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*Prescriptivism and the Public*

Linguists lament that people of all education levels often seem more inclined to listen to self-proclaimed prescriptive language experts like William Safire, Lynne Truss, and William Strunk and E. B. White, than to linguists. When it comes to physics, people turn to physicists as the experts to consult on the topic; when it comes to language, people often turn to experts without training in linguistics. What are the implications for an organization like ISLE? The organization was created with this central aim: “to promote the study of English Language, that is, the study of the structure and history of standard and non-standard varieties of English, in terms of both form and function, at an international level.” How should we approach this enterprise in a public discourse where nonstandard varieties are still regularly denigrated and standard varieties are referred to as “good English” or just “English”?

This talk considers the ideologies that linguists and non-linguists share and don’t share about standard and nonstandard varieties, prescriptive rules, and “grammar” in order to map potential shared conversational ground and productive strategies for addressing misunderstandings and misinformation. I assess language we as linguists have used to talk about prescriptivism with non-experts and analyze the language of public responses to descriptivist arguments. I cannot yet share David Crystal’s optimistic argument in *Stories of English* (2004) that we are nearing the end of a “linguistically intolerant era,” and this talk seeks to lay out new ways forward for having a constructive, civil conversation about prescriptivism and language variation that could further the aims of organizations like ISLE both within the academy and far beyond it.