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Of greengrocers, sports commentators, estate agents and television presenters: who's in a usage guide and why

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ABSTRACT

Weiner (1988. "On Editing a Usage Guide." In *Words for Robert Burchfield's Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, edited by E. G. Stanley, and T. F. Hoad, 171–183. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 173) describes usage guides as being 'as broad as the English language, covering spelling, punctuation, phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexis, and involving sociolinguistic considerations'. This paper focusses on these 'sociolinguistic considerations', to try and answer the question of why people like greengrocers, sports commentators, estate agents and television presenters are stigmatised for certain perceived linguistic errors. The greengrocer's apostrophe is well known (Beal, Joan C. 2010. "The Grocer's Apostrophe: Popular Prescriptivism in the Twenty-First Century." *English Today* 26 (2): 57–64), but the other three categories, the sports commentators' adverb (the flat adverb), the estate agent's pronoun (*yourselves* for *you*) and the television presenter's demonstrative pronoun (*these/those ones*), I first encountered in Caroline Taggart's *Her Ladyship's Guide to the Queen's English* (2010), one of the three most recent and most prescriptive publications in the HUGE database of usage guides and usage problems. Discussing Taggart's usage guide as a case study, I will go into the question of why certain groups of speakers are made into the object of prescriptivism and will argue that the British class system plays an important role in this. As a case study, this article highlights the need for more linguists to view usage guides as a genre that needs to be treated critically rather than be ignored, as is generally the case at present.

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Introduction

Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926) is probably the most iconic of English usage guides (Busse and Schröder 2010). It might be argued that the ultimate recognition of its status came when Fowler was finally admitted as an entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, Online) in September 2017 (OED, s.v. *Fowler*, n.2),¹ while the related words *Fowleresque* and *Fowlerian* were included around the same time as well (*Fowlerish* is still missing from the dictionary; see Tiekens-Boon van Ostade 2018a, 1). Usage guides are language advice manuals that give usage advice on every aspect of the language, 'spelling, punctuation, phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexis' (Weiner 1988, 173).² Busse and Schröder (2009, 72) thus define usage guides as 'integrative all-in-one reference work[s] written for educated lay people that bridge the traditional divide between a grammar and a dictionary'. For the purpose of the present paper, Weiner's addition that they also 'involve [e] sociolinguistic considerations' is of particular interest: in proscribing usage variants, writers of

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usage guides often attribute a linguistic feature that they consider unacceptable to specific groups of speakers. An example from the first usage guide that is known to have been published, Robert Baker's *Reflections of the English Language* (1770), is his identification of the phrase *of themselves and Families* as 'mere Shopkeepers Cant' (1770, 118). Greengrocers belong to the category of shopkeepers, and they are a well-known target of criticism of the misuse of apostrophes (Beal 2010): the phrase *greengrocer's apostrophe* is even listed as a compound in the *OED* (s.v. *greengrocer*, n.). But there are other groups of speakers that usage guide writers focus on as well.

Usage guides are a popular genre, both in Britain and the US, and they are produced by anyone with an inclination to try and conquer the market for this type of manual. Baker (1770), for instance, was a hack writer, Fowler (1926) a former teacher, writer and lexicographer (he and his brother Frank together produced the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1911); Taggart (2010) used to be an editor, and now publishes books on all kinds of popular topics for the general market,³ and Heffer (2010) and Kamm (2015) are journalists. Linguists, too, publish usage guides, like Crystal (1984) and Trask (2001). Another recent example is Stephen Pinker's *The Sense of Style* (2014), which contains a chapter that might be described as a usage guide. Usage guides provide advice on usage problems, such as whether it should be *it is I* or *me*, the placement of *only*, the dangling adjunct (as in *Pulling the trigger, the gun went off*, Mittins et al. 1970) and double negation, and advice concerning such contested features can be proscriptive, prescriptive, descriptive or a combination of these three.⁴ Peters (2006) describes a change in approach to usage problems over the years, ranging from the early presentation of *ipse dixit* views on what was considered correct or not, through a reliance on usage panels to, most recently, a descriptive basis in surveys and linguistic corpora. Detailed analysis of the usage guides in the Hyper Usage Guide of English or HUGE database, however, which was constructed precisely to enable this kind of research (Straaijer 2014), showed that the development of usage advice over the years is not quite as favourable as that. Usage guides, as I demonstrate in *Describing Prescriptivism* (2020), continue to offer pre and proscriptive linguistic advice rather than showing, in the course of time, an increasingly descriptive attitude to language use as Peters suggests, and as one would expect since the growth of linguistics as a descriptive science. As I also argue in this book and as noted above, this may have to do with the fact that usage guides are not a genre of specialists, while even linguists, as authors of usage guides, have rarely taken a systematic approach to the subject. Pinker's selection criteria for the usage problems he discusses, for instance, are not made explicit. This affects the type of usage advice offered, which makes it necessary to view each individual usage guide in the light of its publication history. What is more, usage panels are not in effect representative of the speech community at large, while Garner made only selective use of language corpora for his *Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (1998 and later editions) (cf. Smits 2017; Straaijer 2018b).

One example of a usage guide that continues in the age-old pre and proscriptive tradition of English usage guides, even though it is one of the three most recent works in the HUGE database, is Caroline Taggart's *Her Ladyship's Guide to the Queen's English* (2010). It was originally published by The National Trust, and consequently enjoyed considerable public exposure by being on display in the shops of English country houses and other historical monuments in the care of The National Trust. Yet, in contrast to equally traditional as well as popular usage guides like Strunk and White (1959) and Heffer (2010), it never attracted any critical attention from linguists (cf. Pullum 2009, 2010; Crystal 2010), nor was it ever reviewed in the press as far as I know.⁵ In this paper, I will do precisely that: I will take Taggart (2010) as a case study to discuss the question presented in the subtitle to this paper, who is in a usage guide and why. And I will do so in order to show that, cleverly marketed though the book is, one of its purposes is to marginalise particular groups of speakers, thus in effect placing them in the shadow of the standard. In appealing to a public of insecure speakers and writers, I believe as a linguist that such an approach within the current usage advice tradition does more harm than good.

Her Ladyship's Guide to the Queen's English

Her Ladyship's Guide to the Queen's English (2010) was not Caroline Taggart's first usage guide, nor is it the only book she wrote on language. Her website presents an impressive array of publications, including as many as eleven books on language:⁶ *Improve your Word Power* (2019), *The Accidental Apostrophe* (2017), *Misadventures in the English Language* (2016), *Kicking the Bucket at the Drop of the Hat* (2016), *New Words for Old* (2015), *500 Words You Should Know* (2014), *Collins Little Book of Grammar Secrets* (2014), *The Book of London Place Names* (2012), *Pushing the Envelope* (2011), *The Book of English Place Names* (2011) and *My Grammar and I (or Should that Be 'Me?')* (2009), her other usage guide, written jointly with J.A. Wines. This book did generate reviews in the papers, in contrast to *Her Ladyship's Guide*. *Her Ladyship's Guide* was reissued in 2016, published this time by Batsford, to fit in with Taggart's subsequent *Her Ladyship's Guide* books: *Her Ladyship's Guide to Running One's Home* (2012), *Her Ladyship's Guide to the British Season* (2013), *Her Ladyship's Guide to the Art of Conversation* (2016) and *Her Ladyship's Guide to Greeting the Queen* (2016). Together, the books form an attractive set, while, at £8.99, they are attractively priced as well. Possibly, as also the pink colour of Taggart's website suggests, they are targeted specifically at women, which may be a clever selling device from a linguistic perspective as well. Women, as has been repeatedly shown in sociolinguistic research, tend to be more focussed on the standard,⁷ and thus might be particularly inclined to buy a book like this.

In Taggart's usage guide, 'Her Ladyship' functions as a persona, which serves to create a distance between Taggart herself as the author and the views on linguistic correctness she presents in her book. At the same time, as an alleged member of the English aristocracy, this persona is imbued with linguistic authority, being an exponent of 'the Queen's English', a phrase that is also part of the book's title. Her Ladyship thus represents a model of language use that is worth adopting if, it is suggested, one wishes to be successful in British society today. 'Who is Her Ladyship?' is a question Taggart addresses in her introduction, explaining that she is

a person of a **certain age** and a **certain level of education**. She is also, undoubtedly, of a **certain class**, although she claims that this is far less important now than it used to be. She admits to being a snob, but she is more a linguistic snob than a social one. She speaks a language that, for the purposes of this book, is called Elegant English (2010, 6) (emphasis mine).

In the above quotation I've highlighted three characteristics that are meant to give authority to the linguistic pronouncements made by this persona in the course of the book, her age, education and social class. 'Elegant English' is defined by Taggart as the opposite of 'the vulgar, the ugly and the inaccurate in language' (2010, 7), and all her linguistic comments in the book are meant to be viewed in this light. On the same page she identifies her target audience as the kind of speakers who are most in need of linguistic advice: first observing that 'there is no shame in coming from the north of England and very little in coming from North America or the Antipodes', she adds that 'many native speakers of English, whatever their social and geographical origins, feel uncomfortable with their own language – for the simple reason that they have never been taught its rules' (2010, 7). While the first statement makes every sociolinguist cringe, the additional comment bears a considerable amount of truth: as described in great detail by Deborah Cameron in her book *Verbal Hygiene* (1995), English grammar teaching was no longer part of the British school curriculum from the 1960s and 70s onwards (see also Beal 2018), and this has in effect produced what Keith (1990) calls a 'grammarless generation' (see Ebner 2017, 372). This is indeed what several of my own survey respondents complain of: 'I'd argue that scrapping the systematic teaching of grammar in UK state schools in the 1970s was the beginning of the end, and there's no way we can ever recover from that,' one of them wrote (cited in Tiekens-Boon van Ostade 2020, 132). The large number of usage guides published during the 1980s and 90s, as I argue in *Describing Prescriptivism*, can be explained as a response from the market to cater to this linguistic insecurity. And

as the quotations from *Her Ladyship's Guide to the Queen's English* show, Caroline Taggart aims to do the same, though her book is bound to make readers rather more than less linguistically insecure.

Taggart's selection principles

The starting point of the book, Caroline Taggart told me in an interview presented in Appendix 3 of *Describing Prescriptivism*,⁸ was *Noblesse Oblige* (1956) by the novelist Nancy Mitford, who is described as having an 'upper-class pedigree [which] was impeccable' (Taggart 2010, 11). *Noblesse Oblige* includes one of the earliest articles within the field of sociolinguistics, Alan S.C. Ross's 'U and Non-U: An Essay in Sociological Linguistics' (1956), originally published in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* in 1954. In addition, Taggart consulted 'several more serious and comprehensive guides to English', which, as the bibliography of *Her Ladyship's Guide* informs us, include two style guides, Bryson (1991) and *The Oxford Manual of Style* (2002), two usage guides (her own, published with J.A. Wines in 2008; and Sayce 2006),⁹ and a few etiquette books. Basically, however, she

chose examples (of 'confusibles' [*sic*], for example) that appealed to me. And I mentioned it to friends, many of whom came up with examples of expressions or confusions that annoyed them. But it was very personal – I basically wrote about the things that amused or annoyed me (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2020, Appendix 3).

In other words, Taggart primarily adopted the old *ipse dixit* approach which, according to Peters (2006), represents an outdated way of dealing with usage problems in language advice literature. Some examples of Taggart's confusables (2010, 94–122) are *acetic/ascetic/aesthetic*, *brassiere/brasserie/brazier*, *caveat/caviar*, *cite/sight/site*, *epigram/epigraph/epitaph* and *prescribe/proscribe*, though the inventory also includes more widely recognised, and what might therefore be called proper, usage problems like *adverse/averse*, *their/there/they're* (cf. Vriesendorp 2016) and *whose/who's*.

The HUGE database includes 123 usage problems, and Taggart is listed for 49 of them – more than Lamb (2010) and fewer than Heffer (2010), for whom 39 and 73 usage problems may be found, respectively. Some examples are the split infinitive, as in *to happily potter about the garden* (2010, 38), the origin of which Taggart mistakenly traces back to the eighteenth century (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2020, 26); double negatives, which she says 'are among the clearest indicators of Inelegance' (2010, 43); quotative *like* ('And I'm, *like*, yeah, whatever ...'), which she calls a 'distressing colloquialism' (2010, 76); the placement of *only* of which she still maintains that it 'should be positioned ... as closely as possible to the word it qualifies' (2010, 54), even though it no longer represents a real usage problem today (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2020, 164, 177.); the non-literal use of *literally*, about which she claims that it is 'one of the most commonly misused words' (2010, 77) for all its being in widespread use and enjoying what Kostadinova (2018a, 36) identifies as covert prestige among its users; *try and* (for *try to*) which Taggart labels as 'incorrect' (2010, 51) despite its idiomatic status in British English (Hommerberg and Tottie 2007); and *of* for *have* as in *should of*, *may of* and *could of*, which, she writes, 'should never, ever be used in this context' (2010, 29), thus ignoring that usage is only problematical when it comes down to converting speech into writing (see the discussion of *could of* in Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2020). This rather arbitrarily compiled list shows a mixture of – not uncommon – prejudice against the eighteenth-century normative grammarians (split infinitive), unawareness of the status of usage items (*try and*), the desire to keep old chestnuts like the placement of *only* alive (also *literally*), the strong condemnation of features associated with the language of young people (*like*), as well as the identification of double negation and the use of *of* for *have* as markers of inelegance.

What 'Elegant English' is not

Searching a digitised version of *Her Ladyship's Guide* for the word *elegant* takes us to Taggart's chapter on grammar, and to three boxed pieces called 'The sports commentator's adverb', 'The

Morecombe and Wise relative pronoun' and 'The estate agent's pronoun' (2010, 52, 55, 56). In these sections, specific groups of speakers are singled out for particular usages that Taggart considers incorrect, the flat adverb, the use of relative *what*, and that of the *-self* pronouns, instead of what is considered more regular, as in (1), (2) and (3), respectively:

- (1) Federer is serving beautiful (for *beautifully*)
- (2) Beauty like what I have got (more elegant: *Beauty such as mine*)
- (3) I'd be delighted to show it to yourselves (for *you*)

The chapter contains two more such pieces: 'The shopper's apostrophe' and 'The television presenter's demonstrative pronoun' (2010, 47, 57). The first type of commentary focuses not on the greengrocer's apostrophe but on the 'idiosyncratic' use of apostrophes by '[m]any prominent British department stores' like Harrods, Marks and Spencer and Selfridges (all spelled correctly, according to Taggart, without the apostrophe). Apostrophes are a frequent target of criticism from the general public, who regularly express their discontent by writing letters to the editor on the subject (Lukač 2018). By the 'television presenter's demonstrative pronoun' Taggart refers to the 'commonly heard tautology ... *these ones* or *those ones*': having heard 'the host of a gardening programme, checking how her seedlings were faring, refer to *these two ones here*', Taggart comments: 'A lesser person than Her Ladyship might have screamed' (2010, 57).

Targeting specific groups of users for what Taggart considers incorrect language use is in line with Weiner's sociolinguistic considerations referred to above that are part and parcel of the discussion of usage problems in usage guides. And given the *ipse dixit* approach acknowledged by Taggart herself, these may just have been features she accidentally noticed and decided to deal with in her usage guide. Flat adverbs, however, are not specifically the domain of sports commentators: Morana Lukač and I, in an article on the subject (2019), found that a sentence like *go slow* is quite typical of the spoken language generally, though more so in American than in British English. So for flat adverbs to occur in what is after all spoken usage in the language of sports commentators should not call for comment as such. Television presenters, particularly in programmes about everyday topics like gardening, would similarly use features that are typical of spoken usage, and the use of *these/those ones* would hardly seem worth commenting on in this respect. Besides, as the image on the blogpost *These ones, those ones* suggests,¹⁰ the forms are quite naturally taken as the plural forms of *this one* and *that one*. But the BBC has long been the target of linguistic criticism by listeners and viewers (Burchfield 1981; Luscombe 2012; Ebner 2016; Tiekens-Boon van Ostade 2018b), and Taggart's particular focus on television presenters may merely be another example of this (even if the programme in question may not have been broadcast by the BBC). The use of *what* as a relative instead of an interrogative pronoun, illustrated in (2), which Taggart believes is its proper function, is quite common in many varieties of non-standard English (Cheshire and Whittle 1993, 68 – 70). The perpetrators of this alleged grammatical gaffe, Eric Morecambe (1926 – 1984) and Ernie Wise (1925 – 1999) – not their real names – were television comedians, and according to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online edition), in which they both have an entry, '[t]he Morecambe and Wise Show ran uninterruptedly on ATV between 1961 and 1968 and undoubtedly established them as national favourites' (s.v. Morecambe, Eric). Their use of sentences like the one illustrated in (2), and put into the mouth of Glenda Jackson, according to Taggart, 'delighted a generation that had, by and large, studied grammar and knew that these were deliberate illiteracies for humorous effect'. Her proscriptive advice is directed at 'younger readers', who, it seems, would benefit from advice against using the kind of non-standard English that Her Ladyship deems inelegant (2010, 55), even though these right might no longer get the allusion to the Morecambe and Wise Show in all its sociolinguistic context.

But what about the estate agent? What makes estate agents into the target of criticism of a linguistic feature that was already in general use in eighteenth-century English? In my analysis of eighteenth-century English standard and non-standard pronominal usage, I found what I called the

non-reflexive *-self* pronominal used by a variety of writers as a modesty device – both from the perspective of the self and of the addressee – to avoid coming across too directly (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1994, 229 – 232). Its usage was never standardised, but has evidently nevertheless continued, as the example cited by Taggart suggests. The reason why Taggart specifically attributes the usage to estate agents may once again be accidental, the result of private experience perhaps. But in order to understand why it is estate agents that are focused on here we need to turn to the book *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* by the British social anthropologist Fox (2004). Fox's book includes a section called 'The Awful Estate-agent Rule', where she tries to account for 'the universal and apparently quite irrational English dislike of estate agents' (2004, 124). Estate agents are 'constantly mocked, sneered at, censured and abused', she writes, and they are 'ridiculed as stupid and incompetent "twits", but also reviled as sly, grasping, cunning and deceitful'. The explanation for this, she argues, is that people find it offensive that, in trying to sell their homes, estate agents in effect put a price on 'our lifestyle, our social position, our character, our private self, something people try to minimise by 'making [estate agents] the butt of our jokes and scorn', even, as Taggart's criticism has shown, to the extent of making derogatory comments on their language use. To me, it seems that any other linguistic feature might have been associated with the estate agent in Taggart's book if it had happened to draw her attention. So before generalising about the language of estate agents or any of the other social groups that come in for her linguistic criticism, readers of *Her Ladyship's Guide to the Queen's English* need to realise that Taggart 'basically wrote about the things that amused or annoyed' herself only (see above).

In conclusion: social class and usage criticism

Caroline Taggart is not a linguist, so perhaps she cannot be blamed for not basing herself on up-to-date linguistic analyses of some of the linguistic features she discusses in her book. What I think she can be blamed for, though, is that she doesn't discuss in her introduction her starting-point for writing the book, by saying, as she did when I asked her about this for my study of usage guides and usage problems in *Describing Prescriptivism*, that the book presents an essentially personal account of what 'amused or annoyed' her in as far as the question of correct language use is concerned. By putting her views and opinions into the mouth of an allegedly authoritative persona, who is presented as middle aged, highly educated and upper class, specific groups of speakers are singled out as the perpetrators of language features that may not be part of formal standard English but that are nevertheless quite common in colloquial usage. In this light, there is perhaps some comfort in the conclusion drawn by Viktorija Kostadinova in her study of attitudes to usage by Americans, usage guide writers included, who doubts whether top-down prescriptive attitudes, indeed like those expressed by Taggart and as analysed here, will in the long run have any effect on usage (2018b, 248).

A rather more enlightened view on language than that found in Taggart's book, is presented by Harry Ritchie in *English Grammar for the Natives* (2013). Ritchie is not a linguist either: he is a writer and journalist, and in his book, he takes a perspective that is more in line with views held by sociolinguists, by arguing that native speakers should not feel intimidated by prescriptivists. Ritchie calls grammar a 'nebulous subject [which is] presided over by stern, scary men, who write books telling where we always get things wrong' (2013, 2). I have shown here that women write such books, too (see also Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2020, 56), so gender is not an issue in the usage debate (as Kamm 2015 terms it), or at any rate not since women entered the arena. What *is* an issue in all this, Ritchie continues, is social class:¹¹ 'the purpose of all the old-school grammar guides and usage manuals isn't to impart linguistic knowledge but to provide a rulebook for middle- and upper-class membership, and keep out the 85 per cent who don't use the right passwords' (2013, 9). '[N]on-standard grammar,' he writes a few pages further down (2013, 11), 'is one great shibboleth', and he singles out the British context where this is most apparent: 'Standard's rejection of non-standard happens everywhere English is spoken, ... but nowhere as thoroughly as in Britain, where language and class are most intimately intertwined' (2013, 9). The fear of having their social position evaluated, as Fox,

cited above, argues, is one of the explanations for the British loathing of estate agents. It is in this context that *Her Ladyship's Guide to the Queen's English* was produced, and this helps us understand, though not condone, the perspective taken in the book. It may also help us understand why usage guides like this 'continue to be churned out', as Ritchie puts it (2013, 6), and perhaps also why there continues to be a market for them. 'Insecurity sells,' Ulrich Busse, the author of several studies on usage guides, once said (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2020, 16). But Ritchie, a non-linguist, also comments that this state of affairs 'still meet[s] no challenge from academic linguists, who clearly regard the stuff in the bookshops as beneath consideration' (2013, 6). It is indeed precisely this what [*sic*] this article has set out to do, in line with the critical reviews of traditional usage guides produced by Pullum and Crystal, as referred to above. And I challenge other linguists to do likewise.

Notes

1. See my blogpost 'Fowler into the OED' for a suggestion to this end (<https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2011/09/16/fowler-into-the-oed/>).
2. See also Straaijer (2018a, 11–12) and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2020, Chapter 1).
3. For an overview, see her website at <https://www.carolinetaggart.co.uk> (accessed 5 April 2019).
4. See Ebner (2017), Tieken-Boon van Ostade and Ebner (2017) and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2020) for examples of this.
5. To check this, I consulted Factiva, a database of newspapers and other printed documents (<https://global.factiva.com/>).
6. Most of the books' publication dates were retrieved from WorldCat (www.worldcat.org).
7. This was confirmed once again by Ebner (2017) in her study of attitudes to contested usage features among British speakers today.
8. I'm immensely grateful to Caroline Taggart for sharing these views with me. Doing so (alongside several other writers of usage guides) has contributed in an important way to providing a comprehensive account of the usage guide as a genre in my book *Describing Prescriptivism*. I also want to acknowledge her generosity in presenting me and my project members with a copy of her book so that we could include it in our studies.
9. On the difference between style guides and usage guides, see Peters and Young (1997, 317–318), Ebner (2016), Straaijer (2018a) and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2020, 41).
10. See: <https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2019/04/19/these-ones-those-ones/> (accessed 26 April 2019).
11. 'The uneducated' or 'illiterate' are frequently targeted in usage guides as well (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2020, Chapter 5).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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