

# PRESCRIPTION AND STANDARDISATION

## 1.1 Language prescription and its consequences

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Oliphant, 1873:226)

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 1.2 Linguistics and prescription

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

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

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

(Aitchison, 1978:13)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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