Language and the Dictionary

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History of Information

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Where We Are
Rise of the vernacular

The creation of the modern dictionary

The circles of knowledge
Rise of the Vernacular
The stirrings of English

English diglossia/triglossia in the Middle English period

- English, the spoken vernacular
- French used by nobility, in courts.
- Latin used for religion, scholarship.
The creolization of English

Whan that April with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath Perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(so priketh hem nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages...
Out of the shadow of Latin

Emergence of standard dialects
   (London English, Parisian French, Tuscan Italian)
Printing & Literacy
The Reformation
Proto-nationalism
The Emergence of the Vernacular

The decline of Latin

1661 Boyle publishes New Experiments Physico-Mechanical in English, followed by The Sceptical Chymist in 1661 later arranges for Latin translations of works to counter piracy

Pct of Latin titles in German-speaking world:

- 1650: 67%
- 1700: 38%
- 1750: 28%
- 1800: 4%
The Emergence of the Vernacular

Concerns that the vernacular (i.e., ordinary spoken) language is not an adequate vehicle for philosophy, history, etc.

Besyde Latyne, our langage is imperfite, 
Quhilk in sum part, is the cause and the wyte [fault], 
Quhy that Virgillis vers, the ornate bewte 
In till our toung, may not obseruit be 
For that bene Latyne wordes, mony ane 
That in our leid ganand [suitable language], translation has nane....

Gawin Douglas, 1553

Shall English be so poore, and rudely-base 
As not be able (through mere penury) 
To tell what French hath said with gallant grace, 
And most tongues else of less facunditie?

John Davies, 1618
"Inkhorn words" -- learned words coined from Greek or Latin: absurdity, dismiss, celebrate, encyclopedia, habitual, ingenious

Among all other lessons this should first be learned, that wee never affect any strange ynkehorne termes, but to speake as is commonly received: neither seeking to be over fine or yet living over-carelesse, using our speeche as most men doe, and ordering our wittes as the fewest have done. Thomas Wilson, *Arte of Rhetorique*, 1553
Robert Cawdrey, Table Alphabeticall, 1604:

Some men seek so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mothers language, so that if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell, or understand what they say, and yet these fine English Clearks, will say they speak in their mother tongue...Also, some far journied gentlemen, at their returne home, like as they love to go in forraine apparrell, so they will poudre their talke with over-sea language....
The Composition of Mod. English

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Anglo-Saxon

Old Norse

French

New Latin (inkhorn)
The Creation of the Modern Dictionary
Early dictionaries are usually bilingual (e.g., Latin-Cornish), organized thematically.

First monolingual dictionaries appear in early c. 17. with Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabetical of Hard Usual English Words*, 1604 ("for the benefit and helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or other unskillful persons")
The desire for "illustration" in France

1530: Founding of Collège de France, with French admitted as language of higher education
1539: Ordonnonces de Villers-Cotteret (1539) establish use of French in law courts
Percentage of book titles published in Paris in French:

- 1501 10%
- 1528 14%
- 1549 21%
- 1575 55%

Would to God that some noble heart could employ himself in setting out rules for our French language... If it is not given rules, we will find that every fifty years the French language will have been changed and perverted in very large measure. G. Tory, 1529
Formation of the Académie Française

Modeled on the accademia della Crusca, Florence (1583), which published 1st dict. In 1612
Formed in 1635 by Cardinal Richlieu; 40 members ("les immortels")
1st ed. of dictionary appears in 1694 (6 or 7 others since then).
Model for other language academies in Sweden, Spain, Romania, Portugal, Russia, etc.
"Sixty years ago the only people who bought books were scholars, but today there is hardly a woman with some claim to education who does not read. Readers are to be found in every class, both in the towns and the country, even the common soldiers... take out books from the lending libraries." Deutsches Museum, 1780

"I cannot help observing that the sale of books in general has increase prodigiously within the last twenty years. The poorer sort of farmers who before that period spent their winter evenings in relating stories of witches, ghosts, hobgoblins, etc. now shorten the winter nights by hearing their sons and daughters read tales, romances, etc. and on entering their homes you may see Tom Jones, Roderick Random, and other entertaining books stuck up on their bacon-racks." James Lackington, 1783
"Rank and privilege" in theory set aside, and discourse becomes ostensibly impersonal:

"...when any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or emnity with the author, I must depart from this situation; and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being and my peculiar circumstances." David Hume, 1757

Cf modern sport-talk radio...
"It is certainly right and prudent to consult the public opinion. ... If the public opinion did not happen to square with mine; if, after pointing out to them the danger, they did not see it in the same light with me, or if they conceived that another remedy was preferable to mine, I should consider it as my due to my king, due to my Country, due to my honour to retire ... but one thing is clear, that I ought to give the public the means of forming an opinion." Charles James Fox, 1792
[Britain] has become a nation of readers. --Samuel Johnson, 1781

The newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life…creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. --Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. 
Print, the Public, and Linguistic Anxiety

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The problem of the public sphere:
How to coordinate public opinion via an impersonal print discourse between people who are anonymous to one another, in the absence of context…
The Growing Sense of Crisis

John Dryden (1693): "we have yet no prosodia, not so much as a tolerable dictionary, or a grammar, so that our language is in a manner barbarous.

William Warburton (1747): the English language is "destitute of a Test or Standard to apply to, in cases of doubt or difficulty.... For we have neither Grammar nor Dictionary, neither Chart nor Compass, to guide us through this wide sea of Words."
The Growing Sense of Crisis

Continuing desire to fix ("ascertain") the language:

"Suffer not our Shakespear, and our Milton, to become two or three centuries hence what Chaucer is at present, the study only of a few poring antiquarians, and in an age or two more the vitcims of bookworms." Thomas Sheridan

Short is the date, alas! of modern rhymes,  
And 'tis but just to let them live betimes.  
No longer now that Golden Age appears,  
When partiarch wits survived a thousand years:  
Now length of fame (our second life) is lost,  
And bare threescore is all ev'n that can boast:  
Our sons their fathers' failing language see,  
And such as Chaucer is shall Dryden be.  
Cf Alexander Pope, "Essay on Criticism"
An academy to "ascertain" the language?

1712: Swift writes "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue in a Letter to Lord Harley

My Lord; I do here in the Name of all the Learned and Polite Persons of the Nation, complain to your Lordship, as First Minister, the our Language is extremely imperfect; that its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions; and 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. ..
The Rejection of an Academy

If an academy should be established for the cultivation of our stile, which I, who can never wish to see dependance multiplied, hope the spirit of English liberty will hinder or destroy...

Johnson, Preface to the Dictionary

As to a publick academy... I think it not only unsuitable to the genius of a free nation, but in itself ill calculated to reform and fix a language. We need make no doubt but that the best forms of speech will, in time, establish themselves by their own superior excellence...

Joseph Priestly, Rudiments of Grammar, 1761

Contrast the role of the state in French....
The COMPLETE English Dictionary, explaining most of the HARD WORDS which are found in the BEST ENGLISH WRITERS.

By a Lover of Good English and Common Sense.

N. B. The AUTHOR assures you, he thinks this is the best English DICTIONARY in the world.
Johnson to the Rescue!

1746: J. approached by "conger" of booksellers to make dict. for 1500 guineas
Johnson installs himself and his amanuenses in Gough Square to begin work on the Dictionary
1747: The "Plan of an English Dictionary" appears
1755: Appearance of j' Dictionary
Some Johnsonian Definitions

Excise: A hateful tax levied upon commodities, and adjudged not by the common judges of property, but wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid.

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.
The Success of the Dictionary

Talk of war with a Briton, he’ll boldly advance,
That one English soldier will beat ten of France,
Would we alter the boast from the sword to the pen,
Our odds are still greater, still greater our men . . .
First Shakspeare and Milton, like Gods in the fight,
Have put their whole drama and epick to flight...
And Johnson, well-arm'd like a hero of yore,
Has beat forty French, and will beat forty more!"

David Garrick
The Success of the Dictionary

The English Dictionary appeared; and, as the weight of truth and reason is irresistible, its authority has nearly fixed the external form of our language; and from its decisions few appeals have yet been made. Robert Nares, 1782

*Did the Dictionary really fix the language?*

Johnson condemns words like *bully, coax, and job.*
The Persistence of Form

The dictionary: the most conservative and conventionalized of literary genres.

Cf Adam Makkai: "Nothing significantly new has happened in lexicography since the first printed dictionaries after Gutenberg invented the printing of books."
Features of Johnson's Dictionary

Meanings illustrated by citations from English writers: "The book written by books"
The Didactic Uselessness of Definitions

Weakness of genus-differential definitions

disappointed MW: defeated in expectation or hope
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Weakness of genus-differentia definitions

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**disappointment** is when you expect something to happen
The Didactic Uselessness of Definitions

Weakness of genus-differentia definitions

**disappointed** *MW*: defeated in expectation or hope

**disappointment** is when you expect something to happen
And you want it to happen
The Didactic Uselessness of Definitions

Weakness of genus-differentia definitions

**Disappointed** MW: defeated in expectation or hope

**disappointment** is when you expect something to happen
And you want it to happen
And when the time comes for it to happen
The Didactic Uselessness of Definitions

Weakness of genus-differentia definitions

**disappointed** *MW*: defeated in expectation or hope

**disappointment** is when you expect something to happen
And you want it to happen
And when the time comes for it to happen
It doesn’t happen
The Didactic Uselessness of Definitions

Weakness of genus-differentia definitions

**Disappointed** MW: defeated in expectation or hope

**disappointment** is when you expect something to happen
And you want it to happen
And when the time comes for it to happen
It doesn’t happen
And you feel bad
The Methodology of Lexicography

Method for isolation & circumscription of relevant precedents (identification of “the language” in terms of public discourse)

Method for isolating and abstracting contributions of individual words to interpretation, independent of both linguistic and extralinguistic contexts

Method of reducing use of word to a "mechanical" rule that determines correct application of word.
The Symbolic Function of the Dictionary
The Americanization of the Dictionary

You have corrected the dangerous doctrines of European powers, correct now the languages you have imported... The American language will thus be as distinct as the government, free from all the follies of unphilosophical fashion, and resting upon truth as its only regulator. William Thornton, 1793.

From the changes in civil policy, manners, arts of life, and other circumstances attending the settlement of English colonies in America, most of the language of heraldry, hawking, hunting, and especially that of the old feudal and hierarchical establishments of England will become utterly extinct in this country; much of it already forms part of the neglected rubbish of antiquity. Noah Webster, 1806
Cf Webster’s Spelling reforms: *honor*, *theater*, etc., but also *tung*, *iz*...

"A capital advantage of this [spelling] reform in these States would be, that it would make a difference between the English orthography and the American.... I am confident that such an event is an object of vast political consequence."
Development of the Dictionary

1857-1928: Preparation of the OED; historical record of the entire language...

James Murray
We could scarcely have a lesson on the growth of our English tongue, we could scarcely follow upon one of its significant words, without having unawares a lesson in English history as well, without not merely falling upon some curious fact illustrative of our national life, but learning also how the great heart which is beating at the centre of that life, was being gradually shaped and moulded.

Richard Chevenix Trench
[The dictionary] is the national key to human knowledge. … It behooves all those who are concerned in the education of the young to place this book on the same plane as the churchmen of old placed the English Bible. The dictionary should be placed on a lectern in every school throughout the land. Frank Vizetelly, 1898
Readings for 2/28


Fisher, George, acceptant. 1748. The American Instructor: or, Young Man’s Best Companion …. Philadelphia.

Read: the Title Page and “Advice to a Young Tradesman, Written By an Old One” (pp 375-377).