morphology and syntax of the language (and perhaps also to its vocabulary and pronunciation), most likely as it would be taught to non-native speakers of the language.

“There have been three grammars written on the language Quechua.”

A “grammar” here refers to a written text that details the phonology, morphology, semantics, and syntax of the language.

“Our innate capacity for the grammar of a language is quite amazing.”

“Grammar” here refers to the set of linguistic principles or rules, a linguist’s scientific description of the phonological, morphological, semantic, and syntactic rules of a language.
7. Is That Ungrammatical?

Which of the following sentences are ungrammatical in terms of your descriptive grammar? That is, which sentences are not possible sentences of English for you? Mark each ungrammatical sentence with an asterisk, *. Which of the sentences that you don’t mark with an * do you think are prescriptively ungrammatical? (Would someone correct you if you said them?)

The ones that are ungrammatical in any dialect are marked with an asterisk, *. The others may be acceptable in some dialects, though they violate some prescriptive rules of usage or formal style (given in parentheses):

1. *Rosie a beautiful pony is.
2. Maurice and me are going to the movies tonight.
   (avoid objective pronoun me in subject position)
4. All the tulips are coming up in the garden.
   (probably fine for all speakers, though more formal all of the tulips)
5. *The all tulips are coming up in the garden.
6. *Purple big pillows were on her bed.
7. Everyone should know their own address.
   (singular everyone as antecedent for plural their)
8. Who did you talk to? (sentence ends with a preposition to)
9. Cat climbed up the tree.
   (ungrammatical unless Cat is understood as a proper noun)
10. I have drank six glasses of water in a row.
    (past participle drank versus drunk)

8. Correct According to Who or Whom?

All of us can probably remember when someone corrected our language (and many of us can also probably think of examples where we have corrected someone else’s language). Sometimes this correction can lead to modification; we adopt the “new” form in order to be more socially acceptable. What is a rule of grammar that you have learned is the correct or proper way to say something but that you do not always (or ever) use in speaking? For example, you may have learned that It’s me is incorrect, and the correct form is It is I; however, you may use me anyway, and I sounds odd to you. Have you modified your speech to say It is I? Who corrected you? How would you respond to someone who tells you that your way of speaking is wrong? Write a short paragraph on the language authorities in your life and what modifications you’ve made (or not made).

Answers will vary.

9. Language in Different Places

The following sentences are grammatical in some variety of English but perhaps not in yours. Do you recognize each as English? Why or why not?

1. He is joking only. (Indian English)
2. Those cat were just a-playing. (Appalachian [American] English)
3. They might could make a deal. (Southeastern American English)
4. Ought she to walk the dog soon? (some British English varieties)
5. They have made a good life for theirselves. (various varieties)
6. This car needs washed. (various varieties)
7. We’ve already boughten some bread. (various varieties)
8. The child has learnt the alphabet song. (some British English varieties)
9. She done told you. (various varieties)

Answers will vary.

10 Language in Different Times

Below are some examples of varieties of English that are no longer spoken but are the ancestors of Present-Day English. Do you recognize each variety as English? Why or why not? Which sentences are “older” than the others? Try to put them in order, and explain why you ordered them the way you did. (An answer key is at the end of this “Review, Practice, and Explore” section.)

a. Untill you had gave me an account of what you had Cut . . .
b. That I ne knew therwith thy nyceete
   That I knew not thereby your foolishness
c. Hiericho seo burh wes mid weallum ymbrymed & feste belocen
   Jericho the city was with walls surrounded and firmly locked
d. Cecile answerede, “O nyce creature!”
   Cecile answered, O foolish creature!
e. Thou sydest no word syn thou spak to me
   You said no word since you spoke to me
f. I have thoughts of what you Said to me Concerning them fish.
g. I wonder you had not wrote to me.
h. For ðes folces tocyme, and hi ne dorston ut faran ne in faran
   Against the people’s arrival, and they no dared out go nor in go

Old English (from the OE Heptateuch) c, h
Middle English (from Chaucer’s Second Nun’s Tale) b, d, e
Early Modern English a, f, g

11 Sign Language versus Body Language

Find at least four examples of arbitrary signs in American Sign Language or another sign language of your choice. Also find a few examples of nonarbitrary signs. What are some grammatical features of the sign language you are researching? How do your examples illustrate the difference between sign language and body language?

Answers will vary depending on students’ knowledge of ASL signs and their origins. Some signs may make them less arbitrary than others (the sign for “boy,” for example, indicating the brim of a cap, and certain classifiers, such as the handshapes for “vehicle” and “flat things”). This provides a good opportunity to discuss the complex notion “arbitrary.”
12 Linguistic Competence and Linguistic Performance

Listen to a conversation and try to record, as best you can, what is being said by one of the speakers. You will likely find that the speaker very rarely uses complete sentences. Rewrite the conversation, filling in any material that is missing. What does this simple exercise tell you about the distinction between competence and performance?

Answers will vary.

13 Language Myths and Stereotypes

Learning more about language allows us to recognize misperceptions about language when we hear them. While some “language myths” are rather benign, some can be very discriminatory. Based on what you’ve learned in this chapter, choose four of the following language myths (none of the statements below is true) and explain why they are misperceptions. Why do you think such misperceptions persist? Try to explain.

- Some languages have no grammar.
- French is much more romantic than German.
- English descended from Latin.
- Aborigines speak a primitive language.
- Teenagers are ruining the English language.
- Children are taught language by their parents.
- We’d speak better English if schools would teach more grammar.
- Some kids learn language better than others.
- People who use double negatives are just lazy.

Answers will vary.