

The Essence of the Ink-Horn Controversy

Before it is possible to begin to understand why the ink-horn controversy took place, a little of the history of the English language must first be understood. Throughout the history of English, vocabulary from other countries has been a source of borrowing (Kemmer 2010). During the Middle English period (1100-1500AD) England was a triglossic nation; Latin was the language of the church and scholarship, French was fashionable for the higher classes and the language of administration, while English remained the native tongue and was considered 'low level' (Chubarov 2011a). During this period there was also a wide range of dialects, and a variety of shapes a single word could take, for example knight could read: 'knighte', 'knyghte', 'knyht', 'knith', 'cnipte' (Chubarov 2011b). As a result of this variation it was easy to be misunderstood. Consequently, the government created a chancery standard, for use in official domains, to eliminate ambiguity. Holmes (2008:225) argues that for language change to take place, the target language must have some prestige attached to it; the chancery standard was adapted from the South-Eastern dialect as this dialect was considered to be elegant and polished (Chubarov 2011c). The power triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London, meant that this geographical region was also a political centre and an area of power and scholarship (Chubarov 2011d).

During the Middle English period, a standard was beginning to emerge and the foundation of Standard English had materialized by 1500; however, there was still a great deal of variation (Chubarov 2011e). Nonetheless, the notions of 'correct' and 'incorrect' language began to develop and confusion between variant forms began to decrease (Crystal 2004:285). During the 1500's the first legal and published Bibles, translated into English from Latin, started to circulate the nation. This, along with chancery standard and the introduction of Caxton's printing press (1476) all helped to standardise the English language. With this in mind, in a period of great language change and development, it is possible to consider why some people may have been perturbed by the introduction of new and foreign terms. This could have propelled the emerging standard of the English language into a state of turmoil once more.

The debate that the influx of foreign words caused was later named the 'ink-horn controversy'. This is because ink-horn terms often derived from the classical languages such as Greek or Latin and were named ink-horn terms as they were longer than their English counter parts. Consequently, these terms used up more ink from the ink-horn where the quill ink was stored (Chubarov 2011f). As a result of their foreign origin many people found these terms alien to their native tongue and sought to defend the English language before it got overwhelmed by "immigrant words" (Bragg 2003:124). However, some welcomed the new terms and those who used ink-horn terms enthusiastically were often described as 'smelling of the ink-horn' (Crystal 2004:292).

It is difficult to define two points in time when the ink-horn controversy started and subsequently finished; this is because language takes time to change and develop. It is suggested that the ink-horn controversy took place during the Early Modern English period, around 1600, in a time called the Renaissance (Crystal 2004:285). It is argued that the controversy occurred during this time as a result of the rapid expansion of the English vocabulary, change in attitude toward language and the emergence of prescriptivism (Crystal 2004:285-286).

During the Renaissance period, the English language of Germanic origins was thought of as the language of the lower classes. Crystal (2004:287-288) explains that the English language was associated with simplicity and was thought of as rude; while the Romance languages, such as French and Latin, were described as 'fayr'. It was felt by some that

the English language would be improved if it included properties of the Romance languages (Crystal 2004:288). It was considered that the inclusion of high-style ink-horn terms within the vocabulary would create a more erudite and desirable language (Blank 2006:224-226).

During the Renaissance period many scholars rediscovered their interest in studying classical languages such as Greek and Latin (Chubarov 2011g). Crystal (2002:209) notes that there was also a renewed interest in classical literatures during this time, along with an inclination for furthering knowledge in the fields of science and medicine. Bragg (2003: 121) adds that the Renaissance period also observed a new intellectual interest in astronomy. However, there were no ways of describing the new concepts, philosophical notions or commodities, some of which were imported from overseas, thus words were borrowed from other languages to fulfil this function (Crystal 2002:209-210). Smith (2006:120) argues that languages advance because the language has to cope with fulfilling more functions; this certainly seems to be the case in the Renaissance period. It seems almost natural that words from Latin and Greek were increasingly sought and readily adapted to express the modern notions that appeared around the sixteenth century (Crystal 2002:209-210; Crystal 2004: 288-289). This is because scholars considered Latin as a language of classical thought and science and it was also the lingua franca between the English and the European scholars (Bragg 2003:120).

Pursuits of the mind seemed only to be available to the upper echelons of society, as were the Latin words that communicated them. Blank (2006:222-223) argues that the introduction of words from the classical languages excluded common people as they did not have knowledge of Latin. An understanding of the Latin language was often necessary to infer the meaning of the new or re-introduced terms; as a result common people were left ignorant. Van Gelderen (2006:179) argues that "vocabulary is an important marker of social class"; with this in mind, it must be questioned why a controversy occurred between scholars regarding 'ink-horn terms', if by using them it meant that they could be distinguished as 'an educated elite' (Blank 2006:224).

Crystal (2004:292) suggests that some people disliked the influx of ink-horn terms because of their foreign nature. Crystal (2002:210) also purports that the entry of foreign vocabulary caused controversy as the terms were obscure and they obstructed the development of the native language. John Cheke (1557 cited in Blank 2006:229), a classical scholar and prevalent figure in the ink-horn debate, described older language as unmixed and 'vnmangeled' in comparison to Early Modern English language. Cheke, along with other aficionados of the English past, began to rediscover the English language's Anglo-Saxon roots in search of authentic English words to replace the recent Latin introductions (Blank 2006:228-229). The Anglo-Saxon roots also became associated with England's national heritage (Blank 2006:229). However, Crystal (2004:292) argues that the purity of the English language is a myth, as the foundation of this essay demonstrates, but understands that "it plays an important part in forming social attitudes".

The diversity of the English language, with the increasing amount of neologisms, led Alexander Gill, a grammarian, to propose that "Englishmen [were] not speaking English and [were] not understood by English ears" (1619 cited in Blank 2006:213-214). A letter published by Thomas Wilson, who attacked those who used ink-horn terms to an excessive degree, supports Gill and illustrates how the introduction of words from the classical languages caused the native English language to seem almost alien to an indigenous speaker (Barber 1976:56-57). An example of the letter follows below:

"Pondering expending [weighing], and reuoluting [revolving] with my self your ingent [enormous] affabilitie, and ingenious capacitee, for mundane affaires: I cannot but celebrate and extolle your magnificall dexteritee, above all other."

(Cited in Chubarov 2011f)

However, Wilson does not condemn the use of all Latin borrowings. He proposed that some learned borrowings were acceptable if they helped to improve the English vocabulary (Barber 1976:58-59). Many Latin words were used in the fields of medicine and science; a numerous amount of these can still be heard within the language of the twenty-first century, for example *larynx*, *pancreas*, and *tibia* (Chubarov 2011h).

Crystal (2004:291) argues that it may not simply be the borrowing of vocabulary that was condemned, but the quantity and rate at which words were being consumed that caused the opposition. Van Gelderen (2006:176) suggests that an estimated twenty-seven thousand new words entered the English language between 1500 and 1600 AD. However, this is arguable as Blank (2006:222) asserts that it was ten-thousand to twenty-five thousand words that entered the English language. Blank (2006:222) goes on to propose that some words were borrowed; however, some were invented by writers, including Shakespeare (Bragg 2003:148), who were trying to enhance the language. It must be noted that during this period it was not just whole words that were borrowed; some English words became attached to loan words. This was done through the use of prefixes, suffixes and compounding. The properties of some words also changed and moved from being nouns to verbs (Bragg 2003:128; Van Gelderen 2006:178). Crystal (2004:292) argues that because of the high volume of borrowed words being introduced the language began to seem obscure to native speakers.

It seems that the amount of words and their foreign nature were the mutual causes for the ink-horn controversy. Some people felt that the Germanic word stock was at risk so attempted to use Old English terms instead of the classical borrowings (Blank 2006:228). Others chose to use the neologisms in a bid for new learning and to promote the development of the English vocabulary (Crystal 2002:212). Richard Mulcaster, a prominent figure in the ink-horn debate, considered the notion of using both the Germanic English language and the new classical borrowings simultaneously (Bragg 2003:128). Mulcaster expressed that he recognised the need for Latin as this was the dominant language for communication with European scholars; however, he also felt that English should be acknowledged and developed alongside the classical languages (Van Gelderen 2006:176).

Echoes of the ink-horn controversy can still be observed in modern society: The Plain English campaign mirrors some of the notions of the ink-horn controversy. The Plain English Campaign (2011) posits that many documents, reports and publications are written in 'gobbledygook', often derived from French or Latin, and this can frequently be misinterpreted by some readers who do not have the relevant knowledge to understand it. The campaign aims to "[present] information so that in a single reading, the intended audience can read, understand and act upon it". The Plain English Campaign (2011) states that: "Plain English means writing with the audience in mind and presenting information clearly and accurately". This mirrors some of the arguments within the ink-horn controversy and shows the effect that this period of time had on the English language of today.

In conclusion, this essay has shown that the Early Modern English period was a significant time for language change and growth. It has been argued that the reasons why the ink-horn controversy took place were because people had differing opinions of how the English language should be. Some people were purists who protested against the influx of classical borrowings, while others embraced the new language in a bid for new learning (Crystal 2002:210-212). Regardless of why the ink-horn controversy took place, and the debate that loan words continue to cause today, it is possible to see that as a result of the English Language borrowing throughout history, and using both the loan words and Germanic English stock concurrently, the English language has been afforded great scope for stylistic variation (Crystal 2004:289). Bragg (2003:128) posits that because of England's borrowing tradition and the developments of vocabulary during Renaissance England, the English language was able to mature and grow into a world language.

References

- Barber, C. L. (1976) *Early Modern English*. Edinburgh: André Deutsch Limited
- Blank, P. (2006) 'The Babel of Renaissance English.' In *The Oxford History of English*. ed. by Muggleston, L. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Bragg, M. (2003). *The Adventure of English*. London: Hodder and Straughton
- Chubarov, A. (2011a) *French vs English* [Online] Available from <http://1066andallthat.com/english_middle/french_vs_english_03.asp> [27 January 2011]
- Chubarov, A. (2011b) *Emerging Standard* [Online] Available from <http://1066andallthat.com/english_middle/standard_01.asp> [27 January 2011]
- Chubarov, A. (2011c) *Organic Rise of Standard* [Online] Available from <http://1066andallthat.com/english_middle/standard_02.asp> [27 January 2011]
- Chubarov, A. (2011d) *The Role of Chancery Standard* [Online] Available from <http://1066andallthat.com/english_middle/standard_04.asp> [27 January 2011]
- Chubarov, A. (2011e) *The Basis of Standard English* [Online] Available from <http://1066andallthat.com/english_middle/standard_06.asp> [27 January 2011]
- Chubarov, A. (2011f) *Loan Word Antipathy* [Online] Available from <http://1066andallthat.com/english_modern/inkhorn_05.asp> [27 January 2011]
- Chubarov, A. (2011g) *Expansion of English Vocabulary* [Online] Available from <http://1066andallthat.com/english_modern/inkhorn_03.asp> [27 January 2011]
- Chubarov, A. (2011h) *Latin as a Dominant Source of Borrowing* [Online] Available from < http://1066andallthat.com/english_modern/inkhorn_04.asp> [27 January 2011]
- Crystal, D. (2002) *The English Language 2nd edn*. London: Penguin Books Ltd
- Crystal, D. (2004) *The Stories of English*. London: Penguin Books Ltd
- Holmes, J. (2008) *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics 3rd edn*. England: Pearson Education Limited
- Kemmer, S. (2010) *Loanwords: Major Periods of Borrowing in the History of English* [Online] Available from <<http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~kemmer/Words/loanwords.html>> [27 January 2011]
- Plain English Campaign. (2011) *Drafting in Plain English* [Online] Available from <<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/specialist-areas/legal/drafting-in-plain-english.html>> [10 February 2011]
- Smith, J.J. (2006) 'From Middle to Early Modern English.' In *The Oxford History of English*. ed. by Muggleston, L. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Van Gelderen, E. (2006) *A History of the English Language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company