The usage guide: its birth and popularity

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An examination of the rise of English usage guides since the 18th century

Introduction

The most proscriptive eighteenth-century grammar of English, according to Sundby et al. (1991), is Knowles's *Principles of English Grammar* (1796). With 722 comments in which grammatical mistakes are criticised, Knowles heads the list which Sundby et al. compiled for their *Dictionary of Normative Grammar*. The copy of Knowles's grammar which Sundby et al. analysed was the fourth edition; the grammar had first come out in 1785 in Liverpool, and it enjoyed a moderate popularity (Alston, 1965:78–9). The fourth edition of Knowles's grammar consists of 144 pages, which makes it considerably longer than the first edition (36 pp.) (Alston, 1965:79). Fifteen pages of the book are devoted to a section called 'Of Verbal Criticism'. This section includes according to Sundby et al. (1991:8) 'some 460 "improper" sentences [which] are presented in alphabetical order ..., the "proper" form of (the relevant part of) each sentence being given on the right'. In addition, the book contains an appendix with 'Exercises of False Construction', which are included to 'afford the schoolboys and teachers for whom the grammar was intended ample opportunity for testing their linguistic ability, improved (it may be supposed) by diligent study of the first two lists'. Some examples of Knowles's 'Improper expressions', followed by the suggested corrections, labelled 'Proper', are listed in (1):

1 The Articles were as *follow*. *follows*
It is no more *but* was expected. *than*
No *less* than twenty Persons. *fewer*
(1796:66, 67, 71).

Several of Knowles's usage problems deal with the same phenomenon, such as adjectives used as adverbs (*agreeable*, *entire*, *exceeding* and *miserable*), the use of the perfect infinitive as in

2 We thought we should *have won* (Proper: *win*) (1796:70)

which is dealt with three more times under H (*have*), the use of *different to* (Proper: *from*) (twice) and of *averse/aversion to* or *for* (Proper: *from*) (twice, once under A and once under T). The question of whether it should be *a new pair of shoes* or *a pair of new shoes* occurs twice in immediate succession, perhaps because the first has *he* as its subject and the second *she*. The next item deals with the proper order of adjectives, noting that it is *a*



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rich old rather than *an old rich man*. This item is followed by the prescibed order for the adjectives in *a beautiful young woman*: Sundby et al. suggest that the grammar addressed boys only, but Knowles's intended audience evidently included girls as well.

In dealing with usage problems, Knowles taught not by precept, like the majority of the normative grammarians of the time, but by example. Rather than stating, for instance, as Lowth and Murray did, that 'Two Negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an Affirmative' (Lowth, 1763:139; Murray, 1795:121), Knowles provided three examples of multiple negation (under A), correcting them into single negatives followed by *any*:

3 I cannot by *no* Means allow it. *any*.
Nor let *no* Intruder approach me. *any*.
Nor is he now feared *no* more. *any*.
(1796:65)

The examples are short and were probably made up for the purpose; the first one in (3), however, is close enough to the example *I cannot by no means allow him, that this argument must prove* provided by Lowth (1778:122) and others to suggest that Knowles consulted earlier grammars. Some examples, moreover, appear to have their origin in a grammar book:

4 Contrary to all *Rule* of Grammar. *The Rules.*
As also before an Apostrophe. *del[ete]*.
Two Nouns of different *Signification*ˆ.*s*.
(1796:66, 70, 75)

I have only been able to identify the source of the second sentence in (4), i.e. Shaw (1793:4).

Most of the usage problems in Knowles (1796) concern idiomatic expressions, which are construed with a wrong preposition, as in (5):

5 He had been accused *with* Theft. *of*.
It is consonant *with* our Nature. *to*.
(1796:65, 67, 77)

Altogether, there are 115 such instances. Another major category in the grammar, with 91 examples, deals with the problem of tautology:

6 Go flee *thee* into the Desert with Speed. *del*.
I did not expect to meet *with* you. *del*.
(1796:76, 77, 78)

The question of whether it should be *averse to* or *from* or *different to*, *from*, or indeed *than*, as well as the tautology of *from* in *from whence* – all of which occur in Knowles's list 'Of Verbal Criticism' – are still dealt with today in a usage guide like *Fowler's Modern English Usage* (ed. Burchfield 1996).

Following Knowles in the list in Sundby et al. (1991:454–6) are the grammars which I have listed in Figure 1 according to the number of proscriptive comments they include Baker (1779, 2nd ed.), however, is not a grammar but a usage guide, while Campbell (1719–96) was a rhetorician, not a grammarian. Nearly half the grammars in Figure 1 date from the final decade of the eighteenth

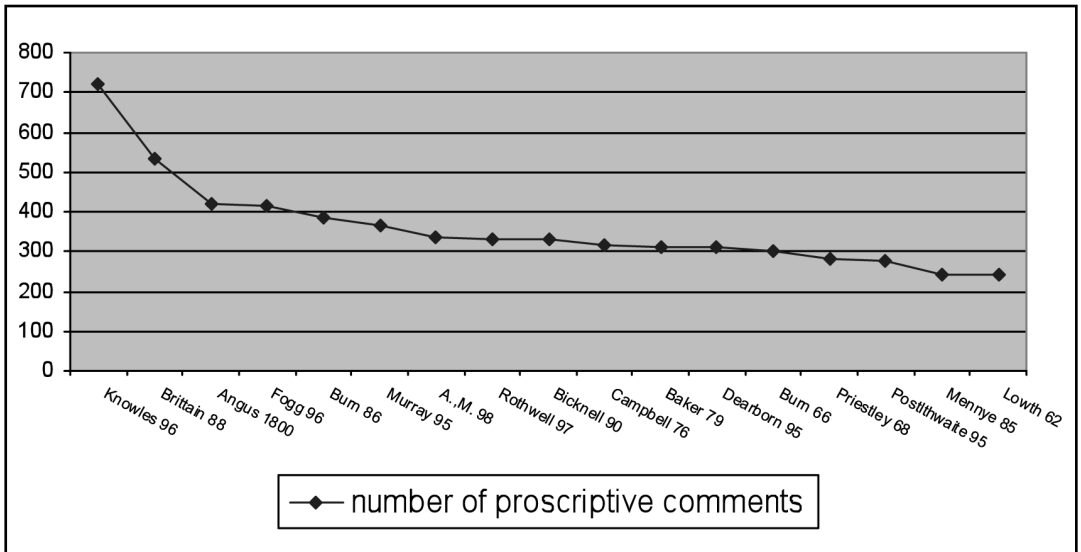


Figure 1. Numbers of proscriptive comments in grammars analysed by Sundby et al. (1991).

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century; compared to the decade preceding (four grammars), their number has doubled, which is a striking increase. The proscriptive comments that we find in the grammars are a sign of a prescriptive approach to language use: forbidding specific errors or usage, the grammars presented a norm of grammatical correctness. The above figures show that this focus on grammatical correctness had become particularly strong by the end of the eighteenth century.

As with Knowles, various grammars are included in the list in a later edition: Priestley (1768, 1st ed. 1761), Baker (1779, 1st ed. 1770), A. (1798, 1st ed. 1785) and Rothwell (1797, 1st ed. 1787), while Burn's grammar even occurs twice (1st ed. 1766, 4th ed. 1786): all these grammars had undergone considerable revision, becoming more proscriptive as a result. As for Priestley's grammar, Hodson (2006) has shown that since its original publication in 1761, the *Rudiments of English Grammar* was largely revised for its second edition of 1768. With only 22 proscriptive comments in the first edition and 283 in the second, this increase is of great interest, for Priestley is usually considered to be a descriptive grammar. Hodson (2006, 2008), however, has demonstrated that this is a misconception, and this has been confirmed by Straaijer (2009).

For my purposes here, the graph in Figure 1 ends with Lowth, whose grammar, first published in 1762, is usually described as an icon of prescriptivism (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2010). The many grammars preceding Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* in Figure 1 demonstrate the fallacy of this. Figure 1 also includes Baker's *Reflections on the English Language*, though not in its first edition of 1770 but in the second. The first edition contains fewer proscriptive comments, 196 vs. 312 for Baker (1779), so it comes considerably lower on the list in Sundby et al. As in the case of Burn and Priestley and possibly other grammars as well, the revision of the *Reflections* confirms the increase of prescriptivism during the second half of the eighteenth century, which had its culmination in the final decade of that century but which would continue to grow in popularity down to this very day, typical products being Bill Bryson's *Troublesome Words* (3rd ed., 2001) and Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* (2003).

Baker's *Reflections*: the first usage guide

Baker (1770) has been called 'the ancestor of those handbooks of abuses and corrections which were so freely produced in the nineteenth century' (Leonard, 1929:35). It is a curious and unique book, consisting of 127 rules that deal with lexical and syntactic features (Vorlat, 2001:392). The rules are numbered, but are otherwise completely unordered, so readers would have had a hard time finding a feature they sought guidance for. The book's subtitle reads that it was drawn up *In the Nature of Vaugelas's Remarks on the French*. Claude Favre de Vaugelas (1585–1650) was one of the original members of the Académie Française which had been founded in 1634. Coming across Vaugelas's *Remarques sur la Langue Française* (1647), possibly through a Circulating Library to which he belonged, Baker tried to produce something similar for English. The resulting *Reflections* wasn't his only effort of this kind, for a year later he published *Observations on the Pictures now in Exhibition at the Royal Academy, Spring Gardens and Mr. Christie's* (1771). In the preface to the *Reflections*, moreover, Baker wrote that he had earlier 'committed to the Flames ... a great Number of Remarks, that I had been making for four or five Years upon the several Performances of our Players; and which I had intended to digest and to publish' (1771:xxiv–xxv). Baker appears to have been a hack writer (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2008a), who attempted to make money with books for the entertainment of the general public. Another example is *Witticisms and Strokes of Humour* (1766), which, however, sold poorly despite being, as he wrote, 'what I then thought and still think as diverting a Thing as ever appeared' (1770:xlii). All this explains the random presentation of his linguistic reflections as well as the book's rambling style, even by his own admission – 'Having ... rambled much,' he wrote in the preface, 'I shall continue to ramble on' (1770:xxvi). In serving as a form of entertainment rather than as a practical usage guide like Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, the *Reflections* is very similar to a twentieth-century publication called *Paradigms Lost*, subtitled, significantly, *Reflections on Literacy and its Decline* (Simon, 1980). This book presents a series of language columns published in 1976 by Simon in the American magazines *Esquire*

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and *More*, in which he deals with 'major and minor abuses of the English language' (1980:xvii). There are more similarities between the two books than just their titles and presentation, which suggests that, though published two hundred years apart, they belong to one and the same tradition.

Baker and Simon compared

One peculiar feature of Baker and his *Reflections* is that he had evidently never heard of a standard work like Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) when he embarked on the *Reflections*:

> It will undoubtedly be thought strange, when I declare that I have never yet seen the folio Edition of Mr. *Johnson's* Dictionary: but, knowing Nobody that has it, I have never been able to borrow it, and I have myself no Books; at least, not many more than what a Church-going old Woman may be supposed to have of devotional Ones upon her Mantle-piece; for, having always had a narrow Income, it has not been in my Power to make a Collection, without straitening myself. Nor did I ever see even the Abridgement of this Dictionary till a few Days ago, when, observing it inserted in the Catalogue of a Circulating Library where I subscribe, I sent for it.
>
> (Baker, 1770:iv–v)

Baker claimed in his preface: 'Such as my work is, it is entirely my own ... Not being acquainted with any Man of Letters, I have consulted Nobody' (Baker, 1770:iv). I have not found any evidence to the contrary, and this is confirmed by the preface to the second edition, where he admits never to have heard of Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* either:

> I here declare, as in the Preface to the first edition, that the performance is entirely my own. I have had no assistance from any friend; nor have I borrowed from any work. I even did not know, till the late Dr. Salter shewed me the [sic] Introduction to the English Grammar, that any thing of the kind had ever appeared among us. (Baker, 1779:xxiii)

He comments upon the striking similarity between Lowth's grammar and his own work, denying any possibility of plagiarism, on his own part or that of Lowth:

> I then perceived that some (*not many*) of the observations I had made, had been already made by the author of that work. On the other hand, there are observations in a subsequent edition of the Introduction, which I had made in my first edition. But I have no suspicion that any of those observations were borrowed from *me*. Whoever will give himself the trouble to compare the two books will, indeed, be inclined to wonder that they do not oftener detect the same incorrectnesses than they actually do.
>
> (Baker, 1779:xxiii)

Lowth's grammar had indeed been revised considerably since its original publication in 1762, so much so that the second edition of 1763 should be considered as the first edition proper (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2006). His famous stricture on double negation, for instance, is only first found in the second edition. It is peculiar that Baker never read the grammar beforehand, for Auer (2008) has shown that it is regularly listed in catalogues of Circulating Libraries. It may never have occurred to him to look for such publications.

Baker, as the many literary references in his *Reflections* show, was extremely well-read; for all that, he was barely educated, which makes him rather exceptional when compared to the other writers on grammar included in Figure 1. Linguistics as a discipline did not exist at the time, but the more authoritative grammarians nevertheless possessed distinct qualifications that made them into experts, though some more so than others. By way of 'explicit credentials' Chapman (2008:23) mentions education, possession of a university degree, occupation, specialised publications and membership of a professional organisation. Lowth, according to these criteria, was an expert par excellence, but Baker had none of these qualifications. As he wrote in his preface, he 'quitted the School at fifteen', and he was consequently 'entirely ignorant of the Greek, and but indifferently skilled in the Latin' (1770:ii); Vorlat (2001:394) indeed comments upon his poor command of grammatical terminology. With Latin being the main subject taught in schools and universities at the time, his lack of formal education would almost naturally disqualify him for writing a book on English grammar and usage. But, he boldly asserted, 'Why should this incapacitate a Man for writing his Mother-tongue with Propriety?' (1770:ii).

In his preface to *Paradigms Lost*, Simon (b. 1925) similarly admits to a lack of formal qualifications as a language commentator: 'This book ... must be recognized as the work of an amateur' (1980:xv). As a non-native speaker of English, though educated at Harvard, it is

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precisely being an outsider, 'coming to English relatively late', that made him qualified for the job. Comparing himself to Joseph Conrad, Karen Blixen and Vladimir Nabokov, he writes:

> If you have a sufficient feeling for and facility with language [as a school-boy Simon had spoken three languages fluently, Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian and German], coming to a specific tongue later rather than earlier can prove a distinct advantage. One approaches that language with better credentials – linguistic (one's previous languages), cultural (one's awareness of language as the interpreter of a society), and emotional (one's ability to appreciate and love, which grows with the years). There is a sense in which one is both an insider and an outsider in that language, and the interplay between the two becomes creative play. (Simon, 1980:xiii)

Neither Baker nor Simon thus have the qualifications of a writer on language; they themselves, however, didn't consider this a problem, in the firm expectation that there will be a market for their books.

In this they were correct: originally published anonymously, Baker's *Reflections* proved to be fairly popular. In the preface to the second edition Baker records that the first edition 'had a tolerable sale' (1779:xxiii). The title-page of his *Observations on the Pictures now in Exhibition* (1771) reads that the book was written 'by the author of the Remarks on the English Language'; if Baker's earlier authorship was called upon to advertise this book, the *Reflections* must have sold fairly well. The second edition, indeed, carried his name on the title-page. Vorlat (2001:392) traced his influence on several later grammars, Wood (1777), Hornsey (1793), Bicknell (1796), Angus (1800) and, interestingly, Knowles (1796). Simon's *Paradigms Lost* is advertised on the cover as a 'national best-seller'. Though this might be interpreted as merely a marketing device, the book was nevertheless reasonably popular: my own Penguin edition reads that the first edition was published in 1980 in the US by Clarkson N. Potter and in Canada by General Publishing Company Limited and in 1981 in Britain by Penguin, which reissued the book twice that year and again in 1984.

Another similarity between the two authors and their approach to language is their belief in an English Academy to put an end to the existence of usage problems like the ones discussed in their own work. Baker dedicated the *Reflections* to the King, to whom he proposed to

> take into Consideration whether it might not be proper to establish in *London* an Academy of the Nature of that of the *Belles Lettres* at *Paris*, and of several in *Italy*. This seems to be a Thing extremely wanted among us. Our Language, as has been often observed, is manly and expressive: but our Writers abound with Incorrectnesses and Barbarisms: for which such an Establishment might in a great Measure be a Cure. (Baker, 1770:i–ii)

Pleas for an Academy, however, had not been heard since the early eighteenth century. Simon similarly believes that 'salvation must lie [in] the eventual creation of an Academy of the Anglo-American language' (1980:7). A few pages further down he returns to this notion:

> Punctuation, spelling, grammar – how much longer will they be with us at all? Or will there be a backlash, sweeping them in again with renewed stringency? I doubt that – unless, as several readers have suggested, we were to have an academy on the model of the French Academy. But that is highly unlikely: such academies, even if instituted long ago by royal fiat, have a hard time surviving in this permissive age of the common man; to create one now, over the hue and cry of the linguistic levelers, would be nearly impossible. But necessary. (Simon, 1980:12)

The notion that an academy might put an end to linguistic abuse, as even Simon argues, is that of the non-linguist ('several readers' had suggested it) – amateurs like himself and, two hundred years earlier, Baker. It is also striking that he blames the unlikely success of such an institution to 'this permissive age of the common man'. This brings to mind the controversy between John Honey and Peter Trudgill upon the publication of Honey's book *Language is Power. The Story of Standard English and its Enemies* (1997), brought out into the open by Trudgill's review of the book in 1998 and Honey's rejoinder published two years later. Here, we witness a battle between linguists (comprising Trudgill himself along with 'Jenny Cheshire, Jim Milroy, Lesley Milroy, Roy Harris, Sir John Lyons, David Crystal, Jean Aitchison, Frank Palmer, Michael Stubbs, Michael Halliday, William Labov, Stephen Pinker, Suzanne Romaine, Walt Wolfram, Donna Christian, Howard Giles and Noam Chomsky'; Trudgill, 1998), who are branded by Honey as enemies of the English language, and those

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who have the fate of standard English at heart (Honey and others). In the light of this controversy between structural linguists and those involved with normative linguistics it is not surprising that Pinker (1994:385) – also included in the list – calls Simon a 'malicious know-nothing':

> Simon has simply discovered the trick used with great effectiveness by certain comedians and talk-show host, and punk-rock musicians: **people of modest talent** can attract the attention of the media, at least for a while, by being unrelentingly offensive.
>
> (1994:385; emphasis added)

Equally unrelenting, Baker condemned grammatical mistakes in no uncertain terms. According to Vorlat (2001:397), he classified authors into 'bad writers, incorrect ones, tolerable ones, not so good writers ... good writers, and "our best authors", "our most judicious writers"'. The same phenomenon is found in the footnotes in Lowth's grammar (1762), which I have argued elsewhere represent a usage guide avant-la-lettre (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2008[a]). It is, however, this public mud throwing that was one of the reasons for the grammar's immediate popularity (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2010). The main difference with Honey and Trudgill is that most of the grammatical offenders exposed by Baker, and all those in Lowth's grammar before him, were dead (Percy, 1997:134; Vorlat, 2001: 398).

Writers of usage guides: a discourse community

Baker and Simon, though published more than two hundred years apart, belong to the same type of movement. Watts (2008) argues that irrespective of the fact that most of them were not and often even couldn't have been acquainted with each other, eighteenth-century grammarians made up a discourse community, as in their aims to codify the English language they share 'common interests, goals and beliefs' (Watts, 2008:43). The same, I want to argue here, applies to writers of usage guides: as the remarkable similarities between Baker and Simon have shown, they, too, have the same interests, goals and beliefs, though different ones from the eighteenth-century grammarians. Even their respective backgrounds as declared non-specialists binds them together. Another member of this discourse community is Fowler, who is described by Burchfield in his preface to the third edition of *Modern English Usage* (1996) as being isolated 'from the mainstream of the linguistic scholarship of his day' (1996:vii), a characteristic he shares with Baker. Fowler typified himself as 'no true lexicographer' (McMorris, 2001:195), a non-expert in other words. But so was Burchfield: in the preface to *Modern English Usage* he identifies himself as being outside the mainstream of the linguistic scholarship of his day by assuring the reader that the book contains 'no tree diagrams, no epistemic modality (except to explain what the term means), no generative grammar' (1996:xi). Brewer (2007) demonstrates that Burchfield was 'the first, and possibly the only, editor of *OED* to bring personal, often idiosyncratic, judgements on individual words and usages openly into the Dictionary' (2007:121), something one would hardly expect of a lexicographer. 'It is no accident,' she continues, 'that he later produced a new edition of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*.' Lynne Truss, too, presents herself as a non-specialist:

> I am not a grammarian. To me a subordinate clause will for ever be (since I heard the actor Martin Jarvis describe it thus) one of Santa's little helpers. A degree in English language is not a prerequisite for caring about where a bracket is preferred to a dash, or a comma needs to be replaced by a semicolon. (2003:32)

Like Baker before her, she makes a point of having had to borrow an essential book from the University of London Library as a source for *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, i.e. Eric Partridge's *You Have a Point There* (1953) (Truss, 2003:177). Like Simon, she tried to involve the general public by writing 'an article for *The Daily Telegraph*, hoping to elicit a few punctuation horror stories' upon which she could base her own account (2003:48). Like Burchfield – and Fowler before him – who argues that newspapers 'reflect and reveal the solecistic waywardness of "the half-educated" general public in a much more dramatic fashion than did works of English literature' (1996:vii–viii), Truss regularly focuses on newspapers as the object of her criticism: 'Less stoppable is the drift towards American telegraphese in newspaper headlines'; 'Have you noticed that newspapers use [the semicolon] less and less?'; 'Some British newspapers, notably *The Guardian*, have dropped the use of italics for titles' (2003:98; 105; 146). Truss agrees with Baker in 'paying no Regard to Authority', as Baker had written

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on the question of good usage, adding: 'I have censured even our best Penmen, where they have departed from what I conceive to be the Idiom of the Tongue, or where I have thought they violate Grammar without Necessity. To judge by the Rule of *Ipse dixit* is the Way to perpetuate Error' (1770:iv). Truss, for instance, criticises the use of the splice comma, two clauses linked by a comma rather than a coordinator or subordinator, by Beckett, Forster and Somerset Maugham (2003:88). Like the others, her worry is the decline of standards and of standard English, and of punctuation in particular: 'standards of punctuation in general in the UK are indeed approaching the point of illiteracy' (2003:xix). Her article in the *Daily Telegraph*, she writes, 'detonated a dam'.

Prescriptivism as a stage in the standardisation process

Baker was the first author to publish a usage guide, but his *Reflections* came about more or less by accident, in an attempt to make money from books that would appeal to the general public. Whether he was aware of it or not, in focusing on language his book is, however, a product of its age. Percy (2009) has argued that linguistic criticism was popular in the public press around the 1750s; this is, indeed, where I believe Lowth picked up the idea to present grammatical errors by 'our best Writers' in his grammar, and these notes at the same time caused his grammar to be such an immediate success (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2010). The same prescriptive approach is evident in Knowles's section 'Of Verbal Criticism', though Knowles doesn't supply any names of offending authors. In the century following, works listing grammatical errors became extremely popular. Neither Lowth's nor Knowles's grammars were, however, intended as usage guides: both works primarily deal with the principles of English grammar. In Lowth's grammar this is, for instance, clear from the fact that he refused to have a Table of Contents for the 1778 reprint of his grammar (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2010), which would have helped readers find their way about the grammar more easily. Murray's grammar, first published nearly twenty years later, does have one, and it includes references to particular usage problems, like 'Of Nouns of Multitude' and 'Of two Negatives' (1795:vii). Lowth refused to recognise the need for a Table of Contents because he believed the *Short Introduction*'s major function was that of a grammar proper.

A more typical example of a usage guide is Walton Burgess's *Five Hundred Mistakes of Daily Occurrence in Speaking, Pronouncing, and Writing the English Language* (1856). As in Baker's *Reflections*, the items are 'grouped miscellaneously, *without classification*' (Burgess, 1856: iv), so again the question arises how the reader was to benefit from the book other than by reading it from cover to cover. The first page serves as a good illustration of the book's contents: there we read that you can't say that you would be *enjoying* bad health, that it is *corporal* not *corporeal punishment*, that *notable* for *careful* as in *She is a notable woman* is obsolete, that *advertisement* has its stress on *vert*, not *ise*, that *up* in *rose up* is superfluous and that *set* in *set down* is wrong as '*setting* is said of the sun in the west, but cannot be properly applied to a person taking a seat' (Burgess, 1856:19). The latter comment is typical of the tone adopted by Fowler in his own work as well. According to McMorris,

> Henry fretted in his letters to Oxford about the tone of the book [i.e. *The King's English*, which he co-authored with his brother Frank], for he and Frank were beginning to fear that it would be 'more serious reading' than they had intended: 'We try to throw in a little elegant flippancy here & there, but grammar is a very solemn theme ...'. (McMorris, 2001:59)

'Elegant flippancy' is also found in his *Modern English Usage*, as when he writes under the entry 'infinite(ly)' that 'there are naughty people who will say *i*[*nfinitely*] when they only mean *great* or *much* or *far*'. His classification of speakers into five categories according to whether or not they know and/or care about the split infinitive is another instance of this. None of this 'jocosity' – Fowler's own word (McMorris, 2001:59) – survived Burchfield's rigorous revision.

'Elegant flippancy', whether actually funny or not, also characterises the tone of Simon's book, as illustrated by its title, but also, for instance, by his treatment of 'the wanton and shocking destruction of the good and necessary English word *gay*':

> One fine, or not so fine, day, some homosexual pressure group in America decided that the preferred term for *homosexual* was henceforth to be *gay*. And forthwith there was *gay liberation*, *gay pride*, *gay whatnot*, and, worse

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> yet, the substantive *a gay*. Although there is considerable disagreement about how it all came to pass, the presumable source of the term is *gay boy*, the Australian slang for *homosexual*. Where, however, did the Aussies get it?
>
> (Simon, 1980:25)

While an actual joke – 'A panda walks into a café. He orders a sandwich …' – is behind the title of Truss's book, its tone is similarly lighthearted: 'Now, so many highly respected writers adopt the splice comma that a rather unfair rule emerges on this one: only do it if you're famous' (2003:88). We find similar tongue-in-cheek comments in Baker. In Rule xxx, in which he criticises the use of *came* as a past participle, he concludes: 'If these Writers persist in this Use of the Word *Came* [as in *He is Came*], I would advise them, not to be inconsistent with themselves, to employ the Word *Went* likewise with the Auxiliaries, and to say *He has went* …', adding that 'if we should bring them all to conform to it, we should have a new Language' (1770:30–1). Even Lowth aimed to be funny when concluding his discussion of preposition stranding with the comment: 'This is an Idiom which our language is strongly inclined to' (1762:127–8). None of his followers, or indeed later scholars reading the grammar, identified the sentence's deliberate jocosity, silently correcting it into the more proper version with pied piping (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2006).

Lowth has been branded an icon of prescriptivism, and although it was not so much his grammar itself that was prescriptive as such as the use of it that was made of it by his users or even other grammars after him, it is only in the following decades that prescriptivism takes off the ground properly. The nineteenth century became an age of prescriptivism, with, as Michael (1997) typifies it, a 'hyperactive production of English grammars'. Grammars were published in unprecedented numbers, though without bringing anything new; instead, they kept mulling the same ground in order, presumably, to gain a section of a growing market that consisted of the linguistically insecure. This was a new development in the standardisation process, and its roots can be found in the early 1760s, when there is a sudden increase in grammar production for the common market (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2008[b]). But the usage guide is a different phenomenon altogether, in that rather than focusing on actual grammar it aims to point out and correct linguistic errors and – increasingly – to offer the public some entertainment in the process. Books like Baker's *Reflections* and Burgess's *Five Hundred Mistakes* came to be in increasing demand, catering for a market of socially ambitious people who were in need of linguistic guidance accordingly.

Following the publication of Baker (1770) as the first usage guide, this new development came to stay, as the current popularity of Fowler, Bryson, Truss and many similar works illustrates. To understand what all this is about, it is helpful to look at the standardisation process as described by Milroy and Milroy (1991). Contrary to the commonly referred-to model of standardisation developed by Haugen (1966), Milroy and Milroy distinguish seven stages which they present in a somewhat different order than Haugen: selection, acceptance, diffusion, maintenance, elaboration of function, codification and prescription (1991:27). For the history of English, this model works extremely well (see Nevalainen and Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2006:274–86), and it has the distinct advantage of including a prescription stage, which Haugen's model does not. This final stage in the standardisation process is still in process: coming after the codification stage, in which the rules of the language were codified in grammars and dictionaries, the next stage in the process is that users have to be made to apply these rules. This led to an ever continuing battle between normative writers and the general user, as the norm that defined what was considered correct in formal speech or writing was largely an artificial one. According to Michael (1991:11), for instance, this norm is 'contradicted by the everyday experience of the children to whom [the grammatical rules] were taught'. What we now call prescriptivism – a term with generally negative connotations – was the result; rather than describe language as it is actually used, its aim was to uphold the standard of linguistic correctness that had previously been laid down in grammars of English. People involved in this are usually called purists, guardians of the English language, or, more negatively, shamans and language mavens (Bolinger, 1980; Pinker, 1994:383–8).

Conclusion

Normative linguists are looked down upon by modern linguists as prescriptivists, primarily

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for the reason that their approach to language is not descriptive (Pullum, 1974). In their turn, as the controversy between Honey and Trudgill has shown, normative linguists object against alleged linguistic permissiveness which they attribute to modern linguists with their strict requirement of taking a descriptive approach to language. Both views are, of course, simplifications of the true state of affairs (see for instance Cameron, 1995). In this paper, I have argued that, starting with Baker, prescriptive writers should be looked upon as a discourse community in their own right, aiming to preserve the standard as laid down in grammars and dictionaries. Modern linguists such as those in Trudgill's review of Honey's *Language is Power* similarly form a discourse community which is likewise characterised by 'common interests, goals and beliefs', though very different ones from those of normative linguists. It is important to realise, I think, that even Lowth was aware of this, and of the fact that there were different approaches one might take to language. When explaining his aims in the preface to *A Short Introduction*, he distinguished between language as a *system* ('the Language') and language *use* ('the practice'):

> It is not owing then to any peculiar irregularity or difficulty of our Language, that the general practice both of speaking and writing it is chargeable with inaccuracy. It is not **the Language**, but **the practice**, that is in fault. (1762:v–vi; emphasis added)

Lowth was concerned solely with grammar at the level of usage, and he had adopted this approach deliberately. 'Those,' he wrote at the end of his preface,

> who would enter more deeply into this Subject, will find it fully and accurately handled, with the greatest acuteness of investigation, perspicuity of explication, and elegance of method, in a Treatise intitled HERMES, by JAMES HARRIS Esq; the most beautiful and perfect example of Analysis that has been exhibited since the days of *Aristotle* (1762:xiv–xv).

Lowth, according to Pullum (1974), has always been 'more mentioned than read'. The above recognition has come about by looking at his grammar in the context in which it was written. We consequently have been able to learn that Lowth was not the prescriptivist that modern writers have depicted him to be. For all that, he was of course not a linguist in the modern sense either: as a discipline, linguistics was yet to come into being. As for the rise of the prescriptivist tradition shortly after his grammar was published, it is, I believe, important to recognise that different approaches to language and to grammar represent the ideas of different discourse communities, each with their respective interests, goals and beliefs. This would, I think, bring recognition and acknowledgement for what are in effect different branches of a single discipline of linguistics. It would consequently no longer require a writer like Simon to assert that he is not afraid in his treatment of usage problems 'of being prescriptive, aggressive, and optimistic' (1980:xvii), or for Milroy and Milroy to assure their readers in the opening sentence that their focus in *Authority in Language* (1991) would be a 'dispassionate' one. A dispassionate approach to language is a prerequisite of any scholarly discipline, particularly linguistics. ■

Note

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Continued on page 44

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served by damaging people's self-confidence in this way.

I am no defender of the species that White once scornfully called 'the modern liberal of the English Department, the anything-goes fellow' (Guth, 2006: 416); I have no time for sloppy or ungrammatical writing. But I object to the time that is wasted in trying to teach students falsehoods about English grammar. And I think this is a linguistic issue of unusually large practical importance. Linguists should not be shy about condemning all the harm that this opinionated, influential, error-stuffed, time-wasting, unkillable zombie of a book has done. ■

Notes

1 Thanks to Andrea Olinger for generous help in providing me with an older edition of *Elements*; to Barbara Scholz for supplying comments on earlier drafts; and to Jan Freeman and David Russinoff for both of these valuable kinds of assistance.

2 Eleanor Gould Packard assisted White in the 1979 revision. Some of the points introduced may have been her idea rather than White's.

3 Mark Liberman, 'The evolution of disornamentation', on Language Log (http://158.130.17.5/~myl/languagelog/archives/001912. html), 21 February 2005.

4 'Once you look for temporary potential ambiguity, you'll find it everywhere', Language Log (http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=267) 24 June 2008.}

5 Heidi Harley noted this on Language Log (8 April 2008, http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=4).

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