

4.1

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Critique of language norms in English

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Abstract. This article attempts to sketch by example how discussions about English language norms have developed from the late 16th century until today. These complex discussions are closely related to the processes of standardisation and codification of English. They reflect the changing social norms that are shaped in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries as a consequence of industrialisation and urbanisation, as well as through the emergence of the British Empire on the one hand, and the growing economic and political importance of the United States on the other. While the discussion of language norms in the 18th and early 19th century is largely normative and prescriptive, the late 19th and 20th century sees the emergence and development of a descriptive tradition focused on linguistic diversity mainly in academic discourse, which is further influenced by linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics since the mid-20th century. Today, public discourse about language norms is still frequently prescriptive, which is reflected for instance in the debates about politically correct language use or a fixed linguistic norm in education, as well as in discussions about the alleged decline of the English language due to its growing role as international *lingua franca* and global language.

Keywords

verbal hygiene, prescriptivism, standardisation, codification, language norms

General

Critique of language norms has been part of academic and public discourse about English since the Early Modern Age. Throughout the history of the English language, language norms, their change and 'decay', the "faults" of the English language and *best* or *proper English* have been associated and justified with authorities, regions, social groups, institutions, varieties, nationalities, logic and traditions, but also with emotions, morals, aesthetics and ideals of communication. The critique of English language norms affects all levels of language (syntax, semantics, phonology, morphology, orthography and punctuation) as well as sociolinguistic

and pragmatic components (accent, politeness) within the continuum of written and spoken forms of English.

As language has a social dimension, competent language users continuously do not only interpret but also evaluate language structures and language usage (see, e.g. Cameron 1995/2012, Curzan 2014). In doing this, critique of language norms always points at and reflects processes of language variation and change in progress. 'Language norms' thus always have a descriptive as well as a normative/prescriptive character (see, e.g. Finegan 1992, Edwards 2006).

Historical

Discussions of English language norms and their critique start to appear with the beginning of the standardisation of English in the Early Modern Age. The introduction of book printing and the social spread of education between 1500 and 1700 played an important role as reflecting and constituting contexts for viewing English no longer as "rude", "barbarous", or "deficient", but for promoting the gain in prestige of English through publications in the vernacular. The selection of the standard variety related to the language use of the royal court and the educated and literate elites in London, Cambridge, and Oxford and was reflected in a regional preference for South-Midlands varieties of English. The process of elaboration of the standard variety (see Haugen 1966) brings with it a stronger awareness for norms and precision in language use and the necessity to extend the repertoire by borrowings and word creations. Latin as the model of linguistic eloquence, rhetoric, logic and had far-reaching influence on the developing Early Modern English standard, especially in lexis, word formation, and syntax. There was, however, also early criticism with respect to the increasing Latinisation of English, reflected in the 16th-century *inkhorn controversy*, which opposes and ridicules the excessive use of Latin loanwords by academics in every-day communication, as well as in mocking malapropisms, i.e. the wrong use of loan words preferentially from the classical languages and French, which may be found personified in literary and dramatic characters such as Shakespeare's "Dogberry" in *Much Ado about Nothing*.

Since the late 17th century and the beginnings of the codification of the standard variety, the discussion and critique of language norms has emerged in form of a pronounced *complaint tradition* in English. The debate about language norms developed into attempts to define grammatically, lexically, and phonologically correct language usage that would raise the prestige of Standard English and of its speakers. In the preface to his famous *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Samuel Johnson writes: “We have long preserved our constitution. Let us make some struggles for our language”. He rejects some words of English as “rude”, “barbarous”, “redundant” or “improper” (cited in Hitchings 2011: 89). This form of prescriptive standardisation of language usage developed into a typical characteristic of debates about English in the 18th century. Famous proponents of prescriptive standardisation, like Jonathan Swift or Daniel Defoe, strive for an English language academy and stipulate a codification of English to preserve its “state of perfection”, which is reflected in the publication of numerous grammars of English. The English “state of perfection” is nostalgically seen in the ancient language use of authors like William Shakespeare and Sir Edmund Spenser.

English grammars of the 18th and 19th centuries reflect a covert critique of language norms that must be seen within the context of their production and reception. Existing language norms are, for instance, described as ideologically marked and characteristic only for the upper social strata. Within the context of industrialisation and subsequent urbanisation, the gentry aims at distinguishing itself from the upwardly mobile urban middle class on the one hand, but on the other hand correct language usage modelled on the speech of the elite becomes crucial for the social advancement of the middle class. *Propriety* and *politeness* develop into key concepts in the evaluation of language use. Language norms are further presented as accessible for a wider audience in 18th- and 19th-century grammars – comparable to the earlier reformatory translations of the Bible into the vernacular. Specialised grammars, like Fenn’s (1798) *The Mother’s Grammar*, for instance, are addressed particularly at mothers, who are considered to play an important role in the promotion of language norms as part of early child education. Lowth’s famous *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) is based on the descriptive observation of aristocratic language usage and is not exclusively normative, although he orientates himself at the model of Latin and censures *preposition stranding*

or *double negation*. Lowth's *Grammar*, as well as Lindley Murray's *English Grammar, Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners: With an Appendix, Containing Rules and Observations for Promoting Perspicuity in Speaking and Writing*, published in 1795, may be considered the most influential grammars of the English language in the late 18th and the first half of the 19th century, moulding speakers' conception of "good" English.

Present

Critique of language norms is a manifestation of a certain view on ideal social structures. On a deeper level, it uncovers the anxiety and concern of certain social groups to lose their status quo. Such preserving motivations are displayed in a conservative defense of norms as well as in puristic attempts to cleanse the standard from borrowings. Ideological and political motivations for critique of language norms also appear in the 20th century. The term *Political Correctness*, which emerged within the context of the *Civil Rights Movement* in the USA in the late 1960s, is, for instance, such a politically motivated critique of existing language norms (e.g. Finegan 2001, Curzan 2014). *Political Correctness* endeavours to avoid racist, religious, sexist, and other kinds of social stigmatisations of individuals and groups by evading politically incorrect expressions (such as *kraut* as a derogatory expression for Germans) as well as by replacing discriminating expressions by more neutral ones (such as replacing *chairman* by *chairperson*). The discussion of *Political Correctness* has received new impulse especially in the research of language and gender (see Cameron 1995/2012, Beal 2008, Curzan 2014). A further example of politically motivated critique of language is the *Plain English Debate*, which was launched in Great Britain in 1979 in order to simplify the language of the government. Finally, the many varieties of English with their varying prestige necessarily evoke discussions about correctness and normativity, such as the often-complained "Americanisation" of British English (see Leech and Smith 2005). Some varieties of English serve as *lingua francas* and *global languages* and trigger critique of language norms, since the dominance of English and its influence on other languages is viewed critically.

The German linguistic term *Sprachnormenkritik* as well as the correspondent German linguistic sub-discipline cannot be straightforwardly transferred to the research tradition on critique of language norms of English linguistics of the last thirty-odd years. Notwithstanding, English linguistics has developed a strong research tradition that critically investigates normative language practices since the mid-20th century at least.

The functions of the concept of *critique of language norms* for language-critical reflexion

The most prominent expression of the demand to view linguistic attitudes and purism as an integral part of language usage and to investigate their origins is Deborah Cameron's (1995/2012) sociolinguistic approach of *verbal hygiene*. *Verbal hygiene* denotes active practices of modifying or filtering normative language use. Cameron describes the different evaluative parameters of these negative processes and emphasises that the different evaluative parameters of these normative processes, even though *verbal hygiene* is also necessary for successful communication. As Cameron (1995/2012) claims, *correctness* is not the only criterion for the establishment of norms. The various examples of *verbal hygiene* do not have a common conception of desirable and correct language use. However, all these examples share the fundamental opinion that one way of using the language is to be preferred to another. *Verbal hygiene* thus reflects an essential theoretical linguistic assumption according to which language usage is a public social act based on language norms which may themselves become the target of critique and debate.

Cameron (1995/2012) distinguishes the concept of *verbal hygiene* from that of *prescriptivism*, as the latter is associated with a range of normative metalinguistic practices that focus on correctness and correct usage and thus follow a codified norm or standard variety. *Verbal hygiene*, in contrast, attempts to highlight the existence of normative linguistic practices that interfere in different ways and for various reasons with language usage (cf. Curzan 2014: 14–18). *Prescriptivism* has developed negative connotations in the English linguistic tradition over time, to the degree that it has almost become a taboo (see Burridge 2006): Both term and concept seem to suggest ignorance, intolerance and prejudice. The construction

of binary oppositions between allegedly arbitrary, subjective-prescriptive practices in historical grammars on the one hand, and supposedly more academic, objective-descriptive and 'enlightened' attitudes in modern grammars on the other is, however, likewise evaluative and censoring. For Cameron, linguists who automatically devalue complainers as ignorant and raise the corrective index finger for neutrality are also prescriptive. In this context, she mentions Robert Hall's classic *Leave Your Language Alone!* (1950) as well as David Crystal's *The Fight for English: How Language Pundits Ate, Shot and Left* (2006), which he wrote as indignant reaction to Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (2003). She further sees Henry Hitching's recently published *The Language Wars. A History of Proper English* (2011) in this tradition.

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