

Explain the reasons for the emergence of prescriptive attitudes towards language and the quest for the best models of “King’s English” in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

During the era of Early Modern English, the years between the 16th and 18th centuries, Britain experienced a chaotic few decades (Chubarov 2011). It began with the gunpowder plot in 1605, followed by two civil wars in 1642-6 and 1648-51 and subsequently Britain struggled through the great plague and fire of London in 1665-7 (*ibid.*). This turmoil infected every area of life during this time, as Crystal acknowledges, ‘the fear of disorder has been a common theme in the plays of the Jacobethan period. *Chaos...is first found in Shakespeare*’ (2005: 366). This period of unrest succeeds the Renaissance, an era in which much of the classical learnings from the past were in public consciousness again. These decades were best known for their artistic developments, as well as, according to many a few centuries later, entertaining the best example of the English language (Chubarov 2011). Many prestigious writers in the 17th and 18th centuries looked to the authors and playwrights of the Renaissance as paragons of linguistic ability. The concerns of literary authorities during the Early Modern English period were with ‘fixing’ the English language, leading to the moniker of the period: “Age of the Grammarian” (*ibid.*). Many of the great authors of the time supported ideas to prescribe rules for the language, concerned with “good” or “correct” usage of English. The reasons for this concentrated effort to renovate the language shall be discussed herewith. This essay also explores the search for the ideal example of the English language, whether it could be found spoken in the court, in the newly emerging dictionaries or the various translations of the Bible.

The Early Modern period experienced a remarkable increase in the population, in particularly the end of this era, which witnessed a doubling of the birth rate (Crystal 2005: 367). In 1550 the population was estimated at 2.5 million, within a hundred years this number had doubled, and by 1700 there were estimated to be 6 million people living in England (*ibid.*). Unsurprisingly, this led to an influx in immigration to the capital city: in 1650, the total was estimated at 400 000 people, which grew to 575 000 within 50 years, making it the ‘largest city in Western Europe’ (*ibid.*). However, outside of London, there was a great rise in urban growth: Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester became manufacturing centres, while Bath and Brighton were famous for their leisure resorts (*ibid.*). This rise in the population, and urbanisation of cities throughout the country, led to necessary expansion of the social classes (Chubarov 2011). Thus, a new social class emerged, filled with businessmen, merchants and industrialists, who, as Crystal suggests, were ‘an increasingly powerful sector of society’ (2005: 369). And so, the Gentry class was formed.

The Gentry became a feature of life in the 17th and 18th centuries, however ‘ownership of a fortune does not guarantee refined behaviour’ (Leith 1997: 56). The inception of the new class divisions required tutorials in behaviour for the new members of the gentry: ‘politeness was purveyed to non-elite individuals in an array of manuals and encyclopaedic guides’ (Klein 1995: 363). In these books of etiquette, all aspects of behaviour were considered: from how to pour tea and not eating with one’s hands, to using the language in the ‘correct’ way (Chubarov 2011). ‘The English 18th century was an age of politeness’ (Klein 1995: 362), thus such publications as *The Gentlemen Calling* (1660) and *The Ladies Calling* (1673) were found to be very popular among society (Chubarov 2011). This popularity suggests politeness and civility were considered prestigious; those who were considered ‘polite’ were members of the elite culture (Klein 1995: 362), and many strived to achieve this standard. Leith suggests the most accessible way of accomplishing this was to ‘embrace the standards of correctness in

speech' (1997: 56). This need for linguistic instruction was argued with the observation that even the most prestigious members of the literati break the rules of language occasionally, thus, if playwrights such as Shakespeare are not always correct, this 'proves the need for guidance for lesser mortals' (Chubarov 2011).

Along with these etiquette manuals, noted literary figures took it upon themselves to produce a set of rules in order to fix the English language. As Leith remarks: 'insecurity about social status is reflected in the nervousness about being incorrect in linguistic behaviour' (1997: 57). Writers such as Dryden, Defoe and Swift maintained the state of the language was in decline, 'looking back upon the Restoration...as the classical age of the language' (Baugh & Cable 2002: 258). Taking their inspiration from the French 'Academy', these intellectuals aimed to form committee for the sole purpose of improving the English language. Set up in 1664, the Royal Society planned to undertake the reformation of grammar and spelling, however this proposal was curtailed in 1665 with the arrival of the bubonic plague (Chubarov 2011). The debate continued with some strength with Jonathan Swift supporting the development of an Academy in 1697, claiming to 'fix the language forever' (Crystal 2005: 368). Researchers believe this unrelenting attitude towards improving the language was a reaction to the growing literacy rate in England, 'learned discourse was no longer confined to the elite circles, it was now being extensively published in English' (Baugh & Cable 2002: 254). In order to separate the privileged from the working classes, a 'codified standard' was necessary to ensure their speech was 'sharply different' (Leith 1997: 57). It has been suggested that many of those endeavouring to achieve this standard were looking at classic languages, such as Latin, as the pinnacle of linguistic excellence (Baugh & Cable 2002: 255). These languages, hundreds of years older than English, seemingly having reached a standard, and that, coupled with the literary and social prestige they held, would be regarded as 'approaching perfection' (Baugh & Cable 2002: 255). As Baugh and Cable claim: '[many were] labouring under the mistaken notion that the classical languages...had continued unchanged for many centuries, some held that English might be rendered equally stable' (2002: 263). Unfortunately, despite Swift's confident declaration, such grammar and spelling reforms did not take place, and the people of England were obliged to look elsewhere for exemplary uses of the language.

As discussed, England was still in need of guidance in regards to their language, especially those in the gentile class. Despite many having attended either University or one of the Inns of Court, there were still those who were searching for a model on which they could base their speech (Chubarov 2011). Language was still considered to be the 'weapon of class', thus many people looked to the people in the Court to produce England's finest examples of language usage (Leith 1997:57). As Crystal explains: 'the notion of the 'King's English' was widespread': people viewed the language used in the court as 'pre-eminent' (2005: 379). This belief was not new, 200 years earlier, in Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique* (1553), there is talk of 'counterfeiting the king's English' (Crystal 2005: 379). The responsibility to deliver correct and prestigious language continued through the decades, altering the term to 'Queen's English' in 1592 with Thomas Nashe's satirical pamphlet *Strange Newes* (Crystal 2005: 379). Such attitudes are valid, with the understanding that language was 'the preserve of the elite', and the Court would have been filled accordingly with the privileged (Leith 1997:57). This belief was also held by pedants such as Swift, who claimed the court represented 'the standard of propriety and correctness of speech' (Crystal 2005:379). However, he was sorely disappointed as he is later to have claimed the actual linguistic practices of the court 'left a lot to be desired' (Chubarov 2011). A realistic discovery, for although the elite circles were exposed to education long before the other classes, the entire country was still in need of direction when it came to linguistic practises: the upper classes were only able to do as much as they could regarding language with the limited guidance available (Chubarov 2011).

The search for the best model for the English language, or 'King's English' continued. At this time, there were and had been many editions and versions of the Bible circulated written in English (Chubarov 2011). Swift considered 'these Books...have proved a kind of Standard for Language, especially for the common People' (Crystal 2005: 380). It is said that once England was an officially Protestant country, thus using English for biblical writing, this literature 'consolidated the emerging standard' (Chubarov 2011). Due to its status as a sacred text, the bible ensured the continuity of the English language to be circulated throughout parishes across the country (*ibid.*). The King James Bible, first published in 1611, gave the language used, 'ultimately derived from the London dialect', a widespread, positive reputation that lasted longer than any of the previous Bibles (*ibid.*). However, the tumultuous relationship that England had with religion caused controversy among the different sectors of Christianity. In the 16th century, many contradictory versions of the Bible were produced: Tyndale's New Testament in 1524 was a very conservative, Catholic edition, but, as mentioned, less than 100 years later the authority lay with the protestant manuscript (*ibid.*). The constantly changing belief system reduced the influence of the Bible and this, along with other religious movements growing in popularity at the time, meant there were many competing translations and interpretations of theological terms (Crystal 2005: 380).

Lastly, the dictionary was also considered to be a contender for the best model of 'King's English'. From Robert Cawdreys' *A Table Alphabeticall*, in 1604, to Johnson's *Dictionary*, in 1754, their motivation has echoed that of the prescriptivists: to fix and standardise the English language (Chubarov 2011). Primarily, Cawdreys' publication, containing just less than 3000 words in its first edition, was intended for 'the benefit and helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskilful persons' (Price 2008). However as the years went by many linguists began developing more comprehensive and prevalent tomes (Crystal 2005: 280). John Kersey produced a *New English Dictionary* in 1702, with an estimated 28 000 words, while Nathaniel Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* included nearly 60 000 words by its 1736 edition (Chubarov 2011). Despite the escalating popularity of the dictionaries throughout the country, they were not seen as particularly helpful as they gave 'little guidance in regards to usage' (*ibid.*). For example, Cawdreys' volume focused on the 'understanding of hard vsuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French, &c.', words that were not used frequently in everyday speech (*ibid.*). Researchers also argue that earlier dictionaries 'lacked illustrative support from prestigious authors' when defining the word in question (Crystal 2005: 380). As a result, Samuel Johnson began a project in 1746 to produce a conclusive and certifiable piece of work, taking three years to source citations to illustrate his definitions (Chubarov 2011). Johnson fully believed in the preservation of the language, saying:

My idea of an English dictionary [is] 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. (Chubarov 2011)

This dictionary was considered the best of its kind, and was seen as the best model for the English language until the appearance of the Oxford English Dictionary at the end of the 19th Century (*ibid.*). Thus, Johnson's systematic technique ensured those living in the 18th century and beyond would have no doubts concerning their linguistic usage.

To conclude, the 18th century was a period of 'linguistic insecurity...[and] linguistic conservatism': there was a strong movement that believed the language was in need of improvements as it had 'decayed from an earlier, better state' (Arnovick & Brinton 2006: 359). Historically, the 18th century was the Age of Reason, of rationalist philosophies and 'Cartesian logic', and thus, many believed the language ought to be 'logical, orderly and symmetrical' as well (*ibid.*). It can be seen that the rise in population, and therefore 'growth in the middle class and [increased] social mobility', played a very important role in the emergence of prescriptivist attitudes in the late 17th and 18th centuries (*ibid.* p.358). It was decided that the new Gentry class needed guidance concerning all aspects

of their behaviour: these etiquette books launched the relentless attempts to develop an English version of the French language Academy (Chubarov 2011). Researchers have often suggested another reason for emerging pedantry in these centuries: many of the upper class was concerned for their own positions, with the influx of the middle class, the elite felt 'their position and authority eroding' (Arnovick & Brinton 2006: 358). Consequently, in order to maintain a social distance, they were warned by linguists against the 'contamination of 'polite' language by the lower classes' (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, the efforts of the linguists came to nothing; therefore, a search began for the best example of the 'King's English'. Despite examining both the speech of the court, following assumption that the upper classes held the key to a more prestigious form of the language, as well as the variations of the Bible that had been published at the time, it was decided the dictionary was the paradigm of the English language (Chubarov 2011). Nevertheless, only one dictionary would do, and that was Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, produced in 1754, that was held in greatest esteem and believed to be the best model for the English language at that point in time. It was this body of work, so systematically constructed and thoroughly cited, that the people of England turned to for decades to come (*ibid.*).

References

- Arnovick, L. and Brinton, L. (2006) *The English Language – A Linguistic History*. Ontario: Oxford University Press
- Baugh, A.C and Cable, T. (2002) 5th edn. *A History of the English Language*. London: Routledge
- Crystal, D. (2005) *The Stories of English*. London: Penguin
- Chubarov, A. (2011) *The Rise of Prescriptivism*. Lecture delivered for module 291ENL on 19 January 2011 at Coventry University.
- Klein, L. (1995) 'Politeness of Plebes' In *The Consumption of Culture, 1600-1800*. ed. by Bermingham, A. and Brewer, J. London: Palgrave
- Klein, L. (1994) *Shaftsbury and the Culture of Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Leith, D. (1997) *Social History of English*. London: Palgrave
- Price, R. (2008) *The History of Dictionaries*. Lecture delivered for 'English Language' on 9 December 2008 at Farnham College.