ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOKS

The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Prescriptivism

Edited by Joan C. Beal, Morana Lukač and Robin Straaijer

AFTERWORD

David Crystal

Handbooks like this one play an important role in the development of a subject. They provide an opportunity to take stock: to review past achievements, report ongoing activity, and identify new research directions. The chapters in this collection illustrate all three functions. However, unlike most handbooks, the initial task with this volume was to clarify the history and use of the term in its title. This is apparent in the introductory remarks of all the chapters, and the entire focus of two (Pullum and Cameron).

My overall impression is that there has been a significant growth in understanding the complexity of the notion. From a simple concept of the prescribing or proscribing of individual usages, in which prescriptive and descriptive perspectives were seen as polar opposites, the chapters display a nuanced acknowledgement of the different approaches that exist within prescriptivism, the parallels that can be found with linguistic enquiry, and a recognition of the need to explore the underlying issues involved, with "ideology" a recurring theme. Pullum draws attention to one of these parallels: "evidence-based grammars, aiming simply to characterize the sentence structures characteristic of a language, and evidence-based prescriptive manuals, which aim to present reasoned advice on how to use the language in ways that will be well regarded", and several examples of the latter are reported in these pages. Cameron illustrates the need for a new direction, in her retrospective on "verbal hygiene": "criticism might do better to focus less on the idea that making value judgments is inherently bad or wrong, and more on the nature, logic and quality of the judgments being made in any given case". She also points to the need for a global perspective, mentioning France and Brazil as countries where attitudes to verbal hygiene are going to differ, and it is this that constitutes the most striking feature of the handbook's coverage.

1. The global perspective

A global frame of reference is critical in developing a general account of prescriptivism. Our understanding of its nature has been limited by the fact that so much of the literature around the subject has focused on English. There has been a (largely unspoken) assumption that the kinds of issue that characterise the history of prescriptivism in English will recur in other linguistic settings. Perhaps the most important contribution of the handbook is to show that this is not

DOI: 10.4324/9781003095125-30

the case. Its perspective is impressively global, and major differences emerge among languages as well as within individual languages. To summarise the coverage:

Europe and nearby: Austria and Germany (Dollinger), Netherlands (Lismont et al.), Spain (Hickey), Nordic countries (Peterson and Hall), France (Walsh and Humphries), Brittany (Manchec German), Croatia (Starčević et al.)
Middle East: Israel (Gafter and Mor)
Africa: Arabic-speaking countries (Hallberg), Nigeria (Schneider), South Africa (Kaschula et al.)
Australasia: Russia (Mutajoki), India (Schneider), Southeast Asia (Wee and Samosir), Singapore (Schneider), China (Klöter), Australia (Peters, Burridge)
Americas: Canada (Walsh and Humphries), South America (Hickey)

Several other parts of the world are mentioned in passing in other chapters. Moreover, the differences that emerge between languages have their analogy in the differences that are found within pluricentric languages. This is discussed for Spanish (in the Americas) by Hickey, for Chinese by Klöter, for Arabic by Hallberg, and for English by Schneider in relation to World Englishes, Peters in relation to "inner-circle" norms (with particular reference to Australia and Canada), and Burridge in relation to American influence on Australian spelling norms. Wee and Samosir add the perspective of English-speaking situations where none of the interactants have English as a first language, which has led to the growth of a notion of English as a Lingua Franca, with norms that can be very different from those in inner-circle countries.

All these authors emphasize how prescriptivism takes on an individual character in their country. The political history of a nation is usually the critical factor. In the case of Chinese, this is extensive, as Klöter points out: "China clearly has a tradition of linguistic prescriptivism that goes back to the first millennium BCE". But the influence of long histories can also be found elsewhere. Arabic and Hebrew are cases in point. Hallberg stresses the individuality of Arabic: "two notable differences between the standard language ideology of Arabic and that of the Western language communities for which this concept was originally developed. The first relates to the lack of native speakers of SA [Standard Arabic] (or of anything resembling it), and the second relates to the status of the codification and the historical distance from its formation" – referring to its Islamic roots. The conclusion is as clear a contrast with an English-language perspective as one could imagine: SA is "not associated with socio-economic prestige, socially driven style shifts, or linguistic change".

Similarly, Gafter and Mor stress the individuality of Hebrew's classical origins: "the standard language ideologies that developed in Israel differ considerably from those found in many well-studied cases in Western Europe", due to its three-stage development, in which the classical period was followed by a long period of disuse, before the modern, nation-oriented stage was achieved. The linguistic revitalization of Hebrew was based on an ideology that "was to remain as faithful as possible to the older, i.e., classical and "authentic", strata of the language". The small size of the country is another factor that provides a contrast with an English-language perspective. Regional variation "is seldom the object of overt commentary or the target of prescriptive activity". Instead: "A social axis that Hebrew speakers are acutely aware of, however, is that of ethnicity, and, as such, it interacts with prescriptivism in complex ways" (the authors illustrate from Askhenazi and Mizrahi groups).

Several other chapters show how old and new political and cultural situations define the character of a country's prescriptivism. Kaschula et al. illustrate this in relation to the role of missionary activity in South Africa, and to the development of a unique sociolinguistic situation

there, in which eleven official languages compete for norms in a post-apartheid world. Peterson and Hall show it in relation to the Nordic countries. The attitudes encountered in Iceland, for example, with a tradition of literary continuity that reaches back to the Icelandic sagas, are very different from those seen in countries where such a tradition is lacking. In Croatia, the major political changes seen in the region of former Yugoslavia since the 1990s present a unique challenge: "criticism of prescriptivist ideas is often described by discursive opponents as being 'anti-Croat', 'pro-Yugoslav' or 'communist',

In relation to English, Wee and Samosir illustrate the impossibility of generalising about prescriptivism in Southeast Asia: "the countries in the region have had significantly different histories with the language, mainly owing to their contact with colonialism or lack thereof. For example, while Brunei, Burma, Singapore, and Malaysia were under British rule, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam were colonized by the French, Indonesia by the Dutch, and Thailand avoided colonial rule altogether". Similarly, Klöter stresses the political issue in China: "the norms of Chinese are defined and implemented by different agencies in different polities or 'self-governing entities'", notably the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, and Taiwan. As they go on to explain: "In each polity, the definition of linguistic norms takes place within a unique pattern of societal multilingualism", so that "prescriptivism is not so much about setting the norms for one particular language but rather about selecting one language for formal usage and, by definition, excluding alternative options". They conclude: "no two polities within Greater China … define linguistic prescriptivism in the same way".

In so many cases, we see the "centre of gravity" of a language shifting. This is well recognized in relation to English, where for every one native speaker these days there are some five or six non-native speakers (Crystal, 2019). But we see it also in relation to Russian, as Mustajoki points out: "Russian spoken outside Russia adds an interesting perspective to the discussion on an official norm of the language. The speakers in this category outnumber native speakers living in Russia". Manchec German shows it on a smaller scale in relation to intergenerational transmission in Breton, where the original native speakers, a steadily decreasing minority, find themselves "largely cut off from the community for which it is fighting", due to the growth in a younger movement that promotes a variety of Breton that older people find unintelligible and which leaves "no room for native vernacular speakers in the media or in any other official capacity". Ironically, the same concern is expressed in relation to a language that we would not conceive of as "endangered". Hallberg comments: "the historic threat now facing the Arabic language is not primarily from foreign languages and globalization … the real enemy of the Arabic language in use is the vernaculars". The fear is that Standard Arabic will go the same way as Latin.

2. The digital perspective

Several papers draw attention to the Internet in general, and to social media in particular, as a major factor that changes the "centre of gravity" of a language, and thus the character of the norms that are reflected in prescriptive thinking. A term that many readers will find novel is *grassroots prescriptivism*. It is characterized by Lukač and Heyd as "prescriptive phenomena that are (or appear to be) bottom-up rather than top-down, produced and reproduced within communities, networks, and socialities rather than named and visible experts". The contrast is between individual members of the general public and a country's institutions, which can be anything from a personal usage manual to an official Academy (as noted in the papers on French and Hebrew). Until recently, there was simply no way for most individuals to make their views known, apart from the occasional "letter to the editor", and suchlike. I had the experience of

dealing with the thousands of letters sent to the BBC, during my "English Now" series during the 1980s, but I always felt that the constituency of Radio 4 listeners who were bothered enough to complain about usage (accompanied by a sense of urgency, as most letters had first-class stamps, to arrive as soon as possible) were not typical of the majority whom I encountered in other settings, especially younger people. Social media has changed all that. It is now possible for anyone with a computer or smartphone to have a voice. And not only a computer: as Ellen Jovin shows in her novel approach (Jovin, 2022), it is possible to hear grassroots voices simply by setting up a table in a public place and waiting for questions and comments to arrive.

I suspect every writer in this book could have made a point about the Internet. The issue is explicitly addressed in several chapters: by Cameron – "social media are increasingly influential in setting the grassroots verbal hygiene agendas"; by Mustajoki in relation to Russian – "a real linguistic revolution started with online chat and text messaging"; and by Kaschula et al. in South Africa, talking specifically about the way taboo words can change as a result of "the influence of technology, particularly social media platforms which provide platforms where language regulation has few subscribers". Walsh and Humphries broaden the perspective, to include "top-down" approaches as well: "the internet has provided a platform for prescriptivism on an individual and institutional level, which is more accessible than ever before. This applies both to those who actively engage in prescriptivism, by writing blogs about language or commenting on someone's language use on social media, for instance, and to the potential audience accessing prescriptivist texts – online dictionaries are accessed more frequently online than their print equivalents". But it is the "bottom-up" perspective which is most intriguing. I wonder, for example, what impact it might have on the situation in Arabic-speaking countries. Hallberg comments: "Arabic is associated with an aggressive standard language ideology supported by both religious and nationalist discourses and a long tradition of prescriptivist literature". Could a grassroots movement alter such a situation?

One of the next stages in the development of prescriptivism studies must surely be to evaluate the role of "grassroots voices". Is this a world "in which prescriptivism plays no role at all" (Schneider)? Or is it one in which a new kind of prescriptivism will emerge? It is too soon to say. Social media have been around for less than twenty years (Facebook 2004, YouTube 2005, Twitter 2006), which is an eye-blink in the history of language; the technology and behavioural norms are constantly changing (as when Twitter's prompt switched from "What are you doing?" in 2006 to "What's happening?" in 2009); and the linguistic character of individual platforms, and of the Internet as a whole – what I used to call "Netspeak" (Crystal, 2006a) – is still unstable. Social and cultural changes generate new constituencies and demographics that make generalisation difficult. Facebook has got older; Twitter has got younger. And circumstances alter. Who in 2020 (BC – Before Covid) would have predicted the extraordinary growth of Zoom-type platforms, with their different patterns of conversational interaction? And then there is the near future, which will make the medium more audio and less graphic. At present, any prescriptive trends are focused on the written manifestations of the Internet – punctuation, capitalisation, spelling, texting abbreviations, and so on – but a new dimension will emerge as speech takes up more and more digital space. The issues surrounding accents, for example, have not hitherto been a major Internet issue. That will change.

3. Evaluating the variables

This mention of accent raises a more general question. Which features of language loom largest in any discussion of prescriptivism? The chapters have no consensus here. There is of course a widespread focus on writing, as opposed to speech, and on vocabulary. But it is difficult to get

reliable information. Lismont et al. draw attention to "non-institutionalized practices", such as parents correcting or advising their children, and note that these are difficult to identify. A perspective from child language acquisition, missing so far from the prescriptivism debate, could help here. Historiographical methods are another good starting-point, as shown in the chapters by Tieken-Boon van Ostade on usage guides and Yáñez-Bouza, who looks at these and also grammars and pronunciation dictionaries. Corpus studies are a further resource, as pointed out by Szmrecsanyi and Bloemen. But these approaches face serious difficulties. Authors of usage guides never give criteria for the selection of the entries they include, which makes it impossible to establish the motivation for including a particular topic. I can understand why. Having written one such guide (Crystal, 2000/1984) I appreciate how difficult it would be to make intuitions about selection explicit, other than an impressionistic reliance on notions of frequency derived from earlier guides, letters to the press and (in my case) to radio programmes, and suchlike. Corpora face a different issue, for studies of prescriptivism, because (as Lukač and Stenton point out) it is never clear just how far the texts included have been altered by copy editors. Variation in a writer's usage is particularly likely to be eliminated, because (as they go on to say) "Consistency clearly outweighs the prescriptive notions of correctness as a criterion for introducing changes to texts". It is not only copy editors. Anyone with editorial responsibility can alter a text to follow in-house pressures, which can be anything from the amount of text that will fit in a line or column to a concern to follow a house style or conform to an imagined standard of excellence. There is no uniformity of practice, as Lukač and Stenton conclude in their study, identifying two broad groups in the decision-making process over *data is* vs *data are*, one favouring singular data and the other plural, at the same time noting that practice can vary depending on the accompanying linguistic context.

It is not as if all the variables are equal. There are big differences between, on the one hand, items of contentious vocabulary, which are sporadic in occurrence (how often will we encounter *disinterested* in our reading?) and disputed morphology and syntax (somewhat less sporadic, but again, how often will we encounter *data is/are*?), and on the other hand, punctuation, which is always in front of our eyes (paragraphing, word-spacing, and the like, as well as sentence punctuation) and pronunciation (including accent), which is always in our ears – hence the relevance of the chapter by Watt et al., which stands out in a volume that is largely devoted to the written language. Frequency of encounter is a critical factor, as Peters points out in her discussion of *-ise* and *-ize*: "The entrenchment of *-ise* in AusE and *-ize* in CanE … is in both cases helped by the fact that the regional spelling is instantiated in countless verbs in their respective dictionaries, and reinforced by regular encounters with representative verbs in everyday texts". She contrasts this with *gotten* as past participle and *phenomena* as a collective singular, which "have few analogues".

These are all illustrations from English. When we consider different languages, the priorities vary dramatically, as seen in several chapters. In Dutch, for example, "orthographical variables are more easily influenced by prescribed language norms than morphological or syntactic variables" (Lismont et al.). By contrast, in Arabic, a language with "a rich root-and-pattern-based derivational morphology", errors here are a major source of disquiet (Hallberg). Choice of alphabet is a factor in territories where Russian plays a major role, and countries adopt their own conventions for the romanization of Cyrillic names (Mustajoki). In Chinese, handwriting (the only time this is addressed in the handbook) is critical, as Klöter points out: "In Chinese writing, prescriptivism can refer to a character's shape or the quantity and arrangement of strokes within a graph. In the case of the former, a mix of material, political, and aesthetic considerations resulted in the formation of many writing styles". From the examples in this book, it appears that each language presents its own constellation of items that attract prescriptive

concern – which raises the question: are there any prescriptive universals? Differences loom large in this volume – an inevitable consequence of the small number of languages it proved practicable to include. As the number of languages surveyed grows, I would hope to see an increased focus on similarities.

4. Evaluating influence

It's clear that we are still a long way from understanding the role of prescriptivism in relation to language practice and change. How many people actually care about the issues raised by prescriptivists? And, among those who do, does the awareness of the prescriptions have any real impact on their linguistic lives? As Cameron says: "we still know relatively little about either the linguistic preoccupations which are most salient in many people's everyday lives, or the kinds of institutionalized authority they find relevant to their concerns". "Can precepts shape language usage?" ask Szmrecsanyi and Bloemen. Their study shows mixed results: yes, in relation to preposition stranding; no, in relation to *that*-shift. Lismont et al. conclude from their research that prescriptivism "had little effect on language use"– though they "did uncover instances where grammarians may have succeeded in accelerating the ongoing transmission of incoming forms in language use". Tieken-Boon van Ostade points out the big difference between asking the general public what their favourite usage guide is and finding out whether this is actually used. I would add a third question: do people feel their reading has changed their linguistic practice? I asked all three questions in 2006, when I was giving literary festival talks about *The Fight for English* (Crystal 2006b), my riposte to Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, which came out in 2003. I would ask the audience: How many of you have bought Lynne's book? Virtually every hand went up. How many of you have read all of it? About half the hands went up. How many of you feel your punctuation practice has been altered as a result of reading the book? Usually, no hands went up.

Related to this is the question of just how much of a language is influenced by a particular set of prescriptions. There is often an assumption in usage guides that the target is "the language as a whole". However, it is a matter of common experience that sociolinguistic and stylistic varieties by their nature have different linguistic identities and are thus likely to evoke different prescriptive attitudes. The kind of usage issue that would concern a user of, say, religious English, and the ideology lying behind it, is going to be very different from the issues that concern lawyers, journalists, broadcasters, and all the other users – let alone the diversity of opinion expressed by literary authors, whose potential influence is unknown. But, to take an example, did Kurt Vonnegut's injunction in *A Man Without a Country* ever cause anyone to change their practice, especially in view of his final quip?

> Here is a lesson in creative writing. First rule: Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college.

He uses no semicolons in his book, until the very last chapter, when he uses one and adds:

> And there, I've just used a semi-colon, which at the outset I told you never to use. It is to make a point that I did it. The point is: Rules only take us so far, even good rules.

This is a big topic for future research, for as Schneider says, "little research has been conducted on the interrelationship between prescriptive attitudes and language varieties" – or, for that

matter, individual authors. I have met many budding authors who say they are modelling their style on a famous author. In one case (described in Crystal, 2016), the budding author was Joanne, age 10, and her model was Terry Pratchett. But would Pratchett's antipathy to, say, repeated exclamation marks, transfer to her? (One of the characters in the Discworld novel *Eric* (1990) insists that "Multiple exclamation marks are a sure sign of a diseased mind".)

The concept of variety has itself been questioned. While linguists were happy to see in educational thinking an absolutist notion of "correctness" replaced by a relativistic, variety-dependent notion of "appropriateness", there is a danger that the concept of a variety can be interpreted too rigidly. This is a point taken up by Cushing and Snell, arguing against a model in which people "impose neat boundaries between standardised (or 'school') English and 'home' dialects". They make the point that "children's linguistic repertoires are complex and layered, and thus any attempt to regulate their language use according to separate 'varieties' will inevitably oversimplify the range of resources involved". The same point might be made about any variety. Those who advocate a "plain English" usage in such areas as law, politics, and medicine need to recognize that there is no clear-cut distinction between "plainness" and "complexity". And heterogeneity underlies the "mono-ideologies" identified by Starčević et al.

We are just as uncertain about the relative role of the institutions that are involved. Which "territorially-specific authorities", as Dollinger puts it, are most relevant? The notion of "top-down" includes a multiplicity of sources, from national government policies, academies, the view of individual ministers, local governments, school boards, shared school practices, individual teachers, publishing houses, usage guides, and individual authors. Of all these, in my Radio 4 series, when correspondents told their own stories, it was school practice that was most often mentioned. As one writer explained:

> The reason why the older generation feel so strongly about English grammar is that we were severely punished if we didn't obey the rules. One split infinitive, one whack; two split infinitives, two whacks; and so on.

This emphasis on individual points of correction is a familiar trope in the prescriptivist literature. Against it must be placed the view of Cushing and Snell (and others in this volume): "Our aim is to reject the idea that prescriptivism in education surfaces solely through individual acts (such as a verbal correction in the classroom) and conceptualise prescriptivism as systemic, institutional and structural". The devil lies in the detail – here, just how much is involved in the notion of "not solely".

We are also uncertain about the constituency that buys, reads, and is influenced by (or claims to be influenced by) prescriptions. Here too there is a familiar trope: it is an older and conservative population. The handbook provides evidence that this is an overstatement. Burridge concludes: "it is not simply older speakers who perceive the danger of AmE usage – the "loss of Australian identity" was a familiar refrain in the reactions of even the younger speakers". Youth plays a critical role in developing new norms for Breton (Manchec German). And Kaschula et al. provide the example of Afri-Kaaps, "contesting traditional standard forms of Afrikaans"; it is "a variety spoken by younger people who identify largely as descended from the first nations such as the Khoikhoi".

These points, of course, apply equally to linguists and others who adopt a descriptive stance. Have all the linguistically informed usage guides and descriptions been as influential as their authors hoped? There is a pessimistic tone in some of the chapters. Burridge has a long

experience of encounters with the general public, and she concludes: "I had always assumed that by laying out the findings of linguistic research, linguists would get the message across. However, I have since learned that linguistic facts do not speak for themselves, especially when they fly in the face of people's commonsense views about language. Even when we think we are getting the linguistic message across, people often fall back on their comfortable knowledge, what they 'know' to be true". Cameron concurs, noting the recurrence of the same issues of prescriptivism over the years, and wondering if it is "futile to exhort language-users to refrain from engaging in it". Is it, as she hints, an effect of age? I sympathise. I have just looked at the first published piece I ever wrote for the general public: an article in the *Liverpool Daily Post* in 1963. I could have written it today with hardly any change.

But I am still optimistic. Is there a "perpetuity of prescriptivism" (Cushing and Snell) in England's schools? My experience, based on innumerable school visits over the past twenty years (BC) is that this has been seriously reduced, at least in the teaching of English language at A level. I hardly ever encountered a teacher of the old-school kind, insisting on prescriptions. This has been replaced by routine classroom discussion of the nature of prescriptivism, its historical origins, and the issues it raises. Teachers stress the relevance of appropriateness and are well aware of the fuzziness involved in such notions as variety. Generations are thus emerging who do not share the prescriptive mentality of earlier generations. New materials and resources, such as the school-orientated *Babel* magazine, reinforce the new attitudes. But of course, this is only one country.

And while all this is going on, there continues to be a role for the linguist, who can add a more general and informed perspective to any debate. This is a point made strongly by Bradley, who describes the linguist in "the role of impartial language 'fact-checker' or parliamentarian". I also believe it is still of value to draw attention to the facts of usage – for example, pointing out that claims about usages being "recent" usually have historical antecedents – even if some people persist in ignoring them. But it's important not to overstate. My BBC correspondence shows that there are others who do take the point, and where the interaction has not been futile. And most do express interest in linguistic facts, even if their attitudes apparently remain unchanged. They are, after all, genuinely interested in language, otherwise they would never have written (and paid for their stamp). It can also be helpful for linguists to provide additional perspective to a contentious issue. I am thinking here of cases of contested pronunciation such as the choices for *imgr* discussed by Lukač and Heyd, where similar issues turn up in onomastics, in relation to the pronunciation of personal names and place names, and cases like the singular use of *they* discussed by Cameron, where people tend not to notice that there is a parallel case in the historical development of *you* – something Bradley draws attention to in his chapter. It may be necessary to develop new models in the process, such as the "more realistic view" of production as "orderly heterogeneity" advocated by Starčević *et al.* and the concept of "pragmatic prescriptivism" discussed by Bradley in relation to gender, but just as applicable to other areas of linguistic enquiry.

Anyone who reads through these chapters can surely be left in no doubt about the editors' claim in their introduction, that "prescriptivism can no longer be a fringe topic in the description of language in society", and must be viewed as "a serious field of study within linguistics". We are still some way from a general theory of prescriptivism that is capable of encompassing all languages and all variation within a language, but this handbook clearly points the way towards such an achievement, in its focus on principles alongside practices, proposals for methods of enquiry, and illustration of the way hypotheses about usage and attitudes might be tested.

References

Crystal, D. (2000). *Who cares about English usage?* (updated ed.). Penguin. (Original work published 1984)

Crystal, D. (2006a). *Internet linguistics* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (2006b). *The fight for English: how language pundits ate, shot, and left.* Oxford University Press.

Crystal, D. (2016, June 3). A defence of grammar. *Times Educational Supplement*, 26–32. www.davidcrystal.com/GBR/Books-and-Articles

Crystal, D. (2019). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Jovin, E. (2022). *Rebel with a clause: tales and tips from a roving grammarian.* Hachette UK.