The Fictionality of Standard English. Construction of Language Norms in 17th- and 18th-Century Britain

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Abstract
Discourse promoting language standardisation attempts to establish an ideology behind the selection and acceptance of a variety by creating a pedigree for the standard, and at the same time, obscuring variation and condemning other varieties, often through the construction of categories such as purity, antiquity and beauty. The paper analyses some crucial aspects of these constructions in the discourse of grammarians, intellectuals, and literary authors, who used several text-types and rhetorical schemata to convey concepts related to language ideology, language policy and language attitudes. In Britain, the first opportunity to develop these arguments corresponds to the time of early colonisation, but the full bloom of such rhetorical strategies came later. With a stronger monarchy, new explorations overseas, the gradual annexation of the Celtic areas and an increased internal stratification of society, 17th- and 18th-century Britain was an ideal terrain for the development of these ideologies.

Key-words: language ideology; historical sociolinguistics; meta-discourse.

1. The Rhetoric of Standardisation

The processes involved in the various phases of standardisation[1] bring with them the establishment of a hierarchy of language forms, in which there is a varying degree of association between linguistic items and social, geographic, economic and political factors. The discourses constructing this association are the result of the ideologies and cultural tendencies of the age producing them (Armstrong and Mackenzie 2013), as well as of the metaphors and mental processes that prevail in

[1] For a useful review of the most common definitions of such process and its phases, see e.g. Nevalainen and Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2006.

the relevant cultural and social environment[2]. In turn, language takes on important representative values both in becoming emblematic of other processes, social dynamics and socio-political anxieties and insecurities, and in creating a further measure of discrimination and stratification within society. The present contribution aims at highlighting some of these rhetorical associations, and at tracing some of the related discourses, as they emerge from English texts belonging to various genres in the 17th and 18th centuries[3].

In the case of the establishment of standard English, first and foremost in Britain, but later also in the US and in other English-speaking communities, the influx of ideologies and beliefs on language-related discourse is more visible than in other countries; from a relatively early stage onwards, language has been selected in the community as one of the main foci for the conveying of political and social values, and for the catalysing of several facets of social conflict. While all European societies have developed, at different stages in time, a set of rhetorical strategies to employ language within the processes of nation-building (for a recent collection of papers on such issues see Putzu and Mazzon 2012), of cultural self-representation and identity-development, and of managing internal and external conflicts with *neighbouring* cultures (minorities, *enemies*, border-communities, etc.), Britain faced from relatively early on the confrontation with *the Other* in a pre-colonial perspective, i.e. in the relation with the Celtic areas, which was the first contact-conflict situation to be instrumental in the creation of a language rhetoric, at a time which precedes standardization of English itself (see for instance Crowley 2000; 2005; Gray and Mazzon 2011).

These discourses have been described effectively by Watts (2011) as *language myths*, narratives that contribute to the association between varieties and extra-linguistic values, in such a way as to foster the ideology and the belief-system of specific social groups: in this sense, discourse about language is then transformed into an overarching metaphor standing for other values. Among these myths are:

[2] At least, according to cognitively oriented constructionism, see e.g. Elder-Vass (2012: 10-16).

[3] Although many of the early works mentioned here are now available in digitised form, direct quotations in the present paper are often from secondary sources. See Crowley (2000; 2005).

(1) Reconstructing a *pedigree* for the standard variety and/or the national language, narrating a glorious past – this myth inspired most early philology until the 20th century, including evolutionistic accounts and figurations such as the *Stammbaum*. The purpose is to create a unilinearity in the history of a language which, in spite of undergoing dramatic typological changes, is still called *English* – the very projection of this name backwards in time expresses the anxiety of reconstructing a line of descent[4]. Another strand of this myth is actually the claim of the antiquity of English, already voiced in the late 17th century. Richard Verstegan claimed in 1605 that the source of the "English-Saxon language" was clearly recognisable: "This language vndoubtedly is that which at the confusion of Babel, the Teutonic people […] did speak". Although English was not the language that Adam spoke, as others maintained, Verstegan continued: "yf the Teutonic bee not taken for the first language of the world, it cannot bee denied to bee *one of the most ancientest of the world*" (quotations from Bailey 1991: 38)[5].
(2) Defining *real* English, setting the boundaries of prestigious varieties through concepts of *true/authentic* vs. *false*. This myth inspired most prescriptive trends (with a major impact on educational systems), as well as exclusivist discourse on alternative varieties. One early example of this rhetorical strand is offered by Alexander Gil, who in his 1621 essay described and assessed several dialects, and concluded that

> [a]mong all dialects, none is so flavoured with barbarism as the western; among the country fold in the rural parts of Somerset, one can readily question *whether they are even speaking English or some foreign idiom*. (quoted from Bailey 1991: 46)

(3) Establishing the value of *purity* (closely related to racial discourse) vs. *mixture*, which also inspired negative prejudice against pidgins and creoles and reinforced resistance to borrowing in the German-speaking areas, at least until the Second World War (Martyn 1997). One early example is the dispute over the so-called *inkhorn terms* and the tendency of the English language to accept

[4] On the importance of naming and labelling languages in this key, see Mazzon, Deidda, Dongu, Gray 2012: 81-85.
[5] Here, as in the following quotations unless otherwise specified, I have italicised relevant parts.

loanwords, particularly during and after the Renaissance. While Mulcaster characterised borrowing as a sign of English "intelligence and wit" as early as 1582, William Barnes labelled it as "proof of national inferiority" as late as 1830 (Bailey 1991: 59, 193).

The later transplantation of English to various territories gave rise to a number of disparaging comments on the dangers of (genetic, cultural, but also linguistic) mixture; in fact, such discourse was anticipated by that on language contact in Ireland, the first territory of experimentation of colonial ideologies (Gray and Mazzon 2011: 39-40), although it was developed fully only much later, as we see from the following remarks by travellers from the second half of the 18th century (quoted from Bailey 2010: 183):

> The very Propriety and Accent of the *English* language were quite corrupted in this Island [Jamaica], by *conversing so much* with *Mulatoes* and *Negroes*, for they were *so closely intermixed*, that they suckled, eat [sic], drank, and lay together; wherefore their Tempers and Manners may be very easily accounted for. (1747; words italicised in the original)

> The Africans [just arrived in Jamaica] speak their respective dialects, with *some mixture broken English*. The language of the Creoles is *bad English larded with the Guiney dialect* […] The better sort are very fond of improving their language, by catching at any hard word that the Whites happen to let fall in their hearing; and they alter and misapply it in a strange manner. (1774)

In the following pages I discuss examples of such myths, particularly those produced at a time in which Britain, like most of Europe, was having to deal on the one hand with rapid internal transformation in social structures induced by the pre-industrial and early industrial age (including urbanisation, expanded literacy and text-production, and internal migration), and on the other hand with negotiation of identity with the inhabitants of the Celtic areas, the settlers of the American continent, and the highly differentiated communities of the mercantile and colonial world[6].

With the exception of Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesy* (1589), which suggested a "best rule" for the standard (Blank 1996:

[6] Contrasting and (implicitly or explicitly) comparing English with other European languages is also part of these processes.

8), before the 17th century, although comments on language variation abound, one variety is rarely indicated as better than another. Shakespeare and other literary writers used localised (especially Celtic and south-western) speech variants as vehicles of (usually negative) stereotypes (Blake 1981: 80-92). During the 17th and especially in the 18th century, there was a gradual change in the conceptualisation of language itself, and a unified form of language was increasingly identified as a marker of a unified society (Machan 2009: 200-201). Thus, variation, change, and any form of language mixture became *aberrations* that good, healthy and powerful nations should be able to avoid by protecting their language. These arguments often meant the construction of rhetorical schemata aimed at establishing the value of *good English*. Three strands of discourse will be examined and exemplified in what follows.

2. The "Bad Savage" vs. "Good Savage" Argument

This discourse tradition refers to the well-known narrative of the superiority of the European traveller/settler vis-à-vis the so-called primitives; the somewhat fantasy-driven depiction of the *savage* often extends to their language, which is seen as inferior to that of the European settler or traveller. Blakemore's *The Nature of Man* (1711, quoted from Goetsch 1988: 341) provides an example:

> So *void of Sense* the Hottentot is found,
> Whose Speech is *scarce articulated Sound*,
> That 'tis disputed, if his doubtful Soul
> Augment the Human or the Brutal Roll.

That there could be no comparison between such languages and English is clarified for instance by Buchanan, who in his *British Grammar* (1762; quoted from Smith 1984: 9) claims that to say the English verb system is simple, for instance, is tantamount to affirming

> that the English Language is nothing superior to that of the Hottentots; and that the wisest and most respectable Body of People upon the Face of the Globe, *own a language which is incapable of ascertaining their ideas*, or of exhibiting the Soul, and its various Affections.

This ideological stance is echoed in reverse in *Gulliver's Travels*

(1726), where the Englishman becomes the *language slave* and is portrayed as savage and barbaric:

> My only concern is, that I shall hardly be able to do Justice to my master's Arguments and Expression, which must needs suffer from my Want of Capacity, as well as by a Translation *into our barbarous English*. (Fox (ed.) [1726] 1995: 167)

Several decades earlier, Dryden had already written in the *Epistle Dedicatory* to *Troilus and Cressida* (1679): "But how barbarously we yet write and speak your Lordship knows and I am sufficiently sensible in my own English." (quoted by Frank 1982: 229; see also Jones 1953: 7-8). This reversal, however, only confirms the ideological stance behind it, where the only element announcing the rhetoric of the good savage arising in the following period is determined by the alleged ability of *primitive* languages to express passions (Goetsch 1988). In an age such as Swift's, dominated by the idea that a civilised language should be fit to express rationality, and should reflect in its structure the intellectual progress of the nation (an idea that Swift also satirised in his passages on language in the Grand Academy of Lagado in Part III of *Gulliver's Travels*, but that he otherwise supported), the notion that a language is only fit to express emotions clearly made its speakers inferior, indeed hardly human. This is stressed by Sheridan (1762: 156) in his *Dissertations:*

> As the natives of such countries, *are little more than mere animals*, so have they scarcely the use of any other but their animal faculties; and *they have little more benefit from the use of speech, than what animals have in the natural language of the passions, which they enjoy in common with them, and in equal perfection*.

This is also shown in *Gulliver's Travels*, since the language of the Houyhnhnms is said to "express the Passions very well", but to lack many words – in Swift's account, this ultimately means that they have no way of lying and that their world lacks all the complications of refinement that are assessed negatively in his own society; still, this language can be classified as primitive, in the same way as the Houyhnhnms represent the Noble Savage. For instance, the language of the Houyhnhnms is compared to Dutch, a language

that elsewhere in the book is termed "jabbering" and clearly has negative connotations in terms of politeness and refinement[7]. The capacity for abstract and rational thought was deemed the worthiest development for a human community and this was reflected in the corresponding development of their language. "Development" was seen in the abundance of "particles" and in the "rich inventory" of sounds, letters, and words (Smith 1984: 115). This strand also encodes a rhetoric of progress, in which languages and cultures proceed from a barbarous stage to becoming *civilized* (Beach 2001: 122).

The same rhetoric applies not only to language but also to literature, as exemplified for instance in Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774) in which he claims to trace

> the *progress* of our national poetry, from *a rude origin and obscure beginnings*, to its *perfection in a polished age* (quoted from Connell 2006: 182)

The Celtic languages and their varieties of English are among the most common objects of discrimination in terms of the *bad savage* – along with their alleged rudeness (especially in the image of the *rude Scots*: see Lauzon 2008: 160; Jones 2010: 224-230). Their speech was considered uncouth and undignified to the point of being gibberish and they were described as subhuman (Gray and Mazzon 2011; Mazzon, Deidda, Dongu, Gray 2012: 143-164). The Celtic languages were compared to some sort of sickness which should thus be eradicated, and their English *purified* and standardised. Such a comparison had already been drawn in the 16th century:

> the Irish language was free dennized in the English pale: this *canker* tooke such deepe roote, as the body that before *was whole and sounde was by little and little festered*, and in maner wholy *putrified*. (Richard Stanihurst, 1577, quoted from Palmer 2001: 42)

> Now whereas Irelande hath beene, by lawfull conquest, brought under the subjection of Englande, not onelye in king Henry the second his reigne, but also as well before as after […] & the conquest hath béene so absolute and perfect, that all Leinster, Méeth, Ulster, the more parte of Connaght and Mounster, all the civities & burroughes in Irelande, have béene wholly

[7] This characterisation is obviously related to the long history of ambivalent, and often conflictive, political and military relations between Britain and the Netherlands.

Englished, and with Englishe conquerours inhabited, is it decent, thinke you, that theyr owne auncient native tongue shal be shrowded in oblivion, and suffer the enemies language, as it were *a tettarre, or ring worme, to herborow it self within the jawes of Englishe conquerours*? no truely. (Richard Stanihurst, 1577, quoted from Blank 1996: 146)

[Now that] the vulgar English tongue be universally planted, *the Irish language*, which is one of the chief and principal causes of the continuance of *barbarity and incivility* amongst the inhabitants of the Isles and Highlands, may be *abolished and removed.* (*Irish Act for the English Order, Habite, and Language*, 1537; quoted from Machan 2009: 165)

This argument persisted until much later and was still echoed by Matthew Arnold:

The sooner the Welsh language disappears as an instrument of the practical, political, social life of Wales, the better; the better for England, the better for Wales itself. (1867; quoted from Machan 2009: 65)

These arguments were reversed when the good savage spirit began to spread. As Horne Tooke wrote at the very end of the 18th century:

Savage languages are upon an equal footing with the languages (as they are called) of *art*, *except that the former are less corrupted*. (quoted by Smith 1984: 124)

This reversal is eminently expressed by the Ossian controversy (see Connell 2006), which was an attempt to incorporate the distant past into a common heritage and thereby appropriate the potentially centrifugal Celtic strands, and the reactions to this attempt. Through this debate, Scottish and Irish intellectuals tried to construct a common heritage and to raise the status of the Celtic languages and Celtic varieties of English[8]. Partly connected with that aim was the theory that American Indians spoke languages etymologically related (or even recognisably similar) to Celtic languages. One example is a letter allegedly written by the Governor of Virginia, Major General Richard Bennett, who was captured by

[8] This attempt included a reversal of some of the same myths used within standardisation, such as the longevity, antiquity and purity of the Celtic languages (Luzon 2008: 263-265).

the Tuscorara [sic] Indians. The next day, they entered into consultation about us, which after it was over the interpreter told us that we must prepare to die the next morning. Thereupon, being much dejected, and speaking to this effect in the British [Welsh] tongue: 'Have I escaped so many dangers and must I now be knocked on the head like a dog?' Presently an Indian came to me, and took me and *told me in the British tongue* that I should not die, and thereupon went to the Emperor and agreed for my ransom. (1740, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, quoted from Lauzon 2008: 253)

Such accounts encouraged the organisation of several expeditions and countless discussions between supporters of a uniformitarian view of *the savage*, and were thus absorbed into the rhetoric of the *rude Scots* versus the *authentic British*, in which intellectuals like Hugh Blair played a major part (Blair 1763; Connell 2006; Lauzon 2008: 251-252). Blair, for instance, not only used the myth of antiquity (1763: 20), but also recovered the value of the expression of passions. He saw the incapability of so-called primitive languages to express rational ideas as the source of poetic expressivity within the *genius* of the language (Blair 1763: 2, 53).

3. The "One Is Good, Several Is Bad" Argument

The importance of a visibly unified language for the development of national identity was significant at different stages of British history and was also effectively transferred to America, especially through the words and works of Noah Webster. His role was later nostalgically evoked by a 1857 newspaper article:

Here, *five thousand miles change not the sound of a word*. Around every fireside, and from every tribune, in every field of labor, and every factory of toil, *is heard the same tongue*. We owe it to Webster. (quoted from Machan 2009: 177)

What we find in Webster's writings clearly confirms this:

Our political harmony is therefore concerned in a uniformity of language. As an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as in government. … besides this, *a national language is a band of national union*. (quoted in Crowley 1996: 47)

It is often noted that language variation is already remarked upon before the completion of standardisation, such as in Caxton's

Preface to Eneydos (quoted from Jones 1953: 5; see also Machan 2009: 220-221), usually without much negative judgement. In 1586 Richard Carew viewed this diversity (including that between different sociolects) as "copiousness", one of the most laudable features of a developed language (Watts 2011: 134):

> Moreover *the copiousness of our Language appeareth in the diversity of our Dialects*, for we have Court and we have Countrey English, we have Northern and Southern English, gross and ordinary, which differ from each other […] and express the same thing in divers sorts.

However, a polarity developed between the ideas of "pure South" vs. "corrupted North", a difference often attributed to corruption generated by mixture and, among other factors, by climate differences (Watts 2011: 123-128). There are well-known precedents for this, such as the 14th-century *Polychronicon* by Ranulph Higden:

> Tota lingua Northimbrorum, maxime in Eboraco, *ita stridet incondite*, quod nos australes eam vix intelligere possumus; quod puto *propter viciniam barbarorum contigisse* [The whole language of the Northumbrians, especially in York, *hisses so confusedly* that we of south can scarcely understand it, so that I supposed *to have bordered on the vicinity of the barbarians*]. (quoted in Watts 2011: 124-125)

The prejudice against northern English goes back earlier, to Giraldus Cambrensis at the end of the 12th century (Mazzon, Deidda, Dongu, Gray 2012: 87), and continued down to Johnson, Sheridan, and Lord Monboddo and beyond (Smith 1984: 29; Beach 2001: 125). However, at the beginning of the 18th century this was just one strand of discussion, the drive for unification being so strong and urgent (particularly in relation to nationalism) that this polarity was surpassed by a tendency to condemn all types of variation, both the "barbarous North" and the "effeminate South" (Tiusanen 2012: 343). These language variants did not comply with the norms of the new standard and therefore represented a threat to national unity. As Blank (1996: 8) explains:

> [b]y a "common language" […] Renaissance authors intend a national language – an English pertaining, by consensus, to the "whole countrey". This language, also described by contemporaries as "pure" English or

"true" English, was rhetorically distinguished from "uncommon" dialects in terms that suggest that they are not English at all, but rather "strange", "counterfeit", or "foreign".

It is therefore clear that even before the 18th century, *real* English was identified with a unified form that would represent the growing nation, *as opposed to* foreign or provincial expressions (Di Martino 1984: 119). Thus, in the *Preface* to his dictionary, Dr Johnson wrote that English had been neglected because it had been

suffered to spread, under the direction of chance, into *wild exuberance*, resigned to *the tyranny of time and fashion*, and exposed to the *corruptions of ignorance, and caprices of innovation*. (Johnson 1755: *Preface*)

A common language became desirable for political reasons. Once again, the otherness of the Celtic regions was brought to the fore by Sheridan in his *Letters on Elocution* (1762: 115)[9]:

Thus not only the Scotch, Irish, and Welsh, have each their own idioms, which uniformly prevail in those countries, but almost every county in England, has its peculiar dialect. Nay in the very metropolis two different modes of pronunciation prevail, by which the inhabitants of one part of the town, are distinguished from those of the other. One is current in the city, and is called the cockney; the other at the court-end, and is called the polite pronunciation. As amongst these various dialects, one must have the preference, and become fashionable, it will of course fall to the lot of that which prevails at court, the source of fashions of all kinds. *All other dialects, are sure marks, either of a provincial, rustic, pedantic, or mechanic education; and therefore have some degree of disgrace annexed to them*.

[9] Compare his quite different view of language variation in Greece, where the existence of dialects is seen as strongly positive, as a consequence of the persisting sense of cultural subalternity towards the classical languages and cultures: "[T]he different dialects of Greece, were not like ours, corruptions, or deviations from propriety; no, *they were rather peculiar beauties, which each state was proud of, and cultivated with care*; and nothing but vanity in the other states, could prevent their being adopted into general use, and all made part of the mass of one language. And we find that several of their most eminent writers, made this use of them with great success; and that their works were much ornamented, by *the agreeable variety* which this introduced." (Sheridan 1762: 143)

This diversification should be eliminated:

> [I]t cannot be denied that an uniformity of pronunciation throughout Scotland, Wales and Ireland, as well as through the several counties of England, would be a point much to be wished; as it might in a great measure contribute to destroy those *odious distinctions between subjects of the same king*, and members of the *same community, which are ever attended with ill consequences, and which are chiefly kept alive by difference of pronunciation and dialects.* (Sheridan 1762: 206)

Thus, differentiations in speech became the epitome of negativity, an opposition that sooner or later would also be encoded as the difference between *vulgar language* and *refined language*, employing a concept of variation that in turn clearly reflected cultural conflict:

> Such extreme concepts dismissed everyone except the classically educated as an identifiable group characterized by their incapacity for refined thought and moral behaviour. Varieties of social class and modes of education were disregarded as diverse groups of people were reduced to one, most disreputable kind. […] Arguments stressing that vulgar and refined language were the same language were invariably written by radical thinkers. (Smith 1984: x).

The whole period therefore shows a tendency to move away from an idea of plurality as an asset to that of uniformity as the primary value, to the extent that language variation was condemned precisely because it was visible proof of social stratification.

4. The "Fix it and Keep it" Argument

Until the Renaissance and partly also afterwards, the prevailing idea was that English was inferior to the classical languages, and also inferior to those of France and Italy (Jones 1953: 7-10). By the end of the 16th century, however, this attitude began to be reversed, and a rhetoric of the dignity and even of the superiority of English as a national language was built, with arguments that connected the progress of the language with that of the nation. These claims of superiority can be found at the beginning of the 17th century: Richard Carew's *Epistle concerning the Excellencie of the English Tongue* (1605) and the derivative V*index Anglicus, or the Perfections of the English Language Defended and Asserted* (1644) already reveal

in their titles that the perception of English has shifted to that of a dignified language which has developed enough to be preserved and spread beyond the realm. This trend reached a peak in the last decades of the 17th century. In 1674, Fairfax wrote:

> Yet I verily believe that there is *no tongue under heaven that goes beyond our English* for speaking manly strong and full. (quoted from Frank 1982: 221)

The damage created by the mixture of various elements, it is argued, has been overcome, and the progress of the language can be resonantly celebrated, as in Thomas Heywood's *An Apology for Actors* of 1612:

> our *English* tongue, which hath ben *the most harsh, vneuen, and broken language of the world*, part *Dutch*, part *Irish*, *Saxon*, *Scotch*, *Welsh*, and indeed *a gallimaffry of many*, but perfect in none, is now by this secondary means of playing, *continually refined*, euery writer striuing in himselfe to adde a new flourish vnto it; so that in processe, *from the most rude and vnpolisht tongue, it is growne to a most perfect and composed language*. (quoted in Bailey 1991: 47-48)

Excellence in the language indicated the greatness of a nation, and the model of Latin, with its attainment of *perfection*, continued to be the paradigm. The aim was to create a classical language, on a par with Latin and Greek (the related arguments are analysed in Beach 2001), which could also become a model to be taught and spread to bring *civilization* to new territories[10]. Once the language was thought to have reached excellence, the need arose to keep it in that condition and preserve it from decay, a need already voiced by William Bullokar in the 1580s:

[10] The importance of language teaching and learning in colonial dynamics is encoded in all parts of *Gulliver's Travels*, where these are clearly elements that represent a hierarchy of dominance. Gulliver must learn several languages and treats this as a priority, especially to deal with the power structures of the various countries he visits; the populations he meets offer tuition in their languages, and his opportunities for integrating and acquiring prestige in the new environment are often specifically connected to his ability to learn the language (Beach 2001: 118).

whereas men be of opinion, that our language is at this present time in perfect and sensible vse: my opinion is, that it is the great goodnes of God, *if the same be now staied in that perfectness*, which may continue as long as letters shal endure. (quoted in Bailey 1991: 32)

Although the passing of time could produce progress and improvement, it could also produce decay, corruption, and obsolescence, all words that had very negative connotations at a time in which the ideal was the eternity of the classical languages and literatures. As Thomas Paine would write two centuries later,

[T]he circumstances of the world are continually changing, and the opinions of men change also, and as government is for the living, and not for the dead, it is the living only that has any right in it. That which may be thought right and found convenient in one age may be thought wrong and found inconvenient in another. In such cases, who is to decide, the living or the dead? (*Rights of Man*, 1791, quoted in Smith 1984: 48)

This dualism is reflected, for instance, in Swift's proposal for a language academy, where he thus voiced his preoccupations:

I do here […] complain to Your Lordship, as First Minister, that our Language is *extremely imperfect*; that its *daily Improvements* are by no means in proportion to its *daily Corruptions*. (Swift 1712: 8)

Fear of obsolescence, in particular, was pervasive, as it is a danger impending on all human endeavours. On this topic, Sir Willliam Temple – Swift's patron and employer over several years – wrote, in "An Essay Upon the Advancement of Trade in Ireland"(1673),

the case for the ancients by asserting that the very longevity of the ancient languages proves their preeminence. Only a pure language could stand the test of time, and only the noblest thoughts would last through the ages. The comparative instability of modern languages makes any modern intellectual endeavour transient: "If our wit and eloquence, our knowledge or inventions, would observe it; yet our languages would not: there is no hope of their lasting long, nor of anything in them; they change every hundred years or so as to be hardly known for the same, or anything of the former styles to be endured by the later; so as they can no more last like the ancients, than excellent carvings in wood, like those in marble or brass". (quoted from Francus 1994: 40)

This preoccupation is reflected in *Gulliver's Travels*[11], and is epitomised in several writings by Johnson and Sheridan, where the English language is represented as a promiscuous feminine body, as subject to corruption and decay as that of a harlot (Beach 2001: 128), and by Pope's line about Dryden becoming one day as remote as Chaucer, if the decay proceeds unimpeded (Neumann 1943: 202). By the 18th century, there was a widespread feeling that this decay could and should be stopped, or at least slowed down. Swift and Johnson are both frequently quoted for their explicit condemnation of decay and uncontrolled change, especially in connection with the negative influence attributed to specific social classes. In Johnson's *Preface* to the *Dictionary* we read about "the laborious and mercantile part of the people" in these terms:

> The[ir] diction is in a great measure *casual and mutable* […] this *fugitive* cant, which is always in a state of *increase or decay*, cannot be regarded as any of the *durable* materials of a language, and therefore must be suffered to perish with other things *unworthy of preservation.* (quoted from Smith 1984: 14)

By employing the decay of Latin as an example, Swift's *Proposal* lists various reasons for such negative developments – mixture and "corruption of manners" standing out among the rest:

> There were many Reasons for the Corruptions of [Latin]: As, *the Change of their Government into a Tyranny*, which ruined the Study of Eloquence, there being no further Use of Encouragement for popular Orators: Their *giving not only the Freedom of the City, but Capacity for Employments*, to several Towns in *Gaul*, *Spain*, and *Germany*, and other distant Parts, as far as *Asia*; which brought a great Number of forein [sic] Pretenders into *Rome: The slavish Disposition of the Senate and the People*, by which the Wit and Eloquence of the Age were wholly turned into Panegyrick, the most barren of all Subjects: *The great Corruption of Manners*, and Introduction of forein Luxury, with forein Terms to express it; with several others that might be assigned: Not to mention those *Invasions from the Goths and Vandals*, which are too obvious to insist on.

[11] "The Language of this Country being always upon the Flux, the *Struldbruggs* of one Age do not understand those of another; neither are they able after two Hundred Years to hold any Conversation (farther than a few general Words) with their Neighbours the Mortals; and thus they lye under the Disadvantage of living like Foreigners in their own Country" (Fox (ed.) [1726] 1995: 145).

From there, it was a relatively short step, in the age of the rise of modern science, to the suggestion – first voiced by Dryden and Evelyn, and later widely discussed in the Royal Society – that an authoritative body be created to regulate and establish a standard. The first to put forward this suggestion with a full argumentation was Daniel Defoe, who included "Of Academies" in his *Essay on Projects* of 1697. His suggested aim for the Academy was:

> to encourage *polite learning*, *to polish and refine the English tongue*, and advance the so much neglected faculty to *correct language*, *to establish purity and propriety of style*, and *to purge it from all the irregular additions that ignorance and affectation have introduced* […]. By such a society I daresay the true glory of our English style 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. (Defoe 1697: 233)

Here, both extremes of society are condemned for their speech habits, and the norm-setting task is entrusted to the middle class in terms of the "cultivated, refined, well-bred" men[12] or "the polite part of the nation". These views had already been eloquently anticipated by Puttenham in *The Art of English Poesie* at the end of the 16thcentury:

> This part in our maker or Poet must be heedyly looked vnto, that it be *naturall, pure, and the most vsuall of all his countrey*: and for the same purpose rather that which is spoken in the kings Court, or in the good townes and Cities within the land, then in the marches and frontiers, or in port townes, where straungers haunt for traffike sake, or yet in Vniuersities where Schollers vse much *peeuish affectation* of words out of the *primatiue languages*, or finally, in any vplandish village or corner of a Realme, where is no resort but of *poore rusticall or vnciuill people*: neither shall he follow the speach of a craftes man or carter, or other of *the inferiour sort*, though he be inhabitant or bred in the best town and Citie in this Realme, *for such*

[12] The place of women in this social selection is somewhat ambiguous; it would be too ambitious to try and review thoroughly the alternative ways in which the language of women is seen in this progress towards politeness, correctness, and refinement. Roughly said, most comments alternate between considering women's speech negatively, as whimsical, and seeing their language use positively, as practical (Fitzmaurice 1998: 314).

persons doe abuse good speaches by strange accents or ill shapen soundes, and false ortographie. But he shall follow generally the *better brought vp sort*, such as the Greekes call [*charientes*] *men ciuill and graciously behauoured and bred.* (Arber (ed.)1869: 157)

There are numerous references to the classes responsible for despicable language habits, and these span from, unsurprisingly, the lower urban classes to the university wits – often ridiculed for their "affectation" – and to court fops, likewise criticised as affected, frivolous, and subject to fashion (Di Martino 1984: 89).

One emblematic example is the dispute over abbreviations, alternatively praised as efficient and clever (e.g. by Horne Tooke in his *Diversions of Purley*, vol. 2, 1805, see Smith 1984: 119) or condemned (e.g. by Swift about a century earlier), and attributed in turn to the sloppiness of the lazy and uneducated lower classes or to the whimsical fashion-consciousness of frivolous would-be intellectuals. *The Spectator* contributed to the formation of this middle-class paradigm by providing, for instance, examples of letters (allegedly received by the periodical) as instances of *polite language* to be imitated, or, on the contrary, *vulgar* expressions to be avoided, in which abbreviations are quoted as negative examples (Di Martino 1984: 80-81).

Another example is the conflict between Germanic versus Frenchified or Italianate styles. Dryden criticised some writers because they "corrupt our English Idiom by mixing it too much with French" (quoted in Di Martino 1984: 69), and Swift, for instance, was often praised by his contemporaries for his avoidance of Romance words (Neumann 1943). This is a strand of purism that would later pave the way for the whole rhetoric of Anglo-Saxonism, another reversal that placed value on the nation's indigenous resources. A reaction to this is visible at the end of the 18th century with Murray (1795: 134-135) praising the absorption of foreign words as a sign of copiousness and refinement.

The idea of an academy was vehemently opposed on strictly political grounds, especially from the Whigs, by Oldmixon, a fierce opponent of Swift (see Baugh and Cable [1951] 2012: 262ff; Tiusanen 2012: 338), as well as by grammarian Joseph Priestley in the second edition of his work (1768), and from free thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic, who made of this counterargument a symbol of the

fight against tyranny and in favour of freedom of speech (Baugh and Cable [1951] 2012: 263-265; McColl Millar 2012: 79). Webster complained against self-appointed people

> who dictate to a nation the rules of speaking, with the same imperiousness as a tyrant gives orders to his vassals. (quoted from Hickey 2010: 16)

One such self-appointed person was Dr Johnson, who claimed in the *Plan* of his *Dictionary* that his mission was to put some order into the confused state of the language. Part of his rhetoric is conveyed through military metaphors of conquest and domination:

> *Like the soldiers of Caesar*, [who] look on Britain as a new world, which it is almost madness to invade. But, I hope, that though *I should not complete the conquest, I shall at least discover the coast, civilize part of the inhabitants*, and make it easy for some other adventurers to proceed further, to *reduce them wholly to subjection, and settle them under laws.* (Johnson, *Plan for a Dictionary*, quoted in Beach 2001: 124)

The alleged confusion of the language is lamented in the *Preface* to his *Dictionary*, written after the latter was completed (Coleman 2012: 99, 101-102):

> When I took the first survey of my undertaking, I found our speech *copious without order, and energetic without rules: wherever I turned my view, there was perplexity to be disentangled, and confusion to be regulated;* choice was to be made out of boundless variety, without any established principle of selection.

Later on in the *Preface*, Johnson makes it clear that his mission will remain an ideal goal, as it is impossible to fix the language as the ideology of the time suggested.

5. Conclusion

Thus, there was a connection between language ideology and socio-political views in 17th- and 18th-century Britain. Apart from reflecting broader cultural orientations, perceptions, structures, and conflicts, meta-linguistic discourse directly represented belief systems of social groups. It is not uncommon for communities to include language among their tools for external and internal discrimination

at some point during their history. Views of language tend to be in accordance with other socio-political views held by specific communities or subgroups within a culture. For instance, it can be noted how towards the end of the period examined here and shortly afterwards, the spread of egalitarian ideologies directly influenced some British grammarians and intellectuals such as Cobbett (Mugglestone 1997) and Hazlitt (Tomalin 2007), leading them to argue for the independence of English grammar from the Latin model, and for the legitimacy of *common English*, which should not necessarily be considered *broken*. Such views, along with the so-called Celtic revival and, later, the appropriation discourse in post-colonial contexts, began as marks of countercultural agency[13] only to gain consensus, in time, and become relatively mainstream.

The study of such argumentation is not only helpful for a deeper understating of ideological strands at different points in time in British history, but also enlightens a critical review of modern linguistics, which, in spite of proclamations of objectivity and neutrality, often resents the influence of such intellectual traditions and can itself be the conscious or unconscious carrier of hidden ideologies.

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[13] For a seminal treatment of counterculture see Yinger (1960); for a view of language conflict within such a perspective see Mazzon (2015).

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