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## Grassroots prescriptivism

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## From usage guides to language blogs<sup>1</sup>

### 4.1 Introduction

In debating what is perceived to be ‘correct’ language use and in searching for answers to questions such as ‘Is *thusly* a word?’ or ‘Should I use *affect* or *effect*?’, most people prefer to consult online sources. This was a finding of a recent online survey that aimed to explore people’s practices of looking up usage advice. Guidelines on what is considered correct usage have traditionally been available in various genres: grammar books, style guides, and usage guides often include explicitly stated prescriptive rules of usage.<sup>2</sup> Even dictionaries and grammars that are not expected to make explicit normative statements but rather to describe the linguistic system may occasionally be consulted as reference sources on what constitutes ‘correct’ usage (Milroy, 1992, pp. 8–9; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 2). Since the advent of the internet, however, many of the genres that traditionally comprised usage advice have adapted their format to the online medium. Publishing houses now offer online dictionaries accompanied by additional interactive resources, including blogs and multimodal resources, one example being the Merriam-Webster *Ask the Editors* videos, which fea-

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<sup>1</sup> Lukač, M. (2017). From usage guides to language blogs. In I. Tieken-Boon van Ostade (ed.), *English Usage Guides: History, Advice, Attitudes* (pp. 107–125). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> On the distinction between usage guides and style guides, see Straaijer (2017) and Ebner (2016, pp. 310–11).

ture topics on usage as well. Online versions of style guides by publishing and media houses are also, often freely, available, and through an additional subscription, *Oxford Dictionaries Online* offers access to a number of online editions of usage guides including *Garner's Modern American Usage* (3rd ed., 2009) and *Pocket Fowler's Modern English Usage* (Allen [ed.], 2nd ed., 2008).

With technological advancements, the introduction of Web 2.0, and with the rapid growth of user-generated content, we are witnessing the development of many internet genres, among others blogs, micro-blogs (such as Twitter), digital forums and different forms of social media. With public platforms now potentially being available to any user with an internet connection, the online medium has enabled individual authors writing on language use to gather followers and establish themselves as language authorities. One of the online sources created by an individual author that has gained immense popularity is the US-based educational podcast *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing*.<sup>3</sup> The *Grammar Girl* podcast has been downloaded tens of millions of times: iTunes, for instance, listed it among the twelve 'Best Classic Podcasts' in 2013 (Slashgear, 2013), and its creator, Mignon Fogarty, has published seven books on usage since 2006, when she started publishing the podcasts.

All *Grammar Girl* podcasts are available in blog format as word-for-word transcriptions of the audio segments. Currently, there are over 500 of them, and most of the topics covered are the result of

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Mignon Fogarty for enabling me to have access to the *Grammar Girl* comments for the research for this chapter.

crowdsourcing—that is, they were inspired by questions from the audience. In addition, below the blog entries there is a comment section allowing feedback from the audience. This section is also a forum where questions from the audience are elicited, some of which are selected and addressed in subsequent episodes of the *Grammar Girl* podcast. ‘I choose my topics,’ Mignon Fogarty states, ‘based on listener questions and on my own knowledge about what the common questions are that people have about language’ (personal communication, 31 January 2016).

This chapter begins by examining the popularity of grammar blogs like *Grammar Girl* in relation to other online sources based on the results of the above-mentioned survey. I will compare the format of an online usage guide, here called a ‘usage guide 2.0’, with traditional printed usage guides that are part of the Hyper Usage Guide of English or HUGE database (Straaijer, 2014), a collection of British and American usage guides published between 1770 and 2010 (see also Straaijer, 2017). Furthermore, I will present an analysis of the interaction in the comment section of four *Grammar Girl* podcast transcriptions including more than 400 comments from the audience. Comments on a website relating to language use reveal the practices and the dynamics of a metalinguistic discourse that supports or potentially opposes the norms constituting ‘correct usage’. In broader terms, such comments facilitate the analysis of public discourses relating to the ‘ideology of standardisation’ (Milroy and Milroy, [1985] 2012, p. 18). Whereas so far linguists have described the role of prescriptivism in public debates in more detail (Milroy and Milroy, [1985] 2012, pp. 24–46; Pinker, 1994a,

pp. 370–403; Curzan, 2014), in this chapter I will also analyse the role of descriptivism in usage debates. In contrast to the limited media forums available to the general public prior to the birth of Web 2.0, such as letters to the editor (Lukač, 2015), internet users can now engage in online discussions without any restrictions being imposed upon them apart from the online community's norms and guidelines. This analysis sheds light on the ways that the internet and digital technologies have affected the public metalinguistic discourse.

This chapter will therefore show that potential innovations are brought to metalinguistic discussions by the online medium in the form of the growing numbers of descriptive comments originating from the general public, and in that of the dynamics specific to an online community such as language-related 'trolling'—the behaviour in which an individual, a 'troll', is 'being deliberately antagonistic online, usually for amusement's sake' (Hardaker, 2013, p. 58; see also Donath, 1999, pp. 42–7; Hardaker, 2010). There are, however, clear indicators that many of the online discussions among members of the general public, and many of the topics proposed by them that are selected by the author of the *Grammar Girl* website for discussion, simply reflect and continue the 250-year-old tradition of usage advice (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2010).

## 4.2 The popularity of grammar blogs

In an online survey conducted between December 2015 and January 2016,<sup>4</sup> respondents were asked to rank the sources that they most frequently used when searching for advice on language use; in all, 189 people responded to the survey. The three categories with which they were presented included printed books (such as grammars, dictionaries, and style or usage guides), online sources (Google search, online dictionaries, internet forums, and language blogs), and automatic grammar checkers (such as Microsoft Word Grammar Checker and grammar apps). The results showed that online sources were rated as most popular by 51 per cent of the respondents, and that the younger the respondents, the more frequently they consulted online sources. Among the youngest group, below the age of 25, online sources were ranked first by 81 per cent of the respondents. In the questions that followed, the respondents were asked to report in more detail on their practices of looking up usage advice online, and to select among five online usage advice genres those that they consulted most often. Grammar blogs constituted the second most popular source of online usage advice in this survey, preceded only by online dictionaries.<sup>5</sup> Those who reported consulting grammar blogs, moreover, were predominantly native speakers who were also language professionals, such as translators, writers, journalists, editors, language teachers, linguists, lexicographers,

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<sup>4</sup> The survey, conducted through the web-based survey tool Qualtrics, was published on 21 December 2015 on the 'Bridging the Unbridgeable' project blog.

<sup>5</sup> The percentages of respondents who reported using the five genres of online sources were as follows: online dictionaries, 95.3%; grammar blogs, 47.1%; Wikipedia and Q&A websites, 42.4%; web forums, 40.6%; and language corpora, 27.6%.

and students of languages or linguistics; these informants constituted 70 per cent of the group of grammar blog users.

Another aim of the survey was to examine the perceived reliability of different printed and online sources with respect to the usage advice they provided. Institutional sources, such as those produced by renowned publishing houses like Oxford University Press, were perceived as the most reliable. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) and the *Oxford Dictionaries Online* (ODO) were rated highest among the survey respondents. The name ‘Oxford Dictionary’ seems to remain synonymous with the ‘great Dictionary’ (Winchester, 2003, p. 2) until today. The list of the sources that were rated on their reliability also included the *Grammar Girl* website. The mean ratings for the ten sources included in the survey on a five-point Likert scale<sup>6</sup> based on their reliability are listed in Table 4.1.

Following the three online dictionaries with the highest reliability ratings, i.e. *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Oxford Dictionaries Online*, and *Merriam-Webster Online*, are two large-scale language corpora consisting of samples of naturally occurring text, the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). Although linguistic corpora do not offer explicit grammar advice, they are regularly consulted as sources by users in determining common usage.

The three lowest-scoring sources are Wikipedia and the two automatic grammar checkers, a grammar program called Grammarly and the Microsoft Word Grammar Checker. In terms of both the number of

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<sup>6</sup> The format of the scale used to measure the respondents’ attitudes towards the presented statements was: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) disagree, and (5) strongly disagree.



respondents who were familiar with the website and the reliability they attributed to it, *Grammar Girl* came just behind Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (MEU), arguably the most influential twentieth-century usage guide in Britain (Crystal, 2009, p. vii). Just over half the respondents reported being familiar with both *Grammar Girl* (50.6%) and MEU (52.4%); both of the sources were rated moderately positively in terms of their reliability.

**Table 4.1** Mean values for the ratings of the sentence '... is a reliable source for grammar advice': strongly agree (1)–strongly disagree (5)

Source	Mean	Standard deviation
<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>	1.64	.721
<i>Oxford Dictionaries Online</i>	1.64	.778
<i>Merriam-Webster Online</i>	1.84	.803
British National Corpus	2.00	.894
Corpus of Contemporary American English	2.03	.920
Fowler's <i>Modern English Usage</i>	2.24	.917
Grammar Girl	2.52	.979
Wikipedia	3.01	.948
Grammarly	3.24	1.132
Microsoft Word Grammar Checker	3.55	1.035

What the results of the online survey suggest is that among online usage sources, which are currently the most popular format for sources on usage, grammar blogs constitute a relevant and popular category. Some of them, such as *Grammar Girl*, are well known, and are consulted and perceived as moderately reliable sources on usage.

### 4.3 *Grammar Girl* as a usage guide 2.0

In this section the usage guide genre will be compared with the *Grammar Girl* website based on the basis of three characteristics: the purpose with which each is written, their content, and their target audience. The

question that arises is whether websites such as *Grammar Girl* can be viewed as extensions of the usage guide genre in the online medium and, therefore, as constituting a new category of usage guides, which I designate as usage guides 2.0. A usage guide is defined as an ‘integrative all-in-one reference work [...] that bridges the traditional divide between a grammar and a dictionary’ (Busse & Schröder, 2009, p. 72). The beginnings of the genre can be traced back to 1770 and the publication of Robert Baker’s *Reflections on the English Language* (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2008a, p. 17), and the purpose of a usage guide is to help users decide between alternatives which from a descriptive point of view both exist in the language but of which one, for some reason or another, is considered less good English than its counterpart (Weiner, 1988, p. 173). The topics and the content covered in usage guides are thus disputed items of usage, also called ‘usage problems’ (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2013). Finally, the intended audience of usage guides are ‘linguistically insecure’ native speakers of English (Weiner, 1988, p. 173; Beal, 2009, p. 42) who were not ‘born into’ the standard variety. The majority of the usage guide authors were traditionally writers, editors, teachers, and educators (cf. Straaijer, 2014; 2017), while the number of linguists who have authored usage guides is small in comparison: Crystal (1984) and Peters (2004) are among the two more notable exceptions.

The tagline used on the homepage of the *Grammar Girl* website is ‘Your friendly guide to the world of grammar, punctuation, usage, and fun developments in the English language’. Whereas the website also includes pieces featuring topics generally related to language, such

as ‘How Do Words Get in the Dictionary?’ and ‘Do the Minions Speak a Real Language?’, most of the topics covered on Grammar Girl address usage problems. According to the Alexa website (a commercial tool developed by Amazon.com which provides web traffic data and analytics),<sup>6</sup> the five most frequently used search terms that send traffic to the *Grammar Girl* website are *complement*, *further vs farther*, *affect vs effect*, *when to use a semicolon*, and *when to use a colon*. This list indicates that most people who visit the website are in search of advice on disputed items of usage. Mignon Fogarty confirms that the idea behind creating the website was to offer clear-cut advice on usage problems. While working as an editor, she informed me, ‘I noticed that my clients were making a lot of simple errors such as using semicolons incorrectly and not knowing the difference between *affect* and *effect*. I created the *Grammar Girl* podcast to cover these simple rules and styles for native English speakers who wanted a quick refresher or simple answer’ (personal communication, 31 January 2016).

To compare the topics and the content covered in *Grammar Girl* and in printed usage guides, I looked for the ten most popular usage problems addressed in the HUGE database and in the *Grammar Girl* podcasts. The popularity of the topics was based on the number of usage guides mentioning a particular usage problem in HUGE, while the number of comments written below the Grammar Girl transcripts on the website was taken as an indicator of a post’s popularity; in taking the latter approach I am basing myself on a study conducted by Mishne and

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.alexa.com>.

Glance (2006), which analysed the correlation between the number of comments on blog posts and blog popularity. The *Grammar Girl* comments included in my own analysis covered the period between 6 September 2006 and 29 April 2013, when over 18,000 comments were posted under the transcripts of 461 podcasts on language use. In Table 4.2, I have listed the results of my search for the ten most frequent usage problems in the HUGE database and on the *Grammar Girl* website.

Though the HUGE database covers usage guides published between 1770 and 2010 and the topics of Grammar Girl podcasts were elicited between 2006 and 2013, there is nevertheless a considerable amount of overlap between the two: five out of the ten most popular usage problems are identical between both lists, i.e. *who/whom*, *lay/lie*, singular *they*, *less/fewer*, and *I for me (between you and I/between you and me)*. While this finding confirms the similarities in the topics covered in traditional guides and in usage guides 2.0, it also shows that the content of usage advice sources seems to vary little over the years. In fact, all the other usage problems listed for the *Grammar Girl* website can be found in traditional usage guides as well.

Specific recurring usage problems constitute an essential part of the prescriptive tradition, and they are commented on even though their current status as ‘controversial items of usage’ is arguable. Nevertheless, the discussions on these items—which Weiner, a usage guide author himself, calls ‘old chestnuts’ (1988, p. 175)—are among the key identifying features of the genre (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2015a, p. 57).

The target audience of the *Grammar Girl* website are native speakers. With a high number of non-native speakers searching for advice on English grammar online, however, foreign language learners constitute a substantial segment of the audience based on the reports of Mignon Fogarty and on the number of comments in which authors identify themselves as non-native speakers, such as: ‘My mother tongue is Portuguese, and I study English by myself. So, I love listening to your podcasts’, and ‘I am a student from Vietnam. I have just accidentally come across your site when searching for a good way of learning grammar.’

**Table 4.2** Most frequently discussed usage problems in the HUGE database and in *Grammar Girl* comments (September 2006–April 2013)

HUGE usage problems	No. of usage guides	Grammar Girl usage problems	No. of blog comments
<i>shall/will</i>	65	<i>who/whom</i>	645
<i>different to/than/from</i>	63	<i>affect/effect</i>	512
<i>who/whom</i>	63	<i>lay/lie</i>	361
<i>lay/lie</i>	63	ending a sentence with a preposition	329
<i>Only</i>	62	active/passive voice	305
split infinitive	62	singular <i>they</i>	268
<i>I for me</i>	61	<i>a/an</i>	181
singular <i>they</i>	59	<i>which/that</i>	171
<i>less/fewer</i>	58	<i>less/fewer</i>	170
<i>none</i> in plural context	55	<i>between you and I/between you and me</i>	166

As in the case of most printed usage guide authors (see Straaijer, 2017), Mignon Fogarty, a former editor, is a language professional but not a linguist. Traditional usage guide authors are often criticised for their subjectivity in the selection of topics and in their judgements on what constitutes correct usage, as well as for their lack of referencing (Algeo, 1991, p. 6; Peters and Young, 1997, p. 317; Peters, 2006, p. 765). As a rule, however, the *Grammar Girl* podcasts do include lists of references for each usage problem discussed (e.g. the *AP Stylebook*, the *Chicago Manual of Style*, *Garner's Modern American Usage*, *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, *Etymology Online*, *World Wide Words*, and *Google Ngram*).

The traditional usage guides and the *Grammar Girl* website coincide in their purpose, content, and target audience. Whereas the online medium is new, the *why*, the *what*, and the *who* of usage advice has not greatly fluctuated over the years. On the one hand, the process of topic selection has been influenced by crowdsourcing and interaction with the audience, and the level of referencing both the descriptive linguistic sources and the prescriptive ones has significantly increased. Nevertheless, what can be observed on the other hand is a clear continuation of the usage guide genre in this relatively new online medium. Much of the consistency in both the format and the normative recommendations is influenced by questions from an audience searching for clear-cut guidance on usage, and it is this feature that makes this usage guide 2.0 significantly different from the traditional genre.

#### 4.4 Comments on the *Grammar Girl* website

Comments posted by the *Grammar Girl* audience below the podcast transcripts are revealing in that they identify the characteristics of this particular online discourse community—more specifically, in that they determine who its members and what their goals are. The comments additionally offer an insight into the dynamics of online metalinguistic discourse and into the underlining arguments in debates surrounding correct usage. What I will present here is an analysis of 412 comments published below four posts on the *Grammar Girl* website: ‘Like Versus As’ (posted on 13 April 2007), ‘Units of Measure’ (16 August 2007), ‘Which Versus That’ (30 October 2009), and ‘Ending a Sentence with a Preposition’ (31 March 2011). The discussions were coded for personal information shared by the commenters in the body of the text,<sup>7</sup> the types of comments posted, and the criteria through which the claims presented in the usage discussions were justified. The analysis is consequently divided into three sections. I will first comment on the relevance of the commenters’ identity construction in the *Grammar Girl* discussions; this is followed by an analysis of the comments themselves, based on the type of information that is shared and the commenters’ arguments presented in the usage debates. Finally, I will address a topic that emerged as relevant through the qualitative analysis of the data—the role of repetitive narratives in metalinguistic discourses.

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<sup>7</sup> In order to preserve the commenters’ anonymity, the data including their user names and other personal details were omitted before the analysis.

#### **4.4.1 *The commenters' identity construction***

The identities of *Grammar Girl* commenters are, as in any online environment, primarily enacted and 'written in text' (Turkle, 1999, p. 643). It is in online interactions that language becomes 'central to creating, performing, and negotiating one's identities' (Vásquez, 2014, p. 68). The analyses of online reviews by Mackiewicz (2010) and Vásquez (2014) have revealed that in attempts to gain credibility, participants in online discussions tend to reveal personal information, such as their experience and expertise (as in examples 1–5 below), while they also offer self-descriptions of character (as in examples 6 and 7). Whereas establishing credibility is one of the relevant aspects of sharing personal information among members of online discourse communities, another is constructing and expressing self-identities online (cf. Page, 2012; Lee, 2014).

Among the 412 posts analysed, only in 54 (13.1%) did the authors explicitly provide self-identifying information. The commenters most commonly provide information on their native language, age, place of origin, and profession. The self-identified non-native speakers generally participate in the discussions by posting questions and encouraging the author to continue providing usage advice. These commenters usually address the author directly and not the other members of the community; in doing so they express positive stance, but in most instances do not contribute any new information to the on-going discussions.

Both age and place of origin serve as experiential, first-hand evidence of the commenter's knowledge of the language-related topic; the example in (1) illustrates this.



- (1) As a child of the 60s, I can safely say that ‘where it’s at’ rarely meant ‘where it is.’ More often, it was the equivalent of today’s ‘cool’: ‘Panama Red is where it’s at.’ ‘Demonstrations are where it’s at.’ ‘Afros are where it’s at.’

In engaging in an ongoing discussion on the topic of ‘Ending a Sentence with a Preposition’, the commenter in (1) provides an account based on personal experience in opposing a previous assertion by a commenter who denounced the usage of ‘where it’s at’ as a ‘useless corruption’. According to the commenter, who is evidently personally familiar with the youth slang of the 1960s, ‘where it’s at’ constitutes an idiomatic expression and, in its most common usage, does not indicate location. The largest number of comments (22 out of 54 altogether) in which a person discloses personal information refers to their professions. Commenters mentioning their professions are either identifying themselves as language professionals or are emphasizing their expertise on the topic in question on the basis of their occupational affiliation. These commenters are also the ones who most commonly add new information to the on-going discussions in threads following the podcast transcripts. In the example in (2), a medical writer adds a comment to the discussion under the title ‘Units of Measure’ based on personal experience in encountering irregular usage of units.

- (2) I am a medical writer at a European pharmaceutical company, and I must say that you hit on one of my pet peeves with today’s topic. I often see sloppy use of units, even from persons who should know better. I thought I’d chime in on some points that you skipped. [...] with the temperature units, it seems to be an open question. The AMA style guide does not leave a space between the quantity and the degree, but other style guides (I believe ACS among them) do.

As an expert on the topic, the commenter takes a more critical stance towards the content of the podcast and adds information that is considered to be missing. Moreover, being a language professional, the commenter refers to external sources—two style guides, one published by the American Medical Association and the other by the American Chemical Society. Many of the self-referential comments that mention the commenters' professions appear in the first sentence of the post, as in examples (3) – (5):

- (3) As a freelance writer and editor, I often find myself frustrated by poor sentence structure and superfluous prepositions.
- (4) From one technical writer/editor to another, kudos on joining the battle against misuse of the English language.
- (5) As a strictly descriptive linguist and ESL teacher, I am often driven crazy by the comments of prescriptivists and grammarians.

Through asserting their qualifications in this way, the commenters lend credibility to the content of their posts by positioning themselves as experts—they are the ones with specialised knowledge in the discourse community. The strategy of initially stating their expertise in the field, prior to explicitly introducing an argument and making a contribution to the discussion, potentially adds to the perceived reliability of the commenter (Mackiewicz, 2010, pp. 17–21). Finally, some of the commenters construct their online identity by explicitly referring to their language attitudes and their status as grammar enthusiasts, as lay persons with an interest in usage-related topics, or, as they designate themselves, as grammar sticklers, as illustrated in (6):

- (6) Thank you for finally covering this! I'm known as a bit of a stickler for correct grammar amongst my friends, and some of them delight when they catch me using a preposition at the end of a sentence.

There are instances, like the one in (7), in which the comments posted by the participants who construct their self-identities as grammar sticklers are subject to linguistic criticism from other commenters.

- (7) A. My mother taught my sister and I the prepositions in a song every day on our way to the babysitter. I was 9 and my sister was 6. To this day, I still know all the prepositions and am a grammar freak. I never use prepositions at the end of a sentence.

B. It seems that the next subject should be the correct use of 'I or me'. Few people use these correctly. There is a comment in this thread in which the author typed 'My mother taught my sister and I the prepositions in a song', when it should have been 'my sister and me'.

By explicitly positioning herself as a 'grammar freak' in the discussion on sentence-final prepositions, A evokes linguistic criticism from B, who points out that A's comment uses *I* in object position in the sentence when it should have been *me*. More extreme examples of negative stance towards this group of commenters can be found in attempts at 'trolling' (cf. §3.1). Grammar is a common object of the criticism of trolls in any form of online discussion (cf. Hardaker, 2013, p. 72). Instead of commenting on the content of the posts, trolls comment on the participants' language use. In a blog dedicated to usage, criticism of the grammar found in both posts and comments is quite common; unsurprisingly, there are several instances of trolling among the comments analysed. The example in (8) is an instance of successful trolling in

which the troll, B, evokes a sincere response from a commenter (A) after correcting A's post for punctuation—more specifically, for the usage of contractions, colons, sentence-initial conjunctions, and missing commas.

- (8) A. Hey Grammar Girl, I love this podcast. I'm just a lowly student, who is not particularly well versed in grammar rules. But (: ) listening to your podcast which, by the way I find to be highly entertaining, has made me want to argue in favour of more grammatically lax writing. [...]

B. @A: If you love something, you might try listening to it:

Paragraph I

1. Contraction (I'm)
2. Starting sentence with conjunction (But)
3. Colon in parentheses indicates you are not sure if there should be a colon there; there most definitely should not.
4. 'by the way' not finished with a comma.

[signature] SUCCESSFULLY TROLLED BY B [...]

A. @B: I apologise if I gave impression of being high-minded or self-righteous. As I mentioned before I am only a high school student and by no means a learned grammarian. [...] Perhaps I was too lax with my grammar

Trolling in (8) is successful, as A reacts by apologizing for the seemingly 'high-minded or self-righteous' comments in the preceding post and acknowledges 'incorrect' grammar usage.

In disclosing personal information, the commenters position themselves within the online discourse community by identifying themselves as members of the target audience (learners), claiming competence (experts), expressing their interest in the topic (grammar sticklers), or being antagonistic to other participants in the discussions (trolls). Whereas providing self-identifying information is one of the

primary ways of asserting expertise in online usage debates, commenters support their arguments through a variety of additional discourse strategies. This is a topic that I will discuss in the next section.

#### **4.4.2 Types of comments**

Based on the types of information that commenters provide in the written text, all of the comments in my collection were classified into one of the following seven categories: the introduction of new information, questions (usually directed to the author), corrections of information posted either by the author or by other commenters, examples of mistakes, humour, personal comments, and encouragements to the author. Table 4.3 presents this classification according to frequency of the respective types of comments.

As the overview in the table shows, the most common types of comments include new contributions to a topic, which account for a third of all comments in the dataset analysed; the authors concerned thus form a group of genuine contributors to the discussions.

**.Table 4.3** Comment categories in the *Grammar Girl* dataset

Type of comment	%
Introducing new information	33.2
Question	22.1
Correction	13.6
Personal comment	11.4
Encouragement	10.0
Humour	8.3
Examples of mistakes	1.4

These contributors either refer to previous comments in an existing thread or to the original post. Whereas discussions do develop among

the Grammar Girl followers, especially in longer threads, 80 per cent of the comments analysed are directed at the author.

Since the comment sections are also places where topics of future podcasts are solicited, many members of the audience post questions as well, usually asking the author to give a recommendation on correct usage while presenting two alternative constructions as in (9) and (10).

- (9) Which is correct?!  
       The car runs AS it should  
       or  
       The car runs LIKE it should

- (10) Can you say ‘equivalent to’ or should it be ‘equivalent of’?

*Grammar Girl* is here addressed in her capacity as a language authority and is asked to provide guidance on ‘correct’ usage. The commenters in examples (9) and (10) request simple answers and normative guidelines; the *Grammar Girl* podcasts and their respective transcripts cater to such requests and do so by providing explicit answers. What is striking in these two examples is the fact that no linguistic context in which the items are used is provided; the underlying idea here is that there is a single correct linguistic form which should be used independently of the register in which it is occurs.

The category ‘corrections’ in Table 4.3 refers either to the corrections directed at the content of a particular podcast or to the language used in the podcast itself or in the comments presented by other commenters. These comments potentially include negative face-threatening acts in which either the author’s or the commenter’s writing is negatively evaluated. In (11), one commenter is addressing a podcast in which

*Grammar Girl* advocates the use of sentence-final prepositions, which goes against many prescriptive recommendations.

- (11) You gave the example that it is okay to say, ‘What did you step on?’ That is incorrect. The proper way to say that question is, ‘On what did you step?’

Examples (9) – (11) present comments from a segment of the audience which expects the *Grammar Girl* website to be their reference source for easy-to-apply prescriptive rules on the ‘correct’ way of speaking and writing. Therefore, if the guidelines provided in the podcasts fail to coincide with traditional prescriptive recommendations, these readers will disagree with *Grammar Girl*’s advice and offer alternative rules that they acquired either through teaching or from their knowledge of relevant sources.

In making personal comments, the members of the *Grammar Girl* audience express their own experiences relating to usage, or share their views on language without contributing new information to the discussion on particular usage items, as in (12).

- (12) I had a non-fiction book published about 10 years ago. One of the most memorable things in that process was working with an assigned editor. Along with other nonsense he told me to never end a sentence with a preposition.

Through describing their past experiences and personal views, and employing self-disclosure, the authors of such comments construct and perform online identities. In comments which make up 10 per cent of the dataset, the audience praise the podcast and encourage its author to ‘Keep up the good work’; such comments are not real contributions, and neither the author nor other readers usually respond to them. There

are two types of humorous comments in the dataset; firstly, there are instances in which authors introduce anecdotes that are often retold in the context of usage discussions (cf. §4.4.4) and secondly, as exemplified in (13), commenters target other commenters who express opposing views.

- (13) Favorite joke with which to ridicule others, ‘What was E.T. short for?’ Because he had little short legs. : )

Example (14) is an instance of a further category of comments, ‘Examples of mistakes’: authors of such comments make contributions to the topic by providing examples from everyday life. In this particular quotation, the author cites a sentence found in a formal text that includes a sentence-final preposition:

- (14) I have no patience, however, with textbook authors that fail to follow the rules of formal, academic writing! In my textbook, for example, the author writes, ‘Rubrics often differ from one instructor to another, so this example will give you an idea of some of the kinds of elements you might be graded on.’

The authors of such comments relate the contents of the podcasts to their own experiences and observations, and thus commonly designate the addressed usage items as their ‘pet peeves’.

Although the comment section is primarily envisaged as a forum for eliciting questions from the audience, my analysis of the comments in my collection shows that the online community does more than that. By providing personal input, commenters contribute new information to the topic, offer alternative points of view, and enact their online identities.



#### ***4.4.3 Arguments presented in metalinguistic debates***

Whereas the functions of comments posted by the audience in response to podcasts on usage advice were the topic of the previous section, in what follows I will address the content of the comments based on the types of arguments presented by their authors in metalinguistic debates. In commenting on discussions involving issues relating to standard language ideology, linguists have noted that many prescriptive texts resort to extra-linguistic justifications in their argumentation (Pullum, 2004, p. 7; Lukač, 2015, p. 329). The analysis of the descriptive side of metalinguistic debates, however, with some exceptions (Cameron, [1995] 2012, pp. 5–11), has received less commentary from linguists. Whereas prescriptive arguments are more often than not perceived as expressions of the standard language ideology, descriptive arguments, usually originating from the field of linguistics itself, are not commented on but are rather considered to be objective accounts of usage (cf. Pinker, 1994a, pp. 370–72). In examining the content of the comments in the dataset, I first identified those comments whose authors explicitly positioned themselves as descriptivists; this group accounted for 54 comments (20.4% of the dataset). Explicitly prescriptive comments were more numerous, accounting for 227 comments (55.1%); the remaining comments did not belong to either of these groups. All comments were then categorised according to ten types of arguments that are found in support of the criticism or of the preferences expressed regarding usage: prescriptive rules, external authorities, logic, rules of the linguistic system, common usage, teaching, euphony, semantics, sociolinguistic considerations, and language history. The categories identified emerged

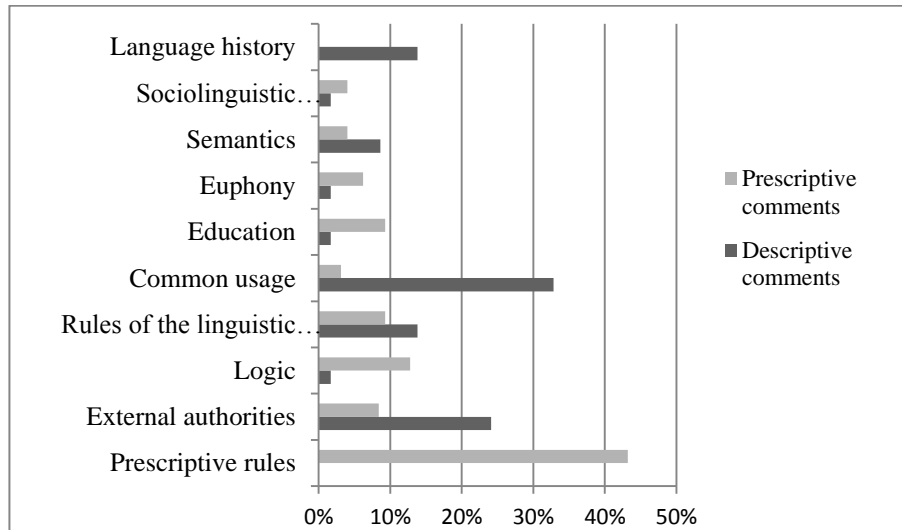
from my collection of comments; perhaps unsurprisingly, however, they at least partially coincide with the criteria for usage criticism listed in Allen (1992) (cited in Busse, 2015, p. 77), Pullum (2004, p. 7) and with the list of arguments on which recommendations are based in usage guides introduced in Weiner (1988, pp. 178–80). The frequencies of the arguments, their description, and examples of each category are presented in Table 4.4. The examples were drawn from the collection analysed. Of the ten types of argument identified in the dataset, as many as eight were found among both groups, the one identified as descriptive and the other as prescriptive; however, the frequency of the number of arguments in the different categories differed, as may be seen in Figure 4.1.

**Table 4.4** Categories of argument support in metalinguistic debates

Type of argument used (%)	Description	Examples from the GG comments
Prescriptive rules (34.7%)	Rules of correct usage are transmitted through the prescriptive tradition.	If a comma is required, use ‘which’, if not, then ‘that’.
External authorities (11.2%)	Acceptable usage is recommended by linguistic authorities.	The <i>Chicago Manual of Style</i> recommendation is not to hyphenate with abbreviated units.
Logic (10.5%)	Rules of language correspond to rules of logic and should not include redundancy, contradictions and illogicality.	‘Where are you’ instead of ‘Where are you at’ (...) It seems both shorter and more intelligent. The word ‘at’ is clearly not needed— <i>redundant</i> .
Rules of the linguistic system (10.1%)	The linguistic system defines what constitutes usage norms.	In ‘he stood up for the cause,’ ‘cause’ is merely the <i>direct object of the verb</i> ‘to stand up for’ and <i>not the object of a preposition</i> . Thus, ‘His cause is something to stand up for’ is perfectly acceptable English

Common usage (9.1%)	The description of the speakers' linguistic behaviour defines what constitutes acceptable usage.	Do <i>native English speakers</i> say 'That's where it is at' or 'That's where it's at'? (...) Not only is 'at' perfectly acceptable here, the <i>speaker's</i> intention may actually REQUIRE the 'at'.
Teaching (7.7%)	Rules of correct usage are transmitted through teaching.	<i>I learned this</i> 65 years ago when my <i>Wonderful English teacher</i> instructed and challenged us with a then common commercial ad for cigarettes. 'Winston tastes good LIKE a cigarette should'.
Euphony (5.4%)	Usage is subject to aesthetic judgements. Correct usage is or sounds more beautiful.	It <i>sounds terrible</i> and frankly I think it's embarrassing.
Semantics (4.9%)	Acceptable usage is determined by the correspondence of the linguistic form and meaning.	In some cases 'outside of' could convey a subtly <i>different meaning</i> to 'outside'.
Sociolinguistic considerations (3.5%)	Usage identifies speakers as members of particular (marginal) social groups.	'Off of' to my mind identifies the speaker as likely to be an <i>American</i> , and possibly <i>someone that needs a smack on the upside of the head</i> .
Language history (2.8%)	Usage is acceptable if it has been part of the language over (a considerable period of) time.	I have simply noted that [the use of 'like' as a conjunction] has been around <i>since the 1600s</i> .

The descriptive comments were the only ones referring to language history, while they included references to external authorities and common usage more frequently. The prescriptive commenters in my collection were the ones resorting to prescriptive rules, and they more commonly referred to logic, teaching, and euphony in support of their arguments. The two groups did not differ in how frequently they mentioned the rules of the linguistic system, semantics, and sociolinguistic considerations in their comments.



**Figure 4.1** Frequency of argument support categories in prescriptive and descriptive comments

The high frequencies of the arguments that appeal to actual usage and to prescriptive rules in the descriptive and prescriptive comments respectively suggest that these types of arguments are key in identifying the elements of descriptive and prescriptive discourses (Figure 4.1). The authors of the descriptive comments additionally refer to language history in demonstrating that the linguistic items that are currently considered problematical in language have, in fact, been in use for a longer period of time. Zimmer (2005) refers to the practice of misinterpreting long-existing usage items as examples of linguistic innovation under the term ‘Recency Illusion’. What is perhaps most surprising in my analysis of the categories identified here is the frequency with which linguistic authorities are alluded to in the descriptive comments. Whereas Pullum (2004, p. 7) lists ‘Authoritarianism’ as one of the principal bases for justifying prescriptive claims, according to my own findings, descrip-

tivists are more likely to cite established linguistic authorities, such as dictionaries and usage advice literature (e.g. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, *Collins Dictionary* and *The New English Grammar*), as well as reputable authors, grammarians, and lexicographers (Bryan Garner, Paul Brians, Jack Lynch, as well as Samuel Johnson). In appealing to authorities, the prescriptivists in my collection of commenters either cited rules without any references or referred to what they had been taught in school. Defining usage as logical or aesthetically pleasing are considerations pertaining to prescriptivism (see also Weiner, 1988, pp. 178–9; Pullum, 2004, p. 7).

Both groups of commenters referred to linguistic norms in their argumentation, one set of norms stemming from usage and the other from an existing set of prescriptive rules. Linguistic observations were found to take into account diachronic developments, meaning, and common usage, including what may be found in reference sources such as dictionaries. Linguistic comments thus constitute the underlying support for descriptive statements on what constitutes acceptable usage. Prescriptive norms, on the other hand, are based on the existing system of rules that are transmitted primarily through education, and they are related to extra-linguistic concepts that attribute notions of beauty and logic to the linguistic system. The sets of arguments were, however, found not to be restricted to either group of comments, the descriptive commenters resorting to education and logic in their arguments, and the prescriptive commenters supporting the presented normative rules by way of linguistic analysis.

#### ***4.4.4 Repetitive narratives and humour in metalinguistic discourses***

Another unifying element in the contributors' comments was the repetitive sharing of anecdotal evidence, with the aim of showing that their authors were well informed about the metalinguistic discourse in question. The participants in the metalinguistic debates analysed here, more specifically the recent contributors to the *Grammar Girl* comment threads, rely on their existing knowledge in sharing views on acceptable usage. The content of some contributions, however, is regularly repeated by a considerable number of commenters, even after they had already been shared in the thread. These contributions are accounts of usage-related anecdotes. In discussions on the proscription against sentence-final prepositions, for instance, the name 'Winston Churchill' tends to occur frequently due to the existence of a well-known anecdote relating to the politician allegedly rejecting the rule:

- (15) Winston Churchill's famous line was supposed to have been written in the margin of a piece of writing by one of his subordinates who was foolishly attempting to avoid ending sentences with prepositions.

He wrote: 1. This is the sort of English up with which I will not put. His point was that the sensible way of writing the sentence was: This is the sort of English I will not put up with.

The humorous anecdote is used both for claims in support of the commenters' descriptive position and by those who make prescriptive comments in claiming that the awkwardness of Churchill's construction does not refute the general application of the rule against ending sentences with prepositions. A search through the HUGE database confirms that the story has also been recounted in a number of usage guides

published throughout the twentieth century, including Gowers (1948, p. 48), Crystal (1984, pp. 58–62), Mager and Mager ([1992] 1993, p. 297), Brians (2003, p. 73), Peters (2004, p. 438), Pickett, Kleinedler, & Spitz (2005, p. 372), Sayce (2006, p. 78), and Lamb (2010, pp. 57–58). Although Zimmer (2004), for instance, describes the quote as apocryphal, Churchill never objected to its being attributed to him: he was aware of Gowers noting the witticism in *Plain Words*, in which we find the first mention of it. Churchill must have been well acquainted with the contents of *Plain Words*, since he recommended the book for departmental use in Parliament in 1954.<sup>8</sup> Another such example is the following anecdote from a *Grammar Girl* comment related to the use of *like* as a conjunction in the Winston cigarette ads from the 1950s.

- (16) Many people became aware of the two options in 1954, when a famous ad campaign for Winston cigarettes introduced the slogan ‘Winston tastes good—like a cigarette should.’ The slogan was criticised for its usage by prescriptivists, the ‘as’ or ‘as if’ construction being considered more proper.

The accounts of the same anecdote in the HUGE database again confirm its status in the usage-related discourse: it is retold in a number of usage guides from the final quarter of the twentieth century onwards, including Morris and Morris (1975, p. 370), Randall (1988, p. 205), *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (Gilman, 1989, p. 600), Mager and Mager ([1992] 1993, p. 216), *The New York Public Library Writ-*

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<sup>8</sup> I thank Rebecca Gowers for kindly shedding light on the details of the Churchill anecdote. See also the transcript of the House of Commons debate dating from 16 November 1954 for Churchill’s recommendation of *Plain Words* ([millbanksystems.com/commons/1954/nov/16/departmental-letters-english](http://millbanksystems.com/commons/1954/nov/16/departmental-letters-english)).

*er's Guide to Style and Usage* (Sutcliffe, 1994, p. 11), and O'Conner (1996, p. 103).

Such narratives constitute a part of the metalinguistic discourse. By retelling the anecdotes, authors show that they are acquainted with the prescriptive rules and the narratives associated with them; they cite them as 'punchlines' in the threads, occasionally without providing any context—this is illustrated in a one-sentence comment in (17):

(17) That is the sort of English up with which I shall not put!

The recurring narratives, along with the consistency of the arguments provided and the topics discussed in usage guides, illustrate the repetitive nature of the metalinguistic debates on usage.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

Online sources constitute the most relevant category of usage advice sources today. Although major publishing houses that traditionally provided usage advice literature noticed the potential of making their sources available online, through the introduction of the online medium new linguistic authorities have come to be established. The *Grammar Girl* website is one such authority. Although its format is new, its purpose, content, and target audience do not differ from those of traditional usage guides. Such websites are part of a genre that has merely expanded by being published online and is, therefore, designated as a 'usage guide 2.0'. Websites like *Grammar Girl* enable what was not possible for the authors of traditional usage guides: interaction with and among the audience. Although the comment sections analysed primarily serve to elicit new topics of *Grammar Girl* podcasts, followers use the com-



ment sections to contribute new information and to construct and express their online identities as ‘learners’, ‘experts’, ‘grammar sticklers’, and ‘trolls’. The meta-linguistic debates show two polarised groups of commenters, who resort to either prescriptive or descriptive arguments. The unifying element between these two groups is that they offer arguments traditionally found in discussions on usage, retell familiar anecdotes related to the usage tradition, and preserve and continue online the metalinguistic debates on what is perceived as correct usage.

