Thesis summary

Until the beginning of this century, with a few notable exceptions, prescriptivism has received little serious attention among the academic linguistic community as a factor in language variation and change. The studies included in this thesis are part of the project 'Bridging the Unbridgeable: Linguists, Prescriptivists and the General Public' at Leiden University led by Professor Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, which is embedded in a growing research initiative that is attempting to paint a fine-grained picture of linguistic prescriptivism in the English language. The five studies included in this thesis all explore different aspects of what I call grassroots prescriptivism (cf. Heyd, 2014). In a broad sense, grassroots prescriptivism refers to prescriptivism from below, or, in other words, to the prescriptive efforts of lay people and their contributions to metalinguistic prescriptive debates. More specifically, the studies included in this thesis largely focus on the metalinguistic comments of ordinary people expressed on traditional and new media platforms, that is, letters to the editors of newspapers, radio phone-ins, and online forum and blog discussions. In contrast to institutional prescriptivism, or so-called prescriptivism from above, which is enforced by bodies such as language planning boards, governmental committees, and official agencies, grassroots prescriptivism includes the attempts of lay people to promote the standard language ideology.
The thesis is divided into seven chapters, with the first and the last providing the general context for the five case studies addressing different aspects of grassroots prescriptivism. The types of analysis employed were largely influenced by the nature of the data analysed, which ranged from letter-to-the-editor sections of newspapers (Chapters 2 and 3), interviews with British journalists all of whom dealt with matters pertaining to usage (§2.3), online surveys devised to test the attitudes to usage of the general public (§2.4, §2.5.2, and §6.3), and online usage discussions in blogs (Chapter 4) and on Wikipedia (Chapter 5). The discussions on particular usage features (e.g. the usage of who instead of whom in object position, less instead of fewer with countable nouns, singular they, and the adverb thusly), were contrasted with prescriptive pronouncements in the Hyper Usage Guide of English or HUGE database (Straaijer, 2014), which is a collection of 77 usage guides published in the period between 1770 and 2010 and compiled for the purposes of the Bridging the Unbridgeable project (cf. §4.3, §5.5.3, §6.3). State-of-the-art corpora of the English language, such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008–), Global Web-based English (Davies, 2013), and the British National Corpus (2007) were also used as tools for comparison in the corpus-driven analysis. As for its theoretical framework, the thesis draws on insights from the fields of language attitude studies, sociolinguistics, and corpus linguistics.

Chapter 2 aims to identify (i) the social groups of those who engage in grassroots prescriptivism, (ii) the usage features addressed in
metalinguistic debates, and (iii) changes, if any, in the usage features that are discussed in the debates. In answering these questions, I explored two collections of letters written to the editors of *The New York Times* (50 letters) and *The Times* (105) across a four-month timespan (March–July) between 2000 and 2010. Additionally, I conducted an online survey in 2015 together with Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade to find out about people’s practices of engaging in discussions on usage, both online and offline. My own findings show that whereas people of all social backgrounds engage in grassroots prescriptivism participation in metalinguistic debates is not egalitarian. The authors of letters to newspaper editors are, most commonly, highly educated males. In other words, to borrow a term from Pierre Bourdieu, it is primarily people who are viewed as possessing ‘cultural capital’ who claim their status in usage debates. Whereas gender differences are less pronounced in metalinguistic discussions carried out in the new media, those largely underrepresented in the online context, according to the survey, are non-native speakers. In spite of the fact that non-native speakers by far outnumber the native speakers of English, their participation in usage debates remains limited, due to, I tentatively conclude, the fact that they believe that they lack linguistic capital. The comparison between the American (*The New York Times*) and British (*The Times*) quality newspapers allows for some provisional empirically supported insights regarding the differences in standard language ideology between the two countries. This topic was explored earlier only theoretically in Leslie Milroy’s article ‘Britain and the
United States: Two Nations Divided by the Same Language (and Different Language Ideologies)’ (2001). Whereas the letters published in the British newspaper indicate a prevalence of linguistic purism focusing on concerns regarding the influx of Americanisms into British English, the American letters reveal that political correctness, or what Anne Curzan dubs ‘politically responsive prescriptivism’ in her book *Fixing English* (2014), remains the most frequently discussed topic in usage debates on the other side of the Atlantic. Changes in the topics discussed in usage debates are particularly interesting it that orthography has been taking centre stage of late, a shift that is largely due to the so-called moral panic associated with computer-mediated communication. Interesting too is the finding of the online survey that descriptivism and tolerant views of language use are primarily championed among those who have had an education in linguistics as an academic discipline.

Chapter 3 reports on a study including 258 letters to the editor published across the English-speaking world on the topic of the misplaced (or greengrocer’s) apostrophe. The misplaced apostrophe has garnered much attention recently, from the founding of the Apostrophe Protection Society in 2001, through an entire chapter devoted to the punctuation mark in Lynne Truss’s best-selling book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (2004), to public discussions in the UK following the apostrophe being dropped from the names of companies such as Waterstones, Barclays Bank, Boots, Harrods, and Selfridges. Through a corpus-driven analysis of key words and key semantic domains, I have
attempted to identify both the topics included in the letters, as well as the characteristics of prescriptive language at large. The results of the analysis show that letter writers tend to use factual support for their (largely subjective) claims. The analysis of the linguistic features used and topics included in the letters reveals that prescriptive arguments have their origins in the extra-linguistic realms of the aesthetic, correct, suitable, and ethical.

Newspaper letter-to-the-editor sections are among the earliest platforms on which usage debates appeared. Currently, however, they comprise only a fraction of the discussions available on the subject. The liveliest debates on usage today can be found online. Chapter 4 describes one such platform, namely, the Grammar Girl blog, which I refer to as a ‘usage guide 2.0’. A comparison between the usage features addressed in the respective blog with the usage features included in the HUGE database revealed that, in spite of the changes brought about by the new medium, much of what can be seen on the Grammar Girl website reflects a continuation of the 250-year-old usage guide tradition. Although Grammar Girl interacts with her readers and refers to sources such as grammar books, usage guides, as well as to linguistic studies of particular contested language features, most of the usage problems included on the website did not differ from the ones in traditional usage guides. A qualitative analysis of 412 comments on the website focuses on linguistic means of identity construction among the followers of the website, who describe themselves as ‘learners’, ‘experts’, ‘grammar sticklers’, and ‘trolls’. It was striking to find that
the two polarized groups of commenters, that is, prescriptivists and descriptivists, do not differ greatly in the type of argumentation they employ. They offer similar support for their arguments by referring to, for instance, education, logic, and authority figures, they retell anecdotes relating to the usage tradition, and preserve the established characteristics of the usage-related discourse in the new medium.

Chapter 5 continues examining grassroots prescriptivism in its online context. It focuses on Wikipedia as a place where usage is debated and usage advice formulated. Whereas Wikipedia is the largest collaborative knowledge-creation and knowledge-sharing project in history, it is not without precedent in linguistics. In 1879, James Murray, the then-editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, invited members of the public to contribute to the dictionary’s development. Thousands of quotation slips were submitted, the content of which is still accessible to scholars today. In the online context, members of the public have also been collaborating in creating online dictionaries such as *Wiktionary* and the *Urban Dictionary*. Wikipedia editors, so-called Wikipedians, on the other hand, I discovered, have been collaborating in creating entries on usage features. This type of collaboration in Wikipedia is revolutionary in that it represents one of the first platforms in which usage rules are co-created by experts and lay people alike. A corpus-driven comparison between Wikipedia entries and the entries in the HUGE database showed that the style in which the traditional usage guides are written is more narrative and personalized, whereas that in Wikipedia entries on usage assumes a more objective stance. Moreover,
and unsurprisingly perhaps, traditional usage guides focus on prescriptive rules and stigmatize nonstandard usage. On the other hand, due to the principles that guide collaboration on the pages of the online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia entries reflect critical and up-to-date accounts that rely on linguistics as a discipline and on actual usage instead of on pronouncements of individual authors who assume the roles of self-appointed authorities.

Chapter 6 explores the usage of the adverb *thusly*, which is generally viewed – and stigmatized – as a hypercorrect form of *thus*. The chapter analyses (i) the history of the prescriptive rule enforced against the usage of *thusly*, (ii) attitudes of speakers towards the usage of the word, and (iii) actual usage of *thusly* by way of a corpus analysis. The results indicate that, in spite of the almost century-long history of proscribing the usage of *thusly*, the word continues to be used in specific contexts, predominantly in American English. Moreover, the acceptance rates for *thusly* are rising particularly among younger speakers. Finally, the analysis of the word’s usage in this specific context demonstrates that accounting for a word’s frequency generally comprises only the first step in an investigation that should always be followed up with exploring the actual linguistic context and the regularities in the usage of the contested linguistic items.

This thesis aims to demonstrate that members of the public are not simply passive recipients of prescriptive rules, but active participants in usage debates. Participation in these debates, however, includes barriers resulting in them being dominated by participants who
are seen as possessing cultural and linguistic capital, that is, by the educated and by language professionals. Whereas the new media have contributed to removing some of these barriers, many groups of people remain excluded from metalinguistic discussions, mainly non-native speakers of English. Twenty-first-century prescriptivists, such as Grammar Girl and Bryan Garner, the author of *Garner’s Modern English Usage* (2016), are beginning to rely on linguistic data and report on patterns in usage in forming their linguistic advice. Linguists, on the other hand, are beginning to engage with the public, which is something that they have rarely done in the past. Slowly but surely, prescriptivism, like language itself, is changing. Its demise, however, as the findings of the studies included here show, is highly unlikely.