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When is a Word Not a Word?

Language beyond the dictionary

As the English Project sets out to celebrate and document the diversity of English, *Josie Dixon* examines the history of attitudes to linguistic plurality.

The history of the English language has been one of perpetual expansion, its richness and diversity in usage its greatest resource. Coinage and invention, adaptation, amalgamation and transmutation of words and their sources have kept our language dynamic, in a constant state of organic growth and change. This has given rise to the linguists' discourse of plural 'Englishes', used to describe a language which is emphatically not monolithic but has spawned a myriad variants of different kinds, be they pigeons and creoles, regional and local dialects, or the argots of any other community or practice, from rap to text messaging. Against this background of perpetual innovation, dictionaries will always struggle to keep up, and to do justice to that plurality.

In case we take our linguistic diversity and pluralism for granted, it's worth reflecting on the contrast with the French language, notoriously subject to the literary and cultural policing of the Académie française. This august institution, formally established in 1635, acts as a regulatory body, attempting to outlaw encroachments from other languages and stem the tide of hybridisation threatening the purity of the French tongue with the inventions of Franglais and the like. In seventeenth-century France, the highest literary values were placed on linguistic refinement and restraint: the vocabulary of Racine is a fraction of the size of Shakespeare's, and offers a telling contrast with our own tradition of linguistic promiscuity and freedom of invention. Such a fate might perhaps have been our own (though it's hard to imagine), since the eighteenth century saw a vigorous public debate on whether an Academy should be established in Britain, to provide an authority that would pronounce on correct usage and promote aspirations towards order and fixity, for a language whose evident instability in the hands of its users had become a source of profound cultural anxiety.

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Debating 'dyversitie and chaunge'

The roots of this question go back into the sixteenth century, when the translation of classical and continental texts was provoking a sense of the English language's inadequacy to meet the demands of Renaissance thought. A debate ensued over whether enriching resources should be sought in the classical and European languages, or in the revival of native vocabulary and derivations. The introduction of printing heightened the sense of the English language's instability – its general lack of system or rule (before the first dictionaries were produced), and the proliferation of word forms, meanings, pronunciations and spellings – by contrast with the fixity of dead languages like the classics. Caxton

himself had highlighted the issue of 'dyuersitie and chaunge of language' in his prologue to a translation of Virgil in 1490, not least in relation to the compositor's dilemma 'bytwene playn, rude and curyous' variants, observing in the earliest stages a tension which still persists between oral freedom and the desire for standardisation in the printed record.

It soon became apparent that such tensions were not simply a linguistic matter. Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique* in 1553 set out a straight choice between adopting established social distinctions which separated 'courte talke' and 'countrey speache' or standardising so as to 'vse altogether one maner of language'. Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* went further in 1589 in advocating a regionally-based standard for literary language, excluding the rich linguistic resources of half the country in the process:

> neither shall he take the termes of Northern-men, such as they vse in dayly talke … nor in effect any speach vsed beyond the riuer of Trent, though no man can deny but theirs is the purer English Saxon at this day, yet it is not so Courtly nor so currant as our Southerne English is; no more is the far Westerne mans speach. Ye shall therefore take the vsuall speach of the Court, and that of London and the shires lying about London within lx. myles, and not much aboue.

'The great pest of speech'

Puttenham's argument for reining in regional diversity was only one aspect of the linguistic restrictions at issue in the period. An even greater source of anxiety than regional dialect was the adoption of 'foreigners' into the language, in an age of translation, trade and new levels of cultural exchange with the continent. This concern would persist at least as far as Dr Johnson, who declared that 'the great pest of speech is frequency of translation' and railed against 'the licence of translatours, whose idleness and ignorance, if it be suffered to proceed, will reduce us to babble a dialect of *France*.'

By contrast the early advocates of this kind of transnational linguistic enrichment drew on the metaphors of cultivation and cross-breeding, which formed part of a wider Renaissance debate about nature versus nurture. So, in 1594 we find Thomas Nashe enjoining his contemporaries to 'graft wordes, as men do their trees to make them more fruitfull'. Many writers of the period were conscious innovators, welcoming (as Sir Thomas Elyot had done in 1531) the naturalisation of 'wordes late commen out of Italy and Fraunce, made denizens amonge us.' But the influx of elaborate Latinate vocabulary (and the sort of pedantic linguistic obscurity satirised in the speech of Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost*) soon led to a backlash. George Gascoigne articulated the views of many (in a tradition that continues forward to George Orwell and beyond) when he declared in 1575 that 'the more monosyllables that

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you vse the truer Englishman you shall seeme, and the lesse you shall smell of the Inkehorne'.

'The wells of English undefiled'

The sense that Englishness was somehow at stake in the battle over language became a question of political as well as cultural import in the debate that ensued. Learned foreign derivations were seen as divisive, leaving the hearer or reader 'in their own mother tonge, straungers to be counted and aliens' (thus 'E.K.' in the epistle to Harvey, prefixed to Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender*). Before long, the debate would acquire nationalistic overtones; Johnson's invocation of 'the wells of English undefiled' (quoting Spenser on Chaucer) as 'the pure sources of genuine diction' formed part of his crusade against 'spots of barbarity' in the language, associated with French derivations 'from which it ought to be our endeavour to recall it' (we might compare present-day attitudes to the influence of American culture on our language).

The fear of linguistic disinheritance from a native tradition was accompanied by the sense of other kinds of political vulnerability associated with England's dependency on foreign cultures. Sir John Cheke in 1557 wrote with concern of a linguistic trade deficit whereby English, viewed in economic terms, was 'ever borrowing and never payeing'. Nathaniel Fairfax retorted in 1674 'as for a tongue that borrows not nor spends, I believe 'tis nowhere to be found, or ever will be': effectively, language will become devalued if the exchange of currencies is not kept active. This financial rhetoric lent itself to traditionalist, conservative arguments against linguistic borrowing: native resources represented the wealth of long heritage, whilst new foreign enrichment created a language which was disdained as nouveau riche. Samuel Johnson would later develop this line of thought in his notion that 'commerce, however necessary, however lucrative, as it depraves the manners, corrupts

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the language.' He was equally dismissive of the diction of 'the laborious and mercantile part of the people', described as 'fugitive cant, which is always in a state of increase or decay, cannot be regarded as any part of the durable materials of a language, and therefore must be suffered to perish with other things unworthy of preservation'.

An Academy in Britain?

With the social and political stakes evidently high, the drive towards some means of regulating and purifying the language gave rise to a mission for linguistic cleansing, whose legacy is still evident in the views of today's guardians of correctness, such as the Campaign for Plain English. A recent edition of Radio 4's *Word of Mouth* provided some wonderful insights into the pitfalls of language policing, and the infinitely more liberal stance of linguists like Mark Liberman of the Language Log website, for whom the 'killjoy prescriptivists' are quite simply insufficiently alive to 'the intricacy and charm of language as it really exists'. But as in any debate about liberty, there are many who feel more comfortable with rules and authority, and so it proved in the eighteenth century.

It was against just such a background of highly charged debate about the politics of language that the notion of establishing an Academy in Britain began to be discussed. The idea had some strong advocates, including Daniel Defoe, who was in favour of the strictest authority, under whose jurisdiction 'it would be as criminal then to coin words as money'. Others including Johnson pointed to the failures of the French inspectorate, and argued that such an enterprise must be in vain, language being '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'. Ultimately – and fortunately for our linguistic heritage - the idea was resisted. Instead, Lord Chesterfield took it upon himself to recommend 'the old Roman expedient in times of confusion and choose a Dictator', and it was Johnson whom he nominated to compile a new Dictionary that was to provide just such a point of authority and jurisdiction.

Johnson's Dictionary

Johnson was at once the right and the wrong man for the job. His Dictionary remains a magnificent monument to the language of eighteenth-century England. The inclusion of examples of usage – in his case overwhelmingly literary – was at once its greatest legacy (in our own time, most importantly for the OED) and its downfall, at least in relation to Chesterfield's original manifesto for the lexicographer's job as one of 'purifying and finally fixing' the language. The 'exuberance of signification' which greeted Johnson's labours defeated him at every turn, rendering it impossible to pin down usage or meaning with any hope of fixity.

Johnson's Preface, written after the Dictionary was compiled, reads as a humanising confession of failure to fulfil the ambitious plan with which he had been charged. His description of the dynamics of language change and the drive towards coinage articulates a new understanding of the impossibility of the lexicographer's mission:

> Those who have much leisure to think, will always be enlarging the stock of ideas, and every increase of knowledge, whether real or fancied, will produce new words, or combinations of words. When the mind is unchained from necessity, it will range after convenience; when it is left at large in the fields of speculation, it will shift opinions … as any opinion grows popular, it will innovate speech in the same proportion as it alters practice.

The wavering lines of argument in his Preface suggest that compiling the Dictionary left Johnson oscillating uncertainly between prescriptive ambitions ('the duty of the lexicographer to correct and proscribe') and descriptive results (in his rueful acknowledgement that practice, custom and usage are the final arbiters, and an irresistible force for change). In the end, the conservative in Johnson renders the dominant tone an elegiac one: there is a tendency to equate change with 'decay', even 'degeneration', and he concludes 'if the changes that we fear be thus irresistible, what remains but to acquiesce with silence, as in the unsurmountable distresses of humanity?'

Lexicographers and linguists

While modern lexicographers clearly understand their enterprise as descriptive rather than prescriptive, the compilers of every dictionary must face the same dilemma, as usage forever outstrips the printed record. Successive editions are now understood to be stages in an ongoing process, and updating online dictionaries has in some ways facilitated the necessary fluidity: we have come a long way from the notion of the Dictionary as a fixed monument. Yet publishers still want to market their Dictionaries as fundamentally authoritative – even definitive – and how many of us can say that we have not fallen into the trap of consulting a dictionary ('*the* Dictionary') for 'the right answer' to linguistic problems, questions and disputes? So, do we still want established boundaries to our language, or are we now happy to live in a world of infinite linguistic free play?

Lexicographers have to draw their boundaries somewhere; linguists don't. The English Project is a new language centre based at the University of Winchester, which will eventually become a visitor attraction offering

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a living museum for the English language. While the project as a whole is still in development, it has had a runaway media success with a living language initiative designed to explore and record those parts of the language that dictionaries don't reach. 'Kitchen Table Lingo' is a database for those original words which develop in family usage – the only criteria being that they must have been in use for a month or more by three or more people, and must not be in the OED. It is designed fundamentally as a celebration of the 'springs of inventiveness and creativity in English, devised by ordinary English speakers'.

Kitchen Table Lingo

The delicious words emerging from this compilation bear witness to the wonderful variety of linguistic coinage, its sources and derivations. Onomatopoeia is an obvious resource: I recall from my own childhood, before the days of microwaves, that the Pyrex disc which would rattle in the bottom of a saucepan of milk, as a warning to take it off the heat before it boiled over, was known in our family as the 'dig-a-dig'. Toddler language is another: my two-year old's word 'duggle' (for hug or cuddle) has long outlived his struggles with pronunciation, to become part of the family lexicon. Contractions and portmanteau words are a great source of invention and wit, producing terms like 'drismal' (weather), 'Liverpolitan' (upmarket Merseyside) or 'improposition' (speaks for itself!). Sometimes it's hard to come up with a precise derivation, but the word just feels right – the disgruntled dog looking a bit 'griffley', or the over-cautious elderly driver in a flat cap in the car in front, 'mimsing' at 30 mph on an open stretch of road.

The first book of words to emerge from the project was published last autumn, and included celebrity contributions from Melvyn Bragg, Ann Atkins, Ian McMillan, Simon Armitage, Philip Pullman and others. The possibilities are endless, and the project's compilers have plans to extend the idea into other arenas: domestic (bedroom lingo? lavatory lingo?), professional (boardroom lingo? shopfloor lingo?) and so on. The accent is on the informal, even subversive, contexts where linguistic invention thrives – a school version seems more likely to spawn behind-the-bikesheds lingo than classroom lingo. The educational potential of the project is huge, and there are plans for living language initiatives in schools, as well as for the more scholarly applications of the database for academic linguists.

Beyond the dictionary

Here the project represents something significantly new: while linguists have studied sociolects of various kinds, the family has perhaps been seen as too small and variable a unit to merit serious study of lexicon and usage (as opposed to the more generalised cognitive processes of language development in children). Indeed

the phenomenon of private language in family contexts has if anything been viewed more as a disorder or impairment to linguistic development, if one thinks of the unique language sometimes developed between twins, known as idioglossia or, more pathologically, cryptophasia. In stressing the importance of language for wider social communication we have come to distrust the exclusiveness of private language. Now, under the auspices of The English Project, 'Kitchen Table Lingo' gives our private language a more inclusive airing in a celebratory public context, motivated not least by the sheer fun of invention. So let's hear it for the rich possibilities of our oral language, too often sidelined in a culture that has become dominated by the printed word. Living beyond the dictionary allows us to push back the frontiers of language in a creative space where we can all escape the linguistic police and enjoy some freedom from the rules.

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