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Chapter 7

The rise of prescriptive grammars on English in the 18th century

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1. Introduction

This chapter deals with the dramatic increase in the number of publications on English grammar in the second half of the 18th century in England. These texts have been discussed in connection with the process of language standardization since they propagate a normative, prescriptive view of language (cf., e.g., Milroy and Milroy 1991). The questions I will focus on are the following:

- Why is there an increase in the number of grammars of the English language from the middle of the 18th century onwards? and
- How are these texts to be understood in their socio-historical context?

One can of course ask ‘why should we care about prescriptive grammars?’, ‘why should we study them’ or ‘why should we ask the questions previously raised’? The answers to these questions are, of course, positive ones in that it makes a great deal of sense to study this era and these texts for the following reasons: (1) If we are dealing with sociolinguistics, we first of all have to study language in its context, and investigate the factors that might have influenced the creation of such texts. The social history of the time has to be taken into account: We profit from knowledge about the school situation, about the literary texts of the time, about earlier grammars, about the printing situation, etc. in order to develop an understanding of the meaning of the texts. I intend to point out a number of such socio-historical factors in this chapter. (2) The grammars of the 18th century are important with respect to many of the ideological ideas on language, that are still present in today’s discourse, and the process of language standardization, which, of course, did not end in the 18th century. Finally, (3) to understand today’s ongoing language processes better, it is important to embed our investigations in historical studies. Some have called this field ‘historical

sociolinguistics’ others have named it ‘socio-historical linguistics’, as reflected in the title of the online journal edited by Tiekens-Boon van Ostade in the Netherlands, that actually combines the two terms. I believe that we can gain much from such investigations, no matter what term we use.

This chapter is organized as follows: In section 2, I will give a brief historical sketch to contextualize the situation before the 18th century. In Section 3, I will describe the increase in the number of grammars of the English language in the 18th century in more detail and in Section 4 I will point to some characteristics of such grammars in order to demonstrate how these texts were constructed. Then I will proceed to answer the question ‘Why in the 18th century?’ and will illustrate my findings with examples from the grammars (Section 5). To conclude I will offer an analysis of a grammar from 1784 by a lesser known grammarian called John Fell, because he displays a surprisingly modern attitude to the study of the English language that might be unexpected for a prescriptive grammarian (Section 6).

2. Before the 18th century: A brief historical sketch

The situation of grammar writing from the renaissance until just prior to the 18th century can only be presented very briefly here. In general, we can say that, while there was a wealth of textual material in English, there was not yet what we would understand as a standardized system of orthography or an established version of English that was perceived as ‘standard English’. In addition, many scientific and scholarly texts were written in Latin rather than English, there was no official school system yet, nor was there a systematic teaching of the English language as such. Overall, we can say that, in comparison with the 18th century, there were only a number of treatises on the English language from 1580 onwards, some of which were still in Latin.

Examples of such 16th and 17th century grammars of the English language are the following:

| | | |
|------------------|------|--------------------------------------|
| William Bullokar | 1586 | <i>Pamphlet for Grammar</i> |
| Paul Greaves | 1594 | <i>Grammatica Anglicana</i> |
| Charles Butler | 1633 | <i>The English Grammar</i> |
| Ben Jonson | 1640 | <i>English Grammar</i> |
| John Wallis | 1653 | <i>Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae</i> |
| John Wharton | 1654 | <i>An English Grammar</i> |

For example, John Wallis' *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae*, which was written in Latin, was highly influential for the writers of the next century as well.

3. The increase in the number of grammars in the 18th century

As mentioned above, there is an enormous increase in grammar writing from the 1750s onwards. Ian Michael (1997: 41) reports for the last three decades of the 18th century that 99 new grammars were published during that time. If you count the new editions and print-runs of previously published grammars as well, the total is an astonishing 345. To visualize this increase in the number of grammars in the second half of the 18th century, I have reproduced a graph by Michael (1987: 12) that shows the number of publications in intervals of five years. Figure (1) demonstrates that the

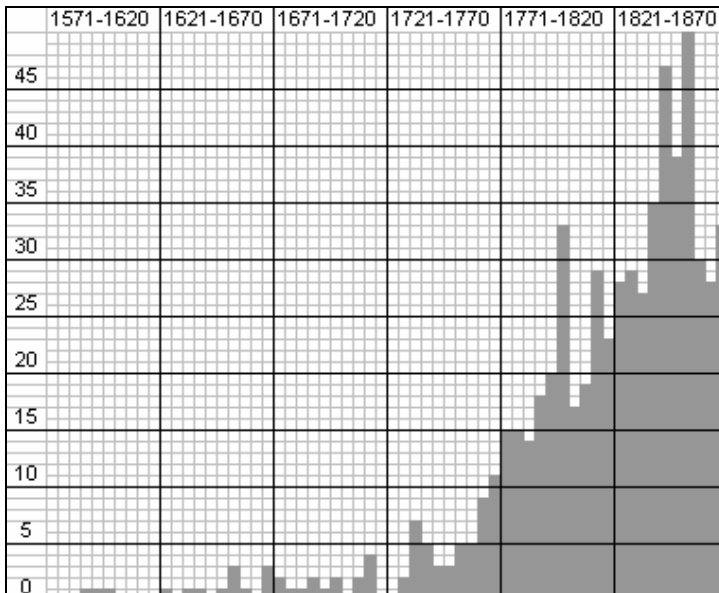


Figure 1. The increase in the number of grammars on the English language per five year slots, according to Michael (1987: 12) (shading added; reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press)

number of publications increases steadily from the middle of the 18th century onwards. What one can also see is that this process did not stop by any means at the end of the 18th century, a point I will return to later.

4. Material: The 18th century grammars consulted

In order to study the grammars, we have to go to the original primary sources, which I accessed in the form of the “English Linguistics 1500–1800” microfiches, edited by Alston in 1974. For this analysis the grammars I have chosen from this corpus are all from the second half of the 18th century. The authors are:

| | | |
|-------------------|------|---|
| Fisher, Ann | 1750 | <i>A new grammar.</i> |
| Priestley, Joseph | 1761 | <i>The rudiments of English grammar.</i> |
| Lowth, Robert | 1762 | <i>A short introduction to English grammar.</i> |
| Fenning, Daniel | 1771 | <i>A new grammar of the English language.</i> |
| Fell, John | 1784 | <i>An essay towards an English grammar.</i> |
| Murray, Lindley | 1795 | <i>English grammar, adapted to the different classes of learners.</i> |

The grammars by Fisher, Priestley, Lowth, Fenning and Murray were successful grammars of their times, while Fell’s was less well known (Alston 1974).

4.1. Some characteristics of these grammars

Before we move to some explanations for the increase in numbers, I will mention a few characteristics of the grammars I consulted to give the reader an idea of how these texts were constructed.

- In the title pages or prefaces it is usually mentioned that the grammars are written for young men, ladies, children, and/or schools or foreigners. The authors often mention that English is not taught at schools and that their book is intended to fill this gap.
- The grammars have a clearly ‘prescriptive’, some also a ‘proscriptive’ stance. This means that they not only list what should be done, but some also describe what linguistic behavior should be avoided by giving examples of bad English.

- By analogy, a distinction is being made between ‘proper’, ‘correct’, and ‘polite’ versus ‘improper’, ‘low’ and ‘incorrect’ use of English.
- Some authors attempt to move away from the Latin example of grammar writing by inventing English terminology. Ann Fisher (1750), for example, proposes the term ‘helping verb’ instead of ‘auxiliary verb’.
- In terms of text genre, there are two main types: Namely a “Question & Answer” text, or, alternatively, the grammars are written as an informative “essay”, that is as a factual non-dialogic text.
- The grammarians comment on the way in which their books should be used, and usually recommend learning the grammar rules by heart. Some also offer exercises for the students.
- In addition, it should be mentioned that the grammarians rely heavily on each others’ work. There is, in other words, a significant amount of copying going on, although some authors, like Lindley Murray, avoid reproaches of plagiarism by referring to themselves as ‘compilers’ rather than as authors of the grammars (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1996; Steadman-Jones 2003; Terry 2003).

These characteristics are also the ones reported in the literature on prescriptive grammars in general. I will present some examples for the prescriptive nature of the texts, as this is one of their most striking features. The examples are taken from Robert Lowth’s influential *A short introduction to English grammar* from 1762. Robert Lowth was a renowned Oxford Professor of Poetry, well-known for his expertise in Hebrew. In 1777 he became Bishop of London.

What we can see in Figure (2) are two fairly typical pages of Lowth’s *Grammar*. Lowth gives the description of the grammar rules in larger print and then comments on the main text in footnotes. It is mainly in these footnotes that we find evaluative comments, and good and bad examples of English. The arrows are added and point to the sources that Lowth uses: Clarendon, Dryden, Pope, Tillotson.

To illustrate this usage, let us have a closer look at footnote 7, reprinted in Example (1):

- (1) “He caused all persons, *whom* he knew had, or he thought might have, spoken to him, to be apprehended.” Clarendon, Vol. III, p. 618.8 **It ought to be *who***, the Nominative Case to *had*; not *whom* as it were the Objective Case governed by *knew*. (Lowth 1762: 97, emphasis in bold added)

This *it ought to be* is a quite typical formulation used by Lowth and can be read as an indication of his prescriptive stance.

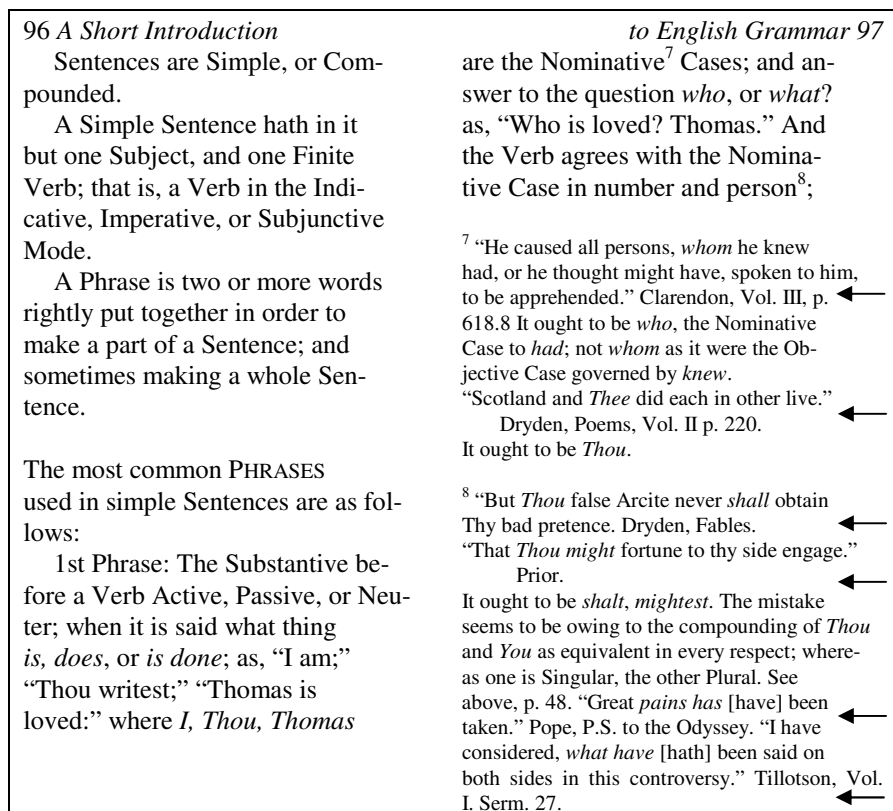


Figure 2. Lowth, *A short introduction to English grammar*, 1762, pages 96-97 (arrows added)

Lowth uses a canon of mainly restoration and early 18th century writers as his source for good and bad examples. As Table 1, compiled by Tiekens-Boon van Ostade (1997: 452), shows, Lowth does not shy away from criticizing even the language of the bible. Swift, to name just one of his other sources, is mentioned 39 times, and is criticized 39 times. Lowth thus sets himself up as an *authority* over authors of literary work.

Table 1. Numbers of quotations from Lowth's "best writers" as well as from the Bible (reproduced from Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1997: 452; reprinted with the permission of the *Société Neophilologique*)

| | total | main text | notes | criticised |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|-------|------------|
| Bible | 44 | 10 | 34 | 21 |
| Old testament | 19 | 6 | 13 | 6 |
| New testament | 25 [sic.] | 4 | 22 | 15 |
| Swift | 39 | - | 39 | 39 |
| Addison | 22 | 4 | 18 | 16 |
| Dryden | 20 | 4 | 16 | 16 |
| Pope | 18 | 2 | 16 | 14 |
| Clarendon | 17 | - | 17 | 17 |
| Milton | 16 | 1 | 15 | 15 |
| Prior | 14 | - | 14 | 14 |
| Tillotson | 12 | - | 12 | 12 |
| Atterbury | 6 | - | 6 | 6 |
| Bolingbroke | 6 | - | 6 | 6 |
| Gay | 1 | - | 1 | 1 |

5. Why in the 18th century?: Suggested reasons for the increase in the number of prescriptive grammars

Let me now move to answering the question 'why did this increase in the number of grammars occur in the second half of the 18th century'? I propose the following four reasons:

- (I) There is a new market situation with so-called 'social climbers',
- (II) a process of language standardization is involved,
- (III) as well as the notion of politeness,
- (IV) and finally, new developments in the printing trade play an important role.

It has to be stressed that these reasons are interrelated and thus closely connected. In what follows I will discuss them one by one.

5.1. New market situation: ‘Social climbers’

In the 18th century we have an increase in population numbers from roughly 7 to 12 million people (Belanger 1982: 18–19; ‘United Kingdom’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2007). The middle classes grew and aspired to climb the social ladder. They are referred to as social climbers.

Apart from amassing more wealth, these people wanted to better their situation by investing into ‘polite’ language – a notion that I will return to later. With respect to the grammars, Susan Fitzmaurice (1998: 315) claims that “[w]hat is striking about these texts is that they seemed to promise social advancement”. Correct language was therefore seen as a commodity that could be bought and “marketed” (Fitzmaurice 1998: 325). Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2000: 33) supports this argument by saying that the booksellers and publishers had an interest in exactly this market to make a financial profit: “The booksellers’ concern was not the language but the market”. For example, one of the leading publishers, Robert Dodsley, not only published Samuel Johnson’s famous *Dictionary* in 1755, but also Lowth’s grammar in 1762 (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2000, 2003).

5.2. The process of ‘standardization’

The 18th century is not only the century of population increase, the middle classes and social climbers, but it is also closely associated with the process of language ‘standardization’ in general. Even as early as 1697, Daniel Defoe called for a language ‘Academy’ in analogy to the *Académie Française*. This English Academy, however, never became a reality. And Swift, in his 1712 *Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue* also argued for improving the current language situation.

In the course of the 18th century the idea that English was deteriorating and that it was past its prime is also reflected in the grammars which try to ‘fix’ proper language usage. This process is called ‘codification’ in the literature on standardization (cf., e.g., Haugen 1966). Several ideologies have been found to play a prime role in this process, as discussed, for example by Milroy and Milroy (1991). Watts (2000) mentions, among others, the

- *Language and nationality myth*: The idea that Britain needs one language that unifies it and that can be transported to the colonies;

- *The myth of superiority*: The idea that a particular variety of English is better than all the others;
- *The myth of the perfect language*: The idea that a language can reach a state of perfection. In the grammars this is usually seen to have been the case at the turn of the 17th to the 18th century; and
- *The myth of the undesirability of change*: This means that if change is happening, it is perceived as being for the worse.

The process of standardization is a fascinating topic that would have deserved a chapter in its own right. Here I cannot go much further into detail, but I will briefly illustrate the ‘myth of superiority’ with an example from Hugh Jones (1724). In his *An accidence to the English tongue*, Jones is quite clear about which English needs to be fixed. He claims that:

(2) Out of this Confusion of English may we collect 5 principal Dialects and Tones.

1. The *Northern Dialect*, which we may call *Yorkshire*.
2. The *Southern*, or *Sussex Speech*.
3. The *Eastern*, or *Suffolk Speech*.
4. The *Western*, which we may call *Bristol language*.
5. The *Proper*, or *London Language*. (Jones 1724: 13)

What we can see here is a process of ‘selection’, that is elevating one variety at the cost of the others. This process also eventually helped to bring about a stigmatization of those speakers who did not speak the ‘proper’ language (cf., e.g., Milroy 1999, 2000). As I have reported previously, Lowth, like many of the other grammarians in the second half of the 18th century, uses a canon of written, literary sources to create the distinction between good and bad English.

5.3. The notion of ‘politeness’

One aspect that is closely linked to the process of standardization is the notion of politeness. Several researchers (Stein 1994; Fitzmaurice 1998; Watts 1990, 2000, 2002) have studied this aspect and the following explorations are based on their work. We can summarize three processes that are of importance with respect to politeness in the 18th century:

- (I) Two poles emerge between ‘correct’ / ‘proper’ versus ‘incorrect’ / ‘low’ / ‘vulgar’ language usage.
- (II) There is the creation of a *moral* distinction between people who speak politely and ‘with propriety’ and those who do not.
- (III) It is believed that it is possible to *learn* the ways of ‘polite society’.

I will now look at these three propositions in turn. A vital aspect of the study of politeness is the historical development of this concept, a point also stressed in my current research on politeness in contemporary English (cf., e.g., Locher 2006). In the present context this means that we have to look at the change in meaning the word ‘politeness’ experienced in the 18th century. Stein (1994: 8) claims that before the 18th century, politeness referred to “a social ideal, the polite urban, metropolitan gentleman, well-versed in the art of ‘polite’ conversation, a man about town”. By the second half the 18th century, Stein continues, a new notion of ‘politeness’ had developed, one that is closely linked to prescriptivism, in that two poles between ‘correct’ / ‘proper’ language spoken by the so-called ‘polite society’ and ‘incorrect’ / ‘low’ / ‘vulgar’ language usage are created. To illustrate this consider the following three examples from Lowth’s grammar. In Example (3), Lowth describes the usage of *an eight days* as *obsolete, vulgar* and *improper*:

- (3) About “*an eight days*:” that is, a space of eight days. *Luke ix. 28*. But the expression is obsolete, or at least vulgar; and we may add likewise improper: ... (Lowth 1762: 20)

Lowth objects to the usage of “an eight days”, i.e., the combination of the singular article with a plural noun, on the grounds that *days* “has not been reduced by use and convenience into one collective and compact idea” such as *a hundred* or *a thousand*. In Example (4), Lowth describes an agreement mismatch as an *enormous solecism*, a serious blunder:

- (4) *You was*, the Second Person Plural of the Pronoun places in agreement with the First or Third person Singular of the Verb, is an enormous Solecism: and yet Authors of the first rank have inadvertently fallen into it. (Lowth 1762: 48)

And in (5) Lowth censures the omission of relative pronouns most severely:

- (5) The Construction is hazardous, and hardly justifiable, even in Poetry.
(Lowth 1762: 137)

What we can see from these examples is a creation of a notion of ‘correct’, ‘proper’ and ‘polite’ language versus ‘incorrect’, ‘improper’ and ‘impolite’ language usage.

The second aspect linked to this development is that *a moral distinction* started to be made between people who speak politely and ‘with propriety’ and those who do not. This is illustrated once more with an extract from Hugh Jones’ text. He claims that:

- (6) We should aim at an elegant and fluent Style; gliding like a smooth River, and not running violently like a rapid Torrent. Our Language affords us Choice of Words, and Variety of Expression; in which *we should imitate the Learned and Polite, the Correct and Pure*, without jingling Terms, harsh or obsolete, vulgar or unbecoming Words, ungrateful to the Ear, difficult in Sound, or offensive to Modesty, good Manners, or good Sense. (Jones 1724: 62, emphasis added)

Jones thus claims that the *Learned and Polite* people are also *Correct and Pure* and that they should be taken as a model. A similar view is expressed by Lindley Murray, an American who lived and published in England most of his life. He argued in the following way in 1795:

- (7) That persons who think confusedly, should express themselves obscurely, is not to be wondered at; for embarrassed, obscure, and feeble sentences, are generally, if not always, the result of embarrassed, obscure, and feeble thought. (Murray 1795: 183)

Murray proposes that a connection is made between a person’s mental capacity and the way he or she speaks. Finally, in (8) Lowth describes the so-called mismatching of verb forms as follows:

- (8) In the rest it seems wholly **inexcusable**. The absurdity of it will be plainly perceived in the example of some of these Verbs, which Custom has not yet so **perverted**. We should be immediately **shocked** at *I have knew, I have saw, I have gave, &c:* but our ears are grown familiar with *I have wrote, I have drank, I have bore, &c.* which are altogether as **barbarous**.” (Lowth 1762: 89–90, emphasis in bold added)

That Lowth labels these mismatchings as *inexcusable*, *perverted*, and *barbarous* and argues that one should be *shocked* at hearing them is significant

because these words reflect on the speaker's character. The way a person talked began to be seen as an index of his or her social worth as well. What we witness, then, in the latter half of the 18th century is, to put it in Richard Watts' words, that

language use became a marker of socio-political affiliation in Britain, and has continued to serve the function of social, political and educational demarcation till the present day. (Watts 1990: 299)

This brings me to the final point connected to politeness. The social climbers mentioned earlier had an interest in acquiring 'proper' language. This 'proper' language is what they were given to believe they would find in the grammars. They wanted to avoid appearing as if they belonged to the 'lower' classes, and they hoped that they could better their social situation by acquiring 'proper' English. The texts clearly indicated that you could *learn* to speak properly, as exemplified in Example (9), taken from Lowth's preface:

- (9) A Grammatical Study of our own Language makes no part of the ordinary method of instruction which we pass thro' in our childhood; and it is very seldom that we apply ourselves to it afterward. And yet the want of it will not be effectually supplied by any other advantages whatsoever. Much practice in the polite world, and a general acquaintance with the best authors are good helps, but alone will hardly be sufficient: we have writers, who have enjoyed these advantages in their full extent, and yet cannot be recommended as models of an accurate style. (Lowth 1762: vii)

In his preface, Lowth first points out that a lack in proper language education cannot be *supplied by any other advantages whatsoever*. In other words, no matter how wealthy you have become, your language will still give you away – unless you study. In the continuation of the example, Lowth admits that *even* writers who had practice in the *polite* world still make mistakes, presumably because they had no proper training in the English language. At the same time, however, Lowth implies that the whole endeavor of the grammar he has written is meant to educate those who do not have access to this polite world, and that studying the English language is a necessity in order to become refined and in command of an *accurate style*. The middle classes were thus encouraged in their struggle for social betterment and were led to believe that language played a major role in such an advancement.

5.4. New developments in the ‘printing’ trade

Finally, the last point suggested as a factor that facilitated the increase in the number of grammars in the 18th century is the development in the printing trade more generally. According to Belanger (1982), at the end of the 17th century there were virtually no magazines or newspapers and publishing was only possible in London, Oxford and Cambridge due to the so-called ‘Licensing Act’, which expired in 1695. If we compare this situation to the one at the end of the 18th century, we find that a dramatic shift has taken place. There are now local newspapers and periodicals, even though the national newspapers are still based and thriving in London, and there are pamphlets and books available for purchase. In addition, the copyright situation had changed dramatically over the same period of time, in that there was no longer any perpetual copyright. This meant that provincial publishing received an enormous impetus, that cheap editions of the classics could now be produced, and that unaltered reprinting of established bestsellers, such as the grammars, had become possible everywhere.

This changed situation in the printing trade, in combination with the other factors previously mentioned, helps to explain the large numbers of re-editions and reprinting of prescriptive grammars. Lowth’s grammar, for example, sold 34,000 copies by 1781 (Mandelbrote 2004). Since the market was clearly there, this might also go a long way towards explaining that the increase in the number of new grammars continued into the 19th century.

5.5. Summary: Suggested reasons for the increase in the number of prescriptive grammars

To summarize so far, we can say that there are several interrelated factors which can explain the increase in the number of grammars of the English language from the middle of the 18th century. The grammars have to be seen in the light of the process of ‘standardization’, which elevated one particular English variety over others. This process can be seen in connection with the notion of ‘politeness’ that had developed away from describing polished, and refined behavior in general, to pointing out ‘correct’ language usage. The middle classes believed that, by acquiring ‘polite’ language, they would also get access to ‘polite’ society. The grammar books, in addition to spelling books and dictionaries, were perceived by the social climbers as a help on their way to achieving this aim. There was, in

other words, a market for these books, and one that was considerable due to the increase in population in the 18th century. Finally, and not unimportantly, the new developments in the printing trade made it possible to cater for this market and to produce books all over the country.

6. John Fell's *Essay towards an English grammar* (1784)

To demonstrate the topicality of 18th century grammars for today's linguists, I have chosen examples from the grammar by John Fell, a minister, schoolteacher and classical scholar (Gordon 2004). This grammar was published in 1784 and contains a preface written by the editor, that is "generally attributed to Richard Sharp, a pupil of Fell's" (Alston 1974: I, 380). It is not a particularly successful grammar in that it was only published once, but I have chosen it because there are interesting thoughts on the English language as such that are worth being discussed. Let me start by giving a number of details on this work.

6.1. Characteristics

According to the editor in the preface, John Fell's grammar is written and published with the aim of "instructing youth", for those who "are already acquainted with polite literature" and for "foreigners" (xiii). It consists of a preface, a discussion of the parts of speech, a chapter on syntax and a text on auxiliary verbs. Fell's grammar is thus less complete than others' since he leaves out a discussion of the spelling system or prosody (cf. e.g., Ann Fisher's grammar). The text is written in an 'essay' rather than a question and answer style. Fell does not give 'bad examples' of English but uses 'good writing' for illustration. Among the sources of good writing that he uses, Fell lists the Holy Scriptures, Shakespeare, Milton, Sidney, Locke, Addison, Dryden and Pope (xv). In addition, Fell explicitly refers to the grammars by Lowth, Johnson and Priestley. He often discusses different points of view on a grammar issue, and asks rhetorical questions before presenting his own conclusions. He thus engages in a discourse with the other grammarians (cf. Watts [1999] for the notion of a 'discourse community' with respect to the grammarians). What I want to focus on here are the contradictory statements about language in the editor's Preface (v–xiv) but also in Fell's main text, because they show us competing forces at work.

6.2. Striking contradictions

On the one hand, the Preface clearly describes the quite common idea that there *is a pure and genuine* English, as can be seen in Example (10).

- (10) During the last thirty or forty years there are but a few [writers] that deserve the praise of having expressed themselves in a *pure and genuine* strain of English. (Fell 1784: vi, emphasis added)

In (11), the editor identifies the age of best writing at the beginning of his century:

- (11) I fear we cannot find in our later writers so rich, so appropriated a diversity of expression as we can in *those that flourished at the beginning of this century*. (Fell 1784: x, emphasis added)

And in (12), he shows prescriptive and evaluative tendencies, when he speaks of *disgusting* language that is due to *affectation*. This term was, at the time, perceived to be the opposite of ‘polite’ language (Watts 2002: 159).

- (12) The alterations in our language here taken notice of, are certainly not for the better: they give the phraseology a *disgusting* air of study and formality: they have their source in *affectation, not in taste*; ... (Fell 1784: ix, emphasis added)

Examples (10) to (12) are very much in line with the prescriptive stance I have illustrated in previous sections.

The contradictions to this position arise in quotations such as the following. In (13), a fairly modern idea of a non-prescriptive, even *descriptive* approach to a grammarian’s work is pursued by the editor:

- (13) It matters not what causes these customs and fashions owe their birth to; the moment they become general, they are laws of the language; *and a grammarian can only remonstrate, how much soever he disapprove*. From his opinions and precepts an appeal may always be made to the *tribunal of use*, as to the *supreme authority and last resort*: for all language is merely arbitrary. (Fell 1784: xii–xiii, emphasis added)

This modern attitude is especially aptly summarized in Fell’s comments on neuter and passive verbs in (14):

- (14) ... the Writer will by no means presume either to resist or censure, *intending no more than to state the facts, frequent among our best writers, just as they are*, ... Whether such conduct would be a real improvement, or a diminution [sic.] of our language, *the learned public must determine, with whom is the undoubted right of decision*. (Fell 1784: 114, emphasis added)

Here Fell seems to be influenced by the science tradition thriving in the 18th century, which has also been called the Age of Reason and Enlightenment. He presents himself as somebody who collects facts and presents them *just as they are*. This attitude can also be found in Joseph Priestley's work, *The rudiments of English grammar* from 1761, and precedes the ideas of the 19th century grammarians who put forward the idea that linguistics should be descriptive rather than prescriptive (e.g., Max Müller 1861; Bloomfield 1933; discussed in Milroy and Milroy 1999: 6–7). At the same time, however, Fell leaves judgement to the *learned public*, which immediately contradicts a descriptive approach as such.

What is the solution to these apparent contradictions between the quotations (13) and (14) and the ones in examples (10) to (12)? I suggest that the writer of the preface and Fell himself do not actually solve the contradictions, but that the solution the editor proposes in the preface merely adds a further angle to the discussion as can be seen in a further extract. In one and the same Example ([15]–[17]) we can see that he wants the grammar to be *both* prescriptive *as well as* descriptive. Just before Example (15), the editor has mentioned the efforts of the *Académie Française* to save French from deterioration. He goes on to say:

- (15) [B]ut the republic of letters is a true republic, in its disregard to the arbitrary decrees of usurped authority. Perhaps such an institution would do still less with us. Our critics are allowed to petition, but not to command: and why should their power be enlarged? (Fell 1784: xi)

The editor is thus not in favor of an English Academy, and implies once more that authority lies with custom, that is with the language users. The role of critics can therefore only be to suggest changes, but not to *command* them. He then continues by saying that:

- (16) The laws of our speech, like the laws of our country, should breathe a spirit of liberty: they should check licentiousness, without restraining freedom. (Fell 1784: xi)

In other words, the editor – and I assume Fell too (cf. example [14]) – is in favor of regulating language usage after all, but only to a certain degree and without constraining a person's freedom. In addition, the editor feels strongly that the English language in its current stage is deteriorating. He says that:

- (17) The most effectual method of preserving our language from decay, and preventing a total disregard to the Saxon part of it, is to bring about a revolution in our present mode of education. (Fell 1784: xi)

The solution to prevent this deterioration from continuing, in the editor's view, is to revolutionize the education system.

6.3. Striking contradictions: Summary

Summarizing this discourse, we can see two contradictory ideals. On the one hand, a 'scientific' approach is described that is coupled with an idea that language changes, that 'use' is the ultimate authority, and that the grammarian is only a compiler of what he can observe in the (primary) texts, an attitude reflecting the era's scientific concerns with empiricism. On the other hand, the text demonstrates a different ideological approach which propagates a belief in the existence of a 'best' language, coupled with a notion that the Saxon heritage must be preserved. The time of best writing is linked to the writers of the early 18th century. This conservative view stands in opposition to the implied recognition that language changes through use. Such contradictory views are not reconciled in the text, but an emphasis on the importance of education is added.

In doing this, the text also reflects a concern of many of the numerous grammar publications during the 18th century, namely the feeling that the English language has been neglected in the teaching of young people and that it should deserve more attention in the schools. While 'English' had already been taught in schools before the 18th century, never before was there a need for instruction expressed this clearly and frequently. This can also be seen in the numerous private schools that opened in the 18th century to provide an education in the English language, some of which only lasted a couple of years. Attending school in general, however, only became compulsory towards the end of the 19th century (cf. Michael 1987; 'United Kingdom', 'Education' in Encyclopaedia Britannica).

7. Concluding remarks

The 18th century is a fascinating era for linguists to study an ever-increasing awareness of the English language as witnessed in the printed material of the time. The grammars that are produced in such enormous numbers from the middle of the century onwards deserve being studied in more detail. Among others, Tieken-Boon van Ostade and her team are currently pursuing this interest in the research project on ‘The codifiers and the English language: tracing the norms of Standard English’ (2004). In this chapter I discussed a few reasons for the increase in the numbers of publications on English. In addition, I suggest that Fell’s grammar serves as an intriguing example to show that many of the issues that linguists deal with today, such as prescriptivism versus descriptivism exemplified in the controversy around John Honey’s contribution (e.g., 1997), the ongoing question of the development and nature of standard English, and the connection of these issues to education were already discussed in the 18th century. The brief analysis of Fell’s *Grammar* shows that a text of a comparatively unknown grammarian and his editor can serve unexpectedly as a rich source for modern-day linguists who are interested in these subjects.

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