

Focus on Language

In *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck wanted to tell a story about ordinary working people. One way that he tried to capture the personality of these people was to use a lot of dialogue. Although Steinbeck was well-educated, he did not write the characters' words in standard English. Instead, he wrote down their words just as the characters might have really said them.

The Grammar of Spoken English

This chart gives you some examples of the kind of grammar you can expect to find in the dialogue in *Of Mice and Men*.

| GRAMMAR FEATURES | EXAMPLES FROM CHAPTER 1 |
|---|--|
| The subject of the sentence is left out. | ▪ [It] Tastes all right. (p. 3) |
| The wrong pronoun is used. | ▪ That's all you ever can remember is them rabbits. (p. 4-5) |
| The negative is used incorrectly. | ▪ Tried and tried, but it didn't do no good. (p. 4) |
| The word ain't is used instead of am not, is not, and are not . | ▪ I ain't sure it's good water. Looks kinda scummy. (p. 3) |
| The word of is used instead of the word have . | ▪ We could just as well of rode clear to the ranch.... (p. 4) |
| The auxiliary verb is left out. | ▪ Lennie, you [are] gonna be sick like you was last night. (p. 3) |
| The incorrect form of the verb is used. | ▪ Lennie, you gonna be sick like you was last night. (p. 3) ▪ Look what I done . (p. 3) |

Speech Reductions

You have probably noticed that English speakers often run words together and/or leave out certain sounds when they speak. These reductions are a common linguistic occurrence in spoken language, especially in informal situations.

These reductions are usually not written down because they belong to the spoken language. However, Steinbeck tries to write down many of the reductions in his characters' speech so that his readers can "hear" what his characters sound like.

| REDUCTIONS | EXAMPLES FROM CHAPTER 1 |
|--|---|
| <p><i>Of, to,</i> and <i>have</i> reduce to unaccented <i>a</i> and are added to the previous word</p> <p><u>Ex.</u> 1. <i>kind of</i> = <i>kinda</i> 2. <i>going to</i> = <i>gonna</i> 3. <i>ought to</i> = <i>oughta</i> <i>want to</i> = <i>wanta</i> or <i>wanna</i></p> | <p>1. "Looks <i>kinda</i> scummy." (p. 3) 2. "Lennie, you <i>gonna</i> be sick like you was last night." (p. 3) 3. "You never <i>oughta</i> drink water when it ain't running." (p. 3) "Didn't <i>wanta</i> stop at the ranch gate, that's what." (p. 4)</p> |
| <p>Consonant sounds are left out. An apostrophe is used to show where the sounds used to be.</p> <p><u>Ex.</u> 1. <i>that's</i> = <i>tha's</i> 2. <i>just</i> = <i>jes'</i> 3. <i>just</i> = <i>jus'</i>, <i>spend</i> = <i>spen'</i> <i>telling</i> = <i>tellin'</i>, <i>them</i> = <i>'em</i></p> | <p>1. "<i>Tha's</i> good." (3) 2. "'<i>Jes'</i> a little stretch down the highway,' he says." (p. 4) 3. "Might <i>jus'</i> as well <i>spen'</i> all my time <i>tellin'</i> you things and then you forget '<i>em</i>, and I tell you again." (p. 4)</p> |
| <p><i>You</i> changes to <i>ya</i>.</p> <p><u>Ex.</u> 1. <i>you</i> = <i>ya</i></p> | <p>1. "I'll tell <i>ya</i> again." (p. 4)</p> |
| <p><i>Do you</i> and <i>are you</i> sometimes reduce to <i>ya</i>.</p> <p><u>Ex.</u> 1. <i>do you</i> = <i>ya</i></p> | <p>1. "Yeah, what <i>ya</i> want?" (p. 4)</p> |

Putting Ideas Into Practice

The following sentences are taken from the first chapter of *Of Mice and Men*. "Translate" each of these sentences into standard English.

1. I got both of 'em here. Think I'd let you carry your own work card? (p. 5)

2. What'd you take outa that pocket? (p. 5)

3. I ain't got nothin', George. (p. 5)

4. You remember where we're goin' now? (p. 6)

5. I'll give him the work tickets, but you ain't gonna say a word. You jus' stand there and don't say nothing. (p. 6)

6. If he finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won't get no job, but if he sees ya work before he hears ya talk, we're set. (p. 6)

7. Now when we go in to see the boss, what you gonna do? (p. 6)

8. I ain't gonna say nothin'. Jus' gonna stan' there. (p. 6)

9. They was lookin' for us, but they didn't catch us. (p. 7)
