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7 Breaking the *Who/Whom* Rule: The Final Taboo?

Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade

1 Introduction

The year 2020 saw the publication of Martin Amis's book *Inside Story, A Novel*. Martin is the recently deceased son of the late Kingsley Amis (1922–1995), well known for his many novels, most of which, from *Lucky Jim* (1954) onwards, enjoy considerable popularity.¹ But Kingsley wrote a usage guide (or language advice manual), too; that is, a collection of language notes was found after his death which was converted into a book called *The King's English* and published posthumously in 1997 (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2018, 2020: 189–197). The book is written in the same humorous style as Kingsley's novels, and makes good reading. A second edition came out in 2011, with an introduction by Martin which had appeared a month earlier in *The Guardian* (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2020: 2). It is therefore not altogether surprising to find a section on usage problems in *Inside Story*, a most unusual novel to say the least. These so-called 'writing tips' deal with the choice between *I* or *me* in coordinated object phrases and with *myself* as a possible alternative, but also with what Martin calls 'the "who or whom?" business' (2020: 371).² They caught the attention of a Dutch reviewer (Van Essen, 2021), and hence also mine as a linguist interested in prescriptivism: what made Martin Amis single out *who/whom* for discussion in his novel?

Around the same time, watching the British political thriller series *Roadkill*, broadcast in the Netherlands early in 2021, I was struck by the occurrence in the final episode of a comment on the use of *who* where *whom* would have been grammatically correct: 'Told by who?', a senior lawyer angrily tells off her junior colleague, frustrated by a lost case for which she holds him accountable. 'By whom. By whom is English if you want to be a lawyer.' (It is the only metalinguistic comment in the series.) Ostensibly, the comment is about lack of education, a frequent argument in prescriptive commentary (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2020: 44–45, 132–133), but it stands out because it does not condemn *who* for *whom* for being 'not good English' (cf. Sundby *et al.*, 1991: 45), as might be expected,

but as ‘not English’. After all, even ‘who’ used erroneously would be English. How does this reflect on the fact that the actors in question, despite their English names in the series (Rochelle Madeley and Luke Strand), both clearly have a migration background? This is a sensitive issue today, when race (as in this case) is no longer supposed to play a role in society.

Racism does play a role, and an overt one at that, in the 2021 American Netflix series *The Chair*, along with sexism and ageism, and ‘the “who or whom?” business’ comes up there as well. In a meeting over an issue regarding a lecturer’s alleged expression of Nazism in class, a senior university administrator is corrected when asking the offending lecturer ‘to who’ he is going to talk about the issue (Episode 3). ‘To whom’, the department chair corrects her superior. The actor in question, the Canadian-American actress Sandra Oh, the daughter of South-Korean immigrants, impersonates a character called Professor Ji-Yoon Kim in the series, and her Korean background plays a major role in the various episodes. Does this contrast suggest a different role played by racism in popular culture in British and American society today, overtly in the American series but only covertly in the British series? If this is the case, why would *who/whom* have been singled out here? As in the case of *Roadkill*, it was the only (grammatical) metalinguistic comment made in *The Chair*.³

These are the questions that will be addressed in this chapter, and I will do so by considering them in the context of popular culture, a field that plays a role in prescriptivism as well, as discussed in my book *Describing Prescriptivism* (2020: 181–209).⁴ And to see to what extent different English-speaking cultures view ‘the “who or whom?” business’ differently, I will contextualise the above findings by means of a corpus-based analysis, drawing on two of the English corpora developed by Mark Davies: *The TV Corpus* and *The Movie Corpus* (Davies, 2021).⁵ The analysis will focus exclusively on metalinguistic commentary on the occurrence of *who* in dialogue when *whom* would have been appropriate instead (and occasionally vice versa). ‘[M]etalinguistic practices’, Cameron (1995: 32) notes, ‘have been more sneered at than studied’, and according to Hodson (2014: 164), they have not often been analysed as they occur in film, but my analysis will show how studying such practices allows us to gain deeper insight into the reasons for drawing upon stigmatised features that are used for characterisation purposes in different forms of popular culture. In the process, my analysis will also highlight some drawbacks of working with the TV and Movie corpora that are due to their make-up as well as to their contents. But, first, I will discuss the *who/whom* issue in a wider context with the help of information from the HUGE database of English usage guides and usage problems (*Hyper Usage Guide for English*; Straijter, 2014).

2 ‘The “Who or Whom?” Business’

Martin Amis explains the question of when to use *who* and when *whom* through a substitution procedure: if you would use *him*, then *whom* is required, and if *he*, use *who* (2020: 372). He illustrates this straightforward rule with the following examples (emphasis added in bold throughout this chapter):

- (1) John, **whom** I know to be an honourable man – I know **him** to be an honourable man.
- (2) John, **who** I know is an honourable man – I know **he** is an honourable man.

Nearly 25 years earlier, his father had stated in *The King’s English*: ‘It has become safe to say that, except in funeral addresses ..., or as a joke, *whom* is no longer heard from speakers of English’, concluding the brief section that ‘no rule of thumb is possible for the writer’ and that in case of doubt it might be wise ‘to forget the word altogether’ (1997: 242–243). Usage of *whom* as a direct object pronoun has lost considerable ground over the years and this has been attested in various studies,⁶ but Martin evidently thinks differently about this.

The King’s English is one of the 77 usage guides in the HUGE database, and *who/whom* is one of the 123 usage problems selected from these works. Usage guides, according to Weiner (1988: 173), deal with issues relating to ‘spelling, punctuation, phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexis, and involv[e] sociolinguistic considerations’. Such issues are considered usage problems, which Ilson (1985: 167) characterises as instances of debatable language use that show ‘actual occurrence, fairly widespread occurrence, and [are] discussib[le] without giving offence’. As a typical ‘old chestnut’ (Weiner, 1988), the *who/whom* issue is found from the earliest usage guide onwards (Baker, 1770) down to 2010, the end date of the database. HUGE contains only 14 usage guides which do *not* mention the issue – 13 if Taggart (2010: 49) is included; she only briefly mentions *who/whom* under the heading ‘Some common mistakes’, but does not include the item in the index, which is probably why it was missed in the compilation of the database. If we classify these 64 usage guides according to place of publication (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2020: 57), 29 of them can be considered American and 35 British. *Who/whom* is dealt with in British publications throughout the timespan of the database, and in American ones from 1856 (Anon.) down to Fogarty (2008). The first American usage guide, Hurd (1847), does not deal with the issue.

Studying the discussion of *who/whom* in the usage guides confirms the main finding presented in *Describing Prescriptivism* (2020):⁷ there is no straightforward descriptive progress over the years, contrary to what would be expected since the establishment of linguistics as a descriptive

discipline (Cameron, 1995: 5, 97). Despite the alleged descriptive progress discussed in Peters (2006), there are relatively early usage guides like Hall (1917) that take an exclusively descriptive approach, while much later ones, such as Taggart (2010), continue to provide the kind of prescriptive advice one would expect from much earlier publications (Ticken-Boon van Ostade, 2023). While Taggart (2010: 49) merely notes that ‘*who* should be used for the subject ..., *whom* for the object’, Lamb (2010) adds:

There is a tendency now to use *who* instead of *whom* in sentences such as *The man, who I know well, is very poorly*, when *who* is the direct object of the verb *know*. **This is wrong** but very common. Some people accept it, especially in speech. (Lamb, 2010: 80–81)

Some people may accept *who* as a direct object, but Lamb clearly does not; nor does Fogarty (2008: 50–51), who (like Martin Amis) suggests that if *him* is the appropriate personal pronoun form, *whom* should be used. The same ‘memory trick’, called ‘the him-lich maneuver’ (a quib on the Heimlich manoeuvre, which is to be applied to prevent people from choking), is provided in an entry from 2016 on Fogarty’s very popular language advice website *Grammar Girl*, and similar tips are provided in other American usage guides, like Booher (1988), Randall (1988) and *The New York Public Library Writer’s Guide* (Anon., 1994).

Lamb (2010) suggests in the above quotation that the tendency to use *who* for *whom* is a recent phenomenon (‘now’), and this is also noted by Peters (2004), but Hall (1917: 317) mentions that Richard Grant White (1822–1885) had already commented in 1867 that *whom* was ‘visibly disappearing’. A similar comment in *Live and Learn* (Anon., 1856?: 84) – ‘we seldom hear the objective case used either by vulgar or refined speakers’ – is adopted to encourage readers to use the grammatically correct form, attributing the failure to use *who/whom* correctly to lack of education or lower-class background. Several usage guide writers, moreover, distinguish between formal and informal usage. Fowler and Fowler (1906: 61), for instance, write that ‘[a] distinction should ... be made between conversation, written or spoken, and formal writing’. This usage guide is, moreover, the first in the HUGE database that allows for the use of *who* in object position. Some writers consider the use of *whom* in informal contexts ‘pedantic’ (Partridge, 1947; Ebbitt & Ebbitt, 1978) or ‘pretentious’ (Anon., 1994; Ayto, 1995), while Butterfield (2007: 169–170) cites ‘the American humorist Calvin Triller observ[ing], “As far as I’m concerned, ‘whom’ is a word that was invented to make everyone sound like a butler”’. The existence of different attitudes to usage between speakers of British and American English which Butterfield illustrates here is confirmed by Peters (2004: 578–579), who notes that the ‘decline [of *whom*] is more marked in the US than the UK’ and that *whom* ‘seems more formal to Americans and Australians than to the British’. Furthermore, she

continues, '[i]n the US, *whom* as object pronoun is associated with academic and expository prose rather than fiction'. Usage guides also comment on the hypercorrect use of *whom* in places where *who* would be required, that is, in subject position; Partridge (1947: 369–370), for instance, describes this phenomenon as a 'frequent error in literary use', and *The Written Word* brands it as 'a glaring error' (1977: 318). Hence, Kingsley Amis's advice, cited above: in case of doubt, 'forget the word altogether'.

3 *Who/whom* and Popular Culture

3.1 Data collection and analysis

The *who/whom* issue is not only deployed in television series like those discussed in section 1, but also in other forms of popular culture (for a description of which, see section 3.2). Keeping track of the occurrence of metalinguistic (grammatical) commentary in my reading of modern literature, popular and otherwise, I regularly come across cases in which the faulty use of *who* is drawn upon for purposes of characterisation. Of the 30 different usage problems I encountered over the past 10 to 15 years, the *who/whom* issue occurred most frequently: apart from Martin Amis's *Inside Story* I found it in John le Carré's *A Most Wanted Man* (2008), Len Deighton's *Funeral in Berlin* (1964) and *Berlin Game* (1983), and Benjamin Black's *The Black-Eyed Blonde* (2014). In Kathleen Schine's *The Grammarians* (2019), moreover, the use of *whom* following a preposition stands out as overly and deliberately correct in the context of a pedantic discussion about the placement of *only*:

- (3) I know what an adverb is and where it goes, for god's sake. I, for example, am picking up a knife. I have only one sister **at whom** I am pointing it. (Schine, 2019: 104)

Possibly, *who/whom* is deployed by writers because for readers it is an easily identified target for derogatory sociolinguistic characterisation, as in Deighton's *Berlin Game* (1983) or le Carré's *A Most Wanted Man* (2008):

- (4) 'Security from **who**?' I said. 'Or, as you might put it, from **whom**?' (Deighton, 1983: 223)
 (5) But for how long? And from **who**? **Whom**? (le Carré, 2008: 275)

The speaker in (4) is Giles Brent, a double agent who is described as 'neat and tidy and fussy' as well as Eton-educated (Deighton, 1983: 57, 60), which the main character is not, and the comment implies that this includes his linguistic habits, too. These instances show how, by criticising each other's language, the characters concerned are doing what Hodson (2014: 164) describes as 'social work', in relation to others as in (3) and (4), or as self-criticism as in (5). The latter example illustrates the speaker's

linguistic insecurity as to the correct usage of *who* or *whom*. The speaker is Tommy Brue, a banker who neatly fits into the category of middle-class people who are listed in R.W. Burchfield's preface to the third edition of *Fowler's Modern English Usage* (1996: ix) and who might regularly consult Fowler on linguistic features they are insecure about.

While the instances in (3)–(5) illustrate implicit metalinguistic commentary, those discussed in the introduction to this chapter are examples of correction of the alleged grammatical mistake in question. To what extent do these different types of comment occur in television series in general or in the related genre of films across the relatively recent history of English for which evidence is available? To investigate this, I drew on *The TV Corpus* and *The Movie Corpus*, which are part of the family of English corpora available at www.english-corpora.org/. These corpora include data from various countries (NA, NA+, AU/NZ, Br) plus the category 'other', and cover the periods 1950–2018 (TV) and 1930–2018 (Movie), respectively (see Davies, 2021: 25–26). From a historical perspective, the contents of the corpora are heavily weighted towards the end of these periods due to the simple fact that with time more material has become available. Besides, *The TV Corpus* was found to contain not only fictional television series, but also some live series, like *QI*, a British panel show broadcast by the BBC. Including unscripted alongside scripted material, a feature not recognised by Davies (2021: 24), the corpus make-up is thus not quite homogeneous; this, however, will be shown to play an interesting role in my analysis of the data.

While *The TV Corpus* includes as many as 326,201,276 words, *The Movie Corpus* is much smaller, though still considerable in size, at 199,479,302 words. To carry out my metalinguistic analysis I searched both corpora for the keyword 'whom', which produced 8,707 (TV) and 7,477 (Movie) hits, respectively. I manually corrected these data for noise and instances that merely recorded general usage of *whom*; some of these were stock phrases like *to whom it may concern* (TV: 79, Movie: 73), a fossilised epistolary phrase, and *for whom the bell tolls* (TV: 40, Movie: 46), originally the title of a novel by Ernest Hemingway (1940) taken from a poem by John Donne. Repeated instances of *whom*, as in (6), were counted only once.

- (6) Well, who shall I marry? It's "**whom**". **Whom** shall I marry? (Movie: *If a Man Answers*, NA, 1962)

This resulted in 122 instances from *The TV Corpus* and 72 from *The Movie Corpus* for analysis, that is, approximately 0.37 and 0.36 instance per million words, respectively. The *who/whom* issue is thus equally popular in both genres. The great majority of these instances, however, are from North American (NA) series or films. This is not surprising: despite the description of the corpus covering various countries, the database includes predominantly North American productions: 81% for *The TV*

Table 7.1 Data distribution by country (or countries) of origin of the production (raw figures and relative frequencies)

Corpus	NA	NA+	AU/NZ	Br	Other	Total
<i>TV Corpus</i>	102 (83.6%)	1 NA/FR (0.8%)	2 AU/1 NZ (1.6%)	16 (13.1%)	–	122 (100%)
<i>Movie Corpus</i>	64 (88.9%)	1 NA/Br (1.4%)	1 AU/NZ (1.4%)	5 (6.9%)	1 Korean (1.4%)	72 (100%)
Total	166 (85.6%)	2 (1%)	4 (2.1%)	21 (10.8%)	1 (0.5%)	194 (100%)

Corpus and 77% for *The Movie Corpus*. Table 7.1 shows the distribution of the data in the two sets according to country as checked for individual films according to the information from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) supplemented by descriptions from Wikipedia.⁸ The data will be interpreted accordingly.

The first instance from *The TV Corpus* dates from 1958. Films were around well before television became a popular medium, and this is reflected in the data, which goes back to 1937:

- (7) Was taken to the East 51st Street station. East 51st Street. Who...
Whom shall I ask for? You ask for Lieutenant King. (TV: *Hitchcock*, NA, 1958)
- (8) she might give a little dinner for them. For who? – “**For whom**”, Georgie. – “For whom, Georgie.” (Movie: *Montague the Magnificent*, NA, 1937)

The instance in (7) reflects hesitation on the part of the speaker, who self-corrects *who* to *whom*, and in (8) the speaker is corrected by someone else. Both cases are examples of implicit metalinguistic commentary. Instances of this kind are found down to the end of the period covered by the two corpora, but whether there has been an increase in frequency over the years is impossible to say due to the uneven historical and international source material in the two corpora. The fact that the issue is still drawn upon as such is interesting in its own right, given the observed disappearance of *whom* since the mid-1850s (according to comments in the HUGE data; see section 2).

I have classified all instances according to whether they merely illustrate correction, as in (7) and (8), whether they show discussion of the issue or whether they additionally offer a linguistic explanation of what should be the correct form. I have added a fourth category, called ‘Criticism through context’, because I encountered more instances like (3), where only the context, in this case the speaker taking a deliberate prescriptive stance, must be interpreted as illustrating the *who/whom* issue (for the category called ‘Awareness’, see below). The results are presented in Table 7.2.

Table 7.2 Data distribution by type of metalinguistic comment (raw figures and relative frequencies by corpus)

Metalinguistic comment	TV Corpus		Movie Corpus		Total	
Correction	94	78.4%	49	66.2%	143	73.7%
Discussion	20	15.0%	8	13.5%	28	14.4%
Explanation	7	5.8%	5	6.8%	12	6.2%
Criticism through context	1	0.8%	8	10.8%	9	4.6%
Awareness	–	–	2	2.7%	2	1.1%
Total	122	100%	72	100%	194	100%

The categories ‘Correction’ and ‘Criticism through context’ have already been illustrated in examples (7)–(8) and (3), respectively. Examples of ‘Discussion’ and ‘Explanation’ are the following:

Discussion:

- (9) So you’re seeing her tomorrow? – Seeing **whom?** – What? – Whom is he seeing? – **Did you say “whom”?** – Yes. (TV: *Mad about You*, NA, 1994)
- (10) It looks like we already sold it. My bad. To–to who? **To whom? Seriously?** I don’t know if that’s right. You’re right I don’t know if that’s right. You’re right. **It’s “to whom.” It’s whom? Okay.** Anyway. (Movie: *The Babymakers*, NA, 2012)
- (11) That your wife is having an affair? Yes. With who? Whom? What? With whom. [Jack] **is this your idea of a joke?** No. All right fine, with whom? (Movie: *Candlestick*, Br, 2014)

Explanation:

- (12) Yes? At the risk of sounding pedantic, it’s “to whom” I owe so much, not “to who”. – Is it? Who is a subject pronoun, your father is evidently the **object of the sentence, so therefore one should use the object pronoun**, namely whom. (TV: *Walliams & Friend*, Br, 2016)
- (13) Who. What? You can’t say “whom” **because there ain’t no proposition [sic] in front of it.** (Movie: *Victor/Victoria*, NA, 1995)
- (14) I got it from that teacher who... whom... **whom is the objective...** (Movie, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese*, NA, 1995)

There are two instances in *The Movie Corpus* which did not fit into any of the four categories identified, because they merely show awareness of the *who/whom* issue as a sociolinguistic feature:

- (15) I always go for a **dame with guts**. That’s “whom” you’re going to call. (Movie: *The Desperate Hours*, NA, 1955)

- (16) What did you hit him with? – Hit whom? “Whom”? Whom? **You a Northern boy?** What’s a Northern boy like you doin’ ... (Movie: *In the Heat of the Night*, NA, 1967)

In six instances, all of them North American and dating from 1996–2015, the correction of *who* to *whom* as in (17) or even usage of *whom* itself as in (18) produces irritation on the part of the participant in the dialogue:

- (17) But tick tock for who? You know it’s “for whom.” **Don’t try to provoke me.** I didn’t know that. (TV: *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, NA, 2015)
 (18) And **quit saying** “whom.” (TV: *Alpha House*, NA, 2014)

Two of the instances conveying irritation are from the same series, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, which suggests more than just a chance interest in the phenomenon with the scriptwriters. In three cases the correction is not taken up, as in (19):

- (19) I mean, who was ignoring who? **Whom. Who?** Toss me the sun block. (TV: *Privileged*, NA, 2008)

Five instances, two British and three North American, suggest that the *who/whom* issue serves as a linguistic joke or is interpreted by the audience as such, as in the following examples (20) and (21):

- (20) To. To who? No, it’s “to whom”. **LAUGHTER APPLAUSE** Yes, touche! Yes. Tou-bloody-che! Yes. Yes. (TV: *QI*, Br, 2015)
 (21) Tough man. You know him? – Whom? – **Not whom. home.** – home? – E.J. home. (Movie: *Shamus*, NA, 1973)

Example (20) is from a live television show (see above), and the laughter and applause provoked by the correction of *who* into *whom* illustrate that by this time the *who/whom* issue is no longer taken seriously, at least not in a British English informal spoken context like that of *QI* (the corpus data include another example from the show, from 2010, which likewise generates ‘LAUGHTER [AND] APPLAUSE’). What we see in example (21) is of interest from a phonological perspective, as the wordplay suggests that *whom* and *home* can be perceived as being homophonous in certain varieties of English, in this case North American English (see also below).

In as many as 20 instances (TV: 9, Movie: 11) the correction or discussion takes the wrong turn, intentionally so in some cases on the part of the scriptwriters. The instances are mostly North American (see example (22)); one is British (see example (23)) and another one AU/NZ; while the single instance from a Korean film in the data (Table 7.2) serves to illustrate imperfect mastery of English (see example (24)).

- (22) Well, someone needs to save us. But who? I mean, “whom.” **My grammar has left me.** Another omen. (TV: *Hart of Dixie*, NA, 2014)

- (23) Room, who...? Who? Whom...? Whom? – **Whom room?** – Whom room? Um... **Whom is in there?** That is the bathroom. (TV: *Only Fools and Horses*, Br, 1991)
- (24) At night, **those whom busy** disappear. **Those whom lonely**, will be outside on the streets. (Movie: *Slow Video*, Korean, 2014)

The example in (23), like the one in (21), plays on a different pronunciation (or perception) of *whom* in different dialects of English. Here, a British English example, *whom* is rhymed with *room*; *whom/home*, in (21) but also in a meme that will be discussed in section 3.2, do not rhyme in Standard British English, but would appear to do so in the American variety of the scriptwriter concerned and in that of the creator of the meme. If they did not, the joke would have been missed.

3.2 The larger picture – *who/whom* and popular culture

The above analysis of the instances from the TV and Movie corpora shows that the *who/whom* issue is routinely drawn upon in films and television series. Though the amount of data is limited, and proper interpretation is hampered by the uneven distribution of the corpus material across time and country of origin, we do see considerable awareness on the part of scriptwriters of the status of the *who/whom* issue as a shibboleth as well as the readiness to deploy it for pedantic purposes. Scriptwriters, like the novelists discussed in section 3.1, have drawn on the phenomenon since the earliest days of the two genres onwards, with one Movie and five TV instances dating from 2017 (all of them North American). The issue is primarily employed for linguistic characterisation, while it also occasionally serves to generate cheap laughs, as in examples (21) and (23). For scriptwriters to achieve these effects, there must have been considerable awareness among the general public throughout the period covered by the corpora of the social significance of the Standard English ideology that condemns speakers for making mistakes in the usage of *who/whom*. The two unscripted instances from the BBC series *QI* that raised laughter and applause, moreover, suggest that, in British English at least, attitudes to the *who/whom* issue have changed: now, usage reflects what might be interpreted as anti-prescriptivism (cf. Cameron, 1995: 5–6; see also Joseph, 2020: 18–19), and speakers are publicly derided for still insisting on the allegedly correct use of *who* and *whom*. This anti-prescriptivism is topicalised in Stephen Fry’s ‘Kinetic Typography – Language’, published on YouTube in 2010,⁹ and is frequently drawn upon for the creation of memes and commodified on popular artefacts like mugs and t-shirts (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2020: 216–217, 181–183). Searching for such items on the internet produces owls, occasionally wearing spectacles, saying ‘whom’, thus mimicking the sound owls make, or a meme with a student saying ‘Can I go whom [“home”]?’ when challenged by a teacher

to produce a sentence containing *whom*. Playing on the pronunciation of the words *whom/home* was also attested in the TV and Movie data, as illustrated by example (21). Storey (2010: 149) calls this ‘textual poaching’, and the commodification of the shibboleth through the sale of mugs and t-shirts but also keyrings and bumper stickers (Cole & Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2022) is typically part of ‘fan culture’: people flaunting such objects publicly identify themselves with a particular community (Storey, 2010: 147–156). These communities may be made up of football fans or of speakers of urban dialects like *Haags*, the working-class dialect of The Hague in the Netherlands (Cole & Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2022; cf. Johnstone, 2009; Beal, 2018), but also, as in this case, of people openly identifying themselves as anti-prescriptivists. The *who/whom* issue, moreover, is not the only example that is adopted to express anti-prescriptivist fan culture, as illustrated in chapter 7 of *Describing Prescriptivism* (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2020).

If the *who/whom* issue functions as a generally recognised feature of anti-prescriptivism today, to the extent that commenting on a faulty use of *whom* in the BBC panel show *QI* generates laughter and applause, the question arises as to why the issue was drawn upon in the British series *Roadkill*, particularly in the form of one senior lawyer telling off a younger colleague for using a grammatical form that is ‘not English’ rather than saying that it was ‘not **good** English’. No laughter was intended, so something else must be at play here, and more than merely that of the characters ‘doing social work’ (Hodson, 2014: 164). To try and answer this question, I studied the series’ reception and critical response from the general public by analysing the reviews on the IMDb website at the end of January 2022, about a year after *Roadkill* had originally been broadcast.¹⁰ There were 126 reviews, most of them dealing with topics such as the politics of the plot and the cast (including Hugh Laurie’s hair style), but some reviewers criticised what they saw as the series’ ‘awful’, ‘unnatural’ and ‘boring’ dialogue, and its ‘terrible script’ in general. Whether these comments covered underlying issues of prescriptivism is hard to say, but one reviewer called the language of the series ‘out of date’, which may be an interesting clue towards finding an explanation for the prescriptive comment about *who/whom*. It seems unlikely that David Hare, the author of the series, was solely responsible for the dialogues and thus for the *who/whom* comment. But if he was, it may have been his age at the time of writing – he was born in 1947 – that would explain the series’ old-fashioned language that one reviewer commented on, and this may also account for why an ‘old chestnut’ was invoked in the process.

The question remains whether, as suggested above, there is a relationship between the deployment of this particular linguistic shibboleth and the racial background of the actors (rather than that of the characters in the series who both have English names). Some of the reviewers called the series ‘distasteful’ because of ‘tokenism and racial profiling’, while another

wrote about being ‘tired of having “diversity” rammed down my throat’. A third noted that ‘[t]he people of colour are side actors ... that are mostly in prison except a morally bankrupt barrister’. To the latter reviewer the barrister’s English name, both as a fictional character and in real life, does not appear to have played a role in viewing the series from a racial perspective. The contrast with the American series *The Chair*, where both in the series and in real life the main character’s background is unmistakably and overtly Korean, is striking in this respect. But as in the case of the example in (4) from *Berlin Game*, where an Eton-educated British spy is assumed by the novel’s less well-educated protagonist to be able to distinguish grammatically between *who* and *whom*, ‘moral bankruptcy’ seems to be linked with linguistic bankruptcy in *Roadkill* as well, where one character invokes an age-old and in British English no longer very topical issue of prescriptivism to vent her frustration on a junior colleague. If this is indeed the case, along with the fact that it is a real-life but ostensibly not a fictional person of colour who is made to criticise a similarly positioned character for not knowing English well enough to function as a lawyer (doing social work indeed), the dialogue is actually much more subtle than reviewers have noted. As an underlying but undeniably present feature of the series, racism has thus been introduced against the current insistence on the inclusive nature of present-day (British) society. This consequently resulted in the breaking of the taboo of non-inclusivity. As viewers, we are no longer supposed to identify characters of colour as having a non-English background, whereas for many people reality is otherwise. It is this deliberately invoked inclusivity that the characters’ fictional English names are intended to put across. But with one actor of colour reproaching another actor similarly of colour for not *speaking English* correctly rather than for not speaking *good English*, the *who/whom* shibboleth has been converted into one involving race rather than the more traditional one of social class (i.e. lack of education).

To understand what is going on in this piece of *Roadkill* dialogue, it is helpful to turn to John Storey’s discussion of globalisation and popular culture in chapter 8 of his book *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*, a standard publication in the field and one that is of considerable interest to linguistics as well (cf. Werner, 2018: 5). Storey describes popular culture as ‘an arena of struggle and negotiation between the interests of dominant groups and the interests of subordinate groups’ (2010: 4); the arenas he reviews include television, fiction, film, newspapers and magazines, and music, the first three of which are addressed in the present chapter as well. Struggle and negotiation refer to the self-identification of groups in society as consumers of, for instance, popular or tabloid versus broadsheet newspapers in the UK, whose readers tend to be more highly educated (cf. Lukač, 2018: 29), or, from the perspective of this chapter, spy novels by writers like John le Carré and Len Deighton versus the recent novel by Martin Amis. As for the latter example, it is striking that the

who/whom issue features in both types of literature illustrated here, though Martin Amis refers to it for a different reason than the other novelists – that is, not for the purpose of characterisation but in the context of providing writing advice. It is worth noting in this light that Martin Amis, who was born in 1949, was of nearly the same age as David Hare, and that both appear to have antiquated notions of linguistic correctness.

But the point raised by one of the IMDb reviewers as to the racial differentiation in *Roadkill* between the main and the side characters also needs to be considered. By turning prescriptivism into a racial issue rather than one concerning lack of education, as I argued above, Hare presents his characters – both of them lawyers – as struggling to belong to an English elite in a society that should be, but in actual practice is not, characterised by inclusiveness. Social class and (lack of) education were regularly put forward as important factors by British informants in surveys investigating prescriptive attitudes which I conducted for *Describing Prescriptivism*, but usage problems were also, unexpectedly, attributed to non-native English speakers like ‘oriental students’ and ‘Irish cleaners’ (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2020: 179). Storey discusses globalisation in relation to popular culture, arguing that with the increase of worldwide mobility, ‘the world appears to be getting smaller’. As an example, he mentions the Indian dish tikka masala, ‘the most popular *British* dish’ at the time (2010: 159–160). In other words, what used to be seen as ‘foreign’ in British culture, is now seen as local, and even national. To oppose the ‘foreign’ and the national as concepts defining (British) popular culture, Storey (2010: 165) considers characteristics of class, ethnicity, gender, generation, ‘race’ and sexuality. Social class is central to British society (see e.g. Reid, 1989; Agha, 2003), and Lesley Milroy (2001) argues that it is a major characteristic that distinguishes British from American society, where it is ethnic origin that correlates with language use and linguistic awareness instead. Ethnicity is indeed a theme, along with gender and generation (age), that dominates the American series *The Chair*, as is recognised, but also criticised, by the IMDb reviewers of the series.¹¹ But as my surveys have shown, class, in the form of lack of education, is no longer the only factor invoked by British informants as correlating with what they regard as linguistic mistakes: ethnicity and race, too, are mentioned, though not explicitly; most likely this is because the subject is still considered taboo in society today. It seems that this taboo is deliberately broken in the *Roadkill* dialogue analysed here.

4 Conclusion

Taking only two series into account, one British and the other American, for my analysis of the current status of the *who/whom* issue within popular culture barely provides a representative picture of this usage problem within these two societies. Placing my findings for *Roadkill*

and *The Chair* into the wider context provided by my analysis of metalinguistic data retrieved from the TV and Movie corpora in effect proved complicated due to the practical limitations caused by the make-up of these corpora. Nonetheless, my findings do suggest a changing situation that might point to further differences between British and American society today than only social class and ethnic origin, as suggested by Lesley Milroy twenty years ago. Whereas racism, sexism and ageism can be made into topics in an American series like *The Chair*, and are identified as such by its viewers, racism, as I have argued in this chapter, is only subliminally present in the British one, and merely surfaced as a result of a close reading of a single prescriptive comment in the final episode of the series. Why the issue in question, the “‘who or whom?’ business’ as Martin Amis called it, was chosen may have to do with the age of the author of the series, for whom the *who/whom* issue as a usage problem probably agrees with his arguably outdated views on linguistic correctness. In this respect, Hare and Amis are no different from the final three – likewise elderly – usage guide writers in the HUGE database, who all prescribe *whom* in object position or after a preposition; most likely this is what the general public expects a usage guide to do. Drawing on the issue in both series would therefore not have been unusual given the popular nature of the genre concerned: as my analysis has shown, the “‘who or whom?’ business’ is regularly exploited for characterisation purposes in film and television series, just as in other forms of popular culture (novels, memes and commodified artefacts like mugs and t-shirts). The ability to use *whom* correctly is a well-known shibboleth, but to call errors in the usage ‘not English’ takes the criticism further than just being the result of lack of education.

Despite the limitations of the available resources, my analysis of overt and covert metalinguistic commentary of *who/whom* usage in two state-of-the-art linguistic corpora also suggests that it is important to consider awareness and evaluation of instances of prescriptivism in the national context in which they occur. In the USA, the *who/whom* issue can still be drawn upon for characterisation purposes, whereas in the UK public criticism of alleged mistakes in usage nowadays meets with derision on the part of the audience. That different evaluation processes in the light of different varietal norms of correctness need to be taken into account is confirmed by the following example. On 1 January 2022, an article appeared in *The Guardian* online, called “‘Different from’ is correct and “‘iconic’ is meaningless: what I know after two decades as a subeditor”.¹² In the article, which generated as many as 4,194 comments within days of its occurrence, the author, Susan McDonald, describes the *who/whom* issue as one of her ‘personal bugbears’. In the light of the above discussion, this came as rather a surprise, until Joan Beal (personal communication) mentioned that McDonald works for *The Guardian’s* Australia edition. Australian society, according to Severin and Burrige (2020: 203), is

‘highly rule-governed’, which, the authors argue, makes them adhere very strictly to prescriptive rules of language as well. As McDonald’s article confirms, the *who/whom* issue is no exception. Severin and Burrige (2020: 204) believe this strict adherence to prescriptive rules to be due to the ‘cultural cringe’ experienced by many Australians, who suffer from a sense of inferiority when comparing their language use with that of speakers from the UK or the USA (see also Císlerová, this volume). Like British English, Australian English is barely represented in the TV and Movie corpora which I drew upon for this chapter; as Table 7.1 shows, my data analysis produced only four instances from Australian films or television series altogether. Finally then, my chapter, and as confirmed by the findings of Severin and Burrige (2020), suggests that it would be worthwhile to set up separate databases for different forms of popular culture from different Anglophone backgrounds, so that issues of prescriptivism, like that of *who/whom*, can be investigated properly.

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Notes

- (1) Martin Amis died on 19 May 2023. *Inside Story* was his last published novel.
- (2) The section ends with the advice: ‘Never worry about ending a sentence with a preposition’ (Amis, 2020: 371).
- (3) The only other such comment involves the different pronunciation of *prescient* (Episode 5) between British and American English. The comment serves to bring up racism as a topic in the series (‘I don’t say that because you’re Asian. I mean, I don’t even know that you’re Asian’, says the character who was corrected by the pedantic professor in this scene, entangling himself increasingly deeply as he continues.)
- (4) Werner (2018) and Trotta (2018) make an eloquent claim for the study of the language of popular culture in its own right, describing various linguistic and other disciplines that might profit from such research. Though neither mentions prescriptivism as a field of interest in this context, the present study shows that, along with my earlier discussion of the topic in *Describing Prescriptivism*, prescriptivism is well worth studying from this perspective as well.
- (5) Davies’s very careful description of the construction of these two freely available corpora in effect demonstrates the extent to which even a very recent publication like Veirano Pinto (2018) is arguably outdated.
- (6) Different developments in this process between British and American English are, however, discussed by Lukač (2018: 185–186).
- (7) The usage problems analysed in Tiekens-Boon van Ostade are *could of*, *likely*, the placement of *only*, flat adverbs and *try and/to* (2020: 119–146).

- (8) The metadata from this database were an important source for the construction of the two corpora (Davies, 2021).
- (9) See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7E-aoXLZGY> (last accessed January 2022). The *who/whom* issue does not come up in the video, but many other ‘old chestnuts’ do.
- (10) See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10846250/reviews?ref_=tt_urv (last accessed January 2022).
- (11) See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11834150/reviews?ref_=tt_urv (last accessed January 2022).
- (12) See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jan/01/different-from-is-correct-and-iconic-is-meaningless-what-i-know-after-two-decades-as-a-subeditor> (last accessed January 2022).

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