Sociolinguistic Standard versus Prescriptive Ideal

What is correct English?

B.A. Essay
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Abstract

Not all linguists support the view that language variations are equally complex and logical. According to language ‘purists’, both those from the past and the present time, some versions of language are considered to be better than others. They emphasise the fact that there are certain forms of a language, which are unchangeable, and people should apply them both in speaking and writing, whilst ignoring language changes, which are considered to be corruptions. There is a battle between two opposite views, which continues to this day: linguists who wish to prescribe rather than to describe the rules of grammar and those who wish to describe speakers’ basic linguistic knowledge, instead of telling them how they should speak. The main aim of this paper is to introduce and compare two main approaches to language: prescriptivism and descriptivism, and to investigate what is better for the English language and its speakers. Should linguists prescribe how the language ought to be spoken and written, or just record how, it is in fact, spoken and written in daily life?
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1. Introduction

Language change is a natural and inevitable process, which does not have to lead to its decay, as the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, wrote "Time changes all things: there is no reason why language should escape this universal law." (Aitchison, 2001, p.4). However, there are still a lot of educated people who are resistant to language change and seek for language purity. Differing views have led to a split between those who accept the changes and those who are hesitant. Prescriptivism is the idea that every language has its standard grammar, pronunciation, and spelling and any deviations from this is inappropriate. For example, a strict English grammarian will tell you not to split infinitives or to end a sentence with a preposition. Descriptivism, on the other hand, is basically a description of how language is actually being used by its speakers and attempts to explain why, ignoring what is right and wrong (Fromklin, Rodman & Hyams, 2011, p. 294-297).

These two approaches to language are often perceived as being at two opposite ends of the spectrum. Prescriptivists believe that you can control language and that the standard variation of a language should be officially sanctioned. There are many organisations all over the world, which try to define and establish control to standardise language. Prescriptive grammar is associated with a fear of change and the degradation of language, while descriptive linguistics recognise non-standardised varieties and observes how language changes, rather than preventing it from changing. English prescriptive grammar is based upon Latin grammar, as it was founded when Latin was still widely used. This means that there are many rules that may not make sense within a framework of modern English, as English and Latin are two completely different languages (Stewart & Vaillette, 2001, p. 14-16).

Language changes at different times and has variations from region to region. However, standard language favours one dialect over the rest, giving a high linguistic status to those who speak it, and a lower status to those who do not speak it. There is no such thing as good or bad grammar, as the main purpose of all grammar systems is to indicate to users how to interpret words and form sentences within each particular language. Of course, patterns of sentence formation vary from language to language, or
even between communities. However, the main essence of grammar is to make a
language mutually intelligible. No language exists which is unintelligible to those who
use it. Linguists often underline this undeniable fact to those who are upset by and
against the use of English in a ‘non-standard’ manner, which allow the existence of
sentences such as “He didn’t do nothing or I seen that” (O’Grady et al., 2011, p. 7-8).
Nevertheless, the term grammar is often used to refer to two different things: first, to the
rules applied subconsciously by those who speak a language, and secondly, a linguist’s
intentional attempt to codify these rules (Kenyon, 1938).

The main aim of this paper is to investigate which linguistic system is better for
the English language and its speakers. Whether linguists should write how the language
ought to be spoken or written, or just record how it is, in fact, spoken or written. This
paper consists of five parts. It begins with the brief introduction and definition of
prescriptive and descriptive grammar, and is followed by the history and development
of two grammar systems. Arguments between prescriptivism and descriptivism appear
in the fourth section of this paper. In the final part, the paper draws conclusions and
recommends the correct attitude to those two approaches by providing an objective view
and arguments for and against the form of the English language, which should be
considered to be correct and be promoted as an ideal version.
2. History and development of prescriptive grammar

This chapter is a short introduction to the History of English and development of prescriptive grammar. It gives deeper insight to the social and economic causes that led to the establishment of Standard English.

The Norman invasion of England in the Middle Ages transformed England into a multi-lingual and multi-dialectal nation in which Latin, French and English existed side-by-side. By the 16th century, language competence in those three languages was even required by the specialised, chiefly legal elite. English would have been their mother tongue; Latin was the language required by the Church, the Roman Classics, most forms of scholarship, and some politico-legal matters. Additionally, French was needed for administrative communications within Britain and was considered to be a trend which established itself throughout Western European society (Crystal, 2004, p. 1-2).

The Middle Ages were a period of significant population growth. This rapid increase of population led to its spread and the emergence of language variations and characteristics, which were particular to a region or community. The most noticeable differences between language dialects have been shown to exist between the most distant parts of Britain – the north and the south (Crystal, 2004, p. 2). During the Middle Ages in Britain, all accents and dialects had equal status. It was an age of language tolerance, where written language allowed the use of a wide range of regional variations, and variant forms were acceptable. None of the dialects were considered superior. English speakers cherished and accepted all varieties within the language, without suggesting and judging that they were somehow flawed. It was the only period in the history of English in which regional language varieties were so willingly and widely expressed (Crystal, 2004, p. 2).

In the fifteenth century individual writers has already displayed sporadic attempts to embellish and enhance their literary language, at least along certain limited lines (Baugh & Cable, p. 233). Nevertheless, the sixteenth century was the period in which a considerable amount of literary texts had appeared in order to admit and defend the patriotic value of the language against those who unflatteringly compared English to
Latin or other modern languages. This intellectual manifesto had changed the attitude towards English by emphasising the significance of its cultivation and insisting upon its adjustment to education and literary purpose (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 233).

Significant influence on the beginning of English language standardisation had an increase in the socioeconomic status of the southeast region of England, in particular, London, Oxford and Cambridge in the Middle Ages. Social changes always have linguistic consequences as the language form associated with power and prestige gains higher social status and at the same time determines the standard, which defines a proper and educated form of English. Such a process usually has an inevitable impact on the perception of dialects, where regional varieties begin to be evaluated as inferior and flawed. Nevertheless, it takes time to establish new linguistic standards, in Britain the differentiation and opposition between standard and non-standard varieties did not fully manifest itself until the end of the eighteenth century (Crystal, 2004, p. 2).

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the period of the Augustan Age in English, people searched for stability. This period was characterised by a strong need for order and regulation. The intellectual tendencies to standardise and fix English grew in strength. One of the main impetuses that led to a strong urge to set up the standards of correctness was the fact that many intellectuals from upper class society spoke different dialects, which was not socially a good situation for them. Before the Augustan Age of English, intellectuals’ main concern was whether it is worthwhile to use English in formal texts, where Latin had long since been traditional, if the addition of a large amount of new vocabulary to the English lexicon was justified, or if a more satisfactory system of spelling could be implemented (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 241). In this time, attention was drawn to English grammar, as it had been observed that English grammar is inconsistent and it suffers from the lack of a codified system. This leaves its speakers in a state of uncertainty as to what is correct English and what is incorrect English (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 241). John Dryden, one of the scholars preoccupied with Latin, wrote "I am often put to a stand in considering whether what I write be the idiom of the tongue…and have no other way to clear my doubts but by translating my English into Latin.” (Fromkin, Hyams & Rodman, 2011, p. 15). During the 18th century, significant progress was made in encrypting and standardising the lexicon of English.
At the beginning English was still viewed as a lawless, extremely imperfect language, which was prone to daily corruptions (Bergs & Brinton, p.969-970). In 1712, Jonathan Swift, the great linguistic conservative, objected to language impurities and called for an academy for "Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue ", arguing that: "our language is extremely imperfect; that its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions; and the Pretenders to polish and refine it, have chiefly multiplied abuses and absurdities; and, that in many instances, it is offend against every part of grammar." (Swift, 1712). Swift claimed that the language people used at that time was being highly corrupted, despite daily corrections. He insisted that English should gain a permanent, polished form, which could protect it from change. In the classical period, Latin was found to be purer and more educated than contemporary languages, because at that time Latin was a strictly written language, which did not have to face the changes that are natural to spoken languages. This phenomenon had influenced the ideas of seventeenth and eighteenth century writers who felt that English grammar should replicate that of Latin (Stewart & Vaillette, 2001, p. 14-16).

2.1 Prescriptive grammar rules

The chapter gives deeper insight into the process of creating prescriptive grammar rules in English and their consequences.

In the eighteenth century, Latin became the determinant of social status, because it was the language used by the most educated. However, with the expansion of the British Empire at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, and the rise of London as an imperial metropolis, English becomes one of the most important languages in the world. In order to give the language a purified and embellished form, scholars tried to replicate Latin grammar in the English language (Wright, 2000, p.6). The new middle class that emerged in the Renaissance wished to speak the dialect of the ‘upper’ classes, their desire led to the appearance of the many prescriptive grammar publications. Since then, the power to decide what is correct and what is not correct English grammar has been in the hands of scholars, such as Bishop Robert Lowth, who released "A Short Introduction to English Grammar with Critical Notes." The new rules of grammar prescribed by Lowth were in many cases influenced by his personal taste. He argued against the use of double negatives, as according to him
"Two negatives in English destroy one another or are equivalent to an affirmative" (Stewart & Vaillette, 2001, p. 16). Before his publication, such double negatives as “I don’t have nothing” were in common use in many regional language variations. The new grammatical rules introduced by Lowth, such as never using double negatives, and you in singular should be followed by the plural were, have been adopted into English grammar and reproduced by those who wanted to speak "properly" (Fromkin, Hyams, & Rodman, 2011, p. 295-296). Although the rule never allows use of double negatives, it is still valid to this day. Nevertheless, some of the modern artists such as the Rolling Stones did not hesitate to break the rule in writing the lyrics of the song Satisfaction (http://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/everyday-grammar-double-negatives/2743416.html):

"I can’t get no satisfaction
I can’t get no satisfaction
‘Cause I try and I try…"

The song would not have the same strong message if its words were compatible with the rules of grammar and written this way: “I cannot get any satisfaction?” Therefore, artistic creativity should not be embedded in the strict, frozen framework of grammatical rules. What is more, some of the richness in the English language comes from dismissing these rules. Hence, artists should not be criticised for fitting the language to their thoughts and refusing to adjust their ideas into the framework of prescriptive grammar rules.

Another influential scholar, John Dryden, in 1672, prescribed the rule to never end a sentence with a preposition, since then the correct version of the sentence: Where do you come from? was the sentence From where do you come? Although ending sentences with a preposition was a natural habit in English since the beginning of the Middle English period, it did not restrain him from prescribing this rule. Once again, he used the same argument to support the validity of this principle by arguing that he found it to be non-Latin (Stewart & Vaillette, 2001, p. 15). John Dryden had also banned the splitting of infinitives, since at that time people should say to go boldly where no one has gone before instead of saying to boldly go where no one has gone before. The only
argument that Dryden uses against the use of split infinitives and the ending of sentences with prepositions was that he found them to be non-Latin. However, in Latin infinitives are composed of one word, for example, the equivalent of the English word *to write down* is *describere*, which makes it impossible to split (Stewart & Vaillette, 2001, p. 15). However, in 1762, Bishop Robert Lowth attempted to confirm the validity of the principle to never end a sentence with a preposition. In contrast to Dryden, Lowth provides arguments to support his view. He says that "This is an Idiom which our language is strongly inclined to; it prevails in common conversation, and suits very well with the familiar style in writing; but the placing of the Preposition before the Relative is more graceful, as well as more perspicuous; and agrees much better with the solemn and elevated Style." Similarly, to Dryden, Lowth’s understanding of grammatical principles was influenced by the study of Latin, however, Lowth expressed his awareness that use of Latin grammatical rules in the English language is not always justified and may become problematic, and he objected to "forcing the English under the rules of a foreign Language" (Lowth, 1762, p. 107).

2.2 Prescriptive grammar rules today. Is it wrong to end a sentence with a preposition?

The Latin grammar model has gained complete acceptance in English. Some of the prescriptive rules established in the 17th and 18th centuries are still valid. This chapter questions the validity of some of the prescriptive rules and provides rational arguments, which reveal the groundlessness of their application in today's English.

The philosophy not to end a sentence with a preposition is a remnant of Latin grammar, in which a preposition was the one word that a writer could not use at the end of a sentence, as sentences should end with strong words (Garner, 2000, p. 266). However, the rule does not necessarily make sense in a framework of modern English. Nevertheless, many textbooks and people still support the view that a correct English sentence should not end with a preposition. Although some sentences in English, which end with prepositions sound natural, for instance: infinitive structures *Tom had no one to play with*, questions beginning with who, where, what, etc. *What are you interested in*, passive structures *She enjoys being fussed over*, or relative clauses *They must be*
convinced of the commitment that they are taking on. (http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2011/11/grammar-myths-prepositions). In some cases, using prepositions at the end of a sentence is even required in order to avoid overly formal and awkward sounding sentences. Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s response to the criticism he received, associated with the occasional use of prepositions at the end of a sentence, is often quoted as an example of how, in some instances, it is ridiculous and unnatural to avoid prepositions at the end of sentences. He replied, "This is the sort of nonsense up with which I will not put" (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2011, p.296). Avoiding prepositions can lead to producing linguistic complexities, which handicap proper comprehension. In 1947, a scholar summed it up as follows: "Those who insist that final prepositions are inelegant are taking from the English language one of its greatest assets – its flexibility – an advantage realised and practiced by all our greatest writers except a few who, like Dryden and Gibbon, tried to fashion the English language after the Latin." (Garner, 2000, p. 267).

3. Descriptive linguistics

The chapter analyses the Descriptivists’ approach to grammar and indicates the main differences between prescriptive and descriptive doctrine.

"Just read the sentence aloud, Amanda, and listen to how it sounds. If the sentence sounds OK, go with it. If not, rearrange the pieces. Then throw out the rule books and go to bed" (Fromkin, Hyams, & Rodman, 2011, p.295). This quotation perfectly reflects the descriptive linguistics approach to grammar. Contrary to prescriptive grammar, the main aim of descriptive grammar is the observation and description of the grammar and language used in different communities, without making judgments related to the proper application of prescribed grammatical rules (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, p.294). Descriptive grammar operates from the presumption that the only determinant or authority concerning what is considered to be a valid and correct form of language are its native speakers, and there is nothing wrong with sentences such as, "I ain’t doing nothing." In other words, the utterances that violate the prescriptive grammar rules of standard English may be found to be grammatically correct in different dialects of English, and appropriate in different registers of those dialects (Gordon, 2008).
Descriptive grammar describes grammar patterns that appear in sentences spoken in different varieties of a language and accepts them without making any judgments.

According to descriptivists, no language or variety is superior to any other in a linguistic sense. Linguists who take a descriptive approach to language do not dismiss different varieties of language because they do not fulfil the prescriptive grammar requirements. Descriptive rules do not describe the ideal utterances that should appear in English; instead, they describe the real use of language in its natural environment. For example, a prescriptive grammarian might say do not use double negatives, it is illogical and violates the rules of grammar, while a descriptive grammarian only formulates the facts, for instance, some English speakers split infinitives and some use double negatives for negation. They assume that sentences with double negatives or a preposition at the end of a sentence are not really errors of English, but rather errors of standard English. It seems obvious that if an English speaker will produce a sentence with double negatives such as "I don't know nothing," the use of double negatives will not impair the comprehension. Descriptive grammar rules are determined by usage rather than the logic conveyed in prescriptive grammar rules (Stewart & Vaillette, 2001, p. 14-16).

3.1 Language varieties

The paragraph below shows some examples of non-standard usage of English in native English speaking countries.

English can differ on various linguistic levels including sound, vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and pragmatics. Standard English is just one of many different dialects of English. It is usually associated with the prestigious dialect, which is local to London and the Central Midlands. However, the adoption of a particular language variety as a standard version is always related to political and economic power, and has nothing to do with the linguistics aspects (Kersti, &Burridge, 2010, p. 3). Standard English is just one of many varieties of English, which is usually the language used in writing and printing and in the education system in all of the English speaking countries. It is also the variety taught to non-native learners. Standard English is purely a social dialect, which is often found in a variety of educated people, as it is the language associated
with high social status and prestige (Tony Bex & Richard J. Watts, p. 2). Dialects are mutually intelligible variations of a language and they resemble each other on all linguistic levels much more than they differ, otherwise communication between the dialects would be impossible (Tony Bex & Richard J. Watts, p. 7). The various linguistic variations within the spoken and written English of particular geographical regions are determined by the origin of their settlers. Therefore, the lexicon and grammar of the native English speakers is very diverse. For example, the use of present tense verbs varies between the dialects as is shown in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>East Anglia</th>
<th>North and Southwest</th>
<th>Southeast and ‘standard’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>walk</td>
<td>walks</td>
<td>walk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>walk</td>
<td>walks</td>
<td>walk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s/he</td>
<td>walk</td>
<td>walks</td>
<td>walks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we</td>
<td>walk</td>
<td>walks</td>
<td>walk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they</td>
<td>walk</td>
<td>walks</td>
<td>walk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another example of dialectal variations in English is the use of various combinations of modal verbs in the dialect of Hawick in the Scottish Borders region. The sentence below shows the example of double modal auxiliary construction where *can* and *could* follow another modal auxiliary.

a. You **should can** do it (=You ought to be able to do it)

b. Rose **would could** visit Archie if she went to Melrose. (=Rose would be able to visit Archie if she went to Melrose.)

We can also encounter the ‘*embedded modal auxiliary constructions*’ in the dialect of Hawick such as:

c. You’ll **have to can** see her whether you like it or not. (=You’ll be able to see her whether you like it or not.)

d. I **would like to could** speak Gaelic. (I would like to be able to speak Gaelic.)
These types of syntactic constructions are forbidden in standard English. According to prescriptive grammar rules, modal auxiliaries cannot appear after the complementiser *to*. In contrast to non-standard dialects in Scotland, standard English allows only the use of modal verbs in syntactic structure (O’Grady, Archibald & Katamba, 2011, p.486-488).

Dialects may also contain morphological differences. The table below compares the use of the verb *be* in the present tense in standard English and in the East Somerset dialect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
<th>East Somerset dialect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>am</td>
<td>be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You(SE)/Thou(East Somerset English dialect)</td>
<td>are</td>
<td>art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She/he</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>are</td>
<td>be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>are</td>
<td>be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they</td>
<td>are</td>
<td>be</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In standard English, the verb *be* has three forms *am, are* and *is*, whereas in East Somerset only two: *be* and *art*. Additionally, the subject verb agreement patterns are also different. In standard English, *is* occurs with the third person singular, and *are* with the rest except the first person singular. In East Somerset, *art* is used with the second person singular, and *be* occurs elsewhere (O’Grady, Archibald & Katamba, 2011, p. 493).
There are also noticeable differences between British and American English, both in lexicon and grammar, for example, the perfect auxiliary have is used with just and already in British, but is omitted in American English (van Gelderen, 2006, p. 261).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American</th>
<th>British</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I just/already ate</td>
<td>I have just/already eaten</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lexicon of British and American English slightly differs as some of the words that appear in both varieties have different meanings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>British English</th>
<th>American English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>homely</td>
<td>down to earth</td>
<td>ugly (of people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nervy</td>
<td>nervous</td>
<td>bold, full of nerve, cheeky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pants</td>
<td>trousers</td>
<td>women’ underwear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pavement</td>
<td>footpath</td>
<td>road surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to tick off</td>
<td>to scold</td>
<td>to make angry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In some varieties of English, the use of negatives also differs. The majority of English native speakers use the adverb anymore in a negative construction such as: That joke isn’t funny anymore or She doesn’t work here anymore. However, in some dialects, especially in Iowa, Ohio and parts of Canada, this is found in positive statements meaning “nowadays” for example: He complains a lot anymore, which means He complains a lot nowadays in the standard dialect of English (van Gelderen, 2006, p. 262). We can also observe different terms for naming the same nouns or items in the different varieties of English. Table 3.2 shows a selection of lexicon varieties gathered from dictionaries, native speakers and websites, corpora (van Gelderen, 2006, p. 266).
The table above shows that Australian English has more in common with British English, than American and Canadian English. However, we should keep in mind that there are also regional and demographic language differences within those countries, for instance, in Canada, *holiday* and *vacation* are preferred in different parts of the country. Another example is the use of the word *tap*. The study conducted in 1993 on both sides of the US-Canadian border reveals that the American equivalent (*faucet*) of the Canadian word *tap* is widely used away from the centres of political power in Ontario (van Gelderen, 2006, p. 266).

The differences between lexicons are the result of contact with indigenous and immigrant languages, and the preservation of some of the English words from 17th century. Some of the loan words in Australian English are taken from aboriginal languages and many of them relate to zoological and botanical terms such as: *bilby*, *kangaroo*, *koala*, *dingo*, *numbat*, *wombat*, *coolibah*, etc. (Australian National Dictionary Centre). On the other hand, the appearance of different terms in British and American English is caused by the loss in current British English of some of the words that go back to the 17th century which are still preserved in American English (van Gelderen, 2006, p. 264-267).
3.2 Attitudes to language variations

The process of standardisation gave rise to social and value judgments. The standard usage is often associated with high status and education. The chapter discusses causes and consequences of the belief that one dialect is superior to other variations within the language.

Language users often display strong attachment to a particular variation of the language; however, such a sense of attachment may take an extreme form, which leads to divisions within the speech community, as one of the dialects is perceived to be superior. Therefore, the usage of inferior or ‘a low’ form of the language is regarded as a sign of ignorance and poor educational background, which is found to be the cause of the spread and cultivation of corrupted forms of the language. English, like most modern languages, includes indicators of ‘correct’ usage that evoke strong reactions in people. The non-standard usages are often cited within letters, which appear in newspapers as being 'ill-formed', for example, sentences such as:

a. We was just doing us job (Nottingham Council worker on local TV news)
b. To boldly go where no one has gone before (Star Trek)
c. I ain’t never done it, Miss (Sheffield schoolchild)
d. Donuts (sign at Goose Fair, Nottingham).
e. 10 items or less (Marks & Spencer)
f. We have much to thank the government for (Prof. Ron Carter in an article on standard English)
g. The date is presented in tabular form (student’s sociolinguistics essay)
h. Hopefully the box office will be open when we get there (overheard on London bus)
i. If I was rich, I’d still do the lottery (old man in Birmingham newsagent)

All of these sentences are considered incorrect according to the prescriptive grammar and standard usage of English. In example a we can see that the subject and the helping verb do not agree and the possessive pronoun is non-standard as well. However, in the Nottingham dialect, such usage is grammatically correct, and it would be unnatural for its speakers to express themselves in a standard English in this context. Example b was
cited earlier in the paper as a violation of the prescriptive grammar rule to not split infinitives, nevertheless the correct form 'Boldly to go…' sounds slightly unnatural and loses its persuasive rhythm. On the other hand, example c violates the prescriptive grammar rule to avoid using double negatives in a sentence, as double negatives cancel one another and produce a positive, affirmative sentence. However, according to some variations of English, double negatives intensify the negation and are perfectly good constructions when a certain emphasis is needed. Example d shows the fast changes in American spelling, where the standard spelling *doughnut* has been gradually replaced by the simplified spelling form of *donut*. The sign *10 items or less* that appeared on a display stand in the shop Marks & Spencer, triggered a wave of criticism as according to speakers, who follow the prescriptive grammar rules, the term items is a count noun so it should be used with words denoting people or countable things such as few. Sentence f shows Prof. Ron Carter’s intentional attempt to break the prescriptive grammar rule to avoid splitting infinitives. Example g indicates a common mistake, which is often made by native speakers of English. The noun *date* is plural as it comes from the word ‘datum’ so sentence d violates the subject-verb agreement rule. However, due to the widely prevalent use of the non-standard construction ‘*date is…..*’ it seems very likely that this form will become adopted into standard ‘correct’ usage. Another interesting example is the overuse of the word *hopefully* in the sentence h as according to the old standard view of sentence grammar, the adverb ‘hopefully’ cannot be attached to ‘the box-office’, since the box-office cannot be hopeful. However, speakers often use ‘hopefully’ as a sort of pragmatic adverb to express his/her hopes. In other words, the sentence means ‘I am hopeful…’ The last example shows incorrect selection of the verb in the subjunctive mood, which is used to express various states of unreality such as wish, possibility, or judgment. In this case, the verb should be in the subjunctive mood ‘If I were rich’. However, nowadays very few native speakers understand this grammar rule and the ‘correct’ usage more often remains in frozen forms. It is very likely that the frozen standard form ‘If I were you…’ in British English will be replaced by a non-standard variation (Stockwell, 2007, p. 94-99).

Nevertheless, the process of standardisation gave rise to social and value judgments. The ‘correct’, ‘pure’ language usage was associated with high status, education, and morality. It was argued that the most appealing, idealised language is
spoken by the ‘best’ members of society, where other dialects claimed to have rustic, corrupted forms, which were often associated with the peasantry and working class (Schreier, 2014, p. 6-13). The false belief that English has a permanent and polished form with various dialects deviating from the norm may lead to the division within the speech community due to linguistic prejudice. People tend to judge another person’s education, social status, and wealth based on linguistics variations. Prejudiced attitudes to non-standard dialects often leads to discrimination against substandard varieties in public life. For example, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which was founded in 1930, once used only broadcasters who spoke standard English with an unvarying RP accent, as the BBC described its English as “the speech of educated professionals.” However, the requirement to speak with RP in the BBC was not part of a deliberate policy, rather it was the accent preferred by the media at that time. Fortunately, nowadays, the media display a higher tolerance towards various regional dialects. Today, presenters speaking standard English in a variety of different regional dialects are commonly heard on BBC broadcasts. Additionally, in 2005 the BBC initialised a national campaign to promote non-standard, regional dialects in Britain (Schreier, 2014, p. 7).

Although the RP English, or so-called Queen’s English, is spoken by only three percent of the population, its speakers have a significant advantage over the speakers of non-standard dialects when it comes to employment in high positions. Received Pronunciation is often associated with people who have a higher IQ and of a higher social class. The Telegraph mentioned a report from the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission which revealed that recruiters prefer certain accents over others, which gives an immediate advantage to those who speak with Upper Received Pronunciation, widely referred to as ‘posh’ English (Brummies’ accents are ‘worse than staying silent’, study shows...). Language communities decide which varieties of language enjoy the highest prestige and social status. Therefore, social judgments can be immediately extracted from speech patterns such as accent, grammar and pronunciation. However, prejudices towards less prestigious dialects are a result of location stereotypes rather than accent features. Nevertheless, there is still a strong correlation in Britain between dialect, accent, and social class as RP English is more commonly spoken amongst the educated, and is most closely associated with those in the upper class and
upper-middle class, who have received formal education. Nevertheless, linguistic
discrimination is culturally and socially determined due to a preference for one variety
of English over another, despite the fact that dialects are mutually intelligible variations
of language that contain equally complex and logical grammatical system (Schreier, 2014).

However, we should pay attention to the arbitrariness of "standard usage," as
standard British English is just one of a few varieties of standard English. In order to
illustrate the differences, we should reconsider the different use of [r] and the related
phenomenon of social judgments against these in Standard British and American
English. The omission of r in words, for instance, "car" "far" or "father" is characteristic
of Britain’s prestigious RP accent, and it differentiates its speakers from the speakers of
less prestigious rural dialects which preserved the r in their speech. On the other hand,
standard American English is the rhotic dialect, as the r pronunciation is consider to be
more prestigious and the r-drop in the north-eastern part of the United States is
generally viewed as an inferior, substandard variation of the language. A comparison to
the r-drop shows that none of the articulations are innately better than another, but
simply one variant is considered to be better or worse depending on a variety of social
factors (Fromkin, Hyams, & Rodman, 2011, p. 434).

Imposing one language or variety of a language on the population is often
closely and inseparably connected with issues of power and ideology. Therefore,
linguistic prejudices often have their roots in historical factors and social changes.
However, negative attitudes to non-standard varieties of language are more often
associated with undesirable social judgments related to a particular community rather
than to linguistic aspects such as accent, pronunciation, and grammar. The reasons why
a particular language variety is associated with specific traits or stereotypes are related
to historical events and social changes. Nevertheless, linguistic discrimination is
culturally and socially determined due to a preference for one variety of over another.
This is despite the fact that dialects are mutually intelligible variations of language
consisted of equally complex and logical grammatical systems (Schreier, 2014). Garner
cites William Saphire, according to whom the invention of prescriptive grammar rules is
just a source of discrimination and manipulation used by the people being in power
(Garner, 2004, p. 230):
“Some of the interest in the world of words comes from people who like to put less educated people down – Language Snobs, who give good usage a bad name. Others enjoy letting off steam in a form of mock-anger, treating their peeves as pets. But most of the interest, I think, comes from a search for standards and values. We resent fogginess; we resist manipulation by spokesmen who use loaded words and catch phrases; …”

4. Language change: progress or decay?

Language change is an inevitable and gradual process which is prompted by a variety of causes, of which some are natural and some are social. This chapter will discuss the causes and consequences of language changes.

All living languages go through an ongoing process of change. Nevertheless, linguistic change is a gradual, slow process, which does not lead to rapid alterations within a language (Fromkin, Hyams & Rodman, 2011, p. 488). Therefore, people never perceive their language as radically corrupted and altered in comparison to the language which was spoken a generation before. However, English has undergone a continuous, disruptive process of change throughout the three major periods in its history: Old English (approximately from 450 to 1100), Middle English (from 1100 to 1500), and Modern English (from 1500 to the present). Old English has become completely unintelligible for English speakers nowadays as relatively few Modern English words come from Old English. A fragment from Beowulf shows why Old English needs to be translated into Modern English (Fromkin, Hyams & Rodman, 2011, p. 489):

Wolde guman findan þone þe him on sweofote sare geteode.

He wanted to find the man who harmed him while he slept.

The example above illustrates that Old English differs from its modern equivalents in many respects and is incomprehensible for present-day readers. On the contrary, The Canterbury Tales, written by Geoffrey Chaucer approximately five hundred years after Beowulf, is easier to understand for modern readers as can be seen in the first lines of the Prologue (Fromkin, Hyams & Rodman, 2011, p. 489):
WHAN that Aprille with his shoures soote

The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote,

"When April with its sweet showers

The drought of March has pierced to the root…"

Nevertheless, Geoffrey Chaucer’s works, published only 200 years before those of Shakespeare, are considerably more difficult for the average reader than Shakespeare’s plays written 400 years ago, which are still familiar and comprehensible today. Fortunately, English changes slowly over time what enables today’s readers to comprehend the works written even 400 years ago (Fromkin, Hyams & Rodman, 2011, p. 489).

The opposing views on language changes are the ongoing subject of a fiery debate between Prescriptivists and Descriptivists. The prescriptive ideology values linguistic choices within the frame of established standards of correctness. They strongly encourage precision and discourage ambiguity. Prescriptivists view language as involving a multitude of decisions relating to sentence structure and word choice (Garner, 2004, p. 233). They oppose allowing one word to take over another’s meaning (infer- imply, lay- lie, like-as). Additionally, they discourage the uncritical use of two forms, especially opposing forms for one meaning (categorically – uncategorically, couldn’t care less – could care less, regardless – irregardless). Nevertheless, this problem is intensified because forms such as uncategorically and irregardless are often used as intensifiers despite the fact that their use violates prescriptive grammar rules. The expression could care less also gains in popularity, although the proper, dominant form used in printing is couldn’t care less. Some linguists argue that the use of could care less is illogical, as it does not convey what the speaker really means as could care less signifies that the speaker cares a little. Therefore, Prescriptivists value consistency and historical continuity (preferring “home in” over “hone in”, “just deserts” over “just desserts” or slough off over sluff of). Even though they approve the changes, they consider them beneficial for the language users. Meanwhile, Descriptivists perceive language as a matter of instinct and a tool that is incapable of being misused or abused. They do not resist linguistic changes as they find that this process is inevitable and a characteristic of all living languages. What is more, Descriptivists criticise Prescriptivists for their conservatism and artificial rules, which sooner or later will pass away and only make people insecure as to
whether or not they are using the right phrase. “If language is going to keep changing anyway – and it is – what is the use of posting the little rules and making people uncomfortable only to see them eventually blown away by the wind?” (Garner, 2004, p. 230-231). Nevertheless, according to Garner, the linguistic choices that a speaker or writer makes affect how others will react. Therefore, language users need systematic guidance in their linguistic choices, as the usage constantly evolves, and so must judgments about usage (Garner, 2004, p. 231).

John S. Kenyon an American linguist who draws attention to the equal complicity of both uneducated, lower-class speakers and people from a higher social status in the process of language change. According to him, it is not only the passive ignorance of uneducated people who spread linguistic changes unconsciously, which is powerfully influencing language usage. Kenyon underlines the fact that a profound, widespread linguistic ignorance of past and present linguistic patterns in English is also displayed in the language use of educated people, which also leads to gradual and significant changes within the language. He says that there are only a small percentage of American teachers of English, who have had scientific training in language areas such as phonetics (Kenyon, 1938, p. 467-468). Nevertheless, Kenyon emphasises the undeniable fact that even those literate, educated speakers are not able to follow the latest scientific improvements in their language. As a result, English is constantly moulded to a considerable extent by the ignorant efforts of those who might seek to improve it. They seem to be unaware that many usages and pronunciations now accepted as correct had their beginning in ignorant blunders. For example, before the 14th century you was only a plural objective pronoun. By the misunderstanding of certain ambiguous constructions such as: “if you like,” which means if it pleases you. You came to be accepted as a nominative form, (You are strangers). Due to another shift, you also came to be used for one person. Since it is exclusively usage which not only accepts or rejects, but first creates grammatical forms, syntactical constructions, meanings of words and pronunciation, you is as grammatically singular and nominative as it is plural and objective. Additionally, a whole series of blunders in verb forms has given us the forms: baked, carved, crept, stepped, bound, bit, spoke (Kenyon, 1938, p. 470).

Some of the language critics act on the baseless assumption that a word can have only one proper meaning; for example, they claim that the word alibi should never be used as the equivalent of the word excuse. According to them, alibi, has a very specific, limited and
legalistic connotation that does not allow for its usage as a synonym, as there is not any connection between these words. They find that an extended, figurative meaning of the word “alibi” is unjustified and incidental (Kenyon, 1938, p. 471). English teaching programmes leave us unaware of elementary linguistic’ phenomena such as "the nature and the formation of sounds we use, the simplest laws, and operative facts of sound change, the relation of spelling forms to the living languages, and the historical development and prevalence of standard types of speech with their interrelation” (Kenyon, 1938, p. 472-473). Errors arising from this kind of illiteracy have been adopted and accepted in the English language. We are often outraged at the use of drownd for drown, gownd for gown, acrost for across and onced for once; but we have accepted the d in astound, sound and thunder, and the t in against and midst, which originated from the same mistakes. Another example in the history of English is the acceptance of the h sound in words which migrated from Old French to English. When words such as honour, humble, horrible, hospital etc. came as loan words into the English lexicon, they had no h sound for centuries. However, the spread of spelling these words with h in imitation to Latin, led also to the articulation of the h sound in those words (Kenyon, 1938, p. 473-474).

On the contrary, to John S. Kenyon, the literary critic, Douglas Bush, represents a more conservative view towards the process of language change. According to him, common violations of traditional usage threatens to cut us off from a great heritage (Bush, 1972, p. 238-243). He expresses the concern that people are unaware of most prescriptive rules in English grammar "The only ‘errors’ familiar to the masses seem to be the split infinitive and the ending of a sentence with a preposition, and neither of these usages is an error” (Bush, 1972, p. 239). Douglas seems to support the 18th century conservative view that there is a direct correlation between the manner of language use and general intelligence. He says that careless English is both a symptom and the agent of sloppy thinking and feeling, and of sloppy communication and confusion. His view suggests that sloppy English hinders not only our thoughts but also interpersonal communication. Although he is completely aware that language is changing and growing, and to smaller extent decreasing, he claims that the changes should be initiated from above (Bush, 1972, p. 239-244). Changes should only be made by those educated men who are concerned about the use and abuse of language. Those people who value the relationship between rhetoric and persuasion and private and public
ethics. He is concerned that society becomes more reluctant to accept archaic and rigid discipline within the use of language and more often promotes uninhibited, unstructured freedom in speech. He also mentions the fact that in the past, new words, new meanings, or new phrases, had to go through a period of trial in order to evaluate their usefulness in language. According to him, nowadays corrupted English can be established overnight, thanks to the mass media of the airwaves. This type of language often becomes the current usage of people from different social classes. Douglas does not hide his negative attitude to the appearance of the third edition of the Webster Dictionary, where all words, meanings, and usages actually in use had been recorded. The aim of the third edition of the Webster Dictionary was the description of current American speech, without judgment as to what is right or wrong according to orthodox prescriptive rules. In fact, the concept of error had no validity, as any intelligible expressions which people could utter had an automatic right to be accepted (Bush, 1972, p. 239). Douglas criticises the writers of the dictionary for rejecting standard authors in favour of often insignificant temporaries as easy acceptance of "corruption" which nourishes carelessness and confusion.

Jean Aitchison, a Professor of Language and Communication, makes an attempt to ratify the myths that operate around language change. She finds that, first of all, we should distinguish between language change and its decay. According to her, language does not change for worse due to its sloppy use, as people naturally adapt their speech to suit their situation. Variation in speech is normal, because we adjust different styles of language to suit different occasions. We need to understand the language, rather than trying to correct it. She says that speakers are only free within the framework of the much earlier established order or the fixed outline of the language which is a part of our heritage. All languages have rules, for example, in English we usually put the verb inside the sentences. Although, we can also meet deviations from the norm, for example in Welsh, where the verb comes first: "Caught the spider the fly." Nevertheless all languages and dialects have their own subconscious rules and patterns for creating sentences, as without these rules communication would break down (Aitchison, 1996, p. 5). English has never reached the peak of perfection, its ever-shifting nature keeps it flexible, so it can cope with changing social circumstances. She does not support the Douglas Bush view that much of the language change is caused by the sloppiness and laziness of its speakers. As an example, she cites the omission of t in the articulation of
the word butter. In British English, the pronunciation of *bu’er* with a glottal stop in place of the older butter is often heard, as it is very difficult to pronounce a word with many consonants. For example, the articulation of the sentence "Betty had a bit of bitter butter" requires considerable muscular tension, in this particular case the omission of *t* cannot be regarded as sloppiness (Aitchison, 1996, p. 10). Another of Bush’s beliefs which Aitchison opposes is the idea that we somehow assimilate all of the floating changes from those around us, and this is something which we ought to fight against because it corrupts the language. According to her, changes are indeed created through social contact, but people adopt these in the manner they wish to fit into their own particular social group. Language change is a natural process and dynamic social development force us to waive the language in particular way in order to cope with the changing circumstance. However, it is better for a language and its speakers, when linguistic changes are initiated by those who care, as educated people usually spread linguistic changes in a more conscious manner.
5. Conclusion

The eighteen-century concerns and the rise of prescriptive grammar are perhaps understandable, as English grammar at that time was inconsistent and suffered from the lack of a codified system, which often left its speakers in great uncertainty as what is correct and what is not correct English. The application of Latin grammatical rules into the English language at that time seemed to be justified. Latin in the classical period was found to be purer and more educated than contemporary languages because it was strictly a written language, which did not have to face the changes that are natural to spoken languages. Although one scholar, Bishop Robert Lowth, expressed his view that the implementation of Latin grammatical rules in the English language is not always reasonable, and may become problematic, this did not stop him from prescribing the rule which forbade the use of a double negative. The prescription of rules was often based upon the personal taste of each individual scholar, as some of rules did not make sense within the framework of the English language. Therefore, real rules need to be distinguished from artificially imposed ones. For example, an old illogical belief that logic should govern language led to a ban on the use of double negatives. The authority behind prescriptive rule usage was often only supported by the statement that it is not in good use, as it does not imitate Latin. For example, the only argument Dryden had against the use of split infinitives and ending sentences with prepositions, was that he found them to be non-Latin. Although at that time, the Latin model had gained complete acceptance in English, the replication of some of the rules from Latin grammar should be questioned, as too rigid, unjustified rules often take away much of the flexibility from a language and make its speakers insecure about their language use. Unfortunately, most of the prescriptive rules from the 18th century are still more or less current, and are still influencing the view of educated on ‘correct’ grammar.

The prescriptive ideology values linguistic choices within a framework of established standards of correctness and strongly opposes changes that it finds unnecessary. However, a strong attachment to a particular variation of the language may take an extreme form, which can lead to divisions within the speech community, as one of the dialects is then perceived to be superior. Consequently, the usage of an inferior or ‘a low’ form of the language can be regarded as signs of ignorance and a poor educational background. Therefore, descriptive
linguistics recognises non-standardised varieties and observes how language changes, rather than prevents it from the change. Descriptivists acknowledge equal status to all variations within the language. They are aware that the adoption of a particular language variety as a standard one is always related to political and economic power and has nothing to do with linguistic aspects. Therefore, the answer to the question what is right and wrong in English and who decides this is not obvious. Nevertheless, the historical facts suggest that the power to establish the standards is in the hands of those who are more educated, and who gained a higher social prestige and control within the society. Nevertheless, prescriptivists should be free to promote and advocate their rules; however, they should not prevent public opinion from judging those rules. The Prescriptivists’ role cannot be limited to implementing new usage and the stigmatisation of everything which does not fall within the framework of prescriptive grammar rules. The new prescriptive rules should undergo a period of probation, as it is only when a part of the population has adopted the new usage that its adaptation will seem to be undesirable. The validation of old prescriptive rules, such as avoiding the use of double negatives or split infinitives, ought to be reconsidered for verification. Prescriptivists have to be realistic and cannot expect perfection from speakers, as they are not able to follow all grammatical rules. On the other hand, Descriptivists should continue to observe the variations within the language, as their research gives us deeper understanding of why language is in continuous change and how people understand grammar.

The opposing views on language change are the subject of an ongoing and fiery debate between Prescriptivists and Descriptivists. Prescriptivists are reluctant to embrace change that they find unnecessary, and they are opposed to replacing the old meaning of a word with a new one. Whilst Descriptivists find change to be an inevitable process. In fact, English is changing, but all living languages must change and also must adapt to new social circumstances. The English language continues to change as it has done throughout its history. Change makes language flexible, richer, and adaptable. The process of language change is gradual and does not lead to its decay as speakers will always make certain their language is efficient. Therefore, the grammarians should promote balance, peaceful coexistence and liberty within confines of the English language. The should describe language as it exists in real use and observe positive and negative values attached to different ways of speaking.
References


