

# AUTHORITY IN LANGUAGE

Investigating Standard English

Third edition

*James Milroy and Lesley Milroy*



London and New York

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## PREFACE

It is well known that in British and American society judgments are made about 'correct' and 'incorrect' use of English and that in some countries, such as France and Italy, academies exist which prescribe 'correct' use of the language concerned. In this book, it is our intention to examine such prescriptive judgments about language and the consequences of such judgments in society and in the daily lives of individuals. We attempt to do this in a wide historical and social context.

First, we consider some difficulties in assessing popular and publicly expressed attitudes to language use, and we relate prescriptive attitudes to the phenomenon of language standardisation. This entails a consideration of the historical development of Standard English and the consequences of this in eighteenth-century prescriptivism. We also attempt to consider the mechanisms by which the notion of a standard language has been maintained, and in Chapter 2 we give special attention to a linguistic complaint tradition in English. This tradition, which has taken the form of complaint about so-called mis-use of language and linguistic decline, has altered little since the eighteenth century.

Second, we attempt a critique of some forms of prescriptivism. In this critique, we point out that, although standard languages are necessary and must be maintained, many of the narrower forms of prescriptivism have lost sight of the function of prescription in maintaining the standard. Our argument involves making some necessary distinctions that are often not made (for example, the distinction between speech and writing and between 'grammaticality' and 'acceptability' in language use). We have also found it necessary to point out the wide capacity of ordinary individuals who use language appropriately in a variety of different circumstances – their communicative competence.

Finally, we look at some of the practical consequences of language prescription and standardisation in formal teaching and language testing. We attempt to demonstrate that in professional contexts such as language teaching and speech therapy, prescriptive ideologies have a considerable effect on the design and scoring of language assessment procedures, and that such procedures are often

inadequate. Our critique of such procedures is based on the facts of language variation and communicative competence as we have discussed them in earlier chapters.

The first two chapters are concerned with the relation of prescription to standardisation of language, and to mechanisms by which standardisation is maintained. Chapters 3 and 4 consider the distinction between speech and writing and the tendency of prescriptive statements to be based purely on written language, taking little account of variation in speech. Chapter 5 looks more closely at the social stratification of language that results partly from standardisation. Chapters 6 and 7 extend the discussion to *communicative competence*, arguing that the language abilities of speakers need to be defined in terms of their capacity to use a number of styles and varieties appropriately; prescription, however, is characteristically confined to judgments on a single specific style or variety. In Chapter 8 we look more closely at the effects of prescription on language assessment procedures.

It will be clear from this brief summary that we examine practical consequences of language prescription and standardisation primarily from the perspective of recent empirical, descriptive and theoretical work in *linguistics*, including *sociolinguistics*. As far as possible we have attempted to exclude prior ideological commitment – i.e. our approach has not been developed within any particular socio-political theoretical paradigm.

The book is the joint work of both authors. The main drafts of Chapters 1–4 were prepared by J. Milroy, and those of Chapters 5–8 by L. Milroy. Both authors have, however, been fully involved in the organisation and preparation of all parts of the book, and they take joint responsibility for its contents. As there has recently been considerable public discussion of language problems in such spheres as the educational system, we hope that this book will help to extend the debate.

We are grateful to the following friends and colleagues for comments and criticisms on an earlier draft of the book. We appreciate their help, while of course taking full responsibility for the version which now appears in print. Thanks to Kevin Connolly, Anthony Edwards, Paul Fletcher, Michael McTear, William Mittins, Katherine Perera, Don Porter and John Wilson; to our series editor Michael Stubbs we are particularly grateful for comment, advice and support, and for the idea of writing the book in the first place.

To the Speech Therapists of Northern Ireland and the Speech Therapy students of the Ulster Polytechnic, with whom the ideas set out in Chapter 8 were developed during the years 1978–82, particular thanks are due. We are also extremely grateful for the generosity of the Simon Committee of the University of Manchester, who enabled Lesley Milroy to work on the manuscript of this book during her tenure of the Senior Simon Fellowship in 1982–3. The support of colleagues in the Department of General Linguistics, University of Manchester, during this period, is also much appreciated. We are also grateful to Josie Barber, Ted Cornell and Nicola Nash (of the

## PREFACE

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James Milroy

Lesley Milroy

## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

When we compiled the second edition of this book in 1991, we commented on its relevance to public discussion of language problems in such spheres as the education and speech therapy services. In the intervening years in Britain, debate on the teaching of English, particularly Standard English, has become particularly fierce and politicised, involving a good deal of acrimony between teachers and politicians over the contents of and thinking behind a reformed, centralised English language curriculum. In an extensive analysis of the social and political agenda underlying the debate, Cameron (1995) notes that linguists (particularly sociolinguists) have entered the fray, usually on the side of teachers and have themselves regularly been targeted for criticism on the grounds that they are hostile to the principle that Standard English should be taught in schools. Rather than attempting a radically updated analysis of this very public language debate, we refer readers to Deborah Cameron's excellent discussion.

We have attempted to give a flavour of the heightened level of public feeling aroused by issues of language standardisation and prescription in an extensive revision of chapters 2 and 8. Debate on language issues has been equally fierce in the United States, the Ebonics controversy and the activities of the English Only movement having received a great deal of publicity on both sides of the Atlantic. Accordingly, we have added an additional Chapter 9 where somewhat different British and American language ideologies are related to national histories and social and political ideologies. In this chapter, we also relate issues of prescription and standardisation to the language ideology frameworks which have become popular in the years since the second edition of this book appeared.

We thank Rosina Lippi-Green, Alicia Beckford, John Rickford, Theresa Satterfield, Keith Walters and Katherine Woolard, all of whom have at some time helped us by discussing the material presented in Chapter 9. Thanks also to Paul Foulkes and Paul Kerswill for supplying us with relevant press cuttings.

James Milroy and  
Lesley Milroy  
University of Michigan

# KEY TO SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

*Phonetic symbols* are enclosed in square brackets, e.g. [a]; they indicate pronunciation of given sounds.

*Phonemic symbols* are enclosed in slant brackets, e.g. /a/; they are used to indicate contrasts in sound – thus, /a/ in *bat* and other words contrasts with /ɛ/ in *bet* and other words.

Where phonetic and phonemic symbols are not self-explanatory, their values are exemplified in keywords.

Linguistic variables, as defined by sociolinguistic investigators, are enclosed in round brackets, e.g. (a).

Citations of *spelling forms* are italicised; thus, *h* refers to a letter and not necessarily to any corresponding sound.

Abbreviations used are explained in the text. The main ones are:

RP	Received Pronunciation
SE	Standard English
NSE	Non-standard English
BEV	Black English Vernacular
AA(V)E	African American (Vernacular) English



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# PRESCRIPTION AND STANDARDISATION

## 1.1 Language prescription and its consequences

In this book we attempt to look dispassionately at *prescription* in language and the effects of prescriptive attitudes on the daily lives of individuals. Prescription depends on an ideology (or set of beliefs) concerning language which requires that in language use, as in other matters, things shall be done in the 'right' way. We can, perhaps, best understand what it is by comparing language with other aspects of human behaviour, such as dress or table manners. If, in a particular culture at a particular time, guests at a dinner are required to wear evening dress (of a particular form) and required to use their knives and forks in a particular way, these requirements are *prescriptive*, that is, they are imposed from 'above' by 'society', not by *ad hoc* agreement amongst the guests themselves. They are also *arbitrary*: in North America, for example, the fork is transferred to the right hand for eating, whereas in Britain, the fork remains in the left hand and the knife in the right. One could actually think of a variety of perfectly efficient ways – besides these – in which a meal could be eaten; yet, in these cultures, the slightest deviation from the prescribed norms is immediately noticed and considered to be 'bad manners'.

Language is a much more complex phenomenon than table manners: it is also a much more central aspect of human experience. Whereas table manners are codified in handbooks of etiquette, 'correct' use of language is codified in handbooks of usage. It is probable that all speakers of English (and probably most speakers of many other languages) have a number of definite opinions as to what is 'correct' or 'incorrect' in the language they use. They may often look to 'expert' opinion, rather than to their own knowledge of the language, to decide. Particular English usages, such as double negatives, as in *He never said nothing*, are viewed as unacceptable although they are very widely used; some varieties of a language (e.g. BBC spoken English) are publicly considered to be 'better' than some other varieties (e.g. Birmingham urban dialect). Indeed, some languages are thought to be in some senses 'better' than others: it has often been claimed, for example, that French is more logical than English.

Language, as we have suggested, is a much more complex phenomenon than

such things as table manners, and it is difficult to separate the nature of language prescription (i.e. imposition of norms of usage by authority) from a number of related phenomena, such as *normalisation* and *standardisation* of language. In this first chapter, we shall attempt to address these difficulties; in particular we shall relate prescriptive attitudes very largely to standardisation of language. However, we must first briefly consider some of the consequences of prescriptive and authoritarian attitudes to language behaviour for the daily lives of individuals. These consequences are more wide-ranging than has usually been acknowledged, and it is part of our purpose in this book to indicate how deeply these attitudes affect us and how widespread their consequences are.

Some of the narrower consequences of language prescription are really quite well known, although they are usually accepted by the public as quite reasonable and are not questioned. A person who speaks English perfectly effectively, but who has occasional usages that are said to be 'substandard' (e.g. omitting initial [h] in words like *happy*, *hair*, or using double negatives) may well find that his or her social mobility is blocked and may, for example, be refused access to certain types of employment without any official admission that the refusals depend partly or wholly on his or her use of language. This point is quite clearly understood by the writer of the following (a Victorian English language scholar), who spoke of [h] dropping as a 'revolting habit', and added:

Those whom we call 'self-made men' are much given to this hideous barbarism. . . . Few things will the English youth find in after-life more profitable than the right use of the aforesaid letter.

(Oliphant, 1873:226)

These are strong words; yet many readers may believe that it is quite right that people should be refused employment on the grounds of 'wrong' pronunciation or grammar *alone*, possibly justifying this opinion by arguing that these faults are signs of 'carelessness', which reflect on the general character of the individual. They may not, however, be aware that a majority of their fellow-citizens are accustomed to commit 'faults' (such as [h]-dropping), and that they are therefore condemning a very large proportion of the population. Furthermore, those who do use so-called 'unacceptable' grammar and pronunciation generally belong to the lower social groups; therefore, such attitudes to language can be interpreted as a kind of social-class discrimination, and it may be that political power favouring certain élite groups is exercised in part through these shibboleths. Although discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, gender or social class is not now publicly acceptable, it appears that discrimination on linguistic grounds is publicly acceptable, even though linguistic differences may themselves be associated with ethnic, religious and class differences (see further J. R. Edwards, 1979; Hudson, 1980). In effect, language discrimination stands as proxy for discrimination on these other grounds (for a fuller discussion see Lippi-Green, 1997) and may be openly used to discriminate

against lower class or minority speakers while avoiding direct reference to class or ethnicity.

As a result of the development of sociolinguistic research in recent years, it has become possible to address a number of practical problems in social and educational matters that can be affected by prescriptive attitudes to language. Two of these are particularly discussed in this book. The first concerns the education of minorities in Britain and the United States, both being countries that have large ethnic minority populations whose native language may not be English. This question is further discussed in Chapters 5 and 9.

A second extended area in which the prescriptive ideology is important is language testing and assessment. Standardised tests that are intended to estimate children's linguistic abilities are used in the educational systems of many countries, including Britain and the United States. Standardised testing procedures are also widely used to assess degrees of language handicap in people (often children) who have speech impairments. This is not an unimportant matter. It was estimated by Quirk (1972) that about 4 per cent of a population is likely to suffer from language handicap: this means that the number of speech-impaired people in Britain is probably over 2 million and in the USA 10 million.

Language testing and assessment, as we shall demonstrate in Chapter 7, are often based on rather simplistic notions of the nature of language and its use. The tests frequently do not take account of variation according to dialect and occasion of use. In addition, they often do not allow for the application of conversational rules such as ellipsis. Thus, if a child is shown a picture of a horse jumping over a fence and asked what the horse is doing, he may be penalised for replying: *Jumping over a fence* rather than *The horse is jumping over a fence*, despite the fact that he is applying a normal conversation rule of ellipsis. He may then be given a lower score, which might not greatly distinguish him in this case from a child at an earlier stage of speech development who answers *Horse jump fence*. In such cases, it seems that the test procedure is confusing literary or written norms (which are resistant to ellipsis) with spoken norms (see further, Chapters 3, 4 and 8 below).

We have argued that prescriptive attitudes have far-reaching consequences including the two already mentioned, and these consequences are explored in some detail in later chapters. But, in the remainder of this chapter, we are concerned more broadly with the nature of language prescription and its relation to the process of language standardisation. In Section 2 we go on to discuss the attitudes of professional language scholars to prescription and compare these (in Section 3) with public and popular attitudes. In the final section we attempt a fuller account of the nature of language standardisation.

## 1.2 Linguistics and prescription

The existence of prescriptive attitudes is well known to linguistic scholars, but in 'mainstream' linguistics of recent times scholars have generally claimed that

prescription is not a central part of their discipline and even that it is irrelevant to linguistics. It has not been fully studied as an important sociolinguistic phenomenon. All standard introductory textbooks in linguistics affirm that linguistics is a descriptive discipline and not a prescriptive one:

First, and most important, linguistics is *descriptive*, not prescriptive. A linguist is interested in what *is* said, not what he thinks *ought* to be said. He describes language in all its aspects, but does not prescribe rules of 'correctness'.

(Aitchison, 1978:13)

Similarly, handbooks compiled by linguistic scholars make the same reservations. Daniel Jones has this to say in the introduction to his *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1955): 'No attempt is made to decide how people *ought* to pronounce; all that the dictionary aims at doing is to give a faithful record of the manner in which certain people do pronounce.'

Although it is necessary to insist on the priority of description, it does not follow from this that prescription should never be studied at any point. However, the reservation about prescription that is commonly expressed has, in practice, led to a general tendency to study language *as if* prescriptive phenomena play no part in language. Many professional language scholars appear to feel that, whereas it is respectable to write formal grammars, it is not quite respectable to study prescription.

The attitudes of linguists (professional scholars of language) have little or no effect on the general public, who continue to look to dictionaries, grammars and handbooks as authorities on 'correct' usage. If, for example, lexicographers (dictionary-makers) attempt to remove all traces of value-judgment from their work and refuse to label particular usages (such as *ain't*) as 'colloquial' and others as 'slang', there is likely to be a public outcry. This was notoriously the case when *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* appeared in the USA in 1961 (see the discussion by Sledd, 1962). Its failure to provide such evaluations of usage was described by one critic as 'a scandal and a disaster'. More recently there have been many complaints about Robert Burchfield's revision of Fowler's classic *Modern English Usage* on the grounds that his acknowledgement of current changes in usage encourages 'misuse' of language. Behind such attitudes one can sense the view that since the language is believed to be always on a downhill path, it is up to experts (such as dictionary-makers) to arrest and reverse the decline. It is not necessary to dwell at length on these widely shared attitudes. Readers will have seen letters to the newspapers complaining about particular usages, and we shall comment later on the 'complaint tradition' in English.

Modern linguistic scholars, however, have always had good reason to assert that their discipline is fundamentally descriptive and not prescriptive. During this century, their assertions have been motivated by a desire to study language

in all its forms as objectively as possible. If we want to know more about language as a phenomenon and the universal human capacity to use it, then we must try to base our discipline on observed fact (as far as possible) and certainly not on a set of prejudices. After all (so the argument runs), it would be absurd for a physical scientist to refuse to study some molecule because he felt it was more 'sloppy' or 'careless' than some other molecule or for a zoologist to classify animals in terms of their 'ugliness' or 'friendliness' rather than their membership of genera, etc.; it is equally absurd for the linguist to rule out study of some particular aspect of language use because he or she has some negative attitude to it. In this view of linguistics, the idea of linguistics as a 'science' obviously looms very large.

The view that linguistics is a science (bound up as it is with anti-prescriptive and anti-evaluative notions) has been prominent for a much longer time than is generally acknowledged; it was quite clearly stated in the nineteenth century. Max Müller in his *Lectures on the Science of Language*, delivered in 1861, stated that linguistics is a *physical* science. In this, he was affected by current nineteenth-century notions of the nature of science: he meant that linguistics was analogous to biology and geology and differentiated from 'humanities' such as history, literature and law (1861:22). Müller went on to make the usual assertion that all forms of language are equal as far as the 'scientist' is concerned:

In the science of languages . . . language itself becomes the sole object of scientific inquiry. Dialects which have never produced any literature at all . . . are as important, nay for the solution of some of our problems, more important, than the poetry of Homer, or the prose of Cicero.  
(1861:23)

Before this time, Richard Chenevix Trench (1851) (who later became an archbishop) had proclaimed that language had its own 'life', independent of man, and had attacked those who attempted to control the development of language by 'arbitrary decrees' (Trench, 1888:223–4). Although these scholars were affected by current Victorian ideologies (see Crowley (1991) for a discussion of Trench), they were also reacting against the authoritarian linguistics of the eighteenth century, which we discuss later in this volume. For nineteenth-century scholars, linguistics had become primarily a historical or evolutionary discipline. It was clearly necessary for them to give attention to obscure and antique varieties of a 'non-standard' kind if they were to explain the complicated processes of change that had given rise to modern languages like French, English and German, and which continued to affect these languages.

Although these respectable Victorians were already reacting strongly against the prescriptive attitudes of the eighteenth century, the most extreme anti-prescriptive statements, as far as we know, are those made by some members of

the 'American structuralist' school of linguistics. Bloomfield (1933:22) felt that discovering why *ain't* is considered bad and *am not* good is not a fundamental question in linguistics, and he thought it strange that 'people without linguistic training' should devote 'a great deal of effort to futile discussions of this topic'. Bloomfield was certainly implying that the study of prescriptivism was not of central interest to linguistics; he was thereby limiting the field of linguistics to a descriptive study of form and system in language which takes relatively little account of language as a *social* phenomenon. Some of Bloomfield's followers have gone further than this and have attacked 'unscientific' approaches to language with missionary zeal. C. C. Fries (1957) seems to have equated traditional school grammar with prescription (which was by definition 'bad' and 'unscientific' in the view of structural linguists of the time), and in his book on English syntax he went so far as to even reject traditional linguistic terms such as 'noun', 'verb' and 'adjective'. Fries's work was directed towards the educational system; that of Robert A. Hall, Jr. was directed at the ordinary consumer. Anxious to assure all his readers that their use of language was just as good as that of anyone else, he proclaimed that 'there is no such thing as good or bad, correct or incorrect, grammatical or ungrammatical, in language' (1950).

Although linguistic scholars would certainly dispute the details of this pronouncement, they have continued (for the most part) to assert or assume that their discipline is descriptive and theoretical and that they do not deal in prescription. In Western Europe and America most theoretical linguists would still affirm that all forms of language are in principle equal. As Hudson (1980:191) has put it:

Linguists would claim that if they were simply shown the grammars of two different varieties, one with high and the other with low prestige, they could not tell which was which, any more than they could predict the skin colour of those who speak the two varieties.

Although some evidence from work by social psychologists (Giles *et al.*, 1974, 1975) lends some support to Hudson's point, we do not, in fact, know whether *standard* languages can be conclusively shown to have *no* purely linguistic characteristics that differentiate them from non-standard forms of language (the matter has not really been investigated). It appears to be an article of faith at the moment that judgments evaluating differences between standard and non-standard varieties are always socially conditioned and never purely linguistic. However, we shall later suggest that the process of language standardisation involves *the suppression of optional variability in language* and that, as a consequence, non-standard varieties can be observed to permit more variability than standard ones (e.g. in pronunciations of particular words). Thus, there may be one sense at least in which the *linguistic* characteristics of non-standard varieties differ from those of 'standards'.



However this may be, we shall see in Chapter 4 that non-standard forms are not simply debased variants of standards and that they can be shown to be 'grammatical' in their own terms. Historically, standard languages have been superimposed on dialects. If a linguistic scholar is to do his work adequately (to give a clear description of a language, to explain how children acquire language, to explain how languages change in the course of time), he would be extremely foolish to allow his own prejudices and notions of correctness to get between him and his data. But the professional linguist's insistence on 'objectivity' and 'scientific inquiry' appears to have been generally misunderstood. This may arise partly from scholarly neglect (until recently) of the *social* functions of language. Although it is understandable that linguists should have to place clear limitations on their field of inquiry (especially if they are to make progress in *formal* linguistics, following Chomsky (1965) etc.), we are unlikely to make great progress in understanding the nature of language if we entirely ignore its *social* functions and characteristics. Amongst these are phenomena such as language standardisation, the nature of literacy, notions of prestige in language and popular attitudes to usage.

In the following sections, we shall go on to consider such matters. But first we should like to point out that misunderstanding of linguists' attacks on prescription may have had dire consequences in some quarters. Since the 1950s there has reputedly been a decline in the teaching of 'grammar' in schools. Some educationalists appear to have interpreted attacks on *prescriptive* grammar as attacks on the teaching of grammar in general; and as university language teachers, we have become aware that some students now enter universities to study English or modern languages with a rather hazy idea of basic grammatical terminology (such as *subject*, *transitive*, *preposition*). Some commentators have even claimed that there has been a decline in general literacy as a result of this trend. We see no reason to accept this latter point, as it is a relative question that cannot be adequately tested. However, experts in linguistics have sometimes been blamed for the decline in grammar teaching (and the supposed decline in literacy).

In the UK, one vehement critic of the supposed malign influence of linguistics on English language teaching is John Honey (1983, 1997). He has named an array of linguistic scholars (including – astonishingly – Noam Chomsky, who has never been concerned with educational or social issues), as encouraging a neglect of standard English teaching in schools. This is an entirely false claim. It is true that there has been some opposition to the teaching of English grammar, but in our experience this has arisen mainly from the preference of lecturers for literature teaching. Far from discouraging 'grammar', university linguists have been closely involved in maintaining and encouraging its teaching. No one has ever opposed the teaching of standard English, and many of those named by Honey as 'enemies' of standard English have devoted much of their careers to teaching it – training students to write clear and correct standard English. Experienced teachers will not take kindly to an attack