

REFORMED PRESCRIPTIVISM: DICTIONARIES OF USAGE

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Abstract. Dictionaries of usage, though popular with the general public in English-speaking countries, often meet with modest acclaim in academic linguistics. The paper reviews standard-setting policies employed by dictionaries of usage over time and explores recent changes in the concept of the standard of usage in practical lexicography, stimulated by the development of large corpora, now commonly used as data sources by general-purpose dictionaries. Differentiation of usage by several levels employed by *Longman Guide to English Usage* (1989), viewed as one of the landmarks in the history of usage guides, has been analysed. The key terms of its metalanguage relating to parameters of usage were collected from the text of all entries, since *Longman Guide* employs no labels outside the main text. The resulting list of key terms showed that it followed the trend set by corpus studies and later by grammars and general-purpose dictionaries. It attempted to bridge the gap between dictionaries of usage and requirements of corpus linguistics which insists that the descriptive approach to language should find its way into dictionaries. The analysis of the metalanguage of the dictionary entries and of eight parameters of usage employed by the dictionary reveals that in *Longman Guide to English Usage* appropriateness substituted correctness in the concept of the standard of usage, thus justifying and legitimising variations within the standard which had been formerly viewed by lexicographers and grammarians as unitary.

Key words: prescriptivism, standard of usage, dictionaries of usage, levels of usage, appropriateness

INTRODUCTION

Dictionaries of usage (or usage guides), unlike explanatory dictionaries, do not aim at describing the word-stock of a language or even its core vocabulary comprehensively. They focus on debatable issues of lexis and grammar: variations in the standard of usage, its dynamics, deviations from the norm, language errors, etc., and offer recommendations on usage. In this sense, they are unequivocally prescriptive.

Gray areas of usage can involve any language level: phonetic (pronunciation, stress patterns), morphological (grammatical forms, word-building patterns), syntactic (word-order, rules of agreement, combinability, etc.), semantic (meanings of words easily confused, words similar in meaning but not interchangeable in particular contexts, etc.), style (levels of usage in both word choice and grammar), spelling, punctuation and even elements of composition.

Since setting standards in language usage has always been both a theoretical and a practical issue and requires some consensus among professional linguists and the general public, the question what kind of balance is feasible and how it can be achieved remains topical forever.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is only natural that dictionaries of usage contain a fairly limited number of entries or headwords. For example, H.W.Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926) comprised 7732 entries, *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* by B.Evans and C.Evans (1957) – 4974 entries, *The Longman Guide to English Usage* by S.Greenbaum and J.Whitcut (1980) – 5000 entries, *Pocket Fowler's Modern English Usage* edited by R.Allen (1999, 2004) – slightly over 4000.

It is also understandable that, unlike today's general-purpose explanatory dictionaries, usage guides cannot boast of uniformly structured entries and rigid limitations on the range of words used in entries (a standard requirement now for the metalanguage of definitions in explanatory dictionaries).

Despite their claims to follow the language habits of the “best authors”, or “the leaders of society”, or “the most respected people”, dictionaries of usage have long been notorious for their subjective approach to what is “the best usage”. There has always been a difference of opinion as to what is correct and what is incorrect. For example, *at about* is incorrect according to E.Partridge's *Usage and Abuse* (1964), just verbose (wordy) in J.Shostak's *Concise Dictionary of Current American Usage* (1968), standard usage (*at about 3 o'clock*) in B. and C. Evans's *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* (1957), standard, but colloquial in M.M. Bryant's *Current American Usage* (1962) (Postnikova (Постникова, 1975:11).

Another evidence of subjectivity is that the very range of language data included in dictionaries varied greatly: the comparison of entries in eight dictionaries of usage (letters A,B,C,H,O,N,V) revealed only 35 common entries in them (Postnikova (Постникова, 1975:12). This shows that the areas of concern differed widely and there was no consensus on either the selection procedures of language data or on their assessment. Paradoxically, at the same time dictionaries of usage were implicitly or explicitly based on the assumption that there is (or, rather, should be) one accepted standard of usage. When the concept of the standard of usage became the object of research in the 20th century, the approach inevitably came in for biting criticism, for it was not backed up by any theoretically sound concept of a single standard or by any reliable criteria of “correctness”.

Academic derision, however, has had little influence on the general public which, apparently, requires some authority on language use. Clear evidence of this is the impressive publication record of usage guides in both Great Britain and the USA, which shows that they are in constant demand. A few landmarks are listed below.

A *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* by H.W.Fowler, one of the best known 20th century dictionaries of English usage, was first published in 1926. Numerous reprints followed (the latest in 1994) and several revised editions: in 1965, by E.Gowers, and in 1996 by R.Burchfield. The latter, *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (the so-called Third Edition) was, in Burchfield's own words, largely rewritten, and was regarded as too liberal by some reviewers. Its revised version came off print in 1998, the re-revised one was published in 2004. Burchfield's 1996 version was the parent work of *Pocket Fowler's Modern English Usage* edited by R.Allen (a hard-cover edition) in 1999, paperbacks were published in 2002 and 2004, the second edition followed in 2008. It worded recommendations in a simpler way and added some new entries on American English, neologisms, gender neutrality, etc.

Other brands of usage guides were published too, e.g. *Longman Guide to English Usage*. (Greenbaum and Whitcut, 1989) by Longman, it was reprinted by Penguin Books in 1996. Representing one of the best-known brands, *Longman Guide* came off print at the time when the "corpus revolution", though in progress already, had just started having some impact on works beyond corpus research as such. The breakthrough in lexicography was the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (ed. J.M.Sinclair, 1987) based on the *Birmingham collection of English Texts* (or *Collins Birmingham University International Database*) of 20 million words. An important landmark in grammar was the descriptive *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk et al., 1985), consulted by the authors of the *Longman Guide to English Usage* which, therefore, used corpus data, but did not employ them as a primary or first-hand source. *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* by P.Peters (2004) was the first usage book to have made extensive use of data from large corpora of American and British English as primary sources (Online 1).

In this context, and given that American usage guides, unlike British ones, are less influential beyond the USA, it is surprising, at first glance, that Landau considers usage guides to be largely an American phenomenon. However, in terms of circulation numbers and popularity with the public they certainly are an American phenomenon. Many of them are mass-market books which 'combine the direct appeal to personal interest [...] with the qualities of a reference book, and can perhaps best be viewed as a kind of etiquette book' (Landau, 2001:263). Landau explains their commercial success by sociolinguistic reasons:

'The insecurity Americans feel about their use of language [...] is felt most intensely among the middle class [...] most characterized by ambition to move up the scale of social acceptability. The mastery of a particular kind of language use is perceived, correctly, as important and usually essential for upward movement. Since American society is more fluid than British [...] those who are ambitious and insecure are the great believers in prescriptive attitudes.' (Landau, 2001:262-263).

Publication record and the popularity of usage guides, evidenced by numerous reviews in the media on both sides of the Atlantic, are striking given that the publications of *Fowler* and other brands in the past 25 years followed more than half a century of attacks on prescriptivism by linguists of various denominations,

starting from American structuralists, e.g., the famous *Leave your language alone!* – ‘a condemnation of correctness-mongers’, as the book jacket tells us (Hall, 1950). Prescription and standardization were commonly viewed as irrelevant to academic linguistics: ‘Linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive. A linguist [...] describes language, but does not prescribe rules of “correctness”’ (Aitchison, 1978:13).

The two trends which are still steadily on the rise, discourse analysis and corpus linguistics, though both at odds with structuralism, dislike prescriptivism for their own reasons: the former sees it as an exercise of power and social discrimination, and both point out that prescriptivist recommendations on language use often fly in the face of corpus data.

In spite of that, there are clear signs of reviving academic interest in Fowler in particular and in prescriptivism at large. A noteworthy example is D. Crystal’s recent reprint of the original Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* and his reassessment of Fowler’s contribution in a new introduction and notes on 300 entries (Fowler, 2009). Crystal holds that Fowler bridged the gap between prescriptivism and descriptivism and explores in his notes the ‘tensions between his prescriptive and descriptive temperaments’ (Online 2).

METHODS

Longman Guide to English Usage is analysed below in terms of the prescriptivism-descriptivism dilemma confronted now by dictionaries of usage in the face of market pressure, on the one hand, and today’s requirements of academic linguistics, on the other. *Longman Guide* is viewed here as an attempt to reformulate the concept of the standard of usage, to apply the principles of linguistic research in the field so far least affected by them: dictionaries of usage are most dependent on the constraints of a highly competitive book market targeted on a broad readership.

The concept of the standard of usage is defined briefly in the *Introduction*: ‘Standards are different in different periods of time; in different places; and on different occasions’ (Greenbaum, Whitcut, 1989:v); but the analysis is based on the list of all the key terms of *Longman Guide*’s metalanguage related to the standard of usage and employed throughout the dictionary. Since the *Guide* does not employ any labels marking levels of usage beyond the main text and has no list of labels, they had to be collected from the entries throughout the dictionary. Both frequent and rare terms were considered to be relevant. For the purposes of the analysis the key terms were grouped into eight parameters of usage. Results are summarized and discussed below.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The existence of and need for a standard are acknowledged by the terms *standard* – *substandard*, *educated* – *uneducated*, *correct* – *incorrect*, *recommended* – *should be avoided*, etc. Numerous evaluations range from the categoric *perfectly good*

English, the only choice, through usually preferred to, more traditionally accepted, it seems pedantry to object to this usage, to the once more categoric sounds dreadful. In this sense *Longman Guide* fits squarely in the prescriptivist tradition.

At the same time, the dictionary differentiates the standard of usage according to at least eight parameters: 1. Degrees of formality; 2. Dynamics of usage (old-modern); 3. Regional varieties; 4. Frequency of occurrence; 5. Written-spoken usage; 6. General-professional (specialized or technical) usage; 7. Emotive or evaluative connotations; 8. Degrees of appropriateness (Doroshenko, 2006:367).

The first four of the parameters are treated as highly differentiated scales or clines. Thus, the degrees of formality are a broad range from very/decidedly formal through (somewhat/ rather) formal, (rather) informal, informal, very informal, slang, to mention only some distinctions of about 20 (here and below only some examples representing the most obvious distinctions are given). The dynamics of usage is also a highly differentiated scale ranging from modern, fashionable, through now accepted to conservative, old-fashioned, archaic, obsolete (over 15 distinctions are made).. Regional (British and American English) varieties are also presented as a broad scale ranging from only British English, preferred in Britain, through both British and American to exotic in Britain, largely American, only American (17 distinctions, in total).

Frequency is a smaller scale ranging from *rare, exotic, also heard through more(less) usual, common, much commoner* to the disapproving *overused*.

Parameters 5, 6, 7 are split into subcategories which are not scaled. Many labels for written and/or spoken usage form pairs of opposites, e.g. *general* and *scientific*, *formal* and *informal*, *careful* and *careless*, *good* or *skilled* and *pretentious*, etc.

However important the distinction between spoken and written usage, it is rarely marked alone, being mostly bound up with other levels of usage, especially with degrees of formality, regional variation, dynamics of usage and regional (British-American) differences. Professional usage is split into numerous occupational fields: business, financial, legal, scientific, military, etc. The terms *language, context, use* (for example, in *modern business language*) in entries commonly imply conformity to standard use. Otherwise the term *jargon* is used, e.g. *modern business jargon*. This term is defined in the entry 'varieties of English', as 'specialised vocabulary condemned as incomprehensible' i.e. a technical term used in the wrong audience (Greenbaum and Whitcut, 1989:746).

Connotations can be divided into two categories: they mark a) the attitude expressed by the speaker/writer or the reaction of the addressee (*disapproving, derogatory, patronizing, impolite, offensive, neutral, polite, flattering*, etc.); b) characteristics of the speaker/writer (*pretentious, pompous, self-important, affected*).

The last parameter, appropriateness, and related terms (e.g., *inappropriate*) are not found in the text of the dictionary entries too often. However, it seems to be the key and, in a sense, the cover term for all the others, and serves as a substitute for the notion *correctness* which had traditionally presupposed a unitary standard of usage.

CONCLUSIONS

Differentiation of usage at several levels employed by *Longman Guide to English Usage* followed the trend set by corpus studies and discourse analysis, which both require that large and representative data-bases be used, and to some extent bridged the gap between dictionaries of usage and requirements of modern descriptive linguistics. The analysis of the metalanguage in the dictionary shows that 'appropriateness' has substituted 'correctness' in the concept of the standard of usage. The parameters of usage serving as constituent elements of appropriateness reflect the rhetorical essence of this notion: language forms and utterances are evaluated from the viewpoint of the communicative situation which determines the choice of language means used by the speaker/writer.

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