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*On Pietroski's Conjoining Meanings*

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*Andel Starčević, Mate Kapović, Daliborka Sarić, Jeziku je svejedno (Language could care less), Zagreb: Sandorf, 2019, 376 pp.*

*Jeziku je svejedno [Language could care less]* is a book written by three young Croatian linguists from the University of Zagreb dealing with prescriptivism in general and prescriptivist practices in Croatia in particular. The topic itself is far from new. In their book *Authority in Language*, which came out in four editions (first published in 1985), James Milroy and Lesley Milroy say in the Preface that: “Essentially, *Authority in Language* explores the perennial topic of correctness in language” (xiii). And with correctness goes what is correct to use, that is prescription of correctness. They say: “If, in a particular culture at a particular time, guests at a dinner are required to wear evening dress (of a particular form) and required to use their knives and forks in a particular way, these requirements are *prescriptive*, that is, they are imposed from ‘above’ by ‘society’, not by *ad hoc* agreement amongst the guests themselves.” However, they also stress that “language is a much more complex phenomenon than table manners: it is also a much more central aspect of human experience”. (1)

Starčević, Kapović and Sarić’s book is divided into two main parts: Part 1 “Prescriptivism and the ideology of the standard language” is of much more interest to general linguists, psycholinguists, cognitive science prac-

tioners and especially political philosophers since it is more theoretically oriented and puts stress on basic findings on communication, language variability, standard/nonstandard varieties of language and focuses on the important questions of language policy and language planning. Part 2 is a scathing critique with many vivid and damning examples of Croatian prescriptivists' catastrophic practices, and in many cases even more ludicrous usage advice they give to ordinary speakers. For the audience of this journal I shall concentrate more on the first part of the book and leave the second to the delightful inspection of Slavic linguists.

How do the authors characterize prescriptivism? It is a conservative language ideology and they draw a strong parallel with any other (political) conservative ideology: there is an insistence of the *status quo*, so called stability (language as it is). There is resistance to change. Language change is seen as deterioration or, in Jean Aitchison's words, language decay. There should be order, the standard language should obey strict language norms, that is the rules of the standard language (which the authors insist on calling the standard dialect), tradition, obedience of authority (which leads to a proliferation of language manuals, usage guides, dictionaries, the glorification of the speech of educated people, "good" writers, etc.). This includes the promotion of national unity (under the banner of the standard/national dialect), resistance to the so-called anarchy of spoken language and also to the dialect/language contact. They, I think rightly, believe that such characterizations are easily recognized as features of conservative ideology in general (134).

It is believed (but not uniformly) that prescriptivism is not part of linguistics and that prescriptivists are not linguists since they propagate attitudes that are not part of scientific linguistics. Linguists describe, they do not prescribe. Prescriptivism has been labeled 'amateurish linguistics'. It is interesting, and partly amusing, how Steven Pinker refers to prescriptivists in his most recent usage guide, (aimed at improving the style of good writers), *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. He wonders: "Who are these writers? You might think I'm referring to Twittering teenagers or Facebooking freshmen. But the writers I have in mind are the purists—also known as sticklers, pedants, peevers, snobs, snoots, nitpickers, traditionalists, language police, usage nannies, grammar Nazis, and the Gotcha! Gang... The idea that there are exactly two approaches to usage—all the traditional rules must be followed, or else anything goes—is the sticklers' founding myth" (323–324).

People attach great value to many different phenomena and thus also to language in particular. As the Milroys stress: "Ordinary people (i.e. non-linguists), however, have been accustomed from time immemorial to make value judgments about language" (1991: 10). In a most recent book on prescriptivism by Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, *Usage Guides and Usage Problems in British and American English* (Routledge 2020), many pages are devoted to the explanation of these bottom-up prescriptive efforts of ordinary language users from all social backgrounds, which are referred to (by Morana Lukač) as 'grassroots prescriptivists'. Bottom-up or grassroots prescriptive efforts are understood as those initiated by lay members of the general public. The book under review is not about them but about top-

down prescriptivism, which is mostly carried out by so-called language authorities. The book is actually a defense of ordinary people's inquiries about language from, in Pinker's words, "pedants" or "language police".

As other (mostly Anglo-American) linguists have done, the authors of this book show where prescriptivists or purists have gone wrong. Unacceptable are subjective proclamations about right and wrong in language, the talk about better or worse language forms. Purists have a strong inclination to select one, and only one, from a set of other, equivalent forms and usages and recommend that one as the 'correct' form. But, as it is well known, no language or dialect can be shown to be better or worse than another *on linguistic grounds alone*. The authors especially stress that language is rarely simple, binary, black and white, without exceptions, formally consistent and symmetrical. Language as a social fact is similar to its speakers – complex, multicolored, multifarious, full of unusual forms, meanings, expressions and usages. They firmly assert: "Language is simply like that and it could not be different" (75).

The authors clearly say and argue that the conservative view of language as advocated by purists/prescriptivists goes hand in hand with conservative right-wing politics. It has been noticed and stressed that although discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, gender and social class is not publicly acceptable any more, it appears that discrimination on linguistic grounds *is* publicly acceptable (Milroy and Milroy 1999: 2). Thus the duty of linguists is to react critically if they notice that certain individuals in positions of power and supposedly in the name of linguistics manipulate and purposefully misguide or wrongly inform the ordinary speakers about linguistic issues and thus instigate collective language insecurity and create and perpetuate social inequality (68). The authors stress that language policy, and with it language planning, is primarily politics so it is unacceptable to present language planning as an objective, scientific and neutral activity that creates a more perfect, more precise and more economical language variety, i. e. the standard variety. What is in fact done is the ideological act of persecution of other language forms and varieties. Furthermore, there is no language without variant forms of some words, no language with one meaning per word and no language without mixing of codes and registers. Why should the standard language be as remote as possible from actual usage? Why is the standard better when it has less to do with ordinary, i.e. real language use? (188). What is the use of the artificiality of the standard? The authors think that this is no service to speakers but it serves very well the purpose of authors of usage guides and their numerous editions, which brings them a substantial profit.

What is the result or consequence of an uncritical acceptance of usage guides? First, they create language insecurity so that ordinary speakers feel that they do not know their own language. In a vivid metaphor by the journalist Jurica Pavičić "speaking and writing one's mother tongue becomes like walking on a minefield in which any wrong move/step can be fatal" (*Jutarnji list*, a Croatian daily newspaper). The second consequence is the manipulation of the average speaker. In Einar Haugen's terminology, it creates language schizoglossia, language insecurity where the speaker is ashamed of using his/her own language and where s/he develops a fear of

his/her native language. A particular political reference is to the 1990s in Croatia, when people, in order not to be accused of writing in Serbian, used newly and artificially created Croatian words, many of which fortunately did not survive. Thirdly, prescriptivists spread out the idea that language is attacked by foreign (today mostly English) words, more particularly Serbianisms. Fourthly, a widespread belief that language is decaying and not simply changing. This is, of course, the idea held by most ordinary speakers, who think that language in general was better in earlier generations. This prevalent, yet inaccurate, belief of common speakers that language was once at its golden peak is further used and manipulated by prescriptivists to propagate the view that, for example, foreign words 'weaken the resistance /hardiness of national being' and that they 'cloud the real meanings'. The authors rightly conclude that "this is an illusion but a persistent implicit or explicit prescriptivist mantra which induces in speakers an unfounded feeling of fear about a pending language chaos and inability to express thoughts" (82).

The authors have been accused that in their book they advocate communicative chaos and that they are against the standard language. Communicative chaos is a non-existing phenomenon and the authors have stated many times (especially in their interviews and presentations of the book around Croatia) that they are not against standard (which would be absurd to start with) but that they are against rigid and crude prescriptivism. In their own words, talking about the aim of the book they say: "In this book we deal not only with the deconstruction of the mystificatory nature of prescriptivism but we are also concerned with exaggerations in the normative practice/activity, primarily in different kinds of usage guide books and also in the choice of elements/forms that prescriptivists want to change, mould or throw out/dispose of. Moreover, we are concerned with their non-scholarly argumentation that goes with such advice, based on a non-scholarly interpretation of linguistic phenomena and thus inconsistent/incoherent implementation of language 'corrections'" (127).

The book is written in a clear argumentative style with a lot of vivid comparisons of which I will mention only a few. .... *While the astrologer does not claim to be an astronomer, the prescriptivist pretends to be a linguist (43). Should the standard language be like a Greek vase in the museum, the artifact that should be admired, around which one should walk gingerly as if on eggshells and not to be used on any occasion since it might get damaged? (189).* In their interviews they say: Prescriptivists sell *poisonous fog*, the myth about language chaos serves to *frighten little children*. To give prescriptivism a scientific status would be *as if the physicist advocated bilocation* or if a medical doctor said that *in hospitals priests are more relevant than doctors*.

What they advocate for language is directly correlated to their political beliefs. We are openly political, they say, and their criticism of prescriptivism as scientifically unfounded goes hand in hand with their justified belief that prescriptivism is politically backward and that produces damaging social consequences. Prescriptivism goes with conservative language ideology and as we have conservatism (right-wing) in politics, we see all of that reflected in prescriptivists' attitudes to language. Just as conservatism is tied to nationalism so is prescriptivism.

In conclusion, this book is worth wider public notice of linguists, cognitive scientists and in particular political philosophers interested in language. Here are three reasons for it, the most important mentioned last: 1. It is the first thorough criticism of prescriptivist practice in Croatia, 2. It is a valuable addition to numerous books on language prescriptivism in general and 3. Its main stress is on the political underpinnings and moreover and more importantly, political repercussions for wider society and its speakers that prescriptivists bring about by their persistent and unnecessary advocacy for language corrections.

Linguistic activism or critical linguistics is the activity of linguists who fight against using language as an instrument for social discrimination and manipulation. This book is a first-rate act of activism. Their fight against language discrimination, against a rigid standard language and for its spontaneous change and for a legitimate recognition of various dialects goes hand in hand with their belief that nobody should be discriminated socially, e.g. because they are poor or because they are female or homosexual. Jurica Pavičić, the above-mentioned writer and journalist, has said that this book, apart from being a highly relevant scientific book, is *politically perhaps the most important book* that appeared in Croatia in 2019. Behind the authors' liberal views on language policy and language planning lies hopefully a more liberal Croatia.

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