

Language and the Hostility of Time: The Failure of Swift's Prescriptivism in *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*

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Artikkelin aiheena on Jonathan Swiftin (1667–1745) vuonna 1711/2 poikkeuksellisesti omalla nimellään julkaisema ehdotus, että englannin kielen kehitystä valvomaan perustettaisiin Ranskan mallin mukainen akatemia. Julkaisu sijoittuu Swiftin kauteen Englannin hallituksen menestyksekkäänä propagandistina, ja se pyritään tässä artikkelissa sijoittamaan hänen menestyksensä luomaan kontekstiin. Ehdotuksen teksti asetetaan aikakautensa yhteyteen mm. tarkastelemalla sitä vastustanutta John Oldmixonin kiistakirjoitusta. Swiftin normatiivisuutta valotetaan vertailulla konservatiivisen Lontoon piispa Robert Lowthin asenteisiin sekä radikaalin William Cobbettin paljon myöhempään kielen oppaaseen. Swiftin ehdotusteksti epäonnistui tavoitteissaan ja sen todetaan sisältävän Swiftille harvinaisia retorisia ja kontekstuaalisia virheitä. Se edustaa kuitenkin hyvin hänen yleisiä näkemyksiään, jotka tässä artikkelissa tulkitaan pikemminkin pessimistisiksi kuin ihmisvastaisiksi. Swift vastusti kielen muuttumista, jotta kirjailijoiden teokset voisivat säilyä jälkipolville huolimatta kieltä hänen mielestään vaarantavasta poliittisesta ja moraalaisesta korrumpiosta. Hänen tekstinsä ilmaisee huolestuneisuutta, jopa tuskaa, Englannin kielen tulevaisuuden suhteen.

Keywords: Jonathan Swift, normative grammar, language change

1 Introduction: Swift's Tory Proposal

Jonathan Swift's *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1957; orig. publ. 1711/2) is an attempted intervention in the inevitable progress of language change. In the interests of writers hoping for immortality, Swift wants to align English with relatively stable languages where change was slow such as Greek as opposed to languages where the language change was drastic such as Latin which transformed into several languages (1957: 9). To achieve this, he suggests that starting an English Academy on the French model might successfully prevent the threatening ravages of time which he fears are about to make the English spoken in his time obsolete and limit its scope to a few islands off the coast of Europe (1957: 9, 14, 18). The project was ill-starred and ill-advised even though it was inaugurated when Swift's political friends were reaching the height of their power but the ominous rifts between

them had already started to appear (Glendinning 1999: 100–1, Ross and Woolley 2008/1984: xxx). The suggestion itself was taken as partisan and vigorously opposed, and as Swift's friends eventually fell out of power, the English language had to do without an academy, with only the scientifically oriented Royal Society to bolster it, but the success of the language has disproved Swift's dire anticipations. His own prose is still legible largely without commentary except for cultural and political context. In the context of Swift's other writings this text becomes an ironic document in many ways. Some political anxieties of the moment may have influenced the portrayal of language as always under specifically political threat. Swift awkwardly identifies himself as a "projector" or innovator, a class of people he usually hated, and refers to Robert Harley as "Prime Minister" (1957: 17), exposing himself to easy attack by partisan whigs such as John Oldmixon (1970, orig. publ. 1712). Swift had recently defeated one of England's most successful battlefield commanders, the Duke of Marlborough, by the power of the pen as the government's chief propagandist in charge of its political paper *The Examiner*,¹ a feat celebrated by no less a man than Michael Foot (1984). Later as an opposition writer he went on in the 1720s to famously defeat the project of Wood's half-pence in the sensitive issue of exploiting the Irish to provide for one of the King's mistresses. His *Proposal* therefore represents a curious lapse, a failure in an extraordinary career of both subtle and attention-grabbing and often successful intervention.

2 Swift Triumphant

Swift is today celebrated for his most complex texts, written ironically and using complex forms of indirection and subterfuge due to the political obscurity of his early and late years, though he was of course capable of indirect forms of expression even at the height of his access to power. His political views have been subject to voluminous debate, often from an exclusively English perspective, some of the evidence and most of the controversies having to do with the late part of his career when he lived in Ireland under a degree of political suspicion and even surveillance. His Irish identity has been established and celebrated, and we have now moved to interesting discussions of how the Swifts that have been around have been constructed, how the folklore and scholarly lore about Swift and women, Swift and Irishness have been created and questions of Swift and slavery

¹ The most easily available of the *Examiner* essays is No. 16 of 1710, see eg. *Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift* (2010).

have been ignored.² Here I propose to pursue a few ideas about language and its nearly allegorized enemies in the context of a text which by Swiftian standards is fairly univocal. The clear rhetorical goals of *A Proposal* allow me to focus on issues of rhetorical success and unsuccess as well as the issues of pain shown in this interventionary text, usually mentioned in accounts of the history of the English language as an example of linguistic conservatism.

Swift's triumphs include the defeat of the government scheme of so-called Wood's half-pence, an effort by the British government to introduce more coinage in Ireland without any consultation with the Irish at all and through the agency of an individual of low social standing, which was treated as a further insult. After the success of Swift's propaganda in the famous *Drapier's Letters*, a boycott buried the scheme and Swift gained the reputation as an Irish patriot, well discussed by Robert Mahony (1995). Sabine Baltes's thorough account (2003) usefully discusses other texts involved in the pamphlet war against this English financial imposition upon the Irish, giving a broader textual context. Sean D. Moore's discussion (2010) brings in information about the Irish and English book trade and clarifies many of the issues involved in organizing the Irish national debt, an important further issue for Swift who hated debt and opposed English mercantile domination of Ireland. See Swift's 1727 "A Short View of the State of Ireland" for a direct condemnation of mercantilism in Ireland, and for a treatment under erasure, the famously ironic *A Modest Proposal* whose final section treats practical methods of stopping the economic oppression of the Irish Kingdom (as Swift views it) as unrealistic and visionary (1973a, 1973b). The only course of action left was therefore the infamous project of capitalistic and colonial cannibalism, which is even suggestive of the slave trade (see Richardson 2004: 60).

Victoria Glendinning (1999: 97) is critical of the debate regarding Swift's English political position, and her one-page discussion of the issues of Tory and Whig outlines the complex political positioning of an intelligent elite male actively involved in the politics of both church and state at this time and who was for a large part of his life sidelined in provincial Dublin. Today we should probably view Swift's politics from the viewpoint of his church involvement, his personal allegiances and his Irish positioning (see eg. Oakleaf 2003: 32–3) and also Irish constructions of him. Particularly informative is Robert Mahony's

² See Kelly (2002), Mahony (1995), Barnett (2007) and Richardson (2004).

discussion of the Irish perception of Swift: he analyzes Swift's reputation among Catholics, Protestants and in folk narrative (1995, esp. p. 66–88 on the Protestant 'Liberator'). According to him, Henry Grattan had at some point before 1811 included this textual addition to his 1782 speech hailing Irish legislative independence: "Spirit of Swift –spirit of Molyneux –Your genius has prevailed –Ireland is now a nation!" (1995: 78–9). Similarly wide in scope is Kelly's book on various Swifts present in popular culture (2002). For Swift the Irish nation was the Protestant nation, as is clear from his Irish tracts, and this tends to complicate his fame among the Catholic majority of this colonially divided nation.

3 Swift Errant in *A Proposal*: Normative Unsuccess

Swift's surprising failures need to be addressed. Swift uses the term Prime Minister about Robert Harley, a term that was still at that time in disrepute, at the same time presuming to identify what he calls "Your Lordship's duty as Prime Minister" (1957: 17). It was easy for John Oldmixon to pick on the title that still had a French ring to it, with ominous associations of unfree government: "that Novelty the Reverend Author has introduc'd into our Language, where the Term *Prime Minister* has no more a Place than *Will and Pleasure*" (1970: 30). There is an uncertainty of tone in Swift's text in his attitude to Harley, sometimes servile and sometimes overconfident. A similar faux pas is Swift's vacillating reference to himself as a projector while giving mixed signals about projects. Usually Swift was against projectors, and wrote in *A Tale of a Tub* in opposition to innovators and futurists who bore the public with their plans for public benefit in what has been called "a projecting craze" in the late seventeenth century. Oldmixon puts Swift squarely in a category that he was uncomfortable with: "Projectors, like Quacks, promise Wonders" (1970: 34). He insults Swift as the kind of visionary that he had delighted in debunking: "The Doctor may as well set up a society to find out the Grand Elixir, the Perpetual Motion, the Longitude, and other such Discoveries, as to fix our Language beyond their own Times" (1970: 24). Swift had proposed an academy to control the English language while not outlining the methods of appointment, thereby opening himself up to the charge that a government-appointed body was bound to be partisan: Oldmixon regards any potential Whigs on this would-be committee as renegades. Finally he equates the control of language with mind-control: "It will be in vain to pretend to *ascertain* Language, unless they had the secret of setting rules for Thinking and could bring Thought to a Standard too" (1970: 26–7).

Swift does express a normative and prescriptive view on an issue that appears to be a pet peeve, his resentment of what he perceives to be abbreviations. He resents what was then fashionable, the marking of elision in the written form of past tense verbs, “*Drudg’d, Disturb’d, Rebuk’d, Fledg’d*” (1957: 11), a usage that had been extended to be used in prose from poetry where it at least had a metrical function to signal to the reader which of the then current variant pronunciations was to be used. This written usage has in fact since then been dropped. Swift felt that trying to approach spoken usage in this way was pointless because spoken usage on this point varied so much. Swift appears to have had a resentment of abbreviations in general as well as all other efforts to bring the written form closer to the spoken form as a sort of worship of the transient at the expense of long-term intelligibility. Oldmixon deliberately misunderstands the argument, and only refers to Dryden’s poetry, which was clearly not at issue:

I can’t imagine Mr. Dryden’s Poetry will be in any Danger of becoming unintelligible, tho’ he has us’d Abbreviations [sic] as much as any Polite Writer; and will preserve that Character when the Doctor’s is forgotten, unless we should return to our Original Barbarity, as he says we incline to do. (1970: 20)

Oldmixon is clearly right here in identifying the descent to barbarism as one of Swift’s phobias. On the other hand, Swift is right in that the very abbreviations Swift excoriated have made Oldmixon’s text obscure or at least quaint to today’s reader. As a writer, Oldmixon comes nowhere near Swift’s caliber and is frequently tedious, yet his demolition of the superior writer is determined and strong. By associating Swift with other texts widely known to be his, he manages to imply that the seriously intended *Proposal* can be treated lightly. The lack of timeliness of Swift’s proposal seems evident to him, and in a mock-concessive way he suggests that “it may not be improper to wait for some more propitious Opportunity” (1970: 27). Oldmixon reads Swift’s anxiety superficially as “the contempt with which he treats the *English Tongue*” (1970: 31).

In his award-winning biography, David Nokes (1987: 95–8) placed *A Proposal* (which he calls *Proposals*) in the context of other Swiftian projector-pieces, especially his unironic *Project for the Advancement of Religion and the Reformation of Manners*. Nokes compares these both together to Robespierre’s “thoroughgoing apparatus for ensuring the tyranny of virtue” though he regards Swift as torn between conflicting attitudes and only then resorting to a suggestion to impose “greater state regulation and control” (1987: 97). Others proposing an English academy include at least Dryden, Defoe and Joseph Addison (Tieken-Boon van

Ostade 2008: 241) but Oldmixon's view that a dictionary and a good grammar would be more urgently needed, actually won out. Yet a more subtle sense of Swift's position among normativists or prescriptivists requires some points of comparison.

We have traditionally blamed Robert Lowth, Bishop of London for the dogmatic Latin-based prohibition of the double negative. However, according to Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, he actually only included his rule in the second edition of his treatise in 1763; apparently he did not himself use double negatives in his formal letters and it did not occur to him at first to prohibit them despite their occurrence in his native Winchester; apparently the double negative was already on its way out and had to be avoided in order not to reveal a provincial background (2008: 262–3). The issue in the first place is not whether we use the double negative but with its meaning: Lowth explains that two negatives destroy each other and produce a positive, agreeing with earlier opinion, including Benjamin Martin's who had given an algebraic account of this idea in 1748 (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008: 262). Two negations negate each other in Latin, the language of elites, unlike in the scholar's Classical Greek where they express a strong negative, as they did in Old English, and as they continue to do in many forms of colloquial English, though this usage is often stigmatized. Today's descriptively based grammatical advice may need to warn against using double negations on the grounds that recipients find them confusing: since the normative tradition and an extremely long-term colloquial tradition are at odds, a reader or especially a listener may find it hard to tell which is being followed, resulting in radical communicative breakdown since the two available interpretations are exact opposites. Therefore the avoidance of this construction is treated as a signal of educational competence. Some form of standardization was clearly needed. We definitely should not treat the ambiguity of this expression as a mere imposition of Latin precedent by Robert Lowth, a distinguished scholar of the poetic form of the Psalms who here attempts to produce a fixed meaning that would be acceptable in elite discourse and thereafter function as a norm. The Bishop was just trying to be helpful but his conservative normative idiom has exposed him to criticism. A less prescriptive example of the normative tradition is perhaps surprisingly the polymath William Cobbett whose political thinking becomes clear in his *Grammar*.

The English Grammar of William Cobbett in a series of letters addressed to his son is a noteworthy text, written in 1820 and first published by the author in

London in 1829 (1901 edition by Waters used here, orig. publ. 1884). Most of Cobbett's advice appears to me sound for the purposes he assigns to his book in the Dedication: "to give practical effect to the natural genius found in the soldier, the sailor, the apprentice, and the plough-boy" (1901: xii), but I will by-pass the details except for mentioning the fact that the double-negative is discussed with an exercise in the form of an analysis paragraph (1901: 207–8). His examples of bad usage are chosen in an openly political manner from linguistic authorities such as Dr. Johnson and Dr. Watts and from the language of men of power such as the King and Manners Sutton, Speaker of the House of Commons as well as Lord Castlereagh whom he finds obscure and unintelligible (1901: 256–7) and the Duke of Wellington whose style he finds vulgar (1901: 253). The dedication is addressed to Queen Caroline, often known as the Rebel Queen, who is credited with "gallant struggle... against boundless power" (1901: xiv–xv). The point of Cobbett's normative grammar is for aspiring members of the working class to do better than the politically repressive part of the elite who are shown up as unable to write or perhaps even think clearly. The politics involved in normative language thought are therefore quite widely diversified.

Normativism and prescriptivism have a more complex and mixed heritage than my generation sometimes realizes. Having been taught to reject the perhaps schoolmarmish rules imposed upon us in our youth, it was our desire to actually find out how this language was spoken and used. We wanted to start the job by first of all doing the descriptive job properly. Yet in periods of diversity and mobility, such as the eighteenth century and ours, forms of standardization are needed, and at that age normative grammar had a definite role among various other standardizing influences such as the church. Denigrating the forms of standardization of a past era is as much a historical error as trying to stop the clock on language change by imposing normative rules to control the future (Swift's project); our rules are not and could not be their rules, and our standardizing influences such as TV and worldwide popular music could not be theirs either. Among other standardizing forces operative at Swift's time, religion naturally held pride of place for him as a high-standing member of the Anglican clergy, while the enemies to the stability of language are portrayed as corruptions in religion, morality and political freedom.

4 The Friends and Foes of Language

The positive ideals Swift upholds are explicitly identified as preservers of language and sources of a specific “Standard”:

if it were not for the Bible and the Common-Prayer-Book in the vulgar Tongue, we should hardly be able to understand any thing [sic] that was written among us an hundred Years ago,[...] those Books being perpetually read in Churches, have proved a Kind of Standard for Language, especially to the common People. (1957: 14)

Swift frankly idealizes the period beginning from Queen Elizabeth’s time and ending in what Swift calls the Rebellion of Forty-two. After that, the strengths and corruptions of style are for each period directly linked to political and moral values such as the virtues of princes. For particularly benighted periods, strong language is used:

During the Usurpation [Cromwell’s], such an Infusion of Enthusiastick jargon prevailed in every Writing, as was not shaken off in many Years after. To this succeeded the Licentiousness which entered with the Restoration; and from infecting our Religion and Morals, fell to corrupt our Language...” (1957:10)

The connections between wrong-headed religion, bad politics, bad morality and bad language seem so natural to Swift that he hardly needs to explain them, resulting in a stern criticism of all forms of transgression as tending towards similar dangerous barbarity. Generally non-Anglican protestants are given short shrift in Swift who fully supported the Test Act. This strong emphasis on religious unity in the form of Anglicanism should be seen from the political viewpoint, and in light of his aversion to war as a calamitous and wasteful disaster. As Oakleaf put it: “Internal dissension invited foreign invasion, he believed; hence his consistent hostility to factions in the state and sects in religion” (2008: 17). As Oakleaf also pointed out, Swift shared with Hobbes, whom he attacked, a basically negative view of humanity but simply drew different conclusions from it (2008: 16). Yet both in Hobbes and in Swift, the negative view of human potential strengthened an authoritarian strain.

The enemies of language are more numerous and diverse than friends. They include in the Roman period, the spread of empire resulting in geographical and linguistic diversity in individual colonies and provinces and eventually “Invasions of the Goths and Vandals” and in a general sense “revolutions”, meaning rapid political change (1957: 8–9). The highly ambiguous matter of barbarism in

Swift can be seen from the viewpoint of Rawson's important *God, Gulliver and Genocide* (2001) which sets Swift in the context of European genocidal narratives. Genocide cuts in many ways in Swift, for the extermination of alleged savages such as the Yahoos by self-claimed superiors such as the Houyhnhnms has been read in such a variety of ways. There is a lot of large-scale violence in Swift, but the specific genocidal agent in a given passage has to be carefully identified. A clear reference to Spanish colonial practices is not a recommendation whereas its application to similar practices by the British is a more volatile interpretive move: it would have carried a specific danger in times without genuine press freedom. The danger was real, if less for the persistently anonymous Dean, more for the identifiable printer. Swift often borders on the hyperbolic in his hatreds of dissenters and incidentally Scots whom he regularly refers to as dogs. The boundary between exaggeration and violence is permeable, as was shown by Ian Higgins's discussion of a rhetorical tradition of invective (2008). Violence, barbarism and power rhetoric in Swift will continue to fascinate due to their strongly political ambiguities.

The concepts of threat are politically laden: barbarous enemies of Rome, imperial overreach and revolution, but moving closer to his own time and to his concerns as a member of the clergy, Swift goes on to discuss immorality and superficiality in the form of another enemy, fashion in all its guises. Being up-to-date in a short-term and temporary sense was always misguided for Swift who preferred practicality in dress and frankness in manners. Particular threats were "Men of wit and Fashion" and the "licentiousness which entered with the Restoration" (1957: 10). Swift's humour descends to silliness. He softens his strictures on women in this satire of manners by claiming that men's conversation has deteriorated after leaving women out of society and by claiming that women would at least have been better judges of the sounds of language than "illiterate Court-Fops, half-witted Poets, and University-boys" (1957: 13), but women are at fault for dropping their consonants, as is the "corruption of manners and the introduction of foreign [sic] Luxury, with foreign [sic] Terms to express it" –economic and moral corruption in the form of consumerism (1957: 8). The discussion partakes of the tropes of the barbarous north and effeminate south and vowel-favoring women and consonant-happy men, a trope still oddly visited by Jespersen in *The Growth and Structure of the English Language* (1948: 2–4).

Swift's relations with women have occasioned prurient speculation and criticism of his personal conduct. He was rejected by Jane Waring or Varina, and his

conduct occasioned ambiguity in the lives of first Esther Johnson or Stella who may have been his secret wife, since Lord Hardwicke's marriage act of 1753 had not yet come to require marriages to be public, but the motive for secrecy remains obscure, and second Esther Vanhomrigh or Vanessa who expected more than a flirtatious correspondence. Barnett's recent reading of Swift's emotional life seems as compassionate as can be hoped for in regard to eros: "It was the misfortune of first Stella and then Vanessa that after his experience with Varina Swift did indeed keep his happiness, if not all of his writings, within his control" (2007: 68).

5 The Pains of Language

Pain is shown in the very premises of Swift's argument in *A Proposal*. He believes that "our Language is extremely imperfect" and he despairs of what he as a classically trained gentleman thought of as the reward of writers, eternal fame: "The fame of our Writers is usually confined to these two Islands, and it is hard it should be limited in *Time* as much as *Place*, by the perpetual Variations of our Speech" (1957: 14). A similar sense of impending defeat is shown in Swift's awareness of the marginality of his concerns in comparison to the financial concerns that were paramount in Oxford's mind:

The Design of this paper is not so much to offer You *Ways and Means*, as to complain of a Grievance, the redressing of which is to be Your own Work, as much as that of paying the *Nation's Debts*, or opening a Trade into the *South Sea*, and though not of such immediate Benefit as either of these, or any other of your glorious actions, yet perhaps, in future Ages, not less in your honour. (1957: 6)

The future orientation here reveals an almost desperate tone. Swift seldom ironically put his hopes into the future, for his pessimism was more habitual than his purported misanthropy. To do so would have given hostages to fortune, and involved a capitulation to his arch enemy, time. All of the enemies of language here act as the stooges and pathetic sidekicks to Chronos, helping their master destroy whatever of lasting value has been created, expressing a suspicious, pessimistic but simultaneously brave and principled, if conservative, response in a time of rapid change. We should not indict Swift for misanthropy, but certainly regard him as a critic of any optimistic and perhaps futuristic belief in progress.

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