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Language Prescription. Values, Ideologies and Identity
Bristol & Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. 320 p.

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- 1 Modern linguists have frequently distanced themselves from others writing on language by claiming they are descriptive rather than prescriptive. The assumptions behind that binary are repeatedly challenged in the fifteen contributions to this volume, which explore prescriptive language behavior in its many manifestations. In the past thirty years, this binary has been subject to increasing criticism (Cameron 1995, Curzan 2014). The relationship of that binary to others – natural/artificial, good/bad, democratic/authoritarian – invites us to examine the very nature of our discipline, and indeed of language itself.
- 2 Linguists have usually dismissed prescriptivism as artificial interference with natural linguistic behavior. If linguistics is a science, then it studies natural phenomena; the unconscious, automatic features of language are opposed to the conscious, intentional acts of prescription and proscription. If linguistics is a science, it makes no value judgments on linguistic behavior, but prescription is seemingly all about correctness judgments, and by extension, social, even moral, judgments.
- 3 Some sociolinguists have rejected these types of judgments as reflecting the “ideology of the standard language” (Milroy & Milroy 1999), and therefore an affront to human rights. Prescription is authoritarian, with diverse sources of authority, “out of step with

the democratic ethos of current times” (Severin & Burridge in this volume, p. 206). The ideology identified by the Milroys may itself derive from another ideology, individualism resisting social pressures. Ideology may itself be an ideology, the idea that we are always being manipulated by unseen forces that only the woke scholar can detect.

- 4 Discussion of prescriptivism, in English, tends to be reduced to the discussion of a small number of features: split infinitives, *that/which*, pronoun choices (e. g., *than me/than I*), preposition stranding, a few lexical items; and to a particular genre of writing: usage guides and their application in education and publishing. Such a reductive view of prescription in language encourages the perception of this phenomenon as limited to “mavens” and “Grammar Nazis” whose influence is used to reinforce social hierarchies.
- 5 Prescription, however, is everywhere. Human beings are “normative animals”, as noted by Neil Roughley: “the most pervasive structural feature of the human life form is the proclivity of human animals to live their lives in terms of ‘oughts’” (2019: 6). Enfield & Sidnell (2019: 276) emphasize the pervasiveness of linguistic prescription: “It is not just that word meanings are regulated by norms, but that people are motivated to enforce such norms even in the most mundane and informal of settings”. Word meanings are only one aspect of prescription in language, but the statement could be equally applied to other aspects of language. Self-correction is as common as correction by others.
- 6 The norms are part of living in society. While some linguistic norms serve to preserve social distinctions and thus, as in the nine principles Joseph cites from Pullum (p. 17), align with political conservatism, others support social change. Prescription can be a tool for changing society and for preserving social identities. Equality for all was promoted during the French Revolution by the proscription of *vous* with singular reference, a reform that ultimately failed. Equality for women has been promoted by creating new forms of address (*Ms.* in English), eliminating others (*Mlle* on French official forms), creating feminine forms for names of professions previously reserved for men, and *l’écriture inclusive*, spelling rules that replace the “universal masculine”. Establishing and spreading norms of endangered languages are the means to preserving their existence. For their survival, description becomes prescription.
- 7 It is thus fitting that the first section of this collection is devoted to the description/prescription opposition, exposing the flaws in that commonplace of introductory linguistic textbooks. In six propositions John Joseph (“*Is/Ought: Hume’s Guillotine, Linguistics and Standards of Language*”, p. 15-31) dismantles the anti-prescriptivist claims of modern linguistics. The first proposition points out that people often labelled as prescriptivists turn out to be descriptivists, and descriptivists use terms that express prescriptivist tendencies. At the very least, the line is too blurred to be useful. The second questions whether pure descriptivism is possible as linguistic rules are most often generalized from one, or just a few, speakers, giving those exemplars authority over others. The third notes that in time a description will become a prescription. Whatever Vaugelas’ intent in his *Remarques* (1647), his observations have been treated as rules in subsequent centuries. The fourth laments the impoverished definition of language implicit in anti-prescriptivist claims: language is more than a code for the communication of a message. The narrow version of synchronic descriptivism, proposition five observes, fails to account for variability, and for the social processes that bring about any synchronic state of a language. Finally, anti-prescriptivism denies the role that linguists can perform in the preservation of endangered languages and in

various movements for social equality (as noted above). In short, value judgments in linguistics are inevitable and the binary distinction of prescriptivism and descriptivism is deceptive.

- 8 Marla Perkins (“Inferring Prescriptivism: Considerations by Hobongan and Minority Language Documentation”, p. 32-45) pursues some of the same themes in her study of minority language documentation of the Austronesian language Hobongan. The descriptions become prescriptions when used for educational purposes. Furthermore, the limited number of informants and the limited range of data collected – specifically the focus on phonology, morphology and syntax within sentence-length examples rather than more extended narratives – has the potential to skew the description.
- 9 Don Chapman (“Are You a Descriptivist or a Prescriptivist? The Meaning of the Term *Descriptivism* and the Values of Those Who Use It”, p. 46-70) considers the polysemy of the term “descriptivism”, examining the use of the terms in general corpora as well as in books about language. The fundamental claim of descriptive linguistics is the absence of value judgments, but all linguistic descriptions are judgments of “well-formedness”, as in Fromkin *et al.* 2011 (cited p. 51). One person’s “well-formedness” may well be another’s unforgiveable error. Are errors simply variants? What are the social consequences of such variation? The descriptivist’s claim that the transmission of meaning is unimpeded by such prescriptivist bugaboos as double negatives assumes, *contra* Joseph’s fourth proposition, that language is just about message transfer.
- 10 In a contribution addressing the efficacy of prescription, Lieselotte Anderwald (“The Linguistic Value of Investigating Historical Prescriptivism”, p. 73-94) considers anti-prescriptivism a social and moral obligation of linguists, citing the role of certain prescriptive injunctions as social gatekeepers. Studying the treatment of “vernacular universals” (omnipresent but universally condemned features) in British and American usage manuals of the nineteenth century and in actual usage in a variety of genres contemporaneous with them, she concludes that the manuals were instrumental in changing the social interpretation of certain forms.
- 11 Marten van der Meulen similarly focuses on the expression of moral imperatives in prescriptivism (“Language Should Be Pure and Grammatical: Values in Prescriptivism in the Netherlands”, p. 121-144). Analyzing a century of prescriptive commentaries on Dutch, van der Meulen notes changes in the expression of prescriptions and proscriptions, and in the definitiveness of such statements.
- 12 Efficacy is the focus of Viktorija Kostadinova’s contribution (“Examining the Split Infinitive: Prescriptivism as a Constraint on Language Variation and Change”, p. 95-120). She recognizes contradictions in the evaluation of split infinitives in usage manuals, and the constraints on their use, as evidenced through the analysis of large English language corpora. Clearly the construction has become more common in everyday language and less vilified by the authors of usage manuals. The cause-and-effect sequence is hard to establish but the correlations are clear.
- 13 Loreta Vaicekauskienė (“Maintaining Power Through Language Correction: A Case of L1 Education in Post-Soviet Lithuania”, p. 145-170) describes the use of prescriptivism for nationalist purposes in post-Soviet Lithuania, tracing the “ideology of linguistic ethnicity” in nation-building after Lithuanian independence from the Soviet Union (1990). Traditionally trained descriptive linguists have become key agents in the prescription of a “pure Lithuanian” both in the schools and in the broader community.

While prescription for language preservation is generally seen in a favorable light, the dangers of excess are exemplified by the Lithuanian example.

- 14 Carmen Ebner (“‘Good Guys’ vs ‘Bad Guys’: Constructing Linguistic Identities on the Basis of Usage Problems”, p. 173-193) studies how choices relating to multiple negation and the lexical pair “to *burgle*/to *burglarize*” are perceived in individuals’ group membership. Comparing quantitative data about usage in corpora of British English to the qualitative results of a questionnaire concerning these two items, Ebner confirms claims about language and identity formation, both national (British vs American) and social (dialect and education level).
- 15 Alyssa Severin and Kate Burridge (“What Do ‘Little Aussie Sticklers’ Value Most?”, p. 194-211) contrast the perception of Australians’ reputation for egalitarianism, exemplified by the acceptance of many of the ‘vernacular universals’ cited in Anderwald (above), with their reverence for grammatical and lexical correction. The data come from five years of queries and complaints from the audience of Burridge’s radio and television programs devoted to linguistic questions, comments concentrated on relatively superficial aspects of the English language. The authors attribute the contradiction between egalitarianism and prescriptivism to Australians’ culture of obedience to rules, and the identity issues to pride in defining American as the “other”.
- 16 Nola Stephens-Hecker (“Grammar Next to Godliness: Prescriptivism and the Tower of Babel”, p. 212-230) wonders how religious beliefs might correlate to prescriptive attitudes towards language, thus extending the possible sources of the “ideology of the standard”. The majority interpretation, through history, is that the diversification of human language described in the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11, 1-9) is a curse God imposed on humanity for its hubris. The minority interpretation is that the diversification of language is a blessing. In a survey of students who self-identified as Christian at an evangelical Welsh college, she first asked how students interpreted the Babel story, and then how they felt about five common points of contention in the prescriptivist tradition (split infinitives, double negatives, etc.). While she found a slight correlation between the “blessing” interpretation and less rigidity about prescriptive norms, she prudently concluded that the main contribution of her work is to add religious beliefs to the other belief systems that contribute to prescriptivism.
- 17 Godliness is also featured in Kate Burridge’s study of linguistic attitudes of an isolated religious community in Ontario (“Linguistic Cleanliness is Next to Godliness – But Not for Conservative Anabaptists”, p. 231-247). This study challenges the claim that prescriptivism is universal. Even though this community’s Pennsylvania German is seemingly threatened by incursions from the surrounding English-speaking population, the deep humility of the congregation keeps them from making value judgments concerning changes in their language.
- 18 The final three contributions concern a landmark in English prescriptivism (Fowler’s *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*), and the application of prescriptive strictures by those professionals most directly implicated in prescriptive practice, copy editors. Giuliana Russo (“Fowler’s Values: Ideology and *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926)”, p. 251-263) teases out the multiplicity of perspectives reflected in what is certainly the most influential usage guide in English, comparable to Vaugelas’ comments on French, equally diverse and equally subject to simplistic categorization. Fowler’s emphasis on the authority of “idiomatic expression” reveals a more sophisticated analysis of the quirks of English usage than usually credited. However,

the fact remains that his “idiomatic expression” is the speech of upper-class British males of his generation.

- 19 Linda Pillière (“U. S. Copy Editors, Style Guides and Usage Guides and Their Impact on British Novels”, p. 264-291) compares British and American copy editors’ reactions to changes made by American copy editors to British novels. Surprisingly, many British copy editors preferred the American version in the four stylistic choices she studies: *than me/than I*, *each other/one another*, active voice/passive voice, presence or absence of existential *there*.
- 20 Jonathon Owen (“Practicing Prescriptivism: How Copy Editors Treat Prescriptive Rules”, p. 292-306) analyzes the practices of a different group of editors, student intern editors at the Faculty Editing Service of Brigham Young University, then compared to some volunteer professional editors’ practices. Inconsistency among the editors, both interns and professionals, was perhaps the most significant result, which may signify how unimportant the prescriptive notions of editors are for the broader trajectory of the language.
- 21 Chapman notes the polysemy of “descriptivism”; the contributions to this collection reveal the polysemy of prescriptivism. With this polysemy come diverse “values, ideologies and identities”, to cite the subtitle of this volume. Is prescriptivism simply the unconscious or conscious accommodation we make when communicating with others, or is it an intentional attempt to put others “in their place” through correction? In the first instance it is part of human nature, a characteristic of the “normative animal”. Prescriptivism may even be necessary as a means to achieving social goals, changes in attitudes and the preservation of endangered languages. In the other, prescriptivism is a tool of linguistic bigotry, an ideology of social manipulation contrary to individual identity and agency valued in liberal democracies. The diverse contributions to this volume reveal both the positive and the negative aspects of the “ideology of the standard”.
- 22 It might be worthwhile to use this polysemy to revisit the very notion of ideology: how can we reconcile the oppression implicit in current use of that term, with individuals’ and communities’ apparent desire to seek conformity? As we linguists condemn the moral judgments of prescriptivists, perhaps we should, in all humility, also eschew moral judgments of prescriptivism. As Clare Chambers asks: “what gives the philosopher or the critic the ability and the right to judge that a culturally endorsed practice is wrong?” (2017: 177). If we substitute ‘linguist’ for ‘philosopher’ and ‘critic’ in this question, we might take a useful step towards creating a science of language.

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