

The development of johnson's dictionary

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The Development of Johnson's Dictionary and its Consequences In 1755

Samuel Johnson's A Dictionary of the English Language (DEL) was published and with it a change in language was brought about. It contained 40,000 entries, each with etymology, pronunciation keys, definitions and example quotes to demonstrate the word in use. All of this was compiled by one man over seven years, a feat in itself.

Although not the first ever dictionary; Bailey released the Universal Etymological English Dictionary in 1721 and Catered published the first dictionary of arid words in 1604, it soon became the arbitrator on English language (Willingly, 1994). This paper will look at why The Dictionary was developed, focusing upon social issues regarding language during this period; Johnson's personal motivation in writing The Dictionary; the authors he chose to use as sources in his writing and the words that Johnson thought to be vulgar.

It will then further look at the consequences The Dictionary had upon language at that time and in future years. Towards the end of the seventeenth century there was a feeling of unease about the direction that the English language was moving. The lack of a standard for people to adhere to was thought to have caused a corruption in the language and that for some time it had been steadily going down (Bough, 1993).

It was felt that there was a need to fix the language, to stabilize it and to create a form that would in some sense be permanent which Swift, an active commentator on the English language, further agreed with in his Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue. Here he stated

that the English tongue needed the most improvement, that the corruptions that had appeared in our language had not equaled its refinements. This prescriptive approach was centered on one word: 'ascertainment', which was defined by Dry Johnson as 'a settled rule; an established standard' (DEL, 1773).

This demonstrates how in some ways the dictionary was required to act as an authority on language to avoid further decay. The decay and corruptions that were causing societal unease were due to the English language altering too fast. Crystal (2002) discusses how there was no order to the language and words that seemed to be barbarous and unrefined were slipping into everyday speech. Writers and poets were creating new contractions and abbreviations and there appeared to be no order in the way that Elizabethan dramatists creatively used language.

Alongside this, McKnight (1956) also expresses the new ways that people were spelling in the way that they spoke, adding in extra letters, and having no standard form of punctuation or spelling. In a time when foreign words were uncontrollably coming into the English language, it is not hard to understand where the prescriptive approach came from. Swift wished to clean up the language and he was not alone in this desire; Defoe, Pope, Dryden and other men of many political and literary persuasions cried out for some form of authority to fix the language (Hydride, 1988).

They wished for an end to the downward spiral in language. As a look at Tort solutions to control language straddles a standard; although it may possibly be due to the fact that they were most concerned about their own work not being

understood by future generations more than wishing to improve the English language. As a result of this chaos surrounding English language, several ideas came to the forefront to try and control it before The Dictionary was finally decided upon.

In 1662 The Royal Society was founded and they sought to have the language 'improved' with one of their major debates being whether the English language should be placed into the hands of an Academy. In Italy, the Academia Della Crusca was formed in around 1582 and they produced their first dictionary in 1612 with the hope of purifying the Italian language, this was shortly followed by the French whose Academy also produced a dictionary to cleanse the language. Bough (1993) discusses how these two Academies placed much pressure upon England to establish a standard and were a vital incentive to England establishing its own academy.

Blake (1996) further agrees that the language needed to be purified and refined, its defects removed. Both of these views and the pressure from abroad gave rise to Swifts Proposal for an Academy in 1712 which stated that the Persons who are undertaking this Work, will have the Example of the French' (Crowley, 1991 : 37) to follow. Swift further contends within his Proposal that the Language is extremely imperfect, and that in order for it to be refined to a certain standard an academy should be in force to fix on rules' for the English people to follow.

How effective an Academy would have been cannot be commented upon as the idea never resulted in anything formal, despite it being heavily supported. Johnson plainly expressed his view on the idea in his Preface to the

Dictionary (1755) stating clearly that: Academies have been instituted, to guard the avenues of their languages, to retain fugitives, and repulse intruders; but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been in vain; sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraint.

He also comments further on the idea when voicing the principal English attitude towards an Academy wishing that the English spirit of liberty would hinder or destroy any attempt at controlling the language as it was their personal liberty in language at stake (Monsoons, 1755). Johnson appears to be demonstrating a descriptive view of language here through his comments that language cannot be controlled and that it is the right of the English people to regulate changes in their language. This directly contrasts some of his initial views on language when he decided upon writing the Dictionary.

Johnson's initial ideas were put forward under the title *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* which was dedicated to Lord Chesterfield (Leer, 2007). Within this Johnson talks of how language is a complex and changing system and he associates change with corruption and decay rather than something positive like growth and renewal (Hardy, 1979). This prescriptive view on language echoes throughout the plan for the dictionary as Johnson places himself in the role of a linguistic lawgiver (Hydrice, 1988) when he states that its great aim is to fix the English Language' (Monsoons ; Riving, 1823).

Although Johnson (1823) speaks in a highly prescriptive way when he shows how he wishes to preserve the purity and restrain meanly at our English's end, uttering that the punctuation of the English language should be fixed and a

standard established so that it will be unspoiled in future years, certain areas of The Plan show how he was willing to act in the role of a language innovator. Johnson understood how when foreign words come into our language some are naturalized, some incorporated and that some become aliens; that naturalization occurs after there has been 'an admission into natural speech' Monsoons & Riving, 1823: 5).

Being able to understand the movement of language allowed Johnson to select what should be included in The Dictionary so that it should 'not rely delight the critics but also 'instruct the learner' Monsoons ; Riving, 1823: 5). Within The Plan Johnson further talks of how changes in language are inevitable and that he will inform the reader on the gradual changes of the language' Monsoons & Riving, 1823: 26).

Wishing (2005) contends how Johnson was a highly prescriptive writer wishing to control language and eradicate any errors but when his plan is delved into it is possible to see how Johnson was trapped between the two opposing sides of language development. Johnson (1823) writes how he would include irregularities in speech as changes will always inform us in relation to language. He also discusses how language is the work of man and as such no permanence or stability could ever arise, it is a thing of motion.

This demonstrates how he may have wanted to fix the language and create a standard for people to adhere to but at the same time he knew that he could not 'embalm his language and secure it from corruption and decay Monsoons, 1979: 12). He had grasped that language would forever be changing and that no one, not even a lexicographer, could prevent or control

it. Although Johnson knew that he could not control language, through his choice of taxation and his definitions of words he tried to promote politeness, correctness and purity.

It appears that although he may have comprehended how language changes, his perceptiveness never truly left him as he attempted to exert some control over word usage through his definitions. He made various condemnations on words, declaring them 'low' or a 'can't' word. Gibbers (1986) talks of how Johnson used his definitions to control language and to exercise a positive effect on language and upon perusal of The Dictionary this view is clearly justified, particularly when looked at alongside The Preface.

Johnson states that 'Wild and barbarous Jargon' Monsoons & Riving, 1823: 31) has entered the language and that this fugitive can't, which is always in a state of increase or decay, cannot be regarded as any part of the durable materials of language' Monsoons & Riving, 1823: 58). Here, he clearly expresses his view on words that he felt were vulgar but what is most interesting is that the majority of words that he labeled in this way are now respectable words in present day English. Within Johnson's Dictionary (1755) he lists that Volunteering is a can't word, used by beggars and vagabonds.

This word has had a semantic shift; Johnson's Dictionary defined it as to go for a soldier' and today the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) now shows it to mean to act on or serving or offering one's service. It is now a word that has positive connotations. Further words that Johnson lists as low or can't include 'simpleton', touchy, 'Pat', 'cajole' and 'gambler'. All of these words

still carry the same meaning as they did in 1755 but Johnson attempts in some way to demonstrate that they are not acceptable in polite/proper language through his personal comment on them being low words.

Hydride (1987) discusses how Johnson saw that improper words were a lively and insistent presence in language but he still sought to encourage their suppression through his definitions within The Dictionary. This theme is further explored by Ellis (2005) who agrees that Johnson dismisses any words that he believed were can't in order to exercise some control over the development of the English language. Within present day English, the words Johnson was seeking to remove are no longer thought to be improper and would not be considered to be barbarous words.

Johnson may have attempted to eradicate them from the English language with his prescriptive definitions but he was unsuccessful in this area. Johnson also sought to promote what he saw as correct pronunciation of words during his writing of The Dictionary. He felt that some words 'require their accents should be settled, their sounds ascertained' (Monsoons, 1823: 10) and in order to achieve this he placed pronunciation keys against words and used specific citations to demonstrate the word in use.

Although Johnson claimed to have selected citations that represented all that was pleasing in English literature, they were only meant to offer readers an exemplary example (Willingly, 1994). It is apparent when looking through the authors that he cited that he was influenced by the standard that was becoming most acceptable: London English. By 1660, the basis of having London English as the standard had been widely accepted (Blake, 1996) and

by looking at the authors Johnson selected to use in his dictionary it is possible to see how he too agreed with this.

He most frequently cites Shakespeare, Milton and Dryden' (Lynch, 2003) with Shakespeare being quoted more than any other author (Crystal, 2001). All three of these authors come from Southern England: Shakespeare from Stratford upon Avon, Milton from London and Dryden from Impressionistic. By looking at where Johnson selected his quotations, you can see how he was again using his lexicographer powers to try and encourage what he thought should be Standard English.

He chose to only select quotes from what he thought was the classic period of English, going back no further than Sir Philip Sidney and coming forward no further than 1660 and he selected no writer who might exert a bad moral influence on his readers (Wan, 1974). Although one of the complaints on the decay of the English language during this period was that writers, poets and dramatists had no order to the creative way that they used language, Johnson still selected them to express the correctness of words and this helped in some ways to establish them as the principal writers of good literature.

The effect Johnson's choice of citations and quotes had, alongside the definitions and word selections, was that it regularised spelling and grammatical forms whilst at the same time coo Tyler Ana sanctioning pronunciations (Leer, 2 Alongside tens It also extended the vocabulary of everyday speech, with Johnson continually trying to remove slang and colloquial speech from the English Language. He was able to bring to the forefront the English words that he felt needed to be heard and this resulted

in a broadening of the language and in some ways his Dictionary became the authority of language use (Bough & Cable, 1993).

Johnson was able to create a definitive list of English words and one major consequence of this was that all later dictionaries can now be described as a development or rewriting of Johnson's. No one had ever before written such a comprehensive list which included all the etymology, definitions, pronunciations and citations and in some ways it 'did more than present a linguistic persona. It created the public idea of the dictionary as the arbiter of language use' (Leer, 2007: 168).

This helped to contribute to the standardization of language, it encouraged people to look at the politeness of words, to judge whether or not they were appropriate and placed much more emphasis on the spelling of words and their pronunciation (Blake, 1996). Johnson was able to achieve for England what had been done in Italy and France with their Academies but he did not need a collective to assist him and by doing this he was able to create his new idea of what a lexicographer's role is.

Johnson may have begun his journey in writing The Dictionary being highly prescriptive but through his writing he developed into a more descriptive lexicographer. He admits himself within The Preface that he originally thought that he could fix the English language, stop any alterations that time had allowed to change the language for the worse but after completing his work he realized that no one could stop language corrupting and changing; it was fluid and always shifting.

It could be said that through his writing of a word list he operated under new assumptions as he began to describe contemporary English (Gibbers, 1986) and this is what brought about his change in attitude. Johnson achieved his aim of writing for everyday people and although it is not without mistakes, he set up the groundwork for all future dictionaries.