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Grammarians Assess the English Language

Göran Wolf

Technische Universität, Dresden

In 1972 Jürg Rusch portrayed 16th-, 17th- and 18th-century views of a Golden Age of the English language, and tried to integrate these subjective judgements into their linguistic as well as historical background. Using different examples, I adopt Rusch's approach. My study depicts metalinguistic remarks from selected grammars in which the authors comment on the English language. In my presentation I attempt to relate these judgements to issues frequently discussed in current linguistics.

Grammars – in the sense of books containing rules and examples of a language's grammar – have always attracted a lot of scholarly interest. However, while much thought has been given to English grammars written until 1800, their grammatical terminology and systems as well as their authors¹, little attention has been paid to the more general linguistic opinions expressed by grammarians in their works. Depicting a number of remarks with which the authors commented on the English language, and contrasting these ideas with well-discussed issues in (English) linguistics – i.e. spoken and written language, prescriptiveness and descriptiveness, standard language and standardisation, the present paper² would like to contribute to the research of the history of English grammar writing.

The discussion of grammars and grammar writing in historical linguistics almost always involves the consideration of the terms *standard language*, *standardisation*, *prescriptive* and *descriptive*. For instance, it appears natural to consider the concepts standard language and standardisation, since the former can be a result of grammar writing, and the latter the process which grammars might help to implement. With regard to the different nature of grammars the examination of the terms prescriptive and descriptive seems inevitable. Once again, the given terminology is apparently prerequisite when studying historical grammars. It is also quite prerequisite to authors of modern grammars, but I do believe it was neither necessary nor common for the historical grammarians to give it some thought. Still, the grammatical works which I have viewed reveal that their authors devoted

themselves to these more general linguistic issues, and not seldom their trains of thought anticipate quite recent findings, which I find remarkable and worthwhile presenting.

If prescriptiveness is a quality generally attributed to grammars, it does not come as a surprise that grammarians address this issue explicitly or implicitly. The preface of Robert Lowth's grammar gives a detailed definition of what a prescriptive grammar is and does:

“The principal design of a Grammar of any Language is to teach us to express ourselves with propriety in that Language, and to enable us to judge of every phrase and form of construction, whether it be right or not. The plain way of doing this, is to lay down rules, and to illustrate them by examples. But besides shewing what is right, the matter may be further explained by pointing out what is wrong.” (1995 [1763]: xiii-xiv)³

If the notion is gradable, Lowth's grammar is a very prescriptive grammar, as can be seen in his wording: “We should be immediately *shocked* at I have knew, I have saw, I have gave, &c: but our ears are grown familiar with I have wrote, I have drank, I have bore, &c. which are altogether as *barbarous*.” (94; my italics). Of course, being a teacher, Lowth is right correcting the mentioned instances. However, Lowth's diction and also that of other authors set the prescriptive tone of the rules which are meant for those “guilty of blameable Speling, false Syntax, Tautologies, low and vulgar Diction” (Buchanan 1968 [1762]: xvi). More precisely, (prescriptive) grammars aimed at schoolchildren, because they had to learn how to use grammar in particular and language in general correctly. This is well and truly cemented in the formulaic definitions⁴, introducing the term grammar:

“Grammar is the Art of Speaking and Writing truly and properly.” (Gough 1967 [1754]: 1)

“Grammar is the art of true, and well speaking a Language: the writing is but an Accident.” (Jonson 1972 [1640]: 35)

“Grammar is the Art of rightly expressing our thoughts by Words.” (Lowth 1995 [1763]: 1)

“English Grammar is the art of speaking and writing the English language with propriety.” (Murray 1968 [1795]: 1)

“Grammar is the art of using words properly.” (Priestley 1969 [1761]: 1)

“Grammar is the art of speaking and writing our thoughts with propriety.” (Webster 1968 [1784]: 7)

All of the definitions above are instances of prescriptiveness, even though some of them belong to works that clearly exhibit descriptiveness. As already stated, both qualities cannot be strictly separated, and sometimes grammarians express views that can be interpreted in either way:

“The profit of Grammar [...] is honourable to ourselves. [...] Wee free our Language from the opinion of Rudenesse, and Barbarisme, wherewith it is mistaken to be diseas'd; We shew the Copie of it, and Matchableness, with other tongues; we ripen the wits of our owne Children, and Youth sooner by it, and advance their knowledge.” (Jonson 1972 [1640]: preface)

The profit of description is that, if English can be grammatically portrayed, it is a structured and therefore internationally as well as culturally acceptable language. The profit of prescription is the grammar's educational value. As indicated above, some authors attempted

to be descriptive only. Noah Webster, for instance, favoured descriptiveness. He remarks critically that grammarians wanted to “persuade the English to speak by Latin rules, or *by arbitrary rules of their own*” (1967 [1789]: vii; my italics). Likewise, Priestley states that “all-governing custom shall declare in favour of [one of two contrary practices]” (1969 [1761]: vi-vii). The quotes prove Webster and Priestley preferred a fair amount of descriptive reserve, while many other grammarians rigidly decided which form of speech has to be used.

Occupied with language in general, grammarians also ponder orality and literacy, or – less elaborate – spoken and written language. Those grammarians that account for this dichotomy always explain the different characteristics of spoken and written language, as the following passages show:

“[B]esides, Sound, and Voice, by which we are able to converse with one another when present; There are other Signs have been invented, where these Sounds cannot be heard, to supply the want of them in such manner, as that we may both converse with one another at a distance, and communicate our Thoughts to future Ages. The first of these Signs belongs properly to Speech, or unwritten Discourse. The latter are made use of in Writing.” (Elstob 1968 [1715]: 1)

“We find the most convenient Signs [to express our thoughts], are Sounds, and the Voice. But because these Sounds are transient, and pass away, Men have invented Other Signs, to render them more durable and permanent, as well as visible, or Objects of the Eye; which are the Characters us’d in Writing [...]” (Gildon/Brightland 1967 [1711]: i)

Naturally, these comments refer to the principal distinction between the two opposing media, which studies in orality and literacy render as follows: spoken language is natural and swift, structurally simple and embedded in the context of discourse, whereas written language is artificial and inert, structurally complex and desituated (cf. Chafe 1994 or Oesterreicher 2001). Still, to make only the medial distinction is clearly inadequate to respond to the various types of discourse one can examine nowadays. Therefore, studies in orality and literacy have suggested to consider spoken and written language as conceptual genres (e.g. Oesterreicher 2001: 219), which means that a piece of spoken language might exhibit conceptual features of writing, and, of course, a piece of written language might reveal conceptual features of speech. Priestley already hints at this elaborate and abstract line of thought:

“[A]s writing is a permanent thing, it is requisite that written forms of speech have a greater degree of precision and perspicuity than is necessary in colloquial forms, or such as very answer the purpose of common conversation.” (1969 [1761]: 45)

In the corresponding footnote he states furthermore:

“The ease of conversation seems, in some cases, to require a relaxation of the severer laws of Grammar: at least, that, after the manner of the French, we take the liberty to drop some of the harsher terminations of words. For instance, who, in common conversation, would scruple to say, ‘who is this for;’ or where learnt (or learned) thou this; rather than, whom is this for; or, where learnedst thou this.” (45-6)

In my opinion, the latter comments, but also all other references to spoken and written language certainly reveal that the grammarians discussed here were not only concerned with grammar but also language in general.

Their linguistic awareness is likewise recognisable in the statements on standard language and standardisation. Though the grammarians are rather biased in their ideas, the general findings are quite similar to recent summaries:

“[T]he chief linguistic consequence of successful standardisation is a high degree of uniformity of structure. ... [S]tandardisation is implemented and promoted primarily through written forms of language. ... [S]tandardisation inhibits linguistic change and variability.” (Milroy 2000: 13/4)

Amongst the historical grammar authors the tendency to disapprove language change and variability is widespread, because those who set out to write a grammar felt that, for instance, language change needs to be halted. Change and variability were considered improper; regional varieties were deemed “corrupt” (Buchanan 1968 [1762]: iv), they “infect” language use (Sheridan 1969 [1781]: xvii) which was thought to be generally “in fault” (Lowth 1995 [1763]: ix). Thus, grammarians realized how to implement a standard. In a passage, talking about language change, William Bullokar states that “printing be the best helpe to stay the same, in one order” (1906 [1580]: [251])⁵. This opinion is shared by Priestley who says that “writing [...] fixes, and gives stability to a language” (1969 [1761]: 60). A further, more philosophical support of a standard is seen in the mere study of and occupation with language, which was believed to have brought the standard of Latin and Greek:

“[T]he Romans, as wells as Greeks, carefully applied themselves to the Study of their own Language, and were early able to speak and write it in the greatest Perfection.” (Buchanan 1968 [1762]: xxxiii)

For the grammarians “perfection” is the quality a standard language has: “[A]t the time that a language hath begun to be spoken and written with uniformity, it may be taken for granted, to be arrived to its maturity and perfection.” (Priestley 1993 [1762]: 179); and so Buchanan’s statement is worded more generally by Priestley:

“The progress of a language towards perfection may be considerably accelerated by the labours of persons who give their attention to it; if they study the analogy of the language, recommend phrases that are agreeable to it, and detect and expose those that are improper.” (180)

The grammarians, of course, also propose what the situation would be like, when a standard has been fully achieved:

“The time in which a language arrives at its perfection, it is natural conjecture, will be when the people that speak it have occasion to make the greatest use of it; which will be when their power and influence abroad, and when arts, sciences and liberty at home are at the greatest height.” (177)

So far we have seen that the examination of the grammar of English also embraced the discussion of standard and standardisation, and as is usual for the discussion of standards and standardisation in any language at any time, the grammarians tried to find an answer to the probably most-debated question of all. Noah Webster asks and answers the question cautiously:

“If a standard therefore cannot be fixed on local and variable custom, on what shall it be fixed? If the most eminent speakers are not to direct our practice, where shall we look for a guide? The answer is extremely easy; the rules of the language itself, and the general practice of the nation, constitute propriety in speaking.” (1967 [1789]: 27)

Here it is quite evident Webster approaches the term Standard English without preference or prejudice. His view that “an attempt to fix a standard on the practice of any particular class of people is highly absurd” (25) emphasizes Webster’s descriptive neutrality. Interestingly, over a century later two influential linguists used the term Standard English prescriptively, although their aim was descriptiveness (Crowley 1987).

This paper is hoped to have shown that, despite being protagonists of a historically quite unspecialized and slowly developing linguistic discipline, grammarians have anticipated a lot of the highly diverse fields of language scholarship in general and English language scholarship in particular, which shows grammar authors are not only philologists or linguists because they provided a grammatical description of some sort. I also wish the paper – especially within the context of the Brno conference – has demonstrated that, although the paper’s focus is principally related to linguistics, the sum of cultural, literary and linguistic studies is required to accumulate findings in one of the three. This holds true especially for Ælfric of Eynsham, since at least with regard to the terminology analysed above, his grammatical work does not give any relevant material explicitly. Nevertheless, Ælfric’s literary as well as non-literary writing, his life and the traces he left reveal, for instance, that he was consciously advocating standardisation (Gneuss 2002: 24-6) and, therefore, greatly contributed to Standard Old English, a standard that was only put to an end by the Norman Conquest.

Endnotes

- ¹ Albeit published in 1970, Ian Michael’s monograph is still one of the authoritative surveys of English grammars. It discusses 273 grammars and grammatical works from 1586 to 1801. In contrast, my study, within its scope, can only consider 13 of such grammatical treatises.
- ² This paper is extensively based on grammars from the 1700s and 1800s. To widen the view, I touch on Ælfric’s grammar in the conclusion. Middle English grammatical texts will not be mentioned for two reasons. Firstly, the Middle English period hardly saw any English grammar writing, because “English fell out of use as the language of elementary instruction in Latin grammar, and no grammatical texts in Middle English survive from before the closing years of the fourteenth century” (Thomson 1984: xi). Moreover, those texts that have come down to us do not give metalinguistic comments; they merely explain grammatical notions.
- ³ As can be seen, the paper contains substantial quotations from historical grammars and text books. In all cases I maintain the original punctuation and capitalization. If possible, I also retain orthography, but disregard ligatures, small caps or italics for typographical reasons.
- ⁴ Ian Michael interestingly remarks: “Among the English grammarians a third offer no definitions of grammar. Presumably they take it for granted, or think the formula too trivial to be worth their pupil’s time. If they had disagreed with the conventional definition; or with the usefulness of definitions in general they would have said so. Of those writers who do offer a definition over two-thirds use the formula.” (1970: 189)
- ⁵ Here the page refers to Plessow’s edition in which the original pagination is not given.

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