

BOOK NOTES

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NILS LANGER AND WINIFRED DAVIES (eds.), *Linguistic purism in the Germanic languages*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005. Pp. viii, 374. Hb \$137.00

Reviewed by JOHN EDWARDS
*Psychology, St Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, Nova Scotia B2G 2W5 Canada
jedwards@stfx.ca*

Prescriptivist attitudes toward language have always been with us, and complaints about decline and decay, about foreign infiltration, about the inadequacy of certain dialects – these matters are as perennial as misgivings about the younger generation. Within the scholarly community, there is a long tradition of studying language attitudes, supplemented recently by a revived interest in “folk linguistics” and “perceptual dialectology.” This sort of attention has generally coincided with arguments against prescriptivist intervention, on the grounds that it is neither appropriate nor feasible to attempt to direct vernacular usage. (Hohenhaus, however, in his chapter on computer communication patterns, points out that a refusal to intervene is, itself, a sort of “reverse purism.”) Historically, of course, matters were rather different in intellectual and policy circles and, indeed, prescriptivist intervention remains common: Decisions have to be made when national languages “emerge” and when some print standardization is found necessary; debates about identity choice and maintenance are often argued in linguistic arenas; language-planning exercises involve some degree of control; and contemporary debate about what (if anything) ought to be done on behalf of “endangered” varieties also implies a prescriptivist attitude. As Kristine Horner points out in her chapter on Luxembourg, labels can often confuse in such broad areas of activity: What is seen as purism when directed toward “foreign” elements may be tagged as standardization when the focus is inward. In a broad sense, then, there is a great deal of information in the literature about prescriptivist attitudes and activities; when the editors suggest that “only one monograph” (by George Thomas) has so far attempted to theorize about purism, they are being a little too restrictive.

Among a score of interesting chapters, most make points that go well beyond the book’s particular Germanic focus. Given that religious beliefs have often intertwined with linguistic ones, the chapter on 19th-century Flanders (by Wim Vandebussche et al.) is illustrative. Flemish was seen in some quarters as a barrier against godlessness; in others, the influence of German on Dutch was to be resisted because of sound changes instigated by Luther, the “German Antichrist.” Given the virulence and power of such views – and given the co-occurrence of religious and linguistic narrowness in many other contexts (in the attempted Irish revival, for example), it is curious that Vandebussche and his colleagues would suggest that the twin thrust is a rare one. Maria Geers deals with “puristic substitution” in her chapter, an exercise in which existing words and usages – reflecting unwanted foreign influence – are to be replaced by other, “purer” ones. This can take many interesting forms: reviving archaisms, for instance, or turning to rural and unsophisticated vernaculars in an attempt to capture the native heart of the language. The chapter naturally makes mention of William Barnes, the 19th-century “Anglo-Saxonizer” who aimed to replace *music* with *gleecraft*, *industrious* with *toilsome*, *merchant* with *chapman*, and *astronomy* with *starlore*.

The sections of this book treat historical aspects of the topic, the relationship between nationalism and the prescriptivist impulse, studies of “popular” attitudes and folk linguistics, and purist ideologies in the academy. They are all well presented, generally by experienced scholars. Not only is the book useful for students of Germanic varieties; it should be on the shelf of all who are interested in prescriptivism *tout court*.

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