



The progressive as a symbol of national superiority in nineteenth-century British grammars



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ABSTRACT

This article shows that, despite undergoing significant language change, the Progressive Active was never criticized in prescriptive grammars of English in the nineteenth century. Even more unexpectedly, in British grammars it became a symbol of national superiority over the classical language and English and French, and was praised for making English more accurate, precise, or allowing finer distinctions of “time”. This praise can be linked to the dominant socio-cultural narrative of the time of progress and pride over other nations, for which the Progressive came to stand metonymically.

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1. Introduction

The nineteenth century is still widely seen as the century of prescriptivism in English historical linguistics, and indeed normative grammars were one important medium of standardization. Thus, e.g. in Milroy and Milroy's (1999) framework, the last phases of standardization, especially the codification and prescription stages, are hardly imaginable without prescriptive grammars. The onset of prescription is usually dated to the 1760s (e.g. Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2009, 2012), and prescriptive statements can in many cases be traced back to Robert Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (Lowth, 1762). They were popularized through Lindley Murray's generously helping himself to large parts of Lowth's grammar for his *English Grammar* (Murray, 1795), which was itself much copied, and reissued endlessly over the course of the nineteenth century (cf. Görlich, 1998). Normative grammar writing is often taken as synonymous with proscription, i.e. negative comments on words, constructions, pronunciations etc., so much so that Sundby et al. (1991) exclude all other comments from their collection of eighteenth-century normative grammar writing. And indeed if we read nineteenth-century grammar books, a prescriptive stance in this sense is immediately apparent: Grammar writers of the time were openly critical of many linguistic usages, and quite obviously felt they did not only have the right, but perhaps even the duty to correct their fellow speakers (and writers), and often their fellow grammarians.

Nevertheless, in this context of (often quite vicious) criticism of “errors”, “solecisms”, “overuse” and other “mistakes” in grammar, which frequently shades into moral condemnation, it should not be overlooked that not all grammar writing was proscriptive, that not all comments were negative in tone, and that even extremely censorious comments may contain interesting grains of descriptive truth, as I have shown elsewhere (Anderwald, 2014a). My aim in this article is therefore to provide a more comprehensive perspective on nineteenth-century grammar writing, extending Labov's Principle of Linguistic Accountability (e.g. Labov, 1972: 72) to the study of grammaticography: in my view, studying grammar writing misses interesting insights if it concentrates on prescriptions and proscriptions only, and for a fuller picture we also need to provide

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information about contexts where a comment could, but does not occur; where proscriptions could have been, but were not voiced and – of course – where a grammar writer's tone is neutral or even positive, rather than normative. In general assumptions on normative grammar writing, the Progressive actually constitutes an interesting counterexample, because in my extensive studies of nineteenth-century grammar writing (Anderwald, 2016) I have not come across a single critical comment relating to it, despite the fact that the Progressive demonstrably undergoes change at the time, and that it is actually one of the most frequently mentioned constructions in grammar books. In this article, I will show in more detail why this lack of negative comments is unexpected, in what sense the Progressive can be said to be undergoing change, and I will in some detail present and discuss typical comments of the time, before linking them to the socio-cultural context in which they occur. The curious fact that the Progressive was not only *not* commented on negatively, but actually hailed as a symbol of national superiority in Britain (but not in sources from America) surely tells us something interesting about nineteenth-century Britain, about factors potentially influencing language change, and, last but not least, about our own preconceptions of nineteenth-century prescriptivism.

2. General expectations

For the nineteenth century, Görlach observes that “recent and ongoing change is likely to be classified as ‘mistake’” (Görlach, 1999: 69), and Mugglestone similarly claims that in the nineteenth century “changes in progress (with all their underlying variability) predictably attracted a normative response” (Mugglestone, 2006: 282). Indeed, our (retrospective) expectations of normative grammars are that they would have been critical not only of linguistic phenomena that were regionally or socially marked as being lower-class (perhaps as “vulgar”, “common”, “not educated”, or “not in good taste”), but also of linguistic phenomena undergoing change, especially perhaps of changes from below, because here recentness and unusualness typically intersects with social class. For present-day ‘language guardians’, this expectation is formulated by Labov in what he calls the *Golden Age Principle* (Labov, 2001: 514):

No one has ever said, “I really like the way young people talk today, it's so much better than the way we talked when I was growing up.” ... The most general and most deeply held belief about language is the Golden Age Principle: At some time in the past, language was in a state of perfection. It is understood that in such a state, every sound was correct and beautiful, and every word and expression was proper, accurate, and appropriate. Furthermore, the decline from that state has been regular and persistent, so that every change represents a falling away from the golden age, rather than a return to it. Every new sound will be heard as ugly, and every new expression will be heard as improper, inaccurate, and inappropriate. Given this principle is it obvious that language change must be interpreted as nonconformity to established norms, and that people will reject changes in the structure of language when they become aware of them.

From this passage, we can derive two explicit expectations:

- (1) What is undergoing change will be criticized
- (2) (More specifically:) What is new will be criticized

These two expectations have two corollaries; from (1) follows (1'), from (2) follows (2').

- (1') What is stable will not be criticized
- (2') (In processes of change:) What is old will not be criticized

The overall correct intuition behind Labov's observation can be confirmed not only by his own studies for present-day English, but also specifically for prescriptive grammar writing in the nineteenth century in many cases; for example the new construction of the Progressive Passive is one of the most violently rejected constructions ever (Anderwald, 2014b,c), GET-constructions, also rising considerably in frequency over the time, are regularly criticized (Anderwald, forthcoming), and criticism of the (relatively) new *going-to* future is also occasionally encountered (Anderwald, 2016a). Labov's proviso “when they become aware of them” of course plays an important role, and it is still a desideratum of future work to investigate where exactly this threshold of salience (or notoriety) lies – for ordinary speakers as for grammar writers, and which factors play a role in constituting it; however, judging from the (overall really quite rare) Progressive Passive, new constructions seem to be noticeable even at a low text frequency of under 5 (per 100,000 words), and my case study of obligational HAVE GOT TO suggests that new constructions seem to become salient quite early on, only decades after their first use (Anderwald, 2016a). (For a quantitative approach to sociolinguistic salience more specifically, cf. e.g. Rácz, 2013.)

In addition, we also regularly (then as now) encounter criticism of phenomena that seem to be stable, i.e. that are not undergoing linguistic change, but that are socially marked, such as ‘classics’ of non-standard varieties such as multiple negation, adverbs without *-ly*, or the lack of subject-verb concord (for an extensive study of nineteenth-century comments on the latter topic, cf. Dekeyser, 1975). Rather than change diachronically, these seem to be features that are persistent features of all, or almost all, varieties of English, with the exception of Standard English, and they have been called “vernacular universals” of English for this reason (the term comes from Chambers, 2004; cf. also Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi, 2004; and the

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