**Political Correctness: Linguistic Mistakes, Non-Standard English and**

**Political Affiliations**

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

In the US, it seems that the Right is associated with bad or incorrect language use. This is evident in the critiques politicians such as Trump or Palin receive in the press or on social media; see, for example, Peter Isackson's article in the *Fair Observer* called 'The Daily Devil's Dictionary: Trump's "Tremendous" Problem' (2018), which not only criticises Trump's inability to "vary his adjectives" but also states that "prominent Republicans on the [American] national stage have frequently showed a profound disrespect for articulate language" (Isackson 2018). The Left, on the other hand, seems to be associated with prescribing language in grammar blogs, news articles and on social media; this can be seen in articles such as one in the *Washington Post* written by Alexandra Petri (who is a liberal according to her post history on Twitter and her bibliography of articles) in which Petri makes fun of Palin's and Trump's use of the English Language (Petri 2015). Moreover, where the Right uses words like 'fake news' and 'libtards' as rebuttals to other people's opposing opinions, the Left appears to use prescriptivism to "discredit political opponents" (Chapman, 2012, p. 128). Is it really the case then that the Left uses "better" English than the Right in the United States? And does the number and types of spelling and grammatical mistakes in their language use betray their political affiliation?

In the UK, according to Cameron (1995) and Chapman (2012), Conservatives are often associated with prescriptivism because they are "bound up with issues of tradition and control" (Chapman 2012: 128). This is said concerning the debate about the National Curriculum which started around the 1980s, but is this still the case? In England, the land of the complaint tradition (see e.g. Milroy & Milroy (2012) on this subject), it is more difficult to find prescriptivism in blogs and news articles when it comes to politicians compared to the US. On social media, on the other hand, prescriptivism seems to make an appearance in every comment section, but this does not seem to be by just Conservatives (or, the Right). For all that, there appears to be a slight difference: Conservatives on social media seem to comment on slang, netspeak, and language change – see, for example, an article in *the Daily Mail* by India Sturgis making fun of millennial slang words (Sturgis 2018) – whereas it seems that the Left corrects other people's grammar or comments on how bad someone's language use is – see, for example, Paul Anthony Jones' article in *The Independent* about "[t]he words politicians misuse (and how they should actually be using them)" (Jones 2016). So, does the different political system in the UK change the generalisation that is made by Chapman

(2012) for the US or is it more like the situation as described by Cameron (1995) that overall prescriptivism is practiced by Conservatives?

In this thesis, I would like to ascertain whether the making of language mistakes and the correcting of these mistakes (or, commenting on them) indicate a certain political affiliation in British and American English. Furthermore, I would like to find out what kinds of mistakes are made by people with one political affiliation compared to another, and how this compares between the United States and the United Kingdom. Lastly, looking at prescriptive comments (for instance, the correcting of other commenters' language or remarks about someone's intellect due to a perceived linguistic mistake), I want to find out what kind of comments and judgements are made by people with certain political affiliations and nationalities.

In the next chapter, I will go further into the theoretical background of prescriptivism and the role language standardisation plays in it, the political situations in the UK and the US respectively, and how prescriptivism plays a role in the political discussions in both countries. Then, in Chapter 3, I will describe where and how I collected my data and how I subsequently analysed that data. Lastly, in Chapters 4 and 5, I will describe, analyse and discuss the data I collected.

# Chapter 2: Standardisation, Prescriptivism, and Language Ideology

In this chapter, I will discuss the theoretical background for my research. In order to find out whether linguistic errors and other non-standard usages can identify people's political affiliations, I need to discuss what standardisation is, how it influences attitudes towards language and what role prescriptivism plays in those attitudes. Furthermore, I will discuss the political situations in the United Kingdom and the United States and how the abovementioned attitudes on language play a role in the political discussions of both countries.

## 2.1 Introduction

Many languages, such as English and Dutch, have been standardised, which "affects the way in which speakers think about their own language and about 'language' in general" (Milroy, J. 2001: 530). In what Milroy calls "standard language cultures" (Milroy, J. 2001: 530) the standard form – for instance, Received Pronunciation (RP) in the UK – is seen as the 'correct' use of the language and everything that deviates from that standard is seen as 'incorrect' or even as illiterate (Milroy & Milroy 2012; Milroy, L. 2001: 57). In addition, these judgements of a non-standard language variety are often passed on to its speakers due to a metonymic shift which "provides the slippage for such negative judgements to be expressed in terms of undesirable moral, intellectual, or social attributes of groups of speakers" (Milroy, L. 2001: 63). In other words, deviation from the standard is often seen as a sign of "stupidity, ignorance, perversity, [and/or] moral degeneracy" (Milroy & Milroy 2012: 33) and it is, therefore, seen as perfectly acceptable to discriminate against the people who are guilty of deviating from the standard (Milroy & Milroy 2012: 33). The standard language being seen not only as the 'correct' version of the language but also as the "highest prestige variety" further illustrates this (Milroy, J. 2001: 532). Standardisation is a process often driven by cultural and societal norms and practices, and the standard variety often "acquire[s] prestige when their speakers have high prestige" (Milroy, J. 2001: 532).

According to James Milroy (2001), standardization is "the imposition of uniformity upon a class of objects" (Milroy, J. 2001: 531). However, it is apparent that this kind of linguistic uniformity cannot be achieved by standardisation since even in the standard form, variation of language can be observed. This, however, does not stop language users from pre- and proscribing language or labelling variations of or deviations from the standard language

as 'incorrect', which can be illustrated by the "lack of agreement on the locus of such a [standard] variety" (Milroy, L. 2001: 59). Furthermore, that language changes and varies is not seen as a simple fact of life but as something wrong that needs to be stopped or prevented (Milroy, L 2001: 63). Uniformity, it is felt, must therefore be imposed on the language of its users, which is often done in the form of prescriptivism (Milroy, J. 2001: 531).

## 2.2 Prescriptivism and other forms of verbal hygiene

Prescription is not a separate aspect of standardisation but a stage in the standardisation process (Milroy & Milroy 2012: 22) and "is often seen as loaded with the baggage of the standard language ideology" (Lukač 2018: 11). According to Cameron (1995), prescriptivism, or verbal hygiene as she calls it, consists of acts that are "born of an urge to improve or 'clean up' language" (Cameron 1995: 1). An example of such a prescriptive act is the writing of usage guides, which are not the same as grammars and dictionaries; usage guides aim "to point out and correct linguistic errors and – increasingly – to offer the public entertainment in the process" (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2010: 21). The writing of usage guides started at the end of the eighteenth century with Baker's *Reflections on the English Language* (1770), which is often regarded as the first usage guide, and new ones are still being written today (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2010: 16). However, with the internet being available, many people consult language advice fora when they are unsure about grammar or spelling, such as blogs (e.g. *Grammar Girl*) or other online sources (e.g. *Oxford Dictionaries* and *Grammarly*), to guide them (Lukač 2018: 69). Usage guides and these online sources often contain and discuss usage problems which cannot be tied to a specific language area; they "can be found in syntax, morphology, the lexicon as well as in pronunciation" (Ebner 2017: 5). What does always seem to be constant is that these usage problems "constitute problematic areas because there is more than one suitable variant" (Ebner 2017: 5).

According to Ilson (1985), for a language concern to be labelled a usage problem it needs to adhere to three criteria: "actual occurrence, fairly widespread occurrence, and discussability without giving offence" (Ilson 1985: 167, as cited in Ebner 2017: 6). Examples of usage problems are *I would of* instead of *I would have*, or demonstrative *them* (as in *Them people don't know what they're saying*). The question of which usage problems are described and how they are described in a particular usage guide is entirely up to the author and there is therefore much variation observable within the genre. According to Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2018), material to include in the first place depends on the authors of usage guides and the choices they make, which consequently may vary greatly from one guide to the next (Tieken-

Boon van Ostade 2018: 24). This is not completely the case when we look at blogs and other online sources since there is no restriction on the amount of content that can be discussed there. There are, however, several usage problems that seem to make it into a considerable number of guides and online sources; these are known as the 'old-chestnuts' and include problems such as split infinitives or the use of *literally* in a position where it seems to mean *figuratively*. They are controversial, and the general public is usually highly aware of them, but the 'old-chestnuts' "represent only a very small number of the items discussed in any usage guide" (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2018: 24).

Whereas the genre of usage guides is relatively more formal, there is another side of prescriptivism, namely 'grassroots prescriptivism', which involves "the attempts of lay people [i.e. the general public] to identify and eradicate perceived linguistic mistakes" (Lukač 2018: 3); this is a form of bottom-up prescriptivism "in contrast to top-down prescriptivism that is carried out institutionally" (Lukač 2018: 26). This type of prescriptivism appears in many forms, like letters to the editor (Lukač 2018: 29–33, 45–67) but also below-the-line comments (see e.g. Lukač 2018: 81–99 and Richards 2019) and "since the dawn of the participatory internet, on social media platforms, such as blogs, microblogs (i.e. Twitter), forums and Facebook" (Lukač 2018: 25).

Even though attitudes towards usage problems and other linguistic phenomena can be highly negative, sometimes these attitudes simply do not compare to the actual usage of language users (Lukač 2018: 8-9); see for instance Kostadinova's article (2018) on the use of *literally* in sentences like *I am literally dying* (where the speaker is clearly not actually dying). Attitudes towards this use of *literally* are often negative and the use of *literally* in this context is "predominantly received as a mistake, misuse or an overuse, while its frequent use is associated with carelessness and ignorance of the 'true' meaning of the word" (Kostadinova 2018: 36). However, after corpus analysis, Kostadinova (2018) found that "the majority of those uses are not the 'absurd' or 'illogical' uses which usage guides disparage" (Kostadinova 2018: 36). Furthermore, there are usage problems and other linguistic 'mistakes' which are labelled as 'incorrect' or 'uneducated' speech when they are in fact part of a non-standard variety of English. The double negative (such as *I didn't know nothing*) is a good example of such a usage problem (Cheshire, Edwards & Whittle 1993: 75-76). The double negative appears in many usage guides and is often labelled as 'uneducated speech', as in the *Longman Guide to English Usage* (1988, accessed through the HUGE database): "This usage was once permissible in English, and is still common in uneducated speech". However, the double negative is not some monstrosity that defaces the English language; it is

simply not part of the standard variety and is "typically considered to be common in most English dialects […] including urban varieties" (Cheshire, Edwards & Whittle 1993: 75). Why these non-standard forms are condemned in the prescriptive tradition can largely be explained through the process of language standardisation and language ideology.

## 2.3 Standard Forms of English and Language Ideology in the UK and US

The standard forms of English in the United Kingdom and the United States are not the same – for instance, there are differences in grammar (e.g. *I have got a car* vs. *I have a car)*, lexicon (e.g. *lift* vs. *elevator*), pronunciation (e.g. rhotic vs. non-rhotic) and spelling (e.g. *colour* vs. *color*) – and the same applies to the way in which the language has been standardised (Milroy, L. 2001: 58). This difference in standardisation can be explained by the "somewhat differently structured sociolinguistic landscapes", which are in turn reflected in the language ideologies of both countries (Milroy, L. 2001: 56). However, even though these two ideologies differ, at their core they are the same, namely they are "a public *consciousness* of the standard" wherein "people *believe* there is a 'right' way of using English, although they do not necessarily use the 'correct' forms in their own speech" (Milroy & Milroy 2012: 25).

The American standard English variety is "a variety associated not with any particular social group but more broadly with the levelled dialects of the Northern Midwest" (Milroy, L. 2001: 58). These dialects have been stripped of "locally marked features" (Milroy, L. 2001: 58) and speakers often describe their language as being accentless (Milroy, L. 2001: 58). In other words, in the US, the focus of standardisation is mostly on "the avoidance of particular socially marked grammatical and lexical forms" (Milroy, L. 2001: 58) regardless of the accent of the speaker (Milroy, L. 2001: 57-58). This shows a major difference in the perception of what a standard language entails between the US and the UK, since, in the UK, phonological aspects – or accents – play an important role in standardisation and, in turn, in the language ideology.

This difference in the focus on accents between the UK and the US can be explained by the "special status of RP, an elite accent used by a tiny percentage of the British population" (Milroy, L. 2001: 61) in the UK and the subsequent stigmatisation of (particularly Northern) urban dialects. These dialects are often associated with working class backgrounds and speakers of these accents and dialects are often met with negative "social and economic consequences" (Milory, L. 2001: 62). In the US, there does not seem to be such a stigmatization of urban dialects except perhaps for the variety spoken in New York

City (Milroy, L. 2001: 62). According to Lesley Milroy (2001), "what these differences between British and the American constructs amount to is an image of a levelled type of spoken standard in the United States, as opposed to a British standard constructed (however indirectly and inexactly) with reference to a particular socially marked linguistic model (2001: 62-63)".

Another difference between the two countries is the focus on race and ethnicity in the US and the focus on class in the UK (Milroy, L. 2001: 71). As stated above, in the UK, the urban dialects often associated with the working and lower classes, such as Cockney spoken in London and Brummie spoken in Birmingham, are often regarded as negative and incorrect. In addition, people who speak these varieties are often regarded as uneducated due to the abovementioned metonymic shift (Milroy, L. 2001: 62-63), whereas Received Pronunciation, associated with the upper class and spoken only by a handful of people, is regaled as the only standard form of the language (Milroy, L. 2001: 61). In the US, where the standard has a wider definition and is not as constrained by phonological aspects as RP is in the UK, the stigmatised varieties are often associated with race and ethnicity, for instance African American Vernacular English (AAVE), but also integration from and code-switching to other languages, especially Spanish (Milroy, L. 2001: 68-69, Bernstein 2003). As indicated by Lesley Milroy (2001), this is not to say that race and ethnicity do not play a role in the UK and that class is not discussed in the US, but that the main focus is on these issues in the two respective countries (Milroy, L. 2001: 70-71).

## 2.4 The political climate in the UK and the US

As with the differences in language and language ideology, the ways the legislative branch of the government works in both countries is drastically different. In the UK, the country is legislated by Parliament situated in London. Parliament consists of the House of Commons – which is elected by the UK public – and the House of Lords – which is not elected by the people; Lords are appointed by the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister (Parliament.co.uk). Within the House of Commons, there are several parties that play a large role within this legislative branch, with the Conservative Party (also known as the Tories) and the Labour Party filling most of the 650 seats in the first half of 2019 (Parliament.co.uk). At the moment, the biggest issue in the UK is Brexit, and the country is supposedly set to leave the European Union somewhere in 2020. The Conservative party supports Brexit and the current Prime-Minister (and avid leave-campaigner in 2016), Boris Johnson seems to be an outspoken supporter of leaving the EU without a deal (Conservatives.com; Stewart 2019).

The Labour Party on the other hand has had a far less clear stance on Brexit, even during the campaign before the all-deciding referendum in 2016 (Mason 2016). However, since Boris Johnson took over from Theresa May in July 2019 and has made it clear that he would support a no-deal Brexit, Labour have indicated that they "accepted the result of the 2016 referendum" (Corbyn 2019) but that they would "campaign for Remain against either a No Deal or a Tory deal that does not protect the economy and jobs" (Corbyn 2019).

In the United States, the country is legislated by Congress which consists of the House of Representatives and the Senate; in contrast to the UK, both fractions of Congress are elected by the US public (USA.gov). The House of Representatives consists of 435 seats filled by representatives of all fifty states – the number of Representatives per state is "in proportion to their total population" (USA.gov). The Senate consists of a hundred seats altogether, with "two elected Senators per state" (USA.gov). These two branches of the legislative government consist of elected officials who are members of political parties; in the US, most of these officials are members of the two major parties, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. This is because the US has a two-party system "in which the electorate gives its votes largely to only two major parties and in which one or the other party can win a majority in the legislature" (Two-party system). Donald Trump has been the President of the US representing the Republican Party since 2016; Trump and his (proposed) legislation, such as the border wall, have been very controversial.

## 2.5 Language and Politics in the UK and the US

The language ideologies described above (§2.2) carry over into the political discussion of both countries. This is especially clear when we look at the discussions held towards the end of the 1980s on the teaching of the English language in both the US and the UK (Cameron 1995: 78). In the UK, the discussion was "precipitated by the planning and subsequent implementation of a piece of legislation in England and Wales, the Education Reform Act of 1988" (Cameron 1195: 79). The most important aspect of this Reform Act was the implementation of a 'National Curriculum', which "caused public controversy; none, however, was more controversial than the question of what place in it English Grammar should occupy" (Cameron 1995: 79). In this discussion, the "radical Right focused on two related problems: an alleged decline in standards, and an alleged drift away from the values education had traditionally sought to transmit" (Cameron 1995: 79). The British Conservatives sounded a call for a "return to traditional standards, values and methods in the teaching of the English language" (Cameron 1995: 81).

According to Cameron (1995), this discussion about the teaching of English has "more than a passing resemblance to […] [a] 'moral panic'" (Cameron 1995: 82), which occurs "when some social phenomenon or problem is suddenly foregrounded in public discourse and discussed in an obsessive, moralistic and alarmist manner, as if it betokened some imminent catastrophe" (Cameron 1995: 82). The discussion became so much focussed on moral standards and values that the linguistic and educational aspects were oftentimes overshadowed and partially ignored (Cameron 1995: 81). The group mainly blamed for this moral problem were teachers "along with the linguistic and educational theorists who had brainwashed [children] with half-baked theories and trendy left-wing nonsense" (Cameron 1995: 85). In other words, in this discussion the Right was associated with prescriptivism, whereas the Left – especially the educated Left - was considered a villain trying to oppose the maintaining of the standard language and, in consequence, moral standards.

Around the same time, a similar discussion was taking place in the US, where the Right once again focused on an alleged decline of standards and values. One major difference between the two discussions is, however, that the UK actually "ended up with a national school curriculum" (Cameron 1995: 79). A National Curriculum meant a shift from local to central control, something US Conservatives are generally against; the Right wing in the US "have been more apt to campaign for the removal of all federal influence than for its intensification" (Cameron 1995: 80). However, once again, what is similar (if not the same) between these two discussions seems to be the association between the Right, or Conservatives, and advocating stricter language teaching, and creating a link between language and moral standards and values.

A somewhat different perspective is given by Chapman (2012) when he discusses the United States, its politicians, and the criticism these politicians receive on their language. He argues that, in addition to discriminating against non-standard speakers, there is another function of prescriptivism, namely to "discredit political opponents" (Chapman 2012: 193). Prescriptive complaints directed at Right-wing politicians such as Sarah Palin, George W. Bush and, more recently, Donald Trump suggest that, in the US, liberals are doing the prescribing (Chapman 2012: 193; see e.g. Petri 2015 and Lyall 2019). According to Chapman (2012), this support of prescriptivism by Liberals comes from "the high stock they place in education and from their high confidence that language use is an effective index to a person's education" (Chapman 2012: 193); in other words, making linguistic mistakes "reveals a weakness of intellect that we do not want in a political leader" (Chapman 2012: 194).

The complaints directed at these Right-wing politicians usually have several characteristics, according to Chapman (2012):

> (1) An error is highlighted and usually ridiculed; (2) usually the speaker is considered ignorant, uneducated or stupid because of the 'error'; (3) quite often the speaker is therefore considered unqualified for elected office; (4) similarly, the speaker is sometimes considered an embarrassment to the electorate; and (5) sometimes, the perceived ignorance is transferred to the supporters (Chapman 2012: 198).

This is not to say that only the language of Conservative politicians is criticised; Chapman also found criticism expressed towards the language of Liberal politicians, such as Obama. However, he did see a significant difference between the criticism expressed towards Right-wing and Left-wing politicians; whereas the complaints directed at Right-wing politicians display most, if not all, the abovementioned characteristics, most of the complaints directed at Left-Wing politicians only show the first characteristic and are "less quick to explicitly connect intelligence with usage" (Chapman 2012: 199, 196 – 197). However, in his conclusion, Chapman does indicate that the judgments given, often by the liberal Left, "do not fit the sources of complaints" (Chapman 2012: 205) and, thus, argues that these complaints can be unfounded prejudices (Chapman 2012: 205).

These ideologies and judgements of the language of politicians and their supporters are certainly not a thing of the past (see e.g. Lyall 2019). When collecting data online, Chapman discovered that "far more complaints [are] directed against other commenters than against politicians" (Chapman 2012: 193). When browsing on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, it is not difficult to spot prescriptive sentiments expressed towards others in the below-the-line comments on Facebook and Twitter. However, there does not seem to be a clear dichotomy between Left and Right concerning prescriptivism in both countries.

## 2.6 Concluding remarks

According to Chapman, these *ad linguam* attacks on other commenters "have proven more useful for the left" (Chapman 2012; 200). Would this indicate that generally speaking the Left is more likely to leave prescriptive remarks on the internet? When looking at Donald Trump and the criticism his language use receives (see e.g. Isackson 2018 and Lyall 2019), it also seems that these criticisms include characteristic (5) as discussed by Chapman (2012) –

"the perceived [linguistic] ignorance is transferred to the supporters" (Chapman 2012, 198; see e.g. Burke 2018 and Hatchett 2015). Does this actually mean that the Right uses more 'incorrect' language than the Left?  In this thesis, I want to find the answer to these questions. Furthermore, I would like to ascertain what role non-standard English plays in political discussions on the internet; are non-standard features 'corrected' by social media users and what political affiliation do these online grassroots prescriptivists generally have? Since a large part of the political discussions in both the UK and US takes place on social media platforms, I decided to look to social media to collect my data. How I collected my data and which social media platform I used, will be discussed in the next chapter.

# Chapter 3 Methodology

In this chapter, I will outline how I collected and analysed my data to find out whether making language mistakes and correcting (or simply commenting on) these linguistic errors indicate a political affiliation in British and American English. I will first explain how I identified my search criteria and defined the data, and how I decided to use Facebook as my data collection source over using Twitter. Then, I will show how I collected my data by looking at the below-the-line comments underneath Facebook posts by several British and American politicians and which comments I was hoping to collect. Lastly, I will show how I analysed the collected data in order to find a possible answer to my research question.

## 3.1 Politicians and political affiliation

As discussed in Chapter 2, according to Chapman (2012), the American Left uses prescriptivism as a way to discredit the opinions and arguments of their political opponents (Chapman 2012: 193); according to Cameron (1995), however, it is usually the Conservatives who are focused on linguistic 'correctness' and prescriptivism as evidenced by the debates surrounding a National Curriculum and English language teaching starting in the 1980s (Cameron 1995: 78-82). In both countries, the political climate and related issues – such as the border wall in the US and Brexit in the UK – are not black and white, but to structure my data collection, I divided the political fields of both countries into two abstract groups by choosing certain topics and persons that are prominent in the current political climate. In the United States, I divided the writers of below-the-line comments into two groups consisting of those who are supporters of President Trump and those who are not. As stated above, in the UK, the focus is on the issue of Brexit and, for this reason, I decided to divide my British data into comments written by people who support Brexit and those who want to remain in the European Union. Even though there seems to be somewhat of an overlap between these two camps for British English, they are not the same as being right-wing or left-wing – the same applies to the two camps in the United States. I chose to generalise the data like this to give a clearer, more general and abstract view of the situation.

Since a considerable part of political discussions in any country currently seems to be held on the internet, more specifically on social media platforms, I decided to draw on social media as a source to collect my data. However, since the internet contains a vast amount of information and content, I needed a way to structure my data collection so I would not get lost in the considerable amount of content and look at an equal number of posts by both sides

of the political spectrum. I therefore decided to focus on posts made by two specific politicians from both countries. For both countries, I picked two politicians who are on opposite sides of the political spectrum and who are relatively at the foreground of the political discussions in their respective countries. For the United States, I chose President Donald Trump and the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi; for the United Kingdom, I chose former Prime-Minister Theresa May and the Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn.

## 3.2 Pilot Study

As stated above, I chose to use social media as a data collection source. The two options I looked at were Facebook and Twitter. Since these two social media platforms differ considerably, I did not know which of the two would be more suitable as a data source; for this reason, I decided to conduct a pilot study on both social media platforms, starting with Twitter. For all four politicians mentioned above, I chose four tweets and went through all the replies underneath. From those replies, I copied and pasted every tweet that contained grammatical and spelling mistakes and other non-standard features, such as (perceived errors are highlighted in bold):

1. **Cos them's** just the facts
2. did you learn your lines from **osbourne book of doom**. **g**row up. **your** watching **to** much of the **w**alking **d**ead

The comments I labelled as prescriptive should concern the language use of someone directly involved in the discussion and give a judgement on it. This can range from a simple correction (e.g. *you're*, where a * indicates a correction) or a more complex judgement (e.g. "your spelling serves to underline your political guile"). Furthermore, they can also be a comment on the politician's language use, such as "[Trump] isn't going to understand a word of that. Too many big words".

I subsequently labelled all texts selected for analysis by identifying the writer's nationality, gender, and political affiliation. It was not always possible to find the information I needed because Twitter users do not always share many personal facts in their tweets or on their personal Twitter pages. Furthermore, it was ethically important to anonymise the data I collected, and I therefore deleted all names and distinguishing features from the tweets in order to avoid violating anyone's privacy. Political affiliation was labelled as 'anti-Trump' or 'pro-Trump' for the US, and 'anti-Brexit' or 'pro-Brexit' for the UK. Nationality was important to ascertain, since I only wanted US citizens whose native language is American

English and UK nationals whose native language is British English. These three labels were found by looking at the reply itself, the poster's Twitter account, and their previous tweets. Sometimes it was impossible to ascertain some or any of these three labels, and these were therefore left open.

I first looked at several tweets written by Nancy Pelosi (or her staff) concerning the border wall proposed by Donald Trump (all tweets can be found in Appendix 1). I looked at all the below-the-line comments that Twitter would load underneath the tweets. This means that it is possible that there are more comments for one tweet than for another. It is therefore difficult to give an absolute number of below-the-line comments I analysed for each tweet.

In the below-the-line comments I found fifteen tweets containing language errors, eleven of which were written by Trump supporters. These tweets were easily labelled as pro-Trump; they all contained comments such as that the Democrats' actions lead to rapists "getting into our country", that Pelosi is a "partisan politician who will use every imaginable tool to obstruct [her] political rival", or hashtags such as #buildthewall.  Most of these tweets by Trump supporters involved spelling errors (such as *your* for *you're* and *cant* for *can't*) as opposed to grammatical errors. The other four tweets were written by people who are anti-Trump. Furthermore, I found three tweets containing prescriptive comments which were made in response to two tweets containing language errors; all three tweets were written by people who are anti-Trump.

Underneath the four tweets written by Trump (or his staff) (Appendix 1), I found a total of 31 tweets containing language errors, fourteen of which were made by people who are pro-Trump. Once again, most of these tweets were easily labelled as pro-Trump by the comments in them (see examples above); the ones that were not identifiable through the original tweet were identified through the pro-Trump tweets on the personal Twitter page of the writer which contained comments such as the ones above and pro-Trump memes. These are closely followed by twelve tweets containing language errors (such as *its* for *it's* or missing words) written by people who are anti-Trump and five tweets made by people whose political affiliation is unclear. The anti-Trump tweets were mostly identifiable by the comments within the tweets themselves, such as calling Trump's tweets "tantrums" or saying the US does not "have a country if we let Russia chose our president". For the unlabelled tweets, there were no identifiable comments in the tweets themselves or on the writers' personal Twitter Pages. For instance, someone wrote "their [sic] chickenshits and can't do the right thing" in response to a tweet written by Trump praising several US senators voting for stronger border security. In this case, it is unclear who this person is calling 'chickenshits'

and whether he is a supporter of Trump. Looking into this person's other tweets and personal account did not give a clearer picture and I therefore decided to label this person's political affiliation as 'unknown'. Furthermore, there are three tweets containing prescriptive comments, which were written by people who are anti-Trump. However, these tweets were not made in response to other tweets containing language errors but were comments about Donald Trump's proficiency in the English language in general. Overall, the data compiled indicates that people who are pro-Trump are more likely to make language errors while people who are anti-Trump are more likely to make prescriptive comments. In Table 3.1, these numbers have been summarised.

|  | Pelosi's Twitter | Trump's Twitter | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pro-Trump | 11 | 14 | 25 |
| Anti-Trump | 4 | 12 | 16 |
| Unknown | / | 5 | 5 |
| Total | 15 | 31 | 46 |

Table 3.1. Comments containing linguistic errors.

Next, I looked at tweets concerning Brexit written by Theresa May (or her staff) (Appendix 1), underneath which I collected twenty tweets containing spelling and/or grammatical errors. Eleven of these were written by people who are anti-Brexit, four by people who are pro-Brexit, and five by people whose political ideology is unclear. As stated above, I ascertained these labels by looking at the original tweets, a person's other tweets and their personal Twitter page. It was sometimes enough to simply look at the original tweet, as in the following two examples:

3. We need a NO DEAL and go with a WTO BREXIT, if **you took** the time and **listen** to the people, that's what millions want.
     British male; pro-Brexit
4. **r**evoke A50 now **its** the best way forward
     British ?; anti-Brexit

In example (3), there is a past simple tense before the conjunction but a present simple after. Example (4) was clearly written by someone opposed to Brexit since they are for revoking Article 50 (the article that set Brexit in motion). However, it was often not enough to look at the original tweet, since there is not a clear divide between people being pro- or anti-Brexit. Often, the original tweets could be interpreted in more ways than one. If, for instance, someone expressed a negative attitude towards Theresa May, it need not indicate that they are

anti-Brexit since there are many different opinions within the two camps; being pro-Brexit does not mean you are automatically pro-Theresa May. For instance,

5. **Your** over and done with
   British male; unknown

As with example (5), if I could not identify a person's political affiliation through any other tweets or their Twitter page, I labelled it as unknown. Lastly, I found one tweet containing a prescriptive comment in response to a tweet with a lexical error; this prescriptive comment corrects the lexical mistake made by the previous comment and was made by someone who is pro-Brexit:

6. You have **devised** this country and your policies are killing people
   British male, anti-Brexit
   - Divided?
   British male, pro-Brexit

Then I looked at tweets made by Jeremy Corbyn; the three tweets selected were all about Parliament's inability to deliver on its promises concerning Brexit (see Appendix 1). Underneath these, I collected 25 tweets containing language errors; eleven were made by Brexit supporters, nine by people who are pro-Brexit and five by people whose political affiliation is unclear, and I was unable to find any tweets containing prescriptive comments. I once again made this division by looking at the original tweets, the person's other tweets and their personal Twitter pages. This would indicate that people who are anti-Brexit are more likely to make language errors and that people who are pro-Brexit are more likely to correct these mistakes. In Table 3.2, the figures for the below-the-line comments underneath May's and Corbyn's tweets have been summarised.

|  | May's Twitter | Corbyn's Twitter | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pro-Brexit | 4 | 9 | 13 |
| Anti-Brexit | 11 | 11 | 22 |
| Unknown | 5 | 5 | 10 |
| Total | 20 | 25 | 45 |

Table 3.2. Comments containing linguistic errors.

I subsequently moved on to Facebook where I selected one Facebook post for each politician (Appendix 2) and analysed the below-the-line comments. Commenting on Facebook works differently than it does on Twitter; whereas on Twitter you have to click on a tweet to see the replies from other people, thus leaving the page and losing the original tweet, on Facebook all comments and replies can be found on the same page. Furthermore, on Facebook, replies usually do not show up on someone's personal Facebook page unless that person choses to share them. This is not the case on Twitter where all replies and original tweets can be found on a person's Twitter profile.

Furthermore, due to the considerable number of below-the-line comments on Facebook, I decided not to look at all of them but only at the first 150 to 200 comments and their replies. As with Twitter, I copied and pasted all comments containing perceived linguistic mistakes and prescriptive comments (as defined above) into a document. Then, I labelled these comments with the three labels mentioned above, namely nationality, gender, and political affiliation. As I did with my Twitter data, I tried to identify the contents by looking at the original comment, other comments made underneath the same post, the commenter's Facebook page and their other personal posts. Some people proved to have set their Facebook profile to private, which means that I was unable to look at their personal profile and was only able to go by their comments underneath the original Facebook post. If I was unable to assign any one of the three labels, I left them open.

The first 200 below-the-line comments on Pelosi's Facebook post (Appendix 2) were found to contain 29 comments containing language errors; fifteen of these were written by people who are anti-Trump and fourteen by Trump supporters. Furthermore, I also found four prescriptive comments, all of which were written by people who are anti-Trump. Underneath Trump's post (Appendix 2), I collected a considerably larger number of comments containing linguistic errors, namely 73. 51 of which seem to have been written by Trump supporters, 22 by people who are anti-Trump, and three by people whose political affiliation is unclear. Once again, looking at the original comments was often enough to ascertain political affiliation:

7. But Trump himself **does disrespects** the office almost every day.
   American female; anti-Trump
8. Forget the liberals do what you need to do **trump** we the people have your back to keep this country safe for our **familys**
   American male; pro-Trump

Sometimes, however, I needed to look at someone's profile to find out more about their political affiliation. For instance, this response to someone saying that a wall needs to be built between the US and Mexico because there are drugs coming in:

9.  The drugs don't come in through the **boarders** they come in through the ports.
American male; anti-Trump

It is unclear from this comment whether this person supports Trump. However, looking at their profile, I noticed that they shared several memes ridiculing and criticising Trump, which made me assume that this person is anti-Trump and I, therefore, labelled them as such.

Lastly, underneath Trump's Facebook post, I found twelve prescriptive comments; five were written by Trump supporters, six by people who are anti-Trump, and one by someone whose political affiliation is unclear. Analysis of the below-the-line comments from both Facebook posts indicate that Trump supporters are more likely to make perceived linguistic errors, while people who are anti-Trump seem more likely to correct these errors. In Table 3.3, all the figures have been summarised.

|  | Pelosi's Facebook | Trump's Facebook | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pro-Trump | 14 | 51 | 65 |
| Anti-Trump | 15 | 22 | 37 |
| Unknown | / | 3 | 3 |
| Total | 29 | 76 | 105 |

Table 3.3. Comments containing linguistic errors.

Next, I looked at the comments underneath Theresa May's Facebook post (Appendix 2) and collected seventy comments containing perceived linguistic errors. Of these, 43 were written by Brexit supporters, seventeen by people who are anti-Brexit, and ten by people whose political affiliation is unclear. Furthermore, I found six prescriptive comments; three were written by people who are anti-Brexit, one by someone who is pro-Brexit, and two by people with an unknown political affiliation. Lastly, I looked at the below-the-line comments underneath Jeremy Corbyn's Facebook post (Appendix 2) and collected thirty comments containing perceived linguistic errors. Fifteen were written by people who are pro-Brexit, ten by people who are anti-Brexit, and five by people whose political ideology is unclear. Furthermore, I found four prescriptive comments, all of which were written by people who are anti-Brexit. This data paints a different picture than the data collected on Twitter; people who are anti-Brexit seem more likely to make prescriptive comments and people who are

pro-Brexit seem to make more perceived linguistic errors. In Table 3.4, all these figures have been summarised.

|  | May's Facebook | Corbyn's Facebook | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pro-Brexit | 43 | 15 | 58 |
| Anti-Brexit | 17 | 10 | 27 |
| Unknown | 10 | 5 | 15 |
| Total | 70 | 30 | 100 |

Table 3.4. Comments containing linguistic errors.

## 3.3 Collecting Data

After conducting my pilot study, I evaluated the data I collected and concluded that Facebook would be more suited for my analysis, since the Facebook data seemed more complex and wider in range than the data I collected on Twitter. There were more in-depth discussions between commenters on Facebook, which is likely caused by the way both social media platforms are set up and the level of interaction there is between users. As described above, on Facebook, the original post, comments and replies can all be accessed on the same webpage, and the comments a Facebook user leaves underneath other people's posts cannot usually be found on their own personal Facebook page. This creates more interaction since people can reply to more than one comment and often start lengthy discussions. Furthermore, due to the comments not showing up on the commenters' personal pages for everyone to see, it seems that people are more inclined to speak freely and less diplomatically, as may be illustrated in the following examples:

10. Don't you have some **baby's** somewhere to make comfortable sweetie? Is why nobody on here cares what a demoRAT thinks!
11. Nancy, please resign now, you are senile and need to spend time in a **psyc** ward .
12. Corbyn however will continue to be the crying little Bit** he is tho

I subsequently expanded my corpus by collecting more data from Facebook by looking at the below-the-line comments of two more posts for each politician, ultimately deciding to look at a total of three posts per politician. In order to make these posts and the below-the-line comments as easy to compare as possible, I tried to create pairs by aligning the date they were posted on Facebook. For instance, if I looked at the comments underneath a post from 21 March 2019 on Jeremy Corbyn's page, I would look at a post of the same date (or around the same date) on Theresa May's page. This way, the commenters would reflect the opinions

of people during the same point in time and reflect the public political discussion of that moment. To make the posts even more comparable and to define my data collection further, I picked a certain political topic which the Facebook posts should address; for the United States this was President Trump's proposed border wall and for the United Kingdom this was Brexit. However, I was unable to do this for two out of three posts written by Nancy Pelosi (or her staff) since she focussed more on other issues in the US after a certain date. For this reason, I was unable to pick three posts about the border wall; I did make sure that the other two posts were about Donald Trump, for instance a post about the Mueller Report. All the Facebook posts I looked at can be found in Appendix 2.

## 3.4 Data Analysis

After dividing the data into two groups, American and British comments, I further divided these two groups into three categories; for the UK this was pro-Brexit, anti-Brexit and unknown affiliation, and for the US, these groups were pro-Trump, anti-Trump and unknown affiliation. Then, I indicated which comments contained spelling mistakes, which contained perceived grammatical mistakes and which comments simply did not make sense; since comments could contain both spelling and grammatical mistakes, some comments were counted more than once. Furthermore, I also counted the comments that expressed a prescriptive sentiment, such as direct corrections (e.g. *it's* you're *not* your) and comments about intelligence (e.g. *You can't spell so you are dumb*).

After doing this, I went through all the comments and highlighted the perceived spelling and grammatical mistakes to get the actual number of 'mistakes' that were made. In addition to giving me this number, it also made it easier for me to categorise these errors. I did this by writing down every mistake I encountered – for instance writing *its* for *it's* – and essentially tallying every time I would encounter that mistake again. After doing this, I was able to compare the data between the political affiliations in each country and see which types of mistakes are more prevalent.

Then, I did something similar for the prescriptive comments by describing what type it was – for instance, equating language mistakes with being stupid, being uneducated, or being foreign. This way, I was able to find a possible correlation between certain types of comments and certain political affiliations. Furthermore, I was able to compare the British prescriptive comments to the American ones. Lastly, I compared the mistakes and prescriptive comments made by pro- and anti-Brexit and pro- and anti-Trump commenters.

## 3.5 Concluding Remarks

To summarise, after conducting a pilot study on Twitter and Facebook, I decided to use Facebook as my data-collection tool as it met my needs for data collection best. On Facebook, I choose several posts made by the four politicians chosen; these were Nancy Pelosi and Donald Trump for the US, and Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn for the UK. For each of these posts, I analysed all the below-the-line comments and collected those that contained perceived linguistic mistakes and prescriptive comments. I then analysed all these comments and labelled them with the person's nationality, gender, and political affiliation. After this, I analysed the types of mistakes and prescriptive comments and linked these to the different affiliations and compared them for the individual countries and compared the data from the UK to the data from the US.

# Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, I will describe the data I collected and analyse and discuss the trends visible in that data. First, I will describe the below-the-line comments on the pages of the British and American politicians and how the different political affiliations and countries compare to each other.

Before I start describing and discussing the 'mistakes' I found in the data, it is important to address what I will label as 'mistakes' throughout this and following chapters. Some of them cannot fully be classified as actual mistakes; this is because they are errors from the perspective of the standard language, but these features do occur in dialects and other non-standard varieties of English, such as double negation and *we was*. I do, however, label them here as 'incorrect' usage since they would be labelled as such from a prescriptivist's point of view and occur as usage problems in usage guides and online sources, and because they overlap with 'actual' grammatical mistakes. I will address these non-standard usages in separate sections.

## 4.1 Non-Standard Features in the United Kingdom

As stated in my methodology, I divided the below-the-line comments, 279 in total, into three categories: anti-Brexit, pro-Brexit, and unknown. Below, in Table 1, the figures for each politician's Facebook page and the total figures are listed:

|             | Corbyn | May | Total |
|-------------|--------|-----|-------|
| Anti-Brexit | 49     | 24  | 73    |
| Pro-Brexit  | 42     | 104 | 146   |
| Unknown     | 31     | 29  | 60    |
| Total       | 122    | 157 | 279   |

Table 1. Number of comments per political ideology and politician studied.

I categorised the writers of these comments by looking at the original comment, other comments they had written, their personal Facebook profile, and other Facebook posts they had posted. Some comments were easy to identify because they expressed a clear pro- or anti-Brexit sentiment, such as "we already decided once and for all" or "let's leave on the 29 March". However, most of the comments were more difficult to categorise and I had to look further. Often, the anti- or pro-Brexit sentiments were relatively easy to find on commenters' personal Facebook pages; they posted articles, memes, or other pictures expressing a clear view on Brexit, such as making fun of 'remoaners' (i.e. Brexiteers' name for Remain voters)

or detailing the problems that would arise after Brexit. For some commenters, it was not possible to find a clear affiliation through any of these steps and I therefore labelled them as unknown. Even if I could guess whether they were pro- or anti-Brexit, I labelled them as unknown if I was not absolutely sure.

Overall, the commenters who are pro-Brexit proved to be in the majority; however, there is a considerable difference between Corbyn's and May's pages. On Corbyn's page, people who are against Brexit are in the majority, albeit just so. This is roughly what I excepted since Theresa May (at the time of collecting the data) was the leader of the Conservative Party which is the party mostly in support of Brexit, whereas Jeremy Corbyn is Leader of the Opposition (the Labour Party) which seems to be mostly against Brexit (Corbyn 2019). It would therefore make sense that there are more people who are pro-Brexit commenting on Theresa May's Facebook page.

After dividing the comments into the three categories listed above, I subdivided them according to what kind of perceived linguistic mistakes were made. There are three categories, spelling mistakes, grammatical mistakes, and '?'. In Table 2, these figures have been summarised:

|  | Anti-Brexit | Pro-Brexit | Unknown | Total |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Spelling | 85 | 208 | 78 | 371 |
| Grammar | 27 | 65 | 21 | 113 |
| ? | 2 | 5 | 5 | 12 |
| Totals | 114 | 278 | 104 | 496 |

Table 2. Numbers of mistakes made per ideology and category of mistakes.

I categorised these perceived mistakes by analysing what was actually 'incorrect'. For grammar, this included missing words (e.g. *she good*), 'wrong' tenses (e.g. *he done*) or 'incorrect' pronouns (e.g. *hers knees*). As stated above, this category included actual mistakes but also non-standard features and usage problems. For a mistake to be labelled as a spelling mistake, there could not be anything wrong with the grammar but only with the way it was written. This means that commenters would write *its* instead of *it's*, since it is only the apostrophe that is missing and overall the structure of the sentence is 'correct'. Another example is the use of *of* for *have* in phrases such as *I should have*. This is a usage problem which occurs frequently in both usage guides and in online sources. However, I still decided to include these as spelling 'mistakes' because it seems to be more a phonetic spelling than an actual grammatical mistake. Overall, it is likely that the writers of these comments are aware

of, for instance, the difference between *its* and *it's* but pay less attention to the difference in spelling due to the informal nature of the internet (Vriesendorp 2016: 19). As with the grammatical category, the category spelling 'mistakes' contained actual mistakes, non-standard features, and usage problems. Lastly, the category '?' contains comments that are difficult to decode since the sentence structure and spelling were too ambiguous and chaotic which made it difficult to easily read the message of the writer. Looking at Table 2, it is clear that people who are pro-Brexit make the most perceived mistakes; this group is the clear majority of commenters making spelling and/or grammatical mistakes, even when taking into consideration the data collected from commenters with an unknown political affiliation.

As stated above, most of the mistakes are spelling mistakes – out of the 258 comments containing language errors, 210 contain one or more spelling mistakes; among these, several errors reoccur frequently. Most errors are made when it comes to apostrophes; there are 35 instances of contractions missing an apostrophe, for example *cant*, *wouldnt*, *theyd*, and there are 84 instances where plurals and possessives are used interchangeably, for example, plural 'fascist's' and possessive 'Graylings blunders'. Then there are several mistakes where commenters use homophones interchangeably: *its/it's* (32x), *your/you're* (35x), *there/their/they're* (16x), *then/than* (4x), *to/too* (7x), *of/off* (2x), and *lose/loose* (3); I choose to put the use of *I would of* instead *I would have* (6x) under the same category as the other types of mistakes since *have* sounds similar to *of* when used in contractions (e.g. *would've* and *might've*). However, as opposed to the mistakes listed above, this feature is a known usage problem that makes its appearance in several different usage guides (such as *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (1996) and *Oxford A-Z of English Usage* (2007)). Another mistake, which is not exactly the interchangeable use of homophones, but which does resemble the previous mistakes, is the interchangeable use of *where/were/we're* (4x). According to Vriesendorp (2016), the mistakes above also account for the most frequently discussed usage problems in blogs and other online sources (Vriesendorp 2016: 18); Vriesendorp argues that this is likely due to the informal nature of online discussions, which makes people focus less on their writing than in more formal situations in which writing is required (Vriesendorp 2016: 19). Lastly, there are several mistakes involving capitals – proper nouns without capitals or common nouns with capitals (11x) and the occurrence of 'I' with a lower-case letter (8x), something which is sometimes done deliberately. Lastly, there is the use of *u* or *ur* in place of *you* and *your/you're* (6x). According to Crystal (2006), this is a type of abbreviation used to "save time and effort" (Crystal 2006: 161-162) and is relatively common in the language of the internet – or what he calls Netspeak.

As I mentioned above, some of the mistakes I discuss are not actual mistakes but simply non-standard language use. For this reason, grammatical mistakes and other 'incorrect' usages are a lot more difficult to classify compared to the abovementioned spelling mistakes. However, I was able to find five types of grammatical mistakes and 'incorrect' (or, non-standard) usages that seem to occur more than five times. Most of them (three out of five) have to do with verbs. First, there are several instances in which the subject and verb do not agree with each other:

1. …leaving with a deal which **keep** us in the EU
       Female, pro-Brexit
2. You Mrs May **needs** to resign…
       Female, pro-Brexit
3. …either way he **loose** votes…
       Female, unknown

In example (1), the *s*-form of the third-person singular is missing. The same applies to example (3), in which not only the suffix is missing but the verb is spelled as *loose* instead of *lose*(*s*). The suffix is present in example (2), even though it should not be there; 'you' is the subject of the sentence, not 'Mrs May'. Out of the three examples above, examples (2) and (3) are relatively straightforward. Example (1) is more difficult to classify and could be either a genuine mistake or a non-standard feature. The other instances in this category (not shown above) are not as straightforward because they can also be categorised as non-standard, such as dialect features or usage problems (for example, *we was* and *parliament have*). Even though I will combine these non-standard features with the genuine mistakes later, I will not discuss them here but in a separate section below.

Secondly, the use of an 'incorrect' tense occurs several times:

4. you'll **waken** up in a minute
       Female; unknown
5. has already **promising** so many things…
       Male; anti-Brexit
6. I know exactly how **are you feel**…
       Male; pro-Brexit

Example (4) is probably a simple mistake, possibly a mix up of *wake* and *awaken* or perhaps even a simple spelling mistake. There are two scenarios for example (5): either *promising* should be *promised* or *been* is missing in that sentence. Lastly, there are also two scenarios for example (6): *feel* is missing the progressive suffix *-ing* or the verb *are* should be omitted.

This is likely a genuine mistake and not a non-standard feature since the sentence structure is also incorrect. Once again, these are not the only occurrences of 'incorrect' tense use; there are several other instances of non-standard tense use that I will discuss in the section below.

Then, there are several instances where the verb *to be* has been omitted in several scenarios, for instance in a present continuous or just simply as the main verb/copula, for example:

> 7.  I think I not the only one…
>     Female, unknown

In this example, the verb *am* is missing and the sentence does not seem to suggest that it is a non-standard feature. The rest of the occurrences in this category are more likely to be non-standard usages and will therefore be discussed in the section below.

Furthermore, 'incorrect' pronouns are found, for example with commenters using a pronoun in the 'wrong' context, for instance:

> 8.  May is on **hers** knees
>     Male, anti-Brexit
> 9.  is **you** name [omitted] though
>     Male, anti-Brexit
> 10. **they** objective is to…
>     Male, pro-Brexit

Both example (8) and (9) concern possessive pronouns; example (8) uses *hers* instead of *her*, and example (9) uses the personal pronoun *you* where the possessive pronoun *your* should be used. For example (10), there are two scenarios: the personal pronoun *they* should either be the possessive pronoun *their* or the definite article *the*. The other occurrences of 'incorrect' pronoun usage can be considered non-standard (for example, the use of demonstrative *them*) and will be discussed below.

Lastly, there are several comments in which words are missing, thus disturbing the flow of the sentence and sometimes even making the message they are trying to convey difficult to read:

> 11. …to most here **in south east**…
>     Female, anti-Brexit
> 12. …that's 5 mill more for **brexit psrty**…
>     Male; pro-Brexit
> 13. …the public will not **vote this racist extremist**
>     Male, pro-Brexit

Once again, this category consists of genuine mistakes such as example (12) and more ambiguous usages such as examples (11) and (13). When we look at examples (11) and (12), however, we see that there are missing capitals in both cases and a clear spelling error (*psrty* instead of *party*). It is also likely that the omission of *the* is a simple sign of sloppiness; we can, therefore, assume that these examples are simple mistakes caused by sloppiness. These five categories of mistakes and non-standard features are not the only types of mistakes and features commenters make and use, but these are the ones that occurred more than once.

### 4.1.1 Non-Standard features

As already indicated above, the data I collected from Facebook contained several linguistic 'mistakes' that can better be described as non-standard features or usage problems. In the 297 British comments I collected, there are 25 usages that I would describe as possibly non-standard features or usage problems. These usages can be divided into eight categories. The first of these categories concerns collective nouns that can either have a plural or singular verb attached to them; there are three instances of this:

14. **France have** said…
      Female, anti-Brexit
15. if **parliament have**..
      Female, anti-Brexit (same author as above)
16. **Is the Tories** that **have**…
      Female; anti-Brexit

The examples come from two authors (examples (14) and (15) are written by the same person) and both authors are anti-Brexit. As explained above, this is a usage problem found in some usage guides. Example (16) is actually a feature where there is generalisation of "the *-s* form to all persons" which is found in Tyneside and Southern British English (Beal 1993: 194; Edwards 1993: 222-223).

Next, there are two categories that are quite like each other. The first consists of two parts, namely the use of *was* with plural subject and the use of *were* with the third person singular; in total, there are six instances of this, illustrated by examples (17) to (20).

17. …when **we was** told…
      Male, pro-Brexit
18. **they wasn't** caught…
      Female, anti-Brexit

19. …**the two that's** there
    Female, pro-Brexit
20. Luckily **Chukka weren't** there…
    Male, anti-Brexit

There are three instances of *we was* which were all written by pro-Brexiteers. The use of *we was* and *they was* is "common throughout the south east and indeed other parts of the [UK]" (Edwards 1993: 223). The same applies to the use of *were* for *was* with singular subjects, as in example (20), and the use of *is* with plural subjects, as in example (19) (Edwards 1993: 223). The second of these two categories is the omission of -*s* with third-person singular subjects; there are four instances in my data:

21. …**a deal which keep** us…
    Female, pro-Brexit.
22. When **Teresa May say**…
    Female, unknown
23. …**this sort of hyperbole don't** help…
    Female, anti-Brexit
24. **Trump want** his…
    Male, anti-Brexit

The omission of this suffix appears in East Anglia (Edwards 1993: 222); this could mean that the writers of these comments are from that part of the UK, but it could also be examples of sloppiness. However, I was unable to find out where these writers were from exactly in the UK. These two categories are observed in the comments of people from both sides of the political discussion.

Then there is the use of the past tense instead of the past participle (e.g. *I took* and *I have took*) and the use of demonstrative *them* (e.g. *Them apples are nice*). There are three examples of the first and two of the latter, such as:

25. … I pretty much **done** Europe…
    Male, pro-Brexit
26. Cos **them**'s just the facts
    Female, unknown

The use of the past tense as the past participle occurs in Southern English dialects and is "accepted as regular in the weak verbs which add -ed" (Edwards 1993: 221) in standard British English. Demonstrative *them* is even more widespread and is considered to be "the

most widely reported feature" (Cheshire, Edwards & Whittle 1993: 65) in most British English dialect surveys (Cheshire, Edwards & Whittle 1993: 65).

Lastly, there are two usage problems that occur in my data, the use of *was* in the subjunctive and of *or* with *neither*. Of both problems, there was only one example:

> 27 …**neither** you **or** her…
>    Female, anti-Brexit
> 28. **if** that **was** the case…
>    Female, pro-Brexit

Both these 'mistakes' appear in several usage guides (such as *Remarks on the English Language* (1779), *Practical English Usage* (1980), and *The Queen's English and How to Use It* (2010)) but they do not seem to be a feature of any particular dialects within the UK.

Overall, there are two categories that appear exclusively in only one group of the two political affiliations. First of all, the usage problem in examples (14), (15) and (16) only occurs in comments written by people who are anti-Brexit. Secondly, the extension of the past tense into the past participle (e.g. example (25)) was only found in comments written by people who are pro-Brexit.

### 4.1.2 Prescriptive comments

Lastly, I looked at the prescriptive comments, such as corrections of spelling and comments on word choice; there were twenty such comments in the British data, ten of them written by Remainers, five by Brexiteers, and five by people whose political affiliation is unknown. Most of the prescriptive comments found (more specifically, eight of them) were direct corrections of other comments or replies, for example:

> 29. Leader does not need a capital L, and you missed a comma.
>    Female, anti-Brexit
> 30. I agree, but it's their not there xx
>    Male, pro-Brexit
> 31. think you mean *lose. You're welcome.
>    Male, anti-Brexit

Furthermore, there are five comments that seem to be used as an argument against another commenter's opinion, as a way of debunking their arguments; for instance:

32. Says a man who can't spell route.
     Male, unknown
33. you're discrediting people's opinion based on age but you can't even spell correctly?
     Male, anti-Brexit

Then there are four comments that equate language mistakes with a certain political affiliation or being foreign, for instance:

34. An economic "rout" at that. Your spelling serves to underline your political guile.
     Male, anti-Brexit
35. mind you, a large proportion of you Brexiteers are almost certainly paid Russian trolls, which would at least explain the terrible spelling and awful grammar.
     Male, anti-Brexit

Lastly, there are six comments that respond to and condemn other prescriptive comments:

36. a simple * would be suitable, or a counter argument. Mocking people will only push them further away from your point of view.
     Male, unknown

Example (36) is a response to another prescriptive comment where the writer did not just correct someone's writing but also added a judgement on their intelligence. The writer of example (36) did not agree with that view. Example (36), however, is quite different compared to the other five comments in this category because the other comments contain less formal and diplomatic language and seem to make fun of the commenter who expressed a prescriptive opinion:

37. sowwy for the punctuation his hit a big problem for you?
     Female, pro-Brexit
38. Hit "hisn't ,a pwoblem : fors; me . My gramma is died . Sadly
     Male, pro-Brexit

These comments are a form of linguistic parody; the language mistakes in these comments are clearly made in order to discredit the person prescribing language. Furthermore, these five comments were all replies underneath the same post and the commenters are responding to each other. However, the person who made the initial prescriptive comment did not participate in the discussion that followed.

### 4.1.3 Pro- versus anti-Brexit

When it comes to spelling mistakes, there seems to be a lot of overlap in the types of errors that are made. For instance, the most common mistake for both political ideologies is the interchangeable use of possessive '*s* and plural -*s;* however, even then there is a difference in the number of perceived mistakes that I have collected, with the anti-Brexiteers having twenty instances and the pro-Brexiteers 45. There are some mistakes that I have not been able to find in the comments written by people who are anti-Brexit but did come across in the those written by pro-Brexiteers. These mistakes are the mixing up of *then* and *than*, the spelling of *have* as *of* in phrases such as *I would have*; and the spelling of *you* as *u* (even though, as I said before, this is not really a mistake). All three of them appeared more than once in comments written by pro-Brexiteers, but never in those of anti-Brexiteers. There is no category which appears in the anti-Brexiteers' comments that does not also appear in those written by pro-Brexiteers.

Furthermore, there are six types of spelling mistakes that occur more frequently in the comments written by pro-Brexiteers than in those written by anti-Brexiteers. These are the mixed use of the possessive *'s* and the plural -*s*; the omission of an apostrophe in contractions (e.g. writing *can't* as *cant*); the mixed use of *your* and *you're*; the mixed use of *there, their* and *they're*; uncapitalised *I;* and proper names without or common nouns written with capitals. Lastly, there is one type of mistake that occurs more frequently in the comments by people who are anti-Brexit: the mixed use of *to* and *too*.

Above, I described several non-standard features and indicated that, even though these features deviate from the standard, they are not mistakes. Below, however, I will combine these non-standard features and usage problems with the actual linguistic errors I found in my data. Once again, this does not mean that these non-standard features are mistakes. However, because I am looking at the preconceptions and prejudices people have when it comes to language use and political affiliation, I decided to categorise them as 'mistakes' in my final analysis since the people with those preconceptions and prejudices will likely see these as incorrect or, at the very least, see these non-standard features and these actual mistakes as being part of the same category.

Looking at the grammatical mistakes and non-standard features used by the commenters who are pro- and anti-Brexit, similar deviations from the standard can be found. There are two types of grammatical mistakes and non-standard features that occur in comments written by pro-Brexiteers that do not appear in those from anti-Brexiteers: the incorrect or non-standard use of pronouns and the incorrect or non-standard use of the

subjunctive (e.g. using *if I was* instead of *if I were*; which is a usage problem discussed in several usage guides). As with the spelling mistakes, there is no type of grammatical mistake or non-standard feature that occurs only in comments written by people who are anti-Brexit.

Several types of grammatical mistakes and non-standard features occur more frequently in the comments written by people with the one ideology compared to the other. When it comes to pro-Brexiteers, the grammatical mistakes and non-standard features that occur more frequently are the use of an incorrect or non-standard tense, missing words in sentences (e.g. "no deal had lot more" missing the indefinite article between *had* and *lot*) and the use of an incorrect or non-standard word or category (e.g. "What a completely liar" using *completely* instead of *complete*). Looking at the comments written by people who are anti-Brexit, there are two types of mistakes and non-standard features that occur more frequently: mistakes in subject-verb agreement (e.g. "they wasn't caught lying", which might be an instance of non-standard usage) and absence of a form of *to be* (e.g. "there will nothing stopping us" with *be* missing between *will* and *nothing*).

## 4.2 Non-Standard Features in the United States

As stated in my methodology, I divided the below-the-line comments – 309 in total – underneath the six Facebook posts into three categories: anti-Trump, pro-Trump, and unknown ideology. Below, in Table 3, the figures for every Facebook page and in total are listed:

|  | Trump | Pelosi | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Anti-Trump | 45 | 53 | 98 |
| Pro-Trump | 121 | 67 | 188 |
| Unknown | 20 | 3 | 23 |
| Total | 186 | 123 | 309 |

Table 3. Number of comments per political ideology and politician.

Trump supporters are in the clear majority, and, as compared to the UK, it was easier to ascertain whether a commenter was pro- or anti-Trump. This can be seen in the numbers for the unknown political affiliation (23 for the US compared to 60 for the UK).

After dividing the comments into the three categories mentioned above, I divided them further into what kind of language mistakes occurred in them. There are three categories: spelling mistakes, grammatical mistakes, and '?' (which indicates that it was difficult to ascertain what message the poster was conveying and that the mistakes could not

simply be categorised as spelling or grammatical mistakes). In Table 4, these figures have been presented:

|  | Anti-Trump | Pro-Trump | Unknown | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Spelling | 90 | 270 | 19 | 379 |
| Grammar | 49 | 127 | 8 | 184 |
| ? | 1 | 1 | / | 2 |
| Totals | 140 | 398 | 27 | 565 |

Table 4. Numbers of mistakes made per ideology and category of mistakes.

Above in §4.1, I give a detailed description of how I categorised these mistakes, non-standard features and usage problems. The figures in Table 4 indicate that overall, Trump supporters make the most mistakes, and the difference between anti- and pro-Trump is considerably larger than the difference between anti- and pro-Brexit (see Table 2).

Furthermore, as in the UK, most perceived mistakes are spelling mistakes; out of the 273 comments containing errors or non-standard features, 205 comments contain spelling mistakes. As in the UK, the largest number of spelling mistakes concern the use of apostrophes - the omission of apostrophes in contractions like *wont, dont* and *whats* (42x), and the use of apostrophes for plurals (e.g. *baby's* instead of *babies*) or the omission of the apostrophe in the possessive (e.g. *Trumps properties* instead of *Trump's properties*) – this occurs 58 times. Next, there is the interchangeable use of homophones – *its/it's* (23x), *they're/their/there* (11x), *your/you're* (40x), *lose/loose* (2x), *to/too* (8x), *then/than* (8x), *of/have* in phrases like *might have* (2x), and arguably *were/where/we're* (3x). Once again, it may be noted that these are common usage problems on the internet (Vriesendorp 2016).

Furthermore, there are many errors concerning capitalisation – a proper noun without a capital or a common noun with a capital (22x) and *I* spelled with a lower-case letter (8x); this happens twice as much (in absolute figures) in the US data as compared to the UK. In fact, several American comments were written completely in capital letters. The use of capital letters as a way of emphasising a message or to give the idea of yelling is an often-used device on the internet and is also regularly criticised or seen as rude (see e.g. Anthony 2010; Robb 2014; Rule Number 2 n.d.).

As in my British data, I encountered the use of *u* and *ur* for *you* and *your/you're* (13x). Once again, whether this is regarded as a spelling mistake or as typical of netspeak can be debated and opinions differ per person (Crystal 2006: 161-162). Lastly, I encountered two words which are spelled incorrectly in a few comments: *college* written as *collage* (3x) and

*border* written as *boarder* (2x); except for one instance of *boarder,* all of these words were found underneath Facebook posts by Trump were written by Trump supporters.

I then looked at the perceived grammatical 'mistakes', which, as with the comments in the UK data, were not always possible to categorise into grammatical 'mistakes'. Furthermore, there were once again several instances of 'mistakes' that should more likely be categorised as usage problems or non-standard features. There are nine categories which occur five or more times. The first three categories concern verbs: no subject/verb agreement, a missing form of the verb *to be*, and the use of an 'incorrect' tense:

> 39. …**the pills** Trump takes to grow his hair also **shrinks** his…
> Female, anti-Trump
> 40. well **we bright** enough not to vote democrat
> Male, pro-Trump
> 41. …the national debt has **increase**…
> Female, anti-Trump

In example (39), the subject is clearly plural, but the main verb has the third-person singular suffix -*s*. Example (40) could be described as a non-standard feature which occurs in Southern American English and AAVE (Bernstein 2003: 117; Mufwene 2008: 299-300). Both examples (39) and (40) can possibly be instances of dialect or other non-standard features and will therefore be discussed further in the section below. Lastly, in example (41), there is a present tense where a past participle should be used, though this could possibly be a spelling mistake.

Furthermore, there are several mistakes which involve the use of wrong words or word categories, the use of wrong pronouns, or missing words:

> 42. your **ignorant** is showing
> Unknown, pro-Trump
> 43. …the THREE times **his** contradicts himself later?
> Male, anti-Trump
> 44. I think it's you who **are denial** about the "crisis" …
> Female, anti-Trump

All three examples above are likely to be genuine mistakes. Several other instances in these three categories are more likely dialect or other non-standard features and will therefore be discussed below.

The above-mentioned categories of grammatical mistakes were also present in the British comments I collected. There are two categories, however, which differ significantly

from the British data: the use of *a* for *an* in front of a word beginning with a vowel sound (which only occurred once in the British comments) and the use of double negatives (of which I was unable to find a single instance in the British comments).

### 4.2.1 Non-Standard features

As discussed above, the American data contains several instances of non-standard features and usage problems. There is one commenter who seems to be a speaker of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and who uses a few features of the dialect in his two comments:

> 45. **All mass shootings here in this country is** done by who? If shooting up schools and burning down churches **ain't** a terrorist attack then what is?
> 46. Can't complain about drugs now. **We all laughing** in the hood. We have known for years how **the drugs was** coming here.
>     Male, anti-Trump

In this case, it seems relatively easy to label these features as non-standard. For other instances, however, it was not as easy to ascertain whether they were mistakes, non-standard features or usage problems, since it was not as easy to tell what variety of American English the commenters spoke. In total (not counting the commenter mentioned above), there are 40 instances of perceived non-standard usages or usage problems, which can be divided into nine categories.

Firstly, demonstrative *them* was found three times:

> 47. And not a single one of **them** lawsuits are…
>     Male, pro-Trump
> 48. ill bet you hope **them** silly Russians don't trick…
>     Male, pro-Trump
> 49. …whats wrong with you people **them** dems cant take…
>     Male, pro-Trump

This feature occurs in American usage guides (such as *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* (1957) and *Common Errors in English Usage* (2003)) and is a dialect feature found in American vernacular dialects, such as the enclave dialects of the South (Wolfram 2003: 146, Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998: 342).

Next, there are six instances of double negation, such as:

> 50. They **don't** own **no** businesses…
>     Male, anti-Trump

> 51. You sure as hell **ain't no** Godly person
>         Female, pro-Trump
> 52. it **don't** do **no** good
>         Female, pro-Trump

Like demonstrative *them*, double negation appears in usage guides and is a feature of several dialects of American English (Wolfram 2003: 146, Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998: 339). It is interesting to note that this feature does not appear in my British data, even though usage is widespread in British English dialects. Furthermore, example (51) contains the only instance of the use of *ain't* (besides the AAVE speaker mentioned above), which is another contested feature which occurs in several American dialects (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998: 339-340); according to Bernstein its popularity possibly stems from the fact that there is no "satisfactory contraction for *am not*" (Bernstein 2003: 117).

The next category consists of levelling where the *-s* form is omitted with the third-person singular. This occurs thirteen times altogether and some examples are:

> 53. What he **want** is a monument…
>         Male, anti-Trump
> 54. she **make** 194k a year…
>         Male, unknown

Once again, this feature seems to be part of several dialects within the US, such as AAVE, some Southern and other vernacular dialects (Bernstein 2003: 117, Wolfram 2003: 146, Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998: 335-336).

Then, there is the use of the past tense in place of the past participle, which occurs twice in my data:

> 55. i **have did** my research…
>         Male, pro-Trump
> 56. Never **have** I **saw** a President…
>         Male, anti-Trump

This is like the (predominantly American) usage problem *have went* (see e.g. Tieken-Boon van Ostade & Kostadinova 2015) and a feature of Southern and other vernacular dialects (Wolfram 2003: 146, Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998: 332).

The next category contains the omission of the verb *to be* as a copula or in the progressive tense. There are six instances in my data, for example:

57. well **we bright** enough not to vote democrat
    Male, pro-Trump
58. Curious how many **we dealing** with?
    Female, pro-Trump
59. We know **there something** bad in it…
    Female, anti-Trump

This is a feature of American dialects such as AAVE and Southern American (Bernstein 2003: 117, Mufwene 2008: 299-300, Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998: 335). When we look at example (59), however, it is also possible that this is not a non-standard feature, but a simple mistake, a simple omission due to the s-sound of *something* following *there.*

There are four instances where periphrastic *do* and the weak verb *have* are lacking:

60. where **you been** hiding?
    Male, pro-Trump
61. I have talked to soldiers **who been** down…
    Male, pro-Trump
62. wtf **world u live** in.
    Male, anti-Trump

In all these examples, the verbs *to do* and *to have* would have been auxiliary verbs; they are necessary according to the standard language but have been left out in these instances. Whether this indicates that the writer is using a dialect or another non-standard form of English I find difficult to say with certainty. I have not been able to find any literature indicating that these are non-standard features. However, since I found several instances of these auxiliary verbs being omitted, it is not possible to simply exclude these examples as simple mistakes.

Lastly, there are three examples that each show a non-standard usage:

63. are **yous** serious…
    Female, pro-Trump
64. That**'s** already **been existing**…
    Male, anti-Trump
65. …Presidents were treated so **disrespectful**?
    Female, pro-Trump

In example (63), the author used *yous* instead of *you.* This feature stood out to me since it is a feature found in non-standard varieties of British English, such as Irish English (Harris 1993: 139-140). It is also a feature of certain dialects of American English (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998: 342). The use of *been* in the context of example (64) is mostly associated with

AAVE (Mufwene 2008: 301; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998: 334). Lastly, in example
(65), the adverbial suffix -*ly* seems to be missing; this is also known as a flat adverb and
appears as a usage problem in several usage guides, such as *Remarks on the English
Language* (1770), *Practical English Usage* (1980) and *Strictly English* (2010). However,
even though flat adverbs are often considered a linguistic mistake, it is actually a dialect
feature found in several American dialects, such as Appalachian and Ozark English
(Bernstein 2003: 117; Wolfram & Shilling-Estes 1998: 338).

   Overall, if we look at the non-standard usages and usage problems in the data, most of
the instances are written by Trump supporters; only twelve of the 40 instances of non-
standard usage are written by people who are anti-Trump; demonstrative *them* is exclusively
used by Trump supporters.

## 4.2.2 Prescriptive comments

In my American data, I found 36 prescriptive comments; 22 were written by people who are
against Trump, nine by Trump supporters and five by people with an unknown political
affiliation. Four of these comments directly address a language mistake in another comment,
for instance:

> 66. *you're
>   Male, unknown
> 67. Run on sentence!
>   Male, pro-Trump

Furthermore, there are five comments that are essentially used as an argument against another
commenter's opinion:

> 68. "C" the truth? Come on, Mister. Do me the courtesy of using whole real
>   words to express your opinions. Otherwise you just come across a
>   blithering idiot. PLEASE
>    Male, anti-Trump
> 69. Says the guy misusing ellipses
>    Male, pro-Trump

Five comments equate language mistakes with a certain political affiliation, for example:

> 70. lol you cant [sic] spell just like a democrat.
>    Female, pro-Trump

71. Did you mean severed. If that's the level of your intelligence it's no wonder you support Trump.
Female, anti-Trump

These two examples indicate that both sides of the political spectrum seem to have the same prejudice towards each other, claiming that language use shows that the other side is unintelligent.

Three comments equate being foreign with making language mistakes:

72. Learn how to spell. And let's see your green card asshole
Male, pro-Trump
73. how about you practice your English first. You sound like an illegal immigrant. The only difference is that they speak two languages. You struggle with the only one you know.
Male, anti-Trump

However, one of these three comments also contains a political statement, referring to the rumours of foreign influence in the elections and political climate of the US:

74. Can your Chinese bosses not afford to teach you proper Engrish?
Male, pro-Trump

The use of *Engrish* in this comment is not a spelling mistake, but "a slang term for the misuse or corruption of the English language by native speakers of Asian languages" (*Engrish*, n.d.). Then there is one prescriptive comment which is not directed at another commenter but at Trump himself:

75. Why would I support a despot dipshit? He doesn't even know the word "origins". If you think he is smart, you are a fucking moron.
Male, anti-Trump

Furthermore, there is one comment (as opposed to six in the British prescriptive comments) that condemns another person's prescriptive comment:

76. the sentences were put together better than yours and there are many on the border who would disagree with you.
Male, pro-Trump.

Another contrast to the comments found in the UK is that this condemnation also expresses a prescriptive sentiment as a way of debunking someone else's argument.

Lastly, there is one more category of prescriptive comment, which is also the largest; the following eight comments equate making language mistakes to being poorly educated, for example:

> 77. We can't help but notice that your Writing Skills equal those of a 3rd grader. Trump loves the "poorly educated" and you appear to be one of them.
>        Female, anti-Trump
> 78. 'don't need to invest in our education system……' Pardon me, but your post is the epitome of why there needs to be more poured into that very system. Basic punctuation is important…
>        Male, anti-Trump

This sentiment cannot be found in the prescriptive comments in my UK data and all these comments were written by people who are against Trump.

### 4.2.3 Pro- versus anti-Trump

Looking at my US data, there are three types of spelling 'mistakes' that occur in comments written by Trump supporters that do not occur in comments written by those who are anti-Trump. These 'mistakes' are the mixed use of *were, where* and *we're*, *I would of* instead of *I would have*, and the spelling of *college* as *collage*. There are no spelling 'mistakes' present in the comments written by those who are anti-Trump that do not appear in comments from Trump supporters. Furthermore, all spelling mistakes occur more frequently in the pro-Trump comments. There is only one mistake that occurs equally often (once in both groups): the spelling of *border* as *boarder*.

Below, I will discuss the grammatical mistakes and non-standard features found in my Facebook data. Once again, the actual mistakes and non-standard features will be discussed together, because the people with the preconceptions and prejudices that I am looking at will likely put the mistakes and non-standard features in the same category.

When we look at the grammatical mistakes and non-standard usages, there are two types of mistakes and usages that occur in comments written by Trump supporters but not in those written by people who are anti-Trump, i.e. the use of incorrect or non-standard pronouns (e.g. *them silly Russians*) and the use of *a* for *an* or the other way around. Furthermore, all the other types of grammatical mistakes and non-standard usages appear more frequently in the comments written by Trump supporters than in those written by the other group, except for the use of double negatives which occurs equally often. There is, however, one instance that occurs significantly more frequently than the others; this is the use

of a wrong word or category, which occurs three times more frequently in the comments written by Trump supporters.

## 4.3 Summary

For the UK data, 146 of the 279 comments containing mistakes, non-standard features or usage problems were written by people who are pro-Brexit.  These 279 comments contain a total of 496 linguistic errors, non-standard features or usage problems. Of these, the majority (a total of 371) are spelling 'errors' and most of these 'errors' (208) are made by people who are pro-Brexit. These spelling 'errors' mostly concern apostrophes (e.g. *Fathers job* and *many father's*) and the mixing up of homonyms (e.g. *their/there/they're* and *to/too*). For the US, the data is similar. There are slightly more comments than in the UK data, 309 in total. Of these 309 comments, 188 were written by people who are pro-Trump. These 309 comments contain a total of 565 linguistic mistakes, non-standard usages and usage problems, and the majority (a total of 379) are spelling 'errors' mostly made by Trump supporters (270, compared to the 90 by people who are anti-Trump). The 'mistakes' found in the British data also appear in the US data. However, there are some differences when we compare the spelling 'errors' in the US to those in the UK. Firstly, there are twice as many mistakes concerning capitalisation in the American data, with common nouns written with capitals and proper nouns written without. Lastly, there are two words which have been miswritten, namely *college* (written as *collage*) and *border* (written as *boarder*); these two words do not appear in the UK data, but this is likely due to these issues possibly not being as much in the foreground in the British political discussion and the fact that British English speakers are more likely to use *University* as opposed to *college*, which is evident in the definitions given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for both words (see "college, n" and "university, n").

Next are the grammatical 'mistakes', usage problems and other non-standard usages. In the UK, there are five categories of features that appear more than once in the data. These categories concern:

- subject-verb agreement (e.g. *parliament **have***)
- use of the 'incorrect'/non-standard tense (e.g. *you'll waken up*)
- omission of the verb *to be* (e.g. *She 67*)
- 'incorrect'/non-standard pronoun use (e.g. *them's just the facts*)

- missing words (e.g. *more for brexit psrty*)

The five abovementioned categories can also be found in the American data and are supplemented with two more categories which cannot be found in the British data. These two categories are the use of the indefinite article *a* for *an* (e.g. *a apple*) and the use of double negatives (e.g. *They don't own no businesses*). Overall, most of the features are found in the comments written by people who are pro-Brexit in the UK and people who are pro-Trump in the US.

As stated in this chapter, not all grammatical 'mistakes' identified are actual mistakes. Many instances are actually non-standard features or usage problems which can often be found in British and American dialects. In the British data, there are eight categories of non-standard features. In the US, there are nine, four of which overlap with the non-standard features found in the UK data: demonstrative *them*, the omission of the -*s* form with the third-person singular and the use of the -*s* form with subjects other than the third-person singular, the extension of the past tense into the past participle, and the omission of the verb *to be*. Lastly, in the American data, there is one commenter who seems to speak AAVE and who uses some of its dialect features.

Lastly, I looked at the prescriptive comments I found on Facebook. In the British data, there are twenty comments containing a prescriptive sentiment; the majority of them (ten out of twenty) were written by people who are anti-Brexit. The comments seem to have slightly different sentiments which can be divided into four categories. These categories are the use of linguistic mistakes as a way of debunking someone's opinion, equating language mistakes with a certain political affiliation or being foreign, and condemning prescriptive comments. In the American data, there are 36 prescriptive comments consisting of six categories altogether. All four categories described above can be found in the American data as well. The two categories only found in the American data address the language used by Trump in general (not in the Facebook post or in response to another commenter) and equate linguistic mistakes with being poorly educated.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

Having described my data in the previous chapter, I will discuss my results in this chapter. I will first look at the judgments given on what are perceived as linguistic errors, then I will look at these 'errors' in my British and American data separately, and, lastly, I will compare the data from both countries.

## 5.1 Judgments on perceived linguistic errors

If we look at the prescriptive comments found in my data, it is clear that linguistic mistakes, or non-standard features that are perceived as 'mistakes', come with several preconceptions and prejudices. Besides direct corrections and condemnations of prescriptive comments, there are several ways in which the judgements on language use and perceived linguistic errors overlap when we compare the prescriptive comments in the UK data to those in the US data. Compared to the American data, the prescriptive comments in the UK seem to be less judgmental overall, with the majority of comments (14 out of 23 prescriptive comments) being either direct corrections or condemnations of prescriptive comments – in the American data these comments make up only 5 out of 27 prescriptive comments.

The use of prescriptivism as a way to debunk someone's opinion appears in both sets of data; Chapman (2012:199) calls this "*ad linguam* attacks". Even though most authors of prescriptive comments might not state this sentiment explicitly, their comments (even those containing direct corrections) seem to be used as *ad linguam* attacks. However, there are several comments that actually give an overt judgment on the perceived linguistic errors. In the data from both countries, I find people calling other commenters who make such 'errors' foreigners. Furthermore, in the US, most comments containing a prejudice or preconception equate perceived linguistic errors with being poorly educated. In his article, Chapman's (2012) argument is that the liberal left supports prescriptivism due to "the high stock they place in education and from their high confidence that language use is an effective index to a person's education" (Chapman 2012: 193). My data seems to support his theory, since all comments, except one (written by someone with unknown political affiliation), that equate perceived linguistic errors with poor education are written by people who are anti-Trump. As stated above, even though the pro/anti-Trump divide is not as easy as just dividing the comments into the liberal Left or conservative Right, it does seem that overall those who oppose Trump (in news articles, blogs, and even on social media) seem to be politically more left leaning than right.

In the data for both countries, there are judgments that correlate perceived 'incorrect' language use with a certain political affiliation. In the UK, these comprise only two comments, both by people who are anti-Brexit. Cameron's (1995) view that from the 1980s onwards, it has been the Conservatives who are carrying a torch for prescriptivism seems no longer to fully be the case. If we look at all the prescriptive comments in the British data, the majority come from people who are anti-Brexit, but only just so, with ten comments written by anti-Brexiteers and nine by pro-Brexiteers.

In the US, on the other hand, both Trump supporters and people who are anti-Trump make these judgments; people who are anti-Trump indicate that "Trump loves the "poorly educated" (female, anti-Trump), that because someone's English "sucks" they "must be a Trumpturd member" (female, anti-Trump), and that since someone's intelligence level is perceived to be low due to linguistic errors "it's no wonder that [they] support Trump" (female, anti-Trump). Trump supporters express similar attitudes by saying that Democrats "cant [sic] spell" (female, pro-Trump) and that liberals are "[s]o intelligent [they] should be proud" (female, pro-Trump) followed by several emoticons crying with laughter. So even though the liberal Left seems to place high stock in 'correct' language use, it is clearly not just them who do so; the conservative Right, or in this case Trump supporters, hold and express these judgments as well. If we look at examples (70) and (71) in §4.2.2, we can see that both groups hold the same (or similar) prejudices towards the other group, and, as we can see in the data, not one group is right or wrong; both groups include people who make linguistic mistakes, and use non-standard features and usage problems. However, the clear majority of prescriptive comments are written by people who are anti-Trump, with only a handful written by Trump supporters. Furthermore, what Chapman (2012) indicated in his article, namely that US liberals place high value in education, seems to hold true when we look at the prescriptive comments in the American data; all the comments that equate linguistic 'mistakes' with poor education were written by those who are anti-Trump.

## 5.2 Perceived linguistic mistakes in the United Kingdom

Overall, if we look at Table 2 in Chapter 4, most of the perceived linguistic mistakes are made by people who are pro-Brexit (278 out of 496). As mentioned in Chapter 4, most perceived 'mistakes' are made when it comes to spelling and there are several 'mistakes' that only occur in the comments written by people who are pro-Brexit: *then/than*, *I would of/I would have*, and *u/you*. Even though I did not find these features in the comments written by

anti-Brexiteers, I will not argue that only pro-Brexiteers make these types of mistakes on social media. However, I will argue that, when you encounter one or more such features, it is more likely that you are reading a comment written by someone who supports Brexit. There are also six types of spelling 'errors' that occur more frequently in the comments written by pro-Brexiteers than in the comments written by anti-Brexiteers (these can be found in section 4.1.3), and, once again, it is therefore possible to argue that on encountering one of these 'errors' it is more likely that you are dealing with someone who is pro-Brexit. However, I would also argue that these chances are slimmer than in the case of the other spelling 'mistakes' since they do not occur in the comments written by people who are anti-Brexit at all.

Next are the perceived grammatical 'mistakes'. These so-called 'mistakes' contain a number of usages that are not really incorrect but are simply non-standard features. However, as indicated in Chapter 4, I will discuss these mistakes and non-standard features together since prescriptivists will probably see them as the same category and possibly label them as 'incorrect'. As with the spelling 'mistakes', several types appear in comments written by both anti- and pro-Brexiteers. There are, however, two types of grammatical 'mistakes' or non-standard features that appear only in the comments written by Brexit supporters; these are the 'incorrect' or non-standard use of pronouns and the subjunctive. As with the spelling mistakes, it is possible to argue that when encountering such features, you are more likely dealing with someone who is pro-Brexit than someone who is anti-Brexit. The same applies to the types of mistakes or non-standard usages that appear more frequently in the data from the pro-Brexit group; these are the use of an 'incorrect' or non-standard tense or category and missing words in sentences.

Lastly, as I stated above, non-standard usages are not the same as mistakes. I therefore also looked at them separately (see §4.1.1). There are two non-standard features or usage problems that were exclusively found in one group. For the anti-Brexiteers, this is the usage problem where a collective noun can have a singular or a plural verb, and for the pro-Brexit group this is the extension of the past tense into the past participle. The type found only in the anti-Brexit group is a usage problem found in several usage guides (such as *Oxford A-Z of English Usage* (2007) and *The Queen's English and How to Use It* (2010)) but is not a dialect feature. The type found only in pro-Brexit comments, however, is a distinct feature of British English dialects. So, even though they are both non-standard, they do not belong to the same category. If we look at these two distinct groups within the possible non-standard features I found in my data and take away the usage problems that are not distinct dialect features, the

majority of dialect features are used by people who are pro-Brexit. This seems to suggest that Brexit supporters are more likely to use dialect features in their written language on social media than people who are anti-Brexit.

## 5.3 Perceived linguistic mistakes in the United States

Looking at Table 4 in Chapter 4, Trump supporters make the most perceived linguistic mistakes (398 out of 565 instances). This is a considerable majority, especially when compared to the figures from the UK. It is therefore possible to argue that, according to my data, people who are pro-Trump are more likely to make perceived linguistic 'mistakes'. As with the British data, the most perceived 'mistakes' are spelling errors, which are made by people on both sides of the political discussion. There are three types that occur in comments written by Trump supporters which do not occur in comments written by people who are against Trump: the mixed use of *were, where* and *we're*, the use of *I would of* instead of *I would have*, and the spelling of *college* as *collage*. Once again, even though I did not find these types of 'errors' in the comments written by people who are anti-Trump, this does not mean that they do not make these types of 'mistakes'. However, I would argue that, when you encounter these types of spelling errors, it is more likely that they were written by Trump supporters.

Before discussing the perceived grammatical 'errors' found in my data, I would like to state again that these perceived 'errors' are discussed together with the non-standard features due to the likelihood of them being perceived as mistakes by people holding the prejudices and preconceptions I am discussing. This does not mean that these non-standard features are actual linguistic mistakes.

There are two types of perceived grammatical 'errors' that occur only in the comments written by Trump supporters: the use of 'incorrect' or non-standard pronouns and the use of *a* for *an*. Furthermore, all other perceived grammatical 'errors' or non-standard features appear more frequently in the comments from Trump supporters than in those written by people who are anti-Trump (except for multiple negation, which occurs equally often in comments written by both groups). This makes it possible to argue that on encountering these features, you are more likely dealing with Trump supporters than people who are against Trump.

Lastly, it is important to look at the abovementioned non-standard features found in my American data in isolation. First of all, as opposed to the data from the UK, there are no usage problems which are described in usage guides but are not part of an American dialect;

all features seem to be part of one or more American dialects. Furthermore, most non-standard usages are produced by people who are pro-Trump (25 instances compared to 16 written by people who are anti-Trump), while the use of demonstrative *them* appears exclusively in the comments written by Trump supporters. It therefore seems that Trump supporters are more likely to use dialect features in their written language on social media than people who are anti-Trump.

## 5.4 The two countries compared

When we look at both countries and which side of the political climate make perceived linguistic errors overall, there is a much clearer divide between the pro- and anti-Trump camps in the US than there is between the pro- and anti-Brexit camps in the UK. This difference reflects the complexity of the political discussions in both countries, and my difficulty in ascertaining whether someone was pro- or anti-Brexit opposed to whether someone was pro- or anti-Trump. As stated in Chapter 4, when we look at the people with an unknown political affiliation, it was much more difficult to ascertain the political affiliation for the British commenters than it was for the American ones. Categorising people as simply pro- or anti-Brexit is oversimplifying the issue since there are several more camps within those two categories, for instance, pro-Brexiteers can be pro- or anti-no-deal Brexit. Overall, the discussion surrounding Trump and his border wall seems to be somewhat more black and white; people seem to either support him or not. For these reasons, it also becomes much more difficult to say which political camp in the UK is more likely to make perceived linguistic mistakes than the other, and which 'mistakes' they are more likely to make. This does not mean that it is possible to draw these conclusions with complete certainty for the American data, but it is somewhat easier to do so.

A similar trend is visible in both the British and American data: overall, people who are pro-Brexit and pro-Trump make the most perceived linguistic errors, while people who are anti-Brexit and anti-Trump seem to write the most prescriptive comments. With both countries, the pro-sides are often associated with the conservative Right, as shown by Trump being a Republican president and Brexit being advocated by the Conservative party in the UK. On the other hand, the anti-sides in both countries are often associated with the liberal Left, shown by the Democrats (a party known for its more liberal views compared to the Republican party) forming the opposition to Trump's Republican party and more liberal parties in the UK (e.g. the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats) being somewhat outspoken against Brexit. However, it is important to note here that these associations do not

indicate that these pro- and anti-sides in both countries can definitively be divided into Left and Right, especially with Brexit but also when it comes to the debate surrounding President Trump. However, an argument can be made that my data does somewhat support Chapman's view that the liberal Left, in particular, places a high value on language use and their view that language use indicates someone's educational background, or lack thereof; nonetheless, Chapman's claim that the "judgments do not fit the sources of complaints" (Chapman 2012: 205) seems to hold true.

Even though linguistic 'errors' and non-standard features are used by both sides of the political discussion, it is possible to argue that certain types of mistakes occur more frequently in comments from one group than the other, and therefore that on encountering these types of perceived errors, it seems that we are more likely to be dealing with the pro-groups than with the anti-groups. In other words, people who are anti-Brexit in the UK and people who are anti-Trump in the US seem to be more likely to use standard British and American English than people who are pro-Brexit and pro-Trump.

It is also interesting to see the difference in prescriptive comments when we compare the United Kingdom to the United States. In absolute figures, there were more prescriptive comments in my American data than in my British data, which could suggest that there is more grassroots prescriptivism in the US than there is in the UK. Furthermore, my data suggests that there is more emphasis on language use and level of education in the US than in the UK. In the British data, not one person equated someone's perceived linguistic errors with being under/uneducated. This is interesting since there was a lengthy debate about the teaching of English in the UK in the 1980s, and my findings therefore suggest that Cameron's (1995) description of (mostly British) Conservatives being prescriptivists and the Left being more liberal when it comes to language use no longer holds true. Especially in the US, both the Left and Right hold preconceptions and prejudices when it comes to language and express judgements on language they deem incorrect.

# Chapter 6: Conclusion

After reading Chapman (2012) and *Verbal Hygiene* (1995) by Cameron about politics, prescriptivism, and perceived linguistic errors, I wanted to ascertain whether the making of language mistakes and correcting these mistakes (or, commenting on them) indicate a certain political affiliation in British and American English. I did this by looking at the below-the-line comments underneath Facebook posts of two British and two American politicians. Politicians of both countries had to be on opposite sides of the current political discussions, and I needed a particular political issue to focus on. For the UK, I looked at Brexit and the Facebook posts of former Prime-Minister Theresa May and Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn; for the US, I looked at the issue of Trump's border wall and the Facebook posts of President Donald Trump and Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi.

After collecting and analysing all the data, I found that overall people who are pro-Brexit and pro-Trump are more likely to make perceived linguistic 'errors' and use what were identified as dialect features and usage problems in their language on social media. People who are anti-Brexit and anti-Trump, on the other hand, are more likely to express prescriptive sentiments in Facebook comments. Furthermore, there are several types of perceived language mistakes and non-standard features that either appear exclusively or more frequently in the comments written by Brexit and Trump supporters than in those from people who are against Brexit and Trump. In other words, it is possible to argue that people who are anti-Brexit and anti-Trump are more likely to use standard American and British English and are more likely to want to enforce the standard on social media. This supports the hypothesis given by Chapman (2012) but not the situation as described by Cameron (1995).

When specifically looking at the non-standard features that appear in dialects (not usage problems such as the subjunctive or *neither…or*), it was interesting to see that both Trump and Brexit supporters used them more frequently than people who do not support Trump or Brexit. Even more so, there were dialectal features in both the British and American data that exclusively appeared in comments by these two pro-groups. It would be interesting to further study the use of dialect features in the written language on social media, why certain people use such features and if these two groups are also more likely to speak a dialect in their day-to-day life as opposed to standard American or British English.

If we look at my results, no clear conclusions can be drawn. The situation is not as black and white as simply dividing the general public into two groups and assigning them a

level of linguistic proficiency. There are many nuances when it comes to language use. Being more highly educated does not equal being linguistically superior. Everyone makes linguistic mistakes, uses non-standard features, and uses a usage problem 'incorrectly' at least once in their life. However, one conclusion can be drawn: language use seems to be just as complicated as politics.

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# Appendix 1: Twitter

**Nancy Pelosi**
- The House and Senate resoundingly rejected @realDonaldTrump's lawless power grab, yet the President has chosen to continue to defy the Constitution, the Congress & the will of the American people. #FakeEmergency
  On March 26, the House will once again act to protect our Constitution and our democracy from the President's emergency declaration by holding a vote to override his veto. #FakeEmergency
  House Republicans have to choose between their partisan hypocrisy and their sacred oath to support and defend the Constitution. #FakeEmergeny
    15/3/2019
- Today, I was proud to sign legislation making it clear – once again – that the Congress is committed to protecting the separation of powers in our Constitution & rejecting the President's #FakeEmergency.
    14/3/2019
- .@realDonaldTrump hurt millions of Americans and caused widespread chaos when he recklessly shut down the government to try to get his expensive and ineffective wall, which he promised would be paid for by Mexico.
  Congress refused to fund his wall and he was forced to admit defeat and reopen the government. The same thing will repeat itself if he tries this again.
  We hope he learned his lesson.
  At a time when our country faces challenges about jobs for the future, this money would be better spent on rebuilding America, and on education & workforce development for jobs for the 21$^{st}$ Century.
    10/3/2019
- Rejecting @realDonaldTrump's #FakeEmergency isn't about partisanship – it's about our duty to protect & defend our Constitution. I encourage @SenateMajLdr & the @SenateGOP to do the right thing and protect the separation of powers.
    28/2/2019

**Donald Trump**
- Right now, our borders are being used as gateways for drug cartels & violent criminals – each day adding to the millions of illegal aliens already in the country. That's why JW fights illegal immigration in the courts. Sign the petition + help us win.
    (Retweet)
- I hope our great Republican Senators don't get led down the path of weak and ineffective Border Security. Without strong Borders, we don't have a Country – and the voters are on board with us. Be strong and smart, don't fall into the Democrats "trap" of Open Borders and Crime!
    25/2/2019
- Those Republican Senators who voted in favour of Strong Border Security (and the Wall) are being uniformly praised as they return to their States. They know there is a National Emergency at the Southern Border, and they had the courage to ACT. Great job!
    17/3/2019
- Thank you to the House Republicans for sticking together and the BIG WIN today on the Border. Today's vote simply reaffirms Congressional Democrats are the party of

Open Borders, Drugs and Crime!
>       26/3/2019

**Theresa May**
- You want this stage of the Brexit process to be over and done with. I agree. I am on your side.
  >    20/3/2019
- It's time for Parliament to determine that it will deliver on Brexit. The British people deserve better than Parliament has given them so far.
  >    20/3/2019
- The deal that MPs voted on in January was not strong enough on the backstop. And legally binding changes were needed to get it right. We have now agreed them.
  >    12/3/2019
- Let's get it done.
  >    8/3/2019

**Jeremy Corbyn**
- Where this government has failed, I believe parliament can, and will, succeed.
  >    26/3/2019
- The government has had over two years to find a solution and has failed.
  >    25/3/2019
- "This is all caused by a party putting itself before the country it is trying to govern." Spot on. #bbcqt
  >    22/3/2019

# Appendix 2: Facebook

**Nancy Pelosi**
- Trump's obsession with building a border wall is about two things: Erecting yet another monument to himself and satisfying a campaign applause line. He doesn't mention his promise to make Mexico pay for it anymore.
  - 11/3/2019
- Why? What is he hiding? #ReleaseTheReport
  - 6/3/2019
- Miami Herald: "House Democrats pass Dream Act, succeeding where Miami Republicans failed" #ProtectTheDream
  [https://www.miamiherald.com/.../immigra.../article231151693.html.@MiamiHerald](https://www.miamiherald.com/.../immigra.../article231151693.html.@MiamiHerald)
  - 5/6/2019

**Donald Trump**
- There is a crisis at our Southern Border. Democrats are doing NOTHING to help fix it!
  - 12/4/2019
- My proposed 2020 budget reflects my commitment to defend the great people of our country!
  - 12/3/2019
- We have an undeniable crisis at the Southern Border that Mexico needs to help solve. Democrats need to recognize this is REAL!
  - 7/6/2019

**Theresa May**
- I'm still working on ensuring that Parliament can agree a deal so that we can leave in an orderly way.
  - 21/3/2019
- (Video; no text)
  - 3/4/2019
- A very disappointing night for Conservatives. Some excellent MEPs have lost their seats, some excellent candidates missed out. But Labour have also suffered big losses. It shows the importance of finding a Brexit deal, and I sincerely hope these results focus minds in Parliament.
  - 27/5/2019

**Jeremy Corbyn**
- The government started the negotiations with the EU more than two and a half years ago…
  - 3/4/2019
- Today we've been in Brussels meeting EU negotiators and prime ministers from across Europe setting out our alternative plan.
  - 21/3/2019
- On my visit to Ireland it's clear we cannot have a No Deal Brexit.
  - 30/5/2019