



An English Academy

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Source: *Modern Philology*, Jul., 1910, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Jul., 1910), pp. 107-122

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/432500>

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## AN ENGLISH ACADEMY<sup>1</sup>

Interesting in the annals of English literary and linguistic history is a series of proposals for an English academy. Mention of such proposals is perhaps oftenest met with in connection with the reign of Queen Anne. Then indeed the idea, though by no means new, found its most peculiar and insistent manifestation. Yet the movement toward an academy was not confined to any one period; the proposals extended over some two centuries. They are here brought together in chronological order.

It is customary to associate this movement with the French Academy, founded at the suggestion of Cardinal Richelieu in 1635. Long before that time, however, there had been in England various learned societies, notably a Society of Antiquaries<sup>2</sup> dating from the reign of Elizabeth, 1572. Its founder was Archbishop Parker, and for several years its meetings were held at the house of Sir Robert Cotton. In 1589 it was chartered by the queen as "An Academy for the Studye of Antiquity and History." Its active existence continued into the reign of James. That monarch, for reasons not very clear, possibly on mere suspicion, dissolved the society, probably in 1604. This is apparently the first learned society to enjoy royal favor. Its aims were distinctly historical.

The earliest hint of anything like an authoritative literary society is contained in a letter by Gabriel Harvey to Edmund Spenser, 1580. Harvey has reference chiefly to poetry.

There is no one more regular and iustifiable direction, eyther for the assured, and infallible Certaintie of our English Artificiall Prosodye particularly, or generally to bring our Language into Arte, and to frame a

<sup>1</sup> For the suggestion which led to the preparation of this paper and for a part of the material used, I am indebted to a letter in the *Nation* by Professor Ewald Flügel, of Leland Stanford Junior University, and to replies which that letter brought forth. The extent of this obligation may be seen by reference to the correspondence: *Nation*, LXXIV, 287 (E. Flügel); 306 (H. E. Shepherd); 365 (W. A. Neilson); 406 (Henrietta R. Palmer); 425 (G. L. K[ittredge]).

<sup>2</sup> *Archaeologia*, I, iii. Further details are now available in "A proiect touching a petition to be exhibited unto her Maesty for the erecting of her library & an Academy," which Flügel has printed, from a Cottonian manuscript, in *Anglia*, XXXII, 265 ff. (1909).

Grammer or Rhetorike thereof: than first of all vniuersally to agree vpon one and the same Ortographie.

This he hopes to see "publickely and autentically established, as it were by a generall Counsel, or acte of Parliament."<sup>1</sup> This, however, a mere suggestion thrown out in a private letter, naturally led to no results.

To the same early period belongs a remark of Richard Carew, an antiquary who remembered the society of Elizabeth's time and who knew of academies on the continent. On April 7, 1605, he wrote to Sir Robert Cotton:

It importes no little disgrace to our Nation, that others have so many Academeyes, and wee none at all, especially seeing wee want not choice of wyttes every waye matcheable with theirs, both for number and sufficiency.<sup>2</sup>

In 1616 or 1617 Edmund Bolton (1575-1633), a distinguished and zealous antiquary, came forward with a scheme for a larger society, having in view both antiquarian and literary<sup>3</sup> objects. Through Buckingham he caught the King's ear and presented a petition or plan of organization for a "Corporation Royal to be founded under the title of King James his Academe or College of Honour."<sup>4</sup> This proposed in substance a new honorary order, "an order within the Order of St. George . . . a narrow circle within a large, concentrick," having arms, ribbon, seal, etc. James was impressed so favorably that he added functions not specifically asked for. One of these having his express sanction was that "it should be theirs to authorize all books and writings which were to go forth in print," and "to give the vulgar people indexes expurgatory and expunctory upon all books of secular learning." The society, then, so far as concerned literature, was to pass upon matter rather than manner.

Among the proposed members were many famous in history, science, law, diplomacy, and literature: Edmund Bolton, the originator, George Chapman, Sir Edward Coke, Sir Robert Cotton, Sir

<sup>1</sup> Haslewood, *Ancient Critical Essays*, II, 265.

<sup>2</sup> *Original Letters of Eminent Literary Men*, ed. Sir Henry Ellis, Camden Society (1843), 99.

<sup>3</sup> Bolton's interest in literature and history is attested by his *Hypercritica* (1610-17), in Haslewood, *Ancient Critical Essays*, II, 222 f.

<sup>4</sup> *Archaeologia*, XXXII, 138.

Kenelm Digby, Michael Drayton, Ben Jonson, Inigo Jones, John Selden, Sir Henry Spelman, Sir Henry Wotton.

The proposal dragged along slowly, as everything did at James's court. Before all the steps had been taken James died, March, 1625. Charles was apparently too much absorbed in other matters to give Bolton any encouragement. He considered the plan "too good for the times."<sup>1</sup> The whole scheme therefore finally fell through. Antiquarian interests continued, however, though lacking a permanent bond of union, until George II in 1751 granted a charter to the Society of Antiquaries of London, which still exists. This of course never did anything with language and literature as such.

Of other proposals in the early seventeenth century none had literature and language especially in view; the institutions were to be historical or, like Cowley's, philosophical; and they were to be called colleges, giving instruction as well as opportunities for research.<sup>2</sup> It was not until the Restoration and the consequent renewal of closer social relations with France that the idea of a supreme literary society again sprang up. After the recall of Charles II, writers seeking court favor turned more and more to French literature and French ideals. They knew, of course, of the French Academy, and they saw, or thought they saw, in such an institution a means of improvement. Later attempts, therefore, toward an English academy were more or less imitative. Practically every subsequent proposal specifically refers to the model in France. At any rate, no connection is discernible between the older proposals and those about to be mentioned. Yet even at home the need was felt or fancied, and owing to the peculiar ideas of language then prevalent, continued to be urged. From now on, accordingly, the aim, though often in vague and general terms, was toward "improving" the language.

Meantime the influence of the French Academy had been noted. James Howell wrote in 1650:

The new Academy of Wits call'd l'Academie de beaux esprits, which the late Cardinal Richlieu founded in Paris, is now in hand to reform the

<sup>1</sup> *Archaeologia*, XXXII, 148.

<sup>2</sup> Some account of these may be seen in Weld, *History of the Royal Society*, I, 19 f., 42 f.

French Language in this particular [viz., in orthography], and to weed it of all superfluous Letters; which makes the Tongue differ so much from the Pen. . . .<sup>1</sup>

In 1664 the Royal Society, going outside its customary researches, appointed a committee on the improvement of the English tongue. Of the labors of this committee we have very little record. Among its twenty-one members were Evelyn, Sprat, Dryden, and Sir Peter Wyche; and its meetings were held at Wyche's lodgings in Gray's Inn.<sup>2</sup> We have, however, under date of June 20, 1665, a long letter from John Evelyn to Sir Peter Wyche, chairman of the committee.

After giving his opinion that

the reason both of additions to, and the corruption of the English language, as of most other tongues, has proceeded from the same causes; namely, from Victories, Plantations, Frontieres, Staples of Com'erce, Pedantry of Schooles, Affectation of Travellers, Translations, Fancy and style of Court, Vernility & mincing of Citizens, Pupils, Political Remonstrances, Theatres, Shoppes, &c.,

Evelyn suggests the following means of reform:

1. I would therefore humbly propose that there might first be compil'd a Gram'ar for the Præcepts; which . . . might onely insist on the Rules, the sole meanes to render it a learned & learnable tongue.

2. That with this a more certaine Orthoggraphy were introduc'd, as by leaving out superfluous letters, &c.: such as *o* in Woomen, People; *u* in Honour . . . &c.

3. That there might be invented some new Periods and Accents, besides such as our Gram'arians & Critics use, to assist, inspirit, and modify the Pronunciation of Sentences. . . .

4. To this might follow a Lexicon or Collection of all the pure English-Words by themselves; then those which are derivative . . . then, the symbolical; so as no innovation might be us'd or favour'd; at least till there should arise some necessity of providing a new Edition, & of amplifying the old upon mature advice.

5. That in order to this, some one were appointed to collect all the technical Words. . . .

<sup>1</sup> Howell, *Familiar Letters* (ed. Jacobs, 1892), 510; quoted from ed. 1650 by Flügel, *Nation*, LXXIV, 287, who comments: "Howell writes this to justify his own orthographical 'weeding' out of superfluous letters, and perhaps in the hope of stimulating the foundation of a similar institution in England. It is the same Howell who, in 1630, despaired of calling English 'a regular language in regard, though often attempted by some choice wits, ther could never any Grammar or exact Syntaxis be made of it.'"

<sup>2</sup> Birch, *History of the Royal Society*, I, 499, 500.

6. That things difficult to be translated or express'd . . . . were better interpreted than as yet we find them in Dictionaries. . . . .

7. That a full Catalogue of exotic Words, such as are daily minted by our *Logodædali*, were exhibited. . . . .

8. Previous to this it would be enquir'd what particular Dialects, Idioms, and Proverbs were in use in every several Country of England, for the Words of the present age being properly the *Vernacula*, or Classic rather, special regard is to be had of them.

9. And happily it were not amiss, that we had a Collection of the most quaint and Courtly expressions, by way of *Florilegium*. . . . .

10. And since there is likewise a manifest rotation and circling of Words, which goe in and out like the mode and fashion; Bookes would be consulted for the reduction of some of the old layd-aside words and expressions had formerly *in deliciis*. . . . .

11. Something might likewise be well translated out of the best Orators & Poets, Greek and Latin, and even out of the Moderne Languages. . . . .

12. Finally. *There must be a stock of reputation gain'd by some publiq writings and compositions of the Members of this Assembly, so that others may not thinke it dishonor to come under the test, or accept them for judges and approbators; And if the designe were arriv'd thus far, I conceive a very small matter would dispatch the art of Rhetoric, which the French propos'd as one of the first things they reco'mended to their late Academicians.*<sup>1</sup>

Wyche's efforts came to naught. Only the briefest mention is made of his committee or its work in the *History of the Royal Society* by Birch; none at all in that by Weld; that by Thomson I have been unable to consult. Sprat, who wrote the first history (1667), not only passes over in silence this action by the society, but devotes several pages to his own reflections on the subject. His remark that he has "said nothing but what was before very well known and what passes about in common discourse" indicates that an academy was being somewhat widely discussed. His remarks doubtless reflect contemporary opinion.

But besides, if we observe well the English Language; we shall find, that it seems at this time more then others, to require some such aid, to bring it to its last perfection. The Truth is, it has been hitherto a little

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Henrietta R. Palmer in *Nation*, LXXIV, 406. The letter, modernized in spelling and punctuation, is in the *Diary and Correspondence of John Evelyn* (ed. Bray, 1857), III, 159-62; it is transcribed from the London edition of 1827 in *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. J. E. Spingarn (1908), to whose notes I am indebted for the references to Birch above. There is further mention of the committee in a letter from Evelyn to Pepys (1689), also printed by Spingarn (II, 328f.).

too carelessly handled; and I think, has had less labor spent about its polishing, than it deserves. Till the time of King Henry the Eighth, there was scarce any man regarded it, but Chaucer; and nothing was written in it, which one would be willing to read twice, but some of his Poetry. But then it began to raise itself a little, and to sound tolerably well. . . . if some sober and judicious Men, would take the whole Mass of our Language into their hands, as they find it, and would set a mark on the ill Words; correct those, which are to be retain'd; admit, and establish the good; and make some emendations in the Accent, and Grammar: I dare pronounce, that our Speech would quickly arrive at as much plenty, as it is capable to receive; and at the greatest smoothness, which its derivation from the rough German will allow it.<sup>1</sup>

In a later passage, deploring the ease vanity of fine speaking: . . . that of all the Studies of men, nothing may be sooner obtain'd, than this vicious abundance of Phrase, this trick of Metaphors, this volubility of Tongue, which makes so great a noise in the World,

Sprat explains that the members of the Royal Society have put in execution, the only Remedy, that can be found for this extravagance: and that has been, a constant Resolution, to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style. . . . They have exacted from all their members, a close, naked, natural way of speaking; . . . preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that of Wits, or Scholars" (pp. 112, 113).

Such a resolution would of course have no influence outside of the society.

It is possible also that the committee or the society deemed such work hardly within its field. Weld<sup>2</sup> quotes this note by Robert Hooke (an experimental philosopher), preserved in manuscript in the British Museum and dated 1663.

The business and design of the Royal Society is—

"To improve the knowledge of naturall things, and all useful Arts, Manufactures, Mechanick practises, Engynes and Inventions by Experiments—(not meddling with Divinity, Metaphysics, Moralls, Politics, Grammar, Rhetorick, or Logick)."

How far this was Hooke's private view, whether or not it was shared by his associates, is a matter of conjecture. Yet it is probable that such a limitation was approved by the society as a whole;

<sup>1</sup> Sprat, *History of the Royal Society* (1667), 41, 42.

<sup>2</sup> *History of the Royal Society*, I, 146.



and this may account for the lack of further references to Wyche's committee.

No connection is apparent between Wyche's committee and Bishop Wilkins's *Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*. This work, dedicated to the Royal Society, was presented at a meeting held May 7, 1668,<sup>1</sup> and later in the year was published by order of the society. Wilkins had no hope of seeing his plans carried out; that could be done only by supreme authority, which presupposes a universal monarchy.<sup>2</sup> Wilkins's speculations were suggested by the *Ars Signorum* of George Dalgarno; and he seems to have carried on his work independently of his fellow-scientists.

There were also suggestions from more literary quarters during the same decade. About 1662 the earl of Roscommon formed a plan for refining the language and fixing its standard, the result, presumably, of his residence and observation in France. Just what the plan was is not clear. What is said here is on the authority of Johnson.<sup>3</sup> Johnson adds that Dryden gave his aid.

That Dryden favored an academy we know from his own critical prefaces. In the first of these, the "Epistle Dedicatory to the Rival Ladies" (1664), he says:

I know not whether I have been so careful of the plot and language as I ought; but, for the latter, I have endeavoured to write English, as near as I could distinguish it from the tongue of pedants, and that of affected travellers. Only I am sorry, that (speaking so noble a language as we do) we have not a more certain measure of it, as they have in France, where they have an Academy erected for that purpose, and endowed with large privileges by the present king.<sup>4</sup>

Again, in the dedication of *Troilus and Cressida*, 1679, Dryden hails the earl of Sunderland as the English Richelieu. After order has been restored,

this great and good man will have leisure for the ornaments of peace; and make our language as much indebted to his care, as the French is to the memory of their famous Richelieu. You know, my lord, how he laid the foundations of so great a work; that he began it with a gram-

<sup>1</sup> Birch, *History of the Royal Society*, II, 281.

<sup>2</sup> Wilkins, *Works* (1802), II, 255. This volume contains an abstract of the *Essay*. A reprint of Part III may be found in Techmer's *Internationale Zeitschrift*, IV, 339-73.

<sup>3</sup> *Works* (1825), VII, 167.

<sup>4</sup> *Essays of John Dryden* (ed. Ker), I, 5; *Dryden's Works* (ed. Scott and Saintsbury), II, 134.



mar and a dictionary; without which all those remarks and observations, which have since been made, had been performed to as little purpose, as it would be to consider the furniture of the rooms, before the contrivance of the house. . . . I am desirous, if it were possible, that we might all write with the same certainty of words, and purity of phrase, to which the Italians first arrived, and after them the French; at least that we might advance so far as our tongue is capable of such a standard.<sup>1</sup>

These fond hopes were not realized. Sunderland, like Harley later, was too deep in intrigues to "make the language indebted to his care." Dryden, too, seems to have lost faith.

We have yet [he wrote in 1693] no English *prosodia*, not so much as a tolerable dictionary, or a grammar; so that our language is in a manner barbarous; and what government will encourage any one, or more, who are capable of refining it, I know not: but nothing under a public expense can go through with it. And I rather fear a declination of the language, than hope an advancement of it in the present age.<sup>2</sup>

Progress thus far is slight enough. Some representative men merely suggested an academy as desirable. With suggestion the matter ended. No one came forward with a plan of organization, as did Bolton; there was no concerted action whatever. On the other hand, there was no opposition. The projects simply took no hold upon men's minds. The recommendations were too indefinite to enlist sympathy.

From now on, suggestions took a somewhat more definite form. Writers advocating an academy pointed out specific abuses and corruptions which in their opinion called for correction by supreme authority. The idea did not escape the versatile Defoe, who devotes to it one section of his interesting *Essay on Projects* (1697). In praise of William, Defoe rather exaggerates the importance of an academy. Declaring that

the English tongue is not at all less worthy the labour of such a society than the French, and capable of much greater perfection,

he urges the king

to illustrate [i. e., make illustrious] his memory by such a foundation: by which he shall have opportunity to darken the glory of the French king in peace, as he has by his daring attempts in the war.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Works* (ed. Scott and Saintsbury), VI, 250-52.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, XIII, 118; Ker, II, 110.

<sup>3</sup> *Essay on Projects* (1697), 229, 231.

The work of this society [he continues] should be to encourage polite learning, to polish and refine the English tongue, and advance the so much neglected faculty of correct language, to establish purity and propriety of stile, and to purge it from all the irregular additions that ignorance and affectation have introduced; and all those innovations in speech, if I may call them such, which some dogmatic writers have the confidence to foster upon their native language, as if their authority were sufficient to make their own fancy legitimate.

By such a society I dare say the true glory of our English stile would appear; and among all the learned part of the world, be esteemed, as it really is, the noblest and most comprehensive of all the vulgar languages in the world.<sup>1</sup>

The voice of this society should be sufficient authority for the usage of words, and sufficient also to expose the innovations of other mens fancies; they should preside with a sort of judicature over the learning of the age, and have liberty to correct and censure the exorbitance of writers.<sup>2</sup> . . . .

The exercises of this society would be lectures on the English tongue, essays on the nature, original, usage, authorities and differences of words, on the propriety, purity, and cadence of stile, and of the politeness and manner in writing; reflections upon irregular usages, and corrections of erroneous customs in words; and in short, everything that would appear necessary to the bringing our English tongue to a due perfection, and our gentlemen to a capacity of writing like themselves; to banish pride and pedantry, and silence the impudence and impertinence of young authors.<sup>3</sup>

The chief irregularity which Defoe would have his academy interdict was familiar swearing, "cursory oaths, curses, execrations, . . . which are impertinent, insignificant, foolish," making "a jargon and confusion of speech."<sup>4</sup> His discussion of this point covers ten pages. He then concludes by pointing out how "the manners, customs, and usages of the theater would be decided here; plays should pass here before they were acted, and the criticks might give their censures, and damn at their pleasure; nothing would ever dye which once received life at this original."<sup>5</sup>

This praise of the king finds an echo in the early poetic work of Prior. Dilating upon the coming good and glories of William's rule, he urged the formation of societies of peaceful arts, including

Some that with care true eloquence shall teach,  
And to just idioms fix our doubtful speech;

<sup>1</sup> *Essay on Projects* (1697), 233-34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 238-39.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 250. Defoe discusses also military academies and an academy for women.

That from our writers distant realms may know  
 The thanks we to our monarchs owe;  
 And schools profess our tongue through every land,  
 That has invok'd his aid, or blest his hand.<sup>1</sup>

This brings us to the reign of Anne, the time when correctness<sup>2</sup> was esteemed the chief excellence. Unfortunately those who had much to say did not always practice everything they enjoined. To the theory of correctness, however, they were verbally loyal, until that much-discussed thing became almost a fetish. Someone has mentioned the prim symmetry of Queen Anne gardens, the measured regularity of paths and walls which Pope satirized as

Grove nods at grove, each alley has a brother,  
 visible models for writers. Poets might take their cues from landscape gardeners. While Pope was improving his couplets, prose writers were urging refinements in their art which would have driven it equally far from nature.

Characteristic of the time is an essay by Addison in *Spectator*, No. 135, (August 4, 1711). English, the critic declares, has already too many monosyllables,<sup>3</sup> and this defect is becoming more and more pronounced, *-ed* ceasing to be syllabic, *-s* taking the place of *-eth*, and two or more words being contracted into one (*can't*, *won't*). If this is allowed to continue, to what will the language be reduced? The suppression of the relative also ought to be stopped. Yet "this will never be decided till we have something like an Academy that, by the best authorities and rules drawn from the analogy of language, shall settle all controversies between Grammar and Idiom."<sup>4</sup> As before there was a rhymester to add a benediction.

In happy chains our daring language bound,  
 Shall sport no more in arbitrary sound.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Carmen Seculare* (1700), in Chalmers, *British Poets*, X, 163; quoted by Johnson, *Works*, (1825), VIII, 4.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of correctness in the Popean sense see Conington, *Miscellaneous Writings* (ed. Symonds), I, 2 ff.

<sup>3</sup> This notion was by no means new. Dryden had spoken of English as consisting "too much of monosyllables" (*Works* [ed. Scott and Saintsbury], VII, 237); "We are full of monosyllables" (*ibid.*, VI, 252). And cf. "Our English tongue of all languages, most swarmeth with the single money of monosyllables, which are the only scandal of it" (Nash, *Christ's Tears* [1594], quoted by Emerson, *History of the English Language*, 86).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also *Spectator*, No. 165 (September 8, 1711).

<sup>5</sup> Tickell, *Prospect of Peace* (1712), in Chalmers, *British Poets*, XI, 105; quoted by Johnson, *Works* (1825), VIII, 4.

Meanwhile Swift was reflecting upon the project and directing his efforts in a way which promised success. His first remarks on the subject appeared in *Tatler*, No. 230 (September 28, 1710). This paper he later (February 22, 1712), amplified into a long letter to the lord treasurer (Harley, earl of Oxford), published in the following May under the title, *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue*. This is the only one of his publications to which Swift attached his own name.

Swift's views were those of his time. He added substantially nothing to the discussion; he merely brought the matter more prominently under the eye of authority. He shared with Addison and others an inexplicable aversion to monosyllables; he would preserve as sacred the ultimate vowels in preterits like *disturbed*, *rebuked*. He inveighed against colloquial contractions like *he's*, *I'd*;<sup>1</sup> against clipped forms like *mob*; and especially against slang (*banter*, *bamboozle*<sup>2</sup>) and "cant words, the most ruinous corruptions in any language."<sup>3</sup> These fancied defects render the "language extremely imperfect"; "its daily improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily corruptions";<sup>4</sup> whence Swift is convinced that "if you do not take some care to settle our language, and put it into a state of continuance, I cannot promise that your memory shall be preserved above a hundred years, farther than by imperfect tradition."<sup>5</sup>

To preserve the language against such decay (and incidentally to preserve to future admiring generations the fame of the high and righteous Oxford, as well as his cherished queen—the same plea upon which Defoe urged William to make his reign illustrious), Swift would "fix the language forever." "I see no absolute necessity," he says,<sup>6</sup> "why any language should be perpetually changing."<sup>7</sup> Why not then make English immutable? To this end

A free judicious choice should be made of such persons, as are generally allowed to be best qualified for such a work, without any

<sup>1</sup> These examples are from the *Tatler*; the more general discussion is in the letter to Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> Against these "abominable curtallings and quaint modernisms" Swift protested as late as 1737 (Pope, *Works* [ed. Elwin and Courthope], VII, 362).

<sup>3</sup> Swift, *Works* (ed. Scott), IX, 348.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>7</sup> In quoting this sentence in his letter to the *Nation*, Professor Flügel says: "Perhaps the climax of Swift's statements is contained in the following words, which show how

regard to quality, party, or profession. These, to a certain number at least, should assemble at some appointed time and place, and fix on rules, by which they design to proceed. . . .

The persons who are to undertake this work will have the example of the French before them, to imitate where these have proceeded right, and to avoid their mistakes. Beside the grammar part, wherein we are allowed to be very defective, they will observe many gross improprieties, which, however authorized by practice, and grown familiar, ought to be discarded. They will find many words that deserve to be utterly thrown out of our language, many more to be corrected, and perhaps not a few long since antiquated, which ought to be restored on account of their energy and sound.

But what I have most at heart, is, that some method should be thought on for ascertaining and fixing our language forever, after such alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite. For I am of opinion, it is better a language should not be wholly perfect, than that it should be perpetually changing.<sup>1</sup>

Swift is careful, however, to provide for one means of growth, if only it be by authority.

When I say, that I would have our language, after it is duly correct, always to last, I do not mean that it should never be enlarged. Provided that no word, which a society shall give a sanction to be afterward antiquated and exploded, they may have liberty to receive whatever new ones they shall find occasion for.<sup>2</sup>

This last quotation shows how arbitrary is the whole scheme. Upon being constituted, the academy is to issue a monumental codex expurgatorius, ruling out everything deemed corrupting or incorrect. Thereafter the learned body is to be practically a board

little he knew of the historical conditions of the development of language: 'I see no absolute necessity why any language should be perpetually changing'—a statement, though, which Swift may have merely copied from a man whose name even a modern philologist does not mention without humility and reverence, Bentley, who winds up a paragraph in the *earlier* dissertation (ed. Dyce 2, 13): 'Nay, it were no difficult contrivance, if the public had any regard to it, to make the English tongue immutable, unless hereafter some foreign nation shall invade and overrun it.'" Cf., however, Bentley's previous statement (Dyce, II, 1): "Every living language, like the perspiring bodies of living creatures, is in perpetual motion and alteration; some words go off, and become obsolete; others are taken in, and by degrees grow into common use; or the same word is inverted to a new sense and notion, which in tract of time makes as observable a change in the air and features of a language, as age makes in the lines and mien of a face."

Jebb, in noting the contradiction, says: "The inconsistency, I think, is only apparent. He refers to the English vocabulary as a whole. By 'immutable' he does not mean to exclude the action of time on details of form and usage, but rather points to such a standard as the French Academy sought to fix for the French language" (*Life of Bentley*, 175).

<sup>1</sup> Swift, *loc. cit.*, 355-56.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

of naturalization, passing upon applicants for admission. In these ways English is to be preserved undefiled by foreign taint or native vulgarism. One wonders how such a hater of shams as Swift, one so quick to see through all forms of pretense, could view the august body here proposed as any less a sham than those ridiculed in *A Tale of a Tub*.

Nothing came of Swift's proposal.<sup>1</sup> During the remaining years of Anne, the lord treasurer was too much occupied with plans of which the dean knew nothing; and the death of the queen drove both into retirement.

The idea of an academy seems to have met the approval of Pope, who is said to have drawn up a list of authors whose works might be taken as a basis of a standard dictionary.<sup>2</sup> Orator Henley (1692-1756), whose "gilt tub" Pope ridiculed, proposed among other things that should "cultivate, adorn, and exalt the genius of Britain," "to lay the foundations of an English Academy, to give a standard to our language and a digest to our history."<sup>3</sup> In 1751 John Boyle, earl of Orrery,<sup>4</sup> in mentioning Swift's tract, desired an institution to legislate against corruptions. Some power, he says, there should be to prevent the English from marring the Lord's Prayer with a violation of grammar. Chesterfield deemed an academy desirable.<sup>5</sup> These references show how generally the notion haunted men's minds.

But the time was now at hand when other views should prevail, when an authority actually wielding greater power than an English academy could have maintained should give weight and vogue to saner counsels. However we may estimate Dr. Johnson's knowledge of the life and growth of language, we must applaud his common-sense. This told him that all efforts to regulate and eternally fix a living speech must be futile; and against such futility he often spoke out roundly and soundly. First in point of time are his

<sup>1</sup> In letters to Archbishop King, Swift often mentions his proposal. On September 30, 1712, he wrote: "My lord treasurer has often promised he will advance my design of an academy; so have my lord keeper, and all the ministers . . . but perhaps it may all come to nothing" (*Works* [ed. Sheridan and Nichols, 1813], XV, 241).

<sup>2</sup> Murray, *Evolution of English Lexicography*, 38.

<sup>3</sup> D'Israeli, *Calamities of Authors* (1865), 65.

<sup>4</sup> *Remarks on Swift* (1752), 99.

<sup>5</sup> *World*, No. 100 (November 28, 1754).



observations in *The Plan of an English Dictionary* (1747). Here he notes that in language "the first change will naturally begin by corruptions of the living speech"; that by the arrangement of his dictionary "the reader will be informed of the gradual changes of the language"; and, still more to the point:

Thus, my Lord, will our language be laid down, distinct in its minutest subdivisions, and resolved into its elemental principles. And who upon this survey can forbear to wish, that these fundamental atoms of our speech might obtain the firmness and immutability of the primogenial and constituent particles of matter, that they might retain their substance while they alter their appearance, and be varied and compounded, yet not destroyed?

But this is a privilege which words are scarcely to expect: for, like their author, when they are not gaining strength, they are generally losing it. Though art may sometimes prolong their duration, it will rarely give them perpetuity; and their changes will be almost always informing us, that language is the work of man, of a being from whom permanence and stability cannot be derived.<sup>1</sup>

In Johnson's later utterances we get more explicit references to an academy, and some pointed criticisms on earlier proposals. Thus in the Preface to the *Dictionary* (1755):

Swift, in his petty treatise on the English language, allows that new words must sometimes be introduced, but proposes that none should be suffered to become obsolete. But what makes a word obsolete, more than general agreement to forbear it? and how shall it be continued, when it conveys an offensive idea, or recalled again into the mouths of mankind, when it has once by disuse become unfamiliar, and by unfamiliarity displeasing? . . . .

If an academy should be established for the cultivation of our stile, which I, who can never wish to see dependance multiplied, hope the spirit of English liberty will hinder or destroy, let them, instead of compiling grammars and dictionaries, endeavour, with all their influence, to stop the license of translatours.<sup>2</sup>

To this subject Johnson devoted a few paragraphs in the sixty-first *Idler* (June 16, 1759). Here, after explaining Dick Minim's

<sup>1</sup> Johnson, *Works* (1825), V. 12. One other passage should be noted. "A new pronunciation will make almost a new speech; and, therefore, since *one great end of this undertaking is to fix the English language*, care will be taken to determine the accentuation of all polysyllables by proper authorities, as it is one of those capricious phenomena which cannot be easily reduced to rules" (8). The words in italics have sometimes been quoted as showing that Johnson at this time held views similar to Swift's. The two paragraphs above seem to point more conclusively the other way.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson regarded "frequency of translation" as "the great pest of speech."



plan for an academy of criticism, Johnson sarcastically remarks that Dick's hopes will not be realized "till some happy conjunction of the planets shall dispose our princes or ministers to make themselves immortal by such an academy." This implies that the "happy conjunction" will coincide with the Greek Kalends.

Finally, in the *Lives of Poets* we get a somewhat more sober, definitive pronouncement.

The certainty and stability which, contrary to all experience, [Swift] thinks attainable, he proposes to secure by instituting an academy; the decrees of which every man would have been willing, and many would have been proud to disobey, and which, being renewed by successive elections, would, in a short time, have differed from itself. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Such a society might, perhaps, without much difficulty, be collected; but that it would produce what is expected from it, may be doubted. . . .

In this country an academy could be expected to do but little. If the academicians' place were profitable, it would be given by interest; if attendance were gratuitous, it would be rarely paid; and no man would endure the least disgust. Unanimity is impossible, and debate would separate the assembly.

But suppose the philological decree made and promulgated, what would be its authority? In absolute governments, there is, sometimes, a general reverence paid to all that has the sanction of power, and the countenance of greatness. How little this is the state of our country needs not to be told. We live in an age in which it is a kind of publick sport to refuse all respect that cannot be enforced. The edicts of an English academy would, probably, be read by many, only that they might be sure to disobey them. . . .

The present manners of our nation would deride authority.<sup>2</sup>

Nowhere, perhaps, has anyone better stated the dangers of an academy, or anticipated the spirit in which its solemn decrees would be received by English-speaking people.<sup>2</sup> Johnson in effect has summarized the whole matter. An academy such as here projected is doomed to failure by the very nature of the task. A living language cannot be cramped into the narrow mold made by an organization necessarily limited. Conclusions reached could be

<sup>1</sup> *Works* (1825), VIII, 202.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 167. Cf. Arthur Murphy's comment on this passage in Hill, *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, I, 436 f.

<sup>3</sup> Many will recall the newspaper ridicule heaped upon the Board of Geographic Names, created upon request by President Harrison. The movement toward simplified spelling is too recent to call for comment.

promulgated only as recommendations, never as statutes. Fancy the English-speaking world obeying a mandate upon the omission of the relative. Finally, many, perhaps most, of the questions to be decided would be matters of taste; and taste cannot be regulated by official proclamations. Imagine any body of men conscientiously eliminating "harsh" words complained of by Swift; or admitting, as such, "smooth" words from the female dialect. To outsiders, such a body, however well intentioned, would appear an association of pedants, and be respected accordingly. Justified indeed was Johnson's faith in the spirit of English liberty.

Johnson's dicta put an end to the discussion for many years to come. "He banished," says Professor Flügel, "for at least a hundred years the dreams of regulating the language." With him, therefore, the present investigation may well be closed.

Extended comment by way of conclusion seems unnecessary. The quotations for the most part speak for themselves. Hence I content myself with one general observation.

With respect solely to these proposals, it is perhaps fortunate that the first Hanoverian kings and their ministers gave little heed to literature. It is of course idle to speculate on what might have happened had Queen Anne lived longer, or had George I retained the Tories in power. It is doubtless true, however, that of all the proposals those of Anne's time were assured of the most sympathetic hearing; that an English academy came nearest to founding when Swift penned his letter to Oxford. Had his party survived the change and his influence continued, his cherished dream might have been realized; English grammar might not have had to wait for Lindley Murray; and a safe haven might have been provided for present-day toiling purists. Fortunately the Augustan Age, with its vast possibilities, ended in 1714.

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