# Grassroots prescriptivism

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# Linguistic prescriptivism in letters to the editor[1]

THAT APOSTROPHE
Sir, – Apropos 'That Apostrophe', I have just seen a sign in one of our local shops: 'Open Sunday for Christma's'. (Sign's of the time's?) – Yours, etc., C. HARPUR
(*The Irish Times*, 19 December 1984)

## 3.1 Introduction

Complaints about English language use have been present in print media from the eighteenth century onwards (Percy, 2009). Language-related letters to the editor are a channel through which writers of these letters promote the standard language by stigmatizing nonstandard varieties. Linguists commenting on linguistic prescriptivism often describe such letters as forums for language pedants, where the often 'poorly informed' (Wardhaugh, 1999, p. 2) 'deplore various solecisms and warn of linguistic decline' (Cameron, [1995] 2012, p. vii). Until the proliferation of online discussions of language use and correctness in the last two decades, letters to the editor have been the best-kept records of the lay community's attitudes on linguistic matters (McManus, 2008, p. 1).

[1] Lukač, M. (2015). Linguistic prescriptivism in letters to the editor. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *37*(3), pp. 1747–1757.

The expression of attitudes towards language correctness has been more thoroughly studied in the context of grammars and dictionaries (Card et al., 1984; Sundby et al., 1991, pp. 38–53); however, hitherto there have been few studies on the expression of language attitudes in letters to the editor. González-Díaz (2007) and McManus (2008), for example, used *The Times* and *The Guardian* archives (1995–2005) to analyse ideological underpinnings of linguistic purism.

The study presented here aims to identify the characteristics of prescriptive language in letters to the editor by applying a bottom-up, corpus-driven approach on a corpus of letters written on the subject of the possessive apostrophe. Letters written on the possessive apostrophe were chosen for this study because the apostrophe has been widely discussed in the print media and the letters dealing with this topic are relatively easy to identify by a key word search.

### 3.2 The 'misused' possessive apostrophe

A discrepancy seems to exist between the arguably general agreement on the use of apostrophes in grammar books and usage guides (e.g. Burchfield, 2004, p. 466; Swan, 2005, pp. 464–5) and actual usage that often deviates from the prescribed rules (Sklar, 1976, p. 175). Deviation in apostrophe usage is not a new phenomenon. There are reports dating it back to the beginning of the seventeenth century: 'My earliest sighting [of the greengrocer's apostrophe] was in a cargo list (still in a US museum) of a ship arriving in Virginia in the 1620s. It referred, among other things, to 23 female slave's' (*The Guardian*, 4 March 2003).

The history of this punctuation mark has been all but straightforward (cf. Sklar, 1976; Barfoot, 1991; Beal, 2010), which earned the apostrophe the nickname 'the stepchild of English orthography' (Sklar, 1976, p. 175). In her historical account, Sklar (1976, p. 176) reports that the use of the possessive apostrophe was not adopted until the end of the eighteenth century, although the mark had already infiltrated the English language from French in the late sixteenth century (Crystal, 2003b, p. 203). Sklar concludes that, after a period of stability in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, 'the genitive apostrophe is gradually returning to the confusion from which it but recently emerged' (Sklar, 1976, p. 175). Linguists and authors agree that the apostrophe is on its way out (Sklar, 1976, p. 183; Denison, 1998, pp.119–120; Hitchings, 2011). This process, they claim, will hardly raise any ambiguities and misunderstandings (Denison, 1998, p. 120). Prescriptivists tend to disagree claiming that, once abolished, the apostrophe will need to be reinvented (Truss, 2004, p. 67).

A number of language pedants have engaged in elaborate attempts of apostrophe preservation in recent years. John Richards, a former journalist, founded the Apostrophe Protection Society[2] in 2001, whose primary aim is to 'preserve the correct use of this currently much abused punctuation mark in all forms of text written in the English language.' The society's website, along with other platforms such as Apostrophe Abuse[3] and Apostrophe Catastrophes,[4] contains web links and

[2] The Apostrophe Protection Society's website http://www.apostrophe.org.uk.
[3] The Apostrophe Abuse's website http://www.apostropheabuse.com.
[4] Apostrophe Catastrophes http://www.apostrophecatastrophes.com.

visuals illustrating the orthographic pet peeve. One of the best publicised apostrophe preservation attempts was the Great Typo Hunt, a nationwide mission by two young Americans who corrected hundreds of public typos during a three-month road trip and were imprisoned as a consequence (cf. Beal, 2010; Hurdle, 2010).

The possessive apostrophe has in recent years received a considerable amount of attention from prescriptivists, linguists, and the general public. Truss devotes an entire chapter (2004, pp. 35–67) to the apostrophe in her usage guide on punctuation *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. In her account of twenty-first century prescriptivism, Beal (2010) argues that the greengrocer's apostrophe is the prototype pet peeve of what she calls 'New Prescriptivism' (Beal, 2012). Kress (2000, p. 9) describes the greengrocer's apostrophe as a usage item well recognised by many, the object of mild humour and evaluation. The fact that the possessive apostrophe is so often mentioned in a number of accounts on linguistic prescriptivism reaffirms its position of an 'old chestnut', a recurring linguistic item in debates on language use (Weiner, 1988, p. 175). The recurrence of the topic of the 'mis-used' apostrophes in language-related letters and its prototypical status in the prescriptivist tradition were the main grounds here for narrowing down the data collection to this particular topic.

### 3.3 Data

This study is based on a corpus made up of 258 letters to the editor collected from newspapers published throughout the English-speaking world between 1983 and 2013. There are 155,906 running words in the

corpus, and the average length of a single letter is 99 words (with standard deviation of 69 words). The letters were collected from the online databases *Factiva* and *Proquest Historical Newspaper Database* from 76 different newspapers published in Great Britain, the US, Canada, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand (for the complete list of newspapers see Appendix D). The files were selected by searching the letters to the editor sections of the databases for the key word *apostrophe*. Only the letters directly addressing language use were included in the corpus.[5]

The aim of the analysis of this corpus is to provide a contribution to identifying the common features of prescriptive language. For the analysis presented in this paper, the corpus was analysed for key words and key semantic domains by using USAS, an automatic semantic tagger (Rayson et al., 2004) integrated in the web-based tool Wmatrix (Rayson, 2009). The number of letters written on the subject of the 'misused' apostrophe has risen considerably in the time period covered by the corpus. This trend can be observed from Figure 3.1, which shows the chronological distribution of the collected LEs.

The illustrated data indicate a rising trend in publications of letters addressing apostrophe usage from 2004 onwards. This year, not incidentally, coincides with the publication of the above-mentioned bestseller *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*.

[5] In some of the older letters, the word *apostrophe* was used with the meaning 'digression in the form of address to someone not present'. It goes without saying that these were excluded from the corpus.

The discrepancies in the number of letters written on the topic over the years are not arbitrary, and for the time period from 2004 to 2013, these numbers are not influenced by the overall number of letters in the two databases.

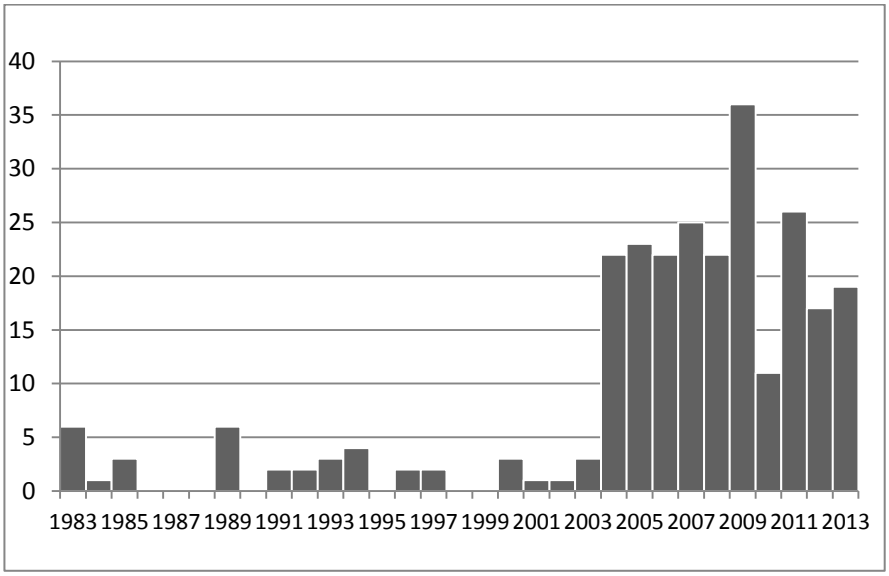


**Figure 3.1** Diachronic distribution in the Letters corpus (N=258)

Prior to 2004, there are generally fewer letters to the editor included in both *Factiva* and *Proquest Historical Newspaper Database.* Authors of letters on linguistic usage are often motivated by individual examples of 'bad' grammar which they encounter in various public locations, however, there are also certain broader social events which influence the occasional rise in the number of featured letters. The Birmingham city council decided to remove apostrophes from street and road signs in 2009 (*Birmingham Post*, 2 February 2009; 3 February 2009) and in 2013, the Mid-Devon district council decided to follow suit (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 March 2013; *Times*, 21 March 2013). The bookshop Water-

stones left out the apostrophe from its name in 2012 (*Telegraph*, 14 January 2012; *Daily Telegraph*, 14 January 2012), causing another wave of reactions. Changes in orthography on public signs and in shop names signal a wider social acceptance of apostrophe dropping,[6] causing strong reactions from the letter writers that consequently prompt them to complain publically.

## 3.4 Semantic analysis

### *3.4.1 Key words and key semantic domains*

The analysis of key words is one of the most commonly applied procedures in corpus linguistics (Baker, 2004, p. 346). Words are identified as key if their frequency is unusually high when compared to a certain norm in the form of a reference corpus (Scott, 1998, p. 62). Key word lists are useful indicators of the 'aboutness' of a text, as they usually reveal the lexical focus or preoccupations of a corpus (Baker, 2010, p. 26). Two criteria need to be fulfilled for a word to be identified as key: the word has to appear in a corpus a certain number of times, and the word's frequency of occurrence in the analysed corpus when compared with a reference corpus should be statistically significant (Scott, 1998, p. 64). The statistical significance in the current study was calculated by applying the log likelihood (LL) test. Words were considered to be key

[6] Waterstones is the latest in the line of British companies to leave out the apostrophe. Barfoot (1991, pp. 129–134) reports on the statements from Barclays Bank, Boots, Harrods, Lloyds Bank, and Selfridges concerning their abandonment of the apostrophe. The grounds provided for abandonment differ, but the companies agree on legal and advertising convenience of the simplified spelling.

at the 0.01% level ($p < 0.0001$; critical value = 15.13) and when they occurred at least five times in the corpus.

The USAS semantic analysis system (Rayson et al., 2004), additionally applied in this study, expands on the keyness method by utilising part-of-speech (POS) and semantic tags. The USAS system enables automatic semantic analysis of text and produces lists of key semantic domains instead of individual words. USAS taxonomy was originally based on the *Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English* (LLOCE). It includes 21 major discourse fields (Table 3.1) and a total of 232 semantic categories (Rayson et al., 2004, p. 3).

**Table 3.1** USAS tagset top level domains (from Rayson et al., 2004, p. 3)

| | |
|---|---|
| A | General & Abstract Terms |
| B | The Body and the Individual |
| C | Arts and Crafts |
| E | Emotional Actions, States and Processes |
| F | Food & Farming |
| G | Government & the Public Domain |
| H | Architecture, Building, Houses & the Home |
| I | Money and Commerce |
| K | Entertainment, Sports & Games |
| L | Life & Living Things |
| M | Movement, Location, Travel & Transport |
| N | Numbers & Measurement |
| O | Substances, Materials, Objects & Equipment |
| P | Education |
| Q | Linguistic Actions, States & Processes |
| S | Social Actions, States & Processes |
| T | Time |
| W | The World & Our Environment |
| X | Psychological Actions, States & Processes |
| Y | Science and Technology |
| Z | Names & Grammatical Words |

It should be noted that the semantic tags in the 150-thousand-word corpus were not manually corrected. Rayson et al. (2004) report on an

overall 91% precision of the USAS semantic tagger when applied to an evaluation corpus.

There are several advantages to the USAS approach. Whereas key word lists are made up of individual words, the USAS tagger additionally identifies over- and underused multiword expressions. The USAS system includes POS and semantic tagging which makes this system more context-sensitive compared to key word lists. By grouping key words in semantic domains, categories for analysis are reduced and individual low-frequency words that belong to a relevant semantic category are not overlooked by the researcher (Rayson, 2008, p. 526). Finally, collecting words into semantic fields indicates trends in the analysed corpus that are not visible *prima facie* in a key word list (Rayson, 2008, p. 542).

### *3.4.2 Key word analysis*

When compared with a reference corpus, top key words of an analysed corpus are often related to the stylistic features and the topic of the texts that make up a corpus (cf. Scott, 1998). The reference corpus used in the present analysis is the BNC Written Sampler (2005). The BNC Written Sampler is a one-million-word corpus compiled to mirror the composition of the full BNC to the greatest extent possible. In Table 3.2, the first twelve key words in the Letters corpus are listed when compared to the BNC Written Sampler.

The top key words in the Letters corpus in Table 3.2 are predominantly related to grammar and punctuation (*apostrophes*, *apostrophe*,

*grammar*, *punctuation*, *spelling*, *possessive*, *plural*, and *language*), which is in accordance with the topic discussed in the letters.

**Table 3.2** First twelve key words in the Letters corpus

| | Key word | Frequency Letters | %Letters | Frequency BNC Written | %BNC Written | LL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | *Apostrophes* | 85 | 0.35 | 0 | 0.00 | 633.04 |
| 2. | *Apostrophe* | 65 | 0.27 | 0 | 0.00 | 484.09 |
| 3. | *Grammar* | 56 | 0.23 | 4 | 0.00 | 387.87 |
| 4. | *Punctuation* | 55 | 0.23 | 3 | 0.00 | 386.15 |
| 5. | *Sir* | 88 | 0.37 | 146 | 0.02 | 352.65 |
| 6. | *Spelling* | 47 | 0.20 | 2 | 0.00 | 333.42 |
| 7. | *I* | 407 | 1.70 | 6904 | 0.71 | 226.60 |
| 8. | *Possessive* | 34 | 0.14 | 5 | 0.00 | 223.59 |
| 9. | *Plural* | 32 | 0.13 | 3 | 0.00 | 217.99 |
| 10. | *Language* | 53 | 0.22 | 94 | 0.01 | 207.12 |
| 11. | *sign* | 46 | 0.19 | 59 | 0.01 | 201.52 |
| 12. | *Letters* | 48 | 0.20 | 73 | 0.01 | 198.51 |

LL > 15.13 ($p < 0.0001$)

However, the key word *Sir* and the first person pronoun indicate stylistic features. The formula *Dear Sir* or *Sir* (see the example in Introduction) is traditionally used in addressing the editor in the beginning of letters. The first person pronoun is a linguistic cue for a more personalised style of the letters where the addressor is more highly involved (Biber, 1995, p. 59). Previous studies have also shown that one of the primary characteristics of this genre is the overt expression of the authors' personal opinions (Pounds, 2005, p. 69).

Finally, there are key words that appear frequently in the corpus, but are seemingly unrelated to either the topic or to specific stylistic features, such as the word *sign*. Further examination of concordance

lines for the word *sign* reveals that traffic and shop signs are often mentioned in the context of 'misused' apostrophe examples.

(1) It is equally confusing to have an apostrophe where one should not be, as in 'Not suitable for HGV's'. The first time I saw this sign I thought something had been deleted or fallen off, for example 'trailers' or 'heavy wheels' or whatever. Alas, it had not. (*Gloucestershire Echo*, 22 September 2009)

(2) Among all this mind-bending pollution, one example stands out: a large sign on the back of a building that is obviously occupied by a tattooist who is hard at work on all sorts of things except the study of punctuation. The sign reads: 'TATTOO'S' (*The Australian*, 16 February 2010).

### *3.4.3 Key semantic domains*

The same differentiation as for types of key words can be applied in distinguishing among key semantic domains. Semantic domains are primarily identified as key because of their relationship to the discourse topic or because they indicate genre characteristics of letters to the editor. Another category, namely those semantic domains that are not directly related to either topic or genre characteristics, will be examined in more detail. The hypothesis here is that these domains might reveal recurring topics and styles of argumentation in the letters, and subsequently will help identify characteristics of the discourse of linguistic prescriptivism.

The thirty-five semantic domains in Table 3.3 are ordered according to the log likelihood (LL) values they scored when compared to the BNC Written Sampler. The initial semantic domains that were identified as key were grouped into three categories: *Genre and topic*,

*Providing factual evidence*, and *Prescriptive language*. These categories were introduced following a qualitative, in-depth analysis.

**Table 3.3** Key semantic domains in the Letters corpus

| | Semantic domain | Frequency Letters | % Letters | Frequency BNC Written | % BNC Written | LL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Language, speech and grammar | 721 | 3.01 | 1653 | 0.17 | 2,535.33 |
| 2. | Paper documents and writing | 345 | 1.44 | 3691 | 0.38 | 393.15 |
| 3. | Evaluation: Inaccurate | 88 | 0.37 | 344 | 0.04 | 235.45 |
| 4. | Education in general | 270 | 1.13 | 3691 | 0.38 | 219.73 |
| 5. | Evaluation: Accurate | 81 | 0.34 | 544 | 0.06 | 147.81 |
| 6. | Personal names | 673 | 2.81 | 16,434 | 1.70 | 141.31 |
| 7. | Using | 151 | 0.63 | 1,965 | 0.20 | 132.38 |
| 8. | Greedy | 38 | 0.16 | 117 | 0.01 | 116.07 |
| 9. | The Media: Newspapers etc. | 84 | 0.35 | 828 | 0.09 | 105.40 |
| 10. | Negative | 331 | 1.38 | 8,052 | 0.83 | 70.47 |
| 11. | Unethical | 49 | 0.20 | 516 | 0.05 | 56.92 |
| 12. | Pronouns | 2,090 | 8.72 | 72,023 | 7.44 | 49.16 |
| 13. | The Media: Books | 97 | 0.40 | 1741 | 0.18 | 48.03 |
| 14. | Business: Selling | 131 | 0.55 | 2,738 | 0.28 | 44.86 |
| 15. | Vehicles and transport on land | 106 | 0.44 | 2,171 | 0.22 | 38.33 |
| 16. | Seen | 14 | 0.06 | 53 | 0.01 | 38.17 |
| 17. | Unsuitable | 11 | 0.05 | 27 | 0.00 | 37.51 |
| 18. | Knowledgeable | 108 | 0.45 | 2,302 | 0.24 | 35.03 |
| 19. | Probability | 36 | 0.15 | 448 | 0.05 | 33.66 |
| 20. | Existing | 738 | 3.08 | 24,177 | 2.50 | 29.63 |
| 21. | Not understanding | 22 | 0.09 | 212 | 0.02 | 28.32 |
| 22. | Unexpected | 15 | 0.06 | 100 | 0.01 | 27.54 |
| 23. | Speech acts | 323 | 1.35 | 9,724 | 1.00 | 24.80 |
| 24. | Strong obligation or necessity | 179 | 0.75 | 4,861 | 0.50 | 24.22 |
| 25. | Avoiding | 27 | 0.11 | 354 | 0.04 | 23.41 |
| 26. | Time: Period | 279 | 1.16 | 8,327 | 0.86 | 22.63 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 27. | Quantities: Little | 11 | 0.05 | 65 | 0.01 | 22.25 |
| 28. | Food | 117 | 0.49 | 2,974 | 0.31 | 21.08 |
| 29. | Non-existing | 6 | 0.03 | 14 | 0.00 | 20.93 |
| 30. | The Media | 39 | 0.16 | 740 | 0.08 | 17.04 |
| 31. | Judgement of appearance: Ugly | 36 | 0.15 | 660 | 0.07 | 17.01 |
| 32. | Alive | 11 | 0.05 | 93 | 0.01 | 16.25 |
| 33. | Sad | 47 | 0.20 | 979 | 0.10 | 16.24 |
| 34. | Degree: Non-specific | 35 | 0.15 | 653 | 0.07 | 15.90 |
| 35. | Linguistic Actions, States and Processes; Communication | 98 | 0.41 | 2564 | 0.26 | 15.67 |

LL > 15.13 ($p < 0.0001$)

In the following sections, I will provide a more detailed analysis of the three categories relevant for the analysis presented here, *Genre and Topic* (cf. §3.4.3.1), *Providing factual evidence* (cf. §3.4.3.2), and *Prescriptive Language* (cf. §3.4.3.3), by describing the semantic domains belonging to these three categories and the lexical items within the semantic domains. Several key semantic domains were not included in the present analysis and were categorised under *Other*, these semantic domains are: *Education in general*, *Knowledgeable*, *Probability*, *Existing*, *Not understanding*, *Unexpected*, *Speech acts*, *Avoiding*, *Quantities: little*, *Non-existing*, *Alive*, *Degree: Non-specific*, and *Linguistic Actions, States and Processes*. Several of these uncategorised semantic domains can be attributed to a great number of lexical items in the corpus which are specific for the genres where 'stance' or epistemic or attitudinal comments on propositional information are expressed (*Knowledgeable, Speech Acts, Linguistic Actions, States and Processes*) (cf. Biber, 2004). Others, such as *Education in general* play a relevant multifaceted role in the prescriptivist discourse and were therefore not cate-

gorised in a single domain, but will be analysed elsewhere in more detail and length that is currently beyond the scope of this paper.

*2.4.3.1 Genre and topic*

The semantic domains *Language, speech and grammar*, *Using*, *Greedy* and *The Media: Books* are identified as key because they contain lexical items directly related to the topic of language use. The lexical items overrepresented in the Letters corpus are related to the discourse of grammar, language use and literacy.

The categorisation in Table 3.4 reveals a type of possible imprecision of the USAS system. Words indicating the grammatical functions *possessive* and *possessiveness* are categorised in the discourse field *Greedy*. The subsequent categorisation that is presented here, however, also enables critical reflection on the automatically attributed categories and creating hyper-categories.

In Table 3.5, the semantic domain of the letter to the editor may be delineated with the six respective categories: *Paper documents and writing*, *Personal names*, *Pronouns*, *The Media: Newspapers*, *The Media* and *Time: Period*. *Paper documents and writing* is a domain consisting of lexical items that reveal references to the newspaper, the letters themselves and the act of writing and editing.

*Personal names* mostly appear in letter signatures and when the authors refer back to correspondents; however, this semantic domain is of special interest also for the analysis of linguistic prescriptivism. Authors occasionally refer to the names of the individuals who are considered to be authority figures in questions of language use.

**Table 3.4** Semantic domains: Topic

| Semantic domain | Lexical items |
|---|---|
| Language speech and grammar | *abbreviation*, *accent*, *adjective*, *ambiguity*, *apostrophe*, *colloquial*, *colloquialisms*, *colons*, *comma*, *English*, *exclamation*, *expression*, *genitive*, *gerund*, *grammar*, *grammatical*, *grammatically*, *homonyms*, *illiterate*, *illiteracy*, *infinitive*, *intonation*, *language*, *linguistic*, *literate*, *misspelling*, *noun*, *paragraph*, *parlance*, *person*, *phonetic*, *phrase*, *plural*, *pragmatic*, *prefix*, *preposition*, *pronounce*, *pronunciation*, *prose*, *punctuate*, *punctuation*, *read*, *rhetorical*, *rhyme*, *semicolon*, *sentence*, *slang*, *spell*, *spelling*, *syllable*, *syntax*, *translator*, *usage*, *verb*, *vernacular*, *vocabulary*, *word* |
| Using | *use* (v.) |
| Greedy | *possessive*, *possessiveness* |
| The Media: Books | *book*, *dictionary*, *writer*, *reader*, *publisher*, *author*, *pedant*, *library*, *manual*, *proof reader*, *literature*, *copy editor*, *grammar book*, etc. |

Language professionals mentioned are commonly usage guide authors, such as Lynne Truss, and authors of classical literary works, such as Shakespeare, Dickens, Chaucer, James Joyce, and George Bernard Shaw.

By citing language professionals and literary figures, the authors are referring to linguistic authorities whose usage is exemplary on the one hand and displaying their knowledge of the field on the other. The semantic domain *Pronouns* points to the personalised style of letters to the editor when compared to a balanced written corpus.

References to the print media are also characteristic of the genre. Finally, the letters often mention specific dates (*Time: Period*) when they refer to the previously published letters that also address usage ‘Letters, September 30’, ‘Letters, January 6’, etc. Letters are often not isolated occurrences; correspondence is rather established among their

authors about usage items that on occasion continues to be printed in the respective newspapers over periods of time.

**Table 3.5** Semantic domains: Genre

| Semantic domain | Lexical items |
|---|---|
| Paper documents and writing | *letter, page, written, write, print, notice, billboard, hyphen, document, delete, leaflet, list, record, address*, etc. |
| Personal names | *Brian Alderson, Elizabeth Woodville, David Crystal, Dolores Schuh, Monica Birch, Simon Caplan, Prince George*, etc. |
| Pronouns | *I, it, its, my, myself, one, our, ourselves, own, something, that, their, themselves, these, this, those, us, we, what, whatever, which, who, whose, your, yours* |
| The Media: Newspapers | *article, columnist, correspondent, editorial, sub-editors, Gazette, headline, journal, journalism, journalistic, magazine, newsletter, newspaper, front-page, reader, reporter* |
| The Media | *editor, media, publication, publish, publishing, reviewer, serial, subeditor, title* |
| Time: Period | *December 2010, Monday, November, September 8, March 5, Jan 25*, etc. |

*3.4.3.2 Providing factual evidence*

Other semantic domains identified as key are *Business: Selling*, *Vehicles and transport on land*, *Seen*, and *Food*. In exemplifying the mistakes in the use of punctuation, the authors consistently refer to these three domains, more specifically, to the misspelled signs in shops, at the grocer's and in traffic.

Claims in the letters are commonly supported by providing factual evidence through examples, figures, facts, and specific occurrences (Pounds, 2005, p. 67). Examples from personal experience are often introduced by the verb *to notice*, as in (3):

(3) In my local market today, I noticed five unnecessary apostrophes. (*The Guardian*, 1 February 1996)

**Table 3.6** Semantic domains: Providing factual evidence

| Semantic domain | Lexical items |
|---|---|
| Business: Selling | *ad, advert, advertise, advertisement, advertising, auction, brand, car, centre, consumer, customer, customer services, mall, market, market stalls, market stall holders, marketers, marketing, merchant, realtor, rental, retailer, sale, sell, service, shop, store, supermarket, trade, trader* |
| Vehicles and transport on land | *approach, road, autobus, avenue, bike, bus, car, car park, cycle, path, cyclist, drive, HGV, lane, motorist, pathway, pedestrian, pram, railway, Rd, road, roadside, road work, sidewalk, station, street, taxi, trailer, vehicle* |
| Seen | *notice* (v.) |
| Food | *avocado, banana, bean, beef, breakfast, brunch, butcher, café, cafeteria, carrot, chef, cook, curry, dine, dining, dinner, eat, food, fruit, greengrocer, grocer, grocery, ice-cream, left-over, lunch, marmalade, meal, menu, nutrition, orange, pancake, pea, pear, peel, peppered, pizza, restaurant, sandwich, sausage, spread, store, supper, taco, toast, tomato, veg, vegetable* |

The examples of orthographical 'offences' given in the letters are predominantly taken from the mentioned three domains. The additional fourth domain, which is not taken up here for analysis is *Education*. As mentioned in 3.4.3, this particular domain plays a more complex role in the discourse of prescriptivism. Education is seen as the cause of the perceived decline of language standards and also as the criterion that differentiates the letter writers from the 'offenders' of proper language use that make the grammatical mistakes. Traffic signs, signs on market stalls and in shops are the types of publicly available text types where punctuation mistakes are easily observable and targeted by the critics. Example (4) illustrates this:

(4) THE only worse misuse of the apostrophe I've seen, than a recent issue of a major business magazine advertising 'Porsche's' for an

> online used-car website, was a sign in a McDonald's stating, 'EFTPO'S not working' (*The Age*, 30 August 2008)

The most frequent collocate of the words from the semantic domain *Food* after the definite article is *'s*, indicating that, not surprisingly, food items are often used as examples of the greengrocer's apostrophe.

(5) So many people try to make plurals by adding an apostrophe before the *s*, that I think they must be told to do so! Among the worst offenders are greengrocers, hence mangoe's, tomato's and carrot's. (*Hull Daily Mail*, 20 October 2006)

By providing these examples, the authors are placing their letters in the tradition of criticising the uneducated greengrocer who stereotypically makes the mistake of placing the apostrophe in the penultimate position with plural nouns.

*3.4.3.3 Prescriptive language*

Defining the features of prescriptive language is not a straightforward task. Therefore, all of the initial key semantic domains were analysed in more detail, in order to identify those that can be attributed to the specific features used to express prescriptive attitudes. In the end, nine semantic domains were classified under the category *Prescriptive language* through qualitative analysis of concordance lines that are presented in Table 3.7.

The language of prescriptivism is primarily characterised by explicit evaluations of accuracy. Language use is labelled as *inaccurate* (6), *accurate* (7), or *inappropriate* (8) in comparison with the norm, which is reflected in the number of lexical items from the semantic domains *Evaluation inaccurate*, *Evaluation accurate* and *Unsuitable*.

Authors typically correct the observed mistakes and pedagogically explain the rules of 'proper' usage.

(6) The incorrect overuse of an apostrophe is now a widespread problem in such incorrect plurals as the 1990s, too often written as 'the 1990's' and 'iPod's' instead of iPods. (*The Ottawa Citizen*, 7 February 2009)

(7) I have been a PA for all my working life and have been paid to spell correctly and to use apostrophes correctly so, obviously, I cringe at the blatant misuse of apostrophes in advertisements, notices etc. (*Derby Evening Telegraph*, 13 February 2013)

(8) I deplore inappropriate grammar and the lack of an apostrophe in the correct place. (*Leicester Mercury*, 24 April 2007)

Other types of evaluations indicate additional grounds for stigmatisation of nonstandard usage, such as establishing the association of nonstandard usage with unethical behaviour. The relationship between linguistic profanity and morality has been previously studied (McEnery, 2006).

The authors of the letters in this corpus establish a similar association: the users of the nonstandard constructions seem to exhibit a lack of ethical norms. In these cases, the language 'offenders' are described as sinners (example 9).

(9) Sir, Re your reporter Josh Reich and his story about airport security (Nelson Mail, May 2), with the sentence 'He told The Nelson Mail he was meeting with both council's while in Nelson...' Meeting with both council's what? It seems you need to do a Principal Skinner and order him to line up behind Bart Simpson to write out 100 times 'Apostrophes are not needed for plurals'. But, to be fair, Josh isn't the only sinner. (*The Nelson Mail*, 11 May 2011)

**Table 3.7** Semantic domains: Prescriptive language

| Semantic domain | Lexical items |
|---|---|
| Evaluation inaccurate | *boo-boo*, *error*, *gaffe*, *inaccurate*, *incorrect*, *incorrectly*, *misplaced*, *miss* (v.), *mistake*, *typo*, *ungrammatical*, *wrong* |
| Evaluation accurate | *accuracy*, *accurately*, *correct*, *corrected*, *correctly*, *corrections*, *error*, *free*, *precision*, *properly*, *put it right*, *rectified*, *right*, *spot on* |
| Negative | *no-ball*, *none*, *not*, *n't*, *nothing* |
| Unethical | *barbarian*, *corrupt*, *corruption*, *misuse*, *rogue*, *shame*, *shameless*, *sinner* |
| Unsuitable | *inappropriate*, *irrelevant*, *misplaced*, *unsuitable*, *tangential* |
| Strong obligation or necessity | *compulsory*, *essential*, *have to*, *impose*, *must*, *necessarily*, *necessary*, *need*, *ought to*, *prerequisite*, *responsibility*, *should* |
| Judgement of appearance: Ugly | *awful*, *deplorable*, *ghastly*, *horrible*, *mess*, *nasty*, *unpleasantly*, *unsightly* |
| Sad | *alas*, *bemoan*, *cringe*, *cry*, *depressing*, *despair*, *distress*, *embarrassment*, *grave*, *grievous*, *howling*, *in a state of*, *mourn*, *pity*, *plaintive*, *regret*, *regrettably*, *sad*, *sadly*, *seriously*, *suffer*, *unhappy*, *upset* |

Another claim for the unacceptability of deviant usage is made on the basis of the aesthetic criterion (cf. Weiner, 1988, p. 197; Pullum, 2004, p. 7). Thus, language use can be categorised as 'ugly' when it differs from the norm, as in example 10.

(10) Swansea Council seem to want to extend their policy of creating more and more obtrusive and unsightly roadside clutter throughout rural Gower. (*South Wales Evening Post*, 13 September 2006)

The semantic domain *Strong obligation or necessity* is another obvious indicator of the presence of prescriptive attitudes in the Letters corpus. This domain consists mostly of deontic modals (*must, ought to, should*, and the semi-modal *have to*) and verbs and adjectives of obligation. These results coincide with previous research of deontic and epistemic modals as indicators of prescriptive and descriptive language attitudes

respectively in the eighteenth-century grammars (cf. Straaijer, 2009). These lexical items are relevant in prescriptive language when the actual 'incorrect' usage is compared to the 'correct' usage—the authors are urging and requiring a change that would bring actual language use closer to the standard language ideal, more generally, the authors of the letter are taking a position in respective of normative rightness (Pounds, 2005, p. 63) as in (11).

(11) Don't get me started on the use of your when it should be you're. (*Lincolnshire Echo*, 25 September 2009)

The category *Negative* is a more covert indicator of prescriptivism, identified upon analysing the concordance lines. Negations are relatively rare, marked occurrences often indicating something different, unusual, or contrary to the expectations of readers (Jordan, 1998, p. 714). In many of the Letters corpus examples, negations are used in discussing the observed mistakes or in promoting 'correct' usage. They highlight that the discussed nonstandard items are not expected, they are marked and different from the expected norms of standard language.

(12) The possessive is not necessary, and apostrophes could be omitted from all newly named roads and streets; there is no need for St George to own a street. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 18 March 2013)

Finally, prescriptive language is characterised by the frequent expression of the emotional state of sadness (key semantic domain *Sad*). The authors usually express sadness in relation to the perceived declining language standards. They are in states of *depression*, *sadness*, *mourning*, they are *unhappy* and *grieving* the observed 'misuse' of language.

(13) Just because a word ends in ‘s’ doesn’t mean it needs an apostrophe. How about ‘Glady’s Knight and the Pip’s’? Laugh? I could cry. (*Lincolnshire Echo*, 25 September 2009)

Prescriptive language is characterised by lexical items that indicate that the authors are stressing their view of the nonstandard usage as marked: the misused apostrophes are incorrect, contrary to the norm and, therefore, aesthetically unpleasing. The metaphor of sinning is projected on the nonstandard usage and its users. Finally, there is a strong sense of obligation and necessity expressed—a plea to the readers who should act upon the perceived nonstandard ‘deviations’ that are potentially spreading across the communities of speakers.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The analysis of key words and key semantic domains in a corpus of language-related letters to the editor presented in this paper sets out to contribute to the analysis of prescriptive language in print media. The corpus linguistic tools adopted for this analysis have proved to be useful in identifying general topics, genre characteristics, and features of prescriptive language used in letters to the editor as the genre where complaints about language use are traditionally expressed in the English-speaking world. Future analysis of letters will include letters written on various usage problems and it will address in more detail the topics of education and language authorities (in the forms of individuals, institutions and specialised literature), which play a relevant role in the complaint tradition discourse.

The results of the quantitative semantic analysis reveal that the factual support of their claims in the form of examples from their sur-

roundings plays a major role in the accounts of the authors of the letters. Similar findings have been reported in Pounds (2005) in a contrastive analysis of English and Italian letters to the editor. Pounds (2005, p. 74) concludes that providing factual evidence in support of epistemic claims is very common in this genre. This implies that although the authors are expressing their own opinions, they are attempting to structure their arguments logically and factually in order to support and justify their argumentation and points of view.

The combination of quantitative and in-depth analyses of concordance lines resulted in identifying several semantic domains strongly associated with prescriptive language. These semantic domains indicate specific linguistic features (e.g. the use of deontic modal verbs, lexis of evaluation and obligation, and negation), and also offer insights into prescriptive arguments, which have their origins in the realms of the aesthetic, correct, suitable, and ethical (for similar accounts see Weiner, 1988, pp. 177–180 and Pullum, 2004, pp. 6–7). This analysis points to the relevant issues to be addressed in the joint qualitative and quantitative analysis of an extended corpus: the characteristics of the discourse of prescriptivism, and the types of argumentation used in the criticism of nonstandard linguistic varieties.