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

Kostadinova, V.

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**Author:** Kostadinova, V.

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## CHAPTER 2

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### Studying prescriptivism

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#### 2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I pointed out that prescriptivism is understood as an ideology of correctness about language use. More generally, it can be understood as a type of language ideology which is manifested through speakers' beliefs, ideas, or rationalisations about language use (see Section 2.7). As such, prescriptive ideology is above the level of awareness of speakers, and it is perhaps the most widely discussed ideology in a standard English context such as the United States. This is also clear from the long tradition of usage guide publications in the United States, which started in the middle of the nineteenth century, and seems to be on the increase today. While linguists have generally been sceptical about the effects of prescriptivism on language structure, language change, and language users, a considerable number of studies have looked at prescriptivism and related phenomena in more detail. In this chapter, I outline the major research strands which provide the theoretical background for the present study.

In Section 1.2 above, I made a distinction between prescriptivism and prescription, drawing on Tieken-Boon van Ostade's work. It is important to keep this distinction in mind in the context of the theoretical background which follows, in that prescriptivism

can be studied in the context of both the codification stage and the prescription stage. In other words, I refer to “prescriptivism” as an ideology and an approach to language which is characteristic of the “prescription” stage in the model for language standardisation proposed by Milroy and Milroy (1985), but is not restricted to this particular stage. The prescriptive approach to language has been found to be characteristic of some eighteenth-century normative grammars as well. In this context, previous studies which have evaluated the influence of eighteenth-century prescriptivism on language use (e.g. Auer and González-Díaz 2005) have also provided useful points of departure for the present study.

The chapter is organised around these major research strands. Section 2.2 gives an overview of usage guide studies and their findings. Apart from studies focusing on usage guides, prescriptivism has also been studied in the context of normative grammars; this research is discussed in Section 2.3. Sections 2.4 and 2.5 review literature on the effects of prescriptivism, and on how such effects are reflected in language variation and change. In relation to the influence of prescriptivism on language variation and change, the notions of linguistic variants and usage problems are of particular relevance; these are discussed in Section 2.6. Finally, Section 2.7 outlines the relevant research on language ideology and language attitudes with reference to American English.

## 2.2 Studies of usage guides

English usage guides are books of language advice, generally intended for native speakers of the language. Busse and Schröder (2009: 72) define the usage guide as “an integrative all-in-one reference work written for educated lay people that bridges the traditional divide between a grammar and a dictionary”. A usage guide is “an integrative all-in-one” work in that it often covers advice on multiple and various aspects of the language, such as grammatical and lexical points, punctuation and spelling conventions, and often pronunciation as well. The extent to which any of these language dimensions is included in a particular guide probably depends on decisions made by its author. A usage guide is a “reference work” insofar as it is intended to be consulted by users who are unsure about a certain linguistic choice. In other words, a distinguishing feature of usage guides is their “external function”, which is “to enable the user to make choices between linguistic variants that can be functionally equivalent in a given context” (Weiner 1988: 173). Such users, as noted above, tend

to be “educated lay people” (Busse and Schröder 2009: 72), who are less interested in how language works than they are in obtaining practical usage advice when confronted with a usage choice they are uncertain about. In that respect, usage guides bridge “the traditional divide between a grammar and a dictionary” (Busse and Schröder 2009: 72, 84). The British and the American usage guide traditions have been the subject of a number of studies, focusing on various aspects of the genre, from its origins and social functions to its form and content. The following section outlines these studies.

However, usage guides are also methodologically and qualitatively different from both grammars and dictionaries. The methodological difference consists in the selection of language features that are covered in usage guides. Unlike grammars, which treat the grammar of a language, and unlike dictionaries, whose aim is to describe the entirety of a language’s lexicon, usage guides treat usage problems (Weiner 1988: 173–174). Usage problems are items of common usage which are considered problematic for a variety of reasons, ranging from supposed grammatical incorrectness, as in the case of *between you and I*, to social controversy, as, for instance, the use of *ain’t* (Ilson 1985; Weiner 1988; Algeo 1991b; Albakry 2007; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2015). Often, these usage problems are so-called old chestnuts, or shibboleths, whose correctness or incorrectness is based on prescriptive notions about language use.

This dimension of usage guides has been decisive in establishing the genre as separate from grammars and dictionaries, as evidenced by the identification of the first usage guide (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2010: 16), *Reflections on the English Language*, written by Robert Baker (1770). Leonard (1929: 35) notes that Baker was “[t]he first writer to codify his preferences into a book, the ancestor of those handbooks of abuses and corrections which were so freely produced in the nineteenth century”. This in turn relates to the qualitative difference between usage guides on the one hand and grammars and dictionaries on the other. While present-day grammars and dictionaries strive to objectively describe and record the entirety of the language as it is used, usage guides are characterised by “their discursive and sometimes very personal treatment of subject matter” (Peters 2012: 248; see also Peters 2006). Thus, the consensus is that by their very nature usage guides are predominantly “a specific form of prescriptivist discourse” (Straaijer 2018: 12). While this may be the case with the majority of the usage guides, it is important to note that not all of these books are prescriptive. Usage guides such as Gilman’s *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (1989) are recognised as offering a balanced perspective of usage based on evidence of language use (cf. Algeo 1991a). Usage guides thus represent a specific form of metalinguistic discourse,

which is usually marked by a high degree of language prescriptivism.

The first American usage guides were published in the middle of the nineteenth century; some of the first such publications were Seth Hurd's *Grammatical Corrector* (1847), Andrew Peabody's *Handbook of Conversation: Its Faults and Graces* (1855) and the anonymous *500 Mistakes Corrected* (1856) (cf. Connors 1983; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2015). Since then, usage guides, handbooks of usage, or usage manuals, as they are variously called, have appeared regularly (on variations within the genre, and related genres, see Straaijer 2018). The variation within the genre makes it difficult to know how many usage guides have been published, but a realistic estimate would be that at least 200 have appeared in America since the middle of the nineteenth century (see Section 4.3 for more details on the basis for this estimate). Not all of these usage guides have proved to be equally successful or popular among the general public. Those that are, however, tend to have a secured status as classics, are usually well known, and can be assumed to be fairly influential. This means that the American usage guide tradition has been characterised by a small number of individuals whose influence has been significant, and whose names tend to be associated with prescriptivism. For instance, Richard Grant White is probably the most famous nineteenth-century usage guide writer and 'chief prescriptivist' (Drake 1977b; Finegan 1980; see also Busse 2015). The twentieth century saw the publication of a number of popular usage guides, perhaps the most famous being Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* (1959). More recently, Garner's *Modern American Usage* (1998) seems to have gained a special place in the American usage guide tradition. In the course of its development, the genre has undergone some changes in terms of approach, methodology, and the manner in which language advice is offered. A noteworthy innovation in this respect is the use of panels of experts as the basis for usage pronouncements (Allen 2009: 357–358; Peters 2006) in some usage guides, as an attempt to achieve a more objective representation of usage norms and standards.

Apart from their pragmatic function of offering usage advice, these books have at various times been linked to broader social functions in American society. Connors (1983: 87), for instance, argues that "such small manuals [...] were the fruits of self-improvement fads and a burgeoning system of class distinctions, partially linguistically based, in America". The connection between books of language advice and self-help literature has also been made (cf. Landau 2001; Beal 2009; Yáñez-Bouza 2015: 25). According to Drake (1977b: 18), nineteenth-century America saw a revival of prescriptive impulses in language after 1850, when the rise of the so-called genteel culture produced greater emphasis on and concern with issues of language correctness.

This genteel culture was characterised by “an increased interest in language, especially in ‘linguistic etiquette’ in genteel publications; in the reaction against innovation; in the application of intellect and logic to language; in the high premium placed by the genteel on books and authority; in the anglophile tendency of the genteel; and in the desire for a responsible, stable community” (Drake 1977b: 18). Later in the nineteenth century, and at the beginning of the twentieth, industrialisation, the emergence and growth of new types of businesses, and migration allowed for unprecedented social mobility; in this context, knowledge and mastery of the standard was considered crucial for the social and professional advancement of the rising middle class (Drake 1977b: 24). This was attested by the popularity of language advice books. According to Drake (1977b: 19), for instance, “[t]he dictionary by the [18]60’s had become a big business, due largely to the great waves of immigrants seeking linguistic passport to the society [...] and due to many native born Americans using linguistic conformity as a means to mobility”.

Further insights into the social circumstances which stimulated the need for language advice, and consequently opened up the market for language advice publications, can be gained from a consideration of the increasing availability of education, and the emergence of new professions. Thus, in a study of the role of high schools in nineteenth-century America, Ueda (1987: 34) notes that “[a] standard written language was needed to foster the nexus of communication that underlay orderly social and economic relations in an impersonal, urbanizing society”. The new businesses that arose around the end of the nineteenth century required a particular set of communication skills, including the use of language. These skills, Ueda (1987: 76) argues, were associated with “standard of living and status in the community”; consequently, parents wanted to make sure their children acquired those skills in high school. This broader social relevance of education, as well as the value assigned to the development of linguistic skills, meant that the prescriptive approach to language advocated in schools and colleges would have had a substantial influence on speakers. The topic of the importance of the standard in the teaching of English in America is also addressed by Marckwardt (1968), who sheds light on the historical process by which prescriptive attitudes to language use became influential in the teaching of English and composition in schools and colleges at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lindley Murray’s grammar, first published in 1795, was the model on which grammar instruction was based in those days (see also Schweiger 2010), and his and other similar books “reflected the authoritarian tradition characteristic of the eighteenth-century grammarians” (Marckwardt 1968: 3). Language-related

publications for the general readership “were even more rigid and unyielding in their attitudes than the elementary school grammars” (Marckwardt 1968: 3; cf. also Bailey 1992: 14–15).

At the same time as these books were becoming popular, the student body in educational institutions across the United States was growing significantly, and high schools and colleges were becoming accessible to people from various walks of life. After World War I, the student body included children of native-born parents without any formal education, as well as children of non-native immigrant parents (Creswell 1975: 90). In such a social climate, in which the relevance of linguistic skills was highly valued, and correct and good English were seen as the prerequisites of social advancement, usage guides and other related genres sold ‘correct English’ as a commodity. A good example of an author and a businesswoman who seems to have been fairly successful at selling ‘correct English’ was Josephine Turck Baker (1873–1942) (Kostadinova 2018a). This perhaps sheds some light on the historical process through which prescriptive ideas about language became popular and widespread in twentieth-century America. A parallel can thus be made with eighteenth-century England, when language correctness was especially important for the rising middle classes, “as the correct use of language would be not only a key to upward social mobility but also a means of distancing themselves from their social inferiors” (Yáñez-Bouza 2015: 25; see also McArthur 1986: 8). This is a think what Landau (2001: 261) means when he describes usage guides as the “twentieth-century descendants of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century grammars” and as “an American phenomenon”, even though the tradition was first attested in the United Kingdom. He also argues that the popularity of usage guides in American English is a reflection of the linguistic insecurity of Americans, as well as the fluidity of American society. Because this fluidity allows social mobility, “Americans are naturally more highly motivated to acquire the skills that will help satisfy their ambitions” (Landau 2001: 262).

The usage guide tradition, as well as its significant social functions over the last 150 years, has very often been criticised in linguistic scholarship. “Throughout its history”, Albakry (2007: 29) argues, “the entrepreneurial academy of usage commentary has been mainly prescriptive, with its judgements based solely on intuitions [... or] the opinions and personal preferences of handbook writers themselves”. The fact that usage guides tend to prescribe, rather than describe, language use has defined the genre for a long time; one implication of this attitude of linguists towards books of this sort has been the relative absence of critical studies



of the genre by linguists – with some notable exceptions, which I address below. For instance, a few short studies of college textbooks or handbooks of composition were inspired by the concern with what standard should be taught in English in the course of the twentieth century (Allen 1935; Dobbins 1956; Malmstrom 1964[1958]; Tibbetts 1966; McDavid 1973; Connors 1983). Some of these were concerned specifically with the consensus on points of usage in these books, and found that handbooks were in considerable disagreement about issues of usage (Dobbins 1956: 46), which indicates a lack of consensus on what constitutes correct and good English.

Tibbetts (1966: 310) is probably one of the first “survey[s] of books on composition, rhetoric, and grammar” to include in the analysis a large number of such books, and to discuss the descriptive dimension of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century textbooks, focusing specifically on the period between 1850 and 1925. While the exact number of textbooks surveyed is not explicitly given, mention is made of some eighteen books from which the author draws evidence in support of the argument that “older textbooks were far less prescriptive than we have been led to believe” (Tibbetts 1966: 310). Creswell (1975) compares the treatment of more than 200 usage items on which a usage note is included in the *American Heritage Dictionary* (1971) to the treatment of those items in a selection of dictionaries and usage guides. His selection of the ten books he analyses in the category of usage guides is an example of the difficulty in describing and delimiting the genre of usage guides. While some of these ten books, such as Krapp (1927) and Nicholson (1957), are usage guides, others – e.g. Leonard (1932) and Crisp (1971) – are usage *studies*. The latter two are in fact significantly different from usage guides, and resemble sociolinguistic studies of attitudes to usage rather than usage guides; I address this point in detail in Section 2.7 below. Beyond such limitations, however, Creswell (1975) is one of the few meticulous and quantitatively precise studies of the consensus in the treatment of various types of twentieth-century publications on usage, both dictionaries and usage guides, with the usage notes in *American Heritage Dictionary* serving as a starting point.

Genre distinctions in the context of metalinguistic works such as usage guides, however, remain problematic (Straaijer 2018), and this is certainly evident in many of these previous studies. The majority of these studies do not consider the issue of genre in much detail. One exception can be found in Connors (1983), who distinguishes between handbooks of composition and rhetoric and other types of manuals of usage. The question of defining the usage guide genre is later approached by Weiner (1988) as well, but not in the context of a study of usage guides in the vein of Connors

(1983). Weiner's discussion is important and informative, but it approaches the topic from the point of view of "the practice of usage guide writing: the scope of the genre, the selection of subject-matter, the use of evidence, the principles of guidance, and the organisation of material", i.e. from the perspective of "one who has attempted the genre" (Weiner 1988: 172). Finally, Algeo (1991b) can also be seen as addressing the question of the nature of the genre, albeit indirectly, through his typology of usage guides. He identifies seven types of guides, grouped into two broader categories. The first of these – and the largest one – comprises guides that are subjective and moralising in nature, while the second contains "works that aim at objectivity and reportage" (Algeo 1991b: 6). The prototypical usage guide belonging to the first category is Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (1926), while for the second Algeo provides the example of Leonard's *Current English Usage* (1932) as a case in point. I already mentioned above that Leonard's survey is very different in kind from usage guides, so Algeo's inclusion of this study in the same general group of usage guides is an example of the lack of and difficulty with a clear delineation of genre boundaries.

Irrespective of these issues with respect to genre delineation, a number of previous studies have addressed the question of the nature of usage pronouncements in usage guides and related genres. Berk (1994: 110) investigates language pronouncements in 26 reference books on language and found that while "[t]he reference books surveyed here reflect the entire spectrum, [...] prescriptivism is the dominant theme". She also found that the majority of the books are prescriptive and that "[a] common pattern among them is to acknowledge that language does change but to justify prescriptivism in the service of a distinction between formal and casual use" (Berk 1994: 112). Algeo (1994) compared two British and two American usage guides, in order to investigate their pronouncements on differences between the two varieties. He found that the four usage books do not agree on British vs. American usage, but modified his conclusion with a call for a more comprehensive empirical study (Algeo 1994: 107).

Two important larger-scale studies were done by Meyers, one in 1991 and another in 1995. Meyers (1991) studied the usage glossaries found in fifty college handbooks of composition, and compared them to the pronouncements in twelve handbooks of usage from the nineteenth century. In this study, Meyers found that there was significant variation and lack of consensus in the pronouncements in these works. Building on previous work done by Allen (1935), Meyers (1995) looked at the extent to which textbooks or handbooks (he uses the two terms interchangeably) are in keeping with the developments in usage and descriptive accounts of such usage. He concluded that there is a discrepancy between the textbooks' pronouncements

and actual usage, and that consequently these textbooks propagate the notion that such pronouncements are absolute standards and it is thus impossible for them to be changed or influenced by usage. Finally, Meyers concluded that no change or increase in linguistic awareness whatsoever had taken place between the 1930s and the 1990s. What he means here is that the textbooks he studied did not show any signs of revising their pronouncements to reflect actual use or descriptive linguistic knowledge. In a similar study, Peters and Young (1997) survey “a set of forty books from Britain, America and Australia and [examine] their treatment of eleven points of grammar to see how far prescription rather than description prevails” (Peters and Young 1997: 315). They further examined referencing practices of authors as an indicator of *ipse dixit* pronouncements and, consequently, of a prescriptive approach to language. What Peters and Young (1997: 321–322) found was that American usage books tend to use more references and to support their pronouncements with secondary sources.

In a more recent study of usage guides, Busse and Schröder (2009: 82) show that usage guides as metalinguistic reference works are characterised by the highest level of personal opinions expressed by authors compared to grammars and dictionaries. This is in line with the observation that usage guides are typically characterised by the discursive treatment of their subject matter (cf. Peters 2012: 248), referred to above. Busse and Schröder (2009) only deal with three editions of Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*, so it may be difficult to generalise their conclusions with respect to the entire body of usage guides. Busse and Schröder (2010) look at the relationship between reference works, such as usage guides and dictionaries, and patterns of actual language use, in order to explore the extent to which the observations on language found in these reference works reflect patterns of actual use. They find that usage guides tend to reflect patterns of actual use to a great extent, and that over time it seems that usage guides have become more descriptive in their treatment of usage, although the extent to which this is true varies for different language features. Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2015) is a study of one particular usage guide, *Five Hundred Mistakes Corrected* (1856), and how it reflects the context in which it was written. An important conclusion drawn by the study is that the usage guide in question contains “a wealth of linguistic data” from the period in question, which can be particularly valuable for historical sociolinguistic research (2015).

What this last study has shown is that usage guides can sometimes provide interesting clues to sociolinguistic aspects of language variation and use. In addition to usage guides, other types of metalinguistic texts, such as normative grammars, have proved to be valuable sources of information for historical sociolinguists on

sociolinguistic variation in the past. An interesting example is provided by Arnovick (1997) in her discussion of the influence of normative grammars on the use of *shall* and *will*, where she notes that the rules about these forms appeared when the forms were undergoing a process of levelling, thus making the rules additionally significant. In other words, the rules were in a sense related to actual processes of change in the language, as “eighteenth-century grammarians maintain that basic illocutionary and semantic distinctions are worth making” (Arnovick 1997: 146–147). This dimension of metalinguistic texts has sometimes found its place in historical sociolinguistic studies. Nevalainen (1997: 158), for instance, refers to historical or early grammars for evidence of treatment of variation in *-ly* vs. zero adverbs. Another good example of the inclusion of evidence from grammars and usage manuals in the study of historical sociolinguistic variation can be found in Poplack (2006: 457), where Poplack describes how, alongside the study of historical language data, she and her colleagues used the descriptions, prescriptions, pronouncements, or value judgements found “throughout the prescriptive history of English”, or, more specifically, in a “collection of nearly 100 English grammars and usage manuals” published between 1577 and 1898, to supplement the analysis with respect to any potential social values that could be discovered in these types of books.

## 2.3 Studies of prescriptivism

With some notable exceptions, the majority of the work dealing with the study of prescriptivism has been carried out in the last four decades. Despite the considerable variation that can be observed in this work, a number of different strands of research can be identified. This classification into groups of studies of prescriptivism is done merely for practical reasons, and reflects the kinds of background information each group of studies contributed.

The first type of studies are (usually book-length) discussions of the phenomenon of prescriptivism and its various facets, ranging from its nature and historical origins to its relationship with linguistics and its manifestations in everyday life. These works were crucial in formulating many of the theoretical assumptions of the present study, and provided useful perspectives on prescriptivism as a sociolinguistic phenomenon. One of the foundational texts in the study of prescriptivism, James and Leslie Milroy’s *Authority in Language: Investigating Language Prescription and Standardisation*, was published in 1985, setting the stage for subsequent investigations of prescriptivism.

Two other important books in this category are Cameron (1995) and Curzan (2014). An important aspect of these studies is that they argue convincingly that linguists need to take prescriptivism seriously in sociolinguistic studies of language variation and change, as well as in studies of language attitudes. Milroy and Milroy (1985) and Cameron (1995) unearth various ideological aspects of prescriptivism, and foreground the importance of a critical investigation of prescriptive phenomena and the ways in which they bear on language use. Curzan (2014: 24) redefines prescriptivism by distinguishing four different strands of prescriptivism: standardising, stylistic, restorative, and politically responsive prescriptivism. In the context of this redefinition of prescriptivism, Curzan (2014) elaborates on how these different strands affect actual language use, and points out the need to take prescriptivism into account in telling language history. Beal (2009) discusses the value of good English in its historical context, and focuses on its present-day manifestations, thus addressing the important issue of what she calls “new prescriptivism”, especially with reference to accent.

Another aspect which characterises these studies is that they predominantly deal with prescriptivism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For example, Milroy and Milroy (1985) bring contemporary sociolinguistic research to bear on deconstructing prescriptive attitudes, and they discuss how these kinds of attitudes can have a negative influence in education, and specifically in language assessment. Cameron (1995) offers in-depth analyses of prescriptivism and verbal hygiene in various contexts such as the role of publishing, and copy-editing in the perpetuation of particular (prescriptivist) language ideologies, or the issue of prescriptivism in the context of changes in the curriculum in the United Kingdom. In the most recent of these studies, Curzan (2014) presents an informed discussion of the potentially far-reaching effects of prescriptivism mediated by grammar checkers in text-processing software.

Another strand comprises historical studies of the development of attitudes to usage and prescriptive ideas over time, exemplified by works such as Leonard (1929), Drake (1977b), Finegan (1980), Baron (1982), and Bailey (1992). While these studies address the topic of the historical development of attitudes to language, and in particular prescriptive or popular attitudes associated with notions of correctness, they all differ somewhat in their approach, and in the historical and cultural contexts they deal with. Leonard (1929) analyses the attitudes to language usage in eighteenth-century normative grammars, without focusing specifically on British or American English. While the study of Leonard (1929) may not be directly relevant for the analysis of usage guides, as most of the publications discussed are grammars,

with the exception of Baker's *Reflections* (1770), it is a classic study which provides a useful historical background for the origin and rise of prescriptive attitudes. Drake (1977b) charts the historical processes which shaped the public understanding of correct language usage in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see also Drake 1977a). Finegan (1980) explores the historical development of attitudes to language usage, with a particular focus on the American context. He specifically addresses the juxtaposition between the "doctrine of correctness" and the "doctrine of usage", in order to show the legitimacy of both positions in the so-called war on authority in language matters. Baron (1982) documents the development of language reforms mainly in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, by focusing on the work of the most prominent language reformers. The work contains a great deal of historical detail about concerted efforts to plan and reform the English language at different times in history. What is also important about this group of studies is that they look at language attitudes to usage, not, strictly speaking, speakers' attitudes. I referred to the importance of keeping these two separate in the context of this study in Section 1.5, and I discuss the terminological decision to employ this word in Section 4.3.

The third group of studies of prescriptivism are historical sociolinguistic studies dealing with the Late Modern English period, and are concerned more specifically with the origin of prescriptive ideology in the processes of standardisation and codification. Prominent studies in this strand are those describing the rise of prescriptivism, the social conditions that contributed to the emergence of prescriptive grammar and usage guides, and the origin and establishment of eighteenth-century prescriptive rules. Quite possibly the earliest study on the relationship between prescriptivism in normative grammars and patterns of actual language use is Fries (1925); see also Fries (1940). In this early corpus linguistic study, Fries examines the attitudes to the use of *shall* and *will* in about 60 normative grammars from the sixteenth century onward, and traces the changes in attitudes to *shall* and *will*, as well as grammarians' rules about the temporal reference uses of these two forms. He found that the general rules dictated that *shall* is used with future temporal reference in the first person but with the meaning of obligation in the second and third persons, while *will* follows the opposite pattern. Fries (1925: 1016) then tested these rules against the frequency of occurrence of *shall* and *will* in self-compiled corpora of British and American English plays. The results showed conclusively that normative rules with respect to the uses of *shall* and *will* were not supported by the observed patterns of use in the corpus data: *will* was found to be more frequent with first person in declarative

clauses, while *shall* was more common with first person in questions. With second person subjects, *will* was found to be more common in questions and in declarative clauses. In addition to these findings, a clearly decreasing pattern was identified in the use of *shall* in second and third persons, while in terms of regional differences, American usage data yielded lower frequencies of *shall* in almost all contexts of use.

Further studies dealing with various aspects of eighteenth-century prescriptivism, in terms of either individual grammarians or specific features, can be found in Tieken-Boon van Ostade's work. Tieken-Boon van Ostade (1994) looks at the relationship between normative grammar rules on pronoun usage and actual use in the course of the eighteenth century, and concludes that there is a continuum of variation from actual use to the standard norm imposed in the grammars. Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2006) shows how Lowth's social network may have affected the language norm he prescribed in his grammar, while Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2008a: 205) revisits the issue of multiple negation in eighteenth-century normative grammars, and concludes that even though multiple negation seems to have been ousted from the standard variety before the eighteenth century, it persisted as a vernacular language feature, used by the lower social classes (see also Nevalainen 2000). This, according to Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2008a), might explain the inclusion of this feature in the grammars. Other studies on the rise of prescriptivism are Percy (2009), who traces the origin of prescriptivism back to periodical reviews in the eighteenth century, and Straaijer (2009), who analyses the level of prescriptivism in normative grammars on the basis of a quantitative analysis of the types of modals used by different grammarians when making language judgements.

These studies are related to the origin and source of prescriptive rules, or investigate the rise of prescriptivism and the nature of eighteenth-century prescriptivist attitudes and discourse. The second type of historical sociolinguistic studies, as I mentioned above, are concerned with what comes after the stage of codification, i.e. the stage of prescription (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2012a,b). The effects of prescriptivism are thus a crucial object of research in these studies, and as such they are of particular interest to the present study; these will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

## 2.4 The effects of prescriptivism

In this section I turn my attention to an examination of studies of the effects of prescriptivism on variation and change. These are larger-scale studies which analyse patterns of precept in normative literature (i.e. prescriptive rules) and compare them to patterns of language variation and change established on the basis of corpus data. In the context of the distinction between codification and prescription, as well as the difference between normative grammars and usage guides, it is important to make a clear distinction between studies which investigate the influence of prescriptive pronouncements in normative grammars on language use, and studies which evaluate the influence of usage guides. While it is important to note that the second group of studies is more relevant for my own analysis, the work done on evaluating the potential effects of normative grammars on language use has also provided many useful perspectives, especially with respect to methodology. In what follows, I address these two bodies of work separately.

Auer and González-Díaz (2005: 318) make a useful distinction between studies of the influence of prescriptivism on a micro level and on a macro level. Micro-level studies, they observe, are “based on social network theory and the influence of prescriptivism on the idiolect of selected people” (cf. Auer and González-Díaz 2005 for further studies). Macro-level studies look at general patterns of change in prescriptive attitudes on the one hand, and frequency patterns in large-scale language use data on the other, through the application of an approach sometimes referred to as “precept vs. practice” (see Auer 2009: 4–11 on the origin of this approach). An early macro-level study whose goal was to investigate the success of nineteenth-century British normative grammarians’ attempts to regulate language use, specifically in the context of number and case relations, is Dekeyser (1975), a study already mentioned in Section 1.3 above. Number and case relations represent cases of government and concord, which were, according to Dekeyser (1975: 2), part of the focus of the syntax of normative grammars. His analysis of prescriptions is based on a self-compiled corpus of 60 grammars and error books, while his analysis of actual language use is based on a self-compiled three-million-word corpus of texts comprising novels, non-fiction, and letters or essays. The results of the analysis showed that while prescriptivism had no effect on diachronic developments in language use in the course of the nineteenth century (Dekeyser 1975: 276), some effect could be hypothesised with respect to genre differences, as more colloquial texts in Dekeyser’s corpus



displayed higher proportions of ‘incorrect’ constructions – which he calls “licentious forms” – than the more formal texts. Another relatively early study whose aim was “to find out how great an effect eighteenth-century grammarians had upon actual usage as far as the double negative is concerned” is Tieken-Boon van Ostade (1982), which found that the constructions of negative concord which normative grammarians used as examples of incorrect usage were actually not found in eighteenth-century texts, while the negative concord feature which did occur in the texts was not commented on by grammarians. Tieken-Boon van Ostade thus concluded that normative grammarians had no effect on the subsequent decrease in the use of negative concord, as this is likely to have happened before the eighteenth century, and, furthermore, that their prescriptive pronouncements were probably based on the usage of earlier periods.

Chafe (1984) addresses the issue of the role of prescriptivism in the development of differences between speech and writing. Through the examination of data on features such as *shall/will* and dangling participles, he proposes that prescriptivism has had an influence, but that this influence may be manifested in different ways in the language. These different manifestations are presented through three models for the potential influence of prescriptivism on similarities and differences between speech and writing. These models will be discussed further in the next section, as they are more relevant to the question of how prescriptive influence is conceptualised in relation to language variation. Chafe also notes that, when looking at prescriptive influence on multiple language features, “[t]here is a sense in which each feature affected by prescriptivism has had its own history” (1984: 102). Using newspaper language data from the nineteenth century to investigate the use of *shall* and *will*, Facchinetti (2000) finds that distinctions between these forms made by normative grammarians – i.e. *shall* expressing futurity with first person subjects, and obligation with second and third person subjects – are generally adhered to in the data analysed. On the other hand, she also finds that grammarians were mistaken in associating perceived misuses of *shall* with Irish speakers, as her data show that “at least in the first part of the nineteenth century, the Irish employed *shall* with first person subject more frequently than the English” (2000: 130).

In the area of the subjunctive, it has been shown that normative grammars may have exerted limited short-term influence on the decreasing trends in the use of the construction in the course of the eighteenth century (Auer and González-Díaz 2005; Auer 2006), while in the context of double comparatives, it has been argued that the role of prescriptivism was that of a reinforcing influence of an already strong decreasing trend (Auer and González-Díaz 2005), similar to that observed for

negative concord (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008a: 205). For the nineteenth century, Anderwald (2014) shows that American normative grammars reacted vehemently against the progressive passive, a construction which was a typical nineteenth-century development. Anderwald's data showed that, despite strong negative criticism, the construction rose in frequency. However, corpus data for the twentieth century indicated that the progressive passive construction declined sharply after its peak around the 1940s, especially in newspaper language. Anderwald (2014: 14) links this decrease to the publication and unparalleled popularity of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* (1959), and concludes:

Surprisingly, then, while for the purportedly over-prescriptivist nineteenth century a prescriptive influence on actual language change could not be convincingly demonstrated, the middle of the twentieth century, the descriptive century per se, showed the most convincing correlation of the publication of a notorious style guide (Strunk & White) and the actual striking reversal in the fortunes of the progressive passive in written American English.

This is an important finding in the context of the present study, because it shows that the effects of prescriptivism need to be investigated for the period of the twentieth century as well. In this context, as I established at the beginning of the previous chapter, usage guides are the central source of data on prescriptive ideology and prescriptive attitudes to usage. Consequently, studies examining the influence of usage guide prescriptions on actual language use also provide an important context for investigating prescriptivism and attitudes to usage in the twentieth century. Albakry (2007) presents a quantitative analysis of the effects of style and usage guide prescriptions on actual language practice in the context of written media registers, by looking at the extent to which style guides and their judgements have influenced newspaper language in American English. He does so by focusing on five language features: clause-initial coordinators, stranded prepositions, split infinitives, functional shift, and modified absolute adjectives. Albakry's analysis is particularly relevant, in that he establishes a difference between strongly and weakly dispreferred features, and hypothesises, on the basis of his results, that strongly dispreferred language features are less frequent in newspaper data than weakly dispreferred ones. However, one limitation of this study may be considered the lack of distinction between usage guides and style guides. This limitation relates to the general problem of clearly delineating different types of genres of metalinguistic works, which I discuss in Section 2.2. One way in which style guides and usage guides can be distinguished is that style guides

tend to be associated with a particular publication (i.e. a newspaper or a magazine), and as such contain language usage rules and guidelines relevant for that publication. Usage guides, on the other hand, are oriented towards the general public (for more on this distinction, cf. Ebner 2016; Straaijer 2018). Similar in some respects to Albakry (2007) is a more recent study evaluating the effects of usage pronouncements on the development of norms in British and Australian English (Peters 2014). Peters (2014: 596) shows, through the example of hyperstandardised language features such as *-iselize*, *alright*, and singular *data*, that in both British and Australian English “the standardization of language norms does not depend on a framework of continually reinforced prescription. Rather, the norms develop their own momentum in common usage”.

The studies discussed so far have shown that prescriptivism seems to have a temporary effect on language change. Evidence to the contrary comes from two diachronic studies: one on the development of perfect infinitives, and the other on the stigmatisation of *you was* forms. Exploring the development of perfect infinitives, Molencki (2003: 175) argues that with respect to counterfactual infinitival constructions, “certain natural language processes [in this development] were either retarded or prevented owing to the prescriptivists’ activities” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Specifically, he shows that before the explosion of normative grammars in the second half of the eighteenth century, perfect infinitives were used to express counterfactual meanings, i.e. expressing unreal, hypothetical situations, but this was stopped by grammarians who considered the expression of temporal anteriority to be the only possible function of the perfect infinitive. Laitinen (2009: 200) looks at the role of eighteenth-century normative grammars in stigmatising singular *you was*, as opposed to singular *you were*, and suggests that “the role of normative grammars in the diachronic development of this particular variable was substantial”. According to his analysis, *you was* started spreading as a typical change from below towards the end of the seventeenth century. Normative grammarians then picked up on the variable *you was/were* and started proscribing *you was*, which resulted in its effective stigmatisation by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Two studies addressing directly the question of the influence of prescriptivism on language change are Tottie (1997) and Hinrichs et al. (2015). Tottie (1997) examines the influence of literacy and prescriptivism on the variation between *that* and *which*, and between *that* and *who*, in both British and American English. With respect to American English specifically, she found that the patterns of use of *that* as opposed to *wh*-forms seem to be affected by the opposing influences of literacy

and prescriptivism. According to Tottie (1997), spoken and general written data from American English show that *that* is the more frequent option, and she associates this with the influence of prescriptivism. On the other hand, among highly educated American speakers, *wh*-forms are more frequent than in general or spoken usage. The author explains this as the result of literacy. In other words, Tottie concludes, literacy and prescriptivism are opposing forces in American English: the former affects the linguistic behaviour of speakers, especially in formal contexts, while the latter affects editorial practices, and consequently, written usage. Hinrichs et al. (2015) is a more recent empirical investigation of the effects of prescriptivism on twentieth-century American English, which has shown that prescriptivism may have had an influence on language change. However, this influence is mediated by other language change and social processes. Specifically, Hinrichs et al. (2015) have shown that certain language features are more sensitive to prescriptive influence than others, and that additional processes such as colloquialisation, or strong language authority, might play a crucial role in eventually determining which language features will be influenced by prescriptivism, and which will not. The research by Hinrichs et al. (2015) is methodologically ground-breaking, in that it applies a novel approach to the empirical testing and measuring of prescriptive influence, and has significantly influenced the present methodological approach. This aspect of the study will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

A final study I consider relevant to mention in the context of analysing the effects of prescriptive language ideology is Kroch and Small (1978). This is an early study of the effects of grammatical ideology on speech on the basis of data from a small group of speakers. Furthermore, the study is a multifactorial quantitative study, and it is a rare attempt to account for both internal and external factors in the study of the effects of, in their terms, “grammatical ideology” on speech. By comparing the use of standard and non-standard forms by radio hosts and call-in listeners, Kroch and Small (1978) found that radio hosts were more likely to use the standard forms. This led the authors to the conclusion that grammatical ideology does have a measurable effect on speech.

All of these studies have provided the point of departure for my conceptualisation of prescriptivism, as well as for the methodological approach, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. Drawing on these studies, in the remainder of this chapter I will address the important question of how prescriptive influence has been conceptualised, and how it can be operationalised and measured. These issues will be addressed with respect to language variation and change on the one hand, and speakers’ attitudes and ideologies

on the other.

## 2.5 Prescriptivism and language variation and change

An important issue related to the difficulty in ascertaining the influence of prescriptivism on language is how this influence is conceptualised. In other words, what do we in fact mean when we ask: does prescriptivism affect language variation and change? In this section, I review previous studies of the effects of prescriptivism on language variation and change by focusing specifically on the ways in which these studies explore those effects, and how they ascertain patterns of variation and change. Since I am concerned primarily with the period from the beginning of the twentieth century until the present day, I will also draw on a number of important studies of grammatical changes in twentieth-century English.

In discussing the nature of the potential influence of prescriptivism on language variation and change, it is crucial to distinguish the effects of prescriptivism on language change from those on language variation. The reason this distinction is crucial is that the majority of the large-scale studies of prescriptive influence have shown that prescriptivism rarely has a lasting influence on long-term processes of language change (e.g. Dekeyser 1975; Chafe 1984; Auer and González-Díaz 2005; Auer 2006; Anderwald 2012, 2014; Yáñez-Bouza 2015). If any effects were identified in these studies, they were temporary (Chafe 1984; Auer and González-Díaz 2005; but see Molencki 2003). On the other hand, on the basis of register variation patterns of these variants, written language can reasonably be hypothesised to be influenced by prescriptive pressures (Anderwald 2012: 267). For instance, Dekeyser, Chafe, Auer and González-Díaz, and Anderwald found that while over time proscribed features do not seem to be affected by prescriptivism, at particular points in time proscribed features are less frequent in edited or formal registers, and are most frequent in spoken data or in fiction.

Taking this register effect further, Chafe (1984) makes interesting and relevant points about the difference between speech and writing, and how the influence of prescriptivism can be conceptualised and explained. He identifies three possible scenarios in which prescriptivism can be considered to account for differences between writing and speech. In the first case, a feature that has been established in the spoken language is not adopted in writing, partly due to the inertia associated with written language norms, and partly due to prescriptive attitudes. Chafe (1984: 96–97)

cites the use of *this* to introduce new information, as in *Then this guy appeared*, as an example of such a case. The second situation Chafe (1984: 97) describes is “[a] development typically associated with prescriptivism”; it refers to a feature that starts out being used in both speech and writing. Once its frequency of use is noticed and commented upon by prescriptivists, the frequency of use of that feature in writing decreases, perhaps to the point of disappearing. However, spoken language still retains the feature. An example of this is the use of *I shall* as opposed to *I will* to express future temporal reference. Initially, both were used to express future, but under the influence of normative grammar prescriptions, Chafe argues, future *I will* became infrequent in writing, with the distinction between the two forms being observed in writing. However, after the initial influence of prescriptivism faded, *I will* increased in frequency, with *I shall* disappearing from written registers. The third pattern of influence is found in the case of features which are not part of the spoken language to begin with, but are rather more typical of written texts. In such cases, of which the split infinitive is given as an example, prescriptivists observe the pattern in written language and criticise it, and, under the influence of this criticism, the pattern disappears. This kind of development, Chafe (1984: 99) observes, “contradicts the notion that prescriptivism always increases the distance between writing and speaking”.

These findings, as well as the patterns observed, serve as important conceptual tools in the formulation of different types of prescriptive influence. One of these patterns, for instance, has been found in studies of the subjunctive, which show that the strong reactions of normative grammarians in favour of the subjunctive, which were triggered by the noticed decrease in use of the feature in the course of the eighteenth century, resulted in a slight temporary increase in the frequency of use of this feature (Auer and González-Díaz 2005). To sum up, the way in which the effects of prescriptivism on language variation and change have been tested is by looking at changing frequencies of proscribed or prescribed variants, and proposing prescriptive influence as an explanation for observed variation and change patterns, in cases where, as noted in one study, all other possible factors seem unlikely to be significant (Auer and González-Díaz 2005). With respect to the influence of prescriptivism on actual language use, then, we need to take into account various levels of language use. It would be one thing to speak of the influence of prescriptivism on the language system itself, and another to speak of the influence of prescriptivism on the frequency of usage in particular genres. As Anderwald (2014: 14) shows with respect to the development of the progressive passive in nineteenth-century British and American English data, “text-type sensitivity of the progressive passive was shown

to be extremely pronounced in both national varieties". This raises the question of identifying patterns of variation and change, as well as the constraints on language variation and change that have been established in previous studies. In what follows, then, I draw on studies of grammatical variation and change in twentieth-century English, inasmuch as this research bears on the present study.

In the context of recent grammatical change, Denison (1998) provides the most comprehensive overview of changes that have taken place in English since 1776, and this account serves as the point of departure for data on many of the features analysed for this study (for more on this, see Chapter 4). According to Denison (1998: 93):

Since relatively few categorical losses or innovations have occurred in the last two centuries, syntactic change has more often been statistical in nature, with a given construction occurring throughout the period and either becoming more or less common generally or in particular registers. The overall, rather elusive effect can seem more a matter of stylistic than of syntactic change, so it is useful to be able to track frequencies of occurrence from eModE through to the present day.

Mair and Leech (2006) also discuss a number of recent changes in English, as well as empirical data on the frequency patterns of particular variants identified as undergoing change. Mair (2006) identifies a number of important processes in twentieth-century English, such as colloquialisation, which add to our understanding of stylistic or extralinguistic factors in shifting frequencies of variants. In other words, processes such as colloquialisation may be seen as opposing tendencies to the influence of prescriptivism, and this may in turn have implications for the operationalisation of these constraints on language variation and change (a question I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4). Finally, Leech et al. (2009) also provide the background for the present study, as they cover a number of important contemporary changes, such as the use of the passive or of *that* and *which* in restrictive relative clauses with inanimate referents. In addition to the analysis of changes in specific linguistic variants, Leech et al. (2009) also identify a number of linguistic or other determinants of language change, which are important to consider in relation to prescriptivism, similar to the process of colloquialisation, identified by Mair (2006). One of the most important conclusions of this research, as mentioned above, is that the twentieth century is rarely marked by profound changes in grammatical structure; rather, observed changes are more visible as changes in statistical tendencies and variation.

This brings me to another point which is important in ascertaining potential

prescriptive influence, the difference between structural change and stylistic change. Szmrecsanyi (2016), for instance, distinguishes environmental change from grammatical change proper. He discusses the problem of relying solely on text frequencies when studying grammatical change and carefully teases out possible confounding variables in a corpus study of variation and change. Drawing on his distinction between environmental change and grammatical change proper, for the purposes of the present study I take prescriptivism to belong to the environment of what Szmrecsanyi calls “textual habitat”. He argues that disentangling environmental change from grammatical change proper is possible. This is an important distinction for the present study, because prescriptivism can more readily be considered as a factor in environmental change than as a factor in grammar change proper. This is also related to the fact that grammatical change takes longer to complete and is slower and more imperceptible than environmental change. Environmental change in frequency could depend on many things, including, I argue, prescriptive influence. For instance, in a hypothetical study of variation in the use of a particular linguistic feature, we might find that certain heavily edited texts contain no instances of that feature, which may in turn lead to the conclusion that the feature has disappeared from the language. However, this would be an instance of environmental change: the hypothetical feature would not be found in these texts simply because the editing process has influenced the use of the feature. The distinction between grammatical change and environmental change may also offer an explanation for the widespread assumption that prescriptivism has no influence on language because it rarely has an influence on grammatical change proper. However, if we take this distinction into account, then we can more meaningfully evaluate prescriptive influence in terms of influence on environmental change. In other words, if we are to understand how prescriptivism affects language, we need to be able to distinguish between its influence on structural diachronic changes, which has been shown to be minimal, and its influence on stylistic, or probabilistic synchronic variation patterns, which, as shown, is more likely to occur.

Alongside the effects of prescriptivism on language variation and change, a separate question is the extent to which prescriptivism has an effect on speakers, both in terms of attitudes and in terms of the language use of individual speakers. This is a question that has not been empirically investigated as often as the first one, in part due to the difficulty of obtaining reliable evidence for a satisfactory answer. One way of going about it is to analyse changes in language use of individuals over time, as in the study of Austin (1994), or to analyse spoken data on the basis of situations in



which speakers may be expected to be under pressure to produce what they consider to be grammatically correct speech; the comparison of language use of radio hosts as opposed to that of call-in listeners in Kroch and Small (1978) may be considered an example. A question relevant to the influence of prescriptivism on speakers is about whether specific kinds of speakers tend to be affected by prescriptivism, if such kinds could reasonably be identified. It may, for instance, be argued that socially mobile speakers are more likely to be influenced by prescriptivism. According to Fitzmaurice (1998), the purpose of eighteenth-century normative grammars was to provide language advice to the lower or middle classes, while Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2008a: 208) notes that these speakers were “the class of people which formed the target audience of grammars like the ones by Lowth and Murray”. In discussing the well-known rule on the use of *who* and *whom*, Aarts (1994: 74) notes that “...it is true that *whom* is now virtually dead in informal English, it is also true that most educated speakers of English are still aware of the rule which says *whom* is the correct form to be used when the relative pronoun is not the subject.” This is why speakers’ attitudes are crucial in ascertaining prescriptive influence.

As a final point with regard to the question of the effects of prescriptivism, it should be pointed out that it is also possible for prescriptivism to be influenced by language variation and change. In other words, over time, prescriptivism and its manifestations (i.e. rules and prescriptions in popular usage guides, or prescriptive speakers’ attitudes) may, and in many cases are bound to, align with patterns of language variation and change. In some of the cases I discussed above, normative literature was found to be influenced by actual language use. In the context of more recent manifestations of prescriptivism, Albakry (2007: 25–26) reasons:

If the practices of newspaper writers coincide with the usage practices allowed for by those preparing usage manuals, can we be so sure that newspaper writers are “heeding” the pronouncements of those handbooks? Not quite, since it is also possible that some of the authors of usage books have been observing what educated writers, including perhaps newspaper writers, are doing in the language. Furthermore, both groups themselves could be observing normative patterns among educated writers. In this scenario, newspaper writers may not necessarily be paying attention to what usage books say but are rather adhering to larger cultural and linguistic norms.

While I will not investigate such claims explicitly, I will consider them in the interpretation of the results of the analyses I present here. In certain cases, as will be argued in Chapter 7, speakers’ attitudes that differ from prescriptive attitudes may be

crucial in determining which proscribed language features will end up being accepted over time.

In conclusion, the distinction between language variation and language change is crucial in assessing the potential effects of prescriptivism in an accountable way. Furthermore, a failure to make this distinction is the reason that people who are sceptical of the influence of prescriptivism on language change usually also dismiss the influence of prescriptivism on language variation. Those people often cite cases of language change as evidence that prescriptivism has no influence. However, looking at synchronic variation and register variation, prescriptivism may prove more likely to be influential than is generally assumed.

Most of the studies of prescriptive influence have shown that normative or prescriptive texts alone are not always a reliable source of prescriptive influence in society, which is another crucial aspect of prescriptivism. In many cases in which prescriptivism has been found to have effects on language variation and change, it has also been shown that such influence was crucially supported or conditioned by broader social or cultural processes. For instance, in the context of the decrease of preposition stranding, Yáñez-Bouza (2015: 125) found that “late eighteenth-century prescriptivism cannot be held principally to account [for the decrease]; in other words, late eighteenth-century precepts did not trigger change, but rather reinforced an existing trend”. The same has been shown in the context of the disappearance of negative concord (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008a). Furthermore, Yáñez-Bouza (2015: 126) suggests that there must have been “latent awareness” of the stigmatised status of preposition stranding, because “something must have happened at this early stage, or even before it, to bring the steady rise in usage to a halt”. She then argues that what must have happened in the course of the seventeenth century was the development of a latent awareness of the incorrectness of preposition stranding, which accounted both for its decrease, and for the stigmatisation of the feature in eighteenth-century normative grammars. That this is also the case in twentieth-century English has been suggested by studies dealing with recent data. Hinrichs et al. (2015), for instance, show that the decline in restrictive relative *which*, in favour of *that*, has been crucially conditioned by processes such as institutionalisation and colloquialisation, while in the area of spelling, the influence of usage guides is sooner or later superseded by the influence of common usage (Peters 2014). In this respect, we could generalise that even though prescriptive literature may not have permanent long-term effects on language change, at certain points in time, prescriptivism – understood more broadly – may be an important factor in variation.

Furthermore, prescriptive and descriptive attitudes identified in metalinguistic works such as normative grammars and usage guides are not isolated from their social context, and may in time start to reflect the broader attitudes associated with language.

## 2.6 Usage problems and linguistic variables

As pointed out above, the main concern of prescriptivist literature on language is the establishment and maintenance of clear distinctions between right and wrong usage. The term ‘usage’ itself, as has been noted previously (e.g. Peters 2006; Albakry 2007; Allen 2009; Busse and Schröder 2009), can be used descriptively, to refer to patterns of usage in a language, or it can be used to refer to the ideological category ‘correct usage’ or ‘good usage’. In the latter meaning, the term ‘usage’ is used to “[refer] to a finite set of stigmatized linguistic features” (Albakry 2007: 29). This boils down to a set of “features of divided usage”, such as “perceived errors of grammar like *you was* or *less* for *fewer*” (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2015: 57), known as ‘usage problems’. Algeo (1991b: 2), similarly, observes that “[u]sage is a choice among alternatives to which users attribute social value”. It is thus useful to consider how the concept of the usage problem, as well as the study thereof, can be usefully connected to the concept of the linguistic variable. In what follows, I will argue that most of the grammatical usage problems are linguistic variables, which is important in approaching an investigation of how they are used. While this is applicable to many usage problems, there are those which cannot be conceptualised as linguistic variables; this is a point I will address in more detail below.

Linguistically, many of the grammatical usage problems can be seen as variants of language structures that are usually assumed to have the same denotational or referential meaning (for a discussion of the assumption of referential equality, see Lavandera 1978), but are considered by speakers to be ‘unequal’, based on a number of conventionally established norms of correctness. This means that *I have not seen anybody*, and *I have not seen nobody* are, from a linguistic point of view, formally different, but referentially the same, because they are realised differently while having the same propositional truth-value or referring to the same reality (cf. Milroy and Milroy 2012: 14–15). Sociolinguistically, however, these two sentences differ in the way they are perceived by speakers, due to the fact that their social and stylistic meanings differ. Milroy and Milroy (2012: 14–15), for instance, argue that the reason that one of these forms would be considered acceptable or correct “was probably

*socially* motivated, and the general compulsion to select one form out of a set of equivalents was a consequence of the trend towards standardisation”. The first item, *I have not seen anybody*, is the neutral standard form, while the second one, *I have not seen nobody*, is the marked form that is perceived as non-standard, and, consequently, as incorrect or faulty. As such, it is associated with dialectal or uneducated speech, and would be avoided by educated speakers.

A broader perspective on usage problems thus foregrounds the most essential aspect of this phenomenon: usage problems are linguistic variants which have come to be particularly salient for speakers in the way that they encode stylistic or social meaning, and subsequently, a set of other properties related to prescriptive ideology. As Lippi-Green (1997: 30) puts it, “[w]e exploit linguistic variation available to us in order to send a complex series of messages about ourselves and the way we position ourselves in the world we live in”. In this context, the study of attitudes towards usage problems among ordinary speakers of English acquires an additional and important dimension. Usage problems become ways in which people can perceive or express social identities. This realisation leads to another important distinction between usage problems that are more socially salient for ordinary speakers and those that are not socially salient. Thus, the working definition of the term ‘usage problem’ in the present study is that usage problems are two (or sometimes more) structural or lexical variants that are both used by at least some members of a speech community, but are seen as different in terms of correctness, acceptability, and style from the perspective of the standard language norm.

It is of course difficult to pinpoint what the standard language norm is, in the sense that the norm is always an ideal, or something that speakers strive towards. This is the reason that Milroy and Milroy (2012) argue that it makes more sense to speak of the standard as an ideology, and note that the ideal of the standard is almost impossible to achieve in practice, especially in spoken language. Accepting that the standard language norm is an ideal, or an abstraction, however, does not mean that such a norm does not exist or that it does not exert influence on speakers. In a particular language community at any one time, it is possible to come up with a set of rules about language use that demarcate standard from non-standard usage. The distinction between single and multiple negation is a case in point. The standard language norm dictates that single negation is the default unmarked variant, while multiple negation is the ‘deviant’ form which violates the standard norm. What I think Milroy and Milroy are referring to when they say that the standard is an ideal, or an abstraction, is that despite the existence of single negation as the standard

form, speakers may still use multiple negation depending on many different factors. In other words, if we look at standardisation as the removal of optional variability from the language, then standardisation, to some extent fails in reality, and it is in that respect indeed an ideology. However, there are undoubtedly contexts where optional variability is minimised and where standard language norms are maintained. Academic texts, journalistic prose, and educational and institutional settings, for instance, are all contexts where the standard language norm is used and manifests itself. What I mean by the standard language norm, therefore, is the generally received or accepted norm with respect to what is perceived to be standard language use in a community. This is also the norm that is prescribed in usage guides. It should be borne in mind, though, that these norms can change over time, and there may sometimes be a mismatch between what is found in standard language use and what is prescribed in some usage guides.

Ilson (1985) discusses several criteria for establishing what constitutes a usage problem. The first criterion for a feature to be a usage problem “is that it should be a *problem*; that is, something that people actually say, rather than something they’d never dream of saying” (Ilson 1985: 166). Interestingly, this criterion is already expressed by Gould (1867), a usage guide writer from the nineteenth century, who notes that “[p]ossible, or imaginary, errors do not seem to be worth the trouble of exposure or refutation” (1867: iv). The second criterion for a usage problem identified by Ilson is that usage problems are usually features that are not restricted to a particular regional dialect, but are used across wider geographical space. This may relate in an interesting way to the notion of “vernacular universals” (cf. Chambers 2004; Nevalainen 2006b; Trudgill 2009). The final criterion, according to Ilson, is that the discussion of a particular feature should not reflect a social taboo – the reason that most slang expressions, for instance, are not usage problems. As far as the reasons for the existence of usage problems are concerned, Ilson (1985: 167–168) refers to various phenomena which might be considered to be contributory factors in the rise of usage problems. The first reason he cites is the idea that considerations of logic, aesthetics, or style dictate that certain language features are better than others. The second reason is that certain linguistic features become associated with the language of the lower social classes, and consequently become stigmatised through the association with qualities such as education, social class, or social standing. The third reason is based on Nunberg’s unpublished work, and is related to the rise in the English speech community of a specific genre of language use, or discourse, which becomes central and especially valued; for the English speaking world this genre is the non-fictional

essay (Ilson 1985: 167). The final reason Ilson (1985: 167) cites relates to the concept of diglossia. He argues that “when English-language usage books recommend some items and condemn others, however arbitrarily, they may be responding to a need to maintain a distinction within Standard English corresponding to the High variety and the Low variety of some other languages”. Building on this definition, Ebner (2017: 7) defines usage problems as “social constructs” which have a “divisive function in society”, and whose use is conditioned by social, historical, and situational constraints. An important point mentioned by Ebner (2017) is that different usage features are associated with different levels of awareness; I return to this in the discussion of the results of the present study.

Another set of criteria for what makes a usage problem comes from Algeo (1991b: 2), who notes that “for something to be a question of usage, three factors must be present: there must exist alternatives of use; language users must be able to choose among them; and those same or other users must think that the choice means something”. These three factors, alternatives, choice, and value, are “implicationally related” (Algeo 1991b: 3). They also correspond to some extent to the first of Ilson’s criteria, which is that in order for something to be a usage problem it needs to be a problem, i.e. it needs to be a variant in the language. This account fits into the linguistic nature of usage problems, and brings us to the relationship between usage problems and linguistic variables, which is a central principle for the empirical study presented here.

The notion of the linguistic variable goes back to the sociolinguistic work of Labov (1972b: 8), who postulated a number of criteria for defining the linguistic variable; these criteria refer specifically to the selection of linguistic variables for the study of the social stratification of language. According to these criteria, a linguistic variable should be well integrated into the language system, it should be highly frequent in language, so that enough tokens can be collected from relatively short stretches of naturally occurring conversation, and it should be socially stratified. This involves ascertaining the possible environments of the variable, as well as the total number of environments in which it occurs (Labov 1972b: 71), thus allowing for an analysis of socially constrained variation following the “principle of accountability” (Labov 1972b: 72). It is also well known that Labov applied this approach mostly, though not exclusively, to phonetic variables. Subsequent sociolinguistic work has applied this notion to syntactic or grammatical variables as well, defining syntactic variables on the basis of two variant forms which have the same referential meaning (e.g. Sankoff 1972).

This approach is not without problems. Lavandera (1978), for instance, has pointed out the difficulty of assuming equal referential meaning of two syntactic variants, and thus, the difficulty in extending the notion of the linguistic variable from phonological to syntactic variables. This was followed by the development of a series of different approaches to conceptualising the linguistic variable (for an overview of this discussion, see Campbell-Kibler 2010: 424–425), from defining variable rules, to using the notion of the linguistic variable rather loosely, to refer to a set of variants used for “saying the same thing” (Chambers and Trudgill 1980: 80, quoted in Campbell-Kibler 2010: 425). The latter position is the one taken in the present study, specifically in the instances in which such an approach is relatively straightforward. While theoretical and methodological assumptions about linguistic variables are important, these issues are beyond the scope of the present study.

As mentioned above, the concept of linguistic variables is difficult to apply to certain usage problems. In the present study such difficulty is encountered in the analysis of the discourse particle *like* and non-literal *literally*. A variationist analysis proper of these two variants would involve ascertaining all possible environments in which these variants could occur, as well as identifying other linguistic variants which have the same meaning or function as the variants in question. Thus, for the discourse particle *like* this would involve identifying all variants which have the same meaning or function, and ascertaining all possible environments in which all of these variants could occur. In a similar vein, non-literal *literally* cannot be seen as a variant of the word *literally*, because what we have in this case is not the same denotational meaning expressed by different forms, but rather the opposite: the same form expressing different meanings. Approaching the use of non-literal *literally* in a variationist way would involve establishing a lexical variable such that *literally* would be one of at least two variants expressing the same meaning of intensification and emphasis. This kind of analysis was not undertaken here, because it requires extensive theoretical work in ascertaining the linguistic variables, which in itself entails problems which are beyond the scope of this study. A more straightforward approach was taken for the analysis of these two features, by relying solely on establishing the text-frequencies of both the discourse particle *like* and *literally* and by distinguishing three different uses of *literally*; this approach is described in detail in Section 4.4.

Approaching usage problems as linguistic variants allows us to make some observations which are important in establishing the approach to the question of the influence of prescriptive ideology on the variation in usage problems. The first relates to Labov’s notion of sociolinguistic stereotypes (Labov 1972b: 139). Usage

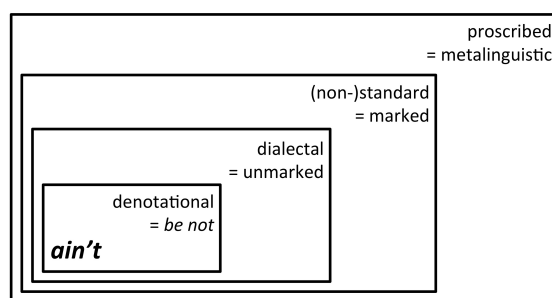


Figure 2.1: A model of the indexical order of meanings of *ain't*

problems are sociolinguistic stereotypes, because they are above the level of conscious awareness of speakers, and they are overtly commented on. This connection between proscribed features and the notion of sociolinguistic stereotypes has previously been observed in the context of *you was* (Laitinen 2009: 201). The second observation is that usage features are related to what Biber (1988: 36) defines as “the aesthetic function” of variation, which is stylistic in nature and refers to the attitudes and ideologies of language users with respect to correctness, acceptability or preference (Biber 1988; Albakry 2007).

A final important aspect of usage problems is that they are not all the same in terms of ‘problematicity’. This point stems from the criteria or reasons for their emergence. Different usage problems are tied to different kinds of social values, and this means that their use may have different implications in different social contexts. This, I propose, could be usefully related to the notion of indexicality, which is understood as that aspect of the meaning of a language feature which comes from its contextual or pragmatic association with specific contexts of use (Silverstein 1976, 2003). Taking the notion of indexicality further, Silverstein (2003) develops the idea of indexical order, which, he argues, is necessary for the understanding of sociolinguistic meaning phenomena. On the basis of Silverstein’s indexical order, I propose that a model can be developed for discussing the meaning of a particular prescriptively targeted feature. For instance, Figure 2.1 presents an example of this model, for the indexical order of meanings of *ain't*.<sup>1</sup>

On the very basic level, *ain't* is a negative form of *be*, and referentially expresses non-existence of something. On this level, *ain't* is referentially equal to any other

<sup>1</sup>I use the example of *ain't* for *be not*, but the model could be applied to the use of *ain't* for *have not*, and indeed, to any other prescriptively targeted language feature.



present tense form of *be not*, and it is on the basis of this referential equality that *ain't* is here considered a variant in the linguistic variable 'present tense *be not*'. The next level in the indexical order is acquired by the use of *ain't* in particular regional or social dialects. This association between such dialects and the use of *ain't* accounts for the development of an indexical relationship between *ain't* and its 'dialect' meaning, which is neutral at this point. One level up, the fact that *ain't* is part of a language variety which is not considered standard adds another order of indexical meaning which associates *ain't* indexically with non-standard language varieties. This association with non-standardness means that *ain't* would not be used in formal educated contexts, which would in turn develop the indexicality of uneducated, incorrect speech; this level thus differs from the previous one in that the use of *ain't* tends to be negatively evaluated. This brings us to the final level of indexical meaning in relation to *ain't*. At this level of the indexical order, *ain't* indexes the ideology of prescriptivism itself, as evidenced in cases where speakers use *ain't* on purpose, either to criticise or make fun of people who use the word (i.e. aligning themselves with prescriptivism) or to criticise or make fun of people who are sticklers about it (i.e. distancing themselves from prescriptivism).

Elsewhere, Silverstein (1996) addresses in detail the question of the semiotic processes by which standard language forms become indexical of particular qualities associated with the use of these language forms. In doing so, he identifies two semiotic processes – folk-extensionalisation and folk-intensionalisation – through which “social differentiations can be displaced onto linguistic differences in usage [...] and these latter can be perceived as a guide to and natural basis for the social differentiation that they index” (1996: 295). He also makes the point that the economic dimension of knowing the standard is an important aspect of the “culture of standardization”, which is particularly relevant for certain social groups, such as yuppies, or yumpies. Silverstein’s work is also important for his observations about the potential influence of the indexical order of meaning in language itself. Silverstein (2003), for instance, talks about how the meaning associated with the use of *he vs. they* is an example of how higher-order indexicality can influence language use and language structure. Given that these kinds of processes are a kind of prescriptivism – on the basis of Cameron’s (1995) concept of “verbal hygiene” and Curzan’s (2014) concept of “politically responsive prescriptivism” – this serves as a good example of how prescriptivism can be an influence on processes of language change. This thus provides an additional theoretical framework, and/or justification, for the hypothesis that prescriptivism influences language variation and change, as well as speakers’

attitudes, in important ways which need to be accounted for, and it also demonstrates the crucial place of speakers' attitudes and ideologies in the study and discussion of prescriptive influence, discussed in the next section of this chapter.

## 2.7 Ideologies and attitudes

The broad field of ideologies and attitudes bears directly on the question of prescriptive influence, because it is through the operation of attitudes and ideologies that speakers may or may not use a prescriptively targeted language variant. Furthermore, the importance of research on language ideology is evident in the fact that prescriptive attitudes to usage are usually associated with the existence of a standard language ideology (Milroy 2001: 530). As discussed in relation to the question of prescriptive influence in Section 2.4 above, large-scale studies of prescriptive influence on language variation and change patterns have shown that in general such influence is contextually or temporally limited at best. However, this is not to say that speakers are not influenced by prescriptivism; in fact, at any given point in time, particular speakers, or groups of speakers, may be more influenced by prescriptive ideas than others. Thus, an investigation of prescriptive influence also needs to be concerned with how such influence is manifested in the context of individual speakers. I already mentioned that this would be investigated on the basis of a study of the actual language use by speakers who are perhaps especially prone to prescriptive influence, but such a study is practically almost impossible on a larger scale. This is why I will be concerned here only with how prescriptivism affects speakers' attitudes and ideologies. More specifically, I draw on work done on language ideologies, language attitudes, and attitudes to usage. In what follows, I address each of these in turn.

Language ideology research provides important assumptions and observations regarding the influence of language ideology on speakers, and consequently on language itself. The term 'language ideology' has been used to refer to many different phenomena related to the relationship between ideology and language, understood in broad terms. For the present study, research into the so-called "ideologies *of* language" (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994: 55) is of particular relevance for the study of prescriptivism, as prescriptive ideology is one of the ideologies of language, and, we might argue, one of the more dominant ones (cf. Garrett 2001: 628). Many definitions have been offered of language ideology. Language ideologies have been defined as

“sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979: 193, cited in Kroskrity 2004: 497), or as “the cultural (or subcultural) system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (Irvine 1989: 255). It is clear on the basis of these definitions that prescriptivism is an ideological category.

This connection is further strengthened if we take into account the phenomenon of language prescription, on which prescriptivism is based (for a distinction between prescription and prescriptivism, see Section 1.2 above and Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2016). Prescription is a stage in the standardisation process defined by Milroy and Milroy (2012). Language ideology has been found to significantly affect language structure, albeit in a limited number of cases. Drawing on Silverstein’s work, Kroskrity (2004: 496–497), for instance, cites the decrease, or near disappearance, of generic *he* as “[a] graphic example of the importance of multiplicity and contention in language-ideological processes, one that has noticeably changed the grammar of English within my generation’s lifetime” (see also Bodine 1975; MacKay 1980; Pateman 1982). Although the example is indeed an instance of how speakers can change usage, and recent work on the different kinds of prescriptivism has dealt with this case as an instance of politically responsive prescriptivism (Curzan 2014), it may also be argued that it is debatable whether this has “changed the grammar of English”, as Kroskrity argues, or merely the usage of pronouns or particular words; whether or not one considers this a change in the grammar of English would depend largely on one’s definition of ‘grammar’. In this respect, this instance also illustrates how, when talking about the influence of prescriptivism, one needs to carefully distinguish between changes in the structure of the language and changes in the rate of usage of a specific feature. Nevertheless, the example shows the power of language ideology to affect language use significantly.

Closely related to prescriptivism is the standard language ideology (e.g. Silverstein 1996; Lippi-Green 1997; Milroy 2001). Silverstein (1996) discusses the processes by which one variety, which has become identified as the standard, becomes indexically associated with specific personal qualities, as well as the function of the standard language ideology in establishing the linguistic economy in the United States in the twentieth century. Lippi-Green (1997) deals specifically with the issue of standard language ideology and its influence in twentieth-century America. She also makes a connection between the work of Foucault and the idea that language ideology of any kind has to do with organising, controlling, and directing language, or having

power over what language variety is going to be used in specific social contexts and functions. It thus becomes clear how language-prescriptive ideology, as an extension of the standard language ideology, can be explained from a theoretical point of view in this way. Lippi-Green's definition of ideology is more critical, and is concerned with unearthing power differentials and the role of ideology in creating and perpetuating those power differentials. The language ideology that relates specifically to the standard is also addressed by Woolard and Schieffelin (1994), in their comprehensive review of language ideology research. They note that "codified, superimposed standard languages are tied not only to writing and its associated hegemonic institutions, but to specifically European forms of these institutions" (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994: 64). Furthermore, they also stress that the ideological nature of standard languages means that ideas about language standards are naturalised and considered to be fundamental or essential to language, rather than forming a linguistically arbitrary, but socially or culturally conditioned category. This observation also applies to prescriptive ideas about language, which owe their persistence across centuries to their naturalised state. These kinds of standard or prescriptive language ideologies have an important role to play in power differentials in a society; this issue has been looked into perhaps most extensively by Lippi-Green (1997) in the American context.

Apart from the influence of language ideology on social relations and power, a crucial question with respect to prescriptivism is whether language ideology affects language structure and language change. As Woolard and Schieffelin (1994: 69) point out, "modern linguistics has generally held that linguistic ideology and prescriptive norms have little significance – or, paradoxically, only pernicious – effect on speech forms (although they might have some less negligible effect on writing)". However, work on language ideology has shown that in certain cases such as "gender in English, T/V pronoun shift, and Javanese speech levels, Silverstein shows that rationalization not only explains but actually affects linguistic structure, or rationalizes it by making it more regular. To understand one's own linguistic usage is to potentially change it" (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994: 70). This work provides important evidence that prescriptivism can indeed affect language change. However, when we talk about prescriptive ideology, it is important to point out that this ideology may be manifested broadly in two different ways. The first way is through institutionalised discourses on language correctness and rules of language use. This kind of ideology will be explored in the present study through the analysis of the usage guide genre (see Section 2.2). The second important site of prescriptive ideology can be found in

the attitudes of ordinary speakers. This perspective is crucial for understanding the effects of prescriptivism, because widely held prescriptive beliefs about language are sometimes in line with institutionalised prescriptions, while other times depart from such prescriptions.

Language ideology research is directly related to research on language attitudes. In current language attitude research, “[l]anguage ideologies provide the organizational schema through which linguistic diversity is viewed, interpreted and evaluated. In this sense, language ideologies represent broad, socio-cultural schemas that shape the development of intrapersonal attitudes towards particular language varieties and their speakers” (Dragojevic et al. 2013: 11). In relation to prescriptive ideology, a particular set of linguistic features or variants becomes associated with the standard language, as well as with the notion of correct language, and becomes indexically associated with certain positive values or characteristics (Dragojevic et al. 2013: 9–10).

Research on language attitudes has been carried out extensively in different subfields of sociolinguistics and social psychology. It is important at this point to distinguish between language attitude studies and studies of attitudes to usage, as these terms appear to be used in research arenas that have different histories, preoccupations, and research questions. Language attitude studies have been the focus of different subfields of sociolinguistics, the sociology of language, and social psychology. These studies deal predominantly with attitudes to phonological or suprasegmental variation in language, and rarely with attitudes to syntactic, semantic, or lexical variation (Finegan 1985; Giles and Rakic 2014). By contrast, studies of attitudes to usage deal specifically with prescriptive usage norms. Such studies have been very rare in English, but the ones that have been conducted provide important starting points for the present research. In what follows I will briefly outline the most important aspects of language attitude research relevant here, and I will then focus specifically on studies of attitudes to usage.

Language attitudes, understood as attitudes which are very closely associated with the language of others, as a topic of modern sociolinguistic research goes back to sociology of language research on attitudes in bilingual settings (e.g. Agheyisi and Fishman 1970). Methodologically, Tucker and Lambert (1972) pioneered the matched-guise technique (MGT) for the purpose of studying attitudes to language varieties in an indirect way (an overview of MGT methods can be found in Campbell-Kibler 2006: Chapter 3). This research was predominantly concerned with uncovering unconscious or implicit attitudes to language, and it was usually conducted in bilingual contexts. Another important development in language attitude research

is perceptual dialectology (e.g. Preston 1999a,b; Long and Preston 2002). In this tradition, perceptions about dialects and varieties are investigated empirically, using a variety of different experimental methods to assess language attitudes. In all of these branches of research on language attitudes, the underlying assumption is that attitudes are implicit, that speakers are usually not aware of them, and that attitudes require a special set of methods to be elicited. Some recent examples of this include cognitive sociolinguistic work done on language attitudes of Dutch speakers by Speelman et al. (2013), whose main goal was to investigate automatically activated language attitudes, which are impossible to access through direct approaches.

This kind of research is also characterised by a marked lack of concern with prescriptive attitudes. Prescriptivism is usually not discussed; when it is, this is often in introductions to language attitudes, as a way of introducing the notion. An illustrative example can be found in Garrett (2010: 6–10), where he notes that sometimes language use “evoke[s] attitudes with a somewhat (though not entirely) different focus, relating to public controversies over language usage”. Here he mentions usage problems such as the use of *hopefully* to mean ‘I hope that’, rather than ‘in a hopeful manner’, and double negatives, and discusses the influence of the standard language ideology on speakers. One study which may be considered an exception to this observation is Albanyan and Preston (1998). The authors of this study investigate the attitudes to standard language norms among a group of American university students. To conclude, while language attitude research has provided an important methodological background for the present study, discussed in detail in Chapter 4, most of this research does not provide much information on the particular prescriptivism-related features I am concerned with here. In addition, as I have mentioned elsewhere, work done by Ebner (2017) in the context of the Bridging the Unbridgeable project has explored prescriptive attitudes to usage as well, specifically focusing on speakers’ attitudes in British English. Ebner’s study is thus in some respects a counterpart for British English to the present study, which is devoted to American English.

For specific information on speakers’ attitudes to usage, particularly in relation to usage problems, a number of studies on attitudes to usage provide important evidence for those attitudes among certain groups of people, as well as their changes over time. The most notable studies of attitudes towards usage in English include Leonard (1932), Marckwardt and Walcott (1938), Mittins et al. (1970), and Crisp (1971). The first of these usage surveys, conducted by Leonard, investigated the attitudes to English punctuation and grammar usage of a group of what is described in the

study as “cultivated speakers”. The goal of the study was to obtain insights into the contemporary norms of usage on the basis of an investigation of the attitudes to usage of educated speakers, and subsequently to use these insights to provide up-to-date guidance and relevant advice on usage. Dictionaries were seen as limited with respect to providing advice on contemporary usage, because of the time lag of a few years before established usage is recorded in them; grammars were seen as having the additional disadvantage of being “based on traditional pronouncements of dubious value” (Leonard 1932: 95). Leonard thus undertook the study of the then current standard of usage, with regard to both punctuation and grammar, by using questionnaires with various problematic constructions to collect rankings of these problematic construction by so-called judges, who included linguists, authors, editors, businessmen, and teachers, who were believed to “constitute a significant sampling of cultivated usage” (Leonard 1932: 96). The study consisted of two questionnaires, one with 102 problematic expressions, and the other with 130. The rating scale used by the judges distinguished four levels of usage: “Literary English”, “standard, cultivated colloquial English”, “trade or technical English”, and “naïf, popular, or uncultivated English” (Leonard 1932: 97). On the basis of those ratings, items were ordered from 1 to 230, and divided into three levels of usage: “established”, “disputed”, and “illiterate” (Leonard 1932: 99). The rated sentences contained a variety of items, from cases like *had better* or *point of view*, which were found to be established usages, to traditional usage problems, such as *ain’t*, the split infinitive, flat adverbs, and singular *they*. The results showed that at the time some of the traditional usage problems were considered acceptable, such as the split infinitive, while others were considered “illiterate”, such as *ain’t*. One of the conclusions of the study is that “grammar is seen to be not something final or static but merely the organized description or codification of the actual speech habits of educated men” (Leonard 1932: 188). Furthermore, the study showed that on the basis of the ratings by the judges, certain usages considered incorrect in handbooks of usage had actually become part of established usage. Finally, it is also worth noting that aside from the pioneering character of this study in the area of surveys of attitudes to usage, its function and application is very clearly established in the area of teaching. What the study aims to do, first and foremost, is to provide current and reliable advice to teachers of English or composition regarding the accepted usage of the time.

Marckwardt and Walcott (1938: 2–3) supplemented Leonard’s study by carrying out his initial intention of comparing attitudes to usage with facts of usage. Even though that had been Leonard’s original intention, it was not achieved with his 1932

monograph, which “deals primarily not with usage itself but with opinions about the usage of words and expressions usually questioned or condemned in grammars and handbooks”. The aim of the Marckwardt and Walcott study was to add to Leonard’s survey of opinions the “facts about current English usage”, as the title of their study suggests. Their investigation of the facts of usage was based on the *Oxford English Dictionary* and its supplement; in addition, they also consulted a number of other works, including Hall (1917) and Horwill (1935). By comparing the labels for the established, disputed, and illiterate usage items used in Leonard (1932), Marckwardt and Walcott found that the opinions of the judges were predominantly conservative. With respect to the established usage items, for instance, they found that very few of those were colloquial. For the disputed usage items, it appeared from their analysis that the majority of the usages considered disputable “are, on the basis of the recorded fact, actually in cultivated use today” (Marckwardt and Walcott 1938: 49). Finally, with respect to “illiterate” usage items, they concluded that “illiterate” was too strong a word to designate what would more realistically be described as non-standard, or regional, usage.

Crisp (1971) is a replication of Leonard’s approach to assessing opinions on English usage, conducted about forty years later than the original study. His additional purpose was also to investigate the facts of English usage, and compare the gap between fact and opinion to that observed forty years before. As mentioned above, the opinions recorded by Leonard were found to be generally fairly conservative when compared to descriptions of actual usage on the basis of the study by Marckwardt and Walcott. Importantly, Crisp hypothesised that this conservatism in opinion will have decreased somewhat, and expected that attitudes would have been more liberal at the end of the 1960s. An additional variable that Crisp introduced in his study was the grouping of data by geographical region – something not done by Leonard. Crisp’s questionnaire included 215 items, based on Leonard (1932) and Marckwardt and Walcott (1938); Crisp also adapted some of the descriptions of levels of usage used by Leonard. The category “illiterate”, was, for instance, replaced with “non-standard” (Crisp 1971: 63). Crisp remained fairly faithful to Leonard’s approach to selecting informants, collecting the opinions of 1764 informants, consisting of linguists, teachers of English, editors of magazines and news media, dictionary makers or editors, and businessmen (Crisp 1971: 67). On the whole, Crisp also found that what he calls language specialists (a group of informants he compared to the linguists in Leonard’s study) were more liberal in their ratings compared to those in Leonard’s study. Crisp also found that of the various groups of informants, language specialists



were the most liberal group, while members of the panel of the *American Usage Dictionary* were the most conservative raters. With reference to particular usage items, Crisp identified a number of items which moved in their ratings from “disputed” to “established”. On the basis of his findings, it may perhaps reasonably be hypothesised that over time speakers had become more liberal in their attitudes to usage.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that a similar survey of attitudes to usage was conducted for British English by Mittins et al. (1970). In part, at least, this study is similar to Leonard’s study in their shared concern with attitudes to usage in education and the teaching of usage standards. Mittins et al. (1970: 5) collected the opinions of 457 informants on 55 items of usage. Their informants consisted of similar groups of speakers to those included in Leonard’s and Crisp’s studies, but were more heavily skewed towards teachers. Unlike Leonard and Crisp, Mittins et al. included register variation in their questionnaire, by asking informants to judge the acceptability of usage items in formal and informal contexts, as well as in spoken and written contexts. One of the more general findings of this study was that people involved in teaching or teacher training are not necessarily the most conservative on matters of usage. This study is in part replicated by Ebner (2017), in a contemporary sociolinguistic take on the investigation of attitudes to usage in British English. Apart from the general conclusions of these surveys of attitudes to usage, they also contain a multitude of data on specific features, which are too lengthy to cover in detail here, but will be drawn upon in the discussion of individual usage problems in the analysis in Chapter 7, as and when relevant. In addition, despite their methodological limitations, these studies provide an important basis for the present study, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

A final strand of research worth mentioning is the research on attitudes to usage carried out in the context of predominantly historical linguistic and sociolinguistic studies; in this context the term ‘attitudes’ is used to refer to the normative or prescriptive types of attitudes understood as being overtly expressed and as being spread by institutional, top-down means. Leonard (1929) is often cited as a ground-breaking work of this sort, in which a modern linguist surveys the language attitudes of eighteenth-century normative grammarians in an attempt to show how diametrically opposed their approach to language study was, compared to the descriptive linguistics of the second half of the twentieth century (cf. Tiekens-Boon van Ostade 2006). In that sense, we can perhaps trace this strand of research on attitudes to usage back to Leonard’s survey. More recent examples include Sundby et al. (1991) and their account of primarily proscriptive views and attitudes to usage in

eighteenth-century normative grammars of English, a study of attitudes to the usage of phrasal verbs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Wild 2010), and a study of attitudes to preposition stranding from 1500 to 1900 (Yáñez-Bouza 2015). It is important to bear in mind that these studies can be seen as dealing with different types of attitudes. The studies discussed in the previous paragraphs of this section concern the language attitudes of speakers, and are often understood more generally (i.e. not necessarily related to prescriptive language ideology). The studies mentioned in this paragraph, however, use the term “attitudes” to refer to the attitudes to language standards, norms, correctness, or acceptability which are found in metalinguistic works such as normative grammars and usage guides. For instance, the attitudes to usage in Finegan (1980) are those found in books on language by lexicographers or language scholars from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States. Those that feature prominently as a research topic in historical sociolinguistic studies are the attitudes of grammarians or writers on language, and relate to the correctness or appropriateness of particular language features. This kind of division may suggest that such attitudes are different, but perhaps that is not the case. There are multiple reasons that the latter type of attitudes to usage form part of historical sociolinguistics, and some of these are related to the available sources of evidence. Historical sociolinguistic evidence on language attitudes comes from written texts, and most of the written texts available are predominantly books on language, which were written in a period when modern linguistic science did not exist, and the predominant language ideology was tied to the superiority of the standard. The writers of these books were concerned with distinguishing between correct and incorrect usage from the point of view of the language standard. In essence, normative and prescriptive grammar writing was essentially an attempt to regulate language use. However, despite the fact that those books presented the normative views of a group of people, they may also reveal information about the attitudes to usage found among ordinary speakers. In this context, the relevance of a study of present-day prescriptivism lies in its potential to shed light precisely on the relationship between attitudes to language found in popular metalinguistic works such as usage guides and attitudes of ordinary speakers.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have surveyed important work in the study of prescriptivism and attitudes to usage in American English, and to some extent, British English. The

studies cited provide a significant body of knowledge about prescriptivism and its effects in the Anglo-American context. What my account of previous research has also shown is that there are still some open questions as to the influence of prescriptivism and the appropriate ways to study it. As the authors of one recent study note, any kind of study of the effects of prescriptivism on language variation and change “must begin with improved empirical description” (Hinrichs et al. 2015: 807). In the next chapter, I will outline the methods used in the current study, which aims at an improved empirical description of prescriptivism.

