

Chapter Four

Setting standards

Grammar focus. Verbs and verb agreement

Introduction.

No one speaks grammarless English. When people interact with one other, they don't simply throw words together. For example, we wouldn't expect anyone to say "The a in box knife put I" no matter how poorly they know English. Even beginners put their words together based on some pattern that they think will work. These patterns are the basis of grammar.

Since we are interested in using descriptive grammar as the basis for helping others improve their English, we ought to be aware of the sources of the different rules English speakers seem to be following. This can give us clues as to how to help others learn Standard English. However, even defining Standard English is more complicated than we might think. Let's test your knowledge of the differences between Standard English and other versions of English by looking at how the verbs work in Awareness Activity (AA) 4.1

Awareness Activity 4.1 Standard English and verbs

In the following sentences something is wrong with the verbs according to the rules of Standard English. First identify what is wrong with the verb according to the rules of Standard English then try to identify the rule that the speaker was following.

1. Me come yesterday.
2. I knowed the answer to that.
3. He got creamed that time.
4. Mary doth like that.
5. I wish I was outside in the pool right now.

Let's take a closer look at each one.

1. Me come yesterday.

The correct version would be *I came yesterday*. This is an example of **learner English**. Notice that for this speaker the rule for expressing past time is to use the regular form of the verb with a time word, in this case *yesterday*. For verbs such as *put* and *cut* this works, but they are the exception rather than the rule. Notice that when talking about the future, this pattern is often a possibility, as in *I drive tomorrow* or *We start at 9*. However, when talking about events in the past, the rule does not apply. You may have heard small children forming past tenses this way. Patois, a version of English spoken in Jamaica, also allows sentences such as this.

Even older children and adults learning English as a new language make sentences such as this in the beginning stages. When these learner-English type sentences occur in the language of older learners, they are called **interlanguage** since they mark a transitional stage between the grammar of their native language and the grammar of Standard English. This nonstandard use of English usually disappears as the learner is exposed to more English and identifies the

correct form, in this case the *-ed* ending for the past tense. Note that this is an error only in the sense that it differs from Standard English. It still follows rules, just not the rules of Standard English.

2. I knowed the answer to that.

This is an example of both **overgeneralization** and a **stigmatized** form. The Standard English version is *I knew the answer to that*. Many English speakers use *knowed* rather than *knew*. In fact the form has been common in English for generations. However, two centuries ago when language scholars were deciding which verb forms would be appropriate for Standard English, the historical *knew* rather than the more recent *knowed* was selected. Since *knew* is frequently used in **academic** discourse, its form has been monitored and reinforced by generations of teachers and editors of various types of reading material. Thus *knowed* has become stigmatized as uneducated English, even though there is no logical reason why *knowed* shouldn't be correct since it follows the general pattern of other verbs that end in *-ow*, e.g. *show-showed* and *mow-mowed*.

Historically many verbs that used to have a vowel change for the past tense now simply add *-ed*, e.g. *help-holp* (now *helped*). Some verbs alternate between the two versions of the past, e.g. *dive-dove/dived*, *hang-hung/hanged* as the *-ed* form of the past tense is generalized for all verbs. However, since these verbs are less common in academic English, their change is slipping through somewhat unnoticed. The application of the generalized *-ed* to *know* has not

been accepted in academic circles, hence it is considered an uneducated overgeneralization.

3. He got creamed that time.

The Standard English version might be *He was soundly defeated that time*. This is an example of conversational or **interpersonal** English. Sometimes it is called street English since that is where it is often learned and used. Notice the conversational verb *creamed* which the dictionary defines as “slang, to defeat overwhelmingly.” It definitely would not appear in a history book though it might be used by a teacher giving a history lesson.

Not only is the verb a conversational rather than an academic one, so is the *get* construction that accompanies it. In written Standard English the passive (where the subject of the sentence experiences the action of the verb rather than causes it) is formed by using a form of the verb *be* with the past participle of the action verb (a form usually ending in *-ed*), as with the usage of *is formed* in this sentence. In our example sentence we see the spoken language version of the passive with the verb *get* used with the past participle *creamed*.

School children, especially at younger ages, tend to use the *get* passive since the verb *get* implies that the subject of the sentence is receiving or getting the action rather than causing the action. The Standard English *be* has no such inherent meaning. Adults also use the *get* passive from time to time in their spoken language, even in academic settings. English language learners who are picking up English on the streets may also use the *get* passive since that is what

they hear others use and the passive meaning is more obvious with *get* than with *be*. However, this form is not seen in reading, except perhaps in fiction when the author is using a conversational tone. In other words in terms of descriptive linguistics, the form is not wrong, since it is used even by educated adults in spoken English. It is simply inappropriate for academic writing.

4. Mary doth like that.

The Standard English version would be *Mary likes that*. This is an example of **archaic** or **poetic** English grammar. An English language learner who likes to read texts from in the 17th Century, such as Shakespeare or the King James version of the Bible, might be tempted to use this form since English verb agreement at the time used *-th* rather than *-s* in the present tense. In those days, adding a *doth* rather than using *liketh* or *likes* simply added another syllable to the sentence and followed a popular pattern of putting the tense marking on an auxiliary verb rather than the verb itself. However, this pattern of using *-th* and *doth* died out as Standard English was being established in the Nineteenth Century. Today it is found mostly in love poetry and in quotations from Shakespeare or the Bible.

5. I wish I was outside in the pool right now.

According to some versions of Standard English the sentence should read *I wish I were outside in the pool right now*. This is an example of **language change** and the difference between **formal** and **informal** English. This use of

the past tense form to indicate a present time wish is an example of what is called the subjunctive. Notice how this applies to other verbs, as in *I wish I had more time* or *I wish I knew the answer*. However, the historical rule for the subjunctive is based on the plural form of the past tense even when the subject of the verb is singular. For all verbs except the verb *be* this rule doesn't matter today because there is only one form in the past. However, with *be* there are two past tense forms in Standard English, *was-were*. Thus this is the only verb to which the historical rule applies. Since the rule only applies to one verb, English speakers are simplifying the subjunctive form by still using the past tense but having regular verb agreement apply. As in sentences 2 and 4, this is another example of how the rules of English change over time. These changes are more readily accepted in less formal interpersonal or street English than in closely monitored academic English. In the last decade, grammar books have begun to accept *I wish I was*, though the historically correct *I wish I were* still is preferred in more formal, highly edited contexts.

We can see then that English language learners are surrounded by different versions or dialects of English, each with its own special uses. Standard English is just one of those dialects. As Standard English began its development, it was based a particular dialect that had prestige at the time. Scholars wrote grammar books and dictionaries to standardize its usage and vocabulary throughout the English-speaking world. The vocabulary was then developed so it could be used in various academic and professional endeavors. These standards were promoted through teachers in schools and editors in the print media.

Through their use in print and later through film, radio, and television the public developed loyalty to the norms.

In the beginning stages of this standardization process when people were unsure of the correct forms, **prescriptive grammar** was the norm. Prescriptive grammar is a corrective grammar based on what certain authorities in the past believed should be the correct form for educated people no matter what people in general might be doing. However, now that the norms of Standard English are commonly accepted, at least in academic and professional settings, there has been a movement to **informalize** English grammar, in other words to take the language out of the hands of experts and return it to the people. Sometimes this is called the plain English movement. Others call it a movement to make English more reader friendly or user friendly. Opponents to this informalization movement call it dumbing down the language and call for a return to the principles of prescriptive grammar. However, in tune with the times the focus for most grammar books today, including this one, is on **descriptive grammar** and how English is actually used by its speakers for various purposes.

Teachers also need to be aware of **pedagogical grammar**. Pedagogical grammar is in some ways prescriptive in the sense that it teaches learners a new and more appropriate way of using English. However, pedagogical grammars usually are based on descriptive principles, focusing not just on formal academic usage but including other aspects of grammar that might be useful for various special purposes. Thus pedagogical grammars are designed to help English language learners successfully interact with other English language users in a

variety of contexts. To see how this descriptive way of looking at Standard English works, let's continue our look at verbs with a focus on verb agreement.

Grammar.

Identifying verbs. Before we can look at the rules for verb agreement, we have to make sure that we can find the verbs in a sentence. We can look for the verbs on the basis of **meaning**. Verbs are sometimes called “doing words” or “action words” (*run, jump, swim, eat*) because they tell what the subject of the sentence is doing. As such they can also be made into commands. However, they also express such things as existence or state (*be, become, appear*) and mental conditions and processes (*believe, deduce, enjoy*). Some verbs have little meaning and only support the meaning provided by the other words (*She is pretty. We had breakfast. He did the dishes. Yes, I do.*) Verbs bind the sentence together showing the relationship between the participants in the action, process or state.

Verbs can also be identified by their **structure**, usually their endings. One type of ending is called **derivational**. These are endings that change other words into verbs. For example, two very common verb-making endings are *-ize* and *-ify*, as in *computerize, digitize, identify, and mortify*. Another is *-en*, as in *redde*n*, worsen, and sadden*. Note that these derivational endings apply only to a small number of verbs. **Inflectional** endings are more common and apply to verbs in general. They are usually associated with indicating when the action takes place. For example, there are two endings associated with indicating that the action is

on-going. The *-ing* creates what is usually called the **present participle** (*John is swimming. Mary is eating.*) The other is added to verbs when you are talking about things in the singular but are not talking about the person you are addressing, in other words the third person singular. This *-s* is added to the verb in the **simple present** tense. (*He swims. Mary eats. The horse gallops. But: I swim. You eat. The horses gallop.*) Notice that with nouns the *-s* indicates that the noun is plural (*horses, cars, ideas*), with verbs *-s* indicates that the verb is singular (*he swims, she jumps, it sinks*)!

To indicate that the action is completed there also two sets of inflectional endings associated with verbs. For many verbs commonly used in conversation, this notion of being completed is indicated by changing the pronunciation of the vowel. (*He eats, he ate, he has eaten. He rides, he rode, he has ridden. He falls, he fell, he has fallen.*) For most verbs, however, the notion of completion is indicated by simply adding *-ed*. (*He serves, he served, he has served. The movie ends, the movie ended, the movie has ended.*) . The name of the first of these completion forms is the **simple past** tense. Grammarians traditionally call this the *-ed* ending even though it applies only to the regular verbs. The other is called the **past participle**. Grammarians traditionally call this the *-en* ending for historical reasons, based on the *-en* we saw on our samples of the common irregular verbs that change their vowels to indicate that an action is completed (*eaten, ridden, fallen*). This past participle combines with *have* to form the perfect tenses (*He has served*) and with *be* to form the passive (*He was served*) Of course the regular verbs use *-ed* for both the past and the past participle. One

learning problem is that there is no way to predict which verbs follow which pattern. How these present and past forms interact with each other to indicate when something happened is the topic of the next chapter.

The third way to identify verbs is to look at the surrounding words or **frames**. One overriding frame comes from the basic SVO word order of English. That means that at the beginning of the sentence we expect the subject (S), usually the person or thing causing the action, followed by the verb (V) or the action. The object (O) or the thing that the action is happening to follows the verb. Verbs can be put into categories according to the frames that accompany them. For example, verbs that appear in the frame SVO (*Peter ate an apple.*) are traditionally called **transitive** verbs (some modern grammars call them object verbs). Verbs in the frame SV (*Joan slept*) are traditionally called **intransitive** verbs (some modern grammars, no-object verbs). Verbs in the frame SVOO (*I gave Jose a book.*) are called traditionally called **ditransitive** verbs (some modern grammars, two object verbs). Verbs in the frame SVAdj (*I feel sick.*) are traditionally called **linking** verbs (some modern grammars, complement verbs),

There is even a more localized frame that can be used to identify verbs. Main verbs can stand alone, as we have seen in our sample sentences. However, they can be combined with the auxiliary verbs *be* and *have* to form tenses in addition to the simple present or past. (*She is eating it. She has eaten it.*) Thus the frames *She is _____ -ing (it)* and *She has _____ -en (it)* can indicate that a word is a verb. In these frames *it* is in parentheses to indicate that it is optional in the frame. Another frame that identifies verbs is based on the

negative (*She doesn't eat it.*). That frame would be *She doesn't _____* (it).

Verbs also can combine with modal auxiliaries to indicate the likelihood that something will happen (*She may eat it. She will see it.*) yielding the frame *She may _____* (it). Notice that with modals (e.g. can, may, will, shall, must) there is no verb agreement. We'll look at modals more closely in Chapter Five. These auxiliary verbs can also substitute for the main verb in a conversation to avoid repetition (*I am, He can. They will. She has. She doesn't.*)

Verb agreement or concord. Now that we know the criteria for identifying the main verb in a sentence, let us look at some principles or rules of thumb for verb agreement or concord according to Standard English.

Rules of thumb: General principles for concord or verb agreement

1. Concord applies only in the present tense when the subject of the sentence is third person singular -- in other words, something being talked about, not the person or persons speaking (first person) or being spoken to (second person).

An –s is added to the verb or the auxiliary, whichever comes first.

e.g. The boy swims in the morning. Susan has seen the movie already.

2. There is no verb agreement with modals. (*can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would, must*)

e.g. The boy may swim in the morning. Susan must have seen the movie already.

3. The verb *be* when it is first not only has concord in the present for all persons (*I am, you are, he is, we are, they are*) but in the past (*I was, he was, you were, we were, they were*). But *I may be there*.

The concord rules look straight forward enough, but sometimes it is difficult to tell if the subject of the sentence is singular or plural. There are three general problem areas: words that look singular but may be plural in meaning, words that look plural but may be singular in meaning, and words with modifying phrases.

Words that look singular but may be plural in meaning.

1. Some words (e.g. *people, police, clergy*) are considered plural even though they do not end in *-s*. (*The people are asking for more help than we can give.*)
2. Some words that used to be in this category (e.g. *data, media*) are now switching to being considered singular (*The media is/are biased*).
3. Some game animals have the same form for the singular and plural (*fish, deer, buffalo, shrimp*). They have singular agreement when referring to one animal, plural when referring to more than one. (*My goldfish looks sick. The fish in my tank look sick.*)
4. Adjectives being used as nouns to describe people are considered plural. (*The poor are demanding more food.*)
5. Group or collective nouns (*family, jury, audience, committee, crew, congress, government*) are also singular in form but plural in meaning. They are usually

considered singular for concord. However, at times they are considered plural, especially in British usage. (*The crew has/have left already.*)

6. The pronouns *who* and *which* can be singular or plural depending on what they are referring to. (*The cars which are in the yard need washing. The car which is in the yard needs washing. Who is that? Who are they?*)

Words that look plural but may be singular in meaning.

1. Some words (*billiards, darts* (the game), *news, measles*) end in –s but are considered singular. (*The news comes on at 9.*)

2. Words ending in –ics (*ethics, physics, politics, mathematics*) can be considered both singular and plural. (*Ethics comes easy to me. His ethics leave something to be desired.*)

Words with modifying phrases.

For words with modifying phrases, most commonly with the preposition *of*, verb agreement is based on the **non-intervention principle**. In other words, concord is with the noun ahead of the preposition rather than with the noun closest to the verb. (*The mother of my friends is coming over.*)

Notice the following two special cases:

1. One of, none of, each of, and every one of are considered singular with the non-intervention principle applying. (*One of those dogs has barked all night. Each of the boys has his own bed.*)

2. Items with two parts (e.g. *scissors, pants, eyeglasses, shoes*) follow the nonintervention principle and are singular for verb agreement when *pair of* is present (*My pair of pants has a stain on them. A pair of glasses is on the table.*) and plural when *pair* absent (*My pants have a stain on them. Your glasses are on the table.*)

With some modifying phrases the **proximity principle** applies, meaning that verb agreement is with the closest noun. Notice the following:

1. With *all of, some of, a lot of* constructions that indicate the quantity of something, the proximity principle applies, (*All of the soup is ready. All of the books are here. A lot of rain causes flooding. A lot of my clothes are too tight.*)
2. With fractions and percentages the proximity principle also applies. (*One half of my money is gone. One half of my dogs are sick. Forty percent of the air is polluted. Forty percent of the people have the flu.*)

Pragmatics and Discourse.

When we help people learn English, we hope that what we are teaching is based on descriptive principles. That way what we teach is reinforced when they interact with others outside the classroom. Let's look at a sampling of pragmatic conditions to see how they affect the principles of verb agreement in Standard English. First let's look at some problems in interpersonal English. Then we'll look at how special rules apply in some types of academic English.

Interpersonal English and Concord. Three verb agreement problems confront English language learners who are learning English by interacting with

native speakers of the language. One involves the salience of the verb *be*, another a simplification of concord rules. A third concerns making concord rules based on semantic rather than mathematical logic.

Saliency. Although, as we saw in AA 3.1 in the last chapter, the verb *is* is the most frequently used word in conversational English, its acquisition is not easy for English language learners. Not only is it just one form of the most irregular English verb (*is, am, are, was, were* versus *play, plays, played*), many languages (e.g. Russian, Arabic, and many African and American Indian languages) do not use an equivalent of the verb *be*, especially in the present tense. Since the frequently occurring *is* plays such an important role in English, teachers teach it and its related forms (*am, are, was, were*) to English language learners from the beginning. However, outside of class, *is* seems to disappear since it usually appears in its contracted form (*John's coming. That's wonderful. Who's that? Here's the book. Susie's back*). Since English is an SVO language, learners expect a distinct V after the subject, not an –s attached to the S which sounds like a plural. As a result, many do not notice it if they are learning English on the streets. Even young children learning English as their native language may not notice it. Thus they produce sentences without *is*. (Susie back. John coming. She my friend.)

Simplifying concord rules. English speakers simplify the complicated agreement rules associated with the verb *be* in the spoken language. When we

looked at expectancy grammar in Chapter Two, we saw that English speaking people expect the information in sentences to be in predictable location surrounded by predictable words. For example, English is an SVO language so we expect the words ahead of the V to indicate who or what is doing the action expressed by the V. Therefore, the rule of thumb is that concord is based on the words in the S position rather than in the O position. This usually works out fine. But what about sentences such as the following which frequently occur in conversation?

Where's your car?

Here's your food.

There's an apple over there.

In these cases the logical subjects (*car, food, apple*) are in the O position. Is the verb agreement with *where, here, and there* in the S position or with *car, food, and apple* in the O position? Logic tells us that it is with the singular nouns even though they are in the O position. However, the following sentences, which are based on what is commonly heard in conversation, suggest something else is developing.

Where's my books?

Here's your parents.

There's two girls outside.

It looks as though English speakers are simplifying the concord rule by basing verb agreement on what is in the S position rather than on the logical subject in the O position, as would be the case in

Where're my books?

Here're your parents

There're two girls outside.

Some linguists call this ignoring of the traditional rule and simply attaching the contracted *is* to the first word **chunking**, based on the assumption that in the mind of the speakers, *where's*, *here's*, and *there's* are new words that ignore verb agreement rather than words with contracted *is*. This simplification of the concord rules, which bases verb agreement on whatever is in the S position rather than the logical subject, is common even in the speech of the educated.

Some speakers no longer use concord in the past tense of *be* and use only *was* for all persons (*I was, you was, she was, we was, they was*). In some dialect areas, speakers add *-s* to all the singular verbs in the simple present, not just the third person (*I says, you says*). Speakers of other dialects have dropped verb agreement in the present tense. (*He don't like that so much. She go to school over there.*) Since verb agreement is a high frequency grammar point, English teachers and editors watch carefully for it. Therefore these simplified concord rules, though common in many communities, are stigmatized.

Semantics overruling logic. Another concord change is happening even among the educated and is less noticed. As we saw earlier, the nonintervention principle applies when the subject of the sentence is followed by a prepositional phrase. (*One of the boys is coming along.*) Standard English says that since *one* and *none* (literally *not one*) are both singular, logically the nonintervention principle

should yield the same verb agreement for both (*None of the boys is coming along.*) However, descriptive studies indicate that with *none* many people apply the proximity principle rather than the nonintervention principle. (*None of the boys are coming. None of the pie tastes good.*) The switch from the nonintervention principle to the proximity principle is also becoming true with *each* and *every* (*Each of the boys have something to do. Every one of the toys are broken.*) The semantic implication seems to be that whereas *one* implies there is only one, *each*, *every*, and *none* when followed by a modifying phrase with a plural noun implies that there are many possibilities, thus requiring a plural concord..

Academic English and concord: science and math. The concord rules of Standard English have special applications when dealing with science. The first has to do with formulas. No matter how many things are combined, subtracted, multiplied, or divided, the verb agreement is always singular. (*One plus three equals four. Four times four is sixteen. Two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen produces water.*) Notice how this differs from the rule for interpersonal English. (*One cow and three horses are in the field*) To remind children that math English differs from conversational English, teachers are told to read $1+2=3$ as *one plus two equals three* rather than *one and two is three*.

The plural unit words for distance, time, money, and weight are also considered singular. (*Five miles is a long way. Twenty minutes goes fast. Four dollars is not much. Fifty pounds is not too heavy.*) Fractions and percentages present another problem. Though they might be expected to be singular for verb

agreement according to general pattern for units of measurement and the pattern for *one of* and *each of*, they follow the proximity principle rather than the expected non-intervention principle for concord. In other words, verb agreement is plural if the following noun is plural (*Two thirds of the birds are sparrows. Fifteen percent of the coins were damaged.*) but singular if a singular noun follows (*One third of the water is gone. Forty percent of the sugar has dissolved.*) For collective or group nouns, the agreement may be singular or plural. (*One tenth of the population agrees. One tenth of the population agree.*)

Reflections.

Some concepts.

- Standard English is just one of a variety of Englishes that people learn.
- The rules of interpersonal and academic English may differ.
- Verbs can be identified through meaning, endings, and structural frames.
- The rules of Standard English are changing as scholars focus on describing how English speakers actually use the language rather than prescribing how they should use it.

Tips for finding verbs

- **Meaning:** look for the words that give the action or what the subject of the sentence is doing, *Susie swims every morning. (swims)*
- **Endings:** look for derivational or inflectional endings
 - **Derivational:** endings used to create verbs, e.g. *-ize (specialize), -ify (identify), -ate (liberate), -en (soften),*

- **Inflectional:** endings used to place the verb in various tenses, e.g. *-ed (played), -ing (is swimming), -en (has eaten), -s (runs)*
- **Structural frames:** look for words that typically surround verbs, much like a picture frame, e.g. has ____-en/-ed (has seen, had played), is ____-ing (is swimming), can ____ (can see), doesn't ____ (doesn't play). Based on the various SVO frames, different categories of verbs can be identified
 - **Transitive (SVO)** The branch (S) hit (V) the car (O)
 - **Intransitive (SV)** The boat (S) sank (V)
 - **Ditransitive (SVOO)** John (S) gave (V) Mary (O) a book (O)
 - **Linking (SVAdj)** Sara (S) looks (V) happy (Adj).

Some key terminology.

- **academic English**—the English most like Standard English, primarily written in textbooks or scholarly documents rather than spoken, used for more formal purposes
- **Chunking**—merging of two words into an unanalyzed whole that ignores the rules of verb agreement, e.g. *There's so many cars on the freeway this afternoon.* .
- **descriptive grammar**—grammar that is based on what the speakers of the language actually do. It recognizes that there are different versions of a language, whether written or spoken, and that different versions may be more appropriate in different contexts

- **informalization process**—a movement to make the academic English found in textbooks and other publications resemble more closely interpersonal English in grammar and vocabulary
- **Interlanguage**—a transitional version of English that reflects how the language learner is interpreting how English works
- **interpersonal English**—also called conversational English or street talk. As the name implies, this is the spoken version of English. Its rules differ from the rules of written English and sometimes conflict with the rules of Standard English.
- **nonintervention principle**—a principle of verb agreement that says that the concord skips over the words closest to the verb, which may be part of a prepositional phrase, to an earlier noun, e.g. *One of my friends is outside.*
- **overgeneralization**—applying a rule too broadly, ignoring exceptions to general patterns
- **pedagogical grammar**—grammar that is written to help teachers know what to teach. Most pedagogical grammars are based on descriptive principles but are prescriptive in the sense that the language learner has to adopt new versions of their language which may be more appropriate for certain situations.
- **prescriptive grammar**—grammar that focuses on standardizing the language based on a version of the language created by teams of scholars. The rules may not reflect what people actually do but stipulate what they must do in order to sound educated

- **proximity principle**—a principle of verb agreement that says that the concord is based on the noun closest to the verb in S position, e.g. *All of my friends are coming. All of the money is gone.*
- **stigmatized forms**—versions of English considered to be signals of lack of education

Rules of thumb: General principles for concord or verb agreement

1. Concord applies only in the present tense when the subject of the sentence is third person singular -- in other words, something being talked about, not the person or persons speaking (first person) or being spoken to (second person).

An –s is added to the verb or the auxiliary, whichever comes first.

e.g. The boy swims in the morning. Susan has seen the movie already.

2. There is no verb agreement with modals. (*can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would, must*)

e.g. The boy may swim in the morning. Susan must have seen the movie already.

3. The verb *be* when it is first not only has concord in the present for all persons (*I am, you are, he is, we are, they are*) but in the past (*I was, he was, you were, we were, they were*) But *I may be there.*

Some reflective activities.

1. Using the “They can _____(it).” frame, test if the following can be used as verbs. (When frames are given, a word in parentheses is used only if it is needed for the frame to work because of the requirements of SV

(intransitive) and SVO (transitive) verbs, e.g. *She slides*, versus *She enjoys it*.)

creation	pacify	walk	deficit	sufficient
hunt	score	remain	large	tension
collide	between	use	format	dictionary

2. How can the following be made into verbs?

critic	sensational	red	strength	caliber
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3. Find the main verb in the following sentences. What are the meaning clues, endings, and frames that you used?

- I have worked all night.
- She clarified her position.
- That didn't worry me.
- Rains may come tomorrow.
- This pill contains vitamin C.

4. Verbs can be in different categories according to the frame that they fit.

Give three sample verbs for each of these frames. Can any verbs fit more than one frame?

- S ___
- S___O
- S___OO
- S___Adj

5. Some children playing in the street were heard to say the following sentences. What seems to be going on with the verbs they are using? What do you think is the source of the new forms?
- He squoze me so hard I thought I was dead.
 - She brung me a soda.
 - She's ate already.
 - I's not real sure about that.
 - He live in Newberry.
6. What are the past tenses and past participles (the form used with *have* as an auxiliary) for the following verbs? Compare your answers with your classmates. Have you heard any other interesting forms in your associations with others?
- learn dive see drink swim hear dream bring give think
7. Put the following verbs in the present tense in the frame *She _____s (it)* and take note of the pronunciation of the inflectional ending. What seems to be the rule for pronouncing *-s* on verbs?
- sing swim play hurt jump go rise rush see bet back buff rub
8. The verb *go* is very irregular in its forms for the past and the past participle (*go/went/gone*). The past tense form *went* actually comes from another verb that has almost disappeared from the language, *wend* (*Dorothy must wend her way to Oz.*) Some suggest that another alternative is developing for the past participle based on the verb *be*. (*go/went/been*) as evidenced by pattern *This boat goes up the river. This boat went up the river.* and

- This boat has been up the river.* As a descriptive linguist in the making, what do you think? Replace *gone* with *been* in other sentences you create to see if it truly is a valid alternative that students ought to know about, at least for interpersonal English. Does the new alternative mean the same?
9. What seems to be the rule for how to pronounce the *-ed* on the following?
smoothed faded puffed purred followed looked printed washed tapped
10. Explain the rule of Standard English that was broken in the following sentences.
- *One half of the spaghetti are gone.
 - *Six plus four are ten.
 - *A lot of people is here.
 - *He swum with me last night.
 - *Where's the cows?
 - *Julia cans study with us.

Grammar detective 4. Exploring verb agreement

Standard English is supposed to be the hallmark of educated English speakers. Let's try another way of collecting data to find out if this is true. This time we will use an oral questionnaire where we ask for judgments about "what sounds best?"

Instructions:

1. Find five educated English speakers of about the same age. All five should either be native speakers of English or all five should be fluent

non-native speakers who learned English the same way—i.e. at school overseas or in school as a child in the USA. Record their background.

2. Read to them the following pairs of sentences and ask them which alternative sounds the best. Do not let them read the sentences.
3. Record their preferences.
4. Tabulate your findings so they can be combined with those of your classmates, e.g. sentence 1--a 2, b. 3
5. Compare your results with the rules prescribed by Standard English.

The prescriptive answers are 1.a, 2.a, 3.a, 4 a, 5 a, 6 b, 7 a (American) 7 b (British), 8 a, 9 a, 10 b. Be prepared to share your findings with the class to illustrate how the principles of descriptive grammar work for educated native and non-native speakers.

1.
 - a. Billiards is so boring.
 - b. Billiards are so boring.
2.
 - a. Two plus two is four.
 - b. Two plus two are four.
3.
 - a. One of the firemen enjoys hearing the alarm go off.
 - b. One of the firemen enjoy hearing the alarm go off.
4.
 - a. None of the firemen enjoys hearing the alarm go off.
 - b. None of the firemen enjoy hearing the alarm go off.
5.
 - a. All of the water is polluted.
 - b. All of the water are polluted.

6.
 - a. All of the students is here.
 - b. All of the students are here.
7.
 - a. All of the crew is here.
 - b. All of the crew are here.
8.
 - a. Each of them sees many advantages in the plan.
 - b. Each of them see many advantages in the plan.
9.
 - a. A pair of scissors is on the table.
 - b. A pair of scissors are on the table.
10.
 - a. There's too many students here.
 - b. There're too many students here.

Teaching ideas.

1. **What's the schedule?** Verb agreement is an important part of the simple present tense. This tense is used to give general conditions, such as personal schedules. For this teaching activity collect pictures from magazines of people doing things. Give one to each student then put them into pairs. Instruct them that each picture illustrates something that this person does very often. Have them tell their partner what the person does to prepare for the illustrated activity. Then tell what happens as the person finishes the activity. For example, maybe the picture is of an unshaven father holding his baby. Some *before* activities might include: He hears the baby cry. He picks her up. He walks the floor. Some *after* activities might

- include: He gives the baby to her mother. He shaves and showers and dresses for work.
2. **What am I doing?** This activity practices the relationship between *I am* and *You are* in conversation and involves pantomime. The teacher performs an action (e.g. pretends to read a book or pretends to pick and smell flowers) and asks “What am I doing?” The students answer “You’re reading a book” or “You’re smelling a flower.” The students then take turns acting and asking “What am I doing?” with their classmates answering with the appropriate “You’re....”
 3. **What was on the table?** This activity practices *was/were*. In a small lunch bag place several small objects (e.g. school supplies or toys), some duplicate, some single. Empty the bag onto the table in front of the class and let the students memorize what was there. Then put every thing back into the bag and have the group recall what was there with the phrase “There was...” or “There were....” as appropriate.
 4. **Past tense bingo.** Make yourself a list of common verbs with irregular past tenses that your students need to learn. Out of large lined note cards make enough Bingo cards for all the class by turning the side with lines sideways and with a ruler drawing lines to create playing cards with 16 squares in a box (4 squares x 4 squares). Using your list of verbs, randomly write in the 16 squares the present tense of any 16 verbs. On another set of smaller cards write the past tense of these same verbs, one per card. These will be your draw cards. Give each student a Past Tense

Bingo card and several beans or opener rings from soda cans to mark the spaces when they have a match. Shuffle your draw cards and place them in a bowl. Draw one and read the irregular past tense. Students who have the present tense version of that verb written in a square shout out the present tense and cover the square with a marker. Each student who has that verb then has to say a sentence that uses that verb in the past tense. Keep repeating the process. When one student has completed a row of four horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, the student shouts "Past Tense Bingo." The bingo cards are cleared, the draw cards are returned to the bowl, and the game starts again with the winning student drawing the verbs from the bowl and monitoring the activities of the other students.