

The project *Bridging the Unbridgeable: linguists, prescriptivists & the general public* invites you to an informal meeting at ICEHL17 on:

USAGE & NORMATIVISM: PUBLIC DISCOURSE & CRITICAL LANGUAGE AWARENESS

TIME & PLACE

to be announced

In our research project we concern ourselves with English usage guides & usage problems. We aim to construct a mutually beneficial ‘trialogue’ between the three groups involved. It is our experience so far that linguists especially are rather hard to engage.

Why this meeting?

We have organised this meeting for the following reasons:

- 1) to engage (historical) linguists in our research project
- 2) to assess their current level of engagement
- 3) to assess their willingness to engage the general public on the issue of English usage
- 4) to discuss possible points of action.

MAIN TOPICS

- the public discourse
- usage & normativism
- critical language

The main topics of this meeting are those which have given the meeting its title. The discussion we would like to have with you – which is largely exploratory – should ideally answer as many of the following questions. The discussion will probably raise other questions, and we hope that this meeting will create a snowball effect in linguistic awareness.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- 1) What is the state of the public & academic discourses regarding usage & normativism in the Anglophone world?
- 2) Are these discourses led or engaged in by academics? or...
- 3) Are these discourses led or engaged in by lay linguists or language professionals (journalists, editors, etc.)?
- 4) Is there a role for historical linguists to engage in this discourse outside academia?
- 5) Is there amongst the public a critical language awareness when it comes to issues of usage & normativism?
- 6) How can (historical) linguists raise or increase this critical language awareness?
- 7) Is it desirable that (historical) linguists raise critical awareness of normativism?

Prescriptivism & linguistics

The descriptive paradigm is such a strong mandate of linguistics that prescriptivism appears to have become a virtual taboo among linguists. Prescriptivism seems to have acquired such a strong negative connotation that even the scientific study (=description!) of this phenomenon has become tainted by it. We suspect that this is why it has been particularly difficult to engage linguists in this project so far: on the whole, too many of them do not consider prescriptivism to require or even merit scientific inquiry.

Our work in society

The valorisation of scientific research, of universities as institutions, and of academia in general, have pushed the discussion of the usefulness of universities to the forefront by political and public debates on whether to increase or cut spending on research and education. It seems that universities are realising that they have not always articulated their societal importance clearly enough to the general public. On a smaller scale this is also true for linguists in the debates on usage & normativism / prescriptivism, and – as a related topic – the role of the standard language.

WE BELIEVE THAT...

- prescriptivism and usage are valid subjects of linguistic inquiry
- the topic of usage matters in linguistics, and that linguistics matters in the topic of usage
- because our research is funded with public money, we should make the results of that research available to the public – and where possible of use to them
- we should not be afraid to be ‘critical linguists’, to be engaged with the public, with the practices of those whose language (variety) we are describing
- as language specialists, we should make ourselves heard, and explain the workings of language – including normative aspects – to the public
- historical linguists are especially suited to be engaged in this debate, since they can place it in a much needed historical and social context
- the participation of linguists is crucial at this point in time, as we risk losing touch with society – or being perceived to – which makes us irrelevant

We suggest that, if we want to involve ourselves and if we want to be heard, we need to become more organised. The following initiatives can help make that happen.

ACTION POINTS / INITIATIVES

- Formulate a research & teaching agenda for (historical) linguists of English on usage & normativism
 - pool publications & research initiatives
 - include topics in curriculum
- Use international platforms to teach critical language awareness about usage & normativism
 - informal international network (such as HiSoN)
 - events at future conferences
 - workshop at the *Conference on Prescriptivism* in Leiden (12–14 June 2013)
 - one of the themes at our *Bridging the Unbridgeable* conference in Leiden (spring 2014)
 - publications, such as *English Today* or the *Chronicle of Higher Education*
 - presence in the digital (popular) media, e.g. researchers' / research projects' blogs, or group pages on social media

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