Chapter Three Rethinking anti-prescriptivism

3.1 An issue on which linguists might have doubts

In contradiction to Hudson's 'Issues on which linguists can agree' (2.1.2, above) and the dogmatic pronouncements of some of the introductory texts, I will suggest that the anti-prescriptive doctrine and related strictures on making value judgements about language are in fact issues on which linguists might have a number of *doubts*. As Roy Harris observes, 'sceptical reflection upon an orthodoxy must always be of value' (1997:234). We might come to see this particular orthodoxy as a stumbling block rather than as a solid foundation for linguistic inquiry and the self-evident starting point for any course in linguistics. At the very least, we might doubt whether the issue of value has been investigated with the thoroughness it deserves. As the most visible manifestation of a whole complex of ideas about the value of language and evaluation in linguistic theory, anti-prescriptivism merits particularly careful re-examination.

First and foremost, we might doubt whether it is true to say that 'we do not prescribe'. Taking a simple definition – '**Prescriptivism is, at root, an attempt to stop people from what they are doing and to get them to start doing something else**' (Borsley and Newmeyer 1997:58; emphasis added) – we can say that linguists do prescribe, in many ways. If linguists did not want to affect the way people use language there would be no such thing as Applied Linguistics. In educational applications they offer advice and recommendation of all kinds. They give counselling and write self-help books (Tannen 1995; Haden-Elgin 2000). They get involved in language planning, call attention to traditionally stigmatized language varieties, and attempt to save endangered languages. They do not stop at advice, but also enforce the academic community's standards and preferences, by teaching academic writing, and by editing and peer-reviewing journal articles. They monitor their own language. They use discourse analysis to help with language problems (Ventola 2000), and stylistics to evaluate texts (Birch and O'Toole 1988). Some linguists become crusaders for non-discriminatory forms of language. Besides these 'official' activities, it is not unknown for linguists to get involved in the issues that bother the ordinary language user – 'Suffocating speech is the kind of language abuse that the public is most aware of, thanks to the complaints of editors, officials, and others who must try to make sense of it. *Jargon*, *gobbledegook*, and *doublespeak* are names for the same thing. Every week some

new monstrosity is registered along with its "translation" to simple English' (Bolinger 1980:385) – thus looking very like the prescriptivists themselves.

Borsley and Newmeyer's definition oversimplifies the issue. An act of *prescribing* in linguistics can be understood as both (i) a proposition and (ii) a proposal,[1] and their definition takes into account only the latter way of understanding it. The anti-prescriptive doctrine says that

> (i) linguists do not prescribe *what language should be like*, i.e. their descriptions are not influenced by their own evaluations, and
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> (ii) linguists do not prescribe *what people should do*, i.e. they do not tell them what sort of language they should use.

In the first case we might doubt whether this is *a viable proposition*. Is it theoretically sound to say that we do not prescribe, in the sense of shaping language according to our preferences? In the second case we might doubt whether this is *an advisable proposal*. Is it a good idea not to offer advice on use of language? The following 'anti-credo' expands on these doubts. (Many have been expressed in one form or another in the critical literature referred to in 2.2 and some were raised in the Internet discussion mentioned in 2.2.4.)

3.1.1 Is this a viable proposition?

3.1.1.1 Could value judgements be a natural part of language?

Cameron observes that 'value judgements on language form part of every competent speaker's linguistic repertoire'. She points out that 'one of the things that people know how to do with words is to evaluate them' and she can see 'no principled justification for neglecting or deriding this metalinguistic ability'; rather, 'there is something paradoxical ... about labelling ideas irrelevant and meaningless, when the people who hold the ideas patently regard them as relevant and meaningful' (1995:xi). A similar sentiment is expressed by Bolton and Hutton: 'bad language really does offend some people' (1998:181). It does not make sense to dismiss prescriptivism as

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[1] Halliday uses the term *proposition* in its usual sense of 'statements and questions' and introduces the parallel term *proposal* to mean 'offers, commands, requests and suggestions' (1994a:71;89).

the aberration of a few isolated reactionaries. It is an integral part of the language beliefs and attitudes and behaviour of the world at large: 'The pressure to abolish differences in behavior – above all in linguistic behavior – is unrelenting' (Bolinger 1968: 276). Just because a behaviour is natural does not of course imply we must condone it, but the persistence and ubiquity of the evaluating behaviour might make us wonder whether it serves some purpose vital to the language system. Matthiessen and Nesbitt's example used to illustrate 'a folk or commonsense theory of language' – 'Jessica, don't whinge' – makes it plain that metalinguistic evaluation is a normal function of language, learned early in life (1996:52).

3.1.1.2 Can we keep IS and OUGHT apart?

Can we deny responsibility for influencing people's language behaviour on the grounds that it was not our *intention* to do so? Stubbs has coined a term for the problem:

> Closely related to the observer's paradox (you cannot observe people when they are not being observed) is **the describer's paradox**: you cannot describe people and their behaviour without the description changing the behaviour. Descriptions are likely to become untrue as soon as they are published, because descriptions of social reality become persuasive as soon as people become aware of them. For example, the attention that linguists have given to non-standard dialects of English, community languages in Britain, and British and American Sign Language has changed the status of these languages. Sometimes this has been the overt aim: to attack the notion that such language varieties are in any way primitive. But they mean that description becomes prescription due to dissemination. (1996: 66)

If linguists do linguistics only for linguists, then there will of course be little risk of 'unintentional prescription'. Few would take a colleague's grammaticality judgements as a model for how they should speak or write, particularly when the sentences are not of the kind used much in either spoken or written English. But when linguistics deals with natural language and is intended to say something to the layperson, our descriptions are bound to be taken as injunctions. Even if we talk in terms of marked/unmarked rather than grammatical/ ungrammatical, our descriptions can still be taken for prescriptions. For example, if we observe that the imperative is a marked Mood choice in academic writing, this will surely be taken not as a neutral observation but as a recommendation to steer clear of it so as to get the tenor right. Our inability to keep IS and OUGHT apart is of course reflected in language, for example, in the

modal verbs such as *must* and *should* and *ought to*, which have the habit of sliding from one to the other interpretation.

3.1.1.3 Is generative grammar a prescriptive grammar?

Borsley and Newmeyer's definition quoted above was a response to Roy Harris's claim that generative linguistics is prescriptive. Several critics have remarked on the similarities between Chomsky's generative grammar and traditional prescriptive grammar:

> If the language happens not to fit the well-defined systems of rules it is declared ungrammatical: rules take precedence over language and grammar returns to prescriptivism. (Robinson 1975:21)

> The normative grammarian is no sooner evicted from paradise than his intellectual stock-in-trade is confiscated by his evictors. The very rules he was condemned for peddling turn up on the linguist's stall, sometimes – but not always – with new labels on them. (Roy Harris 1987:128-9)[2]

> Curiously, we find two utterly disparate outlooks at this same extreme: the *generativists* who regard real language as 'deviant' and replace it with ideal language; and the *prescriptivists* who regard real language as 'non-standard' and replace it with purified language. Both groups feel entitled to understand the nature of 'language' far better than ordinary speakers do, but for entirely disparate reasons: the generativists because they have access to the 'perfect knowledge' of the 'ideal speaker-hearer'; and the prescriptivists because they know just what is 'correct' or 'incorrect', 'good English' or 'bad English'. (de Beaugrande 2002)

Ironically, Fromkin and Rodman's comment on prescriptive grammarians – 'Their goal is not to describe the rules people know, but to tell them what rules they should know' (1993:15) – illustrates in its use of the ambiguous modal *should* the way prescriptive and descriptive must inevitably run together. Language does not construe the case this way for nothing: Chomsky's grammar inevitably reaches a point where his 'objective description' becomes indistinguishable from an injunction (in the *'criticizing/criticism'* example referred to in 5.3.2, below). It might even be seen as *more* prescriptive that the traditionalist's. When correct grammar was socially

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[2] Borsley and Newmeyer (1997:57), incidentally, appear to have misread Harris here as meaning specific rules, such as 'Say *It is I*', whereas at this point in his argument he is plainly referring to *rules per se* (Roy Harris 1987:128-37).

ordained, we had the choice to reject it, but if grammar is innate, then we are obliged to be correct: we have to accept what the Chomskyan linguist tells us are the rules we should know. How can we argue? Chomsky's are 'rules we have no option but to obey ... if there are rules operating beyond the level of consciousness then we have no choice about whether to follow them or not' (Roy Harris1997:265-6).

3.1.1.4 What are the effects of sidelining the social function of language?

We must worry about a theory that separates language from its social functions – which of course include evaluation of language – because it is unlikely to be saying anything that the ordinary language user would recognize as real.[3] If our description has nothing to do with social uses it is unlikely that it will reflect real language, and then we will be neither describing nor prescribing: we will not be talking about natural language at all. The ordinary language user knows intuitively that the propositional meanings cannot be separated from the social ones: what language must be is what the language user must do. (This idea is developed in 3.3.1, below.) The only place the separation can happen is in the linguist's study. An asocial theory has no real application and 'not prescribing' is not a very useful achievement.

3.1.1.5 Can we really describe language objectively?

The most persistent doubt must be whether it is in fact possible to describe language objectively, given that language is not an object in the way that the objects of the natural sciences are objects. What we think language *is* must be subject to our point of view and to the limitations of language, as a philosopher has observed:

> Linguistics is nothing but a rigorous and conceptual way of clarifying, in terms of all the other facts of language, the speech which declares itself in us and to which, even in the midst of our scientific work, we are still attached as if by an umbilical cord.
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> Some would like to break this tie and get away from the confused and annoying situation of a being who is what he is talking about. They would like to consider language and society as if they had never been caught up in it, to adopt a bird's-

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3 Roy Harris remarks on 'the bizarre lack of fit between linguistic theory and linguistic practice that had marked [his] own introduction to the study of language' (1997:240).

> eye view or a divine understanding. In other words, they would like to be without a point of view. (Merleau-Ponty 1973[1969]: 15)

Merely by using language to talk about language we cannot help using the evaluative resources that are inherent in language. (This idea is developed in Chapter Eight.) We cannot claim that our descriptions are uncoloured by our personal prejudices and point of view.

3.1.1.6 Are we confused about what it means to be objective?

Linguists plainly do make value judgements, because to say that all languages are equal is per se a value judgement – to judge *equal* is as much a value judgement as to judge *unequal*. It cannot escape our notice that anti-prescriptivism leads straight back the way it came: to proscribe prescription is to be prescriptive. It is as much a value judgement, for example, to say that prestige pronoun forms are wrong (as Emonds claims, 1986), as to say they are right. As Cameron puts it, anti-prescriptivism 'mirrors the same value-laden attitudes it seems to be criticizing' (1995:3). It may be that the only way not to make a value judgement about language would be to say nothing at all. Even to simply list features is to give those features more value than the ones we did not call attention to. For example, a large part of the reason for the fuss about *hopefully* used as a sentence modifier rather than in its strictly adjectival sense was just that people noticed it, while other similar sentence modifiers, such as *thankfully*, attracted practically no attention and therefore were subject to no particular evaluation. If just *listing* features of language enhances their value (positive or negative) and reflects our values, through what we choose to single out, then how much more so must these be the effects of *theorizing* about those features. Given that linguists do not just list features, in the manner of the 'curiosities' literature, value and evaluation must be very much part of what we do.

3.1.1.7 Are we just over-reacting to an earlier paradigm?

All academic disciplines surely subscribe to a basic philosophy that says they are not in the business of 'bossing people around'. That is the province of religious bodies and political organizations, so it is odd to proclaim this as the fundamental tenet of linguistics. It is perhaps motivated to some extent by irritation at the obtuseness of the public, as Love suggests:

> There are people out there who simply won't let you be non-political about this sort of thing [correctness in language]. Hence – or at least partly hence, anyway – the development of a countervailing political attitude on the part of some linguists, whereby the 'wrongness' of prescriptivism is treated, and aggressively propagated, as though it were somehow a finding of linguistics. (Linguist List 9 June 1994, 5.675)

It may be that in rejecting prescriptive approaches to language we are not so much correcting the mistakes of the past as harping on them in order to prove the rightness of the new. To this end we exaggerate the faults of our predecessors, targeting the most authoritarian of the prescriptivists and selecting as prototypical prescriptive rules such trivia as the injunction not to split infinitives.[4] We might wonder whether the anti-prescriptivist simply does not grasp the tenor of some of the prescriptive literature: in many cases, the approach is ironic and self-deprecating, written for a sophisticated reader who is 'serious but not solemn' about language, (exemplifying the balanced approach to language that Halliday advocates,1976:580). This is not to say that prescriptive authors do not mean what they say about language, but the best of them do have a sense of proportion: 'Nothing is stranger than the way certain so-called solecisms of speech and writing are subject to a popular condemnation. We hear them or (worse still) see them in writing, and then thank God we are not as other men are' (Vallins 1968:71).

The ironic stance of Fowler and his ilk is in striking contrast to the earnest indignation of some recent introductory texts (e.g. Fromkin and Rodman 1993; Trask 1995; Napoli 1996). In these, prescriptivists are seen as necessarily reactionary, but many are reasonable and accept language change as a necessary and vital process; as Vallins remarks: 'The popularity of word-baiting and word-banning is indeed remarkable, seeing how vain and foolish it is to fight against the moving, vital element in the living language' (1968:197). The anti-prescriptivist, on the other hand, is often intransigent, insisting that language *must* change, and neglecting the importance of stability. The prescriptivist is pictured as a solemn pedant grimly banning things. This is to overlook the personal pleasure in using language well which motivates many writers of usage handbooks. As Firth observed

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In fact, the usage handbooks I looked at are generally sensible about this one, suggesting that we deal with the to-split-or-not-to-split question by exercising sensitivity to meaning and euphony – using 'commonsense and a good ear', as even one of the least sensible of them puts it (Bruton-Simmonds 1990:121).

> The genesis of correctness in several forms of speech is possibly part of the social process and part of the personal process. It is true that in everyday life we generally say what the other fellow expects us, one way or the other, to say, but this expectancy is the measure of even our most delightful surprises, and good personal style is highly valued. (1957:186)

Singh, however, is one who is aware of this function of language and deplores the absence of attention to it in current writings in sociolinguistics: 'Language, like labour, is as much a social and, therefore, a joyful activity as it is a truth committed and socially responsible expression of self' (1996b:2). It is possible to see the desire for correctness and excellence in language as positive, not negative. We might want to ask whether linguistics could perhaps accommodate a more balanced approach to prescription, treating it not only (or even necessarily or primarily) as an authoritarian gambit, but also as evidence of a concern for the *value* of language.

3.1.1.8 Are we over-simplifying the issues?

Most of all, because issues of language and value are complex, we must wonder whether it is sensible to base the discipline on a simplistic dogmatism. Perhaps it is not overt prescribing that we should worry about so much as insidious persuasion. Linguistics looks like protesting too much: we are all in the business of trying to get people to see things our way and, rather than deny this, might it not be better to examine openly the means we use to do this? But of course the negative assertion 'we do not prescribe' is not the whole story. It is always followed in the literature by what we *do* claim to do: we describe, in the manner of objective scientists. This is something of a non sequitur: refraining from telling people what to do does not guarantee objectivity. It is the claim to objectivity that is open to doubt and in need of challenging.

3.1.2 Is this an advisable proposal?

3.1.2.1 Is the anti-prescriptive doctrine good for the linguist?

Given that linguists are inevitably involved in the prescriptive activities listed in 3.1 above, we might wonder whether it can be good for us to live with such a split between theory and practice. Will we not find ourselves with a lot of explaining to do, about why we cannot apply our tenets, or why we use the preferred forms ourselves, if all varieties are equally good? Are we perhaps

giving students a confused idea of the linguist's role if we tell them that it is not a linguist's business to prescribe, and that anyone doing this must be teaching an ignorant version of what language is like, and yet promote the linguistics department by telling them how many opportunities there are out there for a linguist, particularly in educational applications?

3.1.2.2 Is the imitation of the natural sciences a good thing?

The wellspring of anti-prescriptivism is the imitation of the natural sciences. This might strike us as dangerous. Perhaps a socio-semiotic science might make more friends and influence more people by being true to its own nature than by imitating other sciences. As an example of the kind of difficulties uncertainty about the nature of the enterprise gets us into, Love notes that Aitchison (in the 1996 BBC Reith Lectures) 'never manages to resolve or smooth over the *prima facie* lack of congruence between the role of purveyor of scientific information and that of cultural commentator' and analyses this as 'a dim echo of the struggle to establish Linguistics as a legitimate and respectable science' (1998:208-9). (Chapter Five looks at the problems of imitating the natural sciences.)

3.1.2.3 Is Political Correctness a sound basis for an academic discipline?

Anti-prescriptive has become a badge of membership in linguistics, used to label everything that we are not. It is difficult to argue against, because to do so is to be seen as taking sides with the 'bad guys'. Such terms are always due for re-investigation, because they close down the thinking process. We find ourselves, for example, obliged to accept the claim that all languages and language varieties are equally able to express anything their speakers need to say. What this means in effect is that they *have the potential to develop* the resources to express anything their speakers need to say (Sledd 1973:259; Hasan 1996:146); a true but vacuous statement. But currently even broaching the topic of variation along social lines lays the researcher open to suspicion. As Hasan points out, 'By a tacit agreement in the establishment of linguistics, it turns out that to get into this field [studies of variation in ways of meaning, especially if such a study is class-based] is to invite either silence from one's peers or a resounding denunciation', and this 'distorts academic communication' and prevents us from getting to grips with pressing social issues (1992:302). Linguistics students who have absorbed the anti-prescriptive doctrine and its

implications are well-primed against investigating linguistic variation in any socially relevant sense.

3.1.2.4 Does the anti-prescriptive doctrine contribute to educational needs?

Anti-prescriptivists are inclined to view all prescriptive approaches to language as authoritarian. Emonds plainly believes rules about correct pronoun case – which he claims to be 'unlearnable' – are a conspiracy to keep the undesirable elements out by deliberately setting them an impossible task. Certainly we all must admit to some pleasure in knowing something others do not, but we may surely hope that in most cases this translates into a desire to teach it to those others so that they can share in the knowledge. And unless it is accepted that some forms *are* valued above others and that the linguist will not change this, linguistics is not going to have much to offer for educational purposes. The motivation for anti-prescriptivism, besides the desire to be scientifically objective, is to empower people. (This is made explicit by, for example, Labov, 1969 and Emonds, 1986, and by introductory texts such as Napoli, 1996). In this second intention it may fail, because, while it affirms the value of people's own language forms, it denies them the advice that would help them take control of those forms that the powerful value. A principle that in theory works for the liberation of the individual from the shackles of authoritarianism and discrimination has produced a linguistics that has little to offer to anyone seeking to understand language as a means of promoting this liberation. As de Beaugrande has observed, 'As human rights and civil rights are steadily expanded in theory, elaborate counter-trends evolve in practice to maintain a rigid social order' (1997:99). We might ask ourselves whether we are being duped into promoting such counter-trends. The anti-prescriptivist argues that education in the valued forms serves to keep people in their place, but might it not also be the case that teaching the valued forms offers them the chance of social mobility?

3.1.2.5 Is prescribing necessarily offensive?

We might wonder whether the linguist's interpretation of *prescribe* inclines too strongly towards the pejorative. In general usage the word does not necessarily imply coercion or bullying. If a doctor prescribes, this is in effect a recommendation, not an order, and people may be justifiably annoyed with a language expert who fails to offer advice when asked for it. There is a strong suggestion in the anti-prescriptive literature that what is prescribed is always the 'marginalia of

language' (to use Halliday's term,1978:207), but linguists who teach the principles of rhetoric (for example, in academic writing) might also be said to be prescribing, and the resources for effective organisation and management of tenor are surely core rather than marginal elements. Part of the confusion about the acceptability of prescribing stems from the common fault of failing to distinguish between spoken and written language – it is all referred to as *language*. Legitimate concern about interference with people's informal spoken language, particularly accents, is then generalized to disapproval of *any* interference with language, be it spoken or written. Anti-prescriptivism makes much of the offensiveness of telling people how to *speak*, but overlooks the fact that *writing* (and formal speech) must be taught.

3.1.2.6 Is it a good idea to widen the gap between linguist and 'consumer'?

As Singh puts it, the social scientist 'may have forgotten the values that ordinary speakers charitably assume he shares with them' (1996b:7). One of the primary reasons for doubting the wisdom of anti-prescriptivism is that it widens the gap between the linguist and the potential 'consumer' of linguistics. Suggesting we are the only ones who can get at the objective facts may not be a good idea, and it sounds arrogant to say: 'The chief problem is ignorance of language on the part of all concerned. Our job as linguists is to remedy this ignorance' (Labov1969:39). Are we not just saying, like the traditional prescriptivist, 'I insist you see language my way'? When it comes to talking about language there are facts of all kinds, and other people's facts may be just as subtle and well-researched. There is much that we can share, and emphasizing difference not only alienates those who might be interested in the insights we have to offer but also cuts us off from theirs. Given the sheer size of language, we must all proceed on a limited quantity of evidence. Anti-prescriptivists complain of the prescriptivists' tendency to get exercised about small matters, but it could be said that some of the matters linguists find exciting are rather minor bits of language as well.

3.1.2.7 Are we perhaps over-estimating the influence of linguistics?

There must be a major doubt about the naivety of expecting linguistics to make a fundamental change in the way people think about language. As Love observes, 'Aitchison's pious hope that anxieties about change, slipping standards, etc., would be swept away in the light of the information she had to offer was disappointed – instead she was castigated as an agent of

linguistic perdition' (1998:209). While the anti-prescriptive approach has made some important gains – for example, in combatting discrimination on the grounds of accent (Lippi-Green 1997) – we cannot hope to dismiss *all* language prejudice. People will always value some forms of language more than others, and as it is their evaluations that change and maintain the system (an idea which is discussed further in 5.4, below), there is something odd about telling them to stop evaluating and allow the system to function 'by itself'. There does not seem to *be* any 'itself', when we give careful thought to the matter. This is not to suggest that conscientious academics should not speak out against social abuses related to language. However, Emonds's advice that 'mechanisms of class divisions, cultural or otherwise, should be attacked and eliminated if possible' (1986:123-4) is surely too idealistic: linguists will have achieved much if they can just succeed in bringing to people's notice the linguistic mechanisms that maintain these divisions.

3.1.2.8 Is it time to move on?

Certainly there have been abuses to react against. A classic case of such reaction is Labov's (1969) attack on educational psychologists such as Bereiter who believed that genetic inferiority was the reason for Negro children's poor achievement in school. One of the participants in the discussion that followed Labov's paper and is reproduced in the original journal (David D. de Camp), cites Bereiter's claim that it was not worth teaching arithmetic to black children in the rural South because it was plain from the way they said 'three boy' rather than 'three boys' that they could not count even to two, and goes on to say that Bereiter 'is the kind of guy you have got to stomp on' (Alatis1969:41). However, Labov may have drawn too much attention to the 'bad guys': a second participant (Raven I. McDavid) observes that Bereiter's views have 'no particular standing' (Alatis 1969:39). In his 1969 paper, Labov has apparently taken the offensive opinions of a few ignorant people as an excuse for 'proving' that there is no functional difference between standard and non-standard language. Ironically, this is likely to be taken as further excuse for not teaching standard English explicitly, despite his assertion that this was not his intention (1969:41-2); an omission which would disadvantage these children as surely as Bereiter's approach. While it is undeniable that attitudes such as Bereiter's need dealing with by fair-minded people, the fact that we might share Labov's indignation does not prove that his linguistic theory is coherent or valid, or the best way to deal with the problem. It might occur to us that it is time to move on beyond the heavy-handed political consciousness-raising of the 60s and 70s towards a more scholarly approach to matters of language and value.

3.1.3 Summing up

I anticipate the objection that the anti-prescriptive position represents merely an ideal to work towards, not a *fait accompli*. But a weaker version of the doctrine is not to my mind an improvement, because that would still suggest it is a reasonable position and an achievable goal. And besides, it is not thus that it is presented, but as the indisputable starting point for a course in linguistics: 'of course part of what I do [in an introductory linguistics course for teachers] is distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive grammars' (*Linguist List* 22 June 1994, 5.735). Hudson claims that 'any writer of an introductory text book hopes that he is expounding a widely held set of views' (1981:333). That may be a reasonable hope in an established science, but in the contentious new science of linguistics it is too early to assume any such thing. There is much need for reconsideration of the anti-prescriptive article of faith. The following two sections explore the way we might reconsider it, using two new techniques in linguistics: the large-scale corpus search and insights from Appraisal theory.

3.2 Aberrant use of the word *prescriptive*

General discussions about the anti-prescriptive approach in linguistics have done little more than raise doubts. They have not led, to the best of my knowledge, to any constructive rethinking of the place of evaluation in linguistic theory. The oddity of claiming not to prescribe what language users *should do*, when it is clear for all to see that linguists do prescribe in this way, and of claiming not to prescribe what language *must be like*, when minimal investigation will reveal the extent to which our 'descriptions' depend on the angle we take, is set aside as just one of the many inconsistencies we live with, however much practical inconvenience it may cause.[5] However, it is a position we have talked ourselves into through language, and because language is something that we have developed techniques to investigate it is a position we should be able

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[5] For example, a linguist writing about South African varieties of English remarks that '[she thinks] that all teachers of language to some degree experience the schizophrenia of providing their students with the one, correct form while they recognize the arbitrary nature of "acceptable" language use, where "rules" change and not even learned professors can reach agreement' (Van der Walt 1998:49). It is easier for a theoretical linguist to live with the inconsistencies of the anti-prescriptive doctrine than it is for the teacher.

to rethink. In the following I use data from a large-scale computer-readable corpus to examine how the linguist's use of the word *prescribe* compares with general usage.

Hasan has pointed out, quoting Wittgenstein, that 'An unsuitable type of expression is a sure means of remaining in a state of confusion. It as it were bars the way out' (1999:82n.).[6] My corpus search results suggest that the term *prescriptive* and its derivatives, and (what linguistics regards as) its antonym, *descriptive*, have acquired a significance in the discipline of linguistics that is out of step with general usage. It may therefore be worth considering the possibility that these terms cause more confusion than they clear up, and thus hamper rather than facilitate progress in linguistics. I am not the first to observe that they have become a problem: Cameron, for example, explains that she has opted for the term *verbal hygiene* because to use *prescriptivism* 'would just recycle the opposition [she is] trying to deconstruct' (1995:8), and Garner, in calling for a halt to the endless *prescriptive/descriptive* debate, refers to the term *prescriptive* as 'this inflammatory label' (2001:5).

To compare the usage of the term *prescriptive* and its derivatives and antonyms in the literature of linguistics with their general usage, I used the British National Corpus (BNC) simple search facility, which provides a quick overview of the frequency, typical contexts, and usage of a particular word or phrase, sufficient to highlight points that might warrant further investigation. It gives the number of instances of the item in the corpus, downloads a random sample of up to fifty of these, in the form of *s-units*, and supplies access to the bibliographical source of each.[7]

In TABLE 3.2, List A shows the frequencies of occurrence of these terms in the BNC, and List B shows for comparison their frequency in seventy s-units selected from the linguistics literature

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6 She was referring here to the term *arbitrary*, which she says 'has more often led us into intellectual culdesacs than not' (1999:82n.).

7 The BNC consists of a 100 million words from a range of sources, collected between 1991 and 1994, and representing a cross-section of British English, both written and spoken. (Ten percent is transcribed from spoken sources.) An *s-unit* is the sentence in which each instance of the particular word or phrase occurs, or the heading, title or headline, or, in the case of transcribed spoken examples, the clause complex roughly equivalent to a sentence. S-units do not make grammatical and collocational patterns easily visible, as concordances would, but they do help identify contexts. (http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk.lookup.html Accessed 21 May 2001.)

on which Chapter Two is based. Not having access to an electronically searchable corpus of linguistics texts, I could not carry out a statistically valid comparative search. Figures are therefore offered only as suggestive of trends. List B merely offers some support for what intuition would suggest: that the term *prescriptive* and related terms are more frequent in 'linguist-speak' than in general usage. (Where I have used the expression 'general usage' I mean 'usage as represented by the BNC'. Even a 100 million word corpus falls far short of representing the English language as a whole.)

TABLE 3.2 Frequency of occurrence of *prescriptive* etc. in the BNC, compared with some samples from linguistics texts

List A. BNC (100 million words)	
prescriptive	168
prescriptively	3
anti-prescriptive	0
prescriptivism	4
prescriptivist	2
descriptive	693
descriptivism	1
descriptivist	0
prescription	670
prescribe	282
prescribed	1222

List B. Linguistics texts (about 1500 words)	
prescriptive	21
prescriptively	1
anti-prescriptive	2
prescriptivism	26
prescriptivist	11
descriptive	8
descriptivism	3
descriptivist	1
describe/s/d; describing; description	8
prescription	6
prescribe/s; prescribing	5
prescribed	0

List A shows that the word *prescriptive* is fairly common in general usage, though less so than *prescribe*, *prescribed* and *prescription*. *Prescriptivism* and *prescriptivist* barely put in an appearance, and there are no examples of *anti-prescriptive*. The antonym *descriptivism* is represented by one example and *descriptivist* does not feature at all. List B shows that some of these terms have a much higher frequency in linguistics. They would of course be more thinly spread in a larger linguistics corpus, but the point is that we do not need a 100 million words of linguistics texts to discover that the word *prescriptivism* is much more common in this genre than

in general usage. Taking only about 1500 words we can already show that it is at least four times as common. In fact, in general usage it is even scarcer than List A would suggest, given that two of the four instances of *prescriptivism* in the BNC are from linguistics contexts: Cameron (1992) and Cox (1991, a discussion of the relevance of descriptive linguistics to education). (The other two are from a work on ethics.) Similarly, the only two examples of *prescriptivist* in the BNC are from Cameron (1992), and the sole instance of *descriptivism* is from Cox (1991). It seems that the need for these words has not arisen in general British English. One sign that a word supplies a general need is that it will be readily transferred to other contexts, as is apparent in example CDJ 257, quoted below. *Prescriptivism*, however, seems to be unneeded outside linguistics (other than in ethics, in 'the prescriptivism of R.M. Hare'; CS2 213, 688). *Prescriptivism* is a rare word – it makes up 0.000004% of the BNC total – which would explain why, at least in my own experience, it meets with incomprehension from people outside linguistics.

The BNC samples do, however, provide evidence of the need in a variety of contexts for other terms to do with prescribing. The instances of *prescribe*, *prescribed* and *prescription* number 2174 altogether. Of the 150 s-units supplied as random samples of these, 83 (more than half) are from medical contexts. Of the rest, those whose contexts are clearly identifiable include 42 from socio-political, socio-economic, commercial, legal, scientific and industrial contexts, and 15 from religion, art and literature, education, and psychology.[8] There is one from linguistics (Cox 1991). The term *prescriptive* is not as frequent in general usage as any of these three terms, perhaps because prescribing is more often construed as an action or result of an action than as an abstract quality. Of the 50 s-units randomly supplied from the 168 instances of *prescriptive*, 8 are from education,16 from various socio-political contexts, and the rest that are identifiable are divided between law, history, ethics, literature, psychology, and accounting. There are also 6 from linguistics: Cameron 1992, J. Milroy 1992, Cox 1991 (two) and L. Milroy 1987 (two).

Differing frequencies are to be expected when comparing specialist usage with the wide range of contexts that make up general usage. Linguistics has, as specializations do, adapted and extended the semantic field of *prescribing* for its own purposes. However, there are observations

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[8] More accurate figures can be obtained by checking the bibliographical sources, but most of the contexts are deducible from the s-units themselves.

to be made about the *ways* in which it has adapted it. In the following I describe some features of the semantics, grammar, and collocations of *prescriptive* and related terms, comparing the linguistics samples with those from the BNC.

3.2.1 Attitudinal meanings

Linguistics has narrowed down the attitudinal range of *prescribe* and its derivatives to an exclusively pejorative usage. To *prescribe* is the polar opposite of the right way to do linguistics: 'First, and most important, linguistics is **descriptive**, not prescriptive (Aitchison 1987:12). It is by definition bad: 'it is hard to see how anyone could defend the *prescriptive* approach' (Radford 1988). This negative usage is so entrenched as to make it extremely difficult for a linguist to use these words positively, or even neutrally. General usage, however, permits a range of attitudinal usage, from positive to negative. In the medical contexts, *prescribing* and *prescription* are generally positive; where there is negative colouring it is in reference to restrictions on prescribing, the expense of prescriptions, ineffective prescriptions, and so on. The positive connotations of medical prescribing are plainly understood by a hairdresser who borrows the term:

> CDJ 257 Styling products such as mousses and gels are often available from the salon and your hairdresser can 'prescribe' the correct variants for your hair type.

In general contexts, prescribing can even be so positive as to be viewed as a duty:

> FT5 1691 To prescribe nothing could be unethical, uncaring, and perilous in terms of the investigation of the case and the pursuit of truth.

In many examples prescribing is neutral; it is just something authorities are expected to do:

> GVN 1412 There are also a number of texts that are prescriptive in giving guidelines to improving leadership performance.

And prescribing is of course negative in a number of the samples, such as:

> EBU 20 The state of emergency in which our planet finds itself consists not only in the contamination of nature but of the very roots of our thought, which are still shaped by thousands of years of prejudice and prescriptive categories.

Against the wide variety of attitudes to prescribing illustrated by the BNC samples, the exclusively negative use in linguistics is marked. Besides being more varied, general usage is more subtle, incorporating some distinctions that have been excluded from linguistics. For example, it is recognized that it is not necessarily prescribing itself that is bad but the degree:

> AKX 83 Marlborough's art work has been accused by some critics of being too prescribed, a charge Robin Child refutes, insisting that 'there has to be a starting point, a language learnt'.

There are many degrees and kinds of prescribing in these samples: *rather prescriptive*; *too prescriptive*; *more prescriptive*; *the most prescriptive*; *increasingly prescriptive*; *highly prescriptive*; *unnecessarily prescriptive*; *explicitly prescriptive*.

3.2.2 Evaluative patterns of grammar

Attitudinal meaning is not produced by lexis alone; it is also produced by the grammar. Here the two sets of data exhibit some significant differences. The most common transitivity pattern in the BNC s-units for *prescribe* and *prescribed* is Actor-Material-Goal.[9] Where doctors prescribe pills and treatments, in the non-medical contexts the Goals other authorities prescribe are the *manner*; *model*; *method*; *price*; *etiquette*; *limits*; *standards*; *conditions*; *formalities*; *activities*; *appropriate style*; *aims and preferences*; *freedom to act*; *period of time*; *maximum payment*; *capital expenditure*; *terms of membership*; *standards of conduct*; *information combining operations*; *categories of development*; *content of customer agreements*; *that power should be exercised*; *what the political order must be*; *whether a boundary needs to be set*; and so on. In general usage, the Process *prescribing* itself is neutral; it becomes good or bad according to the desirability of the Goal, the thing prescribed:

> H8Y 9 Or, to put the matter more honestly, thought Dorothea Gilberd, tearing her glance from Tom Tedder, why don't they prescribe books that Burleigh School has already got copies of?

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9 These terms are from Halliday 1994a:109ff. Initial capitals denote functions, as opposed to categories.

J16 677 In making provision for open space and in considering the location of houses on plots and their relationship to each other local planning authorities should not attempt to prescribe rigid formulae.

TABLE 3.2.2 Negative evaluation of the Goal colours the Process

they	*prescribe*	← positive (desirable) ←	*books that Burleigh School has already got copies of*
local planning authorities	*should not attempt to prescribe*	← negative (undesirable) ←	*rigid formulae*
Actor	Process (material)	Goal	

The positive or negative evaluation of the Goal is projected onto the Process. When *prescribe* is used intransitively, the Process itself becomes responsible for the negative or positive evaluation. Intransitive usage of *prescribe* occurs in both the BNC and the linguistics sets of data. In medical contexts, it is a positively evaluated process:

ABU 1195 In theory it may sound radical to interfere with a doctor's right to prescribe, although it was not the drug that was being withdrawn, only the branded version.

HHX 17624 The training of nurses to prescribe will be vital if the service is to be as widely available as we want it to be and if it is genuinely to benefit patients.

The default assumption is that the medicine or treatment prescribed is good for you. In linguistics, the intransitive use of *prescribe* has been co-opted for the opposite evaluation: the default assumption is that the grammar prescribed is bad for you, and, far from *prescribing* being the language expert's right, it is his or her duty *not* to do it: 'the important thing is that [a syntax] **describes, not prescribes**' (Napoli 1996:293). In similar fashion, in general usage the evaluation of the Actor projects a positive or negative colouring onto the Process *prescribe*. A doctor or nurse is evaluated as a person invested with the authority to prescribe, reinforcing the positive interpretation of the Process, but it is interpreted as negative if the Actor is not considered as having the authority to prescribe:

G3A 1719 There is no easy answer, for the Spirit blows where he wills, and man can neither prescribe to him nor control him.

What seems to be happening grammatically is that linguistics construes in the opposite direction from general usage. The general procedure is to project the positive or negative polarity of the Goal or the Actor onto the Process *prescribe*. Linguistics, however, does it the other way round: the polarity of the Process *prescribe* (inherently negative) is projected onto the Actor (the grammarian) and the Goal (the grammar).

The resources the grammar offers for decreasing the responsibility of the agent and thus deflecting negative evaluation have been much remarked on by discourse analysts. Common ones are the adjectival past participle, the passive with a non-specific agent, and the agentless passive, and all these categories of *prescribed* appear in the 50 BNC samples of this form. (43 of the 50 samples are passive or adjectival.) A survey of the 21 samples from the medical contexts in this batch suggests that in cases where the medicine or treatment has had bad effects doctors tend to use the agentless passive (EDC 999 *In those instances where Valium had been prescribed, several interviewees had become addicted*), whereas patients are more likely to use the active simple past tense (C8B 675 *My GP prescribed an oral antibiotic which I took for five months, but it didn't do anything*).

It is perhaps less often noted that the grammar also has resources for *increasing* the responsibility of the agent. Because it has a need to stigmatize the prescriber, linguistics has developed a preference for *prescriptive*, the adjective derived from the noun (*prescription* → *prescriptive*), as reflected in TABLE 3.2 List B above. The adjective derived from the verb (*prescribe* → *prescribed*) can modify only the thing prescribed – *the prescribed element*; *prescribed etiquette*; *the prescribed waiting period* – and is thus not much use to linguistics, because linguistics does not allow anything to be prescribed. *Prescriptive*, on the other hand, modifies the prescriber : *we are prescriptive*; *they were more prescriptive about what was morally correct*; *the Government is avoiding being too prescriptive*, along with a variety of other entities. This form opens the door to further forms that go beyond singling out the prescriber and expand the scope for disapproval. From *prescriptive* we derive *prescriptivism*, which calls attention to the process of prescribing as an independently existing syndrome. This nominalization in turn makes possible another adjective form, *prescriptivist*, which implies adherence to an ideology: *a reactionary prescriptivist concern about "correct" grammar* (*Linguist List* 13 June 1994, 5.690). The form *prescriptivist* also serves as the noun agent, which identifies the Actor by the act, and makes prescribing an intrinsic identifying characteristic of a person:

> If linguists continue to argue in the insular world of journals, etc., they give up the fight to the prescriptivists and allow the mistaken views to continue, forever irritating. We should be launching into unheard-of territory: that of the Safires and the Buckleys. Who are they anyway? They are no linguists! (*Linguist List*, 13 Jan. 1998, 9.47)

The function of the adjectival and noun agent suffix *-ist* is of course often to polarize attitudes towards the behaver: *socialist, communist, behaviourist, formalist, prescriptivist.*

Although the adjective *prescriptive* appears in both general and linguistics usage, its typical function differs. In the BNC samples 15 out of 50 instances of *prescriptive* function as Epithet (gradable). (Some examples are given above: *rather prescriptive*, *too prescriptive*, etc.) In the linguistics samples it functions almost exclusively as a Classifier (ungradable).[10] There is only one instance where it is treated as an Epithet: *essentially prescriptive works, such as dictionaries.* Linguistics conceptualizes a *prescriptive grammar* as a class of grammar, and a *prescriptive grammarian* as a species of grammarian; we are unlikely to encounter '*very* prescriptive', or '*moderately* prescriptive' grammars or grammarians. Typical of linguistics usage is the following:

> CCV 243 We have been impressed by the evidence we have received that this gave an inadequate account of the English language by treating it virtually as a branch of Latin, and constructing a rigid prescriptive code rather than a dynamic description of language in use.

Linguistics makes *prescriptive* into a kind of technical term, which it is not in the usages reflected in the BNC samples (except in the legal expression *prescriptive right* – where *prescriptive* means 'sanctioned by long-standing custom' – a usage which appears in two of the BNC samples). A 'rigid***ly*** prescriptive code', with *prescriptive* functioning as Epithet , would suggest that codes come in different degrees of prescriptiveness, but this is not what linguistics intends; because it wants to make a black/white distinction between (what it believes are) two distinct ways of looking at language. *Prescriptive* grammar is the polar opposite of *descriptive* grammar. An Epithet allows for grading: something can be 'moderately prescriptive', 'too prescriptive', and so on, which makes it easy to see that the term is being used evaluatively. A Classifier appears to be neutral because grading is absent, but if the thing classified has a

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10 Epithet and Classifier are functional grammar terms, Halliday 1994a:184ff.

particular value in some social group it nevertheless evokes an evaluation, and this will be implicitly accepted by those who are *au fait* with the belief system of that group. In linguistics this acceptance has made *prescriptive* and *descriptive* look like scientific classifications. However, where there is no overtly evaluative lexis, a clue that the meaning may be primarily evaluative is the way the term keeps company with (what is perceived to be) its polar opposite.

3.2.3 Evaluation realized by collocation

Patterns of collocation in a corpus can reveal much about meaning, and typical antonyms can be particularly significant. In my linguistics samples, *prescribe*, *prescriptive*, etc. (*prescri-* words) are frequently accompanied in the same s-unit by (what linguists regard as) their antonyms: *describe*, *descriptive*, etc. (*descri-* words). These pairs are less frequent in the BNC samples, as shown in TABLE 3.2.3, which highlights the way linguistics privileges a limited area of the semantic fields of *prescribing* and *describing*.

TABLE 3.2.3 The probability of *prescri*-words being collocated with *descri*-words, and of *descri-* words being collocated with *prescri*-words

	BNC (200 s-units: *prescribe*, *prescription*, *prescriptive*, *descriptive*)	Linguistics texts (70 s-units)
s-units containing paired *prescri-* and *descri*-words	7[11]	19
s-units containing *prescri*-words	166	70
% probability of *prescri-* being collocated with *descri-*	4.2%	27%
s-units containing *descri*-words	61	20
% probability of *descri-* being collocated with *prescri-*	11.5%	95%

It seems likely that there is a much higher probability in linguistics than in general usage that *prescri*-words will be collocated with *descri*-words (27% as against 4.2%), and similarly that

[11] There are in fact10 in the 200 BNC s-units. I have omitted three that are from a linguistics rather than general source (Cox 1991).

descri-words will be collocated with *prescri*-words (95% as against 11.5%). (These figures are not to be taken *very* seriously, given the small sample of linguistics data and the non-random nature of its selection.)

Of the 19 pairs from the linguistics samples, 16 stress the opposition very strongly, for example:

> The reason why present-day linguists are so insistent about the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive rules is simply that traditional grammar was very strongly normative in character. (Lyons 1981)

They explicitly point out the 'contrast', the 'difference', and the 'distinction' between *prescribing* and *describing*; they treat the two terms as either/or pairs; and 7 instances make the polarity clear by negation: *Linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive*. The remaining 3, on the other hand, criticize this black/white opposition, for example:

> I have watched prescriptivism get a bad name because it strikes most linguists as simply the opposite of descriptivism, which it certainly isn't. (*Linguist List*, 13 June 1994, 5.719)

In the 7 paired instances from the BNC general usage, 3 match the typical linguistics usage, emphasizing the *prescriptive/descriptive* antithesis by negation:

> C8R 1263 In the final analysis, one cannot prescribe for the whole of constitutional development – to some extent, one can do no more than describe and speculate.

> EEM 971 It described the appearances but could not be prescriptive against true astronomical knowledge.

> GWN 1031 Many of these sections are descriptive rather than prescriptive and contain sentences such as 'Most legislators are not lawyers, however, and need to rely on skilled advice'.

but not all of these stress the antithesis or mutual exclusivity:

> B28 206 What an international perspective can add is a sense of the contradictions or points of stress in the new structures: the attempt to shift the whole system by floods of detailed description and prescription ...

CTY 1194 The book is both an account of and an intervention in that process, veering between the descriptive and the prescriptive.

and the others, more significantly, allow for another possible antonym:

HHV 6372 That is not a **retrospective** or prescriptive but a descriptive process and will allow the citizens of this country to measure the standards of service that they receive from their local authorities.

HJ0 10989 Hence ... the inquiry has an intent which is '**educative**' rather than aiming merely for either purely 'descriptive' or 'prescriptive' results.

What is perhaps more significant is that the BNC corpus samples for *prescriptive* include a number of possible antonyms that do not make their appearance in the linguistics samples: *educative*, *persuasive*, *tentative*, and *advisory*, showing that antitheses other than *descriptive* are possible:

CBX 3262 The guidance is **persuasive** rather than prescriptive and has a lower level of authority than statements of auditing standards.

EW7 1236 There can be no doubt that this sort of help is most valuable for teachers, and where it cannot be provided from a curriculum development project itself might in less ambitious form be offered from a teachers' centre or from a schools library service, although in the latter case the advice on sub-themes and topics would necessarily be **tentative** rather than prescriptive.

HXT 62 The new planning system adopted in 1981 had moved away from detailed prescriptive national targets to relatively broad outlines of central government priorities, more **advisory** in intent.

These examples suggest that *prescribing* belongs in a semantic field of meanings which have to do with 'telling people what to do' but which vary considerably in their implication of obligatoriness and forcefulness. These are subtleties that linguistics misses, in particular the understanding that to *prescribe* is not synonymous with *coerce*:

EUW 494 Again we are prescriptive, and you are **free to choose** or not.

CS2 215 They are prescriptive in the sense that their role is to prescribe (which means much the same as **recommend**) some particular sort of conduct.

The variety of meanings in the 50 BNC samples for *descriptive* exposes the way linguistics has narrowed down the meaning of this word too. In linguistics one of its two main uses is as antithesis to *prescriptive*, meaning 'factual and objective'. (The other is as antithesis to *explanatory*, as discussed in 3.2.4, below.) 11 examples in the BNC data show it being used in the literary sense of 'vividly written', for example:

> EA9 1549 Brochures and tariffs should be well designed, colourful and descriptive.

This suggests that for the layperson the first meaning to spring to mind might be 'characterised by imagination and inventiveness' rather than 'scientifically objective'. The other 39 s-units for *descriptive* are from academic, scientific, legal and technical rather than lay contexts, using the word in the sense of 'relating to objective, scientific description'. Two are from linguistics (omitted from the BNC examples in TABLE 3.2.3), and these are the only evidence in the set of 50 samples for *descriptive* of a concern to separate *descriptive* from *prescriptive*, apart from one example from a legal context (GWN 1031, quoted above) and one from Hansard (HHV 6372, quoted above). There are, however, two examples of a distinction somewhat similar to the one linguistics makes: 'an **emotive** rather than a descriptive meaning' and '**symbolic** or **ideological** rather than descriptive'. The overall impression in the 50 samples for *descriptive* is of a wide variety of antonyms. Some from the sciences represented here, including social sciences, are *theoretical*, *experimental*, *speculative*, *analytic*, *conceptual* and *mathematical*; for example

> HPN 2119 It is noteworthy in this regard that cumulative sciences, such as descriptive geology, tend to contain papers with very long reference lists, whereas the more **theoretical** disciplines, such as geophysics, focus on a smaller number of critical references.

To sum up: the *descriptive/prescriptive* antithesis is not strongly represented in the BNC samples, many of which are from scientific contexts. Its high frequency in the introductory texts examined in section 2.3, above, would suggest that beginners in linguistics are being introduced to linguistics as an atypical kind of science in which the term *description* has acquired an interpersonal, evaluative colouring – 'good, accurate science' as opposed to 'bad, inaccurate science' – that it does not have in general usage (including scientific, as represented by the BNC samples). Perhaps one of the first things a beginner in other sciences learns is the necessity for *describing* data before attempting to *theorize* about it. Yet in many introductory texts in

linguistics the first lesson is the necessity for outlawing prescription. In the BNC samples, the term *descriptive* typically collocates not with antonyms but with complementary processes; it occurs more often in the sense of *a step towards something* (*describing* as a preliminary to *analysing*, *understanding*, *theorizing*) than as *the opposite of something*:

> ASL 107 Their work **laid the foundation** for understanding developmental mechanisms and was largely descriptive, carefully recording the changes in the form of the embryo during both normal development and when it was experimentally perturbed.

> B7L 516 **Before we can begin to understand** social interaction we must have a sound descriptive data-base: an 'ethogram' or compendium of all the behaviours an animal typically performs, how often they are performed, with whom and to whom.

> CLE 152 Yet it remains true that unless the typologies are elaborated beyond a mere classificatory and descriptive labelling of different situations – that is, by attempting to specify the conditions under which each type develops – they remain at **only a very preliminary stage of theorising**.

3.2.4 Other aberrant use of general terms

Prescribe should not be seen as an isolated example of a marked usage in current orthodox linguistics but rather as a member of a set of interconnected words to do with scientific method that have shifted ground: a shift that has to do with the imitation of science and rejection of evaluation. *Describe* seems to be the root of the problem: it is problematic as an antonym to *prescribe* and it is also problematic in the way it is interpreted in relation to two other terms: *observe* and *explain*.

Chomsky's generative linguistics takes the term *descriptive* in a direction that is extremely marked. In his demands for 'observational', 'descriptive' and 'explanatory' adequacy, *observational* has become what general usage would term 'descriptive; *descriptive* has become what most would call 'explanatory'; and *explanatory* has shifted to mean only one kind of explanation: explaining how a child learns language. *Explanatory* has thus become a highly valued term in theoretical linguistics, serving to reinforce solidarity amongst those who consider this kind of explanation the prime goal of linguistics and to exclude those who consider it to be only one of many goals. In fact, all three terms in generative linguistics are marked, not only by

their divergence from common use but also by their restriction to a particular task, as is evident from Haegeman's standard introductory text on Chomsky's 'Government and Binding' (or 'Principles and Parameters') theory. She defines 'observational adequacy' as 'a description of the facts' (1994:6), but the term refers to only one kind of fact-finding: 'distinguishing those strings of words which are sentences of the language from those which are not sentences of the language in question' (1994:5); and she defines 'descriptive adequacy' as 'provid[ing] an account for [sic] the native speaker's intuitions' (1994:6); again a restriction of what is to be described. In her account, what *descriptive* means for a generative linguist has moved far from the meaning it has for the general user and for other scientists (as evidenced by my search of the BNC). She says a 'descriptively adequate' grammar will

> provide an analysis ... try to capture the relation between [a] and [b] ...formulate a general principle to explain ... lead us to predict that ... (1994:6)

– processes which the ordinary English speaker would call 'analysing', or 'theorizing', i.e. 'finding explanations'. Such extreme markedness might well be described as eccentric, and it works to exclude the non-generative linguist and the general language user. I quote further from Haegeman to show how this exclusion is achieved through the generativist's own language. She states: 'We say that a theory reaches explanatory adequacy if it can account for the fact that the principles of the internal grammar can get to be known by the speakers, i.e. if it can account for language acquisition' (1994:10). The crucial word here is the indefinite article: it is not '*our* theory', or '*generative* theory', but '*a* theory': in other words, any linguistic theory that wishes to establish its credibility will have to use the term 'explanatory' in the generativist's special sense of explaining how a child 'acquires' language. (This has led, in my own experience, to a breakdown of communication between a generativist and a functionalist, in which the functionalist was bewildered by the generativist's insistence that systemic functional linguistics 'does not *explain* anything'.)

The above discussion suggests that the use of the word *descriptive* is even more marked than *prescriptive*. In linguistics it has become the strongly favoured half of one dichotomy (*descriptive/prescriptive*) and at the same time, at least in Chomsky's view of theory, the strongly *dis*favoured half of another (*descriptive/explanatory*). The problem lies not so much in the

distinctions that are made as in the unsubtle dichotomizing approach and particularly in the rejection of one half.

3.2.5 Thesaurus and dictionary evidence

There are of course other convenient ways to obtain a quick overall impression of the likely everyday usage of a term, such as simply to consult a dictionary, or a thesaurus. Collins Concise Dictionary gives definitions of *prescriptive* that reflect the general usage as illustrated by the BNC samples, but, interestingly for a resource designed for the lay user, gives a contrastive definition of *descriptive* that reflects the linguist's usage: '3. relating to description or classification rather than explanation or prescription'. (This may have resulted from a strong linguistics influence in the compiling of this dictionary: a surprising number of its entries are terms from linguistics or include the linguist's meaning of a word in their definitions.) The synonyms the Corel WordPerfect8 electronic thesaurus suggests for ***prescriptive*** are: *didactic, edifying, educational, instructive*. For ***descriptive*** it suggests: *detailed, graphic, particular, specific, vivid*. Roget's Thesaurus (1987), strangely, recognizes ***prescriptive*** in one field of meaning only, under *dueness*, in the special sense of *a prescriptive right*, along with such words as *merited, warranted, sanctioned, inalienable, legitimate*, and it follows this with a set of antonyms under *undueness*, such as *unauthorized, unsanctioned, unlicensed*. ***Descriptive*** is categorized under *description* along with words such as *graphic, colourful, vivid, well-drawn, true-to-life, realistic, impressionistic, evocative, emotive*, and *detailed*, and there is no set of antonyms immediately following. ***Prescribe*** is listed under the heading *advice*, and ***prescription*** under *advice* and *precept*; and again no antonyms are suggested. The synonyms suggest that on the whole the attitudinal meanings of both ***prescriptive*** and ***descriptive*** range from neutral to positive (apart from perhaps *didactic*). Neither thesaurus carries any suggestion that ***descriptive/prescriptive*** might be an antithetical pair on the lines of *objective/subjective*, or *pure/applied*, or *tolerant/authoritarian*; or that they could carry the connotations *good science/bad science* or *sense/nonsense*, in the manner of *astronomy/astrology*.

Presumably Roget would have considered the opposite of *prescribing* to be 'refraining from prescribing', not *describing*. As shown in TABLE 3.2.5, he classified *prescriptive* and *descriptive* as two different kinds of human activity rather than as antithetical ways of carrying out the same activity. In fact, as the editor of the 1987 edition points out, Roget conceptualized Classes 1 to

6 as 'a logical progression from abstract concepts, through the material universe, to mankind itself, culminating in what Roget saw as mankind's highest achievements: morality and religion' (1987:ix). Although we might not accept Roget's nineteenth century hierarchical view, it is nevertheless reasonable to regard 'Intellect' and 'Volition' as sequences in a progression rather than as mutually exclusive categories. Linguistics wants to replace naive *prescription* with intellectually respectable *description*, i.e. to move from Volition to Intellect, the opposite of the direction Roget had in mind, and rejecting the prior category. In my opinion, Roget's is the more subtle view: intellectual progress is not only culminative, it is also cumulative: it is not a process of leaving behind inferior models but of building on them. More importantly, as the editor of the new edition points out, Roget takes into account the difficulty of making clear distinctions: 'life, as Roget himself points out, is not easily compartmentalized. "Choice", for example, involves both the will (Class Five) and the intellect (Class Four)' (1987:ix). The current orthodox model of linguistics reveals itself as naive and unsubtle in its attempt to force a separation between Intellect and Volition and, more importantly for my argument, between Intellect and Emotion.

TABLE 3.2.5 *Roget's Thesaurus* classification of *prescribing* and *describing* (Table based on 1987 edition: xv-xvi)

Class (*Roget's* lists 6 Classes: 1.Abstract Relations 2.Space 3.Matter 4.Intellect 5.Volition 6.Emotion)	4. Intellect	5. Volition
Section	Means of communicating ideas	Voluntary action
Head	590 Description (p.283)	691 Advice (p.343)
Item	*describe*	*prescribe*

3.2.6 Is this kind of divergence from general usage advisable?

Viewing language as a 'meaning potential' (Halliday1994b; 1997), I can sum up this discussion by saying that a hitherto thinly populated area in the lexical and semantic systems of English has been colonized by the discipline of linguistics. This is a process referred to by Hasan as 'activation': a bringing-into-being of terms for which there was a 'potential space', a place

'staked out for them' in the language (2002a).[12] The BNC shows the verb forms of *prescribe*, the participial adjective form *prescribed*, and the nominalization *prescription* to be well established for a variety of uses, particularly in the field of medicine. However, although the English derivational system provides for the bringing into being of the Classifiers *prescriptive* and *anti-prescriptive*, the nominalizations *prescriptivism* and *anti-prescriptivism*, the Classifier and noun agent *prescriptivist*, and their antonyms *descriptivism* and *descriptivist*, it seems that there has been little or no call for these other than from the discipline of linguistics. The *-ism* variety of nominalization typically construes a variety of human behaviour as a doctrine, a body of beliefs and practices, and invites an ideological positioning in response to it. The absence from general usage of *-ism* or *-ist* forms derived from *prescribe* suggests that *prescribing* does not arouse strong feelings, either positive or negative, in the general populace.

It is to be expected that specialist terminology should borrow everyday words and adapt them to its own uses: this is essential if we are to progress from lay to expert metalanguage. Terms such as *Actor*, *Goal*, and *Process* seem to me legitimate borrowings, because they are being used to facilitate precise technical description. However, the term *prescriptive* is not a technical term, but is being used to prop up an 'us and them' view of talking about language. It has become important to linguists not so much for talking explicitly about language as for reinforcing solidarity in the linguistics community. The danger of this commandeering of ordinary vocabulary is that linguistics may cut itself off from other language users who persist in clinging to *their* meanings, and I would question whether the development of the term *prescriptive* and its derivatives away from the general usage contributes to useful understanding of language that can be fed back into the community or whether it does not rather contribute to the discipline's alienation from lay concerns.

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12 The example she gave was the word *globalization*, a potential term that the derivational system of English allowed but which did not come into actual use until there was a need for it.This seems to be the case with the terms *prescriptivism* and *prescriptivist*, which the discipline of linguistics has activated. (The BNC, completed in 1994, contains only 64 instances of *globalization/globalisation*. Such a low score indicates how quickly a corpus may cease to provide a true synchronic reflection of the language.)

3.3 Re-appraising *prescription*

Because the meaning of an activity or behaviour is construed by language, a way to get some clarity on the matter is to examine how the language does it. In this section I look at some further aspects of the grammar/semantics of *prescribing*. In particular, I make use of insights from APPRAISAL theory (Martin 2000a; White 2001), a new venture in exploring the semantics of value and evaluation which starts from the assumption that, as we must have a system of values in our culture, and as these must be construed through language, we should be able to discover 'what sets of values we have that are coded in the lexicogrammar that we exploit at discourse level' (Thompson 2001). I have found the concepts of JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION[13] and of **inscribed** and **evoked** appraisal useful in shedding light on the construal of prescription and on our misplaced confidence in the possibility of objective description of language. In section 3.3.1 I borrow part of the Appraisal framework to explore a conceptual complexity which the anti-prescriptive approach ignores, and in 3.3.2 I analyse an introductory text from the point of view of *inscribed* and *evoked* appraisal.

3.3.1 The semantics of *prescribing*

Radford et al. declare that 'The views of lay people about language are often quite simplistic' (1999:17), but I believe linguists themselves are guilty of over-simplification themselves in their understanding of prescription, which is typical of the separating approach in current orthodox linguistics: the way it likes to compartmentalize things and mark boundaries clearly; its fondness for antonyms where others might prefer to see continuity. The attempt to exclude prescription from description is evidence of a failure to take into account the semantic complexity involved in talking about behaviour, and language is essentially a behaviour: 'Language does not exist: it happens' (Halliday et al.1964:9). Language offers a variety of paired resources for the construal of behaviour: *proposal/proposition*; *modalization/modulation*; *material Process/relational Process*; *judgement/appreciation*, and a significant characteristic of the pairs is the difficulty of keeping the two halves apart: *must do* and *must be* have a habit of running together. This is unsurprising if we remind ourselves that a behaviour is in reality one phenomenon on which we take two perspectives, splitting it into a producer and a 'product'.

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13 It is a notation convention in SFL to use small caps to designate systems.

The problem becomes particularly acute when the behaviour is the one we call 'using language', and even more so when the behaviour is 'using language to talk about using language', i.e. linguistic theorizing. The anti-prescriptive approach errs in believing in the reality of the split, and this allows it to talk about the *product* of the behaviour separately from the *producer*, and hence to claim that we can make rules for the one without involving the other: 'Linguists draw a distinction between *prescriptive* rules, those which are artificially imposed, and *descriptive* rules, those which describe language behaviour' (Aitchison 1997:108). Adding to the illusion here is the sophistry involved in conflating two meanings of the word *rule* – 'laws we are expected to obey' and 'regularities' – and saying the second has nothing to do with the language *user*. Generative linguists want to retain the notion of rules while not ruling anyone, which, as Roy Harris notes, leaves them with the problem of 'how to find a plausible function for non-prescriptive rule-formulations' (1987:130). The very idea of two different kinds of 'rules' is evidence of having been deceived by language into thinking it is something separate from the user. But saying what *language users should do* and saying what *language should be like* are not two separate activities: they are one, seen from two perspectives, as Cameron observes: '"description" and "prescription" turn out to be aspects of a single and normative activity: a struggle to control language by defining its terms' (1995:8). Borsley and Newmeyer's definition – 'Prescriptivism is, at root, an attempt to stop people from what they are doing and to get them to start doing something else' (1997:58) – misses this connection entirely.

To see the connection, it helps to consider the way language construes other human behaviours alternately as actions or as abstract entities brought into existence by the actions. Sport, for instance, is typically construed as resulting in 'products': 'I was able to recover by hitting a perfect chip ... and I was able to go on and make a few birdies' (interview with Sergio Garcia, *The Eastern Province Herald*, 27 April 2002:11). There would seem to be something wrong with a report that had Garcia 'chipping the ball perfectly and going on to hit the ball in such a fashion that he scored one stroke under par for several holes', and it would be even more peculiar if we also de-nominalized *stroke* and *par*. SFL theory claims that grammatical resources are shaped by their functions. An obvious function of the nominalizations in the golf report is economy, and a less obvious one is syntactic flexibility.

This kind of construal of behaviour can also be seen as having an interpersonal function. For example, a reprimand to a child might be phrased congruently as 'You ought to behave more

politely', or metaphorically as 'You ought to have better manners'. In this real example from my own experience, the latter wording was used by an adult addressing a three-year-old, perhaps because she wanted the child to understand that it was not the child she was annoyed with so much as the manners (an important pseudo-distinction used by caregivers to socialise a child while at the same time defusing interpersonal tensions). The child's response in this case was 'These are the only manners I've got!' For an adult, grammatical metaphor is a natural way to construe behaviour, but it may seem very marked to a child. What this child plainly did pick up was the notion that you can deny responsibility for the product of the behaviour if you construe it as separate from the producer. The same construal of *manners* as a product appears in a BNC sample, in which the object seems to be to avoid saying 'told them to behave better':

> HH3 10751 However, one day my colleagues attacked me for imposing my 'middle-class values' on the children because I had emphasized polite speech and decent manners in my sessions.

and in a diplomatic construal of European behaviour in a (fictional) conversation amongst Indians: 'I believe the Politicals are obliged to have better manners'.[14]

It is illuminating to consider the grammar of behaviour a little further. Because there is no verb 'to language',[15] we are obliged to talk about 'using language'. Halliday distinguishes two varieties of transitive material Process: the *creative* – the 'bringing about' type: *The carpenter made a table*, and the *dispositive* – the 'doing to' type: *The carpenter mended the table* (1994a:111). There is of course in reality no entity produced by the behaviour *languaging*. But the grammar requires an object so that we can talk about this behaviour more easily. Sometimes we construe 'languaging' as a *creative* material Process, because it does seem as though the behaviour brings an object into existence, and the ways we have of collecting evidence of its existence – writing and recording – reinforce the illusion. But it is more usual to take the illusion a step further and construe the Process as *dispositive*: we talk about 'using language', as though it had an existence prior to the behaviour that produced it. The grammar aids and abets the

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E.M. Forster, 1924, *A Passage to India*.

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Although it has been used here and there by people who have become aware of the lexical gap – for example, *Languaging* is the title of a chapter in Postman and Weingartner (1975[1969]) – it has not caught on in general usage.

illusion, so that it is difficult to think of language any other way, and it comes to seem reasonable to tell people to 'leave their language alone'. As Cameron observes, this title (Hall,1950) 'implies a separation of language from its users', as if 'language would be better off without the unwelcome attentions of its speakers' (1995:3). And indeed this seems to be a belief common to generativists, who talk about 'performance errors', and prescriptivists, who complain about 'sloppy usage': 'the difficulties that arise in [clear expression in writing and speech] typically result from the inconsistent or careless use of one's linguistic knowledge, not from any inherent flaw in the grammar itself' (O'Grady et al.1997:6).

It is the needs of language that prompt the question 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' We would not be able to say much about dancing if we were restricted to the verb *dance*, and similarly we would be restricted in what we could say about language were it grammaticised only as a Process: *to language*. The metaphorical construal of this behaviour has perhaps evolved not so much because we like to think of language as having an existence independently of its producer as because the nominalized form is more modifiable and more syntactically flexible. Language as a behaviour does not have a genuinely congruent realization in (the English) language, but is standardly metaphorical.[16] Once we conceptualize language as an entity we can do more things with it grammatically: experientially, interpersonally and textually. It can be a Participant; it can be Subject or Complement, it can be Theme or Rheme. More importantly (for the view of linguistics as science), like any nominalization it fits comfortably into typical scientific discourse. Halliday and Martin call attention to the 'semogenetic explosion' nominalization makes possible, because it can 'function in a vast array of relational clause types' (1993:40). The noun *language* is at home with the hundreds of verbs which are used in this kind of discourse: we can easily imagine clauses in which language *exemplifies / represents / constitutes / correlates with / differs from / leads to* ... and so on, to use a few of Halliday and

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By this is meant *grammatical* metaphor (Halliday 1994a:342ff.). To say a construal is 'congruent' does not necessarily mean it is the most common form, but rather that it 'comes first', ontogenetically, phylogenetically and logogenetically; it is the one that seems most consonant with the way things happen in real life. It is recognizable, as Martin observes, as the language of children; the language of familiar speech in a relaxed setting; the language of trying to make yourself understood to a foreigner; and so on (1993: 237). The metaphorized construal is set up to serve the functions of the discourse: *a stroke* is plainly a more versatile discourse form than *the player hit the ball once*. (Reddy 1993[1979] is a well-known exploration of the *lexical* metaphors involved in construing language as a product that we convey to each other through 'conduits'. The lexical metaphor is underpinned by the grammatical metaphor.)

Martin's examples of causative relational Processes (1993:41). Because grammatically language is more at home as a Participant than as a Process, it is no wonder we come to think of it as an entity we can examine scientifically in the manner of the physical and biological entities this kind of discourse typically deals with. It is also understandable that we should then come to regard discourse about language-as-a-product-brought-into-existence-by-nominalization-and-detached-from-its-producer as a scientific, expert discourse and discourse about language-as-people-doing-and-meaning as a lay, inexpert discourse. In fact, the latter starts at a disadvantage, because there is no adequate grammar to express it. We do of course have the verbs *talk*, *utter*, *speak*, *write*, but these refer rather to the production of sounds and letters than to the essential process of producing a *meaning*. Halliday's intransitive use of the verb *mean* (passim) is an attempt to overcome the problem by creating a grammar to fill the gap and refocus on language as a process that cannot be meaningfully detached from its producers.

The strong impression we have that language must be like the table in the sense that it is still there when the carpenter has gone away is, as mentioned above, an illusion produced by our ability to record evidence of it, primarily in writing. If we talk about the written evidence of a piece of language as though there were no user, then we are not really talking about language at all but about a pale reflection of it. If we claim, as linguists do, to be talking about *real* language, then we have to remember that we are talking about a kind of behaviour. To talk about it at all, we have to pretend that it is made up of two entities, **system** and **use**. This is not a problem *unless we forget that it is a pretence*. If we forget, then we fall prey to innumerable delusions, and these have real consequences, as is shown in Chapter Four, below.

Understanding how the grammar construes language is the groundwork for a better understanding of the *evaluation* of language. Because the congruent and metaphorical ways of construing human behaviour allow for two ways of evaluating it: one which focuses on 'people behaving', and one which focuses on the 'product' (concrete or abstract) of that behaviour, Appraisal theory describes the first as an ethical judgement, and the second as an aesthetic appreciation. (We *judge* the carpenter and we *appreciate* the table.) JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION are neutral technical terms in Appraisal theory: they imply evaluating something as either good or bad. With AFFECT, which is the term for our reactions to experience, they comprise the three sub-systems of the system of ATTITUDE (White 2001). As FIGURE 3.3.1.1 shows, Martin suggests that AFFECT may

be seen as the basic system: 'the resource deployed for construing emotional responses' (2000a:145), which is

> institutionalized in two major realms of uncommon sense discourse. As JUDGEMENT, AFFECT is recontextualized as an evaluation matrix for behaviour, with a view to controlling what people do. As APPRECIATION, AFFECT is recontextualized as an evaluation matrix for the products of behaviour (and wonders of nature), with a view to valuing what people achieve. (2000a:147)

APPRECIATION and JUDGEMENT are hard to separate when talking about language. In FIGURE 3.3.1.2 I have shown that prescription is based on the same kind of institutionalization of 'uncommon sense discourse'. To *prescribe* in linguistics can signify *either* an evaluative proposition: APPRECIATION of language as product, *or* an evaluative proposal: JUDGEMENT of the producer. But, because language **system/instance**[17] and language **use** are not in reality separate entities, evaluation of one must imply evaluation of the other. Pronouncing on the value of a piece of language must inevitably also be a pronouncement on its producer; because there is no language without a user. If we say 'this is how language should or should not be' then we are at the same time saying 'this is what a language user should or should not do'.

It is an odd inconsistency of the anti-prescriptive approach that when talking about traditional grammar linguists accept the double-faceted construal of language – they would agree that JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION do go hand in glove: a *prescriptive grammar* is both 'a grammar that tells people how they should speak/write' and 'a grammar that reflects the grammarian's own language preferences' – but when it comes to talking about their own 'descriptive' approach to language, they change the rules, claiming to be able to talk about the product without at the same time talking about the producer, as though linguistic theory existed independently of the theorist. However, if we doubt whether describing and prescribing *can* be separated, then we must accept that our language-about-language functions in the same way as it does for the prescriptivist.

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17 As Halliday observes, system and instance are not two separate phenomena, but the same phenomenon seen from two different perspectives (2001). This is discussed further in 5.4, below.

FIGURE 3.3.1.1 JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION as institutionalized AFFECT (Martin 2000:147, FIGURE 8.1, redrawn)

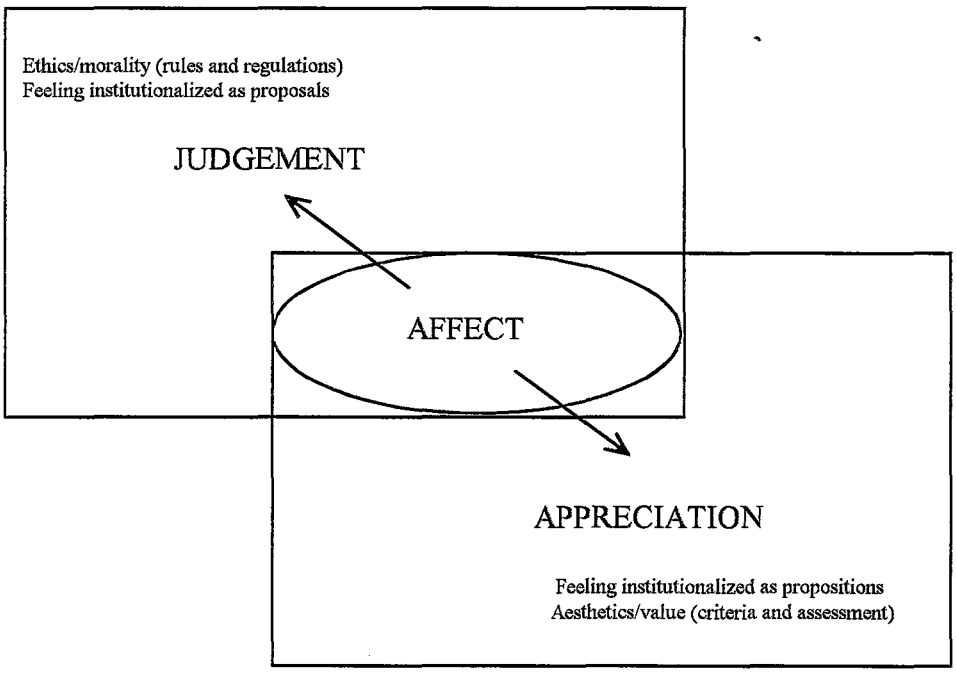
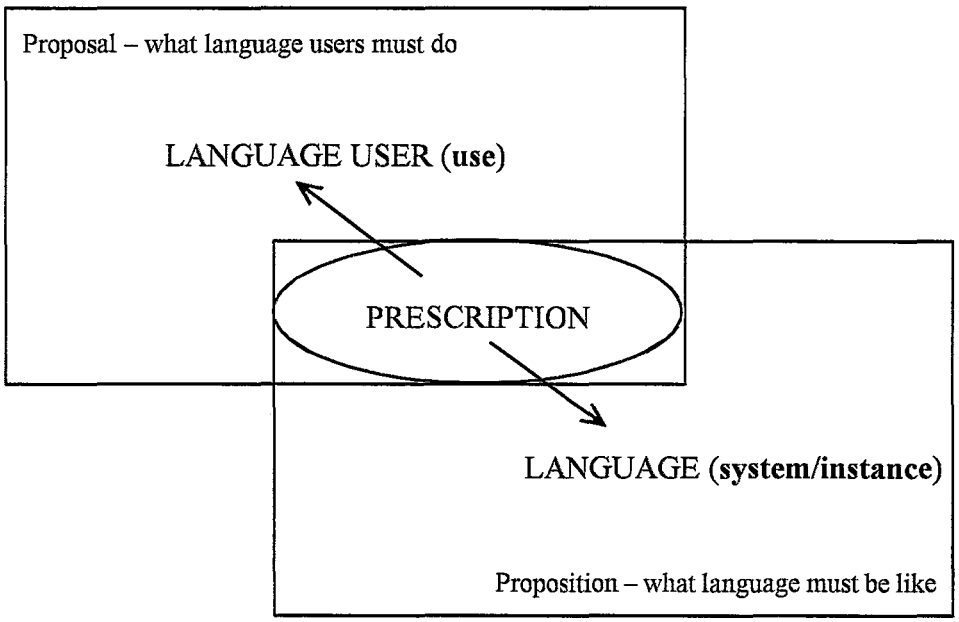


FIGURE 3.3.1.2 Two meanings of *prescription*, based on Martin's figure 8.1, above.



In claiming not to prescribe, linguists use two excuses. One is the claim that we can describe language (system/use) without evaluating it. But this is not at all certain, because we must describe it from a point of view. So our description is likely to be an evaluation, or perhaps more accurately an *interpretation*. This seems to me a useful word for talking about metalanguage, because it parallels the term *construe*: language *construes* experience (i.e. in part reflects and in part constructs it) and metalanguage *interprets* language (i.e. in part describes and in part evaluates it). On this understanding, we must always be saying both 'this is how the system/use is' and 'this is how the system/use ought to be'; in other words, there must always be an element of prescription in our description of language. The other excuse is that linguists do not *intend* to prescribe. However, intention is not the issue here. What matters is that the 'describer's paradox' makes it likely that this *will* be the effect of our interpretations, given a wide enough audience and a describer with sufficient prestige.

Apart from denying intention, linguists also overlook the effects of their pronouncements because their view of what constitutes influencing language behaviour is limited. When they condemn prescription, what they have in mind generally are classroom-style injunctions. But prescriptive effects may be indirect too. Simply talking about language draws attention to features that might otherwise have passed unnoticed, and opens up the possibility of change, because language noticed tends to become language imitated. Change also comes about when people change their view of language as a whole: seeing language differently is a step towards using it differently. This was no doubt the reason for listeners' indignant responses to the laissez-faire message of Aitchison's 1996 BBC Reith Lectures. They were very sure that it *would* have effects on the use of English. Aitchison's belief that it is possible to *describe* language without *influencing* language did not convince them, nor did they believe that language users do not need to look after language because it would look after itself. Unlike the linguist, they were not inclined to view language as something separate from its users.

The way we think about language must affect the way we use it. The literature class Christie studied (1999a, discussed in 2.3) produced the ideas the teacher wanted because 'English studies, like other studies in the curriculum, seek to develop pedagogic subjects who take up particular values and adopt particular perspectives upon human activity' (1999a:173). Linguistics is no different from other studies: it seeks to develop students who take up particular values (for example, that linguistics is a liberal discipline that views all varieties of language as equally

good) and adopt particular perspectives (specifically, to adopt the perspective of the Western linguistic tradition, which assumes that language can be studied as an autonomous object). The effect of an introductory course in linguistics on students' own use of language might be quite marked were it not counteracted by the standard prescriptive teaching that goes into ensuring that they learn to write acceptable academic English. The effect of the linguist's official laissez-faire approach to language on linguistics students' production of language may therefore never be put to the test, and it will seem to make sense to go on teaching the anti-prescriptive doctrine, because plainly the students' own language is 'looking after itself'.

3.3.2 The semantics of *influencing*

This section refers to the first five paragraphs in Appendix 1, an extract from Matthiessen and Halliday's on-line introduction to systemic functional grammar (1997). (Page numbers in this section refer to this text unless otherwise stated.) As is typical of introductions, the *regulative* discourse is necessary for setting the reader up to be receptive to the *instructional*. The first says 'See language our way' and the second 'Given that view, this is what language looks like'. As Christie observes of the literary classroom (2.3, above), this kind of instruction can be conceptualized in terms of clause grammar as a *projection*: we do not so much tell people what language 'is like' as what '*we think* it is like' or, more exactly, taking the role of evaluation into account, as what '*we like to think* it is like'.

The evaluations conveyed by a text may be *inscribed* or *evoked*, as explained by Hunston and Thompson: 'Inscribed appraisal is explicitly expressed in the text (a **bright** kid, a **vicious** kid), whereas with evoked appraisal an evaluative response is projected by reference to events or states which are conventionally prized (a kid who **reads a lot**) or frowned on (a kid who **tears the wings off butterflies**)' (2000:142). On the principle that readers are best persuaded by ideas that they believe they have thought of by themselves, the evoked variety of appraisal works by concealing 'the meaning negotiation that is at the heart of all communication' (2000:143). It is the kind that, against a background of shared information, invites the receiver of the message to share the sender's values.

Two observations need adding to the above definition. One is that whether a text evokes values will depend on the reader. Taking the butterfly example, no values at all would be evoked for a

reader whose world has no butterflies. As White observes, 'each reader will interpret a text's tokens of judgement according to their own cultural and ideological positioning' (2001:13). The other is that it is difficult to draw a clear boundary between inscribed and evoked varieties. Where one analyst might argue that phrases such as *falls far short* and *only a small fragment* simply appeal to conventionally prized or frowned-on states (evoked), another might prefer to see them as explicitly encoding value (inscribed). I have taken modifiers such as *far* and *only* as signals that these phrases may be analysed as inscribed appraisal. A helpful way to distinguish between inscribed and evoked appraisal would be to note that we could design computer software to recognize the former but not the latter. As Hunston and Sinclair observe, a local grammar of evaluation can be set up 'provided we limit our discussion to evaluations which are explicit' (2000:84; discussed further in 8.3, below). (It follows that when we claim that our descriptions are objective and ignore the evoked evaluations that underpin them we are taking a computer's eye-view of the matter: ignoring evidence of human value systems unless it is in taggable form.)

The following analysis looks at the two kinds of appraisal in the sample text. Further insights might be gained from examining it from the point of view of Graduation (Force and Focus), and Engagement, but space does not allow for this more delicate level of analysis here. The aim of the analysis is to demonstrate that the authors' description of the grammar must be read as proceeding from a certain set of values, mostly realized by evocation rather than directly inscribed in the text. This indirectness is their strength: the values are 'triggered by superficially neutral ideational meanings which nevertheless have the capacity in the culture to invoke judgemental responses' (White 2001:12). The reader who goes to such a text for instruction may be unaware of being invited to share a variety of evaluations. To become aware we have to 'read between the lines', as lay metalanguage would have it.

No theory of language is built on complete and impartial knowledge; rather, as Hymes puts it, 'Laymen, social scientists, and linguists alike proceed largely on the basis of received attitudes and limited information' (1983:168). To complicate matters, readers proceed on the same basis: they check what they are receiving against their own baggage. The evoked appraisal in this Internet text is evidence of the authors' guesswork about what form that baggage might take, given that the majority of potential readers would be academics in linguistics or in language education, and that a few might be complete outsiders. When writing about a specialist subject for a mixed readership, it is necessary to appeal to widely held values that will provide the lay

reader with a foothold on the instruction and at the same time not alienate the person who is in the know.

The reference to the 'well-known' wave/particle theory of light in the first paragraph (**§1**) indicates the kind of reader the authors hope they are addressing. Evoked appraisal 'assume[s] shared social norms' (White 2001:13), and 'respect for science' is one that readers with or without a background in linguistics may be assumed to share.[18] Another that both the linguist and the interested general reader might start with as a step to understanding systemic functional linguistic theory is 'respect for traditional school grammar', or perhaps contempt for it. Either way, this is another value to build on. Evoking appraisal does not necessarily mean setting it up to agree with the reader's likely positive or negative judgement: a skilled rhetorician can take a positive evaluation and reverse the polarity in the course of the text. What is important is that a value should be evoked. In this text the values of traditional grammar are evoked to form a base the reader can recognize, and the polarity is then reversed. Besides natural science (positive) and traditional classroom grammar (negative), a third general (positive) value evoked by this text is 'knowing a number of exotic (i.e. non-European) languages'. These evocations are fairly straightforward. More interesting is the subtle way the text evokes the contradictory value systems of the divided territory of linguistics. For a newcomer to the territory these divisions will of course be all but invisible: he or she may not even be aware the territory is divided. Evoked appraisal is not something that is inherent in the text; or rather, the clues are there to be picked up only by initiates, which is of course why a text may be naively regarded as 'factual'. The following is a brief outline of the appraisal in each paragraph of Matthiessen and Halliday's text.

A remarkable feature of **§1** is that the regulation it sets up contains the seeds of its own destruction. The standard function of the regulative discourse in a text of this kind, as exemplified by those discussed in 2.3, is to induce the reader to accept the authors' version of language as 'the facts'. This first paragraph sets out as just another typical example of this genre.

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At least, it is generally assumed so. However, one of the findings of a UK House of Lords report on the popular understanding of science was that 'While people appear to have an appetite for popular science, the paradox is that this is accompanied by increasing scepticism about the pronouncements of scientists on science-related policy issues of all types'. (http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/ld199900/ldselect/ldsctech/38/3804.htm *Science and Society*, 14 March 2000, accessed 30 March 2000)

The appeal to the prestige and respectability of science – nuclear physics in particular – is not unexpected: this is commonly the discipline's way of 'presenting its credentials': *a phenomenon that can be studied*; *light*; *physical motion*; *the physical phenomenon of the atom*; *Democritus' theory*; *Rutherford's theory*; *Bohr's theory*; *Democritus' atom*; *Bohr's atom*; *a configuration of subatomic particles*; *the rich diversity of properties we uncover in the phenomena.*

However, this piece of regulatory discourse changes the tune by announcing that 'theory determines how we interpret phenomena', in other words, that there are other ways of seeing – *light can be interpreted either as particle or wave*. We are to understand that this is only one version among many, because nuclear physics [/linguistic theory] is ways of seeing rather than discovery of facts: *What kind of thing the atom* [/language] *is thought to be will of course vary considerably as we move from one theory to another*. This is a kind of anti-regulative regulative discourse, because it is saying that linguistics does *not* have 'the' facts. The regulatory message is that the reader is free not to be regulated, because grammar is not a pre-existing entity waiting to be discovered but is *interpreted according to different theories* (**§2**).

In **§1** the appraisal is the evoked variety. The only wording that might be taken as inscribed appraisal is *rich* in the last sentence, though in academic parlance this word tends to have a more straightforwardly propositional meaning, something like 'multi-faceted', and here perhaps it means nothing much more than *extreme*. For linguists, *complementary* and *rich* evoke values: negative for the formalist, whose leanings are to simple and elegant explanations, and positive for the functionalist, whose leanings are to complexity and multi-facetedness. These negative and positive values are brought to the fore in **§3** and **§4**.

The second paragraph (**§2**) sets out definitions, a scholarly procedure which might elicit from the general reader approval of the authors' tidy-mindedness: an uncontentious, conventionally prized value. However, as White points out, 'Under the heteroglossic orientation ... we are reminded that even the most "factual" utterances, those which are structured so as to background interpersonal values, are nevertheless interpersonally charged in that they enter into relationships of tension with a related set of alternative and contradictory utterances' (2001:18). For anyone embroiled in the highly-charged and fractious atmosphere of linguistics, some alternative values are quite plainly evoked here. The insistence on unambiguous definition of the key term *grammar* carries a particular value for the linguistics community, against the background of Chomsky's

'systematic ambiguity' (discussed in detail in Chapter Six, below). The appraisal it might evoke (using categories from Martin's framework for analysing JUDGEMENT in English, 2000:156) could be described as **social sanction** (positive) for the **veracity** and **propriety** of Matthiessen and Halliday's disambiguation.

This paragraph introduces another element conventionally prized by general readers and linguists alike: understanding exotic languages, which is likely to evoke a judgement of positive **social esteem** for the linguist's **capacity** from the general reader (Martin 2000a:156). For the linguist there is again more to it: a theory that is usefully applicable to a variety of languages – *Chinese, English, and Japanese* – is valued not just for its own sake but against a background of suspicion that linguistics of recent years has been excessively anglocentric. This value is reinforced in **§4**: *non-European languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Tagalog, Thai, Vietnamese or the languages of other regions and continents.*

The third paragraph (**§3**) brings the 'alternative and contradictory utterances' into sharper focus, by setting up two lists of opposed approaches to theorizing, as shown in TABLE 3.3.2.1.

TABLE 3.3.2.1 Orientations of formal and functional grammars in **§3** (Matthiessen and Halliday 1997:3)

In one, language is a set of **rules – rules** for specifying structures; so grammar is a set of **rules** for specifying **grammatical** structures, such as the construction of a transitive **sentence** with 'verb + object'. This perspective is that of **logic** and philosophy, e.g. in the foregrounding of the **sentence** as the basic unit of language, organized on a **logical** model into Subject + Predicate. Since the **sentence** is the basic unit, it is studied in isolation.	In the other view, language is a **resource** – a **resource** for making **meanings**; so grammar is a **resource** for creating **meaning** by means of wording. This perspective is that of **rhetoric** and ethnography, e.g. in the foregrounding of **text** (discourse) as the basic unit of language, organized according to the **rhetorical** context. Since **text** is the basic unit, the sentence is studied in its discourse environment.

Later, in the instructional part of the text, the authors pick up and summarize these oppositions that have been set up in **§3** of the regulative introduction:

> Among current theories of grammar, systemic grammatics can be located within a broadly defined class of 'functional grammars' that are typically characterized by certain orientation: it is oriented towards
>
> | | | |
> |---|---|---|
> | function | rather than | forms |
> | rhetoric | " | logic |
> | text | " | sentences |
> | resource | " | rules |
> | meaningfulness | " | grammaticality (26) |

A more extensive list of such opposed qualities – 'what the good guys and the bad guys should celebrate' – is provided by Martin (2000a:162). These oppositions are familiar in linguistics, but the general reader could be excused for missing their evaluative implications in **§3**, because they are listed dispassionately as though they are two equally valid ways of seeing, like *particle* and *wave* (although the statement that the sentence is studied *in isolation* might evoke values even the general reader would pick up).

In the first three paragraphs the appraisal is evoked; in the fourth (**§4**), however, the groundwork having been laid, some of the appraisal is of the inscribed variety, with values being explicitly encoded in the lexis: *diluted, falls far short, takes over too much, limited, builds in too little, only a small fragment, richer*. Again, two contrasting lists are set up:

TABLE 3.3.2.2 Orientations of formal and functional grammars in **§4** (Matthiessen and Halliday 1997:3)

usually presented in school (outdated and inadequate practices)	*At this stage in history* (present needs)
a diluted version of the 'grammar as rule' type of theory... *rules of grammar...* *words in sentences...* *it falls far short of the demands...* *it takes over too much from the European languages...* *it is of limited value in interpreting the grammars of non-European languages...* *it builds in too little...* *It allows us to see only a small fragment...*	*Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Tagalog, Thai, Vietnamese or the languages of other regions and continents...* *the challenges of the age of information...* *the overall organization of the grammar of a language as a system of information...* *a richer theory of grammar...* *the age of information...* *education... computation...* *automatic processing of text...* *technical innovations...* *manipulate vast amounts of text (spoken or written)...*

With the change in **§4** to a more emphatic form of evaluation there is a change in the grammar to match the semantic contrasts. Analysing the transitivity pattern of the first three paragraphs, we find a predominance of relational, mental and verbal Processes (*grammar is one of the subsystems, we need theory, we speak of the grammar of English*), with a smattering of material Processes of a not very physical variety (*use the same term, trace these two strands*). **§4** changes the pattern to a predominance of material processes, physically active-sounding ones for the most part, which carry much of the contrastive weight (*falls far short, takes over too much, builds in too little, allows us to see, does not provide us with, meet the challenges*) and produce an impression of effective activity contrasted with ineffective. Several of the Processes are realized by phrasal verbs, which set up a rhythm that further emphasizes the contrasts. It is noticeable that there is apparently no human agency involved in constructing the grammars: the agentless passive is used (*is usually presented*), or the grammar itself becomes the agent (*it allows us to see*), so that criticism of the inadequate grammarian is tactfully evoked rather than directly inscribed.[19]

There are in fact three layers of pairs of contrasted values in this paragraph, to be discovered by three different kinds of readers. The first is the obvious contrast between the methods of an old-fashioned school system and the demands of the information age, which evokes values the general reader can be expected to bring to the text (it is assumed the reader will share the authors' assessment of which is to be prized and which frowned on, or be ready to be convinced). The second is the contrast which will evoke familiar values for any linguist: the negative and positive poles of traditional Latin-and-Greek-based school grammar and the new science of linguistics. The third, the most 'submerged' layer, will not be seen at all by a general reader or by a novice in linguistics, yet the values that it evokes will be quite clear to a reader who is informed about the 'functional versus formal' debate in linguistics. It will be plain to such a reader that the authors' criticisms of traditional school grammar could equally well be applied to Chomskyan generative grammar: sentence rather than text-based; dealing with grammaticality judgements rather than meaning; seeing language as rule rather than resource; effective for analysis of European rather than non-European languages; unworkable in computational applications such as Natural Language Processing; and so on. The authors' values are plainly 'there' for such a reader despite no overt reference being made to them. The text is an interesting exercise in

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19 Technical terms here are those used by Halliday to describe the transitivity system of the grammar (1994a:106ff.)

subtlety and demonstrates the value of careful management of inscribed and evoked varieties of appraisal. The sympathy of the third variety of reader is enlisted without distracting the reader who is not au fait with these quarrels and does not need to be involved and, besides this, tact is exercised and direct confrontation with Chomskyan non-sympathisers avoided.

Could it perhaps be claimed that this third set of values is not so much evoked by the text as imagined by this reader? I believe we can say it is evoked, if we compare what the text says with what a typical introductory text, denigrating traditional grammar in the typical fashion, would *not* say; in other words, if we compare the choices this text makes with those of other texts in the same genre. The first clue is the reference to 'the "grammar as rule" type of theory'. The typical introductory text does not class a school grammar with formal theories: it treats it simply as the opposite of linguistics. It is also not usual to suggest that school grammar is inadequate for 'interpreting the grammars of Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian' and so on. Nor is it usual to complain that 'the kind of grammatics that is usually presented in school' is inadequate for 'the automatic processing of text'. These are more than sufficient triggers to let the informed reader know that a veiled reference is being made to currently burning issues in the discipline.

The fifth paragraph (**§5**) sums up the regulative section and moves on to the instructional part of the text, with a reminder that the purpose of the instruction is ultimately to back up what has been claimed in the introduction: that SFG 'is designed to display the overall system of grammar rather than only fragments' and is therefore a more valuable response to the demands of the information age than 'the theory of grammar that is still the received tradition in school' (1).

Finally, the overall organization of the text is also important in producing effective appraisal: 'an important strategy in the establishment of interpersonal positioning in a text is to stage inscribed and evoked evaluation in such a way that the reader shares the writer's interpretations of the text's tokens' (White 2001:13). The aim is to produce a movement through the text which takes the reader along with it. Gregory's term *phase* is useful here:

> Phase is used to characterize those stretches of discourse in which there is a significant measure of consistency and congruity in what is being selected from the three metafunctional resources of the language. What are termed transitions in and out of phases are indicated by a marked change in choice from one or more functional components. (1988a:318)

For example, the change in Process type from the first three paragraphs to the fourth signals a new phase. The change is functional, as remarked above: it signals a change in emphasis. With this change goes a change in Appraisal type, from evoked to a combination of evoked and inscribed. Again the phases are functional: the authors exercise caution and lay a groundwork of shared values before becoming more open about them. The phases are shown in TABLE 3.3.2.3.

TABLE 3.3.2.3 Phases in **§§1-5** (Matthiessen and Halliday 1997:3)

	form of appraisal	predominant choice of Process	interpersonal meaning
§1-§2 **§3**	evoked (positive) evoked (negative → positive)	relational	cautious evaluation
§4 **§5**	evoked and inscribed (negative → positive) evoked	material	bolder and more emphatic evaluation

To sum up, the five introductory paragraphs work by evoking contrasting sets of values in such a way that the reader will come to the basics of SFG prepared to understand it in the way the authors desire. The regulative approach is necessary to set up a receptive frame of mind. Martin analyses 'interest' as a form of Affect (2000a:152), and one might also say that there is no interest *without* Affect: the instructee needs to be drawn into the instruction by the lure of emotional satisfaction, even if it is the unspectacular kind associated with intellectual pursuits. When we analyse language, we inevitably bring our own values and needs to the task of making sense of it: which aspects to focus on, how to categorize its parts, how to explain change, and so on. To understand someone else's analysis we have to first establish some sympathetic connection with their way of seeing.

To say that the introduction to Matthiessen and Halliday (1997) is an effective piece of rhetoric is not to suggest that there is anything sinister about it: where rhetoric is subtle it is up to the reader to question where he or she is being led. As Martin observes, the resources of the grammar are deployed for good and bad ends alike: they are used 'for making interested truths' (2001:3). A text like this in functional linguistics can offer us the tools for discovering these resources, in other words, in a sense it protects the reader against itself. I observed above that the regulative introduction to this text is set up to counter its own regulative force.The striking difference between this and other introductory texts in linguistics is that, although as is standard its authors invoke the prestige of science and criticize traditional grammar, the reasons they give for doing

so are different. For them the value of science lies not in finding facts but in interpreting phenomena, and for them the problem with traditional grammar it is not that it is prescriptive and coloured by the grammarian's preferences but that it fails to admit complementary perspectives. If, as these authors suggest, the essence of science/linguistics is taking complementary perspectives, then there is no room for insisting that the linguist's description is objective and free from value judgements. Once we are clear about the involvement of our values in our descriptions, then we can work with better understanding of what we are doing – *taking perspectives* (rule or resource, grammaticality or meaning, logic or rhetoric) – and thus we can be in a position to decide which is the best way to do it, given the kinds of needs there are for our descriptions. The important point about this text is that, while using the standard regulatory approach, and standing firmly by its own view of the preferred way of doing things, it also contains an invitation to differ, *a built-in critique*: licensing the reader to re-interpret the data and not to take the authors' view as the last word on the matter; in other words, to be freed by the grammar rather than enslaved by it.

It is instructive to compare this text's subtly evoked values with those from a very different genre, the festschrift, which, because it is addressed chiefly to the converted, licenses conspicuously inscribed appraisal:

> One of the greatest gifts Michael has given to those of us who are proud to call ourselves "Hallidayan" linguists is that he does not place a straightjacket on us. He himself is always willing to try a new way of looking at some phenomenon, and even at times disappoints those students who want a clear answer to the question: "Is it this or that?" ... this spirit of open-minded inquiry is now an integral part of the systemic functional way of "doing linguistics". (Berry et al. 1996:xiv)

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have suggested that we need to reconsider the claim that linguists describe language without making value judgements. I have offered a list of reasons to doubt this claim (3.1); a consideration of the meaning of *prescriptive* against the background of general usage (3.2); and analyses of the semantics of *prescription* and *influence* (3.3). The aim of this chapter has been to suggest that we need to get away from the 'naively positivist notion of untheorised facts' Martin (1997:430). The complex involvement of values and evaluation in any language

about language cannot be dealt with adequately by the anti-prescriptive approach, which seems to me little more than sloganeering.

The topic of how language users' (and metalanguage users') values and evaluations are involved in language is, however, more than just matter for philosophical argument: it has practical implications. As observed in 3.1, above, linguists do not keep out of practical language matters, and the anti-prescriptive approach goes hand-in-hand with a desire to right the wrongs of society as they are manifested in language discrimination. Cameron observes that linguists are selective about whose prescriptions/values they oppose: 'In theory, "prescriptivism" could refer to any form of linguistic regulation, but in practice it is strongly associated with those forms that are most conservative, elitist and authoritarian' (1995:8-9). Laudable social objectives are, however, not well served by a theory that vetoes the expression of value judgements other than the approved one that 'all languages and language varieties are equally good': a position which can be as oppressive as the traditional authoritarian approach, and which, ironically, deprives linguists of the power to do anything practical for the oppressed. The next chapter sets out to support this claim, with particular reference to a seminal text in sociolinguistics, Labov (1969).