Fixing English

Over the past three hundred years, attempts have been made to prescribe how we should and shouldn’t use the English language. The efforts have been institutionalized in places such as usage guides, dictionaries, and school curricula. Such authorities have aspired to “fix” the language, sometimes by keeping English exactly where it is, but also by trying to improve the current state of the language.

Anne Curzan demonstrates the important role prescriptivism plays in the history of the English language, as a sociolinguistic factor in language change and as a vital meta-discourse about language. Starting with a pioneering new definition of prescriptivism as a linguistic phenomenon, she highlights the significant role played by Microsoft’s grammar checker, debates about “real words,” nonsexist language reform, and efforts to reappropriate stigmatized terms. Essential reading for anyone interested in the regulation of language, the book is a fascinating re-examination of how we tell language history.

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Fixing English

Prescriptivism and Language History

Anne Curzan
In memory of Richard W. Bailey
Contents

List of figures viii
Acknowledgements ix

Introduction: does prescriptivism fail? 1
1 Prescriptivism’s umbrella: standards, style, restoration, and political intervention 12
2 Prescriptivism’s lessons: scope and “the history of English” 41
3 Checking grammar and grammar checkers 64
4 Dictionaries and the idea of “real words” 93
5 Nonsexist language reform and its effects 114
6 Reappropriation and challenges to institutionalized prescriptivism 137
7 Finding shared ground: public conversations about prescriptivism 170

References 178
Index 190
Figures

2.1 Hockett’s (1957) timeline of written and spoken English  page 55
2.2 Frequency of *hopefully* in Time Magazine Corpus from the 1920s through 2000s  57
3.1 A neighborly exchange about correct punctuation (circulated on the Internet in Fall 2012)  74
3.2 The Microsoft Word Grammar Checker’s explanation of sentence initial *and, but, or, or plus*  82
3.3 The Microsoft Word Grammar Checker’s explanation of *that* and *which*  91
5.1 The frequency of “he or she” in COHA by decade  127
5.2 The frequency of “his or her” in COHA by decade  127
5.3 The frequency of “he or she” in COCA by register  128
5.4 The frequency of “police officer” in COHA by decade  132
5.5 The frequency of “policeman” in COHA by decade  132
5.6 The frequency of “policewoman” in COHA by decade  133
5.7 The frequency of “police officer” and “policeman” in COCA by register  133
5.8 The frequency of “firefighter” and “fireman” in COCA by register  134
5.9 The frequency of “flight attendant” in COHA by decade  135
5.10 The frequency of “stewardess” in COHA by decade  135
5.11 The frequency of “flight attendant” and “stewardess” in COCA by register  135
6.1 The frequency of the word “gay” in the Corpus of Historical American English  152
6.2 The frequency of the word “queer” in the Corpus of Historical American English  152
6.3 The frequency of “niggardly” in English books, 1800–2000, in Google Books Ngram Viewer  158
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