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## PLAIDOYER FOR A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF PRESCRIPTIVISM

В статье подробно рассматривается понятие "прескриптивизм". Автор подчеркивает особую ценность исследования прескриптивизма в сопоставительном аспекте.

*Ключевые слова:* прескриптивизм, языковая норма, сопоставительное языкознание.

*The article considers the notion of Prescriptivism. The author points to the potential value of an investigation of Prescriptivism not limited to the problems specific to a single language.*

*Key words:* Prescriptivism, standard language, comparative linguistics.

### I

*In this essay I shall be guided by the precept of my colleague John Ayto to be "descriptive about prescriptivism" and by the injunction of Professor Randolph, Lord Gwyke, that those working at The Survey Of English Usage at University College London should study not only Use but also Reaction to Use.*

*Which leaves me with the task of saying what Prescriptivism is. Prescriptivism is the study of What Should Be by contrast with Descriptivism, the study of What Actually Is.*

*Prescriptivism springs eternal in the human breast. Some years ago Professor Suzanne Romaine of Oxford University gave in London a lecture about her work with pidgin and creole languages, and in particular the pidgin Tok Pisin of Papua New Guinea. In the course of this lecture she regaled us with examples of her command of Tok Pisin. After the lecture I asked her whether in her field-work anyone had ever corrected her, saying, for instance: "You speak Tok Pisin very well — but actually we don't say it that way, we say it this way." Without hesitation she said No. Prof. Romaine may well have fallen foul of the irksome politesse that inhibits people who know a language from correcting the mistakes of those trying to learn it. But I think there may have been a deeper reason.*

*Tok Pisin, as a pidgin, had by definition no native speakers. No one felt competent to judge the quality or correctness of anyone else's use of the language. Now, however, it has acquired native speakers and become a creole. Indeed, as Neo-Melanesian it has become one of the most important languages of Papua New Guinea. And when a pidgin becomes a creole, it seems to me that two things happen nearly simultaneously. The language begets relative clauses, so that "A man was here. He wanted to see you." can become "The man who was here wanted to see you." And the language's native speakers develop Sprachgefuhl and the Academic Spirit of Prescriptivism and start writing letters to The Port Moresby Gazette accusing other people (e.g. journalists or the young) of corrupting their beautiful language with ill-considered or new-fangled words and constructions. It can be argued that English is itself a pidgin combination of Old English, Old Norse, and Old French that has become a creole — and now of course is by no means short of either relative clauses or prescriptive judgments.*

*Prescriptivism is thus part of what constitutes a Speech Community. It helps to ensure the existence of a Standard Language which, like money that is legal tender, is fit for all uses. And even those who find its dicta now and then officious or offensive cannot but admit its practical advantages. Some years ago B&B 2 and Channel 4 both ran series of programmes about the English language. In one of them a Jamaican poet was interviewed who had opened a stall in London's Brixton Market selling broadsheets of Jamaican poetry. He said that among the first things that had to be done was to standardise Jamaican spelling so as to facilitate the printing of the poetry. I was reminded of how idiosyncratic English spelling used to be until it, too, was standardised to make printing easier and eventually to enable people to look words up in dictionaries.*

*In its role as guardian of the speech community, prescriptivism is perhaps quicker to condemn than to approve. It seems to disapprove in particular three sorts of phenomena: traditional rogue elements (e.g. split infinitives), new elements (e.g. hopefully as a sentence adverb), and imports from other varieties (e.g. Americanisms in British English) or from other languages. In other words, prescriptivists condemn items that are Incorrect, New, or Strange. The last type of condemnation affects cosmopolitan languages that, like English, have spawned more than one Standard Variety. In the English-speaking world nowadays, both British English and American English serve as legal tender, as is shown most obviously by their co-existent different standard spellings. It also affects other languages chiefly in respect of their attitude towards foreign borrowings. We know that in recent years French people have reacted against borrowings from English, in particular because such borrowing was seen as an alternative to using the word-formational processes available to French. May I ask whether there is any negative reaction to borrowings from English in contemporary Russian? It is worth noting that attitudes to foreign*

borrowing can depend on the source language. A Dutch study now some years old found that Dutch-speakers objected least to borrowings from English, more to borrowings from French, and most of all to borrowings from German.

## II

I have suggested that though Prescriptivism helps to construct a Standard Language, it also in a very real sense presupposes one, with respect to which (and to the socio-linguistic status quo) Prescriptivism can play several roles, not always mutually compatible. It can support the status quo. It can subvert the status quo. It can satisfy a desire for beauty and elegance. It can confer practical benefits (e.g. standardised spelling).

We are lucky to have for the history of Prescriptivism in The West the work of two outstanding scholars: Bernard Quemada<sup>1</sup> and Geoffrey Nunberg. Quemada identifies two successive periods in the history of French Prescriptivism, which he names, by reference to the goals pursued by each, *Le Bel Usage* and *Le Bon Usage*. *Le Bel Usage* was associated with the Court, the Aristocracy, and their hangers-on. An example is the first edition of the Dictionary of the French Academy (1694). Its authors insist that the French language has achieved in their own day a pinnacle of perfection. It would be counter-productive to rely on earlier precedents. Therefore the dictionary need not include examples attributed to earlier authors. The examples invented by the Forty Immortals of the Academy cannot be bettered. In due course, however, *Le Bel Usage* was challenged by *Le Bon Usage*, the Prescriptivism of The Rising Middle Classes. How could they challenge the effortless elegance of the Aristocracy's norms? Answer: by making the daring claim that their own norms are not just theirs: they are Universal Norms that are Objective and are based on Reason, Consistency, Analogy, and Etymology. In other words, *Le Bon Usage* is the Prescriptivism of the Enlightenment.

Although I have no evidence that Quemada and Nunberg know each other, I am amazed at how well they support each other's work. And that's vitally important for historical reasons. For the 17<sup>th</sup> Century the French record is pretty complete whereas the English record was interrupted by the Civil War and the Glorious Revolution. For the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the English record is pretty complete whereas the French record was interrupted by les événements of 1789. Thus it is only by combining the work of Quemada with the work of Nunberg that we can begin to get an overview of the history of Prescriptivism in both French and English. As regards English, there appears to have been a belief that The Best English was that spoken at the court of Queen Anne (died 1714); whereas by the time Samuel Johnson's dictionary appeared (1755), linguistic usage required Objective Validation in the form of examples attributed to The Best Authors. So in that period of 41 years *Le Bel Usage* had in English yielded to *Le Bon Usage*. Yet even now the memory of these two contrasted Prescriptive criteria survives in surprising ways. For instance, consider the dictionary usage label obsolete. In Reader's Digest Great Illustrated Dictionary the label can be applied to an item for which there is no citational evidence after — 1714. In Merriam-Webster dictionaries, the cut-off point is — 1755!

Nowadays, in English at least, *Le Bon Usage* reigns supreme for those folk who care about such matters. And, as Nunberg reminds us, it is in its origins liberal, humane, and anti-authoritarian. Yet because it is associated inextricably with the Middle Class its principal function these days is not to subvert the status quo but to support it. With respect to their feeling about language, Lord Gyirk divides the denizens of the English-speaking world into the Assured, the Anxious, and the Indifferent. The Assured, remnants perhaps of the Aristocracy, have no doubt that their usage is plenty good enough. The Indifferent, at the bottom of the social scale, couldn't care less. The Anxious, typically members of the Middle Class, may well exercise more power than the other two groups, but still feel the need to assert their linguistic legitimacy because they are still Anxious to avoid being snubbed by the Assured or mobbed by — the Mob. It is for the Anxious that Usage Guides such as Fowler's Modern English Usage are written; fortunately, the Anxious are rich enough to afford books.

## III

It is no coincidence, I believe, that proponents of *Le Bon Usage* formulated its tenets towards the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Not only was there a social need for such ideas, but also there was a basis for them by analogy with what else was going on simultaneously. In 1786 Sir William Jones helped to lay the foundations for scientific philology by asserting the relationship of Sanskrit to Latin and Greek. His work, together with that of earlier scholars, established the existence of a large Indo-European family of languages on a foundation of solid empirical evidence. If the Rationally Enlightened basis of *Le Bon Usage* is open to question, the Rationally Enlightened basis of Philology is not. Philology is real science even if Prescriptivism is pseudo-science or (using more neutral terminology) Para-Science.

I contend that throughout the history of human thought Science and Para-Science have grown up together, hand in hand: Philology/Linguistics & Prescriptivism; Chemistry & Alchemy; Astronomy & Astrology; Neuroscience & Phrenology. The prestige of the Sciences lends lustre to their Para-Scientific counterparts.

Before ending this brief excursus into Wissenssoziologie I should like to speculate about a possible influence of Philology upon Biology. When Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, he (and Alfred Russel Wallace) had available a well-established well-

<sup>1</sup> Quemada B. *Les Dictionnaires du Français moderne*. Paris, 1968.

known analogy: the evolution of languages from a common source. Just as Latin evolved above the Pyrenees into French and below the Pyrenees into Spanish and Portuguese, so finches living on separate islands might not unreasonably be expected to evolve different characteristics over time. Just as linguistic evolution contradicted the Biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel, so biological evolution contradicted the Biblical narrative of the separate creation of species. Yet linguistic evolution had come to be accepted even by the People of Faith who were to condemn biological evolution. Alas, I have so far been unable to find evidence to support the thesis that Darwin and Wallace had Philology in mind when they were working on Biology. Surely if they had had, they would have used the relative acceptability of linguistic evolution as an argument to mollify the religious critics of biological evolution. Nevertheless, it is hard not to believe that they were unaware of such a powerful analogy. Indeed, later in his career Charles Darwin acknowledged the analogy: "The formation of different languages and of distinct species, and the proofs that both have been developed through a gradual process, are curiously the same."<sup>2</sup>

#### IV

This article already contains references to Prescriptivism in various languages. My purpose in writing it is to encourage my colleagues to collaborate with me in a study of Prescriptivism not limited to the problems specific to a single language. I began to realise the enormous potential value of such an investigation when I read Franz Josef Hausmann's magisterial *Einführung in die Benutzung der neufranzösischen Wörterbücher*.<sup>3</sup> Hausmann's exemplification of usage controversies in French made me aware of how similar some were to usage controversies in English — and how different others were!

In progressing slowly through Svetlana's *Festschrift* I have been amazed — and delighted — to find that several of her contributors have interests similar to mine. Thus Professor Litvin calls our attention *inter alia* to:-

- 1) how *К.ОФЕ, К.ОФИЙ* has changed its gender from masculine to neuter;
- 2) how the cases used in forming complex numbers in Russian have been simplified;
- 3) how the patronymic has tended to be used less in Russian names.

What can English offer in return?

1) This is a problem of grammatical gender. We all know that English has long since lost the grammatical genders that it used to have and that Russian has retained. But there are in English important analogous problems still, as in *Everyone should do -his/his or her/their best.*; and English boats can be referred to as it or she whilst English babies can be referred to as it, she, or he.

2) This is a problem of grammatical case. We all know that the present-day English case system is vestigial only. But English does have examples of divided usage with respect to numbers: *September (the) 11 (th) (.) two thousand (and) one v 11 (th) September two thousand (and) one.* (It's worth saying that the standard US truncation of this date, 9/11, happens to coincide with 911, the telephone number to dial there in an emergency; in Britain it's 999; the EU has another one.)

3) This may or may not have an exact analogy in English, depending on whether a patronymic counts as a middle name. Svetlana's patronymic is Григорьевна (from her father's first name; my middle name is Frederick (which was my father's first name). There's lots to be said about how English treats middle names (when it doesn't just drop them): Robert Frederick Ilson, Robert F. Ilson, R. F. Ilson, and even R. Frederick Ilson (remember J. Alfred Prufrock?). I might add that in English-language dictionaries the entry middle name is very hard to explain properly.

So when comparing usage problems in more than one language, one must consider both the possibility of a formal analogy and the possibility of a functional analogy.

#### V

Having started with usage problems in Russian and tried to find their English analogues, I would in an ideal world now present a taxonomy of usage problems in English in the hope that my Russian colleagues would provide Russian analogues — and in the hope that other colleagues would provide analogues in other languages, too. But time presses and space is constrained. So I shall content myself for now with only a few of the most important types in English (in no particular order):-

- 1) clichés: *at the end of the day; the bottom line*
- 2) collocation: *bored with* (officially correct)/*bored of* (frequent in British English but disliked); *different from/to/than*; *suffer from* (officially correct)/*suffer with* (frequent in British English but disliked)
- 3) hypercorrectness, especially with respect to me and was: *between you and I; for my wife and I; he said that if it were true it was horrible*. Note also the recent strange rise of shall in British English: *Lift Number 2 shall be the next lift.*

<sup>2</sup> Darwin C. *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. 1871. P. 59 (quoted in: Dennett D. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. 1995. P. 135).

<sup>3</sup> Hausmann F.J. *Einführung in die Benutzung der neufranzösischen Wörterbücher*. Künzingen, Neimeyer, 1977.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*. P. 139—144.

4) unacceptable blends: < \*by far and away the best (= by far the best + far and away the best); \*I'm afraid to say you're wrong (= I'm afraid you're wrong + I'm sorry to say you're wrong); \*"both ladies commenced to cackling" — John Irving, 2009 (= both ladies commenced cackling + both ladies commenced to cackle)>

5) syntax: <enough that X can Y (frequent but unacceptable to those who remember "enough for X to Y"); provide someone an excuse (frequent but unacceptable to those who remember "provide someone with an excuse")>

6) parallelism: <?you've either got it or you haven't got it (= you've either got it or not got it; either you've got it or you haven't got it); \*we had bread, cheese, and there was coffee (= we had bread and cheese (,) and there was coffee)>

7) euphemism: <customer (= passenger); surge (= (troc) escalation); issue (= problem); unacceptable (= wrong); faith (= religion; religious, as in faith schools/faith-based schools = religious schools)>

8) pronunciation: <har'assment (= h'arrassment); cent'roversy (= c'ontroversy); dispute (= disp'ute): the disputed pronunciations are all found in British English; only the first is current in American English>

## VI

In assessing usage problems in one or more languages, the following questions should be asked:-

- 1) What is the problem?: <everyone must do his best>
- 2) What type of problem is it?: gender
- 3) How severe is the problem?: very severe (to judge from the commentary it has received, as in various equivalents of The Port Moresby Gazette). I shall not discuss here the various methods that have been used or proposed to assess the severity of usage problems.
- 4) What is the explanation of the problem?: traditional use of his/him after such pronouns v contemporary reluctance to regard his/him as sex-neutral.
- 5) What are the alternatives?: <everyone must do his or her best (considered clumsy by some); everyone must do their best (considered great by me but almost illiterate by some)>
- 6) What else is revealed?: <everyone shaved his beard; everyone wore her best skirt (i.e. that there are other context-specific options)>

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