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## Language prescriptivism : attitudes to usage vs. actual language use in American English

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# CHAPTER 1

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## Language prescriptivism

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### 1.1 Introduction

The view of language prescriptivism as a phenomenon which originated in the eighteenth century and is, at best, only marginally related to processes of linguistic variation and change can still be considered particularly prevalent in descriptive linguistics. For instance, compared to the prescriptive and normative grammars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, twentieth-century grammar writing is strikingly different. While this paradigm shift in English grammar writing was completed long ago, and the most influential reference grammars of English, such as Biber et al. (1999) or Huddleston and Pullum (2002), are descriptive grammars of English, written by linguists and based on linguistic scholarship, the normative tradition of prescribing correct language use has survived to this day. In other words, prescriptivism is “alive and well” (cf. Beal 2009: 47). Perhaps the most persistent and entrenched twentieth-century manifestation of this tradition is the genre of ‘usage guides’ (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2010). These books of language advice – variously referred to as usage guides, handbooks of usage, usage manuals, and usage books – first appeared in England at the end of the eighteenth century (Leonard 1929; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2010). A similarly popular practice of publishing books

on language advice arose in America during the nineteenth century, when the first American usage guide was published (Connors 1983; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2015), resulting in an equally productive and long-lasting tradition. Since then, the number of titles published and copies sold has grown in both countries. William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style*, undoubtedly the most popular American usage guide, is considered a classic, and has become part of popular culture. Since its publication in 1959 – the version revised by E.B. White – over ten million copies have been sold (Roberts 2009; Pullum 2010a).

On the other side of the Atlantic, an often cited example of the success such publications can achieve is Lynne Truss's guide to punctuation, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (2003), which has sold in excess of two million copies (Curzan 2014: 41). The majority of the advice which these books provide has in general been met with strong criticism from linguists (cf. Burchfield 1991). Pullum (2010a: 34), for instance, argues that “the success of [Strunk and White's] *Elements* [is] one of the worst things to have happened to English language education in America in the past century”, and that “the people who rely on it have no idea how badly off-beam its grammatical claims are”. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* provoked a similar reaction, this time in the form of a book-length historical account of attitudes to English usage by Crystal (2006). In his treatment of the subject, Crystal contextualises the historical development of attitudes to usage, highlighting the futile attempt of usage commentators to restrain, control, or “fix” the English language. Intertwined with the historical account of the development of attitudes to usage through the centuries are arguments about topics such as the nature of language variation and change, or the crucial role of situational context in discussions of language standards and norms (Crystal 2006: 152). These are arguments which linguists often use to point out the failures and shortcomings of language advice found in usage guides (e.g. Pullum 2010a,b). Linguists often perceive these prescriptive approaches to usage to be acutely misleading with respect to the nature of language use and linguistic change. This is often pointed out with reference to the strikingly different meanings that certain basic linguistic terms, such as “grammar”, “language”, and “rule” (cf. Curzan 2014), have in general language use. Lamenting the confusion surrounding the understanding of what grammar is, Leech et al. (2009: 1), note that “[r]ather than see grammar as the vast and complex system of rules which helps us organize words into constituents, clauses and sentences, [among usage commentators] the term is restricted to refer to a collection of variable and disputed usages which have been selected arbitrarily in the course of almost 300 years of prescriptive thinking

about good grammar and proper English”.

However, this does not tell the entire story about usage guides. Despite the problems in their approach to language use and the falseness of many of these claims, there are three other important – and perhaps less controversial – characteristics of the usage guide tradition which are worth pointing out. The first one is its stability and entrenchment in contemporary society. This stability is both historically conditioned, by the long tradition of the genre, and synchronically relevant, as is evident from the continuing popularity of usage guides. Thus, despite well-documented historical accounts of the linguistically arbitrary nature of prescriptive language ideologies and their guaranteed failure in the face of inevitable processes of language change, “[m]anuals of English have sold well for generations” (Crystal 2006: viii), and new titles continue to appear. There have been at least thirty new usage guides published in America since the turn of the century. The American usage guide genre now numbers more than two hundred titles (see Section 4.3), and, as Creswell (1975: 1–2) noted almost forty years ago, “[u]sage guides remain the go-to source of authority on matters of language usage”. Judging by the number of guides which have appeared since, his observation remains equally applicable nowadays.

The second characteristic of the usage guide tradition, which is perhaps related to the relatively large number of publications, is that not all usage guides are the same, or indeed equally prescriptive. In fact, it has been recognised that the dichotomy between prescriptivism and descriptivism is never neatly manifested in practice. Cameron (1995: 3–5), for instance, argues convincingly that prescriptivism and descriptivism can be seen as mirroring similar ideological positions, and are often intertwined in actual language use (see also Pinker 2014: 188–189). This is supported by scholarship on eighteenth-century normative grammars which shows that, contrary to the stereotypical notion, some normative grammars are not exclusively prescriptive, and that they often feature prescriptive and descriptive approaches side by side (e.g. Hodson 2006; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2006; Straaijer 2009). Much the same applies to usage guides. Although criticism has been directed at some usage guides, others have received positive reviews from linguists. This is perhaps more readily noticeable in relation to empirically based usage guides, such as *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (cf. Algeo 1991a).

The third relevant characteristic of usage guides is their value. Linguists have often recognised the indispensable social function of good usage guides (cf. Weiner 1988: 182–183), as well as the value of usage guides in general, despite the level of misguidedness of some of their language advice. Crystal, for instance, recognises that

despite the fact that usage guides fail to “fix” the language, or teach speakers how to use language effectively,

they do have a value. They help to alert us to the issues of change that worry the more conservatively minded members of society. They also perform a valuable service in drawing attention to those features of language where it is all too easy to be lazy or careless, and where sense or intelligibility suffers as a result. (2006: 157)

Thus, beyond the obvious social usefulness of usage guides, they have a rather subtle and linguistically relevant value, in that they inevitably contain information about linguistic variants, even when some of these variants are the subject of criticism. It is these aspects of the usage guide tradition which serve as the starting point for my investigation of the American usage guide tradition and its role in perpetuating prescriptive attitudes to language, its influence on language users and language use, and its relationship with linguistics. The question of the influence of usage guides is thus a question of the influence of prescriptive ideology in general. In the introductory chapter, I will discuss the importance of studying this question, and will elaborate on the motivations and assumptions of the present study.

I am here concerned specifically with American English, and I will at times make references to comparisons between this variety and British English. The reason for this is that the American usage guide tradition is distinct from the British tradition, and also from the growth of English as a global language. It is of course important to keep in mind that this focus on one specific variety is not meant to imply that similar observations would necessarily apply to other contexts, such as World Englishes. For instance, Inner Circle varieties, in terms of the model of Kachru (1992), are different from Outer Circle and Expanding Circle varieties, in terms of norms, ideologies, and socio-historical context. For instance, one potential problem that might immediately be identified is the fact that the intended readership of usage guides is *native* speakers of the variety in question, as the spread of English beyond the Inner Circle has shown that the concept of the native speaker may no longer account for the types of speakers of English that exist in these ‘new’ contexts (cf. e.g. Singh 1996). However, addressing the question of prescriptivism, usage guides, and language advice literature in relation to Outer and Expanding circle contexts in any reasonable depth is beyond the topic of this dissertation (however, see Cameron 2012 for an interesting discussion of language prescription in the context of Global English).

## 1.2 Defining prescriptivism

Prescriptivism is related to “an ideology (or set of beliefs) concerning language which requires that in language, as in other matters, things shall be done in the ‘right’ way” (Milroy and Milroy 2012: 1). Fundamentally, prescriptivism is an approach, or a response, to variation and change in language, in that it sets out to counteract that change. As such, it is part and parcel of the process of standardisation, which involves, in the words of Milroy and Milroy (2012: 6), “the suppression of optional variability in language”. In other words, from the point of view of prescriptive ideology, linguistic variants are strongly, almost viscerally, associated with values. At the most fundamental level, those values are ‘good’ and ‘bad’; extended to language, additional values refer to such things as standardness, correctness, appropriateness, clarity, and legitimacy. The use of *ain’t* is an example of this; it is an incorrect form, and is not recognised as a legitimate English word, because it is not a variant which is acceptable in standard English (see Chapter 5). The instinct to regulate which expressions legitimately belong to a language and which do not means that prescriptivism “implies above all, authority; it also implies order, stability, predictability and reason” (Drake 1977b: 1). The attempt to regulate the value of linguistic variants on a micro-level corresponds to an attempt to regulate language variation and change on a macro-level, by enforcing a doctrine of correct language use. “Adherents to the doctrine of correctness”, Finegan (1980: 10) writes, “strive to mold linguistic practice according to selected patterns of grammar; they attempt to retard the pace of language change or halt it altogether”. In the history of English, the ideology of language prescriptivism is traditionally associated with English normative grammars written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United Kingdom and the United States (e.g. Leonard 1929; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2000, 2006), although it has also been recognised that prescriptivism survives in present-day English as a characteristic of usage guides (e.g. Crystal 2006; Albakry 2007; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2010).

The term “prescription” is also often used alongside the term “prescriptivism”, and there seems to be some confusion as to what is usually meant by these two terms. While “prescriptivism” seems to be used to refer to prescriptive ideology in general, regardless of the time period in which this ideology is found to be manifested, the term “prescription” is used by Milroy and Milroy (2012) to refer to the latest stage in the English standardisation process, which follows the stage of codification (although the

boundaries between stages are not clearly delineated). For instance, in the Milroys' discussion of the stages of standardisation, they use the term "prescription" (see also Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008b, 2016). While Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2016) argues that prescription and prescriptivism should be distinguished as important stages in the standardisation process of English, the difference between the two remains unclear, mostly coming down to arguments related to the negative connotations associated with the term "prescriptivism". For the present study, I distinguish between prescription and prescriptivism; by "prescription" I understand the stage in the standardisation process which follows codification (in line with Milroy and Milroy's model), while by "prescriptivism" I understand the ideology according to which language use should adhere to specific and clearly defined norms and standards of correctness and appropriateness, while language change should be resisted. In this view, prescriptivism can be seen as characterising an approach to language which can be found both in the codification and in the prescription stages. These stages are associated with different functions of prescriptivism. Perhaps the most fundamental difference in the function of prescriptivism is that during the codification stage prescriptivism is part of the process of codifying the language standard and establishing the norms of the language, while during the prescription stage prescriptivism has the function of maintaining the language standards and norms. The codification and prescription stages are also associated with different kinds of metalinguistic works, i.e. normative grammars and usage guides respectively.

In addition to determining its ideological characteristics, a useful and often applied approach to defining prescriptivism is to compare it with descriptivism. Descriptivism is an approach which characterises linguistics, i.e. the objective study of language as it is, not as it should be (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 2–3; Baker and Hengeveld 2012: 19–20). Descriptivism is usually associated with twentieth-century linguistics, a scientific discipline diametrically opposed in outlook and approach to the eighteenth-century grammarians' prescriptive conception of language. Consequently, it is normally assumed in mainstream linguistics that prescriptivism and descriptivism are entirely at odds with each other. Compared to prescriptivism, "[d]escriptivism emphasizes change over stability, diversity over uniformity, usage over authority, and the spoken language over the written language" (Drake 1977b: 1). If prescriptivism is inextricably linked with what Finegan (1980) refers to as the doctrine of correctness, a term first adopted by Leonard (1929), descriptivism is associated with the doctrine of usage. Proponents of the descriptivist view on language variation and change "make no explicit value judgements about the logic, utility, or aesthetics – i.e. the



‘correctness’ of particular lexical or grammatical items, but report the known facts about the ways in which a given form, meaning, or pronunciation is actually used and in what circumstances” (Finegan 1980: 11).

While this neatly established dichotomy is still the predominant way of thinking about prescriptivism, the way that linguists refer to or account for prescriptivism in descriptive studies is not always straightforward. It is perhaps partly due to the entrenched opposition between prescriptivism and descriptivism, or to the strong commitment to descriptivism in linguistics, that linguistic accounts of prescriptivism come in various kinds and at various levels of specificity. Concretely, in relation to the question of the influence of prescriptivism, statements tend to differ; sometimes they are contradictory, and often they are vague. For simplicity, I group existing accounts of the relationship of prescriptivism to language into three kinds of positions with respect to the ways in which prescriptivism is conceptualised and its influence accounted for in descriptive linguistic studies. While this does not represent the entirety of scholarly positions or assumptions about prescriptivism, it will serve as a useful generalisation of a diverse set of statements in the context of the present discussion. It is crucial to identify these three positions at the outset of this study, because they show how prescriptivism has been conceptualised as a phenomenon in relation to language, and, specifically, what that means for the question of the influence of prescriptivism.

The first position assumes that prescriptivism is diametrically opposed to the objective study of language, and that, as such, prescriptive ideology is fundamentally mistaken in its conception of language. Consequently, prescriptive ideology is seen as having no role to play in language development. This stance on prescriptive ideology is representative of the stance on language ideology in general. Kroskrity (2004: 499) traces the “marginalization or proscription of linguistic ideology” back to the beginning of the twentieth century, and the development of the new science of linguistics. “Speakers, through their linguistic ideologies, were neither part of language nor capable of being agents of linguistic change”, Kroskrity (2004: 499) writes, and continues by saying that “[r]ather than being viewed as partially aware or as potentially agentive, speakers – in Chomskyan models – were merely hosts for language”. This meant that linguistic ideology in general, and consequently prescriptive ideology, was not taken into account at all, or, when it was, as, for instance by Bloomfield (1927, 1944), it was ultimately concluded that “speakers’ linguistic ideologies – even those cast as prescriptive norms – had a negligible effect on their actual speech” (Kroskrity 2004: 499). Cameron (1995: 3) makes a similar observation in relation to prescriptive ideology, noting that in linguistics “the evaluative concerns

of speakers (embodied in their ‘prescriptivism’) are by implication seen as both alien and perverse”. This dissociation from prescriptive ideology is very often stated in descriptive grammars (e.g. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 2–5) and linguistics textbooks (e.g. Fromkin 2000: 20; Baker and Hengeveld 2012: 19–20).

The second position differs from the first in that it maintains that prescriptivism is an important sociolinguistic factor. This position is formulated and discussed in a number of recent critical treatments of language prescription and prescriptivism (Milroy and Milroy 1985; Cameron 1995; Curzan 2014), which argue convincingly that prescriptivism should not be written off as a narrow view of language use which is common among a small group of people who distinguish themselves by a fondness for rules and an ignorance of how language works. Milroy and Milroy (1985), as noted above, argue that prescription is a stage in the standardisation process of English, and that it follows the codification stage. Cameron (1995) approaches prescriptivism as the natural tendency for societies to regulate and establish standards and norms of language use; she calls this broadly defined phenomenon “verbal hygiene”. More recently, Curzan (2014) significantly furthers the discussion of prescriptivism and its influence by reformulating the main question at the centre of most discussions of prescriptivism, which usually focus on the failure of prescriptivism to achieve what it purports to do, i.e. stop language from changing. As Curzan points out, the important question when studying prescriptivism is not its success or failure, but its essential nature, its importance in the context of metalinguistic discourses, and the effects it has on language users and language itself. “[M]aking value judgments on language”, Cameron (1995: 3) argues, “is an integral part of using it and not an alien practice ‘perversely grafted on’”. This position assumes that “[a] prescriptive attitude has nevertheless played a noticeable role in shaping the English language” (Chafe 1984: 96), and, furthermore, that this assumption needs to be studied in practice. The majority of empirical investigations of this question have been conducted by historical sociolinguistic scholars focusing on prescriptivism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (e.g. Dekeyser 1975; Tiekens-Boon van Ostade 1982, 1994, 2006, 2000, 2002; Chafe 1984; Tottie 1997; Auer and González-Díaz 2005; Auer 2006; Anderwald 2012, 2014; Yáñez-Bouza 2015). These works include those which study both the establishment and rise of normative and prescriptive language rules (for a discussion of the difference between these two, see Vorlat 1979) during the eighteenth century, and their influence during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. This reasoning has been extended to present-day English; in this context, prescriptivism is understood to have an influence on both language practice and language speakers, and

it is argued that this influence should be studied empirically.

The third position is somewhere between these two, and is the least well defined. It is usually not strongly or explicitly expressed, and is found in cases where either the importance of prescriptivism is recognised, but not discussed in further detail, or where prescriptivism is used as an explanatory tool for processes of language change, although this is also often not explained precisely. A good illustration of this position can be found in Calle-Martín and Miranda-García's (2009) diachronic study of the split infinitive, spanning the period from 1640 to 1920. In it, they observe that the split infinitive is a construction against which there is a strong prescriptive bias, "a fact which makes [split infinitives] practically disappear from corpus data, particularly in the case of consciously edited texts" (2009: 349). In making this observation, the authors implicitly recognise the influence of prescriptive ideology on edited written English. However, this raises additional questions about what exactly constitutes strong prescriptive bias – as opposed to weak prescriptive bias – and how its influence could be identified or measured rather than being merely assumed. Another example of the use of prescriptive influence as an explanatory tool is found in a study of grammatical change in twentieth-century written English, where, on the basis of corpus data, Leech and Smith (2009: 196) identify "a steeper decline of the passive in [American English] possibly due to prescriptivism". More specifically, they note that "[a]n additional reason for a passive decline, probably increasing through the century, has been the hostility (especially in the US) of prescriptive forces – including usage gurus, house style manuals, crusaders in favour of 'plain English', and latterly, grammar checking software – all either overtly or covertly disparaging the use of the passive" (Leech and Smith 2009: 183). They offer a similar explanation for the decrease of the frequency of *which*, as opposed to *that*, in American English (Leech and Smith 2009: 181). A third example of an implicit statement about the potential influence of prescriptivism on language use can be found in a study of the de-grammaticalisation of the infinitive marker *to* (Fitzmaurice 2000b). Fitzmaurice selects infinitives split by *not* as a case study for the investigation of the process of de-grammaticalisation, rather than infinitives split by adverbs; in relation to the latter type of split infinitives, she observes:

This construction is a traditional bugbear of traditional grammarians, and therefore its high profile militates against an objective assessment of the progress of the de-grammaticalisation of the infinitive marker. By contrast, the negative split infinitive – the construction split by a negative operator – has received rather less attention from prescriptivists and has

thus remained less obtrusive in speakers' conscious linguistic behaviour. This type of split infinitive therefore seems worth further investigation. (Fitzmaurice 2000b: 172)

This reasoning seems to imply that there is some kind of influence of traditional prescriptivism on the use of the split infinitive in speakers' conscious linguistic behaviour, which in turn makes it a problematic candidate for an investigation of linguistic processes such as grammaticalisation, which operate below the level of consciousness. While, of course, this is not explicitly stated, such a reading is not impossible on the basis of Fitzmaurice's observations. A more plausible interpretation would be that the author does not believe that the process of de-grammaticalisation is influenced by prescriptivism, but that she is avoiding the issue altogether, in case there might be some influence. It remains unclear what exactly is meant by the argument that "its high profile militates against an objective assessment of the progress of the de-grammaticalisation of the infinitive marker". In other words, it is unclear whether "its high profile" works against an objective assessment because traditional prescriptive grammar may have somehow 'contaminated' this process, or whether it is merely a safer option for the analyst to deal with features which speakers may not be as aware or conscious of as they would be expected to be in the case of prescriptively targeted features. Furthermore, Fitzmaurice argues that, because negative split infinitives have not been the subject of prescriptive usage commentators, it can be assumed that speakers will not be affected by prescriptive ideas about their incorrectness. Establishing this relationship between the two implies that prescriptive usage commentators are influential in disseminating prescriptive ideas about language use. In a discussion of the contributing factors for the disappearance of zero adverb forms, Tagliamonte (2012: 227–228) entertains a potential prescriptive influence which could explain "why zero adverbs in the United States, and perhaps elsewhere in North America, have endured longer than in the United Kingdom", even though she is more tentative in accepting this as the only influence. In all of these cases, potential prescriptive influence is recognised in the context of patterns of language variation and change.

Observations about potential prescriptive influence are also found in studies of speakers' language judgements and intuitions. For instance, in a review of methodological practices adopted in the collection of grammaticality judgement data, Buchstaller and Corrigan (2011) note the potential influence of normative prescriptive ideology when speakers are asked to 'translate' a standard language sentence into their vernacular during data collection. The authors note that this method "presupposes a

situation of relatively low prescriptive pressure in which informants are comfortable providing the dialectal equivalent of the ‘standard’” (Buchstaller and Corrigan 2011: 32). This statement is an implicit recognition of the potential influence of prescriptive ideologies among speakers; in this case, such an influence is seen as a distortion of speakers’ natural, or real, language use. These examples are of course not exhaustive, and are meant to illustrate some of the issues raised in descriptions or accounts of prescriptive influence which belong to the third of the three positions identified here. At the same time they raise a number of questions about the nature of prescriptive influence, the importance of accounting for this influence systematically, and the problem with relying on prescriptivism as an explanation in processes of variation and change.

The difficulty in formulating straightforward answers to these questions is one of the motivations for the present study. The study is part of a broader research project, conducted by Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, which also deals with the stages of prescription and the prescriptivism associated with it in the context of British English (Ebner 2017) and in the context of media discourse (Lukač 2018). It is also a continuation of the work done on the emergence and rise of the normative grammar tradition (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1982, 1994, 2000, 2002, 2012c), in the sense that it attempts to evaluate the possible influence of the norms which started to become established in that tradition. In other words, this study attempts to investigate how prescriptivism is manifested after the codification stage, that is, during the prescription stage. This study will thus explore the nature of twentieth-century prescriptivism and its influence on language variation and change, and language speakers in the context of American English. The present study is based on three important principles, formulated by Curzan (2014), which form the basis for many of its main assumptions. The principles are the following:

- The history of the English language encompasses metalinguistic discussions about language, which potentially have real effects on language use.
- The history of the English language encompasses the development of both the written and the spoken language, as well as their relationship to each other.
- The history of the English language encompasses linguistic developments occurring both below the level of speakers’ conscious awareness – what is sometimes called “naturally” – and above the level of speakers’ conscious awareness. (Curzan 2014: 48)

On the basis of these three principles, I will address the question of prescriptivism, specifically with respect to the twentieth century, from three perspectives. The first perspective involves the study of usage guides as a source of metalinguistic discourses. The second perspective deals with the question of empirically investigating and ascertaining the potential influence of prescriptivism in spoken and written American English. This will be investigated by means of a corpus-based analysis of the patterns of actual use of a select number of language features (described in detail in Chapter 3). Finally, data on speakers' attitudes will be brought to bear on the question of the influence of prescriptive ideology on speakers' conscious language behaviour and language practices. In what follows, I discuss in detail the importance of studying these three perspectives, as well as the initial assumptions adopted in the study.

### 1.3 Usage guides

As mentioned above, some scholars have noted the great significance of usage guides, and the potentially considerable influence that such guides may have on language use (Landau 2001; Crystal 2006). The first principle formulated by Curzan (2014: 48; cf. Section 1.2 above) stresses the importance of metalinguistic discussions, and their potential influence on both language use and language users. Commenting on the attitudes expressed in these books, which are often dismissed by descriptive linguists as irrelevant, Landau observes:

While linguists may deplore the attitudes expressed in usage guides, there is no doubt that such books are popular, and with good reason. The attitudes of others towards one's own language must be considered seriously by anyone who hopes to achieve practical goals. To deplore such attitudes, to argue that such attitudes ought not to exist, is to indulge in fancy and usually means that one is fortunate enough not to need ambition, but wants to show one's sympathy with those who do. Since those who are ambitious and insecure are the great believers in prescriptive attitudes and buy the books that perpetuate them, scholars who are scornful of such attitudes must realize sooner or later that they are addressing only each other. (2001: 262–263)

So, while the influence of usage guides on language use and language users can be assumed to exist, the nature, degree, and mechanisms of this influence have not often

been empirically assessed. If we take these books as a site for the perpetuation and strengthening of metalinguistic discourses and prescriptive attitudes to usage, it is important to provide a more detailed account of the genre and its treatment of usage features.

The first reason for investigating usage guides in the context of this study stems from the fact that the question of the influence of usage guides on language use is a question of the influence of prescriptivism in general. However, before I attempt to investigate the influence of prescriptivism, I turn to a consideration of prescriptive ideology itself. Usage guides present a reliable source for the investigation of metalinguistic discourses, because they are a stable and long-lasting genre, which has played a consistent social function throughout the twentieth century. This allows for an investigation of attitudes to language use, prescriptive or otherwise, as well as, crucially, how these attitudes have changed over time. It is important to take this dimension into account, because existing accounts of prescriptive influence often assume that prescriptive attitudes are unchanging and monolithic. For example, in assessments of prescriptive influence on the split infinitive, scholars usually start from the assumption that split infinitives are proscribed, and then use that as a basis for making judgements about the success or lack thereof of this proscription on the basis of corpus data (cf. the discussion of Calle-Martín and Miranda-García (2009) and Fitzmaurice (2000b) above). In other words, if corpus data show that split infinitives are increasing, this would be interpreted as evidence that the proscription has not been effective, while a decrease in the frequency of use of split infinitives would be considered to be evidence that the proscription has been effective. However, as I will show in later chapters, this approach may not be sufficiently nuanced, because prescriptive attitudes to split infinitives have changed considerably in the course of the twentieth century, to the point where the majority of usage guides now advocate splitting infinitives, and few speakers are now aware of its status as a usage problem (cf. similar results for British English in Ebner 2017). In light of this, Fitzmaurice's (2000b) assumption that speakers' conscious awareness of the split infinitive somehow makes this construction a problematic candidate for studying language change is questionable. Evidence of how prescriptive attitudes have changed is thus the first step in accounting for their potential influence.

Another reason for drawing on usage guides in the study of attitudes to usage is that they evolve to reflect their social and cultural historicity, and this includes popular or accepted attitudes to usage. One way of studying attitudes to usage, as Algeo (1991b: 5) notes, is by examining and summarising what is said about usage in

usage guides. More concretely, usage guides are crucial in perpetuating prescriptive language attitudes. They are a unique product of the English language prescription stage, which is part of the standardisation process (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2010; Peters 2006, 2012), and as such are central to language prescriptivism. Usage guides can be distinguished from descriptive grammars and dictionaries in that their primary function is to offer language advice on disputed points of usage to native speakers of the language; perhaps in part as a consequence of this function, they feature a great deal of personal opinions or subjective judgements on language usage (Busse and Schröder 2009: 82; Peters 2012). They are also important for the stabilisation of attitudes to correct usage, because “[w]hereas table manners are codified in handbooks of etiquette, ‘correct’ use of language is codified in handbooks of usage” (Milroy and Milroy 2012: 1). As such, they provide evidence for what kinds of attitudes to language have become institutionalised through publication and are, consequently, widespread.

Thirdly, usage guides are nowadays arguably the most influential type of metalinguistic works in which popular or prescriptive attitudes to language are expressed. As discussed above, the publication of usage guides has remained steady since their first appearance at the end of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, they also represent a fairly stable genre, albeit not an entirely homogeneous one (Straaijer 2018). However, despite variations within the genre, usage guides, compared to other forms of metalinguistic discourse, such as newspaper columns, letters to the editor, or oral complaints by speakers, are on the whole less ephemeral, less varied, and more tractable than other forms of metalinguistic discourse.

Finally, objective empirical descriptive studies of the genre of usage guides are rather rare (e.g. Creswell 1975; Peters and Young 1997; Albakry 2007; Busse and Schröder 2009, 2010; Busse 2015; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2015). Alongside these important contributions to the empirical study of the usage guide genre, discussions of particular usage guides have previously appeared in the form of positive or negative reviews. Examples of the latter are Pullum’s discussion of *The Elements of Style* (2010a), and his review of Simon Heffer’s *Strictly English* (2010b), and Algeo (1991a) provides a positive review of *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (1989). Aside from providing views on the quality of the usage guides in question, what these publications suggest is that usage guides come in various kinds, and they are not all shockingly prescriptive or uninformed. Dekeyser (1975), for instance, concludes, on the basis of an empirical analysis of the nature of language pronouncements in nineteenth-century grammars, that in the course of that century, normative grammars



became less normative and less prescriptive. Similarly, work on eighteenth-century grammars has shown that many of these grammars are not exclusively prescriptive or descriptive, but can actually contain elements of both approaches to language (Straaijer 2009; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2011). Dekeyser (1975) also posits a potential influence of the development of the science of linguistics on normative and prescriptive works on language. This is an interesting proposition, and one worth investigating in the context of present-day usage guides. Steven Pinker makes a related observation in a lecture on writing style,<sup>1</sup> noting that the most tangible influence of the science of linguistics on the treatment of points of usage is the scientific mindset, which requires empirical evidence in the resolution of usage contentions (cf. Landau 2001: 268). A comprehensive diachronic study of the usage guide genre can provide insights into the development of prescriptive ideologies over time (see also Straaijer 2018; Tieken-Boon van Ostade forthcoming).

Motivated by these considerations, the present study aims to provide an empirical exploration of the American twentieth-century tradition of usage guides. The questions at the centre of this investigation relate to the prescriptive nature of the usage guide tradition in the United States, and the nature of its influence on language practice and on language speakers in this variety of English (for British English, see Ebner 2017). I approach usage guides as a popular metalinguistic genre, strongly associated with normative or prescriptive approaches to language use. The aim is to investigate and assess the attitudes to language use presented in these books, and evaluate it in the context of popular attitudes to language use. I will also focus on testing the stereotypical association of these books with prescriptivism. These books are investigated in order to gain an understanding of how popular ideas about language use since the middle of the nineteenth were presented to a general audience, and to track changes in these ideas in the course of the twentieth century, and up to the present day.

## 1.4 Language variation and change

What makes prescriptivism an important factor to consider in processes of language variation and change is the fact that language variation and change represent concerns which are shared by prescriptive and descriptive approaches to language (cf. Peters and Young 1997: 315). In descriptive, linguistics change is seen as a natural part of

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<sup>1</sup> Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GubdYZPYPg&t=297s>.

language itself, and as something to be considered in investigating the workings of the language system. Prescriptivism, on the other hand, considers change as something detrimental to the language, and its main goal is to stop language from changing and to ‘fix’ it in the state in which it is – or in its allegedly correct state – for ever. However, as mentioned above, prescriptive and descriptive factors are rarely neatly distinguished in language use. Even though the methods and goals of the two approaches are strikingly different, it is important that we gain a better understanding of the mechanisms by which what is seen as a natural process of language variation and change is influenced by prescriptive ideology. The possibility of hypothesising the existence of prescriptive influence on language variation and change, as well as of determining the importance of studying this influence, rests on a number of assumptions about the nature of language variation and change, which I will address in this section.

The first set of assumptions relates to the nature of language change. In Section 1.2, I mentioned the three principles formulated by Curzan (2014) which are important for a study of prescriptivism. One of those principles recognises the importance of language variation and change in both spoken and written language. In other words, evidence from both spoken and written language needs to be considered in assessing the potential influence of prescriptivism, based on the assumption that written language developments are as much part of the English language as spoken ones. This is particularly relevant in the context of prescriptivism, because prescriptive influence is generally more likely to be manifested in written language than in spoken; this, however, does not trivialise that influence. An additional reason for the importance of accounting for the effects of prescriptivism on standard written English is the fact that “standard English, while being one variety among many from a purely descriptive-linguistic point of view, has nevertheless been the most studied and best documented one because of its social and cultural prominence” (Leech et al. 2009: 1).

The second assumption related to the nature of language change is that a change in one word or one linguistic feature is as important as a change in the language system. Curzan (2014: 61), for instance, argues that a study of prescriptivism as a factor in change is important, despite the usual assumption that prescriptivism targets only a small set of linguistic features, because language change often happens word by word. Specifically for the empirical study of prescriptivism, this means that the effect of prescriptivism on the use of one feature is already indicative of prescriptive influence. While prescriptivism is unlikely to change a fundamental aspect of the language system, this does not make its influence less important or trivial. And in some cases, language ideologies “[have] noticeably changed the grammar of English within

my generation's lifetime, resulted from the feminist challenge to the once standard 'generic *he*'" (Kroskrity 2004: 496–497).

The final important assumption about the nature of language change is that changes above the level of consciousness can be non-trivial (Curzan 2014: 61; see also Tottie 1997: 84). While the majority of sociolinguistic studies of language change deal with changes below the level of consciousness, deliberate language change has been shown to be important in its own right. Relevant work in this respect has been done by Thomason (2007, 2011), who shows that contrary to "the general assumption [...] that such changes are relatively trivial, confined mainly to the invention or borrowing of new words, changes in lexical semantics, and the adoption of a few structural features from a prestige dialect [...] adult speakers can and do make deliberate choices that bring about nontrivial lexical and structural linguistic change" (Thomason 2007: 41). The importance of the model of deliberate language change developed by Thomason is based on the argument that while "speakers' choices can indeed lead to drastic linguistic changes [...] these changes only rarely have a permanent effect on the speech of an entire community; and where they do have a permanent effect, it is because of particular social circumstances" Thomason (2007: 58). One of the examples given of what may constitute particular social circumstances is "the deliberate actions of language standardizers" (Thomason 2007: 58).

The second set of assumptions distinguished here relates to language variants, since "[a]t any given moment during a linguistic change, speakers typically experience the change as variation, with some speakers using one variant and other speakers using other variants or with the same speakers using multiple variants, perhaps in different registers" (Curzan 2014: 46). Prescriptivism is specifically concerned with a subset of language variants which have, for one reason or another, become socially salient. Thus, what are usually described as usage problems in the context of prescriptive approaches to language use, are actually language variants which are characterised by language variation, and, potentially, language change. Such variants can then be defined as part of linguistic variables in the sociolinguistic variationist vein. Furthermore, changes in variants in a particular period are identified and analysed on the basis of the assumption that language change is "statistical in nature, with a given construction occurring throughout the period and either becoming more or less common generally or in particular registers" (Denison 1998: 93; see also Leech et al. 2009: 8). The other assumption about linguistic variants relates to the co-occurrence patterns of linguistic variants on the basis of registers and communicative functions. Building on the work of Biber (1988) on the co-occurrence of linguistic features

alongside stylistic or communicative dimensions, and a study of the influence of prescriptivism on the basis of language features as prescriptivism-related factors (Hinrichs et al. 2015), the present study will explore prescriptive influence on the basis of multiple features.<sup>2</sup> The importance of considering multiple features is that prescriptivism is not a monolithic entity, and that while it is true that each prescriptively targeted feature presents a separate case in itself, it can be expected that if the use of language in a particular situation, spoken or written, is influenced by prescriptive concerns, this influence will in turn affect a number of prescriptively targeted features. Thus, the assumption is that in texts where prescriptive influence can be hypothesised to affect the frequency of use of a particular prescriptively targeted variant, it will do so for other such variants as well.

Measuring the potential effects of prescriptivism on language variation and change will be done through a corpus-based study of the language variation and change of a number of selected language features, which is the focus of Chapter 6. The approach taken follows historical sociolinguistic principles, in that linguistic variants are, where possible, identified and defined in a context of a linguistic variable. Both text frequencies and proportions of the occurrence of particular variants are then used as metrics to investigate patterns of occurrence of these variants, and to arrive at an understanding of the patterns of variation and change.

## 1.5 Speakers and attitudes

I have so far used the term attitudes to usage to refer to observations and judgements on language use found in usage guides or similar metalinguistic works. In this section, I turn to another type of attitudes: speakers' attitude (cf. final paragraph of Section 2.7 for studies which look at attitudes to usage in metalinguistic works and Section 4.3 for more details on the distinction between attitudes to usage and speakers' attitudes). Since prescriptivism is a set of beliefs or attitudes about language, the other area in which the influence or effects of prescriptivism can be expected to be found is in speakers' attitudes towards language use, and towards usage features

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<sup>2</sup>The terms 'linguistic variant/variable' and 'linguistic feature' will be used throughout the study, but they have a somewhat different reference. I use '(linguistic) feature' in the sense of Biber (1988) to refer to any language construction, word, or phrase which is targeted by prescriptive ideology. The terms 'linguistic variant' and 'linguistic variable' will be used specifically in cases where a particular feature can be identified as a linguistic variant, as not all features can be defined in terms of linguistic variants as part of a linguistic variable.

in particular. This relates to Curzan's third principle, which considers conscious awareness of language variants to be equally important in the development of the language. When we talk about prescriptive attitudes, we are referring specifically to attitudes to language usage, or, even more concretely, attitudes to specific language features. Garrett (2010: 7–10), for instance, distinguishes a number of different levels at which attitudes to language can take form in a language community. He treats in some detail the question of attitudes to usage features in relation to standard languages and the notion of correct or proper language use. These attitudes are related to explicitly expressed ideas about language, and are highly prominent in society.

However, attitudes towards language use in relation to prescriptivism have rarely been studied empirically, even though the research area of language attitudes is immensely varied, both theoretically and methodologically (cf. Ebner 2017). The term 'language attitudes' is in itself fairly general (see Chapter 2 for a definition), which means that language attitude studies can include anything from stereotypes associated with accents or dialects to attitudes towards second languages and their effects on second-language acquisition. Attitudes to language have been studied extensively from numerous perspectives, most notably in the social psychological tradition (e.g. McKenzie 2010; Giles and Rakic 2014), as well as in the tradition of perceptual dialectology (e.g. Preston 1999a). One reason for the relative absence of prescriptive attitudes and attitudes to usage in studies of language attitudes may be that such studies have traditionally been concerned with unconscious language attitudes, or with language attitudes in multilingual societies. Prescriptive attitudes are considered to operate above the level of consciousness, and as such are seen as attitudes imposed on speakers from outside. Perhaps the prevalence of such prescriptive attitudes makes them a rather predictable subject for research. However, this paradoxically points to two contradictory interpretations of prescriptive attitudes.

The first interpretation is that prescriptive attitudes held by speakers are a reality, but that they are not interesting from a research point of view precisely because they *are* predictable. This implies that prescriptivism influences speakers and their attitudes, but that this influence may not be particularly relevant to research. The second interpretation is that prescriptive attitudes are not as strong or consequential as subconscious attitudes, and as such are not capable of affecting language practice. This implies that prescriptive attitudes have no influence on language users and their language use. In any case, the influence of prescriptivism on speakers has also rarely been looked into. Aside from historical sociolinguistic studies relying on social network analysis in the study of the influence of the emerging standard language

ideology on individuals (e.g. Austin 1994), evidence of the extent to which speakers maintain prescriptive attitudes in present-day English is still rather limited. The inclusion of ordinary speakers in studies of the spread and maintenance of prescriptive attitudes to usage has similarly been neglected, with the exception of recent work done in the context of the Bridging the Unbridgeable project at Leiden University, whose aim was to fill this gap. Surveys of attitudes to usage in the tradition of Leonard (1932) and Mittins et al. (1970) did not engage with the attitudes of ordinary language users, but limited themselves to language professionals (see also Ebner 2017).

This study is a step in the direction of providing insights into how prescriptive attitudes operate among language users. Regardless of what is usually seen by descriptive linguists as the inadequate conception of language in prescriptive ideology, the notions of correct and standard language usage are entrenched in speakers' linguistic lives. "[T]he ongoing prescription that is part of standardization", Curzan (2014: 52) notes, "is part of many speakers' daily experience with the language, both written and spoken". This process of standardisation "has left a strong mark on modern-day attitudes, amongst some at least" (Garrett 2010: 8–9). Looking at the influence of prescriptivism on speakers' attitudes will thus allow for a much more nuanced and grounded investigation of the manifestations of prescriptivism in practice. Prescriptive language attitudes are also important in the discussion of prescriptive ideology and its influence on speakers, because they are potential factors in deliberate language change. Speakers have been shown to have agency in deliberate language change, i.e. language change above the level of consciousness (Thomason 2007). It is important to note that whether such agency will have a significant effect on the population as a whole, and consequently on the language as a whole, is dependent on many factors. In the context of prescriptive language attitudes or language attitudes which are instrumental in keeping the standard vs. non-standard functional distinction in language varieties, these attitudes can be expected to play a significant role.

Finally, understanding speakers' attitudes to usage is a crucial component in evaluating the influence of prescriptivism, not only on speakers, but also on language variation and change. Often, the relationship between prescriptive ideologies on the one hand and patterns of language variation on the other may differ depending on the language features investigated. For some features, for instance the passive in American English (Leech and Smith 2009; Anderwald 2014), prescriptivism may have been a stronger influence than for other, such as the split infinitive (see Chapter 6). Understanding speakers' attitudes to those variants may throw light on these kinds of differences. In relation to eighteenth-century normative grammars, for instance,

Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2006: 553) argues that by studying normative grammars in detail, “we will end up with [...] a clearer picture of how and why actual usage continued to differ from the norm which was imposed upon the language by the prescriptive grammarians of the eighteenth century and beyond”. The same applies to present-day usage guides, and this thesis is an attempt to improve our understanding of the relationship between the usage guide tradition and speakers’ attitudes. The question I will be concerned with here is what other sociolinguistic mechanisms are at play in the maintenance of prescriptively targeted forms, such as the non-literal use of *literally* (see Chapter 7).

## 1.6 Research questions

On the basis of the motivations, problems, and assumptions discussed above, this study offers an empirical investigation of the phenomenon of twentieth-century prescriptivism in American English. I focus on a set of six linguistic features, and will study these from the point of view of the three perspectives elaborated above: the American usage guide tradition, the patterns of language variation of these features, and speakers’ attitudes towards these features. The concrete research questions, based on the empirical investigation of six linguistic features, which will be introduced in Chapter 3, are given below. The first one is the general research question, while the other three are the subquestions addressed separately in Chapters 5 through 7.

- (1) What is the influence of prescriptivism on language use and on speakers’ attitudes to language use?
- (2) What is the treatment of the six linguistic features in American usage guides across time?
- (3) What are the patterns of actual use/usage of these linguistic features?
- (4) What are American native speakers’ attitudes towards language use?

By exploring these questions empirically, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of prescriptivism as a factor in language variation and change. These findings will hopefully provide new insights for both historical and variationist sociolinguistics alike.

## **1.7 Outline**

In Chapter 2, I will review the literature relevant to the study of prescriptivism and its relationship to language variation and change, as well as to speakers' attitudes. Drawing on previous studies, I will also establish the relevant theoretical background for the interpretation and discussion of the results of my various analyses in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Chapter 3 discusses six selected language features, or usage problems, which I will focus on throughout the study, while Chapter 4 presents the methodology used, including the various types of data analysed. Chapter 5 presents the results from the analysis of usage guides, Chapter 6 covers the actual use perspective on the basis of a corpus-based analysis of the selected language features, and Chapter 7 discusses the results and findings from the language attitudes study. The study ends with a conclusion.