



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Analysing the English usage guide tradition: Robert Browning's language as a potential target for prescriptivists

Tieken, I.M.

Citation

Tieken, I. M. (2024). Analysing the English usage guide tradition: Robert Browning's language as a potential target for prescriptivists. *Studia Neophilologica*, 96(3), 768-783.
doi:10.1080/00393274.2024.2406645

Version: Publisher's Version
License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4197939>

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

Analysing the English usage guide tradition: Robert Browning's language as a potential target for prescriptivists

Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade

To cite this article: Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade (17 Nov 2024): Analysing the English usage guide tradition: Robert Browning's language as a potential target for prescriptivists, *Studia Neophilologica*, DOI: [10.1080/00393274.2024.2406645](https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2024.2406645)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2024.2406645>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 17 Nov 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 113



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Analysing the English usage guide tradition: Robert Browning's language as a potential target for prescriptivists

Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade

Leiden University Centre for Linguistics, Leiden, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

J. Lesslie Hall's *English usage* (1917) is an early example of an English usage guide whose approach is – unusually for the text type – strictly descriptive. Based on an analysis of the usage of a large variety of literary and non-literary texts from the Middle English period onwards, Hall presents an enormous array of usage data with the intention of allowing his readers to decide for themselves as to the appropriateness of the feature in question. One author who stands out in the book for his preference for what developed into a much contested construction, the split infinitive, is the well-known nineteenth-century poet Robert Browning. Much studied though he is from a literary perspective, Browning's language as such has rarely been the topic of linguistic research. For all that, it is generally considered unusual, and consequently would be expected to have attracted the criticism of usage guides. In this paper, and drawing on the HUGE database of English usage guides and usage problems, I will focus on the question of to what extent this is indeed the case.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 January 2023

Accepted 4 March 2024

KEYWORDS

Split infinitive; Robert Browning's language; usage guides; J. Lesslie Hall; prescriptivism

1. Introduction

Robert Browning (1812–1889), according to his biographer Clyde de L. Ryals, 'was generally recognized, along with Tennyson, as one of the greatest poets of the period' (1993: 216). Ryals characterises Browning as 'probably the most paradoxical of poets writing in English' (1993: ix), but while Browning's literary output, which includes major publications like the four-volume *The ring and the book* (1868–1869), has been extensively studied, his language has only rarely been analysed. Two notable exceptions are Krause (1971) and Fowler (1998), with Krause conducting a now rather dated approach to try and identify Browning's linguistic fingerprint, and Fowler analysing his presence in the *Oxford English dictionary* (OED) in order to establish the particular characteristics of his vocabulary.¹ Browning's language use, primarily as reflected in the blank verse of his published poems and plays, however, also drew the attention of J. Lesslie Hall (1856–1928), the author of a usage guide called *English usage* (1917) (Tiekens-Boon van Ostade 2023; Tiekens-Boon van Ostade submitted).

CONTACT Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade  I.M.Tiekens@hum.leidenuniv.nl  Leiden University Centre for Linguistics, The Netherlands

¹Fowler consulted the OED on CD-Rom (i.e. its first edition) as well as OED².

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Usage guides are language advice manuals. As a genre they differ from grammars and dictionaries (Busse & Schröder 2009), and they have been around, in the English linguistic tradition at least, since the late eighteenth century in England and from the mid-nineteenth century onwards in America (Tieken-Boon van Ostadé 2020; 2023). Their approach to what is considered linguistically correct may be either pre- and proscriptive or descriptive, though often a combination of these three approaches is found, which thus confirms the nowadays generally contested existence of a simple prescriptive–descriptive dichotomy or continuum (see for instance Rawlins & Chapman 2020). Contrary to what might be expected given the rise of linguistics as a descriptive discipline since the late-nineteenth century, usage guides as a genre have not become more descriptive over the years, nor is it the case that, overall, earlier publications are predominantly pre- and/or proscriptive and later ones more descriptive in nature. Studying their development over the years has shown that these two trends have come to exist side by side. Thus, Hall’s *English usage* (1917), relatively early though it is, is an example of a usage guide that takes a consistently descriptive approach, while much later ones, like Simon Heffer’s *Strictly English* (2010) or Caroline Taggart’s *Her Ladyship’s guide to the Queen’s English* (2010), are predominantly pre- or proscriptive in their language advice.

Hall carefully outlines his approach in the preface to *English usage*: he claims to have analysed ‘more than seventy-five thousand pages of English and American literature’, written by famous authors as well as ‘the “lesser lights” of literature’, but also ‘the works of scholars and linguists’. Hall describes himself as ‘a historian of usage’, and for each of the 140 alphabetically arranged usage features he discusses he presents ‘the authorities *pro* and *con*, record[ing] the usage, and leav[ing] the reader to draw his own conclusions’ (1917: 5–6). Items discussed range from *accept of* to *you was*, and many of these include ‘statistics’ as Hall called them: lists of instances taken from a large variety of authors. Thus, we find 10 instances by Edward Gibbon and one by Mrs Gaskell of the use of *constant(ly)* for *continual(ly)* (1917: 61–62), and 30 instances of the adverbial use of *pretty* by Henry Fielding and three by George Eliot (1917: 217–218). The figures are often low, but may occasionally be very high, as with Lord Macaulay for whom Hall noted 98 instances for the use of *at length* instead of *at last* (1917: 40–42), or William Makepeace Thackeray’s 76 instances of a misplaced relative clause (1917: 162–165). Consequently, these overviews allow us to gain an insight into the linguistic preferences by a considerable selection of authors from the past, going back as far as the fourteenth century. An example of this is Browning’s evident predilection for the split infinitive (Hall 1917: 266–271). Hall’s list of what he calls ‘offenders’ for this construction comprises 34 authors from Wycliffe and Pecoock (Hall’s spelling) onwards, the most striking of whom is Browning with as many as 23 instances – considerably more than Peacock’s four or Spencer’s five. ‘Shall we, then, adopt and push this locution?’ Hall asks the reader. ‘Not necessarily,’ he concludes, because ‘[i]f we deduct Browning’s figures, we have about forty-nine split infinitives in over 75,000 pages of English and American literature’. The split infinitive, in other words, was not very frequent, though Hall did note that at the time usage was ‘spreading in the daily and weekly papers, and in the colloquial English of the intelligent classes’ (1917: 270).

Browning’s 23 instances are not outstanding as such, only so in relation to the usage of the other writers studied by Hall. What is more, his language use is exemplified for other items in the usage guide as well, along with that of his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning

(1806–1861), though with much larger numbers. Searching for their names in a digitised version of Hall's *English usage* produced 31 usage items for Robert but only five for Elizabeth. How exceptional is Hall's focus on Browning's language among usage guide writers? In order to investigate this I will analyse Browning's presence in the HUGE database of English usage guides and usage problems (Straaijer 2014) (Section 2) with a special focus on Hall (1917) (Section 3). In addition, in the light of the lengthy list of allegedly ungrammatical features that characterise Browning's poetry according to Krause (1971), I will consider the question of whether the usage items which drew the attention of usage guide writers like Hall are characteristic of his poetic language alone or whether they occur in his private writings as well, and also how his usage compares to that of his wife and fellow-poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Section 4). Doing so has been standard practice since the early days of historical sociolinguistics (see e.g. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1987 or Sairio 2009), despite the fact that, referred to as inter- and intra-writer variation, it is nowadays presented as an innovative approach to linguistic variation in the past (Schiegg & Huber 2023). One of the things this study will illustrate is that among English usage guide writers the data collection as presented in Hall (1917) is rather exceptional within the tradition. But it will also demonstrate the potential of drawing on usage guides like Hall's for an assessment of contemporary views concerning the language of individual authors, that of Browning in the present instance, but also that of his wife and of his literary rival Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) (see Section 5).

2. Browning in the HUGE database

HUGE is short for Hyper Usage Guide of English, a (relational) database that comprises a selection of 77 British and American usage guides ranging from the earliest publication in 1770 down to 2010.² From these usage guides 123 usage problems were included for the purpose of analysing the usage guide tradition in multiple ways (Straaijer 2015, Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2020: 62–66). Hall (1917) is one of the usage guides in the database, and 37 of the 140 items treated in his *English usage* are included in HUGE. Performing a full-text search in the database for 'Browning' produced nine usage guides published between 1927 (Krapp) and 1999 (Allen). Not all these hits prove relevant: Allen's reference is to a different Browning, while in Wood (1962) we only find an example sentence with Browning's name illustrating the prescriptively proper use of *contemporary* (bold is used for emphasis throughout this paper in the examples quoted):

- (1) Tennyson and **Browning** were contemporary poets, but they are not modern poets.

In two more usage guides, Krapp (1927) and Burchfield (1996), the references are not to Robert but to Elizabeth Browning, on the use of *but* as a preposition (Krapp) and of *lowlily* rather than *lowly* (Burchfield). Browning himself is referred to for as many as fifteen items in HUGE discussed in Hall (1917) and for only a single one each in Vallins (1951), Evans and

²This end date was determined by the run of the project within which the database was constructed (2011–2016; for publications from this project, see <https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/publications/>). Usage guides have continued to be published since then, and more are currently in the process of being written.

Evans (1957), Crystal (1984) and *Webster's dictionary of English usage* (1989). Vallins mentions Browning (along with Tennyson and the poet Robert Bridges) for their use of -t as a suffix in verb forms like '*dipt, kisst, tost, crost*, which they used, no doubt, partly as an insurance against false rhythm on the part of an ignorant reader'; the other three discuss his use of the split infinitive. Like Hall, the first among the HUGE authors to refer to Browning in his usage guide, they must have been struck by this allegedly unusual construction. The split infinitive is a well-known shibboleth in English, though usage has become so frequent in recent years that it has effectively ceased to be a usage problem (Lukač 2018: 184–186). Nearly seventy years ago, Evans and Evans (1957) still claimed that '[t]he construction is a relatively new one', though they cite early users from Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586) onwards, as well as five former American presidents, Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919), Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) and Herbert Hoover (1874–1964), highly reputable users indeed (cf. Hall's reference above to usage by the 'intelligent classes'). *Webster's* discussion of the split infinitive is, finally, worth mentioning because it refers to Hall's comment that 'the construction is common only in Browning' as well as to George Curme's *Grammar of the English language* (1931), which noted that it is 'frequent in Mark Twain, Thomas Hardy, and Rudyard Kipling as well as Browning'. *Webster's dictionary of English usage* was indeed found to be one of the more scholarly (and descriptive) publications in the field (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2020: 217).

3. Browning's language as discussed in Hall (1917)

Hall was therefore not just the first usage guide writer to focus on Browning, but he also discussed the poet's language much more elaborately than any of the other writers mentioned in the preceding section. Besides the split infinitive, his references to Browning in the selected passages in HUGE include the comparison of adjectives (e.g. *deadeat*), double negation, *either* 'each of two', *first two/two first*, *had rather*, *me* as a quasi-nominative (in a footnote only), the gerund, *mutual* for *common*, *myself* for *I/me*, the plural use of *none*, the placement of *only*, preposition stranding, adverbial *pretty*, *thrived/throve* and *whose* with neuter antecedents. Checking a digitised version of Hall's usage guide for items citing Browning that are not in HUGE produced fifteen more items, though none with figures quite as high as for the split infinitive.³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning was likewise mentioned six more times in Hall (1917) than in the HUGE selections: for the possessive case functioning as the antecedent to a relative pronoun,⁴ *sick* for *ill*, singular adjectives used as nouns, *that* used for *who*, and *whose* with neuter antecedents. Her usage figures are always very low indeed, except for the use of *that* for *who*, for which Hall lists eleven instances, but they are particularly high for this item generally, with e.g. 93 instances for Marlowe, 84 for Shakespeare, 59 each for Milton and Spencer, and 34 for Browning (cf. note 3). Citing '115 authorities covering a period of about 400 years, and about 1100 passages', Hall concluded that usage of this feature 'was strong all through the last century' (1917: 300). Neither Robert nor Elizabeth were therefore exceptional in this respect.

³Higher figures are found for the use of the possessive case (43) and the use of *that* for *who* (34), but in neither instance are these figures as unusual in the wider context as in the case of the split infinitive.

⁴As an example, Hall cites Tennyson's *Her name to whom ye yield* (Hall 1917: 208).

4. Usage problems and Browning's 'linguistic fingerprint'

'[S]ome of Browning's contemporaries,' Krause (1971: 2) notes, 'seriously considered his style a hindrance to the reading of his poetry,' and she cites Tennyson as an example. Her study aims to analyse the extent to which Browning's alleged ungrammaticality functioned as a stylistic device in his poetry. The ungrammaticalities she noted in his work include infinitives without *to*, deleted *-ing* forms, the absence of periphrastic *do*, heavy embedding, an idiosyncratic use of *-self* words, *who* used for *whoever*, superlatives in *-est* rather than with *most*, his creativity in the application of particular derivational affixes,⁵ 'peculiar word order', *most* used in the sense of *very*, and the occurrence of flat adverbs (1971: 139–145, 154, 155, 161–163, 178–180). Some of these features, however, would have been relatively common at the time, while others may have been deployed by Browning in order to adapt the language to the restrictions of the medium he wrote in, blank verse. For all that, Browning's frequent deviations from what would have been standard grammar at the time may indeed well have bothered his readers, as Krause comments, then as well as when she herself undertook her study. It is therefore quite reasonable to expect that his language would have attracted the attention of usage guide writers as well.

Hall, for his part, was struck by the exceptionally high incidence of the split infinitive in Browning's verse, and in this light it seems surprising that Krause does not mention the construction because the split infinitive has developed into a well-known shibboleth within the field of prescriptivism. To consider the question of whether Browning's usage was indeed exceptional at the time, I analysed *The complete poetic and dramatic works of Robert Browning* (Scudder 1895) and compared my findings with his usage of the split infinitive in *The letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845–1846* (Browning 1900, Volume 1). I subsequently placed Browning's data into the context of the study by Calle-Martín and Miranda-García (2009) based on an historical corpus documenting the rise and development of the split infinitive. Full details of this analysis are presented elsewhere (Tieken-Boon van Ostade [submitted](#)), but here it will suffice to mention that the results of my comparison – 7.3 instances per 100,000 words for his verse and 6.2 for his letters – confirm Hall's findings with respect to Browning's unusually high figure of usage of the split infinitive in relation to that of his contemporaries.⁶ His use of the type of adverbs splitting *to* from the infinitive form proper, moreover, also differs from what Calle-Martín and Miranda-García found for the subperiod 1850–1920. In other words, Browning was indeed the linguistic pioneer that Hall had discovered him to be with respect to the feature concerned.

How about other features from Browning's language use that have become part and parcel of the prescriptive tradition over the years and that consequently obtained a place in the usage guides as so-called 'old chestnuts'? Would other features of his language have drawn the attention of usage guide writers, just as his usage of the split infinitive did with Hall, and how does his usage compare with that of the features' supposedly more acceptable versions as advocated by the usage guides of the period? To tackle this

⁵His use of the archaic prefix *a-* (e.g. *adeep*, *a-wave*) is a good example of this. The *OED* quotes many such words with Browning as a first or sometimes only user (*ajoint*, *a-ripple*), while many similar coinages are cited for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, too (Tieken-Boon van Ostade [submitted](#)).

⁶No instances were found in his wife's letters, and only a single one in her poem *Aurora Leigh*.

question within the limited context of this paper I decided to select three usage features by way of case studies, all of them old chestnuts:⁷

- the placement of *only*, as in *I **only** heard a vague tale of some priest* compared to *But I have **only** these*
- the use of *whose* with a neuter antecedent as in *a pleasant life/**Whose** small events I treasure* contrasted with *At the edge **of which** the chapel stands*
- and usage of *-lily* adverbs, like *lowlily* compared to adverbial *lowly*.

All three items are included in the HUGE database, where we see that the placement of *only* occurs in usage guides from the start of the tradition in 1770 onwards and is found in 62 of the 77 usage guides, including Hall (1917) and the three most recent ones in the database, Heffer (2010), Lamb (2010) and Taggart (2010). *Whose* for *of which* first occurs in Gould (1867), and is followed by 33 subsequent usage guides, including Hall (1917), though not Lamb (2010) or Taggart (2010). As for the *-lily* adverbs, this is the most recently included item in the tradition of the three features analysed here, as first discussed by Vizetelly (1906). For Hall, the item may have been too new – or, as we will see, too rare – since he does not mention it, nor do we find it in Taggart (2010). For her or for her readers, it seems that usage of forms like *lowlily* does not present a problem. If we check the history of usage through Google Books Ngram Viewer (set to English generally), we see that there was a peak for words like *lovelily* and *jollily* during the 1820s, followed by a steady decline but with a small rise from the start of the 2000s onwards. *Lowlily* was never as frequent, and usage slightly peaked a little later. My decision to include *-lily* adverbs in the present analysis is because this feature attracted the attention of Burchfield (1996), though for Elizabeth rather than Robert Browning, while my search for instances in the texts analysed here only produced data for Robert, not Elizabeth.

For my data collection I used the same method as for my analysis of Browning's usage of the split infinitive discussed above, including Elizabeth's usage in her major poetical work *Aurora Leigh* (1856)⁸ and in her part of the correspondence. For descriptive purposes I will draw on the reference grammar by Huddleston and Pullum (2002), who regularly refer to the views of usage guides in their work (generally referring to them as 'manuals' or 'prescriptive works' without identifying them any further). The authors thus take the genre seriously, which is significant in the light of linguists' generally dismissive attitudes to the role of prescriptivism in language use. Huddleston and Pullum, moreover, note that 'there is absolutely nothing **grammatically** wrong' with features that tend to be criticised in usage guides (emphasis added), many of which have been frowned upon since the late eighteenth century. If prescriptivists disapprove of particular items, Huddleston and Pullum argue, this is due to personal taste, to a 'confusion of informality with ungrammaticality', and to arguments that are linguistically invalid (2002: 6); as shown in Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2020), this has been the case since the early days of prescriptivism.

⁷The examples given as illustrations were all taken from Browning's usage as analysed for this paper.

⁸For all three works analysed I drew on the texts as available from Project Gutenberg.

4.1. The placement of *only*

Pullum and Huddleston (2002: 587) call *only* a ‘restrictive focusing modifier’. The problem with this feature in the eyes of prescriptivists throughout its history (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2020: 119–126) is that the placement of *only* is variable in that the adverb may either occur outside the construction it modifies (the focus) or be directly adjacent to it (2002: 589). In other words, there are two potential variants for each of the two examples above (both from Browning), one with *only* preceding the verb in the main clause (*heard* in (2) or *have* in (3)), and the other with *only* occurring right next to the focal object, *a vague tale of some priest* in (2) and *these* in (3):

- (2) a. I **only** heard a vague tale of some priest (RB)
 b. I heard **only** a vague tale of some priest

- (3) a. But I **only** have these
 b. But I have **only** these (RB)

In speech, according to Pullum and Huddleston, scopal focus is ‘usually [...] prosodically marked’, but because stress marking in written texts is impossible, prescriptivists have long presented the point of view that in writing *only* should be placed immediately before its focus (2002: 590). Actual usage, however, is ‘massively at variance’, Pullum and Huddleston note on the same page, even with ‘the best writers’. Browning’s variable usage, in other words, is therefore no exception. A third variant would have *only* occurring in end position:

- (2) c. I heard a vague tale of some priest **only**
 (3) c. But I have these **only**

The variant is found in Browning’s language too, as example (4) below illustrates, but because usage guides usually limit their discussion to variants a. and b. in (2) and (3), I will not consider endplaced *only* any further here.

The placement of *only* is one of the five usage problems I analysed in detail in *describing prescriptivism* (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2020: 119–126). To this end, I conducted an attitudes survey and a corpus analysis in addition to describing the views of the usage guides in HUGE. Regarding the latter part of the analysis it turned out that after the 1950s, the feature is no longer merely proscribed, though even from the 1990s onwards usage guides are not wholly descriptive in their approach to this feature. Informants no longer proved to consider usage of the feature in preposed focal position, as in examples (2a) and (3a), unacceptable, but usage guides nevertheless continue to prescribe placing *only* immediately adjacent to its focal object (26 of the 62 works discussing the feature, seven of which date from the 2000s). In this respect, little appears to have changed over the years to this old chestnut in the usage guide tradition. My corpus analysis in *describing prescriptivism*, for which I collected data for *only had* and *had only* from several modern text corpora (BNC, Hansard, COCA and TIME),⁹ showed various

⁹These corpora are accessible from <https://www.english-corpora.org/>.

tendencies of usage between different genres on the one hand and American and British English on the other. Thus, to mention one example, *had only* was more frequent than *only had* in the COCA subcategories Magazine and News in American English (2020: 125–126), something that may possibly be explained by editorial reliance on current prescriptive usage advice. My edition of Strunk and White's *Elements of style* (1979), for instance, which according to Pullum (2010: 34) is the most widely used English usage guide in America, notes that in sentences like *He **only** found two mistakes* the meaning 'swiftly [...] departs when words are wrongly juxtaposed' (1979: 30–31).

Hall (1917) was categorised in my analysis of the placement of *only* as a descriptive usage guide, being the second to take this approach regarding this feature since the late 1860s. For this feature he lists 94 authors from Marlowe (1564–1593) onwards who “‘misplac[ed]” *only* in over 400 passages’, adding that ‘further reading would increase the number indefinitely’ (1917: 189–190). For Browning, Hall provides only four instances, which places him into the category of relatively infrequent users: Edgar Allen Poe has 24 instances, Dr Johnson 19 and Thackeray 17, to mention some of the more regular ‘offenders’. Elizabeth Browning does not occur in the list. To try and assess what this figure means in relation to the variable usage identified by Pullum and Huddleston, I selected all relevant instances with *only* from Browning's *Poetic and dramatic works* (ca. 805,500 words) and from his part of Volume 1 of his correspondence with his wife (ca. 80,800 words) and compared these data with those from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (ca. 87,600 words) and from her part in Volume 1 of their joint correspondence (ca. 122,250 words). For relevant instances to be retrieved a variant had to be acceptable along the lines of the examples presented in (2) and (3). End-placed instances like (4) or unclear instances like (5), in which *only* appears to modify the verb (i.e. *glanced over* rather than for instance *read*) rather than the potential focal object (*the article*), have been omitted.

(4) I shall describe a country I have seen in my soul **only**, fruits, flowers, birds and all (RB to EBB)

(5) I have **only** glanced over the article (RB to EBB)

The results are presented in Table 1, with the authors' preference for either form highlighted in bold.

Table 1. The placement of *only* in the literary and epistolary language of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Source	Preposed	Adjacent
	N + normalised/100,000 words	N + normalised/100,000 words
RB's poetic and dramatic works (ca. 805,500 words)	N = 145 18	N = 123 15.3
RB's letters to EBB (Vol. 1) (ca. 80,800 words)	N = 24 29.7	N = 33 40.8
EBB's <i>Aurora Leigh</i> (ca. 87,600 words)	N = 21 24	N = 14 16
EBB's letters to RB (Vol. 1) (ca. 122,250 words)	N = 25 20.5	N = 53 43.4

Not all Browning's literary instances are from his poetry: ten of the preposed ones, as in (2a) and (3a), and eight of the adjacent ones, as in the corresponding b. versions, were found in prose passages. The figures for the adjacent instances include sentences with a reduced form of *it*, as in:

(6) 'T is **only** a page (cf. *It only is a page*)

(7) 'T will be, I feel, **Only** in moments that the duty's seen (cf. *It will only be in moments that ...*)

The reason for including them in the data was that the alternative versions with preposed *only* would be acceptable and actually do occur in his verse, as in

(8) It **only** was this Summer

Browning's decision to use 't rather than *it* will have been for metrical purposes. It is worth noticing in the light of the above discussion of the split infinitive that two of the prescriptively proper instances, i.e. with adjacent *only*, contain a split infinitive:

(9) till I resigned myself **To** only **breathe** the air

(10) And all these making suit **to** only **live**

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's instances include two sentences with 't rather than *it*, presumably for similar reasons as in her husband's case. Her usage of preposed *only* is somewhat higher than that of her husband, but not strikingly so. That of adjacent *only* is very similar. No instances of *only* with a split infinitive were found in *Aurora Leigh*.

Both Brownings show a slight preference for the preposed variant in their poetic work. In their letters we find the opposite, i.e. a comparatively stronger preference for the so-called more correct form. In both sets of letters I encountered an instance with a rephrasing that resulted in a different placement of *only*, most likely for reasons of adding emphasis:

(11) I could **only** mean that, by the expressions to which you refer—**only** could mean that you were my crown and palm branch (RB to EBB)

(12) I meant at first **only** to send you what is in the ring [...] I meant at first to send you **only** what was in the ring (EBB to RB)

These examples show that for both the Brownings the placement of *only* was not part of a haphazard process in their writing, but that they were aware of its potential of providing emphasis.

4.2. Whose or of which

Whose, according to Huddleston et al. (2002: 1049), 'occurs with both personal and non-personal antecedents'. As a variant of *of which* it is discussed in 34 of the 77

usage guides in HUGE, published between 1867 (Gould) and 2010 (Heffer only), but Huddleston et al. do not place variation in usage in the prescriptive tradition. That this seems an oversight is evident from the fact that the issue is discussed as late as in 2010, but also that the entry in Hall (1917: 320–327) includes the longest list of authors using the feature – 150 of them, as attested ‘in about 1050 passages, all the way down for more than 400 years’. ‘Are there any authors left to name?’, Hall wonders ironically, and continues by asking the rhetorical question: ‘why did this *whose* [i.e. with neuter antecedent] incur such opposition?’. Heffer (2010: 113), one of the three most modern usage guide writers in HUGE, is unusually lenient on the subject, and attributes the insistence on *of which* for neuter antecedents to pedants.

Searching for the origin of the controversial status of *whose* with neuter antecedents shows that discussion of the issue goes back to the eighteenth-century normative grammarians. A *dictionary of English normative grammar 1700–1800* (Sundby et al. 1991: 118) thus shows that *whose* for *of which* was first condemned in the early 1760s: by Priestley (1761), who labelled it poetical but called usage ‘harsh’ in the second edition of his grammar (1768), by Buchanan (1762) (‘poetical’), Lowth (1762) (‘improper’) and many subsequent writers. Condemnation goes back a little further, for Sundby et al.’s first reference to a negative comment (‘improper’) dates from 1752, an anonymous 24-page pamphlet called *Observations upon the English language. In a letter to a friend*. Authorship has been attributed to the lawyer George Harris (1721–1796) (ODNB, s.v. ‘George Harris’), and the pamphlet is of particular interest in that it anticipates the rise of the usage guide some twenty years later. Grammarians of the period were keen to devise clear-cut grammatical categories, and the disapproval of *whose* with neuter antecedents may be seen in the same light as the decision to assign *who* and *which* to different categories of animacy (Adamson 2007). One form – one function was an important principle for these early grammarians.

Hall’s list includes both Brownings: ‘Mrs. Browning’ with only one instance and Browning himself with eight. As in the case of the placement of *only* discussed in the previous subsection, this puts them both into the class of minor ‘offenders’: Shakespeare is listed with 57 instances and Poe with 65. How does the language of the Brownings vary with respect to the use of *whose* with neuter antecedent and *of which*? Examples of either variant are the following, both retrieved from Browning’s *Poetic and dramatic works*:

Table 2. Variation between *whose* and *of which* with neuter antecedents in the literary and epistolary language of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Source	<i>Whose</i>	<i>Of which</i>
	N + normalised/100,000 words	N + normalised/100,000 words
RB’s poetic and dramatic works (ca. 805,500 words)	N = 82 10.2	N = 13 1.6
RB’s letters to EBB (Vol. 1) (ca. 80,800 words)	N = 17 21	N = 4 5
EBB’s <i>Aurora Leigh</i> (ca. 87,600 words)	N = 10 11.4	N = 0 –
EBB’s letters to RB (Vol. 1) (ca. 122,250 words)	N = 8 6.5	N = 2 1.6

(13) what next world may prove,/ **Whose** new laws and requirements [...]/ Shall do hereafter what I do meanwhile

(14) Hints and previsions **of which** faculties,/ Are strewn confusedly

In both instances, the antecedent is inanimate, and for both the alternative variant would be acceptable, i.e. *of which* for *whose* in (13) and *whose* for *of which* in (14). The results of my analysis of the Brownings' literary writings and letters are presented in Table 2 (see above), with their observed preferences marked in bold.

Apart from the 82 instances listed for Browning's poetic and dramatic works in this table, there are twelve instances with animate but non-human antecedents such as *lizard* (plants and trees excluded). His usage in such instances may most likely be explained by a process of personification. In *Aurora Leigh* I encountered ten more instances with non-human antecedents as well, such as snakes and goats (the single instance with *angel* was included among the instances with human antecedents). For both authors it is clear from the above data that *whose* with neuter antecedents was the preferred variant: *of which* in this context is found only rarely, and not even once in *Aurora Leigh*. Relatively rare though the Brownings' usage was, it was nevertheless noticed by Hall, along with that of many other writers throughout history. 'Many more [instances] could be found,' Hall commented tongue-in-cheek, 'but there is a limit to human endurance: writer and reader alike would become exhausted' (1917: 323).

4.3. Lowlily

Adverbs in *-lily* rather than *-ly* (*lowlily*, *friendlily*, *sillily*) are a relatively new item in the usage guide tradition, but Hall (1917) does not discuss them. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) do not mention the issue either, merely commenting that the function of forms in *-ly* like *early*, which can be both an adverb and an adjective, is determined by the context. Thus, in *an early departure*, *early* functions as an adjective and in *They departed early* as an adverb (2002: 530). Their approach is of course not historical, but my analysis of *-lily* adverbs in *describing Prescriptivism* (as part of the discussion of the flat adverb, 2020: 137–145) was. Like that of *whose/of which*, the issue has its roots among the eighteenth-century grammarians (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2011: 244–246), and was subsequently carried over into the usage guide tradition. Some usage guides, such as Mager and Mager (1993), regard a form like *livelily* when preceding a participle (*livelily executed*) as correct even though they admit that instances are rare. Checking the instances from the usage guides against actual usage in modern English text corpora (BNC, Hansard, COCA and TIME – see also above), I did attest a number of instances, but not in large numbers, and none for *lowlily*. The form is, however, listed as evidence in the *OED* with a last instance from 1994, and it includes the same quotation from Elizabeth Barrett Browning as the one found in Burchfield (1996) (see Section 2). In 1947, Partridge still considered forms in *-lily* acceptable, advising their usage or alternatively suggesting to rephrase a form like *lowlily* as *in a lowly manner* to avoid ambiguous instances of *lowly* (1947 [1942]: 176), an opinion that is repeated in Heffer (2010).

Searching a digitised version of Burchfield (1996) produced six more references to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, under the entries for *beholden*, *carven*, *childish*, *dole*, *involve* and *soft*. As with *lowlily*, the quotations all match those in the *OED*, so this throws light on Burchfield's working method when revising Fowler's *Modern English usage*. None of the *OED* quotations from Elizabeth Barrett Browning occur in Fowler's first edition or in the second edition by Gowers (1965). For the third edition, Burchfield clearly wished to expand the original entries by supplying quotations for these words, to which end he drew on the *OED* where he found relevant instances from Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In contrast to Hall, he thus did not collect data for his usage guide from a reading of primary documents, but consulted secondary sources like the *OED* instead.

Adverbs in *-lily* do not occur in the Brownings' letters or in Elizabeth's *Aurora Leigh*. I did come across eleven instances in Browning's poetic and dramatic works: *jollily* (3), *lovelily* (3) and *ghastlily*, *holily*, *sicklily*, *sillily* and *overwilily* (once each). Only *overwilily* does not occur in the *OED*, perhaps because it is a nonce-formation, and only for *sicklily* and *sillily* do we find quotations from Browning in the dictionary. The instance cited by Burchfield (and the *OED*) for *lowlily* is not from *Aurora Leigh*, which I analysed for this paper, but from a poem called 'A drama of exile' (1844). Robert's usage is so rare – 1.4 instances per 100,000 words – that it may not have drawn the attention of the readers for the *OED* or, indeed, Hall, who did not discuss the issue of the *-lily* adverbs to begin with. As mentioned in *describing prescriptivism*, usage was rare in any case. That the item did make it into the usage guide tradition at all must therefore, as discussed above, be interpreted as a relic from the eighteenth-century grammarians' attempts to bring order to the English grammatical system at the time: *-ly* in their view was an adverbial suffix, so that adjectives like *early* or *lovely*, as ending in *-ly* already, properly required an additional *-ly* suffix to mark their adverbial function, irrespective of actual usage.

5. Browning compared with Tennyson

As shown above, Browning is sometimes mentioned in one breath with Tennyson, by usage guide writers and others. According to Ryals (1993: 216), the two men were together considered to be the greatest poets of the period, but Ryals also mentions that Browning was never as popular as Ryals (1993: 250); even Elizabeth Barrett Browning, he notes, liked Tennyson's work better than that of her husband (1993: 102). Hall, in contrast to Burchfield, as discussed in the previous section, engaged in proper data collection by analysing primary sources, and Tennyson was included among the many writers he studied. The question therefore arises as to how Tennyson's presence in Hall's usage guide, and in usage guides generally, compares to that of Browning. To answer this question I checked both the HUGE database and Hall's work in its entirety for references to Tennyson for a comparison with Browning as discussed so far.

Tennyson accordingly proved more popular than Browning with the usage guide writers as well: he is cited for usage problems in thirteen usage guides compared to only five in Browning's case, and for many more usage problems: 31 features altogether compared to Browning's Seventeen, Sixteen of which are from Hall. For Browning it was mostly the split infinitive that had drawn the attention of the writers, as indeed in Hall's case. But Hall cites Browning considerably more often than he does Tennyson: for 28 usage problems compared to 13 for Tennyson. There is some overlap between the items

for which both authors are cited: *either/each of two*, *first two/two first*, the gerund, *myself/I*, the placement of *only*, *thrived/throve* and *whose*, but with one exception, Tennyson's position in Hall's frequency lists is never as high as for Browning's for of the split infinitive. The exception is *either/each of two*, for which Tennyson is cited most of all authors listed, with 30 instances (against nine for Browning), while Hall comments that Tennyson's figure represents 'only a fraction of his use of the word' (1917: 85). Evans and Evans (1957) mention Tennyson for this feature as well.

Though Tennyson is cited for many more features by a much larger number of usage guide writers, it was Browning who gained Hall's specific attention. This may have been due to the ungrammatical nature of much of his poetic language, likewise the source of inspiration for Krause (1971). Hall's work proves to be more than a usage guide: it is based on a serious study of English usage throughout the ages, and in the course of his extensive reading, which naturally included Browning as one of the most popular writers of the age, he was struck by the many unusual features in his grammar. Browning, according to Ryals, was 'admired more than read' (1993: 250), but Hall evidently did read him along with a great many other English writers as part of his data collection methodology. In this respect, his method differed significantly from that of a usage guide writer like Burchfield, whose brief had, it is true, merely been to prepare a new edition of Fowler's *Modern English usage* of 1926, and revise the contents in the process. As the above analysis has shown, his methodology included padding entries with further examples, for which he made extensive use of the *OED* (see Burchfield 1996, Acknowledgements).

6. Conclusion

Krause (1971) analysed Browning's poetic writings because she wanted to identify his linguistic fingerprint in the light of the many ungrammaticalities she had noticed in his work. One feature she does not deal with in her study is the split infinitive, but its high frequency in Browning's verse compared to that of other writers did draw the attention of the usage guide writer J. Lesslie Hall. To see whether Hall (1917) was exceptional in its focus on Browning, for the split infinitive alone or in general, I analysed Browning's presence in the HUGE database of usage guides and usage problems. To this end, I studied his usage of three more so-called old chestnuts in the usage guide tradition, i.e. the placement of *only*, the use of *whose* for *of which* and the occurrence of *-lily* adverbs, and in order to determine whether these features were characteristic of his writing as such I compared his poetic usage of these four features with his letters. Furthermore, I compared my findings for Browning with those for his wife, likewise her literary and epistolary writings, to determine to what extent the language use of this poetic couple might have been similar.

My findings for the split infinitive – 7.3 instances per 100,000 words for Browning's poetic and dramatic works and 6.2 per 100,000 words for his letters, against none in his wife's letters and only a single one in *Aurora Leigh* (Tieken-Boon van Ostade submitted) – proved to be considerably lower than those for the placement of *only* (Table 1). In their private writings, however, both Brownings showed a greater preference for the use of *only* in adjacent position, in which their usage agreed with recommendations traditionally made by usage guides. The figure for their use of *whose* for *of which* is much lower than

that for the split infinitive (Table 2), while that for *-lily* adverbs is considerably lower still (1.4 instances per 100,000 words, in Robert Browning's verse only). That the form *lowlily* – Elizabeth's usage, not Robert's – found its way into a usage guide at all may be attributed to the *OED*: Burchfield in his turn gratefully drew on this dictionary while revising Fowler's *Modern English usage*.

Krause may not have looked at the split infinitive because the construction was after all, as the above figures have shown, relatively rare. For all that, comparison with his contemporaries has shown that his usage stood out, and that Hall was right to notice it as an idiosyncrasy on Browning's part. In that respect, it may likewise be considered as part of his linguistic fingerprint, particularly because we find it in his letters, too. The growth of the split infinitive into a shibboleth explains why Browning's usage was subsequently commented on by other usage guide writers as well. Possibly, rare though it was in his verse, Browning's usage of *-lily* adverbs was part of his linguistic fingerprint as well, though in a minor way only. It seems that the demands of the medium he wrote in, blank verse, made him stretch the possibilities of what was considered allowable in the grammar of his time: it was this that drew Krause's attention to his language in the first place. That the *OED* includes one instance of a *-lily* adverb from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse, though not *Aurora Leigh* which I focused on here, suggests that the same may apply to her. Usage as such, however, was so rare that even Hall did not single out the feature for discussion in his usage guide.

Apart from Hall, the usage guide writers in as far as they are represented in HUGE barely criticised Browning's language, particularly when compared to his close contemporary and literary rival Tennyson. This may have been due to the fact that, as Ryals observed, Tennyson's work was more widely read (and appreciated) than that of Browning. Evidence for this may also be found in the *OED*, for which most of the illustrations were supplied by voluntary readers. At the time of doing the research for this paper, Tennyson came 32nd among the 1000 most cited authors in the dictionary, and Browning 107th. (Elizabeth Barrett Browning's position was much lower: 410th place.) In any case, as this paper has shown, it takes a linguist like Krause to decide to focus on Browning's language and its peculiarities. And Hall, in what to all intents and purposes looks like a meticulously performed large-scale historical corpus analysis *avant-la-lettre*, proves to have been more of a linguist than the kind of prescriptivists that usage guide writers tend to be, in the end merely presenting his data, and leaving the final decision as to a feature's linguistic correctness to his readers. This is what one might expect of a truly descriptive approach to English usage, no matter at what point in the usage guide tradition.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Jennifer McDonell from the University of New England, Armidale, NSW, Australia, for informing me about these studies. In addition, I gratefully acknowledge the comments and suggestions from the reviewers of an earlier version of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade is Emeritus Professor of Sociohistorical Linguistics of English at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics (Leiden, The Netherlands). She has published widely on Late Modern English and is particularly interested in the final stages of the English standardisation process, codification and prescription. Her most recent monographs are *In search of Jane Austen: The language of the letters* (OUP, 2014) and *Describing prescriptivism: Usage guides and usage problems in British and American English* (Routledge, 2020).

References

Primary sources

- Adamson, Sylvia. 2007. Prescribed reading: pronouns and gender in the eighteenth century. *Historical Sociolinguistics and Sociohistorical Linguistics*. https://www.hum2.leidenuniv.nl/hsl_shl/Adamson.htm.
- Allen, Robert. 1999. *Pocket Fowler's modern English usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. 1856. *Aurora Leigh*. 4th ed., 1857. London: Chapman and Hall/Bradbury and Evans.
- Browning, Robert. 1900. *The letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1845–1846*. Vol. 1. London: Smith, Elder & Co.
- Buchanan, James 1762. *The British grammar*. London: A. Millar.
- Burchfield, R.W. 1996. *Fowler's modern English usage*. 3rd ed., repr. 2004. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, David. 1984. *Who cares about English usage?* 2nd ed. London: Penguin Books.
- Evans, Bergen & Cornelia Evans. 1957. *A dictionary of contemporary American usage*. New York: Random House.
- Fowler, H.W. 1926. *A dictionary of modern English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gould, Edward S. 1867. *Good English, or popular errors in language*. New York: W.J. Widdleton.
- Gowers, Sir Ernest. 1965. *A dictionary of modern English usage* by H.W. Fowler. 2nd ed. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hall, J. Lesslie. 1917. *English usage. Studies in the history and uses of English words and phrases*. Chicago & New York: Scott, Foresman and Company.
- Harris, George. 1752. *Observations upon the English language. In a letter to a friend*. London: Edward Withers.
- Heffer, Simon. 2010. *Strictly English: The correct way to write . . . and why it matters*. London: Windmill Books.
- Krapp, George Philip. 1927. *A comprehensive guide to good English*. Chicago & New York: Rand McNally.
- Lamb, Bernard C. 2010. *The Queen's English and how to use it*. London: Michael O'Mara Books.
- Lowth, Robert. 1762. *A short introduction to English grammar*. London: A. Millar; and R. and J. Dodsley.
- Mager, N.H. & S.K. Mager. 1993. *Prentice Hall encyclopedic dictionary of English usage*. 2nd ed., rev. by J. Domini. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Partridge, Eric. 1947. *Usage and abuse*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Priestley, Joseph 1761. *The rudiments of English grammar*. London: R. Griffiths.
- Priestley, Joseph 1768. *The rudiments of English grammar*. 2nd ed. London: T. Becket, P.A. de Hondt, and J. Johnson.
- Scudder, H.E. 1895. *The complete poetic and dramatic works of Robert Browning*. Boston & New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company.
- Strunk, William & E.B. White. 1979. *The elements of style*. 3rd ed. Boston etc.: Allyn and Bacon.
- Taggart, Caroline. 2010. *Her Ladyship's guide to the Queen's English*. London: National Trust.
- Vallins, G.H. 1951. *Good English: How to write it*. London: Pan Books.
- Vizetelly, Frank H. 1906. *A desk-book of errors in English*. Ed. 1920. New York & London: Funk & Wagnalls.

Webster's dictionary of English usage. 1989. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.
 Wood, Frederick T. 1962. *Current English usage: A concise dictionary*. Repr. 1970. London: Macmillan.

Secondary sources

- Busse, Ulrich & Anne Schröder. 2009. Fowler's *Modern English usage* at the interface of lexis and grammar. In Ute Römer & Rainer Schulze (eds.), *Exploring the lexis-grammar interface*, 69–87. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Calle-Martín, Javier & Antonio Miranda-García. 2009. On the use of split infinitives in English. In Antoinette Renouf & Andrew Kehoe (eds.), *Corpus linguistics: Refinements and reassessments*, 346–364. Amsterdam: Brill.
- Fowler, Rowena. 1998. Robert Browning in the *Oxford English dictionary*: A new approach. *Studies in philology* 95(3), 333–350.
- Huddleston, Rodney & Geoffrey K. Pullum (eds.). 2002. *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huddleston, Rodney, Geoffrey K. Pullum & Peter Peterson. 2002. Chapter 12. In Huddleston & Pullum (eds.), 1031–1096.
- HUGE. *The Hyper Usage Guide of English Database*. Leiden University Centre for Linguistics. <http://huge.ullet.net>.
- Krause, Florence Phyfer. 1971. The grammatical aspect of Browning's style. PhD thesis, University of Tennessee.
- Lukač, Morana. 2018. *Grassroots prescriptivism*. Utrecht: LOT.
- ODNB: *The Oxford dictionary of national biography*. Online edition. www.oxforddnb.com/.
- OED: *Oxford English dictionary online*. www.oed.com.
- Pullum, Geoffrey K. & Rodney Huddleston. 2002. Chapter 6. In Huddleston & Pullum (eds.), 525–595.
- Pullum, Geoffrey K. 2010. The land of the free and *The elements of style*. *English Today* 26(2), 34–44.
- Rawlins, Jacob D. & Don Chapman. 2020. Introduction: Values and binaries in language evaluation. In Don Chapman & Jacob D. Rawlins (eds.), *Language prescription: Values, ideologies and identity*, 1–11. Bristol & Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters.
- Ryals, Clyde de L. 1993. *The life of Robert Browning: A critical biography*. Oxford & Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Sairio, Anni. 2009. *Language and letters of the Bluestocking network: Sociolinguistic issues in eighteenth-century epistolary English*. Helsinki: Société Néophilologique.
- Schiegg, Markus & Judith Huber (eds.). 2023. *Intra-writer variation in historical sociolinguistics*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Straaijer, Robin. 2014. *Hyper usage guide of English* (<http://huge.ullet.net>).
- Straaijer, Robin. 2015. *The hyper usage guide of English database: User manual*. Leiden (<https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/hugedb/huge-user-manual/>).
- Sundby, Bertil, Anne Kari Bjørge & Kari E. Haugland. 1991. *A dictionary of English normative grammar 1700–1800 (DENG)*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid. 1987. *The auxiliary do in eighteenth-century English: A sociohistorical linguistic approach*. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid. 2011. *The bishop's grammar: Robert Lowth and the rise of prescriptivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid. 2020. *Describing prescriptivism. Usage guides and usage problems in British and American English*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid. 2023. Usage guides as a text type. In Joan C. Beal, Morana Lukač & Robin Straaijer (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of linguistic prescriptivism*, 159–174. London & New York: Routledge.
- Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid. Submitted. Linguistic dandyism: Robert Browning and the split infinitive. Paper submitted for the proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Late Modern English. Ragusa Ibla (Sicily).