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Prescription and standardisation in linguistics

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3 PRESCRIPTION AND STANDARDISATION IN LINGUISTICS

This chapter is linked with Chapter 2 as it discusses prestige accents from the perspective of their formation and maintenance. It introduces and analyses crucial linguistic processes that determine and influence standardisation of a particular accent and prescriptive attitudes attendant upon it.

3.1 Prescription in Linguistics

Prescription in language encompasses a set of beliefs that certain variants are better than others; this may concern sounds, lexical items, grammatical forms, and, at a higher level, accents, dialects and languages. To a certain extent, linguisticprescriptive attitudes differ little from those that govern other areas of life (e.g. table manners, the highway code, etc.). The favoured variants are imposed from above by the authorities and they are also arbitrary, i.e. there is no inherently linguistic reason why this or that variant should prevail over the other(s).

Prescriptive beliefs appear to be extremely popular with the lay public and the despised variants are often described as sloppy, ugly, or illogical. If social advancement is denied due to one's race or religion, this may receive considerable attention in the media and the culprit may face a serious punishment. As far as language is concerned, such discrimination seems to be well alive (cf. Beal 2008a).

There are a number of reasons why to be wary of such prescriptive comments.

Firstly, in some particularities they might be extremely elitist as they condemn a very large part of society. Prescriptive attitudes approach linguistic features in absolute (either...or) rather than relative (more or less) terms. Modern

sociolinguistic research (the pioneering studies of which include Labov 1966, Trudgill 1974 and Eckert 1989) clearly demonstrates how revealing it is to approach linguistic data quantitatively, since speakers hardly ever only make use of one variant while never using the other (another) one. Instead, they typically employ the possible variants of a particular linguistic variable according to e.g. style, situation, or the relative position of interlocutors. In other words, the preferred variants are context-dependent. A modern example to give is the usage of the glottal stop to replace /t/. This sound comes in for a lot of criticism; yet, it is present in most regional dialects as well as in RP. Its usage, however, varies enormously in relation to a number of social variables (cf. 4.2.2.1).

Secondly, prescriptive ideas fail to make the basic distinction between language systems and their use in real-life situations. This distinction was first proposed by de Saussure (1983 [1916]): he distinguishes between la langue (an abstract language system) and la parole (the use of language in specific situations). Later, Chomsky (1965) made a similar distinction when he coined the terms competence and performance (roughly corresponding to de Saussure's terms). If this distinction is not borne in mind, it opens the door for comments that, for example, see the glottal stop as 'a degenerate tendency in modern speech [which] detracts from intelligibility' (McAllister 1963: 34). Of course, there is nothing intrinsically 'wrong' with the glottal stop as far as its presence in the language system is concerned since it is, as a matter of fact, a perfectly standard sound in Danish, for example. Its actual use in social context is another matter though, and people show great sensitivity towards the use of this feature in various styles, speech events and phonetic environments. However, prescriptive comments of the type above generally seem to ignore the differences between formal and informal styles or phonetic environments.

Thirdly, linguistic matters are closely linked with speakers' sense of identity. If a speaker is ridiculed for the way they speak, it may obviously have serious consequences because 'a speaker who is ashamed of his own language habits suffers a basic injury as a human being: to make anyone, especially a child, feel so ashamed is so indefensible as to make him feel ashamed of the colour of his skin' (Halliday et al. 1964: 105). In 1.7.2.1 we have seen that the use of the glottal stop in place of /t/ helps young people in Middlesbrough construct their own local identity (as opposed to older generations that see themselves grouped with either Yorkshire or Tyneside). Any attack on the glottal stop there is thus tantamount to an attack on the people and their identity.

Prescription had long been looked down on by professional linguists. The 18th century (see 2.4) witnessed an unprecedented rise in language prescriptivism. As a result, language professionals in the 19th century tried hard to establish linguistics as a scientific discipline with no space for matters of sloppiness or ugliness. They refused to omit some features from scientific interest in the same way as

botanists do not refuse to study some fungi because they are inedible or because they give off a repulsive smell.

The first half of the twentieth century even intensified the effort to force prescription out of the scope of the discipline. American structuralism, most notably represented by Bloomfield (1933), labelled prescription as unscientific; structuralists attempted to study language completely out of the social context. Likewise, there was no place for prescription in Chomsky's generative grammar and his notion of *ideal-speaker* (1965). Hall (1950: 33) went so far as to claim that 'there is no such thing as good or bad, correct or incorrect, grammatical or ungrammatical, in language'. Other language scholars always maintained the descriptive basis of their discipline. Daniel Jones's *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1955: vii) claims in the Introduction that '[n]o attempt is made to decide how people *ought* to pronounce; all that the dictionary aims at doing is to give a faithful record of the manner in which certain people do pronounce'. Aitchison (1978: 13) insists that 'linguistics is *descriptive*, not prescriptive [and] a linguist is interested in what *is* said, not what he thinks *ought* to be said'.

It is understandable why so many linguists decided to reject prescription (and social context). Their focus was on the language system (langue) and they insisted on the scientific nature of their inquiry. Yet, they failed to answer the crucial question: why do so many people approach the matters of language prescriptively rather than descriptively? In other words, why do people open a dictionary not looking for information about how certain people pronounce but how they should pronounce?

Socially realistic linguistics takes social context seriously and it deems it worthy of linguistic inquiry. Consequently, prescription (as an exclusively social phenomenon) is allowed to enter the scope of linguistic research. One of the first linguists to acknowledge the importance of prescription was Haas, who claimed that prescription 'is an integral part of the life of the language' (1982: 3). He acknowledged what might otherwise appear obvious: people do attach social values to language forms and these forms (despite the proclaimed principle of arbitrariness) are far from equal. Linguistics (or rather sociolinguistics) thus must try and answer the main question: 'why linguistic differences that are essentially arbitrary are assigned social values' (Milroy and Milroy 1991: 19)? Another question for sociolinguistics to answer is why people who clearly distinguish between 'correct' and 'incorrect' variants keep using the latter and do not adopt the former in spite of some disadvantages attached to those 'incorrect' variants.

As far as the former question is concerned, the uniformitarian principle (Labov 1972: 275; also p. 21 here) suggests that social values, in one way or the other, have always been attached to linguistic variants. Nonetheless, the overview offered in 1.4 reveals that prescriptivism in English only became really prominent in the 18th century. The 18thcentury saw an unprecedented wealth of societal

changes—the rise of the middle class being arguably the most important one (Langford 1994: 61). The middle class bridged the gap between the working class and the upper class, and, crucially, brought about relative social mobility. Language became one of the readiest means that people had at their disposal to signal which class they belonged to (or aspired to). Thus, competing linguistic variants came to be associated with adjectives such as polite, proper, vulgar, and sloppy, i.e. they became subject to value-judgments.

Milroy (1987) seems to provide the answer to the latter question with her social network theory and the notions of overt and covert prestige. Overt prestige refers to institutional pressure exerted by the authorities (education, media, employment, etc.) to maintain standard norms. Covert prestige, on the other hand, enforces community norms among peers; these norms often prefer non-standard variants. If covert prestige prevails, members of a particular language community do not adopt standard forms even though their social advancement may suffer as a result; to put it another way, they prefer to adhere to the values of their peer group rather than to those values represented by institutional authorities. Milroy (1987: 208–9) views the two opposing tendencies as competing ideologies of 'solidarity' and 'status'.

As has been said above, the discrepancy between arbitrary linguistic features and social values attached to them is brought about by people's refusal to observe one of the fundamental principles in linguistics as a science: all linguistic variants are equal since they are essentially arbitrary (cf. De Saussure 1983 [1916]: 44). Clearly, people feel that certain words or sounds are better than others. We may again bring to mind again the distinction between *language system* and *language use*. Ordinary people are not interested in language systems as they always make use of language in particular social context, which is subject to considerable stratification and cultural conditioning. Various aspects of language then reflect this stratification and conditioning. In other words, for ordinary people the 'unscientific' matters of superiority/inferiority or beauty/ugliness in language appear to be extremely important.

Value-judgments attached to some linguistic variables and their variants are subject to change. Thus, one variant may be considered superior in one accent while inferior in another one: e.g. rhoticity in the standard pronunciations of American and British English. Furthermore, attitudes to a particular variant can change dramatically within one accent: we have seen in 2.4.2 that the standard variant of /r/ in England was rhotic until the end of the 19th century. Up until then, non-rhotic realisations had been considered vulgar and provincial, largely because the [r]-less variant defied spelling.

In spite of the fact that language guardians make a strenuous effort to promote the 'correct' variants, their attempts in the spoken language seem to have been rather futile: RP is an [r]-less accent today, the glottal stop appears to be gaining

more ground in the accent (4.2.2.1), and intrusive /r/ can now be considered an RP feature as well (4.2.2.5). The lack of success prescriptive zealots have had is also demonstrated by the number of people that speak RP; there are no exact numbers, of course, but the guestimates are rather low (cf. p. 62). Of course, the number crucially depends on the definition of RP, since there must be significantly fewer speakers that speak the variety Wells promotes in comparison with the model of Upton.

Nevertheless, prescriptive attitudes, often channelled through mass media, do succeed in one extremely important area: they raise public awareness of linguistic 'superior' forms. Even though the lay public may not use these forms themselves, they believe there is a standard and, moreover, they seem to have a rather precise idea of what the 'correct' forms are. Indeed, as Milroy and Milroy put it, 'mass media channels effectively give rise to *awareness* of an innovation, but have little influence in promoting *adoption'* (1991: 30). This is confirmed in Rogers and Shoemaker (1971), who prove that personal contact is far more important than mass media when it comes to adopting innovations of any kind (not just linguistic ones).

Generally speaking, prescriptive ideas have enjoyed far greater success in spelling and grammar. As a consequence, it is often asserted that Standard English can be spoken in a number of accents (e.g. Quirk 1968, Upton 2008). RP is merely one of many accents that Standard English is spoken in.

3.2 Process of Accent Standardisation: the case of RP

Linguistic prescriptivism is closely linked to the process of standardisation. We may say that the former could not exist without the latter; prescriptive attitudes are only possible if they are backed by a set of standardised forms.

Standardisation is viewed in Milroy and Milroy as a historical process that is based on ideology; a standard language, including pronunciation is then 'an idea in the mind rather than a reality—a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent' (1991: 22–3). It is an inevitable and never-ending process that exists in every live language; as far as English is concerned, standardisation was needed especially in the modern period when English became the official language of a huge empire. If no uniform standard had been offered, the differences between local dialects and accents might have prevented effective communication.

As regards standardisation, the English language is rather a special case since institutional codification has never been established; instead, the English language has been standardised by means of what may be called natural codification, i.e. language awareness of the 'proper' variants raised by elocution-

ists and various publications in the past three hundred years or so, as details Chapter 1.

Milroy and Milroy (1991: 8) also define standardisation as a process involving 'the suppression of optional variability'. Local accents thus may have more linguistic forms to choose from than RP. For instance, there is only one option for the FACE diphthong in RP (the closing diphthong [ɪ]) whereas there are as many as three options in Geordie (apart from the RP diphthong, local people in the North East may use a general northern sound [eː] as well as a typically local variant [ɪə]); cf. Watt and Allen 2003: 268).

The process of standardisation can be split into the following stages (adapted from Milroy and Milroy 1991: 27):

— selection
— acceptance
— diffusion
— maintenance
— codification

Of course, these stages are not separate; on the contrary, they overlap to a great extent. Drawing on the information in 2.6 and 2.7, these stages are now applied to Received Pronunciation.

Received Pronunciation was selected as the accent to be imposed (cf. Giles et al. 1974) on others due to suitable social and cultural circumstances. Firstly, it was the accent of the upper middle rather than the upper class; the upper class is hardly ever active in the process of language change (Chambers 2002: 53–59). Secondly, it was supraregional and therefore suitable for groups of people coming from a large variety of regional backgrounds.

The accent was then accepted by important institutions—not only the educational ones (prestigious public boarding schools), but also the army, the Church of England, and influential segments of the private sector, too. Later, crucially, the media also played their part.

Public broadcasting along with the educational system and other institutional authorities helped to diffuse the accent (or public awareness of it) both regionally and socially.

The accent was then maintained through the acquisition of prestige and 'elaboration of function' (Milroy and Milroy 1991: 27). Upwardly mobile people realised the accent could be instrumental in achieving a higher position in society. In other words, the accent became closely associated with power, wealth, and it also began to be regarded as 'correct'.

In the last stage, this 'correct' accent was codified in a number of pronunciation materials, most notably in Jones (1917, and later editions), Gimson (1962,

and later editions) and also via Upton's model used in Oxford University Press publications. Apart from academic literature, the prestigious forms have also been promoted and codified via linguistic complaint from the lay public (or the 'complaint tradition', as it is called in Milroy and Milroy 1991: 91).

3.3 The Issue of Literacy: spoken and written discourse

Prescriptive issues and standardisation are closely linked with differences between written and spoken forms of a language. Standardisation of the former seems to precede that of the latter. We have seen in 2.4 that the advocates of standardised forms in English like Swift and Johnson in the 18th century focused solely on spelling, grammar and semantics; these categories are far more prominent in written rather than spoken discourse. Pronunciation only came into prescriptive focus in the 19th century.

The notion of literacy seems to underlie prescriptive ideas. Literacy is seen as a proof of being educated; it is only acquired at school at considerable pains (unlike speech that starts to develop naturally at birth; cf. Bowen 1998). As a consequence, in the prescriptive tradition written forms are preferred to spoken ones. In other words, spelling seems to determine speech. The logic of the argument is simple: if there is only one correct way to spell a word, then there surely must only be one correct way to pronounce it. To give an example, one should consider the long complaint tradition surrounding non-rhoticity, the presence of the glottal stop or the omission of /h/. The main argument against these forms is based on the fact that the sound is or is not 'there' (i.e. in spelling; cf. Mugglestone 1995: 103–4). The position of literacy and the notion of spelling pronunciation has been so strong that it enabled in the past to restore [h] in some words of French origin like *hotel* or *herb*. The words had been [h]-less in English (as they had been in the French language, from which they had been borrowed) for a number of centuries before the dominance of spelling brought about the change.

The focus on literacy also means that the standard discourse (not only pronunciation) is rather formal in its character. This would not be a serious issue if supporters of standard forms did not fail to distinguish between formal and informal styles (or as they are sometimes called the 'message-oriented' and 'listener-oriented' discourse, Brown 1982: 77). The presence of the glottal stop in message-oriented situations may be rather limited because if the focus is on the message, speakers usually try to convey respectability, reliability, and knowledgeability. The sound may, nevertheless, perform an important role in listener-oriented situations (e.g. to signal intimacy between speakers). To condemn the glottal stop as such, calling it is sloppy, vulgar or illegitimate (4.2.2.1 here) and

not taking into account various aspects of its use, appears to be rather ill-advised since it deprives speakers of an important part of their linguistic repertoire: it essentially prevents them from distinguishing between formal and informal styles of spoken English.

Message-oriented situations (e.g. public speeches) are exactly those that need practice and that are, naturally, problematic for those not accustomed to them. Yet, if people fail in this type of discourse, prescriptive attitudes often condemn such people as generally linguistically incompetent. Such people may, of course, display remarkable competence when being in listener-oriented situations (e.g. when talking to their mates in a pub). Milroy and Milroy sum the argument up by claiming that this sort of prescriptivism makes

> [j]udgments of linguistic inadequacy [which] are frequently based not on any objective or realistic measure of linguistic ability, but on an implicit prescription that an individual should have a particular and limited communicative competence. (1991: 140)

One of the reasons why standardisation is more successful in writing is the fact that spoken forms display much more variability due to the fact that speech is the place where linguistic change, by and large, originates (Labov 2001: 134). That is why studying language systems (mainly *context-free* written norms) only provides an incomplete picture of the discipline; linguists also need to take into consideration *context-tied* spoken discourse (cf. Milroy and Milroy 1991: 65). Milroy (1992: 202) confirms the strong link between linguistic change and social context by claiming that 'a linguistic change is a social phenomenon, and it comes about for reasons of marking social identity, stylistic differences and so on. If it does not carry these social meanings, then it is not a linguistic change'.