

Gulliver's travels and the refinement of language and society



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Of all the institutions satirized in Jonathon Swift's "Gulliver's Travels," one that has perhaps been less scrutinized is the destruction of the English language. Throughout the travels, language is the key obstacle in Gulliver's "understanding" of various cultures. Only in book four, however, is the role of language central to Swift's satiric meaning. His condemnation of English Society, is more explicitly an indictment of those that intend to corrupt the English language by promoting lies, change and euphemisms. According to Swift, the English language is extremely flawed. His reasoning has to do with change, noting that those who attempt to polish and refine it are hastening its corruption. Swift fears that as the language continues to drift from the English of the past, "its lessons, its wisdom, are hidden behind the opaque surface of a language that simultaneously is and is not ours" (Montag 114). As the language of the future is altered, the past will soon become unintelligible. The result is a society with an uncertain history, destined for political decline. Rather than merely point out the flaws of the English language and its handling, Swift offers a solution. He suggests that there be created a Standardized form of the English language. One that would incorporate the English of the past with that of the present. The result, would be "improved language and discourse [that] would uncover the roots of many present evils and allow them to be dug out" (Kelly 20). In book 4 of Gulliver's Travels, the language of the Houyhnhnms seems in every way to embody Swift's ideal of the perfect language. The Houyhnhnm language, although seeming rather ridiculous to Humans, is perfect, simple in meaning, and entirely unchanged. They use no Euphemisms and tell things the way they are in truth, for they know no alternative. While the Houyhnhnms are governed by reason and practicality, their language is "primitive only in the <https://assignbuster.com/gullivers-travels-and-the-refinement-of-language-and-society/>

sense that it is pure and uncorrupted. It can do nothing other than communicate what is" (Montag 138). Gulliver notes at one point that their " words might with little pains be resolved into a language more easily than the Chinese" (244). Not Surprisingly, Swift viewed the Chinese language as one resistant to linguistic change. Regardless of the differences in speech among people from different regions in China, the written characters are understood by everyone (Kelly 74). The Houyhnhnm language, therefore, like Chinese, is pure and noble-Swift's attributes to the " perfect language." Before exploring this topic any further, it is necessary to understand more about the character of Lemuel Gulliver. As the medium through which Swift's satire is brought to life, Gulliver is not the typical hero of most English Novels of the eighteenth century. In fact, Gulliver is not heroic at all. While not a fool, his character is defined by practicality. Although described to the last detail in book one, he seems to lack certain humanistic qualities, such as depth of imagination, passion and feeling. What Gulliver does possess, though, is an innate ability to quickly learn the languages of the cultures he encounters on his voyages. Always his primary objective, his desire to learn the language is spurred by different motivations in each of the lands he encounters. In Lilliput, learning the language means that he would have the ability to beg for his freedom: " The first words I learnt, were to express my desire, that he would please to give me my liberty (41)." In Brobdingnag, however, it seems that Gulliver learned the language by force. While Glumdalclitch helped him to polish his skills, much of Gulliver's learning was brought about while being forced to converse with strangers while on display. In Houyhnhnms land, however, Gulliver is inclined to learn the language simply to communicate with the Houyhnhnms, and to tell them of

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the "wonders" of England. Interestingly, it took Gulliver ten weeks to understand the language modestly, and only after three months could he give "some tolerable answers." This is in stark contrast to the length of his schooling in Lilliput and Brobdingnag, where it took him approximately three weeks and less than two months, respectively. Swift, therefore, draws obvious parallels between the refinement of a society and the complexity of the language. The importance of language to Swift's meaning, however, can be understood best by close examination of Gulliver's experiences with the Houyhnhnms. Upon arriving in Houyhnhnms land, Gulliver is a bit shaken. His relations to mankind were dwindling, as evidenced by the deterioration of his relations with his crew. He is, however, still swelled with English pride. He first encountered some Yahoos, human-like creatures who seem to represent the savage nature of humanity. To emphasize their savageness, the Yahoos are given no language by Swift, only at times howling and roaring like beasts. Upon meeting the Houyhnhnm in the field, however, Gulliver found comfort in noticing that the horse-like creature "was speaking to himself in a language of his own" (241). Due to their apparent ability to converse with each other and rationalize, Gulliver concludes that the Houyhnhnms are intelligent animals and entirely rational. What is interesting here is Gulliver's ability to look beyond the fact that the Houyhnhnms were horses. He sees them as rational creatures due to the presence of their language and their apparent intelligence. As before mentioned, Gulliver desired to learn the Houyhnhnm language primarily to be able to share with the Houyhnhnms the "wonders" of his homeland. At this point, Gulliver still felt that the English language and culture was superior, but it seems as though he is beginning to question his beliefs. When told that the word Houyhnhnm signified "the

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perfection of nature," Gulliver acts very surprised and becomes slightly defensive, saying that he will soon share with his master the marvels of his culture. Yet it was ultimately his desire to tell of England's "wonders" that resulted in his downfall. As Gulliver begins his discourse, he quickly comes to realize the corruption that pervades England. Swift means to show, however, that the degradation of English Society goes hand in hand with the corruption of language. Swift's satire is driven by Gulliver's need to describe the most immoral aspects of human nature (lust, malice, envy, etc.) all in the name of England's greatness. Gulliver then seems to realize the ridiculous nature of his words, and later exclaims the difficulty of translating his master's noble words into "our barbarous English" (263). Yet Gulliver goes on to describe English culture in an exaggerated, impetuous manner, with every "wonder" he mentions being more of a vice than a virtue. Swift has Gulliver utilize the lowest forms of the language to discuss the lowest forms of the culture: War, politics, power, and law to name a few. On Government, Gulliver's description of the Chief Minister of State is that of a person able to "excel in the three principal ingredients, of insolence, lying and bribery" (275). Most interesting, however, is Gulliver's description of the workings of attorneys and law, and Swift's obvious disdain of their use of language. According to Ann Cline Kelly, Swift's dislike of lawyers is rooted in their failure to "emphasize common truths" in their writing. They utilize the language "not to communicate comfort and joy to their fellows but to satisfy some patron or boss who will pay them for distorting facts" (Kelly 70). By perpetuating the falsehoods that Swift despised, lawyers were to him inducers of society's downfall. As Gulliver says, lawyers have "wholly confounded the very essence of truth and falsehood, of right and wrong," by <https://assignbuster.com/gullivers-travels-and-the-refinement-of-language-and-society/>

using “ jargon of their own, that no other mortal can understand” (269). After telling his master about humankind, Gulliver comes to the realization that the Houyhnhnms are superior beings. He says, “ the many virtues of those excellent quadrupeds placed in opposite view to human corruptions, had so far opened my eyes and enlarged my understanding” (277). It is here that Gulliver decides to live his life with these “ superior” beings, never to return to mankind. Gulliver admits, however to concealing many particulars, often “ saying the thing that was not” with the intent of favouring the account of mankind. Upon learning of humankind, Gulliver’s master notices a strong parallel to the savage Yahoos of his country. This observance, coupled with the realization that Gulliver often “ says the thing that is not,” leads to Gulliver’s ultimate deportation from the island. Although Gulliver felt and acted like a Houyhnhnm, he could not escape mankind’s natural tendency toward falsehood. It wasn’t until Gulliver posed a serious threat to their language (and therefore well-being) by lying, that the Houyhnhnms decided that he must leave. Swift’s point is emphasized as Gulliver returns home in the final chapter, as Gulliver cannot even bear the sight of his own Yahoo-like wife and children: “ The sight of them filled me only with hatred, disgust, and contempt” (310-11). Rather than converse with his family in “ barbarous English,” Gulliver buys two horses and communicates with them four hours each day in the language of the Houyhnhnms. Gulliver’s wish in the final chapter that all travelers take an oath to print their adventures in truth to their best knowledge, is akin to Swift’s strict belief that the English written word be completely truthful, and exact, while adhering to a noble standard.