

Marten van der Meulen. *Unraveling prescriptivism: Relations between language advice publications and language use in the Netherlands*. Amsterdam: LOT, 2022. VIII + 259 blz. ISBN: 978-94-6093-416-2, DOI 10.48273/LOT0632. €38.

Marten van der Meulen's book, *Unraveling prescriptivism: Relations between language advice publications and language use in the Netherlands*, serves as a relevant contribution to the evolving landscape of research on linguistic prescriptivism. The dissertation, which was successfully defended on 16 January 2023 at the Radboud University Nijmegen, navigates the intricate relationship between language advice publications and language use, particularly focusing on the Dutch context.

The book is embedded within the body of empirical studies on prescriptivism that has been forming since the turn of the millennium. Originating from historical and, predominantly, English sociolinguistics, research into the impact of prescriptivism on language has expanded into diverse contexts, enveloping historical and contemporary periods, as well as different geographical and linguistic landscapes. By guiding readers through both historical and contemporary prescriptive efforts and their potential effects, the work addresses a lacuna in the understanding of Dutch prescriptivism. While treading a new path in terms of the analyzed data, Van der Meulen grounds the work theoretically in the established literature on prescriptivism and adds insights specific to the Dutch linguistic context.

The introduction juxtaposes seemingly incompatible observations. On the one hand, language advice in Dutch, akin to other standardized languages, enjoys popularity and manifests in various forms: from published books, such as *The Schrijfwijzer* (Renkema 1979) with its almost half a million sold copies, and online sources, including the website of the magazine *Onze Taal* and an image-sharing platform documenting language errors *Taalvoutjes* [sic] to newspaper letter-to-the-editor sections. On the other hand, although researchers have acknowledged the Dutch prescriptive canon and investigated its various expressions, there remains a noticeable absence of systematic exploration. This paradox serves as the impetus for Van der Meulen's work.

The core of the book consists of seven independently published chapters, each offering a unique perspective on the relationship between language advice publications and usage. Throughout much of the book, the units of

analysis are “usage items,” defined as “a specific type of linguistic variable, i.e., ‘two or more ways of saying the same thing’ (Labov 1982: 49),” wherein one variant is typically stigmatized. An illustrative example in Dutch involves the variable usage of comparative conjunctions *als* and *dan*, with prescriptive publications largely endorsing one variant, especially in equative constructions (e.g., *even so groot als*). The second unit of analysis, as coined by Van der Meulen, are “precepts,” or “specific evaluations of . . . usage items” found in prescriptive publications. The book explores the diachronic development of precepts regarding the stance towards variation and argumentation, as well as the intricate relationship between precepts and usage.

Chapter 2 initiates a diachronic exploration through an analysis of stance and epithets in 130 twentieth-century Dutch language advice books compiled for this investigation. The analysis reveals an increase in partial acceptance of variation over time, accompanied by shifting values. Notably, PURITY, GRAMMATICALITY, and UNIFORMITY emerge as predominant values among authors providing prescriptive usage advice. While the relevance of PURITY diminishes over time, GRAMMATICALITY gains ground. This arguably reflects the establishment of linguistics as an independent discipline, and grammar assuming a foundational role. Moreover, the value judgments presented are not systematically generated, and authors rely on *ipse dixit* judgments, that is, those grounded in personal preferences rather than in earlier literature. This finding aligns with previous research on English (Algeo 1991; Peters 2006), underscoring common cross-linguistic and cross-cultural characteristics inherent in prescriptive literature.

Chapter 3 further narrows the focus on the treatment of individual usage items in the usage advice literature, and it challenges what has long been considered as the conventional definition of prescriptivism, namely, the suppression of linguistic variation (Milroy & Milroy 1999: 6, 22). The analysis uncovers nuanced trends, with evidence of both growing acceptance and decreasing acceptability in specific morphosyntactic features. Out of the six variables studied, evidence of growing acceptance is observed in the following three cases:

1. Variable verb order in subordinate clauses (i.e., the standard variant (henceforth S) *dat hij is gekomen* “that he has come,” as opposed to the non-standard variant (henceforth NS) *dat hij gekomen is* “that he come has”);
2. Variable adverb inflection (*een heel mooie auto* (S) *een hele mooie auto* (NS) “a very/very.INFL nice car”) and;
3. Optional preposition *hij beloofde* \emptyset *te komen* (S) | *hij beloofde om te komen* (NS) “he promised \emptyset /for to come.”

The opposite trend, indicating a decrease in acceptability, is noted for the following three morphosyntactic features (p. 64):

4. Verb agreement with *a number of X* (*een aantal mensen is* (S) as opposed to *een aantal mensen zijn* (NS) “a number of people is/are”);
5. Verb form for second person singular *kunnen* (*je kan* (S) as opposed to *je kunt* (NS) “you can”); and
6. Double negation (*Ik heb nooit* (S) vs. *ik heb nooit geen* (NS) “I have never/never no”).

These findings lead to the conclusion that generalizations are not useful in a nuanced approach to prescriptivism; precepts may be both inactive and dynamic simultaneously. To explore this, as the author does, case studies and life stories of individual usage items are worth investigating in their own right to account for the interplay between prescriptivism and language use.

In Chapter 4, Van der Meulen revisits Milroy and Milroy’s definition of prescriptivism as suppression of optional variability. Focusing on five usage items related to the comparative particles *als* and *dan*, he delves into prescriptive literature from 1900 to 2017. The analysis reveals a trend toward diminishing acceptance of variation over time, particularly in the case of equatives. Despite general findings suggesting greater acceptance of variation in usage advice literature, comparatives and equatives in Dutch remain a peculiar case, Van der Meulen finds, marked by strict attitudes. The chapter underscores the nuanced relationship between actual usage and prescriptivism, highlighting the presence of ipse-dixit judgments and the often-mentioned suppression of variation as core characteristics of Dutch language advice literature. The author rightly concludes that this case study exemplifies the complex dynamics between prescriptive efforts and the evolving acceptability of linguistic variation.

Based on a collaborative paper with Gijsbert Rutten, Chapter 5 showcases an additional avenue for exploring the potential interplay between prescriptivism and language use. Instead of examining whether prescriptivism influences language use, the question is reversed to explore whether prescriptive pronouncements have their basis in usage. Here, the focus is on a purist word list from 1847 authored by one of the first university professors of Dutch language, Matthijs Siegenbeek (1774–1854) (*Lijst van woorden en uitdrukkingen met het Nederlandsch taaleigen strijdende*, “List of words and expressions at odds with the nature of Dutch”). Siegenbeek’s work, a product of Dutch nationalism in the nineteenth century, vehemently opposes loanwords, particularly from German. This is unsurprising given

his role in the standardization of Dutch through his book on Dutch spelling *Verhandeling over de Nederduitsche spelling* “Treatise about Dutch spelling” (1804), which is, alongside similar publications of the time, seen as marking “the beginning of the official codification of Dutch” (Rutten 2019: 53). The chapter delves into Siegenbeek’s purist tradition, which largely criticizes newspapers and translations. The methodology involves examining 177 entries in the list, with 85 referencing usage, using the Digital Dutch Library of Literature and Non-fiction (DBNL), a 1.07-billion-word collection of more than 10,000 titles, spanning from the Middle Ages onwards. The findings show correlations between Siegenbeek’s pronouncements and usage trends, supporting many of his intuitions about language use and its developments. While not always a perfect proxy for frequency of usage, Siegenbeek’s insights reflect his solid grasp of the Dutch linguistic landscape.

In 2005, Arnold Zwicky published a widely-read blog post on the LanguageLog blog. In the post, he commented on common misapprehensions observed among prescriptivists, specifically highlighting what he termed the Recency and the Frequency Illusions. While the Recency Illusion falsely identifies a linguistic feature as new, the Frequency Illusion overestimates the spread of its usage. In Chapter 6, Van der Meulen empirically examines these misapprehensions in his corpus of Dutch language advice publications. The Recency Illusion is tested by analyzing statements about the timing of language variations. The Frequency Illusion is examined by comparing mentions of frequency in prescriptive writing with usage data and the survey of Dutch probability and frequency terms and phrases (Willems, Albers & Smeets 2020). The study reveals that lexical items are predominantly discussed in the context of recent changes, with grammar being the most discussed topic overall. However, upon comparing prescriptive statements with actual usage, Van der Meulen finds that many linguistic phenomena labeled as recent had been well-established in general usage when first mentioned. The chapter suggests that recency statements have become less popular over time, possibly indicating awareness of established discussions. Van der Meulen tentatively proposes that frequency labels may serve as rhetorical devices rather than genuine arguments. Despite expectations, newer publications do not necessarily contain fewer illusions, challenging the assumption of increasing accuracy over time in prescriptive literature. The study acknowledges the validity of Zwicky’s illusions in the Dutch prescriptive canon, paving the way for further detailed analyses of prescriptive texts.

As mentioned above, a prominent example in the Dutch prescriptive tradition is the usage of the nonstandard comparative conjunction *als* instead of the standard *dan*. The proscription against the nonstandard variant

dates back to the sixteenth century, yet its persistence raises questions about the relationship between usage and norms. To investigate this, Van der Meulen introduces what he calls the “precept-vs-practice” approach, comparing spoken parliamentary debates with official written reports. The study scrutinizes the changes introduced by the *Dienst Verslag en Redactie* “Report and Editing Service” in their transcripts of the spoken debates and preparation of official parliamentary proceedings, revealing how prescriptive norms are enforced within the Dutch parliament. While earlier literature has explored the impact of prescriptivism on language change, the study presented in Chapter 7 stands out for its access to policy documents guiding the editing process. The findings indicate that, overall, registrars (formerly called stenographers) tend to follow established rules in transcriptions, with the exception of the usage of *u hebt* instead of the traditionally preferred *u heeft* (“you.POL have”), suggesting ongoing language change or broader acceptance of both variants.

In his final case study in Chapter 8, van der Meulen employs triangulation to examine linguistic prescriptivism by analyzing prescriptive publications, actual usage, and attitudes. Although not without precedent (see Tiekens-Boon van Ostade 2019), this approach addresses a research gap where few studies explore the interplay between these dimensions. Focusing on nine Dutch usage items, van der Meulen examines their usage in spoken and written corpora, surveys attitudes from the Meertens panel in 2010 (as reported in Bennis & Hinskens 2014), and studies precepts from prescriptive publications between 1995 and 2015. The results reveal a complex but structured variation in the data. The study identifies factors influencing distinct patterns, shedding light on the absence or acceptance of non-standard variants across different linguistic elements. While factors such as frequency, salience, and origin of variation are noted, the exact relationships remain somewhat unclear, suggesting potential avenues for future research in this fertile ground.

In the concluding chapter, Van der Meulen summarizes his exploration of Dutch prescriptivism. His multifaceted studies reveal a shift in language advice precepts, indicating a growing acceptance of linguistic variation over time. Delving into the relationship between precepts and usage, he uncovers various influences at play, noting a prevalent reluctance to embrace linguistic variation within prescriptive guidelines. The book serves as a rich resource for researchers interested in prescriptivism, showcasing diverse avenues for study and highlighting the dynamic nature of research in this field. It is equally engaging for linguists focusing on Dutch prescriptivism and those exploring prescriptivism more broadly, offering valuable

insights for conducting research in the field. Van der Meulen concludes with a practical call for conscious literacy and open dialogue within the realm of prescriptivism. The book, with its social relevance, emphasizes the role of scholarship on prescriptivism in challenging negative stereotypes and fostering inclusivity in language use.

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