4.1

Beatrix Busse/Ruth Möhlig-Falke/Bryan Vit

Standardisation and language criticism in English

Translation: Beatrix Busse/Ruth Möhlig-Falke/Bryan Vit

Abstract. In negotiations of what a standard language is or should be, language criticism – with its evaluation of language and its speakers – has a central role. The article gives an overview of how the attitudes towards standard written as well as spoken British English have developed and changed over time and in the various socio-historical contexts. From a diachronic perspective, a tendency can be observed which begins with an orientation towards the linguistic variety used by the sophisticated elite in the middle of the 18th century and gradually moves towards acceptance and appreciation of local dialects and new standard varieties other than British English in the 20th century. For a long time, however, the ability to use 'correct', i. e. standard language, has been associated with education, appropriate social behaviour and decorum. This view is still subliminally present in British English and other national varieties, such as American English, today. Standardisation also plays a role in the public debates about the politically correct use of certain forms of language as well as in academic discussions about the influence that linguistic discourse exerts upon the attitudes formed about certain social groups.

General

If seen in the context of the process of *standardisation* and the establishment of *language norms*, the concept of ›language criticism‹ is reflected in the changing evaluations of what has been considered to be 'good' or 'bad' written and spoken English over time. As criticism is always based on a norm, attempts at standardising language – and thus, of criticising non-standard forms – can be understood as processes which are inter-related with 'language ideologies', i. e. beliefs and attitudes towards the 'right', 'correct', or 'proper' usage of language and its speakers. Throughout the history of English, prescriptive language criticism is associated and justified with individual authorities, regions, groups, social backgrounds, institutions, varieties, idea(l)s of nation, logics, and traditions – but also with emotions, morals, aesthetics, and ideals of communication.

Standardisation and its evaluative practices affect all linguistic levels (syntax, semantics, phonology, morphology, orthography and punctuation), as well as sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects (e. g. accent, politeness) within the continuum of written and spoken forms of English. As Milroy and Milroy (1985) have pointed out, prescriptivism is the final stage in the process of standardisation, and therefore, it is in the sense of codification and prescription that ›language criticism‹ operates as an ideological practice, perpetuating a set of assumptions about 'correct' language behaviour through discourse (see Mugglestone 2003).

As in other European languages, the process of standardisation of British English is closely linked to the idea that a nation has a national language and that there is a linguistic custom, an ordinary usage or norm to which the citizens of this nation need to conform. Thus, it is in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries – which are significantly constitutive of the British national identity – that grammars, dictionaries, language handbooks, and usage guides for both written and spoken English gain popularity (see Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2009; Busse & Schröder 2009). The alleged "doctrine of correctness in English Usage" (see Leonard 1928) was criticised in numerous studies in the 20th century, leading to a rejection of prescriptivism in linguistics and a somewhat unjustified unwillingness to engage with the original texts by 18th century grammarians (Beal 2009). However, the linguistic inferiority complex that evolves both from the ideal of a standard language and a broader culture of self-improvement still feeds the demand for accent and pronunciation trainings and books that complain the poor state of spelling, punctuation or grammar in English in the 21st century (e. g. Hitchings 2011, Truss 2003; for spoken English, see e. g. Beal 2008).

Historical

The process of standardisation of English begins with a regularisation of the written language. The earliest form of a written standard that is to develop from the late 14th century onwards is the Chancery English, being developed by the scribes of the King's Chancery in official documents and concerned mainly with spelling conventions (see Mugglestone 2003). In the course of the 15th to the 17th century, one of the regional and social varieties of English shifts status from a dialect to a standard language

that gains supraregional validity. The selected standard variety is that of the royal court and the educated elite in Oxford, Cambridge, and London. With London becoming the most important centre for book production, it is spread throughout the country and sets the norm for written usage.

First notions of a standardisation of spoken usage, too, were centred on and around London in the 16th century. Thus, George Puttenham (1529–1590) observed an emerging standard of speech that was used amongst the members of London's 'best society' (Mugglestone 2003). Although these observations did not share the same prescriptivist tone that characterised later statements about language usage, the social setting of the emergence of both written and spoken standard English already reflects the strong connection between language use, class, and education that is to develop further in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Of course, not all language commentators were of the same opinion. When Wordsworth, in the spirit of Romanticism, writes in the preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* that poetry is to represent the language "really used by men" and that nature should be reflected only in the depiction of "humble and rustic life" (Wordsworth [2]1800: 1), this may be read as a critique of language norms that have so far been oriented towards the aristocratic elite. Throughout the 19th century awareness of social class is very strong and members of the social elites strive to maintain their status also by upholding educated Standard English, on the one hand. On the other hand, education spreads to the lower social classes, culminating in the introduction of compulsory education in the late 19th century and facilitating upwards social mobility. Concerns about *correctness* (see Bowerman 2006, Davies 2006), *pure English* or *good style* (see Gross 2006, Nelson 2006) thus contain an additional social aspect, in that the evaluation and the preservation of the standard are explicitly connected with ideas of 'gentlemanliness/ladylikeness', 'good breeding', and 'ideals of conduct'.

In this sense, from early on, the standard variety of British English has been closely associated with class and social prestige. The practices of ›language criticism‹ that accompanied the standardisation process aimed at distinguishing the middle- and upper-class, 'elegant' and 'sophisticated' standard from the 'rude', 'vulgar' and 'illiterate' English of the rustic and urban working class. However, its advocates framed standardisation as an egalitarian project that would unite a nation that had hitherto been divided by linguistic diversity (Mugglestone 2003). To polish and refine

the language was thus considered a duty both of the nation and of the individual.

In the written medium, processes of standardisation are visible, for instance, in the gradual supraregional spread of grammatical forms like the *do*-auxiliary, and of standardised orthography, promoted by dictionaries and grammar books that were increasingly produced and received from the late 18th to the 19th century (see Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008). Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, first published in 1755, is one of the most popular texts of this time, although it was criticised by many for its subjective tone. Pronunciation, too, underwent a process of standardisation. Handbooks, such as *Elements of Elocution* by John Walker from 1810 or Henry Alford's *The Queen's English* from 1864, and sixpenny manuals were produced for those who wanted to learn how to read and talk 'properly' (see e. g. Beal 2010 or Beal/Sturiale 2012). In the process of standardising spoken English, the written medium was subsequently replaced by the radio. The foundation of the *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC) in 1922 marked the beginning of the development of a spoken standard called *Received Pronunciation* (RP), a term first used by Daniel Jones (²1926).

Present

The English language of the late 20th and early 21st centuries has increasingly been marked by the global spread of English as a first and second language, and the development of numerous national varieties of English, some of which have already begun or succeeded in forming their own national standards (see Schneider 2007). In the course of the development of *global English* as an international *lingua franca*, as well as of simplified global communication in the internet age, and the growing influence of the media, the boundaries between the national varieties of English have become increasingly blurred and a 'pluricentric' standardisation has set in, with American English internationally gaining ground where British English used to lead (see Hitchings 2011).

Till the present day, discussions about language usage and language norms have been marked by a long *complaint tradition*. There are, however, two strands of linguistic complaint, or rather language criticism, which are not always clear-cut. First, there is the conservative strand which

laments that English is *going down the dogs* (see Beal 2009) or that the alleged 'Americanisation' of British English threatens its very existence. Often, nostalgic retrospection to former, better times can be observed in this strand, for example in the famous usage guides of the Fowler brothers, *The King's English* (1906) and *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, also referred to as "The Fowler" (1926). Such conservative approaches to standard language were criticised by the work of sociolinguists of the 20th century (Fisher 1958; Labov 1966; Trudgill 1974). The success of Truss's bestselling *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* (2003) or Hitching's *The Language Wars* (2011), however, shows that there is (and probably always will be) a market for this kind of language criticism.

Second, there is a more progressive strand that criticises the sociopolitical effects of language norms. Standardisation is understood as a process of negotiating political, moral, and cultural values on the linguistic plane and evaluations of people's speech are unmasked as evaluations of the people themselves (see Leith 1997). This progressive attitude is also manifest in the various movements that demand 'political correctness', as how we talk about others influences how we think about and act towards them (see e. g. Cameron 1995; Curzan 2014).

In linguistics, the *pragmatic turn* at the end of the 1960s – which placed the focus on linguistic performance and on what people *do* when they use language (see e. g. Austin 1962; Searle 1969, 1979, 1995, 2010) – was decisive in making language usage in a social context an object of academic study. Since the beginning of the 1990s, an approach called *Critical Discourse Studies* has been developed in linguistics that investigates the role of language usage and other semiotic practices in relation to the (re)production of systems of knowledge and power structures (see e. g. Wodak/Meyer 2016). Nonetheless, critical objections to the language usage of politicians and the media in public have a long tradition which, in fact, reaches as far back as to the ideologues of the French Revolution (see Eagleton 1991). In Britain, one of the most popular language critics who may be situated in both strands is George Orwell, whose essay *Politics and the English Language* (published in 1946) mixes puristic with political language criticism.

References

Austin, John L. (1962): How to Do Things with Words. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Beal, Joan C. (2008): 'Shamed by your English?': The market value of a 'good' pronunciation. In: Beal, Joan C. (Ed.): Perspectives on Prescriptivism. Bern/Berlin/Frankfurt a. M./Wien: Lang, pp. 21–40.

Beal, Joan C. (2009): Three hundred years of prescriptivism (and counting). In: Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid/van der Wurf Wim (Eds.): Bern/Berlin/Bruxelles/Frankfurt a. M./New York/Oxford/Wien: Peter Lang, pp. 35–56.

Beal, Joan C. (2010): Prescriptivism and the suppression of variation. In: Hickey, Raymond (Ed.): Eighteenth-Century English. Ideology and Change. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 21–37.

Beal, Joan C./Sturiale, Massimo (2012): Prescriptivism and pronouncing dictionaries: past and present. In: Language & History, 55/1, pp. 1–4.

Bowerman, Sean (2006): Norms and correctness. In: Brown, Keith (Ed.): Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics. Amsterdam/Heidelberg: Elsevier, pp. 701–703.

Busse, Ulrich/Schröder, Anne (2009): Fowler's Modern English Usage at the interface between lexis and grammar. In: Römer, Ute/Schulze, Rainer (Eds.): Exploring the Lexis-Grammar Interface. Amsterdam: Benjamins, pp. 69–88.

Cameron, Deborah (1995): Verbal Hygiene. London/New York: Routledge.

Curzan, Anne (2014): Fixing English. Prescriptivism and Language History. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.

Davies, Winifred (2006): Language education. Correctness and purism. In: Brown, Keith (Ed.): Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics. Amsterdam/Heidelberg: Elsevier, pp. 470–477.

Eagleton, Terry (1991): Ideology: An Introduction. London: Verso.

Fisher, John L. (1958): Social influences on the choice of a linguistic variant. In: Word, 14/1, pp. 47–56.

Fowler, Henry W./Fowler, Francis G. (1906): The King's English. Oxford: Forgotten Books.

Fowler, Henry W. (1926): A Dictionary of Modern English Usage. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gross, Steven (2006): Normativity. In: Brown, Keith (Ed.): Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics. Amsterdam/Heidelberg: Elsevier, pp. 698–701.

Hitchings, Henry (2011): The Language Wars. A History of Proper English. London: John Murray.

Jones, Daniel ([2]1926): English Pronouncing Dictionary. London: Dent.

Labov, William (1966): The Social Stratification of English in New York City. Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Leith, Dick (1997): A Social History of English. London: Routledge.

Leonard, Stirling (1929): The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage 1700-1800. Wisconsin: Madison.

Milroy, James/Milroy, Lesley (1985): Authority in Language: Investigating Standard Language. Abingdon: Routledge

Mugglestone, Lynda (2003): Talking Proper: The Rise and Fall of the English Accent as a Social Symbol. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nelson, Gerald (2006): Description and prescription. In: Brown, Keith (Ed.): Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics. Amsterdam/Heidelberg: Elsevier, pp. 460–465.

Orwell, George (1946): Politics and the English language. In: Orwell, Sonia/Angus, Ian (Eds.) (1968): The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, vol. 4, pp. 127–139.

Schneider, Edgar W. (2007): Postcolonial English: Varieties of English around the World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, John (1969): Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language. London: Cambridge University.

Searle, John (1979): Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, John (1995): The Construction of Social Reality. New York: Free Press.

Searle, John (2010): Making the Social World. The Structure of Human Civilization. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid (2008): Grammars, Grammarians and Grammar-Writing in Eighteenth-Century England. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Trudgill, Peter (1974): The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Truss, Lynn (2003): Eats, Shoots & Leaves. The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation. London: Profile Books.

Wodak, Ruth/Meyer, Michael (^{3}2016): Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis. Los Angeles/ London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC: Sage.

Wordsworth, William (^{2}1800): Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems. London: Biggs & Co.