Codification, Canons and Curricula

Description and Prescription in Language and Literature

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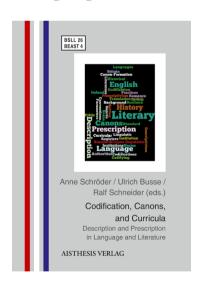
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Description and Prescription
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Description and Prescription in Language and Literature: Introductory Remarks

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1. Introduction

Language, literature and culture develop according to different sets of rules, and it is the task of linguistics, literary studies and cultural studies to describe both the regularities and the changes in these fields. On the one hand, this description unearths standardization mechanisms in all areas that influence practical language application and aesthetic production. On the other hand, although normative and prescriptive statements tend to be avoided to a large extent in the descriptively-aligned philological disciplines, these fields of academic study still contribute to standardization in that they implicitly or explicitly define the standards for the correct usage of language or 'good' aesthetic design for example in reference materials and with the help of other instruments and institutions. Moreover, they contribute to the perpetuation of standards by way of their influence on the curricula of schools and universities. Academia thus needs to question its own prescriptivism on a meta-level. Description and prescription are not mutually exclusive, but should rather be understood as complementary tendencies and interwoven practices that need to be observed not only in the subject-matter of linguistics, literary studies and cultural studies but also in scholarly practice.

The goal of the present volume is to examine the developments and functions of such prescriptive and descriptive tendencies by way of comparing the similarities and differences in the philological sub-disciplines (linguistics, literary studies and cultural studies, as well as didactics) and their respective subject matters. Several theoretical approaches, models and methods are presented by specialists from different disciplines which, as we believe, allow gaining new perspectives for further interdisciplinary research and develop improvements for school and university curricula. The range of papers from various academic disciplines amply demonstrates the fact that norms and normativity are observable phenomena in many cultural realms and that this debate represents a research endeavour which transgresses the boundaries of any one single discipline.

This first-time cooperation on the topic between members of several fields, disciplines and sub-disciplines of English Studies is innovative in so far as the different areas of philological study and research have been presented as *de facto* separate fields of study since the 1970s as a result of theoretical developments and diversification within the disciplines. They are, however, concerned with the selfsame

basic questions as this volume shows. Moreover, especially linguistics and literary studies are currently in the process of rediscovering their mutual roots.[1]

The present volume is designed to collect the plethora of impulses which the discussion of normativity has received over the last few years and to relate them with each other. The prerequisite for the success of this project is to bring together qualified, renowned scholars who have dealt with the notions of prescription and description in very different ways: as historical linguists concerned with the genesis of standard languages, as authors of dictionaries, as literary scholars interested in anthologies and the control mechanisms of literature systems and literary history, as experts of language teaching methodology and curriculum planning. In this way varying conceptual and methodological avenues of normativity shall be put to the test at the same time. Alongside British and American oriented scholars, Romance and German philologists shall also have their say, which makes this volume truly interdisciplinary.

2. The 'State of the Art'

In most basic linguistics textbooks, the dichotomies of prescription/description, prescriptivism/descriptivism and prescriptive/descriptive are introduced as central concepts within the field of linguistics,[2] most often indicating that modern linguistics is understood as descriptive. In literary studies and cultural studies, however, this binary concept plays no role in the meta-theoretical reflection, even though the questions posed in connection to it (normativity, discussion of values, self-conception of the field of study) are also treated in these sub-disciplines.[3]

In modern, descriptive linguistics, language use is seen as the final authority above all written language structures even those in grammar books, dictionaries or so-called usage guides. It is in complete opposition to the prescriptive attitude of the traditional grammars, which as a general rule paid little attention to how the language is used in reality by its speakers. Modern linguistic approaches recognize language facts such as language variation as a part of natural, spoken languages, and are therefore conscientious to describe these as objectively as possible, avoiding value judgements. Older prescriptive approaches, on the other hand, attempt to reduce language variation through the establishment of a general, authoritative norm. Simply put, in

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[1] At the "Anglistentag" (annual convention of university teachers of English in German-speaking countries) in 2007 one panel was devoted to the basic foundations of both linguistics and literary studies in theories from cognitive psychology or inspired by the cognitive sciences (cf. Fludernik and Schneider 2008); in July 2009 an international conference on the connection between linguistics and literary studies was held at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) under the title "Linguistics & Literary Studies: Interfaces, Encounters, Transfers" (cf. Jacob and Fludernik, forthc.).

[2] Cf. for example Bieswanger and Becker 2008, Meyer et al. 2002, Kortmann 1999, O'Grady et al. 1996, Aitchison 1995, Fromkin and Rodman 1993, Lyons 1981, to name but a few.

[3] For more extensive surveys of phenomena of description and prescription in language/linguistics and literature/literary studies, see the contributions to this volume by Busse and Schröder, as well as Schneider, respectively.

descriptive linguistics language is described as it is, while in prescriptive linguistics it is described as it should be.

Nevertheless when native or non-native speakers of a language are uncertain about the correct usage of language structures, they generally consult grammar books, dictionaries or usage guides. In doing so, they expect authoritative statements about the adequacy of expressions or the correct use of grammar when in doubt, because they know that in society in general there are indeed more and less socially acceptable variations (cf. also Milroy 1999: 19). In this context, Joan Beal (2004) talks about 'linguistic insecurity' as a result of the prescriptive grammars in the 18th century. The great commercial success of books such as *Der Dativ ist dem Genetiv sein Tod* 1-3 (Sick 2004-2006) in Germany and comparable publications in Great Britain, such as, for example, those by Lynne Truss (2003) and James Cochrane (2003), are thus an expression of a new prescriptive trend in society, a 'new prescriptivism', which can by all means be seen as a reaction to a *laissez-faire* stance in modern language teaching and education in general.

In the past, linguists have approached the topic of prescriptivism from several different perspectives (cf. e.g. Beal et al. 2008). More recently, workshops such as *Normative Linguistics* at the ISLE-1 Conference from 8th-11th October 2008 in Freiburg i.Br. among others and the active interest of the audiences involved have shown that there is a growing need to discuss this topic. Most notably the effect of linguistic purism on language use and language attitudes has attracted particular attention (cf. e.g. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2006; Auer 2006; Beal 2008). However, the questions of how the current corpus of reference materials meets the requirements of modern philology and how it reflects real language use are only briefly discussed (cf. e.g. Busse and Schröder 2010).

At the same time it should be brought into question whether the terms *prescriptivism/descriptivism* are truly antonyms. Only more recently (cf. Beal and Sturiale 2008), a different angle on modern philology has been propagated. As Cameron (1995: 3ff.) and Milroy (1999: 23ff.) indicated already more than 10 years ago, the descriptivism debate is similarly driven by ideology. This leads to, among other things, a 'demonisation' of each and every normative approach. Yet it is clear that anti-prescriptive discourse – just as much as prescriptive discourse – formulates value judgements about language and norms of language description: "[…] if 'leave your language alone' is not a prescription, what is it?" (Cameron 1995: 7). Moreover, even the descriptive linguists are not (always) able to completely free themselves from the dominant traditional and societal ideology of a 'correct' standard language (Milroy 1999: 39).

The dichotomy *prescription/description* is further examined in this volume and the binary opposition is scrutinised. For especially in terms of (second) language instruction and with school curricula in mind, questions about norms and about 'correct' language use are omnipresent and a 'leave-your-language-alone' attitude hardly feasible. Schools need standards and as such presumably a 'standard language' as well (cf. Carter 1999:163). However, the question of what a 'standard language' truly should be is answered rather negatively by the linguist camp (cf. Trudgill 1999) or perceived as something primarily historical (cf. Bex and Watts 1999: part I). In the

process the problem of 'competing models' and the different (standard) varieties is raised and certainly not only for former British colonies such as Jamaica (cf. Shield 1984, 1989), but also for polycentric languages like English for the EFL classroom (cf. Gnutzmann 1999, 2008; Gnutzmann and Intemann 2005) and the university curricula in other countries.

While in prescriptivism norms are *set*, they are *detailed* in descriptivism. The attempt to describe alone, however, implies the existence of norms, for otherwise only random items could be described and not generalisable individual cases.

There are parallels to be found in literary studies and cultural studies for the field known in linguistics as 'prescription and description', more specifically in literary and cultural production as well as in societal behaviour. These concern, on the one hand, the general presence of regulatory mechanisms and their dependence on power structures as they have been illustrated by cultural-historical, cultural-critical and cultural-sociological approaches since the 1970s by way of Michel Foucault's *Discourse Analysis* (1982), Raymond Williams' *Cultural Materialism* (1978) or Pierre Bourdieu's *Field Theory* (1970). On the other hand, there are specific mechanisms, institutions and practices that act as regulatory and normative forces on literary and otherwise cultural products, on public discourse and scholastic curricula. These phenomena are of particular interest given the fact that generally the perception seems to prevail that our contemporary society liberalises, and cultural production and public (in particular in media) statements of opinion are generally undisturbed by regulations and restrictions. Although today one can hardly find prescriptive approaches in the realm of artistic creation, guidelines are still made through selection and valuation processes for the qualitative and quantitative shaping of both the current cultural scene and the cultural legacy that is passed on to later generations. In particular, the discussion of the literary canon as well as the question of the functions of anthologies and of literary (and cultural) historiography, which are intricately interconnected, have been brought into focus by a cultural-studies-oriented approach to literature. Censorship should also be added as a topic. In all these areas descriptive-taxonomic and normative-axiological aspects overlap both in institutional practice and in academic discussion, and historical and meta-scientific works on this are already available.

The intense discussion of the canon especially in the Anglo-American cultural sphere in the 1970s and 1980s (Fiedler and Baker 1981; von Hallberg 1983; Myers 1989) and the general anti-authoritarian discourses of the time could ultimately have led to the end of efforts toward canonisation and the classification of literary production in the past and present. This notwithstanding, literature remains, like all other cultural products, the object of constant aesthetic and ideological value judgements. For this reason, even such inherently anachronistic publications as Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994) and his *The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer Through Frost* (2004) fail to surprise us. This volume thus even dedicates itself to the question of whether a recent canonisation is not a reflex to the repeated 'opening' of the canon (Fiedler and Baker 1981) and subject-matter expansion, which has exponentially increased the number of texts perceived as scholarly and research-worthy in the area once known as 'English Literature' alone. Noteworthy are:

a) feminist literary studies, the numerous works by women authors promoted into the curricula of universities and schools, and in succession Gender Studies and Gay and Lesbian Studies, which added further texts;

b) post-colonial literary theory and criticism, through which the works of non-white, English-speaking authors received scholarly attention;

c) the standards of political correctness, which had an impact in Great Britain to the effect that the cultural products of the constituent countries of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are more strongly regarded in their regional individuality after a process of political *devolution*, and thus that it is no longer possible to talk about 'English' literature and culture but rather 'British';

d) the phenomena of inter- and multi-mediality have expanded the subject-matter of 'literature', so that now, for example, audio books, films and scripts count as legitimate academic pursuits (Helbig 1998; Rajewsky 2002).

It will be a further task to discuss to what extent the canonisation process will proceed, given the barely manageable number of new editions to the 'classical' canon in these sub-categories; another point requiring discussion is if and how selections are carried out and passed on according to mostly implicit standards. It is important in this endeavour to examine the roles of the universities, fund donors and curricula planners as well as those of the media and cultural institutions. Similarly linked to this quandary is the question, which kind of literary historiography is possible at all after the expansion of the canon and subject-matter? (cf. Nowak 2006)

   Anthologising texts plays a critical role in the process of building a canon. Since the advent of a mass book market, which went hand in hand with the spread of print literature in the Early Modern period, anthologies have fulfilled the basic functions of safeguarding and passing on literary works, but simultaneously the selection, valuation and cultural distinction, too, and thus always moved within the field of description and prescription (Benedict 1996). This applies in particular to shorter texts for the practical reason that they are easier to anthologise, but also pertains to the novel.[4] For the school and university curricula anthologies represented and continue to represent crucial instruments of subject-matter regulation and evaluation. In the Anglo-American realm (and also to a lesser extent in the Anglistics/Americanistics departments of universities in German-speaking countries) the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* and the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* in particular are considered to set the norm for a degree in English Literature. The entire *Norton Anthology of…* series can be regarded as an institution of curricular normalisation. Apart from anthologies, encyclopaedias of literature and similar reference books also take on a regulatory function in the world of literature (*Kindlers Neues Literaturlexikon*, the series of national literature of the Metzler publishing company).[5]

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[4] For the theory and practice of poetry anthologies in Great Britain in history and the present, cf. Korte, Lethbridge and Schneider (2000); for the role of anthologies in the establishment of the novel, cf. Price (2000).

[5] Cf., for example, Seeber (2004), Zapf (2004), Rössner (2007), Beutin (2008).

The various mechanisms of censorship in novels, theatre, cinema and television, the press and the internet continue to constitute a relevant area of cultural normalisation despite the extensive elimination of explicit censorship laws (Smith 1994; Müller 2004a; Korte and Petzold 2008; Fishburn 2008): whether authors of novels are brought to court because their novels impinge upon someone's personal rights; whether fundamentalist groups burn books (as was the case with Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in 1988) or they manage to have a theatre or opera production removed because they see it as a denigration of their religion; whether media institutions (e.g. the British Board of Film Classification) practice self-censorship regarding the portrayal of violence and sexuality; or if pupils are forbidden to read the *Harry Potter* novels because they allegedly contain a glorification of witchcraft irreconcilable with the Christian faith – every case is, despite various possible definitions and the scope of the concept of censorship (Müller 2004b), a regulation of cultural discourse, which operates implicitly as a normalising force on the overall structure of cultural expressions by sanctioning undesirable contributions. The subject of censorship clearly exhibits overlapping terrain with political correctness, since here we are talking about a medial, public self-censorship with prescriptive tendencies about the possibilities to circumscribe that which can be portrayed or said, and cultural values which constantly need to be renegotiated. The sub-disciplines of linguistics, literary studies and didactics come together acutely here, because political correctness includes (among other things) the debate about language regulation (cf. Hoffmann 1996; Greil 1998), and about the literary canon and (university) curricula (cf. Manske 2002 and Hildebrandt 2005), and is regarded by critics as language censorship and a leftist, liberal-motivated threat (cf. the special section of *Forschung & Lehre 2009* (2): 92-107).

3. Areas of Investigation and Structure of the Present Volume

Within this broad and possibly quite disparate subject-matter it is possible to delineate several central areas of investigation which are of concern to the editors and inspired the collection of papers for the present volume.

The Portrayal of Non-standardised or Social and Regional Language Variation

Although the orientation of modern linguistics towards language use leads to a more intensified focus on social and regional language variation, these varieties have yet to be acknowledged as standard or near-standard everyday languages. This particularly includes the area of grammar (cf. Elspaß 2007). For this reason the following questions will be discussed: to what extent are regional and social varieties or pluricentric norms taken into account in reference books (dictionaries, grammars, etc.)? That means more specifically if variation is portrayed at all and, if so, which variants are considered; if the portrayals available are really 'neutral', and which basic recommendations are given as 'correct' language use.

Similarly, the portrayal and/or discrimination of language variation in literature is interesting to investigate. In particular one might wonder to what extent literature and language use in literature and the media can contribute to a pluricentric understanding

of language norms (cf. the pieces on this topic in Laferl and Pöll 2007). In Great Britain for example, the use of Black English in novels and short stories since the 1950s or literary-oriented radio programs like *Caribbean Voices* by the BBC (cf. Wambu 1998) helped this language variety achieve recognition.

The Historical, Socio-Cultural, Economic and Political Foundation upon which Reference Books and Anthologies are Built

The compilers, editors and authors of language reference materials, literary anthologies, dictionaries and literary histories are all shaped or at the very least influenced by their socio-cultural environment and also potentially feel obliged to a long tradition. As a result the following questions about the stability and change of norms are of the greatest import: Who are and were the decision-makers that determined the inclusion or exclusion of a grammatical rule variation in standard reference books or a literary work in the literary canon? What are and were their reasons, motivations and ideologies? By what and whom are and were they influenced? Are there differences/similarities between the societal and ideological structures in the past and today? And what role did and do minority groups play in the decision-making process?

The Impact and Relevance for (Second) Language Learning and the Prospects and Need for the Improvement of Curricula

The academic preoccupation with language, literature and culture in the field of description and prescription has an impact on the educational content of a nation through academic and scientific publications, but also as a multiplicator of the linguistic, literary and cultural knowledge by way of teacher training. Thus, the following questions need to be addressed when inquiring the regulation mechanisms in science and society that lead to normalisation: Can current curricula be understood as the result of such regulation mechanisms? Does that imply the necessity to change them? To what extent does the knowledge of these mechanisms enable us to avoid reduction and selection in future curriculum planning? Are prescriptive tendencies the essence of curricula and if so how can they be created in such a way that prescription and description are brought into balance?

Thus the present volume is structured into four parts: Part I is 'Setting the Scene', investigating the historical background and parameters of codification and canon formation. It is followed by Part II, which deals with 'Authorities and Institutions' and the 'Practices of Description and Prescription'. Ways of 'Expanding the Canons' and 'Testing the Norms' are explored in Part III, while Part IV looks at the 'Teaching of Norms' and possible 'Influences of Description and Prescription on the Curriculum'.

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