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## **Proper English Usage : a sociolinguistic investigation of attitudes towards usage problems in British English**

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## **2. The Usage Debate**

### **2.1. Introduction**

Since the purpose of this study is to include the general public in the usage debate by assessing their attitudes towards a selection of usage problems, it is vital first to provide the necessary background information on what the usage debate is and how it has come about. That English usage is a disputed topic which has been recurrently discussed in society does not only highlight the social interest in language, but it also hints at an ongoing dispute between prescriptivists and descriptivists, two of the key players in the debate. Yet, while this dispute did not always necessarily appear to be actively directed towards the opposing camp, the usage debate can also be considered a social and historical phenomenon which has persisted in society since its origins in the eighteenth century. What the role of the general public has been in this debate will also be explored in this chapter. For this reason, I will link the usage debate to the notion of standard language and language ideologies, since this seems to be an often-neglected characteristic of standard languages. By drawing this link between standard language and ideologies, the notion of correct language is established, which gave rise to prescriptions in the mid-eighteenth century (cf. Beal, 2010; Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2014). Prescription is a central and formative practice of the usage debate, which also constitutes the last stage of Milroy and Milroy's (2012) standardisation process. Based on this discussion, I will sketch the beginning of the usage debate in the mid-eighteenth century and highlight its connection to the rise of prescriptivism. Providing a brief and comprehensive overview of how prescriptivism developed, I aim at highlighting the importance of the usage debate and its historical development. The difference between prescription and prescriptivism (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, *forthc./a*), Deborah Cameron's (1995) 'verbal hygiene', and Ann Curzan's (2014) strands of prescriptivism

need to be established which will aid a better understanding of the issue at hand, i.e. the problem behind a stigmatised feature can be associated with these strands. Furthermore, it is important to emphasise recent developments in the usage debate such as the emerging of a moral panic evolving around the decay of the English language in British society, and to this end I will draw on the application of Standard English in education and the media, two contexts in which the notion of correct Standard English exercises a gate-keeping function.

## **2.2. The Usage Debate and Standard Language**

When talking about standard languages, an ineradicable link is established between the standard variety and language ideologies. This link, which has often been neglected by linguists and sociolinguists in particular (cf. Milroy, 2001, p. 531), is investigated in this chapter and will be shown to play a crucial role in the usage debate. While debates on standard languages among linguists have often been heated (see e.g. Bex & Watts, 1999) and have failed to result in a consensual conclusion on what Standard English is, let alone whether it exists, standard languages are considered a reality by the general public. This difference between linguists' and non-linguists' views on linguistic entities, be it language varieties or specific features of a variety, has already been mentioned in the Introduction. Whether linguists should use 'Standard English', standard English or Standard English is an unfamiliar and perhaps irrelevant question for most members of the general public for whom the term is simply a reference to an existing entity, as is the notion 'proper' or 'correct' English. Hickey (2012, p. 1) acknowledges the different views on standard languages and the view held by laypeople who consider Standard English as just another "single form of language". The notion of a standard language is, however, often accompanied by that of correctness. Leith (1997, p. 33)

explains how a standard language may cause many speakers to believe that they do not speak their own language in a proper and correct manner. This belief is also reflected in Fairclough's (2001, p. 48) description of Standard English and associations commonly made with it:

Standard English was regarded as *correct* English, and other social dialects were stigmatised not only in terms of correctness but also in terms which indirectly reflected on the lifestyles, morality and so forth of their speakers, the emergent working class of capitalised society: they were *vulgar*, *slovenly*, *low*, *barbarous*, and so forth.

The link made here between Standard English and a speaker's character and lifestyle highlights the social implications of nonstandard language use and reflects frequently voiced concerns about one's own alleged language deficits. The issue of variation in spelling conventions has often been mentioned and discussed, yet without finding a consensus (cf. Bex & Watts, 2001; p. 9; Hickey, 2012, p. 1), so it seems as if no agreement on this matter has been reached. As with the title of this thesis (cf. §1.1), I will use the capitalised spelling variant without quotation marks, i.e. Standard English, in this chapter and throughout this study to bridge the gap between linguists and laypeople and to put an emphasis on the importance of the role played by laypeople in the usage debate. When using the term Standard English in this thesis, I mean Standard British English, as attitudes towards British English usage problems are the subject of this investigation.

Oliver Kamm, journalist and author of a descriptive usage guide called *Accidence Will Happen* (2015), provides a concise overview of the usage debate. In doing so, he draws a connection between the beginning of the usage debate and education. While Latin and Greek were the subjects traditionally taught in school, being taught in English seemed inconceivable (Kamm, 2015, p. 79). Early English grammars of the sixteenth century served the purpose of teaching foreigners English as well as introducing English-speakers to the

study of Latin (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 274). Classical languages, such as Greek and in particular Latin, were seen as a role model for English and the epitome of language (cf. Kamm, 2015, pp. 80–81). That is why the study of the English language and English grammars were heavily influenced by Latin. Some of these early links between education and the usage debate are even felt today, not only in that Latin grammar used to be a yardstick to judge English, but also in that prescriptivists base their judgments on principles reflecting Latinate rules, such as the infamous rule on split infinitives. While Kamm (2015, p. 81) stresses the fundamental differences between Latin and English by stating that “[d]ifferent languages have different rules. They need not have the same ones”, this notion was not widespread during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Using Latin as an example in the attempt to fix English, on the other hand, became an important endeavour which took shape in proposals for the introduction of an official institution that might regulate the language.

While the Royal Society, a society dedicated to science founded in 1660, unsuccessfully proposed a language committee in charge of English usage in 1664, proposals for the establishment of an English language academy were voiced recurrently (Nevalainen & Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2006, pp. 281–282). The Italian Accademia della Crusca, which was founded in 1582, and its French and Spanish counterparts served as language authorities on standardising their respective languages by codifying the selected variety and imposing a set of rules on the speakers of the language. Among advocates for an English academy which was meant to hold similar responsibilities were well-known authors such as Dryden, Defoe and Addison, but the most prominent academy promoter was Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), whose *Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, published in 1712, contains several interesting observations of

English at his day (Nevalainen & Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2006, p. 283). Swift (1712, pp. 31–32) argued that the decay of English would result in literature becoming unintelligible, which, according to Swift, would be linked to and caused by language change and variation. Swift’s proposal aimed at institutional support from the government and the aristocracy who he would like to see appoint suitable members of an academy following the French model “to intimidate where these [the French] have proceeded right, and to avoid their mistakes” (Swift, 1712, p. 30). Interestingly, Swift (1712, pp. 28–29) strongly argues in favour of women being included in these language decisions, stating that their absence in the debate had resulted in the present decaying state of English. Swift’s idea of preventing language change and variation and fixing the state of a language forever is also deeply imbedded in the standardisation process of English and can still be found today. An English academy, however, was never realised, the reason being most likely the death of Queen Anne in 1714 who was meant to serve as patron of such an academy (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, *forthc./b*). Cheshire (1991, p. 14) argues that the absence of an English academy in the UK is based on “a cultural and philosophical view of the freedom of the individual in language choice and language use, as in other forms of social behaviour, which makes legislation unpalatable”. These views are also seen as the reason why English has never legally obtained the legal status of the official language of the UK (Cheshire, 1991, p. 14). Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), who initially set out to fix the English language in his dictionary, in particular English spelling (Mugglestone, 2008, p. 243), stated the following on the lack of an official authority: “That our language is in perpetual danger of corruption cannot be denied; but what prevention can be found? The present manners of the nation would deride authority, and therefore nothing is left but that every writer should criticise himself” (Johnson, 1779, p. 12). That self-criticism was meant

to be the sole means of fixing English did not seem to fulfil the needs of society at that time.

Nevertheless, authority on language was still sought and found in Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) and Robert Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762). While Leith (1997, p. 35) states how Johnson's decisions on the spelling of English have shaped modern English, Crystal (2005, p. vii) describes the historical importance of Johnson's dictionary by stating that "[i]t was written at a critical time in English linguistic theory, at the very beginning of a period which would introduce prescriptive principles into English language study, and when the demand for a standard language was at its strongest". Lynch (2009, pp. 92–93) goes on to conclude that Johnson's dictionary enabled its readers to obtain a better understanding of the workings of the English language in that it also constituted "one of the largest anthologies of English literature ever published, and one of the largest dictionaries of quotations". Johnson's dictionary also contained a brief grammar of English in its preface which was, however, not well received and was criticised accordingly. It is argued that the shortcomings of the grammar were due to Johnson having little time left for finishing the grammar as the dictionary took longer than anticipated to complete (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2011, p. 55, drawing on Reddick, 1990, p. 27 for this). Nevertheless, Johnson's dictionary needs to be mentioned for emphasising the role of the users, which is also stated by Kamm (2015, p. 83): "Johnson's *Dictionary* exemplifies the principle that words mean what the users of a language, rather than official academies, take them to mean". This is in line with the frequently cited *norma loquendi*, the custom of speaking, according to which usage should be defined through custom (cf. Lynch, 2009, p. 92; Kamm, 2015, p. 80). Robert Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) constitutes an interesting publication due to the grammar's footnotes

in which Lowth commented on what he thought constituted bad usage by drawing on examples found in the works of well-known, albeit deceased authors (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2011, p. 57). Using footnotes to illustrate incorrect usage and to exemplify his rules, Lowth made use of an innovative way of what today we would call error-analysis, which was, according to Howatt (1984, p. 117), a “double-edged weapon”. While students and readers of Lowth’s grammar might have found it comforting to see others struggling with correct English as well, it must have been unsettling to see well-known and highly regarded authors such as Jonathan Swift be named and shamed for using bad English. It seems as if Lowth’s approach was, however, well-received. Lowth’s grammar gained not only authority, but also popularity, which is reflected in its numerous reprints and editions. Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2011, p. 66) states that the number of “34,000 copies, suggests 34 editions of reprints of 1,000 copies each”, published during his lifetime. Interestingly, Lowth was eager to receive comments and suggestions from the readers of his grammar in order to improve it. Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2011, p. 62) states how one commentator must have drawn Lowth’s attention to the double negative, whose “disappearance from Standard English is frequently associated – wrongly, as it happens – with Lowth”, who included a prescription in the second edition of his grammar. Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2011, p. 75) describes Lowth’s role in the stigmatisation of such usages as follows: “The canon of prescriptivism [which was defined by Vorlat (1996, p. 169) as the norms on which good English is based] may indeed have originated with Lowth’s grammar, but in many instances the book merely formalized what was already being frowned upon elsewhere”. That usage was criticised before Lowth’s grammar has been shown by Percy, who investigated reviews in the *Monthly Review* and *Critical Review*, periodicals which have also been considered “a kind of academy, to publicise and disseminate standards of

English language and literature” (2009, p. 119). The language of literary works was critically commented on by reviewers and their reviews hint not only at the existence of prescriptive attitudes well before Lowth’s grammar, but also at a degree of anxiety and insecurity among literary authors. Percy (2009, p. 123) states that “[r]eviewers sometimes used language as an index of an author’s education and a book’s quality, implying that there were common linguistic standards”. The identification of the eighteenth-century as “the age of correctness”, thus, seems to be accompanied by a growing feeling of anxiety and insecurity in society (Beal, 2010, pp. 22–23).

The eighteenth-century grammarians generally pursued three main aims in their work, which are summarized by Baugh and Cable (2002, p. 277) as follows: “(1) to codify the principles of the language and reduce it to rule; (2) to settle disputed points and decide cases of divided usage; and (3) to point out common errors or what were supposed to be errors, and thus correct and improve the language”. These three aims highlight normative and prescriptive tendencies that prevailed in the second half of the eighteenth century. Including the first proscriptions of correct usage, Lowth’s *Short Introduction to the English Language* constitutes the initial step taken in the direction of a prescriptive approach towards language. Yet, an essential publication introducing the prescription stage and shaping the usage debate permanently is Robert Baker’s *Reflections on the English language* (1770), which is believed to be the first usage guide on English. Publications such as Baker’s *Reflections*, which have turned into an enormously popular genre, can be classified as handbooks, usage manuals or usage guides which aim at providing speakers with advice on how to use language properly and correctly. Leonard (1929, p. 35) commented on the importance of Baker’s publication by saying that it can be regarded as “the ancestor of those handbooks of abuses and corrections which were so freely produced in the nineteenth century”.

Many followed Baker's example of proscribing and prescribing usage by drawing on examples of well-known authors to illustrate incorrect and improper language and having fixing English in mind. What became obvious with Lowth's grammar and Baker's usage guide was the need for linguistic guidance in the late eighteenth century. Hickey (2010, p. 8) describes how in the eighteenth century a newly established and affluent middle class aspired to be accepted by the elites and higher social classes. In order to improve their social standing, language became a crucial asset and means for social advancement. Members of the middle class were, however, plagued by what has come to be known as so-called linguistic insecurity (Labov, 1972, p. 65; 2006, p. 318). This linguistic insecurity affected both speaking and writing and propelled the usage guide tradition in that numerous handbooks, style guides and etiquette books were written targeting this particular group of speakers who wished to climb the social ladder (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2008a, p. 208; 2009, p. 85; Hickey, 2010, p. 18; Beal, 2010, p. 23). Nevertheless, the wealth of the middle class enabled it to find a remedy for this insecurity in "elocution lessons and printed guides which were to proliferate in the last few decades of the eighteenth century" (Beal, 2010, p. 23). Being known as "the age of correctness", the eighteenth century, especially its second half, saw an increase in such language advice literature (Beal, 2010, pp. 22–23). Despite the prescriptive usage guide authors' ongoing attempts to fix English, Nevalainen and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2006, p. 284) describe how this "illusion" of fixing a language had ceased to be dominant in the mid-eighteenth century. This realisation manifested itself already in Johnson, who initially set out to fix the English language in his dictionary, but who realised the impossibilities of such an undertaking (Mugglestone, 2008, p. 243; Lynch, 2009, p. 92).

While criticism of usage can be found already before Lowth, whose grammar writing efforts were part of the codification of the language, the usage debate is still very much associated with the last stage of the Milroyan standardisation process of English: prescription. For Milroy and Milroy (2012, pp. 22–23) the standardisation process of English can be described in seven stages: (1) selection, (2) acceptance, (3) diffusion, (4) maintenance, (5) elaboration of function, (6) codification and (7) prescription. What is stressed by Milroy and Milroy (2012, p. 23) is that standardisation is an ongoing process, and that it did not end after its final stage. Only a dead language, they argue, would have completed all seven stages of the standardisation process fully. Prescription is thus intrinsically connected to Standard English as the perceived final product of the process. While the codification stage of Standard English has produced dictionaries and grammars, such as Johnson's dictionary and Lowth's grammar mentioned above, the prescription stage is characterised by the production of usage guides. Henry Watson Fowler (1858–1933), an English lexicographer and schoolmaster, published the usage guide *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* in 1926. This usage guide, which has recently been published in its fourth edition, has become “the closest Britain has to an Academy of English” (Ezard, 1996, p. 10). Fowler has gained the status of a household name and his usage guide is often “regarded a role model for usage handbooks in Britain” (Busse & Schröder, 2010a, p. 45). That Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* has enjoyed huge popularity is not only shown in its four editions, but also in the number of copies sold. Gowers (1957, p. 14) states that Fowler's usage guide had been sold in more than half a million copies by 1957. Gowers (1965, vii), who was also responsible for the second revised edition of *Modern English Usage*, describes Fowler's stance on language as being that of a prescriptive grammarian who, however, was not shy of debunking myths about usages, such as the one about

*different from* being the only legitimate construction. On the task of revising Fowler, Gowers stated the following in the preface to the second edition:

But his faults were as much a part of his idiosyncrasy as his virtues; rewrite him and he ceases to be Fowler. I have been chary of making any substantial alterations except for the purpose of bringing him up to date; I have only done so in a few places where his exposition is exceptionally tortuous, and it is clear that his point could be put more simply without any sacrifice of Fowleresque flavour (Gowers, 1965, ix).

This quotation highlights how Fowler's usage advice has become authoritative and that changing his advice, even after almost four decades, seemed impossible without causing damage to his reputation. Burchfield (1979, p. 17) quotes a letter written by Fowler in which he describes the intended audience of his usage guide as having an eye "not on the foreigners, but on the half-educated Englishman of literary proclivities who wants to know Can I say so-and-so?, What does this familiar phrase or word mean?, is this use English ... the kind of Englishman, who has idioms floating in his head in a jumbled state, & knows it" (H.W. Fowler 5 April 1911; cited in Burchfield, 1979, p. 17). That the originally intended target audience of usage guides often consisted of linguistically insecure native speakers does not come as a surprise. This intention is also reflected in Fowler's description of his usage guide's audience in the quotation above. Yet, as the genre of usage guides has developed and English has gradually but steadily become a world language and lingua franca, the target audience of usage guides has been extended to include advanced learners of English (Weiner, 1988, p. 173).

Technological advancements such as the invention of mobile phones and the rise of the internet have not only made different languages available to the masses on a global scale, but they have also widened the manner of how language can be used. English has obtained a special status through these advancements and is now considered a world language (Baugh & Cable, 2002,

p. 9). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become of interest to linguists who study how language is used online. The global use of language and new modes of use such as CMC have, however, caused prescriptivists to proclaim vociferously the decay and irreversible doom of the English language (Crystal, 2006a, pp. 1–2). British prescriptivists, for instance, warn, now more than ever, about the invasion of Americanisms into British English, such as Simon Heffer in *Strictly English* (2010). Heffer (2010, p. 165) condemns, for instance, the tendency to use the verb *get* in American English as an “abomination” and continues listing words which he considers unnecessary in British English the use of which he attributes to American influence, such as the ones quoted below:

Other Americanisms that change the idioms of our language to no apparent purpose include *on the weekend*, whereas the British have always done things *at the weekend*, and *in school* rather than *at school*. (Heffer, 2010, p. 182)

What becomes apparent in complaints about language decay and proclamations of the doom of the English language is a recurring theme of the English of the Golden Age, another myth according to which English in the past was more correct and proper than the current English variety (Watts, 2000, p. 35; Crystal, 2004, pp. 475–476). It has to be noted, however, that this particular era is mythological itself, although Jonathan Swift, for example, described the Golden Age of English as the state of English during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603) (Howatt, 1984, p. 109). The claim that it existed and that English was indeed flawless during this period has been used recurrently in the usage debate as well. While many of these proclamations seem to be unfounded, linguists have investigated diachronic changes in language use and the impact of new technologies on language. Mair (2006, pp. 182–183), for instance, investigated changes and trends in twentieth-century English by using a corpus approach, through which he was able to identify trends affecting the formality

of English. According to Mair (2006, p. 186), written English is becoming more informal and is starting to resemble spoken English. That the difference between the two traditional media, spoken and written language, and the differences between degrees of formality would be reduced were predictions already made by Baron (1984, p. 131) in the late twentieth century. Mair's (2006, p. 187) so-called "colloquialization" of English combines these two tendencies and he provides examples from both American and British English corpora. The use of contractions like *it's* instead of *it is* and the avoidance of the passive voice in writing as being promoted for instance in many media style guides are just two of the features which support Mair's colloquialization trend.

The link between standardisation and the rise of prescriptivism from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards has been emphasised in this section. What becomes obvious in this discussion is the apparent need of the general public during the subsequent period for authoritative guidance on language issues. Apart from Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, authority has also been assigned to other publications and institutions. The completion of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1928, after more than 40 years of work, provided the public with another authoritative source on English, albeit one following a descriptive aim (Brewer, 2007, pp. 2–5). Peters (2006) highlights an intriguing characteristic of the usage debate between prescriptivists and descriptivists. While linguists have made use of different methodologies, such as elicitation tests and corpus enquiries, in their analysis of English usage, prescriptivists rarely make use of such methods, let alone refer to the work of others (Peters, 2006, p. 764–765). The prescriptive treatment of English usage often consists of *ipse-dixit* pronouncements, through which usage guide authors tried to enforce authority (Peters, 2006, p. 762). The stark contrast in methodologies applied in the descriptive and prescriptive approaches to

English usage is astonishing. In light of these differences, the reception of descriptive and prescriptive efforts by the general public becomes even more noteworthy. While the descriptive efforts of linguists have been viewed critically or have not attracted a lot of attention from the public, “the voices of non-linguistically trained prescriptivists seem to gain remarkable prominence and public endorsement” (Peters, 2006, p. 775). Thus, it seems as if prescriptivists exert a powerful influence on the attitudes of the general public which is in need of authoritative guidance. Peters (2006, p. 774) consequently states that prescriptivists “predispose the community to accept that there may be good/bad usage wherever there are variants to consider”. The influence of prescriptivists therefore not only seems to be easily exerted on the general public, but it also causes further insecurities among speakers who seem to be already troubled with such dilemmas.

### **2.3. The Notion of Correct (Standard) Language**

While I have tried to outline the developments of the ongoing usage debate since the late eighteenth century in the previous section, I would now like to focus on the notion of correct language, which seems to be often equated with Standard English by the general public. In this section, I will first examine how Standard English has been defined by focussing on Trudgill’s discussion of what it is not, before going on to examine two of the gatekeepers and enforcers of the notion of correct language: education and the media. That usage conundrums and schools are closely connected has been shown in the discussion above and will be further explored in this section. Peters (2006, p. 776) emphasises the role of education by stating the following: “Educational institutions are still expected to be mediators of standard English and bastions of ‘correct’ usage, and taken to task when any liberalization of the English language curriculum is mooted”. Especially in Great Britain, education has an

immense influence on one's social standing, as it has become an indicator of social class membership (Argyle, 1994, pp. 4–6). Thus, it is important to describe how the usage debate is still holding its ground in education today and has continued to contribute to a moral panic among the general public in Great Britain, which has been described by Cameron (1995, p. 83) as the concentrating of anxieties and hostilities prevalent in a society on one issue. The role of the media has in a similar manner been described as that of a gatekeeper. Peters (2006, p. 775) highlights how publishers and media institutions keep “enforcing usage practices”. Such usage practices are often out-lined in publishers' style guidelines and media institutions' in-house style guides, such as the BBC's 2003 *News Styleguide* (2003). The BBC's role and participation in the usage debate will also be examined in this section.

Since the existence of standard languages, such as Standard English, is a heated and disputed topic, definitions of such varieties are scarce (cf. Smakman, 2012). This is possibly due to the ideological dimension of standard languages which make a definition of what they are complex and difficult. Peter Trudgill (1999a) attempts such a definition by circumscribing Standard English based on what it is not. In his discussion, Trudgill (1999a, pp. 118–127) refutes five commonly held associations of what Standard English is:

- 1) Standard English is not a language
- 2) Standard English is not an accent
- 3) Standard English is not a style
- 4) Standard English is not a register
- 5) Standard English is not a set of prescriptive rules

The first rebuttal, “Standard English is not a language”, refers to the above-mentioned widespread belief of the general public that Standard English is a single entity and a language in its own right. Refuting this association, Trudgill (1999a, p. 118) highlights the status of Standard English as a mere variety of

English. Another frequent association of Standard English is with accent, as described in the second rebuttal, as an identification of Standard English with Received Pronunciation (RP) is often made. Trudgill (1999a, p. 118) claims that RP is “a standardised accent of English”, but “not Standard English itself”. The third rebuttal discussed by Trudgill (1999a, p. 119) deals with Standard English being associated with a distinct style. While styles are often defined by their different degrees of formality, Standard English is not restricted to a single style since it can be found in both formal and informal contexts. The term ‘register’ in Trudgill’s (1999a, pp. 121–122) fourth rebuttal refers to the determination of a variety “by topic, subject matter or activity”, an association he proves to be false as register does not impede the use of dialectal varieties of English. This means that Standard English can be used to discuss the global economic crisis just as well as the latest fashion trends. The last rebuttal described by Trudgill deals with the essence of the usage debate, prescriptions of usage. In the following quotation Trudgill (1999a, p. 125) recites what may be described as the descriptive mantra of linguists:

We have to make it clear, however, that [Standard English] grammatical forms are not necessarily identical with those which prescriptive grammarians have concerned themselves with over the last few centuries. Standard English ... most certainly tolerates sentence-final prepositions, as in *I’ve bought a new car which I’m very pleased with*. And Standard English does not exclude constructions such as *It’s me* or *He is taller than me*.

It is this last rebuttal which constitutes the core of the usage debate, as prescriptivists seem to apply a narrower definition of Standard English than descriptivists, i.e. linguists, do, linking Standard English exclusively to notions of correctness rather than taking grammatical correctness into account. Trudgill (1999a, p. 123) concludes his discussion by defining Standard English as a dialect of English which is, however, characterised by its social and cultural importance and role, while he also acknowledges the association

of RP with Standard English. That Standard English is an important variety of English cannot be disputed, especially in its written form. However, unlike other varieties of English, Standard English is also characterised as “a purely social dialect” (Trudgill, 1999a, p. 124) which lost its geographical character, and was estimated by Trudgill at the time to have 12–15 per cent of the British population as native speakers. What is, however, vital for this discussion is Trudgill’s (1999a, p. 124) assignment of these native Standard English speakers to “the top of the social scale (or, as some would prefer, ‘the very top’)”. Thus, it can be concluded that Standard English and its seemingly different interpretations by prescriptivists and descriptivists constitute a crucial point in the development of the usage debate.

Smakman (2012) conducted a survey of university students’ attitudes towards standard language in seven countries, including England, which contains a number of possible characteristics of the countries’ standard languages. In England, 200 university students took part in the study by providing a general description of Standard English and identifying prototypical speakers of the investigated variety (Smakman, 2012, p. 32). Even though the elicited attitudes concern Standard English today, the identified characteristics show an intriguing overlap with characteristics identified in previous historical studies on Standard English. According to Smakman (2012, p. 36), three characteristics were mentioned most frequently by the English university students, according to whom Standard English is non-regional, correct and connected to the higher social classes. That Standard English is often considered to be the correct language variety is connected to the prevalence of the standard language ideology and what James Milroy describes as “standard language culture” (Milroy, 1999, p. 18). What also needs to be borne in mind is that the standard language ideology, described above, is connected to political ideologies. As a consequence, standard languages can be utilised as

a means for the exclusion and inclusion of speakers (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 62; Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 64; Milroy & Milroy, 2012, pp. 50–51). The ‘standard language culture’ describes the awareness of how a standard variety is put on a pedestal and made a “superordinate” variety which is maintained through different media and channels, such as the school-ing system (Milroy, 1999, p. 18). James Milroy (1999, p. 18) emphasises how this way of thinking equates a standard variety not only with correct usage, but also with being the only legitimate language variety in general. Curzan (2014, p. 30) aptly states: “It is not just standard: it is ‘English’”. Excluding speakers on the basis of their insufficient command of the standard variety is a side effect enforced by the standard language culture and can affect a large proportion of the speech community. Despite being native speakers of English, many people grow up doubting their ability to use “correct” English (Milroy, 1999, p. 22). This exclusive character of Standard English contradicts the above-mentioned supra-regional character of this particular variety, making it a complex construct with several functions at the same time.

### **2.3.1. Education as a gatekeeper**

Literacy plays a vital role in the development of the usage debate, as usage guides are aimed at speakers seeking guidance on how to improve their English. When education became compulsory in 1870, Standard English became available to the entire population through teaching, while Latin continued to be an important language in the education of the elite (Leith, 1997, p. 49). That Standard English started to be taught in schools had an impact on its standardisation, as it became “subject to attention and scrutiny, aimed at describing its forms and structures” (Leith, 1997, p. 49). However, not only was the written standard language used as a yardstick, but spoken English, too, became a means to establish a speaker’s social background. With the

establishment of fee-paying public schools at the beginning of the nineteenth century, RP, an accent used mainly by the upper classes, became a true class accent, which was further enforced due to its use in these schools (Leith, 1997, p. 56). Apart from RP, the language use of the educated was believed to reflect standard language best and hence formed the basis for school materials. This common practice was commented on by S. A. Leonard (1932, p. xiv) when describing the informants of his study on American language use:

While it is unfortunate that a more even balance among the groups of judges was not secured, and that few lay persons of taste and culture were included, still practically all the judges are people concerned with the study and use of language; and all are above the average in education. Consequently, the teacher may well examine seriously the results of this survey, compare them with the usage and punctuation requirements in his adopted texts, and ask himself whether it is worth while trying to teach rules which great numbers of educated men no longer observe.

What kind of language variety should be taught in schools has become a frequently asked question not only in the United States, but also in Great Britain (cf. Womack, 1959; Mittins et al., 1970). Cheshire (1997, p. 68) emphasises a fact which needs to be borne in mind and which still holds true today, namely that a reference to the language of the educated often more aptly denotes the language use of “those who consider themselves educated, or who wish to appear educated”. The study on language use in England conducted by Mittins and his colleagues in the late 1960s aimed at providing teachers with contemporary advice on the validity of traditional language rules (see § 1.4). The question of what variety to teach and the frequently voiced, yet often unfounded claims concerning the decay of English grammar teaching in English schools caused a moral panic. It is argued that mass media play a vital role in the incitation of a moral panic (Cameron, 1995, p. 84), and this was indeed shown to be the case at the time. That this moral panic revolving around the perceived decay of the English language and society has survived

needs to be borne in mind. This is for example illustrated by the numerous newspaper articles and reports on the recent introduction of a new and highly controversial Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar Test, the so-called SPaG test, at Key Stage 2 by the former Education Secretary, Michael Gove (cf. Sellgren, 2012; Rosen, 2013). Describing the panic revolving around the decay of the English language during the 1980s, Cameron (1995, p. 86) states:

... because of English teachers' wilful neglect of grammar, children were leaving school illiterate and undisciplined. The 'permissive' teachers became the main scapegoats, along with the linguistic and educational theorists who had brainwashed them with half-baked theories and trendy leftwing nonsense.

Cameron here describes the beginning of the moral panic concerning the decay of English which can be traced back to a newspaper article published in 1982 which decried the falling standards in English grammar teaching by blaming the loose morals of the 1960s for these developments. Although claims about the decay of English grammar had not been new, it was the first time that falling language standards were brought into connection with falling standards in general. It was argued that there was not only this connection, but that the lack of proper grammar teaching had caused this predicament in the first place (Cameron, 1995, p. 86).

This alleged decay of English grammar teaching is connected to changing policies and approaches to language teaching occurring in the twentieth century. While traditional teaching techniques such as rote learning used to be the norm until the early twentieth century, the advancements made in the study of language caused considerable doubt about their appropriateness and effectiveness (Hudson & Walmsley, 2005, p. 595). Henry Sweet (1845–1912), one of the most prominent philologists of his time, did not only contribute to the development of modern linguistics, but also argued for using the students' native language as a starting point for teaching English in schools (Hudson & Walmsley, 2005, p. 595). What is striking is that while the need for instruction

in English usage and grammar was growing, a scientific study of English grammar was neglected by late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century scholars in England. Hudson and Walmsley (2005, pp. 596–597) state that instead the need for language guidance was met by publications “produced primarily by free-lances [sic] or practicing teachers”. The grammar taught in schools was hence mainly prescriptive and modelled on the Latin system, causing a dilemma which was worsened by the growing focus on studying contemporary English literature at the time (Hudson & Walmsley, 2005, p. 598). This neglect of the linguistic study of English grammar came to an end when Randolph Quirk established the Survey of English Usage in 1959 at University College London. Later joined by Michael Halliday, the two men became the driving force behind the scientific study and description of English grammar (Hudson & Walmsley, 2005, p. 607).

Hudson and Walmsley (2005, p. 595) distinguish three key periods in the history of English grammar teaching. The period before 1960, as described above, which is characterized by its traditional teaching techniques and lack of scientific study, was followed by a period of confusion, which lasted from 1960 to roughly 1988. During this period, as Hudson and Walmsley (2005, p. 609) argue, English grammar teaching was absent from schools in England, as it was a disputed and complex subject, not only as to how the subject should be taught, but whether it should be taught at all. The end of this period was marked by the introduction of the first National Curriculum for primary and secondary schools in 1988 (Hudson & Walmsley, 2005, p. 613). Most importantly, this second period is characterized by various governmental reports which aimed at improving the teaching of English in the schools. This period is also characterized by what Hudson (2010, p. 40) calls a “strong ‘top-down’ pressure from the government to find solutions” for the English grammar teaching dilemma. The Newbolt Report, published in 1921, was

drawn up by a committee headed by Sir Henry Newbolt (1862–1938), and it discussed grammar teaching under the headline of “The problem of grammar” (Department of Education and Science, 1921, p. 278). The confusion about what ought to be taught in English schools is expressed clearly in this report as follows:

Is it then impossible at the present juncture to teach English grammar in the schools for the simple reason that no one knows exactly what it is? If by ‘English Grammar’ be meant a *complete* description of the structure of the language with special attention to its *differences* from other languages, it is certainly far too early to attempt to teach it. .... Further, just because English grammar deals with a language so different from the foreign languages, ancient and modern, which the student will have to learn, it is eminently unsuitable as an introduction to linguistic study. Yet, as we have seen, it is highly desirable that children should obtain some kind of general introduction to linguistic study, and that this introduction should be given them through the medium of their own speech. What is to be done? (Department of Education and Science, 1921, pp. 289–290)

Although the committee acknowledged the importance of teaching students their native tongue, as recommended by Sweet, the lack of a scientific study of English clearly obstructed its teaching in schools. This confusion was carried into the 1960s, in which further government reports discussed the future of English grammar teaching. The link between political ideologies and language ideologies can be easily identified in this debate. Cameron (1995, p. 87) highlights how growing right-wing political movements fostered the public’s moral panic by publishing pamphlets and articles on this issue. The dispute peaked in the early 1980s, which saw the publication of John Honey’s *The Language Trap* (1983), a controversial discussion on Standard English in the British schooling system, which was especially criticised by linguists such as David Crystal, the Milroys and Peter Trudgill, who Honey accused of providing misleading ideas on the teaching of English. Honey’s pamphlet was connected to another governmental policy report, the so-called Bullock Report (1975), which recommended that the children’s language variety used at home

should be acknowledged in school, and which highlighted possible differences between children from advantaged and disadvantaged homes by drawing on Basil Bernstein's (1971) restricted and elaborated codes.

Bernstein's use of the term 'code' needs to be clarified here. These two codes represent "functions of a particular form of social relationship or, ... qualities of social structure" (Bernstein, 1971, p. 77), which means that the relationships between social groups are affected by the use of linguistic codes, if not defined by them. However, Bernstein (1971, p. 79) argues that children from working-class backgrounds only have access to one linguistic code, the so-called restricted code, which is defined by a limited set of syntactic elements, for example. The elaborated code, on the other hand, enables a wider variety of syntactic elements, and can be accessed by children from more privileged backgrounds. According to Bernstein (1971, p. 151), a connection could be established between working-class children's limited access to the elaborated code and their success in school and in life in general. Bernstein (1971, p. 151) argues that "[s]uch children's low performance on verbal IQ tests, their difficulty with 'abstract' concepts, their failures within the language area, their general inability to profit from school, all may result from the limitations of a restricted code". His ideas and suggestions seem to have been adopted by the report committee, who made a connection between social class and language acquisition, stressing the importance of the children's home language, as illustrated in the following quotation:

There is an undeniable relationship between social class and language development, but we must qualify all that follows by pointing out that social class is a rather crude indicator. What is really at issue is the language environment in which the child grows up, and particularly the role played by language in his relationship with his mother (Department of Education and Science, 1975, p. 52).

Honey, on the other hand, criticised this approach. He argued that schools should teach Standard English as they would otherwise fail children with a working-class or ethnic-minority background (Cameron, 1995, p. 87).

Weak points in teaching English grammar at English schools were recognised by the government, which initiated further reports. One of these reports was the so-called Kingman Report, which was published in 1988. Since the Kingman Report did not produce the outcome the conservatives and pro-grammar teaching advocates had hoped for, as the prescriptive approach to teaching English and its relation to Latin were deemed not suitable, another committee was assembled and tasked with finding recommendations for the teaching of English grammar at school, which were then published a year later as part of the Cox Report (1989) (Cameron, 1995, p. 89). Despite the controversial status of the Kingman Report, both government reports reached the consensus that English grammar should be taught explicitly in schools, but that traditional teaching approaches were no longer suitable (Hudson & Walmsley, 2005, p. 610). The Cox Report provides an insight into these changing views:

However, many people feel that with the rejection of grammar teaching much of value was lost. We would agree that a certain analytic competence has been lost, and with it the valuable ability to talk and write explicitly about linguistic patterns, relations and organisation. ... There are, however, more useful ways of teaching grammar than those which have been the cause of so much misunderstanding and criticism. (Department of Education and Science, 1989, p. 66)

Neither the Kingman nor the Cox Reports fulfilled the expectations of the conservatives, who would have liked to see a stronger emphasis on the traditional teaching of grammar (Cameron, 1995, p. 89). The media's role in reporting the government's disappointment with the reports contributed to the ensuing moral panic. Nevertheless, a National Curriculum affecting primary and secondary education in English and Welsh schools was introduced in

1988. Besides turning out to be the most problematic subject, the main characteristics of the National Curriculum for English are the abandonment of a prescriptive approach in language teaching and of references to nonstandard or dialectal language use as erroneous, which according to Hudson and Walmsley (2005, p. 613) “is ironic since one of the main reasons why the Conservative government introduced the National Curriculum in 1988 was to eliminate ‘bad grammar’ – the only interpretation of grammar that they recognised”. The third key period of English grammar teaching described by Hudson and Walmsley (2005) is consequently defined by the abandonment of the prescriptive approach in favour of a more descriptive approach in which students are supposed to learn about the variability of English. Marshall (2016, p. 8) highlights an intriguing connection between education and politics, which has already become visible in the discussion of educational reports above, by describing how the Conservative Party has “achieved the changes they wanted not through a national curriculum but through a testing regime”. What Marshall is referring to here is the introduction of new tests, such as the above-mentioned SPaG test, which ultimately aim at the re-introduction of formal grammar teaching. This re-introduction is triggered by the test requirements, such as naming word classes and using appropriate terminology. Marshall (2016, p. 11) states that “in order to pass the test schools will provide decontextualised grammar lessons to prepare children for them. They will be parsing sentences looking for types of clauses”. Although such formal grammar lessons are not part of the curriculum, turning schools into academies and free schools, another policy change initiated by the Conservative Party, means that the National Curriculum is no longer obligatory in such schools (Marshall, 2016, p. 8). Hence, an interesting connection between politics and grammar teaching can be identified in English schools.

Reactions to the introduction of the SPaG test in the early 2010s, furthermore, showed that the debate about language use in schools is far from being settled. What lies at the heart of this debate are different language ideologies. The dichotomous distinction between correct and incorrect language is not only deeply entrenched in the mind of society in general, but has been used as the basis of assessment in education for centuries. It is, however, argued that this dichotomy should be abandoned in favour of a distinction between “appropriateness” in different contexts rather than “correctness”. This knowledge of using contextually appropriate language is also known as “sociolinguistic competence” (Graham, 1997, p. 13; Bayley & Regan, 2004, p. 323), which describes a speaker’s ability to determine the social and contextual appropriateness of language. Advocates of this approach, such as Mittins et al. (1970), the Milroys (2002) and Pullum (2016), claim that such an approach would be more beneficial for children and they therefore often criticise dubious test items. Pullum (2016), for instance, recently highlighted this phenomenon in an online article based on the example of the following two test items:

(1) I have just received a message but I haven’t read it yet.

(2) I received a message but I haven’t read it yet.

Pullum highlights how there is a subtle difference between American and British English with respect to these two sentences, the latter preferring the present perfect tense as used in item (1) rather than the simple past as in (2) which is, in turn, favoured in American English. That is why from a linguist’s point of view both sentences are considered correct. Yet some teachers who favour traditional grammar teaching, with its insistence on a dichotomous view on language and correctness, keep the ongoing debate alive. So it seems as if the standard language ideology and the prescriptive ideology still exert

power over some educationalists and their views on teaching. The role played by prescriptivism in the educational context is emphasised by Curzan (2014, p. 16), who argues that what she calls institutional prescriptive “efforts can have real effects on individual speakers’ lives and speech patterns, on how speakers think about and use language, and on what speakers feel licensed to say about others’ and their own language use”. That this notion of judging other speakers by their language use is an interesting phenomenon of human nature has already been discussed by Nash (1986, p. 1). Being often considered conveyors of Standard English, schools and other educational institutions are often subject to criticism with regard to an alleged lack of English language teaching. How this role as a conveyor of Standard English is perceived by English speakers will be discussed below.

### **2.3.2. The media as gatekeeper**

Having tried to provide some insight into the debate evolving around standard language ideologies in education, I would like to briefly discuss the gate-keeping role of another institution: the media. Media institutions, such as the BBC, have often been assigned the role of language guardians (Luscombe, 2009, p. 1). However, it is intriguing to see that the language use of media institutions, be it newspapers, television channels or radio stations, has been frequently discussed in two manners. While members of the audience regard such institutions as language guardians and consider their language use as correct and reflecting the standard, others are eager to voice their dismay about the alleged misuse of language by exactly the same institutions (Cotter, 2010, p. 195; Ebner, 2016, p. 308). The difficulty of pleasing its audience has been acknowledged by the BBC. John Allen, the author of the BBC’s *News Styleguide* (2003, p. 8), puts it as follows: “Our task is to tread a fine line between conservatism and radicalism, to write in such a way that we do not

alienate any section of our audience”. The basis for such diverging views on the language use of media institutions such as the BBC constitutes language issues falling into the grey area between standard and nonstandard language. Usage problems, such as the misuse of the apostrophe, are frequently found among features the audience complains about in letters to the editor (Lukač, 2016).

How language ideologies affect language use in the media has been shown by Cotter (2010, p. 195), who establishes a link between the credibility of a report and correct language use in her distinction between journalistic language ideologies, craft ideologies and journalistic language values. Craft ideologies build on the concept of ‘craft’, which encompasses journalistic practices and the creation of an identity as a journalist (Cotter, 1995, p. 30). Cotter’s (1995, p. 195) discussion of the journalistic language ideology includes the notion that “[a]ccuracy equals credibility”, while craft ideologies convey the notion of “[g]ood writing equals clarity”. Both notions are connected by two core journalistic language values: precision and prescription. Thus, a clear connection to the standard language ideology is established. As Cotter herself puts it:

Knowing, following, and maintaining the prescriptive rules about language use will ensure precision; precision helps to safeguard both accuracy ... and clarity ... and is thus a fundamental professional value (Cotter, 2010, p. 195).

That prescriptive rules are maintained by journalists has not only been argued by Cotter in the quotation above, but also by Albakry (2007, p. 29), who has shown in his study of American newspapers how prescriptivism is the dominant approach found in style guides. Whether this is also true for the BBC’s style guide was a question which I attempted to answer in a corpus-based and comparative study of usage advice and metalinguistic language use in two usage guides and the BBC’s in-house style guide (Ebner, 2016). The

BBC's stance on two usage problems, *concede victory* and *data* as singular or plural, as discussed in its 2003 *News Styleguide*, was compared to the treatment of these two usage features in Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926) and Burchfield's *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (1996), the third edition of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*. The BBC's style guide was originally intended for the training of new journalists and as an in-house reference. Since this particular style guide discusses radio news reporting, its recommendations affect written language, which is, however, meant to be spoken (Allen, 2003, p. 23). The metalanguage used in the discussion of the usage problems in the three language advice manuals studied was investigated making use of a keyword analysis and concordance analysis using WordSmith Tools through which it is possible to identify the "aboutness" of the investigated corpora (Culpeper, 2009, p. 30). The BNC wordlist was used as a reference corpus. The results of this study showed that the BBC's prescriptive attitudes were strongly expressed in the language used to discuss usage issues. My concordance analysis emphasised this by the BBC's "unique use of evaluative collocations such as *bad English*, *poorly written* or *well written English*" (Ebner, 2016, p. 318).

When it comes, however, to the two usage problems which were directly compared, the BBC's language advice was surprisingly lenient, thus contradicting Albakry's findings. While the BBC recommended the use of *data* as a singular, its stance on *concede victory* has been somewhat unclear, which has also been shown by Luscombe (2012). That is why I will focus on the BBC's treatment of *concede defeat* here. By surveying a number of style guides, Luscombe was able to show the BBC's changing attitudes towards a number of usage problems. While defeat was traditionally conceded by the losers of elections and the like, recent developments also caused victories to be conceded. Luscombe's (2012, p. 153) survey of style guides that treated

the feature showed the following changes in the BBC's attitude to this particular usage issue:

1967–79:	no mention
1983:	'Concede: We now accept that concede can refer either to victory or defeat.'
1990:	'Concede: Losers at elections concede victory, not defeat'
2000:	'Concede: Losers at elections concede victory, not defeat'
2003:	'Concede: Losers at elections concede victory, not defeat'

Luscombe's overview of the BBC's attitude towards *concede defeat*, as illustrated above, is intriguing as the cooperation insisted on the use of *concede victory* from 1990 onwards. The BBC's descriptive approach to the use of *concede victory* is remarkable, especially since the BBC is often referred to as a "beacon of correct English" whose task it is to maintain the standard variety (Allen, 2003, p. 7). The driving force behind the BBC's acceptance and promotion of such descriptive usage features is its audience who engages in a negotiation with the BBC on its language use (cf. Ebner, 2016, p. 318). Allan Bell (1995, p. 23) emphasises the relationship between media institutions and their audiences in that he describes how the language use of the media reflects "language use and attitudes in a speech community". Even though the BBC is considered an authority, the power of the audience cannot be neglected as their complaints and comments need to be taken seriously by the BBC. Allen (2003, p. 7) describes the delicate relationship between the BBC and its audience, who finance the institution through a yearly license fee, by stating the following: "Our use, or perceived misuse, of English produces a greater response from our audiences than anything else. It is in nobody's interest to confuse, annoy, dismay, alienate or exasperate them".

One important aspect of the BBC's role as language guardian is also its role as the defender of Britishness (cf. Ebner, 2016, p. 317). A clear distinction

is made in its 2003 *News Styleguide* between British and American usage by dedicating an entry to Americanisms (cf. Luscombe, 2012, p. 158). The fear of the Americanisation of British English is often mentioned in complaints about language change, as is exhibited by Law (2014), who quotes two such complainants:

Tony Robinson from Cheltenham says, “In these days of mass communication it is sad to see the English language being battered by the ever advancing tide of Americanism.” Mark Hughes from Walsall doesn’t like it either: “The thing that drives me demented is the rampant Americanisation of everything, especially British English, and the habit of turning nouns into verbs, such as prioritise and incentivise. Yuk!”

What is intriguing is the fact that the influence of the American media is often held responsible for changes occurring in British English. The American media are not only said to influence British English negatively, their spread is also held accountable for the decrease in minority languages (Cormack, 2007, p. 57; Phillipson, 2014, p. 59). Nevertheless, Trudgill (2014) argues that most changes spread through communication between interlocutors, rather than through the mere influence of watching American movies for instance, so he considers the alleged influence of American media on British English less relevant.

Being a product of media institutions, style guides need to be distinguished from usage guides which, on the other hand, are a social and cultural phenomenon. Straaijer’s (forthc.) description of the usage guide genre included an investigation of the usage guides contained in the HUGE database and showed that many of these publications are alphabetically organised. Alphabetically organised usage guides underline their purpose as reference works which are not meant to be read from cover to cover, but rather to be consulted on different occasions (Ebner, 2016, p. 311). Unlike usage guides, the purpose of style guides is to provide their readers with instructions on

achieving a specific composition, be it an essay, report or the like (cf. Ebner, 2016, p. 311). Therefore, their setup usually follows a bottom-up approach starting from smaller concepts and ending with a final product, such as a well-written essay. The aim of style guides, such as Griffith's *Writing Essays about Literature* (2010), is to instruct readers on how to achieve a text which conforms to social norms and expectations held by society (cf. Ebner, 2016, p. 311). Since such social norms have been widely accepted in society, there is a high level of uniformity in terms of contents of specific types of style guides (Bennett, 2009, p. 46). Furthermore, Cameron (1996, p. 317–318) argues that style guides are a possible outlet for media institutions to reflect the political ideologies they follow. The aim of such style guides is not only to guarantee consistency in the media's output, but also to establish the media's voice and style. As Cameron (1996, p. 316) puts it, the language policies expressed in style guides are in fact ideological:

Though [style policies] are framed as purely functional or aesthetic judgements, and the commonest criteria offered are 'apolitical' ones such as clarity, brevity, consistency, liveliness and vigour, as well as linguistic 'correctness' and (occasionally) 'purity', on examination it turns out that these stylistic values are not timeless and neutral, but have a history and a politics.

According to Cameron (1996, p. 331), this underlying ideological value of style policies should not be neglected in any analysis of media language. That newspaper articles and even broadcast news are to varying extents scripted and hence edited needs to be borne in mind when using media output as data sources. Journalists consequently possess a language awareness which is combined with the editors' enforcements of the style policies manifested in style guides and style sheets.

Another interesting phenomenon is that journalists and copy editors often decide to share their knowledge with the general public by publishing usage guides. A survey of the 77 usage guides included in the HUGE database

showed that thirteen of the usage guides were written by editors or writers. One such journalist-turned-usage guide author is Simon Heffer, who published *Strictly English* in 2010. How the advice offered by journalists and copy editors differs from usage guide authors with other professional backgrounds, such as Ernest Gowers, a civil servant who wrote *Plain Words* (1948), is a question worth investigating. One of the most recent usage guides written by an editor is Mary Norris' *Between you & me* (2015), in which the author shares her knowledge and experience as a copy editor for *The New Yorker*.

That standard language and its application in institutions like the news media have an effect on people's perceptions of what Standard English constitutes is a valid assumption which often results in native speakers doubting their own language abilities. Those who claim to know better do not eschew to voice their dismay about the decline of Standard English in letters to the editor. Both institutional applications of Standard English described here, education and the media, also highlight the impact and the scope of the ongoing usage debate. What Standard English is and how it should be applied are two focal issues not only in the domains of education and the media. The diverging views held by prescriptivists and descriptivists on these two issues are central to the usage debate and ensure its continuation.

#### **2.4. Defining Prescription and Prescriptivism**

While a brief definition of prescriptivism has already been provided in the Introduction, I would like to elaborate on the distinction between prescription and prescriptivism in this section. It is also necessary to discuss different interpretations of prescriptivism, such as Cameron's (1995) 'verbal hygiene' as well as the different types of prescriptivism introduced by Ann Curzan (2014), which also illustrates how scholars have dealt with prescriptivism.

Furthermore, Tieken-Boon van Ostade's (forthc./a) definition of the Age of Prescriptivism needs to be included in this discussion as well.

Unlike the eighteenth century, in which the codification and prescription of English was mainly undertaken by individuals such as “grammarians and lexicographers operating in a market-place unfettered by guidelines, unsanctioned by imprimatur, and unencumbered by official meddling”, as Finegan (1998, p. 540) puts it, the nineteenth century saw the beginning of institutional endeavours pursuing codification efforts, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which has been regarded as an authority on language ever since. From the late nineteenth century onwards, it became clear that there were two prevalent approaches to the study of language: a prescriptive and descriptive approach, also often referred to as prescriptivism and descriptivism. While descriptivists based their language advice and discussions on *norma loquendi*, actual language use as found in society, albeit the language used primarily by the educated, prescriptivists were eager to provide guidelines and rules often based on their own judgments, which has been discussed above as the so-called *ipse-dixit* tradition. Prescription as the last stage of the standardisation process of English according to Milroy and Milroy (2012) describes a manner of presenting language advice, yet the difference between prescription and proscription, which could be regarded as a corollary of prescription, needs to be clarified. While a prescription contains a rule on how language should be used, a proscription constitutes a prohibition of a particular usage. To illustrate the difference, I will use examples of a prescription and a proscription against the use of *literally* as an intensifier as found in the HUGE database. This usage problem will also be discussed in detail in this study (see Chapter 6). For the purpose of contrast, a descriptive example is also provided. The purpose of bold in the quotations below is to indicate added emphasis.

- Prescription: literally, when used, as it often is, as a mere intensive, is a slovenly colloquialism, **its only correct use being to characterize exactness to the letter.** (Partridge, 1942, p. 172, emphasis added)
- Proscription: It shouldn't need saying, but if you don't wish to be taken literally, **don't use literally.** The word means actually, not figuratively. (Bryson, 1984, p. 83, emphasis added)
- Description: In its primary sense, literally urges you to take a fact "according to the letter," i.e. word for word or exactly as the utterance has it. **Yet for most of the last two centuries it has also been used to underscore figures of speech or turns of phrase which could never be taken at face value: *They were literally green with envy.*** In cases like that, literally defies its literal sense and seems to press for factual interpretation of the idiom, however far-fetched. ... **This use of literally is recognized in all major dictionaries, though some add cautionary labels or usage notes.** (Peters, 2004, p. 326, emphasis added)

As can be seen from Partridge's prescription, he recommends using *literally* only when something is meant in the literal and traditional sense of the word. This prescription is clearly contrasted with Bryson's (1984, p. 83) condemnation of the hyperbolic use of *literally* in that he explicitly says: "don't use *literally*". Peters' advice (2004, p. 326) describes the traditional as well as new use of *literally* without passing a judgment on its acceptability. What also becomes clear from this illustration is that language advice can be rather complex and can consist of not only prescriptions and proscriptions, but also descriptions of how a particular usage feature is used.

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, the usage debate between prescriptivists and descriptivists, a social and historical phenomenon, has become gradually more complex due to the beginning of systematic studies of English which evolved into the establishment of linguistics as a scientific field. Modern linguists, especially sociolinguists, have notoriously eschewed an active involvement in the debate insisting on a description of how language is used by its speakers without passing judgments

(Cameron, 1995, p. 3). Cameron (1995, p. ix) emphasises how laypeople's needs for guidance on language matters frequently clash with linguists' endeavours at merely describing a language. The debate evolving around usage produced a seemingly unbridgeable gap between laypeople, prescriptivists and linguists. However, only few linguists have engaged in the debate by providing a linguistic discussion of usage problem. One of these is Pam Peters, who conducted the so-called Langscape Surveys (Peters, 1998) to gather data on attitudes towards language use for her usage guide *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* which was published in 2004. Although her approach consequently is descriptive, it provides readers with guidance on how to deal with usage problems. Cameron (1995, p. 3) introduced the term 'verbal hygiene' to refer to a phenomenon affecting language use which she, however, does not consider a synonym for prescriptivism. Discussing the issues with the term 'prescriptivism', Cameron (1995) highlights how it has obtained a negative connotation among linguists. The fact that linguists' negative attitudes towards prescriptivism are very similar in nature to the attitudes of those who advocate prescriptivism is intriguing, as both key players exhibit the tendency to ignore each other's existence and diminish their influence. Pullum's (2009) comments on Strunk's (1918) *The Elements of Style* serve as an example of such tendencies. Cameron states the following about these similarities between prescriptivists' and linguists' attitudes: "All attitudes to language and linguistic change are fundamentally ideological, and the relationship between popular and expert ideologies, though it is complex and conflictual, is closer than one might think" (Cameron, 1995, pp. 3–4).

While linguists are often said to describe how language is used by its speakers, prescriptivists would like to see what speakers consider the ideal and proper form of a language to be adopted by everyone. It is important to acknowledge the role speakers of a language play in the usage debate. Despite

being often considered a living entity, language as a system of rules as well as the origin of these rules have been frequently discussed critically. Whether the rules, which linguists deduce from patterns of language use, originate from the language system itself or from within the speaker is an often-disputed question in linguistics (cf. Chomsky, 1986, p. 3, Evans, 2014, p. 98). How speakers use their acquired knowledge about language in interaction with other speakers is characterised by their ability to apply agreed upon norms of interaction. Cameron (1995, p. 6) argues that the rules which linguists provide on the basis of usage description hence capture “behavioural regularity” which stems from “speakers’ apprehending and following certain norms”. Thus, including the behavioural, social and linguistic norms of a speech community in a discussion on language use is inevitable. While agreed upon norms and linguistic conventions do not seem to be considered problematical with respect to their usage, disputed, unsettled or changing norms constitute the basis for the usage debate. This is for example illustrated by the changing meaning of *literally* which is nowadays also used in a hyperbolic manner. While some have accepted these new norms, others struggle to accept them, or are even unaware of their existence.

In *Fixing English* (2014, p. 24), Ann Curzan provides a fine-grained and unprecedented distinction into four strands of prescriptivism which will be briefly summarized and exemplified by providing a usage problem for each strand:

- 1) Standardizing prescriptivism
- 2) Stylistic prescriptivism
- 3) Restorative prescriptivism
- 4) Politically responsive prescriptivism

The first strand of prescriptivism she discusses, standardizing prescriptivism, is undoubtedly connected to the standardisation process of English and comprises rules aiming “to promote and enforce standardization and ‘standard’

usage” (Curzan, 2014, p. 24). Standardizing prescriptivism aims at diminishing the variation in the standard variety in order to achieve stability, which is one of the main aims of the standardisation process according to Milroy and Milroy (2012, p. 19). That is why Curzan (2014, p. 28) also refers to this as the “first key strand of prescriptivism”. An example of a usage problem falling under this first strand is multiple negation, which is a linguistic feature considered not to be part of Standard English. Stylistic prescriptivism, on the other hand, affects mainly formal written norms of usage, while spoken usages barely falls into this category (Curzan, 2014, p. 33). The above-mentioned norms and conventions of usage come into play here, as stylistic prescriptivism is not simply a matter of the use of standard or non-standard language. Curzan (2014, p. 33) states that, as correctness and formality, especially in written formal texts, seem to be connected, stylistic prescriptivism is “a nicety that distinguishes those who ‘know better’ from those who don’t, but it does not distinguish standard English speakers from nonstandard English speakers”. Thus, knowing the linguistic norms and conventions is pivotal in order to conform to stylistic prescriptivism as this strand of prescriptivism consists of rules discussing stylistic issues within the standard language. Curzan (2014, p. 35) uses preposition stranding as an example of stylistic prescriptivism, which is, according to her, “quite specialized in terms of acceptability” and a rule deduced from formality. Hence, the question whether one should use *To whom did you speak?* or *Whom did you speak to?* is a matter of stylistic prescriptivism. The third strand, restorative prescriptivism, consists of efforts made to restore traditional usages, or to “turn to older forms to purify usage” (Curzan, 2014, p. 24). Such rules and efforts aim at restoring earlier usages, which some argue to be the pure forms, and seem to be connected to the myth of the Golden Age discussed in section 2.2 above. Curzan (2014, p. 37) says that this relatively small class of usage

rules shows an overlap with rules falling into the standardisation and stylistic prescriptivism strands, which raises the question of why to distinguish this particular strand of prescriptivism after all. She attributes this distinction to a number of usage rules that neither aims at the stabilization of Standard English nor at the enforcement of stylistic preferences, but which rather aims at “the resurrection of a form no longer standard or even preferred” (Curzan, 2014, p. 37). The distinction between the adjectives *healthy* and *healthful* could be classified as an example of restorative prescriptivism. An example of this can be found in the fourth edition of *Fowler’s Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (2015) edited by Jeremy Butterfield, who discusses how *healthful*, albeit the older word, has never gained ground in Great Britain and seems to be an American phenomenon (see above):

Stateside, such people insist that the only correct word to convey the meaning ‘conductive to health’ is *healthful*, and that *healthy* can never, never ever, be so used. One should therefore, they claim, speak of *healthful eating, food, diets, lifestyles, meals*, etc. (Butterfield, 2015, p. 368).

The fourth and last strand distinguished by Curzan (2014, p. 24) is politically responsive prescriptivism, which includes rules designed to “promote inclusive, non-discriminatory, politically correct, and/or politically expedient usage”. Political correctness, which can be considered the only truly successful measure of prescriptivism, seems to be less controversial to linguists, as it is often excluded from discussions about prescriptivism, which highlights the ideological aspects of prescriptivism. Curzan’s (2014) four strands of prescriptivism are a useful addition to the discussion of prescriptivism as it not only helps to distinguish different categories of rules, but also emphasises the overarching characteristics many usage rules share. Her discussion of prescriptivism and its distinction into four strands is further supplemented by the general differentiation between individual and institutional prescriptivism (Curzan, 2014, p. 16). Being backed by “the cultural

and social power” of authoritative institutions, institutional prescriptivism is spread and enforced through various publications, its “adoption in schools, [and] use as a standard for newspaper editing” (Curzan, 2014, p. 16). The application of institutional prescriptivism has been illustrated above in the discussion of education and the media as gatekeepers of the notion of correct Standard English. From a historical perspective, institutional prescriptivism was preceded by individual prescriptivism, as grammarians and usage guide writers aimed at establishing themselves first as an authority. Today, however, Curzan (2014, p. 16) argues that individuals depend on intuitional authorities to strengthen their own authority and so make use of institutional prescriptivism.

As briefly mentioned above, prescription formed the last stage of the ongoing standardisation process defined by Milroy and Milroy (2012). However, Tieken-Boon van Ostade (forthc./a) argues for prescriptivism not only to be distinguished from this last stage, but also for prescriptivism to be added as another stage in the seven-stage standardisation process and thus making it the current stage of the standardisation process of English. Furthermore, she proposes a new definition and use of the term ‘prescriptivism’ which she argues needs to be distinguished from the process of prescription, and earlier definitions of prescriptivism, which have been discussed above. According to Tieken-Boon van Ostade (forthc./a), prescriptivism should be defined as the negatively perceived treatment of prescriptive efforts, which manifests itself in parodies of usage guides, for example. Basing her argument on the negative perception of prescriptive tendencies in the twentieth century, Tieken-Boon van Ostade (forthc./a) emphasises that it is not the eighteenth century, but rather the period from the twentieth century until today that should be defined as the Age of Prescriptivism. Placing the Age of Prescriptivism at this point is triggered by the increasing popularity of usage guides and the beginning

stigmatisation of many usage problems in the twentieth century, a phenomenon which will be discussed in detail in this study.

### **2.5. Concluding Remarks**

In order to enable a better understanding of the usage debate, it was essential to provide an overview of the debate's development, not only as a debate itself but also as a historical and social phenomenon. Having sketched out the beginning of usage criticism in eighteenth-century periodicals (Percy, 2008, 2009), Lowth's prescriptive footnotes (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2011) and the birth of Baker's usage guide (Leonard, 1929), I have attempted to describe the evolution of the usage debate which has culminated in the form of the usage guide tradition which continues to this very day. It is important to bear in mind that usage guides are not only the product of the Milroyan prescription stage of the standardisation process of English, but that they also fulfil an authoritative role for the general public. The market for usage guides arose and gained in importance and popularity due to the linguistic insecurity of speakers from the rising middle class in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Social climbers who were keen on advancing their social standing saw language use, both spoken and written, as a means for achieving such improvements. That language ideologies need to be taken into account when discussing the usage debate should not be overlooked. The notion of correct Standard English which consolidated in the second half of the eighteenth century has shaped the usage debate permanently. The notion's application in education and the media highlights not only the topicality of the usage debate but also shows how institutional prescriptivism has been used to enforce the notion further. With the establishment of linguistics as a scientific discipline the gap between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to English usage widened. The reception of the efforts of prescriptivists' and descriptivists' in

the study of English usage can be seen as proof of how deeply indoctrinated the notion of correct Standard English is among the speech community as efforts made by prescriptivists seem to be well-received by the general public, while descriptivists' efforts are barely acknowledged.