THE DOCTRINE OF CORRECTNESS IN ENGLISH USAGE
1700-1800

BY

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NOTE

The topic of this study was suggested by Dr. Krapp, with a reference to the valuable notes published by Dr. W. F. Bryan in the *Manly Anniversary Studies*. Dr. Bryan's article on Campbell, the rhetorician, appeared after the completion of this manuscript, but is referred to in the relevant places. The collection of sufficient material in this country would have been impossible without the courteous helpfulness of the library officials of Columbia University, Harvard University, and the Library of Congress, and the facilities of the Inter-Library Loan generously accorded by these institutions and by Princeton, Yale, Cornell, and Michigan Universities.

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The material here presented is of course only a sampling of a large mass of writing about the English language, and particularly about the idea of correctness in the use of English, during the eighteenth century. Further references casting new light on these problems will be gratefully received and acknowledged.

S. L.

Ben Jonson's posthumous "English Grammar" came out in 1640. The titlepage declares that it is "made . . . . out of his observation of the English language now spoken, and in use," and contains also a golden utterance of Quintilian calling *custom* "the surest mistress of speech" and making an apt comparison between current language and current coin. The lesson of this passage seems very hard to learn. Scholars have always consistently averred that good usage is the only conceivable criterion of good English, but most people still clamor for a heaven-sent "standard" to measure their words by. The best established idioms are continually put upon their defence merely because, since they *are* idioms, they differ from somebody's preconceived notion of what ought to be correct.

> George Lyman Kittredge, *Some Landmarks in the History of English Grammars,* 1906.

CHAPTER I

INTEREST IN PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

> I do here, in the Name of all the Learned and polite Persons of the Nation, complain . . . 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.
>
> Swift, *Proposal for Correcting,* 1712.

> I found our speech copious without order, and energetic without rules.
>
> Johnson, Preface to the *Dictionary,* 1755.

CHAPTER I

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY INTEREST IN PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE

1. *Earlier views of English.* The materials on the theory of language, and on English grammar in particular, in the seventeenth century and earlier, are interestingly presented in several studies.[1] These writings show that while interest in problems of language was keen, little or no attention was given to questions of grammatical correctness; criticism previous to the eighteenth century seems to have been concerned with matters of vocabulary chiefly. Fitzedward Hall notes that *its* was a "neoterism" in Queen Elizabeth's day, and states that it had "a weary struggle" for acceptance,[2] but he cites no protest against it. The critical attitude in the eighteenth century is shown by contrast in the "very levanter of ire and villification"[3] aroused by the form "is being built," which apparently was first devised and condemned after 1750. Richard Mulcaster's *Elementarie,* 1582,[4] states the need of bringing "our tung to Art and form of disapline" and says that "our *Sparta* must be spunged"; but Mulcaster's "Grammer" was apparently never completed and nobody seems to have taken up his challenge.

Dr. Fries cites a remarkable quotation from George Fox's "A Battle-Door for Teachers and Professors to Learn Singular

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[1] J. L. Moore, "Tudor-Stuart Views of the Growth, Status and Destiny of the English Language." *Studien zur Englischen Philologie,* Volume II, Halle, 1910.

George H. McKnight, *Modern English in the Making,* Appleton, 1928.

B. S. Monroe, "An English Academy," *Modern Philology,* VIII, 107-22.

Richard Morris, *Historical Outlines of English Accidence,* 1872.

Henry Cecil Wyld, *History of Modern Colloquial English,* Unwin, 1920.

C. C. Fries, "Rules of the Common School Grammars," *P. M. L. A.* XLII, 221-37, and "The Periphrastic Future in Modern English," *P. M. L. A,* XL, 963-1024.

[2] *Modern English,* p. 354.

[3] *Ibid.,* p. 334.

[4] *Op. cit..* pp. 30 and 271.

and Plural; *You* to Many, and *Thou* to One; Singular One, *Thou;* Plural Many, *You"* (1660):

"Do not they speak false English, false Latine, false Greek . . . . and false to the other Tongues . . . . that doth not speak *thou* to *one,* what ever he be, Father, Mother, King, or Judge; is he not a Novice and Unmannerly, and an Ideot and a Fool, that speaks *You* to *one,* which is not to be spoken to a *singular,* but to *many?* O Vulgar Professors and Teachers, that speaks Plural when they should Singular. . . . Come you Priests and Professors, have you not learnt your Accidence?"[5] This is one of the few citations of a grammatical correction of usage previous to the eighteenth century.

2. The demand for correct English was specifically stated early in that century, and it grew rapidly in volume and specific emphasis. Perhaps the first suggestion is to be found in Richard Johnson's *Grammatical Commentaries*: ". . . . our Language . . . . for want of Rule is subject to uncertainty, and the Occasion of frequent Contentions. And upon this account, it has been the practice of several wise nations, such of them, I mean, as have a thorough Education, to learn even their own Language by stated Rules, to avoid that Confusion, that must needs follow from leaving it wholly to vulgar Use."[5a]

Dean Swift, in his proposal for the establishment of an Academy, was more specific in calling attention to the offences "against every Part of Grammar" of which the language was in his opinion guilty.[6] And even Swift's major emphasis was upon problems of wording and pronunciation. A few of Bentley's emendations of Milton and Warburton's of Shakespeare were grammatical. But not until Dr. Johnson and Bishop Lowth took up Swift's challenge with a bill of particulars, in the second half of the century, was much attention paid to grammatical correctness. Johnson himself devoted but

[5]C. C. Fries, *The Teaching of the English Language*, Nelson, 1927, p. 6. Dr. McKnight has other references, particularly to Dryden's emendations of Johnson. *Mod. Eng. in the Making*, pp. 266-270.

[5a]*Op. cit.*, 1706, preface n. p. Dr. McKnight finds the same suggestion in Lane's Grammar (1700) *Mod. Eng.* pp. 291 f.

[6]*A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, in a letter to the Earl of Oxford, 171. , p. 8.

twelve lines of the "English Grammar" in his *Dictionary*, 1755, to presentation of syntax.

3. *The urgent need for reform of English.* Everyone in the eighteenth century, however, appears to have noted the imperfection of the language and the necessity for remedial measures. Philip Withers expressed a commonly accepted idea, that grammatical Construction is the "first Excellence of style";[7] and though Campbell admitted it is a negative virtue, nevertheless it was given precedence and elaborate attention in the period after 1700. Only precision in choice of words ranks with it in consideration by writers on the language during the eighteenth century.

Following Swift at a long interval, Dr. Johnson wrote in the preface to his *Dictionary*, 1755, "I found our speech copious without order, and energetic without rules," and in the "English Grammar" which followed, he remarked that ". . . . in a language subjected so little and so lately to grammar, [such] anomalies must frequently occur."[8] In about the same year John Ward wrote, ". . . . much remains yet to be done, for bringing it [the language] to a regular and compleat system in all its parts."[9]

Lowth's *Short Introduction,* 1762, was devoted to the proposition that the English language is capable of refinement by grammar, whose purpose is "to teach us to express ourselves with propriety."[10] Elucidating and supporting Swift's statement, he maintained that "the English Language, as it is spoken by the politest part of the nation, and as it stands in the writings of the most approved authors, often offends against every part of grammar."[11] In Buchanan, following him, we find, ". . . it is hoped, that Men of Learning, who are studious to correct Composition, will for the future, be exemplary in rejecting such Barbarisms [as he has cited]; otherwise the few

[7]*Aristarchus,* [1788], p. 136.
[8]*Op. cit.,* preface, n.p.
[9]*Four Essays upon the English Language,* 1754 (1758 edition, preface, p. iii).
[10]*Op. cit.,* p. x.
[11]*Short Introduction,* 1762, p. ii.

traces of Analogy that are to be found in our language will, in a little Time, be utterly annihilated."[12] In his preface Buchanan writes, "considering the many grammatical Improprieties to be found in our best Writers, such as SWIFT, ADDISON, POPE, etc. A Systematical English Syntax is not beneath the Notice of the Learned themselves."[13]

4. *The flood of English grammars.* The remarkable inundation of books on language problems during the last half of the eighteenth century was devoted mainly to producing this "Systematical Syntax." Lowth filled the notes of his *Short Introduction* with lists of errors by "standard authors," and the interest aroused was remarkable. Whereas fewer than fifty writings on grammar, rhetoric, criticism, and linguistic theory have been listed for the first half of the eighteenth century, and still fewer for all the period before 1600, the publications in the period 1750-1800 exceeded two hundred titles.[14] And most of these were concerned in whole or in part with solecisms, barbarisms, improprieties, and questions of precision in the use of English.

5. *Basic assumptions about language.* In order to understand the mass of prescriptions about English usage which piled up amazingly in the eighteenth century, and which has indeed continued in increasing volume ever since, it seems necessary to find out if possible why such prescriptions became prevalent and popular, and especially, upon what assumptions about language, and the English language in particular, they are based. For this purpose more than ninety works, ranging from articles, reviews, and pamphlets to the six volumes of Lord Monboddo, were examined for this study. In each, the writer's prescriptions and rules, and especially his statements of the theoretical bases of these in grammar, logic, or whatever he appealed to, were tabulated and analyzed.

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[12]*A Regular English Syntax*, 1767, p. 90. This quotation has its humorous aspect when one recollects the "annoyance at the ravages of analogy"—i. e., popular etymologies, back-formations, and the like—felt by nineteenth-century linguists. See Vendryes, *Language*, (English translation, Knopf, 1925, p. 49).

[13]*Op. cit.*, p. ix. The sentence division is Buchanan's, or his printers'.

[14]See Kennedy, *Bibliography, passim.*

6. *Two contrasting theories of usage.* In dealing with problems of language, one of two basic and contrary principles is generally adhered to; in the eighteenth century the two are clearly differentiated. The one assumes the power of reason to remold language completely, and appeals to various principles of metaphysics or logic, or even makes pronouncements on mere individual preference posing as authority, in the endeavor to "correct, improve, and fix" usage. The other, while admitting the usefulness of purism in recommending what may be regarded as improvements, recognizes language —even cultivated language—as a vastly complicated and often haphazard growth of habits stubbornly rooted, the product of great variation in social soil and climate, not more readily changed by fiat into clipped and formal garden pattern than is any vast area of swamp and jungle and timber-line vegetation. Adherents of this second principle are primarily interested in studying the facts of usage, determining as much as possible of their history and causes, and attempting to classify them according to valid criteria of their social effects in communication.

As will appear in the following chapters, a sufficient basis for beginning a scientific study of English on this second principle was actually available to eighteenth-century scholars. Quite perspicuous statements that usage is the "sole arbiter and norm of speech," in the classical writers and later, were generally known and indeed often quoted. Moreover, the philosophy of John Locke furnished an ample reinforcement of this fundamental principle. And grammars of Anglo-Saxon and texts in this and other Germanic languages were already available.

But the eighteenth-century grammarians and rhetoricians were mainly clergymen, retired gentlemen, and amateur philosophers like the elder Shandy; with an immense distaste for Locke's dangerous and subversive doctrines. Though more or less conversant with classical texts, they had little or no conception of the history and relations of the classical or other languages, and of course no equipment for carrying on lin-

guistic research or even for making valid observations of contemporary usage. One or two like Dr. Johnson and Horne Tooke made forays of some brilliance and did useful work, but none consolidated any position. Frequently they quoted with approval the Horatian dictum about usage, or an equivalent, but always they destroyed its entire force in application. As we shall see in the following chapter, their fundamental difficulty was in philosophy. They built in general upon the neo-Platonic notion of a divinely instituted language, perfectly mirroring actuality but debased by man, and they labored to restore its pristine perfection.

Only one writer, Joseph Priestley, appears to have held to a clear conception of the force of usage, as presented by Horace and Quintilian and by Locke and his followers. His work, marred of course by his lack of training for specifically linguistic research, is, almost alone in the eighteenth century, a precursor of modern study of these problems. It was, however, so remote from the general trend of thought in his time that it was without important influence. It did not often figure in the ireful combats in which the other grammarians, engaged, but was obscured by the brilliance of Lowth's completely logical grammar, published only a month after Priestley's, and was completely buried under Lindley Murray's eclectic productions.

The prevailing view of language in the eighteenth century was that English could and must be subjected to a process of classical regularizing. Where actual usage was observed and recorded—even when the theory was promulgated that usage is supreme—this was, in general, done only to denounce and reform the actual idiom.

7. *The divisions of this study*. The present investigation has been for convenience divided into the categories discussed in the following chapters. All were expressed or implied as basic considerations in writings about the English language in the eighteenth century:

Chapter II. The contrasting ideas (1) of language as an entity or an originally perfect instrument, needing only logical

and authoritative restoration to its pristine state, and (2) of language as a product merely of convention or compact. These are traced to their origin in earlier and contemporary philosophic views of language.

Chapter III. The appeal to authority, whether that of the writer or of another theorist whose *ipse dixit* was assumed to have sway. This extremely common mode of judgment was used by most of the writers here discussed, from Swift to Webster, and of course is still employed.

Chapter IV. The appeal to norms of "universal grammar" to which individual problems of usage could be referred for settlement, developed by Bishop Lowth, Anselm Bayly, and James Harris chiefly. As the only grammars studied to any extent in the eighteenth century were those of the classical languages, this meant in practice an appeal to supposed parallels in Latin, and more rarely in Greek. Occasional resort was had to French, and still less often to the Anglo-Saxon and the other even less comprehended Germanic languages.

Chapter V. The appeal to "reason and analogy" in the language itself. This led to proposing (1) parallels and (2) differentiae in form as altogether essential in deciding problems of inflection and syntax in English. As these two principles were often contrary in application, this is a most involved story of contradictions and mutual recriminations in which all the grammarians took part.

Chapter VI. Appeals to considerations of logic in dealing with problems of syntax and word order.

Chapter VII. Similar application of logic to nice discriminations of the meanings of words.

Chapter VIII. Appeal to the etymology or the earlier meanings of words to determine what their present use should be, and to language history for justification of opinions as to structure. Dr. Johnson, Horne Tooke, George Campbell, and Noah Webster are interesting figures here. In the prevailing state of ignorance of both etymology and the history of languages, this principle naturally introduced further confusion.

Chapter IX. The explicit appeal to custom—variously in-

terpreted as cultivated speech, the usage of the best writers, and "what sounds best"—and its actual repudiation in practically all cases. The elaborate treatment of the subject in Campbell's *Rhetoric* in an amazing instance of attempted adherence to the principle and its utter betrayal.

Chapter X. The attack upon regional and class dialects as opposed to an assumed national and reputable usage.

Chapters XI and XII give examples of various particularly confused attempts to settle points of inflection and of syntax by all these categories of logic.

Chapter XIII is a summary of the study and an interpretation of the effect and value of doctrines of correctness.

A glossary exhibiting the contrast between the facts of usage and the contradictory mass of eighteenth-century dogmas about it, and a bibliography particularly of eighteenth-century publications consulted, are given in the appendix.