

PRESCRIPTIVISM, VARIABILITY AND STABILITY

Prispevek ob upoštevanju jezikovne spremenljivosti in stabilnosti obravnava preskriptivizem s petih vidikov. V uvodu je predstavljeno zgodovinsko ozadje osrednje teme – kodifikacije (intervencija, preskripcija itd.), katere začetki segajo v Italijo in Francijo. V nadaljevanju je predstavljena vloga govora v jeziku in njegovem razvoju, kot tudi neupoštevanje te vloge. Sledi razprava o preskriptivizmu in vzrokih za njegov nastanek (vključno s pomanjkanjem podatkov) z vidika nekaterih idej Praške šole. Le-ta je – v nasprotju z naravnim pojavom spremenljivosti jezika – obravnavana glede na odnos do tujih jezikovnih vplivov. Prispevek se nato dotakne nekaterih vprašljivih vidikov preskriptivističnega pristopa, zlasti njegove obsesije z obliko nasproti vsebini ali pomenu.

kodifikacija, češčina, podatki, tuji vplivi, oblika proti vsebini, funkcionalni pristop, jezikovne spremembe, literarni jezik, preskripcija, preskriptivizem, pogovorni jezik

The topic of prescriptivism, seen against the background of language variability and stability, is viewed here from five angles. By way of introduction, some historical background is given to the central topic of codification (intervention, prescription, etc.), tracing some of its roots to Italy and France. Following this, the role of the spoken language and its development, as well as its neglect, is discussed. This is followed by a discussion of prescriptivism and its causes (including lack of data) referring to some ideas of the Prague School. This, being contrasted to the natural phenomenon of language variability, is viewed in relation to foreign influences on a language. Finally, some questionable aspects of the prescriptivists' approach are discussed, in particular their obsession with form as against content or meaning.

codification, Czech language, data, foreign influences, form versus content, functional approach, language change, literary language, prescription, prescriptivism, spoken language

1 The Problem of Language Manipulation

Codification, aimed at prescribing one language form or variety at the expense of another, has been adopted by linguistics only recently. Primarily, it has been and still is a matter of law, dating back to ancient Jewish and pre-Christian times (*Mishnah* in relation to the *Old Testament*), or ancient Rome (*Lex duodecimae tabularum*, dated 451–450 BC), laying down the laws in written and thus binding form for all concerned; any offenses and encroachments against these then had to be sanctioned and punished.

The history of language manipulation (or human intervention, language engineering, codification, etc.) is not very long for a number of reasons (A, B, C). For centuries or even millennia languages have been used without any guardian angel or police to watch over and regulate them, and no sanctions attached. A *primary reason* (A) for this state of affairs has been *defence* against (and *fear* of) a competitor or another sometimes more powerful language. This has been the case with French, where the legal reform known as the *Edict of Villers-Cotterêts* (1539) established Francien, the Parisian dialect, as the only official language, as against both Latin (its predecessor) and other and prestigious dialects, such as Picard. The odd fact, poorly understood outside, is that this edict concerned grammar only, leaving vocabulary open to all sorts of influences. It has to be stressed that this official standard was not successful until the 19th century. Among other things, the rigidity of this French grammar has led to a number of problems, giving scope for the existence of a parallel spoken standard.

A somewhat similar case is to be found in the Italian Accademia della Crusca, founded in 1582 for the purpose of purifying Tuscan dialect, the *literary language* of the Italian Renaissance, i.e., again, concentrated on one side of the language only and concerned with asserting its role as the *arbiter of literature* (B). None of these trends has aimed at a complete codification of language. However, these two, later to be followed by other language communities, notably by Slavonic languages, including my own, Czech, have become generalized models, aiming at a comprehensive general *standard*.

However, any such artificial standard, in contrast to natural standards of the vernacular and dialects, is a problem. It is artificial and by definition incomplete, since there is only a handful of would-be creators and these are often far from being competent and acquainted with real data. Such a standard does not correspond to anything in language, it is just a kind of artifact (in the past, most its creators were ready to admit was that it was based on a dialect, whatever that means). Should this artifact live, it has to be enforced on users, a very undemocratic procedure.

While many languages struggle for bare survival elsewhere, threatened by extinction, it now seems that some languages, at least in Europe, have adopted this *prescriptive approach*, often in form of special language laws, in hope that it will somehow protect them (C).

But who is the enemy threatening them? Hardly neighbouring dialects, as in the French case, or a strong neighbour, as in the case of German and Czech in the past, since in the age of globalization these are of minor relevance. Should these prescriptivists start fighting against English, the only global language nowadays? Oddly enough, English has undergone one of the most spectacular series of changes in history, so much so that it has completely changed its typological character from an inflectional language to an isolating one. One may wonder what sort of feelings Anglo-Saxons had after the Norman conquest in 1060 about the gradual influx of the contemporary French which they understood poorly. Well, they did not establish

an academy to defend their language and, in the end, the language has developed, unhindered by anyone or being prescribed in any way, into the remarkably viable language we know today. The point to be stressed is that it has adopted and still is adopting an enormous level of foreign imports, especially in vocabulary.

Another point to be drawn from the original French codification is a complete *contempt for history* and language development, the conviction that French will remain unchanged for ever being evident. It is difficult to say how much lack of knowledge and wishful thinking are mixed in here, petrifying the grammar seemingly for ever. Yet every language changes and its changes must find a corresponding expression eventually.

There is no doubt that every language is in need of *stability*, but this must not be enforced at the expense of other factors and historical dimension. Stability of a language is always relative and of varying length. Often it may be identified with the feelings of one generation, or it may be much longer, but it may never be absolute and permanent. This, then, is the dilemma of prescriptivists. Once they start their activities, they will never end, since a living language changes constantly and they are thus periodically faced with a level of changes they will have to cope with. It is a vicious circle, in a way.

All of these points, and other factors, represent a problematic basis for later development, where strong non-linguistic factors re-appeared and had influence on the shape of the language in question. Although this is not the prevalent view today, some of these are to be traced back, in rudimentary form, to the original Prague Linguistic Circle, too. In the following, some of the major factors and aspects of this inclination to prescriptivism will be briefly discussed.

2 Five Major Aspects

2.1 The Spoken Language

Any preoccupation with language by prescriptivists has been solely and exclusively with its written form and disregard, even disdain, for the spoken language has been obvious. Linguistically, this has to be rejected for at least two reasons: (1) *most of the language change comes from the spoken language*, a view greatly stressed by many including de Saussure; (2) *most of the history of languages has been oral* and, even now, most of our communication is not written, a fact easily and surprisingly forgotten by quite a few linguists and all prescriptivists. It is the spoken form which provides the basis, merely by the sheer volume of its use, for language norms, standards, and natural rules, gradually and constantly shaping the language system as a whole. The spoken standard is of necessity natural and generally accepted, and the problem of prescription and rules has never been considered here, since it is not necessary. In contrast to this, the written standard is artificial, often rejected or resisted by many, especially when a new spelling reform

is invented (I am referring here to the almost public revolt in the Czech Republic or Germany recently). It may not exist without codification, as some prescriptivists think (although this is patently wrong in case of most languages, mostly outside Europe). In this, prescriptivists may hardly be called pure linguists, bringing into the discussion strong non-linguistic factors – the older term language engineers would be more to the point here. The unfortunate view adopted by the controversial French philosopher Derrida, absurdly stressing the primacy of the written language, has been refused by most.

The problematic Czech situation, now verging on diglossia (Čermák 1997), is due to the stubbornness of prescriptivists seeing and recognizing only one language, the written and literary one, where there are at least two. The spoken language, devoid of any artificial intervention, represents the only (roughly) natural picture of the language as it has developed for centuries, including all of the changes, radical reductions and foreign imports.

To take the above statement about the supremacy of our everyday communication somewhat further, it is also evident, thanks to our corpus research, that the spoken to written language use ratio is several times in favour of the spoken standard. Accordingly, the problem is a staggering lack of spoken data, whereas written data is abundant. In the Czech case, i.e. the Czech National Corpus, an initiative has been started to collect the absent data on a large scale to be able to draw justified and balanced inferences from both language forms and not only the written one. It is a sad fact that all grammars and dictionaries have been written on the basis the non-spoken data, the picture of the language having thus been gravely distorted.

2.2 Prescription and Prescriptivism

In view of today's corpus linguistics, all prescription (and its stronger form of proscription) has to be rejected, because it has never been based on *sufficient and representative data*. Historically, it may also be viewed as a survey of mistaken views, authoritatively imposed on users in one set of prescriptions (usually a spelling reform) at one time, and subsequently abrogated and cancelled at the next phase (and reform). This is certainly true of the Czech case. However, most of what one reform tried to introduce at the expense of something else, i.e. one variant against another, has been short-lived, and the forms which have eventually prevailed have almost always been spoken in origin. I would rather not go into all of the non-linguistic arguments of prescriptivists, such as best language, or high style, representative or prestigious forms, as there are no real criteria for these, let alone data supporting them. Leaving aside also the problem of scarce and subjective data, and the elitist approach, I would like to raise, yet again, the question of the *right* people think they have to manipulate the language in question the way they do. Who granted them this right and what is their professional capacity to decide this nation-wide sociological and political issue? Being a linguist does not automatically

qualify one to decide on language, as this is a common tool belonging to everyone, and not to a select group, deciding arbitrarily what the majority should use.

Recent Czech tradition, no doubt similar to that elsewhere, has an odious smack of communism, i.e. a select elite dictating to people, while being tacitly refused by majority. It is remarkable how badly understood Prague linguists have been (Vachek 1970; *Teze*, 1929: 46). It is true that they voiced their opinion about the characteristic trend for expansion of the literary language, while never saying that this would or should ever be completed or that the literary language will prevail everywhere: »On the one hand, it is characteristic for the literary language to exert an effort to expand, to acquire a *koiné* function and, on the other hand, an effort to become an exclusive mark of the ruling class«. It is this last part of this 1929 quotation I would like to draw attention to, namely the possibility of a political and ideological misuse of the literary language. At the same time, Prague scholars have never denied plurality of language varieties and were far from postulating the literary language as the only and best variety. In modern terms, plurality (of standards) and multifunctionality are normal hallmarks of any language situation and there is no single variety, including the literary language, that is able to assume and fulfil all of the language functions.

The original Prague attitude (Havránek 1932: 245, etc.), stressing, primarily, the importance of a functional approach in general, has also advocated prescriptive codification of the literary language, based, however, on a knowledge of usage. This practice has not proved to be fully justified, and the approach is both questioned (Starý 1994) and suspended. The prevailing notion of the model author whose language and usage should be followed has been abandoned, too, specifically in view of recent corpus orientation on *typicality* of use.

2.3 Language Variability

It is a basic reality that language develops and introduces formal changes and, ultimately, systemic ones through *variation* (see also de Saussure 1972: Note 176). Thus language variation is not a nuisance (as some prescriptivists might see it) but a natural way of language development and a *manifestation* of it. All language codification means is, then, a negation of this natural phenomenon, *artificial selection* of one form among many, and *petrification* of the state of development. Here, again, one must wonder about the *criteria* for such a selection. Since all living languages undergo development, which cannot be stopped, prescription is a highly artificial and unacceptable thing for a linguist, as it seemingly eliminates variability. The greater the shock the more the variability is thus hidden, being swept under the carpet, but it re-emerges later, having existed in the spoken language, usually. Any corpus user is well aware of variability of all kinds and knows there are no longer black-and-white truths and single options only.

2.4 Foreign Influences

Another favourite argument, sometimes only implicit, is against the influence and import of foreign elements (words mostly) into one's language, accompanied by both phobia and aversion to them. This stems from the mistaken *idea of purity* of one's own language, for which there is, however, no ground. *All languages are mixed* and the mixing goes on. No language exists in isolation, without being object of influences from outside, this process assuming a new form in our age of globalisation. There is in fact no record of a language having perished under an abundance of foreign words, in such cases they only change. *Change*, a natural thing to happen to a language, must not be identified with *extinction*, however, as there are other reasons for that, mostly non-linguistic. It is almost futile to point again to English which appears to have a sponge-like character, absorbing foreign imports from anywhere in an unparalleled way, as is almost the case with French, etc. Likewise, it would be wrong to *mistake change for decline*, a complaint one often hears nowadays. There is probably yet another, this time a psychological, reason for this dislike or rejection of foreign imports, often bordering on laziness. If functional, there is no ground whatsoever to reject them.

2.5 Form versus Content

So far, no mention has been made about the fact that codification and subsequent prescriptivism is concerned, almost entirely, with *language form* (i.e. written form), while no attention is paid to *content or meaning*. This is a peculiar fact since by far the greatest variability and change is to be found in language meaning, rather than form. Is this one-sided obsession with form, a surface aspect of language, really justified? Or do prescriptivists tacitly admit that they are not able to reach so far, however much they would like to?

There is, however, one more critical observation to be made about language form and the attempts of prescriptivists either to change or limit it. In view of what modern corpora tell us, it is now evident that the past history of language studies has been predominantly of a *paradigmatic* nature, while hardly any mention has been paid to language *syntagmatics*, ways of combination of language items, words, etc. This undergoes constant change too, unnoticed by prescriptivists. Having ultimately impact of meaning, this aspect is seemingly part of form, too. Yet this should not, were prescriptivists to become aware of it, be codified, it must be left to its own course of development.

3 Conclusion

A linguist's approach to prescriptivism and some of its aspects, as presented here, must inevitably, and briefly, conclude that any decisions about language, preferably not of a prescriptivist nature, must be based on sufficient (corpus) data and sound linguistic criteria.

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