

## Norms and Margins of English

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PROOF

# 1 Norms and Margins of English

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*Linda Pillière, Wilfrid Andrieu, Valérie Kerfelec and  
Diana Lewis*

When the editors of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* decided in 2007 to delete nature words such as *acorn*, *conker*, *dandelion*, *otter* and *willow* to make room for *blog*, *broadband*, *chatroom*, *MP3 player* and *voice-mail*, there was a public outcry. Eight years later, indignation was still being voiced, with a letter of protest signed by well-known writers such as Margaret Atwood, Michael Morpurgo, Andrew Morton and Ruth Padel.<sup>1</sup> Such a reaction is far from being exceptional. Each new edition of a dictionary is hailed by a flurry of articles focusing on which words have been included and which left out. Public interest is just as high in questions relating to punctuation and grammar. Usage guides such as Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* have become bestsellers, century-old usage guides such as Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* continue to be re-edited, websites such as *Grammar Girl* grow in popularity and letters to the editor continue to argue over points of usage. While people may not always be sure whether to use the apostrophe or not, or whether it should be *organize* or *organise*, they are certainly not indifferent to such questions. As John Allen (2003, p. 7), the former executive editor of BBC Radio News and author of the 2003 *BBC News Style Guide*, notes, 'Our use, or perceived misuse, of English produces a greater response from our audiences than anything else.' These various examples all illustrate the general public's anxiety and concern over problems of usage and language change. Far from belonging exclusively to the domain of linguistics, language norms are very much part and parcel of everyday life.

Yet exactly how speakers relate to problems of usage, and how they situate themselves in relation to language norms, is rarely investigated. Similarly the relationship between standardisation and norms is often taken as 'given' but rarely analysed. While many excellent analyses look at norm enforcement from a historical perspective, focusing on a specific period (Anderwald 2012; Auer and González-Díaz 2005; Gijsbert, Vosters and Vandenbussche 2014), or present prescriptivism as an institutionalised phenomenon (Beal, Nocera and Sturiale 2008; Hickey 2012), or examine the relationship between collective identity, nationalism and prescriptivism (Percy and Davidson 2012), there has been some neglect of the relationships between linguistic norms and language

users, be they gatekeepers or not. Moreover, the language user tends to be portrayed as ‘subservient’ to the norm. Yet language users adopt attitudes to norms: they judge whether a norm is acceptable, and they try to influence norms. This too needs to be taken into account. And if we adopt the position that a model or pattern of behaviour inexorably becomes a standard, then insofar as models and patterns of behaviour are linked to specific times and places, normalisation is no longer a specific event in the teleological process of standardisation, but an ongoing process, liable to change. This volume of essays aims to examine these topics for, in the words of Talbot J. Taylor (1990, p. 141), ‘academic linguistics, by excluding the normative character of language from the cocoon of scientific autonomy, prevents itself from connecting up with or even understanding contemporary debates on the important political issues of language, i.e. on those aspects of language which really *matter* to speakers/hearers’.

Our introduction seeks to provide a broad theoretical framework for the various concepts explored by the authors in this volume; to examine the tensions that exist between margin(s), norm(s) and standardisation; and to give an overview of this volume. We start by investigating some basic definitions of standardisation and norms before considering the relationship between norms and prescriptivism. A third section examines the tension between margins and norms, and finally we provide an overview of the chapters in this volume.

## 1 Standardisation and Normalisation

The terms *standard* and *norm* are often confused, but if we are to tease out the various strands of meaning attached to both, it is important to start with some basic definitions. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a standard variety of language as ‘that variety of a spoken or written language of a country or other linguistic area which is generally considered the most correct and acceptable form’. The earliest recorded reference to Standard English is 1836, but the process of standardisation can be dated far earlier (Hickey 2010). The model of standardisation that is most commonly referred to is that of Haugen (1972, p. 252), which identifies four stages: ‘The four aspects of language development that we have now isolated as crucial features in taking the step from “dialect” to “language”, from vernacular to standard, are as follows: (1) selection of norm, (2) codification of form, (3) elaboration of function, and (4) acceptance by the community.’

These stages are not necessarily successive and may overlap or even be cyclical (Haugen 1987, p. 59; Milroy and Milroy 1999, p. 23). However, representing the process as a series of stages does suggest a fixed chronology. It also shifts the focus away from examining who selects the norm, how the norm is maintained and the motivations behind such language policies (Ager 2001). Milroy and Milroy (1999, p. 22) propose a seven-stage model: selection,

acceptance, diffusion, maintenance, elaboration of function, codification and prescription. Unlike Haugen's model, this model introduces prescription as a final stage in the process. We return to the concept of prescriptivism later in this chapter.

Although the motivations are diverse and may vary over time (Watts 2000), standardisation provides a fixed uniform variety through dictionaries and grammars, thus leading to 'maximal variety in function and minimal variation in form' (Haugen 1972, p. 107). Both dictionaries and grammars give credence to the idea that the standard is invariable. They provide fixed forms and fixed meanings.

It is this impression of stability which appeals to the popular imagination, and which explains in part the general outcry when any kind of linguistic change finds its way into public discourse or official publications. Change is seen as threatening the social order, and there is something reassuring about knowing what is 'correct', which explains in part the popularity of usage guides, as they provide clear guidance on what is right and what is wrong.

Correctness in language has long been equated with civilised behaviour; both are codified practices. As Burke (2004, p. 89) notes, 'civilisation implied following a code of behaviour including linguistic behaviour', and the idea that correct language is morally desirable is still present in today's discourse, notably in usage guides (see Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Chapter 10). Once the standard was seen as the correct variety, all others became 'stigmatised not only in terms of correctness but also in terms which indirectly reflected on the lifestyles, morality and so forth of their speakers' (Fairclough 2001, p. 48). Questions of correctness in language are not simply matters of avoiding a double negative or avoiding *there's* with a plural; 'they are interpreted as reflecting the speaker's intelligence, industry, social worthiness' (Joseph 2006, p. 4).

The title for this volume, *Standardising English*, emphasises that our focus is on standardisation as a continuing process, rather than as a stable, finite point of reference. Indeed, 'the only fully standardised language will always be a dead language as seen at a particular moment in its development' (Bex 2002, p. 26). Standard English is in fact an idealised norm, 'a variety that is never perfectly and consistently realised' (Milroy 2001, p. 543).

Turning now to examine definitions of the term *norm* in the *OED*, we find three definitions. The first is 'that which is a model or a pattern; a type, a standard'. The second sense is 'a standard or pattern of social behaviour that is accepted in or expected of a group', and the third is 'a value used as a reference standard for purposes of comparison'.

For the purposes of this section we focus on the third definition – the idea that a norm, in this case a linguistic norm, can be selected and held up as a reference standard. As a model or pattern, a norm is more or less codified, more

or less prestigious. It is an abstraction that emerges in a community, for whose members it may have both positive and negative orientations (see Kostadinova, Chapter 9). If the concepts of *standard* and *norm* are so closely associated in people's minds, it is because a norm forms a natural basis for a standard. However, when a linguistic norm is selected as a standard and used as a yardstick, it becomes a prestige norm and is associated with values of correctness, appropriateness and social status (Bartsch 1985). Joseph (1987) considers the standard to be a 'synecdochic' dialect insofar as one norm or part of the language stands for the 'whole'.

## 2 The Prescriptivism versus Descriptivism Model

The notion of prescriptivism is closely linked to that of a standard. The *OED* defines *prescriptivism* as 'the practice or advocacy of prescriptive grammar; the belief that the grammar of a language should lay down rules to which usage must conform'. Prescriptivism is, in fact, the interpretation of a norm in the narrowest sense of the word; it is concerned with imposing a specific norm, and it feeds into standard language ideology, the belief in a unified, superior standard variety. As Milroy and Milroy (1999, p. 30) point out, 'the effect of codification and prescription has been to legitimise the norms of formal registers of standard English'; in other words, to legitimise one specific norm.

Prescriptivism has become equated with institutional prescriptivism; that is, with the dicta of recognised language authorities working through formal education and through print publishing. But there is no escaping the fact that the term has come to be used in a narrow, pejorative sense: it carries connotations of 'correctness', of political conservatism, of diktat by the socially influential, of unscholarly prejudice, of suppression of vernaculars. Nowadays it is often associated with mere pedantry and nitpicking. It is a term no doubt used more by its detractors than by prescriptivists themselves. In short, the term has had a bad press and has been at the centre of the long-running debate over language norms and the standardising process.

This debate has frequently been presented in terms of a binary division, with a sharp line dividing two deeply entrenched camps. On one side of the line we have the descriptivists, those who believe in describing language use 'as it is'. Among the descriptivists are to be found those who maintain that 'grammar rules must ultimately be based on facts about how people speak and write. If they don't have that basis, they have no basis at all' (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, p. 5). Facing them, on the other side of the line, are the prescriptivists, the gatekeepers of the standard variety, those who consider that 'one variety of language has an inherently higher value than others' (Crystal 1997, p. 2). The keyword here is 'inherently', for prescriptivists and descriptivists have fundamentally different views of language.

Prescriptivists tend to reify a language, such as English, as an invariant, structured entity that has an existence of its own independently of its speakers. They are often concerned with 'maintaining standards' by guarding against alterations, which are seen as slippage; with preventing the language, as they perceive it, from deteriorating. They thus aim to control both language variation and language change. Prescriptivists are not necessarily language professionals at all. Motivated by a desire to improve language use, they tend to focus on particular linguistic features. These may include spelling, punctuation or the choice of register, but the lexicon and the use of grammar tend to be their primary concerns. Specific points recur regularly, such as avoiding double negation or the use of the passive. The adage 'never use the passive where you can use the active' (Orwell 1946) has been repeated in many usage guides and is to be found on many websites offering advice to the would-be writer. The problem is, as Pullum (2009) points out, that prescriptivists do not always identify the passive voice consistently: any sentence featuring 'be' has sometimes been identified as 'passive'. The condemnation by the American philologist George Marsh of the passive progressive in *the house is being built* as 'an awkward neologism, which neither convenience, intelligibility, nor syntactical congruity demands' (Marsh 1860, p. 649) is often cited to illustrate prescriptivists' inability to prevent new forms from taking hold and becoming common usage (Milroy 2001, p. 550; Curzan 2014, p. 2).

Descriptivists, by contrast, are mostly linguists and sociolinguists whose fundamental interest is in the nature of language. Their concern is to document languages as fully as possible, in all their geographical and social variety, with the aim of reaching a greater understanding of language as a human attribute. Whether or not any given sample of language belongs to a named or standardised variety has no direct bearing on the descriptive enterprise. Linguists are therefore largely uninterested in boundaries between standard and non-standard language and in issues of 'correctness'. Insofar as they address the matter at all, they tend to deny that any linguistic expression can be incorrect or any variety of language inferior to another. For linguists, it is simply a fact that the linguistic sign is 'arbitrary and value-free' (Milroy and Milroy 1999, p. 87). As Jean Aitchison put it in her 1996 Reith lectures on language, 'no part of language is ever deformed or bad. People who dispute this are like cranks who argue that the world is flat' (Aitchison 1997, p. 4).

Prescriptivists, then, tend to be dismissed by linguists as misguided amateurs, whose understanding of the nature of language is faulty and limited. Since prescriptivists' attempts to halt language change are inevitably unsuccessful, they are frequently mocked for taking a King Canute-like stance against the sea of change. Moreover, prescriptivism is charged with creating language anxiety, promoting prejudice and bigotry, and oppressing non-standard language users. Descriptivists, in contrast, are condemned for their overly liberal attitude and

for allowing standards to fall. David Crystal, who has argued that texting has no detrimental effect on spelling, has been labelled ‘an “anything goes” man’ by BBC journalist John Humphrys (2005, p. 333). Jean Aitchison, by openly challenging people’s concerns about the corruption of language, ‘unwittingly banged the linguistic funny bone of Radio 4 regulars, and also some journalists’ (Aitchison 1997, p. xii) and was met with angry comments from many members of the public. Academic linguists who defend the descriptive approach are accused of being ‘permissive, let-it-all-hang-out, anything-any-native-speaker-says-is-swell anarchists’ (McIntyre 2015).

These two views of language look poles apart. Yet the binary opposition oversimplifies what is, in fact, a complex issue. All too often, prescriptivists are presented as if they formed a monolithic, homogeneous group, all sharing exactly the same point of view. In fact, as this volume shows, the attitudes of prescriptivists towards language practices vary; some seek to enforce grammatical rules unquestioningly while others adopt a more nuanced approach.

Critics of prescriptivism tend to focus on a small handful of rules that are to be found in most usage and style guides; rules that stigmatise the use of *ain’t* or double negation, that chastise the use of *hopefully* with the meaning of ‘if all goes well’ and that advise against the use of a split infinitive or the passive voice. Of course, some such rules disappear over time, while new ones are added. But other rules are repeated down the generations and have thus become ‘archetypal usage problems’ that warrant investigation (see Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Chapter 10).

In recent years there has been a shift away from this binary opposition, from a ‘war that never ends’ (Halpern 1997) to a more balanced approach (Curzan 2014). Steven Pinker (2012) suggests that the descriptivist-prescriptivist opposition is, in fact, a ‘pseudo-controversy, a staple of literary magazines for decades’ and argues that ‘most writers who have given serious thought to language are neither kind of iptivist’. Harder (2012, p. 295) argues for a reconsideration of the ‘classic positivist distinction between normative and descriptive statements’. And Wendy Ayres-Bennett (2016, p. 117) points out that recent studies of English grammars from the heyday of prescriptivism in the eighteenth century have challenged the idea that they can be seen in terms of a simple dichotomy between prescriptive and descriptive.

Attitudes and beliefs regarding prescriptivism need to be contextualised and nuanced. Firstly, the long-held belief that prescriptivists are simply conservative die-hards, fighting a battle they can never win, is far from being the whole picture. Charles Ferguson was among the first to challenge this notion: ‘I cannot see how it can be denied, that prominent individual language planners and powerful language planning institutions have had measurable effects on the spoken and written languages of various communities’ (Ferguson 1996 [1987], p. 305). He suggests that the reluctance among linguists to address the topic



at all goes back to Saussure's claim that all attempts to meddle with language are doomed to failure. Prescription can and does play a significant role in shaping a language, and as Anne Curzan (2014, p. 177) argues, it is important that linguists 'account for the power and nature of prescriptivism'. Much in the history of English is missed if its influence is ignored. For example, modern-day spellings of *debt* and *receipt* owe their silent *b* and *p* to prescriptivists who wanted to underline the Latin root of these words. Charlotte Brewer in Chapter 7 shows how James Murray's personal crusade to sound the initial *p* in words of Greek origin such as *psychology* was not entirely in vain. If prescriptivists are too easily dismissed as being of no interest, then linguists risk overlooking the role they have played in the recent history of English.

The aim of this volume of essays is therefore to move beyond this model of binary opposition, which all too readily simplifies the stances of prescriptivists and descriptivists alike, in order to understand more fully how both concepts relate to the wider issue of establishing and enforcing norms and also to language on the margins. More importantly, the focus on (institutional) prescriptivism obscures the universally, inherently normative nature of language. Prescriptivism, insofar as it involves promoting conformity to particular language usages, is a form of social norm maintenance. In this volume we focus on the idea of prescription as one type of norm-setting, albeit a particular type.

### 3 Norms and the Linguistic Community

The standard, with its historical pedigree, its stability and its widespread use in education and in the media, both nationally and internationally, naturally gained in prestige, leading to the inevitable downgrading of non-standard varieties, now relegated to the margins. Speakers are free, however, not to adopt the standard. Writers can choose to contest or reject the standard norm by writing in non-standard varieties or by adopting different norms, thus challenging the norm/margin model and the hierarchy that it imposes. Personal letters and diaries especially are not necessarily constrained by the standard written norm (see Le Corre, Chapter 8).

While the standard is fully regulated by grammars and dictionaries, varieties at the margins do not have such rigid conventions. However, these marginal varieties are also norms. The second definition of *norm* that is given by the *OED*, 'a standard or pattern of social behaviour that is accepted in or expected of a group', underlines the importance of the social group. All social groups have their own model(s) or pattern(s), be they professional, social or regional. All languages of whatever variety conform to norms: 'the use of non-standard forms is just as dependent on community norms as the use of standard forms' (Harder 2012, p. 299). Linguistic norms do not, then, exist in isolation, but

belong to larger sociocultural models. This approach follows Bartsch's distinction between rules and norms. For Bartsch (1987, p. 4), norms are 'the social reality of correctness notions'. By participating in 'a set of shared norms' (Labov 1972, p. 120), speakers demonstrate that they are members of a particular community. Speakers are of course free to adopt or to reject the shared norms, to identify or to distance themselves from the group. 'One adopts the supposed rules of those groups one perceives to be socially desirable, *to the extent* one wishes to be identified with them' (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985, p. 184; emphasis in original). We saw earlier that the standard norm is clearly identified as having social prestige; Trudgill (1999, p. 124) goes as far as to identify it as a 'purely social dialect'.

By conforming to the linguistic norms of a specific group, language users demonstrate that they belong to it and share its values. Only lengthy participation in a social set can guarantee fluency in its language, so that such fluency is naturally taken for a reliable indicator of a person's social history. English speakers are often remarkably sensitive to even minor deviations from the language of 'their' social group and to the socially indexical features of language, and those who master the 'right' written and spoken forms hold valuable social capital within the group. The most arcane 'usage problem' is ultimately linked to the presentation of a particular social identity, to a boundary drawn between social groups distinguishing outsiders from insiders. As Joseph (2006, p.12) observes, 'The impulse to police the *form* of the language... is culturally inseparable from the impulse to police the *borders* of the language', and so the borders of the community. In Frederick J. Newmeyer's (1989, p. 51) words, 'A linguistic norm is a unifying feature of a community: everyone knows it and knowing it sets insiders apart from outsiders.' 'Language anxiety' is not linguistic at all; it is the fear of being taken for an imposter.

Linguistic norms, according to Harder (2012, p. 309), 'work by assigning conventional social signification to what people choose to say (including low prestige to certain forms)'. Harder (p. 304) proposes viewing a linguistic norm as a 'target' in the sociocognitive space of a community.<sup>2</sup> Such a target is the representation of a certain use of language, and speakers, as members of the community, adapt towards the target. According to Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985, p. 181) 'the individual creates for himself the patterns of his linguistic behavior so as to resemble those of the group with which from time to time he wishes to be identified, or so as to be unlike those from whom he wishes to be distinguished'. Milroy (1980, p. 175), studying language use in Belfast, Northern Ireland, shows that 'the closer an individual's network ties are with his local community, the closer his language approximates to localised vernacular norms'. Norms are therefore constantly being negotiated. Language use and social values are closely connected, and in a culturally diverse society, where

several norms are prevalent, a speaker's model of linguistic norms may be more variable. Lepage and Tabouret-Keller (1985, p. 116) go as far as to say that the individual is 'the locus of his language'.

At local levels, unconscious or 'covert' pressures maintain a natural degree of linguistic homogeneity. Such local norms result in what Joseph (1987) calls 'language standards', as distinct from standard languages, which are codified, written languages. But for the wider community, beyond face-to-face interaction, normalisation has to be more explicitly imposed, more consciously respected, and it is these explicit values that are 'present in public discourse about language' (Coupland and Kristiansen 2011, p. 25).

#### 4 Norms and Margins

Norm(s) and margin(s) are interdependent. Variationist studies depend crucially on the use of some standard as a yardstick, typically a standardised language (Meyerhoff and Stanford 2015, p. 8). Variants are identified and measured against such a standard. Non-standard varieties are only marginal in relation to a norm that is considered to be the standard. It would make little sense to talk of 'margins' if there was no norm. Similarly, if there were no varieties on the margins, no norm from which to select the standard, then the standard norm would simply not exist. Moreover, if non-standard varieties did not obey certain norms of their own, they could not be labelled as varieties (Meyerhoff and Stanford 2015, p. 8). This approach to describing (non-standard) varieties, along with the view that a standard language is just one more 'variety' (Trudgill 2002, p. 160), can lead to a reification of named 'varieties' akin to that attributed by prescriptivists to the standard language (Harris 1998).

Normalisation of behaviour is natural to human societies, and language is no exception. As Deborah Cameron (1995, p. 5) points out, the desire to regulate and control language is 'observed to occur in all speech communities to a greater or lesser extent'. A norm would not exist were it not recognised by a group and maintained by a group. A speaker is not 'an incidental user of a linguistic system' but an agent 'in the continual construction and reproduction of that system' (Eckert 2000, p. 43). It also follows that a norm is constantly being negotiated. Norms vary according to time and place, as communities evolve. Forms which were once considered acceptable such as *ain't* can become stigmatised, just as others once frowned upon, such as the split infinitive, now no longer seem so problematic. Received Pronunciation (RP) is recognised as having changed over the centuries (Mugglestone 2003) and as being challenged by new emerging norms such as Estuary English. A norm is always embedded in the sociocultural practices of the time, and the standard, issued from one type of norm, is no exception. However stable the standard may appear to be, it can

be challenged by other norms. The influence of marginal varieties on the standard is visible in the lexicon, with the *OED* recently including words such as ‘bling’ from hip-hop ‘chugger’ from slang or ‘cotch’ from Afro-Caribbean.

The potential for variation, for the standard to be modified is ever present, even if such change is limited through social practice. This tension between the standard norm and other norms is evident in the processes of de-standardisation and demotisation. Both processes affect the standard norm, but in different ways. The first implies that ‘the established standard language loses its position as the one and only “best language” leading to a value levelling’ (Coupland and Kristiansen 2011, p. 28). Demotisation (a term inspired by the German *Demotisierung* and coined by Mattheier 1997) refers to a situation of prestige shift, where a hitherto less prestigious variety comes to be considered the ‘best language’. It does not affect the standard ideology as such, but is a change in how particular ways of speaking are evaluated (Coupland and Kristiansen 2011, p. 28).

There is then a constant tension between the standard norm and the margins, between the individual and the community, between one community and another, as each constructs and negotiates norms. By focusing on the nature of norms, we can better appreciate how prescriptivism, overt or covert, is intrinsic to language use.

The essays in this volume move beyond the prescriptive/descriptive dichotomy by building on this notion of norm. They recentre the debate about language on linguistic communities and language users, and they show that multiple, overlapping norms are at work within a society. This includes newer Englishes too, as illustrated in the essays by Gaëlle Le Corre and Sonia Dupuy. If we accept that establishing a norm is a dynamic process, then it becomes easier to envisage a norm not as an endpoint on a scale, but as a scale itself (Beal 2014, p. 90).

## 5 Overview of the Volume

The volume is organised into three parts, each of which reflects the complexity of norms in language use and contributes to the ongoing debate on the standardisation of language. Part I, ‘Norms and Margins: Ideology and Concepts’, deals with the notions of margins and norms, descriptivism and prescriptivism. Part II, ‘Norms and Margins: A Historical Perspective’, revisits traditional figures of authority such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* and Samuel Johnson. Part III, ‘Norms and Margins: Moving into the Twenty-First Century’, shifts the debate towards language users’ attitudes to the norm. The inclusion of specific case studies, based on collections of data, highlights the importance of considering the interaction between the individual’s linguistic behaviour and the norm, an aspect that has long been neglected in studies of this kind.

Part I continues with two fresh theoretical examinations of the history of prescriptivism and descriptivism. The calling into question of the traditional opposition of the two approaches is a recurring theme through the volume.

In Chapter 2, Sandrine Sorlin suggests that standardisation should be considered from three different perspectives, not the traditional two. The first perspective is the emergence of the standard variety coinciding with a rise in the national consciousness. The normative role of printed texts and the emergence of newspapers and novels, which connected their readers in entirely new ways, contributed to building the nation and imposing a norm. In this context of nation-building, the process of standardisation can be seen as normative, ineluctable and necessary. Through 'Standard English', a people was brought to imagine itself as a nation. In more recent times, attention has been focused on the varieties left on the margins. Influenced by developments in sociology, sociolinguists have emphasised the role played by the standard language in maintaining the socio-economic order and reinforcing the power of the dominant classes. Instead of creating a nation of British citizens speaking a common language, the prestige of the standard language resulted in the humiliation of non-standard English speakers, who were led to see their own language as illegitimate. The end of the twentieth century can indeed be seen as an age of deconstruction of the 'myth' of Standard English by some (socio)linguists, in favour of stigmatised varieties that had been for too long excluded from serious study. In our postmodern (and postcolonial) era, the worth of non-standard dialects has been reasserted. However, as Sorlin points out, this reversal of points of view does not destroy the binary opposition – it simply reverses it – and the author suggests that by envisaging a third stage we can move beyond the basic dichotomy of prescriptivism and descriptivism, acknowledging the role of the individual in language variation. Research in variationist stylistics is increasingly concerned with how the individual uses language variation to construct and manipulate a range of 'personas'. Such an approach aims to do justice to the complexity and heterogeneity of the language of the individual. The recent adoption of dialogic perspectives in the study of the speech of individuals makes it possible to escape the top-down, reductive approach to norms. Developing Coupland's premise that 'people use or enact or perform social styles for a range of symbolic purposes' (2007, p. 3), Sorlin argues in favour of an approach that does justice to the 'complexity and heterogeneity of individual speeches'.

Natalia Guermanova, in Chapter 3, challenges the idea that prescriptivism lacks any theoretical foundation. Drawing on recent work in cognitive sociolinguistics, such as Geeraerts (2003) and Polzenhagen and Dirven (2008), Guermanova examines the role of cultural models in the development of both prescriptivism and the anti-prescriptivist arguments of twentieth-century linguistics. Geeraerts (2003) argues that the Western philosophical tradition has

given rise to two mainstream cultural models that co-exist today: one with its roots in Rationalist thought of the Enlightenment, and the other emerging from Romantic-era ideas about the role of language in cultural identity. Guermanova explores the notion that the tension between these two different paradigms underlies the enduring prescriptivist/descriptivist debate: the emphasis of the 'Rationalist' model on the conventionality and hence mouldability of language contrasting with the 'Romantic' view, in which the inseparability of individual, culture and language means that individuals have little control over language. The chapter thus shows how the relationship between the philosophy of language and attitudes to language norms, long overlooked, can profitably be revisited.

Part II, 'Norms and Margins: A Historical Perspective', contains a number of case studies that also call into question the simple opposition between descriptivism and prescriptivism; they seek to reevaluate traditional approaches to codifiers of the English language, underlining the need to examine the enforcement of linguistic norms within the sociocultural context.

Valérie Raby and Wilfrid Andrieu's study in Chapter 4 of Claude Mauger's *French Grammar*, in parallel with seventeenth-century grammars of English, demonstrates that the descriptivist/prescriptivist dichotomy is at best too restrictive and could even be deemed irrelevant when applied to seventeenth-century Western discourse. The authors emphasise the role played by the process of *grammatisation* (Auroux 1994). This process can be defined as the description of languages based on two technologies that are the foundation of meta-linguistic knowledge: the grammar and the dictionary (Auroux 1992, p. 92). Grammatisation establishes a normative meta-linguistic discourse and plays a central role in standardising the language. While most models of standardisation emphasise the socio-historical dimension (Milroy and Milroy 1999), Raby and Andrieu suggest that the notion of a linguistic norm also needs to be examined from a meta-linguistic perspective. Without overlooking the limits of applying the Latin model to vernaculars, the authors shed light on the distinct types of normativity stemming from this single meta-linguistic source and reveal how comparative approaches between vernaculars were rendered possible by the homogeneous grammatical discourse at their disposal, which in turn created the conditions for the production of grammatical knowledge.

Early authoritarian figures such as Swift, Sheridan and Johnson, are traditionally presented as linguistically conservative, motivated by a desire to fix the language. However, Lynda Mugglestone's Chapter 5 on Samuel Johnson reveals that the tension between the individual and the norm is more complex than may at first appear. She examines the cross-currents of prescriptive and descriptive methods in Johnson's work, looking in detail at his engagement both with normativity and uncertainty, with censure and with the flux that a living language must necessarily evince (and that the dictionary maker might, in

turn, record). For Lord Chesterfield in 1754, Johnson's forthcoming dictionary was intended to emblematised the end of 'toleration' and of naturalisation too. The time for both was past, he declared; Johnson's work was, in this and other respects, to be firmly distinguished from the 'mere word-books' that in Chesterfield's opinion, previous English lexicographers had produced. Johnson, as the 'Preface' to his published *Dictionary* of 1755 confirms, had indeed engaged with the remit of dictionary making as a means of repulsing 'unwanted foreigners' – even if such engagement would, in reality, prove by no means entirely in alignment with Chesterfield's expectations of prescriptive (and proscriptive) process. Mugglestone's close analysis of loanwords, and more specifically Gallicisms, provides an interesting insight into the eighteenth-century discourse of regulation and demonstrates that Johnson's comments in the *Dictionary* reveal 'an intriguing level of engagement with ideas of assimilation, diffusion and control.' The margins of language, on the threshold of the standard norm, are 'flexible and mobile spaces', and Johnson's treatment of Gallicism is not one of straightforward rejection or banishment from the dictionary.

The meta-discourse of the popular pronouncing dictionaries of the eighteenth century provides another example of the need to go beyond a simple prescriptive/descriptive dichotomy. As Véronique Pouillon explains in Chapter 6, the pronouncing dictionaries offered a specific upper-class pronunciation and were designed to meet the needs of a socially aspiring middle class, desirous to imitate their social superiors. Yet, paradoxically, the orthoepists who wrote the pronouncing dictionaries, such as James Buchanan, William Kenrick, Thomas Sheridan and John Walker, were themselves often on the margins of British upper-class society. So while these orthoepists did contribute to reinforcing a socially established norm and the institution of 'a hierarchy of topolects and sociolects', they also evaluated pronunciations according to more arbitrary and subjective criteria, subscribing to an abstract ideal of language, as an analysis of their meta-discourse reveals.

Charlotte Brewer's study in Chapter 7 of the *Oxford English Dictionary* brings many of the preceding themes together, again highlighting the futility of trying to pursue a clear-cut distinction between descriptivism and prescriptivism. She illustrates the need to be aware of the role that can be played by an individual such as Murray in setting the norm in such an established institution as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Brewer shows how dictionaries, which set out to describe an existing standard, could easily slip from description to prescription and that their avowedly descriptive aims were impossible to maintain. Selection was unavoidable, as were the constraints of the culture of the time. The 1898 and 1924 definitions are striking in the way in which they reflect the conventions and mores of the period. Moreover, the lexicographers themselves were not averse to adding their own prescriptive remarks to an entry from time to time. It is therefore quite possible to find conflicting motives, and

sometimes inconsistencies, in the works of these gatekeepers. Using data from the research project *Examining the OED*, Brewer draws on a systematic analysis of *OED* quotations to reveal the bias that favoured particular literary writers, especially male writers, in earlier editions.

One of the themes running throughout these chapters is the need to avoid simplifying the complex relationship between various levels of norms. This is further illustrated by Gaëlle Le Corre's study in Chapter 8 of soldiers' correspondence during the American Civil War. Drawing on a 170,000-word corpus composed of 354 letters written by 76 privates, corporals and sergeants from Virginia, Le Corre demonstrates that the soldiers' writings were influenced not by one norm or linguistic model, but by three: the standard norm, the religious rhetoric used in sermons and the regional vernacular. The constant tension that can be observed in these letters between the academic prescriptive norm and non-standard variations is therefore not a simple binary one. Nor is the relationship between norms and margins a static opposition; the norm is not fixed, nor is it stable. New norms are formed as societies change and evolve.

In the last chapter (Chapter 9) of Part II, Viktorija Kostadinova examines an early American usage guide that has received little scholarly attention: Josephine Turck Baker's *The Correct Word: How to Use It*. Kostadinova's analysis of the 'errors' listed by Turck Baker reveals the enforcement of various norms from spelling and punctuation to sociocultural considerations. As with earlier gatekeepers analysed in this volume, it becomes apparent that Turck Baker is less prescriptive than has previously been claimed. A careful study of the metalanguage used in the various entries shows that this usage guide is descriptive as well as prescriptive. In addition, some of the entries bear witness to language change happening at the time. In other words, usage guides can be a source of valuable evidence of language change and variation.

The chapters in Part III, 'Norms and Margins: Moving into the Twenty-First Century', present various case studies that illustrate how usage problems are social constructs and how they can provide valuable clues to actual usage. They focus less on the powers that seek to establish the norm and more on those who seek to align with the norm: the general public, copy-editors and writers in general.

The success of usage guides demonstrates that a large section of the public is convinced of the need to get one's language right, to use one variety of language over another. Usage guides first appeared during the final decades of the eighteenth century, and they are still popular today. Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade argues in Chapter 10 that they contribute not to codification but to prescription. Among the reasons suggested for the continuing popularity of usage guides, and for the public's keen interest in the reference standard, are social mobility and social class. While the socio-economic situation in which the early style guides were published was clearly far removed from that of the present day,



the desire to be upwardly mobile remains, as does an underlying anxiety as to whether one's own idiolect corresponds to the recognised norm. Tieken-Boon van Ostade shows that usage guides continue to feed the public's basic insecurity about language. The influence of norm-enforcing usage guides today is thus not to be easily dismissed. Public belief in the supreme authority of such guides should, instead, encourage us to examine the effects they have on language use. Tieken-Boon van Ostade explores the various distinctions that can be made between style and usage guides, drawing on a new database specially compiled to analyse usage guides and usage problems. Previous research has tended to focus on what usage and style guides have in common, thus blinding us to the specificity of each individual guide and to the fact that even if each guide belongs to a long tradition it is also firmly anchored in its own socio-historical context. The use of the HUGE database enables Tieken-Boon van Ostade to show how American and British usage guides can differ, motivated by different social and economic changes.

Using an online survey to investigate 11 usage problems, Carmen Ebner in Chapter 11 analyses lay people's understanding of, and reaction to, usage problems such as the dangling participle, the split infinitive and the particle *like*. This rarely explored aspect of the function of usage guides addresses fundamental questions such as the following. How do language users identify correct usage? On what knowledge do they base their judgements? What sort of guidance are they seeking from usage guides and why? It is only when we address these questions that we can understand the power of usage guides and their role in shaping the English language. Ebner's findings underline the variability of acceptability judgements among the British public and enable her to infer which social factors are likely to play a role in determining attitudes to specific forms. Ebner shows how acceptability judgments vary according to age, gender and profession.

Varieties of English which have frequently been relegated to the margins can, over time, become normalised, and this is especially true in the context of New Englishes. The development of New Englishes in diglossic societies seeks to give rise to more stable codifications of those dialects that might at first been seen as on the margins. American English is now accepted as having a standard, as is Australian English, and Chapter 12 by Sonia Dupuy examines the construction *and* recognition of Maori English as a written dialect. She examines literary works by Maori writers to investigate to what extent Maori literature is creating its own norm out of what has for many years been considered as marginalised English.

How far style and usage guides may actually contribute to fixing the written norm and standardising present-day English is explored by Linda Pillière in the final chapter of the volume (Chapter 13). Printing and publishing have long been recognised as playing an important role in the standardisation of

the English language, but the average reader is often blissfully unaware of the norms imposed on an author's manuscript before it reaches the shelves of the bookshop. For 'once the book is published, the editor's marks are invisible' (Lerner 2000, p. 198). However, the existence of American English editions of many British novels provides us with concrete evidence of the numerous modifications that are made by editorial teams, all instances of what Deborah Cameron (1995) labels 'verbal hygiene'. Drawing on a corpus of twentieth- and twenty-first century novels and the results of a survey carried out on copy-editing forums, the author focuses on some of the most common changes made by copy-editors to grammatical and syntactic structures, such as the replacement of *which* by *that* in a restrictive relative clause, or the suppression of existential clauses (*there is/there are*). Copy-editors control the gates to the world of print, and they play an important role in regulating the language.

The chapters in this volume all seek to shed new light on the role of published norm-setters in the English language, past and present, and to consider prescriptivism from a balanced perspective. By revisiting traditional figures of authority such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* or Samuel Johnson, the contributors to this volume invite the reader to reconsider some traditional assumptions about prescriptivism and descriptivism. The reasons for establishing or enforcing norms are various, and the reasons why people choose to follow those norms, or to stay on the margins, are just as complex. By focusing on both institutional norms and attitudes to those norms, and by presenting new perspectives on norm-setting, the chapters in this volume will, we hope, encourage further research and vigorous debate in this domain.

#### NOTES

1. *The Guardian*, 13 January 2015.
2. Usage of the term 'community' or 'speech community' begs many questions. The term is widely used, but rarely defined or justified. It is unsatisfactory, but difficult to avoid. For discussion, see Patrick (2002) and Joseph (2006).

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