CrossMark

REVIEW

Fixing what ain't broke

Anne Curzan, *Fixing English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. x + 197. Hardback £55.00, ISBN 9781107020757

Reviewed by Jonathan Marks, Łeba, Poland

With its subtitle 'Prescriptivism and Language History', *Fixing English* encompasses two senses of 'fixing': firstly, attempting to freeze the language at a particular historical moment and prevent it from changing further and, secondly, attempting to improve it and repair it of its faults and shortcomings.

The starting point of this book is the familiar distinction between a descriptive approach to language (the approach adopted by the goody, who tells it like it is) and a prescriptive approach (the approach preferred by the baddy, who tells it as he or she thinks it should be). However, rather than following familiar practice and dismissing the prescriptive approach as irrelevant to serious linguistic enquiry, Curzan demonstrates convincingly that careful study of the prescriptivist tradition is actually essential for any linguist with an interest in the history of English, partly because prescriptive efforts do sometimes bring about changes in usage, and partly because even when they 'fail' to achieve this goal, or the goal of stemming the tide of language development, they nevertheless affect discourse about language, attitudes to correctness, and the confidence that speakers and writers have in their ability to use their own language.

In the *Introduction: does prescriptivism fail?*, building on Deborah Cameron's concept of 'verbal hygiene' (Cameron 1995), Curzan recognizes 'the humanness of the prescriptive impulse' and characterizes prescriptivism not as an unnatural attempt to subvert the natural development of language but as an activity that arises naturally in speech communities, and a legitimate – and, indeed, essential – part of the scope of enquiry of language history.

In Chapter 1 *Prescriptivism's umbrella: standards, style, restoration and political intervention*, Curzan begins the task of analyzing and clarifying the broad and sometimes confusing territory covered by the umbrella term 'prescriptive'. She outlines the prescriptive/descriptive dichotomy and distinguishes between institutional prescriptivism, which carries some form of authoritative endorsement in the form of reference books, style guides, educational syllabuses etc. – and which is the main focus of the book – and individual prescriptivism, which relies on the informal authority of single persons or communities. She goes on to differentiate between four varieties of prescriptivism:

- standardizing prescriptivism, which aims to enforce 'standard' usage;
- stylistic prescriptivism, which aims to distinguish between points of style;
- restorative prescriptivism, which aims to restore earlier usages, thus preserving the language from decline and decay; and
- politically responsive prescriptivism, which aims to promote inclusive, non-discriminatory or politically correct usages.

Another aspect of the 'umbrella' which she notes is that prescriptivists often describe their subject matter as 'grammar', but this term often in fact encompasses other issues such as word choice, punctuation, pronunciation and style.

In Chapter 2 *Prescriptivism's lessons: scope and 'the history of English'*, the author argues that even when its effect on actual usage is limited, the discourse of prescriptivism both reflects and feeds linguistic insecurity and reinforces popular concern about correctness in language. She also counters the view that 'real' change in language happens in speech, and below the level of awareness, insisting that changes in written usage and changes which are actively debated are equally relevant to the telling of language history. She suggests that the effects of prescriptivism might be conceptualized in terms of *contact*: just as the language of members of a speech community may be affected by contact with other languages, it may also be affected by contact with prescriptive discourse.



JONATHAN MARKS is a freelance teacher trainer, writer and translator based in Poland. He previously worked in the UK, Germany and Sweden. His books include English Pronunciation in Use – Elementary *(CUP 2007) and* The Book of Pronunciation *(Delta Publishing 2012). Email: jonathanmarks@wp.pl*

doi:10.1017/S0266078416000080

 © 2016 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078416000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press

She also shows in this chapter how prescriptivism may sometimes have unintended consequences; for example, concern about the correct use of *whom* can lead people to hypercorrect and say or write *the person whom is involved*.

Chapter 3 *Checking grammar and grammar checkers* argues that the Microsoft Grammar Checker is perhaps 'the most powerful prescriptive language force in the world at this point.' Anonymous and seemingly authoritative, it is an integral part of the Word program, and perpetuates many folk myths about correctness, as well as the common confusion between matters of grammar and matters of style. It is, at best, a blunt instrument which is insufficiently sensitive to contextual appropriacy to make wise recommendations on many points. Many users lack the confidence to switch the grammar checker off or ignore its recommendations. The chapter describes some of the checker's rulings, as well as reviewing the history and the workings of computer grammar checkers and, finally, considering the directional relationship between prescriptive rules and actual usage, concluding that the evidence is mixed: prescriptivism does in some cases influence usage in a particular direction, while in others it rather follows, confirms and reinforces trends which are already in progress. The stigmatization of double negation as 'incorrect' or 'non-standard', for example, dates from a time when it had already, to a great extent, fallen into disuse in standard English. In contrast, Curzan suggests that the recent increase in the use of *that*, in preference to *which*, as a relative pronoun in restrictive relative clauses in edited written American English may be due to the influence of the Microsoft Grammar Checker, which perpetuates a century-old supposed distinction between *which* and *that*, which has, however, until recently, not generally been observed by language users.

Chapter 4 *Dictionaries and the idea of 'real words'* demonstrates the inadequacy of the widespread popular view that the vocabulary of English is a fixed body of words and that any words outside this canon are not 'real'. People are apt to condemn words they dislike as not 'real', even when the meanings of these words are clear and they are in daily use. This chapter also describes how dictionaries, although their purpose has shifted over the centuries from prescription to description, are nowadays often castigated for their failure to protect the integrity of the language and to adjudicate on which words are 'real' and which are not.

Chapter 5 *Nonsexist language reform and its effects* describes the remarkably fast and robust success of efforts of politically responsive prescriptivism to replace sexist language with neutral equivalents, the results of which have, among other things, brought about a shift in such a fundamental part of the English language as its pronoun system (although *they* with singular reference continues to be often 'corrected' in edited writing.)

Chapter 6 turns the focus from institutional prescriptivism to individual prescriptivism in the form of grassroots movements – again, often successful – to reappropriate stigmatized terms which have previously been used for derogatory reference to gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity.

Chapter 7, finally, concludes with a repeated call to regard prescriptivism as a serious sociolinguistic phenomenon, and for a more informed 'public discussion' about prescriptivism between linguists and non-linguists.

Fixing English includes a wealth of examples, quotations from recent times and earlier periods, and references to relevant literature, and is highly recommended as an informative, well-researched and very readable plea for a revaluation of a topic which is all too often deemed unworthy of serious consideration but which is, in fact, 'an integral part of telling language history'.

Reference

Cameron, D. 1995. *Verbal Hygiene*. London; New York: Routledge.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078416000080 Published online by Cambridge University Press