Grassroots prescriptivism

Morana Lukač and Theresa Heyd

Introduction

Linguistic prescriptivism is often thought of as a phenomenon of *longue durée*—it is frequently viewed diachronically, characterized by sustained ideologies, or attitudes that are conserved in speech communities and tend to resurface at intervals (see Spitzmüller, 2007 on waves of linguistic purism in Germany, and Cameron, 2008 on "historically persistent" aspects of gendered language ideologies). Seen from this perspective, it is not surprising that the foundational work by Milroy and Milroy ([1985] 2002) on standard language ideology is centered around the notion of the complaint tradition and explores prescriptivism and language ideology through "[looking] at the history of linguistic complaint from the Middle Ages onward, and [relating] this to present-day continuations" (Milroy & Milroy, 2002, p. 26). In other words, an understanding of the prescriptive ideology as continuous, long-term, and best viewed diachronically informs many key works in the discipline.

Despite this entrenched perspective, it is understood that linguistic prescriptivism is subject to change— change regarding the linguistic features and practices under scrutiny, change regarding the ideologies that come to be associated with them, change regarding ways of speaking about and regulating and policing such linguistic practices. In this chapter on concepts and practices of grassroots prescriptivism, we consider forms of prescriptivism that are arguably recent or at least capture the social imaginary of our time. Thus, we are interested in prescriptive phenomena that are (or appear to be) bottom-up rather than top-down, produced and reproduced within communities, networks, and socialities rather than named and visible "experts", and at phenomena that tend to be styled, *prima facie*, as ludic, ironic or trivial, but which, unsurprisingly, contain the typical power differentials and hegemonic gestures traditionally associated with linguistic prescriptivism.

Whether these practices are indeed recent and emergent or whether they have existed for a long time and have merely been less than visible in the copresence of overt top-down prescriptivism is a matter of

debate. To situate practices of grassroots prescriptivism in contemporary societies and discourse communities, we connect them to shifted constellations of (linguistic) authorities, and specifically to late-modern publics (Heyd & Schneider, 2019). Seeing that, in its most tangible form, these new constellations of linguistic authority and public discourse can be found in digital practices, the bulk of our argument and case study is geared towards ongoing practices of digital prescriptivism.

In the remaining parts of this chapter, we first offer an insight into the theoretical background of our study and define grassroots prescriptivism as one form of a prescriptive practice.

We then argue for the need to re-examine the notions of authority and publics in describing contemporary forms of digital grassroots prescriptivism, with a specific focus on written and multimodal practices. Finally, prior to presenting our case study of Reddit's metalinguistic discussions, we define the forms and structures as well as topics and targets of digital prescriptivism on which we focus in more detail. The second part of this chapter introduces the analysis of a Reddit discussion thread in which users of the platform discuss the preferred pronunciation variant of an internet coinage, the word *imgur*. Our analysis of this self-initiated digital grassroots debate demonstrates the presence of underlying linguistic ideologies associated with the shared linguistic norms and hierarchies of the Reddit community. While our analytical interest is primarily geared towards Anglophone practice, we suggest that many of our findings are not language-specific and hold for different linguistic and cultural contexts.

Theoretical background

Prescriptivism: top-down, bottom-up and beyond

Linguistic prescriptivism is understood, in the following, as a formalized and pronounced form of language ideology, in line with insights from linguistic anthropology (see Gal & Woolard, 2001) and studies on language policing (see the collection in Blommaert et al., 2009). Whereas language ideology encompasses a broader understanding of attitudes and hegemonic figurations, prescriptivist practice coalesces around largely specific rules, lauded or sanctioned linguistic practices, policies, or institutions.

Nevertheless, we assume that all prescriptive practices are an outcome of language ideologies, that is "representations through which language is imbued with cultural meaning" (Cameron, 2012, p. 287) and, more specifically, as strategies of manifesting societal power relations and inequalities through linguistic practice. Thus, prescriptivist stances towards vocal fry are not, in fact, aimed at the finer points of prosodic register, but at differentials of age and gender (specifically, at young women; see Peterson, 2020, 29); the policing of minority languages is not, in fact, driven by a wish for mutual intelligibility, but by imaginations of the nation state and national power (see Gal &Woolard, 2001); and the stigmatization of double negation constructions in American English varieties are not concerned with assertional logic, but are fueled by racist and classist animus toward Black and southern speakers (see Peterson 2020, p. 110f.). Practices of linguistic prescriptivism are, in this epistemological framework, entrenched and recognizable linguistic routines of reproducing language ideologies, and thereby enacting societal power differentials.

Because of this understanding of prescriptivism-as-ideology and ideology-as-hierarchy, studies of linguistic prescriptivism have a tendency, either implicitly or explicitly, to assume vertical relations of influence as shaping the process of prescription. Specifically, prescription is often conceived of as a top-down process, dispensed from above by individuals, institutions or small groups endowed with power. Whereas Pullum (2004) describes this kind of top-level actor as "a very vocal class of people I will call prescriptive ideologues" that are part of the "intelligentsia" of the "Anglophone world" (p.1), Pinker (1994, p. 373) refers to "language mavens", and Blommaert (1999, p. 11) famously calls them "ideology brokers". Who is identified to be part of these kinds of powerful elites depends on the linguistic and societal context observed, but is likely to involve certain expectable functions and professions: grammarians, language associations or academies and educators; politicians and similar public stakeholders; journalists and publishers. Thus Spitzmüller (2007) in his analysis of objections to borrowing from English or anti-Anglo purism in the German-speaking world identifies "purists, linguists and journalists (plus, at a certain stage of the debate, politicians)" as groups who "have participated in the given discourse" (p. 262). These powerful figures—whether identifiable by name or associated more generally with the power structures and social roles of a given society—are seen as imbued with prescriptivist influence both through the symbolic power that they exert on the linguistic market, through

formal and informal networks and hegemonic structures, but also through very concrete and material forms of decision-making, such as concrete policies, editorial decisions, or educational implementations in classrooms and lecture halls.

This focus on vertical, top-down structures of enacting prescriptivist practice is well-researched and represents a key pillar in much of the reasoning around the making of linguistic authority. Yet in the light of substantial transformations of societies on a global scale, the early twenty-first century presented an opportunity to re-examine these broad assumptions. These societal transformations, involving processes of globalization, of increasing mobility and fluidity, have in particular produced new digital publics, and new networked structures and practices of communication (see Blommaert, 2010 and Deumert, 2014 on linguistic perspectives on globalization and mobile communication). While power differentials and hegemonic structures within societies have without a doubt remained in place, and, arguably, undergone new calcifications of right-wing and neo-authoritarian regimes in many places in the world, it is nevertheless observable that the joint forces of globalization and digitization have opened new practices of communication, new ways of claiming or negotiating linguistic authority, and new discourses about language.

The first to prompt this re-examination was Beal (2010) who engaged with "popular prescriptivism in the 21st century" (p. 57) in her analysis of printed and online sources discussing punctuation, or, more specifically, the greengrocer's apostrophe. While Beal is intensely concerned with diachronic continuities, rather than disruptive practices, of prescriptivism, her paper is the first to pose the question "why prescriptivism has returned with such a vengeance in the 21st century" (p. 57). As part of her dataset, she examines popular sites of digital prescriptivism, in particular the website of the so-called Apostrophe Protection Society (current URL: http://www.apostrophe.org.uk/). While Beal's treatment of this digital platform is short, it was to our knowledge one of the earliest forays into examining digital prescriptivism, and prescriptivist practice as an activity of online communities. This approach directly leads on to new ways of analyzing power dynamics in prescriptivist discourse: namely, an engagement with language and society that is not (necessarily) restricted to "ideology brokers" (Blommaert, 1999, p.

11) and overt stakeholders occupying powerful positions in society, but that is equally accessible from a bottom-up directionality, shaping, producing, and reproducing language ideology from everyday practices of digital engagement.

In the past decade, this new attention to emergent forms of prescriptivist practice has led to a more focused analysis of forms of prescriptivism that are, in the broadest terms, *not* organized top-down, but in different ways. In particular, recent studies have explored this under the guise of grassroots prescriptivism (Heyd, 2014; Lukač, 2018), thus taking up the spatial metaphor of up/down and counter-directionality. The idea of grassroots prescriptivism borrows the semantics of grassroots initiatives and political action, and thus describes prescriptivist practice as a form of metalinguistic action that is not restricted to small powerful elites. Instead, the term encapsulates the idea that language ideologies exist, and play out below these formalized and institutionalized levels: locally, disjointedly, based on individuals and small groups, and often in self-initiated, participatory, and communal ways. Lukač (2018) offers the following working definition of grassroots prescriptivism:

> Bottom-up or grassroots prescriptive efforts are here understood as those initiated by lay members of the general public, especially in contrast to top-down prescriptivism that is carried out institutionally. Whereas the most commonly explored prescriptive efforts are those initiated by official language institutions and authorities, grassroots prescriptivists wage their battles in the media by writing letters to newspaper editors, calling radio stations and engaging in online discussions on topics relating to usage. (p. 26)

Earlier, Heyd (2014) laid the focus even more strongly on notions of participation and communities of practice enabling grassroots prescriptivist discourse—a situation not limited to, but found specifically in, digital environments:

> a form of grassroots prescriptivism ... operates at the level of individual language users or small-scale linguistic communities of practice. Simply put, in the participatory culture that is becoming

typical for many forms of discourse in the early twenty-first century, anyone can be a 'prescriptive ideologue'. (p. 493)

Taken together, these two descriptions can thus be seen here as a working definition of what we understand by the term grassroots prescriptivism: a form of prescriptivist practice that is

- Associated with lay members of the general public,

- Produced, received, and reproduced at the level of the individual, of small groups or communities of practice,

- Marked by participatory practices, and

- Associated with (though not necessarily bound to) digital environments and practices.

Importantly, grassroots prescriptivism is not a zero-sum game; it does not imply the decline of longstanding hegemonic systems enforced through linguistic prescription Quite the contrary, these longstanding pathways of associating societal stratification, language ideology and the making of linguistic rules remain firmly in place, as witnessed through many forms of ongoing language policing, from anti-feminist backlash against initiatives for inclusive language, to prescriptions regarding normative monolingualism, and the like. The following two sections seek to shed light on the context and complications out of which grassroots prescriptivism has arisen, by focusing on underlying sociolinguistic theories of changing publics and authorities, and by afterwards zooming in on the specifics of digital grassroots prescriptivism.

Changing authorities, changing publics

As argued above, the understanding of (digital) prescriptivism outlined here is inextricably linked to wider concepts from anthropological linguistics and sociolinguistics. Specifically, it concerns changing ways in which the relation between language use and publics, as well as language use and authority has been conceptualized, in particular in the transition from modernist to late-modern theories of language, publics and socialities. In their overview on mediatized forms of language policing, Blommaert et al. (2009) had already hinted at these complications, without directly spelling out the links between changing publics and changing prescriptive practices, pointing to the notion that "(m)ultilingual media contexts

demonstrate emerging media practices and policing that call into question the concept of language codified in the modernist era ... in official language policies" (pp. 203–204). These practices can be hard to classify in terms of established dichotomies (e.g., top-down/bottom-up) and continua (e.g., overt–covert). Since then, sociolinguistic contributions (in particular, Deumert, 2015; Heyd & Schneider, 2019) have focused on understandings of such "wild and noisy publics" (Deumert, 2015, no pagination) with greater attention. Specifically, this critique targets Habermasian understandings of publics and the public discourse that takes place in them as orderly, civilized, and rational discourse, understandings which often framed these kinds of publics as produced by and for a white, male, educated middle class. In applying sociological critique such as in Gardiner (2004), it has been argued that such modernist readings of public discourse efface the "messier" parts of public discourse which, rather than engaging in the civil encounters in salons and democratic institutions that Habermas discusses, produce loud, heteroglossic, and transgressive ways of speaking. While such spaces have probably always existed, the societal givens of late or liquid modernity make them particularly relevant, so that it becomes increasingly unclear and contested who makes claims to (linguistic) authority, who desires it, and who (under certain circumstances) disavows it. As Heyd and Schneider (2019) argue,

> (t)he complex discourses of securing authority in late modern publics, with elite positioning no longer being an unmarked force from "above," imply a partial blurring of sociolinguistic dichotomies—of relationships such as 'above' and 'below', 'standard' and 'non-standard', 'minority' and 'majority' (p. 436).

These tendencies become particularly relevant when digital communities and socialities are understood as new or recently emerged publics. The blurring of dichotomies—not just the ones pointed to above—has become a central characteristic of digital public spaces, such that digital publics have increasingly been described as convergent spaces (see Heyd, 2014). For example, digital communication practices have long been analyzed as a challenge to conventional dichotomies of spoken *vs*. written language, often producing intermediate, hybrid or ambivalent new modalities (see Heyd, 2021). Similarly, many forms of digital interaction blur the boundary between public and private, for example, through dynamics such as

context collapse on social media (Marwick & boyd, 2011). In this sense, it becomes increasingly uncertain to which extent communication in online communities is understood as public and "visible" by all participants in the communicative tableau.

In more recent developments, it has been pointed out that this complex array of digital publics has seen the emergence of complications in the form of new, previously non-existent, or at least unnoticed authorities. For example, the increasing dominance of global digital service and platform providers and the associated platform capitalism means that a small number of international corporations exerts a considerable influence on what can be communicated, and how, in large parts of social media interaction. In addition, the increasing importance of algorithmic curation and machine learning for the filtering, presentation and consumption of digital discourse has been seen as a potential factor in homogenizing what is understood to be proper, legitimate, and readable material online, and providing new norms for this (see, e.g., Gramling 2016 on the invention of monolingualism).

In summing up these complex, sometimes contradictory, aspects which have surrounded digital publics and continue to emerge in their context, some theorists have resorted to the notion of the post-digital—post-digital societies, communities, and forms of communication (e.g. Cramer 2015). This label has been used to point to the increasing ubiquity of the digital, so that the erstwhile online/offline distinction has become blurred and meaningless. But it also encompasses the ambivalences sketched here between public and private, human and non-human, top-down and bottom-up processes. Blommaert (2020, p. 391) points to this in describing late-modern global societies: "we have entered a 'post-digital' era in which big-tech innovation is matched by grassroots searches for agency, DIY media creation and hybrid media systems". These complexities and methodologically challenging settings need to be kept in mind when we now turn specifically to structures and topics of digital prescriptivism.

Digital prescriptivism

As Lukač (2018) illustrates in her book-length study, grassroots prescriptivist practice is not inextricably linked to digital communication and, as such, is not necessarily a recent practice, as we mention in our

Introduction. Small-scale acts of prescriptive discourse come to us in the form of radio call-ins or letters to newspaper editors and public broadcasters. Nevertheless, the intense connection drawn in this paper between bottom-up and grassroots prescriptivism and digital linguistic practice has manifest reasons. On the one hand, online communication provides affordances that are highly conducive for grassroots prescriptivism: the digital publics outlined above, marked by comparative ease of participation, by networked linguistic practice, and by almost constant and ubiquitous availability through the shift to mobile communication. At the same time, online prescriptivist discourse simply becomes more available to the analytical eye of the linguist interested in such practices, in particular through the archived and searchable nature of many (if not all) digital platforms and communities.

To gain a better understanding of the workings and emergent traditions of digital prescriptivism, this section focuses on two domains of analysis, namely forms and structures in which the practice arises, and the topics and linguistic targets around which digital prescriptivism coalesces.

Forms and structures of digital prescriptivism

As outlined in the previous paragraphs, grassroots prescriptivism is not dependent on the digital environment, but we will focus here on some of the structural aspects of digital interaction and communication that enable it to thrive and become visible. Most centrally, this concerns the participatory nature of online communication since at least the second wave of online communication, that is, since the emergence of easily accessible platforms, networks, and social media with the rise of the social internet from the mid-2000s onwards. Under these participatory conditions, it has become possible for large cohorts of users to contribute to online discourse and voice their opinions, because technical hurdles that existed in the first generation of digital linguistic practices had been taken away. This includes financial aspects such as having access to specialized equipment and an internet connection; social aspects such as having expert knowledge, such as coding skills; symbolic knowledge such as being recognized as a legitimate participant of such early online discourse. Indeed, in the participatory logic of many platforms, networks, and apps as we have known them for the past two decades, users are in fact expected or even nudged toward participating and contributing, for example through social rewards that come with digital-

symbolic speech acts such as liking, sharing or upvoting. In other words, many aspects of digital environments provide formal or informal prompts for users to voice their opinions, contribute discourse and enter online discussions and debates. At least for those who are users of social media and related platforms, engaging in acts of grassroots prescriptivism becomes easier and lower in affordances than, for example, writing a traditional letter to the editor.

A second aspect that is at least indirectly connected to the dynamics of participation in digital discourse is the notion of increased sayability in digital contexts. From early studies on digital discourses onwards, a central question has been to what extent the ease of participating in online discourse prompts the lowering of sociopragmatic standards and enables the voicing of positions and stylistic choices that would not be socially sanctioned in other, non-digital contexts. Although this debate has been controversial, the observation remains that online discourse allows for exchanges that may be perceived as impolite, rude, or transgressive. This may include abusive and deceptive linguistic practices from trolling – understood here in its narrow sense as online antagonism undertaken for amusement's sake (Hardaker, 2013, p. 77) – to cyberbullying (in the sense of "say(ing) and do(ing) things with the capacity to hurt or emotionally injure each other" in online contexts, Brody and Vangelisti, 2017, p. 739). At the same time, this perceived loosening of norms also implies greater variation in the styles of linguistic production that are possible in online discourses: a long tradition of research exists with regard to the usage of linguistic patterns perceived as informal, non-standard or anti-standard (Sebba, 2007), from punctuation and typography to orthography, to forms of reduplication, and omission (see Squires, 2010 for an overview). When we put these two factors in relation with one another, it is easy to see how they might contribute to a budding practice of digital prescriptivism, with linguistic practices perceived as incorrect being in wide use coinciding with a communicative environment that fosters direct and/or rude interaction.

A third structural aspect that appears relevant in the fostering of digital prescriptivism is that of fostering community structures, not just in the more technical sense of creating rather dense networks of users on social media platforms, but also of bringing together like-minded people in socialities, "light

communities" (Blommaert & Varis, 2015), or communities of practice, motivated and oriented by shared interests, goals, or topics.

Topics and targets of digital prescriptivism

Apart from the above-mentioned structural issues that influence why and where digital prescriptivism surfaces, the "what" is of interest, namely, which topics and targets can be identified that undergo digital prescription. The variability, and sometimes idiosyncrasy, of language ideologies notwithstanding, can we identify recurring patterns of digital prescriptivism, and, if so, how do they coagulate into coherent discourses?

When considering the themes that emerge, one general distinction needs to be made, namely between language ideologies online, on the one hand, and ideologies of online language, on the other. Simply put, digital prescriptivism is not picky: it can absorb and encompass existing prescriptivist discourses and become a platform for prescriptivist stances whose targets are not genuinely digital. Thus, online grassroots prescriptivism may reproduce long-existent language ideologies, from linguistic purism to syntactic prescriptions, from complaints about youth language to issues of spelling and orthography.

However, from this broad spectrum, certain topics and themes emerge which can be identified as being specific, and, in some cases, even native to the digital environment. Where digital prescriptivism targets such phenomena that are understood to be digital practices, it makes sense to speak of ideologies about online language. The following overview highlights a few of these digitally specific targets of prescriptivist practice – some of them more manifestly emerging from online environments, some of them tied more generally to the structural givens of digital communication outlined above.

A first strand of digital prescriptivism concerns the clash of local or national linguistic norms and expectations with the transnational, globalized forms of language use that the internet produces and/or makes visible. Specifically for anglophone prescriptivism, the heterogeneous and deterritorialized nature of online communication is a challenge to internalized hierarchies of what constitute legitimate and

"usable" Englishes (see Mair, 2013). In the sphere of online communication, the fluid and malleable, "open-source" (Saraceni, 2015, p. 266) nature of a global language such as English becomes evident through hybrid, local, vernacular, and emerging usages. This is a prompt in particular for the voicing of standard and monolingual language ideologies: concrete outlets of such digital prescriptivist discourse include repositories such as engrish.com (making fun of vernacular, grassroots English practice in Asian contexts) as well as mock-Asian or mock-Spanish memes.

A second point concerns not so much the topics, but the materialities of prescriptivist practice. Through the emergence of the multimodal internet in the mid-2000s, digital practice became a visual practice, marked by increasing ease of taking photographs and creating pictures, storing, distributing, and reproducing visual material – practices which are closely connected to increased availability of digital cameras and mobile devices, but also increased bandwidth, cloud storage, and proliferation of accessible image software. This visual turn in online practice has been quite sustained and continues onward, through practices such as meme culture (e.g. Varis and Blommaert, 2015), and an increasing relevance of audiovisual material. This sociotechnical development had reverberations also for digital prescriptivism, bringing forth an entire genre of picture-based prescriptivism. The early website of the Apostrophe Protection Society, analyzed in Beal (2010) as described above, was an early example of photography-based prescriptivist practice. Heyd (2014) explicitly analyzes and theorizes about these prescriptivist photo blogs and their semiotic layering, based on data from the Blog of Unnecessary Quote Marks. Many further cases of such photo-oriented digital prescriptivism exist, and the practice becomes reproduced on many other social media platforms, from Facebook and Twitter to Reddit.

Beyond this more multimodally oriented strand of digital prescriptivism, a pervasive – and indeed, possibly the most substantial – form of online grassroots prescriptivist practice targets the use of what are understood to be endemically online practices. This concerns in particular enregistered forms of "internet language" or "netspeak", as outlined in Squires (2010), namely stylistic choices that from early on became associated with modalities of writing and typing online. These forms were not only susceptible to processes of enregisterment, as Squires argues, but also to more concrete practices of prescriptivist

discourse, because many of them are associated with deviations from standard written orthography and typography. As Squires (2010, p .468) argues, "[n]etspeak also became linked to nonstandardness and youth, and an imperative of containment articulated a normative contextual appropriateness for the variety".

The features of nonstandardness scrutinized in this way are manifold, including traditionally nonstandard spellings, the use of acronyms and other abbreviations, the use of emoticons and numericals as lexical material, patterns of punctuation perceived as excessive or subpar, forms of presence or absence of capitalization, and the like. The prescriptivist discourses linked to these digital practices of writing were, on the one hand, motivated by the innovative character of the medium; as Baron (2002) noted in one of the early analyses of online prescriptivism, "it will be interesting to see how the tension between individual coping strategies and academically constructed standards for writing online plays out" (p. 412). On the other hand, they carried, and continue to carry, an often quite explicit ideology of diminishing literacy and general communication skills (see Squires 2010 for an extensive discussion) . In other words, prescriptivist discourse targeting perceived patterns of internet language in many ways constitutes a continuation of Milroy and Milroy's complaint tradition (2012, pp. 24–46), including sentiments of linguistic and cultural decay.

A final point concerns linguistic items which are truly endemic to digital usage, namely internet-specific jargon, brand names, terminology or related lexical material. Here, the focus turns to items and linguistic practices that are truly endemic to technologically mediated practice. Accordingly, the prescriptivist stances that surround them often reflect aspects of digital epistemologies: having (or not having) digital literacy; being (or not being) part of communities of practice specific to platforms or discourses; and, in some cases, forms of techno-elitism and digital gatekeeping. These prescriptivist practices may target different linguistic levels. One of them is pronunciation, where brand names or terminology acquires the status of digital shibboleths (see van der Meulen, 2020) through debates of correct pronunciations. Similarly, syntactic and morphosyntactic integration of internet-based neologisms inspires ideologies of correctness (e.g. German-language discussions about the infinitive forms *twittern* vs. *tweeten*). Yet other

discussions target dimensions of semantic or pragmatic meaning, including the perceived-as-correct

contexts of usage of specific terms and forms of jargon. In the case of such prescriptivist practices, we are

truly in the domain of digital prescriptivism in the most literal sense. Therefore, the case study below

further explores these practices of monitoring and prescribing "online pronunciation" in more detail.

Case study: Reddit *imgur* thread

Reddit is an American social news website and a collection of forums. The platform, which refers to itself

as "the front page of the internet" (Widman, 2021), is home to a "large community made up of thousands

of smaller communities ... also known as 'subreddits' [that are] created and moderated by redditors". It

prides itself in incorporating "a community ... about everything you could imagine" (Reddit Zendesk,

2021). The name of this social news aggregating website derives from a play on words: "I read it on

reddit." (Reddit, 2021). With 430 million monthly users, Reddit is the twentieth most popular website in

the world, third in the UK and seventh in the US. Although its groups of users are often described as open

and diverse, the majority of redditors are based in the US (221.98 M), followed by Australia (17.55 M),

and India (13.57), with its audience skewing young and male (Sattelberg, 2021). On the "anonymity

continuum" (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015) associated with social media—where Facebook is one of the

most transparent if not an "anti-anonymous" platform (ibid.), with its explicit policies requiring that users

provide their legal names and photographs, and 4chan the least transparent, as most of its users post under

the username "Anonymous" (ibid.)—Reddit's environment can be described as one of pseudonymity:

when joining the website, users are required to create a screen name that is visible across the site. The

amount of personal information provided by the users varies from some sharing their legal names, to

others creating temporary "throwaway accounts" whose content cannot be linked to the users' regular

pseudonym (ibid.). Most redditors "share personal experiences, give each other advice, [and] support e-

learning" (Richterich, 2014). Next to contributing to the discussions, redditors up- and downvote posts of

other users, which is synonymous with them being perceived as (un-)valuable (ibid.). The website is

primarily moderated through codes of conduct, which come in the form of rules provided on each

subreddit as well as the general list of "dos" and "donts" referred to as the reddiquette. The code of

conduct is implemented by moderators, who, when the rules are not followed, are able to delete comments or ban user accounts.

Seeing that Reddit comprises millions of conversations on different topics, it is unsurprising that linguists before us with an interest in metalinguistic discourses have focused on its threads as objects of their analysis. Alyssa Severin (2018) carried out an in-depth study of the normative behavior on the subreddit r/badlinguistics. By applying a discourse analytical approach to her data, Severin's aim was to reveal trends in normative language attitudes towards salient English usage items on the platform. Although discussions on matters of phonetics and phonology, which are of interest to us here, were not as common as those on lexis, semantics, and morpohosyntax in Severin's data (p. 71), one of the posts she analyzed focused on the pronunciation of the acronym *GIF* "with debate over whether [g] or [dʒ] is the correct variant" (p. 83). Marten van der Meulen (2020) investigated the metadiscourses on the same usage problem and collected a corpus of commentary on the pronunciation of *GIF* posted on "Reddit, YouTube, websites, Facebook and various newspaper articles" (p. 46). van der Meulen (2020) found that the authors of the comments he analyzed preferred [gif] over the [dʒif] pronunciation, although the creator of the GIF file, Steve Wilhite, declared [dʒif] to be the correct pronunciation (p. 49). Moreover, the author highlighted the differences between the traditional usage debates and those found online. He notes a higher level of linguistic sophistication in the arguments presented by those engaged in the online debates, lesser reliance on authority figures, and a greater acceptance of variation (p. 48).

Our study builds on their insights and aims to examine more closely the discourses surrounding the "internet's new usage problems" (Vriesendorp, 2016, p. 18), which emerged when words originating from (*GIF*, *imjur*) or gaining prominence in online contexts (*meme*), entered spoken discourse. Like Severin and van der Meulen, in what follows, we turn our attention towards the commentary on the normative pronouncements of redditors concerning the pronunciation of an internet coinage: the word *imgur,* which is the name of an online image sharing and image hosting service (current URL: https://imgur.com/). The creators of the imgur website have attempted to codify the pronunciation of the word and mention in the About section of the website that the correct pronunciation is [ˈɪmɪdʒər]: "Countless Imgurians across the

world are unsure how to pronounce Imgur. We're here to help you win that bet with your friends: Imgur is pronounced 'image-er' (im-ij-er). The name comes from 'ur' and the extension 'img'--your image!" (Imgur's Pronunciation, 2021). The dispute about the word's pronunciation continues as evidenced by the comment with most upvotes (1,100) below this pronouncement: "don't care, it's still pronounced IMGUR." Finally, in the following sections, we explore the discourse within our chosen subreddit thread in detail given the modest size of our sample. In doing so, we touch on how linguistic forms are ideologically related to social identities within the digital context.

Data and method

r/funny is a subreddit self-described as "Reddit's largest humour depository" and, with 37.3 million members, it is larger than any other subreddit group except for r/announcements. This is unsurprising considering how general the topic at hand is. Redditors humorously describe the r/funny as the subreddit "that links you to your Facebook feed" (Casually Explained, 2020), implying that its content caters to a wide audience. Most of the posts on r/funny include amusing images or videos often accompanied by the author's caption. For our analysis we focused on the thread under the post "My face when I learned that 'imgur' was pronounced 'image-er' rather than 'im-grr'", with an accompanying GIF depicting Sesame Street's Bert reading and looking up from the book as if to say "What did I just read?" Originally posted in 2012, the thread is now archived, and it collectively generated 510 posts, ordered primarily through the number of upvotes each comment elicited from the readers. For example, the three comments with the greatest number of upvotes were

(1) I don't care how they choose to pronounce it. If they spell it with only two vowels, I'm going to pronounce it with only two vowels. (657)

(2) I'm still going to pronounce it im-grr.. I don't give a fuck. (375), and

(3) Screw that. I shall pronounce it however I damn well please. (168)

The page was subject to active moderation with as many as 36 posts deleted, and a moderator questioning whether the topic of the post was appropriate for the r/funny subreddit: "all Mfw [my-face-when] posts should be kept to /r/mfw."

For our analysis of the thread, we used NVivo for Mac (Release 1.5), a software program applied in both qualitative and mixed-methods research, which allows for the capture of web content through its NCapture web-extension for Chrome and storing the selected pages as PDFs. Once captured, the stored information still largely preserves the appearance of the original website and closely represents the data. In the case of Reddit discussions this is particularly useful as we can still follow the levels of comments, and thus note which of the comments were direct responses to the original post, and which were replies to the existing comments. In other words, we can accurately follow the unfolding of the discourse exchange as it occurred. We coded all of the comments for the preferred pronunciation variant when it was provided by the redditor and the type of argument used to justify that variant. Seeing that the qualitatively analyzed comments are public, and that Reddit users use pseudonyms, which protects the privacy of real names, we opted for including direct quotes from users in our analysis without including their Reddit usernames. We are guided in our decision to qualitatively analyze our data by the fact that this research is of value to scholarship on prescriptivism, the information disclosed by the participants in the discussion is not seen as potentially sensitive, and the personal information scarce if present at all. The identity of the real people involved in the discussion is thus protected.

Pronunciation variants of imgur

We first coded all comments in NVivo for the preferred pronunciation variant. Whereas two were mentioned in the original post *imager* or [ˈɪmɪdʒər] and *im-gurr* or [ˈɪmgur], redditors introduced several alternative variants included in Table 1, the most common among which were [ˈɪmdʒur] and the spelled-out variant as if the word were an initialism [aɪ-ɛm-dʒi-i-ɑr].

Table 1

Pronunciation variants of imager

Variant	N (%)
[ˈɪmgur]	81(46.0%)
Alternative variants: [ˌɪməˈtjʊr], [ˈɪmrɔr], [ˈɪmədʒˌjʊər], [ˈɪmədʒˌju-ɑr-ɛl], [ˈɪmədʒˌgr], [ˈɛməˌdʒʊr]	40 (22.7%)
[ˈɪmɪdʒər]	32 (18.2%)
[ˈɪmdʒur]	16 (9.1%)
[aɪ-ɛm-dʒi-i-ɑr]	7 (4.0%)
Total	176 (100%)

Almost half of the redditors (46%) who stated a preference opted for [ˈɪmgur], and only 18.2% opted for the variant prescribed on the website, [ˈɪmɪdʒər]. Almost none of the participants in the discussion allowed for optional variability, an exception being one person who considered the pronunciation of a word that appears most commonly in writing alone to be irrelevant.

(4) I haven't ever said it out loud nor plan on it so I couldn't care less.

If the nature of the normative linguistic debates is changing in the digital medium, our, admittedly limited, dataset does not support intuitions that optional variability, the staple of prescriptivism (Milroy & Milroy, 2012, p. 6), is becoming generally more accepted. Even for a word that is relatively infrequently mentioned in speech, most participants in this discussion prefer agreeing on its single, "correct" pronunciation variant.

Argumentation in the comments

In the second part of our analysis, we examined the comments regarding the type of the argument their authors introduced to justify their preferred pronunciation variant. Five categories emerged from our data, as most commenters resorted to referring to language-internal logic, naming logic, their own usage, common usage, and external authority. Not all commenters offered a justification for their preferred usage; for the ones who did, the codes are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Argumentation coding

Type of argument	[ˈɪmgur] (81)	Alternative variants (63)	[ˈɪmɪʤər] (32)	Total
Language-internal logic	21(25.9%)	2 (3.2%)	5 (15.6%)	28
Naming logic	0	0	19 (59.4%)	19
Own usage	40 (49.4%)	19 (30.2%)	4 (12.5%)	63
Common usage	4 (4.9%)	0	1 (3.1%)	5
External authority	0	0	3 (9.4%)	3
Total	65	21	32	118

Under *language-internal logic* we understand linguistically informed arguments in which redditors explain that their preferred variant reflects pronunciation patterns inherent to the orthography of the English language

(5) Well, look at how it's spelled. Imgur. There are two vowels, which suggests two syllables. The first is "Im" with a soft "I" because there are two vowels between "I" and "u." The next is "gur," which is using a hard "g" because I guess that's the more common way that letter is used. So, it comes out as "ihmgurr."

Whereas this type of comment is most common for those advocating the usage of [ˈɪmgur], the second category, *naming logic*, is exclusive to those arguing in favor of the [ˈɪmɪʤər] pronunciation. Here we find comments that point to rules surrounding the pronunciation of internet coinages stemming from HTML conventions

(6) Img is short hand for image, img is generally read allowed as Image and not whatever the pronunciation of 'img' would be. So it's only common sense that Imgur would be the amalgamation of Image and er, right?

The third category, *own usage*, is the most popular one that we identified in the thread, which means that most participants tend to engage in the discussion by stating their own preferred usage. Those favoring

the most popular variant, [ˈɪmgur], do so alongside expressing an anti-authoritative stance and rejecting the pronunciation deemed as "correct" on the imgur website

(7) Forever calling it im-grr. Zero fucks.

Common usage points to what the redditors believe to be the most established pronunciation among speakers

(8) Most people call it "imgur",

while, in the *external authority* category, as small as it is, we find those who refer to the imgur website creators and their attempts to codify the word's pronunciation

(9) [The original post] should have provided a source, but the answer is in their FAQ.

Discussion

Beyond the prescriptive/descriptive dichotomy

Although earlier studies have found that pronouncements made by authoritative sources—be it individuals or publications such as dictionaries, style, and usage guides—usually play a relevant role in traditional metalinguistic discussions, such as letter-to-the-editor sections of newspapers (Lukač, 2015), and even in online discussions of the more traditional usage problems (Lukač, 2017; Severin, 2018, pp. 96–120; Drackley, 2019, p. 303)—the so-called old chestnuts (Weiner, 1988, p. 175)—their relevance seems to be negligible in discussing the pronunciation of *imgur*. The pronunciation recommended on the About section of the website is largely absent from the discussions and, when mentioned, challenged by most redditors. Our finding echoes van der Meulen's observations (2020) on online GIF pronunciation discussions. In his study, whereas some of the commenters did justify their chosen variant by deferring to the inventor's authority, most explained their preference as one motivated by language-internal logic (p. 49). In both studies, most online discussion participants defy codification attempts by choosing [ˈɪmgur] over [ˈɪmɪdʒər] and [gif] over [dʒif]. In our dataset, in fact, some attempt to delegitimize any linguistic authority of the website creators

(10)   They can claim anything they like. But it reads "imgur". It is pronounced "imgur".

In as many as 63 out of the 118 comments offering support for the preferred pronunciation (see Table 2), the redditors' own usage is introduced as evidence of the perceived correct pronunciation.

In negotiating the finer points associated with digital literacy, which can no longer be perceived as a variable limited to the written, online realm alone, speakers are resorting to different strategies. In our sample, strategies which Baron (2002) refers to as "user-generated coping ... [in which] adults concoct individual or collective strategies for handling lexical issues or the challenges of written language" (p. 8) are the most prominent. In her analysis of the emerging email writing standards, Baron distinguishes the user-generated coping strategies from an opposite force in the norm-negotiating process, the "externally-generated prescriptions" for linguistic style, which she describes both as transmitted norms (p. 8) and as synonymous with prescriptivism (p. 9). Although we may be tempted to conclude that redditors themselves seem to set the pronunciation norms of the internet coinage through a democratic negotiation process, a closer look at the discussions reveals a more complex picture.

While most redditors reject the linguistic authority of the website's creators, almost none of them assume a *laissez-faire* attitude or argue in favor of optional variability. What many of them often argue instead is that the website's creators are not following the existing rules of the English language orthography. In other words, they are rejecting the norms imposed by the website's creators in favor of the established orthographic norms, which they claim to possess. Arguing that their seemingly anti-authoritarian pronouncements equate them acting against prescriptive pronouncements is incomplete. They are rejecting what they see as an arbitrary prescriptive pronouncement of individuals whom they do not consider to be legitimate language authorities and instead argue in favor of the orthographic norms that they have internalized as competent speakers of English, as illustrated by the following example:

(11)   There are some hard and fast rules to language and word construction. It's shit just like this contributing to the general degradation of grammar, spelling, and written communication. Why is it so easy for so many people to treat language as if it's entirely subjective? No one does this with math. I can't just decide that 2+2=5 because it sounds cool to me. And, likewise, no matter how hip I think it may be, b-o-b does not spell 'bill' (nor is i-m-g-u-r pronounced with 3 syllables-this is not a matter of opinion)

The redditor in (11) thus enters the discussion armed with, in their view, adequate knowledge of the language and argues in favor of maintaining linguistic standards, threatened by arbitrary spellings, such as the disyllabic *imgur*, which does not represent three syllables in the prescribed variant [ˈɪmɪdʒər]. The comment in (11) can be easily categorized in Pullum's (2004) taxonomy of prescriptive claims under "logicism" or "basing grammatical principles in logic" (p. 12). Our observation here again is not without precedent. In describing the Twitter discussions surrounding orthographic reform in France, Drackley (2019) singles out the figure of the "ideal speaker" as one emerging from the mobilization discourses used in the dissident Twitter debates (p. 311) of those rejecting the reform. Drackley explains this notion as "individual positioning ... highly revealing of how speakers see themselves and their relation to the standard language ... Moreover, these strategies may be generalizable [beyond the French-speaking context]: in societies that place a high value on the mastery of a standard language ... many speakers emphasize their proficiency by comparing themselves to this ideal and by distancing themselves from those who do not conform (as the 'flawed' speakers)." (p. 311). For Drackley, these discourses reveal an internalized prescriptive ideological positioning of speakers, to a degree where they fail to observe the distinction between the linguistic ideal and actual language use, including their own (p. 311). Some of the redditors who argue in favor of the [ˈɪmgur] pronunciation based on language-internal logic, engage in a similar discourse while positioning themselves as ideal speakers (see examples in [5] and [11]).

Evidence of normative linguistic behavior is not limited to this group of comments. Most comments (19/32) posted by those who favor the [ˈɪmɪdʒər] pronunciation introduce arguments categorized under *naming logic* (see Table 2), exemplified above in (6). Although the *imgur* spelling does not follow the conventions of English orthography, it does draw on HTML shorthand for image, *img*. Those redditors who are familiar with HTML are unperturbed by the spelling, and for them, the pronunciation of the word is unambiguous:

(12)   *A*: ...you pronounced it 'im-grr'? 0_o

I dunno. It was immediately apparent to me upon encountering it for the first time that it's meant to be pronounced 'imager'

Maybe it comes from doing HTML. When I say 'img src' outloud I say 'image source', not 'imj srs'. So to me, 'img' immediately parses as 'image' when reading.

...

 B: Exact same reasoning for me. I never even questioned it. I just can't.. I ..uh.. fuck it. I'm out.

The conventional orthographic rules are here at odds with the conventions we find in online environments. The spelling is not unique to HTML either: as the redditor in (13) explains, similar naming patterns can be observed on other websites as well.

(13)   I assumed it was "imager" because of Flickr and Tumblr and their ilk. You'd think people would know how this works by now.

What emerges from these comments are judgments about people who fail to recognize the orthographic HTML-based rules behind the spelling on *imgur*, ranging from surprise ("...you pronounced it 'im-grr'? 0_o"), to questioning their intelligence ("You'd think people would know how this works by now."), and contempt evidenced by opting out of the discussion altogether ("I just can't.. I ..uh.. fuck it. I'm out.").

In Severin's analysis of the subreddit r/badlinguistics, the prominence of judgements about the intelligence of speakers (or rather the lack thereof) was such that the author devoted an entire chapter to the topic (pp. 158–193). Severin found that the judgement of intelligence (or *topos* of stupidity) cannot be attributed to either side of the prescriptive/descriptive dichotomy. In other words, value judgements of someone's intelligence seem to be common among groups of individuals who position themselves ideologically quite differently in language debates (p. 193). Such dismissive moves in discourse, Severin concludes, tend to "[lead] to conflict," and polarization, "with neither party willing to engage with the other's ideas." (p. 191). Polarization in metalinguistic debates is perhaps best exemplified in Chapman's (2012) analysis of the commentary on the language use of US politicians in left- and right-wing online fora. What is clear, Chapman argues, is that "high stock [is placed] in education" and commenters are "[highly confident] that language use is an effective index of a person's education" (p. 193). To paraphrase the author (p. 201), when a politician's language use is judged as nonstandard, especially on left-wing fora, they are no longer seen as a legitimate member of the elite in a meritocracy.

Here we would like to draw a parallel between these earlier observations and our own based on examples such as those in (12) and (13). In some strands of the analyzed discussion thread, knowing the spelling norms is equated with one's status as a legitimate member of an online community, that is, a web-literate and tech-savvy individual. One commenter thus challenges the original poster by stating: "Your interweb skillz are lacking," where the word *interweb* is a humorous term for internet used to refer to an inexperienced user, and *z* instead of *s* in *skillz* points to leetspeak (Mitchel, 2005), a term used to denote spelling conventions originating from the internet's early bulletin boards, which, although originally associated with the programming, gaming, and hacker communities, have infiltrated the mainstream internet culture. In the hierarchy of the online community, the "HTML guys", referred to by the redditor in (14), are associated with greater social capital, and along with it, in this context, linguistic capital, as they are the ones familiar with the coding spelling conventions.

(14)   I guess HTML guys would know the reference to img immediately.

Different redditors thus draw on different ways of legitimizing "correct pronunciation," and we can recognise their distinct ideological stances as they emerge from the discussions. Whereas some are drawing on their internalized knowledge of the English spelling conventions (11), others point to the new spelling conventions familiar to those who are coding literate (12–14). Although prescriptive/descriptive dichotomies are often unsuitable when describing complex online polylogues, such as those found on Reddit (see also Severin, 2018, p. 237), normative linguistic behaviour remains. Ideological stances are still clearly associated with specific usages that are perceived to be "correct" and "incorrect." Moreover, linguistic variants are still assigned an indexical value and associated with particular social groups and their members' imagined characteristics, such as "being educated" and "tech-savvy."

Online community building

Our report would be incomplete without examining community building strategies that lead to establishing affiliation and creating social alignments in the analyzed digital environment (cf., Zappavigna, 2021). The interactions among redditors as they discuss the "correct" pronunciation of *imgur* demonstrate participation in community building and in establishing a connected presence online. Although the first reading of the responses posted in this thread leads us to conclude that they are replies

to a humorous remark, a more thorough investigation reveals them to be negotiation attempts to settle on common (linguistic) norms. As they negotiate, redditors draw on different aspects of the group's shared identity. Those affiliated with the group are arguably more likely to cooperate in the discussions and attempt to influence others.

In what follows we will focus on two strategies of community building used in the thread, namely the use of humor and drawing on different online discourses. The users who post them believe them to be part of a common cultural repertoire shared among the participants in the discussion. Both humor and interdiscursivity act as what Marone (2015) calls "*community building cushioning glue* [emphasis added] that connects, seals, and buffers different gears of computer-mediated interaction, contributing to defining the boundaries and the identity of the analysed online space" (p. 61). By grounding the humor on specific references, or through so-called specialist humor (p. 77), redditors "create 'insider jokes' that can be understood and enjoyed only by the members of the community" (p. 79). The value in these interactions is not only in the content and information exchanged, but of online communication as supportive of phatic connotations that help establish online affiliation.

Much of the "gluing humor" (p. 65) is self-deprecating and minimizing, as redditors identify with the sentiment of the original post. Others are examples of "disrupting humour" (p. 65), synonymous with mocking and threatening the other's face.

(15)   You had the face of someone who just realized they have had a fist up their ass their whole life [referring to the Bert Sesame Street doll]? Sir, show me on this anatomically correct doll where the evil man touched you?

Some of the humorous and interdiscursive remarks underline group membership through an ability to contextually retrieve the "group-specific assumptions that are required for optimal humorous discourse comprehension" (Yus, 2018, p. 291). Such contextual, group-specific knowledge may include showcasing familiarity with the post repository on Reddit. According to the commenter in (16), for example, the platform is home to numerous discussions on pronunciation.

(16)   Upvote because, 1, me too, and 2, like the only pronunciation spelling I've seen on this page that

    is unambiguous!

Redditors in our dataset also reference memes, when they refer to im-gur as "scumbag pronunciation," in

reference to the Scumbag Steve meme, or jokingly state, "I pronounce it ermahgerd."

Conclusion and outlook

We began our discussion in this chapter by stating that prescriptivism as a sociolinguistic phenomenon is

subject to change. In exploring such changes, we focused on self-initiated digital grassroots debates

surrounding the pronunciation of internet coinages, new usage features that have become the object of

prescriptive commentary. These words, along with other features originating in online registers, can no

longer be viewed as disparate from offline communication, as assumed in earlier scholarship under the

"digital dualism" paradigm (Jurgenson, 2012). This lack of separation between online and offline

language use (cf. Ilbury, 2020, pp. 24–27)—and the blurring of dichotomies that we discussed above—

becomes obvious once speakers start asking questions such as "What is the correct pronunciation of

imgur, *meme*, or *GIF*?" The answers that redditors provide to these questions are telling about the

linguistic ideologies associated with them and shared community norms and hierarchies that are reflected

in the discussions. In these digital communal spaces presumably populated by "wild publics" the

discussions may be lively, but, once we analyze the discourse exchanges, not as diverse or removed from

their more traditional counterparts. Although the hierarchies may have shifted, they are nevertheless

present. Linguistic capital is claimed by *ideal speakers*, knowledgeable on orthographic rules, and the

tech-savvy, fluent in the digital, programming-language influenced register. Our findings, as tentative as

they may be, point to the complexities and the richness of the discussions on emerging usage conventions.

As the debate moves forward, it will be interesting to observe how norms continue to be negotiated as the

imagined dividing line between online and offline communication continues to dissipate.

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