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Grassroots prescriptivism

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Citation

Lukac, M. (2018, November 22). *Grassroots prescriptivism*. *LOT dissertation series*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/67115>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Title: Grassroots prescriptivism

Issue Date: 2018-11-22

Introduction

1.1 Grammar vigilantes

‘For years I’ve heard rumours that here in Bristol someone has been skulking around the streets late at night correcting poor punctuation on shop fronts and signs. Now I always thought it was just an urban myth, but then I heard from a friend of a friend who said it was true.’ This is an introduction to the BBC Radio 4 programme ‘The Apostrophiser’ (Ledgard, 2017) about a self-proclaimed grammar vigilante who garnered much media attention in 2017 for his mission to purge the streets of Bristol of errant apostrophes (e.g. Kentish, 2017). The so-called Banksy of punctuation (Morris, 2017), however, is hardly a unique case of public linguistic censorship enforced by a layperson. Inspired by the success of Lynne Truss’s bestselling prescriptive guide to punctuation, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* (2004), Jeff Deck and Benjamin Herson created the Typo Eradication Advancement League and travelled around the US armed with markers and correction fluid righting the spelling and punctuation errors displayed in public spaces (cf. §3.2; Beal, 2009).

Since the web created a new public platform for both debate and publishing, it is unsurprising that the efforts to clean up and preserve the language have continued unfolding in digital form. Thus, in 2015, a Wikipedia editor, Bryan Henderson, removed 47,000 instances of the expression ‘comprised of’ from the online encyclopaedia on the account

of its redundancy (Shariatmadari, 2015). Henderson claims that ‘comprised of’ is a conflation of ‘comprised’ and ‘composed of’, and the more appropriate alternative is ‘consist of’. According to the myriad reports on the matter, grammar activism is widespread, and it is not only displayed through the public corrections of disputed items of language use. Attitudes and activities of the self-styled linguistic censors can also be traced through letters to the editors of newspapers that contain criticisms of usage features deemed problematical or nonstandard. Letters containing complaints regarding usage are arguably as old as the letter-to-the-editor genre itself. The dates of publication of such letters correspond to the earliest found in online newspaper databases, such as the *Proquest Historical Newspaper Database*, of which the following—criticising non-standard syntactic constructions found in American English—is an example:

- (1) I read with interest an article in your Times of to-day on the phonology and orthography of our language. Will not your correspondent give our young and old men, our children and old women some scathing remarks that shall cause them to eschew ‘I done’, ‘I come to town’, ‘I seen’, ‘I hadn’t ought, had I?’ and a longer list, which I spare you, of syntax so abominable that the young ladies of ‘the family’, strange to say, blush when the ungrammatical member’s mouth is opened. (‘Solecisms of speech’, *New York Times*, 27 August 1876)

Prescriptive practices, as Cameron has already pointed out (1995, p. 2), are fundamental to language use. And, as Burridge puts it, they ‘belong to our tabooing behaviour generally’ and are part of, she claims, a wider ‘human struggle to control unruly nature’ (2010, p. 3). It is these prescriptive comments of ordinary people expressed in letters

to newspapers, radio phone-ins, online discussions, and even on Twitter, that are central to this thesis. Instead of focussing on formal acts of censorship that are carried out institutionally by language planning boards, governmental committees, and agencies, the present thesis sheds light on the attempts of lay people to identify and eradicate perceived linguistic mistakes, which are here dubbed ‘grassroots prescriptivism’.

Before going on to describe the contents of my work, I would like to clarify several points and elaborate on the context in which the studies presented in the following chapters were conducted. My views on popular perceptions of language were shaped by investigations into letter-to-the-editor sections of newspapers across the English-speaking world (cf. Chapters 2 and 3); interviews with British journalists who were either in charge of their media institution’s stylistic guidelines or were in constant contact with their audience concerning matters relating to language at the time this study was conducted (§2.3); online surveys devised to test the attitudes of the general public on usage (§2.4, §2.5.2, §6.3); and an analysis of online usage discussions found in a grammar blog (Chapter 4) and on Wikipedia (Chapter 5). Public views on language have also been brought into relation with actual usage based on patterns identified in state-of-the-art corpora—such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008–) (Chapter 6)—and the prescriptive advice found in both traditional, print usage guides (§5.2, §6.2), and their online equivalents (Chapters 4 and 5).

It is these three perspectives on language use, that of the general public, descriptive linguistics, and prescriptivists, that have been ex-

plored within the research project ‘Bridging the Unbridgeable: Linguists, Prescriptivists and the General Public’ (2011–2016) led by Professor Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade of which this study is part. In the attempts of bridging gaps among the three communities, I have reached out to the general public by engaging in discussions on the topics relating to prescriptivism, which is something that had rarely been done before this project began. I have also solicited responses from the public to questions pertaining to the acceptability of different usage features. Much of this communication was conducted through blog posts on our website (<https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/>) and articles featured in the *English Today* journal from the first issue of 2014 until the last one published in 2016. Considering the relevance placed on interaction within the course of my investigation, I have chosen to include examples of it in the form of my own *English Today* articles (Appendix A) and blog posts (Appendix B) in this thesis. These pieces exemplify an interactive and crowdsourcing methodological approach in linguistics, widely separated from the pronouncements of what Cameron refers to as ‘the finger-wagging tradition’ (1995, p. 3), in which speakers are seen as separate from the language they use, and their attitudes and perceptions relating to usage as irrelevant and possibly harmful.

It is worth noting that this study is embedded in a larger research agenda whose remarkable development I have been able to observe since I started conducting my investigation, and which I will here outline only briefly. In 2012, the field saw new editions of two groundbreaking classical works, Milroy and Milroy’s *Authority in Language* (4th ed.) and Cameron’s *Verbal Hygiene* (revised ed.). New comprehen-

sive accounts of prescriptivism, such as Curzan's *Fixing English* (2014), have appeared in print as well. Moreover, in spite of the recurring pronouncements that 'linguists have [just] not been good about informing the general public about language' (Bauer & Trudgill, 1998, p. xv), a number of linguists have recently been communicating their thoughts on usage and prescriptivism through blogs (*Language Log*, <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/>), TED talks (McWhorter, 2013; Curzan, 2014), podcasts (Slate's *Lexicon Valley*, http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/lexicon_valley.html), and even guest appearances on late night television (The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, 2018). Research projects on language standardisation have proliferated, a prime example of which is the Europe-wide network Standard Language Ideology in Contemporary Europe (SLICE). Studies on prescriptivism and its various aspects are continuing to appear in growing numbers in print and they are presented at conferences. (Five conferences on prescriptivism have been organised so far.¹) Researchers are beginning to answer some of the fundamental questions relating to prescriptivism, the most prominent among which is: What is its effect on language change? (e.g. Auer & González-Díaz, 2005; Poplack & Dion, 2009; Anderwald, 2011; Hinrichs, Szmercsanyi, & Bohmann, 2015).

The five case studies presented here are the result of writing my way into an explanation of grassroots prescriptivism, which comprises yet another factor in this complex field. In doing so, I relied on both the methodology and theoretical insights stemming primarily from socio-

¹ The conferences were organised in Sheffield (2003), Ragusa (2006), Toronto (2009), Leiden (2013), and Park City (2017).

linguistics, more specifically, its strands investigating language attitudes, language change, as well as computer-mediated communication, and corpus linguistics, for the purposes of key word and key semantic analysis, as well as the presentation of frequency-related observations of linguistic variation and change. I will return to these in describing the work's outline at the end of this introduction.

1.2 The end of prescriptivism?

Two contradictory views seem to coexist among linguists pertaining to the current developments and the future of prescriptivism, one of which argues for its apparent demise, and another for linguistic censorship being as vital as ever before. David Crystal, in his chapter 'Into the twenty-first century' in Mugglestone's *The Oxford History of the English Language* (2006, p. 408), advocates the former:

During the latter part of the twentieth century, a noticeable trend towards a more egalitarian society began to reduce the severity of social-class distinctions, recognise the value of diversity, safeguard the rights of minorities, and revitalise demotic values. The immediate linguistic effect was a move away from the prescriptive ethos of the past 250 years [...] and it brought the introduction of new educational paradigms of language study.

Other linguists have also observed the parallelism between the relaxing social norms and those relating to language use and attitudes. In his 1997 chapter 'Parallel Corpora' in *Corpus-Based Studies in English*, Christian Mair offered social explanations for the diachronic frequency changes he observed in the four parallel corpora of the Brown family, Brown (US, 1961), Frown (US, 1992), LOB (GB, 1961), and FLOB (GB, 1991). He used the term 'colloquialisation' (1997, p. 206) in de-

noting a tendency for written norms to become more informal and closer to the spoken language.² The term has been taken up many times since then to account for the increase in the use of, to name only a few examples, contractions of negatives (*not* to *n't*) and verb forms (*it's*, *we'll*) (e.g., Leech et al., 2009, p. 240), the growth of the progressive in writing (e.g., Levin, 2013, p. 215), as well as zero-relative clauses, and *get*-passives (e.g., Mair, 2006, p. 189) (cf. Appendix B, 'Out with whom, in with split infinitives'). I also observed linguistic norms seemingly loosening in my effort to keep records of the changing guidelines among informal authorities in the English language over the past five years. As of April 2012, the Associated Press allows for the usage of *hopefully* as a sentence adverbial, and, as of March 2014, the same source accepts *over* to indicate greater numerical value instead of *more than*. *The Washington Post* made headlines across the world in December 2015 when it accepted the usage of the often-disputed singular *they*,³ as well as the spelling *email*, *website*, *mic*, and *Walmart*, in place of the earlier variants *e-mail*, *Web site*, *mike*, and *Wal-Mart*.

The growing informality of language is not the only indicator of changes, but so are the attitudes towards perceived standards. 'Talking proper'—a phenomenon which Mugglestone traces back to late eighteenth-century London (2007, pp. 279–80)—has been replaced with the notion of 'talking posh'. The superior status of the standard is now challenged as well (Coupland, 2010, pp. 137–38) by the majority of those

² Biber and Finegan (1989, p. 515) preceded Mair's observation by a decade in noting that '[t]he development of a popular literacy fostered a shift towards more oral styles'.

³ Singular *they* was the winner of the American Dialect Society's annual word of the year competition in 2015 (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade & Ebner, 2017).

who are not born into it. It has also been suggested, and largely accepted, that we are currently witnessing a kind of norm-levelling, destandardisation, or the democratisation of the standard through which non-standard variants are incorporated and absorbed (Coupland, 2010, p. 145; Coupland & Kristiansen, 2011, pp. 11–35; Armstrong & Mackenzie, 2013, pp. 161–207). In spite, however, of what we may expect at a time when many are arguing against discrimination and for equality of all groups of people, linguistic prejudices are still largely accepted (Burrige, 2010, p. 4). New generations of ‘language mavens’, ‘pedants’, and ‘wordwatchers’ (Millar, 1998, pp. 177–8) seem to be reiterating much of the older pronouncements in support of the standard language ideology. Severin, for instance, has shown in her sociolinguistic study of young Australians’ attitudes towards disputed items of usage that, in spite of their greater awareness of the social factors governing usage, prescriptive attitudes and scrutiny remain among this group of speakers (2017, p. 79). A British example of a young person acting as a grassroots prescriptivist is included in the Albert Gifford story in Chapter 2.

The prescriptive backlash is also evident in the rising number and popularity of usage guides across the English-speaking world (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, in progress). These publications have not as a matter of course become more lenient in their approach since appearing as a separate genre in the eighteenth century (Tieken-Boon van Ostade & Ebner, 2017). Recent examples of usage guides that, contrary to linguistic evidence in favour of the features’ spread and acceptability, continue to condemn, for instance, the usage of *hopefully* as a sentence ad-

verbial, or spelling *alright* as one instead of two words (*all right*), are Simon Heffer's *Strictly English* (2010), and Caroline Taggart's *Her Ladyship's Guide to the Queen's English* (2010). Bryan Garner is perhaps the best-known American answer to the current legacy of the prescriptive usage guide tradition. In spite of referring to himself as a 'prescriptive descriptivist' (Hingston, 2012) and making use of corpus linguistic tools in the newest edition of *Garner's Modern English Usage* (2016), he continues, in many instances, to make prescriptive *ipse dixit* judgements on language in disseminating usage advice (cf. §5.5.4, §6.1, and §6.5). Finally, this study too would not have been possible without relying on the plethora of language commentary that can be found in all types of media outlets, from newspapers (Chapters 2 and 3), and blog comments (Chapter 4), to discussions on Wikipedia's Talk pages (Chapter 5). As these accounts jointly demonstrate that grassroots prescriptivism, and not only the more institutionalised forms of linguistic censorship, is alive and well in the twenty-first century.

1.3 For how long has the language been in decay?

The short answer to this question is: probably since speakers were aware of any norms being attached to language use. A more detailed answer requires a closer look at the scholarship on the topic of grassroots prescriptivism. The most notable attempt to devise a theoretical account of popular commentary on what is perceived as incorrect usage was made by Milroy and Milroy in the first edition of their book *Authority in Language* (1985). The two authors introduced the concept of the 'complaint tradition' (cf. §5.1) to denote 'the form of complaint

about so-called misuse of language and linguistic decline, [which] has altered little since the eighteenth century' (Milroy & Milroy, 2012, p. vii). In their seven-stage standardisation model, they place the complaint tradition in the final stage of the process of standardisation, i.e. *prescription*, which follows the *selection* of a variety, its *acceptance* by influential social groups, geographical and social *diffusion*, *maintenance*, *elaboration* of function, and *codification* (2012, p. 22). Their model explains well the perpetuating nature of popular linguistic complaints. Although Milroy and Milroy's standardisation model builds on the one introduced by Haugen (1966; 1987), which is arguably the most commonly applied model among linguists, it differs from it in a fundamental way. Whereas Haugen views standardisation as a teleological phenomenon that reaches its final point when the standard variety is fully established, the Milroys see it as a '*process* which—to a greater or lesser degree—is always in progress in those languages that undergo it' (2012, p. 19). Moreover, Haugen's model lacks a prescription stage (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2012), which is relevant for the topic dealt with in this collection.

In describing the complaint tradition, Milroy and Milroy introduced a simple typology and distinguished between the so-called legalistic and moralistic complaints.⁴ The authors define legalistic complaints as 'concerned with correctness [and the] "mis-use" of specific parts of phonology, grammar, vocabulary of English' (2012, p. 31). An

⁴ A newer, fourfold typology of prescriptivism was introduced by Curzan (2014), although her account focuses rather on institutionalised instead of grassroots prescriptive efforts. In an attempt to disentangle strands of prescriptivism, she distinguishes among *standardizing*, *stylistic*, *restorative*, and *politically responsive* prescriptivism (p. 24).

example of such a complaint from the data collected for my analysis is the following comment from the *New York Times* on the usage of the euphemism *extraordinary rendition*. At the time the letter was written, debates took place in the US regarding the transfer of people from one country another for interrogation under torture, which is what the said euphemism denotes.

- (2) How can this country maintain that it is a true democracy and the moral leader of the world yet permit atrocities under its program of ‘**extraordinary rendition**’? (2 March 2005)

The moralistic complaints, towards which the authors are more sympathetic, ‘recommend clarity in writing and attack what appear to be abuses of language that may mislead and confuse the public’ (2012, p. 31). They are anticipated in Jonathan Swift’s *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712), and perhaps best exemplified in the still often-cited essay written by George Orwell *Politics and the English Language* (1946). A more recent example comes from the following letter to the *New York Times*, whose author brings to the editor’s attention the usage of the term *partner* instead of *spouse* in reference to same-sex married couples:

- (3) If Gary Sullivan and Mark Young married in 2005, why do you refer to Mr. Young as Mr. Sullivan’s ‘partner’ rather than his spouse? Using the former term tends to suggest that married same-sex couples are somehow less married than their different-sex counterparts, whom you would never call ‘partners’. (4 May 2007)

Prescriptivism is primarily seen as loaded with the baggage of the standard language ideology, which Milroy and Milroy define as ‘a pub-

lic *consciousness* of the standard [and a *belief*] that there is a “right” way of using English’ (2012, p. 25). What example (3) demonstrates, however, is that prescriptive rhetoric can also be harnessed for politically responsive purposes (cf. Curzan, 2014, p. 24). More recent examples of discussions relating to moralistic complaints see are included in Appendix B in the blog posts entitled ‘Censoring the *G-word*’ and ‘Migrants: the language crisis’.

Previous research on the topic has covered popular linguistic complaints and comments appearing from the eighteenth century onwards. These earliest records of public prescriptive efforts were analysed by Carol Percy, who set up and analysed a database of book reviews in two eighteenth-century periodicals, the *Monthly Review* and the *Critical Review* published at the time (the database itself is still available online, <http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/reviews/>) Percy’s analysis (2008; 2009) yielded many valuable insights into the period in which language seemingly became an objective index of the quality of the book under review. Through the lens of the current analysis, the book reviewers are considered to be the earliest among the grassroots prescriptivists. They pointed out instances of non-standard usage to the readers, and such usage was interpreted as an index of the author’s level of education, social background, and professional competence (Percy, 2010, p. 59). On the market in which high social capital was beginning to be attached to good grammar, reviewers became self-appointed language educators and entertainers of their readers by critically judging contemporary literature. Reviewers appropriated the ideology of standardisation, and by doing so they attempted to ensure their professional

legitimacy through the book review genre, which was just beginning to develop. Percy's is the first historical sociolinguistic overview of complaints in print media. Complaints dating from the twentieth century onwards are taken up elsewhere for analysis.

There are two trajectories of research among the studies that systematically account for linguistic complaints, those that seek to examine linguistic complaints by providing overviews of the problematical usage features and those that do so with the aim of analysing metalinguistic discourses. The studies conducted by Algeo (1985) and Crystal (1997) are examples of the former. Both authors examined public linguistic grievances expressed in the media. Algeo did so by analysing a variety of columns and letters by readers in the US, reporting in most detail on the *Dear Abby* advice column, which, in spite of not specialising in language, included many contributions that touched on usage during the long period of its existence (1956–2009). Algeo concluded that, in spite of a sizeable portion of the reading public being interested in language, it is the topics of lexis rather than grammar that are the subject of popular worry (1985, pp. 57, 63). Homophones (*wreckless/reckless*), variant forms with the same stem (*healthy /healthful*), and redundant expressions (*most unique, personal opinion*) incite much debate. Conversely, grammatical items (sentence-final prepositions, the past tense of *hang* and *sneak, it is we/it is us*) are rarely discussed according to the author (1985, p. 64)

Crystal introduced a 'Grammatical Top Ten' list into *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* (1997, p. 194), which was based on the letters commenting on the most disliked usages from

the listeners of the BBC Radio 4's program *English Now* hosted by the author. He lists the top ten features in the following order: (1) *between you and I*, (2) split infinitives, (3) the placement of *only* next to a word it does not modify as in *I only saw Jane* instead of *I saw only Jane*, (4) the usage of *none* with a plural instead of a singular verb, (5) *differently to/than* instead of *differently from*, (6) sentence-final prepositions, (7) *I will/you shall/he shall* to refer to future time instead of *I shall/you will/he will*, (8) the usage of sentence-initial *hopefully* in the sense of 'it is to be hoped that', (9) replacing *who* with *whom* as the objective form and (10) double negatives. It is worth mentioning that this list served as one of the starting points in establishing the categories of usage problems in the Hyper Usage Guide of English, or HUGE database developed within 'Bridging the Unbridgeable' project (Straaijer, 2014).⁵ The database comprising 77 usage guides, and 123 mostly grammatical usage problems, its purpose, and some examples of the ways in which it can be used by researchers, are described in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this thesis.

Instead of focusing on single usage features as did Algeo and Crystal, González-Díaz (2007) and McManus (2008) examined ideological underpinnings of linguistic purism through a corpus-based analyses of reader letters from databases of *The Times* and *The Guardian*. González-Díaz (2007) compared the findings from contemporary sources—the letters published in the two newspapers in the period between 1995 and 2005—with the descriptions of the eighteenth-century pre-

⁵ More information on the construction of the HUGE database is available on the project's blog (<https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/>).

scriptive strands provided by Watts (2000) and Hohenhaus (2002), which are listed in Table 1.1.

What González-Díaz found is quite indicative of the repetitive and perpetuating nature of prescriptivism (cf. §4.4.4). Namely, many of the historical strands mentioned by the two authors have survived until today and the ones that most commonly reappeared in present-day English were the belief in language as a symbol of national identity and the belief in a Golden Age of the English language.

Table 1.1 Mythical strands in the ideology of prescriptivism according to Watts (2000, p. 41) and Hohenhaus (2002, p. 155)

Watts	Hohenhaus
- language and ethnicity	- the golden age assumption
- language variety	- primacy of written over spoken language
- language superiority	- confusion of language and classical logic
- language and nationality	- the word is the basic unit
- language perfection	- literary language is the highest form of language
- golden age	
- undesirability of change	

Both González-Díaz (2007) and McManus (2008) adopted Halliday's transitivity model in an attempt to discover differences in the ideological stance between the two British quality newspapers, one traditionally conservative and the other liberal and to identify a 'moral panic' in the letters.⁶ Whereas they did not find any evidence of a moral

⁶ The concept of 'moral panic' is defined as an episode 'where the media and society at large fasten upon a particular problem and generate an alarmist debate around it that in turn leads to action being taken against the perceived problem' (McEnergy, 2006, p. 92). Whereas the term received academic treatment already half a century ago by, most notably, McLuhan (1967, p. 89) and Young (1971), in the context of linguistics, the term was appropriated much more recently, by, among others, Cameron (1995, pp. 83–6), McEnergy (2006), and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2013, p. 9).

panic in the analysed data, their studies produced interesting results nevertheless. McManus compared letters published in the 1980s (1985–89), that is in the period of the so-called grammar panic stirred by the national curriculum debate in the UK (Cameron, 1995, pp. 79–116; Milroy & Milroy, 2012, pp. 132–6), with letters published in the 1990s (1995–99). Significant differences were found only in the linguistic levels that the published letters addressed, for which McManus does not offer an explanation. Whereas in the 1980s the main topics of concern were related to lexical items (51%), which corresponds to Algeo’s findings mentioned above, the focus in the letters studied by González-Díaz and McManus was on matters of orthography and spelling (63%) in the 1990s. Finally, both studies suggest that the *Times* letters are more alarmist in their tone when compared to those found in *The Guardian*. We can tentatively conclude that the letters published in the more conservative paper of the two are more prescriptive in their tone.

The introduction of the internet saw the rise of the complaint tradition in the new medium as a result. The ‘digital’ complaint tradition has been explored in several studies all of which explored online complaints within different research endeavours. Skrede Pontes (2007) thus analysed comments on two language-related blogs with the aim of exploring how the complaint tradition as described by Milroy and Milroy (2012) is reflected on blogs as new channels of complaints. In the blogs analysed, she found that people complained more often about written than spoken language and about grammar more than any other component of the language (such as spelling, punctuation, pronunciation, and usage in general).

Chapman (2012) looked at the relationship between politics and prescriptivism in the US by examining the online complaints made concerning the language of politicians. His analysis of web forums and blogs showed that linguistic prescriptivism wins most support from the political left. Chapman was not the first, however, to look at the correlation between political views and prescriptivism, Cameron did so before him in her account of the debate surrounding the national curriculum in the UK (1995, pp. 78–115). Her results run counter to Chapman's, as she found that it was the conservatives, and not the liberals, who were the most strident supporters of prescriptivism. It needs to be acknowledged here, however, that the comparisons between their findings are restricted by the differences between the political systems of the two countries and their different language ideologies (cf. Milroy, 2001; §2.3.1). Linguistic criticism of politicians, Chapman concludes, is premised on an assumed connection between a person's language skills and their ability to govern: people should be governed by the 'educated', the participants of the online discussions conclude, that is, by those able to use an 'educated style'. Usage in these debates may thus be seen as an index of group identity. Problematical features and 'incorrect' usage are, however, often not identified in any linguistic detail by the participants in the online discussions Chapman analysed. The complaints as such can thus be viewed as no more than stereotypes of the politicians' language and of the language of the groups to which they cater.

Finally, Heyd (2014) analysed folk-linguistic photo blogs that record linguistic mistakes and nonstandard practices in public spaces.

The blogs analysed in her study record the usage of emphatic quotation marks (e.g. *New 'management'*, *Fresh brown 'eggs'*) and they are in effect examples of language policing online in the sense that their authors are displaying nonstandard linguistic features and are consequently shaming and stereotyping the speakers who use them, as shown in Figure 1.1. Heyd found that, regardless of the explicit stance expressed by the blog authors in presenting the contents of their blogs, the blogs are all either overtly or covertly prescriptive. In the digital sphere, she goes on to conclude, folk-linguistic photo blogs are prime examples of grassroots prescriptivism.

Monday, January 20, 2014
New "Potatoes"



I wonder what they are actually frying and when they are doing it? Plantains? Yesterday? Thanks Joe.

Posted by bethany at 2:10 AM

Recommend this on Google

Figure 1.1 Sample picture from a folk-linguistic photo blog (from Heyd, 2014, p. 491)

Whereas the case studies presented above focus on public prescriptive efforts either predating the internet or in their digital form, one

of the aims of the present work is to introduce a view that offers continuity and contrast between the old and the new media, as the analyses in Chapters 2 and 5 will demonstrate.

Moreover, a socio-linguistic examination of prescriptive efforts from below has so far been limited at best or based on anecdotal evidence. Whereas my findings represent only snapshots of grassroots prescriptivism, they are the result of systematic analyses of the demographic groups of grassroots prescriptivists, and at the very least provide provisional insights as to the backgrounds and motivations of the people engaging in linguistic criticism and correction.

1.4 Thesis outline

This work offers a new perspective on prescriptive efforts from below, which have been of particular importance in the history of the English language, a language that, for better or worse, lacks a single, formal, institutional authority. Although they take historical aspects into account when necessary, the case studies introduced are primarily synchronic and aim to capture the state of twenty-first-century prescriptivism. Methodologically speaking, while the current work can be placed alongside societal treatment studies—the approach within attitude studies in sociolinguistics that looks at content of various sources found ‘out there’ in society (Garrett, 2010, p. 51)—it owes equally to the tradition of corpus-based discourse analysis and tools applied in corpus linguistics and variationist sociolinguistics in general.

Chapter 2 directly connects with the basic sociolinguistic considerations at the core of the present research agenda. It attempts to pro-

vide a provisional overview of the landscape of grassroots prescriptivism and sets the stage for further exploration. A comparative perspective is adopted in exploring grassroots prescriptivism in both traditional and new media. The aim of the chapter is to answer the questions: ‘Who are the people engaging in usage discussions?’; ‘Which usage features are speakers particularly worried about?’; ‘Can we trace any changes regarding the features addressed in the debates?’. In attempting to provide answers to them, I first turn to the analysis of letter to the editors of *The Times* and *The New York Times* published between 2000 and 2010. This rich source of data allows for insights into the identity of the authors, as well as for a comparison on the state of prescriptivism on both sides of the Atlantic. One of the few attempts of comparing the way that the standard language is ideologised in Britain and the United States has been made by Leslie Milroy (2001). My analysis sets out to provide empirically supported insights on the topic. The second part of the chapter explores the results of an online survey that set out to investigate the practices of voicing linguistic complaints in traditional and new media alike (cf. Appendix C). By doing so, a preliminary comparison is drawn between the traditional forms of grassroots prescriptivism, i.e. letters to the editor, and their digital counterparts.

Both Chapters 2 and 3 share their focus on letters to the editor. They differ in that whereas Chapter 2 aims to provide a top-down sociolinguistic overview, Chapter 3 focuses on a staple theme of usage debates in such letters, namely, the misused apostrophe. They complement each other in that together they paint a picture of the overarching

topics and identities of the authors of such letters, and of the discursive strategies they use. In attempting to answer the research question ‘What are the characteristics of prescriptive language in letters to the editor?’, Chapter 3 employs a corpus-based approach to exploring a collection of letters published across the entire English-speaking world on the topic of the misused apostrophe. The analysis relies on the corpus-based key word and key semantic domain analysis and contrasts the two respective approaches.

The next two chapters comprise yet another topical unit in that they both deal with instances of digital grassroots prescriptivism and bring them into relation with the traditional prescriptive canon as it is represented in the HUGE database. Chapter 4 looks into the comment section of the US-based usage blog *Grammar Girl*. The central research questions in this chapter are: ‘How similar is an online usage guide to its traditional counterparts?’ and ‘What are the characteristics of the comment section of the *Grammar Girl* website?’. The findings show that, in spite of the change in the medium, prescriptive advice has remained much the same in terms of its content. By way of a qualitative analysis, the chapter chronicles the commenter identity constructions as well as the types of comments they post, the support for the arguments they offer, and, finally, their use of humour and anecdotes. Wikipedia’s Talk pages comprise the second online platform for grassroots prescriptivism explored in this thesis. Chapter 5 thus sets out to answer the questions: ‘How are usage problems discussed on Wikipedia’s Talk pages?’, ‘How, if at all, is the gap between lay people and experts closed in discussions on the respective platform?’, and ‘What are the

differences between the advice formulated through grassroots efforts on Wikipedia and the usage advice disseminated by authors of usage guides included in the HUGE database?'.

Chapter 6 departs from previous chapters, which focus on grassroots prescriptivism proper, in that it explores the gradual, albeit limited, acceptance of a stigmatised usage feature, the controversial adverb *thusly*. Whereas complaints and speaker attitudes are explored, corpus-based analysis of the feature's usage takes centre stage. The question posed in the title, 'What is the difference between *thus* and *thusly*?', is explored through triangulation of research methods. The chapter examines the viewpoint of prescriptivists on the usage of *thusly* (by tracing the word's history in usage guides), the general public (through an attitudes survey), and its actual usage (as it is evidenced in language corpora). The respective methodological triangulation is included to exemplify the approach embedded in the wider agenda of the 'Bridging the Unbridgeable' project, namely, one that takes into consideration the three sides of the debate (linguists, prescriptivists, and the general public) in exploring the prescriptively stigmatised linguistic features. Chapter 7 revisits the key terminology, summarises the main findings of this thesis, reflects on the methodology, and looks towards the future of prescriptivism.

When I started my journey into this topic, the amount of material available seemed overwhelming, which is in itself a testament to the presence and relevance of grassroots prescriptivism. It has become clear quite quickly that the topic is complex enough to engage many researchers and their creativity in a number of ways, with the field only

starting to take a more distinct shape. This work is a summary of the paths I have taken in describing grassroots prescriptivism, and of the arguably early attempts at empirically examining questions that have until recently remained on the fringes of the discipline.

