

The Applied Linguist and the Dilemma of Prescription

From awareness of theory to an equilibrium in praxis

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This paper addresses the question “How should applied linguists deal with the expectation that their role is to maintain prescriptive standards in a language, particularly English?” A brief discussion of prescriptivism, language standardization, descriptivism, and linguistic security is followed by a proposal for a practical approach to language teaching through the awareness-raising of key metalanguage that can be of benefit to both students and teachers.

Key Words : Applied Linguistics, Prescriptivism, Descriptive Linguistics, TEFL, SLA, Language Teaching

Introduction

An important experience in my career as a language teacher (i.e., applied linguist) came while reviewing the test results of a Japanese middle school student. Among the questions marked incorrect was ‘John swims better than me’. The desired answer was: ‘John swims better than I’. There was a heavy silence as I realised the situation demanded either an endorsement of ‘correctness’, or a compromise with reality, for the student was not entirely wrong. While the student had not demonstrated the norm taught in class, the student had produced language commonly used by native speakers themselves.

This anecdote encapsulates the prescription/description divide, not only in the dichotomy of correctness, but also in the related issues of context, usage, and authority. A prescriptivist highlights the incorrectness of ‘better than me’, explaining the logic and value of ‘better than I’. A descriptivist claims so-called ‘correctness’, ‘logic’ and ‘value’ are irrelevant, and notes other factors to explain why the other form enjoys popular usage.

The aim of this paper is to briefly discuss the nature of language prescription. Related issues include standardisation, descriptivism, the role of the applied linguist, ‘linguistic security’ and ‘verbal hygiene’. By way of conclusion I suggest language

teachers find purpose and balance by employing a praxis of metalanguage in the EFL classroom.

Prescriptivism

Cook (2003:130) defines prescription as ‘an approach to language claiming there are absolute fixed rules which should be followed by everyone’. It has been described by Crystal (2003a:369) as an approach that uses ‘purity, logic, history or literary excellence’ to enshrine linguistic standards, and criticises any digression from these norms. Batistella (2005:48) adds that prescriptivism entails the belief ‘language and society will suffer unless grammatical inaccuracies and errors are corrected’.

The critique of prescriptivism (cf. Nunberg 1983) that rules of grammar have no scientific basis and are thus arbitrary was countered by Halpern (1997) with the admission that it is precisely these kinds of arbitrary laws (as opposed to natural laws) which need enforcement, and are therefore prescribed. Halpern put forward the question ‘What does language, undisturbed, become?’ This question was first addressed by Robert Lowth and Lindley Murray who authored influential, prescriptive grammars in the 17th and 18th centuries (cf. Crystal 2003b:78). A contemporary author of prescriptivist persuasion is Truss (2006[2003]), a self-styled ‘stickler’ for the correct use of commas and apostrophes:

Stand outside a Leicester Square cinema indicating--with a cut-out apostrophe on a stick-- how the title *Two Weeks Notice* might be easily grammatically corrected (I did this), and not a soul will take your side or indeed have a clue what your problem is. And that's sad....[W]hat happens when [punctuation] isn't used? Well, if punctuation is the stitching of language, language comes apart, obviously, and all the buttons fall off....If one can bear for a moment to think of punctuation marks as those invisibly beneficent fairies, our poor deprived language goes parched and pillowless to bed. (20)

What is noteworthy is that this book was well received by the public, indicated by the accolade, 'New York Times number one bestseller'. It serves as an example that language is an impassioned issue when linked to social standards (cf. Cameron 1995:78-115; Milroy 1999:41; Nunberg 1983; Ottenhof 1996; Pullum 1997; Rickford 1997). This suggests that prescriptivism as a sociolinguistic phenomenon is itself an important study; Newman (1996) argues prescriptivism is a 'myth' functioning to offset the 'linguistic insecurity' resulting from an inability to control dialect variation. Cameron (1995:14) similarly posits that steadfast support for prescriptive rules is partly due to the timely investment in acquiring them, which subsequently promotes a misguided belief that speakers have control over their language.

The consequences of prescriptivist education in the UK can be illustrated by this comment from an elderly person regarding language usage:

The reason why the older generation feel so strongly about English grammar is that we were severely punished if we didn't obey the rules! One split infinitive, one whack; two split infinitives, two whacks; and so on. (Crystal 2003b:91)

This reference to 'English grammar' should in fact be attributed to what is now termed 'traditional grammar'. Crystal (2003b:192) lists two features of traditional grammar that account for much of the negative perceptions of 'grammar' nowadays. First, that only formal styles of English were studied, to the effect that common, informal styles were considered 'incorrect' and received no positive reinforcement. Second, that Latin grammar was superimposed when prescribing English structures. The result was a

feeling that grammar was 'distant, unreal, arbitrary and arcane' (192). Two things can be noted here: the paradox of prescribing such a grammar, and the mistaken connection between Latin and English that early prescriptivists promoted.

This observation introduces another aspect of prescriptivism in regards to the language attitudes it promotes. Milroy (1999:45) explains these attitudes 'stand proxy for a much more comprehensive set of social and political ideas' sometimes presented as 'common sense'. Prescriptivism, with its inherent authoritarianism, agenda of uniformity and arbitrary language rules, is discussed in the national curriculum debate in the UK as representing conformity, a conservative ideology and a means of scaring the public into thinking society is in decline because of a supposed lapse in English standards (Cameron 1995:78-115). Similarly, US prescriptivists denounced a proposal to recognise African-American English, fearing the consequences this would have on English, when in fact such recognition was intended to assist instruction of the Standard (cf. Pullum 1997).

Standardisation

Standardisation can be defined as 'the reduction of variation in language' (Hope 2000:51). Its importance in relation to language prescription is not due to the misguided views that 'standards must be kept' or standardisation benefited (or benefits) from prescriptivist initiatives. Rather, an understanding of standardisation immediately brings into discussion the elements of variation, dialect and language change, which dispel these assertions. Moreover, a look at the process of standardisation reveals what kinds of norms are prescribed and why. As an ideology based on the goal of uniformity (Milroy 1999:19) standardisation is credited for achieving a widely accepted writing standard (23). It also created a 'public consciousness of the standard' (25). While arising primarily from social, political and commercial needs (and not from conformist initiatives by authorities), uniformity in writing--coupled with an expanded literacy and consciousness--set the stage for codification and prescription of written and formal norms (26). This effectively legitimised the formal registers of Standard English, but because colloquial norms were not codified, this resulted 'in a general belief that colloquial and non-standard forms are perverse and deliberate deviations [which] are illegitimate' (26). Hope (2000:51) stresses that standardisation precedes rather than follows

prescriptivism. Milroy (1999:30) and Yates & Kenkel (1999:5) support this assertion by explaining its origins in the 15th century when the dissemination of printed material was problematic due to linguistic diversity. What is important here is the value prescriptivists add to the process of standardisation—described as ‘always in progress’ (Milroy 1999:19)—and how the ideology of uniformity was superseded by one of prestige at a time when England underwent significant economic and social stratification in the 18th and 19th centuries.

This brief summary of prescription has highlighted some of its key elements that can be contrasted with the descriptive approach, which I will discuss in the next section.

Descriptivism

Linguistics is described as the scientific study of language, meaning it is a refusal ‘to accept unscientifically the ways of thinking that, ahead of any professional training, [is brought] to it’ (Mathews 2003:12). Widdowson (1996:78) defines descriptive linguistics as ‘an enterprise whose priority is the description of particular languages rather than the devising of theoretical models for language in general’ Batistella (2005:10) notes that ‘where prescriptivism conserves traditional distinctions, descriptivism sees standards following norms of widespread usage’ and ‘descriptivism makes it clear that the choice between prescribed forms and other variants is social and rhetorical’ (55). As for ‘descriptive grammar’, in comparison with ‘traditional grammar’ mentioned earlier, it is a model of what speakers know about their language enabling them to speak and understand (Fromkin et al. 2005:10).

The descriptivist approach is one where neither value nor prescription is part of an analysis. This is a pressing issue within applied linguistics, distinguished from descriptive linguistics as being ‘concerned with the relation of knowledge about language to decision making in the real ‘world’ (Cook 2003:5). For while a descriptive linguist may feel secure in detached objectivism when analysing language, it would seem that an applied linguist cannot ‘make decisions in the real world’ without making value judgements. Furthermore, as language teachers are considered applied linguists (7), they apparently find themselves in the contradictory role of maintaining prescriptive rules in language. A fundamental question, then, is: ‘how should an applied linguist handle this dilemma?’

Davies (2007:97) suggests a solution in his assertion that an applied linguist ‘views language as part of a whole’. This ‘whole’ encompasses the important points that language is always changing and that a teacher’s role is to prescribe what is acceptable and what is not with the awareness that ideas of correctness change too (Peters 1995 cited in Davies 2007:97). Other aspects of that ‘whole’ prompt a consideration of what the concern for correctness itself means, a recognition of relevant language problems related to the current political context, and a decision on action based both on the language learner’s interests and what standards prevail at the current time (102). An important realisation for the applied linguist then, is that the problem is not correctness itself, but rather the perception of correctness. It is this perception of correctness that is the defining component of prescriptivism so far discussed and this must be separated from the (descriptive) rules of grammar that have been either justified, distorted or rejected through the prism of authority. Thus, it can be shown that the role of a language teacher is not necessarily a contradiction as long as correctness (with its related sociopolitical context) is not viewed as the defining variable when evaluating language.

Verbal Hygiene and Linguistic Security

The inclusion of prescription within a newer understanding of linguistics is discussed by Cameron (1995) who coined a new term, ‘verbal hygiene’, to mean ‘the urge to meddle in the affairs of language’ (vii). She explains that verbal hygiene occurs whenever people reflect on language in an evaluative way’ (9). What has been described as ‘prescriptivism’ in the earlier part of this paper is ‘only one kind of verbal hygiene among many’ (9). It is important to note she questions the notion that linguistics is indeed descriptive (5) and argues that both prescriptivism and anti-prescriptivism are not unlike each other since both ‘invoke certain norms and circulate particular notions about how language ought to work’ (8). A main point of her argument is that some forms of prescriptive work are justified, and the linguist has a responsibility to carry them out, depending on certain principles (cf. 224-228). She contends ‘we are all closet prescriptivists’ (9). Since all attitudes to language are fundamentally ideological (4) what is important is that language controversy be addressed with one’s own subjectivity in mind and that with this knowledge verbal hygiene is justified by the higher purpose of communication’ (23).

Cameron (228-229) makes a plea for a more

critical engagement in language issues as a precondition for more constructive public discourse on language, and suggests linguists make an effort to bridge the divide between themselves and the public, asking 'how linguists might respond to the challenge of verbal hygiene...: Can we make any useful contribution to the discourse of language and value without compromising our own essential values?'

In accordance with Cameron, Yates & Kenkel (1999:2) flatly state: 'acknowledge it or not, we [English grammar teachers] are engaged in a prescriptivist enterprise' Their claim is qualified by a 'rejection of hard-core prescriptivism' (3). They cite Cameron in their assertion that 'reasoned reform efforts of linguists' have only met an irrational intransigence on the part of the general public and many language teachers; both of whom see 'language as value laden and not value free, [and view] mastery of prescriptive norms less as a threat than as an opportunity to deal with linguistic insecurity' (10). Their resolution hinges on this concept of linguistic (in)security; to unapologetically prescribe the most important standards of English with the aim of fostering the needed linguistic security in their students, who can then decide when their speech or writing should conform to the norms or when they should intentionally break them (16-17, my emphasis).

The point of my discussion so far has been to provide English teachers with an awareness that can support Davies' (2007:102) call to 'act as a bridge' between their language expertise and a prescriptive setting they find themselves in. I will expand on this in the final section.

Praxis

Taking cues from Cameron, Davies, and Yates & Kenkel, it is important to move away from theoretical debate and offer something for the classroom. One suggestion is to employ a praxis of metalanguage as an aid in presenting language targets. This is in the spirit of the communicative approach to language teaching, where the teaching of language itself is encouraged (cf. Canale & Swain 1980:28). While acquisition of language structures can be supported by instruction of such linguistic features as grammatical categories, so too can an understanding of language usage benefit from an active awareness of terms language scholars take

for granted. A simple example is the understanding of **standard** and **dialect**. It cannot be assumed that students consciously distinguish between the two, despite any passive awareness regarding their own L1 dialect. Moreover, explicit treatment of the standard promotes the non-prescribing view that it is merely 'a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform' (Milroy 1999:19).

Other terms to consider in this metalanguage are: **formal, informal, grammatical, ungrammatical, appropriate, and inappropriate.**

Not only can 'dialect' be noted, but also whether certain structures are 'formal' or not. Planned or unplanned discourse (written and spoken contexts) as well as purpose and setting, apply here. What is important about 'grammatical' is that it is not a value laden term, as in the prescriptive sense. Rather, it is defined by whether the rules of descriptive grammar can account for an utterance. While a descriptive approach to grammar may be challenging for students from a prescriptivist background, it will surely foster an understanding of the creativity, flexibility, and variability of English (as any language) in a way that prescriptivism cannot. Such an approach may subsequently promote a foregrounding of the core rules of English. 'Appropriate' and 'inappropriate' follow Hymes (1972), to be used when the 'formality' continuum lacks sufficient consideration of context. While Cameron (1995:234-235) and Fairclough (1992b) criticize the concept of 'appropriateness' regarding grammar construction, its inclusion here follows a presumption that its context in TEFL (where language is necessarily graded and conditions less complicated) outweighs any theoretical shortcomings.

One advantage to this structural, knowledge-based approach is the presentation of targets which are not mistaken as a contradiction, paradox or an arbitrary 'that is just the way it is' approach espoused by some EFL instructors¹. A caveat is that a cultural dimension may be needed. When the students' L1 has different semantic constructions, an attempt at clarification should be made in favour of an L1 understanding that a native teacher can follow. While this praxis may be criticised for being an oversimplification of sorts, I insist that such 'simplification' ultimately benefits the English learner who, in practice, is always trying to decipher the pragmatic layers of language that often goes unaccounted for.

1 This opinion is attributed to 17 years experience in the TEFL industry in Japan, both at private language schools and universities.

Conclusion

This praxis of metalanguage is grounded by a critical awareness of correctness, language change and learners' needs advocated by Davies (2007:93,102). It also aims for 'linguistic security' (Yates & Kenkel 1999) in EFL speakers in order to foster informed decision-making on language. An applied linguist who is aware of descriptive grammar, aware of the prescriptive attitudes in state education and aware of the challenges students face in the real world must have a practical method in which an equilibrium can be found. Thus, the employment of this praxis, which is a form of verbal hygiene, can--in the words of Cameron (1995:23)--be justified: 'better communication'.

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