

## Task 1. Read the text and the tasks below.

### Attitudes to language

It is not easy to be systematic and objective about language study. Popular linguistic debate regularly deteriorates into invective and polemic. Language belongs to everyone, so most people feel they have a right to hold an opinion about it. And when opinions differ, emotions can run high. Arguments can start as easily over minor points of usage as over major policies of linguistic education.

Language, moreover is a very public behaviour, so it is easy for different usages to be noted and criticised. No part of society or social behavior is exempt: linguistic factors influence how we judge personality, intelligence, social status, educational standards, job aptitude, and many other areas of identity and social survival. As a result, it is easy to hurt, and to be hurt, when language use is unfeelingly attacked.

In its most general sense, prescriptivism is the view that one variety of language has an inherently higher value of others, and that this ought to be imposed on the whole of the speech community. The view is propounded especially in relation to grammar and vocabulary, and frequently with reference to pronunciation. The variety which is favored, in this account, is usually a version of the 'standard' written language, especially as encountered in literature, or in the formal spoken language which most closely reflects this style. Adherents to this variety are said to speak or write 'correctly'; deviations from it are said to be 'incorrect'.

All the main languages have been studied prescriptively, especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> century approach to the writing of grammars and dictionaries. The aims of these early grammarians were threefold: (a) they wanted to codify the principles of their languages, to show that there was a system beneath the apparent chaos of usage, (b) they wanted a means of settling disputes over usage, and (c) they wanted to point out what they felt to be common errors, in order to 'improve' the language. The authoritarian nature of the approach is best characterised by its reliance on 'rules' of grammar. Some usages are 'prescribed', to be learnt and followed accurately; others are 'proscribed', to be avoided. In this early period, there were no half-measures: usage was either right or wrong, and it was the task of the grammarian not simply to record alternatives, but to pronounce judgment upon them.

These attitudes are still with us, and they motivate a widespread concern that linguistic standards should be maintained. Nevertheless, there is an alternative point of view that is concerned less with standards than with the *facts* of linguistic usage. This approach is summarised in the statement that it is the task of the grammarian to *describe*, not *prescribe* – to record the facts of linguistic diversity, and not to attempt the impossible tasks of evaluating language variation or halting language change. In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we already find advocates of this view, such as Joseph Priestly, whose *Rudiments of English Grammar* (1761) insists that 'the custom of speaking is original and only just standard of any language'. Linguistic issues, it is argued, cannot be solved by logic and legislation. And this view has become the tenet of the modern linguistic approach to grammatical analysis.

In our own time, the opposition between 'descriptivists' and 'prescriptivists' has often become extreme, with both sides painting unreal pictures of the other. Descriptive grammarians have been presented as people who do not care about standards, because of the way they see all forms of usage as equally valid. Prescriptive grammarians have been presented as blind adherents to a historical tradition. The opposition has even been presented in quasi-political terms – or radical liberalism vs elitist conservatism.

**Task 1. Do the following statements agree with the claims of the writer in the text? Write Yes, No or Not Given.**

1. There are understandable reasons why arguments occur about language.
2. People feel more strongly about language education than about small differences in language usage.
3. Prescriptive grammar books cost a lot of money to buy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
4. Our assessment of a person's intelligence is affected by the way he or she uses language.
5. Descriptivism only appeared after the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Task 2.**

**Complete the summary using the list of words:**

**The language debate**

According to 1 \_\_\_\_\_, there is only one correct form of language. Linguists who take this approach to language place great importance on grammatical 2 \_\_\_\_\_. Conversely, the view of 3 \_\_\_\_\_, such as Joseph Priestly, is that grammar should be based on 4 \_\_\_\_\_.

- |   |                  |   |                  |   |                |
|---|------------------|---|------------------|---|----------------|
| A | descriptivists   | B | language experts | C | popular speech |
| D | formal language  | E | evaluation       | F | rules          |
| G | modern linguists | H | prescriptivists  | I | change         |

**Task 3.**

**What is the writer's purpose in the text?**

- A to argue in favour of a particular approach to writing dictionaries and grammar books
- B to present a historical account of differing views of language
- C to describe the differences between spoken and written language
- D to show how a certain view of language has been discredited

**Task 4.**

Nowadays the following statement has become popular among many teenagers:

*English is the only foreign language worth learning.*

Express your opinion on the statement. Your essay should not exceed 120 words.