

Prescriptivism

Introduction to this Special Issue by guest editor Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade

To put prescriptivism on the linguistic agenda as a serious research topic was one of the aims of the Bridging the Unbridgeable project, which ran from 2011 to 2016 at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics. The project, financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), was subtitled ‘Linguists, Prescriptivists and the General Public’, as these were the groups we (as sociolinguists) wished to reach out to with our research. ‘We’ are Carmen Ebner, Viktorija Kostadinova, Morana Lukač, Robin Straaijer and myself, along with several project assistants during the course of the project, the most recent one being Lyda Fens-de Zeeuw. And all of us have contributed to this issue of *English Today*, together with Rebecca Gowers as our special guest.

Readers of *English Today* will have become familiar with our project through the interactive features we published in this journal between January 2014 and December 2016 (with a post-script in June 2017, by Adrian Stenton), in which we regularly asked for input relating to specific usage features we were doing research on. December 2016 was also when we held the closing symposium of the project, called ‘Life after HUGE?’, where all project members presented papers alongside Rebecca Gowers, author of *Plain Words* (4th ed. 2014) and *Horrible Words* (2016), Oliver Kamm, author of *Accidence Will Happen: The Non-pedantic Guide to English Usage* (2015), and Harry Ritchie, author of *English for the Natives* (2013). Adrian Stenton, moreover, presented the initial stages of his recently started PhD project. The symposium was attended by members from all three of our target audiences and the presentations led to lively discussions on topical issues surrounding the English usage debate today. The present special issue of *English Today* presents seven of the papers that were delivered at the symposium.

‘HUGE’ in the symposium’s title refers to the database of usage guides (language advice manuals) and usage problems (issues of contested usage like the split infinitive) that had been

constructed during the project by Robin Straaijer; it is an acronym for ‘Hyper Usage Guide of English’. It has been a major tool for our own research, but is accessible (upon request) to other scholars, too. Lyda Fens-de Zeeuw’s paper in this issue demonstrates how the database can be used to investigate the ways in which usage guide writers through the ages have drawn on the normative grammars by Lindley Murray (1795) and his predecessor Robert Lowth (1762).

The ideology of prescriptivism is the topic of Morana Lukač’s paper, which analyses the efforts of individuals at maintaining linguistic correctness by writing letters to the editors of two major English language newspapers, *The Times* and *The New York Times*. Carmen Ebner also examines differences between Britain and the US when considering the question of why there are so few usage attitude surveys for British English compared to those found in America. Robin Straaijer analyses the different editions of the famous American usage guide writer Bryan Garner (1st ed. 1998 to 4th ed. 2016), in the process of which the work shifted its focus from American to general English usage. Rebecca Gowers describes both the rationale behind writing *Horrible Words* (2016) — a parody of her revision of her great-grandfather Sir Ernest Gowers’s *Plain Words* (1954) — as well as its reception. Taking the non-literal use of *literally* as a case study, Viktorija Kostadinova analyses attitudes to its occurrence by American informants in the light of actual usage. My own paper likewise focuses on attitudes to usage, inspired by John Honey’s controversial pamphlet *The Language Trap* (1983), as they were communicated to the author by letters from members of the public.

In one form or another these papers thus focus on prescriptivism, ranging from views expressed in the 1980s to today in the form of letters from the general public, to the writing and reception of usage guides, to analysing attitudes to usage through surveys and interviews, and to drawing on the tool that was produced primarily to enable

the study of usage guides and usage problems in a systematic way.

A final word of acknowledgement is due here to Clive Upton, previous editor of *English Today*, who was also present at the 'Life after HUGE?' Symposium and offered general interest and his encouragement for this volume.

And to the current editor, Andrew Moody, for his meticulous editing, as well as to the referees of our papers for their valuable comments and suggestions for improvement. Hopefully, this special issue will contribute towards making pre-scriptivism further visible as a very promising topic for linguistic research.
