



Are you a prescriptivist or a descriptivist?

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considers two approaches to vocabulary – definitely not a methodology.

Language shifts and evolves. The words we use today meant something quite different, in many cases, to the words our ancestors used. When the Roman army was victorious in battle they would line up their vanquished foes and kill every tenth person. The meaning of *decimate* has performed a remarkable one-eighty since then, and it would take a brave person to use the original meaning in modern times. But we can also hide behind such changes – an abomination was once anything that fell outside of Jewish law, so it was abomination to trim one's forelocks; now, the more morally censorious use a particular translation of the Bible to condemn people for acts that are not abominations at all, but simply an expression of a deep, personal nature.

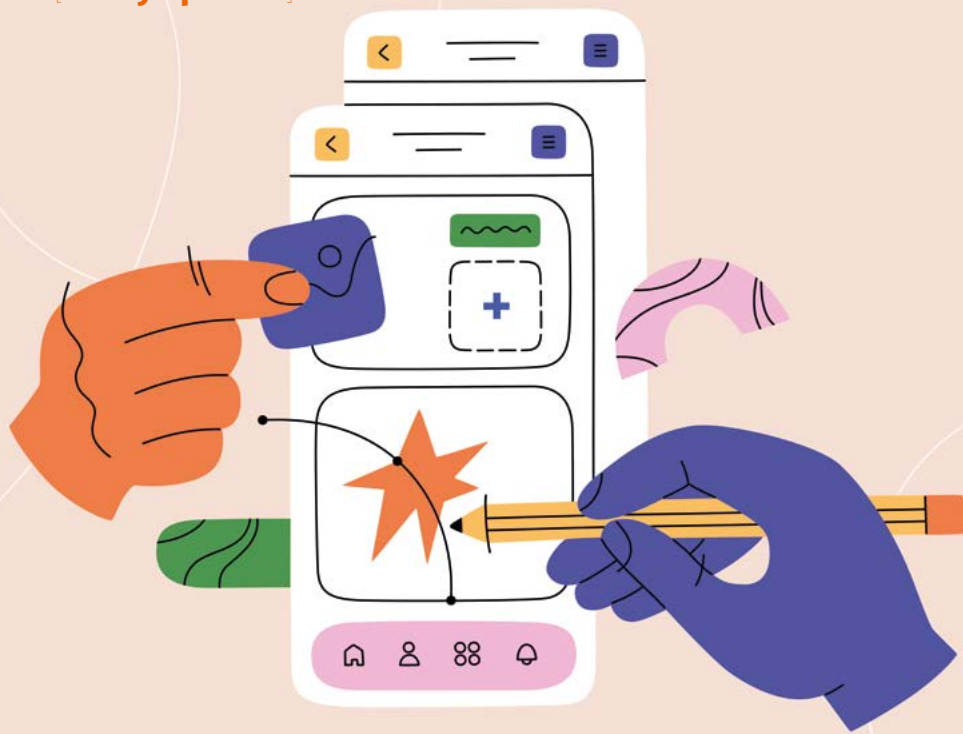
We all respond to changes in language differently but, broadly speaking, all of us fall into one of two camps. On the one hand there are the prescriptivists. Here, think of a doctor writing out a prescription for their patient – the doctor knows best (we assume), and the patient goes along with what the doctor says. On the other, there are the descriptivists, and here we can take a poet – Shakespeare will do – and consider how a poet might use the language they hear around them in creative or novel ways, thus establishing in writing trends that might have been ongoing in their speaking community for some time.

By and large, prescriptivists and descriptivists do not get along well, at least according to some of the conversational

I have witnessed on Twitter (as a prescriptivist, I refuse to call it X). But there is an irony latent in the dichotomy. Imagine a hundred descriptivists got together and started calling themselves prescriptivists – I'm sure the remaining descriptivists would join the members of the opposing camp in their censure.

What's the difference?

How do you know if you are a prescriptivist or a descriptivist? You might think that as teachers of the English language we are all prescriptivists – a dozen students getting it wrong does not mean they are right and the language must change, and we have error correction for a reason. Let me outline three ELT-related scenarios to help you choose where you stand.



Gamification

The first example comes with the word ‘gamification’. Most of the teachers I know use this word incorrectly, and I think that this is to the detriment of those of us who care about true meanings (insofar as the word *true* can ever apply). I overheard two colleagues chatting while waiting for the photocopier to unjam itself, and one said to the other, ‘I love gamifying my lessons. We played tic-tac-toe last week and it was a roaring success!’. All right, they never said ‘roaring success’ but this is my attempt at anonymising the source of the quote.

Playing tic-tac-toe is not an example of gamification. If anything, it might be considered an example of game-based teaching, which is very different. I have come to loathe the word ‘gamification’ because of its widespread misapplication. ‘Gamification’ means the use of game-like elements in the classroom. Duolingo does this well – perhaps too well – by having you collect points for every exercise you do, by having weekly league tables, by tracking every single element of your performance that you can think of. No teacher is capable of true gamification, and nor should they make the attempt. Duolingo is stressful enough for some of us without the techniques it uses being applied to groups of students who can see each other.

If you agree with me here that too many uses of *gamification* are incorrect, you are a prescriptivist.

Method or methodology?

Let’s now look at the word ‘methodology’. This is another pet hate of mine, but I fear I’m on the losing side with this one. The suffix *-ology* derives from the Greek *logos* or word, so when you speak of a thing, you *-ologise* it. In the vast majority of cases this would lead us to the study of that thing, whence *sociology*, *meteorology*, *psychology*, *biology*, *astrology* (well...). Though, of course, there are other uses, such as when we speak of three of a thing – *trilogy* – or speak well of a thing – *eulogy*. Don’t get me started, therefore, on the word ‘analogy’.

But when a teacher speaks of *methodology*; when we see a book about methodology; when we attend conference talks on methodology; are not these really just the word ‘method’ dressed up in more syllables? If we were to study the various methods used by a teacher, we would want the word ‘methodology’ to exist in order to describe what we were up to, but when a teacher who only knows one method talks about their methodology, where are we supposed to go?

As a prescriptivist, it pains me to see the word ‘methodology’ misapplied, but when it is, we at least all know what the writer meant – and if we know what the writer meant, there are grounds for the descriptivist approach. I fear then that this is a battle that has already been

lost, and anyone like me who still thinks it worth fighting is like someone trying to use a diesel engine to prevent coastal erosion – we’re likely just to upset or confuse people in the attempt.

They/them

This brings me to my final example, which is the use of *they* and *them* for third person singular. There remain prescriptivists who denounce this practice, saying it is not what our ancestors ever intended, though here I can’t see any hidden or historical intention; on the contrary, I think that our forebears would have congratulated us on our flexibility of use. Not only is the word ‘they’ far more inclusive – I don’t think anyone thought about being nonbinary in the terms we use today, although Virginia Woolf gave the first hint when she wrote *Orlando* – it also removes the need for the cumbersome *he* or *she*. I work as a proofreader among my various other occupations, and when I receive a paper that is groaning under the weight of *he* or *she* or, worse *he/she*, the first thing I do is to bring in *they* (or bring *they* in?) and suddenly the text seems massively improved. Only the severest prescriptivist would insist on keeping *they* and *them* to refer exclusively to plural nouns and, severe though I am, with this one I am firmly on the side of the descriptivists.

Final thoughts

What does all of this mean? It’s hard to say. The conversations on X (or Twitter, if you must) will continue, and they will generally be an unfavourable reflection of how modern discourse works, particularly on social media. But if these three examples do nothing else, they at least prove the point that we need to think carefully about the language we use, how we consider that language and, most importantly, how we teach it.



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