Controlling Language: Who (or What) is in Control?

Fromm Institute - Winter Session 2019
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More Details about Prescriptivism and “Fixing” Language
Prescriptivism Defined:

• 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 dictating how a language (English) should be used.
Prescriptivism

- The rules and sentence examples we discussed last week are only a small part of the discourse about “good” English.
- What people say and how they react to different forms of English (and to the people who use different forms of English) is more significant.
Prescriptivism

People’s negative reactions to “non-standard” English provide important evidence of how successful prescriptivism has been in controlling how we think about English!
I'll have the English Major's Breakfast — eggs over easily.
His last words were, "Stop correcting my grammar!"
Man says, "Lay down!"

Dog thinks, "It's 'lie down,' not 'lay down,' Stupid."
Facts About Language Reviewed:

• Human language is primarily spoken
• All humans in all societies speak
• Writing is a recent invention
• Modern human dates back to 60,000 BC
• First writing systems are from 3,500 BC
Though humans had been anatomically modern for quite some time by this point, it wasn’t until 60,000 - 40,000 years ago that experts think humans stopped embarrassing themselves and became “behaviorally modern”—meaning exhibiting complex symbolic thought, cultural creativity, and all the other things that make humans humans. It’s widely believed that this rapid development is tied directly to the development of complex language in humans.

Recorded History
3,500 BC - Present

3,500 BC

Earliest evidence of writing; Oldest wheeled vehicle found

Great Pyramid Of Giza (2500 BC)

The beginning of writing around 3,500 BC marks the beginning of us knowing anything about what went on in history.

Bronze Age (3200 - 1200 BC)

Ancient Egyptian Civilization (3150 - 30 BC)

The lives of
Socrates (~470 - 399 BC)
Plato (~428 - 348 BC)
Aristotle (384 - 322 BC)
Alexander the Great (356 - 323 BC)

Buddha lived around this time (exact date disputed)

Roman Empire (27 BC - 470 AD)

The lives of
Julius Caesar (100 - 44 BC)
Cleopatra (69 - 31 BC)
Jesus Christ (7-2 BC - 30-33 AD)

Cool that someone born in 55 BC who died in 35 AD (at the age of 90) would have witnessed the rise and fall of Julius Caesar, the reign of Augustus and founding of the Roman Empire, Cleopatra’s whole reign and the fall of Egypt to Rome, and the birth, life, and crucifixion of Jesus.

You can also see here that Cleopatra lived closer to today than to the building of the pyramids.
More Facts About Language Reviewed:

• Language is:
  • A dynamic human activity that takes place in a social context
  • All languages are made up of many varieties
  • Different varieties of a language (English) result from different degrees of contact and shared identities among people
More Facts About Language Reviewed:

- Varieties (dialects) and styles result from:
  - regional factors
  - socioeconomic factors
  - group identity (ethnic, etc.)
  - communities of practice (e.g., professional groups, families, religious communities)
  - education
More Facts About Language Reviewed:

- Standard English (the prescribed form) is based on:
  - the language spoken by the group in power
  - the language spoken by the group with most influence
- The choice is socially specific but linguistically arbitrary
History Of Prescriptivism

• 300+ years of prescriptivism in English

• Prescriptivism has led to:
  • How we talk about English
  • A discourse about “CORRECT” English
  • People’s feeling compelled (and free) to regulate other’s people’s English
History Of Prescriptivism

• How did prescriptivism evolve?
• Starting from the time of the Norman Conquest and then during the Renaissance and Industrial Age, English borrowed a vast number of words from other languages
History Of Prescriptivism

• Up until the 1500’s, English was seen as inferior to Latin and French

• Then English language scholars decided standardization was needed

• Successfully created a belief system that a specific “correct” English was needed

• Institutional authorities were established (but no one “academy”)
History Of Prescriptivism

• A few publications dating back to 18th century were most important
• Samual Johnson’s 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*
• Johnson had written a “plan” before creating his dictionary
• He had a methodology and compared it to a legal document:
History Of Prescriptivism

Johnson’s plan:

“..., since the rules of stile, like those of law, arise from precedents often repeated, collect the testimonies of both sides, and endeavour to discover and promulgate the decrees of custom, who has so long possessed whether by right or by usurpation, the sovereignty of words.”
A DICTIONARY of the ENGLISH LANGUAGE: in which The WORDS are deduced from their ORIGINALS, and ILLUSTRATED in their DIFFERENT SIGNIFICATIONS by EXAMPLES from the best WRITERS. To which are prefixed, A HISTORY of the LANGUAGE, and AN ENGLISH GRAMMAR. By SAMUEL JOHNSON, A.M. In TWO Volumes VOL. I
History Of Prescriptivism

• First edition of Johnson’s dictionary:
  • Took 7 years to write
  • Contained a 42,773-word list
  • Was innovative because Johnson illustrated the meanings of his words with literary quotations
  • Contained 114,000 quotations (such as Shakespeare, Milton and Dryden)
History Of Prescriptivism

• The *Dictionary* was exported to America soon after publication

• For Americans (2nd half of the 18th century) Johnson was considered a great authority on language

• Influenced lexicography

• BUT Noah Webster argued that Johnson’s English was not the same as American English
History Of Prescriptivism

• Robert Lowth’s 1762 A Short Introduction to English Grammar

• Here’s what Wikipedia says about Lowth:
  • “Prompted by the absence of simple and pedagogical grammar textbooks in his day, Lowth set out to remedy the situation. Lowth's grammar is the source of many of the prescriptive shibboleths.
History Of Prescriptivism

• that are studied in schools, and established him as the first of a long line of usage commentators who judge the English language in addition to describing it.”

• “His most famous contribution to the study of grammar may have been his ... suggestion that sentences ending with a preposition ... are inappropriate in formal writing.”
History Of Prescriptivism

• Later, other self-appointed authorities appeared (e.g., William Safire)

• Also English teachers, parents, people who influenced us growing up

• A discourse about what is good or elegant in language became a discourse about what is correct and incorrect, good and bad
Prescriptivism

• Most interesting questions:
  • What is power of prescriptivism?
  • What are the effects?
Effect Of Prescriptivism

• Prescriptivism has resulted in a meta-discourse about English that people use to control or regulate the language of others

• First: people and intuitions who were considered to be AUTHORITIES created the meta-discourse

• Then individuals continued to spread these beliefs

• The meta-discourse about “good/ correct” English results in language anxiety for many people
Effect Of Prescriptivism

• Language is characterized as:
  • polite versus coarse
  • correct versus incorrect
  • meticulous versus colloquial
  • native versus foreign
Effect Of Prescriptivism

- For many people "good language" is seen as a path to social mobility (cultural capital)
- Language is seen as a sign of intelligence and character (social grace)
- Language is seen as a reflection of political belief
Real-Life Consequences Of Prescriptivism

Two examples from the news:

1a. A study found court reporters in the city (of Phila) regularly made errors in transcribing sentences that were spoken in black dialect.

John Eligon - Jan. 25, 2019

Real-Life Consequences Of Prescriptivism - Continued

• “He don’t be in that neighborhood.”

was transcribed as

• “We going to be in this neighborhood.”

the opposite of what the phrase actually means, namely —>

• that the person is not usually in that neighborhood.
Real-Life Consequences Of Prescriptivism

Examples from the news:

1b “Are Philly court reporters accurate with black dialect? Study: Not really. Cassie Owens: January 22, 2019

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Real-Life Consequences Of Prescriptivism

2. Stanford Linguistics professor John R. Rickford says prejudice toward African American dialect can result in unfair rulings. His research demonstrates how the testimony in African American vernacular was discredited. December 2, 2014
Linguistic Insecurity

• What is linguistic insecurity?

• Definitions according to several well-known linguists:

“Speakers’ feeling that the variety [of their language] they use is somehow inferior, ugly or bad” (Meyerhoff 2006: 292).
Linguistic Insecurity

- Who has it?
  ... [T]hose who adopt a standard of correctness which is imposed from without, and from beyond the group which helped form their native speech pattern, are bound to show signs of linguistic insecurity (Labov 1966: 332).
Linguistic Insecurity

• Where does it come from?

The belief that… “[t]he language of a socially subordinate group is linguistically deficient …” (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006: 398)
Linguistic Insecurity

The belief that there is

“...a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class (LippiGreen 1997: 64).
Prescriptivism Versus Descriptivism

- Linguistics takes a descriptive approach to language.

- A descriptive approach describes the systematic character of language and how language is used.

- Linguists routinely criticize “prescriptivism” for being evaluative in its discussion of language.

- That criticism is itself an example of verbal hygiene!
What is Grammar?

Descriptive grammar (definition #1) refers to the structure of a language as it is actually used by speakers and writers.

Prescriptive grammar (definition #2) refers to the structure of a language as certain people think it should be used.
Examples Of Description Versus Prescription

• Descriptive rule:

• To form a negative sentence in English, add the word *not* after the auxiliary (helping) verb.

• Barbara *is* cooking tonight.

• Barbara *is not* cooking tonight.

• * Barbara *is cooking not tonight* IS NOT ENGLISH
Description Versus Prescription

- If there is no auxiliary (helping) verb, add the verb *do* (in the form that matches the main verb) as well as the word *not* and place it before the main verb.
  - Barbara cooks dinner every night.
  - Barbara *does not* cook dinner every night.
  - Barbara cooked dinner last night.
  - Barbara *did not* cook dinner last night.
Examples Of Description Versus Prescription

• Prescriptive rule:

• Do not use double negatives.

• GOOD - Barbara is not going anywhere tonight.

• BAD - Barbara is not going nowhere tonight.

• GOOD - Barbara doesn’t know anything.

• BAD - Barbara doesn’t know nothing.
Examples Of Description Versus Prescription

Descriptions of Donald Trump’s’ language:

1. MSNBC Jul 24, 2017 - Joy Reid with actor and author Ron Perlman, and Columbia University linguistics professor John McWhorter, on the bombshell statements and run-on sentences from Donald Trump’s recent New York Times interview.


1. Jennifer Sclafani, a linguist at Georgetown University, reports on her two year study of the way Trump speaks. July 7, 2017

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=cpxCl8ylJgE
Debate Between Descriptivists And Prescriptivists

• Each side judges the other
• Decades of misunderstanding
• Descriptivists are mistakenly thought to believe that everyone should say whatever they want - that “anything goes”
Debate Between Descriptivists And Prescriptivists

• In fact descriptivists include the social side of language
  
  • Explain that “non-standard” varieties are legitimate and “rule-governed” (= systematic)
  
  • Believe that non-standard varieties of English are devalued because of prescriptivism (= language control)
Debate Between Descriptivists And Prescriptivists

- Prescriptivism dictates which form is correct - the “Standard”
- Prescriptivism is a powerful force in our lives but
- Need “linguistically informed prescriptivism” (Curzan p. 172)
Debate Between Descriptivists And Prescriptivists

• Need to recognize difference between:
  • Formal and informal English

  1a. To whom did you send it?
  1b. Who did you send it to?
  2a. You have more time than I have.
  2b. You have more time than me.
Debate Between Descriptivists And Prescriptivists

• Need to recognize difference between:
  • Written and spoken English (similar to informal and formal)
   1a. To whom did you send it?
   1b. Who did you send it to?
   2b. Someone left their book here.
Debate Between Descriptivists And Prescriptivists

• Need to recognize difference between:
  • Standard and nonstandard English
  1a. She doesn’t have the time.
  1b. She don’t have the time.
  2a. Why don’t you lie down for an hour?
  2b. Why don’t you lay down for an hour?
Debate Between Descriptivists And Prescriptivists

• Standard English
  • Is not linguistically better but is socially preferred
  • Is the form spoken and written by speakers with social, economic and political power
  • It is the form needed for success in the professional world
Controlling Language

- From engaging in “verbal hygiene” in various everyday ways
- To implementing language prescription at an institutional level,
- Both individuals and institutions try to exert control over how people use and think about language
- IS THERE MORE?
Other Sorts Of Prescriptivism

In addition to prescriptivism that strives for standardization of language (#1), Curzan identifies three other strands/ goals within prescriptivism:

# 2. Restorative (restore older forms)
# 3. Stylistic (primarily writing style)
# 4. “Responsive” prescriptivism which encourages inclusive non-biased language forms.
A Different Type Of Language Control: Language Reform

• Several types of “Language Reform” exist

1. Governments’ Controlling Language as part of National Language Planning and Policies

2. Simplifying/ standardizing language (reforming spelling, “legal” English, etc.)

3. Language Reform as part of social movements
Language Reform As Part Of A Social Movement

• Important examples of language reform (and language “reappropriation”) from:
  • Minority or “disadvantaged” groups
  • Civil Rights Movement
  • 2nd Wave Feminism
• Groups taking control of naming practices and how people refer to them
Why Do People Reform Parts Of Language?

• The push to “reform” something assumes that there is something that needs to be changed

• Definition of reform:
  • “make changes in (something, typically a social, political, or economic institution or practice) in order to improve it”
A Few Examples Of Language Reform

- *Flight attendant* (formerly *stewardess*)
- *Disabled* (formerly *crippled/ handicapped*)
- *Police officer* (formerly *policeman*)
- *Native American* (formerly *Indian*)
- *Head / Chair* (formerly *chairman*)
- *Gay* (formerly *homosexual*)
Changing Labels / Names

• NAACP - Established in 1909
  • National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

• UNCF - Incorporated in 1944
  • The United Negro College Fund

• At the time, the term Black was still considered offensive
Changing Labels / Names

• “Negro” was widely used until the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s (MLK identified himself as a Negro.)

• Wikipedia reports that in “his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, King used the terms negro fifteen times and black four times.

• When he used black it was in a construction with white; for example, "black men and white men.”
Changing Labels / Names

- During the civil rights movement, activists promoted the use of *black*.
- *Black* was considered the right term to convey racial pride, militancy, and power, as in “Black Power” and “Black Panthers”
- Later *Afro-American* (now *African-American*) became more common
- Also, *Black Americans*
Changing Labels, Changing Names: Civil Rights - Winter, 1992


https://www.jstor.org/stable/2749204
Changing Labels / Names

Abstract (1992) - “Labels play an important role in defining groups and individuals who belong to the groups. This has been especially true for racial and ethnic groups in general and for Blacks in particular. Over the past century the standard term for Blacks has shifted from "Colored" to "Negro" to "Black" and now perhaps to "African American." The changes can be seen as attempts by Blacks to redefine themselves and to gain respect and standing in a society that has held them to be subordinate and inferior.”
https://www.jstor.org/stable/3521549
Label Preferences

• The 2005 research examined terminological preferences to better understand the disagreement over these preferences.

Label Preferences

• Telephone interview to 2,382 people at home. National Survey of Black Workers (a national cross-section of African-American adults, 18 years of age or older)

  1,146 (48.1 %) preferred black
  1,173 (49.2 %) preferred African-American
  63 ( 2.7 %) didn’t respond
Label Preferences

• What predicted the preferred term?
  1. the racial composition of the person’s elementary school
  2. their degree of racial “group consciousness”
  3. age
  4. region
  5. size of city of residence
Label Preferences

• No significant differences emerged in preferences based on gender or education

• Younger residents of large cities outside the South preferred *African American*
Changing Labels:

- What is the significance of this?
- WHO is doing the naming
- The people traditionally discriminated against are taking control of the language used to refer to them
- Issues of “group identity” are at work
- In this case, Blacks, but not others, can use the offensive “N-word”