

2. Thomas Blount, *Glossographia* (1656)

Title-page

Glossographia: or a Dictionary, Interpreting all such Hard Words, Whether Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, Teutonick, Belgick, British or Saxon, as are now used in our refined English Tongue. Also the Terms of Divinity, Law, Physick, Mathematicall, Heraldry, Anatomy, War, Musick, Architecture; and of several other Arts and Sciences Explicated. With Etymologies, Definitions, and Historical Observations on the same. Very useful for all such as desire to understand what they read.

Illustrative Entries

Accent (accentus) tune, tenor, the rising and falling of the voice, the due sound over any word or letter, or the mark of any letter which directs the pronunciation. There are also Accents of sentences; As in the close of a Period we let fall the voice, in a demand raise it.

Auricular (auricularis) belonging to, or spoken in the ear. As auricular Confession, is that which is made in private to the Ghostly Father, none hearing but himself, opposite unto publick Confession, which is made in the hearing of many.

Autumnal (autumnalis) belonging to the harvest or Autumn, which is from the sixth of August to the sixth of November; and is one of the four Quarters of the year; Others reckon Autumne to begin at the Æquinoctium. i. about the twelfth of September, and to end at the Solstice or shortest day, about the eleventh of December.

Axiome (axioma) a maxim or general ground in any Art: a Proposition or short Sentence generally allowed to be true, as in saying, the whole is greater then its part.

Banditi (Ital.) Out-laws, Rebels, Fugitives condemned by Proclamation; bando in Ital. signifying a Proclamation. These in the Low-Countries are called Freebooters; in Germany, Nightingales; in the north of England, Moss-Troopers; in Ireland, Tories.

3. J.K. [John Kersey], *A New English Dictionary* (1702)

Title-page

A New English Dictionary: Or, a Compleat Collection of the Most Proper and Significant Words, Commonly used in the Language; With a Short and Clear Exposition of Difficult Words and Terms of Art. The whole digested into Alphabetical Order; and chiefly designed for the benefit of Young Scholars, Tradesmen, Artificers, and the Female Sex, who would learn to spell truely; being so fitted to every Capacity, that it may be a continual help to all that want an Instructor.

Illustrative Entries

Sharp, keen, rough, smart, sower, harsh, &c-c.

A Sharp in musick.

To sharp upon one, or over-reach him.

Sharp-set, or very hungry.

Sharp-sighted.

Sharp-witted.

To sharpen, make sharp, or whet.

A Sharper, a subtil fellow, that lives by his wits.

To shatter, shake, or break to pieces.

A Shatter-pate, or shatter-pated fellow.

To shave, shear, or cut off the hair with a razor.

Shave-grass.

Shaven.

A Shaver.

The Shavings of planed boards, &c.

A Shaving-tub, to hold book-binders paper-shavings

She, as she is a woman.

A She-cousin.

A She-friend.

A Sheaf, a bundle of corn, or arrows.

To sheaf corn, or bind it up into sheaves.

4. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755)

Title-page

A Dictionary of the English Language: In which the Words are deduced from their Originals, and Illustrated in their Different Significations by Examples from the best Writers. To which are prefixed A History of the Language and An English Grammar.

Illustrative Entries

Cu'rious. adj. [curiosus, Latin.]

1. Inquisitive; desirous of information; addicted to enquiry.

Be not curious in unnecessary matters; for more things are shewn unto thee than men understand. Ecclus. iii. 23.

Even then to them the spirit of lyes suggests
That they were blind, because they saw not ill;
And breath'd into their uncorrupted breasts
A curious wish, which did corrupt their will. Davies.

2. Attentive to; diligent about: sometimes with after.

It is a pity a gentleman so very curious after things that were elegant and beautiful, should not have been as curious as to their origin, their uses, and their natural history. Woodward.

3. Sometimes with of.

Then thus a senior of the place replies,
Well read, and curious of antiquities. Dryden's Fables.

4. Accurate; careful not to mistake.

'Till Arianism had made it a matter of great sharpness and subtlety of wit to be a sound believing Christian, men were not curious what syllables or particles of speech they used. Hook.

5. Difficult to please; solicitous of perfection; not negligent; full of care.

A temperate person is not curious of fancies and deliciousness; he thinks not much, and speaks not often of meat and drink. Taylor.

6. Exact; nice; subtle.

Both these senses embrace their objects at greater distance, with more variety, and with a more curious discrimination, than the other sense. Holder.

7. Artful; not neglectful; not fortuitous.

A vaile obscur'd the sunshine of her eyes,
The rose within herself her sweetness closed;
Each ornament about her seemly lies,
By curious chance, or careless art, composed. Fairfax, b. ii.

8. Elegant; neat; laboured; finished.

Understanding to devise curious works, to work in gold. Ex.

9. Rigid; severe; rigorous.

For curious I cannot be with you,
Signior Baptista, of whom I hear so well. Shakespeare.

Se'nsible. adj. [sensible, French; sensilis, Latin]

1. Having the power of perceiving by the senses.

Would your cambrick were as sensible as your finger, that you might leave pricking it for pity. Shakespeare.
These be those discourses of God, whose effects those that live witness in themselves; the sensible in their sensible natures, the reasonable in their reasonable souls. Raleigh.

A blind man conceives not colours, but under the notion of some other sensible faculty. Glanv. Sceps.

2. Perceptible by the senses.

By reason man attaineth unto the knowledge of things that are and are not sensible; it resteth, therefore, that we search how man attaineth unto the knowledge of such things in sensible as are to be known. Hooker.

Is this a dagger which I see before me, The handle tow'rd my hand? Come, let me clutch thee: I have thee not, and yet I see thee still: Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible To feeling as to sight? Shakesp. Macbeth.

The space left and acquired in every sensible moment in such slow progressions, is so inconsiderable, that it cannot possibly move the sense. Glanv. Sceps.

It is manifest that the heavens are void of all sensible resistance, and by consequence of all sensible matter. Newton.

The far greater part of men are no otherwise moved than by sense, and have neither leisure nor ability so far to improve their power of reflection, as to be capable of conceiving the divine perfections, without the assistance of sensible objects. Rogers's Sermons.

Air is sensible to the touch by its motion, and by its resistance to bodies moved in it. Arbuthnot on Air.

3. Perceived by the mind.

Idleness was punished by so many stripes in publick, and the disgrace was more sensible than the pain. Temple.

4. Perceiving by either mind or senses; having perception by the mind or senses.

This must needs remove The sensible of pain. Milton.

I saw you in the East at your first arising; I was as soon sensible as any of that light, when just shooting out, and beginning to travel upwards to the meridian. Dryden.

I do not say there is no soul in man, because he is not sensible of it in his sleep; but I do say, he cannot think at any time, waking or sleeping, without being sensible of it. Locke.

The versification is as beautiful as the description complete; every ear must be sensible of it. Browne's Notes on the Odysse.

5. Having moral perception; having the quality of being affected by moral good or ill.

If thou wert sensible of courtesy, I should not make so great a show of zeal. Shakespeare.

6. Having quick intellectual feeling; being easily or strongly affected.

Even I, the bold, the sensible of wrong, Restrain'd by shame, was forc'd to hold my tongue. Dryd.

7. Convinced; persuaded. A low use.

They are very sensible that they had better have pushed their conquests on the other side of the Adriatick; for then their territories would have lain together. Addison.

8. In low conversation it has sometimes the sense of reasonable; judicious; wise.

I have been tired with accounts from sensible men, furnished with matters of fact, which have happened within their own knowledge. Addison.

5. James Buchanan, *Linguae Britannicae Vera Pronunciatio* [The True Pronunciation of the Language of Britain] (1757)

Title-page

Linguae Britannicae Vera Pronunciatio, or, A New English Dictionary. Containing I. An Explanation of all English Words used by the best Writers; the various Senses of each Word being distinctly pointed out by Figures 1, 2, 3, &c. II. The Language from which each Word is derived. III. The part of Speech to which it belongs. IV. A Supplement of upwards of 4000 proper Names. In which every Word has not only the common Accent to denote the Emphasis of the Voice, but, in order to a just Pronunciation, every Syllable is marked with a long or short Accent to determine its Quantity; and the quiescent Letters, various sounds of Vowels, &c. are so distinguished, that any Person, Native or Foreigner, who can but read, may speedily acquire an accurate Pronunciation of the English Language. To the whole is prefixed a Dissertation on the Species of Sounds, &c. with practical Observations on the various Powers and Formations of the Letters. A Work intirely new, and designed for the Use of Schools, and of Foreigners, as well as Natives who would speak, read, and write English with Propriety and Accuracy.

Illustrative Entries

Cù'rious, (A.) 1. Nice, delicate, uncommon. 2. Inquisitive, or desirous of seeing, knowing, &c. L.

Cùrl, (S.) Hair, &c. turned up into a roll or ring.

Cù'rlew, (S.) A water fowl.

Cùrmü'dgeon, (S.) A covetous niggardly fellow.

Sënsible, (A.) 1. Possessed with senses. 2. Arising from the senses. 3. Perceivable by the senses. 4. Judicious, of good sense. 5. Made to understand.

Së'nsitive, (A.) Having sense.

Së'nsöry, or Sensó'rium, (S.) That part of the brain in which we receive the idea of all impressions made by sensible objects.

6. John Walker, *A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791)

Title-page

A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language. In which not only the Meaning of every Word is clearly explained, and the Sound of every Syllable distinctly shown, but where Words are subject to different Pronunciations, the Reasons for each are at large displayed, and the preferable Pronunciation is pointed out. To which are prefixed, Principles of English Pronunciation; in which the Sounds of Letters, Syllables, and Words are critically investigated, and systematically arranged; the Rules for Pronouncing are so classed and disposed as to be easily applicable to the most difficult Words; and the Analogies of the Language are so fully shown as to lay the Foundation of a consistent and rational Pronunciation. Likewise Rules to be observed by the Natives of Scotland, Ireland, and London, for avoiding their respective peculiarities; and Directions to Foreigners for acquiring a Knowledge of the Use of this Dictionary. The whole interspersed with Observations, Philological, Critical, and Grammatical.

Illustrative Entries

Curious, ku're-us. a.

Inquisitive, desirous of information; attentive to, diligent about; accurate, careful not to mistake; difficult to please, solicitous of perfection; exact, nice, subtle; elegant, neat, laboured, finished.

Curl, kurl. s.

A ringlet of hair; undulation, wave, sinuosity, flexure.

Curlew, kur'lu. s.

A kind of water fowl; a bird larger than a partridge, with longer legs.

Curmudgeon, kur-mud'jun. s.

An avaricious churlish fellow, a miser, a niggard, a griper.

Sensible, sen'se-bl. a.

Having the power of perceiving by the senses; perceptible by the senses; perceived by the mind; perceiving by either mind or senses; having moral perception; having quick intellectual feeling, being easily or strongly affected; convinced, persuaded; in low conversation it has sometimes the sense of reasonable, judicious, wise.

Soot, soot. s.

Condensed or embodied smoke.

Notwithstanding I have Mr. Sheridan, Mr. Nares, Dr. Kenrick, W. Johnston, Mr. Perry, and the professors of the black Art themselves, against me in the pronunciation of this word, I have ventured to prefer the regular pronunciation to the irregular. The adjective sooty has its regular sound among the correctest speakers, which has induced Mr. Sheridan to mark it so; but nothing can be more absurd than to pronounce the substantive in one manner, and the adjective derived from it by adding y, in another. The other Orthöepists, therefore, who pronounce both these words with the oo like ü, are more consistent than Mr. Sheridan, though, upon the whole, not so right.

Yeoman, yo'man. s.

A man of small estate in land, a farmer, a gentleman farmer; it seems to have been anciently a kind of ceremonious title given to soldiers, whence we have Yeomen of the guard; it was probably a freeholder not advanced to the rank of a gentleman.

This word is pronounced by Mr. Sheridan, Mr. Scott, and Buchanan, with the diphthong like e short, as if written yemman, and by Dr. Kenrick as if written yumman. But W. Johnston, Mr. Perry, Entick, and Fry, pronounce the eo like long open o, as if written yoman. This last appears to me to be the most received pronunciation. It is that which we constantly hear applied to the King's body guard, and it is that which has always been the pronunciation on the Stage; an authority which, in this case, may not, perhaps, improperly be called the best echo of the public voice.

7. Thomas De Quincey, 'The English Language', Blackwood's, April 1839

Rich, at several eras, in all kinds of learning, neither England nor France has any great work to show upon her own vernacular language. *Res est in integro*: no Hickes in England, no Malesherbes or Menage in France, has chosen to connect his own glory with the investigation and history of his native tongue.... In its elementary period [the English language] takes a different name – the name of Anglo-Saxon; and so rude was it and barren at one stage of this rudimental form, that in the *Saxon Chronicle* we find not more than a few hundred words, perhaps from six to eight hundred words, perpetually revolving, and most of which express some idea in close relation to the state of war....The process by which languages grow is worthy of deep attention. So profound is the error of some men on this subject, that they talk familiarly of language as of a thing deliberately and consciously 'invented' by the people who use it.

8. 'Proposal for the Publication of a New English Dictionary by the Philological Society' (1859)

1. The first requirement of every lexicon is that it should contain every word occurring in the literature of the language it professes to illustrate.
2. In the treatment of individual words the historical principle will be uniformly adopted.

9. A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles (1928)

The aim of this Dictionary is to present in alphabetical series the words that have formed the English vocabulary from the time of the earliest records down to the present day, with all the relevant facts concerning their form, sense-history, pronunciation, and etymology. It embraces not only the standard language of literature and conversation, whether current at the moment, or obsolete, or archaic, but also the main technical vocabulary, and a large measure of dialectal usage and slang. Its basis is a collection of some five million of excerpts from English literature of every period amassed by an army of voluntary readers and the editorial staff. Such a collection of evidence – it is represented by a selection of about 1,800,000 quotations actually printed – could form the only possible foundation for the historical treatment of every word and idiom which is the *raison d'être* of this work. It is a fact everywhere recognized that the consistent pursuit of this method has worked a revolution in the art of lexicography. In 1891 a great English philologist wrote of the 'debt' which 'English grammar will some day owe to the *New English Dictionary*'; and this debt has been mounting up ever since.

buxom, *a.* (bʌksəm) Forms: **ibuhsum**, **ibucsum**, 2-3 **buhsum(m)**, 3 **bocsum**, **-om**, 3-8 **buxum**, 4 **boʒsam**, **boghsom**, **bousum**, **-om**, (?) **busum**, **boxsom(e)**, **bouxsome**, **bowxom**, **buxsom**, 4-5 **bowsom**, **boxsum**, **buxsum**, 4-6 **bouxom(e)**, **boxom(e)**, **-um**, 4-7 **bughsom**, **bowsom**, **buxome**, 5 **bouxum**, **buxhum**, 5-6 **buxume**, **buxsome**, **-home**, (?) **buscom**, 6 **bowsome**, **buxam**, **buckesom(e)**, 6-8 **bucksome**, 7-8 **bucksom**, (9 **bucksome**), 4- **buxom**. [early ME. *buhsum*, *ibucsum* (perh.: [†]OE. **búhsum*, **ebúhsum*), f. stem of *búʒan* (*ʒebúʒan*) **BOW** *v.*¹ + **-SOME**; cf. MDu. *boochsaem*, Du. *buigzaam*, Ger. *biegsam* flexible, pliant. Branch II seems to have arisen from sense 1c; the development of sense 3 being precisely the same as in **BLITHE**, that of 4 as in Fr. *joli* from 'blithe' to 'comely'.]

I. Easily bowed or bent.

1. Morally. [†]**a.** Obedient; pliant; compliant, tractable (*to*). *Obs.* (exc. as a rare archaism.)

c1175 *Lamb. Hom.* 57 Beo buhsum toward gode. *Ibid.* 75 Beon him ibucsum ouer alle þing. **c1200** **ORMIN** 6176 Þin laferrd birrþ þe buhsumm beon. **c1250** *Gen. & Ex.* 980 An angel..bad hire..to hire leuedi buxum ben. **1340** **HAMPOLE** *Pr. Consc.* 8148 Alle men..þat meke of hert er here, and bowsom. **c1380** **WYCLIF** *Sel. Wks.* III. 49 Oure Ladi Marye..was..buxumer to his bidding þan ony hond-mayde. **c1440** *Generydes* 2505, Thanne came ther in.. The buscommest folk. **c1450** **LONELICH** *Grail* lii. 1006, I schal..maken hem buxom to 3owre hond. **1496** *Dives & Paup.* (W. de W.) IV. i. 160/1 We ben..to them buxom and meke. **1523** **FITZHERB.** *Surv.* (1539) 15, I shall be buxome and obedient to justyces. **1581** **J. BELL** *Haddon's Answ. Osor.* 287b, The Consuls should..swear faythfully to become bonnaire and buxome to the Pope. **1591** **SPENSER** *M. Hubberd* 626 So wilde a beast..buxome to his bands, is ioy to see. **c1684** *MS. Let. Corporation of Kirkby to Judge Jeffreys*, Your Lordship was pleased to give us..your oath to become a buxome and beneficial member of this corporation. [**1843** **BORROW** *Bible in Spain* xliii, To be buxom and obedient to the customs and laws of the republic. **1867** **THIRLWALL** *Lett. Friend* (1881) 88 In the hope that you will be buxom and good, I conclude now my New Year's Lecture.]

[†]**b.** Submissive, humble, meek. *Obs.*

a1300 *Cursor M.* 8356 Þat lauedi til hir lauerd lute Wit buxum reuerence and dute. *Ibid.* 29009 Oure praier aw euer for to be bowsom. **1340** *Ayenb.* 59 Hi..ziggeþ..þet hi byeþ zuo kuede and zuo zenful..vor þet me ham hereþ and hyealde uor wel boʒsam. **c1440** *Promp. Parv.* 57 Buxum, or lowly or make, *humilis*, *pius*, *mansuetus*. **c1440** *York Myst.* xxiv. 141 His sisteres praye with bowsom beede. **a1455** **HOLLAND** *Houlate* xxxiv. 12 Bowsom obeysance.

[†]**c.** Gracious, indulgent, favourable; obliging, amiable, courteous, affable, kindly. *Obs.*

1362 **LANGL.** *P. Pl.* A. VI. 56 Bouweþ forþ bi a brok beo-boxum-of-speche. **1393** *Ibid.* C. IV. 421 God hym-self hoteþ To be boxome at my bidding. **c1460** *Towneley Myst. Annunc.* 79 (*Angel to Joseph*) Meek and buxom looke thou be, And with her dwelle. **1536** **BELLENDEN** *Cron. Scot.* (1821) I. 18 To mak the reders more bowsom and attent. *Ibid.* 108 Ilk story be thi self is separat, To mak thaim bowsome to thine audience.

[†]**d.** with *inf.*: Easily moved, prone, ready. *Obs.*

a1300 *Cursor M.* 25208 Þan suld we be..bowsom his bidinges to fullfill. **1340** **HAMPOLE** *Pr. Consc.* 50 The creatours þat er dom..er bughsom To lof hym. **1377** **LANGL.** *P. Pl.* B. VI. 197 Many a beggere for benes buxome was to swynke. **c1440** *Gesta Rom.* (1879) 22 þe flesh is euer lewid, and buxom to do Evil.

2. Physically: Flexible, pliant. Yielding to pressure, unresisting (*poet.*). *Obs.*

1596 **SPENSER** *F.Q.* I. xi. 37 Then gan he..scourge the buxome aire so sore That to his force to yielden it was faine. **1599** **A. M.** *Gabelhouer's Bk. Physicke* 278/2 The Pockes..are verye buxume. **1615** **CROOKE** *Body of Man* 1111 Their substance is..flexible or buxome that they should not breake but giue way to violence. **1667**

MILTON *P.L.* II. 842 Wing silently the buxom Air. **a1700** DRYDEN *Palamon & Arc.* II. 519 Her turtles fann'd the buxom air above.

II. Blithe, jolly, well-favoured.

3. Blithe, gladsome, bright, lively, gay. *arch.*

(The explanation in Bailey and Johnson, 'amorous, wanton', is apparently only contextual.)

1590 GREENE *Never too late* Aiv, Grey and buxome were his eyne. **1598** FLORIO, *Vago*. blithe..bucksome, full of glee. **1599** SHAKES. *Hen.* V, III. vi. 28 A Souldier firme and sound of heart, and of buxome valour. **1620** SHELTON *Quix.* IV. xxx. 229 He went on his Journey..most glad and bucksome. **1658** S. LENNARD tr. *Charron's Wisd.* Pref., Philosophy, such as this Book teacheth, is altogether pleasant, free, bucksome, and if I may so say, wanton too. **1675** COTTON *Poet. Wks.* (1765) 267 A fine Miss..as free, Buxom, and amorous as He. **1678** MARVELL *Def. J. Howe* Wks. 1875 IV. 196, I could not but remark here of The Discourse..how jovial It is and bucksom. **1827** HEBER *Europe* 312 Freedom's buxom blast. **1848** LYTTTON *Harold* I. i, That buxom month.

4. Full of health, vigour, and good temper; well-favoured, plump and comely, 'jolly', comfortable-looking (in person). (Chiefly of women.)

1589 GREENE *Menaph.* (Arb.) 43 A bonny prety one, As bright, buxome and as sheene As was shee. **1608** MIDDLETON *Fam. Love* III. vii, Those ribs shall not enfold thy buxom limbs. **1611** COTGR. s.v. *Matineux*, An earlie man is buxome. **1681** HICKERINGILL *Vind. Naked Truth* II. 22 Those lazy and bucksome Abby-Lubbers. **1683** tr. *Erasmus' Moriae Enc.* 16 My followers are smooth, plump, and bucksom. **1742** GRAY *Ode Eton Coll.*, Theirs buxom health of rosy hue. **1779** JOHNSON *Gray* Wks. 1787 IV. 303 His epithet *buxom health* is not elegant; he seems not to understand the word. **1823** SCOTT *Pevevil* xxi, She was a buxom dame about thirty. **1828**—*F.M. Perth* iii, A buxom priest. **1843** CARLYLE *Past. & Pr.* III. viii. (1872) 153 Fresh buxom countenances. **1873** *S. Sea Bubbles* i. 4 A slight gathering in of her dress..to exhibit her buxom figure to full perfection.

5. Comb., as *buxom-looking*.

1840 BARHAM *Ingol. Leg.* (1858) 77 He..followed a buxom-looking handmaiden into the breakfast parlour.

The standard language recognised by eighteenth-century grammarians was that variety used by what they called ‘the Learned and Polite Persons of the Nation’ (Swift) – *polite* in the sense of *polished, refined, elegant, well-bred*. Here is some evidence on the language of the common people, which also explains why we know much less about the regional, social, and spoken varieties of eighteenth-century English, except what we can infer from novels, plays, letters, and other indirect sources. It was not worth the attention of scholars.

1. Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755)

Nor are all words which are not found in the vocabulary, to be lamented as omissions. Of the laborious and mercantile part of the people, the diction is in great measure casual and mutable; many of their terms are formed for some temporary or local convenience, and though current at certain times and places, are in others utterly unknown. This fugitive cant, which is always in a state of increase or decay, cannot be regarded as any part of the durable materials of a language, and therefore must be suffered to perish with other things unworthy of preservation.

2. Robert Baker, *Reflections on the English Language* (1770)

...*themselves and Families* (from the *Monthly Review*) ... a very bad Expression, though very common. It is mere Shopkeepers cant and will always be found contemptible in the Ears of persons of any Taste.

3. Anselm Bayly, *Plain and Complete Grammar* (1772)

...though sometimes it may be difficult, if not impossible to reduce common speech to rule, and indeed it is beneath a grammarian’s attempt.

4. George Campbell, *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776)

No absolute monarch hath it more in his power to nobilitate a person of obscure birth, than it is in the power of good use to ennoble words of low or dubious extraction; such, for instance, as have either arisen, nobody knows how, like *fib, banter, bigot, fop, flippant*, among the rabble, or like *flimsy*, sprung from the cant of manufacturers.

5. Philip Withers, *Aristarchus* (1788)

My Animadversions will extend to such Phrases only as People in decent Life inadvertently adopt ... Purity and Politeness of Expression ... is the only external Distinction which remains between a gentleman and a valet; a lady and a Mantua-maker (= *dress-maker*).

In eighteenth-century society associations were made between language and birth, rank, wealth, and education. The evidence of the following quotation suggests that, if the language of the common people was considered inferior by the educated upper classes at the beginning of the eighteenth century, then their ideas and thoughts would be similarly devalued.

Art of Speaking, translated from the French of Messieurs du Port Royal (1676, 2nd ed., 1708)

The best Expressions grow low and degenerate, when profan’d by the populace, and applied to mean things. The use they make of them, inflecting them with a mean and abject Idea, causes that we cannot use them without sully’ng and defiling those things, which are signified by them.

But it is no hard matter to discern between the depraved Language of common people, and the noble refin’d expressions of the Gentry, whose condition and merits have advanced them above the other.

In the eighteenth century, the linguistic differences between refined and common speech were held to match fundamental differences in intellect and morality. Language was regarded as ‘the dress of thought’ or the ‘the mirror of thought’. It was believed that there was a direct relationship between good language and good thinking. This view was reinforced by a theory of language called ‘Universal Grammar’. The following quotation illustrates a belief in the direct connexion between language and the mind, or soul, and in the superior value of abstract thought over the senses.

James Harris, *Hermes: or a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Language and Universal Grammar* (1751)

’Tis a phrase often apply’d to a man, when speaking, that *he speaks his MIND*; as much as to say, that his Speech or Discourse is *a publishing of some Energie or Motion of the Soul*....The VULGAR merged *in Sense* from their earliest Infancy, and never once dreaming any thing to be worthy of pursuit, but what pampers their Appetite, or fills their Purse, imagine nothing to be *real*, but what may be *tasted*, or *touched*.

As it was believed that the contrasts between *refined* language of the classically educated class and the *vulgar* language of the common people mirrored equal differences in intellectual capabilities, as well as virtue and morality, such beliefs had *social* and *political* consequences. For instance, the years of the long wars with France (1793-1815) were marked by the political oppression of popular movements for reform. Ideas about language were used to protect the government from criticism. The notion of the *vulgarity of language* became an excuse to dismiss a series of petitions to Parliament calling for reform of the voting system. The following was stated in a contemporary parliamentary debate:

Liberty of speech and freedom of discussion in this House form an essential part of the constitution; but it is necessary that persons coming forward as petitioners, should address the House in decent and respectful language.

Here are short extracts from three petitions to Parliament. The first was presented by ‘tradesmen and artificers, unpossessed of freehold land’ in Sheffield in 1793 and was rejected; the second, by ‘twelve freeholders’ from Reading in 1810, was accepted; the third was presented by non-voters from Yorkshire in 1817. At that time, only men who owned freehold land had the vote.

Petition to Parliament, 1793

Your petitioners are lovers of peace, of liberty, and justice. They are in general tradesmen and artificers, unpossessed of freehold land, and consequently have no voice in choosing members to sit in parliament; – but though they may not be freeholders, they are men, and do not think themselves fairly used in being excluded the rights of citizens...

Petition to Parliament, 1810

The petitioners cannot conceive it possible that his Majesty’s present incapable and arbitrary ministers should be still permitted to carry on the government of the country, after having wasted our resources in fruitless expeditions, and having shewn no vigour but in support of antiquated prejudices, and in attacks on the liberties of the subject...

Petition to Parliament, 1810

The petitioners have a full and immovable conviction, a conviction which they believe to be universal throughout the kingdom, that the House doth not, in any consitutional or rational sense, represent the nation; that, when the people have ceased to be represented, the constitution is subverted; that taxation without representation is slavery...

Exercise

It was charged that the language of the first petition was ‘indecent and disrespectful’, and compare it with another comment made at the time: ‘I suspect that the objection to the roughness of the language was not the real cause why this petition was opposed’. Parliament judged that the language of the second petition, ‘though firm as it ought to be, was respectful’. The Tory minister George Canning said of the third petition: ‘if such language were tolerated, there was an end of the House of Commons, and of the present system of government’. What attitudes do these comments reflect? What is found objectionable about the language of the first and third petitions?

The grammar and spelling of the extracts above are perfectly ‘correct’. In contrast, consider the following example of a letter of protest against the enclosure of common land, written anonymously by ‘the Combin’d of the Parish of Cheshunt’ to their local landowner.

Letter to Oliver Cromwell, Esquire, of Cheshunt Park, 27 February 1799

Whe right these lines to you who are the Combin’d of the Parish of Cheshunt in the Defence of our Parrish rights which you unlawfully are about to disinherit us of... Resolutions is maid by the aforesaid Combind that if you intend inclosing Our Commond Commond fields Lammas Meads Marches &c Whe Resolve before that bloody and unlawful act is finished to have your hearts bloud if you proceede in the aforesaid bloody act Whe like horse leaches will cry give, give until whe have split the bloud of every one that wishes to rob the Inosent unborn. It shall not be in your power to say I am safe from the hands of my Enemy for Whe like birds of pray will prively lie in wait to spil the bloud of aforesaid Charicters whose names and places of abode are as prutrified sores in our Nostrils. Whe declair that thou shall not say I am safe when thou goest to thy bed for beware that thou lifest not thine eyes up in the most mist of flames...

The ideas about the relationship between social class and language use which were so prevalent in the eighteenth century continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here, for example, is the Dean of Canterbury, Henry Alford, writing a book called *The Queen’s English: Stray Notes on Speaking and Spelling* in 1864.

And first and foremost, let me notice that worst of all faults, the leaving out of the aspirate where it ought to be, and putting it in where it ought not to be. This is a vulgarism not confined to this or that province of England, nor especially prevalent in one county or another, but common throughout England to persons of low breeding and inferior education, principally to those among the inhabitants of towns. Nothing so surely stamps a man as below the mark in intelligence, self-respect, and energy, as this unfortunate habit...

As I write these lines, which I do while waiting in a refreshment-room at Reading, between a Great-Western and a South-Eastern train, I hear one of two commercial gentlemen, from a neighbouring table, telling his friend that ‘his *ed* used to *hake* ready to burst’.

One feature of common usage that was taught as an error until quite recently is called the ‘split infinitive’. Here is Dean Alford on the subject:

A correspondent states as his own usage, and defends, the insertion of an adverb between the sign of the infinitive mood and the verb. He gives as an instance, ‘*to scientifically illustrate*’. But surely this is a practice entirely unknown to English speakers and writers. It seems to me, that we ever regard the *to* of the infinitive as inseparable from its verb.