The Politics of Prescriptivism: One Style Manual, One Century

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When *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* was first published in 1923, it was 40 pages and focused primarily on spelling and typographical issues. By 1976 it was 231 pages and had expanded its attention to a wider range of usage issues, from criticism of an “overworked” adjective such as *ongoing* to a long entry on *women* that begins, “In referring to women, we should avoid words or phrases that seem to imply that The Times speaks with a purely masculine voice, viewing men as the norm and women as the exception.” This talk investigates the changing politics of 20th-century prescriptivism in the U.S. through a case study of eight editions of *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* between 1923 and 2015. In both the forewords and the entries throughout the Manual, the editors navigate the politics of selecting areas of usage for prescriptive intervention—including specifically the political project of inclusive language. How should we understand, for example, the ideologies invoked in “the rule of commonsense” introduced in the 1962 edition? This case study adds to a growing body of scholarship investigating the nuances of modern language prescriptivism and the ideologies that underlie it, as prescriptivism has become a more legitimate object of scholarly inquiry in History of English scholarship.