



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Linguistic Prescriptivism Workshop(s)

In his lecture at the University of Leeds, Peter Trudgill described prescriptivism as ‘the bizarre notion that some forms of language are “right” and others are “wrong”’. He went on to say:

- This notion is propagated by people who feel they have some kind of entitlement to **prescribe** how other people should speak and write.
- This is most often how they speak and write themselves – or think they do.
- These people feel they have authority to instruct the rest of us that certain **grammatical forms** and **pronunciations** and **words** which are used by ordinary people in their everyday lives are “incorrect”.
- What motivates them is not entirely clear. But they typically make these assertions **without any supporting evidence** and **with total confidence**.

The purpose of this workshop is to explore these ideas further. Specifically, the aims are:

- To develop an understanding of what linguistic prescriptivism is and why it is still a dominant force in society.
- To understand that linguistic prescriptivism is not a new phenomenon but that the specific linguistic features it targets may change.
- To be able to identify the kinds of linguistic features that are usually the target of linguistic prescriptivism and consider why such forms are so highly stigmatised.
- To identify the social groups whose language is being judged as “incorrect”.
- To understand and critique the assumptions about language that underpin linguistic prescriptivism.

Below are three texts for you to analyse and discuss:

- **Text 1** is a letter that was sent to parents of pupils attending a primary school in the West Midlands. It contains a list of local dialect phrases and other linguistic features that will no longer be ‘tolerated’ in the school’s classrooms.
- **Text 2** is taken from a 19th century etiquette manual, *A Manual of Etiquette with Hints of Politeness and Good Breeding*, by Daisy Eyebright (1813). It discusses the use of ‘slang’ terms.

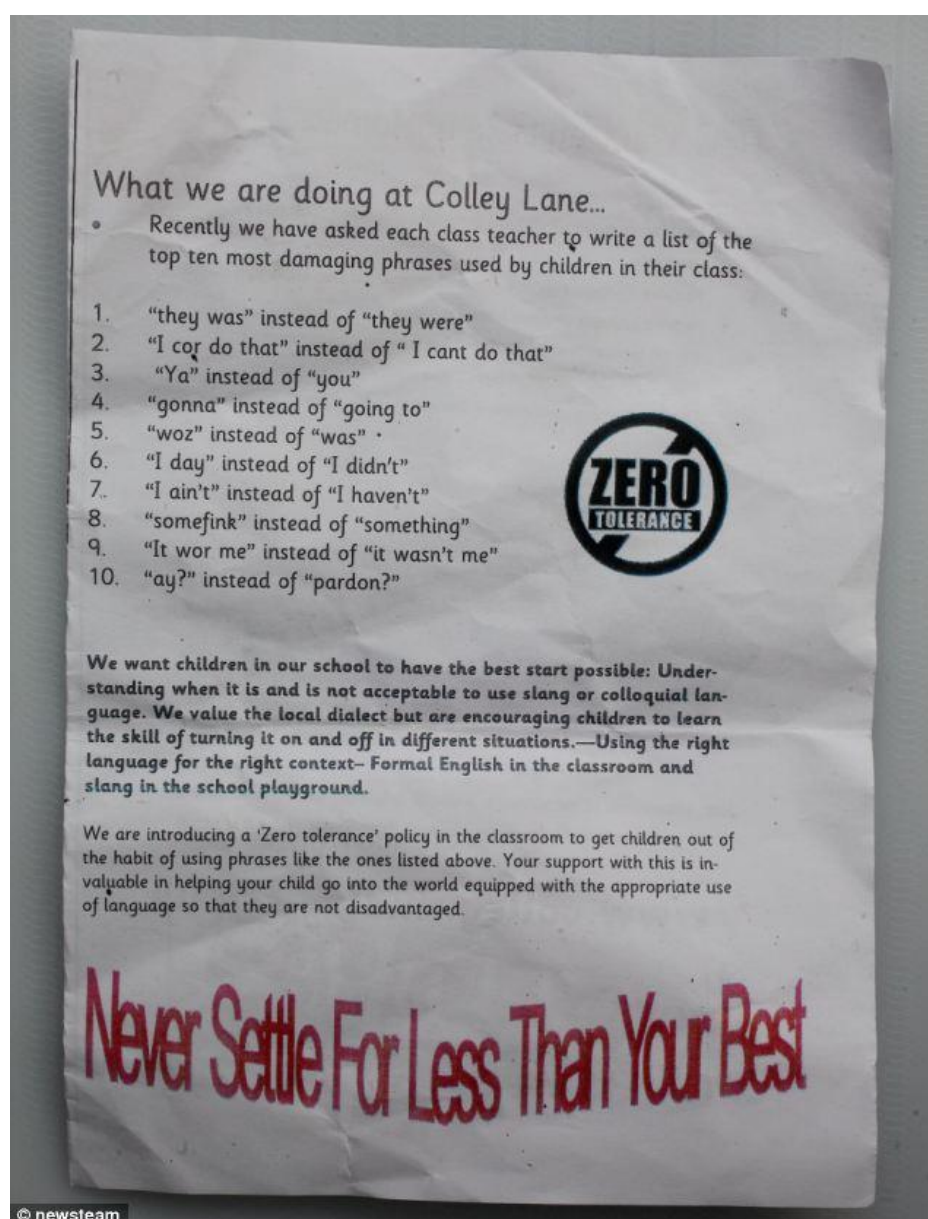
- **Text 3** is a 'personal speech coach' app designed to help individuals 'train against verbal habits and practice speaking articulately, confidently and without all of those "likes" and "sos"'

When working with these texts, read them carefully and make a note of what stands out to you as particularly interesting, significant or anomalous. Consider the questions that follow and discuss in small groups.

Text 1

A letter that was sent to parents of pupils attending a primary school in the West Midlands.

Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-24941692>



Things to think about - Text 1:

- Do you recognise any of the banned words/phrases? Would you use them yourself? If not, why not? Have you heard others using them? Who?
- If you had to draw up a similar list based on the language spoken in your local area, which words, phrases and pronunciations would you include? Are there particular features of your local dialect that people tend to comment on and/or judge as “incorrect”, “wrong”, or “damaging” to speakers? Why do you think this is the case?
- The letter refers to ‘slang’, ‘colloquial language’ and ‘local dialect’. How are these terms being used in the letter? How would you use them?
- Are there any features of your local accent and dialect that you try to avoid in certain situations or with certain people? If so, why? Did anyone teach you to change your language depending on the context? Do you think that explicit instruction about this is necessary (as indicated in the letter)?
- Do you think that this kind of ‘zero tolerance’ approach to local dialect at school will work? What are the potential consequences of this kind of intervention?
- Has anyone ever corrected the way that you speak? In what context? How did it make you feel?
- Do you think that speakers who use a local dialect are ‘disadvantaged’? If yes, in what ways?



Text 2

Taken from a 19th century etiquette manual, *A Manual of Etiquette with Hints of Politeness and Good Breeding*, by Daisy Eyebright (1813).

SLANG PHRASES.

Slang phrases seem to be *à la mode* in this 19th century; and they issue from rosy lips which appear almost incapable of such guile.

We will not repeat the fashionable slang, thereby, perhaps, spreading its serpent trail more widely, but merely allude to the too frequent repetition of "See

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here," "Hold on," and "I say," wherewith not only callow school girls, but even young ladies of so-called aristocratic tendencies, and "*out in society*," delight to adorn their peculiar phraseology.

And to illustrate our point we will relate the following anecdote:

A young man who was in the custom of larding his conversation with the expression "*I say*," was informed that an acquaintance had ridiculed the habit, and declared that he could not speak even a short sentence without bringing in those obnoxious words at least ten times. So the former took an opportunity of addressing him in this amusing style of reproof:—

I say, sir, I hear say you say I say "I say," at every word I say. "Now, sir, although I know I say "I say" at every word I say, still I say, sir, it is not for you to say I say "I say" at every word I say.

Things to think about - Text 2:

- How is the term 'slang' being used in this text? How does this compare with Text 1?
- Which linguistic features are identified as 'slang'? Would you use these features? If not, why not?
- The text points out that 'even young ladies of so-called aristocratic tendencies' use slang phrases. Women's language is often the subject of social commentary. Why do you think this happens? Can you think of other more modern examples?



Text 3

A screen shot from the iTunes store of a 'personal speech coach' app called LikeSo by Say It Media.

Source: <https://apps.apple.com/gb/app/likeso/id1074943747>

LikeSo

[View More by This Developer](#)

By Say It Media Inc.

Open iTunes to buy and download apps.



Description

LikeSo is your personal speech coach. LikeSo offers a fun and effective way to train against verbal habits and practice speaking articulately, confidently and without all of those "likes," and "sos." With two modes of play: FreeStyle, your own open mic, and TalkAbout, a conversation game to practice speaking on the fly, LikeSo provides a real-time analysis of your speech fitness, including optimal pacing for the fast or slow talker.

LikeSo is for your next presentation, interview, meeting, audition, date, debate - even your next conversation!

[Say It Media Inc. Web Site](#) > [LikeSo Support](#) >

[View in iTunes](#)

+ This app is designed for both iPhone and iPad

\$0.99

Category: Lifestyle

Updated: Jan 11, 2017

Version: 1.3

Size: 26.4 MB

Language: English

Seller: Say It Media Inc.

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Rated 4+

Compatibility: Requires iOS 8.0 or later. Compatible with iPhone, iPad, and iPod touch.

Customer Ratings

Current Version:

★★★★★ 9 Ratings

All Versions:

★★★★ 47 Ratings

What's New in Version 1.3

LikeSo is serving up speech fitness training for measuring, monitoring and motivating improvement in our speaking skills! The new version introduces the ability to set Goals and Reminders for upcoming speaking opportunities (Interviews, Presentations, Speeches, Toasts, etc.), Speech Quality Points and your Speech Conditioning Score, an ability to view results over time (day/wk/mos/yr), and the option for data capture. There is more content added to our conversation game, TalkAbout, including a new Topic called The College Interview, and prompts added to Debate Team from the National Speech and Debate Association (NSDA).

Screenshots



Things to think about - Text 3:

- What kinds of language does this app target? Why do you think this is?
- Have you ever tried recording and analysing your speech in this way? If yes, how did you find the experience? If no, would you like to try? Do you think you would find this app useful? Or perhaps you know other people who should try using this app?
- Do you see any similarities between this app and the 19th century etiquette manual?
- Can you think of other modern examples of linguistic prescriptivism?
- Considering all three texts (as well as any other examples you can think of), which social groups tend to be the target of prescriptivism? Why do you think this is the case? What are the potential consequences of this?

