

9

The Appeal to Authority, 1650–1800

186. The Impact of the Seventeenth Century.

The social, commercial, technological, and intellectual forces that were released in the Renaissance had profound effects on the English language, as the previous chapter has described. In the middle and latter part of the seventeenth century the evolution and interaction of these forces led to a culmination, a series of crises, and an eventual reaction. Both the crises and the responses to them were provoked by transmutations of forces that had energized the Renaissance, and these new trends became disruptively intense by the middle of the seventeenth century. The most obvious crisis was the English Civil War of the 1640s, followed by the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. The intellectual turbulence, which involved matters of language and language use, among many other concerns, is somewhat harder to trace than the political turbulence, and it has often been misread. While it is natural for us to take the rationality of scientific discourse as a kind of norm, the new scientists and philosophers of the seventeenth century saw their world view challenged by an outpouring of fervent expression that was often driven by religious zeal and occult science, and which incorporated large measures of irrationality and obscurity, often accompanied by belief in astrology, alchemy, and witchcraft. Radical Nonconformists, Dissenters, and other perceived fanatics were lumped together under the pejorative label “Enthusiasts” by writers and scientists connected with the Royal Society, as well as by more conservative Anglicans. Supporters of rational science such as Henry More, Thomas Sprat, John Wilkins, and Robert Boyle were disturbed by the “ranting” language of the Enthusiasts. More conservative minds were concerned about the very fact of public expression and the sheer bulk of controversial publications.

Learned discourse was no longer confined to elite circles; it was now being extensively published, in English. The practitioners of natural science seemed to glory not only in condemning the Enthusiasts and the old authorities but also in open disputation. They regarded science as a cooperative enterprise which required disagreements. In the seventeenth century, however, it was still very difficult for people to conceive that open controversy was either safe or beneficial to society. As one conservative nobleman put it, “Controversye Is a Civill Warr with the Pen which pulls out the sorde soone afterwards.”¹ In the wake of the recent revolutionary turmoil (1640–1660), featuring civil war, the execution of a king, and a Cromwellian interregnum, his apprehensions were understandable. Thus, there arose during the latter seventeenth century a highly focused public consciousness as regards language. Yet, with few exceptions, though often for different reasons, educated English people recoiled from the solution Thomas Hobbes proposed—that all power, even over knowledge—must reside in a single political authority.

In the 1660s the Royal Society, which served as coordinator and clearing house for English scientific endeavors, proposed a solution in which the English language would play a crucial role. Among the membership, the leading proponents of this solution were religious moderates: Latitudinarian Anglicans and moderate Puritans. They argued that the English prose of scientists should be stripped of ornamentation and emotive language. It should be plain, precise, and clear. The style should be non-assertive. Assent was to be gained not by force of words but by force of evidence and reasoning. An author writing on scientific subjects, as one of them said, should convey "a sense of his own fallibility.... [He] never concludes but upon resolution to alter his mind upon contrary evidence...he gives his reasons without passion...discourses without wrangling, and differs without dividing."² Essentially this amounted to a repudiation of classical principles of rhetoric, which had accented powers of persuasion and could easily be used to project mirages of plausibility. Language, it was urged, should be geared for dispassionate, rational—literally prosaic—discourse. It was also recommended that the higher or "Liberal Arts" should be brought in closer contact with the baser "Mechanick Arts." In this way English prose could facilitate a national unity built around scientific honesty and social utility.

¹ The Duke of Newcastle, quoted by Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer. *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, 1985), p. 290. Chapters 7 and 8 of this book offer useful background for the discussion of language.

² Joseph Glanvill, quoted by Barbara J. Shapiro, "Latitudinarianism and Science in Seventeenth-Century England," *Past and Present*, 40 (1968), 40.

This proposal became a credo of the Royal Society, and its principles influenced efforts to design universal languages. All this bespeaks an intense awareness of the importance of language in almost every sphere of politics, society, and culture. John Locke's ideas about language, in the *Essay of Human Understanding* and elsewhere in his writings were greatly influenced by the Latitudinarians of the Royal Society. He wished that the qualities desired for scientific prose could be extended to all prose. But the Royal Society could not impose its scheme; it could only hope that its members would set an example. Nor did the Royal Society create the "plain style," though it may have accomplished something equally important and that is to give elite sanction to the idea that a plain style was best. In all these endeavors, linguistic and scientific, one sees the emergence of certain widely noted characteristics of the decades that followed in England.

187. The Temper of the Eighteenth Century.

In the light of this seventeenth-century background we may more readily understand the temper of the eighteenth century. The first half of the eighteenth century is commonly designated in histories of literature as the Augustan Age in England. The principal characteristics of this age which affected the course of the English language emerged early and maintained their influence throughout the century, in spite of the eruption of some radical challenges in the final two decades. The eighteenth century sought to retain from the seventeenth century the best features of rational discourse that had been established while rejecting the uncontrolled proliferation of what sober minds regarded as dangerous tendencies in English prose.

In England the age was characterized by a search for stability. One of the first characteristics to be mentioned is a strong sense of order and the value of regulation. Adventurous individualism and the spirit of independence characteristic of the previous era gave way to a desire for system and regularity. This involves conformity to a standard that the consensus recognizes as good. It sets up correctness as an ideal and attempts to formulate rules or principles by which correctness may be defined and achieved. The most important consideration in the foundation of this standard is reason. The spirit of scientific rationalism in philosophy was reflected in many other domains of thought. A great satisfaction was felt in things that could be logically explained and justified. It must not be supposed, however, that the powerful new current of scientific rationalism swept away the firmly grounded reverence for classical literature. Not only in literature but also in language Latin was looked upon as a model, and classical precedent was often generalized into precept. It is easy to see how a standard having its basis in regularity, justified by reason, and supported by classical authority might be regarded as approaching perfection, and how an age that set much store by elegance and refinement could easily come to believe in this standard as an indispensable criterion of "taste." While continuing to venerate Greece and Rome, eighteenth-century English people were increasingly conscious of ways in which their own achievements could be judged as surpassing those of the ancient world. They could easily come to believe in the essential rightness of their judgment and think that their own ideals could be erected into

something like a permanent standard. We may well believe that permanence and stability would seem like no inconsiderable virtues to a generation that remembered the disorders and changes of the Revolution and Restoration.

188. Its Reflection in the Attitude toward the Language.

The intellectual tendencies here noted are seen quite clearly in the eighteenth-century efforts to standardize, refine, and fix the English language. In the period under consideration discussion of the language takes a new turn. Previously interest had been shown chiefly in such questions as whether English was worthy of being used for writings in which Latin had long been traditional, whether the large additions being made to the vocabulary were justified, and whether a more adequate system of spelling could be introduced. Now for the first time attention was turned to the grammar, and it was discovered that English had no grammar. At any rate its grammar was largely uncoded, unsystematized. The ancient languages had been reduced to rule; one knew what was right and what was wrong. But in English everything was uncertain. One learned to speak and write as one learned to walk, and in many matters of grammatical usage there was much variation even among educated people. This was clearly distasteful to an age that desired above all else an orderly universe. The spontaneous creativeness of a Shakespeare, verbing it with nouns and adjectives, so to speak, sublimely indifferent to rules, untroubled by any considerations in language save those springing from a sure instinct, had given place to hesitation and uncertainty, so that a man like Dryden confessed that at times he had to translate an idea into Latin in order to decide on the correct way to express it in English.

In its effort to set up a standard of correctness in language the rationalistic spirit of the eighteenth century showed itself in the attempt to settle disputed points logically, that is, by simply reasoning about them, often arriving at entirely false conclusions. The respect for authoritative example, especially for classical example, takes the form of appeals to the analogy of Latin, whereas a different manifestation of the respect for authority is at the bottom of the belief in the power of individuals to legislate in matters of language and accounts for the repeated demand for an English Academy. Finally it is an idea often expressed that English has been and is being daily corrupted, that it needs correction and refinement, and that when the necessary reforms have been effected it should be fixed permanently and protected from change. In other words, it was desired in the eighteenth century to give the English language a polished, rational, and permanent form. How mistaken were these goals and methods will be shown later. The various features of that attempt will constitute the major topics for discussion in the remainder of this chapter.

189. "Ascertainment."

Eighteenth-century attempts to codify the English language and to direct its course fall, we may repeat, under three main heads: (1) to reduce the language to rule and set up a standard of correct usage; (2) to refine it—that is, to remove supposed defects and introduce certain improvements; and (3) to fix it permanently in the desired form.

As pointed out in the preceding section, one of the chief defects of English that people became acutely conscious of in the latter part of the seventeenth century was the absence of a standard, the fact that the language had not been reduced to a rule so that one could express oneself at least with the assurance of doing so correctly. Dryden sums up this attitude in words: "we have yet no prosodia, not so much as a tolerable dictionary, or a grammar, so that our language is in a manner barbarous."³ That is, the language did not possess the character of an orderly and well-regulated society. One must write it according to one's individual judgment and therefore without the confidence that one might feel if there were rules on which to lean and a vocabulary sanctioned by some recognized authority. It was a conviction of long standing with him. In his dedication of *Troilus and Cressida* to the earl of Sunderland (1679) he says: "how barbarously we yet write and speak, your lordship knows, and I am sufficiently sensible in my own English. For I am often put to a stand, in considering whether what I write be the idiom of the tongue, or false grammar." And he adds: "I am desirous, if it were possible, that we might all write with the same certainty of words, and purity of phrase, to which the Italians first arrived, and after them the French; at least that we might advance so far, as our tongue is capable of such a standard." The ideal was expressed many times in the earlier part of the eighteenth century, perhaps nowhere more accurately than in the words "we write by guess, more than any stated rule, and form every man his diction, either according to his humour and caprice, or in pursuance of a blind and servile imitation."⁴

In the eighteenth century the need for standardization and regulation was summed up in the word *ascertainment*. The force of this word then was some-what different from that which it has today. To *ascertain* was not so much to

³ *Discourse concerning Satire* (1693).

⁴ Thomas Stackhouse, *Reflections on the Nature and Property of Language in General, on the Advantages, Defects, and Manner of Improving the English Tongue in Particular* (1731), p. 187.

learn by inquiry as to settle a matter, to render it certain and free from doubt. Dr. Johnson defined *ascertainment* as “a settled rule; an established standard”; and it was in this sense that Swift used the verb in his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue*.⁵ When reduced to its simplest form the need was for a dictionary that should record the proper use of words and a grammar that should settle authoritatively the correct usages in matters of construction. How it was proposed to attain these ends we shall see shortly.

190. *The Problem of “Refining” the Language.*

Uncertainty was not the only fault that the eighteenth century found with English. The lack of a standard to which all might conform was believed to have resulted in many corruptions that were growing up unchecked. It is the subject of frequent lament that for some time the language had been steadily going down. Such observations are generally accompanied by a regretful backward glance at the good old days. Various periods in the past were supposed to represent the highest perfection of English. It was Dryden’s opinion that “from Chaucer the purity of the English tongue began,” but he was not so completely convinced as some others that its course had been always downward. For Swift the golden age was that of the great Elizabethans. “The period,” he says, “wherein the English tongue received most improvement, I take to commence with the beginning of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, and to conclude with the great rebellion in forty-two. From the civil war to this present time, I am apt to doubt whether the corruptions in our language have not at least equalled the refinements of it; and these corruptions very few of the best authors in our age have wholly escaped. During the usurpation, such an infusion of enthusiastic jargon prevailed in every writing, as was not shaken off in many years after. To this succeeded the licentiousness which entered with the restoration, and from infecting our religion and morals fell to corrupt our language.”⁶

With this opinion Dr. Johnson agreed. In his *Dictionary* he says, “I have studiously endeavoured to collect examples and authorities from the writers before the restoration, whose works I regard as the wells of English undefiled, as the pure sources of genuine diction.” It is curious to find writers later in the century, such as Priestley, Sheridan, and the American Webster, looking back upon the Restoration and the period of Swift himself as the classical age of the language. It is apparent that much of this talk springs merely from a sentimental regard for the past and is to be taken no more seriously than the perennial belief that our children are not what their parents were. Certainly the

⁵ Cf. §193.

⁶ *Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue*.

corruptions that Swift cites seem to us rather trivial. But the significance of such utterances lies in the fact that they reveal an attitude of mind and lead to many attempts in the course of the century to “purify” the language and rid it of supposed imperfections.

There have always been, and doubtless always will be, people who feel a strong antipathy toward certain words or expressions or particular constructions, especially those with the taint of novelty about them. Usually such people do not make their objections felt beyond the circle of their friends. But occasionally an individual whose name carries weight and who is possessed with a crusading spirit offers his or her views to the public. However much the condemned usages may represent mere personal prejudice, they are often regarded by others as veritable faults in the language and continue to be condemned in words that echo those of the original critic until the objections attain a currency and assume a magnitude out of all proportion to their significance. Such seems to have been the case with the strictures of Dean Swift on the English of his day.

In matters of language Swift was a conservative. His conservatism was grounded in a set of political and religious, as well as linguistic, opinions. He cherished the principle of authority in church and state, and thus deplored the Latitudinarians. He decried the skeptical spirit of inquiry proposed by the Royal Society. Innovation, whether in politics or language, cmmbled the cement of society. Taking his writings as a whole, one may surmise that he would have preferred that the seventeenth century, at least after 1640, with its political, commercial, and scientific revolutions had never happened.⁷ Although Swift upheld the classics, he understood the merits of a plain English style, so long as it was not polluted by crude and careless usages. The things that specifically troubled the gloomy dean in his reflections on the current speech were chiefly innovations that he says had been growing up in the last twenty years. One of these was the tendency to clip and shorten words that should have retained their full polysyllabic dignity. He would have objected to *taxi*, *phone*, *bus*, *ad*, and the like, as he did to *rep*, *mob*, *penult*, and others. The practice seems to have been a temporary fad, although not unknown to any period of the language. It continued, however, to be condemned for fifty years. Thus George Campbell in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) says: “I shall just mention another set of barbarisms, which also comes under this class, and arises from the abbreviation

⁷ Interesting perspectives on the motives that underlay Swift’s language proposals may be found in Brian Vickers, ed., *The World of Jonathan Swift* (Cambridge, MA, 1968), especially the essays by Pat Rogers, Brian Vickers, and Hugh Sykes Davies. See also Ann Cline Kelly, *Swift and the English Language* (Philadelphia, 1988).

of polysyllables, by lopping off all the syllables except the first, or the first and second. Instances of this are *hyp* for *hypochondriac*, *rep* for *reputation*, *ult* for *ultimate*, *penult* for *penultimate*, *incog* for *incognito*, *hyper* for *hypercritic*, *extra* for *extraordinary*. Happily all these affected terms have been denied the public suffrage. I scarcely know any such that have established themselves, except *mob* for *mobile*. And this it hath effected at last, notwithstanding the unrelenting zeal with which it was persecuted by Dr. Swift, wherever he met with it. But as the word in question hath gotten use, the supreme arbitress of language, on its side, there would be as much obstinacy in rejecting it at present, as there was perhaps folly at first in ushering it upon the public stage.”⁸ Campbell’s admission of the word *mob* is interesting, because in theory he accepted the test of usage, but he could not quite free himself from prejudice against this word.

A second innovation that Swift opposed was the tendency to contract verbs like *drudg’d*, *disturb’d*, *rebuk’d*, *fledg’d* “and a thousand others everywhere to be met with in prose as well as verse, where, by leaving out a vowel to save a syllable, we form a jarring sound, and so difficult to utter, that I have often wondered how it could ever obtain.” His ostensible reason for rejecting this change, which time has fully justified, is that “our language was already overstocked with monosyllables.” We accordingly hear a good bit in the course of the century about the large number of monosyllabic words in English, an objection that seems to have no more to support it than the fact that a person of Swift’s authority thought monosyllables “the disgrace of our language.”

A third innovation that aroused Swift’s ire has to do with certain words then enjoying a considerable vogue among wits and people of fashion. They had even invaded the pulpit. Young preachers, fresh from the universities, he says, “use all the modern terms of art, *sham*, *banter*, *mob*, *bubble*, *bully*, *cutting*, *shuffling*, and *palming*, all which, and many more of the like stamp, as I have heard them often in the pulpit, so I have read them in some of those sermons that have made most noise of late.” Swift was by no means alone in his criticism of new words. Each censor of the language has his own list of objectionable expressions (cf. § 205). But this type of critic may be illustrated here by its most famous representative.

All of these faults that Swift found in the language he attacked in a letter to the *Tatler* (No. 230) in 1710, and he called attention to them again two years later in his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English*

⁸ I. 428–29.

Tongue. In the former paper, in order to set out more clearly the abuses he objected to, he published a letter supposedly “received some time ago from a most accomplished person in this way of writing”:

Sir,

I *cou'dn't* get the things you sent for all *about Town*.—I *thôt* to *ha'* come down myself, and then *I'd ha' brout'um*; but I *han't don't*, and I believe *I can't do't*, that's *pozz*.—*Tom* begins to *g'imself* airs because *he's* going with the *plenipo's*.—'Tis said, the French King will *bamboozl' us agen*, which *causes many speculations*. The *Jacks*, and others of that *kidney*, are very *uppish*, and *alert upon't*, as you may see by their *phizz's*.—*Will Hazzard* has got the *hipps*, having lost *to the tune of* five hundr'd pound, *thô* he understands play very well, *nobody better*. He has promis't me upon *rep*, to leave off play; but you know 'tis a weakness *he's* too apt to *give into*, *thô* he has as much wit as any man, *nobody more*. He has lain *incog* ever since.—The *mobb's* very quiet with us now.—I believe you *thôt* I *banter'd* you in my last like a *country put*.—I *sha'n't* leave *Town* this month, &c.

“This letter,” he says, “is in every point an admirable pattern of the present polite way of writing.” The remedy he proposes is for the editor (Steele) to use his position to rid the language of these blemishes, “First, by argument and fair means; but if these fail, I think you are to make use of your authority as Censor, and by an annual *index expurgatorius* expunge all words and phrases that are offensive to good sense, and condemn those barbarous mutilations of vowels and syllables.” Later, in his *Proposal*, he was to go much further.

191. *The Desire to “Fix” the Language.*

One of the most ambitious hopes of the eighteenth century was to stabilize the language, to establish it in a form that would be permanent. Swift talked about “fixing” the language, and the word was echoed for fifty years by lesser writers who shared his desire and, like him, believed in the possibility of realizing it. The fear of change was an old one. Bacon at the end of his life had written to his friend, Sir Toby Matthew (1623): “It is true, my labours are now most set to have those works, which I had formerly published,...well translated into Latin.... For these modern languages will, at one time or other, play the bankrupts with books.”⁹

⁹ *Works*, ed. Basil Montagu (Philadelphia, 1841), III, 151.

A succession of writers voiced the fear that in a few generations their works would not be understood. Shortly after the Restoration the poet Waller wrote (*Of English Verse*):

But who can hope his lines should long
Last, in a daily changing tongue?
While they are new, Envy prevails;
And as that dies, our language fails....

Poets that Lasting Marble seek,
Must carve in Latin or in Greek;
We write in Sand....

A little later Swift wrote: "How then shall any man, who hath a genius for history equal to the best of the ancients, be able to undertake such a work with spirit and cheerfulness, when he considers that he will be read with pleasure but a very few years, and in an age or two shall hardly be understood without an interpreter?" And he added, "The fame of our writers is usually confined to these two islands, and it is hard it should be limited in *time* as much as *place* by the perpetual variations of our speech."¹⁰ Pope echoed the sentiment when he wrote in his *Essay on Criticism*, "And such as Chaucer is, shall Dryden be." Even after the middle of the century, when the hope of fixing the language was less frequently expressed, Thomas Sheridan addressed a plea to the earl of Chesterfield to exert his influence toward stabilizing the language: "Suffer not our Shakespear, and our Milton, to become two or three centuries hence what Chaucer is at present, the study only of a few poring antiquarians, and in an age or two more the victims of bookworms."¹¹

It is curious that a number of people notable in various intellectual spheres in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries should have been blind to the testimony of history and believed that by taking thought it would be possible to suspend the processes of growth and decay that characterize a living language. It is the more remarkable in that the truth had been recognized by some from a considerably earlier date. The anonymous author of the pamphlet *Vindex Anglicus: or, The Perfections of the English Language Defended and Asserted* (1644)¹² noted that changes in language are inevitable. Even earlier (1630) that delightful letter writer James Howell had observed: "that as all other sublunary things are subject to corruptions and decay,... ^{so} the learnedest and more eloquent languages are not free from this common fatal-

¹⁰ *Proposal*.

¹¹ *British Education* (1756), p. xvii.

¹² *Harleian Miscellany*, 5 (1808-1811), 428-34.

ity, but are liable to those alterations and revolutions, to those fits of inconstancy, and other destructive contingencies which are unavoidably incident to all earthly things.”¹³ Nevertheless, laboring under the mistaken notion that the classical languages, particularly Greek, had continued unchanged for many centuries, some held that English might be rendered equally stable. That great scholar Bentley explained the changes that English had undergone in the previous two centuries as due chiefly to the large number of Latin words incorporated into the language, and he thought that it would not change so much in the future, adding: “Nay, it were no difficult contrivance, if the Public had any regard to it, to make the English Tongue unmutable; unless here after some Foreign Nation shall invade and overrun us.”¹⁴ Bentley’s influence is apparent in Swift’s opinion that “if it [English] were once refined to a certain standard, perhaps there might be ways found out to fix it for ever, or at least till we are invaded and made a conquest by some other state.” In the same place Swift says: “But what I have most at heart, is, that some method should be thought on for ascertaining and fixing our language for ever, after such alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite. For I am of opinion, it is better a language should not be wholly perfect, than that it should be perpetually changing.” And again he adds, “I see no absolute necessity why any language should be perpetually changing; for we find many examples to the contrary.”¹⁵ It would be possible to show the continuance of this idea through much of the rest of the century, but it is sufficient to recognize it as one of the major concerns of the period with respect to the language.

192. *The Example of Italy and France.*

It was perhaps inevitable that those who gave thought to the threefold problem which seemed to confront English—of standardizing, refining, and fixing it—should consider what had been done in this direction by other countries. Italy and France were the countries to which the English had long turned for inspiration and example, and in both of these lands the destiny of the language had been confided to an academy. In Italy, prolific in academies, the most famous was the Accademia della Crusca, founded as early as 1582. Its avowed object was the purification of the Italian language, and to this end, it published in 1612 a dictionary, the famous *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*. The dictionary provoked controversy, one of the most effective kinds of publicity, and, though subsequently modified in important ways, it went through several editions. In the third (1691) it had reached the proportions of three folio volumes, and the fourth edition (1729–1738) filled six. Here then was an impressive example

¹³ *Epistolae Ho-Eliaanae*, Bk. II, Sec. VII, Letter LX.

¹⁴ *Dissertation upon the Epistles of Phalaris* (1699), p. 406.

¹⁵ *Proposal*.

of the results attained in at least one country from an effort to improve its language. Perhaps an even more effective precedent was furnished by France. In 1635 Cardinal Richelieu offered a royal charter to a small group of men who for several years had been meeting once a week to talk about books and to exchange views on literature. The original group was composed of only six or eight; the maximum membership was set at forty. The society was to be known as the French Academy (l'Académie française), and in the statutes that were drawn up defining its purpose it was declared: "The principal function of the Academy shall be to labor with all possible care and diligence to give definite rules to our language, and to render it pure, eloquent, and capable of treating the arts and sciences." It was to cleanse the language of impurities, whether in the mouths of the people or among people of affairs, whether introduced by ignorant courtiers or preachers or writers. It would be well "to establish a certain usage of words" and accordingly it should undertake to compile a dictionary, a grammar, a rhetoric, and a treatise on the art of poetry. The most important of these projects was the dictionary. Work on it proceeded slowly, but in 1694 it appeared. Thus while England continued to lament the lack of an adequate dictionary, Italy and France had both apparently achieved this object through the agency of academies.

193. *An English Academy.*

There can be little doubt that the vital incentive to the establishment of an academy in England came from the example of France and Italy. The suggestion of an English Academy occurs early in the seventeenth century. Indeed, learned societies had been known in England from 1572, when a Society of Antiquaries founded by Archbishop Parker began holding its meetings at the house of Sir Robert Cotton and occupied itself with the study of antiquity and history. It might in time have turned its attention to the improvement of the language, but it languished after the accession of James I. A proposal that promised even more was made about the year of Shakespeare's death by Edmund Bolton, an enthusiastic antiquary. It was for a society to be composed of men famous in politics, law, science, literature, history, and the like. Those proposed for membership, beside the originator, included such well-known names as George Chapman, Sir Edward Coke, Sir Robert Cotton, Sir Kenelm Digby, Michael Drayton, Ben Jonson, Inigo Jones, John Selden, Sir Henry Spelman, and Sir Henry Wotton, all men with scholarly tastes and interests. But the project died with James I.

In time, however, the example of the French Academy began to attract attention in England. In 1650 James Howell spoke approvingly of its intentions to reform French spelling, and in 1657 its history appeared in English, translated from the French of Pellisson. With the Restoration, discussion of an English Academy became much more frequent. In the very year that Charles II was restored to the throne, a volume was published with the title *New Atlantis...Continued by R.H. Esquire* (1660) in which, as a feature of his ideal commonwealth, the author pictured an academy "to purifie our Native Language from Barbarism or Solecism, to the height of Eloquence, by regulating the termes and phrases thereof into constant use of the most significant words, proverbs, and phrases, and justly appropriating them either to the Lofty, mean, or Comic stile."¹⁶

Shortly thereafter the idea of an academy received support from several influential persons, notably from Dryden and John Evelyn. In the dedication of the *Rival Ladies* (1664) Dryden says, "I am Sorry, that (Speaking so noble a Language as we do) we have not a more certain Measure of it, as they have in France, where they have an Academy erected for the purpose, and Indow'd with large Privileges by the present King." A few months later the Royal Society took a step that might have led it to serve the purpose of an academy. This society, founded in 1662, was mainly scientific in its interests, but in December 1664 it adopted a resolution to the effect that as "there were persons of the Society whose genius was very proper and inclined to improve the English tongue, Particularly for philosophic purposes, it was voted that there should be a committee for improving the English language; and that they meet at Sir Peter Wyche's lodgings in Gray's-Inn once or twice a month, and give an account of their proceedings, when called upon." The committee was a large one; among its twenty-two members were Dryden, Evelyn, Sprat, and Waller. Evelyn, on one occasion, unable to attend the meeting of the committee, wrote out at length what he conceived to be the things that they might attempt. He proposed the compilation of a grammar and some reform of the spelling, particularly the leaving out of superfluous letters. This might be followed by a "Lexicon or collection of all the pure English words by themselves; then those which are derivative from others, with their prime, certaine, and natural signification; then, the symbolical: so as no innovation might be us'd or favour'd, at least, 'till there should arise some necessity of providing a new edition, & of amplifying the old upon mature advice." He further suggested collections of technical words, "exotic" words, dialect expressions, and archaic words that might be revived. Finally, translations might be made of some of the best of Greek and Latin literature, and even out of modern languages, as models of elegance in style. He added the opinion in conclusion that "there must be a stock of reputation gain'd by some public writings and compositions of y^e Members of this Assembly, and so others may not thinke it dishonor to come under the test, or

¹⁶ Edmund Freeman, "A Proposal for an English Academy in 1660," *MLR*, 19 (1924), 291–300. The author of this article plausibly suggests Robert Hooke as the R.H. Esquire.

accept them for judges and approbators." Evelyn's statement is important not so much for the authority that attaches to his words as for the fact that his notions are quite specific and set out at length. Whether because the program he outlined appeared too ambitious or for some other reason, nothing was done about it. The committee seems to have held only three or four meetings. The Royal Society was not really interested in linguistic matters.

It is quite likely, as O.F.Emerson thought,¹⁷ that the moving spirit in this gesture of the Royal Society was John Dryden. Though he was certainly not a pioneer in suggesting the creation of an English Academy, he was the most distinguished and consistent advocate of it in public. Later he seems to have joined forces with the earl of Roscommon. Horace Walpole, in his life of the earl, says: "we are told that his Lordship in conjunction with Dryden projected a society for refining and fixing the standard of our language. It never wanted this care more than at that period; nor could two men have been found more proper to execute most parts of that plan than Dryden, the greatest master of the powers of language, and Roscommon, whose judgment was sufficient to correct the exuberances of his associate."¹⁸ Thus the movement for an academy did not lack the support of well-known and influential names.

But at the end of the century the idea was clearly in the air. In 1697, Defoe in his *Essay upon Projects* devoted one article to the subject of academies. In it he advocated an academy for England. He says: "I would therefore have this society wholly composed of gentlemen, whereof twelve to be of the nobility, if possible, and twelve private gentlemen, and a class of twelve to be left open for mere merit, let it be found in who or what sort it would, which should lie as the crown of their study, who have done something eminent to deserve it." He had high hopes of the benefits to be derived from such a body: "The voice of this society should be sufficient authority for the usage of words, and sufficient also to expose the innovations of other men's fancies; they should preside with a sort of judicature over the learning of the age, and have liberty to correct and censure the exorbitance of writers, especially of translators. The reputation of this society would be enough to make them the allowed judges of style and language; and no author would have the impudence to coin without their authority. Custom, which is now our best authority for words, would always have its original here, and not be allowed without it. There should be no more occasion to search for derivations and constructions, and it would be as criminal then to coin words as money."

¹⁷ O.F.Emerson, *John Dryden and a British Academy* (London, 1921; *Proc. of the British Academy*).

¹⁸ *Catalogue of the Royal and Noble Authors of England* (2nd ed., 1959). The statement is echoed by Dr. Johnson in his *Lives of the Poets*.

194. *Swift's Proposal, 1712.*

By the beginning of the eighteenth century the ground had been prepared, and the time was apparently ripe for an authoritative plan for an academy. With the example of Richelieu and the French Academy doubtless in his mind, Swift addressed a letter in 1712 to the earl of Oxford, Lord Treasurer of England. It was published under the title *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue*. After the usual formalities he says: "My Lord, I do here in the name of all the learned and polite persons of the nation complain to your Lordship as *first minister*, that our language is extremely imperfect; that its daily improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily corruptions; that the pretenders to polish and refine it have chiefly multiplied abuses and absurdities; and, that in many instances it offends against every part of grammar." He then launches an attack against the innovations he had objected to in his paper in the *Tatler* two years before, observing, "I have never known this great town without one or more *dunces* of figure, who had credit enough to give rise to some new word, and propagate it in most conversations, though it had neither humour nor significancy."

The remedy he proposes is an academy, though he does not call it by that name. "In order to reform our language, I conceive, my lord, that a free judicious choice should be made of such persons, as are generally allowed to be best qualified for such a work, without any regard to quality, party, or profession. These, to a certain number at least, should assemble at some appointed time and place, and fix on rules, by which they design to proceed. What methods they will take, is not for me to prescribe." The work of this group, as he conceives it, is described in the following terms: "The persons who are to undertake this work will have the example of the French before them to imitate, where these have proceeded right, and to avoid their mistakes. Besides the grammar-part, wherein we are allowed to be very defective, they will observe many gross improprieties, which however authorized by practice, and grown familiar, ought to be discarded. They will find many words that deserve to be utterly thrown out of our language, many more to be corrected, and perhaps not a few long since antiquated, which ought to be restored on account of their energy and sound." And then he adds the remark which we have quoted in a previous paragraph, that what he has most at heart is that they will find some way to fix the language permanently. In setting up this ideal of permanency he allows for growth but not decay: "But when I say, that I would have our language, after it is duly correct, always to last, I do not mean that it should never be enlarged. Provided that no word, which a society shall give a sanction to, be afterwards antiquated and exploded, they may have liberty to receive whatever new ones they shall find occasion for." He ends with a renewed appeal to the earl to take some action, indulging in the characteristically blunt reflection that "if genius and learning be not encouraged under your Lordship's administration, you are the most inexcusable person alive."

The publication of Swift's *Proposal* marks the culmination of the movement for an English Academy. It had in its favor the fact that the public mind had apparently become accustomed to the idea through the advocacy of it by Dryden and others for more than half a century. It came from one whose judgment carried more weight than that of anyone else at the beginning of the eighteenth century who might have brought it forward. It was

supported by important contemporary opinion. Only a few months before, Addison, in a paper in the *Spectator* (No. 135) that echoes most of Swift's strictures on the language, observed that there were ambiguous constructions in English "which will never be decided till we have something like an Academy, that by the best Authorities and Rules drawn from the Analogy of Languages shall settle all Controversies between Grammar and Idiom."

Apparently the only dissenting voice was that of John Oldmixon, who, in the same year that Swift's *Proposal* appeared, published *Reflections on Dr. Swift's Letter to the Earl of Oxford, about the English Tongue*. It was a violent Whig attack inspired by purely political motives. He says, "I do here in the Name of all the Whigs, protest against all and everything done or to be done in it, by him or in his Name." Much in the thirty-five pages is a personal attack on Swift, in which he quotes passages from the *Tale of a Tub* as examples of vulgar English, to show that Swift was no fit person to suggest standards for the language. And he ridicules the idea that anything can be done to prevent languages from changing. "I should rejoice with him, if a way could be found out to *fix our Language for ever*, that like the *Spanish* cloak, it might always be in Fashion." But such a thing is impossible.

Oldmixon's attack was not directed against the idea of an academy. He approves of the design, "which must be own'd to be very good in itself." Yet nothing came of Swift's *Proposal*. The explanation of its failure in the Dublin edition is probably correct; at least it represented contemporary opinion. "It is well known," it says, "that if the Queen had lived a year or two longer, this proposal would, in all probability, have taken effect. For the Lord Treasurer had already nominated several persons without distinction of quality or party, who were to compose a society for the purposes mentioned by the author; and resolved to use his credit with her Majesty, that a fund should be applied to support the expence of a large room, where the society should meet, and for other incidents. But this scheme fell to the ground, partly by the dissensions among the great men at court; but chiefly by the lamented death of that glorious princess."

This was the nearest England ever came to having an academy for the regulation of the language. Though Swift's attempt to bring about the formation of such a body is frequently referred to with approval by the advocates of the idea throughout the century, no serious effort was made to accomplish the purpose again. Apparently, it was felt that where Swift had failed it would be useless for others to try. Meanwhile, opposition to an academy was slowly taking shape. The importance of the *Proposal* lies in the fact that it directed attention authoritatively to the problems of language that then seemed in need of solution.

195. *Objection to an Academy.*

Though the idea of establishing an academy died hard, the eighteenth century showed a growing skepticism toward it and an increasing attitude of dissent. The early enthusiasm for the example of France had given place, in the minds of some, to doubts about the value of the results obtained by the French Academy. As an anonymous writer in 1724 observes, "many say, that they have been so far from making their language better, that they have spoiled it."¹⁹ Certainly they had not prevented it from changing. The claim that

a language could be fixed in permanent form was the rock on which the hope for an academy seems first to have split. Oldmixon, in his attack on Swift's *Proposal* referred to above, vigorously opposes the notion. "The Doctor," he says, "may as well set up a Society to find out the *Grand Elixir*, the *Perpetual Motion*, the *Longitude*, and other such Discoveries, as to fix our Language beyond their own Times... This would be doing what was never done before, what neither *Roman* nor *Greek*, which lasted the longest of any in its Purity, could pretend to." A much more authoritative utterance was that of Dr. Johnson in the Preface to his *Dictionary* (1755): "Those who have been persuaded to think well of my design, require that it should fix our language, and put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition. With this consequence I will confess that I flattered myself for a while; but now begin to fear that I have indulged expectation which neither reason nor experience can justify. When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, or clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affectation. "With this hope, however, academies have been instituted, to guard the avenues of their languages, to retain fugitives, and repulse intruders; but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been vain; sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength. The French language has visibly changed under the inspection of the academy... and no Italian will maintain, that the diction of any modern writer is not perceptibly different from that of Boccace, Machiavel, or Caro."

Other grounds for objecting to an academy were not wanting. When in the same preface Johnson said, "If an academy should be established... which I, who can never wish to see dependence multiplied, hope the spirit of English liberty will hinder or destroy," he was voicing a prevailing English attitude. The English have always been moved by a spirit of personal liberty in the use of their language. A policy of noninterference appeals to them much more than one of arbitrary regulation. As Johnson late in life again remarked of Swift's *Proposal*, "The certainty and stability which, contrary to all experience, he thinks attainable, he proposes to secure by instituting an academy; the decrees of which every man would have been willing, and many would have been proud to disobey."

Johnson's views apparently had a decided influence. After the publication of his *Dictionary*, advocacy of an academy becomes less frequent. Instead we find his views reflected in the opinions expressed by other writers. Thomas Sheridan in his *British Education*, published a year later, says: "The only scheme hitherto proposed for correcting, improving, and ascertaining our language, has been the institution of a society for that purpose. But this is liable to innumerable objections; nor would it be a difficult

¹⁹ Cf. H.M. Flasdieck, *Der Gedanke einer englischen Sprachakademie* (Jena, Germany, 1928), p.95.

point to prove, that such a method could never effectually answer the end.” He then repeats Johnson’s objections. At least some people realized that language has a way of taking care of itself, and that features which appear objectionable to one age are either accepted by the next or have been eliminated by time. Joseph Priestley, who, as we shall see, was remarkably liberal in his views upon language, anticipating the attitude of later times, inserts a passage in his *Grammar* (1761) that may be taken as indicating the direction that opinion on the subject of an academy was taking in the latter half of the eighteenth century: “As to a public Academy, invested with authority to ascertain the use of words, which is a project that some persons are very sanguine in their expectations from, I think it not only unsuitable to the genius of a free nation, but in itself ill calculated to reform and fix a language. We need make no doubt but that the best forms of speech will, in time, establish themselves by their own superior excellence: and, in all controversies, it is better to wait the decisions of time, which are slow and sure, than to take those of synods, which are often hasty and injudicious.”²⁰

196. *Substitutes for an Academy.*

Since the expectation of those who put their hopes in an academy must have been considerably lessened by the failure of Swift’s *Proposal*, the only means left to them was to work directly upon the public. What could not be imposed by authoritative edict might still win adoption through reason and persuasion. Individuals sought to bring about the reforms that they believed necessary and to set up a standard that might gain general acceptance. In 1724 there appeared an anonymous treatise on *The Many Advantages of a Good Language to Any Nation: with an Examination of the Present State of Our Own*. This repeats the old complaints that English has too many monosyllables, uses too many contractions, and has no adequate grammar or dictionary. But what is of more importance is that it seeks to stir up popular interest in matters of language, calls upon the public to take part in the discussion, and proposes the publication of a series of weekly or monthly pamphlets on grammar and other linguistic topics. In 1729 one Thomas Cooke published “Proposals for Perfecting the English Language.”²¹ The reforms he suggests extend to the changing of all strong verbs to weak, the formation of all plurals of nouns by means of -s or -es, the comparison of adjectives only with *more* and *most*, and the like. Cooke was both an idealist and an optimist, but he did not put his faith in academies. The change in attitude, the belief that a standard was to be brought about not by force but by general consent, is revealed in the words of Sheridan: “The result of the researches of rational enquirers, must be rules founded upon rational principles; and a general agreement amongst the most judicious, must occasion those rules to be as generally known, and established, and give them the force of laws. Nor would these laws meet with opposition, or be obeyed with reluctance, inasmuch as they would not be established by the hand of power, but by common suffrage, in which every one has a right to give his vote: nor”²⁰ That the idea of an academy was not dead is shown by Allen W. Read, “Suggestions for an Academy in England in the Latter Half of the Eighteenth Century,” *MP*, 36 (1938), 145–56.

²¹ As an appendix to his *Tales, Epistles, Odes*, etc.

would they fail, in time, of obtaining general authority, and permanence, from the sanction of custom, founded on good sense.”²²

The two greatest needs, still felt and most frequently lamented, were for a dictionary and a grammar. Without these there could be no certainty in diction and no standard of correct construction. The one was supplied in 1755 by Johnson’s *Dictionary*, the other in the course of the next half-century by the early grammarians.

197. *Johnson’s Dictionary.*

The publication in 1755 of *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson, A.M., in two folio volumes, was hailed as a great achievement. And it was justly so regarded, when we consider that it was the work of one man laboring almost without assistance for the short space of seven years. True, it had its defects. Judged by modern standards it was painfully inadequate. Its etymologies are often ludicrous. It is marred in places by prejudice and caprice. Its definitions, generally sound and often discriminating, are at times truly Johnsonian.²³ It includes a host of words with a very questionable right to be regarded as belonging to the language.²⁴ But it had positive virtues. It exhibited the English vocabulary much more fully than had ever been done before. It offered a spelling, fixed, even if sometimes badly, that could be accepted as standard. It supplied thousands of quotations illustrating the use of words, so that, as Johnson remarked in his preface, where his own explanation is inadequate “the sense may easily be collected entire from the examples.”

It is the first purpose of a dictionary to record usage. But even today, when the scientific study of language makes us much less disposed to pass judgment upon, and particularly to condemn, its phenomena, many people look upon the editor of a dictionary as a superior kind of person with the right to legislate in such matters as the pronunciation and use of words. This attitude was well-nigh universal in Johnson’s day and was not repugnant to the lexicographer himself. In many ways he makes it clear that he accepts the responsibility as part of his task. “Every language,” he says in the preface, “has its anomalies, which, though inconvenient, and in themselves once unnecessary, must be tolerated among the imperfections of human things, and which require only to be registered, that they may not be increased, and ascertained, that they may not be confounded: but every language has likewise its improprieties and absurdities, which it is

²² T. Sheridan, *British Education*, pp. 370–71.

²³ *Network*: Any thing reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections. *Cough*: A convulsion of the lungs, vellicated by some sharp serosity.

²⁴ Webster was severe in his judgment of the work on this score: “From a careful examination of this work and its effect upon the language, I am inclined to believe that Johnson’s authority has multiplied instead of reducing the number of corruptions in the English Language. Let any man of correct taste cast his eye on such words as *denominable*, *opiniatry*, *ariolation*, *assation*, *ataraxy*, *clancular*, *comminuible*, *conclusible*, *detention*, *deuteroscopy*, *digladiation*, *dignotion*, *cubiculary*, *discubitory*, *exolution*, *exenterate*, *impossible*, *impossibility*, *indigitate*, etc., and let him say whether a dictionary which gives *thousands* of such terms, as *authorized English words*, is a safe standard of writing.” Cf. Stanley Rypins, “Johnson’s Dictionary Reviewed by His Contemporaries,” *PQ*, 4 (1925), 281–86. *Denominable*, *detention*, *exolution*, *exenterate* were not in the original edition.

the duty of the lexicographer to correct or proscribe.” In a paper he published in the *Rambler* (No. 208) while he was still engaged on the *Dictionary* he wrote: “I have laboured to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations.” He condemns the word *lesser* as a barbarous corruption, though he admits that “it has all the authority which a mode originally erroneous can derive from custom.” Under *nowise* he says, “this is commonly spoken and written by ignorant barbarians, *noways*” But *noways* was once much used and, as a later contemporary observed, “These ignorant barbarians...are only Pope, and Swift, and Addison, and Locke, and several others of our most celebrated writers.”²⁵ In addressing the *Plan* of his work to the earl of Chesterfield, Johnson said: “And though, perhaps, to correct the language of nations by books of grammar, and amend their manners by discourses of morality, may be tasks equally difficult; yet, as it is unavoidable to wish, it is natural likewise to hope, that your Lordship’s patronage may not be wholly lost.”

That Johnson’s *Dictionary* should suggest comparison with similar works in France and Italy, prepared by academies, is altogether natural. Garrick wrote an epigram on his friend’s achievement in which occur the lines

And Johnson, well arm’d like a hero of yore,
Has beat forty French, and will beat forty more.

A notice that appeared on the continent observes that Johnson may boast of being in a way an academy for his island.²⁶ Johnson himself envisaged his work as performing the same function as the dictionary of an academy. Speaking of pronunciation, he says, “one great end of this undertaking is to fix the English language”; and in the same place he explains, “The chief intent of it is to preserve the purity, and ascertain the meaning of our English idiom.” Summing up his plan he says, “This...is my idea of an English Dictionary; a dictionary by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated; by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained, and its duration lengthened.”²⁷ These statements sound like the program of an academy. Chesterfield felt that it would accomplish the same purpose. In the paper published in the *World* (No. 100), by which he is supposed to have angled for the dedication of the work, he said: “I had long lamented, that we had no lawful standard of our language set up, for those to repair to, who might choose to speak and write it grammatically and correctly.” Johnson’s *Dictionary*, he believed, would supply one. “The time for discrimination seems to be now come. Toleration, adoption, and naturalization,

²⁵ Campbell, *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, I, 371.

²⁶ *Journal Britannique*, 17 (1755), 219.

²⁷ *The Plan of an English Dictionary*.

have run their lengths. Good order and authority are now necessary. But where shall we find them, and at the same time the obedience due to them? We must have recourse to the old Roman expedient in times of confusion, and choose a Dictator. Upon this principle, I give my vote for Mr. Johnson to fill that great and arduous post.” In 1756 Sheridan wrote, “if our language should ever be fixed, he must be considered by all posterity as the founder, and his dictionary as the corner stone.”²⁸ Boswell was apparently expressing the opinion of his age when he spoke of Johnson as “the man who had conferred stability on the language of his country.”

198. *The Eighteenth-century Grammarians and Rhetoricians.*

What Dr. Johnson had done for the vocabulary was attempted for the syntax by the grammarians of the eighteenth century. Treatises on English grammar had begun to appear in the sixteenth century²⁹ and in the seventeenth were compiled by even such authors as Ben Jonson and Milton. These early works, however, were generally written for the purpose of teaching foreigners the language or providing a basis for the study of Latin grammar. Occasional writers like John Wallis (*Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae*, 1653) recognized that the plan of Latin grammar was not well suited to exhibiting the structure of English, but not until the eighteenth century, generally speaking, was English grammar viewed as a subject deserving of study in itself. Even then freedom from the notions derived from Latin was something to be claimed as a novelty and not always observed. William Loughton, Schoolmaster at Kensington, whose *Practical Grammar of the English Tongue* (1734) went through five editions, inveighs against those who “have attempted to force our Language (contrary to its Nature) to the Method and Rules of the Latin Grammar” and goes so far as to discard the terms *noun*, *adjective*, and *verb*, substituting *names*, *qualities*, *affirmations*. But most of the compilers of English grammars came equipped for their task only with a knowledge of the classical languages and tried to keep as many of the traditional concepts as could be fitted to a more analytic and less inflectional language.

The decade beginning in 1760 witnessed a striking outburst of interest in English grammar. In 1761 Joseph Priestley published *The Rudiments of English Grammar*. In it he showed the independence, tolerance, and good sense that characterized his work in other fields, and we shall have more to say of it below. It was followed about a month later by Robert Lowth’s *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762). Lowth was a clergyman who ultimately rose to be bishop of London. He was much more conservative in his stand, a typical representative of the normative and prescriptive school of grammarians. His gram-

²⁸ T. Sheridan, *British Education*, I, 376.

²⁹ See Emma Vorlat, *The Development of English Grammatical Theory 1586–1737, with Special Reference to the Theory of Parts of Speech* (Leuven, Belgium, 1975).

mar was more in accordance with the tendencies of the time and soon swept the field. At least twenty-two editions appeared during the eighteenth century, and its influence was spread by numerous imitators, including the well-known Lindley Murray. *The British Grammar* by James Buchanan appeared in the same year. A somewhat more elementary manual, by John Ash, was published in 1763 with the title *Grammatical Institutes*. It was designed as an "easy introduction to Dr. Lowth's English Grammar." These were the most popular grammars in the eighteenth century. In 1784 Noah Webster published the second part of *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, which enjoyed much prestige in America and not a little circulation in England. Most of these books were the work of men with no special qualifications for the thing they attempted to do. There were, to be sure, writings on linguistic matters that were not in the mold of the practical, prescriptive grammars. A philosophical concern for linguistic universals, especially lively in France at the time, found expression in England in works such as John Wilkins' *Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668) and James Harris' *Hermes* (1751). After more than a century of relative neglect these and other "universal grammars" have recently been revived because of similarities that have been found between them and certain aspects of contemporary linguistics.³⁰ The effect of these philosophical writings upon the development of specific structures in the English language is difficult to assess, but it seems to have been negligible. More important for the history of the English language are the works of more practical and often less gifted grammarians who turned philosophical concerns into linguistic prescriptions. They exerted a considerable influence, especially through the use of their books in the schools, and it will be necessary to consider their aims, the questions they attempted to settle, their method of approach, and the results they achieved.³¹

With them belongs another group that may be called the rhetoricians. Though they did not compile grammars, they often discussed the same questions of usage. Of these one of the most important was Thomas Sheridan, father of the dramatist. His most important work was a lengthy treatise called *British Education* (1756), in which he attempted to show "that a revival of the art of speaking, and the study of our language, might contribute, in a great measure," to the cure of "the evils of immorality, ignorance and false taste." The second part of his

³⁰ See Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics* (New York, 1966), an influential but professedly polemical account. Cf. Robin Lakoff, rev. of facsimile ed. of *Grammaire générale et raisonnée, ou La Grammaire du Port-Royal, Language*, 45 (1969), 343-64, and Hans Aarsleff, "The History of Linguistics and Professor Chomsky," *Language*, 46 (1970), 570-85.

³¹ Here, too, discriminations must be made among grammars such as Lowth's, which by the light of the times was by no means contemptible, and inferior imitations such as Murray's. See R.S. Sugg, Jr., "The Mood of Eighteenth-Century English Grammar," *PQ*, 43 (1964), 239-52.

work discussed the absolute necessity for such study “in order to refine, ascertain, and fix the English language.” He held “that the study of eloquence was the necessary cause of the improvement, and establishment of the Roman language: and the same cause would infallibly produce the same effect with us. Were the study of oratory once made a necessary branch of education, all our youth of parts, and genius, would of course be employed in considering the value of words both as to sound and sense.” His interest in language thus grew out of his interest in elocution, but his opinions throw an interesting light on the eighteenth-century attitude toward language. More influential was George Campbell, a learned Scottish divine, whose *Philosophy of Rhetoric* appeared in two volumes in 1776. Campbell professed greater respect for the evidence of usage and is responsible for the definition of “good use” that is still accepted today. His book is the ancestor of numerous later works, such as those of Blair (1783) and Whateley (1828) and a succession of nineteenth-century treatises.

Questions of grammar and usage had become a matter of popular interest. In 1770 one Robert Baker published *Reflections on the English Language*, “in the Manner of those of Vaugelas on the French; being a detection of many improper expressions used in conversation, and of many others to be found in authors.” As qualifications for his task he mentions the fact that he knows no Greek and very little Latin, and he adds, “It will undoubtedly be thought strange, when I declare that I have never yet seen the folio edition of Mr. Johnson’s dictionary: but, knowing nobody that has it, I have never been able to borrow it; and I have myself no books; at least, not many more than what a church-going old woman may be supposed to have of devotional ones upon her mantlepiece: for, having always had a narrow income, it has not been in my power to make a collection without straightening myself. Nor did I ever see even the Abridgment of this Dictionary till a few days ago, when, observing it inserted in the catalogue of a Circulating Library, where I subscribe, I sent for it.” Nevertheless Baker’s book went through two editions. By men such as these was the English language “ascertained.”

199. *The Aims of the Grammarians.*

Just as the goals of linguistic scholarship vary from author to author in the present century, so one must recognize a variety of concerns in the eighteenth century. In a comprehensive and balanced history of linguistic thought, it would be necessary to consider the full range of writings, from the most specific rules of the handbooks to the speculations of the universal grammars.³² For a history of the English lan-

³² See, for example, Hans Aarsleff, “The Eighteenth Century, Including Leibniz,” in *Current Trends in Linguistics, 13, Historiography of Linguistics*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok et al. (The Hague, 1975), pp. 383–479, and James Knowlson, *Universal Language Schemes in England and France, 1600–1800* (Toronto, 1975).

guage it is appropriate to single out those efforts that most directly affected structures of English, especially as they were taught in the classroom. There was undeniably a coherent prescriptive tradition, within which eighteenth-century grammarians aimed to do three things: (1) to codify the principles of the language and reduce it to rule; (2) to settle disputed points and decide cases of divided usage; and (3) to point out common errors or what were supposed to be errors, and thus correct and improve the language. All three of these aims were pursued concurrently.

(1) One of the things that the advocates of an academy had hoped it would do was to systematize the facts of English grammar and draw up rules by which all questions could be viewed and decided. In his *Dictionary* Johnson had declared, "When I took the first survey of my undertaking, I found our speech copious without order, and energetic without rules: wherever I turned my view, there was perplexity to be disentangled, and confusion to be regulated." It was necessary to demonstrate that English was not incapable of orderly treatment, was not so "irregular and capricious" in its nature that it could not be reduced to rule and used with accuracy.³³ As Lowth said in the preface to his grammar, "It doth not then proceed from any peculiar irregularity or difficulty of our Language, that the general practice both of speaking and writing it is chargeable with inaccuracy. It is not the Language, but the Practice that is in fault. The Truth is, Grammar is very much neglected among us: and it is not the difficulty of the Language, but on the contrary the simplicity and facility of it, that occasions this neglect. Were the Language less easy and simple, we should find ourselves under a necessity of studying it with more care and attention. But as it is, we take it for granted, that we have a competent knowledge and skill, and are able to acquit ourselves properly, in our own native tongue: a faculty, solely acquired by use, conducted by habit, and tried by the ear, carries us on without reflexion; we meet with no rubs or difficulties in our way, or we do not perceive them; we find ourselves able to go on without rules, and we do not so much as suspect, that we stand in need of them." This need obviously had to be met. The grammarians of the eighteenth century would, without exception, have agreed with Campbell, whose *Philosophy of Rhetoric* has been mentioned above: "The man who, in a country like ours, should compile a succinct, perspicuous, and faithful digest of the laws, though no lawgiver, would be universally acknowledged to be a public benefactor." And he adds that the grammarian is a similar benefactor in a different sphere.

³³ John Ash, in the preface to his *Grammatical Institutes*, says: "...it has been supposed, even by Men of Learning, that the English Tongue is too vague, and untractable to be reduced to any certain Standard, or Rules of Construction."

(2) But the grammarian set himself up as a lawgiver as well. He was not content to record fact; he pronounced judgment. It seems to have been accepted as self-evident that of two alternate forms of expression one must be wrong. As nature abhors a vacuum, so the eighteenth-century grammarians hated uncertainty. A choice must be made; and once a question had been decided, all instances of contrary usage were unequivocally condemned. Of all the grammarians of this period only Priestley seems to have doubted the propriety of *ex cathedra* utterances and to have been truly humble before the facts of usage.

(3) "The principal design of a Grammar of any Language," says Lowth, "is to teach us to express ourselves with propriety in that Language; and to enable us to judge of every phrase and form of construction, whether it be right or not. The plain way of doing this is, to lay down rules, and to illustrate them by examples. But, beside shewing what is right, the matter may be further explained by pointing out what is wrong." The last-named procedure is a prominent feature of his and other contemporary grammars. Indeed, one may question whether it is not too prominent. One grows weary in following the endless bickering over trivialities. However the grammarians might justify the treatment of errors pedagogically, one cannot escape the feeling that many of them took delight in detecting supposed flaws in the grammar of "our most esteemed writers" and exhibiting them with mild self-satisfaction. One wishes there had been more Priestleys, or grammarians who shared his opinion: "I... think a man cannot give a more certain mark of the narrowness of his mind... then to shew, either by his vanity with respect to himself, or the acrimony of his censure with respect to others, that this business is of much moment with him. We have infinitely greater things before us; and if these gain their due share of our attention, this subject, of grammatical criticism, will be almost nothing. The noise that is made about it, is one of the greatest marks of the frivolism of many readers, and writers too, of the present age."³⁴

200. *The Beginnings of Prescriptive Grammar.*

To prescribe and to proscribe seem to have been coordinate aims of the grammarians. Many of the conventions now accepted and held up as preferable in our handbooks were first stated in this period. The prescriptive distinction between the two verbs *lie* and *lay* was apparently first specifically made in the second half of the eighteenth century; before that, intransitive *lay* was not considered a solecism. The expressions *had rather*, *had better* were condemned by Johnson, Lowth, and Campbell. Lowth says: "It has been very rightly observed, that the Verb *had*, in the common phrase, *I had rather*, is not properly used, either as an

³⁴ *Rudiments of English Grammar*, Preface.

Active or as an Auxiliary Verb; that, being in the Past time, it cannot in this case be properly expressive of time Present; and that it is by no means reducible to any Grammatical construction. In truth, it seems to have arisen from a mere mistake, in resolving the familiar and ambiguous abbreviation, *I'd rather*, into *I had rather*, instead of *I would rather*, which latter is the regular, analogous, and proper expression." This attitude is still found in some current books. Various opinions were expressed on the propriety of using *whose* as the possessive of *which*, and in spite of historical justification, opposition to this use is still found among purists. The preference for *different from* (rather than *different than* or *to*) and the proscription of *between you and I* are among the attitudes which, generally speaking, have been subsequently approved in the standard speech. Such is the case also with the differentiation of *between* and *among*, the use of the comparative rather than the superlative where only two things are involved (*the larger*, not *largest*, of two), the feeling that incomparables such as *perfect*, *chief*, *round*, should not be compared (*more perfect*, etc.), the defense of *from hence* and the condemnation of *this here* and *that there* (although Webster defended these as ancient usage). Webster also defended *you was* as a singular, and the expression was certainly common in literature. But Lowth and Priestley and others were against it, and subsequent usage has settled upon *were*.

It would be possible to point out many other matters of usage that were disputed by the grammarians. The nature of the questions considered, however, is sufficiently clear from those cited above. One or two more of special interest may be mentioned. The proper case after *than* and *as* was a question that troubled the eighteenth century greatly (*he is taller than I*, or *me*) but Lowth expressed the view that has since been accepted, that the pronoun is determined by the construction to be supplied or understood (*he is older than she*; *he likes you better than me*). Another puzzling question concerned the case before the gerund (*I don't like him doing that* or *his doing that*). His in this construction was vigorously opposed by Harris, Lowth, and others; but Webster held that this was "the genuine English idiom" and the only permissible form. His opinion has come to be the one widely held. Finally we may note that the eighteenth century is responsible for the condemnation of the double negative. Lowth stated the rule that we are now bound by: "Two Negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an Affirmative." Thus a useful idiom was banished from polite speech.

One important series of prescriptions that now forms part of all our grammars—that governing the use of *shall* and *will*—had its origin in this period. Previous to 1622 no English grammar recognized any distinction between these words. In 1653 Wallis in his *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae* stated for the benefit of foreigners that simple futurity is expressed by *shall* in the first person, by *will* in the second and third. It was not until the second half of the eighteenth century, however, that the usage in questions and subordinate clauses was explicitly defined. In 1755 Johnson, in his *Dictionary*, stated the rule for questions, and in 1765 William Ward, in his *Grammar of the English Language*, drew up for the first time the full set of prescriptions that underlies, with individual variations, the rules found in modern books. His pronouncements were not followed generally by other grammarians until Lindley Murray gave them greater currency in 1795. Since about 1825 they have often been repeated in English grammars.³⁵ Here, as elsewhere, the grammarians seem to have been making absolute what was apparently a

common but not universal tendency in the written language, evident in the letter-writers of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.³⁶ That the distinction was not observed in colloquial speech may be inferred from the language of plays, and today it is commonly ignored except by speakers who conform consciously to the rules or inherit a tradition which has been influenced by rules.

201. *Methods of Approach.*

The considerations by which these questions were settled were three in number: reason, etymology, and the example of Latin and Greek.

Dryden had asserted that "the foundation of the rules is reason." But reason covered a multitude of sins. Johnson argued from it when he condemned *the grammar is now printing*,³⁷ because the active participle was "vulgarly used in a passive sense." By similar logic Lowth objected to *I am mistaken*, since it should properly mean *I am misunderstood* and not *I am wrong*. But reason was commonly taken to mean consistency or, as it was called, analogy. Analogy appeals to an instinct very common at all times in matters of language, the instinct for regularity. Even Priestley was influenced by it. "The chief thing to be attended to in the improvement of a language," he says, "is the *analogy* of it. The more consistent are its principles, the more it is of a piece with itself, the more commodious it will be for use." Consequently, where one expression could be paralleled by another in the language it was commonly preferred for that reason. Campbell erects this into one of his general "canons." He says: "If by the former canon the adverbs *backwards* and *for-*

³⁵ See Charles C. Fries, "The Periphrastic Future with *shall* and *will* in Modern English," *PMLA*, 40 (1925), 963–1024.

³⁶ For evidence drawn from letters of a preference for *shall* in the first person in simple future statements, see J. R. Hulbert, "On the Origin of the Grammarians' Rules for the Use of *shall* and *will*," *PMLA*, 62 (1947), 1178–82. For evidence that the grammarians' rules for direct statements, indirect statements, and questions had a basis in usage, see J. Taglicht, "The Genesis of the Conventional Rules of *Shall* and *Will*," *English Studies*, 51 (1970), 193–213.

³⁷ On this construction see § 210.

wards are preferable to *backward* and *forward*; by this canon, from the principle of analogy, *afterwards* and *homewards* should be preferred to *afterward* and *homeward*. Of the two adverbs *thereabout* and *thereabouts*, compounded of the particle *there* and the preposition, the former alone is analogical, there being no such word in the language as *abouts*. The same holds of *hereabout* and *whereabout*. In the verbs *to dare* and *to need*, many say, in the third person present singular, *dare* and *need*, as ‘he *need* not go’; ‘he *dare* not do it’ Others say, *dares* and *needs*. As the first usage is exceedingly irregular, hardly any thing less than uniform practice could authorize it.”³⁸ It was also reasoned, however, that where two expressions often used interchangeably could be differentiated, it was better to make a distinction. Accordingly Campbell argued: “In the preposition *toward* and *towards*, and the adverbs *forward* and *forwards*, *backward* and *backwards*, the two forms are used indiscriminately. But as the first form in all these is also an adjective, it is better to confine the particles to the second. Custom, too, seems at present to lean this way.”³⁹ The same consideration led Priestley to say, “As the paucity of inflections is the greatest defect in our language, we ought to take advantage of every variety that the practice of good authors will warrant; and therefore, if possible, make a participle different from the preterite of a verb; as, a book is *written*, not *wrote*; the ships are *taken*, not *took*” With this opinion Dr. Johnson was in sympathy.

A second consideration was etymology. On this account Johnson and Lowth preferred *averse from* to *averse to*. Campbell again states this principle most fully. He says, “When etymology plainly points to a signification different from that which the word commonly bears, propriety and simplicity both require its dismissal. I use the word *plainly*, because, when the etymology is from an ancient or foreign language, or from obsolete roots in our own language, or when it is obscure or doubtful, no regard should be had to it. The case is different, when the roots either are, or strongly appear to be, English, are in present use, and clearly suggest another meaning. Of this kind is the word *beholden*, for obliged or indebted. It should regularly be the passive participle of the verb *to behold*, which would convey a sense totally different. Not that I consider the term as equivocal, for in the last acceptance it hath long since been disused, having been supplanted by *beheld*. But the formation of the word is so analogical, as to make it have at least the appearance of impropriety, when used in a sense that seems naturally so foreign to it.”⁴⁰ By the same reasoning he maintains, “The verb *to unloose*, should analogically

³⁸ *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, I, 378–79.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 374–75.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 397–98.

signify *to tie*, in like manner as *to untie* signifies *to loose*. To what purpose is it then, to retain a term, without any necessity, in a signification the reverse of that which its etymology manifestly suggests?"⁴¹

Fortunately, the third consideration, occasionally made the basis on which questions of grammar were decided, the example of the classical languages, and especially of Latin, was not so commonly cited. It is true that Johnson is quoted as saying, "It is, seriously, my opinion, that every language must be servilely formed after the model of some one of the ancient, if we wish to give durability to our works."⁴² Such an attitude derived in part from concerns with universal grammar, which Harris defines as "that grammar, which without regarding the several idioms of particular languages, only respects those principles, that are essential to them all."⁴³ Harris was more interested in the philosophical problems involving language than in any practical applications that discussions of those problems might have.⁴⁴ There were other grammarians with more normative goals who found it natural to turn descriptive comparisons into prescriptive rules, especially since most of the ideas of universal grammar were derived from the literary traditions of Latin and Greek. In the course of the eighteenth century a fairly definite feeling grew up that there were more disadvantages than advantages in trying to fit English into the pattern of Latin grammar, and though its example was called upon by one even so late as Noah Webster and is occasionally appealed to even today, this approach to grammatical questions was fortunately not often consciously employed. The interest in universal grammar for its own sake waned during the following century, and it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the works of Wilkins, Harris, and other philosophically oriented grammarians in England and France were revived as precursors of generative approaches to linguistic analysis (see § 255).

202. *The Doctrine of Usage.*

In the latter half of the eighteenth century we find the beginnings of the modern doctrine that the most important criterion of language is usage. Sporadic recognition of this principle is encountered in the previous century, doubtless inspired by the dictum of Horace that "use is the sole arbiter and norm of speech." Thus John Hughes, who quotes the remark of Horace, says in his essay *Of Style* (1698) that "general acceptance...is the only standard of speech." In the fifty years following, Dennis, Johnson, and Chesterfield spoke to the same effect. In the *Plan* of his dictionary, Johnson said, "It is not in our power to have recourse to any estab-

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, I, 398.

⁴² Leonard, *Doctrine of Correctness*, p. 50.

⁴³ *Hermes* (1751), p. x.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 293–96.

lished laws of speech; but we must remark how the writers of former ages have used the same word.... I shall therefore, since the rules of stile, like those of law, arise from precedents often repeated, collect the testimonies on both sides, and endeavour to discover and promulgate the decrees of custom, who has so long possessed, whether by right or by usurpation, the sovereignty of words.” But he constantly strayed from his intention. Chesterfield spoke in similar terms: “Every language has its peculiarities; they are established by usage, and whether right or wrong, they must be complied with. I could instance very many absurd ones in different languages; but so authorized by the *jus et norma loquendi* [Horace again], that they must be submitted to.”

The person who more wholeheartedly than anyone else advocated the doctrine, however, was Joseph Priestley. His voluminous writings on chemistry, natural philosophy, theology, and politics have overshadowed his contributions to the study of language. In this field, however, as in all others, he was independent and original, and in his *Rudiments of English Grammar* (1761) he repeatedly insisted upon the importance of usage. “Our grammarians,” he says, “appear to me to have acted precipitately in this business” of writing a grammar of the language. “This will never be effected by the arbitrary rules of any man, or body of men whatever.” “It must be allowed, that the custom of speaking is the original and only just standard of any language. We see, in all grammars, that this is sufficient to establish a rule, even contrary to the strongest analogies of the language with itself. Must not this custom, therefore, be allowed to have some weight, in favour of those forms of speech, to which our best writers and speakers seem evidently prone...?” He states his own practice accordingly: “The best and the most numerous authorities have been carefully followed. Where they have been contradictory, recourse hath been had to analogy, as the last resource. If this should decide for neither of two contrary practices, the thing must remain undecided, till all-governing custom shall declare in favour of the one or the other.” In his lectures on the *Theory of Language*, written the following year, he again affirmed his creed: “In *modern and living* languages, it is absurd to pretend to set up the compositions of any person or persons whatsoever as the standard of writing, or their conversation as the invariable rule of speaking. With respect to custom, laws, and every thing that is changeable, the body of a people, who, in this respect, cannot but be free, will certainly assert their liberty, in making what innovations they judge to be expedient and useful. The general prevailing custom, whatever it happen to be, can be the only standard for the time that it prevails.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *Theological and Miscellaneous Works* (25 vols., n.p., n.d.), XXIII, 198.

Of almost equal importance in representing this point of view, and perhaps more influential in giving it currency, was George Campbell, whose *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) in two substantial volumes has already been referred to. Proceeding from Priestley's position, which he refers to with approval, he states his own views in very similar terms: "Language is purely a species of fashion.... It is not the business of grammar, as some critics seem preposterously to imagine, to give law to the fashions which regulate our speech. On the contrary, from its conformity to these, and from that alone, it derives all its authority and value. For, what is the grammar of any language? It is no other than a collection of general observations methodically digested, and comprising all the modes previously and independently established, by which the significations, derivations, and combinations of words in that language, are ascertained. It is of no consequence here to what causes originally these modes or fashions owe their existence, to imitation, to reflection, to affectation, or to caprice; they no sooner obtain and become general, than they are laws of the language, and the grammarian's only business is to note, collect, and methodise them."⁴⁶ This sounds peculiarly modern. What is even more important, however, is the fact that Campbell did not stop here but went on to inquire what constituted this body of usage that he recognized as so authoritative. And he defined it as *present*, *national*, and *reputable* use, a definition so reasonable and sound that it has been accepted ever since. It is so well known that it needs no explanation other than the remark that by reputable use Campbell meant "whatever modes of speech are authorized as good by the writings of a great number, if not the majority of celebrated authors."

The difference between Priestley and Campbell is that whereas Campbell expounded the doctrine of usage with admirable clarity and then violated it, Priestley was almost everywhere faithful to his principles. Campbell is frankly inconsistent. In one place he holds "that to the tribunal of use, as to the supreme authority, and consequently, in every grammatical controversy, the last resort, we are entitled to appeal from the laws and the decisions of grammarians; and that this order of subordination ought never, on any account, to be reversed." In another passage, however, he says that everything favored by good use is "not on that account worthy to be retained" and he sets up canons by which features of the language sanctioned by good use may be pronounced objectionable and discarded. Thus Priestley stands alone in his unwavering loyalty to usage. After the perpetual dogmatizing of other eighteenth-century grammarians, it is refreshing to find on almost every page of his grammar statements like "This may be said to be ungrammatical; or, at

least, a very harsh ellipsis; but custom authorizes it, and many more departures from strict grammar, particularly in conversation." "The word *lesser*, though condemned by Dr. Johnson, and other English grammarians, is often used by good writers." "It is very common to see the superlative used for the comparative degree, when only two persons or things are spoken of.... This is a very pardonable oversight." "The word *whose* begins likewise to be restricted to persons, but it is not done so generally but that good writers, and even in prose, use it when speaking of things." "A language can never be properly fixed, till all the varieties with which it is used, have been held forth to public view, and the general preference of certain forms have been declared, by the general practice afterwards. Whenever I have mentioned any variety in the grammatical forms that are

used to express the same thing, I have seldom scrupled to say which of them I prefer; but this is to be understood as nothing more than a conjecture, which time must confirm or refute.”

One must come down almost to our own day to find an attitude so tolerant and so liberal. And the doctrine of usage is so fundamental to all sound discussion of linguistic matters that it is important to recognize the man in whom it first found real expression.

203. *Results.*

If we attempt to view the work of the eighteenth-century grammarians in retrospect and estimate the results that they achieved, we shall find them not inconsiderable. It must be remembered that consciously or unconsciously these grammarians were attempting to “ascertain” the language and to give definiteness and order to a body of hitherto uncoded practice. As a consequence it could no longer be said that English was a language without rules. It might almost be said that we had too many rules. Some of them have since been set aside. Others are of doubtful validity, although they still find a place in our handbooks and are imposed upon those who consider conformity to supposed authority a sufficient criterion of correctness. But though we may recognize that the grounds on which decisions were reached were often faulty, and the decisions themselves were often arbitrary, we must admit that a considerable number of disputed points, rightly or wrongly, were settled and have since become established. Some of the more significant of these have already been mentioned. Thus, with the codification of usage and the settlement of many matters that were in dispute, much of the uncertainty that troubled Dryden and Swift was removed. For this and other reasons English escaped the artificial restraints and the repressive influence of an academy.

204. *Weakness of the Early Grammarians.*

While acknowledging the results attained by the eighteenth-century grammarians and reformers, it is necessary to emphasize the serious limitations in nearly all of them. Their greatest weakness was, of course, their failure, except in one or two conspicuous cases, to recognize the importance of usage as the sole arbiter in linguistic matters. They did not realize, or refused to acknowledge, that changes in language often appear to be capricious and unreasonable—in other words, are the result of forces too complex to be fully analyzed or predicted. Accordingly, they approached most questions in the belief that they could be solved by logic and that the solutions could be imposed upon the world by authoritative decree. Hence the constant attempt to legislate one construction into use and another out of use. In this attempt little or no recognition was shown for the legitimacy of divided usage. Thus, as Noah Webster pointed out, every time they refused to base their statements on the facts of current use they were also refusing to preserve an agreement between books and practice and were contributing “very much to create and perpetuate differences between the written and spoken language.” At the root of all their mistakes was their ignorance of the processes of linguistic change. The historical study of English was still in its infancy,⁴⁷ and though the materials were rapidly becoming available on

which sounder opinions could be formed, most people in the eighteenth century did not realize their importance.

205. *Attempts to Reform the Vocabulary.*

Similar weaknesses characterized the attempts to reform the vocabulary at this time. Everyone felt competent to “purify” the language by proscribing words and expressions because they were too old or too new, or were slang or cant or harsh sounding, or for no other reason than that they disliked them. Swift’s aversions have already been referred to. “I have done my best,” he said, “for some Years past to stop the Progress of *Mobb* and *Banter*, but have been plainly borne down by Numbers, and betrayed by those who promised to assist me.” George Harris objected to expressions such as *chaulking out a way*, *handling a subject*, *driving a bargain*, and *bolstering up an argument*. In a volume of *Sketches* by “Launcelot Temple” the author attacks *encroach*, *inculcate*, *purport*, *betwixt*, *methinks*, and *subject-matter*. Of the last he says: “in the Name of every thing that’s disgusting and detestable, what is it? Is it one or two ugly words?”

⁴⁷ The study of Old English had its beginnings in the Reformation in an effort on the part of the reformers to prove the continuity and independence of the English church and its doctrines. This motive was accompanied by the desire to discredit the doctrine of the divine right of kings and to find the source of English law and administrative practice. The first specimen of the language to be printed, Ælfric’s Easter homily, appeared about 1566–1567 in a volume called *A Testimonie of Antiquity*. In 1659 William Somner published a *Dictionarium Saxonico-Latino-Anglicum*, the first Old English dictionary. In 1689 the first Old English grammar was published, the work of George Hickes. In 1755 the first permanent chair of Anglo-Saxon was established at Oxford by Richard Rawlinson. See Eleanor N. Adams, *Old English Scholarship in England from 1566–1800* (New Haven, CT, 1917); Ewald Flügel, “The History of English Philology,” *Flügel Memorial Volume* (Stanford University, 1916), pp. 9–35; M. Sue Hetherington, *The Beginnings of Old English Lexicography* (Austin, 1980); and Carl T. Berkhout and Milton McC. Gatch, eds., *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship: The First Three Centuries* (Boston, 1982).

What's the Meaning of it? Confound me if I ever could guess! Yet one dares hardly ever peep into a Preface, for fear of being stared in the Face with this nasty *Subject Matter*." Campbell, referring to the strictures in this volume, says: "I think there is at present a greater risk of going too far in refining, than of not going far enough. The ears of some critics are immoderately delicate." Yet he himself has his own list of words to be banned, some of which "though favoured by custom, being quite unnecessary, deserve to be exploded. Such, amongst others, are the following: the *workmanship* of God, for the work of God; *a man of war*, for a *ship of war*; and a *merchantman*, for a trading vessel. The absurdity in the last two instances is commonly augmented by the words connected in the sequel, in which, by the application of the pronouns *she* and *her*, we are made to understand that the man spoken of is a female. I think this gibberish ought to be left entirely to mariners; amongst whom, I suppose, it hath originated." He objected to other words because "they have a pleonastic appearance. Such are the following, *unto, until, selfsame, foursquare, devoid, despoil, disannul, muchwhat, oftentimes, nowadays, downfall, furthermore, wherewithal*; for *to, till, same, square, void, spoil, annul, much, often, now, fall, further, wherewith*. The use of such terms many writers have been led into, partly from the dislike of monosyllables, partly from the love of variety.... However, with regard to the words specified, it would not be right to preclude entirely the use of them in poetry, where the shackles of metre render variety more necessary, but they ought to be used very sparingly, if at all, in prose." Individual objection to particular expressions is not confined to the eighteenth century, but it is here a part of the prevailing attitude toward language. Most of the words criticized are still in use, and these misguided efforts to ban them show the futility of trying to interfere with the natural course of linguistic history.

206. *Objection to Foreign Borrowings.*

The concern that the eighteenth century expressed for the purity of the language included what seems like an undue apprehension that English was being ruined by the intrusion of foreign words, especially French. Defoe observed that "an Englishman has his mouth full of borrow'd phrases...he is always borrowing other men's language."⁴⁸ And in his *Review* (October 10, 1708) he complained: "I cannot but think that the using and introducing foreign terms of art or foreign words into speech while our language labours under no penury or scarcity of words is an intolerable grievance." Shortly before, Dryden had expressed a similar feeling: "I cannot approve of their way of refining, who corrupt our English idiom by mixing it too much with French: that is a sophistication of language, not an

⁴⁸ *Complete English Gentleman*, p. 220.

improvement of it; a turning English into French, rather than a refining of English by French. We meet daily with those fops who value themselves on their travelling, and pretend they cannot express their meaning in English, because they would put off on us some French phrase of the last edition; without considering that, for aught they know, we have a better of our own. But these are not the men who are to refine us; their talent is to prescribe fashions, not words.”⁴⁹ The feeling was very common. In 1711 Addison wrote in the *Spectator* (No. 165): “I have often wished, that as in our constitution there are several persons whose business is to watch over our laws, our liberties, and commerce, certain men might be set apart as superintendents of our language, to hinder any words of a foreign coin, from passing among us; and in particular to prohibit any French phrases from becoming current in this kingdom, when those of our own stamp are altogether as valuable.” Even quite late in the century Campbell could say, “Nay, our language is in greater danger of being overwhelmed by an inundation of foreign words, than of any other species of destruction.”

It is not difficult to see how French was in a strong position to influence English at this time. The language was then at the height of its prestige. It was used at almost every court in Europe. The knowledge of the language among the upper classes in England was quite general, equaled only by the ignorance of English on the part of the French. Sheridan, speaking of the widespread use of Latin in the Middle Ages, says that it was written by all the learned of Europe “with as much fluency and facility as the polite now speak or write French.” Travel in France was considered a necessary part of one’s education, and the cultural relations between the two countries were very close. And yet the danger does not seem to have been acute. The number of French words admitted to the language in the period from 1650 to 1800 was not unusually large.⁵⁰ The *Oxford English Dictionary* records a fair number that did not win permanent acceptance, but among those that have been retained are such useful words as *ballet*, *boulevard*, *brunette*, *canteen*, *cartoon*, *champagne*, *chenille*, *cohesion*, *coiffure*, *connoisseur*, *coquette*, *coterie*, *dentist*, *negligee*, *patrol*, *pique*, *publicity*, *routine*, *soubrette*, *syndicate*. Most of these are words that we could ill afford to lose. Time has again done the sifting and clearly done it well.

207. *The Expansion of the British Empire.*

When we take our eyes from the internal problems which the language was facing and the English were attempting to solve, we observe that in this period the foundations were

⁴⁹ *Dramatic Poetry of the Last Age*.

⁵⁰ See table in footnote, § 133.

being laid for that wide extension of English in the world which has resulted in its use throughout more than a quarter of the earth's surface. Although we occasionally come across references by those who wrote about the language suggesting that the reforms they hoped for and the changes they were suggesting would be advantageous to the language in its use abroad, it is doubtful whether the future spread of the English language was suspected any more than the growth of the empire itself. For the British Empire was not the result of a consciously planned and aggressively executed program but the product of circumstances and often of chance.

England entered the race for colonial territory late. It was the end of the fifteenth century that witnessed the voyages which opened up the East and the West to European exploitation. And when Columbus arrived in the New World in 1492 and Vasco de Gama reached India in 1498 by way of the Cape of Good Hope, their achievements were due to Spanish and Portuguese enterprise. It was only when the wealth of America and India began pouring into Spanish and Portuguese coffers that the envy and ambition of other countries were aroused. In the sixteenth century Spain was the greatest of the European powers, but it spent its wealth on a prolonged and exhausting effort to protect its imperial lands and titles in Europe. Furthermore, its maritime communications with the New World were all too attractive to French, Dutch, and English predators. Thereafter England's real rival for a colonial empire was France.

The English settlements at Jamestown and Plymouth were the beginning of a process of colonization in North America that soon gave to England the Atlantic seaboard. The French settlements began in Montreal, Quebec, and on the St. Lawrence, and then pressed vigorously to the west and south, toward the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico. Wolfe's victory (1759) over Montcalm paved the way for the ultimate control of much of this continent by the English. Although the American Revolution deprived England of one of its most promising colonies, it did not prevent the language of this region from remaining English. Meanwhile England was getting a foothold in India. At the end of the sixteenth century the revolt of the Netherlands and their rapid rise as a maritime power soon brought the Dutch into active competition with the Portuguese in the trade with India. Inspired by the Dutch example, the English entered the contest and in 1600 the East India Company was founded to promote this trade, establishing settlements at Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta. In the reign of Louis XIV the French formed similar settlements not far from Calcutta and Madras. By the middle of the eighteenth century the two great rivals in India, as in America, were England and France. Largely through the accomplishments of a young Englishman named Robert Clive, a clerk in the East India Company with a genius for military matters, the struggle that ensued ended in a series of triumphs for the English, and in the course of another century an area almost equal to that of European Russia became part of the British Empire.

The beginnings of the English occupation of Australia also occurred in the eighteenth century. In 1768 the Royal Society persuaded the king to sponsor an expedition into those parts of the Pacific to observe the transit of Venus across the sun. The Admiralty provided a ship and placed it under the command of an extraordinarily skillful seaman, Captain James Cook. After the astronomical observations had been completed he executed his secret Admiralty orders to explore any lands in the neighborhood. He sailed around the islands of New Zealand and then continued 1,200 miles westward until he

reached Australia. In both places he planted the British flag. A few years later the English discovered a use to which this territory could be put. The American Revolution had deprived them of a convenient place to which to deport criminals. The prisons were overcrowded, and in 1787 it was decided to send several shiploads of convicts to Australia. Soon after, the discovery that sheep raising could be profitably carried on in the country led to considerable immigration, which later became a stampede when gold was discovered on the continent in 1851.

The colonizing of Africa was largely the work of the nineteenth century, although it had its start likewise at the close of the eighteenth century. Early in the Napoleonic Wars Holland had come under the control of France, and in 1795 England seized the Dutch settlement at Cape Town. From this small beginning sprang the control of England over a large part of South Africa. This is not the place to pursue the complicated story of the English penetration of Africa: how the missionary efforts and the explorations of Livingstone played their part and had their culmination in the work of a visionary financier and empire builder, Cecil Rhodes. Nor can we pause over the financial embarrassments of Egypt and Britain's acquisition of control over the Suez Canal which led to the British protectorate over the region of the Nile. Our interest is merely in sketching in the background for the extension of the English language and the effect that this extension had upon it.

208. *Some Effects of Expansion on the Language.*

Apart from the greatly enlarged sphere of activity that the English language thus acquired and the increased opportunity for local variation that has naturally resulted, the most obvious effects of English expansion are to be seen in the vocabulary. New territories mean new experiences, new activities, new products, all of which are in time reflected in the language. Trade routes have always been important avenues for the transmission of ideas and words. Contact with Na-tive Americans resulted in a number of characteristic words such as *caribou*, *hickory*, *hominy*, *moccasin*, *moose*, *opossum*, *papoose*, *raccoon*, *skunk*, *squaw*, *terrapin*, *toboggan*, *tomahawk*, *totem*, *wampum*, and *wigwam*. From other parts of America, especially where the Spanish and the Portuguese were settled, we have derived many more words, chiefly through Spanish. Thus we have in English Mexican words such as *chili*, *chocolate*, *coyote*, *tomato*; from Cuba and the West Indies come *barbecue*, *cannibal*, *canoe*, *hammock*, *hurricane*, *maize*, *potato*, *tobacco*; from Peru we get through the same channel *alpaca*, *condor*, *jerky*, *llama*, *pampas*, *puma*, *quinine*; from Brazil and other South American regions *buccaneer*, *cayenne*, *jaguar*, *petunia*, *poncho*, *tapioca*. British contact with the East has been equally productive of new words. From India come *bandana*, *bangle*, *bengal*, *Brahman*, *bungalow*, *calico*, *cashmere*, *cheroot*, *china*, *chintz*, *coolie*, *cot*, *curry*, *dinghy*, *juggernaut*, *jungle*, *jute*, *loot*, *mandarin*, *nirvana*, *pariah*, *polo*, *punch* (drink), *pundit*, *rajah*, *rupee*, *sepoy*, *thug*, *toddy*, *tom-tom*, and *verandah*. From a little farther east come *gingham*, *indigo*, *mango*, and *seersucker*, the last an East Indian corruption of a Persian expression meaning 'milk and sugar' and transferred to a striped linen material. From Africa, either directly from the Africans or from Dutch and Portuguese traders, we obtain *banana*, *Boer*, *boorish*, *chimpanzee*, *gorilla*, *guinea*, *gumbo*, *Hottentot*, *palavar*, *voodoo*, and *zebra*. Australia later contributed

new terms to the general language. *Boomerang* and *kangaroo* are interesting examples of native words that have passed into universal use. Other words are sometimes found in the English of Australians—*wombat*, a kind of burrowing animal, *paramatta*, a light dress fabric, and *cooeey*, a signal cry used by the aborigines and adopted by the colonists; one is said to be ‘within cooeey’ of Sydney when within an easy journey of the city. Thus, one of the reasons for the cosmopolitan character of the English vocabulary today is seen to be the multitude of contacts the English language has had with other tongues in widely scattered parts of the world.

209. *Development of Progressive Verb Forms.*

Before concluding this survey of the factors affecting the language in the eighteenth century we must notice in particular one characteristic development in English grammar. In a work such as this it is impossible to follow in detail the history of each part of speech. All that can be done is to indicate the more important grammatical changes that have taken place since Old English times and to note such new developments as are of most significance in the language of today. Of these, one of great importance concerns the verb. Where French says *je chante* or German *ich singe*, English may say *I sing*, *I do sing*, or *I am singing*. The *do*-forms are often called emphatic forms, and this they sometimes are; but their most important uses are in negative and interrogative sentences (*I don't sing*, *do you sing*). The forms with *to be* and the present participle are generally called progressive forms because their most common use is to indicate an action as being in progress at the time implied by the auxiliary. The wide extension of the use of progressive forms is one of the most important developments of the English verb in the modern period.

In Old English such expressions as *he wæs lærende* (he was teaching) are occasionally found, but usually in translations from Latin.⁵¹ In early Middle English, progressive forms are distinctly rare, and although their number increases in the course of the Middle English period,⁵² we must credit their development mainly to the period since the sixteenth century. The chief factor in their growth is the use of the participle as a noun governed by the preposition *on* (*he burst out on laughing*).⁵³ This weakened to *he burst out a-laughing* and finally to *he burst out laughing*. In the same way *he was on laughing* became *he was a-laughing* and *he was laughing*. Today such forms are freely used in all tenses (*is laughing*, *was laughing*, *will be laughing*, etc.).

⁵¹ A thorough study of the contexts in which this pattern occurs in Old English, including contexts not influenced by Latin, is by Gerhard Nickel, *Die Expanded Form im Altenglischen* (Neumünster, Germany, 1966).

⁵² A valuable list of early occurrences is given in W. Van der Gaff, “Some Notes on the History of the Progressive Form,” *Neophilologus*, 15 (1930), 201–15.

⁵³ In Middle English, forms without the preposition are usually accompanied by an adverb like *always*, *all day*, etc. (cf. Chaucer's *syngynge he was*, or *floytynge*, all the day).

210. *The Progressive Passive.*

The extension of such forms to the passive (*the house is being built*) was an even later development. It belongs to the very end of the eighteenth century. Old English had no progressive passive. Such an expression as *the man is loved, feared, hated* is progressive only in so far as the verbs *loving, fearing, hating* imply a continuous state. But no such force attaches to *the man is killed*, which does not mean *the man is being killed* but indicates a completed act. The construction *the man is on laughing* was capable also of a passive significance under certain circumstances. Thus *the house is on building* can suggest only that the house is in process of construction. This use is found from the fourteenth century on, and in its weakened form the construction is not unknown today. Colloquially, at least, we say *there is nothing doing at the mill this week. The dinner is cooking and the coffee is brewing* are familiar expressions. In some parts of America one may hear *there's a new barn a-building down the road*. When the preposition was completely lost (*on building>a-building>building*) the form became *the house is building*. Because such an expression may at times be either active or passive, it had obvious limitations. Thus *the wagon is making* is a passive, but *the wagon is making a noise* is active. And whenever the subject of the sentence is animate or capable of performing the action, the verb is almost certain to be in the active voice (*the man is building a house*). With some verbs the construction was impossible in a passive sense. Thus the idea *he is always being called* could not be expressed by *he is always calling*.

In the last years of the eighteenth century we find the first traces of our modern expression *the house is being built*. The combination of *being* with a past participle to form a participial phrase had been in use for some time. Shakespeare says: *which, being kept close, might move more grief to hide* (*Hamlet*). This is thought to have suggested the new verb phrase. The earliest instance of the construction that has been noted is from the year 1769.⁵⁴ In 1795 Robert Southey wrote: *a fellow, whose uppermost upper grinder is being torn out by a mutton-fisted barber*. It seems first to have been recognized in an English grammar in 1802.⁵⁵ As yet it is generally used only in the present and simple past tense (*is* or *was being built*). We can hardly say *the house has been being built for two years*, and we avoid saying *it will be being built next spring*.

The history of the new progressive passive shows that English is a living and growing thing, that its grammar is not fixed, that it will continue to change in the future as it has changed in the past, even if more slowly. If the need is felt for a new and better way of

⁵⁴ OED, s.v. *be*.

⁵⁵ The history of this construction was first traced by Fitzedward Hall in his book *Modern English* (New York, 1873). Much valuable material is assembled by Alfred Akerlund in *On the History of the Definite Tenses in English* (Cambridge, UK, 1911). See also Jespersen, *Modern English Grammar*, vol. 4 (1931), and Fernand Mossé, *Histoire de la forme périphrastique être+ participe présent en germanique* (2 parts, Paris, 1938).

expressing an idea, we may rest assured that a way will be found. But it is interesting to note that even so useful a construction was at first resisted by many as an unwarranted innovation. Although supported by occasional instances in Coleridge, Lamb, Landor, Shelley, Cardinal Newman, and others, it was consciously avoided by some (Macaulay, for example) and vigorously attacked by others. In 1837 a writer in the *North American Review* condemned it as “an outrage upon English idiom, to be detested, abhorred, execrated, and given over to six thousand penny-paper editors.” And even so enlightened a student of language as Marsh, in 1859, noted that it “has widely spread, and threatens to establish itself as another solecism.” “The phrase ‘the house *is being built*’ for ‘the house *is building*’, “he says, “is an awkward neologism, which neither convenience, intelligibility, nor syntactical congruity demands, and the use of which ought therefore to be discountenanced, as an attempt at the artificial improvement of the language in a point which needed no amendment.”⁵⁶ Artificial it certainly was not. Nothing seems to have been more gradual and unpremeditated in its beginnings. But, as late as 1870 Richard Grant White devoted thirty pages of his *Words and Their Uses* to an attack upon what still seemed to him a neologism. Although the origin of the construction can be traced back to the latter part of the eighteenth century, its establishment in the language and ultimate acceptance required the better part of a century.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

For a well-rounded introduction to the quantity and variety of seventeenth-century publication see Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century, 1600–1660* 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1962). On the incidence of literacy, David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, UK, 1980) is the standard work. Barbara J. Shapiro's *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1983) provides the essential background for understanding the impact of the new learning on controversies about the English language. Brian Vickers, “The Royal Society and English Prose Style: A Reassessment,” in *Rhetoric and the Pursuit of Truth: Language Change in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985) is of central importance to an ongoing debate. Linguistic aspects of the issues raised may be approached through the essays of Hans Aarsleff, collected in *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis, MN, 1982) and in the studies of various scholars edited by Joseph L. Subbiondo, *John Wilkins and 17th-Century British Linguistics* (Amsterdam, 1992). Robert Adolph, in *The Rise of Modern Prose Style* (Cambridge, MA, 1968), argues that a utilitarian plain style achieved ascendancy during the Restoration period. The appeal to authority and its reflection in the efforts to set up an academy are discussed in detail by H.M. Flasdieck, *Der Gedanke einer englischen Sprachakademie* (Jena, Germany, 1928), where references to the previous literature will be found. D.M. Robertson, *A History of the French Academy* (London, 1910), treats the model which Swift and others had most in mind. The fullest study of Johnson's dictionary, by James H. Sledd and Gwin J. Kolb, *Dr. Johnson's Dictionary: Essays in the Biography of a Book* (Chicago, 1955) can be complemented by Allen Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary, 1746–1773* (Cambridge, UK, 1990), which

⁵⁶ George P. Marsh, *Lectures on the English Language* (4th ed., New York, 1872), p. 649.

examines newly available manuscript materials. Sterling A. Leonard's *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage, 1700–1800* (Madison, WI, 1929) surveys the points most often in dispute among the eighteenth-century grammarians. The most comprehensive study of early grammars of English is Ian Michael, *English Grammatical Categories and the Tradition to 1800* (Cambridge, UK, 1970). A full list of the works of the grammarians will be found in Kennedy's *Bibliography*, supplemented by R.C. Alston, *A Bibliography of the English Language...to the Year 1800* (Leeds, UK, 1965–87). Important also are A.F. Bryan's "Notes on the Founders of Prescriptive English Grammar," *Manly Anniversary Studies* (Chicago, 1923), pp. 383–93, and "A Late Eighteenth-Century Purist" (George Campbell), *Studies in Philology*, 23 (1926), 358–70. The special circumstances of the Scottish grammatical tradition and Scottish pronunciation are treated by Charles Jones in *A Language Suppressed: The Pronunciation of the Scots Language in the 18th Century* (Edinburgh, 1995). A useful collection of excerpts from sixteenth- to eighteenth-century writings is Susie I. Tucker, *English Examined: Two Centuries of Comment on the Mother-Tongue* (Cambridge, UK, 1961). The same author's *Protean Shape: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Vocabulary and Usage* (London, 1967) discusses a large number of words that have undergone semantic change since the eighteenth century. The borrowings from French in this period are treated by Anton Ksoll, *Die französischen Lehn- und Fremdwörter in der englischen Sprache der Restaurationszeit* (Breslau, 1933), and Paul Leidig, *Französische Lehnwörter und Lehnbedeutungen im Englischen des 18. Jahrhunderts: Ein Spiegelbild französischer Kultureinwirkung* (Bochum–Langendreer, Germany, 1941; *Beiträge zur engl. Philologie*, no. 37). The best brief account of British overseas trade and settlement is still James A. Williamson, *A Short History of British Expansion* (2 vols., 6th ed., London and New York, 1967). For a fuller treatment of the development of progressive verb forms the student may consult the works referred to in §§ 209–10.