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

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## CHAPTER 8

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### Conclusion

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This study set out to explore empirically the influence of prescriptivism on language use and on language users in American English. Given that the English prescriptive tradition targets a relatively small set of language features,<sup>1</sup> the study focused on six of them: *ain't*, the discourse particle *like*, *literally*, negative concord, object *I*/subject *me*, and the split infinitive. A number of assumptions about the nature of the prescriptive influence were established at the outset, in Chapter 1, which provided the starting points for developing the methodology as outlined in Chapter 4, and the analyses presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. The first assumption was that a better understanding of the potential influence of prescriptivism requires a careful analysis of prescriptive ideology, understood as the attitudes to language usage propagated by top-down means, such as the educational system and publications on usage. In order to analyse prescriptive attitudes and how they have changed in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I analysed 70 usage guides published in the United States between 1847 and 2015. The second assumption was that the influence

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<sup>1</sup>The HUGE database contains 123 usage problems, which is of course not an exhaustive list. Chapman (2017: 246) identifies over 10,000 prescriptive rules on the basis of a survey of 30 handbooks; however, it is not clear whether all these rules refer to different usage problems. While there are many usage features addressed in the usage guide tradition, it is also true that the canon of traditionally discussed features is fairly small.

of prescriptivism on language use can reasonably be considered (a) to be potentially relevant only in relation to a small set of prescriptively targeted features, and (b) to be identified in patterns of variation, rather than in patterns of language change. The latter essentially means that prescriptive influence is in general temporally limited. The influence of prescriptivism on patterns of language variation and change was then explored by examining six linguistic features in this context. This was done by using both text-linguistic and variationist approaches to the analysis of most of these features, in order to obtain a reliable picture of the possible influence of prescriptivism. In addition to these analyses, a multifactorial analysis was conducted for one of the features, the split infinitive, in order to explore the extent to which the likelihood that a modified infinitive occurring in a specific text is split is associated with the occurrence in the same text of other prescriptively targeted features. Finally, the third assumption was that, in addition to the potential influence of prescriptivism on language variation and change, prescriptive attitudes also affect language speakers. Here, the attitudes of American English speakers towards the set of six linguistic features were explored by means of a survey and post-survey interviews with 79 speakers. In what follows, I will summarise the findings of this analysis for each of the language features separately, and discuss their importance in revealing the potential influence of prescriptivism.

In the case of *ain't*, the analysis of usage guides showed that the feature has become somewhat acceptable over time, but that this acceptability is restricted to specific contexts of use. These contexts include the use of *ain't* in specific fixed phrases or catchy expressions, in fiction, and in song lyrics. Despite this acceptability, the form is still considered indexical of uneducated speech. The results from the analysis of patterns of variation and change showed that the word is infrequently found in the corpus data. The analysis provided no evidence of change; rather, it suggested that there is register variation in the use of *ain't*. In part, this confirms the observations found in usage guides concerning the restricted acceptability of *ain't*. The analysis of speakers' attitudes showed that *ain't* is the most negatively rated feature of the six linguistic features investigated. All these results together suggest that *ain't* is an 'old chestnut' which continues to be covered in usage guides. Its use is restricted, but it has not entirely been ousted from the language, and, on the basis of a number of studies of non-standard varieties of English, it can be expected that *ain't* will remain part of vernacular usage. In standard language data, however, its use is mostly restricted to very specific contexts. In addition to this, the speakers' attitude data showed that it is a highly stigmatised feature. All in all, it is fairly difficult to ascertain prescriptive influence on the use of *ain't* on the basis of these results, in the context of decreasing

frequencies of use of the form, specifically for the period investigated. However, what can be said with perhaps a greater degree of certainty is that the treatment of *ain't* found in usage guides reflects the main findings on the register sensitivity of *ain't*, as well as its negative social indexicality, as evidenced by the predominantly negative ratings this feature received from the respondents. In other words, in the case of *ain't*, usage guide treatment reflects the sociolinguistic reality of the use of *ain't* in standard American English.

Discourse particle *like* provides evidence for how usage guides react to highly salient language changes. On the basis of the treatment of *like* in usage guides (as shown in Sections 5.2.2, 5.3.2, 5.4.2, and 5.5.2), it can be concluded that language changes which become salient for speakers and are negatively socially evaluated become part of the usage problem canon. A parallel can be made here with the process by which *you was* became a usage problem during the eighteenth century (Laitinen 2009). The speakers' attitudes data also confirmed the negative social indexicality of the use of the discourse particle *like* (see Section 7.3). Despite this, however, the analysis of the actual use of *like* showed an increase in the frequency of occurrence of the word, especially in the COCA data (see Section 6.3). This shows that prescriptivism, as well as the negative social evaluations of the discourse particle *like*, seem not to have exerted any noticeable influence on its use, and little can be said with respect to predicting future trends. However, it has been shown with some level of certainty that usage guides, and perhaps similar metalinguistic works, react to robust and highly salient language changes; this confirms that usage guides and similar works can be used as additional evidence of language changes, especially in past periods, for which there is a paucity of spoken language data.

The case of *literally* is in some respects similar to *like*, in that here too usage guides seem to be responding to an ongoing language change. While the patterns of change in the uses of *literally* observed in the corpus data (Section 6.4) do not suggest a rapidly progressing change, additional factors which may have influenced the salience of the variation in the uses of *literally* are the nature of the feature and negative connotations associated with its use. By the nature of the feature I mean the development of the non-literal use of *literally*, which is perceived as meaning the opposite of the compositional meaning of the lexeme. As a result of the striking opposition between the non-literal use of *literally* to modify figurative expressions and its compositional meaning of 'word for word', the use of non-literal *literally* has acquired an indexical meaning related to lack of logic, absurdity, and ignorance on the part of the language user. Where *like* and *literally* differ, however, is in the extent to

which they are negatively evaluated by speakers. On the basis of a comparison between these two features (see Section 7.9, specifically Figure 7.8), *literally* is less negatively evaluated than *like*. This, together with evidence from the post-survey interviews, suggests that, for *literally*, covert sociolinguistic prestige may be developing, where the non-literal use of *literally* is associated with a specific group of speakers. What is more, among this group of speakers, the word is not seen as negative, but rather as a group-identity marker, as shown in Section 7.4. This may explain the use of the word in the spoken language, despite the negative treatment found in usage guides. Ultimately, what this suggests is that the influence of prescriptive attitudes may be modified by other sociolinguistic processes related to group identity and non-standard usages which function as markers of group identity.

Negative concord is a feature very similar to *ain't* in that it is very limited in actual use data, but it is different in that it is not a frequently discussed feature in the usage guides analysed. The frequency of negative concord started to diminish in the course of the seventeenth century (Nevalainen 2000), and by the eighteenth century the feature had largely been ousted from the standard variety in England, but not from non-standard usage (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008a). In twentieth-century American English, the feature is fairly infrequent in the standard language corpus data used in this study, which may explain in part its relatively infrequent coverage in usage guides. In other words, this is a fairly stable vernacular feature, whose discussion in usage guides may be a relic from the prescriptive tradition.

Pronouns in coordinated phrases provided interesting insights into the relationship between usage guide attitudes and speakers' attitudes. Usage guides tend to be more positive about the use of object *I* than about subject *me*, and this kind of distinction is also reflected in the ratings for these features obtained by respondents (see Section 7.6). However, when it comes to any effects of prescriptivism on actual language use, non-standard pronominal forms are relatively rarely used, so in this case prescriptive influence was not identified. In this case, too, I believe, it can be said that both object *I* and subject *me* are used relatively infrequently in standard American English. What is more, the difference between attitudes towards object *I* and subject *me* does not seem to be reflected in patterns of variation in the use of the two features.

Finally, the split infinitive provides the most interesting case of the potential influence of prescriptivism on language use. The case of the split infinitive suggests that, in relation to the increased usage of a stylistic prescriptively targeted feature, usage guides treatment can develop towards higher levels of acceptability. The fact that the split infinitive is not a salient usage problem for speakers may suggest

that the change in usage guides treatment is more likely for features which are not characterised by negative social evaluations. Thus, the example of the split infinitive shows that, in the long run, prescriptive attitudes to usage tend to change under the influence of both the increasing use of a feature and the lack of negative social evaluations of that feature. However, the split infinitive also shows the complexity and dialectic nature of prescriptive influence. The multifactorial analysis of the use of split infinitives as opposed to non-split modified infinitives on the level of individual texts, discussed in Section 6.8, showed that even though the general long-term trends show that prescriptivism does not exert any influence on the use of split infinitives, synchronic patterns of register variation, and the co-occurrence of a number of prescriptively targeted features show that prescriptive influence can be identified in individual texts, as well as, to some extent, in certain registers or text types. This is, I believe, important evidence suggesting that the way in which prescriptive influence is conceptualised should be more nuanced, and should take into account multiple processes which interact with each other. This leads me to a number of final conclusions, which can be made on the basis of the results discussed above.

The first conclusion is that prescriptive attitudes as instantiated in the American usage guide tradition are not, as has often been suggested, entirely divorced from the facts of actual language use. Usage guides are not produced in a vacuum, even though it is certainly possible to come across pronouncements on language usage which seem to be at odds with how language is actually used. While such examples can indeed be found in individual usage guides, taken on the whole, my study of treatment has shown that the usage guide genre is varied, and continues to develop in ways which are intricately linked with developments in language use. These developments are to a certain extent idiosyncratic for each specific feature, but some similar trends may be observed. One of these trends is that usage features which are 'old chestnuts', and whose actual use is limited to specific contexts, seem to be accepted in these particular contexts. Such features are *ain't*, pronouns in coordinated phrases, and, to a lesser extent, negative concord. For other features whose frequency in use grew in the course of the twentieth century, the treatment has not changed noticeably, and their treatment is predominantly negative; non-literal *literally* and the discourse particle *like* are examples of this trend. Finally, with respect to the split infinitive, the treatment appears to have changed most significantly compared to all the other features analysed.

The second conclusion is that this relationship between prescriptive attitudes and actual use is not a one-way street. It appears to be counterproductive in a study of the relationship between prescriptive attitudes and actual language practice to attempt

to prove either that prescriptive attitudes have absolutely no influence on language practice, rather than the other way around, or that language use affects prescriptive attitudes, and not the other way around. What appears to be the case is that prescriptive attitudes and actual language practice are mutually influenced by each other, and the extent and direction of that influence depend on very many factors, ranging from the language features concerned to the sociolinguistic context in which specific language practices take place. In this context, it is important to understand that it is almost always the case that prescriptive attitudes will affect language practice some of the time, and that the reverse will also be the case. While this observation does not originate with me, it is important to note that the empirical study I have presented here provides confirmation for it.

The third conclusion is that prescriptive attitudes and speakers' attitudes are often similar in their evaluations of prescriptively targeted language features. One of the goals of this study, and indeed, the Bridging the Unbridgeable project in general, was to investigate the extent to which speakers' attitudes reflect prescriptive attitudes to usage found in usage guides. In the concluding section of Chapter 7, I summarised the results from the survey data by way of a visual representation of the ratings and recognition level for the features investigated (see Figure 7.8). Here, I will compare this visual representation with one based on the analysis of treatment and attitude expressions in usage guides. These two visual representations are given in Figure 8.1. The figure provides a schematic representation of the way in which the linguistic features investigated are ordered in terms of acceptability, or positive evaluation on the basis of the analysis of speakers' attitudes (top figure, also discussed in Section 7.9) and on the basis of the analysis of the usage guides treatment and attitudes (bottom figure; see also Chapter 5). The two figures show that while usage guides tend to be more negative in their attitudes than the respondents, the general pattern is very similar. The split infinitive, and to some extent object *I*, are at the positive end of the continuum, while the discourse particle *like*, negative concord, and subject *me* are at the negative end. The two features for which there seems to be some difference are *ain't*, which is more negatively rated by speakers than in usage guides, and *literally*, which is more positively rated by speakers than in usage guides.

Finally, the fourth concluding point I wish to make is that this study has shown that the influence of prescriptivism on actual language use is almost always non-existent in the long term. Where this influence is felt is usually in a short time frame, and it is reflected in the register-constrained variation in the use of specific features. Furthermore, as a potential constraint on language variation, prescriptive influence



is weaker than other constraints, whether intralinguistic or extralinguistic. If we take the model for the hierarchy of variables (i.e. linguistic, stylistic, and social) proposed by Preston (1991) as a useful interpretive framework, it can be argued that when prescriptivism is an identifiable constraint on variation, it is mostly a relatively weak constraint, the influence of which is generally (though there are exceptions) superseded by other intralinguistic and extralinguistic constraints.

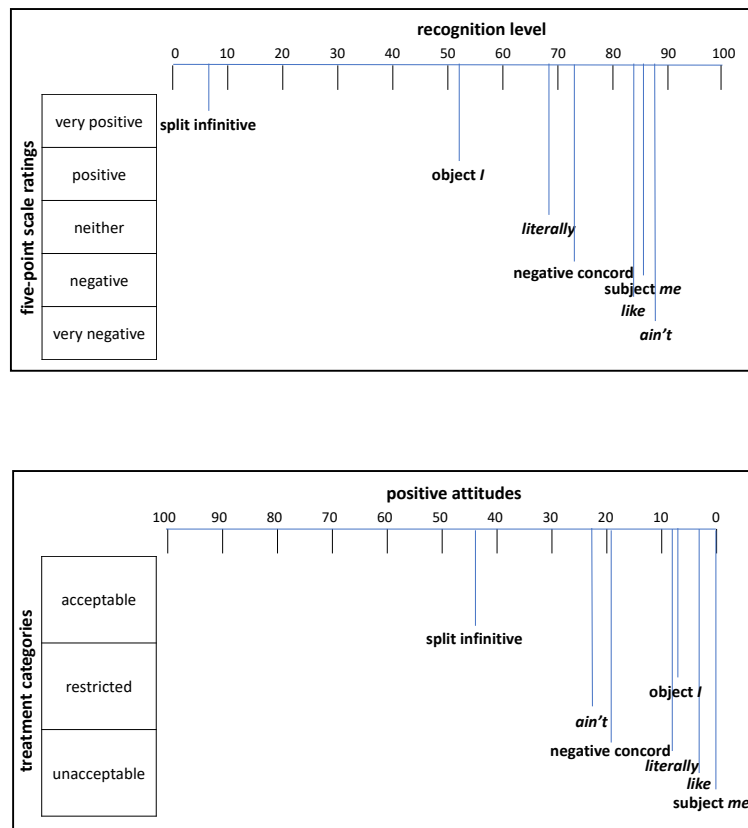


Figure 8.1: Top: schematic representation of the acceptability of usage problems on the basis of speakers' median ratings and average recognition level

Bottom: schematic representation of the acceptability of usage problems on the basis of usage guide treatment and percentage of POSITIVE attitudes

Although this study has shown that the influence of prescriptivism on language

practice may not be robust, it is nevertheless still present, and accounting for this influence in a nuanced way is necessary in studies of variation in the context of prescriptively targeted features. The study has also shown that the twentieth century is indeed the period of the prescription stage in American English (Milroy and Milroy 2012), and usage guides certainly perform a function in regulating language practice specifically in the context of standard written registers. However, there are strong indicators that usage guides are changing over time, as a result of a greater sensitivity to changing norms in language use, as well as changing attitudes. A case in point here is the acceptance of split infinitives. Finally, the application of the three-pronged approach used in this study has proved suitable for uncovering the complex nature of the interplay between prescriptive attitudes on the one hand, and language use and language users on the other.