

Prescriptivism and Descriptivism

Beyond the Caricatures

Dan Clayton goes beyond a simplistic division between sticklers and progressives. He shows that wanting to control language isn't confined to one side – it's the *aspects* of language that they choose to focus on that differs.



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Plain English

Have you ever walked around a supermarket and thought about the role of an 'ambient replenishment controller'? Are you involved in a 'customer-facing' organisation that offers 'solution-focused approaches'? Or perhaps an institution that's had some of its provision 'outsourced' and its staff 'right-sized'? No? Maybe you are, but just haven't realised it yet. Perhaps you haven't got a clue what those sentences even mean, let alone if they apply to you.

But it's OK, because help is at hand from the Plain English Campaign and its war against 'gobbledygook, jargon and misleading public information'. The Plain English Campaign was set up in 1979 to get rid of this kind of corporate gibberish and prescribe clearer, simpler English. They even give their very own 'Crystal Mark' to organisations which use 'Plain English'. So, that's got to be a good thing, hasn't it?

Policing Offensive Language

And what about campaigns to remove offensive and discriminatory words from the language? For over three decades the political correctness movement has made inroads into the worst excesses of racist, sexist and disablist language, encouraging people to think about the impact of the words they use, the potential hurt caused by such words and the reasons why some usages – 'chairman', 'policeman', 'half-caste' and 'coloured' among them – have evolved to carry such negative or loaded connotations.

A speech bubble with a black outline and a drop shadow, containing the text 'Young man - this punctuation error is a disgrace!' in a handwritten style. The bubble is positioned in the upper left corner of the page.

And again, surely this is a noble and laudable goal, isn't it? However, while studying English Language aren't we often encouraged to view those who tell us what's right or wrong usage, good or bad English – **prescriptivists** – rather negatively? The debate is often polarised between two competing positions, with the prescriptivists on one side and the **descriptivists** on the other. The usual presentation of descriptivism as an open-minded, non-judgemental and progressive way of thinking about language use – calling usage 'non-standard' rather than 'incorrect', not using 'deficit' models to describe varieties of English, describing rather than judging patterns of usage – is often accompanied by a presentation of prescriptivism as a fussy, old-fashioned, pedantic and conservative mind-set. But is this fair? Perhaps that's a caricature of both sides of the debate. Are descriptivists really judgement-free in their observations about language use? You could argue, as many language commentators have, that by accepting usage (however 'wrong') as the guide, descriptivists are disavowing standards, allowing the language to be warped by errors, to be dictated to by the uneducated and to become fragmented and unintelligible. In other words, that a descriptivist stance is really a *laissez-faire* stance: whatever will be, will be.

It's true to some extent, however, that prescriptivism can fall into the camps of what Robert Lane Greene in *You Are What You Speak* (2011) describes as **sticklerism** and **declinism**, but it doesn't always have to be this way, and some forms of prescriptivism can be viewed as more benign than others. But first of all, let's look at these two camps and what they involve.

Sticklerism

Sticklerism, is characterised by a finger-wagging approach to others' language use, describing what others say as wrong because it's supposedly illogical or incorrect.

To Greene, the sticklers are engaged in a kind of linguistic one-upmanship, with the author of the 2003 bestseller *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, Lynne Truss, ranking as one of the worst offenders.

Truss took to the streets with her trusty marker pen, correcting comma misuse, haranguing grocers over their dodgy apostrophes and selling millions of books along the way, perhaps tapping into the insecurities that many of us have about how we should best use the array of punctuation marks and grammar rules that appear to exist in English.

Ten years on, the sticklers are alive and well and popping up on the internet in the form of the 'grammar nazis': an example, if there ever was one, of a peculiar form of language change in action, with the once evil and brutal connotations of the term 'nazi' semantically weakening as time has gone by. These self-appointed sticklers admonish posters on chat forums and tweeters on Twitter whenever there's confusion over 'there' and 'their', 'your' and 'you're', or 'must of' and 'must have'. And while it's hard as an English teacher not to feel a slight shudder when these usages appear, because we're in the business of teaching students to use Standard English and these are clearly non-standard usages, the glee with which the grammar nazis lay into their victims is rather unnerving. Forget the content of what's been posted: if there's an errant apostrophe, your points are rendered worthless.

Rules – Custom or Correctness?

But what about these supposed rules which sticklers and grammar nazis swear by? Many of the 'rules' are little more than the preferred customs of particular writers passed down through the generations, bearing little relation to how language is actually used by the majority of the population, then or now. So, there's a body of linguistic evidence to suggest that 'rules' such as avoiding split infinitives, double negatives and prepositions at the ends of sentences are pointless. Their usage rarely, if ever, creates confusion or obscures meaning, and they're more a matter of taste than grammar. Likewise, the use of 'who' and 'whom' seems to be an increasingly archaic distinction, and 'hopefully' is happily used as a sentence adverb without anyone but the daftest pedant thinking it means that the subject of the sentence is literally full of hope. Oh, and even

'literally', that bugbear of many a stickler, is shown to have been used hyperbolically (as in 'When she left, part of me literally died.') since 1769, so we know that it can be used perfectly intelligently without having to mean 'to the letter' as its original *Oxford English Dictionary* citation for 1429 defines it.

And this is part of the problem with the sticklers and grammar nazis. The rules of English are not set in stone and the language changes and evolves, adapted by its users to suit their needs. But to many prescriptivists, this change is a threat. They see nearly all change as a decline.

Declinism

Declinism – Robert Lane Greene's second prescriptivist theme – is a perception that our language is in an irreversible decline from a once-great peak, and that (as ever) it's the fault of feckless young people, vapid technology and pesky immigrants with broken English. Greene argues that English is a long way from declining, quite the opposite in fact, given that literacy rates across the UK and USA are way higher than they were a century ago. Declinism is also a model that fits into one of the better known critiques of prescriptivist thinking: Jean Aitchison's **crumbling castle**.

In a series of lectures for the BBC in 1996, Aitchison argued persuasively that many of the complaints about the supposed falling standards of English were simply recycled from previous generations and that all harked back to a mythical time when English was supposedly at its peak. But the problem with this tradition of complaint is that the further back you go, the further back this mythical peak must have been. Each generation has its doom-mongers too. For every Starkey, Heffer and Humphrys now, there was a Dryden, Swift or Murray a few centuries ago.

One thing that unites the declinists is their lack of genuine consideration for how language is actually used: how double negatives like 'I never did nothing', for example, rarely confuse listeners, or how we're hardly likely to be bamboozled by '10 items or less' signs at supermarket checkouts. And they rarely accept that language changes not just by crumbling away but by adding new words and structures: not so much a crumbling castle as an ever-extending new build, complete with snooker room, sauna and mock-Grecian pillars.

Missing the Bigger Point

Aitchison's metaphor – the English language as a grand castle, gradually falling into disrepair – casts the prescriptivists in the role of arch-conservatives, desperately trying to turn the clock back and keep the language from changing further. And she is quick to point out the folly of the purist prescriptivist stance. She argues that language change is 'natural and inevitable' and that the tradition of complaint about minor details might actually be harmful,

divert[ing] attention away from more important linguistic issues [...] the manipulation of people's lives by skilful use of language ...

In arguing that some forms of prescriptivism are missing the bigger point, Aitchison is identifying a need to care about language use, but going beyond the simple polarisation of good guys and bad guys which descriptivism and prescriptivism sometimes lend themselves to. But some prescriptivists don't really help themselves or their cause. The linguist, Deborah Cameron, writing in *Verbal Hygiene* (1995) identifies a moral and political strand in some prescriptivist thinking. She argues that, to many prescriptivists, language is a proxy battleground for wider social and cultural concerns and that grammar has become a useful tool for waging this war because of its 'strong metaphorical association with order, tradition, authority, hierarchy and rules'. It's a theme also picked up by Henry Hitchings in *The Language Wars* (2011), when looking back at the early prescriptivists – Lindley Murray and Percy Grainger, in particular – who often see 'a connection between proper syntax and moral rectitude'.

In effect, the sticklers and declinists aren't really wagging their fingers or wringing their hands at language use *per se*, but at what it symbolises to them: declining standards, a changing society and a shift in the balance of power from an educated elite to a wider mass of speakers and writers, and now texters, bloggers and tweeters.

Choice of Ground for Complaint

And it's this point that takes us back to the ambient replenishment controllers, the right-sizers and outsourcers, because while some prescriptivists picked battles over language usage and engaged in a kind of culture war, they took their eye off the ball and let other, perhaps more pernicious,

forms of language creep in: language that – in Jean Aitchison's words – led to the 'manipulation of people's lives'.

Right-sizing, after all, is a term that actually means cutting jobs to the 'right' level, but right for who? It's certainly not the right level for the person who's just lost their job. And an 'ambient replenishment controller' sounds amazing. Who wouldn't want a job with that title? Maybe it's a touch less glamorous when you find out it's another term for a supermarket shelf stacker, showing that it was always designed to embellish a fairly ordinary job title.

What's interesting about the 'benign prescriptivism' of groups like the Plain English Campaign and their campaigns against jargon and management-speak is that while they are being critical of what they consider to be poor language use, they are not necessarily making the moral judgements of the purist prescriptivists, instead caring more for clarity than correctness. That's a position that many descriptivists would undoubtedly be happy to adopt too.

And it's not just in the workplace that language can be used to dupe and confuse us. Aitchison herself talks about the language of nuclear warfare in *Language Change: Progress or Decay* (1991) while Steve Thorne examines how military discourse often hides death and destruction in *The Language of War* (2006). It's probably a good thing that some people get worked up about punctuation, because it helps create the tension between innovation and tradition that keeps the language intelligible to its users, but surely, we should be more concerned with stray smartbombs than the occasional stray apostrophe.



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Links

The Plain English Campaign: <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>

Jean Aitchison's Reith Lectures, 'The Language Web': <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00gmvwX>

Bryan A. Garner and Robert Lane Greene debate prescriptivism and descriptivism in *The New York Times*: <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/09/27/which-language-and-grammar-rules-to-flout/>

For further discussion of attitudes to language change, *Language: a Student Handbook on Key Topics and Theories* (published by the English and Media Centre) is recommended.

