This volume of essays on 18th-century English grammars and grammar-writers wrests 18th-century prescriptivism from its customary place in the treatment of the complaint tradition in textbooks of the history of the English language and thrusts it into the world of commerce, of book-sellers and hack writers, of periodical readers and critics, and of schools and the education of women. The volume is the outcome of an international workshop held under the auspices of Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade's landmark research project on ‘The Codifiers and the English Language: Tracing the norms of Standard English’ at the University of Leiden.\(^1\) The collection of essays might be read in the context of the changing debate about the history of the standardization of the English language in the 18th century. Indeed, Tieken's introduction situates the essays and their topics firmly in the context of the processes held to characterize standardization, not least the processes of codification (“the laying down of the ‘laws’ of the language” [p. 1]) and of prescription (“when normative rules of language came to be ‘imposed’ ” [ibid.]).

One of the facts that underpins and motivates the study of the range and variety of grammars produced in the 18th century is the dramatic rise in the production of grammars in the second half of the 18th century, a fact that Tieken connects to the absence of an academy for regulating the use of English in public discourse.

The key question that the contributors seem to have in mind as they examine different aspects of the grammar phenomenon in the period is the nature of the relationship between codification and prescription, both substantively and causally. Tieken argues that it is the desire for social advancement that prompts grammars to be used as manuals rather than as reference books, and this claim is examined variously as the contributors explore questions such as the following: Who were these grammarians? How can the grammars be defined and how did they relate to actual usage? How did grammarians respond to speakers’ desires for instruction? What was the business of grammar writing, and how does this relate to the intellectual endeavour of grammar writing?

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\(^1\) Of the contributors to the volume, three, including Tieken, were project researchers at the time. The two others are Anita Auer and Karlijn Navest.
The book is divided into four thematic sections. The first, “Background”, is both the most catholic as well as the most provocative set of contributions. Don Chapman and Richard Watts tackle the thorny question of what the grammar writers were doing when they wrote grammars. For Chapman (“The eighteenth-century grammarians as language experts” [21–36]), the question is to what extent the grammar writers could be considered to be, for the 18th century, what professional linguists are to the 21st century. He shows that they belonged to an age in which the intellectual amateur rather than the academic professional held sway, and locates his argument in the consideration of the nature of university training and the criteria applied for ascertaining appropriate credentials. Watts (“Grammar writers in eighteenth-century Britain: A community of practice or a discourse community?” [37–56]) revisits the question of whether the grammar-writing project of the 18th century might be usefully described as the activities of a discourse community (Watts 1999), introducing for consideration the question of whether the grammars of the period might be regarded as the manifestation of a community of practice. He concludes, on the evidence of a coherent discourse of grammar-writing at the same time as an absence of coherent and common mutual engagement on the part of the grammar writers, that they do indeed form a discourse community, and he calls for the careful critical study of the grammars themselves in order to gain some purchase on the nature of the discursive strategies deployed by the community. Anita Auer (“Eighteenth-century grammars and book catalogues” [57–75]) provides the material background to discussions such as these by combing the book catalogues of the period for evidence of the dissemination and circulation of grammars. She considers sale catalogues and library lists to ascertain the geographical distribution of grammars, their pricing, and the frequency with which they were sold, and seeks to make inferences about their popularity and influence. She finds that there is an enormous amount of information held in different kinds of book catalogues, but that in the absence of clues to the events they mark, it is impossible to make reasonable inferences about questions of influence or popularity.

This kind of historical material study is excellent preparation for the second section of the book, which deals with the 18th-century market for grammars and with their reception. Astrid Buschmann-Göbels’s study of the publication history of the Bellum Grammaticale, an anonymous polemical pamphlet published in 1712 (“Bellum Grammaticale (1712) — A battle of books and a battle for the market” [81–100]), does more than offer a case study of the early 18th-century market for grammars and the shenanigans of authors and booksellers. The study provides a neat example of how grammar-writers function as a discourse community, criticising (one another’s) published grammars for their methods, results, and theoretical frameworks in an effort to shape the public’s preferences in a highly competitive market place.
Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade’s own contribution to the volume (“The 1760s: Grammars, grammarians and the booksellers” [101–124]) is another chapter of her major project on Robert Lowth (1710–1787), focusing on the publication history of his *Short Introduction to English Grammar* in the context of the publication and reprinting of grammars in the 1760s, to explore the relative roles of booksellers and grammar-writers in developing marketing strategies for particular markets. She acknowledges that while the fact that the grammars were issued in multiple formats in many editions in the period tells us a great deal about the booksellers’ role in creating and exploiting the market for grammars, it does not really tell us much about the audiences that the booksellers were trying to reach. It is the last contribution in this section, Carol Percy’s study of the treatment of the grammars printed in the middle of the 18th century (“Mid-century grammars and their reception in the *Monthly Review* and the *Critical Review*” [125–142]), which attends to the investigation of precisely how the grammars were received by readers, and thus allows the inference of who their readers were and what they expected from grammars. Her scrutiny of reviews published by the *Monthly Review* (1749–1844) and the *Critical Review* (1756–1817) yields important evidence of a public consensus that it was desirable to have published texts on language. More revealingly, the reviewers considered the audiences for different grammars and arguably influenced the public’s judgement and preferences for grammars. Percy also attends to the extent to which reviewers participate in and shape debate about the standardization of languages, demonstrating that they likely played a role in heightening the very anxiety about bad language that the grammars were designed to assuage.

The second half of the volume focuses on grammar-writers on the one hand (Part 3: The Grammarians) and on grammars on the other (Part 4: The Grammars). Both sections are necessarily selective. Part 3 arguably takes as its principal focus the place of women as grammar-writers. María Rodríguez-Gil (“Ann Fisher’s *A New Grammar*, or was it Daniel Fisher’s work?” [149–176]) seeks the identity of the author of Ann Fisher’s *A New Grammar*; Karen Cajka (“Eighteenth-century teacher-grammarians and the education of ‘proper’ women” [191–221]) examines the educational philosophies of women who published grammars for use in their own schools for girls, and Karlijn Navest (“‘Borrowing a few passages’: Lady Ellenor Fenn and her use of sources” [223–243]) studies the extent to which Lady Ellenor Fenn (1743–1813) mined other grammars as sources for her grammars written for children. These essays present a great deal of new material on the role of women in the world of grammar production and use in the 18th century. They shed considerable light on the use of grammars as practical teaching materials in different educational institutions, and highlight the fact that the writers or in some cases the compilers of these grammars were primarily teachers who made their
grammars specifically for use in the classroom. These treatments also allow us to paint a mental picture of the different groups of consumers of 18th-century grammars and so develop a more complex and nuanced account of what has repeatedly been characterized as a middle class anxious to acquire the ability to speak well and appropriately, a perceived attribute of the classically-educated polite classes (Langford 1989, Fitzmaurice 1998).

Jane Hodson’s contribution to this section ponders the nature of and motivation for the differences between the two editions of Joseph Priestley’s (1733–1804) *Rudiments of English Grammar* of 1761 and 1768 (177–189). She suggests that Priestley’s decisions indicate his own developing vision as a grammar-writer as well as his realization that a book devoted to the task of educating the reader could not also easily be expected to be a learned treatise on grammar. The latter issue brings us neatly to the substantive concerns of the final section of the book, namely, the subject of the grammars. The three essays in this section address the treatment of different grammatical problems in the 18th-century grammars, raising questions about the models for English grammars, the relationship of grammatical description and actual usage, and the influence of the prescriptive grammarians on the actual form of standard English. Nuria Yáñez-Bouza (“Preposition stranding in the eighteenth century: Something to talk about” [251–277]) examines the treatment of preposition stranding in the grammars in order to relate the description of grammatical phenomena to their evaluation and proscription as inelegant and colloquial. She shows that 18th-century writers seem to have shared a common set of beliefs about preposition-stranding as a vernacular idiom that was relevant to the consideration of rhetorical and stylistic concerns. Randy Bax (“Foolish, foolisher, foolishest: Eighteenth-century English grammars and the comparison of adjectives and adverbs” [279–288]) turns to the phenomenon of adjectival and adverbial comparison to examine the extent to which so-called analytic comparative constructions such as ‘more foolish’ co-exist and vary with synthetic comparatives such as ‘foolisher’ in the grammars. By surveying approaches to the two types of comparative constructions over time, he concludes that a change in approach, to pay greater attention to the feature’s formal aspects, coincided with a widening readership of the grammars, thus responding to the perceived desire of the market to be guided in matters of good usage. The final contribution in the volume is Victorina González-Díaz’s corpus-based examination of the double marking of degree in expressions like more better or more lovelier, namely, double periphrastic comparatives (“On normative grammarians and the double marking of degree” [289–310]). She shows through a study of the constructions in a range of text-types produced in the early modern period that they tended to be associated with non-standard varieties of English. Turning to their treatment in the grammars, she finds that grammar writers are quite selective in their comments
on periphrastic constructions, mentioning lesser as a viable alternative to less, but being less enthusiastic and positive about using worser as an alternative to worse. This volume aptly represents the recent explosion of interest in the extent to which the codification and prescription project undertaken by the normative grammarian discourse community was actually situated in and shaped by the material economic and social changes affecting the English middle classes in the middle of the 18th century. And it is thanks to this volume that we understand a great deal more about the intellectual and economic milieu in which booksellers determined the market for this particular type of self-help manual and in which school teachers decided that writing and publishing grammars was the best way to develop appropriate teaching materials. The challenge remains to find evidence that can be used to illuminate the issue of the grammarians’ influence on middle-class usage which would bear witness to the effects of prescription and prescriptivism.

REFERENCES


Reviewer’s address:

Susan M. Fitzmaurice
School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics
University of Sheffield
1 Upper Hanover Street
SHEFFIELD S3 7RA
United Kingdom

e-mail: S.Fitzmaurice@sheffield.ac.uk