

Andrea Beltrama
Interdisciplinary Seminar in Linguistics

Doctrines of Linguistic Correctness: Revisiting the Prescriptive/Descriptive Distinction

Course description – “Linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive!” From day one of every intro class, we are taught that conceptualizations of language in terms of *correct* or *incorrect*, *good* or *bad* are absurd, and squarely fall outside the range of phenomena that linguists should study. In this class, we will critically re-consider the validity of this approach from a variety of perspectives. Building on recent work in psycholinguistics, linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, we will develop an approach in which "folk theories" on language are indeed an empirically fascinating domain to better understand how language works. While doing so, we will also take into examination several different domains of linguistic research where disregarding prescriptive norms in the name of purely descriptive accounts appears to be problematic. Some of the questions that we will consider include:

- 1- What are the socio-historical and ideological processes that contribute to the emergence of an *orthodox* way of speaking?
- 2- Do ideology-free perspectives on (the study of) language really exist?
- 3- What are the values that speakers invest prescriptive norms with?
- 4- What empirical interest can prescriptive norms have for linguistic research?
- 5- What methodological implications do prescriptive norms have for linguistic research?

Spirit of the class – As the title suggests, this course is primarily meant to foster discussion and problematize issues, as opposed to search for definitive answers. There will be two textbooks (Verbal Hygiene, by Deborah Cameron, and Fixing English: Prescriptivism and Language History, by Anne Curzan) and a substantial amount of readings drawn from (sometimes, radically) different perspectives, including formal linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology and media/popular commentaries on language use. Because of this, **active** class participation, willingness to engage with (at times) challenging readings and openness to different perspectives are constantly required throughout the course.

Evaluation – The final grade will be based on the following:

Attendance and participation (20%) - Students are expected to do the readings before the Tuesday class. On Thursday, each student will lead discussion on a particular set of readings at least once over the course of the quarter.

Weekly response papers (20%) – A (max) 500 words paragraph engaging with (at least) three readings and raising (at least) two questions for class discussion. Students leading discussion are exempt from writing the response paper for the specific week.

Midterm assignment (20%) – A take home 4-5 page paper based on the analysis of a set of materials that contain.

Individual term project (40%) – The project consists of three main components.

- Picking a particular linguistic phenomenon which has been (or might be) of interest for both linguistic theory and prescriptive doctrines. The phenomenon can be relevant to any level of linguistic analysis (phonetics, syntax, morphology, semantics). You can focus on a phenomenon already discussed in the course, but you will be expected to go beyond what was said in class should you decide to do so. You are encouraged to come to talk to me no later than Week 4 to discuss the topic of your choice. And I have a long list of interesting phenomena, should you be short of ideas!
- Providing a well-argued analysis of the phenomenon. This includes two parts. First, a description of its linguistic/grammatical properties, as well as the way it is conceptualized in prescriptive doctrines. Second, you'll have to discuss *one* aspect of how the present phenomenon can cast light of any of the issues discussed in class. Possible perspectives include (but are not limited to!):
 - a) What kind of language ideology underlies the prescriptive attitude towards this form?
 - b) How do prescriptive and descriptive accounts diverge (or converge) with respect to this form?
 - c) How does the prescriptive treatment of the phenomenon relate to the doctrines surrounding similar linguistic forms?
 - d) What methodological implications do prescriptive attitudes have for a linguistic investigation of the phenomenon?

Developing one theme will be sufficient, and different themes will be more or less ripe depending on the phenomenon of interest.

- Writing up your work in the form of a 10-15 double-spaced page paper (due June 9th) and illustrating it to the rest of the class with a 10 minute presentation in the Week 10 mini-conference.

The plan

The class is divided in two main parts. In the first 5 weeks we will consider the descriptive/prescriptive debate from a broad perspective, introducing theoretical concepts such as *language ideologies, folk rationalizations, standardization, language change, grammaticality/acceptability judgments*. From Week 6 to Week 9 we will focus on specific cases studies. This will give us a chance to take a close look at the different processes whereby linguistic forms are made sense of by both linguists and naïve speakers. Depending on students' interests, the case studies are subject to change.

Part 1

Week 1 - Getting started

Topics: The descriptive/prescriptive debate; Review of the themes of the class;

Readings:

Cameron, Chapter 1-2-3;
Language Myths, selected chapters;
Curzan, part I

Week 2 -The dogma. Description: Science = Prescription: Myth.

Topics: The debate as it has been framed in linguistics

Readings:

Cameron, Chapter 6;
Pinker, Grammar puss;
Language Myths, selected chapters;
D'Arcy on Like and Language Ideologies;
Sprouse and Schutze on the nature of grammaticality judgments as a source of data;
Lisa Lai-Shen Cheng and Corver on the role of Diagnostic tests in Syntax;

Week 3 - Language ideologies, variation, change and prescription.

Topics: Is there any “view from nowhere” in the study language?

Readings:

Gal and Irvine, Language ideologies and linguistic differentiation;
Eckert, Three waves of variation;
Bucholtz. The Whiteness of Nerds: Superstandard English and Racial Markedness
Milroy, Language ideologies and the consequences of standardization.
Preston, Perceptual dialectology

Week 4- Folk theories don't make no sense. Or not?

Topics: Prescription and the principles of rational communication;

Readings:

Cameron, Chapter 2,
Bauman and Briggs, Language Philosophy as Linguistic Ideology;
Horn. Implicature;
Acton and Potts. That straight talk. Sarah Palin and the social meaning of demonstratives.
From verbal crutches to passive voices: prescriptive views, style and rationalization.

Week 5 - The standardization process

Topics: The social/political grounding of prescriptive rules

Readings:

Silverstein, Monoglot standard in America,
Gal, Contradictions of standard language in Europe
Lane. Minority language standardisation and the role of users.
Curzan, part II

Part 2: Case studies (subject to change)

Week 6 - The logic of verbal crutches: Non-literal *literally*, *very unique* and *completely free*.

Readings:

Israel. Literally speaking.
Lasersohn. Pragmatic Halos
Solomon. Are Definitely and Totally the new Literally?
Waksler. Over the Top intensifiers.
Irwin. SO [TOTALLY] speaker-oriented: An analysis of "Drama SO"

Week 7 - Subjugated to the subjunctive. Mood and tense across pragmatics, change and prestige.

Readings:

Giannakidou and Mari. *Mixed* (Non)veridicality and mood choice in complement clauses
Poplack, Shana & Dion, Nathalie. 2009. Prescription vs. praxis
Poplack. 1992. The inherent variability of the French subjunctive.

Week 8 - The puzzle of *acceptability judgments*. Are lay speakers really irrelevant?

Readings:

Labov. When intuition fails
Beltrama and Xiang. These are the pronouns that we use them but we don't like them.
Schütze and Sprouse. Judgment Data.
Staum Casasanto and Sag. The advantages of the ungrammatical.

Week 9 and 10 – Presentations, topics TBA

References

Textbook:

Cameron, D. 1994. *Verbal Hygiene*. London: Routledge

Curzan, Anne. 2014. *Fixing English: Prescriptivism and Language History*. Cambridge University Press.

Other readings:

Ameka, Felix, Dench, Alan and Nic Evans (eds). 2006. *Catching language: the standing challenge of grammar-writing*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter

Acocella, Joan. The battle over the way we should speak. *The New Yorker*.

Acton, Eric, and Christopher Potts. 2013. Cravin' that straight talk: Sarah Palin and the Sociolinguistics of Demonstratives. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*

Armstrong, Nigel and Ian E. Mackenzie, 2013. *Standardization, ideology, and linguistics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bauer Laurie and Peter Trudgill. 1999. *Language Myths*. Penguin Books. London.

Bauman, Richard, and Charles L. Briggs. 1999. Language philosophy as language ideology: John Locke and Johann Gottfried Herder. In *Regimes of language*.

Bucholtz, Mary. 2001. The Whiteness of Nerds: Superstandard English and Racial Markedness. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11(1).

Boland, Julie and Robin Queen. If You're House Is Still Available, Send Me an Email: Personality Influences Reactions to Written Errors in Email Messages. *PLoS ONE* 11(3): e0149885.

Curzan, Anne. 2014. *Fixing English: Prescriptivism and Language History*. Cambridge University Press.

D'Arcy, Alexandra. 2007. 'Like' and language ideology: Disentangling fact from fiction. *American Speech* 82.4.

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Giannakidou Anastasia and Alda Mari. *Mixed (Non)veridicality and mood choice in complement clauses*. SuB 17.

- Hitchings, Henry. 2011, *The Language Wars: A History of Proper English*, London: John Murray
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- Labov, William. 1969. The logic of nonstandard English. In *Georgetown monograph on Languages and Linguistics* 22.
- Lai-Shen Cheng and Norbert Corver. 2013. *Diagnosing syntax*. Oxford University Press.
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- Pinker, Steven. 1994. *The Language Instinct*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- Poplack, Shana & Dion, Nathalie. 2009. Prescription vs. praxis: The evolution of future temporal reference in French
- Poplack. 1992. The inherent variability of the French subjunctive. *Theoretical analyses in Romance linguistics*, ed. Christiane Laeufer and Terrell A. Morgan, 235–63. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Silverstein, Michael. 1988. "Monoglot "standard" in America. *Standardization and Metaphors of Linguistic Hegemony*.
- Staum Casasanto, Laura and Ivan A. Sag. 2008. The Advantage of the Ungrammatical. *Proceedings of the 30th Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society*, Washington, D.C
- Trudgill, Peter. 1983. Sex and covert prestige. *On Dialect*.
- Zanuttini, Raffaella. 2015. Our Language Prejudices Don't Make No Sense. *The Pacific Standard*.