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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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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Title: Grassroots prescriptivism

Issue Date: 2018-11-22

Conclusion

7.1 Revisiting the concept of grassroots prescriptivism

The present thesis has been one of the first attempts to examine thoroughly the subject of twenty-first century grassroots prescriptivism. The term ‘grassroots prescriptivism’—which was first introduced by Heyd (2014) and whose theoretical predecessor is Milroy and Milroy’s concept of the complaint tradition (2012, pp. 24–46)—was defined in the earlier chapters of this thesis as the attempt of lay people to eradicate the perceived linguistic mistakes by publically voicing their concerns about the standards of correctness. The findings as well as the challenges revealed in the case studies of this thesis indicate the need to revisit the concept of grassroots prescriptivism. (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2014),

Prescriptivism, regardless of whether it is carried out institutionally or by language users, is inseparable from the notion of the standard language ideology, i.e. the view that the standard variety of language has an inherently higher value than others (cf. Crystal, 2010, p. 2). Although the respective definitions are widely accepted among sociolinguists, they require reassessment at a time when the term ‘standard’—and the concepts related to it—has become elusive. It has been acknowledged that the concept of the ‘standard’ should not be taken for granted, as it is largely a product of perceptual reality and hardly as stable as it is often considered to be (Coupland et al., 2016, pp. 12–13). The findings presented in this thesis also indicate how context-

dependent the notion of the standard is. In spite of the level of standardisation of English, the standard is still perceived differently across varieties and time periods. Today, perhaps more than ever, as a result of the dynamic social processes related primarily to globalisation, the perceived stability and the authority of the standard has become questionable.

Nevertheless, in order to approach the phenomenon of grass-roots prescriptivism analytically, the term ‘standard’ needed to be operationalised in the present context. I have, therefore, set out to explore the discussions on the disputed language features that together make up the ‘prescriptive canon’ (Vorlat, 1996; Chapman, 2010), i.e. the body of folk-linguistic knowledge comprising rules regarding usage problems (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2017, p. 7). The general public usually associates notions of grammatical correctness with the respective rules. An analysis of the complaints embedded in the prescriptive canon enabled me to identify those linguistic features that are salient in prescriptive discourses today (e.g. the misused apostrophe, Americanisms, *who/whom*, *affect/effect*). Moreover, the comparisons between the contemporary prescriptive discussions with the entries in the HUGE database (Chapters 4–6) facilitated a preliminary analysis of the relevant diachronic changes. For all its limitations (cf. §7.4), the approach taken in this thesis allows for observing the changing socio-cultural conditions related to prescriptivism. In concrete terms, I was able to ask, among other questions, the following: ‘Which features are part of the prescriptive canon and why?’, ‘Is the prescriptive canon changing or is it historically stable’, ‘Who are the members of the public that share

and perpetuate this body of folk-linguistic knowledge?', and to answer them accordingly.

Despite the fact that this thesis owes much in terms of its theoretical embedding to the account of the complaint tradition provided in Milroy and Milroy (2012, pp. 24–46), it departs from it in one relevant aspect. Whereas the two authors claim that the complaint tradition has changed little since it appeared in the English language (2012, p. vii), this thesis, at least partly, challenges this view. Changes relating to grassroots prescriptivism are part of the larger on-going processes of sociolinguistic changes (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2014), that is, the changing relationships between language and society. The chapters above have thus demonstrated that such changes are occurring on several levels. The language users' views on linguistic authorities are slowly changing, with new voices finding their way into the language debates. Standards are shifting, and although *prima facie* they seem to be loosening, we are rather witnessing their restructuring. Some prescriptive rules are considered to be obsolete, while others are taking their place. The following sections of this chapter touch upon the possible effects of such changes.

7.2 Bridging the gap

In explaining the differences in the way that linguists and non-linguists perceive language in the context of prescriptivism, scholars have often resorted to the 'rule' analogy. Constitutive or descriptive rules of the linguistic system are described as the rules for the game of chess and the regulatory rules of prescriptive grammar as the rules of etiquette

(Brinton & Brinton, 2010, p. 8). We can follow the former and flout the latter, or as Steven Pinker puts it ‘there is no contradiction in saying that a taxi obeys the laws of physics but breaks the laws of Massachusetts’ (1994, p. 372). Whereas useful in providing comprehensive definitions of the two terms, analogies such as these, inevitably perhaps, do not disentangle the complex fabric of views on grammar held by the expert and lay community alike. And they, consequently, disregard a number of developments that are currently taking place.

Following the newest edition of *Garner’s Modern English Usage*, Mark Lieberman (2016) of *Language Log*—when commenting on Garner’s rebranded empirically-based prescriptivism (cf. §1.2)—states that ‘it seems that Bryan Garner and Geoff Pullum are now on the same team, at least as viewed from a sufficiently distant perspective’. If anything, this sentence implies that we can no longer talk about parallel discourses and a fundamental misunderstanding in terms. Some prescriptivists are, in providing usage advice, resorting to linguistic tools. Linguists, on the other hand, acknowledge that studying prescriptive rules does matter, not only in the context of their relevance for the history of the standard language and studying speaker attitudes, but also ‘in the lived experience of English speakers and writers’ (Curzan, 2014, p. 177). And as Cameron (1995, p. 34) vividly describes:

Consider the text you are reading now. From the moment I began to compose it, it was shaped by all kinds of rules and norms: the rules of standard English grammar and spelling, the norms of appropriate diction and tone, as well as ideas about style that go beyond correctness or appropriateness to a more aesthetic sphere of ‘elegance’ (e.g. be brief, be specific, avoid jargon and cliché). I cannot claim I always observe all the relevant prescriptions and

sometimes indeed I deliberately flout them [...] But when I make this sort of choice I am aware I may be called to account for it.

Those describing the rules of linguistic systems, Cameron argues in the passage above, are not exempt from applying them, and they do so in order to follow the conventions of particular formal genres.

It has often been acknowledged by linguists (§1.1) that the field is not successful in communicating with the lay community. Self-proclaimed experts seem to be able to convey their messages more clearly, and their audience readily lends its ears to the binary advice that offers clear answers to what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in usage. Whereas the Bristol Grammar Vigilante (§1.1) is perhaps more zealous than an average grassroots prescriptivist, his activism is indicative of a sentiment deeply engrained within his speech community. The comments below *The Telegraph*’s online article featuring the story (Yorke, 2017) show that the Vigilante—judging from the following statements of the article’s readers—enjoys considerable support: ‘Bravo, sir, whoever you are. Our dear Lady English has far too few defenders in this age of “anything goes” grammar and punctuation’ and ‘You, sir, are my absolute hero. There should definitely be more people like you.’

With all the faith in education reforms to put an end to the prescriptive era (§1.2), the need for prescriptive advice is not waning, and the discriminatory aspects of language attitudes are far from eradicated (Severin, 2017). Even among those whose education actively attempted to ‘educate away’ prescriptivism, it is fairly common to hear statements such as these, according to BurrIDGE, who gives an account of the Australian context (2010, pp. 11–12): ‘Even though it’s not socioling-

uistically correct to say this, but I think American English is “bad” English and we should try and stay away from it as much as possible.’ For all that, prescriptivism too, like the standard language, while persevering, possibly indefinitely, is changing in some of its aspects in the twenty-first century.

7.3 Changing prescriptivism

In the Introduction, I noted that prescriptive rules change, and, most commonly, these changes become news once accepted by media style guides. Generally, changes—such as the one described above by John Allen, a former Style and Radio Newsroom Editor of the BBC—are accepted only after being in general use for an extended period of time.

The tide of change overwhelms people and the people who care (maybe that’s not the right word) who would make changes would gradually disappear and suddenly it’s perfectly all right to... I mean, we used to have a rule that only *buildings* could be *evacuated*, you couldn’t say that *people were evacuated* in the events of a flood or something, of course that was total nonsense, but that’s what the BBC style guide said: ‘Only buildings could be evacuated.’ It would happen so often that *2,000 people had been evacuated because of...* Eventually there was no point in arguing about it or fighting it even if you were prepared to. That’s how things change.

(John Allen, personal communication, 2 February 2016)

Even when accepted, changes are not received without resistance. A Twitter-based backlash ensued following the changes that the Associated Press introduced to its guidelines (cf. §1.2). ‘Have we ceased to be a society rules by laws and order, AP?’ one tweet read. Scott Lilwall cries out (2014). Grassroots prescriptivism seems to be more resistant to change than its institutional counterpart.

Nevertheless, prescriptivism, too, changes and even the most vigilant among its proponents will accept that infinitives can be split: ‘Her Ladyship [i.e. the persona adopted by Taggart] believes that clarity and Elegance are far more important than eighteenth-century edicts and that to scrupulously avoid splitting an infinitive and thereby produce a clumsy sentence is to take pedantry too far’ (Taggart, 2010, p. 38). Articles regularly appear in newspapers and on websites proclaiming the death of certain prescriptive rules with titles such as ‘10 grammar rules you can forget: how to stop worrying and write proper’ (Marsh, 2013) and ‘7 bogus grammar “errors” you don’t need to worry about’ (Yagoda, 2013).

This does not imply, however, that the inventory of the perceived usage problems is shrinking in its scope. In the place of the old chestnuts, new usage problems are introduced (cf. Vriesendorp, 2016). These new usage problems are often associated with the perceived corruption of the language resulting from computer-mediated communication (cf. §2.5.2) and, in terms of linguistic levels, with spelling and punctuation (cf. Chapter 4). Complaints focusing on spelling and punctuation are, according to the authors who commented on them in some detail (cf. Beal, 2010; Heyd, 2014), examples *par excellence* of twenty-first century prescriptivism. Interesting, too, is Beal’s argument that once punctuation takes centre stage in usage discussions, we are, in fact, witnessing a rise in literacy. The concept of literacy, Beal explains, has now expanded to include the knowledge of, often minute, rules of punctuation. Such complaints, Beal argues (2010, p. 62), are ‘a consequence of universal education’, though they are also symptomatic of a division

between the ‘knows’ and the ‘know-nots’ with respect to prescriptive rules.

Another change, chronicled in Chapters 2, 4, and 5, and ensuing from digital online discussions, touches on the nature of participation in what can broadly be referred to as the prescriptive discourse. The introduction of the participatory internet changed the answer to the question: Who participates in usage debates? In spite of optimistic pronouncements in the spirit of web egalitarianism summarised in the title of Clay Shirky’s influential book *Here Comes Everybody* (Shirky, 2010), however, not everyone does take part in debates. The debates on usage, be it in blog comment sections or on Wikipedia Talk pages, are dominated by language professionals, who among themselves form a heterogeneous group, comprising both those who enforce language rules (such as editors and teachers) and descriptivists (linguists and lexicographers). Online platforms on usage are therefore arguably set up as meritocracies, rather than democracies.

Online platforms, moreover, allow for interaction between prescriptivists and their audience, which is something that should have seemingly qualitatively changed the discourse. Yet, the content of websites such as *Grammar Girl* remains comparable to the usage guide genre in its printed form. And much of what we can see among those disseminating advice online can be categorised under what Schaffer (2010) calls ‘Old Whine Online’. We can observe the retelling not only of the same rules, but also of the prescriptive narratives. Prescriptivists, not unlike university lecturers, continue retelling the same humorous anecdotes relating to prescriptive rules (such as sentence-final prepositions,

cf. §4.4.4) for generations. Significant shifts occur only when the rules of the game change. In new online genres that are not the products of single authors but rather of the negotiation of many, prescriptivism is largely ousted in favour of linguistic description. In the case of Wikipedia, this happens under the guidance of community principles, i.e. the principles of Verifiability and of Neutral Point of View.

Striking in the online context is the fact that the largest group of English speakers—that comprising NNSs—remains largely silent in these discussions. More than gender, age, class, or education, it is the sociolinguistic variable of nativeness that correlates with the speakers' willingness to take part in linguistic discussions (cf. §2.4). 'English with an accent' (Lippi-Green, 2012) remains an obstacle and an indicator of the lack of linguistic capital, or at least it is perceived as such by NSs and even NNSs themselves.

Finally, in accounting for the changes in twenty-first-century prescriptivism, a covert yet extremely influential factor needs to be taken into account, namely, automatic grammar checkers, which Curzan refers to as 'the most powerful prescriptive force in the world' (2014, p. 64). Their hidden prescriptivism, which is ingrained in technology, is finding its way into written language use below the threshold of the authors' conscious awareness. Automatic grammar checkers are reiterating many of the rules that are part of the prescriptive canon. The Microsoft Word Grammar Checker frowns upon sentence-final prepositions, the use of *like* as a conjunction, and nonstandard constructions such as *He talk* (Curzan 2014, pp. 79–80). In flagging 'errors', it fails to distinguish between style and grammar, standard and nonstandard va-

rieties. Moreover, it promotes prescriptive rules and spelling preferences of the American English variety, paying little attention to the many other standard varieties of the language. Although, as my analysis has revealed, grammar checkers are still met with scepticism (cf. §4.2), their influence on language use is undeniable. The extent and the nature of this influence, especially in varieties other than British and American English, remain yet to be explored.

7.4 Methodological challenges

The exploration of people's commentary on grammar involves dealing with 'big' and 'messy' data. In an attempt to manage such data and draw connections and conclusions regarding the phenomenon of grass-roots prescriptivism, I have reached out for the tools and categories available primarily in corpus linguistics and sociolinguistics. Each of the puzzle pieces that the chapters of this thesis represent are aimed to form a meaningful whole, yet, each of them is distinct due to the complexity of the topic, which was viewed through the prism of different approaches. The methodology employed in Chapters 2–6 is thus revisited individually in this section.

Although snowball sampling proved to be beneficial in collecting survey responses described in Chapter 2, as with other nonprobability sampling techniques, it is not possible to make unbiased estimates or to generalise from a sample collected in this way to the general population. Similarly, as argued above, letters to newspaper editors analysed in Chapters 2 and 3 cannot be viewed as reflections of public opinion (cf. §2.2.1). Although exploring the attitudes of people who already are

interested in language or belong to privileged social groups is compelling in its own right, turning the attention to the population at large in future studies would further add to our understanding of the topic. Chapter 3 investigates one of the most recognisable features of orthographic prescriptivism, the misused apostrophe. Other linguistic features merit similar attention from researchers. Moreover, it would be particularly interesting to determine which new linguistic features are included in the prescriptive canon and why they are singled out at all. Chapters 4 and 5 turn to an exploration of two online platforms, the Grammar Girl blog and Wikipedia. In Chapter 4 (cf. §4.2), I touch on the array of available online sources on grammar advice, the so-called usage guides 2.0. Their number and different formats are steadily growing and they too lend themselves to further analysis. More is to be said about the relationships between people engaging in online discussions on grammar and their motives for participation.

The methodological approach taken in Chapter 6 is subject to limitations similar to those found in any study engaging in a corpus-based analysis of relatively low-frequency linguistic features. Whereas the occurrence of *thusly* in large-scale corpora, such as COCA, is rather limited, as I am writing this, a Google search for the word on the English-language pages yields as many as 2,060,00 results. Although using the web as a corpus may thus be useful, such an approach hinders the process of analysis due to the lack of data structure. New web-based corpora, such as GloWbE (Davies, 2013) and the Intelligent Web-based Corpus (iWeb) (Davies, 2018–), however, may offer potential solutions to such problems.

7.5 Moving forward

In spite of all the fears expressed surrounding the disappearance and decay of standard English, with the number of its defenders on the rise such fears hardly seem to be justified. One thing is certain though: the set of rules of standard English with which grassroots prescriptivists claim to be familiar are constantly changing, and those who complain are usually correct in saying that what they observe in usage is quite different from what they were taught was ‘correct’ in school. Although this conclusion may seem obvious to a linguist, perhaps less obvious is my observation chronicled throughout the previous chapters that the face of prescriptivism is changing as well.

In studying the language of the usage guide genre (Chapter 5) and its online counterparts (Chapter 4), I was able to get an insight not only into the way their authors communicate with their audience, but also into what they believe are their audience’s needs and expectations. Instead of addressing, as Henry Fowler (§5.2) did in 1926, the ‘half-educated Englishman’, a number of ‘new’ prescriptivists are aware of the fact that they are addressing a global audience for whom comparable sources are only a click away. As Mignon Fogarty puts it, ‘all the traffic data tells me that people learning English are a real audience segment’ (personal communication, 31 January 2016). With objectivity becoming an increasingly important factor in the writing of those positioning themselves as experts on usage, prescriptivists are borrowing from linguists and engaging in dialogues.

Today, more than ever before prescriptivists are lending their ears to linguists. This is not to say that the dialogue is always approached in

the same way. After I wrote about the rise of the descriptive backlash against prescriptive rules on the project's blog (cf. Appendix B, 'The descriptive backlash'), one of the blog's followers commented on my usage of *myself* in the subject position in the following sentence fragment: 'In the survey Ingrid Tieken and myself conducted in 2015'. A person signing off as a 'British native speaker and translator' stated that '[*Myself*] as a replacement for "me" or "I", I prescribe that it is still considered incorrect by people who care about grammar rules'. Whereas I explained in my reply that the usage exists in language and that I find it quite amusing to insert it in a rather informal blog post on a topic relating to descriptivists 'fighting back', grassroots prescriptivists did not seem to acknowledge the context and were not willing to extend the discussion beyond what is 'right' and 'wrong'.

As limited as the success of explaining the relevance of context has been (cf. Burridge, 2010; Severin, 2017), attempting to communicate our findings relating to sociolinguistic variation and change remain the main tools employed by linguists in disseminating these findings on usage to the wider community. The attempts at triangulating, that is, analysing prescriptive pronouncements, speaker attitudes, and actual usage, remain most useful for linguists who not only study prescriptivism but also commit themselves to broadening the avenues for both discussion and investigation.

