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LINGUISTIC PRESCRIPTIVISM

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1 Introduction

Linguistic prescriptivists have a bad name. To most academic linguists they display ignorance about language at best, and pernicious social or political attitudes at worst. Linguistics students are taught the shortcomings of prescriptivist grammars in their first semester. Thereafter, their pronouncements about correctness are either ignored or relegated to data in sociolinguistic studies of (distressingly popular) attitudes towards language. Either way, linguistic prescriptivists are dismissed as having nothing useful to offer. The non-academic public is more divided: while there is and always has been a market for their wares, many perceive language correctors as annoying busy bodies.[1]

In philosophy, curiously, it is hard to find much on linguistic prescriptivism beyond scattered remarks. Our plan is to make a start on changing this.[2] For the avoidance of doubt (and perhaps disappointingly), we are *not* about to argue that it is wrong to split your infinitives. Our attitude here is in line with the orthodoxy in linguistics. Those who want you not to boldly go will need to find support elsewhere. Our plan instead is to pursue twin goals:

Goal 1: Uncover a plausible interpretation of "linguistic prescriptivism", ideally one under which it merits careful philosophical evaluation
Goal 2: Consider whether any variant of linguistic prescriptivism, thus understood, is defensible

Our tactic with respect to Goal 1 will be to run through a series of suggestions, at least some of which are obviously incorrect (Sections 2 and 3). We do this partly just to rule them out, but more positively so as to extract useful lessons regarding where each attempt goes wrong. Building on these lessons, we arrive at an understanding of linguistic prescriptivism sufficient to turn to Goal 2. Is linguistic prescriptivism as bad as it is said to be, whether for the reasons usually offered or for others? Our conclusion: it is not (Section 4). This claim comes with a very important qualification, however. We are sufficiently sympathetic to standard objections to *stereotypical* language prescriptions that we opt for a new, less freighted label. That done, however, we suspect most people reading this article will already agree with us, perhaps without realizing it.

2 First Approach: Linguistic Prescriptivism via Paradigm Examples

Orthodox linguists perceive linguistic prescriptivists as pre-occupied with certain paradigm "bugbears". We take these as our departure point, to give ourselves a kind of ostensive definition:

To be a linguistic prescriptivist is to feel passionately that such-and-such examples, and others like them, violate the rules of language, and that the correct rules must be followed.

For this to become a proper definition we need to flesh out both "such-and-such examples" and "others like them".

It's easy enough to identify cases complained about by those Steven Pinker (1994) calls the "language mavens":

Pronunciation	E.g. "nuclear" as "new-kyu-lurr"
Word forms	E.g. backformations ("liaise" from "liaison"; "orientate" from "orientation")
Word meanings	E.g. "livid" as meaning red-faced
Structure	E.g. preposition stranding ("Who'd you buy it for?"); case agreement ("John and me are married"); split infinitives ("to boldly go")
Conflation	E.g. "disinterested" and "uninterested"; "shall" and "will"; "that" and "which"; "less" and "fewer"
Writing	E.g. "Potatoe's half price"; "naive" without the umlaut; the Oxford comma; starting a sentence with "But"
Euphemisms	E.g. "collateral damage" instead of "killed civilians"; "conscious uncoupling" instead of "deciding to break up"
Informality	E.g. "ain't", and contractions in general ("doesn't") in writing
Purity	E.g. so-called Americanisms ("done good" instead of "did well")

We could go on (and on). In English-speaking countries, anxieties often centre on "bad grammar". For many non-English language communities, prescriptions against creeping Anglicization are more central ("*courriel*" in place of "email" in French, say). But as the last example in our list shows, English speakers too can have anxieties about linguistic infection or domination (reflecting, unsurprisingly, the wider socio-political context: Americans fretting over Briticisms is less common than the converse).

Continuing with orthodox perceptions, we can now flesh out "and others like them". By orthodox lights, all examples share something in common: they display an underlying muddle about language on the part of the prescriptivist. Two broad and overlapping failings stand out: being empirically ill-informed and having a nefarious social or political purpose. Let us take these, in turn. (Our intention at this point is not to press these charges home but to give a sympathetic airing to the standard take on prescriptivism.)

As linguists like to point out, many prescriptions rest on evidence-free assertions about correct usage. The prescriptivist Michael Dummett, for example, rejects as "incorrect" the sentence "The Chinese economy is growing at 20% a year". He simply states that "…is growing at the rate of…" and "…is growing by…", are correct, while the amalgam is not (1993: 34). We have yet to find a native speaker who agrees. Another example Dummett offers is the "dangling participle" in "Taking the broad view, Napoleon did more good than harm". Using this would be "a grammatical mistake", he tells us, unless one meant to say that Napoleon was taking the broad view (1993: 43). Again, to us and the other native speakers we have consulted, the more obvious reading (i.e. that Napoleon was a benign force overall) is perfectly acceptable, with context resolving the amphiboly in the usual way. (We don't mean to pick on Dummett in particular: all such texts include similar cases.)

Prescriptivist authors do occasionally attempt to justify their prescriptions, for example, by citing some general rule of "the language". Thus, we come to a second kind of empirical misinformation: historical ignorance of how the rules arose. Many have roots in some arbitrary decision never consistently respected even in the past. John Dryden decided in the 17th century that preposition

stranding was an "error" (1808 [1668]: 217–8). He chides one of England's greatest playwrights (Ben Johnson) and one of its greatest poets (Dryden himself!) for the habit. David Crystal (2006: 111) suggests he was drawing parallels with Latin, in which prepositions must precede nouns (hence their name). But why should English follow Latin and why should we follow Dryden? The same applies for the rule that "disinterested" should mean impartial rather than uninterested/indifferent. John Donne used it in the "wrong" way (1638 [1608]: 99), and many have since. This implicit prescriptivist appeal to a Golden Age is not only inaccurate, it has utterly implausible consequences, such as "nice" still being an insult – deriving from "*nescius*" via Old French, it once meant something like "stupid" – or modern Portuguese being a decadent form of Latin.

Another example of historical obliviousness is the presumption that rapid language change is both novel and a sort of decay (Swift 1712; Truss 2003: 16–17). In fairness, prescriptivists do acknowledge the inevitability of language change, but their examples suggest this is lip-service. The British prescriptivist Simon Heffer, for example, begrudgingly acknowledges that "[w]ords do change their meaning over time", (mis)describing this as a "democratic decision" that is "validated by authorities such as lexicographers caving in to abuse" (2011: 140). On the very next page, however, he bemoans "alibi" having lost its Latin meaning ("elsewhere"), describing this as a "rare case of an adverb having become a noun" and blaming contamination from overseas ("another thing for which we have to thank the Americans", p. 141). Dummett, too, admits to the inevitability of language change, but argues that "it is *we* who change it, and it is up to us how fast it changes" and that "some people's use of English is changing much *too* fast", threatening to make Hume and Berkeley inaccessible (1993: 8–9). As any diachronic linguist recognizes, thanks to the arbitrariness of the sign, grammatical mutations and linguistic borrowings are and always have been ubiquitous, with new usages being coined as fast as old ones are lost. The changes are even semi-predictable in certain respects.

Continuing with empirical ignorance, ill-founded charges about a loss of function are frequent. Dummett describes language change of the kind he is resisting as a "heinous crime" that is "harming generations to come". Both he and Heffer offer an A to Z of "important distinctions" being "lost to our language" (Heffer 2011: 140–62; cf. Dummett 1993: 89–96, 115). To use "begging the question" for raising a question allegedly risks "depriving the language of a useful phrase", Dummett tells us (1993: 90). Likewise, he complains, the use of "alternately" as a synonym for alternatively will lead to the regrettable loss of its current meaning, which is to say switching back and forth between two states (1993: 89). Another popular prescriptivist distinction, supposedly functional, is the "shall/will" contrast. In American English, "shall" is nowadays largely confined to idioms; in British English, prescriptivists agree on the distinction's importance but not on what it is supposed to be (compare Dummett 1993: 58–9 with Heffer 63–6). The result is that "shall" often serves merely as a nervous signal of formal register. Whatever the distinction once was, we seem able to communicate effectively without it now. We also now know we can get by without the "alternate/alternatively" distinction; and we can let go of "begging the question" since we still have "circular reasoning" and "petition principii".

Many claims about the *cognitive* function of certain vocabulary items are in any case empirically naive. Loss or change of vocabulary doesn't have to weaken one's ability to conceptualize and reason. Spanish speakers aren't confused about the difference between toes and fingers just because they use "*dedos*" for both. Conversely, English-speaking biology students aren't rendered less capable of absorbing information about the structural parallels between toes and fingers by their use of different words for each. The supposed direct and inflexible influence of the lexicon on psychology is overhyped: cognitive tools don't always need to be reflected in our language.

Finally, complaints that vernacular language is illogical are generally ill-founded. Double negation (e.g. "That ain't no bird") is a common target, and Heffer singles it out as an "offence against logic" (2011: 57). Unsurprisingly, no actual justification of this canard is forthcoming. (If

English were some sort of regimented proof system, comparable to modal logic, he'd perhaps be right, but in that case "Jaime can't run" would be readable as "Jaime is able to not run".) Objections to "John and **me** are married" are likewise misguided. It is no good invoking the rule that any pronoun in subject position must have nominative case (giving "John and **I** are…"). Many other Indo-European languages do not require this for conjunctive subjects (e.g. in French it is "John et **moi** sommes mariés", not "John et **je** sommes mariés"), suggesting there is no logical inconsistency when English speakers do the same.

Besides being rife with *empirical* mistakes, heart-of-the-stereotype linguistic prescriptivism is commonly criticized (on the standard view of it among linguists) for expressing or being driven by dubious *moral and political* opinions. We'll begin with some blatant exemplars, then note some more subtle ones.

Some prescriptions look plain-old reactionary, antiquarian, backward-looking, or purity-invoking – in a way that chimes with a conservatism opposed to social progress. That is evidently the message behind Heffer's description of himself as an advocate of "the highest standards of grammatical accuracy" in his dealings with "the apostles of political correctness" (2011: 199). Many prescriptions, far from being simple but much-needed assertions of what English really is, strike most linguists as simply snobbish, haughty or self-righteous. (The condescension is sometimes glaring, as with the name given to the so-called "greengrocer's apostrophe", i.e. a non-standard apostrophe before an "s".)

Prescriptivists may also be criticized as apologists for sexist and racist language. Think here of the fact that there exists in English, only for women, a title specific to a married person, namely, "Mrs.". Linguistic prescriptivists may recognize this as a sexist feature of our language, yet insist that "such is proper English", so that "Miss" and "Mrs." must be retained over "Ms.", as if we must live with the language bestowed upon us by history.[3] The same applies to the racism apparently implicit in the verb "gyp", used in American English to mean cheat or swindle and thought to be linked etymologically to "Gypsy", i.e. Romany. Alternatively, stereotypical linguistic prescriptivism may unwittingly serve the cause of racism or sexism by denying that the language in question is problematic. Spanish usage, for example, defaults to the "-o" ending on nouns and adjectives when both genders are being talked about, which is also the ending for male-only groups. For instance, the term for a group of friends consisting of men is "amig**o**s"; for a group of women, it is "amig**a**s"; for a group of women and men it is, again, "amig**o**s". To "preserve the language", prescriptivists may be led to deny that Spanish is thereby sexist.

This brings us to more subtle considerations. Prescriptive rules are a hodgepodge of good and bad. Genuinely worthy advice can be found therein: style guides urge clarity, precision, brevity, etc. The call to obey their rules can therefore seem to be a mere plea for "standards" in a benign sense. Mixed in with these rules, however, are senseless ones. The only effective function of these is as shibboleths: one is expected to know and follow them in professional and even educational contexts. "Ignorance" marks one out; linguistic outsiders are disqualified or disfavoured. Moreover, knowing these norms, precisely because they are pointless, typically requires growing up with the right sociolect, or effortful training, or expensive schooling. Consider, as one example among many, the British-English spelling rule that distinguishes "practi**c**e" (noun) from "practi**s**e" (verb). It is entirely redundant, since the grammatical category will always be evident from the position of the word in the sentence, as American spelling proves (always "c"). Yet ignorance of this "rule" and the hundreds like it can be a barrier to a good job, a higher grade, etc., because prescriptivists like Heffer include it among those that "have to be learned" (2011: 160). To object to enforcement of the "practice/practise" rule is to invite the charge of lacking standards, or of resisting the perfectly sensible advice that prescriptivists bundle up with the exclusionary foolishness. By such a mechanism, says our orthodox linguist, a malign socio-political consequence – reinforced class hierarchies – is "masked" by sensible recommendations.

A closely related and equally subtle way in which prescriptions can enforce unjust hierarchies is through the selection of norms that ensconce prestige dialects, on the specious grounds that they serve as a much-needed *lingua franca*. The fact that some are born into that "standard dialect" while others (speakers of African American English, say) have to adapt to pass as linguistically normal, is overlooked. Only those outside the linguistically and otherwise privileged group are called on to "remediate".

A discussion of the extent to which the descriptivists' diagnosis of moral/political failings is justified would take us too far afield. We refer readers to the other articles in this volume for related discussion. We limit ourselves to this observation: "for the sake of the language" should not trump respect for the social and political well-being of oppressed groups. In the politics of gender and transgender language, for example, English pronouns are not a stakeholder. It's reasonable to complain that linguistic prescriptivists downplay this: Dummett, for example, is concerned that by replacing "mankind", etc., with "humankind", etc., we risk "inflicting damage on what has come down to us from the past" (1993: 110).

If all this is along the right lines, we now have our "and others like them". What the pronouncements of stereotypical prescriptivists have in common, it seems, is that they reflect ill-informed assumptions about language, often driven (intentionally or not) by a dubious political agenda. On the face of it, then, our two goals have been met. We have not only identified what linguistic prescriptivism is, we have evaluated it – very negatively.

Not so quick, we say. By unpacking both "such and such examples" and "others like them" in this way, what we have really sketched does indeed probably capture how anti-prescriptivists understand their target. Moreover, the criticisms typically made against this target – criticisms we have been sampling here – seem just (though a fuller discussion than we can give here would be needed to make that charge stick). But this whole approach fails to set up the debate satisfactorily.

For a start, the view that we should follow ignorant and pernicious dictates about language is patently indefensible. It doesn't merit careful philosophical evaluation. In addition, self-described prescriptivists would reject this characterization as inaccurate and unfair. If they were invited to say what "such-and-such examples and others like them" came to, they would point to a cluster of what they would describe as "useful linguistic distinctions" or "valuable grammatical rules". On both fronts, this is hardly a promising platform for philosophical discussion.

We also reject this first conception of linguistic prescriptivism because it describes not so much a thesis as an attitude or tendency, or even an emotional disposition. A dismissive description of prescriptivists as annoyingly supercilious, as ruled by emotion rather than calm enquiry, seems to be about building a caricature rather than developing a thesis deserving of consideration. (We'd add that passion per se is somewhat of a red herring. Dispassionate prescriptivism is not a contradiction, and anti-prescriptivists can be passionate too.)

3 Second Attempt: Linguistic Prescriptivism as a Thesis

Ideally we want a *thesis*, one it will be instructive to evaluate philosophically but in any case one that serves as a marker of the "prescriptivist" side of this heated dispute. Let's call this posited thesis "Linguistic Prescriptivism" (big L, big P). We now canvas a series of possible statements of it. As per our ongoing strategy, we begin with something not especially promising:

Linguistic Prescriptivism$_1$: There are norms governing language use, and they should be followed.

In favour of this, prescriptivists will at least recognize themselves as advocates of it. That is a step up from where we were heading in Section 2. Unfortunately, both in common parlance and when

it is being poopooed by linguistically informed academics, our target thesis cannot amount merely to "There's a way language should be used". Just about everyone (rightly, we suggest) agrees to the applicability of a wide range of norms on language use. These include a moral prohibition on at least some out of: lying, insinuating known falsehoods, speaking out of ignorance, ad hominem attacks, unwarranted rudeness, propaganda, bullshit, coercion, linguistic oppression, gratuitous insults, hate speech, and inciting genocidal violence. They also include the conversational norms without which linguistic exchange would be vastly more challenging, such as Grice's "be relevant" (1989), or proscriptions on defective concepts.

Perhaps what sets prescriptivists apart is a more specific concern with the choice of linguistic "vehicle" (the wrong word, the wrong spelling, the wrong grammar, etc.) to express a given content. This yields:

> *Linguistic Prescriptivism$_2$*: There are norms governing not just *what* things you say but *how* you say them; these norms should be followed.

This captures the bugbears. Nonetheless, it is still far too wide. There are many attitudes to language use that fit this definition without constituting what we would ordinarily call "prescriptivism".

Some word choices, for example, are resisted as very generally offensive by all reasonable parties and not only by prescriptivists. Slurring words come immediately to mind. Following Diaz-Legaspe et al. (2019), we take these to have the same propositional content as their neutral correlates: begging pardon for the nasty term, "chink" and "Chinese person" are true of the same set of individuals. The difference is a matter of sociolinguistic register: slurring words are typically marked as [+ vulgar, − polite, + derogatory], whereas their counterparts are not. By our lights, then, *what* is said with a slurring term need not be disrespectful, but *how* it is said will always be, setting aside the notorious problem cases of re-appropriation and mention. A non-prescriptivist can also hold that certain other forms of language are vaguely wrong most of the time, albeit not morally so: impressive sounding but obscure or vague terms, for example. Some forms of language are arguably simply unattractive, such as repetitive phrasing, cliché, and "management-speak". A non-prescriptivist can surely lament, as violations of good style, these "ways of saying it".[4]

Sociolinguistic register gives us another set of examples, this time highly context-sensitive: phrasings that, though not inevitably or even typically objectionable, are inappropriate *in certain conversational situations* by nearly anyone's lights, prescriptivist or not. Consider pub-worthy register in an academic essay, or a medical professional asking if you wouldn't mind "having some shit grubbed from your ass" rather than asking to "take a fecal swab". (Notice that this last example has a moral tinge: use of [+ vulgar, + slang] terms is impolite and disrespectful to the interlocutor, given this discourse situation. We revisit the topic of rudeness and disrespect below.) Finally, several of Grice's (1989) maxims of manner apply precisely to how something is said (choose unambiguous wording, be orderly, be brief, etc.). But not all Griceans – and not all conversants – are prescriptivists.

Perhaps we need to recognize that the norms linguistic prescriptivists claim to champion are *the rules of the language*. They aren't concerned merely with what and how we communicate, but with the "linguistic code" – with the tongue itself, rather than "speakings". Just as moving a rook diagonally is wrong because it violates a rule of chess, those who object to split infinitives may claim to be upholding a rule of English. This thought gives us:

> *Linguistic Prescriptivism$_3$*: The language itself, or some endorsed "standard" version of it, is constituted by specifiable norms, and failure to acknowledge and respect them constitutes being mistaken.

This frames the prescriptivism debate as a debate over whether *the rules of proper English* permit "Who'd you buy it for?", "new-kyu-lurr", etc. A strength of this suggestion is that it fits with both pro- and anti-prescriptivists' understandings of what is at stake. Thus, it meshes with a familiar charge against prescriptivists: that they naively assume there is such a thing as "the language" (Spanish, German or what-have-you). It squares with prescriptivists' customary insistence that some standard form must be learned and respected, or "that one variety of language [the 'standard' variety] has an inherently higher value than others, and that this ought to be imposed on the whole speech community" (Crystal 2010: 3). It also reflects characteristically "prescriptivist" concerns over the alleged decay, unrestrained change, drift, or infection of the language.

Frustratingly, though no longer obviously inadequate, this remains too lax. Defenders of our Linguistic Prescriptivism$_3$ would include many one would not ordinarily classify as prescriptivist. A bona fide non-prescriptivist might nonetheless argue, in a Davidsonian or Wittgensteinian spirit, that speech is a purposive, essentially rational activity, and that linguistic meaning is inherently normative. That would seem to satisfy Linguistic Prescriptivism$_3$. Indeed, nearly everyone reading this article, in their day-to-day practices, is signed up to this thesis in virtue of correcting the lexical and grammatical mistakes of non-native speakers, and commenting in student essays on spelling, word choice, and grammatical structure, or indeed in redrafting their own work. The whole point of such practices is to reinforce or at least conform with existing norms and standard forms. Prescriptivists caricature the descriptivist as holding that "anything goes" (cf. Dummett 1993: 9; Heffer 2011: xv; Truss 2003: 4) but their foe here is imaginary. Whatever they preach, descriptivists issue corrections all the time – just not the ones issued by prescriptivists.

Could it be that, while everyone's practice is to uphold present norms, only the prescriptivist insists loudly on the importance of doing so and expresses unwillingness to countenance language change, perhaps on grounds of maintaining traditions? Again no. This modification would not rescue Linguistic Prescriptivism$_3$ because many of the people loosely identifiable as prescriptivist acknowledge the importance of language evolution. We already saw both Dummett and Heffer doing so, albeit a little disingenuously. Moreover, historical prescriptivists such as Jonathan Swift (1712) and the political radical William Godwin (1810) were as concerned with fixing or "optimizing" the rules of English as with ascertaining and maintaining the existing rules. The same goes for Dryden in his proposal for avoiding preposition stranding. And in modern times, reforming language has been a clarion for one of the stereotypical "bad guys" of prescriptivism: L'Académie Française regularly introduces and promotes neologisms to discourage borrowings from English ("baladeur" instead of "Walkman", "ordinateur" instead of "computer").

Let us take stock. In pursuit of Goal 1 we drew attention in Section 2 to a range of stereotypical cases, a heated debate, and some suggestive societal attitudes (and name-calling). This helped us to recognize who the combatants are but didn't give us a useful definition. In this section we have been attempting to formulate a thesis, "Linguistic Prescriptivism", advocacy for which serves to mark out those who self-identify as and are described by critics as linguistic prescriptivists – the "language champions" or the "language mavens", as it may be. None of our three attempts has succeeded.

Maybe the fault is ours. Maybe there is such a thesis, but we have yet to discover it. This isn't wholly implausible given the additional options that come readily to mind. Mightn't a linguistic prescriptivist be a person who holds that a purely descriptive science of Linguistics is neither possible nor desirable? Or mightn't they be singled out as holding that it's possible for a majority of native speakers to misapply a term (meaning that linguistic facts fail to supervene on the behaviour of the majority of speakers)? In both cases, probably not. Against the first, we will see below that even non-prescriptivists might hope to glean facts relevant to language reform from the scientific study of human languages. Against the second, consider a philosopher who thought (in the vein of Kripke/Putnam) that expertise or causation play a central role in fixing reference. An upshot

of their position might seem to be that, outside the ken of its users, the majority practice may fail to determine meaning (as in e.g. "libel" vs. "slander", or "quark", or "aster" ["star"] among the Ancient Greeks). Such a philosopher is not ipso facto on the "prescriptivist" side.

We incline towards a more radical stance: there simply is no proposition, Linguistic Prescriptivism, held by all and only those stigmatized/valorized as "prescriptivists" and ripe for philosophical evaluation. We incline towards this not simply on the egocentric grounds that we have failed to identify it. Our suspicion as based on principled reasons. One is that "linguistic prescriptivist" seems to be a loaded label for which no neutral characterization is possible (see Cameron 2012: 8). For critics, it functions as a boo-word while for supporters it is a hooray-word. (This would explain why normative proposals about language which strike orthodox linguists as acceptable are thereby discounted as not genuinely prescriptivist.) A second reason is that, as noted earlier, prescriptivists prescribe an unholy mixture of anodyne good sense and the highly specious. In one chapter one is being told to write clearly and respect the genre of your text; in the next, one is being told how important it is to use (or not use) the Oxford comma. Unsurprisingly, then, it has proven frustrating to isolate exactly the things prescriptivists do in a way that isn't either circular, dismissive, or contentious. In this respect, our first attempt (Section 2) was perhaps on the right track after all: rather than seeing prescriptivism as the expression of some univocal thesis, we should recognize it as a social phenomenon or practice, engaged in by some and bemoaned by others. A useful comparison might be made with "populism". Different populist figures, it is true, tend to adopt thematically similar stances – nationalism, victimhood, etc. – but one would not try to define the term simply by distilling these postures into a unifying thesis. Populism is something certain people engage in under certain conditions with certain effects.

Happily, there is a philosophically interesting thesis in the same neighbourhood. We encountered it above, as Linguistic Prescriptivism$_1$ ("There are norms governing language use, and they should be followed"). Why did this fail to capture the prescriptivist viewpoint, pertaining as it does to *prescriptions about language*? Because the label is simply too freighted to admit of such a straightforward characterization. (Compare the fact that, nowadays, "holding politically accurate viewpoints" fails miserably to explicate "politically correct".) Our suggested expedient is to hold fast to the definiens and abandon the definiendum. That is, we propose dropping the label "linguistic prescriptivism" and talking instead of "language norming", by which we mean to include *any attempt to evaluate language use on normative grounds*. This includes the stereotypical prescriptivist attempts, certainly, but not only them. Making this shift takes us immediately to where we want to be: with an interesting evaluative question. When, if ever, is language norming a defensible pursuit? On the standard view in linguistics, the stereotypical examples of linguistic prescriptivism we opened with in Section 2 are *not* defensible instances of language norming. But that hardly shows there aren't other instances that are defensible.

Answering this question is (modulo the verbal shift) our earlier Goal 2. A comprehensive treatment is well beyond the reach of this article. As we announced at the outset, this article is an attempt to get a philosophical conversation started. In that same spirit, in Section 4 we survey a range of cases of what we regard as acceptable (or not obviously unacceptable) language norming. If nothing else, we hope to illustrate the sudden ease with which it becomes possible to discuss normative topics once we drop the "prescriptivism" label (and the invective) and move away from the paradigm cases.[5]

4 Is Language Norming Ever Defensible, and If So, When?

We begin with two general worries about a blanket rejection of all language norming (i.e. not just of "traditional prescriptivism"). First, we note that if such a rejection were motivated by hostility to stereotypical prescriptivism it would be hypocritical, since even prescriptivism-bashers engage

in norming to some degree. The imperative in the title of Robert Hall's (1950) anti-prescriptivist lament, *Leave Your Language Alone!*, is itself an instance of language norming. The view that it is permissible to split infinitives is every bit as normative as the view that it is impermissible.

Second, and more speculatively, we worry that self-avowedly "neutral descriptions" of language often mask judgements of superiority that tacitly underwrite discrimination. However unwittingly, even "descriptive" dictionaries may effectively denigrate non-standard dialects. To come at it via an analogy, one might repudiate allegedly "socio-politically neutral" sciences of criminology or economics – since, plausibly, it's naive to suppose that there can exist such things. If norming really is unavoidable, it's better to do it openly and properly. This is not to say there cannot be descriptive, scientific aspects to linguistics; it is merely to warn that there will potentially always be more to it.

We turn now to describing some potential instances of defensible language norming. All are subject to caveats and pleas for restraint, but each one has at least prima facie credibility. For expository ease rather than out of a desire to make deep distinctions, we divide them into *aesthetic*, *practical*, *epistemic*, *moral*, and finally *political*.

Beginning with aesthetic norms, many, and we include ourselves here, will recognize that there exist objectively good and bad styles. Rev. Martin Luther King's verbal flourishes are striking and stirring. W.V.O. Quine's prose stylings set him apart as a superior philosophical writer. In contrast, management-speak and cliché show how some language can be flatly ugly. What's more, one may well cherish the code itself, not just the creative deployment of it: Welsh recitation trades on the distinctive prosody of that very language, and translations, particularly of verse or other artistic forms, typically miss something present in the original. Specifying what exactly is given up when aesthetically valuable language is foresworn is notoriously difficult. An analytical rendition of lines from a poem (e.g. from "Theirs not to make reply, / Theirs not to reason why, / Theirs but to do and die" in Tennyson's poem, *Charge of the Light Brigade*, to "It wasn't up to them to dispute their orders or to ask why they were given; their job was simply to act and to die"[6]) clearly loses something, but what? That question presumably overlaps substantially with parallel questions we might ask about dance, music, or design.

For those who are sceptical about such considerations, we offer a different kind of aesthetic example. We presume that there is nothing globally wrong with culturally specific rules of etiquette, e.g. social norms about which knife to use with which dish (a curved and broad blade for fish), what dress is appropriate for what occasion (avoid bright pastels at funerals and button-down shirts at the beach). Other options aren't illogical or immoral: the rules that persist are just the ones that people happen to follow. Nor is every violation inexcusably wrong. One may, to make a point, wear a bikini at a thesis defence or blue jeans at a wedding, or eat peas off a knife (cf. Thackeray 1848: 5). But insofar as norms of manner are defensible in these other contexts, manners in language are too. Indeed, our earlier example of apt register in a medical setting seems to be a case in point. "We, like, seen 'em all, like, shitting n' stuff" may not be normatively unacceptable across the board, but it is when composed by a solicitor in a legal brief or inserted in an academic essay or a letter to one's employer. As with politeness in other contexts, linguistic politeness norms can potentially become shibboleths, a badge of membership and so a means of exclusion. But that only shows the need for a balance to be struck. Professional contexts should be neither a bear-pit nor like the court at Versailles.

Turning to practical language norms, the broad thought here is obvious: it is useful to have a uniform linguistic standard for knowledge transmission and for the coordination of action. This justification has the same form as for any other common standard: we need a standard; current practice should serve as a default; current practice is X; so, all else equal, we should respect X. Indeed, attempts to establish a common linguistic standard are familiar and many seem perfectly unobjectionable. In the course of writing this very article we have had to verify American spellings

in dictionaries; and we have been told that, for the volume as a whole, authors should adopt double quotes for mention and APA style for references. Defeasible standards of this kind can have a clear practical function. A consistent use of "billion" across the English-speaking world is hardly a "minor instance of cultural rape" just because the American-English meaning won out over the British-English one (Dummett's description in 1993: 112). Linguistic subcultures – academic philosophy comes to mind – are full of terms with agreed-upon meanings, norms that are genuinely useful to those in that subculture and not merely as a kind of membership badge.

Now for the caveats. Not all claims made in the name of usefulness stand up to scrutiny. We saw Heffer taking himself to be upholding the highest standards, and Dummett seemingly took it upon himself to invent a standard of his own. Recall too the dangers underscored by anti-prescriptivists. Despite his admirably liberal views on other matters (2001), Dummett's production of a heavily prescriptive style guide aimed at undergraduates at an elite establishment university arguably supplies nourishment to the British class system, disguised behind claims about having a responsibility to the language and to future generations (1993: 8). Thus, any given practical prescription demands credible and specific arguments, with due concern for unintended effects.

A second caveat is that that the scope for setting explicit standards for the entire language community is necessarily limited. These things tend, in the main, to take care of themselves. If a phrase is genuinely important it will typically survive or else be replaced by an equivalent (e.g. "circular reasoning" for "beg the question"). The relatively new term "proactive" annoys some, but its survival will probably turn on its utility (in forming a contrast with "reactive", say), not on anyone's lobbying for or against. When a usage fizzles out, that probably just means it has ceased to matter enough. This is why the loss of the distinction between "practical" and "practicable" is not the tragedy Heffer implies (2011: 160).

A final caveat is that any practical standard needs to be change-tolerant. New modes of expression will arise as communication media evolve, for example, which they have at least since the invention of the telegraph. Indeed, as the world as a whole evolves, and humans continue to express their creativity, or to talk across linguistic boundaries, linguistic practice will force changes on any standard. As noted, the *Académie Française* has managed to root out some Anglicisms but the attempt to resist all borrowings has been doomed. ("La fin de semaine" for weekends is used in North America, but the standard in Europe is "le week-end".) Practical standards, then, must be invoked with specific justifications and due modesty.

We turn now to epistemology. Putting a word to something, as with "slut-shaming" or the "proactive/reactive" contrast, can sometimes help us understand our world more easily. So, there may be cases where reform, in the guise of introducing a novel usage, is knowledge-conducive. The repeated and overt choice of "partner" over "spouse", for example, can draw conscious attention to the existence of equally valuable marriage-like relationships or to the non-availability of marriage as an option for homosexual couples. The caveat this time is that, as we suggested earlier, the cognitive impact of the lexicon has sometimes been overhyped (recall our "dedos" example). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in its strong form has been empirically falsified. Thus, it's a mistake to insist, without evidence, that losing "that/which" or "who/whom" will have a negative epistemic impact. Again, language norming can serve an epistemological end, but where it does so must be decided on a case-by-case basis.

For moral norms governing language use, we suggest that, depending upon context, using the familiar second-person pronoun *tu* in French with an unfamiliar elder, as opposed to the more formal *vous*, may signal disrespect (likewise for *du/Sie* in German, *tū/āp* in Hindi, and *ti/chi* in Welsh). To the extent that it is sometimes morally wrong to signal disrespect, "Do not address unfamiliar elders with *tu*" is a legitimate prescription. English no longer contains the same distinction, but similar examples may be achievable through the example of titles. Consider the student who, having never met his professor, writes her an email with the salutation "Hey bud!" or "Dear

Miss ———" despite awareness of the linguistic norm that anything short of "Dear Professor ———" would signal disrespect.

Now for the tiresome caveats. The precise relation between etiquette and morality is controversial, and our understanding of it may be in flux as West meets East (Bell & Pei 2020: 1–8; Olberding 2016). These proofs-by-example therefore come with qualifications. One is an assumption we are making but will not try to justify, namely, that while etiquette rules are not the same as moral rules (they have an arbitrariness that moral rules lack, for example), once they are in place and legitimately so, they have the power to generate moral prescriptions. Purposely disrespecting them is rude, impolite, and hence to some degree morally blameworthy. The second is an allowance: some etiquette rules lack legitimacy, in which case it may be acceptable to violate them as a way of signalling disagreement. A French speaker who dislikes the way the "tu/vous" distinction operates might reason in this way. (That same battle took place in English in the past. Quakers were mocked for insisting on the familiar "thou" form for everyone, irrespective of status. Ironically it was this familiar form that died out, in a kind of levelling-up that left just "ye" or "you".) And among those who argue for the elimination of titles, some would include professional academic titles on the list. Finally, prescriptions of this kind are, like most moral rules, defeasible at best: in some circumstances, rudeness may be warranted. Linguistic appropriateness often depends on extra-linguistic considerations.

Turning finally to political cases, the defensibility of language norming has already emerged thanks to the example of progressive reforms: promoting gender-neutral language (avoiding "mankind" for humankind, permitting "they" as gender-neutral singular), for example, and excising slurring words. Discussion of these and other examples (e.g. applying conceptual engineering to defective concepts; decrying fig-leaves and essentializing generics) can be found throughout this volume. Such cases confirm that language norming is not a conservative phenomenon and is not a progressive phenomenon. It cuts across the political spectrum.[7]

Taking off from such examples, we note in passing that even an earnest descriptivist might reasonably hold that the science of linguistics, and not armchair linguistics, can and should serve as a departure point for informed social change. As an example, granting that certain forms of language should be excised, descriptive linguistics might tell the politically progressive how best to achieve this: e.g. field work or tracking of corpora might tell the progressive reformer what, as a matter of fact, tends to rapidly and thoroughly induce change (e.g. avoidance by trend-setters) and what does not (e.g. top-down proselytization in academic settings). Compare criminology or epidemiology: the descriptive science might reveal what causally underpins racial disparities in incarceration or the rapid spread of viruses, and hence how governments that value the elimination of these effects might best react. There is nothing nefarious about understanding those disciplines as compatible with normative evaluation. Likewise, language norming is perfectly compatible with the practice of linguistics as a science.

Another potential (and admittedly tentative) defence of language norming would see it as a prophylactic against an overreaching individualist libertarian view on language. Here we envisage someone taking a rabidly anti-prescriptivist stance, reasoning that no language is superior to any other, and that people should be allowed to choose whichever one they prefer: given the "arbitrariness of the sign", choice of language per se is value neutral. Linguistic change, or linguistic uniformity for that matter, is thus always fine in itself as long as no coercion is involved. After making some obvious practical concessions (no rational agent will choose to use "dog" to refer to applesauce, or prefer "He sleep is quiet no" over "He is sleeping quietly"), this unfettered anti-prescriptivist will hold that no official, paternalistic norming is permissible. Such an unqualified stance would have unhappy consequences, at least by our lights.

In particular, this anti-normative line of reasoning would preclude any laws aimed at promoting and preserving minority languages, or indeed treasuring other forms of linguistic diversity.

More than that, consonant with extreme libertarian principles, it might prohibit the use of tax dollars towards such ends. This would jeopardize measures like those in Canada, where legislation has successfully re-established French as a *lingua franca*, halting an emerging hegemony of English. Quebec's Law 101, for example, required children of immigrants to go to French-medium schools rather than to English-medium schools, and forced commercial signage to be in French or prominently in French. Softer measures in Ireland and Britain are helping preserve Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic as living, evolving languages, though these measures are often resisted by an alliance of quasi-libertarian thinking and the anti-prescriptivist thought that, since there is nothing wrong with English, nature should be allowed to take its course.

To come at the point another way, natural languages are, among other things, cultural products. So, it is possible to treasure and to want to protect a given tongue, without supposing that it is better than other languages – just as one can prize a distinctive cuisine. Diversity of cultural goods might *in itself* be valuable, and the persistence of a particular cultural tradition can be an aspect of the welfare of those whose culture it is. Likewise, different ways of speaking should be valued and respected, not nudged out of existence or into museums. Where necessary, diversity should be promoted on grounds of social justice – including measures to protect language environments. This, however, is a kind of language norming.

5 Summary and Conclusion

Given the relative silence among philosophers on the topic of linguistic prescription, we began our exploration of the terrain with a modest goal:

> **Goal 1**: Uncover a plausible interpretation of "linguistic prescriptivism", ideally one under which it merits careful philosophical evaluation.

This proved surprisingly difficult. Our first gambit involved identifying some paradigm examples: the ones self-avowed prescriptivists seem most exercised about. We then drew on standard criticisms by descriptive linguists to find a unifying feature of these cases. This first attempt was manifestly flawed. It perhaps captured what prescriptivism's foes have in mind as their target – a passionate, misguided promoter of the asinine – but it cannot serve as a neutral account of the label's meaning. Nor does it yield a viewpoint worthy of philosophical assessment. This first sally thus uncovered, at best, a social phenomenon, a practice stoutly defended by some and decried by others.

Our second approach, then, was to consider whether there was any unifying *thesis*, Linguistic Prescriptivism, acceptance of which marks out those commonly agreed on all sides to be linguistic prescriptivists. We moved through a series of gradually more promising possibilities. Each one, however, turned out to be too broad (since denying that lying and inciting violence are acceptable uses of language, celebrating concision and clarity of expression, or insisting on correct spelling in journal articles, hardly makes one a prescriptivist in the normal sense) or else too restrictive (since prescriptivists do not resist all language change).

At that stage we *sort of* gave up on Goal 1. We concluded that no thesis is endorsed by, and only by, those who fit the label "prescriptivist" as it is ordinarily used. The fundamental problem, we decided, lies with the term. It is valanced (negatively for some, positively for others); the recommendations associated with it intertwine the obviously unobjectionable with the silly and lamentable; and it captures a social activity more than a theory. Only "sort of", though, because there is a perfectly clear proposition in the neighbourhood: *that there are norms governing language use, and they should be followed*. This took us to where we wanted to be – with an interesting question – but required us to rechristen our topic ("language norming" instead of "linguistic prescriptivism"), if only to distance ourselves from the justly tarnished stereotype.

We then proceeded to Goal 2, reworded in effect to:

> **Goal 2**: Consider whether any variant of linguistic prescriptivism, thus understood, *language norming* is defensible.

We pursued two avenues. First, any all-purpose rejection of language norms, we tentatively suggested, would be both hypocritical, and underappreciative of the inevitability of norming. Second, again briefly and guardedly, we offered initially plausible examples of appropriate norming: aesthetic, practical, epistemic, moral, and political.

The overall lesson is that one should drop the standard perfunctory dismissal: there is a non-silly thesis, a philosophical cousin of linguistic prescriptivism in the usual sense. Language norming is acceptable, and the interesting question is just: when? Rarely, it turns out, if we limit our attention to the stereotypical complaints of linguistic prescriptivists. But we suggested a range of cases where language norming looks attractive. A fuller defence of any of them must turn on extra-linguistic considerations (political outlook, views on etiquette, etc.). But on the face of it, and drawing on the expertise of descriptive linguists, philosophers can and should undertake language norming, albeit with due caution and on a case-by-case basis.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 For a history of prescriptivist battles over English since the Anglo-Saxon period, see Crystal (2006). For a nuanced discussion of prescriptivism today, see Cameron (2012).

2 The topic is addressed a little more substantially by philosophically minded linguists (see, e.g., Huddleston & Pullum 2002; Liberman & Pullum 2006; Lyons 1981; McWhorter 2008; and Pinker 1994). Among philosophers, Michael Dummett has written a prescriptivist guide to English (1993), consonant with remarks he makes in his philosophy proper (1981: 142, 1991: 88–92). This guide figures in our discussion. R.M. Hare (1952), we note, draws a contrast between descriptivism and prescriptivism in metaethics; the contrast of the same name in linguistics arose around the same time, but any link seems to end there.

3 All three titles, in fact, were originally variant abbreviations of the title "Mistress", which was as neutral on marital status as "Master". The "Mrs." form first mutated into a marker of social rather than marital status (Erickson 2014: 45).

4 Steven Pinker, while hardly a friend of prescriptivists (see his 1994), nonetheless tries to rescue the norms of "good writing" from them in his 2015 work.

5 Deborah Cameron, with whom we are in substantial agreement here, countenances a more vivid alternative, "language hygiene" (2012), but for our purposes this has an unwanted negative whiff. The same goes for "language ideologies" (Schieffelin 1998).

6 The rendition is from www.litcharts.com/poetry/alfred-lord-tennyson/the-charge-of-the-light-brigade, retrieved 03.08.20.

7 Anti-progressives, moreover, have increasingly co-opted the "linguistic prescriptivism" charge for use against proposals of this kind. We see this as further reason to drop what has become, in essence, a confusing boo term.

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