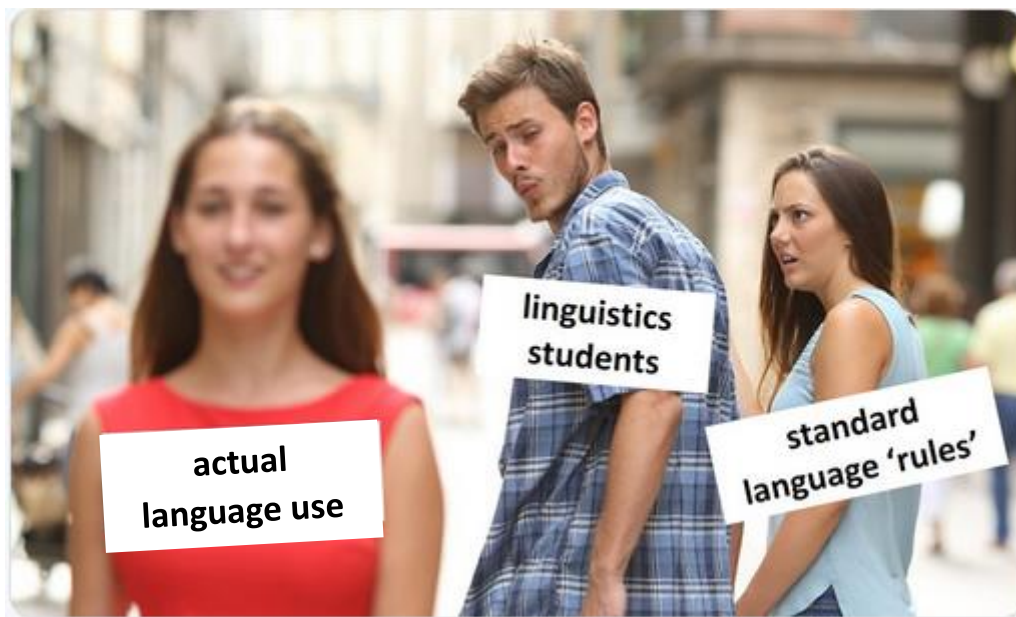


Grassroots prescriptivism in below-the-line comments of *The Pedant*

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Chapter 1. Introduction

“...it may not be a crime to boldly split infinitives but it sounds horrible and it is horrible” (Camelot, 26 September 2017).

The twenty-first century has seen a steady interest in linguistic prescriptivism, – the belief that there is a correct form of English, usually termed Standard English, which is superior to other non-standard forms (Straaijer, 2016:233; Ebner, 2017:1). This is not only illustrated in the above quotation, but is reflected in the increase in blogs, as well as websites and usage guides offering advice on what is ‘correct’ English. There are even automated (bot) accounts on Twitter than will tweet you with suggested corrections, should you make a grammar mistake when tweeting.

An additional way in which concepts of linguistic correctness and prescriptivism have historically been promulgated and discussed is via the public press (Sturiale, 2016) where authors and journalists have provided advice and guidance regarding the ‘correct’ forms of Standard English. The advice offered, according to Sturiale, was disseminated either in the form of specific advice columns or through letters to the editor responding to the original article, and veers between prescriptive to the more descriptive. Alongside other forms of linguistic prescriptivism mentioned here, there has also been an increase in regular newspaper columns and articles discussing ideas of language correctness, for example by journalists like Lane Green in *The Economist*, Oliver Kamm in *The Times* and the linguist Peter Trudgill in *The Eastern Daily Press*. While covering areas such as pronunciation and language change, most columns and articles are concerned with points of grammar and usage problems, ranging from old chestnuts such as the split infinitive (Kamm, September 26, 2017) to comma splices (Kamm, 2017, November 4). The articles and columns can derive from a controversy engendered by a perceived linguistic error made by someone in the public eye or from a query raised by a member of the public, addressed to the author. For example, in August 2017, Kamm wrote a column discussing *less* with countable nouns, a usage problem shibboleth, after the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, chastised an MP for using *less* instead of *fewer* (Kamm, 19 August 2017). In response, some commentators below-the-line (BTL) echoed Kamm’s belief that Mr Speaker was being overly pedantic. Others took a far more prescriptive stance, such as JM, who commented: “No, Mr Kamm. It is the accepted convention that “fewer” is used with count nouns and less for “non-count” nouns. The fact that some people continually make an error here does not make their usage correct” (JM, 19 August 2017).

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With the development of online versions of newspapers, responses to these articles can be published immediately as readers post their opinions and comments BTL. As with letters to the editor (Lukač, 2016; Sturiale, 2016), which are the traditional equivalents and precursors of BTL comments, these comments are worth studying for what they reveal about grassroots prescriptive attitudes – defined as attitudes held by non-linguists towards language correctness (Heyd, 2014:489–490; Lukač, 2016:321).

Using comments posted BTL by members of the public, in response to a regular column on language use in *The Times* titled “The Pedant”, written by Oliver Kamm, a journalist-turned-usage guide writer, I will examine these posts for evidence of grassroots prescriptivism. The aim of this thesis is to explore grassroots prescriptive attitudes as expressed by the posters. I will approach the topic by identifying the main themes, in particular the types of arguments used, and language preoccupations of the commentators, and on the basis of their comments I will examine whether the evidence provided by this analysis confirms previous studies on prescriptive attitudes and grassroots prescriptivism, such as Joan Beal’s “The Grocer’s Apostrophe: Popular Prescriptivism in the 21st Century” (2010) or Morana Lukač’s “Linguistic Prescriptivism in Letters to the Editor” (2016). My analysis will focus on two specific issues important to posters, derived from the frequency with which these recur BTL. Firstly, what do the commentators themselves understand by and mean when they discuss prescriptive ideologies, including prescriptivism, descriptivism – its alleged linguistically more objective counterpart (Cameron, 1995:5) – and language ‘correctness’? Secondly, based on the regularity with which the usage problem occurred both above and BTL, posters’ responses to a classic usage problem – that of *less* with countable nouns – are analysed for grassroots prescriptive attitudes. The thesis concludes that a small majority of BTL posters hold well-documented grassroots prescriptive attitudes towards language correctness.

In what follows I will first discuss prescriptivism and its place as the final stage in the standardisation of English, criticisms of prescriptive ideologies, and examine the increasing popularity of prescription in the twenty-first century, particularly online (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 explores the methods and data I used, providing an overview of *The Times* including general sociolinguistic data on the readership and “The Pedant” column, before describing how the data was analysed. Chapters 4 and 5 contain the results and their analyses. Chapter 4 focusses on metalinguistic discussions surrounding prescriptive ideologies while Chapter 5 examines a traditional usage problem – that of *less* with countable nouns. Within these two

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chapters I not only provide a quantitative analysis of the argument types used, but also a comprehensive examination of them. Lastly, Chapter 6 provides a conclusion.

Chapter 2. Understanding prescriptivism

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss what is understood by prescriptivism in the context of this thesis, firstly by providing a definition and then by the examination of prescription as the final stage in the process of the standardisation of English. Next, I will look at a part of this standardisation process, what Milroy and Milroy (2012) term the complaint tradition, before providing an overview of the descriptive arguments used to rebut some common prescriptive beliefs. The next section analyses prescriptivism in the twenty-first century, including the continued popularity of usage guides. Lastly, the role of Web 2.0 in enabling grassroots prescriptive attitudes, whether through more traditional means such as BTL comments or language blogs, or more innovative mediums like photo blogs, social media platforms including Facebook and Reddit or specific groups such as The Apostrophe Protection Society is examined.

2.2 Defining prescriptivism and prescriptive ideologies

2.2.1 Defining prescriptivism

The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines *prescriptivism* in a linguistic sense as: “The practice or advocacy of prescriptive grammar; the belief that the grammar of a language should lay down rules to which usage must conform” (*OED*, s.v. prescriptivism). In contrast, the *OED* defines *descriptivism* as “describ[ing] the way language is used, without prescribing rules or referring to norms of correctness”. As shown by the two *OED* definitions, prescriptivism is most usually placed in opposition to descriptivism (Cameron, 1995:5; Beal, 2009:36; Curzan, 2014:1, 12). Prescriptivism then, can be defined as a normative attitude towards language, in this case Standard English (henceforth SE), that upholds and perpetuates conventions that are often contrary to regular usage (Crystal, 2006; Peters, 2006).

2.2.2 Prescription in the standardisation of English

Milroy and Milroy (2012:30) describe *prescription* as the final stage of the English standardisation process, following on from *codification*. While the *codification* stage established a set of conventions for the development of SE (cf. Crystal, 2004:365–387; Nevalainen & Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2006:282–284; Milroy & Milroy, 2012:28–29), *prescription* – the attempt to enforce the conventions established by the codifiers, – is an ongoing process and has, overall, only been partially successful (Milroy & Milroy, 1991:69).

Usage guides, which “offer[ed] advice on language use” (Straaijer, 2017:12), are an example of how this standardisation process was enforced. While guidance on ‘correct’ grammar was naturally included, usage guides also contained advice on conventions of style, etymology, spelling, lexis, punctuation and pronunciation (Weiner, 1988:173). (For further information see Crystal, 2004; Peters, 2006; Beal, 2009; Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2010, 2017; Straaijer, 2017.) Weiner (1998:178–179) also discusses what he terms ‘social’ considerations, which covers the sociolinguistic aspects contained in the advice offered by usage guides.

One consequence of this continuous attempt to impose normative rules has been to establish and reinforce the idea that there is only one ‘correct’ and, by implication, superior form of English (cf. L. Milroy, 2001:61; Crystal, 2006:105; Milroy & Milroy, 2012:30; Curzan, 2014:30; Pullum, 2017:186). As a result, non-standard forms of English have been denigrated and stigmatised (Fairclough, 2001:48; Crystal, 2004:105), both institutionally from those setting and enforcing the standard, such as politicians and educators who develop school curricula (cf. Cameron, 1995; Watts, 2011; Milroy & Milroy, 2012), and from the public (cf. BurrIDGE, 2010; Heyd, 2014; Lukač, 2018c).

2.2.3 The complaint tradition

While prescriptive language ideologies have often been enforced from above, through government institutions or via education, Milroy and Milroy (2012:30–31) argue that a normative language ideology has also been promoted by the public, through what they term the complaint tradition, which they divided into Type 1 and Type 2 complaints. Both types of complaint have traditionally involved activities such as writing letters to the editor of newspapers such as *The Times* (Lukač, 2016), or complaining to institutions like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) about perceived incorrect language use (Ebner, 2016:309). The internet has enabled these normative activities to expand online and include groups who traditionally would not have participated in discussions over usage (Lukač, 2018b:4). Examples include blogging about language use, participating in metalinguistic debates in newspapers, magazines or online forums and message boards, or belonging to groups on social media centred around language (mis)usage.

2.2.4 Linguistic criticisms of prescriptive language ideologies

As noted previously (§2.2.1), prescriptivism is usually defined in opposition to descriptivism. While descriptive linguists have studied how language is used by its speakers to help them derive internal rules and structures (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002:8), prescriptivists take little

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account of usage, and instead attempt to impose arbitrary conventions on usage (Crystal, 2006:104; Peters, 2006:761). Many of the arguments put forward by prescriptivists to support their prescriptive ideologies have been analysed and rebutted by linguists. The most commonly employed are discussed below. Firstly, prescriptivists generally ignore usage. This places artificial conventions on naturally occurring and grammatically correct language use. An example is the prescription of *less* with countable nouns. While this usage is regularly prescribed by language pedants and in usage guides such as Simon Heffer's *Strictly English: The Correct Way to Write... and Why it Matters* (2010) or Caroline Taggart's *Her Ladyship's Guide to the Queen's English* (2010), linguists like Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey Pullum argue it is not grammatically incorrect. It is, instead, only more informal than using *fewer* with countable nouns (Huddleston, 2002:1126–1127). Furthermore, ignoring usage also results in prescriptivists rejecting natural language change (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002:6). Secondly, prescriptivists frequently confuse their personal stylistic conventions with actual grammatical rules (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002:7). For example, the prohibition on using split infinitives can lead to sentences that are confusing or ambiguous as a consequence of the attempt to avoid splitting the infinitive. Thirdly, informality is often confused with ungrammaticality, as *less* with countable nouns again highlights. As purists only recognise the most formal grammatical register, they choose to ignore the variety of styles, both formal and informal, that are found within SE. Moreover, within these styles, usage may differ slightly without being 'correct' or 'incorrect' (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002:8). Fourthly, many rules invoked by language purists rely on an *ipse dixit* philosophy (Peters, 2006:762), with prescriptions being inconsistently applied between authors when compared (Ilson, 1985:175). Lastly, many of prescriptivists' opinions comprise fallacious arguments ranging from relying on Latinate rules that share little or no similarities with English (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002:8; Pullum, 2004:10), resulting in old favourites such as the split infinitive, predicated on a misunderstanding that the infinitival subordinating marker *to* is distinct to the verb following it, and spurious analogies between one area of grammar and another, such as case assignment with coordinated and non-coordinated pronouns (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002:9–10).

As the arguments above highlight, linguists are generally dismissive of the arguments put forward by prescriptivists. However, others are more cautious of ignoring them entirely. In *Verbal Hygiene* (1995:4), Deborah Cameron argues that in this language debate neither side is neutral, with both prescriptivists and descriptivists promoting language ideologies. As the study of prescriptivism, including that of grassroots prescriptive attitudes, has gained in

popularity as a discipline within linguistics, those involved on the descriptive side of the language debate have acknowledged that there needs to be greater understanding of what drives prescriptive ideologies, particularly in the twenty-first century (cf. Curzan, 2014:170–177; Lukač, 2018b:4–5).

2.3 Prescription in the twenty-first century

In “Three Hundred Years of Prescriptivism (and Counting)” (2009:13–17), Joan Beal argues that the first decade of the twenty-first century has been undergoing a period of linguistic prescriptivism, driven by similar reasons and which is comparable to that found in the late-eighteenth century. As with its earlier counterpart, the twenty-first century manifestation has seen a proliferation of language advice, both in print and online, which focusses on usage, style, grammar and orthography. A culture of linguistic insecurity first recognised by Labov in the 1960s, an emphasis on self-improvement, rising insecurity in the middle-classes and an emphasis for women, in particular, to employ ‘proper’ English (Beal, 2009:50) has resulted in an expanding interest in language ‘correctness’ and prescriptive ideologies.

2.3.1 Usage guides in the twenty-first century

Confirmation of Beal’s (2009) premise that prescriptive attitudes are undergoing a resurgence in the twenty-first century can be found in the growing popularity of one of the traditional ways to promote standard language ideologies – the publication of usage guides. Though it does not include every usage guide published, the Hyper Usage Guide of English (HUGE) database (developed as part of Leiden University Centre for Linguistics’ Bridging the Unbridgeable project) lists seventeen usage guides published between 2000 and 2010. Since 2010, the end-date of the HUGE database, more guides have been published. In the UK, these have included guides by journalists such as John Humphries (2011) and Oliver Kamm (whose book *Accidence Will Happen* (2015) is discussed in §2.4.1.1), and the British newspaper editor Sir Harold Evans (2017). Publishers are evidently responding to the continuing demand from the British public for advice on how to speak and write ‘correctly’.

Usage guides published since 2000, such as Caroline Taggert’s *Her Ladyship’s Guide to the Queen’s English* (2010), Simon Heffer’s *Strictly English* (2010) and Sir Harold Evans’ *Do I Make Myself Clear?* (2017), continue in the prescriptive tradition of the genre first established in the late-eighteenth century, with *ipse dixit* judgements and a recycling of the same usage problems such as split infinitives and dangling participles (Straaijer, 2017:22–24). As the genre has developed, however, there has been a certain, if limited, progression

towards, as Straaijer (2017:21–22) terms it, the professionalisation of usage guides. Consequently, a few have been published by, or in close consultation with, linguists and offer a more descriptive understanding of traditional usage problems. In 2004, the linguist Pam Peters published the *Cambridge Guide to English Usage*, followed by a guide for Australian English in 2007. Kamm’s *Accidence Will Happen* (2015:110–111) provides a list of books, including Huddleston and Pullum’s *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002) (henceforth *CGEL*) which have influenced his descriptive stance. Nonetheless, within the genre, descriptive usage guides remain an exceedingly small minority (Lukač, 2018c:106–107), with most continuing to repeat and reinforce traditional prescriptive usage norms.

2.3.1.1 Kamm in the usage guide tradition

As a journalist, Kamm fits into the long tradition of non-linguists writing on language usage (Peters, 2006:774). Labelling himself a “reformed stickler” (2009, 2015:xv), Kamm takes an explicitly descriptive stance when compared to other journalists-turned-usage guide authors, such as Sir Harold Evans or Simon Heffer. Nor does he claim to be a linguistic authority, in contrast to other usage guide writers like Bryan Garner (Smits, 2017). Instead, Kamm bases much of the advice he offers, both in his book and “The Pedant”, on works by linguists such as Rodney Huddleston, Geoffrey Pullum, Steven Pinker and David Crystal (2015:110–111). Influenced by Noam Chomsky’s theory of universal grammar (UG), Kamm draws the UG distinction between grammar rules that native speakers instinctively know and rules that are imposed artificially or arbitrarily (2015:xv). He is clear, however, on the necessity for people to be taught, and understand, the conventions of SE as this is part of the institutional norm (2015:xiii–xiv), while arguing that non-standard varieties of English hold equal validity and language change should be embraced rather than rejected (2015:54, 56–57).

2.3.2 Usage Guides 2.0

While traditional means to promote prescriptivism, such as the usage guide, continue to be popular, the internet has enabled and encouraged the public to contribute to metalinguistic debates, leading to greater grassroots participation (Lukač, 2018a:103). The increasing popularity of the internet as a place to look for language advice, especially among those under twenty-five (Vriesendorp, 2016; Lukač, 2018a:109), has led to a proliferation of advice being offered, much of which is prescriptive. One way language advice is offered is via online language blogs, such as Mignon Fogarty’s *Grammar Girl*. Investigating these blogs,

Schaffer (2010:28) found that of the twenty-seven she analysed, twenty-five endorsed traditional prescriptive norms. Only two of the blogs, *Language Log*, written by linguists including Geoffrey Pullum and Ben Yagoda, and *The Web of Language*, written by Dennis Baron, an English and linguistics professor, were descriptive in content. The other twenty-five were mostly prescriptive or proscriptive (Schaffer, 2010:25). When Schaffer investigated these twenty-five blogs further, she found that the authors were employed in professions such as editors, copy editors, writers, journalists and teachers, all of which enforce standardised or hyper-standardised linguistic norms (Schaffer, 2010:25; see also Cameron, 1995:50–54). The over-representation of these occupations is also found when the authorship of traditional usage guides is examined (Peters, 2006:775; Lukač, 2018a:113). This supports other research (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2013:8; Chapman, 2017:248; Lukač, 2018b:7) which has found that people who use language in their professional life, especially in a gatekeeping role, continue to monitor usage through activities such as blogging or writing letters to the editor, even when it is not required of them. Hence, Web 2.0 has allowed traditional prescriptive advice to be widely promulgated, with online blogs fulfilling an almost identical function as the traditional print usage guide. This is further supported when the occupations of the blog authors are examined.

The similarities between printed usage guides and online language blogs is also the finding of a later study by Lukač (2018a), on Mignon Fogarty's *Grammar Girl* blog (one of the twenty-seven investigated by Schaffer in 2010). Lukač (2018a:113) found that the purpose, content and target audience of *Grammar Girl* was identical to that of traditional usage guides. Moreover, the usage problems covered in the blog and in print usage guides remained similar, with five out of the top ten most popular usage problems found in print guides also being included in the top ten in *Grammar Girl* (Lukač, 2018a:112–113). When Fogarty's previous employment as an editor – which is, as discussed above, an occupation associated with standard language norm enforcement – is noted (Lukač, 2018a:113), a clear correlation can be made between the language advice which is offered online and the tradition of printed usage guides, from the recycling of traditional usage problems to who is providing the advice.

However, the forum in which the advice is presented, whether through a blog or video blog (vlog), also permits greater participation by the public and, thus, more opportunities for grassroots debates over prescriptive ideologies. As with the advice offered by the authors of these blogs, however, much of the BTL language advice offered by the public remains prescriptive in nature. When Lukač (2018a:120–123) analysed the *Grammar Girl* comments,

she found that explicitly prescriptive comments accounted for 55.1% of the overall comments, an example being: “You gave the example that it is okay to say, ‘What did you step on?’ That is incorrect. The proper way to say the question is ‘On what did you step?’” (Lukač, 2018a:116). Only 20.4% were explicitly descriptivist, for example: “As a strictly descriptive linguist and ESL teacher, I am often driven crazy by the comments of prescriptivists and grammarians” (Lukač, 2018a:116). Commentators who held more prescriptive views referred to prescriptive conventions to support their viewpoint, such as “If a comma is required use ‘which’, if not, then ‘that’.” (Lukač, 2018a:121). In contrast, descriptivists cited actual language usage as an argument, for example: “I have simply noted that [the use of ‘like’ as a conjunction] has been around since the 1600s” (Lukač, 2018a:121). Prescriptivists further argued that certain usages were correct or incorrect based on appeals to euphony, logic or teaching, arguments previously noted by Pullum (2004; see also Weiner, 1998:178–179). Those who held descriptive views cited linguistic authorities or referred to language history to support their arguments (Lukač, 2018a:120–123). Many of the arguments put forward by grassroots linguistic activists of either persuasion were identical, or similar to, those traditionally advanced in the debate surrounding prescriptive discourse, such as acceptability being driven by common usage, which suggests that while the medium has expanded from print to digital, public attitudes towards correct usage remain divided (Lukač, 2018a:125).

2.3.3 ‘Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells’ 2.0: Online alternatives to the letter to the editor

Web 2.0 has enabled grassroots prescriptive activities to flourish while traditional types of prescriptive rule enforcement, such as the usage guide, have been reinvigorated online. As shown by Lukač’s (2018a) analysis of *Grammar Girl*, BTL comments enable grassroots participation in metalinguistic debates. This phenomenon, however, is not only restricted to language blogs. It is also found in the comments and Tweets to any organisation that has an online presence, such as newspapers, magazines, broadcast institutions like the BBC or businesses. In 2006, the UK retailer Marks and Spencer was criticised after customers found orthographic mistakes in sentences printed on the front of clothing – in both cases the infamous greengrocer’s apostrophe. This led to complaints from grammar pedants and much hilarity in the UK press (“M&S”, 2006; Beal, 2009:45). These comments, emails and Tweets which focus on ‘correct’ English usage are the digital successors to the traditional letter of complaint to the editor (Lukač, 2018b:4) and are often referred to in the UK as being written by ‘Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells’ (Wallop, 2013). The public is now able to respond online

immediately to identify perceived language mistakes and prompt discussions over correct usage.

While these different forms of technology have made it simpler for grassroots activists to discuss language (mis)use, objections still follow the traditional structure of the letter of complaint to the editor: the highlighting of the perceived grammatical mistake and a request, which varies in its stridency, to correct it. However, other grassroots prescriptivists have made use of the internet to discuss language in more innovative ways. These include single issue groups such as The Apostrophe Protection Society, founded in 2001, dedicated to preserving the correct use of apostrophes (Beal, 2010). Social media, such as Facebook, enables users to set up online groups such as *Bad spelling and grammar on signs and notices*. Reddit has forums like *r/grammarfail* or *r/unnecessary apostrophe*. Often readers can submit photos of the perceived grammatical mistakes and invite comments from other members. While most sites claim to be descriptive or neutral in their language stance, a normative and judgemental tone is often found when the original posts and comments are examined (Beal, 2010:61; Heyd, 2014:510). Humour is often employed by contributors and commentators to counter accusations of prescriptivism. However, two separate studies on photo blogs and Facebook groups have both found that the humour serves as a cover for the normative insistence of standard language rules (Heyd, 2014:499; Švelch and Sherman, 2018:2405–2406). Nonetheless, these types of approaches to discuss language remain limited when compared to online activities that echo more traditional forms of language debate such as online language blogs or tweeting about the perceived error.

2.4 Concluding remarks

Prescriptivism is the attempt to enforce a normative version of the standard language and rejects and denigrates other non-standard varieties. Occurring as the final stage in the standardisation of English and following on from codification, prescriptive ideologies have been promoted through means such as usage guides and by the complaint tradition. The twenty-first century has seen a continuation of prescriptive attitudes. This has partly been enabled by Web 2.0, which has allowed those who have traditionally been interested in the correct usage of English, such as journalists or copy writers, to promote and maintain prescriptive ideologies even when they are not required to do so. Moreover, it has encouraged new groups of people, who previously would not have become involved in discussions on language usage, to participate. This is sometimes done innovatively, via social media platforms such as Facebook or through photo blogging. When these language and photo blogs

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or social media groups are analysed, however, much of this grassroots metalinguistic discourse remains prescriptive in nature and is found to enforce traditional standard language ideologies.

Chapter 3. Data and methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss and explain the choices of data and methodologies I chose to use in this thesis. In §3.2 I explain why I chose to use *The Times* and specifically “The Pedant” column and I also include a summary of the sociolinguistic data for “The Pedant” readers. In §3.3 I discuss how I chose the data to be analysed, the analytical framework I used to examine the data in Chapters 4 and 5, and an explanation of how I calculated the quantitative data included in these two chapters.

3.2 Data

3.2.1 *The Times*

I decided to use *The Times* for my thesis as between 26 June 2009 and 25 August 2018 it published a weekly column written by Oliver Kamm, “The Pedant”, which discussed English usage and usage problems. The column predominantly focusses on grammar, and as discussed in §2.3.1.1, Kamm takes a descriptive view on traditional usage problems. However, the primary reason for choosing “The Pedant” is that, unlike other columns discussing language, such as the “Johnson” column in *The Economist* written by Lane Greene, readers are permitted to comment below the articles. Furthermore, as previous studies have analysed grassroots prescriptive attitudes, including letters to the editor, including *The Times* or BTL comments posted on a grammar blog (Lukač, 2016, 2018a, 2018b), previous research exists on grassroots prescriptive attitudes which I could compare my findings to, in particular to see if attitudes identified in previous research are replicated in BTL comments by readers. Secondly, *The Times* is a well-respected national newspaper and has a wide readership. The daily circulation is approximately 440,000 for both the print and online editions (Mayhew, 2018).

3.2.2 “*The Pedant*” column

“The Pedant” was published weekly, usually on a Saturday, between 26 June 2009 and 25 August 2018 in both print and online versions of *The Times*. While Kamm has not officially stated that he has ceased writing the column, none have been published since 25 August 2018. The title “The Pedant” is mostly meant ironically, though in the first column Kamm states that he is “curmudgeonly...about language” (Kamm, 2009). His aim in the column is to “deal with language and will prescribe usage”. Prior to April 2016, BTL comments were not

enabled. This meant that I had a naturally defined corpus end date and, indeed, I found that the further back I went to April 2016, the fewer comments there were per article.

3.2.3 Sociolinguistic data of “The Pedant” commentators

It is possible to ascertain some general sociolinguistic data about *The Times* readers. The readership is predominantly over 35 (“Monthly Reach”, 2017) and politically is to the centre-right, although the paper is more moderate and not as tribal as other comparable broadsheets, such as *The Daily Telegraph*. For example, it supported the election of Tony Blair, a left-wing politician, as Prime Minister in 2001 and in the 2016 UK referendum on whether to stay in or leave the European Union, *The Times* supported remain. Nonetheless, *The Times* readers tend to be socially and fiscally conservative, and are usually older, more educated and wealthier when compared to the general UK population (“Monthly Reach”, 2017).

There are limitations, however, to what sociolinguistic data is available on *The Times* readership and, in particular, “The Pedant” commenters. Unlike other newspapers (such as *The Guardian*) the online posting software used by *The Times* online does not allow other subscribers to obtain information on commentators via their profile. This means that unless it is clear from the user name or is mentioned specifically by the commentator, it is not possible to ascertain the gender or age of the poster, especially as posters have the option of using a pseudonym. Therefore, I have used singular ‘they’ in this thesis to refer to posters where their gender is unclear. Furthermore, it is not possible to check the date when commentators first subscribed to *The Times* or commenced posting, the number of comments they have posted or to view these previous comments grouped together chronologically. Consequently, none of this data can be assembled for sociolinguistic analysis. However, based on Lukač’s analysis of grassroots prescriptive letters to *The Times* (2016, 2018b), it is reasonable to assume that there is little difference in the demographics between those who write letters to *The Times* and those who choose to post BTL. Generally, they are older, male and have or have had a profession connected to language use, such as teaching or copy editing.

3.3 Methods and analysis

3.3.1 Choosing “The Pedant” columns

When Kamm’s columns were analysed, I found there were a total of 89 articles which discussed grammar, resulting in a corpus of 3,370 individual posts which I could analyse. These posts cover the period from 13 August 2016 to 25 August 2018. I read all these posts to identify popular topics and more general information such as language and rhetorical

techniques used. Based on this initial analysis, in particular the frequency of debates on prescription as an ideology and *less* with countable nouns, I decided to focus specifically on these two topics. I again analysed all the posts which discussed these topics, which resulted in a corpus of eleven columns where BTL debates on prescriptive ideologies had occurred, and eight columns for *less* with countable nouns. The columns are listed in Appendix B (prescriptive ideologies) and Appendix D (*less* with countable nouns).

3.3.2 *The framework for analysing argument types*

To analyse my findings in Chapters 4 and 5, I chose to follow the ten types of argument support found in metalinguistic debates developed by Lukač (2018a:120–121). This provided a clear analytical framework with which to identify the various types of argument used by commentators and also enabled me to make comparisons between previous research and my findings. However, I found I needed additional sub-categories to those provided by Lukač, so I also used argument types identified by Pullum in his paper titled “Ideology, Power and Linguistic Theory” (2004:7). Pullum’s sub-categories are useful as they allowed me to provide a more nuanced analysis of arguments which would otherwise be grouped under the broader headings used by Lukač (2018a:121), an example being ‘prescriptive rules’. In her analysis, Lukač (2018a:120–123) groups arguments utilising ‘prescriptive rules’ under one heading. By using Pullum’s (2004) categories, I was able to classify them further into one of four sub-categories of argument under the heading of ‘prescriptive rules’: ‘nostalgia’; ‘classicism’; ‘aestheticism’ and ‘ascetism’.

I also found that some of these argument types were more appropriate depending on whether I was examining the metalinguistic discussions on prescriptivism or the specific usage problem of *less* with countable nouns. While some discussions on prescriptive ideologies referred to a specific usage problem to illustrate a wider argument, such as the examples given in §4.3.1.2 on split infinitives and flat adverbs respectively and were, thus, included in my analysis, comments which became focussed on the usage problem, as opposed to the discussion of prescriptive ideologies, were excluded. To include these comments, particularly in the quantitative analysis, would result in misleading results with regard to the frequency of the argument types used BTL. This was especially the case with arguments which relied on ‘semantics’ and ‘euphony’ which were invariably used to discuss a specific usage problem which, in turn, generated further comments about the problem and changed the focus of the discussion. I therefore chose to exclude these two argument types in my analysis for Chapter 4. In contrast, when analysing the debate surrounding *less* with

countable nouns this issue did not arise. This meant I could include both ‘semantics’ and ‘euphony’ as categories of argument type. Therefore, in Chapter 4, I have chosen to focus on the four most popular argument types employed by posters: ‘prescriptive rules’; ‘rules of the linguistic system’; ‘external authorities’ and ‘logic’ for a more detailed qualitative analysis. In Chapter 5, I will focus in more depth on the six remaining argument types, such as ‘common usage’ and ‘sociolinguistics’. Thus, when read as a whole, all ten argument types are discussed.

3.3.3 *Categorising the arguments*

With the theoretical framework established, I could start to analyse and classify the various comments as to what argument type they represented and whether they were prescriptive, descriptive or neutral. Using previous studies by linguists such as Pullum (2004), Peters (2006) and Lukač (2018a), I was able to identify certain repeated themes and then classify them according to argument type. Below in Table 3.1 is an extract from Appendix A, for the argument ‘euphony’. As can be seen, where I was unable to find an example the table is marked with an N/A for not applicable. The complete categorisation along with examples from “The Pedant” is at Appendix A.

Table 3.1 Characteristics used to classify BTL comments for the argument type ‘euphony’

Argument type	Prescriptive	Neutral	Descriptive
Euphony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The usage sounds or feels horrible. • The usage makes the poster feel awful. <p>“But fewer blueberry muffins just feels better.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usage may lead to some people not liking it for reasons of euphony but does not give own opinion. <p>N/A</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Argues that prescriptions based on euphony are stylistic. <p>N/A</p>

3.3.4 *Calculating the quantitative data*

To arrive at the quantitative results in Chapters 4 and 5, three separate sets of calculations were needed. Firstly, to calculate the overall percentages for the types of arguments used, found in Tables 4.1 and 5.1 the following formula was used:

$$\frac{\text{total number of argument type}}{\text{total number of types of argument}} \times 100 = \text{percentage}$$

(‘prescriptive ideologies’ or ‘less with countable nouns’)

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Using the category of ‘prescriptive rules’ in Chapter 4 as an example, I divided 53 (the total number of comments utilising this argument type) by 273 (the total number of comments) to give me a figure of 19.4%. To show whether these arguments were prescriptive or descriptive, I checked each post and noted whether it was prescriptive or descriptive and used the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{argument (prescriptive / descriptive)}}{\text{total number of times argument used per type}} \times 100 = \text{percentage}$$

Again, using ‘prescriptive rules’ as an example, this meant that I divided 32 comments (which relied on prescriptive rules to support the argument) by 53 (the total number of comments in this category) to give me a percentage figure of 60.3%, which I presented in Table 4.1. The same process was employed to reach the percentages for descriptivist comments.

To calculate the figures for the sub-categories of arguments used I repeated this process, dividing the number of times a sub-type of argument was used prescriptively or descriptively by the total number of times an argument was used per type, shown by the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{argument (prescriptive / descriptive) for each sub-category}}{\text{total number of times argument used per type}} \times 100 = \text{percentage}$$

For example, to establish how many prescriptivists and descriptivists utilised arguments of ‘nostalgia’ (under the heading of ‘prescriptive rules’), I divided 8 (the number of times prescriptivists used it) by 53 (the total number of times all arguments categorised as ‘prescriptive rules’ were used). This gave me a percentage of 15.1%. I repeated this for the number of times descriptivists used arguments utilising ‘nostalgia’ to give me a figure of 7.5%. The complete calculations can be found in Appendix C for the argument types used in discussions on prescriptive ideologies and in Appendix E for *less* with countable nouns. Having explained my methodological framework, in the following chapter I will analyse the argument types used in grassroots discussions in “The Pedant” on prescriptive ideologies.

Chapter 4. Types of arguments presented in BTL metalinguistic debates discussing prescriptive ideologies

There's a simple rule of thumb which you can use to establish what grammar is and is not "correct". If some busy-body pedant tells you that something is "incorrect", then it is almost certain that it is in fact "correct". (MT, 27 May 2017)

4.1 Introduction.

In this chapter I will analyse the grassroots arguments used to promote or refute prescriptive ideologies identified in BTL discussions on prescriptivism within the corpus analysed. I will first provide a quantitative analysis of the types of arguments employed before examining the four most common argument types in greater detail. These are: rules of the linguistic system, prescriptive rules, external authorities, and lastly logic-based arguments.

While investigating this topic I have found that many of those who engage in discussions on prescriptive ideologies, irrespective of their viewpoints, have a good understanding of the arguments employed on both sides of the debate. Echoing Cameron (1995:3–4) and as already discussed in §2.2.4, posters are sensible to the ideological values placed on the terms ‘prescriptive’ and ‘descriptive’. The following exchange between two commentators, MT (who has also posted under the pseudonym Think before you Drink before you Post) and JM, identifies this awareness:

- (1) MT: So, what to call these two groups. How about “traditional grammarians” and “professional linguists”? I would agree that these two descriptions are not value-free, but I think those values are important and apt.

JM: You might use the terms you suggest; they seem fair enough, except that you should remove the loaded adjective. Grammarians and linguists would seem reasonable. (1 October 2017)

This exchange highlights the levels of understanding and engagement shown by “The Pedant” commentators in discussions on prescriptive ideologies and exemplifies why I chose to analyse this feature in more detail.

4.2 The types of arguments presented in debates discussing prescriptivism

To gain a deeper understanding of grassroots prescriptive attitudes in “The Pedant”, I chose to analyse the types of arguments used in discussions which debated linguistic prescription as an ideology. These debates arose spontaneously and often had little connection to the specific usage issue or topic discussed above-the-line (ATL) by Kamm. Overall, metalinguistic discussions on prescriptivism occurred under eleven columns (out of a total of 89 analysed)

which are listed in Appendix B. Comments specifically referring to prescriptivist or descriptivist ideologies, which were not connected to a specific usage problem, made up 213 comments out of the 3,370 comments analysed (6.3% of all comments) and included some of the longest and most passionately argued posts on both sides of the debate. How I classified each argument to be prescriptive, descriptive or neutral can be found in Appendix A. Of these 213 comments, 82 (38.5%) were explicitly prescriptive in the arguments used, while 96 comments (45%) were explicitly descriptive. The remaining 35 comments (16.4%) were neutral, often giving an anecdote, summarising arguments put forward by either side without including an opinion or making a humorous comment, such as this comment by a poster named Chatton, who made a joke, based on the famous Star Trek line “to boldly go”, in response to a discussion on split infinitives:

(2) I’m boldly going to pass on this. (30 September 2017)

Table 5.1, below, shows the eight different types of arguments used in discussions on prescriptive ideologies, the overall percentage and frequency of use by prescriptivists and descriptivists. Additionally, each argument type is illustrated with a BTL example from “The Pedant”. The complete analyses are in Appendix C. In total, I identified 273 examples of the eight argument types. A single post could contain multiple argument types, which explains why more posts overall were descriptive, while more arguments overall were prescriptive. Overall, 166 or 57.8% of all the comments I analysed were prescriptive, while 121 (42.1%) were descriptive. The most commonly employed arguments to support or oppose prescriptive norms were: ‘rules of the linguistic system’, ‘prescriptive rules’,¹ ‘external authorities’,² ‘logic’,³ ‘common usage’, ‘education’, ‘sociolinguistic considerations’ and lastly, ‘language history’.

¹ Included under ‘prescriptive rules’ are the prescriptive arguments identified by Pullum (2004). These are: ‘nostalgia’; ‘asceticism’; ‘aestheticism’ and ‘classicism’.

² Included in this is Pullum’s (2004) category of ‘authoritarianism’.

³ Included under ‘logic’ are the prescriptive arguments identified by Pullum (2004) as ‘functionalism’; ‘coherentism’ and ‘logicism’.

Table 4.1 Categories of argument types in metalinguistic debates on prescriptive ideologies.

Types of argument used (%)	Description	Frequency of argument type (%)		Example from “The Pedant” comments
		Prescriptive	Descriptive	
Rules of the linguistic system (26.4%)	Acceptance or rejection that the linguistic system defines what constitutes usage norms.	45.8%	54.1%	Because word order is crucial to English syntax and it's customary to put a modifier next to the constituent that it modifies.
Prescriptive rules (19.4%)	Rules of correct usage are transmitted through the prescriptive tradition.	60.3%	39.7%	...others, like the supposed distinction between less and fewer, are artificial: they are intended to prescribe how language should be used.
External authorities (18.1%)	Acceptance or rejection of recommendation as acceptable usage by (linguistic) authorities.	34%	66%	The leading expert on English grammar in the UK is Prof. Geoffrey Pullum of the University of Edinburgh. Many of his writings are very accessible and can be downloaded from his webpage.
Logic (11.5%)	Rules of language correspond to rules of logic and should not include redundancy, contradictions and illogicality or be chaotic.	93.1%	6.9%	No, the traditional grammar is better...It is more logical than the descriptivist position, because the rules are more logical.
Common usage (7.7%)	Acceptance or rejection that the description of the speaker's linguistic behaviour defines what constitutes acceptable usage.	53.6%	46.4%	I was sat...is becoming so common among people who routinely use SE...that I'm pretty sure it will be regarded as SE in less than 20 years.
Education (7.3%)	Rules of correct usage are taught through teaching.	58.3%	41.7%	I don't think I've ever said that the concepts of grammar taught in schools up till the 1960s were irrelevant. My point is that in very many cases they were factually in error. The subject is fortunately taught much better in schools now than it typically was in my parents' and grandparents' generations.
Sociolinguistic considerations (3.1%)	Usage identifies speakers as members of particular (marginal) social groups.	86.7%	13.3%	The thought of “text speak” and “estuary english” being the norm saddens me and makes me realise my time is nearly up.
Language history (1.7%)	Usage is acceptable if it has been part of the language over (a considerable) period of time.	20%	80%	“Gift” has been used as a transitive verb in English for at least 400 years.

While these findings are broadly similar to those contained in Lukač's (2018a:121) investigation into the *Grammar Girl* comments, there are also some differences. Firstly, arguments which relied on 'rules of the linguistic system' were the most common, with 'prescriptive rules' in second place. Furthermore, Lukač (2018a) found that 'prescriptive rules' was used solely by prescriptivists, while my investigation found that this argument was also employed by descriptivists, if only to challenge normative arguments. This was also my finding when I looked at 'common usage', where, again, it was more commonly used by prescriptivists.

Appeals to, or rejections of, the 'rules of the linguistic system' were the most commonly used arguments, discussed further in §4.3.1. This is, perhaps, unsurprising as discussions on prescriptive ideologies can be more abstract than ones focussing on a specific usage problem and, thus, can lead to more technical discussions on linguistic theories and evidence. As with Lukač (2018a:120–123), my investigation found that this argument type was more commonly used by descriptivists (54.1% or 39 times), though use by prescriptivists was also common (45.8% or 33 times). Mostly, however, when prescriptivists referred to linguistic rules, it was to reject underlying linguistic theories or to misapply them.

Reliance on 'prescriptive rules' (discussed below in §4.3.2) was the second most common argument type, used 53 times (19.4%) in total. Also included within this category are arguments reliant on 'style', such as the examples discussed below in §4.3.2.3, and what Pullum (2004:7) terms 'nostalgia', 'asceticism', 'aestheticism' and 'classicism'. As all of these types of argument emphasise the maintenance of the proscription to avoid negative consequences, such as language decay or ugliness, I included them under 'prescriptive rules'. These arguments were predominantly used by prescriptivists (60.3% or 32 times). In contrast to Lukač (2018a), however, my investigation found that just under 40% of comments which mentioned 'prescriptive rules' were posted by descriptivists. While initially surprising, on closer investigation these comments directly rebutted many of the arguments put forward by prescriptivists and criticised prescriptivism as an ideology in general. Within 'prescriptive rules', the largest sub-category used was 'nostalgia' – referring to a "golden age" of grammar and censuring language change (22.6% or twelve times), closely followed by 'style' (13.2% or seven times). 'Asceticism' – language misuse caused by laziness and sloppiness – was employed six times (11.3%), then 'aestheticism' – the chosen usage is ugly or awkward – four times and lastly, 'classicism' – relying on Latin or Greek to maintain prescriptive rules – which was used three times.

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Mentioning an external authority to strengthen a commentator's argument was the third most common argument type (see §4.3.3). In total, this argument was used 47 times (17.2%), mostly by descriptivists (66% or 31 times). Prescriptivists employed this argument type 16 times (34%). While descriptivists referred to linguists such as Rodney Huddleston, Geoffrey Pullum and Stephen Pinker to support their arguments, when prescriptivists mentioned these external authorities it was to challenge or explicitly reject them. Instead, when prescriptivists presented external authorities, the authors or works they chose to cite were less academically rigorous, such as Simon Heffer's *Strictly English* (2010). Prescriptivists also relied on what Pullum (2004:10) terms 'authoritarianism' – posters referred to literary classics they had read either to support their prescriptions or to enhance their standing as a reputable interlocutor in the discussion.

Arguments involving appeals to logic were the fourth largest category, making up 10.6% of all arguments, discussed further in §4.3.4. Logic-based arguments were overwhelmingly used by those who promoted prescriptive norms (93.1%), and these figures are almost identical to those found by Lukač (2018a:122). Included within this category are what Pullum (2004:7) terms 'functionalism' – prescription to avoid ambiguity, misunderstanding or redundancy (48.3% or fourteen times); 'coherentism' – prescription to avoid chaos, randomness or disorder (27.6% or eight times) – and lastly, 'logicism' – the use of the prescription avoids irrationality (24.1% or seven times),.

In contrast to Lukač's findings (2018a:122), a small majority of arguments utilising 'common usage' were posted by prescriptivists. Fifteen comments (53.6%) opposed the premise that a specific language feature should be deemed acceptable in SE even if it is in common use. The other thirteen comments (46.4%) were descriptive and argued, instead, that common usage should be a determiner as to whether something is acceptable or not in SE.

Arguments centred on education and grammar teaching were employed 24 times (8.8%) in total. Fourteen comments (58.3%) were prescriptive, either commenting that grammar was taught more effectively when the poster was young and/or that it is currently badly taught in schools. In contrast, descriptivists argued that grammar teaching prior to the educational reforms implemented in the 1980s and 90s was often poor and that the grammar teaching children currently receive is better.

The final two categories, 'sociolinguistic considerations' and 'language history', the seventh and eighth categories of argument, were used most by prescriptivists and descriptivists respectively (fifteen times and five times). Comments utilising sociolinguistic factors were mostly prescriptive or proscriptive in tone, either deliberately mimicking (and

exaggerating) non-standard features or spelling (cf. Lukač, 2018b:10), or noting that non-standard and ‘incorrect’ features made the speaker look stupid or uneducated. Lastly, ‘language history’ was referred to in only five comments and again, the overall percentages are similar to those found by Lukač (2018a:122). Four out of the five comments were posted by descriptivists, referring to the length of time a feature has been used in English. The sole prescriptive comment argued that even if this were the case, this was not a reason to include the usage in SE.

By analysing the types of arguments used by posters participating in metalinguistic debates on prescriptivism as a topic, the repetition of existing arguments by both sides of the debate noted in previous studies (cf. Huddleston & Pullum, 2002; Pullum, 2004; Curzan, 2014; Lukač, 2018a) is clearly identified. Certain argument types, such as appeals to prescriptive rules or logic-based arguments are overwhelmingly employed by posters who support prescriptive norms with regard to SE. In contrast, those who are descriptive in their outlook refer to rules and evidence provided by linguists and look to ‘language history’ to assist in defining what should be deemed acceptable.

4.3 Further analysis of grassroots discussions on prescriptive ideologies

In section §4.2, above, I provided a quantitative analysis of the different types of argument used in grassroots debates on prescriptivism. My findings show that both the argument types, and the frequency with which they are employed, are similar to previous studies and suggest that there is still a wide gulf between descriptivists and prescriptivists when ideas of language ‘correctness’ are debated. In this section I will examine the four most popular argument types in greater detail, i.e. analysing them for the rigour of argument used and looking at features such as semantic choice and tone.

4.3.1 Rules of the linguistic system

The most common type of argument used BTL, I found, were appeals to, or rejections of, the rules of the linguistic system. When analysing how prescriptivists and descriptivists understand this argument type, I found fundamental differences which I classified into three further sub-categories. The first covered debates involving the acceptance or rejection of broader linguistic theories, such as Universal Grammar (UG). The second was how linguistic rules were understood and interpreted by descriptivists and prescriptivists, while the third was the accusation by prescriptivists that linguists have an ‘anything goes’ attitude towards grammar.

4.3.1.1 BTL attitudes towards linguistic theories

The differences between prescriptivists and descriptivists in understanding the ‘rules of the linguistic system’ apply to some of the most prominent theories in linguistics. While descriptivists support theories and the premises that underlie them, such as UG and the principle that native speakers inherently have an awareness of grammar, those who are prescriptive in their outlook view these theories as just one among many and, thus, reject them. Prescriptivists argue that UG is too broad and applies to too many different grammar systems to have any true credibility. This rejection of theories such as UG subsequently allows prescriptivists to reject any rule which is based on observed linguistic regularities when later presented by descriptivists. Prescriptivists argue that what is considered a fact can be contested if the fact is based on an incorrect proposition.

In a lengthy debate, which continued over three days, four regular commentators, BB, JM, SH and MT, debated prescriptive versus descriptive ideologies, including the theory of UG. In the exchange below between two of the posters, JM and BB, the difference in opinion towards fundamental linguistic theories is shown as they debate UG and whether grammar rules are arbitrary or inherent. JM, who claims that all grammar rules are arbitrary, first states:

- (3) There are no “real, natural grammar rules” as you suggest, unless you subscribe to the view espoused by Pinker that there is a deep grammar”. (30 September 2017)

In response, BB replies:

- (4) You don’t have to accept Pinker’s view of grammar to see that there are real, natural grammar rules. You just have to observe that speakers combine words in some ways and not others. English speakers normally place the subject before the verb whereas Welsh speakers normally place it after... There are rules of grammar here and speakers abide by them whether they are consciously aware of them or not. Linguists try to find out what the rules are. (30 September 2017)

The following day, JM responds:

- (5) It is not pertinent to the argument to say that there is more than one grammar because, if grammars...are derived from nature, there should be some universal rules governing them all... There are not unless Pinker is correct. Grammatical rules vary widely between different languages. But even Pinker's analysis – if it is correct – ...falls very far short of providing a universal pattern that would explain the grammatical rules as we understand them. (1 October 2017)

BB answers:

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- (6) Languages are also complex systems of rules (or, if you prefer, patterns or regularities), which speakers acquire and abide by without any special effort. Speakers do not need help with the rules of their language. (2 October 2017)

This lengthy exchange highlights several issues with the prescriptive viewpoint espoused by some of the commentators. Firstly, as noted by Kamm (2015:59–61), purists are often unaware of the basic tenets of linguistics, even those which the public have a greater awareness of, such as UG. JM repeatedly refers to Pinker as the original proponent of UG, rather than Noam Chomsky, a misunderstanding that BB later corrects him on. Secondly, by rejecting the idea that speakers have an inherent understanding of grammar, prescriptivists are also able to reject linguistic systems, such as English, which have been developed through observations of how the language is actually used by speakers. If theories like UG are unprovable, they argue, all grammar rules must be arbitrary as they are predicated on an unprovable theory. Thus, the prescriptive rules developed by earlier grammarians should be viewed as equally valid. By this rationale, prescriptivists can counter any descriptivist argument which states that a perceived usage problem is actually acceptable under the rules of the English linguistic system. This reasoning is demonstrated in the exchange between Kamm and JM, below in §4.3.1.2, discussing whether split infinitives are acceptable.

Evidence of this debate over what constitutes a linguistic fact is exemplified in the brief, but rather bad-tempered exchange below, again between JM and BB:

- (7) JM: More descriptive prejudice.

BB: More interest in facts rather than fantasies.

JM: No, just the descriptivists' view of what 'the facts' are. (9 December 2017)

The use of the words 'prejudice' and 'fantasies', alongside the placement of 'facts' inside quotation marks, immediately highlights the acrimonious tone of the discussion and reiterates JM's view that linguistic facts can be debated. Repeating this point, JM continues:

- (8) Well, that depends on what your definition of a fact is. Of course, it is premises from which one begins to assess facts and the interpretation that one places on the facts that is important... I do not dislike descriptivists; I merely disagree with some the premises from which they interpret their facts and their interpretation of some of those facts. (9 December 2017)

4.3.1.2 *Understanding linguistic rules*

Alongside differences between descriptivists and prescriptivists in the acceptance of established linguistic theories, there are also differences between the two groups in what is meant by linguistic ‘rules’ and how these rules should be applied. This has been noted by Milroy and Milroy (2012:11–12), who write “[p]ublic statements about language...almost never show explicit understanding of the distinction between *system* and *use* and seldom acknowledge another important fact about language, that it is in a continuous state of change”. While descriptivists BTL understand and use ‘rule’ in its linguistic sense – that of an observed regularity – prescriptivists mostly interpret the word more traditionally as an instruction or order that should be followed. This interpretation precludes prescriptivists from challenging their prescriptive or proscriptive conventions, one consequence of which is to reject common usage as a reason to accept contested usage problems as part of the standard language. The comment below, by a regular poster, Emmell, illustrates this:

- (9) I have a problem with the definition of “rule” as “an observed regularity”. To my way of thinking, a rule is something to be observed rather than something that most people choose to observe. (20 August 2017)

This rigid interpretation of what constitutes a rule and the misunderstandings that can arise from this inflexibility can also be seen in an exchange below between JM and Kamm. JM argues for the unacceptability of splitting the infinitive based on a mistaken belief that the infinitive must consist of *to* + *verb*. Kamm argues that split infinitives are acceptable because:

- (10) ... word order is crucial to English syntax and it’s customary to put a modifier next to the constituent that it modifies. (26 September 2017)

In response, JM writes:

- (11) Besides, you assume that “to” is not part of the infinitive. I disagree...Therefore, the modifier is placed next to the constituent it modifies in “legally to minimise. Thus, your argument about syntax is false. (26 September 2017)

JM attempts to use linguistic arguments to support his assertion that the infinitive should not be split by the modifier. However, his lack of linguistic knowledge (something already noted in §4.3.1.1) is shown by his denial that *to* is not integral to the infinitival form, and, consequently, that it is grammatically acceptable to split an infinitive (cf. Huddleston & Pullum, 2002:581–582). JM’s rejection of linguistically verifiable rules is also found in

debates on other usage problems including flat adverbs (cf. 26 September 2017, 12 December 2017) and the use of *less* with countable nouns.

4.3.1.3 ‘Anything goes’ with grammar

The third sub-category of argument I found when analysing ‘rules of the linguistic system’ is the accusation, levelled by prescriptivists, that linguists and descriptive grammarians have an ‘anything goes’ attitude towards grammar (cf. Crystal, 2006:207; Pullum, 2018:178). While little evidence is offered to support these assertions, this is something I also found in my analysis of prescriptive “The Pedant” commentators. In the example below, a poster called Magister comments that Kamm believes grammar rules are irrelevant.

- (12) Magister: Having read your column for some time, I have the impression that you are suggesting rules of grammar are now irrelevant. Virtually every week this rule or that rule now doesn’t matter and one may construct sentences as the mood dictates innit. I assume innit is now acceptable.

Kamm: My argument is not that grammatical rules are irrelevant but that the rules need to be stated correctly. I often state examples of genuine rules, like word order or inflection for tense. (9 December 2017)

There are two arguments contained within Magister’s post. Firstly, Magister clearly states that they believe Kamm, and by implication anyone who holds a descriptive outlook, rejects all grammar rules. As Kamm responds, this is not true. Secondly, they make a prescriptive sociolinguistic reference by choosing to finish their comment with the tag question *innit*. The use of *innit* is one that is repeatedly used by prescriptivists, particularly in “The Pedant”, to mock language change and speakers of non-standard varieties of English. As Kamm (2015:57, 2017a, 2018) has argued, while *innit* is slang “...it’s no more destructive of communication than the tag-phrase *n’est-ce pas* in French...” and its use is, therefore, unlikely to result in misunderstandings. However, by directly asking whether “*innit* is now acceptable”, Magister emphasises their point that grammar rules no longer need to be followed. The use of *innit* also implies that ‘incorrect’ grammar is connected to class and education, a common prescriptive sociolinguistic belief (cf. Cheshire & Milroy, 1993:13; L. Milroy, 2001:73–74).

My findings support previous research (Lukač, 2018a), that both prescriptivists and descriptivists posting in “The Pedant” refer to linguistic rules to support their arguments. However, while descriptivists use the rules in a scientific and empirical manner, prescriptivists instead reject rules that underpin the arguments made by descriptivists, either

by questioning the rules themselves, claiming that descriptivists wish to remove grammatical rules, or by querying the scientific premises that underlie these facts.

4.3.2 Prescriptive rules

The second most common argument type in discussions on prescriptivism in “The Pedant” were arguments which supported or rejected ‘prescriptive rules’. They included ‘nostalgia’ and prescriptive norms based on stylistic preferences. Three other categories identified by Pullum (2004:7): ‘asceticism’; ‘aestheticism’ and classicism’ were also included under ‘prescriptive rules’. However, due to the small number of times these sub-categories of arguments were employed I will focus this discussion on ‘prescriptive rules’, ‘nostalgia’ and stylistic preferences only.

4.3.2.1 Prescriptive rules

While the majority of arguments employed when discussing prescriptivism use specific argument types such as ‘nostalgia’ or ‘style’, other arguments refer to specific prescriptive conventions, either in support or opposition, or as an opportunity to comment on prescriptive rules more generally. In a discussion on split infinitives, a certain WF writes:

- (13) All my working life I tried to avoid splitting infinitives in reports...Occasionally this resulted in the inclusion of phrases that went ‘clunk’. But I knew that if I broke this pointless rule someone would send a ‘corrected’ draft back to me...Thank goodness we are increasingly abandoning grammatical ‘rules’ which add nothing to meaning and serve no useful purpose – apart from helping some people to judge others. (26 September 2017)

While WF first refers to split infinitives, including an anecdote about how he had to avoid using them even at the expense of readability in reports, he next comments that these “grammatical rules” add nothing to meaning and, further, enable people to be judged sociolinguistically. In his post, WF addresses and refutes one of the main arguments used by prescriptivists – that prescriptive rules aid clear communication. Instead, observing them worsened readability. Furthermore, by commenting on the sociolinguistic features of prescription, WF also notes that these rules are frequently employed to establish and maintain ingroups and outgroups based on who knows the ‘correct’ usage (cf. Chapman, 2017:251).

Another poster actively refuting prescriptive rules is MT. As part of a long post discussing natural rules of grammar versus ‘artificial’ ones favoured by purists, he writes:

- (14) Some rules...are natural: they are intended to model observed phenomena; others, like the supposed distinction between less and fewer, are artificial: they are intended to prescribe how language should be used...What I am calling “artificial” rules have to

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be taught and are not followed consistently 100% of the time even by the most educated and careful speakers (and are not followed at all by most people). (1 October 2017)

As with WF in (13), MT notes that many of the allegedly “artificial” rules are imposed for sociolinguistic reasons, for example, to show that the speaker is better educated, and are not followed by even the most careful speakers. Furthermore, by arguing that these rules have to be actively taught, MT emphasises their artificiality. If the educated, who are meant to know these rules, are unable remember them all, these rules are ultimately not essential for effective communication.

In contrast to the two descriptive arguments put forward in (13) and (14), in the same discussion on split infinitives, PH argues to maintain prescriptive rules in relation to split infinitives, but also for prescriptive rules more generally. He writes:

- (15) While I hesitate to brazenly dispute with the Pedant, I think in his rush to zealously topple a perceived pillar of grammar, the Pedant fails to clearly distinguish the proper goal. For me there are three principles of good writing (whether on the page or spoken) - style, harmony and clarity. While clearly (to shamelessly and heavy-handedly plagiarise the Apostle) the greatest of these is clarity, an eye should be kept on harmony (to facetiously mix the metaphor). The Pedant and others may feel I have contrived to more than adequately demonstrate myself to self-evidently lack any aural ability, but I feel entitled to authoritatively state that I seem to but rarely recognise any split infinitive construction that did not leap out to clunkily assail the ear. (26 September 2017)

Throughout his long post PH uses humour to enhance his arguments, something noted by Lukač (2018a:124), as well as to soften his criticism of Kamm, with whom he disagrees. He also uses religious language and metaphors to support his criticism – pillars are zealously toppled, and PH echoes St Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:13 by stating there are three principles of good writing. This is meant to highlight PH’s own erudition, not only through the echoing of a Biblical phrase, but by the use of the rhetorical ‘Rule of Three’. PH further argues for the maintenance of prescriptive norms for stylistic reasons, discussed further in §4.3.2.3. Lastly, PH ends his post with an example of a split infinitive which is not only clunky for the reader but deliberately uses the word ‘clunky’ for added emphasis.

4.3.2.2 Nostalgia

The second most common sub-category of ‘prescriptive rules’, as identified by my analysis, are arguments which utilise ‘nostalgia’. These arguments include references to a “golden age” of linguistic correctness and decry social and linguistic change (J. Milroy, 1995:59;

Pullum, 2004:9). In the following exchange, BB and SM debate whether the quality of written English was higher in the past. SM makes the following claim:

- (16) Writing that does not make sense, because the author knows not the meaning of words nor the order in which to place them. Sheer idiocy. (29 April 2017)

SM uses hyperbole to emphasise his argument, claiming that people today do not know the meaning of words or are unable to write syntactically correct sentences. That this is an exaggerated claim is easily disproved. As James Milroy (1995:60–61) argues, “the modern world requires a much higher level of functional literacy from a greater proportion of the population than in the past”. Secondly, SM uses an old-fashioned word order – “the author knows not the meaning...nor...”. This could be for several reasons. The language is more poetic and echoes the Biblical phrase “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke, 23:24) which thus enhances the hyperbolic nature of SM’s claim. While the use of this phrasing may be a consequence of SM’s age (particularly as Kamm himself notes that he believes his readers are from an older generation (Lukač, 2018b:7)), the frequency with which commentators such as SM and PH in (15) imitate Biblical language and phrasing suggests that it is a deliberate stylistic choice, done to emphasise the poster’s education and authority, rather than reflecting their natural way of writing and speaking.

In response, BB challenges SM to prove that present-day written English makes less sense than it did in the 1950s or 60s. SM cannot and instead responds:

- (17) Nah, it’s all fake news, innit. (29 April 2017)

This reply is interesting for several reasons. SM uses humour as a deflection to avoid answering BB’s question. This is a different use of humour when compared to PH in (15) or HA in (19) below, both of whom use humour in a self-deprecating manner to temper criticism. Moreover, as previously discussed in §4.3.1.3, the use of *innit* BTL has become a shorthand for commentators to reject descriptivist ideas on language and it is reasonable to assume that SM is aware of this. While he uses *innit* in a similar way to Magister in (12), SM also employs it to emphasise his initial argument that people, especially the young, are now unable to use ‘correct’ grammar, as *innit* is more frequently used by young people (Martinez, 2015:387). Despite providing no evidence to support his claim, SM, thus, appears to be referring back to a ‘golden age’ of English.

4.3.2.3 *Style*

The third most popular sub-type of argument invoked stylistic reasons as grounds to maintain prescriptive ideologies. As previously noted by linguists such as Peter Trudgill (1999:119–120), even within SE what constitutes a ‘correct’ style occupies a broad spectrum from extremely formal to extremely informal. However, prescriptivists in “The Pedant” often confuse grammatical correctness with their personal stylistic choices and use these to justify their prescriptive norms. Kamm, himself is aware of this, and emphasises the difference between stylistic preferences and correct usage in a BTL post. He writes:

- (18) I carefully distinguish between grammatical rules and stylistic preferences in almost everything I write about language...I have stylistic preferences too. But I don't regard them as the only correct way to write. (26 September 2017)

Nonetheless, despite Kamm being explicit in the differences between style and correctness in his columns and BTL, prescriptivists continue to conflate the two. The following exchange is typical of these discussions. In a debate, dated 8 November 2017, HA posts:

- (19) Being an old git, I sometimes rail at linguistic changes that would have got me into trouble with my English teachers – like converting verbs (invite) into nouns and the use of less for discrete items e.g. people. However if there is no ambiguity does it matter – except for those foreigners who wonder what the hell is going on, and for those of us who see some elegance in our language disappearing? (8 November 2017)

HA begins his post by using humour, stating he is “an old git”. Unlike SM in (17) who uses humour to avoid answering a question, HA acknowledges to other readers that he is aware that his views might be overly pedantic by introducing his post in this way. He also identifies himself with the ‘grumpy old man’ phenomenon, which is a popular and amusing trope with the public and is epitomised by journalists like John Humphries or Simon Heffer (cf. Beal, 2010:62, 2018, para. 30). To support his argument of language decline he provides examples of perceived language inelegance, such as “the use of less for discrete items e.g. people”. Furthermore, he cites his former English teachers as an external authority for additional credibility. HA lastly asks a rhetorical question – “does it matter?” – before answering it by providing sociolinguistic and stylistic reasons. It is only at the end of the post that he specifically mentions style – “elegance” – as a reason to maintain these stylistic rules, but the whole post is an implicit argument for style to determine rules of correctness.

Understanding this implicit argument contained in HA’s post, SH responds and notes how much confusion over ‘correctness’ arises because of stylistic preferences. He writes:

- (20) Your reference to "elegance in our language" is precisely where much of the confusion arises among the self-appointed language police...Elegance is a stylistic preference...These stylistic usages are referred to as register and are linked to social situations and circumstances. (8 November 2017)

SH makes a similar point to Kamm in (18), noting that stylistic decisions are based on individual preferences. He further argues that they are influenced by the social context a person finds themselves in. However, despite the regular repetition of this argument by descriptivists, many pedants still conflate style with correctness, particularly with specific usage problems such as *less* with countable nouns or split infinitives.

4.3.3 BTL attitudes towards external authorities

The third most common type of argument used by posters involved the appeal to, or the rejection of, external authorities to support their viewpoint. Works cited included those by linguists such as Huddleston and Pullum's *CGEL* (2002) or proscriptive usage guides like Heffer's *Strictly English* (2010). As Lukač (2018a:122–123) found, which authors were cited and how acceptable their evidence was, depended on whether posters positioned themselves as a prescriptivist or descriptivist. I found that, overwhelmingly, neither side considered the external authorities put forward by the other side as acceptable. Some prescriptive commentators also utilised arguments based on what Pullum (2004:10) terms 'authoritarianism', with posters mentioning literary classics they had read to support their arguments. In the following exchange, MT and Alabama, for instance, argue over who has a greater understanding of the English language:

- (21) MT: The 13 (read) books about language on my shelf in the living room... suggest that I might know something about language. And the content of your posts suggests you don't know very much at all about language.

Alabama: I grew up on Gore Vidal, William Buckley and Norman Mailer.

In this exchange, Alabama, unable to cite any linguistic works, instead relies on classic American authors to underpin her support for prescriptivism and to present herself as a knowledgeable interlocutor.

The most commonly cited work mentioned by posters who are descriptivists is Huddleston and Pullum's (2002) *CGEL*, which was cited or recommended ten times. For example, in a debate on split infinitives, BB writes:

- (22) The real rules are set out in good grammar books such as Huddleston and Pullum's *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. (30 September 2017).

Other descriptive authorities mentioned included Pullum (for his individual research), who was recommended four times, as well as Pinker. Older works by Jespersen and Curme were also cited. Descriptivists also provided external links to academic papers which supported their arguments. In contrast, those advocating prescriptive arguments provided no external links.

As with arguments relying on linguistic rules, many prescriptive posters reject the evidence of linguistic authorities presented by descriptivists. Firstly, as Cameron (1995:xi) has stated, descriptive linguists can be viewed as isolated from the language concerns of the public. This is confirmed by my own data, as shown by the following comments, both from Bebop and echoing Cameron's (1995) argument. In response to a column in which Kamm included a Tweet by the linguist Lynn Murphy, which read "Terror of polysemy? Really? Don't we have better things to worry about?" (Kamm, 2016), Bebop writes:

- (23) This is a find. Classic reader-in-linguistics-speak. Why don't the lumpen laity get their priorities right and see things as readers in linguistics do? Ivory tower? Moi? (3 December 2016)

In a later post, Bebop writes:

- (24) [T]here is an insouciance (or at least that is the impression) in the linguists' consensus. They seem to convey the message that anything goes... Their descriptivist approach sometimes floats free of any practical implications for the writing and speech of people who do not know much about language. (27 February 2017)

Secondly, as already noted in §4.3.1, other prescriptive posters reject descriptive external authorities, like Huddleston and Pullum, as they do not accept the observations upon which the findings are based. The reason for this may be that they have never personally come across the contested usage, or because they reject the evidence on which linguists have based their conclusions and need more evidence, as shown by this comment from 'Tale of the ancient engineer' (TOTAE):

- (25) As for Huddleston and Pullum, the argument for accepting it seems to be that it is in common parlance. I can only say I've never seen or heard it. Which authors do Huddleston and Pullum cite? (10 December 2017)

4.3.4 Logic

The fourth and final argument type I will discuss in this chapter is logic. Using Pullum's (2004:7) categories, I divided this type into three further sub-categories: 'functionalism'; 'logicism' and 'coherentism'. Proponents of these argument types claim that prescriptive norms ensure that grammar is logical and ordered and thus preserves intelligibility,

comprehension and prevents linguistic chaos. In what follows, I will discuss these categories one by one.

4.3.4.1 Functionalism

The most common logic-based argument used by posters BTL employs ‘functionalism’, which Pullum (2004:7) defines as arguments utilising prescriptive norms “to avoid ambiguity, misunderstanding, redundancy, etc.”. In the example below, a regular poster, Bebop, argues:

- (26) The grammar enables precision of thought and expression. If the grammar is wrong the thought may well be unclear. (6 May 2017)

In this comment, Bebop draws a correlation between incorrect grammar usage by the writer/speaker and possible confused thinking which can lead to ambiguities in understanding. This supports Pullum (2004:13–14), who states that prescriptivists associate the correct use of grammar with an orderly mind.

Another example of an argument which employs functionalism may be found in a post written by Ancient Mariner, who comments:

- (27) Our language, which if used correctly combines beauty and precision is, too often, becoming unpleasant and ambiguous. (26 September 2017)

In this example the functionalist argument is combined with another one, in this case ‘aestheticism’. Correct usage is claimed to be beautiful, while incorrect usage is ugly. Furthermore, Ancient Mariner claims that ambiguity results in unpleasantness. The pairing of these words reflects the strong emotions which discussions about language correctness can invoke (cf. Burridge, 2010:6). However, by identifying linguistic ambiguity as unpleasant, Ancient Mariner demonstrates a misunderstanding of the English linguistic system, which is often lexically ambiguous with meanings derived through the context of the complete sentence. This misunderstanding is also demonstrated in the following exchange between Did You Ring Sir (DYRS) and BB:

- (28) DYRS: The real issue with grammar is that what is said should be unambiguous. It takes some intelligence to spot what is ambiguous, so you should be asking why it is that the BBC spouts so much (in the news mostly) ambiguity?

BB: English is full of ambiguities...But most of the time they are no problem and go unnoticed because it is clear from the context which interpretation is meant. I suspect this is generally true when ambiguous utterances are used in the output of the BBC.

DYRS: Its [sic] the news that offends most...I used to note down the two or three a day there used to be...I always concluded it was due to lack of intelligence on the part of the news writers...On occasion the ambiguity was corrected (with proper use of grammar) later in the day. But they should never have occurred in the first place.

BB: Without examples, I do not know what you have in mind. As I have noted, English is full of ambiguities and hence we all use ambiguous sentences frequently. However, it is generally clear from the context what we mean. (9/10 December 2017)

Here, BB states that “English is full of ambiguities”, but because of context most speakers understand what is intended by the speaker. It is interesting, however, that rather than address BB’s points on ambiguity and context, DYRS instead focusses on the BBC in relation to perceived ambiguities in grammar. As noted by Crystal (2006:182–83) and Ebner, (2016:309), the BBC is perceived as a language guardian, whose task is to preserve the ‘correct’ form of SE. Thus, perceived transgressions of these norms quickly attract censure from grassroots prescriptivists. When challenged by BB, DYRS can offer little evidence to support their claims about the BBC though they continue to repeat them. DYRS’s correlation between clear, non-ambiguous English usage and intelligence, and their habit of noting alleged ‘mistakes’ made by the BBC places DYRS firmly in the group of prescriptivists who use complaints over language as an identifier of their intelligence (see Chapman, 2017:248–249; Lukač, 2018b:7).

4.3.4.2 *Logicism*

The second type of logic-based argument employed by commentators is ‘logicism’, defined by Pullum (2004:7) as appeals to prescriptive norms “to avoid irrationality”. Examples of logicism include:

- (29) No, the traditional grammar is better...It is more logical than the descriptivist position, because the rules are more logical. (27 May 2017)
- (30) No, the old grammarians were not really descriptivists, precisely because they taught how language worked and formulated rules for people to obey. Why? Because that tended to make grammar logical and simpler for everyone. (27 May 2017).

Both these examples are comments by JM and exemplify the relationship between normative grammar conventions and logic in the minds of purists. In (29) JM makes a circular argument when comparing prescriptive and descriptive attitudes towards grammar. In (30), he makes a correlation between the grammarians who based their rules of grammar, and by extension ideas of ‘correctness’, on Latin (cf. Peters, 2006:261) and subsequent more “logical and simpler” grammar. Furthermore, as with Emmell in (17), JM views a rule as something to

obey. He argues that following these rules results in grammar which is “simpler for everyone”. However, it can be argued that instead of leading to simpler grammar, the attempt to make English follow Latinate rules has had the unintended consequence of complicating the public understanding of grammar by causing many of the most common usage problems, such as the split infinitive or preposition stranding.

4.3.4.3 *Coherentism*

The final sub-category analysed in this section is ‘coherentism’ – the argument that adherence to prescriptive norms prevents “chaos, randomness and disorder” (Pullum, 2004:7). As with logicism, the main proponent of coherentism-based arguments is JM. He argues that prescriptive rules prevent grammatical chaos.

- (31) The truth is we have grammatical rules and these need to be insisted upon if, especially in the present age with the avalanche of badly written material, we are not to descend into grammatical chaos where communication becomes hard or impossible. (25 February 2017)

In (31), JM combines ‘coherentism’ with a ‘nostalgia’ argument. He first uses nostalgia to make a comparison between an unspecified era when grammar and writing were better, and the present where “badly written” communications now predominate, without providing any evidence to support this claim. JM uses hyperbole to support this assertion by describing this “badly written material” as an *avalanche*. This disaster metaphor suggests that JM is being overwhelmed and crushed by incorrect language. Next, JM uses the ‘coherentism’ argument – that bad writing will result in grammatical chaos. This is also another slippery slope fallacy. Lastly, JM argues that the rules “must be insisted upon” reflecting the prescriptive belief that there is only one form of ‘correct’ English (cf. Kamm, 2015:43–7; Pullum, 2017:179;).

4.4 Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have investigated the different types of arguments used by prescriptivists and descriptivists to discuss prescriptive ideologies. That over 6% of all posts were focussed on this issue only emphasises the importance of this topic to “The Pedant” commentators. My analysis showed that many of the argument types and language choices used by commentators agree with those identified by linguists such as Pullum (2004) and Lukač (2018a). While I found some differences in the popularity of argument types and how often each group used them when compared to Lukač (2018a), overall my results are remarkably similar, even though the demographics of the posters in the two studies are different.

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Additionally, prescriptivist “The Pedant” posters used hyperbole and fallacies to stress the importance of ‘correct’ grammar.

I also found that prescriptivists often misunderstand linguistic theories and rules, exemplified by their opposition to theories such as UG and the (mis)understanding of how to define a linguistic rule, despite using these rules to support prescriptive norms. Other common tropes and targets used by prescriptivists included them stating that linguists have an ‘anything goes’ attitude towards grammar and criticising perceived language misuse by organisations such as BBC. There were also differences between prescriptivists and descriptivists in their attitudes towards external authorities. Descriptivists cited works by linguists while prescriptivists referred to authors who are interested in language through their work but who have no formal linguistic training, such as Simon Heffer. Both sides remained sceptical of the evidence presented by the other.

Lastly, while discussions on prescriptive ideologies comprised over 6% of all the BTL posts, those who participated in these debates were restricted to a small number of regular commentators, such as JM, BB, Bebop, Emmell and MT. This existence of this core group of posters, who regularly revisited the debate surrounding prescriptive ideologies, may explain why so many of the discussions were repetitive, with the same commentators reiterating the same points without altering their own viewpoint. This was particularly the case in discussions between JM and BB.

To conclude, despite being aware of the different arguments used in the debate surrounding prescriptive ideologies, as shown by the first quotation in this chapter, commentators continued to repeat them and showed little sign of changing their minds at the conclusion of any of the discussions. Instead, those posters who were classified as being prescriptivist maintained and repeated their normative viewpoints, repeating grammatical shibboleths and arguments that have been refuted by linguists. In the following chapter I will analyse a specific usage problem – *less* instead of *fewer* with countable nouns, to explore whether similar arguments are used by both sides and whether a specific usage problem attracts the same passions and level of debate.

Chapter 5. *Less* with countable nouns

“It amuses me that people still regard fewer/less as some kind of shibboleth. Personally I couldn't care fewer.” (LC, 12 August 2017)

5.1 Introduction

In 2008, the UK supermarket chain Tesco amended the signs above their checkouts to read “up to ten items” instead of the original “ten items or less” after a campaign criticised their use of *less* as being grammatically incorrect. While this change was widely reported at the time, it was never entirely clear who was behind the campaign to criticise Tesco for their supposedly poor grammar. The BBC news website reported it was a consequence of “coming under pressure from linguists” (“When to use ‘fewer’”, 2008), while the *Daily Telegraph* noted that “Tesco has bowed to pressure from those lobbying for the use of good English” (Peterkin, 2008). While it can be questioned whether linguists would have contacted Tesco to criticise them for using *less* instead of *fewer*, it is reasonable to assume that many of those who did complain to Tesco were grassroots prescriptivists making use of the increased opportunities to complain that Web 2.0 and social media have provided. Tesco, the BBC reported, had taken advice for the wording of the new signs from The Plain English campaign, whose spokesperson, Marie Clair, took a descriptive stance, saying “Plain English doesn't want to be too pedantic about language, although '10 items or fewer' is grammatically correct, it can sound cumbersome” (“When to use ‘fewer’”, 2008). In contrast, Ian Bruton-Simmons, the spokesperson of the Queen's English Society, a charity founded with the aim to “keep the English language safe from perceived declining standards” (<http://queens-english-society.org/>) was more critical, stating “Language should not be confused because it weakens it” and that the use of English had been “‘rotten for a long time’ and says the ‘efficiency of words has been lost...’” (“When to use ‘fewer’”, 2008). This one episode encapsulates the debate over whether it is acceptable to use *less* with countable nouns.

In the previous chapter I analysed the types of arguments used by commentators in “The Pedant” in discussions on prescriptivism as an ideology. In this chapter I will again look at the argument types used BTL, but in relation to using *less* instead of *fewer* with countable nouns. As with the debate surrounding prescriptive ideologies, my decision to analyse this specific feature was driven partly by the frequency with which it was discussed BTL when compared to other well-known usage problems, such as flat adverbs or preposition stranding. Spontaneous debates of *less* with countable nouns arose beneath five columns, in addition to the three ATL where it is specifically discussed by Kamm. Indeed, the only other usage

problem that elicited a similar level of response was that of the split infinitive. Additionally, as I wrote in Chapter 3, studying a specific usage problem enabled me to compare whether different topics altered the prevalence of the argument types, alongside allowing me to look in more detail at alternative arguments to those I analysed in Chapter 4. To begin with, I will provide a brief overview of the history of *less* with countable nouns as a usage problem before providing, as in the previous chapter, a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the argument types used by “The Pedant” posters.

5.2 A brief history of *less/fewer* as a usage problem

The rule that *fewer* should be used with countable nouns and *less* with uncountable nouns is one that generations of students have had drummed into them, and indeed, is one that I have repeated to my own students when teaching them English. However, the rule is one that is, again, a consequence of the standardisation process begun in the late eighteenth century. It was Robert Baker who first made the distinction in usage in his 1770 book *Reflections on the English Language*, writing: “THIS Word [less] is most commonly used in speaking of a Number; where I should think *Fewer* would do better. *No fewer than a Hundred* appears to me not only more elegant than *No less than a Hundred*, but more strictly proper” (Baker, 1770:67). While Baker qualified his advice with “should” and “appears to me”, over time this distinction, based solely on Baker’s personal preference, has hardened into a rule. It is a usage guide staple and features in fifty-eight out of the seventy-seven usage guides in the HUGE database. The most recent three entries in the database, dating from 2010, are all prescriptive in tone and advise that *less* should only be used with uncountable nouns. There is, however, no grammatical reason for the distinction, as is clear from Baker’s original entry.

The confusion arises, in part, due to the question of whether mass nouns, such as units of time or food stuffs, should be treated as individual single units or as one inclusive item. In the *CGEL*, Rodney Huddleston (2012:1127) writes “the comparative occurs directly with a count plural noun: both forms are found, but *less* is subject to quite strong prescriptive disapproval, so that *fewer* is widely preferred in formal style, and by many speakers in informal style too.” Nevertheless, Huddleston adds a postscript, which notes that while *less* is proscribed, the usage has become increasingly common, and that “the current revival seems inexorable, given the strong pressure of analogy with *more*” (Huddleston, 2002:1127). This gradual relaxation of the proscription against using *less* with countable nouns is borne out by Carmen Ebner (2017:243). Her research, which included asking members of the public to complete surveys which assessed their attitude towards the acceptability of fourteen well-

known usage problems, found that the public considered using *less* with countable nouns to be fairly acceptable overall, and this increased to acceptable in informal situations. Lastly, in keeping with his descriptivist outlook, Kamm (2015:181) holds that using *less* with countable nouns is acceptable and should be influenced by “what’s pleasing to the ear”.

5.3 The types of arguments presented in debates discussing *less* with countable nouns

When analysing the argument types used to discuss *less* with countable nouns, I repeated the process adopted for the analysis in Chapter 4. Debates on *less/fewer* occurred under eight columns in total, including the three ATL columns where the problem was discussed by Kamm. The list of columns is contained in Appendix D. In total there were 82 comments BTL which debated the acceptability of using *less* with countable nouns (2.5% of the total number of comments analysed within my corpus). Of these 82 comments, 36 (44%) were prescriptive while 27 (33%) were descriptive. The other nineteen (23%) were neutral, making jokes, as in the quotation used at the beginning of this chapter, or discussing examples of usage, such as this response from DJ on whether the plurality of the nouns influences whether *less* or *fewer* should be used:

- (1) "Less than ten coins" or "fewer than ten coins"? "Less than ten minutes" or "fewer than ten minutes"? Both are plural, but I'd say "fewer" and "less" respectively. (15 April 2017)

Table 5.1, below, shows my analysis of the argument types used when discussing *less/fewer*, alongside the frequency with which they were used by prescriptivists and descriptivists. Also included is an example of each type of argument taken from “The Pedant”. The complete analysis of the argument types is presented in Appendix E. In total, I identified ten different argument types, which were, in descending order of frequency: ‘prescriptive rules’; ‘rules of the linguistic system’, ‘common usage’, ‘external authorities’, ‘semantics’, ‘sociolinguistic considerations’, ‘logic’, ‘language history’, ‘euphony’, ‘and lastly, ‘education’. Unlike my analysis in Chapter 4, I included the argument types of ‘semantics’ and ‘euphony’, as these argument types were clearer to identify for this feature, with obvious examples, such as those I have used in §5.4.2 and §5.4.5. Overall, the difference between argument types which supported prescriptive or descriptive viewpoints was negligible, with 49.5% being prescriptive while 50.5% were descriptive and, as in Chapter 4, the apparent discrepancy between the majority of comments being prescriptive while the

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majority of argument types being descriptive is explained by descriptive comments containing several argument types.

Table 5.1 Categories of argument types in metalinguistic debates on using *less* with countable nouns

Types of argument used (%)	Description	Frequency of argument type (%)		Example from “The Pedant” comments
		Prescriptive	Descriptive	
Prescriptive rules (22%)	Rules of correct usage are transmitted through the prescriptive tradition.	55%	45%	It is the accepted convention that “fewer” is used with count nouns and less for “non-count” nouns”.
Rules of the linguistic system (18.7%)	Acceptance or rejection that the linguistic system defines what constitutes usage norms.	17.6%	82.4%	...fewer modified ‘week’ not ‘quarter’, so if you subscribe to the less/fewer distinction, the FT was right.
Common usage (12.1%)	Acceptance or rejection that the description of the speaker’s linguistic behaviour defines what constitutes acceptable usage.	27.3%	72.7%	No one ever says ‘fewer’ with mass nouns and we can therefore infer it’s not part of English grammar. But almost everyone uses ‘less’ with both nouns of mass and nouns of quantity.
External authorities (9.9%)	Acceptance or rejection of recommendation as acceptable usage by (linguistic) authorities.	55.6%	44.4%	As for evidence that it is not an error, how about the statement by Huddleston and Pullum on p.199 of A Students’ Guide to English Grammar that less jobs is ‘informal’? ‘Informal’ is not the same as thing as ‘in error’.
Semantics (9.9%)	Acceptable usage is determined by the correspondence of the linguistic form and meaning.	66.7%	33.3%	I have always regarded the ‘less/fewer’ debate as one of according the words their accurate meaning. Definition of less = “a smaller amount of”, not “a smaller number of”.
Sociolinguistic considerations (7.7%)	Usage identifies speakers as members of particular (marginal) social groups.	71.4%	28.6%	[On people who use <i>less</i> with countable nouns] No law against sounding like an uneducated idiot.
Logic (6.6%)	Rules of language correspond to rules of logic and should not include redundancy, contradictions and illogicality or be chaotic.	100%		...some things are worth fighting for, especially if the rules are easy to comprehend (as the rule is in this case), or they help to preserve the logic of the grammar...
Language history (6.6%)	Usage is acceptable if it has been part of the language over (a considerable) period of time.		100%	Less has been used with countables for centuries. It’s part of the language and there’s nothing ‘ungrammatical’ about it.

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Euphony (4.4%)	Usage is subject to aesthetic judgements. Correct usage is or sounds more beautiful.	100%	But fewer blueberry muffins just feels better.
Education (2.2%)	Rules of correct usage are taught through teaching.	100%	As far as your grammar is concerned I can't fault your logic, but it would still grate on me to use less with countables...I suppose it is because I was taught English in the 1950s and 60s and I am very set in my ways.

The most common argument used when discussing *less* with countable nouns was, I found, 'prescriptive rules', used overall twenty times (22%). As with my findings in the previous chapter, this argument type was used more often by prescriptivists than descriptivists at 55% (eleven times) to 45% (nine times) respectively, though the frequency of use between the two groups was very close. However, when I examined the sub-categories of arguments included under 'prescriptive rules' I found that only 'nostalgia' was used, with two comments (10%). Furthermore, unlike my findings in Chapter 4, 'nostalgia' was used solely by prescriptivists.

The second most common argument type was 'rules of the linguistic system', which was overwhelmingly used by descriptivists at 82.4% (fourteen times) when compared to prescriptivists, who used this argument type only three times. This contrasts with my findings in Chapter 4, where 45.8% of comments using this argument were posted by prescriptivists. This could be a consequence of the narrower focus in discussions on a specific usage problem, when compared to the far broader range of possible discussion points included under 'rules of the linguistic system' in the previous chapter. Nonetheless, these results are closer to those found by Lukač (2018a) in her *Grammar Girl* investigation.

The third most frequently employed argument was 'common usage', which I discuss in greater detail in §5.4.1, below. This argument type was used eleven times in total (12.1%), mostly by posters who advocated a more descriptive viewpoint (72.7% or eight times to 27.3% or three times respectively). Again, this contrasts with my findings in Chapter 4, where two-thirds of comments which mentioned 'common usage' were posted by prescriptivists. My findings are, however, consistent with Lukač's analysis (2018a:122) of the *Grammar Girl* commentators.

The fourth and fifth most commonly used arguments were those which mentioned 'external authorities' to support an argument and 'semantics', each used nine times (9.9%). Unlike my findings in Chapter 4, where two-thirds of the arguments which mentioned

external authorities were posted by descriptivists (cf. §4.2), I found that in discussions on *less/fewer*, external authorities were referred to almost evenly by both sides. Indeed, when the two examples of ‘authoritarianism’ are included, prescriptivists referred to external authorities only slightly more often than descriptivists (five times to four times respectively). Arguments which utilised ‘semantics’ – the word choice, and therefore ‘correctness’, is determined by the linguistic form and meaning – were used nine times in total; six times by prescriptivists, who argued that the distinction between *less* and *fewer* should be maintained and three times by descriptivists who argued that there was no difference in meaning between the two, so it was acceptable to use either with countable nouns.

‘Sociolinguistic considerations’ was the sixth most common argument type. As with my findings in the previous chapter, I found that this argument type was predominantly used by prescriptivists (five times), in comparison to descriptivists who used it only twice. Some prescriptive posters who made sociolinguistically-based arguments were particularly strong in their descriptions of those who used *less* with countable nouns, labelling them as “stupid” and “uneducated”. I explore this more, below, in §5.4.3.

Again, including Pullum’s (2004:7) sub-categories, I found that logic-based arguments were used only six times in discussions on *less/fewer*. This contrasts to Chapter 4, where it was the fourth most common argument type. Within this category, the most popular sub-category was ‘logicism’, used three times. Next was ‘functionalism’ (two times), followed by ‘coherentism’ (once). This contrasts with my findings in Chapter 4, where ‘functionalism’ was the most common sub-category. As with discussions on prescriptive ideologies, the main proponent of logic-based arguments was JM, who provided five out of the six examples I identified.

The three least used argument types were: ‘language history’, ‘euphony’ and lastly, ‘education’. Arguments which referred to ‘language history’, discussed in §5.4.4, were used six times in total, and all examples were descriptive. ‘Euphony’ – that the ‘correct’ usage sounds more beautiful – was used four times. All examples were prescriptive, which is similar to Lukač’s findings (2018a:122) and is discussed in §5.4.5. Lastly, in contrast to my findings in Chapter 4, where it was the sixth most popular argument type, ‘education’, also discussed in §5.4.4, was used only twice and both examples were to support the maintenance of prescriptive norms for *less/fewer*.

As I found in my analysis in Chapter 4, certain argument types were employed more regularly by either prescriptivists or descriptivists and this remains the same for *less* with countable nouns. However, while the top two argument types were the same for both of my

in-depth investigations: ‘prescriptive rules’ and ‘rules of the linguistic system’, within ‘prescriptive rules’ there were differences, with only the sub-category of ‘nostalgia’ being used in discussions on *less/fewer*. Arguments using ‘common usage’ were more frequent, perhaps as it is easier to use this argument type in relation to a specific usage problem. The same reasoning applies to the argument type of ‘semantics’ (which featured in discussions on prescriptive ideologies only in relation to specific usage problems), ‘sociolinguistic considerations’ and ‘euphony’. Logic-based arguments were less common overall, and there was also a difference in the frequency with which the sub-categories were used. As with Lukač’s findings (2018a:121), ‘language history’ was rarely used and only by descriptivists. Lastly, in contrast to my findings in Chapter 4, ‘education’ was used only twice, both examples of which were prescriptive in nature.

5.4 Further analysis of grassroots discussions on *less* with countable nouns

In my analysis above, I provided a quantitative analysis of arguments used when commentators discussed a well-known usage problem. As before in Chapter 4, in this next section I will examine specific argument types and analyse them for the rigour of the argument used, and features such as lexical choice and tone. While the two most commonly used argument types were the same as in Chapter 4 – ‘prescriptive rules’ and ‘rules of the linguistic system’ – I will not examine them again in this chapter unless they occur in conjunction with another argument type I am analysing. Doing so would be repetitive and add little to my findings. This also applies to arguments mentioning ‘external authorities’ and logic-based arguments. Instead, in this chapter I will focus on the six argument types I have not yet discussed in this thesis, i.e. common usage, semantics, sociolinguistic considerations, language history, euphony and, lastly, education. By focussing on these types of arguments, my aim is to provide a full analysis of all ten argument types identified in grassroots prescriptive discussions in “The Pedant” over these two chapters.

5.4.1 Common Usage

Arguments which use ‘common usage’ to defend or reject *less* with countable nouns are the third most common type and are mostly utilised by descriptivists. However, as with the discussions on prescriptive ideologies in the previous chapter, the most vehement opposition to permitting *less* with countable nouns comes from JM. In a long thread, he writes:

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- (2) It is the accepted convention that “fewer” is used with count nouns and “less” for “non-count” nouns. The fact that some people continually make an error does not make their usage correct. (19 August 2017)

When further on in the thread BB informs him that Huddleston and Pullum state that using *less* instead of *fewer* is informal but not incorrect, JM responds:

- (3) I also not that you now suggest that this usage is “informal”. Well, that covers a multitude of possibilities, besides begging the question of who decides what is formal and informal and on what basis. (19 August 2017)

Both these comments from JM show how prescriptivists reject common usage as a reason to amend their viewpoint on the ‘correctness’ of prescriptive norms, a characteristic which has been commented on (Kamm, 2015:52–54). By stating that common usage does not stop something being an error, JM positions himself in opposition to natural language change. Moreover, his comment in (3) also exemplifies how those who hold normative language values can confuse register with correctness, something I have discussed already in §2.2.4.

In contrast, some posters who are prescriptive in debates on prescriptive ideologies, have a more descriptive outlook in discussions on *less/fewer*. For example, under a column, which included criticisms of Simon Heffer for his normative stance on *less/fewer*, Bebop comments:

- (4) Why is less viewers less formal than fewer viewers, according to Oliver, if they are both equally correct? The only explanation is that, in a tradition familiar to the last few generations, they are, as SE, not both equally correct: convention and habitude rule that, in the disputed usages, fewer is correct in SE. There is no other ‘style’ question at issue here... The issue is not grammar but acceptability as SE. In Oliver’s sentence above⁴ stylistic surely means adhering to traditional notions of SE correctness or not doing so – a rather restricted notion of style. The terms stylistic and style tend to carry rather more weight than they should in these discussions. (13 March 2017)

Bebop writes that if there is no difference in grammatical correctness between *less* and *fewer*, the only objection to using *less* with countable nouns is for stylistic reasons. They further comment that stylistic preferences “tend to carry more weight than they should” in discussions on usage problems. This identifies the often-contradictory attitude prescriptivists can hold towards usage problems. Pedants can ignore some prescriptions while continuing to adhere to others. This contradictory attitude is further underlined in a comment in response to another column which again discusses *less/fewer*. Bebop writes:

⁴ The sentence featured in Kamm’s column was: “ITV moved the news for this?’ Panned #NightlyShow pulls in less viewers than News at Ten . . .”.

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- (5) The difference of opinion about less and fewer is...about the acceptability of actual uses. Fewer money is not a usage... (15 April 2017)

Bebop's post also highlights another criticism centred on the acceptability, based on common usage, of using *less* with countable nouns. This is the argument that as people do not use *fewer* with uncountable nouns, so *less* with countable nouns should also be deemed unacceptable. This is illustrated in a post from AW, who writes:

- (6) I am waiting for you to justify "less biscuits and fewer cheese". (19 August 2017)

In response MT writes:

- (7) There is no justification for "fewer cheese" because nobody ever says it and therefore it is wrong. (19 August 2017)

This argument regarding common usage is one that is frequently employed by prescriptivists, so much so that Kamm, himself, had addressed it four months earlier, BTL. He writes:

- (8) No one ever says "fewer" with mass nouns and we can therefore infer it's not part of English grammar. But almost everyone uses "less" with both nouns of mass and nouns of quantity...It's part of the language and here's nothing wrong with it. (15 April 2017)

Nonetheless, as seen in (6), those unhappy to concede that *less* is acceptable due to common usage, continue to repeat the argument.

Several posters, including Bebop and LC below, comment that as there is no grammatical difference between using *less* or *fewer*, common usage may result in the distinction between the two disappearing. While prescriptivists opposed this, descriptivists, such as LC, accepted that this is part of natural language change, writing:

- (9) [T]here's no grammatical reason for insisting on this usage and "fewer" provides no more information. My suspicion is that in a couple of generations' time it will be considered unnecessary and archaic. (27 January 2018)

5.4.2 Semantics

Arguments based on the semantics of *less* and *fewer* were the fifth most common type used by BTL commentators. Discussions were often linguistically technical in nature, focussing on whether the countable noun used with *less* was single or plural and whether *less* should be used with single or mass nouns, as the example below, posted by PB, illustrates:

- (10) Surely it depends on whether the variable described is continuous or discrete. The number of coins is discrete so you have fewer of them. Time is continuous so you have less than 10 minutes (because you may well have more than nine minutes - say nine and a half) Money itself is effectively continuous so you would have less money

and you would probably have less coinage in circulation, the number of coins minted being to all intents and purposes continuous, but fewer coins in your pocket unless of course you were very rich and had very large pockets. (15 April 2017)

Discussions on correctness also focussed on whether clarity and comprehension would be maintained if *less*, rather than *fewer*, were used with countable nouns. While descriptivists, such as BB and Kamm, state that any ambiguity through lexical choice will be reduced if the sentence is placed in the context of the wider discussion, those who argue for maintaining the distinction, assert that ambiguity should not be tolerated. This is demonstrated in the following exchange:

(11) JABT: Once again OK [Oliver Kamm] dismisses the relevance of the distinction between 'few' and 'less' so I challenge him to tell me the meaning of the following sentence - "This school employs less qualified teachers". Does it mean the teachers have fewer qualifications or there are fewer of them?

BB: It's ambiguous just like "This school employs more qualified teachers".

Emmell: Whereas "this school employs fewer qualified teachers" is unambiguous.

Kamm: Yes; so is "this school employs teachers with less qualifications". We can manage perfectly well with "less" for count nouns and mass nouns, just as we manage with "more".

Emmell: Sometimes I want to be ambiguous, sometimes I don't. If I want to state UNambiguously that the number of qualified teachers is lower than that of poorly qualified teachers, why shouldn't I choose to use "fewer" instead of "less"? (12 August 2017)

While JABT is correct in saying that the use of *less* in the context of the sentence results in that sentence being ambiguous, the point is countered by BB and Kamm, who both comment that *more* is also ambiguous, while no prescription exists over its use with either countable or uncountable nouns. As Kamm (2015:57) has written and as my findings support, pedants can lack a sense of proportion and Emmell's final sentence in the above exchange shows this. While neither BB nor Kamm have stated that Emmell cannot use *fewer*, particularly in the context of the sentence under discussion, Emmell, nonetheless, implies that they have by writing "why shouldn't I choose to use 'fewer' instead of less'."

The following week, again in response to a column discussing *less/fewer*, Emmell re-states their opinion that the distinction between *less* and *fewer* should be preserved. They write:

- (12) HOWEVER, "less qualifications", though admittedly unambiguous, not only sounds wrong, but in my opinion IS wrong. To find the "correct solution" (fewer qualifications) is not, I contend, difficult. (20 August 2017)

In this comment, Emmell acknowledges that in the sentence under discussion – "This school employs teachers with less qualifications." – there is no ambiguity. Nevertheless, Emmell is opposed to using *less* as it is 'incorrect'. They offer no evidence for this, instead relying on an *ipse dixit* statement. They, moreover, make a sociolinguistic judgement, commenting that as it is not difficult to use the "correct solution" of *fewer*, those that use *less* instead, must be less intelligent, a common belief of prescriptivists and commented on already in §2.2.2.

In contrast, JM argues in favour of maintaining the distinction, not because of possible ambiguities, but because of the adjectival classes, where *fewer* is conventionally used for countable nouns. He writes:

- (13) the fact that there is a useful distinction between the two words –
 few, fewer, (fewest?)
 little, less, least

"Fewer" fits into the set of adjectives that qualifies countable nouns. One might say "There were few apples", not "There were little apples" (except to mean there were small apples). Thus it is easy to see that "There were fewer apples" is preferable to "There were less apples". Why confuse the functions of the two adjectives? (20 August 2017)

His comment overlooks the long history of using *less* with countable nouns (discussed in greater detail in §5.4.4). It also ignores how English treats *more*, which is an analogous comparative adjective and had been mentioned BTL by Kamm in (11) the previous week. Lastly, JM offers another circular argument: use *fewer* with countable nouns as its used with countable nouns. As with Emmell in (12), JM offers no evidence to support the prescription of *less* other than adjectival class.

Lastly, sociolinguistic considerations are provided to uphold the convention for *less/fewer*. In contrast to (12), however, Bluestocking argues for the distinction to be maintained to aid non-native learners of English. They comment:

- (14) It is useful for learners of English to understand the distinction, otherwise they might say things like "He earns fewer money than I do", or "If you want to lose weight, drink fewer beer". (27 January 2018)

5.4.3 Sociolinguistic considerations

The sixth most common argument type was ‘sociolinguistic considerations’. As the examples in (12) and (14) show, comments which prescribe the use of *less* with countable nouns can combine several argument types. When analysing this argument type specifically what emerges is the inconsistency with which those who uphold normative language conventions apply them. For example, in (15) below, Bebop notes that using *fewer* in certain circumstances, while being grammatically correct, will seem “starchy”, but argues for maintaining the distinction, particularly in SE. Yet this, too, emphasises how prescriptivists confuse register with correctness within SE, already discussed in §2.2.4, with the insistence that *fewer* should be used in all but the most informal of situations.

- (15) Fewer has starchy connotations in certain expressions. I think that is why we say one person less...In everyday, colloquial language some things trump formal or over-formal consistency and/or correctness.

Even though I don’t think the two usages can be hermetically sealed off from each other I do think the distinction should be maintained in SE where the tone is relatively formal...And also in general where one is using a register above the very informal. (15 April 2017)

Moreover, by refusing to accept *less* in anything other than the most informal situations within SE, Bebop does not just make a distinction between those who do or do not use *less* with countable nouns more generally, but also distinguishes between BTL commentators who are more relaxed about using *less* within the parameters of SE, and those who are not, like Bebop. The insistence on an additional layer of ‘correctness’ emphasises that this group hold “superior qualities” and a greater understanding of SE when compared to other posters who may have a more *laissez faire* attitude (Chapman, 2017:245).

The concern to present the ‘correct’ register and the subsequent negative judgement if a speaker fails to do so is another sociolinguistic consideration put forward to uphold the *less/fewer* prescription. In a post, dated 20 August 2017, JM comments:

- (16) And, of course, those who do not realise that such usages are informal do themselves a disservice when formal language is called for, especially in the employment market. So, let’s insist that while different groups may, in the end, use language as they will, it would be a good thing to insist on a standard correct language as the preferred means of communication. After all, this not only helps to level the playing field for everyone but it also helps to prevent linguistic chaos. (20 August 2017)

In his post, JM specifically mentions job applicants who use *less* instead of *fewer*, and the supposed disadvantage this would place them under when compared to candidates who use

the ‘correct’ term. This connection between the successful application of the ‘rules’ and a subsequent reward is noted by Chapman (2017:242), who writes: “that using prescribed forms will ensure positive judgements.” He continues: “[t]hat this notion seems natural to most people is a mark of the prescriptive tradition’s success.” JM’s post also presupposes that people are unaware of the different registers used in various social situations. This shows a lack of knowledge of current grammar teaching under the National Curriculum, in which students are specifically taught about register in SE even if a non-standard variety predominates outside the classroom (Cheshire & Milroy, 1993:25; “National curriculum”, 2014). Lastly, JM again uses ‘coherentism’ to repeat his view that adherence to prescriptive norms prevents chaos.

While JM defends the *less/fewer* distinction for partly altruistic reasons, there are also commentators who are harsher in their judgement of people who use *less* with countable nouns. In response to a comment which argues that it should not matter whether *less* or *fewer* is used, Alabama writes:

(17) Yeah, right. No law against sounding like an uneducated idiot. (19 August 2017)

In this comment, Alabama underlines the long-established dictum among prescriptivists that grammatical imprecision equates a lack of intelligence (cf. Milroy & Milroy, 2012:21 Chapman, 2017:243). It is implicit in this post that those who do follow the grammatical convention of *less/fewer* are, thus, more intelligent than those who do not. This is reinforced by her use of ‘idiot’, which is aimed not only at those who do use *less* with countable nouns generally, but also as an *ad hominem* against the BTL commentators who take a descriptive stance. Finally, just as with Bebop in (15), Alabama uses *less/fewer* as a way to implement a further in-group/out-group divide within the BTL commentators. This is understood and commented on by BB, who responds:

(18) Somebody who sounds like an [un]educated⁵ idiot to pedants sounds like a normal person to ordinary people. (19 August 2017)

His reply not only challenges Alabama directly over her judgmental statement and *ad hominem* attack, but neatly turns on its head the usual argument from prescriptivists that linguists are indifferent to the concerns of ‘regular’ language users (cf. §4.3.3). Instead BB presents the pedants as the ones who are uninterested. Lastly, the use of *less* with countable

⁵ In an email, BB confirmed that he meant to write uneducated. (BB. personal communication, 22 May 2019)

nouns to judge and separate people into in/out groups, observed in both Bebob's (14) and Alabama's posts, is acknowledged in a comment by LC:

- (19) It's remarkable how often a stylistic preference is adopted to separate "our kind of people" from everyone else. (27 January 2018)

5.4.4 Language history

The eighth most common argument type was employed solely by descriptivists and invoked the history of *less* with countable nouns as a reason for permissibility. These include posts by Kamm (20) and BB (21), which pertain to its regular use in Middle and Early Modern English and also posts which refer to Robert Baker as the originator of the prescription. Several posters, including LC (22) and Bluestocking (23), provide links to external sites to corroborate their arguments. Examples include:

- (20) Less has been used with countables for centuries. It's part of the language and there's nothing "ungrammatical" about it. (15 April 2017)
- (21) As for things like less mistakes, Huddleston and Pullum note in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (fn.16, 1127) that it was used in Early Modern English and suggest that 'the current revival 'seems inexorable', give [sic] the strong pressure of analogy with more'. (20 August 2017)
- (22) I'm sure Mr Kamm will correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe the count noun rule was a relatively recent introduction from one of those dreaded guides to "correct" English. Ah - I didn't think I dreamt it. Only Wikipedia but backs up what I thought: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fewer_vs._less (27 January 2018)
- (23) Apparently, it's all thanks (or no thanks) to someone called Robert Baker, who proposed the form in his *Reflections on the English Language* (1770), but as a preference rather than a rule. <https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/08/economist-explains-1> (27 January 2018)

As noted above in §6.4.2 with the comment from JM (13), both the long-documented history of *less* with countable nouns and Baker's role in the introduction of the prescription are never addressed by prescriptivists.

5.4.5 Euphony, and education

The final two argument types used in the *less/fewer* discussions were 'euphony' and 'education' and both were employed exclusively by prescriptivists. As with arguments which rely on 'semantics', those which employ 'euphony' are used in conjunction with another argument type in three out of the four instances found. Two (24 and 27) are used in conjunction with the argument type 'education', while Emmell (25) uses a sociolinguistic

argument to equate intelligence with grammatical ‘correctness’ and adds that it is “not...difficult” to use *fewer*. Two out of the four instances I found accept that there is no grammatical reason to reject *less* with countable nouns, but two posters, Antidisestablishmentarianism (26) and Emmell, still reject this usage as incorrect. Regardless of whether they accept the usage as grammatically correct or not, all four commentators write that the ‘incorrect’ usage “feels” or “sounds” wrong, or “grates”, which emphasises the almost visceral and emotional response that discussions on *less/fewer* can provoke. The comments from PD (24) and Emmell (25) highlight these emotive responses. PD uses the word *feels* to describe his reaction to using *less* with count nouns, while ‘Emmell’ uses capitalized *IS* to stress their opposition to the usage.

- (24) ...But 'fewer blueberry muffins' just *feels* [emphasis added] better. I'm sure that's how I was taught (2 October 2016)
- (25) HOWEVER, "less qualifications", though admittedly unambiguous, not only *sounds* [emphasis added] wrong, but in my opinion IS wrong. To find the "correct solution" (fewer qualifications) is not, I contend, difficult. But even if it were, I'm with you when you say that the distinction between "less" and "fewer" is worth preserving. (20 August 2017)
- (26) But in this case, it is *grating* [emphasis added] when less/fewer are interchanged, and there is a simple rule that children are taught and do follow - 'countability'. If you can count the difference, it is 'fewer', if you can't it is 'less'. (Less fun etc) (9 December 2017)

Both PD and another poster, AW (27), refer to what they were taught at school when rejecting *less* with countable nouns. AW, in particular, acknowledges that he was taught in the 50s and 60s, which despite evidence to the contrary (cf. J. Milroy, 1995: 60–61), is lauded as a “golden age” by many prescriptivists.

- (27) As far as your grammar is concerned I can't fault your logic, but it would still *grate* [emphasis added] on me to use less with countables...I suppose it is because I was taught English in the 1950s and 60s and am set in my ways. (15 April 2017)

5.5 Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have analysed the types of arguments used in discussions on the use of *less* with countable nouns. I found that, overall, there was an almost equal split between prescriptive and descriptive arguments presented by commentators. Moreover, while ‘prescriptive rules’ and ‘rules of the linguistic system’ were the two most commonly used argument types, as in the analysis presented in Chapter 4, a different discussion topic – the

specific usage problem of *less* with countable nouns – resulted in different argument types being used more frequently, examples being ‘common usage’, ‘euphony’ and ‘language history’. Given the frequency with which the *less/fewer* usage problem was discussed BTL, it was surprising that argument types such as ‘education’ and ‘euphony’ were not more popular, particularly as exposure through education is often a reason to follow usage prescriptions (Ebner, 2017:80). While many prescriptivists used arguments focussed on ‘semantics’ and emphasised the difference in meaning between *less* and *fewer*, little attention was paid to the analogous comparative *more*, and prescriptivists did not respond when presented with this as an argument by descriptivists. Likewise, prescriptivists again failed to understand that ambiguity is inherent in English and, thus, using *less* with countable nouns will not lead to miscommunications.

Not only was there a change in the popularity of argument types used, when compared to Chapter 4, but also with the usage of sub-categories within these arguments. While ‘prescriptive rules’ was the most commonly used, within the various sub-categories I only identified ‘nostalgia’, which was used solely by prescriptivists. I found the same when analysing logic-based arguments. While all three sub-categories were utilised, the numbers were very small when compared to those analysed in Chapter 4. This suggests that discussions on specific usage problems, such as *less* with countable nouns, requires a different sub-set of argument types than debates on prescriptive ideologies.

There was a broader range of posters who commented on *less/fewer* discussions when compared to debates on prescriptive ideologies in general, which might account for the closeness between descriptive and prescriptive views. While there were still the ‘usual suspects’, such as BB, JM, Bebop and Emmell, who were typically the most vociferous in their arguments, other posters like LC and Bluestocking regularly contributed as well. This could be because of the topic – discussions on a specific usage problem are not as abstract as those surrounding prescriptive ideologies and require less knowledge of linguistic theories. Additionally, it could be because the topic is more interesting; most people will have been taught this rule and had to apply it throughout their school days and working lives and feel they have something to contribute. Within those who comprised the core group of prescriptive posters, such as JM and Bebop, a broader range of views was exhibited when compared to my findings as presented in Chapter 4. While some, such as JM and Emmell, again argued for the maintenance of prescriptive norms, others who had been orthodox in discussions on prescriptive ideologies, such as Bebop, were less so when involved in discussions on *less/fewer*. This reflects the *ipse dixit* attitude that is common amongst

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prescriptivists and emphasises how personal stylistic preferences influence grassroots prescriptive attitudes. As in the previous chapter, posters who argued for the acceptability of *less* with countable nouns provided empirical evidence to support their claims, by referring to linguistic research or even to Robert Baker, who first introduced the *less/fewer* distinction, in contrast to those who supported a more prescriptive stance, who did not. While, overall, the balance between prescriptive and descriptive comments was almost even, the tone in some comments was more aggressive than when compared to discussions on prescriptive ideologies. This was particularly the case with one poster, Alabama, who not only held strong sociolinguistic views about people who used *less* instead of *fewer*, but used an *ad hominem* attack against other BTL posters.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

When I began investigating grassroots prescriptive attitudes of “The Pedant” commentators for this thesis, I assumed, that as readers of a language column which advocated a descriptive viewpoint, a majority of posters would share Kamm’s attitudes towards the various usage, lexical and semantic problems discussed in his columns. Instead I found that my findings support previous research, in particular Lukač’s (2018a) *Grammar Girl* investigation, that participants in grassroots metalinguistic discussions continue to support prescriptive norms. In debates on prescriptive ideologies, this was a small majority with 55% of all arguments being prescriptive. In debates on *less* with countable nouns, the arguments for and against the maintenance of the proscription were more evenly divided between prescriptivists and descriptivists. Nonetheless, that slightly more commentators overall preferred a more old-fashioned and traditional prescriptivist interpretation of grammar (whether in the abstract as in discussions on prescriptive ideologies or in relation to a specific usage problem) is unexpected, especially as these debates were occurring BTL in columns written by a writer who advocates a more descriptive outlook.

The frequency of usage for specific argument types resulted in some interesting findings. For both prescriptive ideologies and *less* with countable nouns, the two most commonly employed argument types were ‘prescriptive rules’ and ‘rules of the linguistic system’. While the popularity of ‘prescriptive rules’ is unsurprising, especially when compared to the findings from Lukač’s (2018a) *Grammar Girl* investigation where it was the most commonly used argument type, what was unusual was the number of times descriptivists made use of this category (including its sub-categories), if only to rebut arguments put forward by prescriptivists. Consequently, nearly 40% of the examples in the discussions on prescriptive ideologies were posted by descriptivists, while in discussions on *less* with countable nouns the figure was even higher at 45%. Both of these findings contrast with Lukač’s (2018a) analysis of the *Grammar Girl* comments, where all the comments under this category were prescriptive.

In my analysis of the ‘rules of the linguistic system’ I was surprised by how closely this argument type was employed by both sides in debates on prescriptive ideologies and the detail of grammatical knowledge exhibited. While some prescriptive posters, such as Magister in §4.3.1.3, repeated the common trope that descriptive grammarians have an ‘anything goes’ attitude towards grammar, others, such as JM and Bebop presented well-developed arguments, reflecting an engagement with current linguistic thought, even if they

misunderstood or rejected these theories. When challenged to support their views by descriptive posters such as BB, MT or Kamm, these misunderstandings became apparent though, highlighted in JM's insistence that the infinitival form requires *to*, discussed in §4.3.1.2. When *less* with countable nouns was discussed, there was, perhaps, less scope for confusion over linguistic theories, which resulted in this argument type being used mostly by descriptivists. I found a similar trend when 'common usage' was examined. In discussions on prescriptive ideologies, prescriptivists made use of this argument type more frequently than descriptivists. However, when *less* with countable nouns was debated, as with Lukač (2018a), this argument was used primarily by descriptivists.

When I analysed the attitudes of prescriptivists and descriptivists towards the use of 'external authorities' I found that neither side accepted the authorities who were put forward by the opposing side. In discussions on prescription as an ideology, descriptivists made most use of external authorities to support their arguments. However, in debates on *less/fewer*, this argument type was used slightly more by prescriptivists, although this finding included the two cases of 'authoritarianism'. When excluded, this argument was used more frequently by descriptivists. All examples of 'authoritarianism' I found were prescriptive in tone, suggesting that, as Pullum (2004:10) argues, pedants use a (flawed) literary canon on which to base their stylistic preferences, rather than reading linguistic texts.

In both sets of analyses, logic-based arguments were overwhelmingly used by prescriptivists, and this corresponds to Lukač's (2018a) findings. However, it was less common in discussions on *less/fewer*. As with 'linguistic rules' and 'common usage', this could be because a discussion on a specific usage problem is less abstract than one on prescriptive ideologies. This is, perhaps, borne out not only by the small number of times it was used overall in *less/fewer* debates (six times), but also by the differences with which the sub-categories of argument were employed. While 'functionalism' was by far the most common in prescriptive ideology debates, comprising just under 50% of all logic-based arguments, it was used only twice in *less/fewer* discussions. In both sets of discussions, the main proponent of logic-based arguments was JM, who was extremely emphatic that English must follow rules and be logical, even when evidence to the contrary was presented to him.

My findings on 'euphony', 'sociolinguistic considerations' and 'language history' all support previous research, in particular Lukač (2018a), both in who is more likely to rely on these specific argument types and how popular they are in metalinguistic grassroots discussions. In particular, 'sociolinguistic considerations' produced some interesting observations. First was the ironic use of the question tag *innit* by prescriptivists, especially in

the debates on prescriptive ideologies, as a technique to reject opposing arguments and also to infer the poster's superiority, in contrast to those who may use it as part of their natural speech. Second, I was surprised by how judgmental some commentators were when perceived 'incorrect' grammar was discussed, such as Alabama calling people who use *less* with countable nouns "uneducated idiots".

That purists equate 'incorrect' grammar with a lack of education draws attention to how few commentators utilised 'education' as an argument type, particularly as Lukač (2018a) found it was the sixth most common in her *Grammar Girl* investigation. In my analyses I found that this argument was in the bottom third for both prescriptive ideologies and *less/fewer*, where it was the least popular. As noted by Ebner (2017:80), education would be expected to influence attitudes towards language 'correctness', hence my surprise that it was not more frequently used. Whether this is a consequence of commentators having a greater awareness of metalinguistic matters more generally, meaning that they did not feel the need to rely on it, or whether neither topic encouraged the use of this specific argument type, is not clear from my analyses. However, this does suggest that while popular wisdom holds that education standards around grammar teaching have declined and that people are supposedly now unable to use grammar correctly, when involved in discussions centred around prescriptive ideologies or specific usage problems, "The Pedant" commentators chose to rely on alternative arguments to support their point of view.

There were several interesting linguistic techniques used by posters. The first, observed in the discussions on prescriptive ideologies, was that of Biblical rhetoric: either paraphrasing famous Biblical passages, as seen in §4.3.2.1 and §4.3.2.2 or by using religious imagery, also in §4.3.2.2. Commentators like JM also invoked apocalyptic consequences for the English language should proscriptions be removed or contested usages become acceptable. Second was the way commentators used humour. As noted by Hyde (2014) and Švelch and Sherman (2018), humour has been used as a mechanism to avoid accusations of prescriptivism in grassroots metalinguistic debates while, in actuality, helping to reinforce normative language attitudes. While commentators in "The Pedant" mostly used humour in a different way to the two studies above – the humour was self-deprecating, designed either to deflect or minimise potential disagreements, or to acknowledge that the poster's view could be construed as overly prescriptive – it was still primarily employed by those who wished to uphold normative language values. The other way humour was employed was through the use of puns and verbal word play, such as the quotation at the beginning of Chapter 5. This type

of humour has been noted by Schaffer (2010) and was used by both prescriptivists and descriptivists.

When my findings were looked at as a whole, further interesting trends emerged. Firstly, there was a difference in quite how prescriptive some commentators were depending on the topic. Some posters, such as JM and Emmell, maintained their prescriptivist stance irrespective of the topic. However, others such as Bebop took a less rigid stance in debates on *less/fewer* and this reflects the *ipse dixit* attitude common amongst language purists. Secondly, while many of the posts were extremely long and well argued, no commentator seemed convinced by the arguments put forward by the opposing side. This resulted in discussions becoming repetitive and possibly acted as a deterrent for more casual readers of the column to become involved in BTL debates. This does, however, support Chapman's (2017:243–244) idea of a community of 'some readers', which in turn contains various sub-groups with membership predicated on the exactness of adherence to 'the rules'.

While it was not possible to fully ascertain sociolinguistic data on the commentators, from what was included in posts I was able to gain some impressions of the age, education level and occupation of the commentators. References to attending school in the 1950s or 60s and the few comments about the poor quality of current grammar teaching suggest that commentators are older, something noted by Lukač (2018b:7) in correspondence with Kamm. Incidences of 'authoritarianism', in particular by Alabama, demonstrate that the commentators perceive themselves as well-read and thus educated, which allows them to feel they can participate in metalinguistic debates even if they have not read specific linguistic texts. Lastly, some posters also mentioned their occupation; BB is a former professor of linguistics while Emmell was a TEFL teacher. In Chapter 4, WF in (13) gives an anecdote about his struggle to have reports approved which contained split infinitives. Several others mention employment as teachers, lecturers or civil servants. This corresponds with previous research (c.f. Cameron, 1995; Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2013; Chapman, 2017), that those who are involved with language 'correctness' within their profession continue to involve themselves in metalinguistic activities in their free time, often in a gatekeeping role.

The role of Kamm, himself, is particularly interesting. Firstly, he is a journalist, a common occupation for those writing usage guides. As a "reformed pedant" whose interest in studying actual language use has developed into a column and a book on usage, Kamm is acting as a language authority, although one who holds more descriptive views than some of his peers. However, Kamm almost always participates in the BTL grassroots metalinguistic discussions that his columns encourage. Therefore, he is, perhaps, the

exemplar for being both a language authority and grassroots language activist, as defined by Lukač (2018b:7). This is particularly the case when Kamm becomes involved in debates that are not connected to the ATL topic(s) he has written about that week, where he is participating solely as another commentator, rather than as an authority figure. That he is viewed in these debates solely as another participant, rather than as an expert, is perhaps borne out by how often he is challenged BTL by the purists such as JM and Bebop.

Finally, while the medium in which the discussions took place – that of an online version of a newspaper – is relatively new, this was not reflected in the format of the posts, which made little use of more innovative ways of discussing grassroots prescriptivism, such as the photo blogs and Facebook groups investigated by Heyd (2014) and Švelch and Sherman (2018) respectively. While this was partly a result of the software used by *The Times*, links to other articles could be posted. However, few posters overall took advantage of this facility. Instead, the posts in “The Pedant” closely resembled comments under the *Grammar Girl* blog (Lukač, 2018a) in their back-and-forth discussions, real time responses, digressions and repetitions of arguments. While the purpose of “The Pedant” columns, as envisioned by Kamm, was to encourage a move away from the prescriptivism found in most traditional usage guides by providing a linguistic explanation for the contested usage, a majority of posters still maintained a prescriptivist stance. Thus, the BTL comments can be seen as a hybrid between the traditional letters to the editor and the online grammar blog/usage guide and another way for grassroots prescriptive norms to be promulgated, even though this was not Kamm’s intention when writing his columns.

In conclusion, my detailed analyses of the argument types used in the two topics: prescriptive ideologies and *less* with countable nouns, confirmed previous research (cf. Pullum, 2004; Lukač, 2018a) that grassroots linguistic debates continue to uphold prescriptive language norms. This is even when the debate occurs in a medium, in this case a newspaper column, that is promoting an explicitly descriptivist outlook.

Appendix A

Characteristics used to classify BTL comments for each argument type

To gather data for my analysis I not only had to determine what type of argument was being used BTL, but also to decide whether the comment was prescriptive, descriptive or neutral in tone. To do this I drew up a checklist of characteristics to look for, based on the examples given by both Pullum (2004) and Lukač (2018a), alongside characteristics noted by other linguists such as Peters, Chapman, and Milroy and Milroy. When examining a comment, I looked for the following characteristics to help classify them. Underneath the bullet pointed characteristics are examples taken from “The Pedant” which provides an example (where found) for each argument or sub-argument type.

Argument type	Argument sub-category	Prescriptive	Neutral	Descriptive
Prescriptive rules		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules should be followed without question. • Use of <i>ipse dixit</i> attitudes (Peters, 2006:762). <p>“It is the accepted convention that “fewer” is used with count nouns and less for “non-count” nouns.”</p> <p>“The old grammarians...formulated the rules: so that one could generally formulate what was right/acceptable usage.”</p>	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules should not be followed all the time. Some are out of date and do not reflect actual language usage. • Do not have rules for rules sake. <p>“...others, like the supposed distinction between less and fewer, are artificial: they are intended to prescribe how language should be used.”</p> <p>“I certainly agree that it is legitimate to criticise other peoples’ use of English and give prescriptive advice. My problem with other language pundits is that the grounds of their criticisms are often in error.”</p>
	Nostalgia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was a ‘golden age’ of grammar teaching. • People wrote and spoke better in the past. <p>“The cessation of grammar teaching in the late 60s and 70s was</p>	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There has never been a ‘golden age’ of grammar. <p>“Which are the consequences? Has anyone died? Has meaning been lost? Is there any less insight, intelligence, humour or</p>

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	<p>ideological, pure and simple. We are now seeing the consequences. Writing that does not make sense as the author knows not the meaning of words nor the order in which to place them.”</p>		<p>brilliance around in print? I fear that you is an old geezer mourning a golden age that never was.”</p>
Style	<p>“Yes, the language will evolve and change, just do not ask me to join in.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Confusion of personal stylistic preference with ‘correctness’. <p>“Being an old git, I sometimes rail at linguistic changes that would have got me into trouble with my English teachers...However if there is no ambiguity does it matter – except for those foreigners who wonder what the hell is going on, and for those of us who see some elegance in our language disappearing?”</p>	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognition that personal stylistic preference is not the same as being correct.• Recognition that register dictates when specific conventions should or should not be applied. <p>...[Some] constructions might be considered to be stylistically “wrong” but they are emphatically not grammatically wrong. And they can only be stylistically “wrong” in particular stylistic contexts. So, not much “wrong” as contextually “inappropriate”.</p> <p>I carefully distinguish between grammatical rules and stylistic preferences in almost everything I write about language...I have stylistic preferences...[but] I don’t regard them as the only correct way to write.</p>

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	Asceticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usage highlights laziness or sloppiness or the part of the user. 	N/A	N/A
		<p>“Losing the precision of our language is unnecessary and lazy.” (3 Dec 2016)</p>		
	Aestheticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usage is ugly or awkward. <p>“Our language, which if used correctly combines beauty and precision is, too often, becoming unpleasant.”</p>	N/A	N/A
	Classicism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justification for proscription based on Latinate grammar rules. • Latin and other classical languages are superior to English. <p>“If there is a cause of declining ability to understand grammar, and to think analytically, it may be the abandonment of Latin as a subject in schools.”</p>	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is aware that English grammar does not follow Latinate rules (Peters, 2006:761) and that many usage problems arise from the restrictions. <p>“I think it was more the veneration of classical civilizations and their dead languages, from the 1700s to the 1800s, that led to someone making up this daft rule.”</p>
Rules of the linguistic system		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejects or has doubts over accepted linguistic theories. • Believes descriptive grammarians and linguists have an ‘anything goes’ attitude towards grammar rules. • Does not accept grammar rules based on observations of natural language use. 	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grammatical rules are based on observations of how language users use the language in actuality. <p>“There are hundreds of and hundreds of pages of rules that are natural; they are probably somewhere between being innate and emergent. These rules, because they are natural, do not need to be taught to native speakers. In contrast a rule</p>

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External authorities	<p>“The descriptive grammarians have... no response to the criticism that for them “anything goes”. If they are to counter this criticism, they must make reference to rules, but then they say there are no rules as such. All there is...is what people say and write.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relies on non-specialist or non-academic authorities, in particular prescriptive usage guide writers, such as Simon Heffer, to support their maintenance of proscriptions. • Rejects the authority of linguists and experts. • Mostly does not offer supporting evidence. 	N/A	<p>proscribing “me and John went shopping” is artificial. It has to be taught. Consequently, it is nonsense and not widely followed”</p>
Authoritarianism	<p>“It’s not a case of not listening and learning. It’s a case of not accepting the descriptivist grammarians position, which is just one position and I should say, with very good reason, not the best.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses knowledge of literary canon as a substitute for specific understanding of linguistic theories. 	N/A	<p>“The leading expert on English grammar in the UK is Prof. Geoffrey Pullum of the University of Edinburgh. Many of his writings are very accessible and can be downloaded from his webpage.”</p>
Logic	<p>“I grew up on Gore Vidal, William Buckley and Norman Mailer.”</p>		

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	Functionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules should be followed to prevent misunderstandings due to ambiguities. 	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejects argument that ambiguity leads to misunderstandings in communication.
		<p>“The grammar enables precision of thought and expression. If the grammar is wrong the thought may well be unclear.”</p>		<p>“English is full of ambiguities...[b]ut most of the time they are no problem and go unnoticed because it is clear from the context which interpretation is meant.”</p>
	Logicism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prescriptive grammar rules ensure logic within the English grammatical system. 	N/A	N/A
		<p>“No, the traditional grammar is better...It is more logical than the descriptivist position, because the rules are more logical.”</p>		
	Coherentism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without prescriptive rules, English will become chaotic. 	N/A	N/A
		<p>“The descriptivist position tends towards chaos. The descriptivist is not interested in making things simple and logical; he can’t be. His main aim is simply to describe what people say and write, no matter how awkward or illogical the grammar. The prescriptivist position tends towards logic and order, and rules that are as simple as possible.”</p>		
Common usage		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Argues against common usage as a reason to accept change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepts that language usage and change occur but does not express an 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepts that languages change and adapt and that if a usage becomes common, it might be accepted as part of SE.

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Sociolinguistic considerations

- In the most extreme cases, against linguistic change.

“The descriptivist position, because it always has to account for how some...people start to vary a usage, always has to create more rules and exceptions, many of which are totally incomprehensible except to those with a detailed interest in grammar.”

“It is the accepted convention that “fewer” is used with count nouns and less for “non-count” nouns. The fact that some people continually make an error here does not make their usage correct.”

- SE is the only ‘correct’ form of English.
- Within SE only the most formal registers should be used.
- Non-standard forms of English are ‘lesser’ or incorrect.
- Uses knowledge of proscriptions to show poster is more intelligent than others (c.f. Chapman, 2017).
- People who use the proscribed form are stupid, uneducated or lazy.

opinion on whether this is good or bad.

“A combination of factors could well lead to other expressions being which most people definitely think are non-standard, being seen to be acceptable as SE over the next few years.”

“Oliver did say, however that ‘A construction like me and Tom went to town’ would be wrong in formal standard English but appropriate and grammatical in informal usage. My problem is to know how to switch.”

“No one ever says ‘fewer’ with mass nouns and we can therefore infer it’s not part of English grammar. But almost everyone uses ‘less’ with both nouns of mass and nouns of quantity.”

- There is no ‘correct’ form of English.
- Non-standard varieties of English are equally as valid as SE.
- However, people should know when to use SE.
- There is a scale of formality even within SE, dependent on context.
- Knowing whether a feature is acceptable or not in SE, does not make someone better or more intelligent than someone who does not.

“Thank goodness we are increasingly abandoning grammatical ‘rules’ which add

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- People who use the proscribed form will be unsuccessful academically or in their careers.

“The thought of “text speak” and “estuary english” being the norm saddens me and makes me realise my time is nearly up.”

“The argument for the correction of sloppy language is that the hearer subconsciously classifies the speaker as being uneducated.”

Education

- Refer to what the poster was taught in school as a reason to maintain the pre/proscription.
- The teaching of grammar in schools is worse than when the poster was at school.

“As far as your grammar is concerned I can’t fault your logic, but it would still grate on me to use less with countables...I suppose it is because I was taught English in the 1950s and 60s and I am very set in my ways.”

- Poster may refer to their education but do not express an opinion on whether grammar teaching is better or worse.
- Interested in how grammar is currently taught.
- Understands that teaching methodologies are now different.

“Can you bring me up to speed with modern teaching methods? As a now retired teacher of English as a foreign language, I’m seriously

nothing to meaning and serve no useful purpose – apart from helping some people judge others.”

- Poster argues that current grammar teaching, which is based, partly, on advice from linguists, is more accurate than the grammar teaching provided in the 50s and 60s.
- Rejects claims that there has been a fall in standards in writing, speaking and grammar.

“I don't think I've ever said that the concepts of grammar taught in schools up till the 1960s were irrelevant. My point is that in very many cases they were factually in error. The subject is fortunately taught much better in schools now than it typically was in my parents' and grandparents' generations.”

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Euphony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The usage sounds or feels horrible. • The usage makes the poster feel awful. 	<p>interested to know HOW grammar is being taught in English schools these days.”</p>	<p>“The traditional teaching of grammar was then supplemented with arbitrary baseless proscriptions, which did not improve the quality of communication in any way.”</p>
Semantics	<p>“But fewer blueberry muffins just feels better.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Argues to maintain the pre/proscription or meaning will be lost. <p>“...I challenge him [Oliver Kamm] to tell me the meaning of the following sentence – “This school employs less qualified teachers”. Does it mean the teachers have fewer qualifications or there are fewer of them?”</p>	<p>[On <i>less/fewer</i>] “Surely it depends on whether the variable described is continuous or discrete. The number of coins is discrete so you have fewer of them. Time is continuous so you have less than ten minutes (because you may well have more than nine minutes – say nine and a half).”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning can depend on context. <p>“It’s ambiguous just like ‘This school employs more qualified teachers’.”</p>
Language history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejects evidence that contested usage has existed for a long period of time. • Rejects acceptability even if usage is old. <p>“Once again, the early 17C quotation [to show usage]...has almost no relevance. That was then; this is now.”</p>	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usage is acceptable if it has been part of the language over (a considerable period of) time. • Usage might be older than initially thought, even though it may be less common currently. • Considers the history of how the proscription against a specific usage arose.

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“Less has been used with countables for centuries. It’s part of the language and there’s nothing ‘ungrammatical’ about it.”

Appendix B

Columns by Oliver Kamm analysed for BTL debates on prescriptivism

- 3 December 2016: 'Disinterested' is a more flexible word than many think
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/disinterested-is-a-more-flexible-word-than-many-think-l06rtcgv7>
- 25 February 2017: Don't believe the warnings by grammatical sticklers
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dont-believe-the-warnings-by-grammatical-sticklers-br5dhmh8p>
- 29 April 2017: There never was a golden age of proper grammar
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/there-never-was-a-golden-age-of-proper-grammar-z065pk2dr>
- 6 May 2017: We shall fight them on Churchill's silly full stop
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/we-shall-fight-them-on-churchills-silly-full-stop-ttzg2w5pz>
- 27 May 2017: Me and Nicky Morgan face Daily Mail scorn shoulder to shoulder
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/me-and-nicky-morgan-face-daily-mail-scorn-shoulder-to-shoulder-qw793qbsb>
- 19 August 2017: Point of order on John Bercow's ideas about count nouns
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/oliver-kamm-point-of-order-on-john-bercows-ideas-about-count-nouns-h7tkczmfq>
- 26 September 2017: It's really not a crime to boldly split infinitives
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/it-s-really-not-a-crime-to-boldly-split-infinitives-7qrhc8p3k>
- 30 September 2017: I approve of split infinitives, but I'm no 'grammarchist'
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/i-approve-of-split-infinitives-but-im-no-grammarchist-zhkf0pr03>
- 8 November 2017: Orwell's guide to English belongs on the scrapheap
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/orwell-s-guide-to-english-belongs-on-the-scrapheap-knc8w25ws>
- 9 December 2017: Use of the word 'whom' is not a test of correct English
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/oliver-kamm-use-of-the-word-whom-is-not-a-test-of-correct-english-5gbccnz9g>
- 27 January 2018: Linguistic snobbery that brides the political divide
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/linguistic-snobbery-that-bridges-the-political-divide-kb58ppzm9>

Appendix C

Arguments types used to discuss prescriptivism as an ideology

	Type of argument	Sub-category of argument type	Prescriptive	Descriptive	No. of times argument used in each (sub)category	Total no. of times argument used per type	% argument type used overall (total ÷ 273)
1	Rules of the linguistic system		33 (45.8%)	39 (54.1%)		72	26.4%
2	Prescriptive rules		8 (15.1%)	12 (22.6%)	22 (41.5%)		
		Nostalgia	8 (15.1%)	4 (7.5%)	12 (22.6%)		
		Style	3 (5.7%)	4 (7.5%)	7 (13.2%)		
		Ascetism	6 (11.3)	0	6 (11.3%)		
		Aestheticism	4 (7.4%)	0	4 (7.5%)		
		Classicism	3 (5.7%)	1 (1.9%)	4 (7.5%)		
	Total		32 (60.3%)	21 (39.7%)	53	53	19.4%
3	External authorities		15 (32%)	31 (66%)	46 (97.9%)		
		Authoritarianism	1 (2.1%)	0	1 (2.1%)		
	Total		16 (34%)	31 (66%)	47	47	17.2%
4	Logic						
		Functionalism	12 (41.4%)	2 (6.9%)	14 (48.3%)		
		Coherentism	8 (27.6%)	0	8 (27.6%)		
		Logicism	7 (24.1%)	0	7 (24.1%)		
	Total		27 (93.1%)	2 (6.9%)	29	29	10.6%
5	Common usage		15 (53.6%)	13 (46.4%)		28	10.3%
6	Education		14 (58.3%)	10 (41.7%)		24	8.8%
7	Sociolinguistic considerations		13 (86.7%)	2 (13.3%)		15	5.5%
8	Language History		1 (20%)	4 (80%)		5	1.8%
	Total		151	122		273	
			55.3%	44.7%			

Appendix D

Columns by Oliver Kamm analysed for *less* with countable nouns

- 1 October 2016: No genuine rule dictates the use of less or fewer
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/no-genuine-rule-dictates-the-use-of-less-or-fewer-cs25kv8s5>
- 11 March 2017: Using ‘less’ with count nouns is not an egregious error
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- 15 April 2017: And the award for total balderdash goes to Jeremy Paxman
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/and-the-award-for-balderdash-goes-to-jeremy-paxman-zc7958956>
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<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/supposed-rules-of-grammar-are-often-merely-folklore-wmwppqlq>
- 19 August 2017: Point of order on John Bercow’s ideas about count nouns
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/oliver-kamm-point-of-order-on-john-bercows-ideas-about-count-nouns-h7tkczmfq>
- 26 September 2017: It’s really not a crime to boldly split infinitives
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/it-s-really-not-a-crime-to-boldly-split-infinitives-7qrhc8p3k>
- 9 December 2017: Use of the word ‘whom’ is not a test of correct English
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/oliver-kamm-use-of-the-word-whom-is-not-a-test-of-correct-english-5gbccnz9g>
- 27 January 2018: Linguistic snobbery that brides the political divide
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/linguistic-snobbery-that-bridges-the-political-divide-kb58ppzm9>

Appendix E

Argument types used to discuss using *less* with countable nouns

	Type of argument	Sub-category of argument type	Prescriptive	Descriptive	No. of times argument used in each (sub)category	Overall no. of times argument used per type	% argument type used overall (total ÷ 91)
1	Prescriptive rules	Nostalgia	9 (45%)	9 (45%)	18 (90%)	20	22.0%
	Total		2 (10%)	0	2 (10%)		
			11 (55%)	9 (45%)			
2	Rules of the linguistic system		3 (17.6%)	14 (82.4%)		17	18.7%
3	Common usage		3 (27.3%)	8 (72.7%)		11	12.1%
4	External authorities	Authoritarianism	3 (33.3%)	4 (44.4%)	7 (77.8%)	9	9.9%
	Total		2 (22.2%)	0	2 (22.2%)		
			5 (55.6%)	4 (44.4%)			
5	Semantics		6 (66.7%)	3 (33.3%)		9	9.9%
6	Sociolinguistic considerations		5 (71.4%)	2 (28.6%)		7	7.7%
7	Logic	Logicism Functionalism Coherentism	0	0		6	6.6%
			3 (50%)	0	3 (50%)		
			2 (33.3%)	0	2 (33.3%)		
	Total		1 (16.7%)	0	1 (16.7%)		
8	Language history		0	6 (100%)		6	6.6%
9	Euphony		4 (100%)	0		4	4.4%
10	Education		2 (100%)	0		2	2.2%
	Total		45	46		91	
			49.5%	50.5%			

Appendix F

Complete list of columns and quotations from “The Pedant”

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