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Marten van der Meulen

Unraveling prescriptivism

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Relations between language advice publications and language use in the Netherlands

Language advice publications contain precepts about specific cases of language variation (*usage items*), for which one variant is deemed unacceptable. Such works are a manifestation of the ideology of *prescriptivism*, or the idea that there are 'right' and 'wrong' linguistic forms. Dutch examples of usage items include the comparative conjunctions *als* and *dan* 'as/than' and verb agreement with quantifying noun *aantal* 'number', among many others. This thesis takes these rather neglected works, particularly aimed at Dutch speakers in the Netherlands, as a starting point, investigating both the development of usage items and their interplay with usage.

Results highlight the variability of prescriptivism. Studies of the general usage item tradition and specific selections of usage items show that the stance towards variation differs synchronically and diachronically between usage items. Argumentation is used haphazardly. The mapping of Dutch prescriptivism to actual language usage presents a similarly varied picture. The influence of usage on language advice publications seems limited. Frequency and recency statements rarely conform to actual usage, although exceptions can be found. Conversely, a case study of parliamentary language shows that precepts can influence language use, depending on the mode, usage item and linguistic level (grammatical or lexical). The final chapter finds a limited number of patterns in the distribution of acceptance between precept, usage and attitude, suggesting mutual influence.

All in all, this thesis emphasizes the importance of studying prescriptivism as a complex, rather than a monolithic phenomenon, and argues for a re-evaluation of the intricate relations between prescriptivism and usage.

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