The English Language in the 18th Century

Text 23: Samuel Johnson Preface to a Dictionary of the English Language

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Structure

- Flashback 17th Century
- Historical Overview 18th Century
- Linguistic Issues 18th Century
- Bio Samuel Johnson
- Text Work & Background Information
- More Linguistic Movements in the 18th Century and Results
- Fun Part
Flashback 17th Century

- Religious struggles & political disorders:
- Stuart dynasty
- Civil War
- Catholics/Anglicans/Puritans
- Execution of Charles I
- Cromwell & the Republic
- Restoration of monarchy
- Glorious Revolution, Bill of Rights
**Historical Overview**

**18th Century**

- House of Hannover (1714-1837)
- Two Jacobite Rebellions failed
- Parliament gradually gained more power, Whigs & Torys
- Industrialization & Urbanization
- Population explosion from 7 to 14 Mio
- Sea power, colonies
- Wars: Seven Years War, War of Independence
Linguistic Issues
18th Century

- Standardize, refine & fix the language
- Idea of “Ascertainment”
- Academies and earlier works in Italy & France
- English plans for an academy died with Queen Anne
- Greatest needs: dictionary and grammar
- Afterwards attempts at standardization by individuals (e.g. Samuel Johnson)
Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)
Bio Samuel Johnson

- Son of a bookseller in Lichfield, Staffordshire
- Precarious financial conditions & health problems
- Left Oxford after 13 months, married
- Worked as a teacher & writer, went to London

- **Works:** Essays, Criticism, Sermons, Biographies...
  - 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, Novel *Rasselas*
- Master’s degree from Oxford in 1755 and later two honorary doctorates from Oxford & Dublin
- Buried in Westminster Abbey
- Today England’s 2nd most cited author after Shakespeare (James Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson*)
Text Work, Part 1

- Need for order & rules
- Variety is seen as negative
- Purity is to be achieved
- Appeal to authority → writers of reputation
- Rules established by experience & analogy
- Baugh & Cable: but also prejudice and subjectivity
Examples from the *Dictionary*

- **Lexicographer:** A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.

- **Oats:** A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland appears to support the people.

- **Pension:** An allowance made to any one without an equivalent. In England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country.

- **Tory:** One who adheres to the ancient constitution of the state, and the apostolical hierarchy of the church of England, opposed to a Whig.

- **Whig:** The name of a faction.
Text Work, Part 2

- Negative taste of “modern” expressions
- Authority: Writers before the Restoration (see next slide)
- *Teutonick* instead of *Gallick* character of the language
- Idea of a fixed-groundwork, also for the future
Johnson’s Authorities

- Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) Poet: *Defence of Poetry, Arcadia*
- Richard Hooker (1554-1600) Influential Anglican Theologian
- Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) Philosopher & Statesman, Introduced inductive methodology for scientific inquiry
- Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618) Aristocrat, writer & explorer
- Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) Poet: *The Fairie Queene*
- William Shakespeare (1564-1616)
Examples from the Dictionary

GE'NIUS [Latin; génie, French]

1. The protecting or ruling power of men, places, or things.
There is none but he whose bearing I do fear: and, under him, my genius is rebuked; as it is said Antony’s was by Caesar. *Shakespeare’s Macbeth*
The genius and the mortal instruments are then in council; and the state of man, like to a little kingdom, suffers then. *Shakes. Jul. Caesar*
And as I awake, sweet music breathe, sent by some spirit to mortals good, or the unseen genius of the wood. *Milton*
And the tame demon that should guard my throne, shrinks at a genius greater than his own. *Dryden*
To your glad genius sacrifice this day; let common meats respectfully give way. *Dryden*

2. A man endowed with superior faculties.
There is no little writer of Pindaric who is not mentioned as a prodigious genius. *Addison*

3. Mental power or faculties.
The state and order does proclaim the genius of that royal dame. *Waller*
4. Disposition of nature by which anyone is qualified for some particular employment.

A happy *genius* is the gift of nature. *Dryden’s Dufresnoy*

Your majesty’s sagacity, and happy *genius* for natural history, is a better preparation for enquiries of this kind than all the dead learning of the schools. *Burnet’s Theory of the Earth, Preface*

One science only will one *genius* fit; so vast is art, so narrow human wit. *Pope on Criticism*

The Romans, though they had no great *genius* for trade, yet were not entirely neglectful of it. *Arbuthnot on Coins*


Studious to please the *genius* of the times, with periods, points and tropes he slurs his crimes. *Dryden*

Another *genius* and disposition improper for philosophical contemplations is not so much from the narrowness of their spirit and understanding, as because they will not take time to extend them. *Burnet’s Theory, Preface*

He tames the *genius* of the stubborn plain. *Pope*
Text Work, Part 3

• Temporary or local convenience is rejected
• Idea of “usage” appears only later in the 18th century
• Effects of trade and colonization: corruption of the language
• Translation alters the language → change is negative
• Language as a matter of liberty
• French “deformation” of the English language
Effects of Colonization on Vocabulary

- Native Americans: *caribou, moccasin, skunk*
- Spanish & Portuguese influence via Mexico: *chili, chocolate, coyote, tomato*
- Cuba & West Indies: *barbecue, canoe, hurricane, potato, tobacco*
- India: *bungalow, cashmere, curry, jungle*
- Africa: *banana, gorilla, voodoo, zebra*
- Australia: *boomerang, kangaroo*

→ All of these contacts have contributed to the cosmopolitan character of the English vocabulary today. (Baugh & Cable, P.208)
More Linguistic Movements and Results

• The grammarians, e.g. Joseph Priestley, Noah Webster (classical models of Greek & Latin)
• Important grammatical changes: Progressive and Past Progressive
• Rhetoricians, e.g. Thomas Sheridan → idea that refined language fosters good moral
• Philosophy concerned with linguistic matters, e.g. idea of universal grammar

→ Results: On the whole standardization of the English language was achieved, although often decisions were made by individuals on faulty grounds. (Baugh & Cable, p. 203)
Fun Part: Video

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yezUD8F
U8qE
Sources

- [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/)
- Johnson, Samuel (1755) “Preface to a Dictionary of the English Language” at: [http://www.gutenberg.org/ dirs/etext04/engl10.txt](http://www.gutenberg.org/ dirs/etext04/engl10.txt)
- [http://www.samueljohnson.com/definitions.html](http://www.samueljohnson.com/definitions.html)