Teaching Tricky English: More the Exception than the Rule

Adrian-Florin BUȘU*

https://doi.org/10.52744/AUCSFLSA.2023.01.30

Abstract:
This article tackles the irregularities of English language and the means of dealing with them. Starting from a short presentation of the history of English language and the way it has evolved throughout time, the present paper aims at understanding the underlying reciprocity of various levels of grammar that generates complexity and irregularity at one level, triggering at the same time changes at another level, having as a result an alteration of the symmetry of forms distribution in grammar. At some point in the process of learning English, students tend to get frustrated because almost no rule in English is straightforward and there are always exceptions to a rule; more than that, it somehow seems that breaking rules in English grammar has become a rule itself. However, in-depth understanding of grammar structures may prove useful for learners in order to master the use of English.

Keywords: rule, exception, distribution, symmetry, change

Rezumat:
Acest articol tratează excepțiile întâlnite în gramatica limbii engleze și oferă câteva explicații privitoare la acest aspect. Pornind de la o scurtă prezentare a istoriei limbii engleze și a modului în care aceasta a evoluat de-a lungul timpului, prezentul articol urmărește explicarea și înțelegerea relației de reciprocitate dintre paliere limbii, care se manifestă la diferite niveluri ale gramaticii, generând complexitate și excepții pe un palier, dar și schimbări la alte niveluri. Rezultatul acestor interacțiuni între nivelurile gramaticii limbii engleze este o alterare a simetriei distribuției formelor gramaticale. În anumite situații, pe parcursul procesului de învățare a limbii engleze, studenții devin uneori frustrați, întrucât în limba engleză aproape că nu există regulă gramaticală care să nu aibă excepții; mai mult decât atât, se pare că existența excepțiilor a devenit ea însăși o regulă. Totuși, o înțelegere profundă a structurilor gramaticale și a regulilor care le guvernează se poate dovedi foarte utilă în utilizarea corespunzătoare a limbii engleze ca instrument de comunicare.

Cuvinte cheie: regulă, excepție, distribuție, simetrie, schimbare

* Department of Applied Modern Languages, University of Craiova, adibusu2002@yahoo.com
More often than not, people tend to regard language as a complex system that works flawlessly so long as rules are obeyed. This is a process that is quite similar to the process of driving a car: following road rules takes you safely to your destination, that is, by extrapolation, to successful communication in the case of following grammar rules. But what is to be done when exceptions tend to outnumber rules? Rules and formulas work, so people tend to stick to them. However, most languages break their own rules, English in particular, mostly because this language is made up of bits and parts from various languages across the world, partly due to its own history and partly due to the way in which it has evolved.

Natural languages are biological systems prone to evolutionary change, so it is natural that they evolve gradually (Ritt:2004). English is no exception to this theory. So how do exceptions occur? One plausible explanation is that the reciprocity of different levels of grammar generates complexity and irregularity on one level when changes occur at another level. Another explanation is that changes triggered by extra-grammatical factor may affect the symmetry of forms distribution in a grammar (Janda:1991).

To understand the reasons why breaking rules in English grammar has almost become a rule itself, let us remember how English was formed: classified as the West-Germanic branch of Germanic languages, which originated from the Anglo-Frisian dialects, it was shaped by the Norman Conquest into Anglo-Norman and then reshaped by Old Norse. Early Modern English came into being only about 500 years ago and comprised loans from Latin, Greek, French, German and Dutch. It was the language of Shakespeare’s sonnets and plays, which contributed to the standardization of English language in the 17th and 18th centuries. This brief historical insight is meant to show that English is a mixture of languages and influences, which makes it quite a challenging language to learn, despite the easy-to-learn tag attached to it by some people, just for superficial reasons.

Students sometimes tend to get frustrated because no rule in English grammar is straightforward. To a greater extent, a rule is defined as a generalization of empirical observations that allows predictions on data. However, rules need to be validated by the production of an example or a specific application, that is by an extension in general. There are always exceptions to rules, hence the process of learning English becomes troublesome. In other words, when we take into account a certain grammar rule, most of the time we find that specific pieces of data refuse
to comply with the established rule. It is these pieces of data which are defined as exceptions and which, obviously, require a rule to violate. Here is a series of the most common irregularities in English that may render it difficult for students to learn and some tips to navigate one’s way around:

1. Silent letters should be silent. But are they all?

   The Great Vowel Shift consisted of a set of changes in pronunciation that took place between the 15th and 18th centuries. Because of this vowel shift, the pronunciation of all Middle English long vowels was altered. Some consonant sounds changed as well, particularly those that became silent. As a result, spoken English put a halt on pronouncing certain consonants such as p, b or g, while the written language refused to change its spelling. The result is a number of confusing words, such as debt, receipt, and design, whose b in debt, p in receipt and g in design are not pronounced, yet they are present in writing. Contrary to the popular belief, it is not memorizing that helps how to correctly pronounce these words, but understanding related words. However, thing may get confusing when their related words have the same spelling, but a different pronunciation, where the letter is no longer silent: for instance, in crumb, the b remains silent, but is pronounced in crumble.

2. It takes just one letter to change pronunciation.

   Another example of pronunciation alteration is slaughter and laughter: although there is one extra s in slaughter, these two words are pronounced completely different. Slaughter is pronounced the regular way for the morphemic group augh in English, whereas the pronunciation of laughter is irregular. The in-depth explanation is that slaughter comes from Old Norse and therefore inherited the original pronunciation, in which the consonant group gh is silent, whereas laughter originates in Old English, in which the consonant group gh was morphed into t. In other cases, say loans from Greek of French, some consonants are silent, although they are present in writing. For instance, the French word cologne is pronounced with a dropped g, as well as the initial p in the Greek psychology, as the English phonematic system does not have a sound for groups of consonants such as gn or ps. The Neogrammarian Controversy dealt with such diachronic issues and focused on the hypothesis that Sound Laws work without exception, as:

   All sound change, insofar as it is mechanical, takes places under exceptionless laws, i.e. the direction of the sound movement is always the same with all members of a speech community – unless dialect split occurs – and all words, in which the sound undergoing the sound movement occurs in the same circumstances, are without exception affected by the change. (Osthoff and Brugmann, 1878: XIII)
The Neogrammarians claimed that, at a certain moment in time, all words comprising relevant sounds underwent a particular sound change, mainly motivated by physiological factors, and later on by considerations from psychology. Their ideas were then supported by Verner’s Law, who tested the exceptionlessness-paradigm and managed to demonstrate that exceptions may be explained by taking into account the position of the word accent: “However, one must not be content with the assumption of chance. In such a case, there must be, so to speak, a rule for the irregularity; it is just necessary to find it.” (Verner, 1877:101). Moreover, factors such as sociolinguistics, analogy and lexical diffusion sustain the idea of sporadic changes in exceptionless sound changes. To this purpose, McMahon (1994:21) describes Sturtevant’s Paradox: “sound change is regular but creates irregularity, whereas analogy is irregular but creates regularity”.

3. Plural nouns end in -s. Except for 100+ nouns.

A simple rule on this matter states that nouns form plural by adding consonant -s to singular. How difficult can it get? Not terribly, but still… This plural suffix is used as default and turns up whenever there is no existing form already or none that can be formed by analogy, as in many loan words (pizzas), in abbreviations (CPUs for Central Processing Units, for instance) or in proper names (the Browns – all the members that form the Brown family). As a consequence, -s suffix is characterized as the regular form, whereas the rest of seven classes of plurals are considered irregular, driven by analogy. Thanks to Greek and Latin influences, English has morphemic transformations in nouns from -us into -i, for instance fungus-fungi, or from -um into -a, as in datum-data. Other words have an irregular ending for plural, such as children, which may cause confusion for young learners, who tend to mix up the incorrect form childs with the possessive child’s. Moreover, they sometimes tend to apply the -s rule to the plural form of irregular nouns, overlaying a rule to an exception, resulting in the incorrect form childrens. This class of -en suffix for irregular plurals is loaned or inherited from the -e, -en, -er class of suffixes for plural in German.

4. Just adding -ed to short infinitive does not form the past tense for all verbs.

Almost all inflecting languages have a certain amount of irregularity in their grammatical forms, except for Esperanto, which is an artificial language and has no irregular verbs. There is enough evidence to support the theory according to which the centermost parts of the language constitute most of the exceptions of a grammatical system. Just consider two of the most commonly used verbs in English: have and go. They are circumscribed to a group of exceptions in the sense of extreme irregular
verbs which do not share many common features within their paradigms. Although they were, at some point in history, regular verbs, these two examples of verbs evolved towards irregularity by accelerated sound change, as in the case of have-had, or by lexical change, as in the case of go-went, in which go is combined with Medieval English wend, which replaced the Old English ēode. Go-went illustrates the typical lexical mixing process, that is the combination of two different verbs into one paradigm through means of inflectional split.

5. Past participles typically end in -ed, except for when they don’t.

Past participles are either used as an adjective or used in a verb phrase and they typically end in -ed. Difficulties occur when dealing with irregular verbs, around 300 in English (that is roughly 3%), approaching 200 in normal use, although most grammar books list around 100 as most commonly used. Most exceptions to -ed ending include -en ending, as in given or hidden, whereas others do not change base form at all, as in cut-cut-cut or put-put-put. There seems to be no other way of dealing correctly with these gremlins that pure memorization and intensive practice with them.

6. A real head-scratcher: homophones

Although they sound alike, homophones are spelt differently. This may not seem to be a big problem, but it can cause confusion unless students keep using them. Let’s take a look at meat (any type of food that is derived from animals) and meet (the action of being introduced to someone), or sea (as in a large area covered with water) and see (the process of watching or looking at somebody or something). The cause of such issues is traced back in the 14th to 17th centuries, when already existing words overlapped loans with a different meaning, but whose pronunciation was similar. As a result, some letters shifted and evolved into words that sound alike but are spelt differently.

7. Do you think homophones are complicated? How about heteronyms?

Unlike homophones, which sound alike but are spelt differently, heteronyms are spelt alike, but have different connotations and pronunciations. For instance, close has identical spelling for its meaning of to shut as verb and nearby as adjective. Most of the time, the confusion generated by these heteronyms appears in reading and affects the flow of a sentence if the reader has to track back in order to grasp the correct meaning of the context.

8. Switching counting techniques

In the case of compound ordinal numerals, the rule states that we follow the high-low constituent pattern, such as in twenty-one, eighty-seven and so on, in which decade words (such as ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty and ninety) come before a word for ones (1 to 9).
However, in the 13-19 interval, the exact opposite patterns apply, in which the low constituent, represented by the words for ones comes in front of the high constituent, or the decade words, such as in *thirteen, fourteen, fifteen* and so on.

9. Why *was* and *were*? Wasn’t *was* enough?

Starting from the observation that irregular verbs have a single form in Past Tense, it comes naturally to add one more exception to this rule: the suppletive verb *to be*, which has two distinctive forms: *was* and *were*. The explanation for this exception is the phenomenon known as rhotacization, which occurred in most languages, and which converted an alveolar consonant to a rhotic consonant. The Old English *wesan*, which had the same meaning as *beon* (to be), had the form *wæs* for 1*st* and 3*rd* person singular in the Past Tense, which underwent the process of rhotacization, changing consonant /s/ to /r/, resulting in *wære* for 1*st* person plural, 2*nd* person singular and plural and 3*rd* person plural, later morphed into the Modern English *were*.

10. Adverbs of frequency go in front of verbs. More often than not.

The rule states that if a sentence has only one verb, the adverb of frequency is placed in the middle of the sentence so that it is positioned after the subject, but before the verb, as in *She always has coffee in the morning*. This rule does not apply to sentences containing forms of *to be*, case in which the adverb of frequency must follow the verb, as in *She is always late for classes*, or to sentences containing auxiliary verbs, as in *I have always enjoyed watching films* or modal verbs, as in *I can never remember his last name*. These exceptions may seem a little random, but the reason is related mainly to pronunciation, more exactly to the principle of least effort in speaking. To be more specific, fluent speakers tend to contract the forms of *to be* and auxiliaries, therefore placing an adverb of frequency in front of these verbs would interfere with contractions and hinder communication.

All things considered, it is worth mentioning that the Latin *exception probat regulam* is not necessarily an aphorism, but a means to show that an exception to a rule demonstrates that there is a rule for it to be an exception. Although the process of learning English can sometimes be described as difficult by students because of the multitude of exceptions to rules that may hinder the process of acquiring grammar and lexical structures, a good comprehension of the underlying reciprocity of various levels of grammar that causes such linguistic phenomena, combined with a great deal of practice, are the solutions to overcome students’ reluctance to exceptions in English.
References:


