The Hermeneutics of Language: Reconciling Prescriptivism, Descriptivism, and Post-Colonialism

by

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Introduction

My thesis began when I took an advanced writing theory course in the Fall of 2022 and was introduced to current discourses about composition pedagogy – specifically the methods and attitudes underlying the teaching of writing. Through the course texts, classroom discussions, and my own further research, the tensions surrounding English academia I had implicitly experienced as an undergraduate student were explicitly articulated. I learned that English is arguably facing an identity crisis, with departments closing, the canon in question, and its purpose interrogated. Further complicating the discipline's situation are accusations of its role in continuing colonial structures, through its literary canon and enforcement of communication standards. My thesis is restricted to the latter, as I attempt to dissect the debate surrounding writing instruction – a debate that has existed in universities since the 1870s (Russel 22) between two dominant attitudes regarding what makes good writing: prescriptivism and descriptivism.

In the context of my thesis, I will define prescriptivism as an approach towards writing prioritizing structure, grammar, and standardization. It asserts how and when to use appropriate language. Furthermore, as my thesis is primarily concerned with Canadian academic contexts, my discussion of prescriptivism will be limited to prioritizing what I define as Standard Written Canadian English (SWCE), the academic dialect of written English used in Canadian universities. I will define descriptivism as an approach prioritizing expression and colloquial

usage. Descriptivism asserts instead the individual experience of language, including cultural and personal influences. Currently, prescriptivism has become associated with colonial structures, while descriptivism is considered by some as essential to decolonizing English academia. But what really is prescriptivism, and does its tether to structure and grammar perpetuate oppression? Can English academics be sure that descriptivist approaches achieve post-colonial aims? What if there is another solution that integrates both methods? With my thesis, I hope to grapple with the current questions surrounding the teaching of writing and build a new method reconciling obfuscating ideological factors. To resolve the discourse surrounding prescriptivism and descriptivism and achieve a post-colonial pedagogy, the nature of writing must be examined. Here, post-colonialism means not only recognizing and reconciling the ongoing legacy of colonialism, but also creating truly "post-colonial," or decolonized English academic spaces. Furthermore, I hope to dissect and reject the common pitting of prescriptivism and descriptivism, objectivity and subjectivity, structure and expression against each other. Instead, I assert that these dynamics are interdependent, strengthening and informing each other, and compositional pedagogies must constructively reflect this reciprocity. I acknowledge that as an undergraduate student, my thesis is limited by my lack of personal experience and expertise in pedagogy development and practice. However, I would like to offer my observations, analysis, and experience regarding writing instruction and learning from the perspective of the other side of the classroom and as an English undergraduate student who truly loves composition.

Ultimately, I assert that a truly post-colonial composition pedagogy must reject the reductive dichotomization of prescriptivism and descriptivism, building instead a new understanding of the interdependent relationship between these concepts founded on a metaphysical realist philosophical approach and the fostering of "personal academic style."

How Has Writing Been Taught?

Understanding how English academia has reached its current compositional crisis and how it can move forward requires both a historical examination of how writing has been taught and viewed in Canada until now and also a brief analysis of the academic debate between prescriptivist and descriptivist approaches. In North America, the history and purpose of composition pedagogy in Canadian universities have intentionally differed drastically from their American counterparts. As Kevin Brooks describes, even the definition of composition has diverged significantly between Canada and the United States: "Underneath the two distinct but stable curriculums is a rich history of economic, cultural, and disciplinary motives for shifting (or attempting to shift) the meaning of the term 'composition'" (674). Nevertheless, for both countries, the industrialization of education in the 1870s marked an irreversible shift for universities, with the entry of "students from previously excluded groups into the nascent mass education system" (Russel 22). Arguably, writing became the primary space where tensions between inclusion and standardization collided: "Language, particularly the written language that organized and facilitated the differentiation and rationalization of industrial society, lay at the very center of the conflict between disciplinary standards and social equity, exclusion and access" (Russel 23). Frictions and confusion surrounding composition pedagogy arguably only continues to escalate as Canadian universities arguably continue to become increasingly specialized and industrialized in the twenty-first century.

Generally, American universities responded to significant increases in student population and decreases in writing quality with pragmatic composition pedagogies (Brooks 673). Here, pragmatism is defined as a "down-to-earth, practical philosophy, completely committed to common sense" (McInerny 55) prioritizing action and problem solving, always "moving toward

resolutions that have practical repercussions" (McInerny 55). In pragmatic approaches, the objective is subordinated to what is tangibly useful: "An idea becomes true or is made true by demonstrating itself to be useful, as having distinct practical value" (McInerny 56). Since 1874, composition pedagogies in the United States sought to remedy students' declining writing skills by reducing writing to a technical tool, heavily influenced by a general trend towards practicality: "During the ten years after 1865, almost every visible change in the pattern of American higher education lay in the direction of concessions to the utilitarian type of demand for reform" (Vesey qtd. in Brooks 675). In America, composition became "a specific first-year course in American higher education … connot[ing] practicality, utility, and mechanical correctness" (Brooks 675). Viewed as "a set of elementary transcription skills unrelated to disciplinary activity" (Russel 23), writing in America was generally reduced to a practical tool to be corrected by an overly prescriptive emphasis on memorization, standardization, and grammar: "writing instruction past the elementary school was viewed as mere remediation of deficiencies in skill rather than as a means of fostering a continuously developing intellectual and social attainment intimately tied to disciplinary learning" (Russel 25).

Conversely, Canadian universities responded with a "philosophical idealism that largely rejected practical and material goals for education" (Brooks 676), continuing Canada's arguably typical trend of defining itself contrary to America: "This history will be a familiar story of Canadians distinguishing their national culture and identity by drawing contrasts with American practices" (Brooks 674). English departments in Canada approached writing as "a belletristic art, the product of genius or inspiration rather than of the mundane social and professional activity of the disciplines" (Russel 23). For most of the twenty-first century, little direct composition instruction was offered in Canadian universities (Brooks 677), even if adherence to ill-defined

standards was expected. The decades of stagnancy in Canadian composition pedagogy can arguably be ascribed to prevailing traditional British imperial systems and philosophical idealism: “This remarkable almost century-long curricular stasis can in part be ascribed to a colonial perspective that Daniel A. Coleman has described as ‘White civility.’ Another stabilizing force was the dominant Anglo-Canadian tradition of philosophical idealism” (Fee 28). Instead, writing skill was expected to primarily develop through reading literature (Brooks 678). At best, Canadian idealist composition pedagogies generally denigrated the explicit teaching of structure and grammar as “American, practical, and unintellectual” (Brooks 683). At worst, Canadian English departments generally considered explicit writing instruction a destabilizing threat that would sunder departments into a two-class system “with a relatively small permanent body of senior professors teaching all the upper levels of students, and virtually all of the literature courses - the real university courses, in effect - and a large body of temporary junior staff doing the hack work of teaching and correcting composition courses” (Priestley and Kerpneck qtd. in Brooks 678). From 1957 even until the 2000s, “a highly developed sense of Canadian national culture was instrumental in keeping American composition located in a discursive field of practicality and popular culture and outside of Canadian higher education” (Brooks 674).

Nevertheless, the introduction of explicit writing instruction, including grammar and structure, in Canadian universities was eventually introduced in the 1990s (Brooks 685). As Brooks describes, “[s]ince 1989, the seeming triumph of liberal-capitalism in the global economy and the apparent weakening of the nation-state have forced humanists in Canada and the United States to increasingly define their mission in economic rather than nationalist terms” (685). Yet, in general, as Brooks describes, aside from localized movements, there has not been “any

significant shift in university or national culture towards reevaluating the meaning of composition" specific to Canada (685-686). It is arguably unsatisfactory to both professors and students in Canadian universities for Canadian composition pedagogies to remain confused regarding the purpose of academic writing instruction and fluency. The historical inheritance of British colonial traditionalism, philosophical idealism, belletristic perspectives, and identity confusion creates a perfect storm undermining Canadian composition pedagogy. When undergraduate students question the importance of learning SWCE, professors can struggle to justify teaching, regulating, and grading students' adherence to standards, structure, and grammar. Canadian academics often would not wish to align themselves with a dialect historically tied to British colonial systems, nor can philosophical idealism, with its primacy of the subjective, assert the importance of objective external structures such as grammar. The unfortunately persistent narrative of Canadian institutions desperately attempting to individuate from America undermines the credibility of SWCE, framing it as another immature bid for authentic identity undermined by its one-sided insecurity eschewing anything American. Lastly, the lingering legacy of belletristic perspectives towards writing in Canada dismisses composition as deserving of serious academic study and instruction.

Furthermore, complicating approaches to composition pedagogy is the necessary movement to decolonize English academia, with scholars such as Asao Inoue and Vershawn Ashanti Young problematizing structure and standardization. Arguments interrogating prescriptivist practices cannot be answered by the aforementioned historically reductive Canadian or American approaches to writing, as they fundamentally misunderstand the purpose of writing in its entirety. Writing is neither unedited expression nor route skill. Moreover, methods towards writing instruction pitting structure and free expression can neither reconcile

historic or contemporary problems nor achieve post-colonial aims, because they will be fundamentally unbalanced by obfuscating political and theoretical discourse. Ultimately, though undergoing a new examination through a post-colonial lens, North American English academia has arguably approached writing from either unbalanced prescriptivism or descriptivism since the 1870s, reducing it to either a technical tool or belletristic art.

What Is Writing?

However, if writing is neither only aesthetic expression nor mechanical skill, then what is it? Writing is a form of communication and a specific manifestation of language. Since humans utilize and adapt language to all contexts (for example: formal, informal, artistic, technical, individual, and collective), language must be flexible, able to express and process meaning in multiple contexts. As a form of language, perhaps writing uniquely requires more intention, precision, and nuance than other forms of communication, since it is unassisted by other factors in same way verbal speech is – for example, by body language, vocal tone, and immediate context. Since composition pedagogies are primarily concerned with writing, it must understand its principle subject in order to create a reliable, valid, and effective methods of instruction and learning. Analyzing the philosophical underpinnings of writing and language, I hope to assert how objectivity and subjectivity are both needed to accomplish the purpose of language – a vehicle for understanding and communicating reality as well as socially and internally. The aforementioned historically idealist philosophies in North American composition pedagogies arguably destabilize or provide an incomplete foundational understanding of writing, when a metaphysical realist approach may provide a truly comprehensive approach. But before it can be understood why idealist approaches fall short and why a metaphysical realist approach would rectify these gaps and reconcile prescriptivism, descriptivism, and post-colonialism, idealism and

metaphysical realism must be understood, especially in how they divergently approach the subjective and objective.

As McInerny describes, "[o]ver the two and a half millennia of its history, Western philosophy has seen times when realism was the more influential force, and other times when it was idealism that dominated" (15). Realism has its origins in Aristotle, whereas Plato is regarded as the father of idealism (McInerny 15). However, beginning with René Descartes in the early 1600s and until now, idealism has overwhelmingly dominated realms of epistemology and philosophy, forming the basis for most fields of knowledge, especially in the humanities and arts – including English (McInerny 11). In this context, idealism does not mean a pursuit of ideals, but a philosophical approach asserting the primacy of the subjective. In my thesis, the subjective is defined as what belongs to and is dependent on the subject or the self. Conversely, the objective means what actually is, what belongs to and exists in reality. Philosophical idealism gives primacy to "ideas before things" (McInerny 13) and places "more store in concepts than what concepts are about" (McInerny 13). Idealism asserts that reality and knowledge are dependent on by the inner subjective understanding of the mind – for example, Descartes's famous declaration, "I think, therefore I am." As McInerny describes, under idealism, the changeable and personal understanding of the individual precedes and constructs reality and the objective: "instead of seeking to conform our thoughts to things, we should seek to conform things to our thoughts. Ideas must come first. They are the tools by which we shape our experiences" (51). The objective is either relegated to less important than the subjective – such as by Descartes, deemed as unknowable – such as by Kant, or entirely dismissed – such as by postmodernism or pragmatism.

Conversely, metaphysical realism begins with the premise that reality can be known, primarily through sensory data: "Our starting point is 'the immediately self-evident existence of external beings'" (McInerny 16). From that sensory data, objective universals and essences can also be known. Metaphysics is exclusively concerned with the study of being (McInerny 5), and realism asserts that reality is objective and knowable. Realism, in this context, does not mean a "realistic" approach, but a philosophical perspective maintaining the primacy of the objective. As Kreeft describes, "metaphysical realism is the belief that universal concepts correspond to reality; that things really have common natures; that 'universals' such as 'human nature' are real and that we can know them" (20). In other words, "the object of human reason … is objective reality" (Kreeft 17). This approach asserts a truth and reality independent from human comprehension that a person can come to know. In metaphysical realism, a person's changeable inner ideals and understandings conform to an external objective – the inverse of idealism: "we begin our investigations by looking outward, not inward, which simply means that we recognize that the proper object of the human intellect is real being, things in the external world" (McInerny 16). Metaphysical realism does not negate the importance of a person's internal ideals but rather allows for both the objective and the subjective in harmony. By prioritizing the objective, metaphysical realist approaches do not sunder individuals' inner worlds from outside reality but instead deepen the interdependent bond between the two realms: "we take the world, the entire universe, into ourselves, so that is becomes part and parcel of us. The world 'out there' and the world 'in here' merge and marry" (McInerny 17). The goal of metaphysical realists is to first understand reality, then their own internal self, and subsequently to understand the objective and subjective in relational reciprocity and ordering.

Regarding composition pedagogy, when language – in all manifestations including writing– is understood from a philosophical idealist understanding, it becomes untethered to reality because idealism fundamentally subordinates the objective to the subjective. In some extremes, idealist approaches even deny the objective's importance or existence. Idealism's incomplete view of writing has seemed to remain unnoticed by most critiques of composition pedagogies. However, I argue that philosophical idealism rests at the heart of historical clashes between prescriptivism and descriptivism, and as such, will similarly be unable to reconcile these concepts or satisfy post-colonial interrogations of writing instruction. Idealist writing approaches, by prioritizing the subjective and dismissing the objective, not only tend to fall into unbalanced descriptivist perspectives but also have an essentially compromised ability to communicate structure, standards, and grammar. For at its core, idealism subordinates structure to the freeform: "[idealism] is not so much a matter of adjusting myself, so that I square with the objective order (i.e., reality), as it is a matter of attempting to adjust the objective order, so that it squares with my presuppositions as to what is useful" (McInerny 57). Thus, when North American composition pedagogies are accused of perpetuating colonialism by continuing to teach structural rules, instructional and communication standards, such as grammar and grading, many academics find it difficult to respond, for idealism does not ascribe value to the objective nor view it as separate from human creation. Categories and systems of order, including grammar, are "mental classifications we make, not real features of the world that we discover" (Kreeft 17). Therefore, all "objectivity" is a manifestation of an individual's subjective creation. Moreover, idealism inherently problematizes authority, as the logical conclusion of idealism views authority as similarly created by the subjective, for under idealism, "[m]an himself becomes the measure" (McInerny 57). Why would a student need to learn SWCE if is it a past

creation of or inherited set of traditional conventions from another individual or collective, especially if these collectives are historically British or Canadian imperialists?

Conversely, how would metaphysical realism satisfy this question? First, as compositional pedagogies must be grounded in a clear understanding and definition of writing, I will outline how metaphysical realism would understand language. Under a metaphysical realist approach, language and all knowledge can be understood by and utilizes both the subjective and the objective. When defined through a metaphysical realist framework, language becomes organized in three interdependent categories: terms, concepts, and words (Kreeft 40). The process of knowing originates with "terms," the most basic and objective unit of meaning "that denot[e] an object of thought" (Kreeft 41). "Concepts" refer to each individuals' comprehension of a term's meaning (Kreeft 40). Lastly, "words" refer to the verbal or written linguistic expression of a term (Kreeft 40). Words change throughout cultures, time periods, and languages, whereas concepts are subject to individual understanding. Thus, both are based on the subjective. However, terms are objective and unchangeable in meaning, and as Kreeft describe, "expres[s] objectively what is known subjectively in a concept" (40) and "ancho[r] many different words in different languages" (41). For example, gravity is an objective reality, a "term." The subjective, personal understandings of gravity that vary from person to person, culture to culture, and time period to time period would fall under the "concept" of gravity. Lastly, in English, the letters and sounds making up "gravity" to symbolize its objective existence compose the "word" gravity. I argue that only metaphysical realism's understanding of language composed of three reciprocal categories combining the objective and subjective can reconcile descriptivism's desire for personal expression and prescriptivism's valuation of standards, grammar, and structure. Under a metaphysical realist framework of writing, it

becomes possible to prioritize understanding and communicating the objective and marrying it to a person's inner ideals, whereas under an idealist framework, language remains divorced from the possibility of understanding the objective and overly emphasizing the subjective.

Furthermore, metaphysical realist approaches assert "that reality is intelligible; that it includes a real order" (Kreeft 20). Human knowledge and categories of understanding are "taken from reality into our language and thought, not imposed on reality from our language and thought" (Kreeft 20). Relating this metaphysical realist framework to writing, the instruction and learning of structure, standards, and grammar is not the "imposi[tion of] an order on a reality that is really random or chaotic or unknowable" (Kreeft 20) but an "express[ion of] our discovery of order, not our creation of order" (Kreeft 20). Under a metaphysical realist approach, I argue that the standards and grammar of SWCE philosophically must be learned because grammar is essential to all language, including writing and dialects. In other words, grammar is an integral reality, a universal inevitability of language that if absent, would denature language, rendering it no longer a communicative vehicle but chaotic non-communicative gibberish. However, my discussion of grammar must be similarly defined and qualified to be properly understood. There are arguably multiple layers of grammar. The earliest, deepest, and most objective form of grammar is "the set of formal patterns in which the words of a language are arranged in order to convey larger meanings" (Francis qtd. in Hartwell 109). This layer of grammar is learnt through a combination of inherent cognitive capacity towards acquiring language and experientially interacting with other native speakers in early childhood: "all speakers of a language above the age of five or six know how to use its complex forms of organization with considerable skill" (Francis qtd. in Hartwell 109). However, as writing is a distinct medium from verbal speech, reading and writing are taught and learnt most commonly in academic spaces. Though the

environment for speech is informal and for written is formal, the methodology remains the same, with a person more experienced and fluent in the dialect guiding the learner into increasing fluency. The second layer of grammar is "the branch of linguistic science which is concerned with the description, analysis, and formulization of formal language patterns" (Francis qtd. in Hartwell 109). Formal academic processes studying grammar do not create grammar, but take the objective into human understanding: "Just as gravity was in full operation before Newton's apple fell, so grammar in the first sense was in full operation before anyone formulated the first rule that began the history of grammar as a study" (Francis qtd. in Hartwell 109). Lastly, the third layer of grammar can be called "linguistic etiquette" (Francis qtd. in Hartwell 109). Grammar's third mode is arguably the most subjective, for it is concerned with style and preferences. However, the third mode of grammar is not meaningless because of its ties to both social conventions and personal preferences, for, as Giltrow asserts, "style is meaningful" (9). Furthermore, the "originality academic readers value depends on style" (Giltrow 9). The three-tiered categorization of grammar fits seamlessly into a metaphysical realist framework. First, the objective reality exists, or in this case, grammar and the necessity to organize communication into a logical framework exists. Then, humans interact with this objective, initially understanding it and then internalizing it into subjective frameworks, creating both integral categories like subject predicate order and non-essential categories like punctuation rules. In other words, grammar becomes informally and formally studied, formalized, and described. Lastly, a person's inner ideals or a collective's conventions begin to stylize grammar and language – for example, actual punctuation usage.

Moreover, grammar anchors language to logical ordering and processes. Logic is another integral part of language, since communication both utilizes and expresses ordered reasoning.

Arguably, structure expressed in grammatical usage is related to the organization of rational thought. Thus as a dialect, SWCE must have a grammar that can be taught and learned. The grammar of SWCE is both subjective and objective, as outlined in the aforementioned differing layers of grammar. SWCE grammar and standards are objective in that they arise from the inevitable reality of grammar in a language and enable the communication of rational, understandable thought. Conversely, they are also subjective, in that they can shift from differing time periods and be customized to create each individual student's personal academic style. Aligning with metaphysical realism, the specialization of SWCE into personal academic style mirrors the processes of looking first to the objective to know reality, then comprehending one's own inner subjective ideals, and then marrying both in reciprocal harmony. I argue that it is the responsibility of composition pedagogies and instructors to explain and guide students through the process of understanding the objective and the subjective as interdependent. Building from my metaphysical realist foundation, differing academic genres and written structures similarly have objective "essences" or integral realities. An essay must argue a thesis through analysis. A declarative sentence must make a statement; an interrogative must ask a question.

Regarding post-colonial aims, under a metaphysical realist approach, teaching and learning SWCE no longer become acts of assimilation to inherited subjective conventions created by colonial collectives, but instead a necessary part of understanding an objective reality, being able to articulate and process this reality, and also attain fluency in a linguistic dialect. Thus, to resolve the current crisis between prescriptivism, descriptivism, and post-colonialism, writing instruction must reject idealism for metaphysical realism. A metaphysical realist approach to language fully allows for the interdependence of prescriptivism and descriptivism, because it seeks to understand both structure and the personal in reciprocal, relational harmony.

Therefore, I argue that structure, grammar, and personal expression in writing can only be fully understood and integrated by metaphysical realism. A reexamination of and foundational change in the philosophical basis of English must occur not only because idealism has and will continue to bring confusion, division, and error to English, but most importantly because perhaps only a metaphysical realist approach can reconcile prescriptivism and descriptivism, subjectivity and objectivity, and accomplish the aims of language.

How Does Writing Need to be Taught?

Based on a philosophically metaphysical realist approach, how then does SWCE need to be taught? I hope to propose a new post-colonial approach towards writing and English academia free from pitting descriptivism and prescriptivism against each other and reductionist definitions of writing. As mentioned earlier, writing is neither a technical skill needing remediation nor a belletristic art of pure unedited expression, and pedagogies relegating the learning of writing to either of these prescriptive or descriptive extremes are doomed to confusion or paradox, since they are incomplete. Writing can be understood simultaneously as an articulation of an individual's humanity, a method of deepening intellectual understanding, and a communicative professional tool. Written communication utilizes both subjectivity and objectivity, with one requiring and strengthened by the other. The objective stems from grammar being an inevitable reality of language and dialects: "The grammar of a language … is a complex and abstract system inherent in the language" (Milroy and Milroy qtd. in Giltrow 58). The subjective stems from not only the changeable or created conventions arising in the second and third layers of grammar, but also from individuals' inner ideals and personal preferences manifesting and customizing their own personal writing style. Lastly, it is another reality that writing requires unique precision and intentionality, because, as mentioned before, written communication is

created and read in isolation from external aids such as verbal or body cues and immediate context. Thus, in order for a personal academic style to be created, students must be able to fluently wield and articulate intention in their writing usage: “a good workman knows what he is doing and why he is doing it. He knows the rules of his craft.” (Sullivan 35). But before the question, “How does writing need to be taught,” can be answered, the nature of education, authority, judgment, and language standardization must be examined.

In very simplified terms, currently there is a descriptivist movement in linguistics and English academia advocating for the reduction of or removal of standardization in composition– including grammar, grading, and writing structure – in order to decolonize writing pedagogy. One such advocate, Asao Inoue, describes his journey to reject “structured language systems” (21), saying that “problematizing grades … led me to problematize my judgment practices, which then led to problematizing the conditions of white supremacy in my classrooms” (21). But, are prescriptivist practices of standardization and structure inherently oppressive?

Inoue’s approach and other similar descriptivist perspectives arguably conflate authority, judgement, and structure with oppression. As Deborah Cameron asserts in her book, *Verbal Hygiene*, the drive to improve language “is as basic to the use of language as vowels are to its phonetic structure, and as deserving of serious study” (1). Though hesitating to align herself with prescriptivism, Cameron further argues that the structures and strategies “born out of an urge to improve or ‘clean up’ language, exemplify the phenomenon [she] call[s] verbal hygiene” (1). Applying her arguments to the debate surrounding descriptivism and prescriptivism, Cameron’s rejection of the near “dogmatic opposition to prescriptivism” (Oaks 1) aligns with Oaks’s assertions that prescriptivism is unavoidable in practice or theory: “prescriptivism is often useful and appropriate in some settings, perhaps even inevitable” (Oaks 2). As Oaks further argues,

English pedagogies and academics need to "be more open in acknowledging the important and legitimate role that an informed and measured language prescriptivism can sometimes have" (11). He concedes that a "'dutiful prescriptivism" … in which people merely perpetuate and prescribe old usage rules that have been handed down to them, often without much thought or regard for language varieties, development, or change, and often without regard to situational context" (Oaks 3) does not satisfy the aims of education or communication. However, Oaks argues instead for an acceptance of an "'informed prescriptivism' … informed by linguistic knowledge and findings, acknowledge[ing] the significance of language varieties as well as developments and changes in the language, and recognize[ing] the important role of situational context" (3). He further asserts that standards and structure benefits students, providing safety, efficiency, and fairness (11). Moreover, contrasting with Inoue's problematizing of judgment, Cameron calls the evaluative mechanisms of communication natural: "making value judgments on language is an integral part of using it, and not an alien practice 'perversely grafted on'" (3). A person cannot escape judgement and choice in communication, for the act of communicating requires decisions about tone, word choice, and style. The arguably unconscious and conscious use of judgment is tied to the inevitable acquisition of and articulation of language, including English: "All native speakers have implicit knowledge of the grammar of English: it is this knowledge that enables speakers to use and understand their language. Amongst other things, this knowledge enables the speaker to judge what sentences are possible in the language" (Milroy and Milroy qtd. in Giltrow 58). Therefore, the movement to remove prescriptive practices and judgment goes against the nature of writing itself. Moreover, under metaphysical realist understandings of human epistemology, judgment is one of the acts of the human mind

and intellect – the other two being understanding and reasoning (Kreeft 28). Therefore, I argue that removing judgment further undermines an integral element of human rationality.

Additionally, even if called descriptivist, advocating for the removal of prescriptivism for supposed moral, inclusive, or scientific reasons is inherently prescriptive – a fatalistic paradox. Removing prescriptive practices on the basis of the problematizing judgment arguably not only eradicates an integral, inescapable facet of writing and communication, but also ignores the reality that prescriptivism and descriptivism are inseparably reciprocal. The dichotomy between prescriptive and descriptive approaches is ultimately invalid because "a descriptive grammar embodies value judgments" (Greenbaum qtd. in Oaks 3). Pedagogies and instructors "may aim at pure description, [but] they find it almost impossible to avoid prescription" (Hodson qtd. in Oaks 2). For ultimately, the inherent paradox crippling pitting descriptive and prescriptive methods against each other is due to "the problem of describing a language without providing a standard has yet to be solved" (Bruthiaux qtd. in Oaks 3). I argue that the problems purist advocates for either approaches can never be solved because separating the two is fundamentally impossible.

Moreover, despite Inoue's arguments, it may be similarly impossible to avoid authority in education. When English professors espouse purely descriptivist approaches in teaching, theory, and pedagogy, they inevitably place themselves in another fatalistic paradox. When professors mark or edit students work, teach instructive lectures, or provide recommendations or feedback, they are arguably engaging in prescriptive practices. As Oaks describes, "If this sort of contradiction sits uncomfortably with … professors, imagine how confusing this could be to their students" (2). Vilifying prescriptive practices and then concurrently engaging in them confuses students as it places both the student and the instructor in an "ideologically contradictory position" (Oaks 2). Furthermore, the rejection of grading altogether would arguably regress

academia to the 1960s, where proselytizing uninhibited expression resulted in “unworkable, chaotic, or downright subversive” (Russel 27) educational spaces. Though there are some academics who might celebrate the subversion of education, in reality students would arguably struggle to thrive in these subversive, chaotic instructive spaces devoid of the “fairness, efficiency, and safety” (Oaks 6) prescriptive practices like standards, structure, and grammar provide. Moreover, aside from the principles of justice, efficiency, and safety being intrinsically important to honour in pedagogy, educational success has become increasingly “high stakes since, as McNamara and Ryan explain, in addition to college entrance decisions, ‘tests are now used to control access to employment, residency, and citizenship — so the issue of … fairness becomes more acute’” (Oaks 6).

Additionally, the removal of prescriptivism because of its ties to authority and judgment arguably fundamentally misunderstands the dynamics of education. Dynamics of power between instructors and students can never be erased, for it is an undeniable reality that professors have power over their students. The question that necessitates answering then is, “Do instructors’ irrevocable position of power made their authority automatically dictatorial?” Arguably, no, educators engaging in their authority is not an inherently immoral, oppressive act. Neither does it automatically undermine or endanger student’s dignity or identity, because authority itself is not inherently evil or oppressive. As all forces of power, it can be either immorally or morally wielded, and thus, it needs to be interrogated and kept accountable. In this vein, instructors engaging in prescriptive practices do not automatically use their authority or teaching of structure and standards to dominate students. Unfortunately, some compositional pedagogies and instructors have forced learners to assimilate to arbitrary or colonial systems, but I argue that, without dismissing the immorality of these occurrences, they do not make educational spaces

only assimilative spaces. Based on a balanced view of authority, I argue that there can be moral and even beneficial methods to incorporating prescriptive practices in to compositional pedagogy. Oaks asserts that it is both rational and helpful for instructors to utilize their authority to assist students through navigating appropriate language choice tailored to context and purpose: "it makes sense that those individuals with the relevant and necessary linguistic knowledge, expertise, or experience will be invited to provide useful suggestions, directions, or instruction regarding how some language forms or varieties could most appropriately be used in a particular setting or how a language task or procedure should be performed—in other words, to provide prescriptions" (Oaks 3). Furthermore, I argue that defining all educational authority as oppressive gives colonial systems too much unilateral power. Conflating authority with colonial systems necessarily defines it as the property of ethnic tyranny, erroneously and deterministically robbing ethnic and marginalized populations from access to authority and power. I argue that not only do ethnic or marginalized populations have their own authority, but they also continuously negotiate and wrest authority from colonial occupied spaces, including in educational spaces. Thus, I argue that authority is an inevitability in educational spaces, though how it is wielded is determined by the instructor, students, and pedagogy.

Similarly, avoiding a standardization of written Canadian Academic English may be impossible. Linguistic descriptivists such as Milroy decry language standardization because "all languages … are observed to be variable within themselves and not uniform at all, and they are also in a continuous state of change" (Milroy 17). Furthermore, he argues that pedagogies and instructors clinging to standardization are clinging to an ideological dream: a standard form exists in some abstract dimension and by some consequences of the ideology of standardization (Milroy 17). However, I argue that SWCE is a dialect, and like all forms of language, it is

internally ordered. No language or dialect can escape the inevitability of objectivity and grammar in all three layers, as Wallace describes, “the very possibility of language depends on rules and conventions” (121). Standards are more than foreign structures imposed on languages or dialects, for I argue that they connect to both “terms” and concepts as understood in the metaphysical model of language. Language standards, especially written standards represent what objectively exists in reality in a symbolized or verbalized “word,” creating or enabling the creation of each person’s inner “concept” or understanding of the term. Furthermore, from a communicative, practical perspective, a certain basic levels of standardization represent implicit agreements between individuals within a collective agreeing upon set modes and units of expression. Standards are especially important in writing, since as mentioned before, it is a form isolated from cues other than reading and interpretation. Ironically, as Milroy and Milroy describe, “[t]he most general grammatical rules of a language, or dialect of a language, are learnt by the native speaker in infancy and childhood without explicit instruction; they are rule of speech” Milroy and Milroy qtd. in Giltrow 58). Writing, in conjunction with reading, is formally taught in educational spaces: “children are taught reading and writing at school” (Milroy and Milroy qtd. in Giltrow 58). Thus, I argue that the academic teaching and learning of SWCE in Canadian universities seamlessly follows the natural method of learning writing.

Moreover, standardization may not be as divisive in Canadian contexts as they are in American and British spaces. While outlining the history of primarily verbal Standard Canadian English, Dollinger defines language standards as “the norms or canons of generally-accepted language usage’ … correlate[d] with the neutral sense of a standard as ‘an average or conventional property” (Dollinger 4). With a standard dialect being “the grammar and core vocabulary of educated usage” (Dollinger 4), he further asserts that each dialect “comprises

features of syntax, morphology, and core vocabulary" (Dollinger 4). Dollinger asserts that standardization in Canada has largely stagnated since 1960 "because there is a sense in which the notion of standards is alien to – perhaps even repugnant to – our national character" (6). Interestingly, he argues that Canadians become quite uncomfortable when educational spaces declare the need to increase academic standards, for "an imposition by some authority on one's behaviour or activities" (Dollinger 7) seems to be at best uncomfortable and at worst unjust. However, somewhat ironically, Standard Canadian English (SCE) is remarkably uniform: "one of the most frequent observations about Canadian English – among both linguists and the general public – is that it is remarkable uniform from coast to coast" (Boberg 160). SCE is more uniform than Standard American English (SAE) and Standard British English (SBE): "Canadian English is said to exhibit far less regional variation than American of British English, a trait … that would seem to make the proclamation of a national standard a less problematic idea than it might be elsewhere" (Boberg 160). Coupling Boberg's analysis of SCE and also the aforementioned inevitability of grammar and standardization arising in language – especially writing, I argue that teaching SWCE in Canadian composition pedagogies is not necessarily a subscription to standardization ideology, but a reflection of both current research findings regarding SCE and also language's purpose as a communicative structure.

Thus, if prescriptivism and descriptivism are reciprocally interdependent, education inherently calls on authority, and language cannot avoid standardization and judgement, how does English academia reconcile the complex colonial legacy of teaching SWCE? What would an authentically post-colonial composition pedagogy look like in Canadian higher education?

To satisfy post-colonial aims, academics such as Vershawn Ashanti Young advocate for the acceptance of non-standard or alternative dialects of English in academia, calling for code-

meshing over code-switching. He argues that for students whose primary dialect is not Standard English, communicating in it can be seen as assimilation and a negation of ethnic identity, describing that academic success can make ethnic students "feel forced to abandon their race – the ultimate impossibility" (90). He further asserts that expecting students to code-switch between dialects "enforce[es] educational schizophrenia" (Young 96) as students "are forced to see themselves as embodying two different racial, linguistic, and cultural identities" (Young 96). "Equating language to identity" (Young 96) is further complicated by the equation of usage non-conformed to standard rules as somehow a moral transgression. As Fee describes, the overly prescriptive enforcement of grammar usage often takes on a distorted moralistic tone, with unstandardized communication seen as immoral: "The connection of good speech and writing and moral health has always been a mainstay of the middle class" (27).

Although I agree with Young assertions that "all dialects and languages are equal in terms of structure even if they are unequal in terms of prestige" (96), I argue against Young's claims that code-switching undermines ethnic identity. I fundamentally disagree that engaging in multiple dialects compromises identity, for individuals arguably already code-switch consciously and unconsciously multiple times a day. Code-switching becomes, then, not another artificial imposition regulating writing instruction and fluency in academic spaces, but a natural participation in how individuals already implicitly and explicitly navigate communication contexts. The written styles people use to write professional emails, text intimate friends, or create diary entries, for example, involve switching from dialect to dialect, because matching style to the context and needs of the speaker and audience is an integral part of communication. Additionally, a compositional pedagogy based on Oak's aforementioned informed prescriptivism in conjunction with a balanced descriptivism would facilitate student's abilities to code-switch,

utilizing "formal standard written English for one kind of task but less formal English for an advertisement or other setting, where the formal written standard would sound pompous and out of place" (3). Furthermore, in my daily lived experience as a biracial Canadian, it is possible and even natural to engage in two different languages and cultures without negating the other. When I participate in my Irish identity, I do not negate my Chinese identity. When I speak Cantonese, Irish, or even if I speak another language altogether such as Spanish or English, I am not abandoning my inalienable ethnic identities. Thus, I argue that Young's rejection of code-switching overlooks not only the inescapable reality of code-switching, but also the multifaceted fluidity and resilience of ethnic identity. I further argue that languages are not moral or immoral by nature, for they are abstract communicative structures. As Milroy describes, "no moral judgement or critical evaluation can be validly made about the abstract structures we call languages" (16). He further asserts, "[i]t is the speakers of languages, and not the languages themselves, who live in a moral universe" (Milroy 16).

Additionally, adapting Ashcroft et al.'s assertions about appropriating colonial languages as a means of decolonization can provide further insight into how instruction of SWCE can accomplish post-colonial aims. Throughout Africa, Asia, and North America, colonial education systems imposed European languages, assimilation, and standardization to degrade and undermine the identity and dignity of indigenous ethnic populations. In Canada, educational systems like residential schools were created to explicitly annihilate Indigenous identity through the removal of cultural identity and language. How can English academia reconcile the abstract nature of language with the lived sociopolitical and individual experience of language in teaching composition? As Canadian educational spaces – including English academia – currently attempt to decolonize, Ashcroft et al.'s argument that European languages can be repurposed and

decolonized “by seizing the language of the centre” (37) can offer a method to decolonization that incorporates standardization and individual expression in harmony. In Ashcroft et al.’s proposed method of language appropriation, “the language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant European culture” (7). I argue that SWCE does not belong to colonial systems and defining it as such gives colonialism too much power, for SWCE can be learned, appropriated, and transformed by ethnic populations and converted into a means of resistance, relation, and reclamation. Moreover, there is a fundamental distinction of choice in the university classroom, the choice and autonomy of the student to attend higher education. University students freely choose to enroll in higher education, attend courses, and deepen their knowledge and expertise in a discipline, whereas systems of colonial education were imposed upon populations without choice and with a dehumanizing dismissal of their existing knowledge. Regardless of external circumstances or pressures - even if overwhelming, I argue that university students fundamentally choose to attend higher education.

Therefore, to achieve post-colonialism, reconcile prescriptivism and descriptivism, and honour the purposes of language, I advocate for a compositional pedagogy built on an authoritative approach to authority (Wallace 122), with authoritative meaning drawing from the authority of the educator build on and justified by knowledge, experience, and expertise. An authoritative approach would allow the educator and the learner to have a reciprocal relationship built on mutual respect, drawing on the autonomy and dignity of both. Authoritative approaches also mirror the natural method of language learning. Whether language is learned informally in verbal speech or formally in written text, the underlying principle is the same. A beginner is guided by an experienced speaker into learning the structure, grammar, and linguistic words and sounds of the language. In this process, learners eventually built up their own authority and

expertise in the language, eventually tailoring it into increasingly proficient, articulate expressions of their unique personalities, experiences, and contexts.

Conversely, authoritarian approaches built on extreme prescriptivism view the educator as a dominant power, the student as an empty vessel, and education as a punitive system. This approach would subscribe to punishing practices such as a minimum standard of correctness and would prioritize assimilation. Authoritarian approaches also erroneously conflate unstandardized writing with moral transgressions, a historically punitive practice meant to degrade marginalized demographics (Fee 27). As Wallace describes, many overly prescriptivist advocates and approaches can ignore the sociopolitical and personal complications involved with learning (120). Lastly, what could be arguably called "permissive" approaches built on extreme descriptivism view the educator and the learner as the same in terms of knowledge and expertise, which is fundamentally false in any field of knowledge and skill. Although education is a mutual partnership of learning between the educator and the student, students do not come to class fully formed or an expert in their field, and this is not shameful, degrading, or wrong. When I arrived at Mount Royal University (MRU) in 2018, I did not know how to write a research essay or how to conduct academic research. My lack of knowledge did not mean I was morally inferior to my teachers nor did it discount the expertise in other areas I already brought to my English courses. However, it meant that in this specific area, I required guidance from a mentor with expertise to help me learn how to build my own.

Furthermore, I advocate for an authoritative approach tethered to the five foundational composition pedagogy principles and practices asserted by Mutnick and Lamos:

1. Assume students can learn and deserve to be engaged in serious intellectual activities and curricula, not skill-and drill-based 'remediation.'

2. Engage in ‘extra’ student-centered work – whether in the form of time, conference, feedback, or other related scaffolding techniques.
3. Address ‘higher-order’ issues of argumentation, evidence, and analysis alongside ‘lower-order’ issues of grammar, style, syntax, and punctuation.
4. Integrate academic writing and reading instruction.
5. Value the inevitable tension between acknowledging what students ‘already know’ and trying to ‘move them to what they need to know.’ (21)

Regarding the four main methods of writing instruction outlined by Mutnick and Lamos, my approach would be a blend of error-centered and academic initiation approaches while in dialogue with the concerns brought up by critical literacy and spatial approaches (21). My proposed authoritative approach would view students as developing their fluency in SWCE, similar to error-centered approaches’ paradigm of mentor and apprentice (Mutnick and Lamos 22), while concurrently aligning with critical approaches’ valid assertion that students arrive in possession of expertise in other dialects of communication and of the language learning process in general (Mutnick and Lamos 27). By positioning SWCE as a dialect or genre that students code-switch into, my approach would align with academic initiation approaches’ view of students eventually becoming fluent in the languages and conventions utilized in academic contexts (Mutnick and Lamos 24). Finally, my authoritative approach, although understanding why spatial approaches value customizing support to students’ course and discipline specific demands (Mutnick and Lamos 27), fundamentally cannot agree with the removal of instructor authority in favour of student-lead spaces.

Lastly, I argue that an authoritative approach to composition pedagogy would build learners’ personal skill, style, and authority in SWCE, while concurrently acknowledging their

own unique autonomy, dignity, and identity – elements that essentially enrich and construct their individual style of SWCE. For "[w]hen student writing is deficient, then, it is deficient ... in ways having directly to do with the student's real control of the subject matter. … To raise the level of student writing . . . would be in effect to raise the student's level of intellectual attainment in the subject matter itself" (Rader qtd. in Russel 28). An authoritative approach builds up the authority of the student, but also allows for students to create their own personal academic style, subsequently allowing for the eventual communication of students' personal and artistic expressions in their academic writing. I argue that the eventual ability for students to articulate their unique personality and style in their academic work is important because it represents not only a deep fluency in the dialect of SWCE, but also is the most complete representation of how the objective and subjective reciprocally relate in language.

Ultimately, I argue that the reduction of writing to distinct dichotomies between descriptivism and prescriptivism, the subjective and the objective, the academic and the non-academic is dehumanizing. Teaching students the necessary tools and style needed to communicate in an academic setting allows them to further process, deepen, and express their humanity. It enriches them to be able to fluently communicate in multiple dialects. Building a compositional pedagogy allowing for the seamless interdependence between the objective and the subjective, the logical and the emotional, the individual and collective is ultimately humanizing, as it enables a more complete and deepened articulation of each student's humanity. It facilitates the emergence of each student's personal academic style. Students are capable of learning how to write in, master, and tailor the structure of academic dialect to their own individual voice, the creation of a personal subsection within the larger specialization of SWCE.

Case Study

Part of the motivation to write this thesis has been my personal experience as a learner of SWCE. I acknowledge that I was raised in an English speaking home and was also homeschooled until grade nine, so my personal and educational experience is restricted to the privileges and limitations of my context. Internally, I am someone who tends towards descriptivism, and as I child, I both hated learning grammar and struggled with it. My writing style tended towards imprecision and freeform expression, and it was difficult for me to understand why I needed to edit my writing to obey seemingly endless sets of rules and pedagogical demands for conciseness, consistency, clarity, and coherence. If I liked my writing and it made sense to me, why did I need to edit it for the sake of a distant reader or external standards? But, in high school and university, I seriously began to question and re-evaluate my inclinations, as I realized that though unfettered expression allowed me to convey parts of myself, it did not allow me to articulate, process, or understand all of my humanity – such as my rationality. Nor did it allow others to understand me, my thoughts, or my emotions in their entirety. As such, it actually subverted and damaged my ability to communicate and undermined the aims of writing and communication in general. For example, from childhood well into my young adulthood, I struggled with both "low-order" issues of run-on sentences and comma usage, as well as "higher-order" issues of logical argumentation. My issues in these domains did not mean I was morally in error nor incapable of intellectual reasoning. However, it meant that I had to practice and mentored into how to articulate high-order issues via analytical content and persuasive ordering, but also through mastery of "low-order" issues such as comma placement.

Most representative of my discovery of the value of structure is my journey from writing exclusively freeform poetry to now exclusively closed form poetry. Similar to my experience with compositional form, when I first began writing poetry in 2012, I only wrote in free-verse,

because I viewed structure as artificial, oppressive, and arbitrary – having no place in my artistic style. However, when I took two creative writing poetry courses at MRU, I was challenged to write in closed poetic form. Initially though both alien and repulsive to me, I eventually embraced structured grammar usage and set form because through these formal standards, I found that I was paradoxically able to articulate more of my humanity, marrying my high emotionality with my equally as important rationality.

Thus, in the Fall of 2022 during my advanced composition course, when course readings or my classmates argued against writing standards or structure, I could not agree because of my experience of the compositional, artistic, and personal development I gained through learning SWCE and structure. Arguably, SWCE is important to learn, for as Giltrow describes, "[w]ithout access to scholarly ways of speaking, student writers cannot occupy scholarly positions, or use scholarly methods for producing statements, or speak to academic interests" (10). As I mentioned before, in my first term at MRU, my complete inexperience with the conventions of academic research barred me from engaging in scholarly conversation. Over my six years at MRU, through courses and mentorship from teachers, I learned how to access and contribute to English academic spaces. When I engage in SWCE, standard grammar usage, or poetic structure, I argue that I am seamlessly blending prescriptivism and descriptivism, because I inherently bring my own personal experience into any set form of communication I engage in. Ultimately, learning structure and SWCE in partnership with my internal valuation of my unique individual identity enabled me to develop my own personal academic style, subsequently deepening my ability to articulate my experience and humanity in academic analysis and artistic expression.

Conclusion

Founded on metaphysical idealism and the development of personal academic style, English composition pedagogy may only be able to achieve post-colonial aims by embracing the interdependence between prescriptivism and descriptivism. Ultimately, the reductive pitting of these approaches against each other fails to achieve or understand the aims of communication or education. Instead, building a compositional pedagogy allowing for the seamless reciprocity between prescriptivism and descriptivism facilitates a complete understanding of language, authority, personal expression, and prescriptive practices (structure, standards, grammar). I argue that authoritarian and permissive approaches, alongside their tendencies toward unbalanced prescriptivism and descriptivism, must be rejected. Conversely, an authoritarian approach fully aware of the sociopolitical tensions surrounding the learning of SWCE and reciprocally integrating the expertise of the instructor with the students' developing academic fluency in SWCE and must be embraced. As I have personally experienced, learning SWCE allows for the emergence of a personal academic style. My developing expertise in SWCE and personal style is only possible because writing is not an isolated technical skill or a belletristic art, but an act of communication tied to both the objective and subjective. Lastly, my discussion is admittedly imperfect, not only because of the constraints of an undergraduate thesis, my lack of experience teaching and developing pedagogy, but also the significant, charged connotations and lived realities surrounding the collision of prescriptivism, descriptivism, and post-colonialism. Moreover, educational spaces comprised of human agents will always be imperfect. However, I argue that through metaphysical realism, an integration of both the objective and the subjective, and an authoritative approach with a balanced understanding of authority will be able to satisfy post-colonial aims. As at any existential reckoning, English academia has the opportunity to either denature and devolve, or renew and transfigure. I argue that it is not only possible to

reconcile past and present conflicts between prescriptivism, descriptivism, and post-colonialism, but also to create a new approach that is fully tethered to the aims of language, the instruction of grammar, and the development of students' personal academic style.

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