Enchaining Syllables and Lashing the Wind: Samuel Johnson, Thomas Sheridan, and the Ascertainment of Spoken English

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Abstract
This paper examines approaches to pronunciation, and its prescriptive reform by means of lexicography via the 18th-century nexus of Samuel Johnson, his biographer James Boswell, and the elocutionist Thomas Sheridan (who attempted to teach Boswell to modulate his accent towards metropolitan norms). While Johnson's engagement with fixing pronunciation forms a staple part of the remodelled lexicography he described in his 'Scheme' of 1746, and his *Plan* of 1747, the paper explores both Johnson's problematisation of the pragmatics of prescriptivism, and his careful detailing of variation and change within the entries he composed. As Johnson argues, prescriptivism and the formulation of appropriate edicts for reform are, of necessity, merely one half of the story. The other consists of those who must try to implement or adopt what is prescribed. Johnson's critical reading of prescriptive practice, and his scepticism of the innovations Boswell advocated and Sheridan endeavoured to introduce, is made the basis of a critical examination of the pronouncing dictionary as institution, and the project of elocutionary reform per se.
Keywords: Samuel Johnson; prescriptivism; pronunciation; lexicography.

1. Introduction

To what extent speech could – or should – be made part of the codifying practices of 18th-century lexicography was, for Samuel Johnson, a topic which prompted some resistance. His own *Dictionary*, first published in 1755 (a fourth revised edition would appear in 1773), "shows you the accents of words", as Johnson reminded his biographer, James Boswell (Hill (ed.) 1971: II, 161). Johnson's "accents", however, referred merely to the position of stress, as in the marking he provided for ACCENT itself or, indeed, for DICTIONARY: A'CCENT, DI'CTIONARY, as the respective entries state.

Nevertheless, as Boswell reminded Johnson (here in a reported conversation from March 1772), codification might, in this respect, usefully exhibit greater range as well as specificity. "It may be of use, Sir, to have a Dictionary to ascertain the pronunciation", Boswell duly ventured. As he added, "We want marks to ascertain the pronunciation of the vowels" (Hill (ed.) 1971: II, 161).

Boswell's sense of *want* ("1. To be without something fit or necessary; [...] 3. To fall short of; not to contain", as Johnson's *Dictionary* explains) was highly topical. Elocution served across the late 18th century to commodify particular forms of accent as objects of desire. As for writers such as Thomas Sheridan, John Walker, and James Buchanan, it was increasingly depicted as a means of projecting, and performing, different social identities. To speak with the right accent was "a sort of proof that a person has kept good company" as Sheridan had, for instance, persuasively claimed (1762: 30). Conversely, regionally-marked accents, such as Johnson retained (and Boswell attempted to shed) were often positioned as in need of change. As in Sheridan's framing rhetoric, they emblematised "sure marks" of "disgrace"[1].

Speech, as Boswell's experience confirmed, could as a result seem fraught with both hazard and uncertainty. If Johnson steadfastly maintained the location of the "purest English" to be in Lichfield, the city of his birth (Hill (ed.) 1971: II, 463), he would, in Sheridan's terms, merely provide telling illustration of those

provincials who have grown old in the capital, without making any change in their original dialect. (Sheridan 1762: 37)

Boswell's speech-patterns were instead voluntarily put under Sheridan's jurisdiction. "My mentor! My Socrates!", as Boswell eulogistically declared of Sheridan after attending his lectures on elocution in Edinburgh in 1761. Sheridan's modelling of standardisation, and his proscription of regionalised speech – in which Boswell's native Scottish tones were included – was heeded

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[1] On 18th-century conceptions of Scots as a provincial variety of English, see e.g. Douglas's 1779 *Treatise* (Jones (ed.) 1991), as well as the advice which Sheridan (1762; 1780) and Walker (1791) provide for individual remedy in this respect. On Johnson's regional accent, see Hill (ed.) 1971: II, 463-464.

with alacrity. A wide-ranging assimilation of social anxieties (and negative indexical values for particular forms of speech) is perceptible in Boswell's *London Journal*, affirming the project of self-reformation on which he had, under Sheridan's guidance, embarked. "I have discovered that we may be in some degree whatever character we choose", Boswell states (Pottle (ed.) 2004: 47), drawing attention to his deliberate re-styling of identity by means of the spoken word. In the *Journal*, unmodified Scottish accents are depicted with distaste. Fife accents are "hideous", he notes in January 1762; "Mrs. Miller's abominable Glasgow tongue excruciated me", he avers on March 17th (Pottle (ed.) 2004: 116, 221).

Boswell's conversation with Johnson on the subject of articulatory reform, recounted in his *Life of Johnson*, can nevertheless emerge as a site of considerable unease. It was prompted, at least in part, by Johnson's on-going revision of his *Dictionary* (see Hill (ed.) 1971: II, 155), but a further spur clearly lay in Sheridan's plans for his *General Dictionary of the English Language,* with its subtitle *One Main Object of Which Is to Establish a Plain and Permanent Standard Pronunciation* (eventually published in 1780 – see Sheridan 1780). Codification, correctness, alongside prescriptive approaches which, as Sheridan argued, might yield a uniform pronunciation across the nation would all present a range of personal, ideological, and linguistic conflicts; similarly problematic was the role which lexicography might play in this respect. Sheridan's scheme to disseminate an elite accent by means of print prompts, for example, self-evident dissent from Johnson's point of view. "Sheridan's Dictionary may do very well; but", Johnson points out, "you cannot always carry it about with you: and, when you want the word, you have not the Dictionary". Codification and the textual pragmatics by which a reference book is used are, for Johnson, firmly interlinked. A characteristic simile makes his scepticism plain. A dictionary of pronunciation, Johnson suggests, is "like a man who has a sword that will not draw". It may, he added, be "an admirable sword, to be sure; but while your enemy is cutting your throat you are unable to use it" (Hill (ed.) 1971: II, 162). Sheridan's vaunted method did not convince.

Issues of nationhood, power, and other aspects of the pragmatics of reform also intervene. "What entitles Sheridan to fix the pronunciation of English?", Johnson demands: "He has, in the

first place, the disadvantage of being an Irishman, and if he says he will fix it after the example of the best company, why they differ among themselves" (Hill (ed.) 1971: II, 161). Against Boswell's desire for ascertainment, Johnson draws attention to what he sees as the inevitable conflicts of rhetoric and reality in processes of this kind. He stresses variability rather than uniformity, as well as the difficulties which even "the best company" might offer as regulative models[2]. Johnson's own estimation of *want* hence remains unchanged. A DICTIONARY, as Johnson's revised edition of 1773 affirms, is

A book containing the words of any language in alphabetical order, with explanations of their meaning. (Johnson 1773: DICTIONARY)

Pronunciation, by definition, is unspecified. Boswell's desired "marks" are absent from vowels and consonants alike.

It is tempting to dismiss Johnson's critical reaction to Sheridan's proposed work as part of his characteristic "talking for victory" (Richetti 2012) – a desire to gain the verbal upper hand, prompted perhaps by professional jealousy as well as personal animosity. Johnson's rivalry with Sheridan was well-known and Boswell had earlier documented Johnson's sense of grievance at the royal pension granted to Sheridan in recognition of his endeavours to reform the arts of speech[3]. Sheridan's swift appropriation of Chesterfield as patron in his *British Education* of 1756 offered a further divide:

Who is the fittest to preside over such an undertaking? Who is the best qualified to promote it, and to ensure it's success? I am much deceived if there would be a moment's hesitation, and if the name of CHESTERFIELD would not instantly be pronounced by every one, who is a judge of the subject, (Sheridan 1756: v)

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[2] See also Johnson (1755)'s entry for ORTHOGRAPHY, and its supporting citation from Swift: "In London they clip their words after one manner about the court, another in the city, and a third in the suburbs; all which reduced to writing, would entirely confound *orthography*".
[3] "When I returned to London in the end of 1762, to my surprise and regret I found an irreconcilable difference had taken place between Johnson and Sheridan. A pension of two hundred pounds a year had been given to Sheridan". As Boswell adds, Johnson "thought slightingly of Sheridan's art" (Hill (ed.) 1971: I.386).

as Sheridan had deferentially declared, announcing his own scheme to fix the spoken language with Chesterfield's support[4].

Significant, too, in terms of the history of English lexicography, is the fact that Sheridan's confident claims to ascertain pronunciation clearly exist alongside earlier ambitions by which Johnson's own "idea of an English dictionary" – set out in his 1747 *Plan of a Dictionary* – had also been one in which "the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated" (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 57). Johnson's diction of intended regulation – applied to sounds as well as semantics – had been overt.

It is still more necessary to fix the pronunciation of monosyllables, by placing with them words of correspondent sound, that one may guard the other against the danger of that variation, which to some of the most common, has already happened, so that the words *wound*, and *wind*, as they are now frequently pronounced, will not rhyme to *sound*, and *mind.* (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 38-39)

Sheridan's renewed claims to conquer that which Johnson had found impossible could, in this light, make potentially uncomfortable reading.

In the *Life*, Boswell ends this reported conversation with Johnson's decisive dismissal of codifying practices for the spoken word. Johnson's martial metaphors, used to condemn the pronouncing dictionary (and its intended role), resonate with other images of Johnsonian cut-and-thrust in terms of conversation. "Yes, Sir; you tossed and gored several persons", as Boswell reports of a morning-after discussion from May 1769 in which, as Richetti notes, Johnson declares himself "highly satisfied with his colloquial prowess the preceding evening" (Richetti 2012: 38). In this essay, however, I would like to explore Johnson's problematisation of lexicography and its potential for representing (and reforming) the spoken word. As we will see, Johnson's reservations in terms of ascertainment and pronunciation encompass serious questions of process and methodology which extend both to the project of

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[4] Chesterfield had been named as the patron of Johnson's *Dictionary* in 1747, though this connection had been severed, in Johnson's famous letter, in February 1755 (see Redford (ed.) 1992: 1, 95-97).

reform *per se*, as well as to the ways in which a reference work on this basis might be written as well as employed. A dictionary "will be required by common readers", as Johnson had, for example, stressed in 1747:

It is to little purpose that an engine amuses the philosopher by the subtilty of its mechanism, if it requires so much knowledge in its application, as to be of no advantage to the common workman. (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005:29)

2. Prescriptivism and Pronunciation – Early Ideals

The potential intersection of prescriptivism and pronunciation has, in reality, a long history in writing on English. George Snell's *Right Teaching of Useful Knowledg* of 1649, for instance, already emphasizes the ways in which education might aid in the targeted reform of speech. Method – what Snell terms "modalitie" (1649: 19) –is made a subject of close concern. As he recommends, "if anie disciple bee ignorant in that hee should saie, put him to saie it over two or three times'. Remedy is located in practical instruction within the context of the school. As Snell adds:

if the learner do confidentlie pronounce anie word or syllable undely, the teacher shall caus him to pronounce the same in a right manner, three or fower times together; that so by frequent iteration of that which is right, the error may be unlearned. (Snell 1649: 24-25)

Spoken English, and attendant notions of infelicity and reform, likewise feature in Swift's *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712) and his (slightly earlier) critique of current English in the *Tatler* in September 1710.

Elisions, by which Consonants of most obdurate Sound are joined together, without one softening Vowel to intervene

are, for example, condemned while forms such as "*Tom* begins to *gi'mself* airs" are picked out for similar censure (Bond (ed.) 1987: III, 193). Habits of

pronouncing the first Syllable in a Word that has many, and dismissing the rest; such as *Phizz, Hipps, Mobb, Pozz., Rep.* and many more [...] are the Disgrace of our Language

are equally proscribed. It was, Swift exhorted, imperative for pronunciation to be brought within a project of systematic education and reform. "Do they teach you how to Speak?", he had demanded of Sheridan; were this not to be the case, he stressed, then "they teach you *Nothing*" (Sheridan 1784: 19). Swift's "words always passed with me for Oracles", as Sheridan later admits of his godfather's influence upon his work.

Nevertheless, when Johnson began work on his *Dictionary*, spoken English had remained largely without corrective measures. Earlier dictionaries, such as Dyche and Pardon's *New General English Dictionary* (3rd ed., 1740), had signalled the provision of marks to "prevent a vicious Pronunciation" (title page). Yet, as the Preface confirms, variability was, in reality, pervasive and attendant guidance general in the extreme. "The Southern parts of this Kingdom differ very much from the Northern", we are told, yet providing "Rules and Observations" on spoken English is given as "very tedious, and also useless". Johnson's stated remit to fix pronunciation, outlined in the 1747 *Plan* (and the antecedent 'Scheme' of 1746) was therefore both wider and, indeed, innovatory in English lexicography. While precedents can be located on the continent – "The accuracy of the French, in stating the sounds of their letters, is well known", as Johnson states in the *Plan* (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005:40) – these had, as yet, not been implemented in vernacular works.

Ascertainment in terms of pronunciation therefore already appears as an explicit goal in Johnson's 'Short Scheme for Compiling a New Dictionary of the English Language' (MS Hyde 50, 38-39), dated April 30, 1746. Discussing words such as *woodbine* and *honeysuckle*, Johnson notes that these "require that their accents should be settled, and their sounds ascertained" (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 385). "It is surely therefore proper to provide that the Harmony of the Moderns may be more permanent", he expounds, not least since "a new pronunciation will make almost a new language" (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 89). Variation is, by the same token, presented as subject to proper redress by the lexicographer:

It is still more necessary to fix the sound of monosyllables, by placing with them words of like sound, that one may guard the other against the danger of […] variation. (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 391)

Nevertheless, Johnson's conflicted position on prescriptivism as process is often plain; ambitions for stability can already be used to explore a critical divide between what might be desired – if not necessarily realised – in terms of both language and control. The wish "that these fundamental atoms of our speech, might obtain the firmness and immutability of constituent particles" is, as Johnson admits, undeniable (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 461). Yet, as he warns, lexicography – commended as an "art" – cannot, with reason, secure that which its prescriptive manifestations most desire. Johnson's problematisation of lexicography is acute. As the drafted 'Scheme' explains, words (and their various manifestations)

will be always informing us that Language is the work of man, of a being from whom unchangeable stability cannot be derived. (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 462)

"Art", seen in these terms is, unable to "prevent the mortality" of words, or the conditions of mutability and change under which a living language must exist.

The dictionary-maker's intended power is likewise seen as highly circumscribed when applied to the realities of language in use. "Expectation" and "performance" are placed in careful apposition:

I know that expectation when her wings are once expanded, flies without Labour or incumbrance to heights to which Performance cannot attain. (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 431)

Commissioned to write a dictionary by which English might be fixed, the real identity of Johnson's dictionary-maker, as we are reminded in the *Plan*, is disconcertingly made that of the "slave of science" whose subordination to knowledge rather than fancy is a salient aspect of his role. As Johnson had already noted in the 'Scheme', here in an earlier manifestation of the same metaphor, dictionary-makers are free to follow what he tellingly refers to as the "Phantoms of Desire" only when the "Shackles of Lexicography" are released (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 461)[5]. The pragmatic realities of evidence, and Johnson's interest in documentary authority – and the

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[5] SHACKLES: "Fetters; gyves; chains for prisoners" (Johnson 1755: s.v.).

varied "excursions into Books" he would make in this intent (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 84) – are thereby set against tempting, but essentially insubstantial, aspirations. Phantoms can be followed but they cannot, by their nature, be pinned down. Fixity is, in this light, rendered a complex ideal from the beginning, together with the processes of change and reform which the dictionary-maker might seek to impose.

3. Spoken English: Methodology and Process in Johnson's *Dictionary*

The *Dictionnaire* of the Académie Française was famously content to rely on the categorical prescription *on dit* in validating preferred forms of usage; what is stated as right should be information enough. Johnson's own approach to lexicography (and the nature of authority) was, as we know, rather different (Reddick 1996). Even in the early 'Scheme' and *Plan*, Johnson habitually adduces evidence in support of the conclusions which might be drawn. Citations from Addison, Pope, Milton, and Rowe are, for example, used to illustrate particular points of usage, and the interpretative cruces they raise. Reading as empirical process, and the determined gathering of testimony across a range of texts, underpins the making of the *Dictionary* (further reading was also undertaken for the fourth edition). Johnson's marked-up books, of which fourteen now remain[6], document a careful process of testimony and collection. In Johnson's copy of Watts's *Logick: or, The Right Use of Reason*, we can, in effect, track his progress through the text. Underlining marks out potential headwords while vertical strokes delimit the citational examples which might be used in support:

| If the Books which you read are your own, mark with a Pen, or <u>Pencil</u>, the most considerable Things in them which you desire to remember |,

as an annotated section of Johnson's copy of Watts records[7].

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[6] This figure includes the recent discovery of Johnson's copy of Pope's *Odyssey.* The full list, excluding the latter, is given in Reddick 1996: 204.

[7] Citation (with marking) taken from Johnson's copy of Isaac Watts, *Logick: or, The Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry after Truth* (8th ed.., T. Longman, London, 1745) in the British Library.

A similar process informed Johnson's reading of, say, William Holder's *Elements of Speech* (here in a marked-up text we no longer possess). This was the source of a wide range of entries on the theory of pronunciation and articulation within the *Dictionary* (see e.g. Labiodental, Polysyllable, or Palatick, defined as "Belonging to the palate; a roof of the mouth", as well as the entry for Pronunciation itself). By no means one of the great writers from "the *wells of English undefiled*" (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 95) with whom Johnson's work is prototypically associated, Holder's evidence was likewise used in documenting words such as Dental and Mute, Emphasis and Aspiration. For Johnson, entries in the *Dictionary* are, as here, routinely supported by consideration, and citation, of supporting material. "The solution of all difficulties, and the supply of all defects", must be "sought in the examples subjoined to the various senses of each word, and ranged according to the time of their authours", as readers are advised (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 93).

Nevertheless, Johnson's methodology raises self-evident problems for spoken English. Citations provide a method of deriving contextual meaning or, as used in the *Dictionary*, of illustrating orthographical variability in a form of "suffrage" by which, as Johnson explains, power (and the selection of a norm) must effectively pass from lexicographer to reader[8]. In terms of pronunciation, Johnson's scrutiny of poetic texts can therefore provide empirical evidence of, say, qualitative patterns of identity by means of rhyme or, via metre, of prosodic variation. Yet in other ways, deriving the breadth of information the dictionary-maker might require is problematic. The dictionary-maker in this respect is often forced to rely on his own sense of the language for any ancillary information that might be required see e.g. Johnson's statement that *clothes* "is pronounced *clo's*" (s.v. Cloth, sense 4), or his comment under Friend that "This word, with its derivatives, is pronounced *frend*, *frendly*: the *i* totally neglected". "Pronounced *hawm*", Johnson helpfully explains under Halm ('straw').

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[8] "In examining the orthography of any doubtful word, the mode of spelling by which it is inserted in the series of the dictionary, is to be considered as that to which I give, perhaps not often rashly, the preference. I have left, in the examples, to every authour his own practice unmolested, that the reader may balance suffrages, and judge between us" (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 77).

Evidential problems of this kind clearly contribute to some of Johnson's later scepticism with reference to Sheridan's project of reform. How, after all, do we know what forms are really representative in spoken English, or which variants should be selected or promoted as a norm? As befits a reference book, advice can be given; Johnson, as in the examples above, can intervene where there is potential for ambiguity or confusion in terms of the realisation that might be used. Yet, even in the 1747 *Plan*, Johnson draws attention to pronunciation as a site of conflicting authority which cannot, in reality, be entirely dispelled by the dictionary-maker. "Some words have two sounds, which may be equally admitted, as being equally defensible by authority", he observes (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 39). Pope rhymes *state* with *great* ("For Swift and him despis'd the farce of state, / The sober follies of the wise and *great*"). Yet in Rowe, *great* rhymes with *seat* ("As if misfortune made the throne her seat, / And none could be unhappy but the great"). Variation in this respect is presented rather than resolved, offering interesting parallels to Johnson's careful – and descriptive – documentation of variant forms in terms of spelling (see Mugglestone 2015a: 96-109) or his carefully assembled evidence on the polysemy of words.

Similar patterns appear in the *Dictionary* itself. For a dictionary-maker ostensibly committed to stability, we can, in fact, locate a surprising amount of information on variability and 18th-century speech. As under FAULT, we are told that "the *l* is sometimes sounded, and sometimes mute". Rhymes such as *thought: fault* (attested by both Dryden and Pope) provide supporting evidence of vocalisation. King's rhyme of *fault* and *salt* ("Which of our thrum-cap'd ancestors found *fault* / For want of sugar-tongs or spoons for salt?") is conversely used to adduce /l/-retention and evidence of more conservative models of speech. Neither are censured while Johnson adds, in fact, a further comment on the changing currents of usage, observing that "in conversation *l* is generally suppressed". "The *l* is often not sounded", Johnson likewise observes under HALF, manifesting a similar lack of concern for invariance and rule. "It is very frequently pronounced *chaw*, and perhaps properly", he states in a further retreat from matters of absolute correctness and control under TO CHEW. *v.a..*

Comments on frequency ("generally", "often", "sometimes") make Johnson's departure from the absolutes of rule equally plain.

"The poets use [the accent] variously", he notes under Antique, a word for which change is clearly in progress:

It was formerly pronounced according to the English analogy, with the accent on the first syllable; but now after the French, with the accent on the last, at least in prose.

As under Avenue, he draws attention to what "sometimes" but not invariably happens:

It is sometimes pronounced with the accent on the second syllable, as *Watts* observes; but it is generally placed on the first.

Variation, rather than being "guard[ed] against" (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 38), is habitually given its due in comments on speech within the *Dictionary*. So, too, are the patterns of ellipsis which English in use reveals. "It is usually pronounced, and often written, *monastry*", the entry for Monastery affirms, neutrally detailing patterns such as Swift had earlier decried. "It is now commonly pronounced *hern*", Johnson notes, with similar intent, under Heron.

It will sometimes be found, that the accent is placed by the authour quoted, on a different syllable from that marked in the alphabetical series; it is then to be understood, that custom has varied, or that the authour has, in my opinion, pronounced wrong,

as Johnson avers in the 1755 'Preface' (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 79). His words are often taken as representative of his proscriptive stance in matters of spoken English. Yet, if we examine the realities of Johnson's practice in the *Dictionary*, a more complex situation instead emerges. As under Carousal, poets can, for example, find their authority set against that of general use, inviting consideration of the proprieties which this, too, both generates and enforces:

It seems more properly pronounced with the accent upon the second syllable; but *Dryden* accents it on the first,

Johnson notes, documenting both forms – even if, like ordinary speakers, he gives preference to the former. "It may be observed that *Shakespeare* accents the first syllable", Johnson states under Supportable (placing the emphasis on the second syllable instead

in the notation he deploys). Johnson's diction of observation is significant, referring the reader to the perceived salience of testimony and evidence in this respect. Here, both variants are documented, even if the dictionary-maker's recommendations again turn in the direction of custom and the contrastive authority which this provides. *Empyreal* provides comparable information. The headword is given as EMPY'REAL (with the stress on the second syllable) but Johnson explains that, in his evidence, it is clear that

> *Tickell* accents it on the penult[imate]:
> […]
> But *empyreal* forms, howe'er in sight
> Gash'd and dismember'd, easily unite.

Poetic authority and individual use are, in such ways, placed against the patterns of general use. A statement which can seem overtly proscriptive ("in my opinion [...] pronounced wrong") can, in reality, serve to reveal a wider consideration of English stress-patterning and placement in the conclusions that Johnson draws[9].

Close scrutiny of the *Dictionary* can thereby often reveal an interesting engagement with evidence (and Johnson's wider sense of the language) as well as the enterprise of lexicography *per se*. Recommendations can, of course, be made:

It is sometimes pronounced with the accent on the last syllable, but it is placed more properly on the first,

as Johnson notes, for example, under BARRIER, again paying careful attention to his assembled evidence. ACADEMY, Johnson likewise confirms, was pronounced "anciently, and properly, with the accent on the first syllable, now frequently on the second". Johnson's sense of normativity can look to the past (and the authority of the "ancients") but it is, importantly, also orientated to the kind of authority (and variation) which usage "now" bestows. As under PRODUCT (here in another later revision in the 1773 edition), the potential for "suffrage" on the part of the reader clearly remains. "*Milton* accents it on the first syllable, *Pope* on the last",

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[9] See equally HORI'ZON. *n.s.*: […] "It is falsely pronounced by *Shakespeare ho'rizon*".

Johnson notes. For both, judgement – and prescriptive edict – are conspicuously withheld while evidence is provided on both counts. "*Milton* accents it indifferently", he comments under Sojourn ("A temporary residence") in another entry in which normative rule is absent. "It was anciently pronounced with the accent on the first syllable, now indifferently", readers are likewise informed under Corrosive. "Not to have such difference as that the one is for its own sake preferable to the other", Johnson's entry for Indifferent usefully explains. If variation is a "danger", it is one which is widespread in the realities of use.

As such examples suggest, Johnson's stated ambitions to secure "unchangeable stability" are therefore regularly undercut by careful (and descriptive) acknowledgement of the variability that a living language must reveal. Pronunciation, after all, as Johnson notes, is "that which every variation of time or place makes different from itself" (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 78). Time and change attract frequent comment (see e.g. Aspect: "It appears anciently to have been pronounced with the accent on the last syllable, which is now placed on the first"). Advertise is similar: "It is now spoken with the accent upon the last syllable, but appears to have been anciently on the second". Long before Boswell's discussion of pronunciation and lexicographic reform in 1772, it is clear that Johnson, in both theory and practice, could, in reality, reveal marked reservations as to what lexicography might be able to achieve in terms of the wider reform of speech. As in his reading of earlier orthoepists (he refers, in the course of the *Dictionary*, to the work of Alexander Gil, John Wallis, and Charles Butler, among others), Johnson's doubts as to the capacity of written English to provide an accurate representation of the sounds of speech were plain. If phonemic correspondence can be indicated, qualitative nuance, as he suggests, as yet remained beyond what lexicography (or, indeed, orthographic reform) might judiciously provide[10]. "Of sounds in general it may be observed, that words are unable to describe them", he declares in the 'Grammar' accompanying the 1755 *Dictionary* (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 278-279): "I suppose my reader already acquainted with the English

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[10] For Johnson's stance on orthographic reform, especially in terms of phonemic representation, see Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 295-296, and also Mugglestone 2015a: Ch. 4.

language; and consequently able to pronounce the letters", he states of his own methodology in this respect[11].

Notation in the *Dictionary* hence precludes, by design, the kind of detail which practical standardisation might require. In Johnson's approximate transcriptions (which appear occasionally throughout the text), qualitative information is largely absent. If *benign* is, as we are told in the relevant entry, to be pronounced as *benine*, phonetic instruction is restricted to the absence of /g/ and an implied analogy with *nine*. The precise realisation of the <i>, diphthongised as part of the Great Vowel Shift, is unspecified, as is that of the unstressed vowel in *be-*. Similar is Johnson's entry for *climb* in which he notes "It is pronounced like *clime*" or, under COUGH, that it is "pronounced *coff*"[12].

Equally significant, in terms of the wider implications of prescriptivism in this respect, is Johnson's repeated probing during the dictionary years of the transactional basis which linguistic reform must assume in order for change to take place. In these terms, not only is it necessary to have an effective, detailed, and transparent notation but equally requisite is the willing submission of those who might use the reference work in question. Prescriptivism acquires, in this light, a characteristic Johnsonian doubleness[13], being seen not only from the viewpoint of the would-be prescriber but also from that of the intended recipients of such advice. As he warned in 1750 in *Rambler* 72, for example, "those who exalt themselves into the chair of instruction", and "venture upon the presumptuous office of teaching others", have, in reality, often done so without "inquiring whether any will submit to their authority" (Bate and Strauss (eds) 1969: 12)[14]. The writer, as Johnson adds, cannot "obtrude his services

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[11] As under MUM (interjection), occasional information on articulation is nevertheless provided: "it may be observed, that when it is pronounced it leaves the lips closed". This, however, is also clearly seen as mimetic in terms of sense: *mum*, as Johnson explains, is "A word denoting prohibition to speak, or resolution not to speak". Johnson's entry for HISS reveals a similar interest: "To utter a noise like that of a serpent and some other animals. It is remarkable, that this word cannot be pronounced without making the noise which it signifies".

[12] The doubled <f> arguably signifies a short preceding vowel.

[13] On Johnsonian habits of exploring double perspectives, see e.g. Fussell 1972: 148.

[14] A good example is presented by the grammarian Robert Lowth's instructions to the bookseller Robert Dodsley (one of the publishers of Johnson's *Dictionary*) to

unasked", while there can be "many temptations to petulance and opposition". Edict and obedience are by no means seamless in this view.

Schemes of linguistic reform may, of course, be advanced but, as Johnson comments in the *Dictionary*, it is the implementation of this proffered guidance which remains critical for both realisation and success. "Few have followed them", as Johnson concludes, for example, on the various schemes by which, across the history of English, individual remedies for English spelling had been proposed. As a result, he added, if such writers "have done no good, they have done little harm" (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 301). On this model, reform remains ineffectual, as he concludes, and habits of spelling undisturbed. Johnson's criticism of wilful change, founded on the intent to create a new standard without reference to wider models of use or, indeed, supporting evidence, is plain. Such writers evidently take "pleasure in departing from custom, and […] think alteration desirable for its own sake", Johnson comments. "I suppose they hold singularity its own reward, or may dread the fascination of lavish praise", he added with marked irony (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 36).

4. Enchaining the Syllables of Speech

"Each successive stage of making the *Dictionary* seems to represent a falling away", writes Lawrence Lipking (1998: 121), surveying Johnson's apparent departure from prescriptive ideals as the *Dictionary* slowly comes into being. The extent to which Johnson's position on pronunciation is to be seen within this rhetoric of decline is an interesting question. From the beginning, as we have seen, a marked uneasiness can, in reality, inform Johnson's thinking on prescriptivism and its potential for pragmatic realisation. As in the various entries in the *Dictionary*, we can instead be invited to scrutinise spoken variation and change, or to examine contrastive patterns of evidence by which individual choice might be made by readers in the practices they adopt. If advice is given, it is rarely

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use the spelling *bulle* rather than Johnson's recommended spelling *bull* in printing Lowth's *Life of William Wykeham* in 1757 (see Tierney (ed.) 2004: 304).

exhortatory[15]. As in the comments which appear, say, under PED ("commonly pronounced *pad*" – Johnson 1773: s.v.) or PLUMBER ("commonly written and pronounced *plummer*"), or RARE in the sense "Raw; not fully subdued by the fire" ("often pronounced *rear*"), Johnson's norms of practice are often descriptive in intent – detailing what he presents as general use rather than offering autocratic dicta for reform, or notionally better forms which readers should henceforth adopt.

Ambitions for phonetic fixity were, of course, given their own detailed scrutiny (and critical reassessment) in Johnson's 1755 'Preface'. Metaphors (and issues of both power and slavery) are again prominent in the structures of explication he adopts. The endeavour to "enchain syllables" is, Johnson stresses, like the attempt to "lash the wind". In both, Johnson implies, resolve is pitted against what is seen as a natural force. Yet both, in turn, are declared to be "the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength" (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 105) in ways which clearly problematise conventional prescriptive expectations about power, and its rightful exercise. For Johnson, a continued absence of ascertainment thereby emerges as indicative of wisdom rather than failure. "Sounds are too volatile and subtile for legal restraints", he affirms (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 105). Speech remains unchained and unfettered both in 1755 and in his later revision of the *Dictionary* though, we might note, Johnson does – perhaps in response to Boswell's comments in 1772 – often elaborate on pronunciation where ambiguities are marked, adding, say, under RONT in 1773 that it is "commonly pronounced *runt*" in the sense "An animal stinted in the growth", or that REEK, meaning "A pile of corn or hay", is "commonly pronounced, *rick*".

Sheridan's ambitions for the active standardisation of speech nevertheless stand in sharp contrast to conclusions (and practices) of this kind. Johnson's rejection of lexicography as an agent of control is ignored:

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[15] Though see e.g. Johnson's comment under s.v. FEUILLEMORTE, that the word is "Corruptly pronounced and written *philomot*". He does, however, also provide a separate entry, with supporting evidence from Addison, for *philomot.*

With equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay. (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 105)

Instead, Sheridan resolutely constructs Johnson as a writer who exemplifies the linguistic stability which the proper use of lexicography might bring:

should our language ever be fixed, he must be considered by all posterity as the founder, and the dictionary as the corner stone. (Sheridan 1756: 376)

"Embalming" is meanwhile promoted as an active ideal in Sheridan's own work. He draws on classical precedent too, noting that stasis had been secured by languages such as Latin and Greek in order to maintain their continued use (Sheridan 1756: ix). Johnson's contention (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 295) that pronunciation is but a "shadow […] changing while they apply it" (which he had advanced in rejecting the claims of spelling reformers who use sound as a model in attempting to institute orthographic change) would, in this respect, merely prompt renewed endeavour on Sheridan's part. Johnson's argument is reversed. "Body" and "shadow" can, Sheridan avers, be aligned through proper prescriptive method and resolution (Sheridan 1762: 243)[16].

Johnson's scruples on obedience and autocracy are likewise cast aside. Sheridan instead fosters a wide-ranging discourse of emulation and, indeed, desire. An elite London pronunciation is, he argues, "sought after by all, who wish to be considered as fashionable people, or members of the beau monde" while "attainment" in this matter is "ardently desired by an infinite number of individuals" (Sheridan 1762: 30). Prescription and proscription are rendered essential to meet what is depicted as a social and linguistic need. In Sheridan's writing, metapragmatic forms of evaluation, applied to favoured and disfavoured variants alike, are therefore provided in abundance. Pronunciation can be "vitiated" or a "vice", marked

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[16] Johnson's resistance to the idea of pronunciation as a model for spelling is widely attested in the *Dictionary.* See e.g. his comments under the entries for COMPATIBLE, DIMPLE, COMFIT or EMBEZZLE.

by "defects" and in need of a "cure". Corresponding sections of Johnson's work, as well as individual entries in his *Dictionary*, can, in contrast, appear strikingly neutral.

Johnson's reservations on notation – and the efficacy of the written language to form a guide in this respect – are also dismissed. It is instead the "noble use of the invention of printing" (Sheridan 1762: 247) that will, as Sheridan contends, serve to democratise elite metropolitan accents across the nation, eliminating the localism – and attendant "disgrace" – which, in his opinion, speech continued to reveal. In the kind of excessive "subtiltie" which Johnson feared in lexicographic method, Sheridan hence fuses numerical diacritics (which intentionally discriminate between the different sound values of letters) together with indications of stress-placement and semi-phonetic respelling. The recommended enunciation of each word will, he contends, hence be made entirely visible (see fig.1).

FIGURE 1
Sheridan's (1780: 9) scheme of notation

Intended structures of power, we might note, also change in tandem. Variation (which was carefully documented, as we have seen, under a range of entries in Johnson's work) is, with marked hubris, now resituated by Sheridan as a project intended by God for man's

rightful agency and reform. Speech, as Sheridan declares, is indeed the

universal gift of God to all mankind. But … in his wide dispensations, in order to excite industry, and reward the attendant on service […] he has only furnished the material, and left it to man to find out, and make a right use of them. (Sheridan 1759: 15)

Accordingly, language in all nations "must prove either barbarous, discordant, and defective, or polished, harmonious, and copious, according to the culture or neglect of it" (Sheridan 1759: 15). Johnson's "neglect" will, in this light, find its own proposed remedy in Sheridan's methods of reform, and the "right use" this will impose.

   Johnson's martial metaphors in his conversation with Boswell in 1772 can, in this light, be seen as both depicting and – and defusing – the shift in lexicographic practice (and linguistic remediation) that Sheridan aimed to secure in terms of English speech. Just as in Johnson's earlier critique of advertising (and the transformative processes on which this, too, had relied) in *Idler* 40 (Bate, Bullit, Powell (eds) 1970: 125)[17], Sheridan's project is located in the kind of "promise, large promise" which, as Johnson noted, is "the soul of an advertisement". In terms of the dictionary, an improved system of notation might, in principle, as Johnson admits, therefore make an "admirable sword". In Johnson's intellectual schema, knowledge, after all, is never wasted. Yet in matters of swordsmanship, it is, of necessity, clear that usage is all, as Johnson also points out. If the pronouncing dictionary is to be a weapon of redress, its use should be swift and easy. Yet, while in written composition, linguistic indecision in relation to spelling or sense can easily be remedied by recourse to a dictionary or other work of reference, in speech, he suggests, matters are surely different. Conversation cannot stop while consultation is made and notation decoded. The power that a pronouncing dictionary might contain must, in effect, remain sheathed.

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[17] See e.g. Johnson's description of "The Vender of the *Beautifying Fluid*" who "sells a Lotion that repels pimples, washes away freckles, smooths the skin, and plumps the flesh; and yet, with a generous abhorrence of ostentation, confesses, that it will not *restore the bloom of fifteen to a Lady of fifty*" (Bate, Bullit, Powell (eds) 1970: 125-126).

The variability which even the "best company" continues to reveal in matters of accent adds, as Johnson notes, further complications for the effective implementation of a norm. As in Figure 1, Sheridan might indeed number three varieties of *a* or two of *o*, but Johnson's awareness of the real problems of imposed change remains acute. If his own "Dictionary shows you the accents of words", this was, as he qualified, only "if you can but remember them" (Hill (ed.) 1971: II, 161). Human fallibility offers, as here, still further difficulties for the lexicographic pragmatics of reform and the standardisation of speech. For Johnson, the level to which new modes of speech might be learnt from a pronouncing dictionary is thereby rendered questionable *per se*.

Johnson's reservations are, to some extent, well-founded. While a direct relationship is often assumed between pronouncing dictionary and individual accent reform (see e.g. Beal and Sturiale 2012), it is clear that articulatory information within works of this kind is often highly imprecise. Relevant descriptors can, by the same token, be strikingly opaque. Prescriptive aims by which the "best English" is deemed fully rhotic (see e.g. Sheridan 1762: 60), and invariably /h/-full (even in positions of low stress) while schwa is neither identified not transcribed suggest other pragmatic difficulties for the "standard" that might result, were such advice to be followed literally to the letter. Boswell's vocal reformation, as he admitted, resulted not from the dictionary but direct teaching, first by Sheridan and afterwards by Mr. Love in Drury Lane (Hill (ed.) 1971: II, 159). Similar *viva voce* instruction underpinned the changes in, say, Sarah Siddon's voice, commended by the lexicographer William Smith in 1795, as well as Alexander Wedderburn's reformation of his Scots tones (also under Sheridan's instruction). A later example can be provided by Michael Faraday's determined displacement of cockney in favour of a supra-regional and proto-RP, here with the assistance of the elocutionist Benjamin Smart (Mugglestone 2011). Faraday's earlier attempts at self-reformation using print alone were abandoned.

Significant, too, in the wider enterprise of reform by means of lexicography is, as Michael MacMahon observes, the paradoxical diversity that individual exponents of 18th- (and 19th) -century prescriptivism will, in reality, reveal in terms of what is recommended as a norm. As he remarks:

In many cases […] it is impossible to be certain whether pronunciations of particular words given in any of the orthoepical dictionaries represented actual current usage, a minority usage that carried with it a certain social cachet, or an as yet unspoken fantasy form that the author, for whatever reason, would like to have heard being used. (MacMahon 1998: 189)

The evidential basis of most pronouncing dictionaries indeed remains unclear; if Sheridan and Walker often take their lexical (and semantic) information from Johnson, the pronunciation they provide, as Alexander Ellis later comments (1869: II, 627-628), often transparently derives from precept rather than any form of systematic enquiry. As in the *Dictionnaire* of the Académie, we can, in effect, be returned to a methodology in which an autocratic *on dit* is paramount. Writers of this kind can be united by their emphasis on uniformity and the need for adherence to the "best" models of speech, while differing in fundamental ways as to the constituent elements by which such patterns might be identified as well as adopted.

   While the pronouncing dictionary would nevertheless become a staple of the elocutionary movement, being widely used in schools (see Mugglestone 2007; 2015b) as well as for personal instruction, we might note the consolidation across the 19th century of what is seen, and recognised, as the "elocution voice" – a mode which is characterised not only by its departures from the forms of speech an individual might originally have possessed but also from those more natural modes of enunciation which are elsewhere in use. Agha's (2003: 231) documentation of enregisterment as a process by which clusters of specific features "become differentiable […] as a socially recognised register of forms" is, of course, easily applied to the ideologised variants of supra-regional discourse which appear in language comment from the mid-18th century. It can, however, equally be applied to the consequences (and casualties) of elocution, and the imperfectly wielded "sword" of which Johnson warned. Mr. Donne's studied correctness of pronunciation in Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley* draws on enregistered patterns of precisely this kind, for example. His speech is used as a signifier of affectation and pretension in Bronte's documentation of his "stilted self-complacency" and "rickety dignity" (1849: I, 8). "You scarsley ever see a fam'ly where a propa carriage or a reg'la butler is kep", as he is made to state (1849:

II, 116-117). "You must excuse Mr. Donne's pronunciation, reader; it was very choice; he considered it genteel, and prided himself on his southern accent", the narrator comments in response. The same patterning exists into the early 20th century. The historian and lexicographer Andrew Clark, for instance, comments in his *War Diary* on the literally pronounced effect of elocution lessons on a commercial traveller he encounters at breakfast in a hotel in Oxford on December 8th 1914 (he "had studied elocution under a master who had certainly taught him to speak very distinctly, though rather stiltedly")[18]. Pronouncing dictionaries and elocution, Clark suggests, can bring change in ways that by no means yield the results that might initially have been desired.

Boswell, interestingly, would agree. A protégé of Sheridan and Johnson alike, it is perhaps appropriate for Boswell to gain the last word in a study of this kind. As we have seen, he carefully records Johnson's thinking on lexicography and the spoken word in 1772, offering useful evidence on Johnson's dissenting voice and the qualifications which were advanced in relation to this popular project of reform. Included in his *Life of Johnson,* first published in 1791, Boswell's own critical reflections on the prescriptive enterprise in which he had, via Sheridan, come to participate are, however, equally clear. No longer the impressionable young man of twenty who had listened attentively (and obediently) to Sheridan's exhortations, Boswell's recommendations are now rather different. As he specifies: "Let me give my country-men of North-Britain an advice not to aim at absolute perfection in this respect" (Hill (ed.) 1971: II, 160). Spoken standardisation, and the uniformity of an intentionally delocalised speech, are alike rejected. "A small intermixture of provincial peculiarities may, perhaps, have an agreeable effect", Boswell instead suggests. Like the "notes of different birds" that "occur in the harmony of the grove", it is diversity rather than sameness which, on reflection, can "please more than if they were all exactly alike".

As in Johnson's writing, nature and artifice are placed in careful opposition. Boswell's readers are advised "not to speak *High English*, as we are apt to call what is far removed from the *Scotch*" (Hill (ed.)

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[18] Clark's manuscript 'War Diary' is in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The citation comes from his fourth notebook, p. 83.

1971: II, 159), not least since this, as Boswell points out, is "by no means *good English*, and makes the 'the fools who use it,' truly ridiculous". "A studied and factitious pronunciation, which requires perpetual attention and imposes perpetual constraint, is exceedingly disgusting", he instead concludes (Hill (ed.) 1971: II, 160). Sheridan, we might safely assume, is no longer "Sophocles" while experience here, too, has self-evidently brought its own rewards. Boswell's *"Good English"* has its being in a varied community of discourse in which heightened models of correctness, and the linguistic self-consciousness (and anxiety) which these comport, are rendered out of place. Sheridan's "sword" of reform is returned to its sheath.

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