

Introduction: does prescriptivism fail?

In January 2010, the American Dialect Society voted *fail*, the noun, the Most Useful Word of the Year. I first encountered the word a year and a half earlier, when the students in my Structure of English course taught me the slang phrase “epic fail.” An epic fail is not just any fail: it is a fail of monumental proportion, often, my students explained, involving hubris. As *Slate* magazine described it in an article in October of that year: “Not just coming in second in a bike race but doing so because you fell off your bike after prematurely raising your arms in victory” (Beam 2008). The collapse of several major American investment banks in 2008: an epic fail. The University of Michigan football team losing to Appalachian State in 2007: another epic fail.

Fail as a noun is linguistically interesting because it exemplifies language change, whether it represents a clipping from the noun *failure* or a functional shift from the verb *fail* to the noun *fail*. (The noun *fail* existed earlier in English but was listed by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as obsolete, except in the phrase *without fail*, until this innovative meaning of the noun *fail* was added to the *Dictionary* in 2011.) The emergence of the noun *fail* is the kind of linguistic change that linguists enjoy studying, a change that bubbles up “from the people” – in this case, perhaps, from a late 1990s arcade game in which players were told that “you fail it.” This phrase became a more widespread exclamation in response to someone’s failure at a range of activities, and once shortened to “Fail!” it would easily have enabled a functional shift of *fail* from verb to noun. The noun *fail* simultaneously exemplifies the kind of change that stereotypical prescriptive language pundits – pundits who take it upon themselves to tell English speakers how they should and should not talk and write in order to use “good” or “correct” English – would lament: Why do we need another noun when we already have *failure*? And why do people insist on nouning verbs?

The previous paragraph sets up a traditional binary in modern linguistics: the descriptive linguist standing in opposition to the prescriptive pundit or “grammarian.” Descriptive linguists study language change as a natural and inevitable part of any living language. Prescriptive commentators and scholars react to language change, typically with a desire to “fix” the language: both *fix* in the sense of hold stable (i.e., fix in time) and *fix* in the sense of improve.

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In linguistic scholarship on the history of the English language, the prescriptivism of the modern period is often framed as, in many ways, an epic fail. It represents a concerted effort by a group of elitist, sometimes self-proclaimed language authorities to stop language change that does not recognize that language change cannot be stopped. It qualifies as an epic fail because, first, modern prescriptivism demonstrates hubris. For example, *New York Magazine* theater critic John Simon, a self-proclaimed language prescriptivist, declares outright in the PBS documentary “Do You Speak American?” (2005) that descriptive linguists, with their assertions about the inevitability of language change, are “a curse upon their race, who of course think that what the people say is the law.” Lynne Truss, in her runaway best-seller *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: A Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (2003), scolds that incorrect use of punctuation stems from lazy writers who do not care enough, and she encourages the sticklers of the world to unite in public criticism of these writers’ behavior, including taking red pens to badly punctuated grocery store signs.

Second, modern prescriptivism has chalked up a significant number of failures: it has witnessed – or some might say suffered from – several centuries of language change that has flown in the face of prescriptive criticism. For instance, nineteenth-century grammarian George Marsh chimed in as one of many voices railing against the passive progressive, a construction new to that period. In *Lectures on the English Language* (1863, 649), Marsh writes:

The phrase ‘the house *is being built*’ for ‘the house *is building*’ is an awkward neologism, which neither convenience, intelligibility, nor syntactical congruity demands, and the use of which ought therefore to be discountenanced, as an attempt at the artificial improvement of the language in a point which needed no amendment.

Almost a century and a half later, this lament seems quaint. Dean Alford, in the *Queen’s English* (1875), condemns *desirability* and *reliable* as terrible words – a prescriptive stance that again appears naïve and fruitless, given how standard both words have become. Yet the complaints continue, from declaring the verb *incentivize* a form of “boorish bureaucratic misspeak” (Rothstein 2000) to lambasting *invite* as a noun that “eviscerates the language” (Leslie S. March, quoted in Bradley 2008).

Linguistic scholarship on the history of English has often highlighted the unrealistic goals of prescriptive efforts and has presented examples of ways in which language change defies prescriptive mandates. The scholarship thus sets up an evaluation of prescriptivism and its goals based on its success or lack thereof in stopping language change. In keeping with such an evaluative frame, Samuel Johnson’s famous quotation from the Preface to his 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* is often showcased as the confession of a prescriptivist who has seen the light, who has recognized his own hubris and the epic fail of his original plan for his dictionary:

Those who have been persuaded to think well of my design, require that it should fix our language, and put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition. With this consequence I will confess that I flattered myself for a while; but now begin to fear that I have indulged expectation which neither reason nor experience can justify. When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, or clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affectation.

Johnson still seems to be describing language change as corruption and decay – a claim that I, as a linguist, would dispute – but he recognizes in this excerpt that language change is inevitable. And while Johnson is right that his dictionary did not, and could not, embalm the language, I argue in this book that histories of English are mistaken if they minimize or marginalize the modern prescriptive project as failed because it has failed *to stop* those alterations which time and chance have made in language. In marginalizing prescriptivism, they can miss important developments in Modern English usage and in meta-discourses about usage, both of which are part of language history.

If the sole goal of language prescriptivism is assumed to be stopping language change, then prescriptivism fails. But I argue here that the goals of prescriptivism are often more complicated than that, and it oversimplifies scholarly inquiry to evaluate prescriptivism only with respect to its “success” versus “failure” in stopping change. To begin, the two meanings of *fix* productively highlight at least two major aims of prescriptive efforts: in some cases to resist language change and preserve an older and/or standard form that is seen as fully adequate if not superior; in other cases to improve upon the language, either by introducing new forms or distinctions or by proposing a return to older, more conservative forms. Second, if scholars reframe their questions about language prescriptivism around how it may or may not influence language change and how it shapes modern meta-discourses about language, there is much better evidence that prescriptivism at least in part “succeeds.” It may not succeed in the way that any given prescriptivist hopes it might, but the sheer presence of prescriptive efforts has the power to affect attitudes about usage as well as, in some cases, the development of actual language usage. This is one among many reasons why the concept of success, like that of failure, probably does not serve the purposes of scholarly investigation well. Success and failure take the stated goals of prescriptivism as the endpoint and the basis of measurement. I contend that the stated goals should not be the focus of inquiry. A more interesting set of questions focuses on the power of prescriptivism, regardless of its specific aims and desired outcomes,

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to shape the English language and the sociolinguistic contexts in which the English language is written and spoken.

An analogy may be useful here. If we imagine a living language as a river, constantly in motion, prescriptivism is often framed as the attempt to construct a dam that will stop the river in its tracks. But, linguists point out, the river is too wide and strong, too creative and ever changing, and it runs over any such dam. However, if we imagine prescriptivism as building not just dams but also embankments or levees along the sides of the river to control water levels and breakwaters that attempt to redirect the flow of the river, it becomes easier to see how prescriptivism may be able to affect how the language changes. The river may flood the embankment or spill over the breakwater, but that motion will be different due to the sheer presence of the barriers. And even if prescriptivism is seen as only the dam, which is then overwhelmed by the power of the river, the sheer presence of the dam affects the flow of the river. In this way, the consciously created structures around or in the river, like prescriptive language efforts, constitute one of many factors that must be accounted for to understand the patterns of the river's movement – or of a language's development over time.

All that said, even helpful analogies between language and physical phenomena are also often problematic. First, they tend to abstract language away from the speakers who are responsible for the existence of any language, making a living language into a kind of life form in and of itself. Historical sociolinguistic scholarship rightly emphasizes the need to focus on the speakers who change a language; and in this book I stress the value of ensuring the focus extends to include the speakers, books, and now computer programs that have prescriptive things to say about the ways in which the language is changing. Language change is often systematic but not mechanistic. The idiosyncrasies, which are as much a part of language change as the larger, more systematic patterns, stem from the idiosyncrasies of human speakers. Second, the English language is not one river. As John McWhorter (1998) describes it, any language is a bundle of dialects, and the English language is no different. Much of this book will focus on modern American English, and that too encompasses many dialects; but the argument about the importance of prescriptivism holds for other world varieties of English and other languages. In addition, as I argue in more detail in Chapter 2, the “English language” and its history should comprise written and spoken English as two different, interrelated, and interacting forms of English (often standard English in the case of the written). Finally, the prescriptive rules here analogized with levees and breakwaters tend to focus on only one small part of the language, separating out a word or a construction for censure or improvement in ways that the water in a river simply cannot be differentiated for attention to only one part of the water.

If the general reframing highlighted by the river analogy holds, though, and prescriptivism can and does influence the history of a language, intriguing and

important puzzles remain to be solved by historians of English: What have been and continue to be the effects of prescriptivism on Modern English usage? And how have modern prescriptive efforts shaped the meta-discourses about language that swirl around and interact with actual usage? To think about these two questions from a different perspective, what does a language history miss if it does not account sufficiently for the presence of widespread institutionalized prescriptivism?

I define the term *prescriptivism* in more detail in the next chapter, teasing apart four major strands of prescriptive rules that language authorities have historically imposed on the language and its speakers. For now, it will suffice to restrict the term to those language rules about “good” or “better” “or correct” usage created, perpetuated, and enforced by widely recognized, often institutionalized language authorities, and then subsequently perpetuated at the more individual level, often with reference to these culturally sanctioned language authorities. For English, these language authorities have never been gathered in one academy, despite calls for such an institution by writers such as Jonathan Swift and an attempt at its creation by John Quincy Adams – and despite the model provided by the Académie française. Instead, English speakers have relied on a network of authorities or “language mavens,” to adopt a term introduced by William Safire and further popularized by Steven Pinker (1994). These authorities have historically been lent authority through the power of publication: creating grammar books and style guides; editing books and dictionaries; opining on language in newspaper columns. The exception perhaps is English teachers, whose institutional authority allows them to enforce prescriptive rules; typically they rely, however, on published works such as grammar books, style guides, and dictionaries. As discussed in detail in Chapter 3, the Microsoft Word Grammar Checker has also become one of the most powerful prescriptive forces that English writers encounter on a regular basis.

There is a reason I phrased the questions above about the effects of prescriptivism as questions about Modern English usage and the discourses circulating around it. The questions are inherently modern ones, given that the rise of institutionalized prescriptivism is a modern phenomenon, dating back to the eighteenth century or a bit before and becoming a powerful social force in the nineteenth century. The eighteenth century witnessed the early proliferation of grammar books and dictionaries, including Samuel Johnson’s famous dictionary – resources designed to record and regulate the language, which had come to be recognized as eloquent, worthy of being used for literature and a range of academic subjects. Up until the middle of the sixteenth century, English was generally seen as unworthy and “rude” compared with Latin and French; with a change in attitudes about English’s worth and potential came a massive influx of borrowed terms, sometimes needed in order to enable English to handle technical academic discussions, sometimes added for rhetorical flourish. And as English

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expanded and became more eloquent, grammarians and rhetoricians also got the sense that it was becoming unruly. In the eighteenth century, Johnson was far from alone in his laments about the corruption and decay of English, and many English language scholars and commentators shared his desire to “fix” the language in the sense of stabilize it.¹

Fix the language they did not. However, they succeeded in creating several centuries of language anxiety and a firmly entrenched belief system about the correctness of standard varieties of English and the authority of resources such as dictionaries and usage manuals. These outcomes affect the history of Modern English at multiple levels, including: the favoring and disfavoring of specific constructions, particularly in formal contexts; the creation of language resources that have become standard in the education of most English speakers, if not a routine part of their daily lives; and the fostering of meta-discourses that serve to regulate the language of others, from whether or not a construction is “allowed” in formal writing to whether or not a word is “a real word” (as noted above with the word *fail*), all of which can perpetuate class and educational hierarchies based on language use.

These changes in language use and in meta-discourses about language are equally part of the history of English, as I discuss in Chapter 2. The history of English should be viewed as comprising not only the changes that happen in the language despite prescriptivism but also those changes that are in various ways influenced by the language prescriptivism that has characterized the modern period. The fact that the passive progressive (e.g., *the house is being built*) has become standard despite prescriptive criticism constitutes as interesting a development in the history of English as the current overuse of *whom* in formal contexts (e.g., *the person whom is involved*). The latter represents at least in part a response to prescriptive efforts to enforce “correct” use of *who* and *whom*, efforts that have made some speakers anxious that where they might want to use *who*, *whom* is actually “correct.” As this example shows, prescriptivism can have unintended, “rogue” consequences, but it has consequences nonetheless. In this case, rather than stopping the replacement of *whom* with *who* wholesale and creating (or returning to) a time when *who* is always used in subject position and *whom* in object position, prescriptivism has created a situation in which some speakers and writers may replace *who* with *whom* in formal contexts. In all likelihood, *who* will replace *whom* in all contexts in the long run, and a

¹ There are several excellent recent histories of the rise of Standard English, of language anxiety, and of prescriptive projects, including David Crystal’s *Fight for English: How Language Pundits Ate, Shot, and Left* (2006), Jack Lynch’s *The Lexicographer’s Dilemma* (2009), and Tim Machan’s *Language Anxiety* (2009). See also Edward Finegan’s comprehensive chapter on “Usage” in Volume VI of the *Cambridge History of the English Language* (2001), as well as his earlier book *Attitudes Toward English Usage: A History of the War of Words* (1980), and Dennis Baron’s *Grammar and Good Taste: Reforming the American Language* (1982).

history of the pronouns needs to take prescriptivism into account to understand the progression of the change as it takes what might otherwise be unexpected turns. Remember the levees. If histories of English evaluate the prescriptive project solely in terms of its success or failure to stop language change, they can miss these real-world consequences for speakers, both in how they use the language and how they think about their and others' use of the language.

Linguists do not yet, however, completely understand how prescriptivism can or has shaped the history of Modern English. In response to the widely held idea among non-linguists that language change might be slowing down in the modern era due to rampant prescriptivism and standardization, linguists have often swung perhaps too far in the other direction, arguing that these efforts have no effect, that language change carries on despite prescriptivism, unhindered by it – brushing prescriptivism off like the proverbial fly. The following summary statement by Rosina Lippi-Green, in the first edition of *English with an Accent* (1997), effectively captures the published stance of a significant number in the field: “Language changes whether we like it or not. Attempts to stop spoken language from changing are not unknown in the history of the world, but they are universally without success” (10).² Certainly language will change anyway; there is no debate among linguists about that fact – although much of the public has yet to be convinced of, or to become less wary and concerned about, the inevitability of language change. But are all attempts to prescribe or proscribe language in response to change “without success”? In his book *The Fight for English*, David Crystal (2006, ix) describes his focus as: “the story of the fight for English usage – the story of a group of people who tried to shape the language in their own image but, generation after generation, failed.” Crystal’s statement is completely accurate in asserting that usage pundits have proven unable to mold the language into the (more) ideal language they think it should be; English speakers are too creatively unruly – and too many – to be guided that coherently. But these people who have tried to shape language have not been unsuccessful in shaping language and the sociolinguistic contexts in which it is used, even if the end product does not match their ideal image.

In her groundbreaking book *Verbal Hygiene* (1995), Deborah Cameron productively shifts the question away from whether or not prescription is a good thing or an unnatural imposition. She argues that verbal hygiene, which she defines as the desire to regulate, improve, and clean up the speech of others, is a natural part of all speech communities: it is “observed to occur in all speech

² In the second edition of *English with an Accent* (2012), Lippi-Green revises the sentence but still condemns prescriptive responses to language change to failure: “And still people will take up the battle cry and declare war on language change. All those attempts – and there have been a lot of them – are doomed to failure, unless they are instituted by means of genocide” (8).

communities to a greater or lesser extent” (5). In other words, as soon as a group of speakers come together, living and/or working together as a community, some speakers will begin telling other speakers how to talk (“better,” in ways deemed more appropriate, in ways deemed more cool, etc.). While verbal hygiene may be imposed, particularly if it comes from speakers or institutions with significant social or political power and gatekeeping capacities, it is not unnatural to language use and communities. Cameron asserts that more interesting than the question “should we prescribe?” are questions about “who prescribes for whom, what they prescribe, how, and for what purposes” (11). These questions are centrally important and provide a richer way to consider verbal hygiene as a sociolinguistic phenomenon.

With Cameron’s work as one critical starting point, I shift the focus from cause and purpose to effects – and as a result to more historical questions. As a historian of English, I have become increasingly aware of the limited integration of prescriptivism into histories of the language in the modern period; it is typically relegated to the historical context, largely divorced from developments in the language itself. The dynamics of some speakers telling other speakers how they should use the language, and speakers’ responses to those prescriptions, are some of the many factors that influence speakers’ linguistic behavior. And altering individual linguistic behavior, of course, alters the course of a language more generally. In addition, histories of English have mirrored the prescriptive preoccupation with a fairly narrow set of prescriptive rules about punctuation, grammar, and style, and, as a result, they have often sidelined some of the most powerful prescriptive discourses affecting usage, such as nonsexist language reform.

To think productively about the questions I am posing about the effects of prescriptivism on the history of the language, historians of English need to recognize an array of prescriptive efforts as a natural part of language communities, not an unnatural imposition on naturally occurring language change. As Cameron points out, recognizing the humanness of the prescriptive impulse is not the same as condoning all prescriptive efforts; while language-based power dynamics are a natural part of speech communities, not all exercises of this power are responsible or well founded. They are, however, part of history. From this perspective, then, changes that result from prescriptive forces are also not unnatural changes but part of the puzzle that language historians are seeking to solve about why varieties of the language have changed in particular ways.

I am not the first to make an argument along these lines, but the argument has yet to have a significant enough impact on the canonical historical narrative of the English language (or arguably on studies of language variation and change more generally). Over twenty years ago, James Milroy and Lesley Milroy, in their foundational book *Authority in Language* (1991), challenged sociolinguists to think seriously about prescriptivism’s effects:

When we view language as fundamentally a social phenomenon, we cannot then ignore prescription and its consequences. The study of linguistic authoritarianism is an important part of linguistics. (11)

Sharon Millar (1998, 178), in a brief but important article, also questions the “failure” of prescriptivism and proposes that “prescription may have something to teach linguists.” Sociolinguistics has demonstrated the importance of phenomena such as language stigma and prestige. Millar crucially extends these findings: “Since prescriptive activities are involved in the propagation of ideas about ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘prestigious’ and ‘stigmatized’, they may be a useful source of information for the sociolinguist seeking to understand how mechanisms of change and maintenance operate” (178).

The past decade has witnessed the publication of several excellent volumes dedicated to the historical development of prescriptivism (e.g., Beal et al. 2008; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008d; Percy and Davidson 2012). Handbooks on the history of English have often included a treatment of prescriptivism as part of a chapter on standardization or variation (e.g., Görlach 1999; Crowley 2008) or on usage (e.g., Finegan 2001). Some recent histories of the language that adhere less to the traditional periodization model (i.e., Old English, Middle English, etc.) have successfully integrated language attitudes into the discussion of language history (e.g., Crystal 2004; Mugglestone 2006). And a growing body of scholarship has examined the relationship of prescriptive grammar to usage (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1982, 2002; Auer and González-Díaz 2005; Yáñez-Bouza 2006, 2008; Anderwald 2012). However, institutionalized prescriptivism as a sociolinguistic phenomenon has yet to be effectively integrated as a factor into the broader study of “language change” in the history of English. As Anderwald (2012) points out, current scholarship takes contradictory stances on prescriptivism, from accepting its influence (perhaps too uncritically) to dismissing it as having no “real” effect.

There are signs of progress in terms of the integration of prescriptivism into the telling of the language’s history, but currently it seems to be largely confined to books that address historical developments in language attitudes rather than technical, structural developments in the language (I address some of the disciplinary issues involved in history of English scholarship in Chapter 2).³ For example, Tim Machan (2009, 8), in his book *Language Anxiety*, describes the “social desire to stigmatize or ameliorate a particular word” as one of several social factors influencing language change. Jack Lynch (2009, 6) in *The Lexicographer’s Dilemma* writes of language commentators: “In a sense, they’ve all been failures: despite their combined efforts, the language is every

³ Leech et al. (2009) is a notable exception. These studies of change in twentieth-century American and British English consistently consider prescriptive influences as a possible factor in the patterns of change observed with, for example, relative pronouns and the subjunctive.

bit as messy and irrational as it was three hundred years ago. But all have shaped and influenced the language we speak today. To understand our language, we have to understand them.” But in books focused primarily on structural developments in the language, prescriptivism has more often been framed as a factor that gets in the way of change. For example, in her textbook on the history of English, Elly van Gelderen (2006, 8) describes prescriptive rules as factors that “inhibit internal change,” and does not explicitly include them as factors that might cause “external change” in the same way that contact with other languages does, a point I return to in Chapter 2. We should beware of wording that could be read to suggest that changes in the language caused by prescriptive impulses are not somehow “real” language change, internal or external: it falls into the binary of suggesting that some changes are “natural” to language and others are unnaturally imposed. The natural–unnatural binary can prove unhelpful in thinking about the relationship of prescriptivism and language history.

This book offers a new perspective on the role and importance of prescriptive efforts in the history of English in the modern period. It includes four case studies that highlight significant prescriptive discourses in the modern period that have not received adequate attention to date – discourses that entrench, exploit, and challenge ideologies of correctness and legitimacy in language, and discourses that have in several cases demonstrably affected modern English usage. The first of seven chapters develops an extended, more nuanced definition of prescriptivism than has previously been available in linguistic scholarship. The second chapter discusses some of the repercussions for history of English scholarship of taking prescriptivism into account, proposing three guiding principles for scholarship in the field. Chapter 3 surveys research on the effects of grammatical prescriptivism on written usage as context for a detailed case study of Microsoft Word Grammar Checker, which has become a pervasive force on writers’ awareness of specific usage rules and potentially on the prose that they produce. Chapter 4, in focusing on the rise of the English dictionary, examines the idea that there are “real” and “not real” or illegitimate words in English – and the effects of that idea on notions about acceptable public language. The surprisingly successful effects of nonsexist language reform efforts, which have sometimes challenged tenants of institutionalized prescriptivism, are the subject of Chapter 5. And Chapter 6 explores the consequences of efforts to reappropriate words such as *gay*, *queer*, *dyke*, and “the N-word,” which both challenge and change institutionalized prescriptivism. The final chapter addresses the challenge prescriptivism presents to linguists trying to disseminate alternative views of language variation and change as part of the public conversation about language.

The extended examples of prescriptive language efforts included in this book present only a snapshot of prescriptivism’s importance in and effect on the history of English. The examples are limited primarily to the United States and in some cases the United Kingdom, which obviously tells only part of the