Why grammars have to be normative – and prescriptivists have to be scientific*

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Abstract This chapter advocates drawing a terminological distinction between **normativity**, a property of statements, and **prescriptivism**, an advisory motivation or intention. Systems of normative statements can be interpreted either as neutral descriptions of structure or as advice about correct usage. The familiar failings of many prescriptive works such as inaccuracy, snobbery, and reformist zeal can be regarded as contingent and inessential: the best usage guides do not exhibit them. And although descriptive linguists commonly accuse prescriptivists of paying insufficient attention to the facts, the truth is that high-quality usage guides pay more attention to empirical data than most syntacticians ever do.

1 Normativity versus prescriptivism

There is a century-old tradition among linguists of treating the terms 'normative' and 'prescriptive' as synonyms. For my purposes, this is unfortunate, because the two terms can be usefully employed to draw a significant distinction. There is a historical rationale for equating the two words, but I am not swimming entirely against the terminological current by separating them. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1961, p. 1540) assigns the word 'normative' four main senses, and they broadly correspond to the chronological stages of the word's semantic development:

> **1** 'of, relating to, or dealing with norms, their nature, or mode of discovery and existence';
>
> **2** 'explicating, inferring, or discovering a norm';
>
> **3** 'creating, prescribing, or imposing a norm', as in *a normative judgment*;
>
> **4 a** 'regulative, heuristic', **b** 'prescriptive, didactic'.

I simply want to draw a sharp line between senses **1** and **4 b**, employing the word 'normative' for the former (as in modern analytic philosophy) and 'prescriptive' for the latter.

A statement is **normative** if and only if it is concerned with the realm of values rather than facts: of what ought to be, rather than of what exists or happens. So, for example, 'Torture is morally wrong' is a normative statement: it speaks of what ought not to be done (whether or not it is) on pain of violating a moral standard. On the other hand, 'Torture is proscribed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' is not itself normative. It just states a contingent fact about the content of a certain text.[1]

The distinction between normative and non-normative statements applies just as well to statements of grammatical constraints.[2] Suppose a grammar of English entails the statement that could be informally given as follows:

> A phrasal adjunct never separates a clause-initial auxiliary verb from the following subject noun phrase.

This can be read as saying merely that no phrasal adjunct ever **is** found between an initial auxiliary and a subject, thus entailing that **Was immediately afterward the policy abandoned?* will never be encountered in corpora. If that were not very largely true for most texts, we would have to suspect there was something amiss with the statement, hence the grammar. Yet word processing mistakes do occur, and texts written inexpertly by foreigners are produced and published, and errors are missed by copy-editors, and ungrammatical sentences are sometimes deliberately uttered, and so on. Occasional exceptions may be encountered.

However, the same statement can be read as saying that such placement of phrasal adjuncts is simply not permitted: that sentences violating it **ought** not to occur, and should count as culpable grammatical **errors**.

Note that the following sentence is quite different, in that it expresses a non-normative statement:

> The grammar that I consulted includes a constraint forbidding phrasal adjuncts from immediately following clause-initial auxiliary verbs.

This simply makes a factual claim about the content of the particular grammar I consulted. It does not, of itself, define anything as incorrect, and does not pragmatically imply anything along those lines, unless further premises are supplied (e.g., that the indicated grammar is should be trusted implicitly).

Hanns Oertel (1901) may have been the first linguist to talk about 'normative grammar'. He treats 'didactic' as a synonym of 'normative', and contrasts it with what linguists of the scientific kind do. 'Normative or didactic grammar sets up a certain standard as correct,' he says (Oertel 1901, p. 87), and he goes on to discuss the matter of defining a standard variety of a language that can be taught to those who speak non-standard dialects of it. Clearly he is talking about efforts to improve the speech of non-standard dialect users, and contrasting normative grammars with scientific ones.

Much literature has followed him. For example, every reference to 'normative grammars' that I could find in Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2017) appears to refer to grammars with an advisory and didactic mission. My practice in this chapter will be to refer to grammars of that sort as **prescriptive**, and to reserve the term **normative** for use in the philosophers' sense.

Leonard Bloomfield (1933, p. 7) puts Oertel's opposition between the prescriptive and the scientific in more vivid terms, suggesting that evil authoritarians were actually lying in wait for an opportunity to oppress the people with the standards they were itching to impose:

> In the eighteenth century, the spread of education led many dialect-speakers to learn the upper-class forms of speech. This gave the authoritarians their chance: they wrote *normative grammars*, in which they often ignored actual usage in favor of speculative notions.

Bloomfield's project at the time was to establish and popularize a relatively new practice in the study of language: attempting to infer the grammar of a language from careful observation of the way its users actually behave when they use it, and on that basis construct a characterization of the state of the linguistic system. He notes – correctly – that some grammarians go beyond mere recommendation of favoured patterns of structure: they dismiss evidence from native-speaker usage entirely, and dream up aprioristic reasons for disapproving constructions; they offer conjectural explanatory suggestions based on logic; and with their 'speculative notions' they go so far as to propose linguistic reforms. This is all true, but I will argue later (in §4) that it is not of central importance. It certainly has nothing to do with the normativity of systems of statements that aim simply to characterize the norms of a certain speech community at a given time. We can follow Oertel in calling these systems **scientific** grammars.

2 Normative grammars as scientific grammars

John Joseph (2020) argues at length against the notion that any scientific grammar can be truly non-prescriptive. He claims that no matter how hard a linguist may strive to give a pure description of the syntax of a language, prescriptivism leaks in. For one thing, as soon as someone with the authority of a grammarian states that things are phrased in thus-and-such a way in a language, people who cannot claim such authority will take it to mean that things ought to be thus phrased.

Joseph has a variety of concerns in his paper, more than I have space to discuss here (for example, he detects latent prescriptivism in the connotations of the term 'deviant' as informally used by linguists to mean 'ungrammatical or unacceptable in some way'). I want to pick up just one of his points. He quotes a remark of mine (see Pullum 2004, p. 2) about the constraint that requires auxiliaries to precede the subject in declaratives with a preposed negative adjunct (*At no time did he leave the room* is grammatical and **At no time he left the room* is not). I said:

> The claim being made is not that speakers of Standard English OUGHT to position tensed auxiliaries before subjects in clauses with a preposed negative adjunct; the claim is that they actually DO position them thus (setting aside unintentional failures like typing or editing errors that sometimes prevent people from doing what they intended).

I was arguing that a grammar entails things about how users (typically) behave, provided we allow for anomalous situations (like accidental word-processing slips, or my having to type the asterisked example above).

I now regret writing just 'not' instead of 'not merely', because I also want to defend a complementary statement. I want to say that the claim made by the cited constraints is not merely that speakers of Standard English DO position tensed auxiliaries before subjects in clauses with a

preposed negative adjunct, but that they actually OUGHT to position them thus, if they want to be taken as using English in a normal way.

With the added 'merely', the two statements are compatible. Grammatical constraints can be interpreted in both ways: both as descriptions of what is (typically) found in corpora, and of what counts as correct and appropriate.

Normativity in the philosopher's sense is (*contra* Oertel) not antithetical to scientific grammar. Indeed, I would say a grammar that did not make clear what is a correctly formed sentence, and what is not, would be a grammar that does not do its job at all, and there is nothing very scientific about that.

I am of course presupposing (e.g., when I write 'typically' above) that the relation between grammatical constraints and facts about observed speech acts is indirect. This will not be true in some areas of phonetics, sociolinguistics, or conversational analysis, but to study syntax we normally have to idealize or normalize the data. Depending on the purpose at hand, one might want to erase phenomena like coughs, stammers, and stumbles from records of speech, without denying that in real life they occur, or that they might even convey meaning. It might also be reasonable sometimes to ignore obviously bungled mid-sentence changes of plan, restarts, or multiple occurrences of parenthetical *you know* when seeking evidence about normal sentence structure.

Naturally, the appropriateness of specific idealizations is always a matter for debate and negotiation; investigators will differ on such decisions. One syntactician might decide to idealize spoken data by not even transcribing filled pauses such as 'um' and 'er', while another might hypothesize that these elements are located systematically in utterances and could be grammatically significant. It would depend on the project at hand. But humans are not functionally flawless; accidental speech errors ('fluffs', as actors call them) do occur.

No matter where the linguist may draw the line in screening out errors, any codification of the linguistic patterns typically found among mature native speakers defines a **norm**: a standard that a linguistic expression might satisfy or might not.[3] Somehow over the past century it became controversial to admit this. Bloomfield's antipathy to normativity is connected to his logical-positivist view that the linguist's subject matter has to be the physical properties of utterance tokens; Chomsky's rejection of normativity clearly stems from his espousal of the view that linguists are studying stable states of the electrochemical events in an individual human being's mental activity, ultimately brain structure. The problem is that neither seem to be able to capture any sense in which a sentence might be truly described as correctly or incorrectly structured.

If linguistic theorizing about relative clauses is really concerned just with the etiology of behavior leading to production of utterances that contain relative clauses (Bloomfield 1933), or with constant properties of brain states of a speaker capable of using or apprehending a relative clause (Chomsky 1965), then the distinction between what the grammar defines as well-formed and what the speaker does in particular circumstances is simply not drawn at all. And Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance is not the solution here: it merely posits one conjectural cognitive module in combat with another. It does not bear on the issue of what the grammar should properly call 'right' or 'wrong'.

It is a crucial point, however, that the normativity of a grammatical constraint does not entail anything at all about what someone should do (or not do). A person who violates a constraint set forth as part of a linguist's grammar has not thereby done something that they shouldn't have done. Interestingly, Chomsky (1986, p. 241), despite explicitly believing that grammars are not normative, actually makes this point in the course of a lengthy argument against Kripke (1982), and gives the correct reason. For an arbitrary speaker Jones, says Chomsky (1986, p. 241), 'The rules of Jones's language ... entail nothing about what Jones ought to do (perhaps he should not observe the rules for one reason or another; they would still be his rules)'.

Alan Millar (2004) elaborates at length on what is effectively this point. He draws exactly the distinction we need – between (i) defining what is correct and (ii) advising people about what they should do. When a practice is governed by a certain 'rule' (or respects a certain constraint, as I would say), 'Participating in the practice makes one subject to that rule' (pp. 168–9); and if you are subject to it there is a certain sense in which you ought to obey it. But 'rules' (constraints) are not laws of physics: they can be ignored or broken. You 'may participate in the practice and also flout the rules'. It is true that 'participating in a practice incurs a commitment to following its governing rules and therefore to doing what the rules prescribe': if you aim to be thought of as a participant in a practice and you don't even follow its defining principles, you're not even trying. However, crucially, 'It does not follow that one ought to follow the rules'. Why not? Why is that not a self-contradiction? Because 'it might be that one ought instead to withdraw from the practice.'

To apply this to the case of a linguistic prescription (though that is not Millar's focus), consider the constraint that defines the so-called 'split infinitive'. Defining it with full rigour is not entirely straightforward (because of phenomena like verb phrase ellipsis and parenthetical interruptions), and the term is a misnomer (English does not have an infinitive verb form), but here we can simply say that the constraint forbids adjuncts from being linearly positioned between the infinitival marker *to* and the head verb of the infinitival complement that it introduces. The constraint draws a distinction between phrases that respect it (which are tacitly defined as well-formed or 'good') and phrases that don't (which the constraint defines as erroneous or 'bad'). Yet nothing follows from it about what anyone should do.

A syntactician might formulate the constraint against 'split infinitives' simply as a prerequisite for searching out sentences in literary works that violate it, exactly as George Curme (1930) did more than a century ago – his compendious work *Syntax* cites large numbers of attested literary examples (pp. 458–467, esp. pp. 461–465). Curme was concerned to defend the view that 'split infinitives' are natural, frequent, and useful in English writing, and have been attested over many centuries. In his view it was the people who urged avoidance who were making a mistake. You can always respect the constraint if you want to, and that may be useful in ensuring that your writing is not criticized by those who think 'split infinitives' are an error; but you can instead simply withdraw from the practice of writing English in a way that respects the constraint. Curme thought we should; he even asserts (p. 461) that 'it is more characteristic of our most prominent authors' rather than 'the minor writers, who avoid it as they fear criticism.'

Summarizing thus far, normative statements of constraints do not intrinsically imply any recommendation about the use of any construction, or about using the relevant language at all. Lin-

guists hypothesize sets of grammatical constraints in order to characterize phenomena accurately. If that is done well, people inclined toward supplying prescriptive advice may be better placed to consider how people should be advised to use the language; but stating the constraints is not to be equated with advising people to respect them.

3 Inessential faults of prescriptive works

What separates descriptive from prescriptive writers on language inheres solely, I would argue, in mission and motivation. And the mission of helping others to use their language in ways that will be perceived more positively by others is unquestionably a noble one. However, we need to clear away three side issues that obscure the mission. Prescriptivist works have long been condemned – sometimes rightly, sometimes excessively – for (i) inaccuracy, (ii) snobbery, and (iii) revisionism. I want to consider each of these, and argue that none of them are intrinsic or crucial to the prescriptive approach.

3.1 Inaccurate generalizations

Linguists have pointed out glaring mismatches between stipulations concerning 'proper grammar' and generalizations about normal usage by users of English. And of course the property of stating untruths about syntax cannot be regarded as a good point in a recommendatory or advisory book. A publisher is not going to want a dust jacket blurb saying 'This book promulgates invented edicts that experienced users don't comply with and never did'.

Conceivably there is profit in having more edicts to list: more to state means longer and more expensive books. But false statements won't be selling points after they are spotted as fictive. The general public is credulous on matters of grammar, and hoary old compilations of nonsense still sell quite well, but publishers should keep in mind the danger that readers could wise up and start laughing at discredited grammar books rather than at the purported errors they enumerate.

3.2 Contemptuous attitudes

The snobbish, bossy, petulant, and contemptuous attitudes displayed by some prescriptivists are a striking feature of the genre. The level of scorn and deprecation is sometimes quite astonishing. Simon Heffer (2010, 2014) exemplifies this about as well as anyone. Heffer calls familiar expressions 'simply illiterate' (2014, 263) or 'sickening' (2014, p. 371), and openly acknowledges that he prefers to ignore what the evidence of other writers' usage suggests.

Such talk has a long history. Several decades before Heffer we had John Simon calling a speaker with non-standard verb inflection 'an illiterate ignoramus who neither knew nor cared to know better' (Simon 1981, p. 147).[4] And a century before him we had Richard Grant White (1822–1885) opining that using *preventative* rather than *preventive* to mean 'tending or intended to prevent' should be considered evidence 'of an utter want of education, and of a low grade of intelligence' (R. G. White 1870, p. 229). Users of *preventative* up to that point had included Daniel Defoe and George Washington, as pointed out by Gilman (1989, p. 770); but it's doubtful that White's word rage would have been much influenced if he had known about such distinguished users of the word: in a sense, the evidence that even notable people were using words or phrases he hated was the very thing he was angry about.

Angry deprecation of this sort, common though it is, and closely linked to the social function of prescriptivist ideology though it may be, is not intrinsic or necessary to the advisory writer's craft. Just as a good teacher does not treat students with contempt, prescriptive usage guides do not need to impute culpability, failure, illiteracy, or dim-wittedness to those who decline to regulate their usage by its standard. There is a big difference between classifying a construction as ungrammatical or 'not Standard English' and calling it an 'abomination' and condemning its users as ignorant fools. Rhetoric of the latter sort only gives prescriptivist advice-mongers a bad name.

3.3 Reformist zeal

A bigger problem with prescriptive works is that they sometimes reveal a yearning to fix the language up and make it neater than it was before. Perhaps the clearest case is the strange reform effort launched by Henry Fowler and his brother Frank in *The King's English* (Fowler and Fowler 1906, pp. 75–85) when they decided to recommend that *wh*-words should cease to be used in one type of relative clause. The Fowlers distinguish 'defining' relative clauses from 'non-defining' ones. Since 'defining' relatives by no means always define or restrict, Huddleston and Pullum (2002, henceforth *CGEL*) call them **integrated** relatives: they are fully integral to the syntax of the sentence and not separated off by commas. *CGEL* calls the 'non-defining' ones **supplementary** relatives: they express loosely connected optional supplements to the sense of the sentence and are always flanked by commas. The Fowlers admit that it would be 'excusable' to see *that* and *wh*-words as being in free variation in integrated relatives, since 'it is not easy to draw any distinction' between the two that is 'consistently supported by usage' (p. 80); but they nonetheless propose that the language should be cleaned up in this regard. They suggest that (i) supplementary relatives should never be introduced with *that*, and (ii) integrated relative clauses should never be introduced by *wh*-words.

A century ago it was by no means clear that supplementary relatives could not be introduced by *that*: the Fowlers found many examples that conflict with their proposed edict. In contemporary English, though, supplementary *that*-relatives are extremely rare (see Pullum 2005 for informal discussion of one modern attestation), and might reasonably be treated as sporadic errors. However, the second half of the Fowlers' claim, banning *wh*-words from introducing integrated ('defining') relatives, was an outlandish claim back then and remains so today. (It seems to have been forgotten in the subsequent years that the Fowlers propose banning not just which but also who from integrated relatives: no one in recent decades ever took seriously the idea that the man who would be king is grammatically questionable.)

The Fowlers promptly acknowledge that their position would be impossible to implement in full generality: relative *which* 'can, and sometimes must, be used ... in defining clauses' (p. 80); so they give an amazingly permissive codicil, saying that *who* or *which* 'should not be used in defining clauses except when custom, euphony, or convenience is decidedly against the use of 'that' ' (p. 82). That is, a *wh* word in a defining relative clause should be allowed if (i) people regularly use it, or (ii) it sounds nicer, or (iii) it seems convenient!

They go on to list the exceptions in detail. They hold hold that *Who is it who talks about moral geography?* should be corrected to *Who is it that talks about moral geography?*, but otherwise drop their objection to *who* in defining relatives because *that* with human antecedents 'has in fact

come to look archaic' (p. 83).

They also acknowledge an unavoidable exception in cases where a preposition precedes the relative word; so they propose correcting only the second *which* in the sentence *It is the little threads of which the inner substance of the nerves is composed which subserve sensation*: they claim (p. 83) it should be *It is the little threads of which the inner substance of the nerves is composed that subserve sensation*. Obviously the first *which* has to remain: **the little threads of that the inner substance of the nerves is composed* is plainly ungrammatical.

A further exception involves human-denoting genitive NP determiners. They note that relative *that* 'has no possessive case' (p. 84), so in order to avoid ??*the man that I found the hat of*, which is distinctly ungainly, we cannot use an inflected genitive (**the man that's hat I found*); it has to be a *wh* relative, *the man whose hat I found*.[5]

Yet another exception is aesthetically motivated: 'Euphony demands that 'that that' should become 'that which' ' (p. 84): ??*You should avoid that that annoys you* does not sound good, and *You should avoid that which annoys you* is much preferred.

One further exception is allowed: 'awkwardness' results from using *that* 'when the relative is widely separated from its antecedent' (p. 84).

Their case is now in ruins, as they effectively admit: 'It may seem to the reader that a rule with so many exceptions is not worth observing' (p. 85). Of their three remarkably feeble defenses to any such challenge, the third is 'that if we are to be at the expense of maintaining two different relatives, we may as well give each of them different work to do' (ibid.), which makes it fully clear that no established grammatical generalization or agreed convention of usage is being described here; the Fowlers are proposing a reform, and justifying it by saying it will give *that* and the relative *wh* words 'different work to do.'

Their unmotivated and much-violated restriction has little significance even for them; they say: 'In the following subsections we shall not often allude to the distinction here laid down', and they note that 'The reader will find that our rules are quite as often violated as observed'.

That last remark was certainly correct. The original *Elements of Style* by William Strunk (1918) said nothing about disallowing *wh*-words in integrated relatives. It was only 40 years later when E. B. White revised Strunk to create Strunk and White (1959) that the Fowlers' stipulation was added. And as by Jan Freeman (2005) discovered, White then went back over Strunk's prose taking out all the occurrences of *which* that introduced integrated relatives – surreptitiously altering the record to suggest that Strunk had agreed with him (see Pullum 2010a for more discussion).

For half a century the Fowlers' proposal was largely ignored. President Roosevelt's 1941 speech calling December 7th 'a date which will live in infamy' was not a grammar slip. Down to the present day the natural usage of most writers confirms that integrated relative clauses can be either *that*-relatives or *wh*-relatives. But slowly the Fowler's reform achieved considerable influence among copy-editors in America (though hardly at all in Britain). It never really caught on at the grass-roots level, but conservative usage manuals and professional copy-editors in the USA came to believe that it had, or should, and worked to enforce it.

Their activities continually warp the published record, nudging professionally published English toward the Fowlers' goal.

And they have had some success. Hinrichs et al. (2005) describe a very clever experiment to measure the extent of their success. It is based on looking not just at frequencies of *which* and *that* relatives in different texts, but at the correlation with obedience to other prescriptivist edicts. For example, they find that as the ratio of active to passive clauses goes up over the decades (suggesting compliance with the familiar prescriptive injunction to eschew passives), the ratio of *which* to *that* introducing defining relative clauses goes up as well. The *which*-hunters are winning.

I regard language-improvement projects like the Fowlers' as time-wasting silliness: the goal of trying to get people to write better prose would be much better approached through an honest account of the way experienced speakers use the contemporary language, rather than an imaginary way it could be if some aesthetic tidying-up project were implemented. And yet in a sense this is a side issue.

All three of the tendencies just referred to – inaccuracy, snobbishness, and revisionism – can be separated from the prescriptive project itself. Factual hallucination, elitist contempt, and reformist dreams are not necessary concomitants of works with a prescriptive motivation. And once we put all three of those aside, it becomes clear that prescriptive works can be very useful to anyone who produces writing that is intended for others to read.

4 High-quality prescriptivism and use of evidence

Prescriptive works vary a lot. It would be a mistake to typecast the entire community of usage advisers as head-in-the-sand ignoramuses who ignore facts. In particular, generative grammarians should be careful not to cast such aspersions, since over the past six decades they have notoriously tended to use their own intuitions about their native language as their primary or even sole source of data, dismissing the opinions of laypeople about sentence structure as worthless and unfounded superstitions. A closer look at the practice of responsible prescriptivists reveals them as having more respect for empirical data than many syntactic theoretists display.

As an example, consider the treatment of the controversial adverb *hopefully* in the 5th edition of *Garner's Modern English Usage* (Garner 2022, pp. 552–553). It begins with a factual survey of the two uses – the manner adjunct use (*CGEL*, pp. 670ff) in *It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive* and the modal adjunct use (CGEL, pp. 767ff) in *Hopefully we won't need the bear spray*. Modal adjuncts are a subspecies of what traditional grammars call 'sentence adverbs'; they qualify the way in which the content of a clause relates to truth or epistemic basis. Adverbs commonly used as modal adjuncts include *clearly*, *conceivably*, *necessarily*, *obviously*, *possibly*, *thankfully*, etc. Garner observes that attested usage shows the modal adjunct use 'is now a part of AmE', and then he turns to the empirical issue of acceptability. He notes (p. 553): that although many people think the modal adjunct use should be 'declared ... utterly irreproachable', there is a significant amount of dissent:

> To test the idea, I put out a Twitter poll in October 2020 asking people whether *hopefully* in its common uses (a) is wholly unobjectionable, or (b) retains a little bad odor.

> With 823 votes tallied, some 42% answered (b). I had predicted that the number would be less than 5%. So resistance to the word remains more durable than one might think.

Now, I am not suggesting that it is solid social-scientific practice for an influential reference book author to ask his Twitter followers what they think. Garner's followers are a self-selected population that is almost certainly biased quite heavily in the direction of conservative ideas about Standard English, and they are addressing a point of controversy that carries the baggage of half a century's prejudices and puristic finger-wagging, which many of them would know about. Nonetheless, he does at least check his opinions against those of other speakers. Theoretical syntacticians do relatively little of that.

Garner's conclusion is that the adverb itself now has a bad odour clinging to it: though the controversy has subsided, *hopefully* 'remains a skunked term'. He gives fair advice for a cautious writer who wants a quiet life, a modicum of respect, and minimum exposure to grammatical criticism or ridicule: you should 'avoid it in all senses if you're concerned with your credibility: if you use it in the traditional way, many readers will think it odd; if you use it in the newish way, a few readers will tacitly tut-tut you' (p. 553).

As a secondary descriptive check on actual occurrence, Garner (ibid.) then gives corpus data from the Google N-gram Viewer. Comparing the frequency of *I hope it won't* and *Hopefully it won't* in recent print sources, he finds that the ratio is 7 to 1 in favour of the former. *Hopefully* is not yet the default way to express 'It is my hope that.'

The furore over *hopefully* that broke out in the mid 1960s was a strange and irrational moral panic. Gilman (1989, pp. 512-13) summarizes the history: instances of the modal adjunct use were commonplace at least from 1930 onward, but then the frequency exhibited 'a considerable increase beginning in 1964' (despite the appearance of two 1964 usage handbooks that noted the construction disapprovingly); criticism started to appear in New York magazines and newspapers in 1965; and by the following year the objections were crystallized in Follett's influential *Modern American Usage* (Follett 1966, revised for publication by Jacques Barzun after Follett's death in 1963). Within twenty years former opponents were recanting, which suggests Garner's advice is too cautious. But Garner can hardly be faulted on his employment of empirical methods: eliciting opinions through surveys; tabulating respondents' votes; comparing corpus frequencies; reporting ordinary lay users' disquiet (including its disagreement with his own views); and providing hard data confirming a numerical bias.

It is almost unheard of for a theoretical syntactician to do anything like collecting 823 informants' judgements before deciding on the well-formedness of a sentence or construction. I can think of only one marginal exception, and it was really a study of ongoing syntactic change: Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) obtained judgments from 1,731 Icelandic schoolchildren, amounting to an astonishing 45% of the entire country's birth cohort for 1984, plus 205 adults, to end up with usable answers from a total of 1,895 speakers. They confirmed that a new impersonal syntactic construction had emerged, rejected by adult speakers and prescriptive authorities but fully acceptable to children. But their paper is an outlier within theoretical and descriptive linguistics. Garner is generally far more reponsive to empirical facts than most syntactic theorists, with their casual attitude toward rival intuitions.

The compilers of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (see e.g. Houghton Mifflin 1996b, esp. xii–xiv and xxvi–xxx) use methods broadly comparable to Garner's, emnploying a regularly repopulated Usage Panel of 100 to 200 prestigious speakers of the language: writers, editors, journalists, professors, attorneys, judges, diplomats, legislators, etc. A companion volume, *The American Heritage Book of English Usage* (Houghton Mifflin 1996a, 105), observed that only 44% of the 1968 panel approved of the modal adjunct use of *hopefully*. By 1986 a panel whose other judgements showed less conservativity had nonetheless turned further against it during its period of notoriety, showing only 27% support. The editors conclude that what bothers the panel 'is not the use of *hopefully* as a sentence adverb per se', but rather, that '*hopefully* seems to have taken on a life of its own as a shibboleth.' Though the literati were conceding by the mid-1980s that the modal use was here to stay, non-specialists had decided that the word itself was skunked.

It is an interesting empirical question whether objections to the modal use have indeed triggered an avoidance of the manner use (as in *The dog waited hopefully beside me as I was cutting up the meat*). I would conjecture that it wouldn't (*hopefully* with the meaning 'in an optimistic manner' seems so basic, inoffensive, and well established). Garner seems to assume that the manner sense has started to die out. But be that as it may; what I'm drawing attention to here is merely that both Garner and the *American Heritage* team at Houghton Mifflin conduct surveys and pay attention to quantitative data – practices that are characteristic of responsible social science but not of typical practice in theoretical syntax.

Descriptive linguists and prescriptive usage writers are not rivals within a unitary study of the English language; they represent two different cultures. And use of empirical methods is not what distinguishes between them.

5 Low-quality prescriptivism and contempt for facts

At this point readers acquainted with some of my earlier work might begin to wonder whether this is really me, or some other Geoff Pullum. Do my supportive remarks about prescriptivists and my apparently relativist recognition of different cultures signal a retrenchment? For am I not the same Geoff Pullum who summarized the contribution of that much-loved booklet *The Elements of Style* as '50 years of stupid grammar advice' (Pullum 2009)? Did I not once suggest that usage manual consumers seemed to be masochists (Pullum 2017)?

I am indeed that same Pullum. And no, I have not changed my mind. I acknowledged in the previous section that those whose language study has an advisory rather than descriptive motivation often pay plenty of attention to empirical facts. That does not excuse or pardon the sort of prescriptive usage advisers who ignore every kind of data, offer no reasoned analysis, and support their recommendations with nothing but personal prejudice and snobbery.

Consider E. B. White on the modal adjunct use of *hopefully*. He came late to the party, having apparently not noticed the rise of the modal construction between the 1930s and the 1950s. Strunk's original booklet *Elements of Style* (Strunk 1918) had said not a word about the adverb in question. The first edition of E. B. White's revision of it (Strunk & White 1959) similarly made no mention of it. The issue came to White's attention some time in the middle 1960s: he grumbled about it in *The New Yorker* (27 March 1965; see Gilman 1989, pp. 512). So in the 1972 edition of his revision

of Strunk's book (Strunk and White 1972, pp. 42–3) he added this:

> ***Hopefully.*** This once-useful adverb meaning "with hope" has been distorted and is now widely used to mean "I hope" or "it is to be hoped." Such use is not merely wrong, it is silly. To say, "Hopefully I'll leave on the noon plane" is nonsense. Do you mean you'll leave on the noon plane in a hopeful frame of mind? Or do you mean you hope you'll leave on the noon plane? Whichever you mean, you haven't said it clearly. Although the word in its new, free-floating capacity may be pleasurable and even useful to many, it offends the ear of many others, who do not like to see words dulled or eroded, particularly when the erosion leads to ambiguity, softness, or nonsense.

It is hard to square White's reputation as a fine writer with this chaotic stream of abuse. What exactly is his charge against modal *hopefully*? In 121 words he alleges distortion, silliness, nonsensicality, obscurity, novelty, free-floatingness, pleasurableness, offensiveness, bluntness, erosion, ambiguity, softness, and (as he runs out of new charges and begins to repeat himself) nonsense again. He raves like a drunken preacher, ignoring both Strunk's slogan 'Omit needless words' and his own 'Do not overwrite'. Boiling mad, spluttering with indignation, he fails to hit on any coherent rationale for the ban he advocates.

The adverb was 'once useful', he claims, as if its usefulness is now gone (why would a new discourse function not make it even more useful?). It introduces ambiguity, he charges – as if absence of lexical ambiguity had ever been a characteristic of English. He has nothing to say about the two closely parallel uses of *clearly* (it's a manner adjunct in *They were unable to see the sign clearly* and a modal one in *Clearly they were unable to see the sign*).

White's unhinged emotional ranting deserves the abuse I have heaped on it. And of course his bad advice is not limited to the modal use of *hopefully*: see Pullum (2010a) for a critical discussion of many other misleading claims and flatly wrong advice in *The Elements of Style*. The original version of the book is more than a century old now, and the White revision is long past its 60th anniversary. It should not have been allowed to dominate writing advice in America's colleges and universities for so long.

Others among the ranks of the worst prescriptivists sin just as gravely. Many explicit examples can be found in Heffer (2010, 2014; see Pullum 2010b for a review of the former). Heffer straightforwardly announces that the fact of a construction's being 'greatly favoured' in popular usage 'is no reason to use it', because 'Rules in language are made by logic, not by a democratic vote' (2014, p. 263). You would have to be strikingly ignorant of both grammar and logic to believe that; and you would also have to accept a total severance of the link between what the grammar of English should say and what native-speaker users of English typically do.

Heffer also represents personal whims as facts of grammar (therefore, under his view, facts of logic). Heffer (2014) claims grammatical incorrectness for fully grammatical sentences such as these:

They each went to London. (p. 125)
The three of them no longer speak to each other. (p. 125)
He accidentally walked into a lamp-post. (p. 178)
She is now the chair of her department. (p. 264)
I did the job single-handed. (p. 325)
Scientists warn that an eruption is imminent. (p. 372)

He holds that the modal verb *can* has only the dynamic physical-ability meaning, not the epistemic one (*It is not known whether there can be an odd perfect number*) or the deontic one (*You can use my car if you want*). In fact he claims explicitly that if anyone capable of voluntary motion asks 'Can I kiss you?', the only correct answer is 'Yes' (2014, p. 72). These claims are frankly absurd.

Pullum (2017) argues that the consumers of usage manuals like Heffer's act like masochists, yearning to be disciplined for their grammatical sins. Let me offer just one reminder of the sort of thing that paper was talking about. Louis Menand, a Harvard literature professor, complained in a *New Yorker* book review that the grammar chapter in the 15th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* failed to include a ban on genitive antecedents for pronouns. Arnold Zwicky wrote to Menand pointing out that the putative constraint (a total fiction, apparently due to Follett 1966) was repeatedly violated in Menand's own writing: like any normal writer, Menand uses such phrases as *the city's name for itself*, or *Emerson's reaction when Holmes showed him the essay*. Half a dozen such cases were easily found in a few of the opening pages of one of his own books (*The Metaphysical Club*, Menand 2001), and all that Menand could say when Zwicky exhibited them to him was that he submitted himself to arbitrary grammatical dictats like a man forcing himself to take a cold shower, despite believing that the principles governing usage 'are fundamentally arbitrary, and thus sometimes feel as if they exist only to trip up even the most careful writer.'

Cold showers, and arbitrary edicts whose only point is to trip writers up: it is a bleak picture. Menand sees the principles governing normal usage as arbitrary restraints on his natural inclinations, designed to catch him out. He obeys the restraints solely as a kind of hair-shirt regimen.

No, I do not retract my earlier condemnations of delusional prescriptive manuals or their gullible and apparently punishment-addicted customers. Writers like Simon Heffer, John Simon, and E. B. White exercise a baleful influence on the study of the English language. Saying that is not the same as condemning the whole prescriptivist project: the careful work some usage specialists have done on the limits of acceptability for educated Standard English speakers serves a real purpose. In that respect, the tendency of modern theoretical linguists to decry the efforts of prescriptivist writers sight unseen has created a putative rivalry that serves no good purpose. It encourages the counterposed stereotypes under which usage advice writers are depicted as blinkered fools or malign elitists (Bloomfield's 'authoritarians' who 'ignored actual usage in favor of speculative notions': 1933, p. 7), while linguists are caricatured as anything-goes liberals who believe there are no grammatical restraints at all (one piece about linguists reprinted in Simon 1981 is entitled 'Playing Tennis Without a Net'). The community of scholars studying English grammar is not well served by being divided into two hostile factions constantly caricaturing and insulting each other.

6 Conclusion

I have argued for a clear distinction between normativity (a property that statements have when they are about what ought to be rather than what is) and prescriptivism (an enterprise involving advice concerning how a language should best be used). I claim that if grammars are to draw a distinction between what is grammatically correct and what is not, they cannot be entirely non-normative descriptive theories, whether concerned with physical patterns in concrete utterance tokens (Bloomfield 1933) or electrochemical phenomena in the brain (Chomsky 1965); they must have an irreducibly normative aspect.

It is sad that so many of the books on grammar and usage available to the general public are little more than undisciplined and evidence-free collections of personal peeves and prejudices. I have argued that works of that kind are to be distinguished from both evidence-based grammars, aiming simply to characterize the sentence structures characteristic of a language, and evidence-based prescriptive manuals, which aim to present reasoned advice on how to use the language in ways that will be well regarded. Both have their own integrity and sensible purpose.

Notes

* An early draft of this chapter benefited from the comments of two anonymous referees. Their comments led to a thorough rewriting. Later my Edinburgh colleague John Joseph, to whom I am very grateful, was kind enough to read the rewritten version carefully and provide many incisive and challenging comments. Other useful comments leading to what I hope are improvements in the text were provided by Lieselotte Anderwald, Joan Beal, and Brett Reynolds. Remaining errors are solely mine.

[1] It is true that if someone uttered the sentence one might infer pragmatically that they were condemning torture, or claiming it is morally unacceptable. But that would be in virtue of the assumption that the UDHR itself has morally significant force. The sentence does not actually say that you should not torture people. The inference would be a pragmatic one, relating to what the relevance of citing the UDHR might be in the circumstances at hand.

[2] Considerable conceptual confusion attends nearly all of the literature that talks about 'rules'. In particular, none of the uses made of the term 'rule' in generative grammar can be regarded as denoting anything like rules in the everyday sense, such as the rules of etiquette, driving regulations, legal jurisdiction, or parliamentary procedure. Exploring this topic in full would constitute an inappropriately technical digression, but suffice it to say that I will refer to grammars as consisting of **constraints**, by which I mean declarative statements about the structure of clauses. I avoid the word 'rule' altogether; it appears in this chapter only in direct quotations.

[3] Linguists who are more sociologically inclined may regard the view I take here as too far removed from issues of community, mutual recognition, interpersonal attitudes, and social stratification. I do not have space to develop a more sociolinguistic alternative view – one that might accord more

with the views of Joseph (2020); but see Brennan et al. (2013) for a treatment that grounds norms in attitudes making the members of a community accountable to each other.

[4] It is perhaps not irrelevant that John Simon (1925–2019) was an ethnic Hungarian from Vojvodina in Serbia for whom English was a fourth language. It is not uncommon to find educated people who were originally speakers of other languages purveying fierce and angry prescriptive opinions. Indeed, native speakers may often feel the same way. They see the time they invested as like a monetary investment being threatened by inflation: having devoted all that time to learning fine points of grammar, they are furious to see others getting away with ignoring them.

[5] The Fowlers almost spot an important truth here: they observe that relative *that* 'has no possessive case, and cannot take a preposition before it' (p. 92), but miss the obvious conclusion: *that* is not a pronoun at all. Traditional grammarians have all wrongly taken it to be a pronoun, but *CGEL* categorizes it as a subordinator (traditionally 'subordinating conjunction') comparable to interrogative *whether*. It then follows immediately that it cannot take the genitive *'s* suffix or function as complement of a preposition.

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