Details of Prescriptivism and “Fixing” Language
Double Agenda Related to Topic of Prescriptivism

- Wide-reaching “discourse” about prescriptivism and its effect on how we talk about language

- Difference between a general “prescriptive” approach to language and linguists’ “descriptive” approach
Definition of “Prescription”

- Prescription (noun):
  - a recommendation that is authoritatively put forward
Definition of “Prescriptivism”

• Prescriptivism:
  • Institutionalized Verbal Hygiene
Prescriptivism: an Overview

Prescriptivism

- The deliberate, conscious, and explicit effort made by institutional authorities to regulate the way a language is used.

- The means by which various language authorities work to control language by, among other things, dictating how a language (English) should be used.
Prescriptivism: an Overview

Prescriptivism

- Prescriptivism is partly a product of an effort to **standardize** and **stabilize** language
- Tries to stop language from changing
- Elevates one variety of English above others
Prescriptivism: an Overview

Prescriptivism

• Establishes (and tries to enforce) a “socially preferred” form of English as the Standard

• Designates some forms of English as wrong (and as “socially undesirable”)

• Sets up certain people as “smart” (or at least most knowledgable about language)
Prescriptivism - Reconsidered


• Curzan explains:
  
  • Prescriptivism encompasses the two meanings of the verb *fix*: (1) to improve and (2) to secure/keep constant.
  
  • The important role prescriptivism plays in the history of English.
Prescriptivism - Reconsidered

• Curzan (2014) adds:

  • Prescriptivism is itself a factor in language change (examples: “the person whom is involved” or “between you and I”)

  • Prescriptivism has created a meta-discourse about language
A favorite device for trying to control other people’s language
I don't see what the big deal is on using "they" as a singular pronoun.

Language changes. Even pronouns have changed drastically in the last several centuries.

Shakespeare used the singular they! Chaucer did too!

Yeah, I guess the data is pretty clear on that.

It's "the data are," you garbage.
Commentary About a New Punctuation Practice

• “Our exclamation problem is getting worse!!!” Beth Teitell. December 17, 2018.

New Uses of Exclamation Marks

“Exclamation points have become so dominant that not only have they moved in on the period’s turf, but they’re retroactively changing the tone of words. In 2018, an exclamation-free “OK” reads hostile.”

TEXT EXCHANGE:

• “Want to go for a walk?”
• “OK.”
• “What’s the matter?”
• “Nothing.”
• “I hate when you get like this!”
Judging Each Other’s English

• “This Embarrasses You and I*”

Grammar Gaffes Invade the Office in an Age of Informal Email, Texting and Twitter - Sue Shellenbarger- June 20, 2012

"Such looseness with language can create bad impressions with clients, ruin marketing materials and cause communications errors, many managers say."

https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303410404577466662919275448
Speaker Anxiety About “Grammar”

- Prescriptivism is deeply embedded in powerful institutions
- Prescriptive beliefs and recommendations have resulted in linguistic insecurity and an anxiety in English speakers
- Most important is the effect of this effort at language control on English speakers.
Prescriptivism Versus Prescriptive Grammar

(Ideas Adapted From Anne Curzan *Fixing English* (2012))

**Prescriptivism** - An overall approach by institutional authorities to regulate language

**Prescriptive Grammar** - The specific rules of usage (for English) that prescriptivists recommend
Prescriptive “Grammar”

• What does “grammar” mean?

• The word *grammar* is often used to refer to all aspects of language

• For linguists “grammar” refers to the systematic workings of a language as used by native speakers

• For many speakers, “grammar” refers to the structure of sentences (or a school subject)
Prescriptive “Grammar”

• But what do people mean when they say “I was never good at grammar” in perfect English?

• They probably mean that they don’t know a small set of prescribed rules that are called “proper” or “good” English

• All native speakers know precisely the structures that make English English
Prescriptive “Grammar”

(Ideas Adapted From Anne Curzan Fixing English (2012)

• The set of prescriptive rules that exists is actually a small part of the discourse about “good” English.

• Prescriptive “Grammar” outlines preferred (Standard) usage for at least seven different areas of English usage and calls them all “grammar.”
Prescriptive Grammar Has Rules for:

- pronunciation  [speaking]
- spelling       [writing]
- punctuation    [writing]
- words (lexical) [speaking and writing]
- word forms     [speaking and writing]
- structure (syntax) [speaking and writing]
- style          [speaking and writing]
30 of the Most Common Grammatical Errors We All Need to Stop Making

Written by Amanda Zantal-Wiener
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Even after years of education, there are some things that some people still mess up. For me, it’s algebra. For others, it’s the laws of physics. And for many, it’s grammar.

It’s not easy. Words and phrases that sound fine in your head can look like gibberish when written down -- that is, if you even realize you made a mistake in the first place. It’s easy for little grammar mistakes to slip by, especially when you’re self-editing.

But how do you prevent grammatical errors if you’re not even aware you’re making them?
Examples of Grammar Errors:

- their/ they’re / there (spelling)
- passive vs active (style)
- fewer vs less (word choice)
- *I* vs *me* (word form)
- *between* vs *among* (word choice)
- “I should of gone” vs “I should have gone” (speech to writing)
Nearly everyone makes grammatical mistakes from time to time. After all, the English language is said to be one of the most difficult languages to learn and master.

Take irregular verbs in modern English, such as *lie* and *lay*. These verbs can take unpredictable and confusing forms. For instance, would it be correct to say, “I lie down on the sofa to read *The Huffington Post*“ or “I lay down on the sofa to read *The Huffington Post*“? If you selected the first version because you know the grammar rule for *lie* and *lay* or because it sounded better, you’d be correct.
How “Prescriptive” Are YOU?

Which of the two forms would you use?

1. PRONUNCIATION:
   I don’t go there very ofTen.
   I don’t go there very oFen.

   They asked for Herbal tea.
   They asked for erbal tea.

   The man was accused of sexual harASSment.
   The man was accused of sexual HARassment.
How “Prescriptive” Are YOU?

Which of the two forms would you use?

2. SPELLING:
   adviser/ advisor
   collectable/ collectible
   enquire/ inquire
How “Prescriptive” Are YOU?

Which of the two forms would you use?

3. PUNCTUATION:

“I wonder what the answer is.”
“I wonder what the answer is”.

The word *hello* is used throughout the world.
The word “hello” is used throughout the world.

They bought apples, oranges, and grapefruits.
They bought apples, oranges and grapefruits.
How “Prescriptive” Are YOU?
Which of the two forms would you use?

4. WORDS / VOCABULARY
I’m eager to meet them.
I’m anxious to meet them.

What would you like beside that?
What would you like besides that?

How much farther do they need to drive?
How much further do they need to drive?
How “Prescriptive” Are YOU?

Which of the two forms would you use?

5. WORD FORMS (any part of speech)

The data are great.
The data is great.

This is between you and me.
This is between you and I.

Whose book is that?
Who’s book is that?

The invitation is lovelier than we expected.
The invitation is more lovely than we expected.
How “Prescriptive” Are YOU?

Which of the two forms would you use?

6. STRUCTURE (SYNTAX)

There’s a dozen questions to ask.
There’re a dozen questions to ask.

Do you see the woman who is eating the ice cream?
Do you see the woman that is eating the ice cream?
How “Prescriptive” Are YOU?

Which of the two forms would you use?

7. STYLIST

Where is the office at?
Where is the office?

The book was destroyed by the children.
The children destroyed the book.

I want to gradually increase my strength.
I want to increase my strength gradually.
Examples of Prescriptive Rules

1. Don't split infinitives.

   I would like to quickly consider your proposal.
   I would like to consider your proposal quickly.

2. Don't end a sentence with a preposition. (For this, Curzan reports, prescription has affected usage)

   Which newspaper did the article appear in?
   In which newspaper did the article appear?

   Where did you drive to?
   To where did you drive?
Examples of Prescriptive Rules

3. Use the subjunctive following verbs that express something hypothetical. (In this case, the prescriptive rule tries to restore an old usage and had some success)

   If I were you, I wouldn’t go.
   If I was you, I wouldn’t go.

The report recommends that he face suspension.
The report recommends that he faces suspension.
Examples of Prescriptive Rules

4. None is singular.

None of the sentences above sound strange to me. None of the sentences above sounds strange to me.

5. Don't use double negatives. (Curzan reports that the prescriptions against this occurred AFTER this usage had stopped being used in educated English)

It doesn’t hardly matter.
It hardly matters.
Examples of Prescriptive Rules

6. Adverbs are not the same as adjectives (even though many words are both adjectives and adverbs).

I drove as fast as I could.
I love fast cars.

I always drive slow when I see a police car.
I always drive slowly when I see a police car.

7. Don't use contractions.

I am not going to be able to call you later.
I’m not going to be able to call you later.
Examples of Prescriptive Rules

8. Note the difference between new, old (irregular), and “non-standard” verb forms.

They dived into the water.
They dove into the water.

They brought him home.
They brung him home.

9. Pay attention to the use of who and whom.

Who did you give your book to?
To whom did you give your book?
Examples of Prescriptive Rules

10. Don’t use *ain’t*.
   You can keep asking but it just ain’t going to happen.
   You can keep asking but it just isn’t going to happen.

11. Watch how you use *like*.
   (How does one use *like* anyway !?)
   Is the movie like the book?
   It’s a lot like the book.
   It seems like a good idea.
   It seems that’s a good idea.
   It is as I wanted it to be.
   It is like I wanted it to be.
12. Remember the different uses of I and me.

I can’t believe you didn’t call me.
She sent me the book.

John and I are going to dinner at 7:00
Me and John are going to dinner at 7:00.

Can you give Sue and me a ride?
Can you give Sue and I a ride?
Prescriptivism

- Rules are a small part of the discourse about “good” English
- What people say about English is more significant
- What we teach our children
- What Microsoft Word says about writing
Next week - History of Prescriptivism
Prescriptivism and Descriptivism Compared