

## CHAPTER TWO

# Linguistics professors: winners or losers?

*You call yourself the Moral Majority  
We call ourselves the people in the real world*  
– Jello Biafra

This chapter has the length of two because it includes material that validates the suggestions made in the First Chapter: that linguistics as we have learned to know it is a fake science and a kind of flat-earth society, that the participants' actions are motivated by funding politics, on the one hand, and upholding the tyranny of self-perception on the other, which call for the rejection of objective standards; and why such realizations are perceived irrelevant. In brief, they are irrelevant precisely because they are interesting neither in terms of increasing funding nor maintaining social control. For such reasons, linguists will simply put this chapter away as it is of no apparent use to

them. Yet, for the history and philosophy of linguistics, unraveling the issue offers insight into outlandish but collectively accepted claims and their motivations even if it may be challenging to publish. Of course, from the linguists' perspective, nothing can possibly validate critical observations made of them, but I suggest that funders will find this chapter informative.

A useful point of entry is provided by the Language Trap debate, which is one of the most well-documented conflicts between academic linguists and their opponents in language politics. The ongoing controversy from the 1970s through the 1990s was brought to public attention by John Honey's 1983 pamphlet, *The Language Trap: Race, Class, and the 'Standard Language' Issue in British Schools*, exposing linguists as imposters. They participated in political influencing relating to the curriculum and claimed to present a scientifically proven view of how English should be taught at schools. The problem was that little research had been done by linguists or others even though the questions were relevant. Whatever sporadic results may have been available did not support the linguistics professors' claims. They simply considered their opinion to be scientific because they were professors and did not seem to give much consideration to how science and evidence should relate to each other. This group's idea was, rather, that their discourse was proven superior by the fact that it was communicated through academic publishing, which was conveniently in their own hands.

The debate resulted in entrenched positions. It eroded teachers' and policy-makers' trust in academic linguists, which was exacerbated by the realization that the linguists had publicly lied about their engagement and motivations as acknowledged by Graddol & Swann (1988), who lamented the general linguists' political naivety.

For sociolinguistics, the Language Trap debate was a turning point leading to an intensified interest in the study of language prescription and an ongoing effort to **reclaim the term**, as is especially central to James and Lesley Milroy's now-classic *Authority in Language* (editions: 1985, 1991, 1999, 2012). While this book may appear to consist of incredible nonsense from cover to cover, it is a poignant masterclass of navigating the complexities of the construction of social truth in academia, or what can be called **academic truth**.

On the surface, linguists appeared united because everyone agreed that their external critics were fools. At a closer inspection, one uncovers an **unholy alliance** between general linguists and sociolinguists who essentially disagree with each other but pretend to be united in a sacred war against layperson ignorance; an enterprise that is futile for general linguists but beneficial to sociolinguists' struggle for resources.

### **Descriptive prescriptivism?**

When investigating English language debates, a thing to bear in mind is that the literature is highly science-political and misinformative. General linguists are hesitant to discuss political influencing because standardization is an **occupational taboo**; it is perceived as evil or non-existent. By contrast, the related authoritative discussions in sociolinguistics relate to the distribution of resources between different schools and sub-fields of linguistics. Since money is taboo in science, the discussions have to be blurred in certain parts. It is a matter of the kind of biased discourses that are commonplace in everyday politics.

While it is a common idea that politicians lie, they do not lie as much as academics. This is because modern free democracy exhibits high transparency: politicians are constantly monitored by the media, non-governmental organizations, and

government oversight agencies with whistleblower protection programs. For such reasons, the last few decades have seen tangible progress in Western democracy as manifested by the decrease of double standards, lying, and corruption. In many countries, it has become commonplace for leaders to apologize for their mistakes. but university professors still never make mistakes and never apologize at least so long as the abuse relates to theoretical issues. The system is authoritarian and closed albeit not centralized.

While it is possible in some sciences to err, there has never been an article retraction in linguistics even though there have been calls for them. This chapter shows how linguistics professors consider anything their group publishes in their journals as scientific truth while disregarding any external discourse. If an article was retracted, would that not put such a practice into question?

The emergent authoritarianism in academia hinges on how decision-making is formally structured. In essence, linguistics is a popularity contest, and this state of affairs steers the course of research and achievable outcomes. The communication strategy employed by general linguists asserts the absence of politics in linguistics and language alike. Consequently, the mechanics of how things are operated remain veiled in mystery. This is effective as it prevents public acknowledgment that the academics participate in prescriptivism and form an exclusive group, which allocates funds among its members. No one wants to learn that what can and cannot be understood by science depends on what money can buy.

For most academics, it is good enough to deny the role of finances and internal politics in the construction of truth. However, as science becomes more structured, each structure or field and sub-field provides a new perspective. Economists are not blind to see that money drives research. Sociologists are not politically naïve because they

cannot afford to be due to their interest in analyzing the social game. Gibberish which sounds good to some might not seem sustainable to those with training in social theory and needs to be modified in a way that does not disrupt interdisciplinary solidarity. The aftermath of the Language Trap debate shows how it works, as relates especially to the emerging field of historical sociolinguistics.

### **The Language Trap debate**

So, what went wrong in the debate? According to *Authority in Language* by James and Lesley Milroy, nothing: it was a victory for linguistics professors, who established their professional and ethical superiority over non-linguists, whom they present as random non-experts proliferating a **complaint tradition**. This term is a staple in academic literature and refers to all kinds of fools expressing their silly ideas about Queen's English and the like in opinion letters and call-in talk shows. At the same time, there is a sense of danger because such a complaint tradition—that is right, as taking form in opinion letters and such—causes social inequality and suffering. According to the Milroys:

We argue that complaints by politicians, broadcasters, authors and the general public about incorrect language form part of a more general and continuing process of language standardisation and maintenance.

As can be seen, the Milroys' book is written as a kind of scientific study: they make their hypothesis and then continue to prove it correct. The enemies of language are enumerated: politics, media, literature, and the general public. The perceived problem of linguistics is "language standardisation and maintenance", which results from "complaints against English" (p. 13). The book is especially recommended to students as is informed by its publisher:

*Authority in Language* is indispensable reading for educationalists, teachers and linguists and a long-standing text for courses in sociolinguistics, modern English grammar, history of English and language ideology.

It is one of the points where the successful student is distinguished from the failing one. Many might wonder why the “general public”—is that not the same as the speech community?—is among the troublemakers. Surely the Milroys will explain, but let us first focus on another potential source of cognitive dissonance. *Complaints*. How come this is a scientific term, that is, what scientists study at universities? Language prescription is equated with complaints and corrections, ignoring the positive model given by textbooks, dictionaries, and grammar guides which, in reality, represent the standard mode of prescription. Multiple issues in the textbook are quickly detected but the grading and selection of students require playing along.

Predating the Milroys, the term ‘complaint’ was used by Leonard’s 1929 *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage, 1700-1800*, which argues that correctness is a layperson illusion. The word ‘complain’ first appears in the very beginning of the book, which is of course written in correct Standard English, and I do not suppose Sterling Andrus Leonard (1888–1931) was any more indulgent with his students on grammar and punctuation than other professors. As a side note, I find my articles regularly rejected by linguistics peer-reviewers based on my bad writing.

Leonard quotes Jonathan Swift’s 1712 *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*:

I do here, in the Name of all the Learned and polite Persons of the Nation, complain . . . that our Language is extremely imperfect; that its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions, that the Pretenders to polish and refine it, have chiefly multiplied Abuses and Absurdities, and that in many Instances, it offends against every part of Grammar.

Surprisingly, the Milroys do not cite Leonard but explain that Jonathan Swift and William Caxton ruined English by standardizing it. These people are normally known, respectively, as the author of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and the printer of *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (1473/1474), which might cause some cognitive dissonance among students with an orientation in English literature. Maybe it all just proves that literature and sociolinguistics are too different to mix, but we will see. The Milroys summarize Swift as follows:

Swift recommended that an official body (similar to the Academies of France and Italy) should be set up, first to improve the language, and second, to 'ascertain' (we might now say 'standardise') it. He said that he could see no reason why language should be perpetually changing and believed that English had perceptibly declined since the Restoration (in 1660). As usual in complaint literature, someone or something had to be blamed for this supposed decline. Today it is often the teaching profession or politicians (Orwell, 1946), and sometimes, as we have seen, the scapegoat is now the discipline of linguistics itself (Simon, 1980; Honey, 1983). Swift blamed the loose morals of the post-Restoration period – 'University boys' and frequenters of coffee-houses.

Did Swift really claim that English was ruined by "University boys"? Apparently, he did. The text is available online for everyone to read. It also says:

I believe [You] will agree with me in the reason why our language is less refined than those of Italy, Spain, or France. 'Tis plain that the Latin tongue, in its purity, was never in this island, towards the conquest of which few or no attempts were made till the time of Claudius; neither was that language ever so vulgar in Britain as it is known to have been in Gaul and Spain.

The above passage might cause an involuntary burst of laughter among non-experts, but for the experts—even though they are likely to deny it one way or another—it might be in place to explain that the Romance languages emerged from regional Latin colloquials

of the late Roman empire, which were collectively called *Vulgar Latin*. Swift's passage hinges on the dual meaning of the word to craft a satirical argument, playing with the double entendre of 'vulgar' meaning both common and lacking refinement, thereby highlighting the absurdity of comparing English to Romance languages.

In sum, it was a joke. Swift ridiculed the idea of establishing a language council and all the rest of what the Milroys suggest. As the authors are likely aware of this, it is in place to ask why the Milroys write such rubbish, and why it is considered clever by the academic audience.

### **The real issue**

For the Milroys, the underlying problem is that, as manifested by the likes of Leonard, linguists live in a collective denial about their task. The fact is that the overarching functions of linguistics are divided into three: descriptive, theoretical, and prescriptive. This is quite easy to explain and demonstrate to outsiders, but it is in a blind spot for the selected individuals. The tyranny of self-perception limits human intelligence and understanding. Every general linguist must have internalized the common credo that language prescription and standardization are bad from a professional and ethical point of view. Thus, the issue is vital in the making of the expert, and anyone questioning the credo exposes their inadequacy.

For historical reasons, general linguists have created a **myth** about the evil of prescriptivism. The reality is that, in the times of Swift, linguists attempted to act as the sole authorities in language standardization but failed notably in England, where any eventual attempts to establish a language council were unsuccessful, leaving academics with a weak influence on English. This situation gave rise to what in cultural and symbolic anthropology is called a **historical taboo**. In this case, the portrayal of an

unpleasant historical outcome involves a kind of ancestor disavowal: because the eighteenth-century grammarians brought shame to the community, a core function of the myth is to distance the current members from their precursors who are conversely portrayed as outsiders. These, according to the myth, attacked the core values of the community and failed in a war where the community itself arose victorious.

Of course, the historical details do not add up, which makes it all the more important that only trusted members of the community should be allowed to discuss the events, and their task is to reaffirm the myth. An inappropriate approach to the taboo will result in the removal of the research and the individual. It is a four-tier security system: (1) the members of funding and admissions panels are trained to reject research that touches the taboos inappropriately, even if the research proposal seems interesting to outsiders. (2) If there is, nonetheless, a security breach in or after the first step, the expertise of editorial board members and peer reviewers in academic publishing entails detecting forbidden material and rejecting it. (3) If research that challenges the tyranny of self-perception is nonetheless published, it is up to the professors to understand that it should not be cited. (4) If someone nonetheless cites it, (1), (2), and (3) are reapplied. There is no way out but the exit.

### **Descriptive denialism**

It is the professional mantra that linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive. As such, when linguists read this chapter, they will say nothing about it, but if prompted, they will point out that it is misguided because the author has failed to see that *linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive*, exposing the author as a non-expert. The underlying causes of descriptivist denialism are discussed in more detail in Part II in the chapters

on the Taboo of the Self and the Taboo of Measurability, while this chapter focuses on how authoritative truth is constructed and maintained, and changed all of a sudden.

Briefly, as can be extracted from Leonard, there was a growing need for a national standard in the eighteenth century, which was responded to by the grammarians of the time. The Age of Enlightenment theories, which were based on the classical tradition and prevalent at the time, became considered problematic. It was thought that the linguists' expertise in logical grammar would give them an undeniable authority in language prescription, but it turned out that their reasons were mere opinions based on a learned social norm. Leonard demonstrates how the grammarians' purported logical analogies proved to be inconsistent but, somewhat paradoxically, argues that logical criteria of correctness were sometimes taken too far to change customary usage, especially in French.

Since everyone has an opinion—not least on language matters—it became unclear why the experts should have authority over democracy, and linguists of the time found themselves on the losing side. But later linguists denounced the eighteenth-century grammarians, claiming that they were never linguists in the first place. They were, according to Leonard, mostly clergymen and not real linguists. Leonard uses the *No True Scotsman* fallacy, quite likely reiterating linguistics folklore rather than being purely based on his research or proposing a new idea. The point is that if anyone argues that the representatives of the so-called complaint tradition were linguists nonetheless, modern linguists will demonstrate that, maybe they were “linguists” of some kind, but none of them was a *true* linguist for various reasons.

Leonard is oblivious to the fact that much of science and education were at the time associated with the Church. It was the shift to civil society that caused friction between professional language experts and a rising wider educated public that came to

challenge their authority. To restore their positive self-perception, linguists spun a denial strategy against logical and rational grammar. During the nineteenth century, the picture emerged that language was not the rational creation of Man after all, but something mysterious, something *something* that incompetent people cannot understand and therefore should not discuss. It became generally accepted by the in-group that language prescription is a mere illusion in the minds of ignorant outsiders. That would be the road to monopolizing language policy by the in-group who just lays down natural, non-negotiable facts.

In practice, the difference between such prescriptivism and descriptivism is mostly rhetorical: instead of advising: “You should say...”, or: “It is incorrect...”, the self-proclaimed descriptivists employ **indirect prescription**: “People normally say...”, or “It is uncustomary...”, which, problematically or not, is the same mode of prescription that is today employed by guides written by outsiders, that is, authors hired by publishing companies. Whichever way one looks at it, there is no substance in the professors’ claims.

### **Misrepresentation of history**

For the in-group, prescriptivism is academically proven absurd by exposing its false claims about grammar as exemplified by old-fashioned rules such as forbidding split infinitives and placing a preposition at the end of a sentence, as discussed by both Honey and Pinker among so many others. Leonard dedicates his book to old curiosities, for example, prescribing *thou* for the singular second person. He cites Fries citing George Fox, one of the founders of the Religious Society of Friends as writing:

Do not they speak false English, false Latine, false Greek .... and false to the other Tongues .... that doth not speak thou to one, what ever he be, Father, Mother, King,

or Judge ; is he not a Novice and Unmannerly, and an Ideot and a Fool, that speaks You to one, which is not to be spoken to a singular, but to many? O Vulgar Professors and Teachers, that speaks Plural when they should Singular. . . . Come you Priests and Professors, have you not learnt your Accidence?

Supposedly, the irony is that the prescriptivists themselves cannot write proper English. Having defeated them, we now have a clear and natural language—or would have if it was not for all those prescriptivists between our days and those of George Fox (1624–1691). It is a common practice of linguists to seek examples of wrong advice in outdated books.

In what seems like a self-refuting account, Bex (1999) demonstrates that prescriptivists do not just try to fix their arbitrary rules forever, linking them mistakenly to an interlingual logic like in the above quotation, but they also keep changing them. Bex examines long-standing grammar guides, finding that their instructions have been revised repeatedly in style and content. While the early twentieth-century editions were haughty, discriminatory, and made old-fashioned prescriptions, all this has been gradually corrected to modern style, proving the absurdity of the whole enterprise—as per a **double bind fallacy**. And another one: according to Bex, the authors often admitted that their rules are arbitrary representing an elite variety, which simply happens to have social value. But that should reject the in-group claim that prescriptivists do not understand the social relativity of their advice. Bex concludes that, with such a foundation, he does not see why prescriptivists, typically hailing from school education rather than university linguistics, should have authority in language matters. He considers their arguments as populist, blaming them for students' lack of interest in grammar in the 1950s.

Not surprisingly, grammar was often seen as arbitrary and boring.

Apparently, *the people* would like true linguists to take over even if it is not clear from the context in which way grammar will be non-arbitrary. One approach will be discussed in Chapter Three.

While Leonard provides a superb view of the eighteenth-century scene, it should be taken with a pinch of salt. The shortcomings of the book relate to linguists' need to distance themselves from standardization, considering themselves as representing a distinct occupational group without a history:

[t]he eighteenth-century grammarians and rhetoricians were mainly clergymen, retired gentlemen, and amateur philosophers [...] Though more or less conversant with classical texts, they had little or no conception of the history and relations of the classical or other languages, and of course no equipment for carrying on linguistic research or even for making valid observations of contemporary usage. One or two like Dr. Johnson and Horne Tooke made forays of some brilliance and did useful work, but none consolidated any position. Frequently they quoted with approval the Horatian dictum about usage, or an equivalent, but always they destroyed its entire force in application [...] They built in general upon the neo-Platonic notion of a divinely instituted language, perfectly mirroring actuality but debased by man, and they labored to restore its pristine perfection.

But it was *linguists* who failed at it. Leonard contradicts himself by admitting that the eighteenth-century grammarians did some linguistic research. He claims that they had no means of "making valid observations of contemporary usage". But is that not exactly what their prescriptions were about?

Leonard's account is unrealistic and he forgets to mention that the relations and histories of languages were already discussed in the seventeenth-century French textbook Port-Royal Grammar, whose sources include Andreas Helwig's 1622 *Origenes dictionum germanicarum* among others. Of course, research was much more sporadic than it is today. Books were published infrequently, and they were written by Catholic

monks or Anglican clergymen, noblemen, retired teachers, and hobby linguists. It is easy to judge when writing on a scholarship, but such dedicated enthusiasts were instrumental in the processes leading to today's academic conveniences.

Several volumes discussing the origins and development of language were published in the Continent during the eighteenth century including Gottsched's 1730 *Réflexions sur la formation des mots dans une langue quelconque*, and Condillac's 1747 *Philosophical and Critical Investigations on the French Language*. The 1782 volume *Orientalische und exegetische Bibliothek* is a particularly modern example in that it is edited by Michaelis with contributions from various orientalists of the time.

The eighteenth century witnessed sharply growing interest in comparative philology, culminating in Indo-European studies as proposed by Rasmus Rask and made internationally known by William Jones in his 1786 lectures. Rask was a tutor with training in theology, while Jones was a court judge and hobby linguist. The field of the history and relations of languages that Leonard refers to stems historically from their research. In addition to Jones, British language researchers of the time include Samuel Johnson, whose most famous work is his monumental 1755 *A Dictionary of the English Language*, which includes explanations of word origins and etymologies. Leonard addresses him by his honorary degree "Dr. Johnson", but he was a writer and hobby linguist.

Monboddo's *The Origin and Progress of Language*, 1773, is another example. Lord Monboddo was a Scottish judge and hobby linguist, who wrote extensively on language evolution and the origins of human language. John Jortin, a churchman and historian also wrote about the origin of language and words in his 1760 *Philological Inquiries*. George Hickes was a clergyman who wrote about language history during the

late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. As suggested by Leonard, Tooke, who wrote *The Diversions of Purley*, was likewise a clergyman.

The reality is that these scholars were the linguists of their time. Leonard suggests that the complainers' knowledge was limited to Classical languages, but it is an understatement. During the eighteenth century, the field of linguistics did not yet exist as a distinct academic discipline in the way it does today. Some scholars within university settings engaged in linguistic research and philological studies, although their work often encompassed a broader range of interests.

Universities during the eighteenth century were home to scholars, who conducted research in languages, often with expertise in Latin and Greek. These scholars were not necessarily linguistics professors in the modern sense, but they made significant contributions to the understanding of language and its historical development. Many linguists of the time were philologists, focusing on the study of historical texts. Their work involved translation, deciphering ancient manuscripts, and examining language structures. These efforts contributed to a deeper understanding of linguistic history. Some scholars of the time, such as Sir William Jones and Johann David Michaelis, were affiliated with universities. Jones, for instance, was a judge and a scholar of Oriental languages, while Michaelis was a professor of theology and Oriental languages. Their contributions extended beyond linguistic studies to broader philological and cultural investigations.

The formalization of linguistics as a distinct academic discipline with dedicated departments and professors began to take shape in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but that does not mean that the in-group emerged out of nowhere. Today's linguists are heirs to a longstanding tradition of scholarship, which has evolved over time. These professionals may seem like fat cats in comparison to the pioneers of the field, and

accepting their claim would suggest that Leonardo da Vinci was not an anatomist, Antoine Lavoisier was not a chemist, Benjamin Franklin was not an engineer, Gregor Mendel was not a geneticist, and Charles Darwin was not an evolutionary biologist, rejecting their accomplishments on the grounds that they did not hold a university position.

Across the sciences, on the other hand, Galileo Galilei and Johannes Kepler were professors of mathematics and not ‘true’ astronomers, and all famous polymaths made contributions outside of their tenured field. For example, Leon Battista Alberti held a position as a professor of law but made substantial contributions to architecture, art theory, mathematics, and literature. Many scholars were associated with the Church, including Mendel, who was a monk, and some were self-taught and came from wealthy families, like Blaise Pascal.

During the 18th century in England, many grammarians were clergymen for several interconnected reasons including their educational background. Clergymen of the Church of England were often well-educated individuals with a strong foundation in classical languages, rhetoric, and theology. These skills were highly relevant to the study of language and grammar at the time.

While the monastic system was a central agent in education in Catholic Europe, the Church of England was closely associated with the establishment and maintenance of grammar schools, which became important institutions for education during this period, and clergymen were often involved in teaching grammar and language skills. Thus, the bulk of eighteenth-century linguists were language teachers, often with training in theology and Classical languages. Many clergymen of the 18th century were deeply involved in intellectual pursuits such as linguistic studies. Grammar was seen as

an essential component of education, and clergymen played a prominent role in shaping linguistic thought.

In sum, the 18th century saw the emergence of secular scholars and intellectuals contributing to the field, and over time, linguistic scholarship became more secularized and diverse, moving away from its earlier ecclesiastical associations. Nonetheless, theology continued to be for many the road to higher education and scholarship, including linguistics. Such scholars constituted the linguistics in-group in the eighteenth century, that is, people, whose work was used and cited by the recognized professionals. Despite claims to the contrary, today's in-group represents a continuation of professionalism from the eighteenth century and earlier. Hence, the distinction between prescriptivists and linguists is unwarranted.

Now, let us conduct a little thought experiment and suppose that a university headmaster brought this chapter to his linguistics professors to suggest that they may be teaching rubbish to the school's students. What would happen? General linguists inspect the material and point out that the author lacks basic skills in linguistics as manifested by his failure to understand its descriptivist nature: he should be sent back to an introductory course. Accordingly, claims made here are impossible or irrelevant.

Historical linguists and sociolinguists will *agree* pointing out that there is nothing new in this chapter: they knew it all along, so its scientific value is zero. The professors then take an informal vote and declare the author an idiot. Embarrassed, the headmaster returns to their office. But the question remains: *do* they teach rubbish? It takes a true expert of rubbish to answer the question. At the office, it is the professor. In the corridor, it is the cleaner. It takes all sorts to make a world.

### **The hidden meaning of descriptivism**

A core duty in promoting the ancestor disavowal was to perform a **semantic shift** on the concepts of description and prescription, in which the latter is envisioned as inherently bad from a professional and ethical point. More importantly, the failed eighteenth-century linguists are redubbed as prescriptivists as opposed to the good tribe of linguists, who are their opposite: descriptivists.

Linguists have used whatever power they have to reshape historical narratives, even resorting to Orwellian measures. As suggested, the genius of the Milroys' book was in reclaiming the word. Still, as I am writing this, the Oxford English Dictionary defines prescriptivism as the “**belief** that the grammar of a language **should** lay down rules to which usage **must conform**”<sup>1</sup> (emphases added), implying some sort of authoritarian faith. It is interesting to see that the Dictionary is capable of providing unopinionated definitions of words that in other contexts might elicit strong emotions such as ‘communism’ or ‘neoliberal’. The difference is that the latter two do not belong to linguists’ cultural capital, so they are just words among others. The editors find it hard to resist making a point when the topic touches on their occupational taboos.

This case exemplifies how the function of semantic shifting is to preclude contrasting opinions: anyone defending prescription, unlike the communist or neoliberalist, is guided by faith rather than reason as per English. Paradoxically, the dictionary itself is prescriptive, allowing the conclusion that even the linguists who call themselves descriptivists are some sort of ideological fanatics. This would be denied on

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=prescriptivism>  
(accessed on 2024-01-21)

the grounds that the Dictionary does not complain or correct, but simply lists natural facts.

But there have been **nuanced apologetics** for prescription lately. Their purpose is not to inappropriately challenge academic truth but to try to steer attention in a different direction. They might start like this:

Linguistic prescriptivists have a bad name. To most academic linguists they display ignorance about language at best, and pernicious social or political attitudes at worst. Linguistics students are taught the shortcomings of prescriptivist grammars in their first semester. Thereafter, their pronouncements about correctness are either ignored or relegated to data in sociolinguistic studies of (distressingly popular) attitudes towards language. (Barber & Stainton 2021)

Today's non-linguistics-cum-prescriptivists are considered as the eighteenth-century grammarians as reincarnated in the form of expressers of scientifically unauthorized views in today's discussions. Many historical sociolinguists now consider this attitude changed.

Until very recently, the received view among linguists was that prescriptivism was a 'bad thing', something only worth considering in order to condemn it as a product of unenlightened thinking. As Deborah Cameron states so pithily, it "represents the threatening Other, the forbidden; it is a spectre that haunts linguistics" (Beal 2009)

Has the attitude really changed in general linguistics? I do not think so. Historically and sociologically oriented contributions to the Handbook of Linguistics (ed. Aronoff 2017) do discuss 'standardization' neutrally, but only little consideration is given to 'prescriptivism' by grammarians, with the following conclusion:

2.1 Grammars Should be Descriptive, Not Prescriptive.

As discussed above, this proposition is generally accepted by modern linguists  
(Wasow)

Poser suggests that the underlying problem was that linguists felt sidelined, but their anti-prescriptive propaganda started a slippery slope to a new problem.

Although we linguists often lament our inability to influence what most people think about language, there is one area in which I fear that we may have been too successful. In the past few years I have encountered a surprising number of examples of people mistakenly condemning an observation or complaint about language use as prescriptivism. In some circles those alleged to be guilty of this sin are known as "grammar nazis". I think that it is therefore worth spending some time clarifying what prescriptivism is and why and when it is bad.<sup>2</sup>

When is it bad? It seems predictable that we are headed toward the realization that prescription is the enlightened professional's dutiful obligation, but bad if carried out by outsiders. English language prescription is lucrative and, since tenured professors are not just too busy but also too holy to do it, any non-linguist would understand that the task, then, has to be undertaken by others.

Why is prescriptivism bad? Poser enumerates the common excuses, which are primarily related to the outsiders' professional and ethical inferiority: 'prescriptivists' start by performing a false description—since they are not true descriptivists—and fail to see that grammatical rules are arbitrary—not socially determined, but representing an elite—and then falsely impose such arbitrary rules on native speakers who should know better, causing discrimination, with the ultimate goal to carve these rules into stone so

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20231007063522/http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languageblog/archives/003588.html>

that language can never run its normal course of change, which, then, leads to the worst problem, which is not named, but I suppose it must be language death since it is often said that living languages change. Yes, English will die thanks to the prescriptivists, leaving the students with no job prospects after all their dedication and investment, or something like that. You get the idea: it is bad and needs to be stopped before it is too late.

### **Tactics of demagoguery**

The unholy alliance is one of the core formations in academic funding strategies as necessitated by political arithmetic. If linguists are challenged from the outside, it can offer a smaller in-group party the opportunity to negotiate concessions in return for its support against a common enemy. In the case of the Language Trap debate, linguists were criticized in general, but sociolinguists took over the discourse, superficially promoting everyone's interest. On the Milroys' account, linguists are viciously attacked by a group whom they call

Ordinary people (i.e. non-linguists)

as represented by the likes of John Honey, the author of *The Language Trap*. The implication is just what the narcissistic—or insecure—mind wants to hear: that they are *extraordinary professionals*. In reality, however, many such “non-linguists” turn out to be linguists of some kind despite falling outside the in-group. To say the least, it should come as a surprise that respectable media and publishing houses rely on random fools for their language-related publications. For example, John Honey was at the time of the debate a professor. He was Head of the School of Education at Leicester Polytechnic and became Dean of the Faculty of Education, Humanities and Social Science. Later, he

worked as a professor of English in Japan.<sup>3</sup> None of this makes any difference to the quality of his argument, but it is crucial to see how the Milroys manipulate the reader, something that is very easy to verify from an objective point, but, apparently, impossible to linguists to whom the Milroys' work is a scientific milestone.

In a certain way, the Milroys exemplify what in politics are called **demagogues**, appealing to people's emotional weaknesses rather than rationality with manipulative rhetoric. They oppose free press and free speech and capitalize on an Us versus Them mentality. The reader might find this harsh, but I repeat their statement:

We argue that complaints by politicians, broadcasters, authors and the general public about incorrect language form part of a more general and continuing process of language standardisation and maintenance.

From this perspective, the Milroys' proposal is a counter-attack on democracy, free media, artists, and anyone outside the in-group. The argument is that public discussion of language matters should end. The style is academic, but the tactics are similar to the likes of Donald Trump and other politicians labeled as populists. The full recipe is simple and goes something like this: *We have lost our past glory due to attacks from outsiders and corruption by traitors, but Our potential to rise above all other groups remains; We, the true people, can achieve greatness again if We unite to defeat Our common enemy.* Little consideration is given to the possibility that linguists themselves might be the root of their problems.

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20210617070212/https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education-professor-wants-language-laws-to-teach-us-right-from-wrong-1245888.html>

Such demagoguery arose in linguistics during the twentieth century and motivates many of today's theorists including Chomsky, Lakoff, and Pinker—in different ways and degrees—but is traced back to at least Leonard. The European Romantics, who relied on the mere denial of layperson participation, did not appear to have this aspect in their public communications. I

n the American context, it is reasonable to suggest that mere denialism was perceived as an insufficient tactic against outsiders and that there was a radical shift in attitudes between William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894), who was astonishingly lucid on the particulars of who change language, to Chomsky, who first disconnected language emergence from human agency and then performed a semantic shift on “rationalism” to unable rational discussion about his notion.

We will return to these scholars' motivations in a different chapter, but an underlying structural change relates to the fact that American English, which was peripheral in the nineteenth century, became dominant after the World Wars. The combination of increasing global pressure and lack of authority brought about a severe tyranny of delusion that has become emblematic of American linguistics, catering to a deeply saddened and angry audience.

### **Reclaiming the word**

History of linguistics was rewritten to serve the tyranny of self-perception, and it served well until Honey's criticism, after which it had to be rewritten again—and again. Back in the UK, while dismissing Honey and other outsiders, the Milroys' Authority in Language represents a nuanced apologetic, a type of discourse that is encountered in linguistics from time to time. To understand the issue, due to the top-down, bottom-up, and horizontal selection processes, where professors need the support of high-ranking

officials, students, and colleagues in the field and across disciplinary borders, the successful professor's freedom of thought is restricted to the point that to circumvent all potential conflicts of interest, they must produce an incoherent hodgepodge of ideas to advance their in-group's science-political motive.

It is mostly about funding, but Chapter One suggested that *recognition* is the fundamental currency, and with recognition also comes finances. It is a quick cure for social blindness. *Money talks and bullshit walks*, leading to an eye-opening experience for the individual. The initiated member of the in-group is incapable of seeing beyond academic truth until funding is allocated for the study of language prescription and standardization as is relevant to **historical sociolinguistics**.

To be fair, one must consider the possibility that sociolinguists changed their opinion having familiarized themselves with the evidence and wanted to correct mistakes for the sake of truth, acting on free will. However, I think the case is closed based on the current example because how could the historical facts suddenly change? Some might suggest that some books were forgotten and others rediscovered, but it is more plausible that the Milroys failed to cite Leonard (1929, re-printed 1961) and its close sources on purpose because they found that they contained too much information.

The reality is that, not least following the Language Trap debate, there was a growing interest in prescriptivism, which brought about a need to release it from a strict taboo status to access funding for historical sociolinguistics and have the research published via normal routes. Since general linguists form a much larger trained group of individuals with an impact on the distribution of resources, there was an urgent necessity to cunningly circumvent the taboo of prescriptivism. Rationally, it is impossible, given the circumstances, but the problem might be solved by producing a

few hundred pages of science-politically motivated gibberish that was never meant to make sense in the big picture.

The aftermath of the Language Trap debate exemplifies how academic truth is renegotiated between diverse stakeholders. In *Authority in Language*, the Milroys pretend to be perfectly impartial observers although, in the course of the book, they admit having conducted some of the potentially relevant research in sociolinguistics. On the surface, it looks as if the authors fully agree with the general linguists who participated in the debate. At a closer examination, though, the Milroys rather agree with the critics despite attacking their qualities, paying lip service to the general linguists' dogma. On the one hand, they agree that Swift was a prescriptivist and that prescriptivists are dangerous fools, extensively preaching about the "consequences" of prescriptivism and standardization that are inflicted on the poor individual. However, at a closer inspection,

we attempt a critique of **some forms** of prescriptivism. In this critique, we point out that [...] standard languages are necessary and must be maintained [.]  
(emphasis added)

It is a nuanced or **compromising apologetic**. On the surface, it seems as if the book condemns prescriptivism, but *Authority in Language* is its defense. The purpose is to set conditions for the kind of prescription and standardization of English that is digestible to the overall majority. Common ground is sought in the fact that neither general linguists nor sociolinguists fancy outsiders meddling in their businesses. However, the curious thing about the emerging third wheel of the debate, historical sociolinguists, is that, from their standpoint, they have a clear view of general linguists' dumbness. Of course, prescription is a necessary function of linguistics, but those people are too blind

to see it. Sociolinguists like Graddol & Swann find the general linguists' response to the criticism, especially that of David Crystal, an embarrassment to the field.

Applying a Durkheimian explanation, the complexification of science, in this case, the emergence of historical sociolinguistics as a sub-field, leads to a new perspective. Thus, linguistics as a whole can now see more things, but there is a systemic solidarity between the groups because they are participants in the distribution of shared resources. Ultimately though, in a more Spenserian mode, the primary goal of each group is to gain resources for itself because without them, there is no research and training. These conditions route to a perilous social selection of agents and behaviors, in which the Milroys were successful by simultaneously telling each group what it wanted to hear despite their conflicting motivations.

Sociolinguists consider prescriptivism as their territory since—as general linguists like Pullum (2004) argue—it is political. Sociolinguists have expertise in politics. They agree with general linguists that non-linguists should not interfere with prescription but also imply that general linguists should not stand in the way of their research. The Milroys question the traditional doctrine of descriptivism, criticizing long-dead scholars, who represented a now-abandoned school of linguistics.

the most extreme anti-prescriptive statements, as far as we know, are those made by some members of the 'American structuralist' school of linguistics. Bloomfield (1933:22) felt that discovering why *ain't* is considered bad and *am not* good is not a fundamental question in linguistics, and he thought it strange that 'people without linguistic training' should devote 'a great deal of effort to futile discussions of this topic' [...] Some of Bloomfield's followers have gone further than this and have attacked 'unscientific' approaches to language with missionary zeal. C. C. Fries (1957) seems to have equated traditional school grammar with prescription (which was by definition 'bad' and 'unscientific' in the view of structural linguists of the

time), and in his book on English syntax he went so far as to even reject traditional linguistic terms such as ‘noun’, ‘verb’ and ‘adjective’

The last statement exemplifies the problem of Civil Society and universal education. Linguists argue for the importance of language education. However, if all people are trained in grammatical analysis, few of the students receiving the highest grades will aim at a career in linguistics. Since everyone knows English and English grammar, and we do not even attract the best talent, then, where does our superiority stem from? This is what theoretical linguistics is harnessed to find an answer to. It is a first-things-first approach: the primary concerns are to treat the scientist’s confidence and get funded.

The Milroys agree that when left to “politicians, broadcasters, authors and the general public”, standardization will go horribly wrong. Nonetheless, the linguists’ descriptivism versus prescriptivism debate has also harmed society. The Milroys suggest that

misunderstanding of linguists’ attacks on prescription may have had dire consequences

The cause of the problem was that

the professional linguist’s insistence on ‘objectivity’ and ‘scientific inquiry’ appears to have been generally misunderstood.

It is not a statement claiming that *linguists* misunderstood anything since professors understand while outsiders misunderstand. Furthermore, unlike non-experts, linguists never *complain* but *scientifically observe*:

as university language teachers, we have become aware that some students now enter universities to study English or modern languages with a rather hazy idea of basic grammatical terminology (such as subject, transitive, preposition).

Do they really care? The same idea was deemed as “populist” when made by Honey and, according to the Milroys, it appeals to a vast audience. At any rate, the decline in academic standards was a result of the linguistics professors’ attacks on prescriptivism:

Some educationalists appear to have interpreted attacks on prescriptive grammar as attacks on the teaching of grammar in general

The above quotation acknowledges that linguists did, indeed, attack prescriptivism directly and teaching grammar indirectly. It contradicts Crystal (1984), who rejected Honey’s criticism with the following statements:

I do not recall any case where a teacher was actually working to a policy which attacked standard English, while fostering non-standard communication ...  
Linguists are not against Standard English.

This is why John Honey’s pamphlet *The Language Trap* became pivotal. It was precisely Honey who interpreted *the attacks* on prescriptive grammar as attacks on teaching grammar. Honey’s opinion is the same as the Milroys' with the difference that, rather than vaguely criticizing “some educationalists”, Honey pointed the finger directly at the linguistics in-group. According to their collective spirit, doing so, he could only make a fool of himself. The Milroys’ answer to the problem, bowing in two directions at the same time, derives from their statement:

the process of language standardisation involves the suppression of optional variability in language and that, as a consequence, non-standard varieties can be observed to permit more variability than standard ones (e.g. in pronunciations of particular words).

The genius is in that this definition can be read in two different ways. For general linguists, it is value-laden and only reaffirms their prior view of prescriptivism as bad.

But the term being redefined is standardization, and sociolinguists are guided to interpret it “dispassionately”. The Milroys appear to agree with 1980s linguists who promoted regional variants in the English class on the cost of received pronunciation. Based on the above definition, standardization could be limitless in writing but avoidable in speech.

The Milroys turn out to be much more ambitious. Given the appropriate word magic, based on the Milroys, academic linguists *should* prescribe grammar, and the authors effectively invite everyone to participate in the kind of ‘descriptivism’ that is the basis of a socially informed prescription, which includes “pronunciation (phonology), spelling, grammar (morphology and syntax) and lexicon.”. The final wording is as follows:

standardisation is suppression of optional variation at all levels of language

Hence, prescriptivism is *potentially* evil but, in the hands of the high priests of science, it poses no risk to the community. It is like nuclear energy: you would not let amateurs touch those buttons. Wink: the successful student has made a note of the above quotation.

You may have wondered what it is that linguistics professors do. Well, this is it, and it only continues.

### **Swift’s recanonization**

While the problem may seem to have been solved once and for all from the sociolinguistics perspective—yes, prescriptivism research now receives its due resources—it seems that systemic solidarity has nonetheless been disrupted. While in *Standard English: The Widening Debate* (ed. Bex & Watts), Watts (1999) appeared

fully satisfied with the Milroys' thesis, he points to a mistake in their account in his 2011 *Language Myths and the History of English*. Watts praises the overall thesis but observes that

Milroy is right when he says that the lay conception of English henceforth was that of a cultural achievement and that looking at English in that way has caused a great deal of harm in the form of social discrimination since the early eighteenth century for millions of people in Britain. But he overlooks the way in which language became a political issue. In omitting this aspect of language in the early eighteenth century, the Milroys have raised Swift to a rather dubious status as the "first writer in a complaint tradition, while conveniently forgetting that the myths created around the English language produced "complaints" well before the eighteenth century. It is precisely those myths that Swift uses as part of his satire and political polemic in the Proposal. In omitting the fact that they were dealing with the greatest satirist in English, the Milroys run the risk of creating yet another myth, which we might call, for argument's sake, *the myth of complaining about English*. (Watts, emphasis in the original.)

So, the complaint tradition was nothing but a myth although we, stupids, took it for scientific truth. That is pretty harsh after forcing thousands of students to accept the doctrine. But what real merit did the Milroys have, anyway, given that their work overlooks "the way in which language became a political issue"—is that not supposed to be the least that historical sociolinguistics professors should be able to accomplish?

To a non-expert, it may appear that Watts attacks the Milroys to expose them as imposters because he wants the truth to be told. However, according to my theory, truth as such is irrelevant, and academic truth is a matter of negotiating the distribution of resources in academic publications.

Such a possibility is compatible with Watts's account. He does not *accuse* the Milroys of creating myths masked as science but performs a scientific "conceptual metaphor" analysis on their book, another bogus method relating to Lakoff's so-called

Cognitive Linguistics, which was mentioned in Chapter One. Thus, when Watts observes that the Milroys have created a “myth”, the initiated expert understands that their neural circuits conveying visual and kinesthetic input formed a conceptual metaphor relating to Swift through processes that you would not understand. According to Watts’s publisher,

myths, rather than simply being untruths about language, are derived from conceptual metaphors of language and are crucial in the formation of hegemonic discourses on language. [Watts] argues, in effect, that no discourse—a hegemonic discourse, an alternative discourse, or even a deconstructive discourse—can ever be free of ideology. The book argues that a naturalized discourse is always built on a foundation of myths, which are all too easily taken as true accounts

So, the Milroys’ thesis is not *simply untrue*, but it is *too easily taken* as an objectively true account by non-experts. Does this answer your question? And why does Watts have to say it if he represents the sociolinguistics in-group?

Maybe he does not. Richard J. Watts had a tenure as a professor at the Institute for English Languages and Literatures at Bern. What works for the first might not work for the latter, so it is possible to suggest that *it was found* that the sociolinguists’ discourse was stepping on the interests of English literature. To better understand the complexities, let us compare the situation with a quotation from Beal (2009), who is aiming to restore the honor of Robert Lowth, one of the eighteenth-century grammarians defamed by modern linguists:

What is very worrying for those of us who teach the history of English to undergraduates is that this website “Bishop Lowth was a Fool” is one of the first listed on a Google search, and students are drawn to it like moths to a flame. The entry on Lowth in Wikipedia included this statement at one time, but it has since been edited and is now much more reliable. We can warn students about websites but, unfortunately, this particular myth about Lowth also appears **in respectable**

**text books.** I would suggest that the backlash against prescriptivism in the late twentieth century has led to a knee-jerk reaction against eighteenth-century grammarians, and an unwillingness to engage with the texts which is inexcusable now that they are accessible via ECCO [Eighteenth Century Collections Online]. Students are very surprised when they read what Lowth and his contemporaries have to say, and find that some of these **eighteenth-century grammarians are no more “prescriptive” than the style-guides issued by their own departments.** More recently, a number of scholars have revisited these eighteenth-century texts and attempted to give a more nuanced reading of them. (emphases added)

Beal implies preferring the term ‘nuanced’ apologetic, while I think the alternative ‘compromising’ is quite illustrating. Summarizing the web of lies is getting complicated, but the next subsection offers a useful mini-guide.

### **An outline of the history of post-Rational linguistics**

To sum it up,

1. During the eighteenth century, linguists lost their authority in the social construction of the norm.
2. The purpose of “modern” linguistics, starting in the early nineteenth century, was to deny the existence of the social construction of the norm to stop outsiders from participating. Excuses involved a combination of biologism and psychologism.
3. As linguistic theory consequently faced the threat of becoming subsumed under biology and psychology, Whitney (1892) exposed the theories as fake BUT agreed that language is ‘evolutionary’ in a sociological way to diverge funding for anthropological linguistics.
4. As Whitney had gone too deep into the details of how people actually change language to stifle his opponents, Saussure (1916) agreed with Whitney’s

- autonomous and sociological approach BUT argued that ordinary people cannot participate in the social construction of the norm because they cannot analyze language in any way whatsoever.
5. Saussure's stipulation worked in Continental Europe, where language councils were established consolidating linguists' influence. At the same time, the center of gravity was shifting to the US, with no such authority for English. American linguists stuck to the failing psychologicistic tactic and tried hardening the rhetoric. Leonard (1929) makes a public disavowal of the eighteenth-century grammarians, mistakenly including Swift, and labels prescriptivism and standardization as professionally and ethically wrong.
  6. More biologicistic and psychologicistic bullshit theories follow from
    - a. Chomsky (1965, restoring cognitive psychologism funding but sidelining pragmatics, historical linguistics, and sociolinguistics),
    - b. Lakoff (1980, restoring pragmatics funding), and
    - c. Pinker (1994, restoring evolutionary linguistics funding).
  7. Honey (1987, 1997) calls the linguists' bluff and proposes establishing a regulating authority for English. His discourse is dismissed by general linguists.
  8. Sociolinguists pay lip service to general linguists but take control of the discourse to reclaim prescriptivism to attract more funds to historical sociolinguistics.
  9. To accomplish this, the Milroys perform a compromising apologetic on prescriptivism. Leonard is deleted to allow the restoration of the eighteenth-century grammarians BUT linguists want idiotic examples of prescriptivism, so the Milroys agree to uphold the ban on Swift precisely for the reason that he is irrelevant.

10. Watts (2011) performs another compromising apologetic, endorsing the Milroys' thesis for other parts BUT proposes lifting the ban on Swift to restore the funding related to the research of his works within English language and literature departments.
11. And so on, etc., and so forth, ad infinitum.

Experts will agree that this book is mistaken, but why? Some will point out that I have failed to understand that **science is progressive**, and new information adds to previously established knowledge. Again, one has to wonder how historical material could change overnight. It appears that development in linguistics is circular and authoritarian, but former academic truths are deleted from time to time. This poses certain problems to the task of writing an account of the history of linguistics since the physical material remains but is highly light-sensitive, so to speak. Interestingly, the field is today largely controlled by John E. Joseph, the Milroys' colleague, and authority in standardization research, but this matter will have to be the topic of a different chapter.

### **Faking a difference of opinion**

While it is plausible to suggest that attitudes toward establishing an English language council are shifting to more positive, in-group communications appear to suggest the opposite. As noted by Graddol & Swann, the Language Trap debate widened the gap between linguists and policy-makers. In hindsight, however, it served to unite linguists against a common enemy in a war whose theater is inside an academic echo chamber.

The reader of the linguists' account of the debate is led to believe that it was purely a question of whether or not to accept accents. Anyone who is not a bad person should agree that linguistic variation should not be suppressed by the authorities as that

would lead to inequality and mental problems. This is the academic truth of the debate that we read in the literature, and if a student fails to believe it, they are likely to face exclusion. But Honey lamented being misrepresented by the in-group, whereas Bex & Watts (1999) deplore the political consequences of his discourse:

One of the more surprising features about that debate was the extent to which the views of professional linguists and educators were treated with contempt by the Conservative government and the popular press.

Thus, academics were publicly humiliated. Hence, when dealing with it, one sentence is allowed to include four cases of misrepresentation. First, “popular press” refers to the *Times Educational Supplement*. Second, Honey was an educator. Third, Crystal explains that his sole reason for writing a dismissal of *The Language Trap* was because teachers became critical of Crystal’s thesis, or, as he states,

I have given several lectures to groups of teachers since the publication of the pamphlet, and it has been cited several times, thus ruining what might otherwise have been a constructive workshop discussion.

Thus, a significant number of educators agreed with Honey, who advocated teaching students grammar and Standard English. Fourth, Bex and Watts exaggerate the link between prescriptivism and conservative politics. As the Milroys admit,

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that such views (which are not always as extreme as Honey’s) can be held only by supporters of a particular political party, as might be suggested by metaphors such as ‘right-wing’ and ‘left-wing’ which are often used in relation to language debates; the views are ideological and not in themselves party-political. Supporters of other parties will certainly hold views quite similar to those [.]

When power changed, the Labour government was no less unsympathetic to the in-group's thesis. Honey, using the same divisive rhetoric as the Milroys, explains that his reason for writing another book on the topic, *Language is Power. The Story of Standard English and Its Enemies* was to "alert Labour ministers" because the research proposed by linguists is "a lot of crap".<sup>1</sup> The ministers inspected the proposal and, apparently, came to the same conclusion on the quality of linguistics research since their appeal to increase plurality in the English class was rejected.

In reality, both Honey and the in-group want to increase linguists' power in language prescription and standardization. Honey proposes establishing a formal "National Language Authority" to regulate the use of English. Such language councils are found in many countries, and they provide linguists with permanent job opportunities, funding for projects, and funding and tenures for dialect and minority language research, revitalization, standardization, and maintenance, significantly increasing linguists' say on language matters. Since Honey's first book was well received by the political parties, British professors should have explored the possibility of at least applying for funding for a think tank but, as we can see, they are blind to all reason when the topic touches their occupational taboos.

As regards alleged differences of opinion concerning the simultaneous importance of the prestigious form and regional variants, these have been fundamental questions in national language standardization since its beginnings. For example, Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) wrote his major work, *The Divine Comedy*, in a Tuscan dialect that later became the basis for standard Italian. While he contributed to developing a unified literary language, he was also aware of the diversity of regional dialects and recognized their cultural value. Martin Luther (1483–1546) translated the Bible into German, and his translation aimed at creating a standardized German language

accessible to a broader audience. However, Luther's work also reflected regional linguistic elements, and he recognized the importance of regional diversity.

Eighteenth-century examples of scholars advocating standardization but also acknowledging the value of regional variants include Joachim Heinrich Campe (1746–1818). In his *Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* ('Dictionary of the German Language'), he included words from various dialects. Noah Webster (1758–1843) worked on standardizing American English. His dictionary and spelling reforms aimed at creating a distinct American standard. While promoting standardization, Webster recognized and documented regional linguistic differences in the United States.

These examples illustrate that, even as efforts were made to establish language standards for practical and cultural reasons, many language scholars and reformers were aware of the authenticity and cultural significance embedded in regional variations. The tension between standardization and the appreciation of linguistic diversity constitutes a dynamic aspect of language history. But crying crocodile's tears for dialects may be a mere **appeal to pity fallacy**. Professional linguistics is fueled by funding, not tears, and the top prize is Standard English, not so much in whatever else might appear on the side.

Besides, is it not obvious that these are the *true* language snobs challenged by false ones? Who else would opt for a degree in English, anyway? Bex goes as far as acknowledging that snobbery is part and parcel of the social construction of the norm. Moreover, to the scholars' frustration, dialect speakers have shown little inclination to join a revolution against linguistic oppression to raise the national appreciation of their local variant. Based on surveys, they often consider themselves as speakers of Standard English. The Milroys lament:

It seems that people are willing to pay lip-service to correctness and prestige variants, but at the same time they continue to speak the variety current in their own speech communities.

Well, is that not just practical? Honey, too, considered change and variation as natural parts of language even though the Milroys suggest that he, like Swift, wanted to put an end to language change. To cite Honey's 1997 interview in *The Independent*,

[Honey] is, however, anxious to distinguish his proposal from what he calls "English reactionaries defending the most conservative and inflexible notions of correct English".

His Authority would allow all split infinitives and dangling participles because they are now in common use by educated people and do not inhibit understanding of Standard English. The point of having an Authority is to offer reassurance and security to people who are not sure - and who do not believe **the trendy linguistic theorists who say anything goes**. Standard English will have to co-exist, he says, with American English though there are large parts of the world, including India and Europe, where British models are more likely to be followed. (emphasis added)

That is quite realistic. Despite relating to languages spoken in several countries, there are Arabic, French, and Spanish language councils. What is worse, the situation where most Western languages benefit from having a language council, but not English, is an obstacle to linguistics due to its dominance in science and culture. Global innovation is like a city rail system with few cross-route connections. If the central station is blocked, the entire network faces significant disruptions, hindering the efficient flow of ideas and progress across different sectors and regions. In short, linguistics needs a realistic theory of language construction that is propagated from the US. But the theories offered by American academics like Chomsky and Pinker are based on the idea that institutions do

not exist, or that they are evil or ridiculous. This local stance casts a shadow on the field globally.

It is not a problem at all that a single council would not be enough, quite the contrary. Each Anglophone country should have its own from Scotland to New Zealand. These would cooperate in organizing forums and symposiums to exchange experiences, highlighting the international importance of language maintenance. English being the lingua franca, these could be expanded to conferences with participants representing different languages. It would make sense from the outside perspective because other governmental institutions organize international cooperation events such as conferences on global issues, cultural exchange events, trade and economic symposiums, and education and research partnerships. While linguists *could* travel the world to participate in important events increasing their appreciation and do what they really want to do: complain about declining standards like true experts, they keep shooting themselves in the foot.

Notice, however, that my prediction is not that establishing a language council will end the tyranny of delusion. It is, rather, that modern linguistic theory would shift back on the scale given in Chapter One, from delusional toward denialistic, relieving the likes of Chomsky, Lakoff, and Pinker as no longer required.

In Finland, which has a language council for the many languages of the country, linguists representing the authority subscribe to the mantra that their standardization work is descriptive, not prescriptive. Such a claim is likely justified by the use of indirect prescription even though, empowered by their authority, council members are sometimes quite outspoken in their organ *Kielikello*. At any rate, having such a council is more likely to increase clarity than revolutionize language standardization, as suggested by Honey in his interview:

"Of course language is constantly changing," he says, "though not as fast as has been claimed. What was once an error can become an accepted use - but only if accepted by the consensus of educated opinion. That's the way Standard English has evolved over 600 years."

"We cannot any longer rely on what my generation were taught back in primary or prep school. That's why we need an Academy. It's rules like 'never begin a sentence with a conjunction or end one with a preposition' that need to be changed." Among Professor Honey's examples are "cohort" - used wrongly to mean a colleague or contemporary." The Authority would restrict "cohort" to "group with specific common characteristics, such as year of birth".

To be fair, we should investigate whether Pinker, a linguistic theorist criticized by Honey and defended by the Milroys, argued that anything goes. Pinker's *Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind* fashionably ridicules the idea of an English language council. Pinker then argues that splitting infinitives is normal English usage, as was agreed by Honey, and provides pages worth of well-known topics from language debates. Initially, Pinker dismisses a number of professions:

The legislators of "correct English," in fact, are an informal network of copy-editors, dictionary usage panelists, style manual and handbook writers, English teachers, essayists, columnists, and pundits. Their authority, they claim, comes from their dedication to implementing standards that have served the language well in the past, especially in the prose of its finest writers.

He rejects the idea of an English language academy as a vanity project.

There is no English Language Academy, and this is just as well; the purpose of the Académie Française is to amuse journalists from other countries with bitterly argued decisions that the French gaily ignore.

As discussed, there are many such academies, but their task is not to dictate how people speak but to advise on usage and take responsibility for language maintenance. By

contrast, Pinker claims to be an evolutionary scientist who studies language like biologists study “the song of the humpback whale”. True, there are no whale song academies, but does that not just show that Pinker’s analogy is false? A little later he makes a nuanced apologetic on behalf of the style guides, perhaps paving the way for his more recent product *The Sense of Style* (Pinker 2014).

The aspect of language use that is most worth changing is the clarity and style of written prose ... There are excellent manuals of composition that discuss these and other skills with great wisdom, like Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* and Williams's *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. (Pinker 1994, p. 401)

It is difficult to say whether Pinker’s book is meant to be read as a joke, but he admits consulting style guides for his writing and undoubtedly benefits from his school education despite suggesting that it is silly to teach English to native English speakers. Williams’s book will be briefly discussed in Chapter Three, while *The Elements of Style* is based on Strunk’s 1935 guide with revised reprints. White comments on his revision (1979/2000):

[Strunk’s] book contains rules of grammar phrased as direct orders. In the main I have not tried to soften his commands, or modify his pronouncements, or remove the special objects of his scorn.

Thus, Pinker recommends a prescriptive guide but suggests that he only reaches the refinement of his writing by creating between two and twenty drafts before releasing a paper. This must have included grammar corrections since it is written in pure Standard English. Pinker then goes on to admit becoming annoyed by non-standard word usage like any other person, discussing the evolving meaning of ‘disinterested’.

To sum up, Honey was correct in claiming that language theorists such as Pinker argue that anything goes since it is what Pinker explicitly writes about grammar. Under

the surface, though, there is no evidence of a true difference between Honey's and Pinker's opinions. Both understand the importance of learning to write Standard English despite Pinker's equivocations. Most essentially, he seems to confuse the rules of written and spoken language and fails to consider the crucial fact that spoken language is also based on normative rules. In sum, the correct conclusion must be that Pinker's book is literally "a lot of crap".

### **Communicative superiority**

Graddol & Swann conclude that the Language Trap debate was caused by a communication problem. According to them, there was no debate between experts and non-experts but two discourses. The expert discourse takes form in academic channels and cannot be fully deciphered by non-experts.

Traditionally, linguists and scientists have worked in their ivory towers (the very phrase is a lay acknowledgement of an exotic discourse) and, by and large, have been able to communicate with each other through learned papers, books, journals and conferences etc. Such work might be thought to be isolated from the ideological struggles taking place in the outside world. Problems appear, however, whenever attempts at communication across the two discourses take place. The idea that miscommunication occurs when participants do not share certain cultural assumptions, background knowledge and so on, is a familiar one to linguists — see, for example, the work of Gumperz and other discourse analysts (e.g. Gumperz, 1982).

The citation suggests that such rationalization now forms a sub-field of 'science' of its own. To follow the logic, the initiated expert might also find it difficult to decipher this chapter due to its unacademic terminology. For example, it might be difficult to grasp concepts such as "the Language Trap debate" in the sense that is reported here as suggesting that linguists engaged with an outsider. The correct view is that there may be

inter-academic debates in the scientific press, but suggesting that ordinary people are agents in humanities is analogous to saying that dung beetles are agents in insect biology. But what might be included in the terminology exemplifying the in-group's superior understanding? Graddol & Swann continue:

When attempts are made to make sense of utterances made within one discourse by references to the rules and meaning systems of another, one of two things may occur. The discourse may appear bizarre and unreadable, or, when things do not reach this extreme, and when meanings generated within one discourse remain comprehensible within the terms of the other, such meanings may become transformed. It is not uncommon for identical linguistic forms to be found in different languages with different meanings, but in the case of different discourses within a single language most tokens are, confusingly perhaps, shared. One well known instance of this kind is the word 'grammar' which is understood by linguists and the lay public in quite different ways, to the dismay of many linguists involved in educational work.

There you go, *grammar*. Sounds familiar—did not Chomsky say something abstract, something *something* about grammar? As sociolinguists, Graddol & Swann may not fully share his biologicistic views. Nonetheless, the shared opinion is that laypeople do not understand the scientific meaning of grammar, whatever it is. Graddol & Swann make no attempt to define it and let me explain why. Because *you would not understand anyway*. An initiated member of the in-group knows it intuitively, but the mere effort of trying to spell it out in terms that are open to scrutiny would only reveal one's incompetence. The meaning is only fully contained by the collective spirit, not the individual, but through their membership, the individual gains access to knowledge of it. In practice, Chomsky's claims form part of the sociolinguistics doctrine so long as they are relevant to the financial politics.

The aftermath of the Language Trap debate exposes difficulties faced by the in-group with their socially negotiated definitions, whose purpose is to include all internal stakeholders and exclude all outsiders. Thus, the first point of negotiation is who is in and who is out. Surely, anyone meddling with the in-group's interests, including critics, funders, and external quality monitors needs to be dismissed. Their fault is in speaking incoherently since they do not have access to true knowledge of the terminology.

As will soon be demonstrated, Honey and other critics were rejected on the basis that, while a useful criticism could have been provided, theirs failed on an incorrect definition of 'Standard English'. Surprisingly, it was then acknowledged that the definition had indeed been borrowed from the in-group whereby it could not have been incorrect per se, calling for a new rationale for the rejection of the criticism. The easy way out would have been to simply stick to the original strategy, which is a version of the no true Scotsman fallacy: the critic appears to have understood the terminology but did not *really* understand it.

Eventually, the in-group turns to the **moving the-goalposts** fallacy. They accept that the critics' definition *was* right initially but suggested that the goal had changed: the criticism could have been relevant if it had made use of the new correct definition, which is under negotiation. To understand such a change of heart, the default approach is to ask the question of how this may have been financially useful.

### **Moving the goalposts**

In academic argumentation, the Elders of the funded in-group, unlike the juniors, do not automatically reject criticism but may give the contender a challenge that they only consider themselves as theoretically capable of completing. When the outsider turns out successful, the group changes its tactic claiming that the outsider has not accomplished

anything because the given task was not relevant and something else should have been done.

A version of the moving goalposts scenario is common in fairytales, where the challenger is typically given one task, then another, and yet another, to win the prize in what is sometimes called the **threefold challenge**. In reality, however, nothing can challenge the tyranny of delusion fundamentally because it is a game played by the in-group, for the in-group, and the in-group members acting as the referees. To the outside, it seems like a meaningless game. But if the contender wants their share of the resources, there is a procedure culminating in the assisted rewrite.

A chronic problem of the in-group is that its incoherent doctrines give the more analytic students cognitive dissonance. Because candidates are selected based on the student's loyalty to the common cause, it is either that a first-rank student compromises their research or that more moldable prospects are sought in the second and third ranks. Either way, the accomplished professionals struggle to think outside the box for genuinely new insight. Anyone with more meaningful findings will be of interest to the group in principle, but the only way to membership is through the candidate's acceptance of the common credo. If that fails, the group is likely to initially deny the findings but, as the person has gone, modify them to their needs and reclaim them as their original idea. This is also what happened with Honey.

### **The Condemnation of John Honey**

Finally, let us examine the tactics employed in dealing with Honey. While he may have possibly done a kind of favor to linguists, the inevitability of his fate is best understood from the following passage:

And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. (Matthew 12:31)

If such a language council is eventually established, it could have nothing to do with Honey and can only be the experts' brainchild in order to be accepted by the in-group. Nevertheless, it is quite imaginable that, when enough time has passed, someone will eventually gain funding for research on Honey and, to be recognized, will aim for the restoration of his status as an academically relevant person as was the case with Lowth and Swift.

Meanwhile, anyone who publicly criticizes the tyranny of delusion is ostracized by the community as there is no whistleblower protection program for academic disputes. It is interesting to see what methods the professors employ to find a consensus, considering that general linguists disagreed with Honey's proposition but sociolinguists agreed with it.

Since academic truth is based on the experts' authority, not research evidence and Honey claimed that professors are mistaken, the perceived logical consequence is that Honey is not an expert. Systemic dissonance is resolved by removing the foreign object, in this case by publicly stripping the critic of his standing as a colleague. Professors' credibility must be restored, and there is no ethical problem in publicly humiliating a traitor. As we have learned, the group is ethically superior to others, so whatever they do is considered just by themselves.

To prove their fairness, the group gives the contender a fair chance to explain themselves. As it is constantly looking for funding, the ultimate question is whether or not the challenger's proposal is "interesting" in this respect. The contender will have to pass the threefold challenge which, in academia, requires rejecting the following three concerns: (1) The proposal is impossible (e.g., it is impossible to establish an English

council); (2) the proposal is already covered by previous ‘research’ (i.e., someone has already made the proposal—maybe Chomsky?); and (3) the whole topic is completely irrelevant to linguistics (i.e., there is no funding for it).

In this case, Honey argued well against (1) and managed to make some useful political contacts, suggesting prospects against (3), but failed against (2) as per Bex (1999). There had been a language education committee in the 1980s, but linguists were unhappy about having to share it with non-linguists, who listened to the general public and “populist” opinions. Honey went to the other extreme by suggesting that the in-group should be excluded, which is an insult. What will follow is an informal vote on Honey by the spokespersons of the in-group. Most of the comments relate to his first book proposing grammar and Standard English teaching and were reiterated after his proposal of a language Authority.

First, the raised issue of the linguists’ lack of research evidence is addressed. Graddol & Swann discuss the commonly accepted doctrines of equality and description, admitting that the equality of all languages is not established by research.

the doctrine of equality can be seen as possessing an ideological rather than a scientific status. First, it forms part of a coherent and interlocking set of beliefs (which includes the doctrine of description) that have not, in fact, been subject to the rigorous scientific enquiry which is sometimes supposed, and which may, indeed, involve the kind of value judgement for which scientific proofs are inappropriate.

Thus, there has been a misunderstanding about what the professors’ authority is based on. Honey’s suggestion that linguistics has a problem in this regard is false because linguists are fully aware of their problem as also relates to challenge (2).

This idea, of itself, is not new. For instance, Dell Hymes suggested in the 1970s that straightforward assertions about linguistic equality were based on 'ideological confidence rather than empirical knowledge' (Hymes, 1972).

The problem is that equality is a taboo and therefore its study is inappropriate. But let us not think about it for too long because

the question of whether such linguistic tenets can be scientifically proved is not the main issue we want to address in this paper.

Or anywhere else. All languages are equally good grammatically from a logical point of view, but the participants do not state this because it is forbidden to research logic.

Predicate logic is based on only a dozen grammatical rules and can express everything.

With sufficient vocabulary, all in excess of that is mere cultural decoration.

I might be mistaken about everything as will undoubtedly be claimed, but it is, at least, interesting to see that sociolinguists subscribed to the doctrine of descriptivism in the 1980s. Graddol & Swann cite Hudson's 1981 article *Some issues on which linguists can agree*. Rule number one: linguistics is "descriptive, not prescriptive or normative." It may seem like a small step for mankind, but the Milroys' "Wider Perspective on Prescriptivism" took some two hundred years to develop, wasting a lot of money and careers in its making. Thus, Honey was right but will need to be transferred to the laypeople segment, nonetheless.

The in-group now demonstrates that Honey's writings fall short of manifesting the discernible traits indicative of scientific authorship. Crystal shows that Honey has no idea of what he is talking about, especially as regards linguistic theories. Crystal uses a **cherry-picking** defense fallacy: in order for the critic to substantiate their point, they have to give examples of failing theories. The defense then suggests that there are other

theories that the critic failed to mention, and these may or may not have been better.

Since some of them might have been relevant, the criticism is dismissed as

**uninformed**, justifying the conclusion that the critic is incompetent and has no place in discussions. Crystal argues that Honey should have cited his 1976 book *Child Language, Learning and Linguistics* and not *What Is Linguistics?* As Crystal describes the former, it was “a simplified little book I wrote for Sixth-former some years ago”:

Really, Honey! Pick on books your own size! They do exist. Take the topic which has probably attracted more sophisticated discussion in linguistics than any other—the language/thought issue.

The cherry-picking fallacy crystallizes as a moving goalposts fallacy, suggesting that Honey’s criticism would have been plausible if he had discussed a different issue, something one should not bet on to be true.

Honey refers to his list of quotations as ‘clumsy’ in their handling of this issue (in a paragraph which is itself not a paragon of stylistic excellence), and it must be admitted that, in addressing my Sixth-form audience, I was not as detailed as I might have been. But why then ignore the careful and considered views of, say, John Lyons (who also graces Honey’s list), whose discussion of the Whorf hypothesis, and related matters, in his *Semantics*, anticipates Honey’s blandly expressed objections? Or the many psycholinguistic discussions of this issue, which have appeared in recent years? Why Honey does not refer to the primary technical sources in linguistics, I can only guess. He refers copiously to popularisations and secondary accounts of the subject. For instance, at one point he picks on Chomsky, but he doesn’t do him the courtesy of referring directly to anything he has written—all we get is a reference to a TV interview with John Searle.

Why do linguistics professors make such extensive use of argumentation fallacies? The answer is simple. It is not that they want to be unfair, but they simply cannot afford to

be fair given the circumstances where honesty is forbidden. These are the kind of defenses one gets every time. For one thing, the contender did not demonstrate their knowledge of the works that they did not cite, and now it is too late because they already exposed their lack of sagacity. For another, the cited sources should have been more academic. True academics, of course, are allowed to make use of a variety of sources because they do it in a truly academic way.

In sum, Honey's insistence that linguists should provide research evidence for their claims is dismissed on the grounds of bad writing style and suboptimal sources. Crystal, however, is a rare participant in terms of not being a member of the sociolinguistics in-group and is soon dismissed by Graddol & Swann:

It is also misleading of Crystal to refer to his book *What is Linguistics?* as a book for sixth-formers, since in the preface to its most recent (fourth) edition he identifies these as only one of five audiences and recommends the book to a much wider audience, including teachers. Honey devoted much of his response in the next BAAL [British Association for Applied Linguistics] *Newsletter* to correcting these and other inaccuracies in Crystal's review and to taking Crystal to task for his 'personal anger', 'pique' and 'hysterically defensive stance'.

Graddol & Swann lament that Crystal's sole aim appeared to be the restoration of his own professional reputation rather than supporting the group. Moreover, Honey pointed out that Chomsky's theory has no basis in research, which Crystal does—and does not—reject by juxtaposing the following quotations.

Honey: 'Chomsky offers no firm empirical evidence for his theory of the innate basis of all human linguistic behaviour' (p. 8):

Crystal: 'there is a long way to go before such ideas . . . become convincing. The precise nature of any innate principle needs to be much more precisely defined, and it is difficult to see how this might be done . . .', etc. etc. (Crystal, p. 48)

Thus, according to Crystal, Honey makes a mistake in stating that Chomsky's theory is unscientific because Crystal said so first. It is another double-bind: one cannot criticize both Crystal and Chomsky in the same paper because they do not subscribe to the same idea. But the starting point of the defense was in suggesting that the critic should have cited even more theories to be taken seriously. Either way, academics cannot be criticized, and the ultimate reason is because they assume the role of referees rather than debaters. But there were even more *general* problems with Honey's criticism.

Ah, this little word, *general*, italicised by Honey, but nowhere defined.

Crystal uses the word 'general' on many occasions, but when Honey uses it, it is invalid since he did not define its meaning. We have returned to the purported communication problem, where ordinary people's vocabulary is incomprehensible to the extraordinary experts, and vice versa. Bex (1999) and Crowley (1999) find that Honey has failed to define "Standard English."

Honey's use of 'standard English' to refer to both writing and speech, without clarification, is a common error. Its danger lies in the presupposition that there is in some sense standard (written) English and standard (spoken) English and that they share a common structure. (Crowley)

Here, Crowley refers to the idea that prescriptivism should be limited to writing. But that idea was rejected by the Milroys. Nonetheless, Honey's discourses were a waste of time since he had written two books on a concept that he had failed to understand. Case closed, everyone go home.

Hang on. Davis (1999) realizes that Honey's definition was the same as Trudgill's. The case needs reexamining. A new explanation of the in-group's superiority

is required. Davis proposes a new scientific approach to prescriptivism, citing Samuel Johnson:

Although there is no way of enforcing or maintaining a linguistic standard, we can, by a process of conceptual clarification, arrive at a clearer understanding of why some are continually trying to set up such untenable 'standards' for English. This would be a first step towards regulating the 'perplexity and confusion of our speech' (S.Johnson 1816).

In other words, if standardization remains a paradoxical mystery, only the in-group could approach it appropriately. In hindsight, we see that Crowley and the Milroys adopted Honey's ideas to reform the sociolinguistics doctrine without giving him credit. Furthermore, since it was academically proven that the Language Trap debate was a matter of a communication problem, more funding was needed to improve communication on prescriptivism, which was duly received by the sociolinguistics in-group. Or, as Bex & Watts put it:

This need became even more pressing after the publication of Honey's *Language is Power* (1997) with its peculiar mixture of half truths and ad hominem arguments. However, when we approached potential contributors, it soon became apparent that there was no general consensus as to what constituted 'Standard English' or how best to approach the topic as a field of enquiry.

Eyes were only gradually opening to funding opportunities at the time. The authors point out that it was, after all, *the linguists* who did not have a definition of Standard English at the time. Maybe that was Honey's fault since he used the same definition as Trudgill, which then had to be rejected as a layperson's definition, But there may be other indicators placing the critic outside the professional group.

It would be easy simply to ridicule Honey's work since it is marred by errors and lapses of all sorts. It starts, for example, with the abandonment of a fundamental

principle of scholarship: 'I have not always followed the conventions of indicating when emphasis is the author's or was added by me'. (Crowley 1999).

Crowley is too good to simply ridicule his ridiculous opponent, but points out that such an error of judgment raises the concern of possible "tampering with the evidence." He proceeds to perform a *tu quoque fallacy*: Honey's argument that Labov did not present evidence for this claim is refuted on the basis that his own evidence is "often suspect". For example, Honey cites a "survey of standards of English among undergraduate students at a sample of Britain's 'traditional' universities" commenting on the results rather than sharing them: according to Honey, "Almost all respondents admitted a serious problem."

But notice that the conclusion on declining standards in grammar was the same as the one made by the Milroys and their colleagues based on their mere experience, not even a survey, and no one protested their claim. Everything boils down to external ad hominem and internal flattery because that is all the in-group allows itself to have. Bex & Watts summarize the scientific importance of Crowley's findings:

Crowley's chapter, which appears as an epilogue to this volume, brings these issues into sharp focus from a contemporary perspective. He recognises that the confusion over the definition of 'Standard English' is troublesome **for professional linguists, but he also** discusses the ways in which its use by Honey and his apologists serves to distort the arguments when they enter the public domain. (emphasis added.)

Here, Graddol & Swann take the opportunity to link Honey with the layperson's lay understanding of every term as opposed to the initiated professional's esoteric understanding. Still, the problem remains since Honey's definition was the same as

Trudgill's. Let us see how Graddol & Swann continued their treatise on the communication problem:

the word 'grammar' [...] is understood by linguists and the lay public in quite different ways, to the dismay of many linguists involved in educational work. In the case of the debate about linguistic equality, both processes, leading on the one hand to bafflement and on the other to miscomprehension, can be discerned. Honey's pamphlet, superficially at least, looks as if it is an example of professional discourse. It refers to scholarly sources and ideas in much the same way as might be expected in any piece of academic writing.

However, Graddol & Swann uncover a terminological mistake that might expose Honey as an imposter.

Even its final suggested educational programme, termed 'bilectalism', is not so very far removed from what is elsewhere known as 'bidialectalism', and which has been described in long-standing introductions to sociolinguistics (see, for example, Trudgill, 1974).

There you see, true linguists talk about bidialectalism, not bilectalism. Interestingly, though, the latter term has since then caught on and is relatively commonplace in today's sociolinguistics as can be seen on an article database search. In contrast to Graddol & Swann, Crystal argues that the term is superfluous because there is no real difference between the two, but Honey claimed that Trudgill's 'bidialectalism' associated an individual's competence in two different variants with social oppression, whereby Honey proposed 'bilectalism', which entails a positive view of social adaptability. Still, Crystal agrees that Honey's failing use of some terminology reveals him as a non-expert.

There are two main strands to Honey's argument. Firstly, linguistics is supposed to claim that all (varieties of) language are equally good.

Crystal finds the question problematic because not all language theorists have claimed that all languages or varieties are equally good.

Honey harps on this phrase 'equally good'-though it is a phrase used only by some of the people towards the bottom of his hit-list.

Yet, using the phrase reveals Honey as an outsider as Crystal soon contradicts his above statement:

It is in fact a phrase I would never dream of using-and indeed I have only ever heard it used by non-specialists

Can we have an answer to the question of whether all languages and variants are equally good or not according to Crystal? Apparently, something like that is only asked by a layperson who would never understand the complexities behind the answer if there was one.

it is central to Honey's case. What he does is to exploit the ambiguity of the term to his own advantage, by taking it out of context.

The reader might have thought that the context is the question of whether or not students should be taught Standard English grammar in school. To solve the issue, Crystal distinguishes between 'linguistic' and 'sociological' equality, concluding:

All (varieties of) languages are equal, from a linguistic viewpoint

This is because they are "comparably efficient, adequate, or whatever." This is as scientific as linguistics gets. There is no research per se, but the critic's point is always mistaken because when someone says that linguists claim that all varieties are equal, they are mistaken. After all, linguists did not claim that they are *sociologically* equal.

When they claim that there is no evidence of all varieties being equal, they are mistaken because they are *linguistically* equal. Crystal then refutes himself by arguing that “There is evidence in Honey’s own account that he accepts this distinction” although Crystal’s rejection was precisely based on the claim that Honey fails to understand it. Next, Crystal admits that Honey is right in saying that “there is, in fact, absolutely no evidence that languages keep pace with the social development of their users” but deals with the problem with an **appeal to ignorance fallacy**.

One could riposte: there is no evidence that they do not.

Crystal’s “riposte” illustrates the core reason why linguistics is a fake science: there is no concept of the burden of proof. The professors' hope is that when nothing is studied, only the authority of their titles counts, which allows them to make up all kinds of stories for their benefit.

The expectations of the outside world are different. People assume that being given millions in funding linguists would actually be doing rigorous research to find unbiased answers to relevant questions. The reality is the opposite: the professors’ function is to block any such research. Such a conclusion may seem hard to accept, but the question remains: Why is there no clear research on this? To wit, somebody must be blocking it unless it blocks itself.

We still want to understand why Honey was one hundred percent wrong if his opinion of grammar teaching was the same as the Milroys’, and his definition of Standard English was the same as Trudgill’s. Ultimately, the expertise of the expert group is a matter of knowing **who is in and who is out** because this is what linguistics is all about. It is a network of scholars and peer reviewers in charge of distributing academic resources among themselves.

Eventually, as may have been expected, the legitimacy of Honey's arguments is rejected on the basis that even if he is a linguist, he is not a *true* linguist. Trudgill (1998) concludes:

Honey claims to be "trained in linguistics". This, together with his academic titles, enables him to peddle his views with apparent authority. This authority is entirely spurious. His linguistic "training", I believe, and I apologise if I am wrong, consisted merely of a one-year MA course at Newcastle University under Barbara Strang. Those of us who have taught such courses know that they do not necessarily succeed in converting students into linguists. In Honey's case, he seems, rather, to have been turned into an anti-linguist. Honey has never done any linguistic research. He is not sympathetic to the goals of linguistics. He does not care to discover more about the human language faculty. He is not interested in the typological characteristics, the histories, the structures of the world's languages per se. He does not really even know enough linguistics to get by. He is uninformed enough, for example, to come up with howlers such as "language[s] of a few thousand words" (p. 15), and although he is not foolish enough to refer to "primitive" languages, he actually goes the other way and claims, absurdly, that some languages are "too complex" for the modern world. He is most definitely not a linguist, and often betrays this fact.<sup>4</sup>

We get it, more work needs to be done to brainwash all students completely. But what is the point? Linguists, raise your hand if Trudgill's noble criteria for membership were reasonable. *Everyone*. Then, put your hand down if you are not an expert in synchronic and diachronic typology. *I thought so, too*. Trudgill's expertise on the topic will be examined later in this book.

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