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Prescriptivism in education: from language ideologies to listening practices

Ian Cushing & Julia Snell

The perpetuity of prescriptivism

We begin with three extracts spanning 150 years and taken from teacher textbooks, guidance for schools and professional standards, all published in England:

Defective intelligence. 1) Pronunciation. (1) The most troublesome class of incorrect pronunciations are provincialisms; the substitution of one sound for another, as [ʊ] for [ʌ], and vice versa; the addition of a sound, as *idea-r*, and the omission of sounds, as of the aspirate. These faults partake of a mechanical character, belonging to the ear and half as much as to defective intelligence. [...] (2) Other mispronunciations consist in an improper accentuation. This is a fault, sometimes of habit, generally of ignorance. Its source is to be sought in the difference between the language of books and that of the common people. [...] (3) The cure is with the teacher, who alone is to blame if there exists much incorrectness in his first class. The teacher should take means to secure the accuracy of his own pronunciation and that of his subordinates. [...] Of course, every instance of mispronunciation coming under the teacher's observation must be corrected. (Gill 1863: 155-156).

At the present time it will not be denied that to inculcate the speaking of correct English is the chief solicitude of a very large number of persons engaged in Primary and Secondary Education in this country. Those whose business it is to teach, who are to become public speakers, or who wish to enter upon public life, or affairs of any kind, undoubtedly find it convenient to get rid of whatever native 'vulgarisms' or dialectal peculiarities their speech contains, and to attempt to approximate their Spoken English to that standard form. (Wyld 1906: 356)

A teacher must [...] demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher's specialist subject. (Department for Education 2011a: 11)

We use these extracts as initial illustrations of the perpetuity of prescriptivism in England's schools, amidst a historical narrative of language ideologies in education and how these have long worked to create explicit and de facto language policy. We also use these extracts to show how contemporary policy is tethered to the past, employing a genealogical perspective to highlight how language ideologies are in constant recirculation, and how both students and teachers are subjected to prescriptive policies which impose racialised and classed 'standards'. Whilst the first and second extracts – taken from John Gill's *Introductory Text-Book to School Education, Method, and School Management* and Henry Wyld's *The Place of the Mother Tongue in National Education* – are perhaps most overtly laden with textual traces of prescriptive and deficit ideologies, the final extract – the current professional standards for teachers in England – reproduces the same ideologies albeit in more subtle ways.

Tracing interdiscursive contact points across policy spaces and times is key to the genealogical approach we take in this chapter, examining how 'discursive and non-discursive practices come into being and interact to form a set of political, economic, moral, cultural, and social institutions which *define the limits of acceptable speaking, knowing, and acting*' (Anaïs 2013: 125, our emphasis; see also Foucault 1978). Our aim is to reject the idea that prescriptivism in education surfaces solely through individual acts (such as a verbal correction in the classroom) and conceptualise prescriptivism as systemic, institutional and structural.

Overview and anchor points

There are three central anchor points to this chapter. Firstly, that prescriptivism is rooted in language ideologies and is a process which suppresses the language practices of racialised and classed speakers whilst maintaining the interests of the white bourgeoisie. Secondly, that prescriptive ideologies about language in education have a long historical narrative and are recycled over time; and finally, that language is just one of a package of behaviours that gets policed in schools. These are explored in relation to an enduring idea which has long underpinned education in Britain and the colonial legacies of empire, namely that ‘Standard English’ is an

objective linguistic category which provides access to societal inclusion and should be a primary focus of mainstream educational curricula [...] this raciolinguistic ideology serves to naturalise the idealised practices of the white speaking subject and position these idealised linguistic practices as integral to social mobility. (Flores & Rosa 2015: 162-163)

We show how ideologies clustered around standardised English legitimise prescriptive practices which further entrench social injustices and stratification, carrying long-lasting consequences for teachers and students. The following questions are used as organisational steers. How might prescriptivism be conceptualised as an ideological process and what does this reveal about language inequality in education? In what ways is prescriptivism realised in classroom pedagogies, policy mechanisms and other technologies of surveillance? How might prescriptivism be understood as an intersectional phenomenon, as a racialised, classed and ableist practice which works to grant dominant groups further powers and suppresses minoritised groups? How does the prescription of language work both alongside and as a proxy for the prescription of bodies? How has prescriptivism, as a key tool of standard language and raciolinguistic ideologies, been rendered into policy over time, and what are the historical continuities which have shaped this narrative? And finally, how might exploring such questions contribute to a larger project which seeks to interrogate colonial logics, dismantle linguistic borders and address deeply embedded power imbalances in educational spaces? Our exploration of these questions places a focus on England, given that this is the historical locus of the invention of standardised English, in which schools played a key role (see Crowley 2003; Fisher 1996; Mugglestone 2003) and is thus a key implementational space for prescriptive language ideologies.

Conceptualising prescriptivism in education

Throughout this chapter, *prescriptivism* is understood to describe individual, institutional and socially shared preferences for how language ought to be used and any attempts made to regulate the language of others (e.g. Curzan 2014). We argue that the enactment of prescriptivism in schools is tied up with intersectional language *prejudice*, understood as a bias, stigma, discrimination or unfavourable treatment on the grounds of language which renders some ways of speaking as illegitimate, as part of a racialised and classed pursuit of language and biological purity (e.g. Bauman & Briggs 2003; Bonfiglio 2002; Thomas 1991). Finally, language *policing* is taken to be the surveillance and punishment of speech, writing, gesture and other semiotic markers of identity, especially when seen and heard as being deviant from standardised codes constructed by the white listening subject (e.g. Cushing 2020a; Rosa & Flores 2017). Across these, discourses about language in education are never only about language (or even about language at all) but reflect moral panics about maintaining ‘standards’ and ‘discipline’ in society more broadly (Cameron 2012) as well as intersecting with various axes of personhood such as gender, race, dis/ability and class.

Central to our discussion is the notion of language ideologies, defined as a ‘set of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use’ (Silverstein 1979: 193). One of the most pervasive of these is the standard language ideology, whereby speakers and hearers come to believe in the existence of a ‘standard’ language and that this represents its most ‘correct’ form (Lippi-Green 2012). Given that the social and colonial construct of ‘Standard English’ is designed by, based on and protected by the language practices of the white middle-classes, the ‘educated’, the ‘well-bred’, and the ‘civilised’ (Crowley 2003; see also Bonfiglio 2002; Heller & McElhinny 2017; Mignolo 2000), it follows that ideologies of language standardisation ‘stigmatise particular linguistic practices perceived as deviating from prescriptive norms’ (Rosa 2016: 163), working to silence and erase the actual practices of minoritised speakers.

Accordingly, we also consider prescriptivism through a raciolinguistic perspective, placing attention toward the white listening subject, representing not necessarily individual listeners, but various policy technologies such as assessments and curricula (Rosa & Flores 2017). As the opening extracts to this chapter showed, both standard language and raciolinguistic ideologies have far-reaching consequences within educational contexts (e.g. Holborow 1999; Milroy 2001; Milroy & Milroy 1991; Rosa 2018), with implications for how the language practices of both students and teachers are prescribed. For example, when certain ways of speaking are ideologised as representative of certain types of people, they may be further construed as depicting the qualities stereotypically associated with those people (Snell 2018a, fc). It is through this process of ‘iconization’ (Irvine & Gal 2000) that so-called ‘standard’ forms have come to be understood as emblematic of power, educatedness, authority, and superior moral character, and nonstandard forms of the converse. These beliefs are held not just by powerful groups in society but also by marginalised groups, who can be coerced into aligning with the norms of the powerful and regulating their own behaviour accordingly. This explains why studies have repeatedly found that speakers systematically ‘edit out’ stigmatised features from their speech in more formal settings, and, further, why such features are judged most harshly by the speakers who use them the most (Labov 1972).

Educational institutions have received focused attention in terms of language ideologies and the consequences of prescriptive practices (e.g. Cameron 2012; Cushing fc; Rosa 2018; Snell & Cushing, fc; Wiley & Lukes 1996), showing how schools are spaces in which dichotomies such as ‘academic’ / ‘non-academic’, ‘correct / incorrect’ and ‘appropriate / inappropriate’ come to be constructed, normalised and circulated. The translation of ideology into practice is enacted in a variety of forms, including oral ‘corrections’, scripts and routines for classroom discourse, professional standards for teachers, assessment criteria for language ‘competency’, and various policies pertaining to un/acceptable language use. For instance, Cushing (2021a) examines the textual traces of the standard language ideology within post-2010 UK state-level policy mechanisms, revealing a dense web of prescriptive ideologies which position teachers as standard language role models who have a professional responsibility to police students’ language. These ideologies come to be reproduced within school-produced policies, such as how teachers are expected to ‘speak with clear diction and correct grammar’ and how ‘Standard English must be modelled at all times and pupils’ speech corrected’ (Cushing 2020b).

Whilst some linguists prefer to downplay or ignore the ideological nature of linguistic prescriptivism in schools (e.g. Crystal 2006; Hudson 2020; Trudgill 1999)¹, our stance is that this is *always* ideological and cannot be decoupled from hegemonic power related to dis/ability, class and race. Furthermore, we argue that any discussion of prescriptive language ideologies needs to be located within the historical, social and economic contexts in which they surface, especially when considering the colonial legacies associated with standardised English and the politicised nature of education policy making. Indeed, schools are one of the very institutions in which standardised English was first designed, with histories such as Holborow (1999) and Mugglestone (2003) describing schools as a key implementational space of prescriptive ideologies. Schools are spaces where students and teachers are ritualised into the sharing of state-determined values, cooked up through thousands of hours of interaction which instruct children ‘how to speak, what to wear, how to move their bodies, and, ultimately, how to inhabit different race, class, and gender positions’ (Morris 2005: 44). The inhabiting of different positions in school typically rests on how language practices are perceived by those in power, with ‘competency’ in standardised English one factor in determining which bodies are suitable for school, and which are not. For example, in her ethnography of how racialised bodies are positioned at the periphery of school communities, Ferguson (2000) describes

¹ These three linguists all adopt a non-ideological stance to prescriptivism and standardised English in schools. Crystal (2006: 206) argues that the national curriculum in England has ‘has totally rejected the prescriptive mentality’ with standardised English framed ‘in an inclusive way’. Hudson (2020) supports this position, arguing that curricula in England have always represented ‘explicit rejections of prescriptivism’ (453), how it is ‘not far from the truth’ that prescriptivism is ‘dead’ (458), and that it is a ‘minority view’ that there are social and political reasons to challenge standardised English (455). In a chapter which attempts to define ‘Standard English’, Trudgill (1999: 118) distances himself from the standard language ideology by literally refusing to use the word – he writes “the word ‘ideology’ will not appear again in this chapter”.

how the ‘right’ kind of student (and we extend this to teachers, too) is one who speaks standardised English, with nonstandardised codes being pathologised and framed as in need of remedial intervention:

While children bring a rich variety of language systems into school, the institution imposes a profoundly restricted and jealously guarded monolingual system through the sanction of only one form, Received Standard English, as the legitimate form of expression and exchange in the classroom. [...] Incredibly, their ability to speak and think in more than one language system is not presented to the school population as a marvellous accomplishment to be envied, emulated, applauded, but it is framed as a handicap, a problem to be corrected before their real education can begin. (Ferguson 2000: 205)

Prescriptivism in education then is not ‘just’ about language but about a constellation of practices which prescribe various aspects of culture, bodies, values and behaviours through mechanisms of the white listening subject such as curricula, assessments, pedagogies and classroom discourse.

Prescribing language; prescribing the body

Whereas the majority of work on linguistic prescriptivism in education has focused on speech and writing as disembodied modes of language, here we reiterate the need for an expanded conceptualisation of prescriptivism in which language practices are prescribed alongside other semiotic resources such as clothing, movement, hair and religious symbols.

A wealth of work within the sociology of education has shown the range of semiotic resources beyond speech and writing which come to be prescribed in schools, and how schools operate within a broader architecture of social compliance (e.g. Ferguson 2000; Kulz 2017; Morris 2016; Puwar 2004). Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2018) examine the enduring significance of hair policies and policing in schools, and how these function as embodiments of racialised in/exclusion, subjugating Black symbols of identity, image and group membership whilst venerating whiteness. Black hair is here conceptualised as a ‘key site for the social control of Black bodies’ (2018: 9) by white eyes, much in the same way that Black language practices are routinely stigmatised via prescriptive policies which require racialised speakers to modify their language in ways which fit the demands of the white listening subject (e.g. Alim & Smitherman 2012). In Kulz’s (2017) ethnography of a London secondary school, she discusses the racialised discrepancies of hair policing, showing how middle-class white students with long unkempt hair were generally left alone by teachers, whereas Black students who were regularly reprimanded for flaunting hair rules. Kulz describes the importance of language within this, with racialised students having to perform self-surveillance with their accent and body image in order to become ‘whiter’ and gain legitimacy from teachers (2017: 159). Cushing (2021b) also reports on a London secondary school in which body and language policing ran parallel, operationalised through policies and pedagogies which required students to sit, move and speak in ways which conformed with normative ideas of linguistic and biological ‘standards’. Various schools in the UK have attracted media attention for hair policies which discriminate against Black bodies, as well as attempts to prescribe and police religious clothing (see Parveen & Thomas 2021). In discussing uniform policies more broadly, a US-based study by Morris (2005) further shows the racialised prescription of clothing as part of wider form of regulatory practices, including language, which disproportionately targeted Black and Latinx students who already felt they were not welcome within school. What these studies show then is how language and other semiotic modes of identity are not just prescribed, but criminalised in schools – as a package of outlawed language practices (Rosa 2018) which are perceived as failing to meet the institutional demands of mainstream schooling standards.

Class, race and prescriptivism in education

Prescriptivism in contemporary English education has been justified across the political spectrum as a means of empowering disadvantaged pupils (e.g. Gove 2013; Lammy 2013). According to UK government discourse, the purported goal is to give these pupils access to an objectified ‘Standard English’ which, it is argued, will open up educational opportunities and grant access to ‘power’ and

‘the career professions’ (Hubbard 2020²). The idea that speaking a standardised form of English will lead to social mobility is a ‘stock argument’ (Blommaert 1999: 10) that has remained consistent in debates about language in education in England for over 200 hundred years (e.g. Cobbett 1817, cited in Beal 2018; Board of Education 1921: 72).

The belief in the emancipatory potential of standardised English belies the social and ideological underpinnings of the ‘standard’, in which racialised and classed speakers are further marginalised whilst being under institutional pressure to internalise raciolinguistic ideologies. For example, Baker-Bell (2020) asked a group of Black secondary school students to read samples of Black language and standardised English (or White Mainstream English, following Alim & Smitherman 2012) and describe the imagined speakers. These students associated Black Language with speakers who are “ghetto”, “bad”, “trouble”, “skip school” and “get bad grades” and White Mainstream English with speakers who are “smart”, “good”, “proper” and “respectful”. Significantly, these students used Black language and aligned with Black cultural styles and fashions, yet they saw (and heard) these practices as negative and antithetical to success, internalising ideologies which police their own language and bodies.

The consequences of language ideologies are particularly marked in postcolonial contexts, where the legacies of linguistic imperialism continue to propagate prescriptivism. In their study of the literacy practices of children in Jamaica, Nero and Stevens (2018) show how the standard language ideology stigmatises Jamaican Creole (JC) and privileges Standard Jamaican English (SJE), despite SJE not being the home language of most students. Teachers and school principals played a significant role in enforcing this view by complementing children who used SJE and publicly shaming those who spoke JC. While the stated aim was to encourage students to use a ‘universal’ language that would grant ‘access to power’ (2018: 17), the reality is that the dominance of SJE and its colonial legacies has ‘forestalled social mobility for masses of poor people’ (2018: 13-14), whose access to SJE is limited by institutional structures, such as the funneling of lower-class JC-speaking children into ‘shift’ (rather than ‘full day’) schools that provide fewer hours of instruction. While Nero and Stevens situate their account in relation to sharp socioeconomic stratification in Jamaica, it is apparent that SJE is more associated with Whiteness and colonial power than JC, and thus that standardised English is a racialised as well as a classed concept. Undoubtedly, standardised English and associated ideologies of prescriptivism ‘play(s) a powerful role in maintaining white hegemony’ (Von Esch et al 2020: 397) and the propagation of white linguistic supremacy, a structure in which ideologies about language work to stratify racial categories (see Kroskrity 2021).

The idea that working-class, racialised, and other marginalised speakers must change the way they talk in order to achieve upward mobility is so pervasive that many teachers subscribe to it, believing it to be their moral and professional duty to regulate children’s language through policing (Cushing 2020a), shaming (Nero & Stevens 2018), and whole-school dialect bans (Snell 2015, 2018a)³. These policies typically lack a coherent rationale, with teachers ‘pay[ing] selective attention to a small set of socially stigmatized features in children’s speech, while ostensibly ignoring other deviations from prescribed usage’ (Levey 2012: 418). Teachers can find themselves experiencing what Orzulak (2015) terms ‘linguistic ideological dilemmas’, caught between their desire to ‘take up linguistically responsive positions that value student language variation’ and ‘expectations that they serve as gatekeepers for “standard” English(es)’ (176). This dilemma is compounded by teachers’ knowledge that their *own* language is also subject to surveillance by the listening practices of management and state policies (Cushing 2020a). One apparent solution to this tension is to enact code-switching pedagogies, which ask students to ‘switch from their home speech to school speech at appropriate times and places’ (Wheeler & Swords 2004: 474). However, whilst some scholars advocate code-switching as a means of empowering students who speak African American English

² Sarah Hubbard is (at the time of writing) Ofsted’s National Lead for English. When giving evidence to the Oracy All-Party-Parliamentary-Group’s *Speak for Change* inquiry on 14th July 2020, she defined ‘Standard English’ as ‘English that is correct, that enables you to become an active citizen, to gain entrance to the career professions and also what Geoff Barton calls ‘the language habits of those who wield power’.

³ The head teacher at a Teesside school that banned the use of selected local dialect forms justified the initiative by telling reporters: ‘we would like to equip our children to go into the world of work and not be disadvantaged’ (Williams 2013).

and other stigmatised dialects (see e.g. Delpit 2006 on the ‘codes of power’), others see this strategy as inherently flawed because it simply asks racialised students to see and hear themselves through the eyes and ears of white bodies (Young 2009). Baker-Bell (2020b) highlights the labour and exhaustion that speakers must endure when code-switching:

they are continuously monitoring and policing their linguistic expressions and working through the linguistic double consciousness they experience as a result of having to alienate their cultural ways of being and knowing, their community, and their blackness in favor of a white middle class identity.

(Baker-Bell 2020b: 14)

Students may resist the imposition of standardised English at school if they see it as imitating an identity and culture they do not align with. Others may internalise the message that their own language is not suitable for schooling and develop negative attitudes about themselves, losing confidence in their ability to achieve at school and in education more generally (Baker-Bell 2020a; Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2014; Cheshire 1982; Heath 1983; Snell 2013).

Prescribing ‘appropriateness’

Despite ongoing critiques, the idea that students should switch to ‘appropriate’ forms at ‘appropriate’ times is widespread in contemporary educational contexts. ‘Appropriateness’ discourses reinforce standard language ideologies that seek to impose neat boundaries between standardised (or ‘school’) English and ‘home’ dialects (Flores & Rosa 2015). However, as Snell (2013) makes clear, these binaries are not reflective of naturally occurring language patterns. In her study of children’s language in two social class differentiated schools in north-east England, working-class participants used nonstandardised forms alongside a range of other semiotic resources, *including* standardised forms (as well as phrases from different languages, song lyrics and popular culture). Interactional analyses revealed that the children’s language choices indexed social meanings that extended beyond formality and that what was considered ‘appropriate’ was continually up for negotiation and contestation, depending on the exigencies of the interactional moment as well as speakers’ relative position in the local social order (Snell 2013: 117; see also Snell 2010, 2018b). This research makes clear that children’s linguistic repertoires are complex and layered, and thus any attempt to regulate their language use according to separate ‘varieties’ will inevitably oversimplify the range of resources involved. We also further interrogate the usefulness of the distinction between ‘standard’ and ‘nonstandard’, an ideological binary which continues to be propagated not just in schools but in much linguistics scholarship too.

As well as erasing the complexity and dynamism of language, the dichotomous framing of language that underpins appropriateness-based approaches inevitably leads to status differentials. What is considered ‘appropriate’ in classrooms and other academic settings is standardised English, which becomes the invisible norm to which educators orient (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 171). Students implicitly receive the message that standardised English is valuable for school success, public speaking and the future job market, while nonstandardised English is useful only in informal, casual and private contexts. This perspective does not account for the fact that standardised forms can be used effectively outside of formal, academic contexts and nonstandardised forms can be used in ways that assert status and authority in addition to intimacy and group solidarity (see Snell 2018b; Flores and Rosa 2015: 159). Young (2009) offers ‘code meshing’ as a less binary way of thinking about language use, one which acknowledges standard principles for communication, while encouraging ‘speakers and writers to fuse that standard with native speech habits, to color their writing with what they bring from home’ (65) (see also Canagarajah 2013 and García & Wei 2014 on translanguaging). Importantly, advocates of code-meshing and translanguaging show how these pedagogies also offer a politicised way of conceptualising language and power whilst rejecting ideologies of hard linguistic borders and boundaries.

Fairclough (1992) argues that because dominant social groups have normalised what counts as ‘appropriate’, the term tends to be used more flexibly when applied to these groups. Flores and Rosa (2015) show that white middle-class speakers can deviate from language practices idealised as ‘appropriate’ (or ‘standard’) without stigma or censure ‘while racialized people can adhere to these

idealized linguistic practices and still face profound institutional exclusion' (165). They draw upon an example from Alim's (2007) research in a predominantly African American High School, in which a teacher considered 'she was' to be an example of 'vernacular English' that has to be 'combat[ed]' (164), referring to the generalisation of *was* to plural and second-person subjects (e.g., 'We was', 'You was') but using the standardised variant 'she was'⁴. Flores and Rosa make the point that such forms are heard as 'Standard English' when used by a privileged white student, but when spoken by an African American student the teacher hears them as 'vernacular' and 'in need of correction'. Adopting a raciolinguistic perspective which asks questions of the listener not the speaker, this suggests that 'the issue is not with the linguistic token per se but rather who is uttering the linguistic token' (Flores et al. 2018: 23). Likewise, Snell (2018a) describes how working-class children in the UK regularly use forms prescribed as 'standard', yet their voices are consistently stereotyped as 'nonstandard' and requiring remediation. Examples like these expose the deficit ideology behind code-switching, which contends that marginalised speakers must learn standardised English in order to advance in the public domain but continues to find their linguistic performances wanting while rewarding white middle- and upper-class speakers whose language does not conform to an idealised 'standard'.

The false promises of prescriptivism

Schools prescribe standardised English with the promise that it will grant access to education, the job market, and social mobility. Those who do not comply can expect sanctions and stigmatisation, and the dominant narrative dictates that the 'problem' is located within their own language practices. However, the link between language use and upward social mobility can only be made if we view standardised English as a set of objective linguistic practices that can be neatly delineated and thus acquired and exploited. Yet, research has shown that this is not the case. Institutional assessments of what constitutes "home" versus "school" or "vernacular" versus "standard" language are really measures of how well a student is able to embody particular subject positions (e.g. of "idealised whiteness") rather than empirical linguistic practices (Rosa and Flores 2017: 633). The language of some speakers continues to be stigmatised as deficient regardless of how closely they adhere to perceived standards:

the ideological construction and value of standardized language practices are anchored in what we term *raciolinguistic ideologies* that conflate certain racialized bodies with linguistic deficiency unrelated to any objective linguistic practices. (Flores & Rosa 2015: 150; original emphasis)

Like standard language ideologies, raciolinguistic ideologies are situated within the broader history of European colonialism, where racial Others were discursively constructed as inferior to the European bourgeois subject as part of nation state/colonial governmentality (Rosa & Flores 2017: 623; see also Bonfiglio 2002; Mignolo 2000). An important aspect of this raciolinguistic perspective is the shift in analytic attention away from the speaking practices of racialised speakers and towards the hearing practices of the white listening subject. Adopting a raciolinguistic perspective to prescriptivism challenges the assumption that modifying the language of classed and racialised speakers is the key to promoting social mobility and eliminating class and racial hierarchies:

Simply adding "codes of power" or other "appropriate" forms of language to the linguistic repertoire of language-minoritized students will not lead to social transformation [...because] they are still heard as deficient language users. Attempting to teach language-minoritized students to engage in the idealized linguistic practices of the white speaking subject does nothing to challenge the underlying racism and monoglossic language ideologies of the white listening subject.

(Flores & Rosa 2015: 167)

⁴ Was/were variability is repeatedly and historically referenced in UK policy documents as a nonstandardised construction that teachers should identify in pupils' speech and writing.

Rather than addressing structural patterns which continue to stigmatise minoritised speakers, education policies typically instead ask those speakers to modify their language practices at an individual level, propagating prescriptivism under the guise of social mobility, emancipation and racial justice. These racialised and classed requirements also extend to a cluster of other semiotic resources such as clothing, hair and behaviour, entailing that prescriptivism is enacted through both the eyes and ears of white bodies.

Foundations of prescriptivism in England's schools

The close association between schooling, standardisation and prescription can be traced back through the nineteenth century and into the eighteenth. In this section we underline key continuities between the language attitudes that crystallized during this period and those that endure today, thus highlighting the recirculation of prescriptive ideologies and practices over time (for a more comprehensive history of prescriptivism in England see e.g. Clark 2001; Crowley 2003; Curzan 2014; Mugglestone 2003).

Eighteenth century educationalists emphasised that schooling had an important role to play in the transmission of 'correct' forms of speech (i.e., those sanctioned by the prescriptive tradition). This idea developed apace in the nineteenth century, where notions of 'educatedness' were powerfully linked with a particular way of speaking, one associated with the highest classes in London and those who attended prestigious public schools. Within these schools, conformity to a set of spoken 'norms' was achieved largely through peer-group pressure, whereupon 'the right use of h' and other shibboleths was key to leading 'a quiet life' (a point commended by the Oxford scholar Kington-Oliphant (1873, cited in Mugglestone 2003: 231). Within the emergent state system, it was the role of the schoolteacher to intervene in pupils' speech. This typically meant (as it does today) paying attention to a set of socially marked forms, including the double negative, word-final [m] rather than [ɪŋ], and [h]-dropping. These forms were considered 'vulgar', 'provincial', even 'pestilent'. As George Sampson (1924: 28) later put it, 'the elementary schoolchild began his education with his language in a state of disease, and it was the business of the teacher to purify and disinfect that language'. The result of these attempts at purification and disinfection worked to 'reinforce the hegemony of the standard ideology' (Mugglestone 2003: 255) and create cultures where prescriptive language shaming was a normalised part of school life. Teachers felt the repercussions of this too. The requirement that they adopt the ideals of 'standard' speech was underlined in teaching manuals, training colleges and inspectors' reports, where '[r]egional accents, connotative of 'ignorant' rather than 'educated', were increasingly considered incompatible with the office of school teacher' (Mugglestone 2003: 243-244; see below for a comparison with current practice, and the Gill extract which opened this chapter).

The idea that education could transmit 'standards' of speech continued into the twentieth century, as evident in the 1921 Newbolt Report. This major report on the teaching of English stated that 'the first and chief duty of the Elementary School' is 'to give its pupils speech' and thus to 'make them articulate and civilized human beings' (Board of Education 1921: 60). The report warned that this endeavour would involve a 'fight against the powerful influence of evil habits of speech contracted in home and street'. Nonetheless, this fight was considered necessary since the child who does not learn 'standard English' will experience 'a serious handicap in many ways' (67), including in finding employment (72). In addition, 'if a child is not learning good English he is learning bad English, and probably bad habits of thought' (10). Thus, Newbolt foregrounds social advancement and moral standards as justification for the educational reforms it sought. In addition, it made claims around social cohesion, since spoken language was identified as a key factor in class division (22-3). Despite these egalitarian intentions, the report consistently stigmatises the language of lower-class children as 'uncouth', 'vulgar', and 'bad English'. There would be a challenge to these ideas in the second half of the twentieth century with the publication of several influential educational reports. Chief amongst these were *Children and their Primary Schools* (the Plowden Report, 1967), *A Language for Life* (the Bullock Report, 1975), *The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English Language* (the Kingman Report, 1988) and *English from Ages 5 to 16* (the Cox Report, 1989).

Contrary to earlier beliefs regarding linguistic correctness, the Plowden Report stated that the 'test of good speech is whether any particular use of language is effective in the context in which it is

used, not whether it conforms to certain “rules” (DES 1967: 222). Bullock likewise emphasised the relevance of context, positioning correctness as ‘a matter of conforming to the linguistic behaviour appropriate to the situation’ (DES 1975: 143). Linguists and educationalists would later interrogate what counts as ‘appropriate’ and from whose perspective (as outlined above), but for now we emphasise the point that relative ‘appropriateness’ had replaced absolute ‘correctness’ and this marked a clear departure with what had gone before. Likewise, the aim as outlined in Bullock was not to ridicule or purge the home dialect but to respect it and to teach ‘Standard English’ at school ‘without making the children feel marked out by the form of language they bring with them’ (DES 1975: 287). Kingman and Cox built on these ideas, arguing (as Bullock had done) for the need to extend pupils’ language repertoires. While these reports did not reject the explicit teaching of grammar, they did reject traditional prescriptive grammar, advocating instead for a descriptive approach and the teaching of ‘knowledge about language’ across the English curriculum.

In the 1988 Education Act, the British government introduced a National Curriculum for England, which was published in 1990, based on the attainment targets and programmes of study recommended in Cox (with later revisions in 1995, 1999, 2007 and 2014). Hudson and Walmsley (2005) regard this as a positive development, stating that the most striking part of the curriculum current at their time of writing was ‘the absence of prescriptivism’ (613). They go further, making the bold claim that, in fact:

Prescription is dead – non-standard varieties are tolerated, as are informal registers; variety is accepted, but different varieties are suited to different occasions so the focus is now on the matching of variety to context (Hudson and Walmsley (2005: 615).

However, this optimistic account of prescriptivism sidesteps the controversy sparked by the educational reports published in the 1970s and 80s. Neither the Kingman nor Cox reports were received with approval by the Conservative government of the day, having failed to recommend the return to a prescriptive approach to grammar teaching (and dare we say, associated Victorian values) that had been expected. The reports angered pro-grammar conservatives and were pilloried by the right-wing press for the perceived lax approach to standards of ‘correctness’ (see Cameron 2012, Ch 3, and Crowley 2003, Ch8 for a review). The *Language in the National Curriculum* (LINC) project (directed by Professor Ronald Carter, University of Nottingham) had been commissioned to develop materials that would help teachers to deliver the new curriculum, but its recommendations (which were influenced by contemporary sociolinguistic research) caused such anger amongst government officials that the project was scrapped in 1991 and publication of the materials was blocked by the Minister of State for Education. Crystal (2017) notes that the description of these controversies ‘could easily have been written in 2014, when grammar once again became a focus of ministerial attention’. We take up this point in the next section.

Ideologies of prescriptivism in post-2010 reforms

This section considers traces of prescriptivism within the context of post-2010 reforms in England, representing a set of policy mechanisms which are, at the time of writing, in use by the majority of schools. Although framed as ‘reforms’ by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition which initiated them (and then continued under the majority Conservative government from 2015 onwards), we argue that they are more accurately thought of as a *continuation* of language education ideologies which have long been in place.

Post-2010 policies must be interpreted in relation to the broader socio-economic and political conditions in which they were introduced. The coalition government came to power following a global recession which saw them implement a devastating programme of economic austerity, triggering nationwide civil unrest which created an ideological space where standards-based educational reform was framed as urgent and morally necessary, as a way of countering the ‘poor choices’ made by individuals and the ‘broken homes’ of predominantly multiethnic urban communities (Jones 2014). Prescriptive ideologies about language played a pivotal role in the deficit discourses used to justify these reforms. For instance, the government identified ‘illiteracy’ and ‘poor behaviour’ as a way for teachers to ‘take control of the classroom’ and close ‘gaps’ in attainment and language (Department for Communities and Local Government 2013: 20), crafting a moral panic in which racialised,

working-class young people were constructed as badly behaved, illiterate and in need of strict schooling as an emergency intervention (Cushing *et al.*). These narratives translated to a range of policies, such as a renewed attention on standardised English and ‘word gaps’, a deficit perspective stemming from work conducted in the USA (Hart & Risley 1995) which frames the language practices of racialised, working-class young people as inadequate for schooling (see Johnson *et al.* 2017). A cluster of speeches made by Michael Gove, who served as Secretary of State for Education between 2010-2014 and generally taken to be the chief architect of post-2010 policies, recycled prescriptive discourses of traditional schooling, discipline, social order and standardised English in which nonstandardised language practices were, quite literally, criminalised (see Cameron 2012; Cushing 2021b; Rosa 2018). For example, Gove (2011) spoke of an ‘iron-clad link’ between language, truancy, criminality and illiteracy which ‘condemns’ children to a ‘prison house of ignorance’. In retracing these well-worn contours, the government encouraged schools to instil prescriptive language policies which included the ‘rigorous policing’ of grammar:

Visit the most exclusive pre-prep and prep schools in London [...] and you will find children learning to read using traditional phonic methods, times tables and poetry learnt by heart, grammar and spelling rigorously policed, the narrative of British history properly taught. And on that foundation those children then move to schools like Eton and Westminster – where the medieval cloisters connect seamlessly to the corridors of power. (Gove 2013)

It was via these discourses that post-2010 policies were introduced, granting schools a green light to deploy punitive policies under the guise that this would afford working-class, racialised youth advancements in employment and educational opportunities if they were to assimilate towards the linguistic practices of the white bourgeois. The following section critiques specific policy mechanisms which buttressed this ideology.

Post-2010 mechanisms of prescriptivism

Prescriptive ideologies within post-2010 reforms are manifested via a variety of mechanisms, such as the revised national curricula for schools in England (DfE 2013a, 2013b). Whilst it is unremarkable to suggest that all curricula are ideologically driven (see Apple 2019), the curricula which schools began teaching in 2014 drew heavily on the ideas of E.D Hirsch, a white man, and his work *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Hirsch 1987). In this, Hirsch lists 5000 names, phrases, dates and concepts, which he argues constitutes ‘core knowledge’ in an attempt to legitimise Eurocentric, white-orientated cultures over communities of colour. ‘Competency’ in standardised English is one key strand of this ‘knowledge’, with Hirsch claiming that standardised English is the one true ‘literate language’ of America, ‘enabling us to give and receive complex information orally and in writing’ (1987: 3). Yosso (2005: 82) shows how Hirsch’s colonial ideologies deploy a ‘deficit analytical lens and place value judgments on communities that often do not have access to white, middle or upper class resources’, including language.

Hirsch’s writings explicitly underpin the 2014 national curriculum, which opens with the claim that it ‘provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens [and] to the best that has been thought and said’ (DfE 2013a: 6). As part of this, emphasis is given to standardised English and the listening practices of teachers, who are instructed to monitor ‘clear’ speech, ‘articulate’ language, ‘confident’ ideas and ‘appropriate’ registers:

Pupils should be taught to speak clearly and convey ideas confidently using Standard English. They should learn to justify ideas with reasons; ask questions to check understanding; develop vocabulary and build knowledge; negotiate; evaluate and build on the ideas of others; and select the appropriate register for effective communication. [...] This will enable them to clarify their thinking as well as organise their ideas for writing. (DfE 2013a: 10)

This extract is particularly illustrative of standard language and raciolinguistic ideologies which characterise prescriptive policies in education. It reifies ‘Standard English’, whilst being imbued with discourses of correctness, appropriateness and an overt requirement placed on students to modify their own language practices, rather than teachers modifying the way they hear. Moore & Spencer (2021)

note how current policy reproduces the artificial, binary boundaries between ‘standard’ and ‘non-standard’ English, framing grammatical variation as a ‘choice between the standard variety and nonstandard alternatives’. Cushing (2021a) and Snell (fc) provide a detailed critique of the standard language ideologies in the curriculum and other mechanisms, such as state-issued grammar tests which were introduced by government under the argument that grammar is a system which has ‘clear right or wrong answers’ (DfE 2011b: 14; see Cushing 2021c for an extended critique of how these tests work to coerce teachers into enacting prescriptive pedagogies which embody prescriptive language ideologies).

An additional mechanism which works to prescribe the language of teachers is the *Teachers’ Standards* (DfE 2011a), a set of professional assessment criteria against which teachers’ performance is judged during initial teacher education and then throughout their careers, including job interviews, promotion opportunities and Ofsted⁵ inspections. First introduced in 1984, the Teachers’ Standards have undergone various iterations but have consistently included ideologies of linguistic prescription. For instance, the 1997 version imposed by Labour (DfEE 1997) includes six references to ‘Standard English’, such as how teachers

must demonstrate that they know and understand [...] the nature and role of standard English as the medium through which all subjects are taught and as the general, public English used to communicate within the United Kingdom and throughout the English-speaking world. (DfEE 1997: 24)

Whereas the 1997 version invokes ideologies of Anglocentric native-speakerism and linguistic homogeneity (see Holliday 2006), the 2011 version of the Teachers’ Standards (DfE 2011a) explicitly associates ‘correctness’ with standardised English and positions teachers as standard language role models who must ‘promote’ this within their practice:

A teacher must [...] demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher’s specialist subject. (DfE 2011a: 10-11)

Failure to use ‘correct’ standardised English (i.e. nonstandardised English) carries material risks in terms of career and economic advancement, especially given that the policy is used when ‘considering whether a teacher’s conduct has fallen significantly short of the standard of behaviour expected of a teacher’ (DfE 2011: 5). Policy requires teachers to hear in certain ways – to embody raciolinguistic ideologies and ‘listen on behalf of a broader society’ (Flores et al 2018: 19), enacting the prescriptive demands of the state under the threat of punishments and stigmatisation.

Finally, we briefly describe the institutional listening practices of Ofsted, as one of the state-level mechanisms of school surveillance who have enjoyed greater power under post-2010 changes. Cushing & Snell (2022) demonstrated how prescriptivism is normalised within the inspectorate’s institutional culture. We traced the presence of standard language and raciolinguistic ideologies in a corpus of over 3000 inspection reports published since 1839, showing how hostile comments about nonstandardised speech are particularly present in schools serving low-income and racialised children – and that these comments are filtered through a predominantly white, middle-class workforce. Ofsted’s official language policies have long indicated how their inspectors are trained to listen out for nonstandardised speech patterns, such as in a 2011 research report which praises the practice of a London school serving a community of economically disadvantaged students, in how

staff paid close attention to the difference between standard and non-standard English in spoken language. Pupils were quick to correct themselves when they used words such as ‘ain’t’ and ‘gotten’ in their speech when responding to questions from teachers. They

⁵ Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills. Ofsted carry out regular, formal inspections of schools in England which take place over a week and involve teacher/student interviews, policy gathering, scrutiny of written work and classroom observations.

explained to inspectors how teachers and assistants taught them to use standard English by reminding them constantly during conversations and in lessons. (Ofsted 2011: 22)

Our critique presents various examples of prescriptive practices in school inspection reports – such as a 2015 report of a London primary school serving largely Black African students, where teachers were praised for ‘speaking in standard English when pupils lapse into the local dialect’. Similarly, a school in an economically deprived area of outer Liverpool shows how the inspectorate’s language policing targeted the speech of both students and teachers:

Some staff use non-standard spoken English and model incorrect grammar when they teach pupils. The school should consider ways of helping pupils to speak clearly and correctly, using good vocabulary, technical terms and standard English.

In summary, we argued that that the inspectorate represent institutional agents of linguistic prescriptivism and ‘state sponsored language police’. The inspectorate’s power is upheld through a reliance on durable language ideologies which put management under pressure to police the language of teachers, and teachers to police the language of students. As is common in pro-prescriptive arguments, the inspectorate increasingly attempt to legitimise such practices through a lens of ‘social justice’, under the logics that if marginalised speakers modify their speech towards what sounds like ‘Standard English’, then this grants them access to opportunities previously denied from them. A language ideological perspective, however, shows us that the same speakers will still continue to face discrimination because ideologies about language are never just about language.

Conclusion

Prescriptivism in education represents a particularly durable set of language ideologies which have long been rooted in practices of language policing and prejudice. This chapter has provided an overview of prescriptivism in England’s schools, in employing a genealogical and language ideological framework which has shown how standard language and raciolinguistic ideologies have been in constant recirculation. Although there have been various waves of intensity, such as in the contemporary landscape of post-2010 reforms, we argue that the underlying ideologies of prescriptivism have always shaped policy and practice in England. We therefore repeat our rejection of linguists’ claims that prescriptivism is on the decline or ‘dead’ (see footnote 1), and instead point to how through a language ideological framework, we are able to expose how the underlying logics of colonialism, standardised English and prescriptivism continue to suppress certain speakers and their ways of talking whilst upholding linguistic hegemonies maintained by the white listening subject. In line with innovative scholarship in raciolinguistics and the sociology of language, we emphasise the need for future research to attend not to the language practices of prescribed bodies, but to the listening practices of the prescriber. We also insist that analyses of prescriptive practices in education must adopt an intersectional stance, in attending to the fact that perceptions about language are never just about language, but represent a set of interlocking ideologies pertaining to both linguistic and biological purity.

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