

# The eighteenth-century grammarians as language experts

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## 1. Introduction

The divide between prescriptivism and linguistics is well-known and long-standing. Generally speaking, linguists deplore the seeming naivety of prescriptivism, and prescriptivists deplore the seeming permissiveness of linguistics. Both linguists and prescriptivists claim to be experts: linguists claim to be experts on how language works, and prescriptivists claim to be experts on how language ought to be used. But few claim to be experts in both. Most prescriptivists do not hold advanced degrees in linguistics, publish language research in professional journals, or belong to professional linguistics societies, while most linguists pay little attention to prescriptivism. This divide presents a curious situation in which those who know how language works do not care much about the one issue that most non-experts care about (i.e. usage), and those who care about usage do not know much about how language works.

How long has this divide been in place? Linguists generally trace the rise of prescriptivism to the eighteenth-century grammarians (see also the introduction to this volume). So was the divide between language experts and usage experts present in the grammarians' day too? Or could those same grammarians, the forerunners of today's usage experts, also have been the prototypes of today's language experts, the linguists? In other words, were the eighteenth-century grammarians language experts?

The simplest answer to this question is that the eighteenth-century grammarians were not language experts, simply because experts, as they have come to be considered nowadays, did not exist for practically any field. Today we live in an expert society. We trust experts in medicine, law, highway construction, and most other aspects of life. We hardly think about the qualifications of the experts – we take it for granted that mechanics, dentists, architects and physical therapists know their craft. Yet for that confidence to exist, considerable machinery must be in place. Experts are educated and trained, tested and certified. They produce and share knowledge within professional associations (cf. Haskell 1984: ix–xviii; MacDonald 1995: 157–174).