

Classroom activity 11

As you read these extracts, check words that seem archaic to you in the *OED*, or another etymological dictionary. What are Swift's main criticisms in this extract? How does this differ from Johnson's feelings about his ability to 'fix' language, especially words?

My LORD; I do here in the Name of all the Learned and Polite Persons of the Nation, 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; and the Pretenders to polish and refine it, have chiefly multiplied Abuses and Absurdities; and, that in many Instances, it offends against every Part of Grammar. But lest Your Lordship should think my Censure to be too severe, I shall take leave to be more particular.

Several young Men at the Universities, terribly possessed with the fear of Pedantry, run into a worse Extream, and think all Politeness to consist in reading the daily Trash sent down to them from hence: This they call *knowing the World*, and reading *Men and Manners*. Thus furnished they come up to Town, reckon all their Errors for Accomplishments, borrow the newest Sett of Phrases, and if they take a Pen into their Hands, all the odd Words they have picked up in a Coffee-House, or a Gaming Ordinary, are produced as Flowers of Style; and the Orthography refined to the utmost. To this we owe those monstrous Productions, which under the Names of *Trips, Spies, Amusements*, and other conceited Appellations, have over-run us for some Years past. To this we owe that strange Race of Wits, who tell us, they Write to the *Humour of the Age*: And I wish I could say, these quaint Fopperies were wholly absent from graver Subjects. In short, I would undertake to shew Your LORDSHIP several Pieces, where the Beauties of this kind are so prominent, that with all your Skill in Languages, you could never be able either to read or understand them.

Jonathan Swift, 'A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue', 1711

That it [the Dictionary] will immediately become popular I have not promised to myself; a few wild blunders, and risible absurdities, from which no work of such multiplicity was ever free, may for a time furnish folly with laughter, and harden ignorance in contempt; but useful diligence will at last prevail, and there can never be wanting some who distinguish desert; who will consider that no dictionary of a living tongue ever can be perfect, since while it is hastening to publication, some words are budding, and some falling away; that a whole life cannot be spent upon syntax and etymology, and that even a whole life would not be sufficient; that he, whose design includes whatever language can express, must often speak of what he does not understand; that a writer will sometimes be hurried by eagerness to the end, and sometimes faint with weariness under a task, which Scaliger compares to the labors of the anvil and the mine; that what is obvious is not always known, and what is known is not always present; that sudden fits of inadvertency will surprize vigilance, slight avocations will seduce attention, and casual eclipses of the mind will darken learning; and that the writer shall often in vain trace his memory at the moment of need, for that which yesterday he knew with intuitive readiness, and which will come uncalled into his thoughts to-morrow.

Dr Samuel Johnson, from the preface to A Dictionary of the English Language, 1755

But let us consider, how, and in what extent, we are to understand this charge brought against the English language: for the author seems not to have explained himself with sufficient clearness and precision on this head. Does it mean that the English language, as it is spoken by the politest part of the nation, and as it stands in the writings of the most approved authors, often offends against every part of grammar? Thus far, I am afraid, the charge is true. Or does it further imply, that our language is in its nature irregular and capricious; not hitherto subject, nor easily reducible, to a system of rules? In this respect, I am persuaded, the charge is wholly without foundation.

The English language is perhaps of all the present European languages by much the most simple in its form and construction. Of all the ancient languages extant that is the most simple, which is undoubtedly the most ancient; but even that language itself does not equal the English in simplicity.

The truth is, grammar is very much neglected among us: and it is not the difficulty of the language, but on the contrary the simplicity and facility of it, that occasions this neglect. Were the language less easy and simple, we should find ourselves under a necessity of studying it with more care and attention. But as it is, we take it for granted, that we have a competent knowledge and skill, and are able to acquit ourselves properly, in our own native tongue; a faculty, solely acquired by use, conducted by habit, and tried by the ear, carries us on without reflection; we meet with no rubs or difficulties in our way, or we do not perceive them; we find ourselves able to go on without rules, and we do not so much as suspect, that we stand in need of them.