

## Is the linguists' View of Prescriptive Grammar Reductionist? (A Re-examination of the Accusations Made against the Prescriptive Tradition)

**Sultan Mohammed Saaiyed Al- Rushaidi**

Department of English Language & Literature

Rustaq College of Education

University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Oman

### Abstract

This paper seeks to intellectually stimulate researchers who are interested in the history of grammar and the long-standing debate about prescriptivism. Contrary to popular belief, there are scholars who still put forward arguments about the significant role played by prescriptive grammar in the development of Modern Standard English. Such counter-arguments are usually absent in many introductory textbooks to linguistics, which portray prescriptive grammar in a negative light. Nonetheless, only by listening to both sides of the debate, researchers can make a more objective judgment, avoid reductionist views, and encourage students of linguistics to engage in critical thinking. Therefore, the aim of this study is to re-examine the accusations made against prescriptive grammar by investigating various sources that give a different perspective on the origins and significance of the prescriptive tradition. The study has found that there is a strong connection between the prescriptive school of grammar and the development and preservation of Modern Standard English. Instead of being an impediment, the prescriptive approach that began in the 18th Century was a historical necessity at a time when linguistic variations were out of proportion and accepted standards were absent. The founders of this school did a great service to the English-speaking world by their contributions to the creation of a standard variety that has facilitated communication between speakers of diverse dialects of English. Unfortunately, the merits of this school have been buried by blanket accusations that lack careful analysis of what the works of prescriptive grammarians contained. The study has also shown how the dismissal of the prescriptive grammar can have negative outcomes and why it is important to re-examine the allegations made against it by modern linguists.

*Keywords:* descriptive grammar, language change, meaning shift, prescriptive grammar, standard language, vernaculars,

**Cite as:** Al- Rushaidi, S.M.S. (2020). Is the linguists' View of Prescriptive Grammar Reductionist? (A Re-examination of the Accusations Made against the Prescriptive Tradition)). *Arab World English Journal*, 11 (3) .305-317.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no3.19>

## Introduction

Any statement about language that contains the word “should” is a prescriptive one since it tells people how they ought to use the language. In modern linguistics, prescriptive statements about correct usage are no longer tenable. “Leave your language alone!” declared Robert A. Hall in his classic book “*Linguistics and your language*”, whose original title was the same as the quoted declaration. What he meant by this statement is that people need to disregard what traditional linguistic authorities (e.g., grammar books or dictionaries) have to say concerning one’s language, particularly about correct or proper usage. In almost every introductory book to linguistics (e.g., Hornsby, 2014), there is an unrelenting emphasis on the merits of *descriptivism* and the demerits of *prescriptivism*. It is, as it were, the central pillar of the linguists’ doctrine. Prescriptivism is a relic of the past; it belongs to an ‘unscientific’ age, linguists tell us. On the other hand, descriptive linguistics aims to study language as it is actually used by its native speakers at a particular period of time.

The ancients, as many people today, wrongly assumed that authorities such as grammarians or lexicographers have legitimate authority to *prescribe* (what someone ought to do) and *proscribe* (what someone ought not to do) the correct and proper linguistic habits. In contrast, linguists affirm that the only authority is the usage of native speakers. In his polemic against prescriptive grammar, Pinker (1995) condemned “language mavens” (i.e., traditional grammarians) who do not grasp the fact that humans are born with “a grammar gene” and unconsciously follow the grammar of their language (or dialect), even if they are illiterate. He insisted, “The way to determine whether a construction is “grammatical” is to find people who speak the language and ask them” (p. 370). It is not by consulting grammar books, dictionaries, great writers, but by asking native speakers. If most native speakers happen to use it, then every argument preferring any other alternative is patently irrational.

## The Research Problem & the Significance of the Study

Modern linguists’ view of prescriptivism is very tempting in a contemporary society that has cultivated a negative and skeptical attitude towards authority. As Mulroy (2003) rightly observed, “concern with correct speech is taken as a sign that a person is a despotic, reactionary old fogey, indifferent to social justice and contemptuous of cultural diversity” (p. 79). Nonetheless, the marginalization of prescriptive grammar poses several issues that need to be addressed. First of all, prescriptive grammar is inextricably intertwined with Standard English, the most prestigious variety that is taught to English learners and used in formal institutions. Many of these so-called prescriptive rules are in fact descriptive of Standard English, and as Denham and Lobeck (2013) indicated, such rules have positive social values. To tell English learners to dismiss prescriptive grammar entirely can be a source of confusion for such learners. Moreover, the prescriptive grammar of the 18th Century, as shall be seen later, played a major role in the creation and spread of Modern Standard English, which helped solve the problems of mutual intelligibility between speakers of different English dialects. If this is the case, then why do linguists attack prescriptive grammarians who were responsible for the creation and spread of a standard variety that acted (and still acts) as a unifying force for all English speakers? Another intriguing question that a student of modern linguistics might grapple with is: why were prescriptive grammars so influential in the English-speaking world? Why would a book like Lindley Murray’s sell over 20 million copies if it consisted of nothing but artificial rules laid down by armchair pundits? The lack of clear and convincing answers was the main motivation for writing this paper. A better understanding of such issues can be of some help to students of linguistics as well as English teachers and learners. In the following sections, there will be an

attempt to search for answers to these questions. The first section will give a brief history of why prescriptivism fell out of favour and whether the grounds for rejecting it are unquestionably valid. The second section will demonstrate the historical connection between prescriptivism and the development and preservation of Standard English, a highly valuable asset for all speakers of the language. The third section will elucidate the negative consequences of abandoning prescriptive grammar such as unruly language change.

## The Rise and the Fall of Prescriptivism

### *Prescriptive Grammar: The Beginnings*

In modern linguistics, “*prescriptive grammar*” refers to a grammar approach that emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and reached its peak during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as “born out by the large numbers of grammars that were produced” (Ostade, 2008, p. 6). During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, disturbed by the ever-increasing language variation, some people called for the establishment of an English academy to regulate the use of the English language. Nonetheless, proposals for such academies “died aborning” in both England and the United States (Mulroy, 2003). Something else, however, filled this gap. It was an increase in the publications of authoritative English grammars. These works became immensely popular, so much so that the 18<sup>th</sup> century has been described as “a period when ideas of correctness became an obsession” (Hitchings, 2011, p. 80). Three works were particularly influential: Bishop Robert Lowth’s *Short Introduction to Grammar* (1762), Lindley Murray’s *English Grammar* (1794), and Dr. Samuel Johnson’s magnum opus *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) (Crystal, 2019). These works intended to demonstrate what the authors believed to be correct and proper usage. They were normative in nature. Nonetheless, as shall be seen in due course, the claim that these prescriptive works were mere opinions about language usage created by pundits who lived in ivory towers does not hold water.

In their works, prescriptive grammarians did not accept everything that was common among people. Indeed, they were selective. This is evident in the way Johnson described some words as “low”, “improper”, and “barbarous” (Hitchings, 2011). Some usages were thought to be examples of corrupted speech, such as the use of *double negative*, which, albeit very common, has not made its way into Standard English to this day. As Johnson stated in his preface, “I have studiously endeavoured to collect examples and authorities from the writers before the restoration, whose works I regard as the wells of English undefiled, as the pure sources of genuine diction” (Cited in Crystal, 2006, p. 85).

One of the distinguishing characteristics of prescriptive grammars is their authoritative nature. As Crystal (2017) puts it, prescriptive grammar “lays down rules to which all usage must conform” (p. 94). One of the primary sources of “good language” is the usage of great writers (*the wells of English undefiled*), not the usage of the general public, however common it is. Besides, prescriptive grammarians taught that ‘polite English’ should be ‘purified’ from vulgarities (that is why modern linguists call them *language purists*). Modern linguists do not believe that there is such a thing as “pure language”. The arguments against prescriptivism will be discussed in a later section.

Despite being portrayed in a negative light, the works of grammarians such as Lowth and Murray were immediate successes. One of the intriguing questions that a student of modern linguistics might grapple with is: *why were prescriptive grammars so popular?* One answer is found in *The*

*Language Instinct (1995)*, a popular work by linguist Steven Pinker. When England turned into a major world power, the language variety of its capital (the London dialect) became suddenly a very important language on the international scene. However, unlike Latin, there were scarce resources that did not satisfy the demands made by a large number of interested learners. The writing of usage manuals would soon prove very profitable, so much so that “the competition became cutthroat, the manuals tried to outdo one another by including greater numbers of increasingly fastidious rules that no refined person could afford to ignore” (Pinker, 1995, p. 373). The market demand was one of the forces, according to Pinker, that contributed to the development of prescriptive grammar. In the upcoming sections, different arguments will be discussed, which contradicts the desire-to-earn-profit explanation of the origin of prescriptive grammar.

### ***Latin-based Grammar***

One of the main reasons for the dismissal of prescriptive grammar by modern linguists is the claim that is unjustifiably modelled on Latin. According to linguists, English is a different tongue, and its grammar rules should not be based on another language that is syntactically different. “The grammar of English was for many years described using the same categories as those applied to Latin, and many of our prescriptive rules.... derive ultimately from Latin” (Hornsby, 2014, p. 16). The fact that some English grammarians relied heavily on Latin in their analysis of English is undeniable. Nonetheless, it is worth asking: what is the proportion of Latin-based rules to the overall number of rules presented in English prescriptive grammars? Are most of the rules inapplicable to the English language? Secondly, during the time in which these prescriptive grammars were written, what was the norm among people? The English tongue has certainly changed since the time such works appeared. In the next two sections, different views about what prescriptive grammars taught will be presented.

### ***The Actual Content of Prescriptive Grammars***

A cursory glance at the attacks against prescriptivism would lead any student of linguistics to believe that prescriptive grammars contained nothing but pedantic rules. The same examples of prescriptive rules are given in countless numbers of books. “*Do not end a sentence with a preposition*”, “*do not split infinitives*”, and “*do not use double negatives*”. Such examples would drive a person to believe that prescriptive grammar books only included a series of rules that are artificial or derived from Latin and have nothing to do with the English language. Nonetheless, not all scholars of the history of English give weight to this view. For instance, according to Hinchings (2011),

‘Close attention to the books that advanced the doctrine of correctness shows that they were not so very doctrinaire. It has become orthodox to lay into ‘eighteenth-century prescriptivists’ and accuse them of establishing silly rules. Yet while there really were some hardcore prescriptivists in this period, it is an oversimplification to say that eighteenth-century thinking about English was militarily rigid’ (p. 87).

Crystal (2017), himself a critic of prescriptivism, has pointed out, “one of the dangers in the usage trade is seeing everything in black and white terms. Prescriptivism bad; descriptivism good” (p.109). No book on language would claim to be error-free. However, it is certainly an error to overlook all of the merits of such books and select a handful of examples in order to make an overall judgement about books that were so influential in the history of the English language. Crystal (2017) gives an example of a good language principle proposed by Lindley Murray, which is “Never to crowd into one sentence things which have so little connexion, that they could bear to be divided into two or three sentences”.

For instance, “Archbishop Tillotson died in this year. He was exceedingly beloved by king William and queen Mary, who nominated Dr. Tension, bishop of Lincoln, to succeed him.” Crystal comments, “It is an eminently sensible principle, which English teachers would immediately identify with” (pp. 109-110). Furthermore, Mulroy (2003), the author of “*War Against Grammar*” and who will be extensively referred to in this paper, examined Bishop Lowth’s *Introduction to English Grammar* in order to find how prescriptive it is. To his dismay, he discovered that “the largest portion of the work is devoted to a description of English grammar, not to a catalogue of solecisms” (p. 83). Mulroy cites different examples from Lowth’s Grammar. For instance, Lowth was perfectly descriptive of how English works when he stated, “a noun without any article is taken in its widest sense”. In addition, Lowth was not the hardliner who fought tooth and nail to force people to “end a sentence with a preposition”. In contrast, he differentiated between what is appropriate in speech and what is appropriate in “elegant writing”. Ending a sentence with a preposition is not proscribed in his grammar because it “suits very well with the familiar style in writing”, but it is not recommended in “elevated style” (Mulroy, 2003, p.83). What Mulroy has advanced about the content of the most famous prescriptive grammar calls for a serious re-examination of the too common accusations that abound in some linguistics books.

### ***The Descriptivism of Today is the Prescriptivism of Tomorrow***

As one reads previous works on language, it is common to be struck by the unfamiliar grammar rules or by the meanings that lexicographers attach to words that are used differently today. The prevalent belief that prescriptive grammarians forged such rules and that lexicographers unduly used etymology to attach meanings to words should not be accepted beyond any doubt. Let us take the example of the famous rule that proscribes splitting infinitives. The practice of splitting infinitives is prevalent in modern English. Therefore, the rule that we should never split an infinitive is a prescriptive rule, and according to linguists, it was derived from Latin. Nonetheless, this rule was not actually a prescriptive rule in the past. According to Alford (1810-1871), the author of “*A Plea for the Queen’s English*”, splitting infinitives is “a practice entirely unknown to English speakers and writers” (cited in Mulroy, 2003, p. 84). By the same token, when lexicographers such as Johnson spoke of the meaning of a word, they described how it was used, especially by people of note. Dr. Johnson, to whom the badge of prescriptivism is attached, did not use etymology or his own imagination in writing his definitions. An author of two books on the life and works of Dr. Johnson, Hitchings (2011) argues that “most of the time he did not issue proclamations about what words ‘should’ mean” (p. 89). In conclusion, one should not haste to condemn such works as prescriptive because they do not describe how the language is used today. They described how the English language was used then, before it went through some linguistic changes.

### ***The Fall of Prescriptivism***

Several developments in modern linguistics led to the fall of prescriptivism. One of the main arguments against traditional grammar is its lack of scientific rigour. Modern linguists, in trying to establish the independence of their science, separated their work from language studies of the past by emphasizing that modern linguistics is scientific. Any field of study has to assert that it is objective, impartial, and using scientific methods of investigation. Otherwise, it loses its credibility. Nonetheless, the study of language does not lend itself easily to empirical observation. Once you apply this ‘scientific rigour’ to the traditional study of language, you will find many cracks and gaps. For instance, in traditional grammar, one of the first and most fundamental steps is learning parts of

speech. Once these broad categories are grasped, the learner starts to appreciate the structure of sentences. Modern linguists tried to undermine this traditional approach by calling it imprecise. They have come up with countless subdivisions. As Mulroy (2003) remarked, “The point missed by such criticism is that the purpose of the taxonomy is practical guidance, not theoretical exactitude” (p.37). Therefore, the claim that traditional grammar is not scientific is not sound because their aim was not to find absolute theoretical truths, but to provide practical guidance, which they did. Another evidence for the lack of ‘scientificity’ in traditional grammar is the practice of giving value judgements. In contrast, modern linguistics is scientific because it avoids linguistic value judgements, which have only a social basis (Hornsby, 2014). In other words, it is just our perception that some linguistic forms or expressions are better than others. Therefore, common people who believe that value judgements are applicable to language are simply misguided. Hornsby (2014) likens judgements about language such as “sloppy speech” to someone who makes value judgements about planets (e.g. Jupiter’s moons are ugly). According to him, linguistic value judgements are exactly like that. Just as the astronomer tries to describe the heavenly bodies without any prejudice, linguists must also be impartial in that they only describe the things that they observe. In the linguist’s eye, no language variety has more intrinsic value or is inherently better than another. This view has significantly undermined the importance of traditional grammar teaching, which placed heavy emphasis on the intrinsic value of Standard English. Besides, as Hornsby (2014) indicated, “Prescriptive rules are generally associated with the usage of a dominant or prestige group” (p. 17). If prescriptive grammar does not teach what is correct and proper, but what is socially acceptable among higher classes, then there is a need to acknowledge that there is an anti-democratic element in this approach.

These accusations that were directed against prescriptive grammar combined with dull ways of teaching grammar at schools led to a shocking decision. In the 1960s, grammar was removed from the school curriculum in the English-speaking world (Crystal, 2017). Grammar teaching has come to be seen as obsolete. Were there any consequences of not teaching grammar? Undoubtedly, there were. Mulroy (2003) argues that there is a correlation between the decrease in literacy skills and the removal of grammar teaching. The UK reacted before the US in rectifying this situation, and grammar came back as part of the National Curriculum in the 1990s, although the emphasis now is not only on structure, but on use as well (Crystal, 2017). At present, the status of traditional grammar teaching is the subject of much debate. However, in order to judge the importance of traditional grammar, it might be useful to zoom out, as it were, from the present situation and look at the historical role that grammar teaching played in the development and preservation of Standard English and why Standard English is hugely beneficial, for all speakers of this world language.

### **Prescriptivism and its Role in the Development and Preservation of Standard English** ***On the Necessity of Having a Standard Language***

“A linguistically or dialectally diverse nation needs a standard language to permit mutual intelligibility” (Crystal, 2006, p. 22).

The reason that Americans can communicate with Australians or South Africans is the existence of a standard language. It is the same reason why Omani people can communicate with Moroccans despite the fact that each country is on a different continent. Standard languages are “a blessing that we all take for granted, but probably should not” (Mulroy, 2003, p. 79). Historically speaking, the development of Standard English was an urgent necessity. According to Crystal (2006), during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, linguistic variations in English were ubiquitous, and there was a pressing problem of

“mutual intelligibility”. A simple word like “might” could have more than 20 spellings. It was a time when “ even small geographical distances were barriers to communication” (p. 18). William Caxton, who established the first printing house in England, was disturbed by the extent of this linguistic variation. He complained, “Lo, what should a man in these days now write, egges or eyren? Certainly it is hard to please every man by cause of diversity or change of language” (cited in Crystal, 2006, p. 15). There had to be a solution, and there was none but the creation of a standard language.

England was not alone. According to Mulroy (2003), the establishment of language academies such as the French Academy was crucial for the development of standard languages, which were necessary for solving problems of mutual intelligibility between speakers of different dialects. However, as mentioned before, proposals for language academies “died aborning” in both England and the United States, and the gap was filled by the spread of authoritative works on language. The need for such reference works was so dire, and their lack was, as Hitchings (2011) described it, “a national embarrassment”. Mulroy (2003) said,

‘By dint of honest efforts, Samuel Johnson, Bishop Lowth, and individuals like them contributed significantly to the creation of modern Standard English, with all of its benefits. One might think, therefore, that these pioneers would be respected, if not revered, for what they did’ (p. 81).

Without such authoritative works, one might wonder whether Standard English would have been possible. Similarly, the ‘hardliners’ who fought tooth and nail to preserve ‘classical Arabic’ through grammar teaching have done a great service for every modern Arabic speaker. For instance, Any Arab can open the *Revival of Religious Sciences* By AL Ghazali, written over 1000 years ago, and read it without having to consult any dictionary most of the time.

### ***The Standard Language is More Valuable Than Vernaculars***

It is not uncommon to come across the following argument in some linguistics books (e.g., Hall, 1960, Pinker, 1995): standard English was just a dialect. It happened to be the variety that the most powerful people spoke. Therefore, it was chosen to be the ‘standard’ that everyone had to follow. If it has any prestige, it is not because of its intrinsic qualities. It comes from the social status of those who spoke it. In modern linguistics, there is an immense emphasis that all dialects are equal (Hornsby, 2014). The pervasive belief that the standard language is superior is only a perception; it is a social construct. It has no basis in reality. If there is any reason why you should bother with the prescriptions about the standard language, then it is for your advancement in the material world. Unfortunately, there are people out there who will misjudge you or refuse to hire you unless you speak Standard English. Therefore, you would be better off learning Standard English.

This type of reasoning is appealing to those who are zealous about ideas of equality and democracy. However, it is misleading. In reality, there are more good reasons why one should strive to learn the standard language, and they are discussed below.

### ***The Eloquence Argument***

According to Mulroy (2003), “A Standard Language has a written literature with classical works, dictionaries, grammars, and systems of education” (p. 81). Several Arabic scholars insist that vernaculars cannot compete with Standard Arabic in terms of lexical richness which makes it the

perfect medium for the study of various fields of knowledge (e.g., Al Masdi, 2011). The same point is made by Mulroy (2003) "Spoken dialects have relatively tiny vocabularies. Deficient vocabularies may not prevent speakers from expressing everyday feelings, but fully developed ones enable them to express themselves with much greater precision and on a wider range of subjects" (p. 86). In most standard languages, there is a group of works that have passed the test of time by their durability. Prescriptive grammarians believe that studying such perennial works that represent the pinnacle of eloquence can have a positive effect on one's language and that is why they extensively quote them. Just being exposed to non-standard dialects is not a sufficient condition for developing eloquence. Dr. Johnson explained the meaning of the words in his dictionary by "illustrating their use from the best authors since the time of the Elizabethans" (Crystal, 2019, p.78). A standard language that has existed for centuries provides people with, as it were, a vast ocean of linguistic resources from which they can draw the finest pearls of the language. Nobody can deny that some individuals have greater linguistic genius than the rest of us. When all of these individuals choose one linguistic variety to be the medium of their linguistic creativity, this language variety is deeply enriched. After a few centuries, the great literature produced in this variety becomes a resource for anyone whose ambition is to acquire the power of expression and the eloquence that can be not only effective, but also delightful.

Linguist Pinker (2014), a harsh critic of prescriptivism, has been fascinated by the question "why some writers are so great?" He, like most people, intuitively feels that language can be powerful, effective, moving, delightful, expressive, etc. In a word, it can be eloquent. Upon closer examination, it turns out that their eloquence is not just a natural gift.

'No one is born with skills in English composition per se. Those skills may not have come from stylebooks, but they must have come from somewhere. That somewhere is the writing of other writers. Good writers are avid readers. They have absorbed a vast inventory of words, idioms, constructions, tropes,..... Writers acquire their technique by spotting, savoring, and reverse-engineering examples of good prose.' (p. 12)

One might wonder how writers can absorb these words, idioms, etc. if they only read the works of authors who lived during the last 50 years or so. Now, let us compare them with writers who have access to a tradition that stretches for more than one thousand years. This explains why the Arabic language, which has resisted radical changes, has a very rich vocabulary. In the Arab world, arguments have been advanced to replace regional dialects for Classical Arabic (Al Masdi, 2011). These arguments rest upon one thing: the dialects are easier to understand. Nonetheless, there is no correlation between easiness and effectiveness. Learning classical Arabic involves studying a lot of prescriptions and proscriptions about its grammar. Nevertheless, it is an endeavour that can pay off in the end since it will give you access to millions of books that can enrich your lexicon. Literally, millions of books have been written in classical Arabic. Compare that with what has been written in the Egyptian dialect, for instance.

### ***The 'Moral Virtue' Argument***

The belief that the standard language is more eloquent, elegant, refined, or beautiful is viewed with suspicion (or even ridicule) by modern linguists. As mentioned before, linguists reject linguistic value judgements. For instance, vulgar expressions are not seen as inherently wrong. The only reason why they are regarded as bad is that they are equated with the lower classes. It is just our perception

that such expressions are inferior. After his discussion of the phenomenon of taboo, Hall (1960) concludes, “the “badness” of swear-words of this kind comes from the fact that people- people who are dominant in our society-are displeased by them and will act unfavourably towards people who use them” (p. 22). In recent years, the use of taboo words has become more common in the media, so much so that most people do not feel they are morally repugnant. So, if the society does object to the use of such words, then such words are perfectly fine. In fact, linguists claim that taboos are not universal, and they change from one place to another and from one time to another. Prescriptive grammarians or lexicographers have no authority in telling people what to use and what to avoid.

On the other hand, several traditional scholars such as Lindley Murray in his *English Grammar* argue that good language is more than “socially acceptable speech”. As Hornsby (2014) notes, “Murray was neither the first, nor the last, to equate ‘good’ English with moral virtue” (p. 33). Some linguistic expressions, independent of the society's approval, are inherently disagreeable. In his book on the vices of the tongue, Al Ghazali (1058-1111), an influential Muslim thinker, regarded the use of “euphemisms” when referring to matters done in private such as those related to sexual intercourse as a sign of moral virtue. In contrast, the use of vulgar terms that are explicit is a sign of immorality. Hence, in Al Ghazal’s views, using standard and elevated words is intricately tied to moral virtue. Norman Tebbit, a British politician, said,

‘If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy ... at school ... all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards there’s no imperative to stay out of crime’ (cited in Hornsby, 2014, p. 33).

To conclude, authoritative works on language which indeed contained countless prescriptions have played a major role in the creation and preservation of Standard English (and Standard Arabic as well). Such works do not recommend Hall’s advice “*leave your language alone*”. In contrast, by preaching the standard variety, they promise the learner the reward of eloquence and refined character. Heffer (2010) pointed out that despite what linguists say, “Millions of English speakers believe there is such a thing as good English, and aspire to write it and speak it.” (p. xvi). Because millions were willing to listen to such works, Standard English is a reality today.

### **Language Change can ‘Run Wild’**

One of the main differences between prescriptivists and modern linguists is in their attitude to language change. While linguists are interested in describing how language is used without making any value judgements, prescriptive grammarians are concerned more about maintaining standards of usage and fostering the variety that they believe is correct. Therefore, prescriptive grammarians are less willing to accept language change than modern linguists, who think it is entirely normal and inevitable. This point of contention has led to fierce arguments about whether language change is normal or should be resisted. The following sections will discuss the main disagreements between prescriptivists and modern linguists when it comes to language change.

### ***The Inevitability of Language Change***

Is fixing the language entirely pointless? If we look at the history of English, one might be tempted to be fatalistic about language change. As Hall (1960) remarked, “purists have always been complaining of change in language, and have never accomplished anything by their complaints” (p.

54). Dr. Johnson metaphorically described the effort to fix a language as “lashing the wind” (Crystal, 2017). Objecting to the coinage of new words is irrational. Trying to resist the regularization of an irregular verb will prove futile. In short, to demand that language should stay exactly the same in all ages is not possible. Nevertheless, there is a very important fact about which many linguists neglected to comment. Most people did not have access to education in the past. Indeed, the majority were illiterate. There was no universal education through which knowledge of the standard language could be disseminated. Asking people to follow any standards was extremely difficult. Therefore, the illiterate and the semi-literate were the ones who initiated all kinds of language change. As Heffer (2010) observed, “at a time when so few people were educated, but when even completely uneducated people spoke the language, any attempt to regulate that language would inevitably fail (p. xix). The present situation is completely different. When education became available, the attempts to slow down the process of change were not futile. As Mulroy (2003) noted, “The spread of Standard English through schools has retarded the rate of change in the English tongue” (p. 86). Therefore, the view that language change is uncontrollable, and nothing should be done about it is not reasonable.

### ***The Desirability of Language Change***

Whether language change is desirable or not is a matter of debate. People who try to fix the language claim that the stability of language will help us understand our ancestors, and will help future generations to understand us. On the other hand, linguists argue that language change is completely natural. “The only languages that don’t change are dead ones” (Crystal, 2010, p. 131). Language must change in order to reflect the needs of the speakers, changes in the environments, scientific and technological developments, new cultural norms, etc. In short, as Hall (1960) emphasizes:

‘we should accept linguistic change and its results as something entirely natural and normal, and something which we expect to happen as surely as we expect everything else in the world to change, whether it suits out personal tastes or not’ (p. 190).

It is difficult to give a general answer about language change. As Heffer (2010) indicated, “this is not a question on which it is comfortable to sit firmly on one side or the other” (p. xxvii). Nonetheless, it might be useful to reformulate the question as follows: *What kind of language change is desirable, and what kind of language change is not?* To accept that all language change is natural is questionable. The standard language should be preserved if we are to reap its benefits that were discussed in the previous section. Language change that is necessary and desirable is dealt with at length in linguistics books (e.g., Crystal, 2010). Therefore, the next section will deal with language change that is neither necessary nor desirable, and some of its consequences.

### ***Meaning Shift***

Meaning shift is one of the kinds of language changes that make reading literature of the past difficult, but in a way that the reader might not be aware of. Meaning shift is common in English as well as in other languages. It is when a word does not change phonologically, but its central meaning is replaced by another meaning. A classical example is the word *nice*. It had various meanings in different epochs. It is pointless to try to tell people that they should use the word *nice* to mean *silly*, or to mean *precise* or to mean something that the word meant in a particular period of time (Hall, 1960). The reason why linguists do not object to meaning shift is their belief that words do not have real meanings. Sounds are arbitrary signs. The meaning of a word, as Hall (1960) pointed out, is whatever its speakers give it.

Those who try to preserve a standard language object to meaning shift because it does more harm than good when it comes to comprehensibility. When the 'original' meaning of a word is lost, misinterpretation and confusion when reading old texts will occur more often. For instance, Arabic scholars argue that the real meaning of a word is the meaning given to it by the Quran. The continuous addition of entirely different meanings is something that we should resist. Otherwise, the reading of the Quran will be impossible for posterity.

What Arabic scholars fear is what exactly happened to Shakespeare's English. In his book *Think on my Words: Exploring Shakespeare's Language*, Crystal (2008) explained, "we find the majority of Shakespeare's difficult words – difficult not because they are different in form from the vocabulary we know today but because they have changed their meaning" (p. 156). Some familiar words that people use today meant something different during the time of Shakespeare. For example, in Shakespeare's time, naughty means ('wicked'), heavy ('sorrowful'), humorous ('moody'), sad ('serious'), ecstasy ('madness'), owe ('own'), merely ('totally'), and envious ('malicious') (Crystal, 2008). In order to dig deep into Shakespearean works, you need a glossary. Otherwise, misinterpretation or confusion will be the inevitable result. As we can see, meaning shift here is not an advantage for anyone whose intention is to read great works of the past. When it comes to Holy texts, the issue is far more serious. Misinterpretations of Holy texts can bring about unsolicited quarrels between different sects.

Al Ghazali, in *The Book of Knowledge*, Book 1 of his encyclopedic work *The Revival*, explained how the meanings of some fundamental words in Islam had been shifted. He argued that these words meant something different in the time of the companions of the Prophet. He also says:

'The origin of the confusion between blameworthy disciplines and the legal [i.e. praiseworthy] disciplines was the distortion of the names of the praiseworthy [disciplines]. [These names] were changed and transformed -for corrupt reasons- to mean something other than the righteous predecessors and the first generation intended' (2015, p. 86).

One of the examples is the word "Tawheed" which means, not detailed knowledge about dialectical theology, but to see that "all affairs are from God by the way of a vision that turns one's attention away from [secondary] causes and intermediary means" (p. 86). As we can see, meaning shift can cause all sorts of problems. Can we accept it as something entirely natural? One might ponder.

No doubt the teaching of the standard language in educational institutions using authoritative grammars and dictionaries can keep meaning shift in check. Poor knowledge of what words meant is the reason why people use them in new contexts where they do not belong. Undoubtedly, more people would read and derive much more from Shakespeare if meaning shift was averted.

### ***The Lost Art of Diction***

In his book *Figh Allogah* (Understanding Language), scholar of Arabic Al Tha'labi expounds the subtle differences of meaning in words that are otherwise thought to be synonyms. Such precision is important if one's intention is to express his/her ideas most cogently. The linguistic change whereby words become perfect synonyms is undesirable because subtle differences in meaning are completely lost. The virtue of precision in one's language is no longer present. Modern speakers of Arabic use many words interchangeably. Nonetheless, looking at the contexts in which they were used, it is clear that some words are not perfect synonyms. For instance, some words have favorable connotations,

while other words have negative ones. Being unaware of such nuances of meaning is one of the common pitfalls in translation. For example, modern-day Arabs interchangeably use “إخوة” and “إخوان” to mean “brothers”. In the Quranic usage, however, إخوة refers to biological brothers, whereas إخوان refers to brothers in faith or brotherhood as a result of friendship (Al-Duri, 2014). The English equivalent of this term is “brethren”. Such subtle differences are not easily noticed. One must read dictionaries to be familiar with such nuances of meanings.

Using words interchangeably, although they are not perfect synonyms, cannot be regarded as entirely natural or desirable change. To further illustrate the point, in linguistics, *phonetic change* and *phonemic change* are not the same thing. Each term conveys a precise meaning. No linguist would be happy to see one of his/her students using these words interchangeably. Indeed, marks will be lost in the exam. Nor will such change help future students of linguistics to understand what has been written in the past about the subject. This is not to say that a language can deteriorate to the degree that people can never be precise again. That is of course not true. If the precise meaning of a word dies away, people can coin another word or use other means to get their meaning across. Nonetheless, this is unnecessary. The best we can do is to know the precise meaning of words that already exist in the language. That will enable us to be more precise and to understand better millions of works produced by our ancestors.

### Discussion & conclusion

According to Mulroy (2003), “That we can communicate with our instinctive abilities is undeniable; that we can do so “with exquisite precision” on the basis of instinct alone is doubtful” (p. 85). The foundation on which prescriptive grammar is built is that we need to study the grammar of the standard language, with all its prescriptions and proscriptions. Although this approach seems to be intolerant to diversity and resistant to language change, it has helped in the development and preservation of Modern Standard English. Any learner who wishes to master Standard English has to be aware of its rules, which might be different from his/her way of speaking. Therefore, its acquisition is going to involve studying a lot of prescriptions and proscriptions about its grammar. As Mulroy (2003) indicated, “writing well involves the conscious mastery of countless prescriptions” (p.85). Modern linguists' adage that we should “*leave our language alone*” is questionable. Most people are not born speaking the standard variety of their language. While one's dialect should be honoured, the standard variety has a central place in the educational system, used in formal institutions, and can bring forth huge benefits for its speakers. Through the standard language, people can participate in the great dialogue to which numerous intellectuals of successive centuries have contributed.

In conclusion, this article has tried to demonstrate that the black-and-white approach to the issue of prescriptive grammar is not justified. Prescriptive grammar, despite its pitfalls and limitations, has played a major role in the development of Modern Standard English, which is a great asset for all English speakers. Moreover, the prescriptive grammars of the 18th Century did not consist of artificial rules that had nothing to do with the English language. Although these grammars taught rules that were not descriptive of all English varieties, they contained sound principles about the structure of the English language in general. Of course, there is a lot to be unearthed about this tradition. This article is only a call for more serious re-examinations of the history of prescriptive grammar.

**About the Author:**

Sultan Mohammed Al Rushaidi works as a lecturer of TESOL for the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in Oman. He has an M.A in TESOL. His teaching and research interests include linguistics, historical linguistics, applied linguistics, translation and interpreting, and language teaching methodology. He has taught several courses such as Sociolinguistics, Readings in Applied Linguistics, Report Writing, and Communicative Language Teaching.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2740-0261>

**References**

- Al-Duri, M. (2014). *دقائق الفروق اللغوية في البيان القرآني (The Subtle Differences of Meaning in Quranic Discourse)*. Beirut : Dar Al Kotob Al Ilmiyah.
- Al Ghazali, A. (2015). *The Book of Knowledge: Book 1 of The Revival of Religious Sciences* (K. Honerkamp, Trans.). USA : Fons Vitae.
- Al Ghazali, A. (2010). *كتاب آفات اللسان: الكتاب ٢٤ من إحياء علوم الدين (Book of the Vices of the Tongue, book 24 of The Revival of Religious Sciences)*. Cairo : Dar Al Fajr Liltorath.
- Al Masdi, A. (2011). *العرب والانتحار اللغوي (Arabs and Linguistic Suicide)*. Beirut : Dar Al Kitab Al Jadidah Al Motahidah.
- Al Tha'labi, A. (2015). *فقه اللغة ( [The Science of] Understanding Language)*. Beirut : Al Maktabah Al Asriyah.
- Crystal, D. (2006). *The Fight for English: How Language Pundits Ate, Shot, and Left*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2008). *Think On My Words: Exploring Shakespeare's Language*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2010). *A Little Book of Language*. USA : Yale University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2017). *Making Sense: The Glamorous Story of English Grammar*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2019). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press
- Denham, K. & Lobeck, A. (2013). *Linguistics for Everyone*. Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- Hall, R. A. (1960). *Linguistics and your language*. United States : Anchor Books.
- Heffer, S. (2010). *Strictly English*. UK : Random House Books.
- Hitchings, H. (2011). *The Language Wars : A History of Proper English*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hornsby, D. (2014). *Linguistics: a Complete Introduction*. London. Teach Yourself.
- Mulroy, D. (2003). *The War Against Grammar*. USA : Heinemann
- Pinker, S. (1995). *The Language Instinct*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Pinker, S. (2014). *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. New York: Penguin Books
- Ostade, I.T.V. (Ed.). (2008). *Grammars, Grammarians and Grammar-Writing in Eighteenth-Century England*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.