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## *Ann Fisher, descriptive or prescriptive grammarian?*<sup>1</sup>

Le grammatiche inglesi del diciottesimo secolo sono state a lungo divise in due categorie principali: grammatiche prescrittive e grammatiche descrittive, benché in realtà pochissime appartengano a quest'ultima categoria (un'eccezione notevole è il lavoro di Priestley). Alcuni studiosi moderni hanno severamente criticato l'approccio prescrittivistico, accusandolo di non illustrare gli usi linguistici del tempo, ma di veicolare un misto di inglese seicentesco e di interpretazioni soggettive da parte dell'autore. Il suo intento principale era di imporre regole, eventualmente inventandole, nella presupposizione che non esistessero. Tuttavia, una rigida dicotomia tra testi prescrittivi e descrittivi è stata recentemente messa in discussione. Vorlat (1998: 285-286), ad esempio, propone tre categorie per le grammatiche del Cinque e Seicento che possono forse adattarsi anche alle grammatiche settecentesche: (i) testi che descrivono il linguaggio registrandolo, (ii) grammatiche normative e (iii) grammatiche prescrittive. Tiekens-Boon van Ostade (2000b) ha altresì dimostrato che la stessa grammatica di Lowth, praticamente un simbolo del prescrittivism, contiene anche usi contemporanei. Si ritiene quindi possibile utilizzare un continuum lungo il quale le grammatiche si collocano, dimostrandosi più o meno prescrittive, o più o meno descrittive. Questo studio intende illustrare questa ipotesi attraverso l'analisi del testo di Ann Fisher *A New Grammar, with Exercises of bad English* (1754).

### 1. *Introduction*

The prescriptive approach to language is, probably, the most outstanding feature of eighteenth-century grammar texts, and its antonym, in terms of language analysis, is the descriptive approach. This opposition has favoured a new dichotomy in the study of language: prescriptivism vs. descriptivism, two approaches which until recently have been regarded as incompatible. However, this distinction is not precise and some modern linguists have questioned the inflexibility of these two attitudes to lan-

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was read at the *Late Modern English Conference*, Edinburgh 2001.

guage analysis, pointing out that the so-called prescriptive grammar offers numerous insights into descriptivism. Strongly opposed views are thus no longer tenable. My aim is to exemplify this through the analysis of Ann Fisher's *A New Grammar, with Exercises of bad English* (1754).

Ann Fisher was the extraordinary author of this work. And we may say extraordinary because her textbook became the fourth most popular grammar, with almost forty editions and reprints, after Murray (1794), Ash (1760) and Lowth's works, with 65, 50 and 47 editions respectively (1762) (Rodríguez-Gil 2002). This fourth position becomes even more important when we learn that *A New Grammar* was the first grammar published by an Englishwoman, and that she was a pioneer in her field, followed by six women grammarians who published their works later in the eighteenth century (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2000a). Fisher's book is also outstanding *per se*, and two features clearly show this. On the one hand, its stated anti-Latin trend which led her to devise an English grammar following her own observations of this language. On the other hand, the methodological innovations introduced in her work, such as an abstract of grammar or a new type of school exercise called "examples of bad English", which was so popular that it spread very quickly all over England and even America, which was to become the second most widely used exercise during the eighteenth century (Michael 1987: 325). However, despite all these merits, *A New Grammar* and its author have been largely ignored for a long time.

## 2. *A traditional account of descriptive and prescriptive grammar*

Only two eighteenth-century scholars are said to have followed the descriptive model, namely Priestley and Campbell, since prescriptive grammar was the trend to which most eighteenth-century authors adhered. Baugh and Cable state that "the person who more wholeheartedly than anyone else advocated the doctrine [...] was Joseph Priestley" and they further say that "of almost equal importance in representing this point of view, and perhaps more influential in giving it currency, was George Campbell" (Baugh and Cable 1987: 282).

The descriptive approach to grammar took custom and analogy as the grounds for language observation and it was really not so interested

in establishing what was correct or incorrect, as in observing authentic spoken language and in portraying it faithfully, with its variation, without interfering with personal judgements and prejudices. The emphasis on usage was inspired by Horace, who claimed that “use is the sole arbiter and norm of speech” (Baugh and Cable 1987: 28). However, the descriptive trend was not successful among eighteenth-century English grammarians due to its radical opposition to what the majority were doing. Consequently, it was soon overshadowed by the main approach to grammar, the prescriptive approach.

As we have seen, Joseph Priestley is considered the most prominent representative of the descriptive approach. This attitude to language analysis is somewhat obvious throughout his work. We read in the preface to his *Rudiments of English Grammar* (1761: iv, vi) that the principles which are to guide his approach to grammar are: “to exhibit only the *present state* of our language” thus following custom as the authority of language. This grammarian appeals to usage when discussing grammatical categories or syntax. For instance, when explaining the verb *to be*, he states: “This verb (the most irregular of all others, in almost every language) borrows its various forms from words of very different origins. *Use* hath established the modification that is here laid down.” (*my emphasis*) (Priestley 1761: 20n). Another example of emphasis on usage is found when he deals with the difference between the auxiliaries *shall* and *will*:

Use hath of late, varied, and, as it were, interchanged the sense of them: for when we simply *foretell*, we use *shall* in the first person, and *will* in the rest; as *I shall*, or *he will write*: but when we *promise*, *threaten*, or *engage*, we use *will* in the first person, and *shall* in the rest; as, *I will*, or *he shall write*. (Priestley 1761: 22)<sup>2</sup>

With this kind of comments, Priestley seems to recognise that language usage does not depend on linguistic authority but on social conventions, i.e. he is unconsciously maintaining that there is no inherent correctness or incorrectness in any grammatical form.

<sup>2</sup> According to Gotti (2003: 133), “this explanation for the alternation of the two paradigms – *shall/will/will* for mere prediction and *will/shall/shall* to indicate the speaker’s promise – is not an innovation by Priestley, but was already present in Wallis (1654)”, who in turn was preceded by Mason (1633).

Modern linguistics, which favours descriptivism, has long appeared biased against prescriptivism. Thus eighteenth-century grammars have been disparaged as texts not reflecting the contemporary state of the English language, and not paying attention to custom but to authority, analogy and reason:

The 18th century is the first century to evince a more massive interest in syntactic usage, albeit primarily from a prescriptive or proscriptive angle: the grammarian, not usage, became the official arbiter of language. Grammar came to be viewed essentially as the selection of ‘proper’ forms, or, as Dr. Johnson (1755) has it, “the art of using words properly”. These prescriptive grammarians (for example Lowth and Murray), whose rules were largely a mixture of Latin grammar, “logic”, “reason” and prejudice, were ignorant of or unwilling to accept the processes of linguistic change and unaware of the fact that usage is essentially a matter of social convention. (Rydén 1981: 513-514)

The kind of language of which the prescriptive trend was in search, was a language that did not change and was not affected by corruption and variability. It did not allow for dialectal or local variation, a language only admitting one type of correct usage. In order to achieve this invariant and perfect language, authors turned to written language as the source of their grammars. It is therefore important to understand the concept of prescriptivism considered in the eighteenth century. The rise of prescriptivism was due to a mixture of social, economic and political factors. It was meant to meet the social demand for tokens that showed that gentry belonged to the upper classes. Prescriptive grammars “conflated such linguistic and social judgements as ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’, ‘polite’ and ‘vulgar’ ” (Percy 2003: 46). This concept of prescriptivism is illustrated quite clearly by means of a comparison between medical treatment and language ‘treatment’:

The cognitive matrix of the lexeme *prescription* contains the following five elements which can be transferred from the domain of medical treatment to that of language:

A patient who needs/wants to be cured; a speaker/writer or group of speakers/writers who need to be cured of ‘malformed’, ‘infectious’, ‘debilitating’ language use.

An improved state of health; a state of ‘perfection’ in language structure and use which is the desired goal of the treatment.

A means through which the cure can be effected; a set of methods through a figure of authority (e.g. a doctor) to diagnose the illness and prescribe the course of treatment; a language expert with the authority to diagnose the problem and make the prescription(s), (e.g. a grammarian, lexicographer, elocutionist, orthographer).

An institution, e.g. a chemist's, from which the medicine can be procured; an educational institution that can dispense the methods for improvement prescribed.

For the notion of 'prescription' to make any sense at all when transferred to the domain of language study, however, we need to ask whether there *is* or could be a state of perfection in language competence and/or language use, to which a language 'expert' could refer, i.e. that there is an agreed-upon linguistic norm. Given that this norm, or 'standard', exists or is presupposed to exist, linguistic prescriptivism can be defined as the belief in a set of social processes similar to those outlined above. (Watts 2000: 31-32)

According to eighteenth-century prescriptive grammarians, questions on language usage were solved on the basis of three considerations permitting the achievement of this "state of perfection" in language structure and use. These are reason, etymology and the model of Latin and Greek grammar (Baugh and Cable 1987: 279).

Robert Lowth, with his *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762), is the most outstanding grammarian adopting this approach. He prescribed what language uses were correct and pointed out errors and solecisms with examples taken from authors like Milton, Dryden and Pope. Moreover, he described other varieties of usage only in order to condemn them (Freeborn 1992: 387). His aim of providing rules as a guide to the English language is clearly stated in the preface, which highlights notions such as *propriety* and *right/wrong*:

The principal design of a Grammar of any Language is to teach us to express ourselves with propriety in that Language, and to be able to judge of every phrase and form of construction, whether it be right or not. The plain way of doing this, is to lay down rules, and to illustrate them by examples. But besides showing what is right, the matter may be further explained by pointing out what is wrong. (Lowth 1762: x, the preface)

Lowth discussed and established many points of usage that have continued until the present day, such as the use of *shall* and *will*, double

negatives or the distinction between *lay* and *lie*. However, although he settled many disputed points, it is more important to observe the attitude that lies behind this: the concept of what is appropriate or not. Notions like ‘false grammar’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ‘mistakes’, and ‘errors’ permeated the discourse of English grammar in the eighteenth century and structured the terms of that discussion in ways that are still valid in our times (Finegan 1992: 125). These notions do indeed occur throughout his grammar work in examples such as:

Frequent mistakes are made in the formation of the Participle of this Verb. The analogy plainly requires *sitten*; which was formerly in use [...] but it is now almost wholly disused, the form of the Past Time *sat*, having taken its place. Dr. Middleton hath with great propriety restored the true Participle: “to have *sitten* on the heads of the Apostles.” (Lowth 1762: 75n)

There are not in English so many as a Hundred Verbs, [...] which have a distinct and different form for the Past Time Active and the Participle Perfect or Passive. The General bent and turn of the language is towards the other form, which makes the Past Time and the Participle the same. This general inclination and tendency of the language, seems to have given occasion to the introducing of a very great Corruption; by which the form of the Past Time is confounded with that of the Participle in these verbs. (Lowth 1762: 85)

### 3. *Modern perspectives: prescriptive or descriptive grammar?*

The massive appearance of English textbooks prescribing rules for native grammar was a reaction against the ‘unruliness’ of language, since such was the state of the mother tongue in the seventeenth century, or, at least, that is how it was conceived to be. This consideration is important, in order to make the following point. According to the traditional view of prescriptive grammar, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prescriptive English grammar writers: (i) did not allow for language change; (ii) saw change as a corruption and variability was suppressed; (iii) used written language as the source of grammar writing; (iv) based correctness on personal judgements, on reason, analogy, etymology and

the authority of the ‘best authors’; (v) considered that usage was not relative since there was only one correct usage.

These concepts are contrary to those attributed to contemporary linguistics: “(1) Language changes constantly; (2) Change is normal and represents no corruption but improvement; (3) Spoken language is the language; (4) Correctness rests upon usage; (5) All usage is relative” (Hartung 1963: 258). Such a radical opposition between these principles and those of linguistic prescriptivism suggests that the prevailing tenets of today may well have been a reaction against the prescriptive grammar of the previous centuries, in the same way as prescriptive grammar was a reaction against ‘unruly’ language.

This shift in interest in current linguistics has triggered off an avalanche of criticism against prescriptive grammar, which has been assessed without taking into account the eighteenth-century socio-historical context. Modern linguists reject traditional authorities to explain usage and argue the need of a blend of factors other than logic, analogy and personal prejudice, to interpret language use (Pooley 1963: 253). There is a bias against the prescriptive analysis of grammar and a variety of arguments have been put forward to reduce the value of this approach. For instance, it has been accused of not realising that language change and variation are often arbitrary, capricious and unreasonable, and of imposing logic and authoritative decree to determine language usage (Baugh and Cable 1987: 285). The key seems to lie in the negative attitude that modern linguists have of prescriptive grammar:<sup>3</sup>

Prescriptivism is also a negative term for linguists in a more technical sense. It is the disfavoured half of a binary opposition, ‘descriptive/prescriptive’; and this binarism sets the parameters of linguistics as a discipline. The very first thing any student of linguistics learns is that ‘linguistics is descriptive not prescriptive’ - concerned, in the way of all science, with objective facts and not subjective value judgements. Prescriptivism thus represents the threatening Other, the forbidden; it is a spectre that haunts linguistics and a difference that defines linguistics. (Cameron 1995: 5)

<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, despite all the blame on the prescriptive approach in the language analysis of eighteenth-century English grammarians, we also find contemporary linguists who show this same attitude in their own scholarly work (cf. Milroy 2000: 12-13).

#### 4. *The descriptive side of prescriptive grammar*

Prescriptive grammar is strongly determined by the need to find external symbols that easily identify and differentiate social classes. Language correctness is thus sought because it is an obvious token of social distinction and, as a result, manuals of grammar are written offering a kind of recipe of what is good and bad usage. But in order to determine what language usage is right or wrong, grammarians need to observe and describe the language use of the elite or educated people. This is clearly stated by Bloomfield and Newmark (1979: 311) when they say that “what educated people *prefer* tends to follow what other educated people are actually *doing* in their use of language”.

Therefore, in prescriptive grammars we find language observation and description, although this language description is undoubtedly socially marked. What Bloomfield and Newmark say may be applied to prescriptive grammar in general, but a special mention should be made of eighteenth-century prescriptive grammar. Del Lungo Camiciotti claims that “the underlying scope of most grammarians of the second half of the [eighteenth] century is neither puristic nor prescriptive, but merely descriptive”, and she goes on to state that these scholars “were not concerned with a standard of correctness conceived as an authoritative pattern of good style drawn from the classics, but with a norm of linguistic behaviour based on the usage of actual speakers” (Del Lungo Camiciotti 1988: 101).

In fact, one of the principles eighteenth-century grammarians followed when justifying the election of one variant, that is authority, is often mentioned in their grammars as an appeal to the language of ‘the best authors/speakers’, and this is merely the observation and description of what was considered prestigious language usage. This can be tested in some of the eighteenth-century grammarians’ preferences, such as the use of *different from* instead of *different of*:

It is likely that eighteenth-century preference for *different from* rested, not on any real superiority in terms of logic, effectiveness, elegance or anything else, but on the observed usage of the ‘best people’ at that time. The choice of that particular form was probably *socially* motivated, and the general compulsion to select one form out of a set of equivalents was a consequence of the trend towards standardisation, a charac-



teristic of which is the *suppression of optional variability*. (Milroy and Milroy 1991: 17)

This discussion can be exemplified with Lowth's grammar. Following Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2000b), we should remember that this text was a commissioned work, which thus met its publisher's requirements rather than its author's. In fact, Lowth's grammar has been recently revised and his work has been shown to offer some descriptive insights:

Lowth is prescriptive only with regard to his insistence on following what he determines to be established (and approved) usage, and he repeatedly acknowledges different customs among existing languages. (Cohen 1999: 84-85)

## 5. *Fisher's grammar: prescriptive or descriptive grammar?*

Since Fisher's *A New Grammar* (1754) was written in the eighteenth century, commentators would expect mostly prescriptive remarks. In the remaining part of this paper, however, I will also discuss observations that may be regarded as descriptive.

### 5.1. *Prescriptive remarks*

At the very beginning of her work, i.e. in the preface, Fisher provides a definition of language and grammar revealing a prescriptive attitude:

The Method of conveying, denoting, or expressing the Ideas of one Person to another, in Discourse or Writing, is universally called LANGUAGE –And the Art of doing the same by Rule, or in the Manner the best speakers and Writers express their Sentiments, is every where called GRAMMAR, which is truly the basis of Literature, being the Source from which all the other Sciences proceed. (Fisher 1754: i)

In this quotation the author mentions two important aspects of prescriptive grammars. First, that grammar consists of rules, i.e. it is the author's task to provide rules of how ideas are expressed grammatically or correctly. Secondly, the author equates rule with "the Manner the best Speakers and Writers express their Sentiments": an appeal to authority

which coincides with one of the arguments used by prescriptive grammarians to justify their statements. Fisher mentions this source of authority only twice in the grammar and syntax chapters of her book, the second when she says that the syntactic rules included in her book “are all that are observed by our best Writers, or necessary in our Language” (Fisher 1754: 113). On this occasion she also adds another criterion for selecting these rules, i.e. she will mention those remarks “necessary to our Language”. This statement reveals a personal bias in the election of the rules to be included, since what is necessary is left to the author’s own discretion.

Further on in her grammar, Fisher defines syntax as “the right joining of Words in a Sentence, or Sentences together” (1754: 112). Here the emphasis is on correctness, which is portrayed in “the right joining”. The author conveys what is right and, implicitly, what is wrong. However, this definition of syntax was not Fisher’s, but a sort of formula among contemporary grammarians: “The set definition of syntax remains virtually unchanged throughout the whole period: ‘the right placing or joining of Words together in a Sentence’ ” (Michael 1985: 466).

Throughout her book we can also see many remarks in which there are value judgements, that is, expressions such as *right* vs. *wrong*, *properly* vs. *improperly*, *elegantly* vs. *inelegantly*, *it ought/ it should/ it must* etc., which imply a sense of suitability and prescription or proscription. One example occurs when Fisher is dealing with the Saxon genitive and states: “it must be observed that when y is the last Letter of a Word that is turned into a Genitive Case it is always retained before the ’s” (Fisher 1754: 69n). Another example is when Fisher discusses the relative pronouns, among which she deals with *that* as a substitute for *who/whom/which*. She says this pronoun is used as an alternative form for the other relatives “though not elegantly” (Fisher 1754: 74). By so stating she was not describing contemporary usage.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, according to Austin (1985: 24), she did not represent or understand current usage since “people were using *that* as a relative in all walks of life and had long been doing so ever since Anglo-Saxon times. *Who* and *which*, from the interrogative pronouns developed later, basically in the ME period.” Another example occurs when the author explains the dif-

<sup>4</sup> Beal has commented (p.c.) that in this rule there is, in fact, a blend of descriptive and prescriptive judgement since, although Fisher condemns the use of *that*, she is aware of its current use as a substitute of *who/which*.

ference in spelling between *its* and *it's*: “those who write correctly never put *it's* or *'tis*; for *its*, or *it is* in Prose” (Fisher 1754: 72-73). Here she does not use such a strong verb as *must* but a more hedged “those who write correctly”. There is, therefore, a tacit tug-of-war between the concepts of right and wrong.

But perhaps the part of her work in which we find most prescriptive examples is the chapter on syntax. This is quite logical, because in the eighteenth century syntax meant giving rules on agreement and concordance. One such rule deals with pronouns and the verb *to be*: “the Verb Substantive, i.e., *am*, with its Past Time *was*, has the leading State of a Relative Name both before and after it; as, *Thou art he; who am I; these were they*” (Fisher 1754: 116). The use of oblique cases of pronouns after this verb did not always meet favour among eighteenth-century grammarians, and opposing views were held. Fisher was among the grammarians censuring the use of the object pronoun after the verb *to be*, advocating for the use of the subject pronoun both before and after this verb. By so doing, the author was distancing herself from contemporary usage because, although up to the sixteenth century the subject case of the pronoun followed the verb *to be*, from this century onwards the use of the oblique case became more and more frequent and came, according to Rissanen (1999: 262), “from below, i.e. initiated by a natural colloquial trend at the level of speech”; whereas the use of the subject pronoun after this verb was, according to Platt (1926: 73), restricted to learned speakers of the eighteenth century.

The rejection of double comparison was one of the rules formulated by the eighteenth century prescribing grammarians. Fisher must have believed the censure of this ‘anomaly’ so important that she recorded it twice; the first mention was in the chapter on etymology, or parts of speech, and the second as a rule of syntax:

Q. *Is it good English to say more fairer or most fairest?*

A. No; you ought to say, *fairer* or *more fair*; *fairest*, or *most fair*; for *more fairer* would signify as much as *more more fair*, and *most fairest* as much as *most most fair*. (Fisher 1754: 79)

Rule X. A Comparative Adverb must not be set before a Quality compared by *er* or *est*; as, *wiser*, *wisest*, and not *more wiser*, or *most wisest*, &c. (Fisher 1754: 117)

These rules dismissing the use of double comparisons of adjectives are based on reason, rather than contemporary usage, since double comparison had already disappeared in the eighteenth century, whereas in the seventeenth century the use of *more/most* as intensifiers was more important than their use as comparative markers:

*More* and *most* were historically not comparative markers, but intensifiers (as they still can be in such expressions as a *most enjoyable evening*). In EMnE, this intensifying function was felt much more strongly; hence writers did not find it ungrammatical or pleonastic to use both a comparative adverb and *-er* or *-est* with the same adjective. Examples from Shakespeare include *in the calmest and most stillest night* and *against the envy of less happier lands*. (Millward 1989: 229)

Following Millward's explanation, it would appear that Fisher, like many other contemporary grammarians who proscribed double comparison, was recording earlier language usage instead of contemporary language.

## 5.2. *Descriptive remarks*

So far, it is clear that Fisher's grammar was prescriptive, but was it also descriptive? Let us now consider some remarks to be found in *A New Grammar* and which convey descriptive language. Although at the beginning of the fourth edition of her book Fisher explained that she conceived grammar as an art governed by rule, and appealed to authority as the model to follow, she also considered that she was observing language and portraying it in her work:

I have, through longer Practice in teaching, more nice Observations on the Language, its Idioms, &c. judged it necessary to make several considerable Alterations, Additions and Amendments in this Impression. (Fisher 1754: iii)

If new observations deserve a new edition – “alterations, additions, and amendments” – it is because she wishes to include language use, albeit in order to correct it. As a matter of fact, we do find several descriptions of language usage: for instance, Fisher (1754: 69-70, 116) deals with the Saxon genitive explaining the following uses:

- Singular noun ending in *-s*: *-s's* (optional *s'* to avoid similar sounds)
- Plural nouns and nouns with no singular that end in *-es*: no *'s* added
- Irregular plural nouns: *'s*
- Words that end in *-ss*: no *'s* added
- When there is a group genitive, the *'s* is added to the penultimate noun.

Fisher thus seems to have recorded actual usage, since this pattern was already established by the end of the seventeenth century for the use of genitive singular forms and in the eighteenth century for the genitive plural forms (Moessner 2000: 395). Moreover, the author recognised that its use was peculiar to the English language and she defended it against the use of the preposition *of*:

Though this *'s* be deemed by some severe *Critics* and *Linguists* an Impropriety, alledging [sic] that *of* is the only true Sign of the *Genitive Case* in English: Yet as every Language has some *Peculiarities* of its own; as *Grammar* is to be adapted to *Language*; as through *Custom* we have *enfranchised* this *'s* to make a *Genitive Case* by an easy *Pronunciation*, &c. as it would be next to an *Impossibility* to get clear of it, by varying the Expressions where it occurs; and as it answers to the *Genitive Case* in *all other Languages*, we may certainly without *Injustice*, term it so in *English*. (Fisher 1754: 116-117)

When explaining how the comparative and the superlative were formed, this author gives as equally valid options the synthetic forms *er/-est* and the analytic forms *more/most* for the comparative and superlative degrees respectively. Of the comparative she says that “it is formed of the *Positive*, by adding the Syllable *er*” and she continues “it is likewise known by the Sign *more* before the *Positive*” (Fisher 1754: 78). Of the superlative Fisher states that “it is formed of the *Positive*, by adding the Syllable *est*” and that “it is likewise known by the Signs *most, very, or exceeding*” (Fisher 1754: 78). According to Lass (1999: 157) the use of the synthetic and analytic variants alternatively to form the comparative and superlative was an eighteenth-century practice:

Until the later eighteenth century, however, usage was nowhere near this uniform. Textual evidence and grammarians’ comments suggest that analytic and synthetic comparison were simple alternatives, with little if any conditioning.

Fisher seems, therefore, to have portrayed real contemporary usage, not an older use, since the uniformity of present-day English had not yet been reached, nor was to be until the late eighteenth century.

Further on in the text, Fisher explains the future auxiliaries *shall* and *will*: “*will*, in the first Person, promises or threatens, but in the second and third only foretells; *shall*, in the first Person, simply expresses, but in the second and third Persons, commands or threatens” (Fisher 1754: 84). So, the pattern she presents is as follows:

- *Shall/will/will* for futurity
- *Will/shall/shall* to promise, command or threaten.

It may seem that including the rules for *shall* and *will* among the descriptive comments is incongruent, since most modern linguists consider its use among eighteenth-century English speakers a social marker – i.e. “an infallible marker of good speech” (Traugott 1972: 170) – and that the rule was artificial and based on authority (Görlach 2001: 120). In fact, the distinction between these two auxiliaries has been a hotly-debated question among twentieth-century linguists. The main discussion is based on whether this eighteenth-century distinction was based on actual usage or invented upon a basis of authority.

Fries analysed the development of this rule in the English grammatical tradition, examining a corpus of English plays from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, concluding that the basis of this rule was not actual usage up to the eighteenth century (Fries, in Hulbert 1947: 1178). However, Hulbert studied several letters by Pope, Gray, and Walpole dating from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries, and reached the conclusion that a preference existed for the use of *shall* for the first person and for *will* in the second and third persons and that this preference was based on actual usage from mid seventeenth- to eighteenth-century English: “an impartial reader of these authors will see that in most cases when in a main clause *I will* or *you, he shall* is used, a promise or expression of volition is intended” (Hulbert 1947: 1181). Taglicht agreed with this, claiming that the rules for these auxiliaries had been misunderstood by modern linguists:

In linguistics, as elsewhere, it sometimes happens that we accept a statement made by a writer, not because of the evidence he presents and its

support, but because we are in general sympathy with his aims and methods. Similarly we may be tempted to reject a statement, not because we have evidence that proves it false, but because it is associated with a school of thought or a point of view that we regard as misguided and pernicious. This seems in fact to have happened in accounts of the historical development of the distinction between *shall* and *will* and of the rules which have been formulated by various writers at different periods about the use of these two auxiliaries. (Taglicht 1970: 193)

This author analyses the examples of these auxiliaries appearing in seven plays and novels written in the period 1675-1725, and states that “the basic ‘plain future’ paradigm *shall/will/will* is founded on genuine usage” (Taglicht 1970: 205) and that:

though perhaps they are not in every detail and undoubtedly are in need of further elaboration, they represent a definite advance and a respectable achievement in the grammatical description of the English language. (Taglicht 1970: 197, 205)

In the same way, Tieken-Boon van Ostade (1985: 124), studying the development of the conventional rules for *shall* and *will*, accepts the conclusions reached by Hulbert and Taglicht, i.e. that these rules were based on eighteenth-century usage. These consecutive articles on the use of *shall* and *will* have swung like a pendulum between two opposing views, i.e. from stating that eighteenth-century grammarians prescribed these rules without any correspondence with actual usage to accepting a descriptive account of contemporary language use. Hulbert, Taglicht and Tieken-Boon van Ostade agree on the descriptive account of these rules, the first two after research carried out on a variety of eighteenth-century language texts; only Fries claims its prescriptive nature. It is difficult, therefore, to say which consideration is correct. However, Fries’ contribution has been accused of partiality by Taglicht:

the desire (or rather, perhaps, the consciousness of a duty) to discredit the admittedly crude and outdated versions of the rules that are found in a great rabble of contemporary schoolbooks seems to have influenced his assessment of the evidence. (Taglicht 1970: 194)

Furthermore, Fries and all those who have accepted his conclusions

are said to have misinterpreted some parts of the evidence and ignored others for the sake of the results (Taglicht 1970: 197). An example of this is that Fries discriminated against some sentences making subjective decisions and interpreted all the contractions <'ll > as cases of *will* (Hulbert 1947: 1179). These subjective decisions as well as his attitude may have influenced the results of his survey and for this reason more importance should be given to the conclusions reached by Hulbert, Taglicht and Tieken-Boon van Ostade. Their position is backed up by Gotti, who has studied central modal verbs in some eighteenth-century English grammars. He states that these verbs, including *shall* and *will*, “had acquired the main present-day grammatical functions and semantic values” in the eighteenth century (Gotti 2003: 132). Therefore, one may say that the rules for *shall* and *will* recorded by many eighteenth-century grammarians, such as Fisher, were based on contemporary usage, and this justifies including this rule among descriptive definitions.

One final point can also be made about phrasal verbs. Though Fisher does not mention them explicitly in her account of the grammatical categories, she lists a few phrasal verbs when dealing with the meaning of the examples of prepositions, such as *speak for*, *cast out*, or *bring into* (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 - *Phrasal verbs in Fisher's examples of prepositions in composition.*

<b>Preposition</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Be	to bespeak	to speak for
With	to withdraw	to draw back
Dis	to dissect	to cut asunder (to separate)
E/ex	to eject	to cast out
E/ex	to exclude	to shut out
Intro	to introduce	to bring into
Per	to pervade	to go over or through

Thus Fisher is part of a group of English grammarians who recognised that the phrasal verb was not the same as a verb plus a preposition, but that it implied a change in the meaning of the verb. This acknowl-



edgment determined a significant advance in the conception of the phrasal verb since these grammarians perceived them as a separate syntactic and semantic entity (Hiltunen 1998: 440). Though the treatment of phrasal verbs as single units was not reached at the time, eighteenth-century grammarians started using phrasal verbs in translations of Latin examples or “as descriptive characterizations of the meanings of various prepositions” (Hiltunen 1998: 443), thus developing a latent awareness of this category.

## 6. *Conclusion*

If we follow modern linguists’ accounts, Priestley and Campbell appear to be the only two eighteenth-century descriptive grammarians, although the latter was a rhetorician rather than a grammarian. It is logical, therefore, that all others are to be considered prescriptive. However, this division is not well-founded, since there seems to be a blend of prescriptive and descriptive language accounts in eighteenth-century English grammars, as I have tried to demonstrate through the analysis of Fisher’s text. In fact, this author may not have been unique in basing several of her remarks on actual usage. Prescriptive and descriptive grammar should no longer be described as opposing poles. Instead, a continuum is a more appropriate description of a situation within which an eighteenth-century grammarian is more or less prescriptive, or more or less descriptive, or indeed, and this could be a third option that requires further study, a normative grammarian. This third option is proposed by Vorlat:

I, therefore, propose three categories: (1) descriptive registration of language without value judgments and including ideally – as a very strong claim – all language varieties; (2) normative grammar, still based on language use, but favouring the language of one or more social or regional groups and more than one written with a pedagogical purpose; (3) prescriptive grammar, not based on usage but on a set of logical (or other) criteria. (Vorlat 1998: 485-486)

Though normative grammar is regarded as a stage prior to prescriptive grammar in the standardisation process (Tieken-Boon van Ostade

2000c: 881), it may well adjust to the description of some eighteenth-century grammars, as many of them were written with a didactic purpose, either for use in schools or academies or for private use. This may well be shown by analysing the uses of *must* / *ought to* / *properly*. Moreover, these grammars recorded the language use of 'the best writers and speakers', that is, of a particularly prestigious social group. Thus normative grammar offers an interesting option worth further research as regards a larger number of eighteenth-century grammars.

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