

ON PRESCRIPTIVISM AND IDEOLOGY

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Abstract

In this article we explore the prescriptive approach to language use in its relation to ideology, past and present. Before Saussure, prescriptivists formulated rules from an instrumental perspective, which saw formal language as a means to persuade, partly by borrowing authority from august sources. We can now see this view as an ideology, and by analysing the mental components of ideology further we argue that the modern prescriptive approach to language appeals to a hierarchical view of society, and hence of language. This view is in conflict with the more recent ideology of equality, and contemporary processes of standardisation need to be understood by reference to this conflict. We argue at the same time that modern 'descriptive' linguistics, by taking the standard as its model, risks contamination from prescriptivism.

Keywords

<Prescriptive> <Descriptive> <Ideology> <Standard language> <Variation>

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el enfoque prescriptivo sobre el uso del lenguaje en lo que respecta a su relación con la ideología, ayer y hoy. Antes de Saussure, los prescriptivistas formularon reglas desde una perspectiva instrumental, que consideraba el lenguaje formal como medio de persuadir, tomando prestada en

parte la autoridad de fuentes prestigiosas. Actualmente se puede tomar esta visión como una ideología, y mediante el análisis de los componentes mentales de la ideología sostenemos que el enfoque prescriptivo moderno sobre el lenguaje apela a una visión jerárquica de la sociedad, y por tanto, del lenguaje. Esta visión se opone a la más reciente ideología de la igualdad, por lo que los procesos actuales de estandarización necesitan entenderse con respecto a este conflicto. Sostenemos también que, al tomar el estándar como modelo, la lingüística ‘descriptiva’ moderna corre el riesgo de contaminarse del prescriptivismo.

Palabras clave

<Prescriptivo> <Descriptivo> <Ideología> <Lengua estándar> <Variación>

I. Introduction

Like any cultural phenomenon, language can be looked at from either a disinterested, neutral standpoint or from one in which analysis is combined with subjective evaluation. In linguistics, the first approach is assigned the label ‘descriptive’ while the second is referred to as ‘prescriptive’. The opposition between the two standpoints is an important one, casting long shadows both inside academia and in the wider community. Inside academia, the importance of the distinction can be gauged from even a cursory perusal of the popular linguistics textbooks. For example, Lyons (1981: 47–54) has eight pages under the slogan *Linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive*, while Fromkin et al. (2010: 13) insist that the proper outcome of inquiry into language is a model that ‘does not tell you how you should speak; [but one which] describes your basic linguistic knowledge’. In the wider community, the distinction intersects with a host of attitudes and behaviours that have to do with how society is structured and how power is apportioned.

Among academics, the sharp awareness of the contrast between the descriptive and prescriptive approaches can be traced to the work of Saussure, who in his famous *Coup d’oeil sur l’histoire de la linguistique* characterizes prescriptive grammar (or, in his terms, simply *la grammaire*) in the following way:

Cette étude, inaugurée par les Grecs, continuée principalement par les Français, est fondée sur la logique et dépourvue de toute vue scientifique et désintéressée sur la langue elle-même; elle vise uniquement à donner des règles pour distinguer les formes correctes des formes incorrectes; c'est une discipline normative, fort éloignée de la pure observation et dont le point de vue est forcément étroit.¹ (Saussure, 1972: 13).

As the quotation implies, prescriptivism operates by reference to some approved model, be that at the level of pronunciation or syntactic structure, whereas descriptivism has no such point of reference. Within the prescriptive approach, therefore, intra-linguistic variation implies deviation from a norm, whereas from the descriptive perspective such variation is merely grist to the observer's mill.

In the present paper, we will argue that prescriptivism in its modern form is the expression of an ideology, one which is anchored both in human psychology and in a broader, hierarchical conception of how society should be organized. However, we will also suggest that in the historical context the normative stance embodied in the prescriptive approach was adopted above all for professional rather than ideological reasons. As regards the contemporary state of affairs, we motivate a perspective in which standardization and its implied crusade against variation is the most basic of all the so-called language ideologies, in the sense that it determines the overarching reference system by which speakers interpret and rationalize linguistic practice and its relationship to social structure.

In addition, we address two phenomena that typically receive less attention in the literature, viz. anti-descriptivism and anti-prescriptivism. The latter is a fundamentally social force deriving from what we take to be the primary cultural conflict of the modern era, which pits the older, hierarchical conception of how society should be organized against the emergent modern orthodoxy that can broadly be designated by the label 'egalitarianism'. In contrast, anti-descriptivism is more apparent in academic discourse, where the preoccupation with attaining so-called *explanatory adequacy* over and above

descriptive adequacy is all too often a pretext for reviving the arbitrary approach that was manifested by the prescriptive grammarians of bygone centuries.

II. A historical perspective on prescriptivism

The prescriptive approach appears to have been around for as long as humans have engaged in discourse about language. To linguists operating in the post-Saussurean context, the fact that this approach represented for many centuries the dominant mode of linguistic analysis is usually understood as being the side-effect of a pre-modern, unscientific mindset. However, while it is true that at least some prescriptive linguists were infected with a quasi-religious belief in the need to safeguard language from ‘corruption’,² a case can be made to the effect that the emergence and subsequent dominance (until relatively recent times) of the prescriptive paradigm reflects the originally instrumental function of grammatical teaching as much as any commitment to a renegade ideology.

Sophisticated linguistic analysis significantly predates the emergence of the Roman republic, being traceable at least as far back as the Vedic grammarians of ancient India. In the western tradition, however, it is the Latin rhetoricians who represent the prototype of the ‘linguist-as-instructor’. According to Law (2003: 62), “the ultimate goal of Roman education – to turn out good orators – cast its shadow over the earlier stages of schooling, in that the grammar-teachers (*grammatici*) shaped their instruction to act as a preparation for rhetorical training”. Within this framework, to be considered useful, discourse on language had to offer something more than detached description. Just as the medical expert or the lawyer offers a service to their client, so the linguistic analyst had to be seen to impart something to their disciple that would be of productive benefit to him in his career or progression through society. Within the rigid pedagogy of the Roman state, this ‘offer’ consisted fundamentally in an induction into both the practice of eloquent discourse and into the conceptual principles that underlay the maintenance of this practice.

Core elements of the latter are summarized by Quintilian, perhaps the most celebrated of all the professional commentators on the Latin language, in the following extract from the *Institutio Oratoria*:

Est etiam sua loquentibus observatio, sua scribentibus. Sermo constat ratione vetustate auctoritate consuetudine. Rationem praestat praecipue analogia, nonnumquam etymologia. Vetera maiestas quaedam et, ut sic dixerim, religio commendat. Auctoritas ab oratoribus vel historicis peti solet [. . .] Consuetudo vero certissima loquendi magistra, utendumque plane sermone, ut nummo, cui publica forma est.³ (Inst. orat. I, vi. 1–3)

Reason, antiquity and authority are leitmotifs of prescriptive discourse and, as such, their presence in the above text is entirely unsurprising. On the other hand, Quintilian also appeals to usage (*consuetudo*), which at first sight implies a more empirical, even descriptive perspective. However, when Quintilian later explains what he means by *consuetudo*, it is clear that he reserves for himself, and by extension grammarians generally, a filtering or ‘gate-keeping’ function.

[. . .] in loquendo non si quid vitiose multis insederit pro regula sermonis accipiendum erit. Nam ut transeam quem ad modum vulgo imperiti loquantur, tota saepe theatra et omnem circi turbam exclamasse barbare scimus. Ergo consuetudinem sermonis vocabo consensum eruditorum, sicut vivendi consensum bonorum.⁴ (Inst. orat. I, vi. 14–15)

The foregoing extracts, like many others that can be cited from the ancient texts, undoubtedly betray an elitist attitude towards language use. However, this clearly unscientific approach is most plausibly attributed to the analyst’s awareness of the need to ascribe social utility to their work, rather than to an irrational outlook per se. By creating and nurturing the perception that there is a single legitimized way of engaging in linguistic practice, the analyst invests their own activity with functionality, but at the same time reinforces the myth

that behind observable usage stands an enduring, reified entity to which full access is mediated by a guild of professional experts.

In the Spanish-speaking world, the leading figure of the prescriptive tradition is commonly thought to be Antonio Nebrija, the author of what appears to be the first grammar of a modern European language. Despite the many centuries separating the publication of Nebrija's *Gramática castellana* (1492) from the period during which Quintilian was active, the preoccupation of both scholars with the teleology of linguistic analysis is quite striking. Indeed, in the prologue to the *Gramática*, Nebrija goes so far as to remind his patron, Queen Isabel of Castile, that she herself had initially been uncertain of the utility of the work:

*[. . .] cuando en Salamanca di la muestra de aquesta obra a vuestra real majestad: τ me pregunto que para que podia aprovechar [. . .]*⁵
(Gramática castellana Folio 3 r.)

While Quintilian's teachings naturally derived their functionality from their relationship to the conventional career pathway of the Roman elite, Nebrija's own work was conducted within a very different social context, in which linguistic analysis had no obvious material value. He thus had to improvise, diffusing the teleological issue raised by Isabel in Salamanca by presenting his grammar as an instrument of the imperial enterprise, specifically with the suggestion (Folio 3 v.) that his text would enable the Spanish language to be taught to the vanquished enemies of the emergent Spanish state, as well as to all those nations (Basques, Navarrans, the French and Italians) who had 'algun trato τ conversacion en españa' ('some dealings or conversation in Spain').

Allied to the foregoing purpose was the notion that the deeds of the monarch needed a vehicle for their preservation (Folio 3 r.). In the following text Nebrija explicitly links the propitious political context with what he takes to be the state of near perfection that the Spanish language had achieved by the end of the 15th century, illustrating nicely the interaction between two of the principal

concepts that underlie the normative approach, viz. instrumentality and the more abstract perspective according to which the grammarian becomes the guardian of a specific, qualitatively superior instantiation of the language.

I sera necessaria una de dos cosas: o que la memoria de vuestras hazañas perezca con la lengua: o que ande peregrinando por las naciones estrangeras: pues que no tiene propia casa en que pueda morar. En la çania dela cual io quise echar la primera piedra. τ hazer en nuestra lengua lo que zeno doto en la griega τ Crates en la latina. Los cuales aun que fueron vencidos delos que despues dellos escriuieron: alo menos fue aquella su gloria τ sera nuestra: que fuemos los primeros inuentores de obra tan necesaria. lo cual hezimos enel tiempo mas oportuno que nunca fue hasta aqui. por estar ia nuestra lengua tanto en la cumbre que mas se puede temer el decendimento della: que esperar la subida.⁶ (Gramática castellana Folio 3 r.)

A final justification for Nebrija's analytical enterprise was that his *Gramática* would assist in the acquisition of Latin, presumably in the sense that, by learning how to analyse their own language, Spanish speakers would become more adept at finessing the more intricate linguistic problems posed by the classical tongue. From one point of view, this rationalization is simply a further illustration of the need felt by the pre-modern analyst to invest their work with functionality. But it is also emblematic of the close relationship that was felt to exist between the subject matter addressed by the rhetoricians of antiquity and the grammarians of the early modern period, a belief which in one form or another persists to the present day.

To summarize so far, the apparently arbitrary and non-scientific dimension to the prescriptive mindset can, in part at least, be regarded as a by-

product of the need felt by the early pioneers of linguistic analysis to invest their work with functionality.⁷ In western Europe, the prototype for this ‘analyst as gate-keeper’ is the Roman rhetorician, whose job was to assist young men in their advancement through the various levels of Roman society. An analogous instrumentality is apparent at the outset of the modern era in the first of the grammars of the modern languages, Nebrija’s *Gramática castellana*, although here the grammarian subordinates his work not to the professional advancement of individual members of the elite, but to that most prototypical construct of the late Renaissance, the building of the nation state.

With the rise of the bourgeoisie across Europe, prescriptive linguists discovered arguably their most enduring market, in the sense that the emergent professional classes together with the ‘new nobility’ represented a growing pool of individuals with a natural instinct for linguistic self-improvement. The most emblematic of the linguists who flourished in this environment was the 17th-century French grammarian Vaugelas, whose stated aim was to “condamner tout ce qui n’est pas du bon ou du bel Vfrage”⁸ (Vaugelas 1663: Préface, VII, 1).

Vaugelas cleverly exploited the social trends of his time and in so doing achieved a lasting authority (see Ayres-Bennett, 1993: 35–37).⁹ On the one hand, he explicitly adopted court usage as his linguistic model by defining *le bon usage* as ‘la façon de parler de la plus saine partie de la Cour’¹⁰ (Vaugelas, 1663: Préface, II, 3), a stratagem which coincided with the centralizing tendencies of the age and specifically the consolidation of an absolute monarchy. Secondly, Vaugelas’s avowed objective of promoting clarity and purity dovetailed perfectly with the objectives of the newly founded Académie Française. Third, he found a ready audience among the newly created nobility, who were anxious to assimilate themselves to the mores of the traditional nobility, in language as in behaviour and dress. And finally, his work satisfied what was felt to be a genuine linguistic need. Demands for a codification and standardization of usage had been made from the early 16th century and, by promoting unambiguously a particular model of usage (that of the royal court), Vaugelas effectively addressed this issue. Analogously to Nebrija, then, Vaugelas can be seen primarily as a professional, tailoring his approach to the demands of the time and delivering prescription because that, in an important sense, was what the market was calling for.

We complete this succinct historical conspectus of prescriptive thinking with a brief look at Andrés Bello’s *Gramática de la lengua castellana destinada*

al uso de los Americanos (Santiago de Chile, 1847). This is in some ways a paradoxical work, given the author's avowed intention to avoid falling into the trap of blindly promoting Peninsular Spanish usage at the expense of Latin American usage: "No se crea que [. . .] sea mi ánimo tachar de vicioso y espurio todo lo que es peculiar de los americanos"¹¹ (Bello 1984: 33). For despite this apparent readiness to observe rather than criticize internal variation within Spanish, Bello still insists on the normative status of the grammatical system that he describes. Indeed the first two of his *Nociones preliminares* could easily have been written by Quintilian or Nebrija:

1. La GRAMÁTICA de una lengua es el arte de hablar correctamente, esto es, conforme al buen uso, que es el de la gente educada.

2. Se prefiere este uso porque es el más uniforme en las varias provincias y pueblos que hablan una misma lengua [. . .] al paso que las frases y palabras de la gente ignorante varían mucho de unos pueblos y provincias a otros, y no son fácilmente entendidas fuera de aquel estrecho recinto en que las usa el vulgo.¹² (Bello, 1984: 35)

As with the efforts of the earlier Spanish and Hispano-Latin analysts, however, the prescriptivism in Bello's approach does not arise *ex nihilo* but stems rather from a more fundamental concern with the teleology of grammatical analysis. In this regard, Bello is very explicit indeed, stating (*ibid.* p. 33) that his principal reason for composing his grammar was to prevent Spanish suffering the fate of Latin in post-imperial Europe:

Pero el mayor mal de todos, y el que, si no se ataja, va a privarnos de las inapreciables ventajas de un lenguaje común, es la avenida de neologismos de construcción, que inunda y enturbia mucha parte

*de lo que se escribe en América, y alterando la estructura del idioma, tiende a convertirlo en una multitud de dialectos irregulares, licenciosos, bárbaros; embriones de idiomas futuros, que durante una larga elaboración reproducirán en América lo que fué la Europa en el tenebroso período de la corrupción del latín [. . .] Sea que yo exagere o no el peligro, él ha sido el principal motivo que me ha inducido a componer esta obra [. . .]*¹³

Quintilian, Nebrija, Vaugelas and Bello wrote at very different times from one another and, superficially, their motives for engaging in linguistic analysis were diverse. In a very fundamental sense, however, they are remarkably similar in that their analytic output is subservient to a greater objective. Thus their condemnation, implicit or explicit, of intra-linguistic variation is not itself programmatic, an irrational manifestation of snobbery or academic prejudice, but rather it is a wholly predictable consequence of the need for linguists to rationalize or justify their activity in historical eras in which synchronic linguistics did not exist as a science in its own right.

III. Descriptivism and anti-descriptivism

The putting of linguistics on a proper scientific footing was in fact achieved only with the advent of Saussure. In his *Cours de linguistique générale*, Saussure identifies the two major tasks of linguistics as being (i) ‘de faire la description et l’histoire de toutes les langues qu’elle pourrait atteindre’¹⁴ and (ii) ‘de chercher les forces qui sont en jeu d’une manière permanente et universelle dans toutes les langues’¹⁵ (Saussure, 1972: 20). In addition to highlighting the importance of diachronic research, the first of these objectives effectively defines the working space of descriptive linguistics. And in this regard, Saussure was clear that linguistic description should not abstain from capturing all aspects of language, including forms that under the prescriptive approach would count as deviations from the agreed norm:

La matière de la linguistique est constituée d'abord par toutes les manifestations du langage humain [. . .] en tenant compte, dans chaque période, non seulement du langage correct et du <<beau langage>>, mais de toutes les formes d'expression.¹⁶ (Saussure, 1972: 20)

If the first task of linguistics, according to Saussure, was essentially empirical, the second was clearly theoretical and in Saussure's formulation (*chercher les forces qui sont en jeu d'une manière permanente et universelle*) we can already detect a concern with the universal apparatus of language that would be rebranded by Chomsky as Universal Grammar. In principle, detached linguistic description and the search for the universal principles of language are natural allies, the one providing the raw data for the other. Arguably, however, while cloaking themselves in the trappings of the hypothetico-deductive method, linguists in the 20th and 21st centuries have not managed to fully escape from the arbitrary rejection of variation that characterized the overtly prescriptive discourse of the pre-Saussurean age.

Since the Chomskyan revolution of the mid- to late 20th century, linguistic analysis has become avowedly mentalistic. With this development, the object of study, Saussure's *matière de la linguistique*, has undergone a subtle transformation, overt description becoming progressively crowded out by the need to map the structure of a psychological entity which Chomsky (1986) refers to as the 'I-language' (where 'I' stands for 'internal' or 'intensional'). In this newer approach, two axiomatic beliefs conspire to render the paradigm broadly anti-descriptivist in nature. Firstly there is the assumption that theoretical conclusions about language structure can only be drawn if intra-linguistic variation is disregarded. As Chomsky (1965: 3) himself put it, '[I]inguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community'. Such a speaker does not of course exist, nor does the relevant speech community, and to the extent that these constructs are not naturally given, the linguist is obliged to reconstruct them using his or her own judgment, much as the prescriptive grammarians of bygone centuries took it upon themselves to rule on matters of correct usage.

The second assumption that militates against a truly descriptive approach is the belief that the evidence provided by individual speakers is configured in a hierarchy of reliability, the opinion of some speakers implicitly being considered less important than that of others. Once again Chomsky can be seen as legitimizing this perspective, suggesting, for example, that it is merely a ‘pretence’ to claim that informant judgments ‘give us “direct evidence” as to the structure of the I-language’ (Chomsky 1986: 36). While there is obviously a case for screening linguistic data in order to weed out the excrescences of language pedagogy, an approach that generally assumes fallibility among speakers in practice empowers linguists to ignore variation and to privilege what is in effect a modern form of the *consensum eruditorum* by which Quintilian lay such store. In this regard the quotation below from the prominent French syntactician Nicholas Ruwet is revealing.

la grammaire générative, abordant des problèmes de plus en plus complexes et délicats, recourt de plus en plus à des jugements très subtils, sur lesquels les sujets hésitent, se contredisent, etc. Le risque d’arbitraire devient grand. Autrement dit, et surtout quand les problèmes étudiés se situent aux confins de la syntaxe et de la sémantique, voire de la pragmatique, les jugements bruts ne signifient plus grand-chose: ils exigent d’être interprétés [. . .] Une question se pose peut-être, que nos linguistes, bons démocrates, préfèrent laisser de côté: y aurait-il des degrés dans la compétence linguistique? Certains sujets parlants seraient-ils plus doués que d’autres pour exploiter les possibilités latentes dans le système? [. . .] la tradition grammaticale n’avait peut-être pas tout à fait tort de privilégier les grands écrivains.¹⁷ (Ruwet, 1990: 77; cited Veland 1998: 101)

The key issue here is that the judgments (and by extension the linguistic behaviour) of individual speakers are claimed to require interpretation by the

linguist. But to what criteria can the latter appeal, other than to his or her own intuition, which in almost all cases will have been moulded by the invariant standard variety of the language that is used in schools and universities? Thus although the modern, apparently scientific analyst no longer talks of ‘authority’ or ‘correctness’, it is difficult in practice to see how variation fares better in the modern paradigm of theoretical linguistics than it did under the overtly prescriptive regimes of the pre-Saussurean era. According to Radford (1988: 10), a leading vulgarizer of the Chomskyan paradigm, variation can be dismissed as falling within the purview of sociolinguistics, with the following (remarkable) result:

For practical purposes, most linguists describing a language of which they are native speakers rely on their own intuitions, and thus the grammar they devise is essentially a grammar of their own idiolect, which they assume is representative of the language as a whole.

With unintended accuracy, the above quotation encapsulates perfectly how easy it is for arbitrary assumptions to be mistaken for linguistic description. As part of this, we can note that the linguist’s readiness to take his or her own idiolect as representative of the language as a whole is of a piece with what Joseph (1987: 2) calls the ‘synecdochic’ status of the standard language, whereby a single invariant grammar comes to stand in place of the myriad varieties that actually constitute the language in question.¹⁸

IV. The ideological dimension

So far we have looked at instrumental or professional motivations for adopting a prescriptive approach. However, one of the major artefacts of the prescriptive enterprise is the creation of the theoretically uniform and fixed entity

known as the standard language. In their role as guardians of this construct, the work of prescriptivists acquires an overtly ideological character, for example in the attempt to repel linguistic invaders of working-class origin from “contaminating” the standard language. Both the fact that such an enterprise is actually pursued and the fact that it is doomed to failure are fundamental components of what might be termed the contemporary sociolinguistic dynamic, as we discuss in more detail below. At this point it suffices to observe that standardization is perpetually fighting a rearguard battle against language change, and from this point of view the process may be seen as a conflict between two opposing ideologies.

The term ‘ideology’ is itself not unproblematic, despite its widespread use in academic discourse since at least the latter half of the 20th century. The complexity of the issue is illustrated by the length of the list of definitions of the concept given by Eagleton (1992), even if several of the sixteen senses of ideology he lists are fairly closely related. One can define an ideology in a neutral way by suggesting that it takes a partial or biased view of the social world, in order to make sense of it. In addition, a common, pejorative understanding of an ideology is of a world-view that helps to legitimize and maintain a set of power relations. Nor are these definitions mutually exclusive. As we are obliged to impose patterns upon the data that bombard us, an ideology helps to make a situation intelligible and, in an analogous way, people tend to rationalize or justify their behaviour by reference to a system of beliefs. In the spirit of Balkin (1998: 1–3), understanding an ideology can be viewed as a procedure whereby the ideology is broken down ‘into its variegated mechanisms’, the latter being no more than ‘special cases of the ordinary processes and operations of human thought’, such as protection of the ego and the tendency to think metaphorically or metonymically.

A sense of the relationship between brute human psychology and ideology underpins Eagleton’s quip (1991: 2) that ideology is ‘what the other person has’, which captures the undoubted truth that individuals tend strongly to regard their own world-view as objective or neutral, and indeed may not notice it, while perceiving bias in that of others.¹⁹ Moreover, the preference for one’s own point of view may be allied to a more fundamental human trait. As Hobbes expressed the matter long ago, ‘such is the nature of men, that howsoever they may acknowledge many others to be more witty or more eloquent or more learned, yet they will hardly believe that there be any so wise as themselves,

for they see their own wit at hand and other men's at a distance' (*Leviathan*, chapter 13). In this perspective ideology is the expression, on the one hand of a fairly innocuous kind of egotism that is fundamental to human nature, and on the other of individual temperament. This then is one of the 'ordinary processes and operations of human thought'.

A further crucial point, obvious enough but worth stating because central to our investigation, is that ideologies are *normative*; they propose a view of the world, or an aspect of the world, as it should be. Even ostensibly non-normative ideologies, like religions having the aim of seeing things objectively, lay a charge upon their adherents to follow a pattern of behaviour. The normative character of ideologies appears to be underpinned by a more basic psychological trait; what Dennett (2006: 109–114) calls the 'intentional stance'.

The essential concept is not new; Dennett cites Hume (1777) to the effect that 'we find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice and good-will to every thing, that hurts or pleases us'. In other words, we attribute intentionality to persons, animals, conceptual systems like ideologies and even things. Our response is normative where the perceived intention contradicts our preferred viewpoint. Dennett suggests that this tendency may be biologically adaptive. In the context of evolutionary psychology, it seems likely that survival strategies designed to promote reproduction, foraging and defence against predators will be enhanced by an intentional stance, or what is sometimes called a 'theory of mind'. As Dennett points out, the latter term is unsuitable in the measure that our conjectures about other minds are generally intuitive and not best described as consciously framed 'theories'.

The intentional stance has far-reaching consequences. No reflection is needed to see that things can have no intentions, even if we retain a naive stratum in our psychology that holds this vestigial view, but a little more is required to realize that intentionality is also ruled out of conceptual systems and their cultural expression. This is simply because they are too complex, and here Balkin's analytical approach, which highlights among other things the relationship between ideology and the ability to think metonymically, comes into its own. For there appears to be a widely shared tendency to see intention exemplified, metonymically, in the manifestations of an ideology. Applied to

linguistic practice, this means ideology as it finds expression in variable language. Speakers most likely have no *conscious* awareness that they are expressing an ideology when they speak, while they appear in contrast capable of identifying it (or projecting it) in their role as hearers. The classic sociolinguistic findings of Labov (1966) on self- and other-reporting appear to instantiate this conflict. Among other things, Labov's study revealed that speakers having the most non-standard pronunciation tended to judge other, similar speakers most severely in terms of the ideological beliefs associated with Standard English. What this seems to show is that a sample of speakers in New York City in the early 1960s had internalized the standard ideology, but that this was at odds with their everyday social practice, as constrained no doubt by the local network in which their social practices took place. The overt normativity reported by Labov, which appears to be typical of standard language cultures generally, can be analysed as a response to the expression of competing ideologies, the (from the informant's viewpoint) antithetical manifestation becoming imbued with intentionality through the above-mentioned process of metonymy.

Turning now to the standard language itself, a common view holds that standardization is but one of several *language ideologies*. Under Silverstein's (1979: 193) definition, such ideologies comprise "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use". And for L. Milroy (2003: 161), "language ideologies may be viewed as a system for making sense of the indexicality inherent in language, given that languages and language forms index speakers' social identities fairly reliably in communities". Given the foregoing remarks about the relationship between ideology and the ordinary processes of human thought, the key terms in the two quotations are 'rationalisation', 'justification' and 'making sense'. Beyond this, however, standardization (together with its obverse, anti-prescriptivism, which we discuss in Section V) can perhaps be seen as the expression of a broader conflict, which pits a hierarchical view of how society should be ordered against an egalitarian one. From that perspective, the sets of beliefs alluded to in Silverstein's definition can be understood as 'second-order' ideologies, the primary dynamic being that the standard draws prestige from the power of its users. Similarly, it seems likely that hearers make 'sense of the indexicality inherent in language' by using their knowledge of how dialect maps on to social structure, a process which, in the modern era at least, implicitly references the standard variety of the relevant language, together with its cultural moorings.

This obviously raises the question of what the standard language itself indexes. In this regard, attitudes towards Standard French can serve as a useful guide, given that French is one of the languages that has been most subject to prescriptive influence. Lodge (2004: 207) lists the beliefs current in France about the standard language as threefold: the ideal state of the language is one of uniformity; the most valid form of the language is to be found in writing; the standard is inherently better than the non-standard varieties (more elegant, clearer, etc.). If we take these three beliefs as a convenient starting point, and as widespread across cultures having standard languages, we see that they are not all of equal interest. Nor is it possible to separate them clearly in every case. A further qualification is that judgments of different types tend to be applied to the three linguistic levels of analysis: speech often attracts aesthetic judgements, grammar tends to be vulnerable to pseudo-logical arguments, while lexis, as we shall see, is above all subject to the *o tempora, o mores* state of mind.

Uniformity

Regarding the widespread negative perception of language change, Labov remarks (2001: 6): “some older citizens welcome the new music and dances, the new electronic devices and computers. But no one has ever been heard to say: ‘It’s wonderful the way young people talk today. It’s so much better than the way we talked when I was a kid’”. This is quite an effective piece of rhetoric, but like much rhetoric it achieves its effect by presenting a rather misleading selection of the pertinent facts. Older people may well react favourably to new technology, but one can question whether products like these have as much indexical value as changes affecting and expressing social identity: speech, clothing, political views and cultural attitudes more generally. Older speakers are notoriously more conservative, both culturally and politically. While the latest smart phone or watch functions no doubt as a fashion accessory and status symbol, new technology is also practically useful in a way that indexical language is not.

The desire for uniformity in language manifests itself as resistance to variation and change, in speech and in writing. Are the motivations similar in each case? Speech and writing differ, quite manifestly, in that criticism directed against speech will often focus on accent features, and these can provoke curious reactions. In countries like the UK where there is an interaction between

social and regional variation, such that the traditional situation is that working-class speakers have a localised accent and middle-class speakers much less so, dialect perception surveys have shown a tendency by respondents to attribute to accents certain personal qualities, like intelligence, honesty and friendliness. This is typically expressed in terms like ‘many respondents judge a Scottish accent to be honest’. Clearly, there is metonymic thinking at work here, since the proposition that ‘a Scottish accent is honest’ means little unless one accepts it is shorthand for something like ‘a speaker with a Scottish accent embodies for many respondents a stereotype that portrays the Scots as honest people’. This is itself of course a most dubious proposition, but it is clear enough that findings like these are framed by the researchers who devise the questionnaires, and that the questions are framed in a more abstract way by the set of stereotypes that prevail in a given community.

A more straightforward example relates to the labels commonly applied in the perceptual literature to speakers of upper-class accents; these often rate as educated and intelligent, but also as remote and aloof. Here again metonymy is at work in seeing a representative of a certain ‘social class’ as embodying the stereotypical attributes of that class; it appears that we are more at ease with the personal than the impersonal, the concrete than the abstract. Quotation marks were used above because it is plain that social class is a conceptual organisation of the reality of inequality (Cannadine, 1998: 188), although like many concepts it undergoes widespread reification, ‘moulding our perceptions of the unequal social world’. Class is therefore a conveniently discrete, one-dimensional way of organising multi-dimensional reality, which encompasses inequality in many directions. Indeed, the concept of class is so schematic that it is allied to metaphorical thinking.

The primacy and beauty of the standard

The second element of the standard language in Lodge’s classification, that sees the most valid form of the language in writing, reflects perhaps a perception that planned language is preferable to unplanned, accompanied of course by a failure to recognise that the one cannot fairly be compared to the other. The result is a tendency to judge speech by the criteria applicable to

writing, and this ignores the fact that relatively few people are capable, without a script, of producing speech that transcribed would read like carefully composed prose. Newsreaders and broadcast journalists, who according to a perceptual study of French (Castellotti and Robillard, 2003) are judged as ‘iconic speakers’ more stringently than other professional speakers like teachers, find themselves criticised for betraying the standard, not only through their use of regionalisms but by producing false starts, hesitations and other characteristic features of spontaneous speech.

The fact that written language can be planned and polished means that an author is able to achieve effects that are harder to bring off in speech, and that a reader can appreciate these at leisure. It is also of course possible to fix writing to some extent. So much is fairly obvious, but the third of the elements identified by Lodge, the inherent beauty, logicity, etc., of the standard, is based on a surprisingly elementary misconception that is allied to the mismatch between speech and writing. The assessment of the standard as inherently better than associated non-standard dialects finds expression in various overlapping ways: the standard can be thought of as more beautiful; as more suitable for literary expression; as better adapted to conveying abstraction; or, in a functional view, as a useful *lingua franca*.

The view that sees the standard as the most suitable literary medium is partly based, as has often been pointed out, on the confusion between medium and use. In this argument we can discard the postmodern view that refuses to recognise any literary canon, and suggest that some writers are simply more successful than others in their use of standard speech or writing to achieve the effects they wish to bring off. Since aesthetic judgments are notoriously subjective, the point can be better illustrated by reference to the view, still prevalent in France, that the French language is characterised by logic and clarity, as summarised in Antoine de Rivarol’s well-known tag, “ce qui n’est pas clair n’est pas français”²⁰ (Rivarol, 1784: 49). As Lodge points out (1998: 23–31), the corollary of this belief is that the structure of French is somehow closer to the ‘language of thought’ or ‘mentalese’ than that of other languages, a view which Rivarol in fact embraced, as he completes the above quotation with the statement that “ce qui n’est pas clair est encore anglais, italien, grec ou latin” (ibid.).²¹

As regards the claim that the standard language is a useful *lingua franca*,

a variety that all members of a speech community can be expected to understand if not produce, this seems ideologically neutral but can be related to what Joseph (1987: 2) calls the standard's 'synecdochic' status, to which we referred at the end of Section III. The image corresponds with reality in that it conveys what Haugen (1972) calls the standard's 'elaboration of function', which dictates that it should be capable of functioning as a means of expression in a wide range of domains, and indeed the history of standardization shows the encroachment of the standard into most if not all areas of public activity. This occurs, clearly, to the detriment of the other varieties. While it seems likely that the standard now functions in this way, at least as a comprehensible spoken variety, this state of affairs is in fact a recent one. A tantalising glimpse into the time before mass spoken media is provided by Green (1940: 238), when writing of the 1920s and 30s in the UK: "at the time I went [to Birmingham] when hardly anyone had more than a crystal set, the announcers of the BBC had not got going with their BBC English so that I sometimes had trouble to make my accent understood or to understand theirs". Green (1905–1973) had a privileged upbringing, and one can assume that his accent was what is now called (hyperlectal) Received Pronunciation. Whether the standard functions as an effective lingua franca in writing is a much more problematic question. Recent attempts in several countries to make official language less abstract and Latinate suggest that, on the contrary, the written standard erects a barrier to comprehension for many readers.

Those who seek to present the standard as the most efficient variety for communicative purposes might also be charged with pursuing a 'naturalizing' agenda, where naturalization is understood as the process through which a hegemonic state of affairs comes to be seen as being rational, or dictated by common sense, or objective. Such arguments carry considerable potency, both in society at large and within the education system. However, it is not difficult to demonstrate that a common-sense standpoint is in fact a loaded one. For instance, earlier views that saw certain social groups as irremediably inferior are now largely superseded, but these were accepted at the time as rational views. The common-sense view in this argument is simply one that is commonly accepted and hence the argument itself is an instance of *petitio principii*.

So far we have considered resistance to regional forms – variation in space and, where relevant, in social origin. However, it is resistance to age-

related variation, especially in lexis, that represents a confluence of the various ideological elements we have been discussing. A single example suffices at this point. Amis's (1997) guide to English usage, whose title *The King's English* consciously echoes that of Fowler's work, is unsystematic (its organisation is alphabetical) and many of its entries are discursive without offering any prescription; indeed, like much of Fowler, the work is for the most part tolerant and rational. The commonest theme is that clear communication should override all other considerations, but here and there nostalgia for the past, with all that that implies, is expressed in no uncertain terms, as in the following discussion (p. 57) of the phrase 'eke out'. It is worth quoting extensively, because it exemplifies almost all of the prescriptivist's range of attitudes:

This once useful and individual phrase has now, in familiar style, been relegated to the status of a dozen near-synonyms. Nowadays you eke out a subsistence by scratching and scrimping [five more near-synonyms follow], and so on. But in the days when words meant what they said you eked out your dull diet with nasturtium leaves, or eked out your defective income [. . .] with other payments. Eke, then, was an archaic adverb meaning also and the verbal expression remembered that. [. . .] The objection to slipshod language is not its remissness, though there is that, as its effective elimination of useful expressions. As things now are, to refer to what used to be eking out you have to go into tedious Latin polysyllables about supplementing sources of resources.

As so often with literature of this type, one's first reaction is to wonder whether it is meant seriously. The last remark, in particular, is very patently open to objection: to substitute *supplement* for *eke out* is to add one unstressed syllable. Surprising also is the appeal to etymology, a fallacy long exploded in linguistics: to suggest that the language somehow 'remembers' or recalls the original meaning of *eke* is to violate one of the discipline's basic principles. Amis is perhaps exploiting his status as an accomplished writer when he laments current linguistic degeneracy: 'in the days when words meant what they said' recalls Labov's remarks about fondness for the past, and we may remark further that nostalgia in one of Amis's generation (1922–95) is regret for a time when

the hierarchical principle we have discussed here was more firmly established than it is now.

V. Anti-prescriptivism

As is implicit in the foregoing discussion, ideologies offer competing world-views, a fact which means that the market place in ideas and attitudes is in a perpetual state of flux. In Western societies the two main opposing ideologies, or at least those that most concern us here, might be defined as pro- and anti-hierarchical, or elitist and egalitarian. Both views are rich in contradiction and fallacy, and each is partial, in both senses of the word: in taking into account only a selection of the facts, and in adopting a *parti pris*.

In linguistic terms, the ideological conflict just alluded to is expressed by means of a proxy war in which the standard language is seen as the preserve of the empowered, while those whose linguistic practice embodies a broadly ‘anti-prescriptive’ stance are simultaneously courted by politicians and chastised for lacking ambition or, to use the term that is currently in vogue, *aspiration*. As a (language-facing) ideology, anti-prescriptivism has been salient in the UK since around 1945, although it was foreshadowed well before then, and it has received considerable reinforcement from cultural traffic with the USA. Anyone who has read a sample of British novels published in the late 1940s and early 1950s will have encountered references to ‘levelling down’, a process which in its linguistic manifestation is similar to dialect levelling but with a broadly non-standard output. Recognition of the phenomenon can be seen in the modern penchant for pseudo-working class linguistic features among politicians who wish to be seen as progressive. In the British General Election of 2015, for example, while the speech of the Conservative leader David Cameron adhered resolutely to the cut-glass phonology enshrined in so-called Received Pronunciation, the leader of the Labour Party, stemming himself from a privileged background, peppered his speech with glottal stops, semivocalized final laterals and other emblems of vernacular English.

It is difficult to determine which of these competing ideologies is currently dominant, and in a sense the question is futile since neither the elitist

nor the egalitarian ideology enjoys total currency in any community. The two are moreover interlocked in that judgments on standard or non-standard types of behaviour are made with reference to a structured system that comprises both, and where, to use Meillet's celebrated phrase (1903: 407), *tout se tient*.²² This is well illustrated by Honey's example of southern Irish accents (1991: 131), of which he remarks: "standing outside the British social system, they are relatively classless". The remark needs considerable qualification, but does come close to capturing the general point just made: where an accent falls outside a structured system or frame of reference of the type described above, judgements in terms of 'standard versus non-standard' are difficult to make.

The interdependency of the two opposing viewpoints has in fact long occupied a position on the periphery of general recognition. For example, an oblique awareness of it is detectable in the following extract from C. S. Lewis's *Studies in words*, which was first published in 1960:

Words which originally referred to a person's rank – to legal, social, or economic status and the qualifications of birth which have often been attached to these – have a tendency to become words which assign a type of character or behaviour. Those implying superior status can become terms of praise; those implying inferior status, terms of disapproval. Chivalrous, courteous, frank, generous, gentle, liberal and noble are examples of the first; ignoble, villain, and vulgar, of the second.

Sometimes there are complexities. All my life the epithet bourgeois has been, in many contexts, a term of contempt, but not for the same reason. When I was a boy [. . .] it was applied to my social class by the class above it; bourgeois meant 'not aristocratic, therefore vulgar'. When I was in my twenties this changed. My class was now vilified by the class below it: bourgeois began to mean 'not proletarian, therefore parasitic, reactionary' [. . .] When

the bourgeoisie is despised for not being proletarian we get an exception to the general principle stated above. The name of the higher status implied the worse character and behaviour. This I take to be the peculiar, and transitory, result of a revolutionary situation. The earlier usage – bourgeois as ‘not aristocratic’ – is the normal linguistic phenomenon. (Lewis 1960: 21–22)

Lewis (1898–1963) is best known in scholarly circles as a specialist of medieval and renaissance literature, but he had philosophical training and *Studies in words* shows a respectable grasp of certain semantic principles – for instance, he evokes what he calls the drift from the descriptive to the evaluative use of a word. The concept is discussed more recently by Traugott (1989), who suggested that the fundamental tendency at the origin of all semantic (and therefore lexical) change is the shift from the objective to the subjective use of lexical items. We can assimilate this shift to the tendency to load emotion into one’s world-view; in other words, to adhere to an ideology. In the case of the epithet *bourgeois*, the mutually contradictory reactions to the term encapsulate neatly the uneasy equilibrium which exists between the elitist and egalitarian ideologies discussed here.

More significant, perhaps, was Lewis’s assumption that what he had noticed was a passing phenomenon. He was writing when the youth movement in its various forms was gathering momentum; in popular music, for example, and in protest against the war in Vietnam. But he refers to his twenties, the time after the First World War when rebellion among the young against their elders was widespread; this attitude continued in various forms, and for different reasons, through the 1930s. Lewis’s assumption that the earlier usage is ‘the normal linguistic phenomenon’ deriving from the hierarchical point of view reflects perhaps his tendency, as among other things a classicist, to take the long view. Elsewhere in his writings Lewis (1961) asserts that this point of view was until quite recently continuous from antiquity, going back at least to Aristotle. From this perspective one can say that the hierarchical viewpoint is ‘normal’ in human society, in the statistical sense of having prevailed for the greater part of western recorded history. Certainly it is a measure of the rapidity and thorough-

going nature of recent social change that this ancient way of looking at things, which prevailed for more than two millennia, should now appear so retrograde. Equally striking, however, is the vigour with which prescriptivism continues to be promoted. While Aristotle's view (by means of which he justifies slavery) is now largely forgotten, or reviled if remembered (to the extent, as Lewis points out, that we are at risk of misunderstanding earlier literature by projecting onto it our contemporary assumptions), its secondary effects, including standardization, continue to be felt through what one might call a form of cultural inertia.

We shall not pursue further our reflections on the egalitarian viewpoint, beyond reiterating that in essence it is ideological, as defined earlier. One obvious difference between (normative) anti-prescriptivists and the efforts of the standardizers is that the latter have produced, and continue to produce, a large formal literature, in the shape of dictionaries and grammars, as well as works commenting on language more discursively, and more recently (and no doubt more effectively) computer spellcheckers and grammar checkers. We may however note in passing that the anti-prescriptive view at one time held sway among educationists who were in a position to influence the practice of English teaching, a policy that did not necessarily benefit those it was designed to assist, given that the view is not widely shared by decision-makers. An oft-cited example in this regard is that those in a position to offer employment to school leavers may favour those who exhibit an easy command of the standard language over those who retain their allegiance to regionally or socially marked linguistic patterns.

VI. Concluding remarks

In this paper we have attempted to distil the thematic continuity between earlier manifestations of the prescriptive approach to language use and the same approach in some of its contemporary forms. An aristocrat in ancient Rome was expected to master classical Latin and to use the variety in persuasive speech; this was in part a practical expectation, since forensic skills were necessary in the political career that ambitious Romans followed. Similarly, an aspiring bourgeois or member of the *noblesse de robe* in pre-Revolutionary France would be expected to mimic the language of the royal court, itself based on the usage of the best writers, an ability which again implied a mastery of the literary

standard. But these expectations have themselves a large arbitrary element, and the situations recall the contemporary use of the standard to compose public documents and also to maintain social distinctions. Viewed in this light, mastery of the standard is a social accomplishment, and its continued existence as a set of shibboleths remains useful to those who value it, while militating against the existence of diversity in language use. This is not to downplay the value of shibboleths as gate-keeping devices, and even though shibboleths are no longer a matter of life and death,²³ prescriptivists continue to employ them as a handy social filter, even though they may affect to deplore their use. Nevertheless, in the ur-conflict that pits the standardized utopia sought by prescriptivism against the centrifugal forces generated by the population at large, the triumph of the standard ideology is by no means assured.

Notes

¹“This study, inaugurated by the Greeks and continued mainly by the French, is based on logic and lacks any scientific or disinterested view of language itself; it aims solely at giving rules to distinguish correct forms from incorrect ones; it is a normative discipline, greatly removed from pure observation and with a necessarily narrow focus.”

² This moralistic approach is apparent among certain 19th century English commentators, for example. Milroy (2001: 550) cites George Marsh, who in his *Lectures on the English language* (1865) argued that ‘moral obliquity’ often underlay linguistic innovation and that ‘to pillory such offences’ was ‘the sacred duty of every scholar’.

³“A certain discipline is appropriate to speakers and writers alike. Language depends on reason, the sanction of antiquity, authority and usage. Reason is manifested primarily in analogy and sometimes in etymology. Antiquity is recommended by a certain majesty and, to put it this way, purity. Authority is usually sought in orators and historians. However, usage is the surest guide for speaking and we should clearly treat language as we would a currency, which bears a public stamp.”

⁴“In speech if something has incorrectly become fixed among the many it should not be accepted as a rule of language. For, passing over the way the uneducated generally talk, we all know that whole theatres and the entire crowd at the circus often cry out using incorrect language. I will therefore define usage in speech as the consensus of the erudite, just as usage in the art of living is the consensus of the good.”

⁵“When in Salamanca I showed a sample of this work to your majesty and you asked me what it could be used for [. . .]”

⁶“And one of two things will happen: either the memory of your deeds will die with the language or it will wander among foreign nations, lacking its own home in which to reside. In the foundation of the latter I have tried to lay the first stone and to do in our language what Zenodotus did in Greek and Crates in Latin. Although these were surpassed by those who wrote after them, at least they, like us, managed to be the first inventors of such a necessary work, something which we carried out at the most opportune moment there has ever been, because our language has now attained such a zenith that one should rather fear its descent than expect its improvement.”

⁷An analogous concern with functionality is evident in the ‘utilitarian’ approach to standardization, which became fashionable during the Enlightenment. A good example of this approach is Swift’s *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Language* (1712), which called for a government-sponsored programme to crystallize the English language in a permanent, invariant form.

⁸“My purpose in this work is to condemn everything that does not belong to correct and elegant usage.”

⁹For example, the notion of *le bon usage* invoked by Vaugelas persists to the present day, most notably by supplying the title of the most widely consulted normative grammar of modern French (see Grevisse, 1986).

¹⁰“The way the best part of the Court speaks.”

¹¹“Let it not be thought that my purpose is to call everything that is peculiar to Latin Americans vicious and corrupt.”

¹² “The grammar of a language is the art of speaking correctly, that is, in a way that is consonant with correct usage, which is that of educated people. This usage is preferred because it is the most uniform in the various provinces and towns that speak a particular language [. . .] whereas the words and phrases of ignorant people vary greatly from some towns and provinces to others, and they are not easily understood outside of the narrow area in which they are commonly used.”

¹³ “The biggest problem, and the one which, if it is not kept in check, will deprive us of the inestimable advantages of a common language, is the influx of constructional innovations, which inundates and clouds much of what is written in Latin America, and which, by altering the structure of the language, threatens to change it into a plethora of irregular, ill-disciplined and barbarous dialects, the germs of future languages which over time will reproduce in America what happened to Europe in the dark period in which Latin was corrupted [. . .] Perhaps I exaggerate the danger, but it is the principal motive that induced me to compose this work.”

¹⁴ “To describe and trace the history of all languages to which it [linguistics] can be applied.”

¹⁵ “To identify the forces that are at work in a permanent and universal way in all languages.”

¹⁶ “The subject matter of linguistics comprises, first and foremost, all manifestations of human language, not just correct language and “elegant usage”, but all forms of expression.”

¹⁷ “Generative Grammar, which addresses problems of increasing delicacy and complexity, has recourse to ever more subtle judgments, about which subjects hesitate and contradict themselves etc. The risk of arbitrariness becomes great. Put another way, and above all when the problems studied are at the margins of syntax and of semantics, even pragmatics, crude judgments mean very little: they require interpretation . . . Perhaps a question arises, which our linguists, good democrats that they are, prefer not to address: could there be degrees of linguistic competence? Could certain subjects have more of a talent than others for exploiting the latent possibilities of the system? . . . perhaps traditional grammar was not completely wrong to privilege the best writers.”

¹⁸ Synecdoche itself is a sub-type of metonymy; specifically, one in which a part of an entity is used to represent the whole.

¹⁹ An adherence to an ideology does not however rule out all insight into its possession. This is apparent from the fact that speakers are quite capable of prefacing a contentious remark with ‘call me old-fashioned, but . . .’ or something similar.

²⁰ “What is not clear is not French.”

²¹ “What is not clear is still English, Italian, Greek or Latin.”

²² “Everything is interconnected.”

²³ But note in this connection the 1937 ‘Parsley Massacre’ in the Dominican Republic, which reputedly turned on a difference of pronunciation of the Spanish word *perejil*.

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