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How Prescriptive Can We Be?

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Linguistics is a descriptive science. The statement is, to most linguists, so obviously true as to be trite. It seems scarcely worth citing linguists who are either dismissive of prescription (e.g. Saussure 1915: 13) or who explicitly state that linguistics is a descriptive study (e.g. Lyons 1968: 42). There are, however, problems with this bald statement. Linguists may be trained to be descriptive, but because of the specialised knowledge their training gives them, they are then called upon to discuss or justify the prescriptions of others. Understandably, they are reluctant to do this. But the desire not to prescribe may in itself be interpreted as prescription. Two recent papers brought the problems with descriptivism into focus for me

In one of these papers (Cameron 1992), Deborah Cameron discusses a panel on language and gender sponsored by the Linguistics Association of Great Britain, which wished to make the language of the association less sexist, notably by changing the title of the figurehead of the association from Chairman.

This proposal was not universally supported, however, and opposition to it was based on an unusual line of argument: that regardless of the merits of the case, a professional organization of linguists must eschew prescriptivism at all costs. In order to maintain their credibility as scientists, linguists must refrain from telling anyone — even their colleagues — how they should speak or write. (An ironic postscript to this story: soon after the discussion the LAGB elected its first woman to the chair. Though it refused to capitulate to the non-sexist designation "chairperson" or "chair", it did at this point change the name of the office to "President"!) (227)

I was not present at the gathering at which this occurred, and cannot comment on the degree of 'universality' with which this proposal was opposed, nor on the motivation underlying the behaviour of those who opposed it. But these matters are tangential to the main point of the story. Cameron points out that the descriptive nature of linguistics is an axiom in the teaching of linguistics from Lecture 1, and that belief in this axiom is one area where linguists frequently come into conflict with lay commentators about language, and not least with educationalists.

The proscription of prescription has been a problem for linguists for some time. Most linguists would feel perfectly relaxed about 'correcting the English' of a non-native speaker, for instance. Many have made a living

doing precisely that. This implies a nice sharp distinction between native and non-native speakers. Yet the notion of 'native speaker' has come in for a great deal of criticism in recent times (e.g. Paikeday 1985). As people who have dealt with the complex language situation in multilingual communities will know, it becomes extremely difficult to define a native speaker, particularly in places like Singapore where there is a political definition of native speaker which may contrast with any linguistic one. Even in New Zealand, where multilingualism is not given the same official recognition it is in Singapore, and where the political definitions are correspondingly less overt, we find news broadcasts stating that 'none of the leaders [of the Maori tribes] speak their native language' (Mana News, Radio New Zealand National Programme, 8th June 1993).

Linguists are usually willing go further than just correcting non-native speakers, anyway. Most linguists feel perfectly relaxed about correcting the English of native speakers, too. I know that when I came across a student in one of the courses I mark for who appeared to treat *although* as a sentence modifier, in that she always put a full stop at the end of a clause that started with *although*, I complained about her English. I couldn't understand what she was writing, so it wasn't helping her. But I was being prescriptive. We are also regularly prescriptive about students who can't spell *grammar*, *pronunciation*, *diphthong* and *occurrence*. Not only that, but we 'correct' our children, although how much effect it has is perhaps debatable. Nonetheless, it is a prescriptive act, particularly if we believe with Carroll (1960: 206) that

By the age of about 6, the average child has mastered nearly all the phonemic distinctions of his language and practically all its common grammatical forms and constructions — at least those used by the adults and older children in his environment. After the age of 6, there is relatively little in the grammar or syntax of the language that the average child needs to learn...

(I don't agree with this, but it's not clear that that makes me any less prescriptive). If this were purely a matter of orthography and punctuation (the mis-use of apostrophes or whatever), we might justify this behaviour on the grounds that it is not strictly linguistic performance that we are prescribing. But my example of *although* and other similar examples shows that our prescriptivism is not limited to these quasi-linguistic peripheral matters.

Despite all this, no linguist would be happy these days about 'correcting' the pronunciation of a New Zealander to make it approximate more closely to the perceived norm of RP. But drawing a distinction between these various cases is by no means a straightforward task. In each case an attempt is being made to get a speaker who has not acquired a given variety in the home context to approximate more closely to what is seen as some kind of norm. In each case the intervention, if 'successful', will have

the effect of changing the speaker's system in some way, and modifying future production on the speaker's part. In each case, the chances of a single case of intervention having this effect are very small, because there is conflict with established patterns in the speaker's personal linguistic system.

Yet out there in the real world, such hair-splitting has little effect. Indeed, it is the reluctance on the part of linguists to prescribe that has caused one of the largest divisions between linguists and the general populace this century. It is interpreted as making linguists look out of touch with reality. As Anthony Burgess puts it, in a different context, 'What is interesting to the philologist cuts no ice with polite society' (Burgess, 1992: 333). To illustrate this point, let me quote from a letter to the editor of the *Times Higher*. The letter is a response to an article (Parrinder 1993) in which it is argued that forcing standard English speech on school-children, as demanded by recent British legislation, is likely to have the effect of diminishing their self-esteem, and making them less capable of coping with formal education. The writer (a university lecturer) asks rhetorically and ironically

Is Professor Parrinder ... convinced that his current undergraduate students read more, and thus have a wider general knowledge, spell and punctuate more accurately, and communicate their ideas with greater assurance and precision than those of 25 years ago? If so, and if his conviction is echoed by most college and university lecturers, then his opinions about how to teach schoolchildren English are the correct ones.

But since, it is implied, this is unlikely to be the case, then we should impose standard English. In a sentence which seems to make its own point about English abilities, the letter continues:

Those who consider that Professor Parrinder's assumption that pupils will produce better work if their English usage is not evaluated in relation to a norm, has failed, precisely, working class children, must be few; otherwise professional teachers of English would surely have taken their evidence into account. (Murphy 1993)

There is much in this letter that linguists could find to object to, besides the punctuation: it misses the real point, it confuses speech and writing, it fails to consider the percentage of the population attending university now and twenty-five years ago, it assumes that practising teachers pay some attention to academic linguists, and so on. It nevertheless makes a point it did not intend to make, namely that linguists have failed to convince even their university colleagues that descriptivism is acceptable but prescriptivism is not scientifically and socially responsible.

Some of this is, no doubt, bad PR. Linguists have been very bad at explaining what they mean when they say that all languages (and, *a fortiori*, all dialects) are equal. Even the use of a term like *equal* sounds social rather

than the comment on linguistic potential (as opposed, note, to current linguistic capacity) it is no doubt intended to be. However much we might say that we would be better to discuss nuclear physics in Hopi than in English, or that there is nothing inherent in Maori to prevent it being used for an advanced course in computer science, the fact that nuclear physics is not discussed in Hopi, nor advanced computer science in Maori (despite recent innovations at the University of Waikato), makes its own point. If all varieties are equal, some are seen — with a certain amount of equivocation on the word *equal* — to be more equal than others.

Some of our failure to convince others of our position may be due to the lack of observable results. Can we prove that speakers of Black English Vernacular (BEV) who go to classes in which BEV is accepted, possibly even spoken by the teacher, do better academically, are less likely to reject the values that school attempts to impose, and are more likely to end up bi-dialectal than speakers of BEV who attend other schools? If we can, we've been remarkably quiet about it. If we can, we should be shouting it from the roof tops, and we're not. I suspect that we cannot. And this wouldn't surprise me, since I believe — though this is not based on any professional linguistic knowledge — that such attitudes are deeply engrained in the society from which BEV speakers come, and that acceptance of their linguistic variety would not be sufficient to change these attitudes (possibly a prerequisite, but no more). For BEV read Maori, Aboriginal or working-class Yorkshire as you see fit.

But some part of our failure to convince others of the correctness of our position may be due to the fact that we are perceived as being hypocritical in this. Hypocritical in that, for instance, we speak of all varieties being equal, but don't actually want our children to speak one of the other equal varieties (or marry someone who does). But this is at a fairly trivial level. The hypocrisy may go beyond that.

First of all, failure to prescribe can be seen as prescribing the status quo. This is the problem with the LAGB decision. If I fail to proscribe sexist language, I implicitly prescribe it. If I do proscribe sexist language, then I prescribe an alternative set of linguistic conventions. Whatever I do, I am prescribing something. The difference is how overtly I offer the prescription. There is a paradox implicit in the whole notion of prescription or lack of it.

Secondly, there is the problem of what we have put in the place of prescriptivism. Rather than saying 'You should talk standard English', we have started to say that 'You should talk appropriate English', where standard English is appropriate in some environments but not in others. We encourage bi-dialectalism rather than enforcement of some (linguistically arbitrary) norm as a unique variety in the school. In an extremely interesting article published in 1991, Harold Rosen of the University of London considers this notion critically.

First of all Rosen points out that although there are speakers who adopt standard English, this happens in conjunction with distancing from

the home and community, typically (we can extrapolate) both psychologically in terms of education and attitude, and also physically in that such people frequently move to different parts of the country (or, in some cases, like my own, overseas!). In other words, a change of linguistic habits is a concomitant of a change in social habits. We have little evidence that you can change linguistic habits without also changing the social habits.

Secondly, Rosen points out the well-known social difficulty in adopting an accent (or variety) associated with a higher social class. Not only are you mocked by your erstwhile peers, you are also mocked by those you emulate. Rosen cites H.C. Wyld on speakers whose English is 'a tissue of affectations ... We feel in listening to such speakers that they are uneasy, unsure of themselves, that they have no traditional or social background'. With reference to the work of Del Hymes and William Labov, Rosen points out that such speakers are victims of hypercorrection and social anxiety. Should we really be attempting to introduce speakers to this kind of state?

Thirdly, Rosen makes the point that if we try to teach standard speech, it is far from clear what we should be teaching anyway. Given that we are now far more aware than we used to be of the variable nature of all varieties including standard varieties, what we need to teach is an ability to select the relevant variants in appropriate percentages. This is such a daunting task that it inevitably falls to the level of trying to eradicate shibboleths like the double negative, or use of adjectival forms in adverbial functions (*he done it real quick*). Given such problems, the actual outcomes of attempting to impose standard English and trying to impose appropriate English are likely to be extremely similar, and indeed, however it actually ended up, much of the theory on which earlier British curricula were created seems to have been an attempt to impose appropriate rather than 'correct' speech.

Finally, note — as Rosen does — that the very notion of appropriateness is one imposed from outside by the teachers, and that their notion of what is appropriate may not match those derived from the social mores of the pupils they teach. In other words, the banner of appropriateness may simply disguise prescriptivism in another form.

All this makes it sound as though the moment linguists deviate at all from their avowed aim of describing the structures and uses of language they inevitably become prescriptive. This may well be true. Indeed, they may be interpreted as being prescriptive even before they have deviated from this aim, as is shown by the furore that arose on the publication of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* over the comment that *ain't* 'though disapproved by many and more common in less educated speech, [is] used orally in most parts of the U.S. by many cultivated speakers, esp. in the phrase *ain't I*'. It is my impression that linguists themselves often fail to see that there are good reasons for this.

As is pointed out in some detail by Clark (1993), the acquisition of language involves working out what is conventional in language. If language is to be a suitable tool for a community, then the community must

have a convention about what words are part of its language and what they mean. If we all behaved like Humpty Dumpty and had words mean whatever we wanted them to mean, communication would soon break down. Thus, at the earliest stages of learning a language there is a conventionally 'correct' answer to 'What is that thing called?'. Part of this convention involves giving priority to established words for things, so that if we want to know whether a device for linking a vehicle to its trailer can be called a *hooker* (as one two-year-old of my acquaintance suggested), the answer is no (a) because it has the conventional lable *hook* and (b) because *hooker* is conventionally used for a different entity; note that neither of these reasons has anything to do with whether *hooker* might be a reasonable label for the relevant device. Children thus come to expect there to be a 'right' answer to questions about language, and those (relatively rare) cases where there is no absolute correct answer are very confusing. It is one thing for the academic linguist to say that *ain't* is right in some circumstances but not so felicitous in others, but that a feline quadruped may be called a *cat* under all circumstances. Most real language users expect the answer for *ain't* to be as clear as the answer for *cat*; moreover, the feel they know what the answer is, just as clearly as they know what the answer is as far as *cat* is concerned.

If linguists cannot prevent the general public from expecting prescriptivism to work, the question then arises as to what linguists should do about their own attitudes to it.

In a brief note Bolinger (1965: vii-viii) makes the point that 'American linguistics has almost an official line on some questions: ... on purism (it is reprehensible).' This official line persists almost thirty years later, and perhaps the first thing we should do is recognise it as too simplistic an approach.

If we can't escape prescriptivism, perhaps we should embrace it, at least to the extent that we overtly recognise what it is we are doing. Many linguists, I think, reject prescriptivism because they see it as enforcing traditional power structures. By making those with no power accept the linguistic myths of beauty, logic and superiority of the standard variety, we force them to acquiesce in the process of keeping themselves out of power. Current philosophy is more directed at empowering those with no power than in maintaining the status quo. If that is the case, there can be no objection to prescribing language structures which are likely to empower, such as the exclusion of racist and sexist language. If this rather Marxist analysis of prescription is rejected, and language prescriptions are seen as no more than harmless pieces of oneupmanship, then there is presumably comparatively little damage to be done by pointing out illogicalities in the system (such as the use of *himself* rather than *hisself* in comparison with *myself*, *ourselves*, etc), and joining in the game. In either case, though, we could be honest about our prescriptivism, and open about why we are doing what we are.

Whatever our attitude, we should not expect to be able to remove prescriptions or to be able to make non-standard speakers speak impeccable

standard English. These would involve going against the whole function of prescriptions in society which I take to be (following Milroy & Milroy 1985) the reduction of variation in a standard form so that it becomes more monolithic and the use of language to distinguish between social groups. If everyone learnt to use *imply* and *infer* consistently, some other prescription would arise to distinguish between the in-group and the out-group, because making that distinction is an important function of language. If our aim is linguistic engineering, we must keep our goals much more modest than imposing even appropriate English. Perhaps we can do no better than convincing people to avoid some of the shibboleths in their most formal styles. If that is the case, we need a set of guidelines to help us decide when to prescribe and when to keep quiet.

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