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ENG 501 Research Methods

19 February 2016

Eighteenth Century English Grammars: The Creation of Culture

As a composition instructor I have discovered that most students can adequately communicate their ideas, but almost all require help writing proper English. Inevitably, during a grammar lesson, a brave student will ask, “Why do we write like this?” For many years, my unsatisfactory answer was “Because that’s how we’re taught to write,” which was followed by the student astutely saying that we do not talk that way.

The written word is slow to change compared to the spoken word which develops new categories and slangs as needed (Burke 648). It depends on successive generations of grammar instructors who are more comfortable with allowing certain changes (e.g., ending sentences with prepositions and allowing split infinitives) to create change in the written language. But where did these rules of English originate? That is the focus of this synthesis of English grammars of the eighteenth century, a time when grammarians codified and standardized the English language as the populace sought self-improvement by learning “properly” written and spoken English.

The clarifying article is Adam R. Beach’s “The Creation of a Classical Language in the Eighteenth Century: Standardizing English, Cultural Imperialism, and the Future of the Literary Canon.” Karen Cajka’s “Ann Fisher: Reforming Education for ‘the Mere English Scholar’” and Nuria Yáñez-Bouza’s “Grammar Writing and Provincial Grammar Printing in the Eighteenth-Century British Isles” also inform my research. I have excluded equally important research by David Borkowski, Paul K. Longmore, Linda C. Mitchell, Beth Barton Schweiger, and Jukka

Tyrkkö. David Wilton's dissertation "Rethinking the Prescriptivist–Descriptivist Dyad: Motives and Methods in Two Eighteenth-Century Grammars" provides a new means of interpreting grammars while Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade's "The Usage Guide: Its Birth and Popularity" and "James Merrick (1720–1769): Poet, Scholar, Linguist" further clarify the need for Wilton's approach to reassessing the grammatical dyad. Carol Percy in "Disciplining Women?: Grammar, Gender, and Leisure in the Works of Ellenor Fenn (1743–1813)" and "Robert Lowth and the Critics: Literary Contexts for the 'Critical Notes' in His *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762)," Marie E. Rodriguez-Gil in "Deconstructing Female Conventions: Ann Fisher (1719–1778)," and Nuria Yáñez-Bouza in "Grammar Writing and Provincial Grammar Printing in the Eighteenth-Century British Isles" and "Senses of 'Grammar' in the Eighteenth-Century English Tradition" all make important contributions to the study of eighteenth century grammars by analyzing the contributions of female grammarians Eleanor Fenn and Ann Fisher, Bishop Robert Lowth, the printing press as encouraging the creation and distribution of grammars outside of London, and the definition of *grammar* in the eighteenth century.

Beach is the English department chairperson at Ball State University (Muncie, Indiana) and studies issues of nationalism, colonialism, and slavery in eighteenth century England ("Adam R. Beach"). His essay provides important information on societal structures of the century. Wilton, according to his article's authorial information, was a doctoral candidate (2014) in the Department of English at the University of Toronto. Cajka completed her doctoral dissertation in January 2003 (Cajka "The Forgotten Women Grammarians...") and was an active researcher on eighteenth century grammars until her death in 2011 ("Karen Cajka Obituary"). Percy, Rodriguez-Gil, Tieken-Boon, and Yáñez-Bouza specifically research eighteenth century grammars and related texts. According to their articles' authorial information, Percy is in the De-

partment of English at the University of Toronto, Canada; Tieken-Boon is a chair in English Sociohistorical Linguistics at the University of Leiden; Rodriguez-Gil is at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in the Canary Islands, Spain; and Yáñez-Bouza is in the Department of Linguistics and English Language at The University of Manchester, England, and holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the University of Vigo, Spain, and co-created the Eighteenth Century English Grammars (ECEG) database with Rodriguez-Gil.

The Third Classical Language

Beach theorizes that right at the time that British expansionism of the eighteenth century increased the populace grammarians decided that English should become the third classical language, behind that of the two previous great empires of Greece and Rome. In 1747 Johnson had proposed his dictionary to systemize English, and Sheridan, among others, embarked on popular elocution projects to help rid the Scots, Welsh, and Irish of their own languages and accents in order to create national unity (Beach 118).

Grammars were a tool of assimilation. They were “a foreign, and forced, tongue to many citizens of the nation” especially after the defeat of a rebellion in 1745 (Beach 118). As the British Empire expanded, the assimilation of various cultures would require a standardized English so that all elements of the empire could communicate with the governmental structure. The creation of a third classical language is intimately tied to British imperialism, but it is that imperialism that inspired grammarians and elocutionists like Sheridan, who complained that English was not properly standardized (118), to codify the English language to make teaching easier. It is within this context that grammarians such as Robert Lowth, James Merrick, Ann Fisher, and Eleanor Fenn emerge.

The Meaning of Grammar

What does *grammar* actually mean for eighteenth century grammarians and their customers.

Yáñez-Bouza uses the Eighteenth-Century English Grammars (ECEG) database to expand on Ian Michael's 1970 work to determine what the term *grammar* meant for those in that century. She begins with a brief early history of grammars, Bullokar's first English grammar in 1586 and the first prescriptive grammar and the last written in Latin by Cooper in 1685 (Yáñez-Bouza "Senses..." 914). Yáñez-Bouza then explains the difference between the first and second halves of the eighteenth century in terms of grammar production. Fewer than forty new grammars were printed between 1700 and 1750, but over 200 grammars in 1600 printings were printed from 1751-1800. Finally, she mentions that the 1800s saw 860 new grammars with 3600 printings (914).

The ECEG contains 323 items, and of those, 200 are grammar books (Yáñez-Bouza "Senses..." 918). Analysis of these 200 items indicates ten primary divisions of grammar, unlike Michael's seven divisions (923). The most popular divisions are ones originally applied to Latin and identified processes (e.g., orthography, etymology, oration, prosody) instead of materials (e.g., letters, syllables, words, sentences) (920). She discusses the standardized patterns of the primary divisions of the grammars and the varied and rich patterns of the secondary content (940). It is important to note, though, that the standardization of the divisions of grammar follows Latin grammatical rules.

Contrarily, Anne Fisher (1719-1798) published her *New Grammar* (1745) based solely on vernacular English (Cajka "Ann Fisher..." 583) and belonged to a small group of approximately twenty-five anti-Latinate grammarians (Rodriguez-Gil 17). These grammarians, and the schools that used their texts, were *dissenters* who created vernacular English grammars schools for their

schools. In addition to her anti-Latinate grammars, Fisher notes English's lack of inflectional endings (15) and creates a grammar "based on the observation of her own language" (16). Furthermore, Fisher introduces the teaching of English by correcting bad examples (18), which grammarians Lowth, Priestley, and Ussher later adopt. Fisher classifies English through vernacular terms (19), such as *name* for *noun* (18).

Fisher wrote about the need for instructors to be more interested in teaching than in merely displaying their classical learning (Cajka "Ann Fisher..." 587), a pointed remark given that most of the English grammars were based on Latin models. Her grammars incorporate examples from English, but she also includes Latin, Greek, French, Hebrew, and Chinese examples. She uses these examples to demonstrate her belief in a "universal grammar" (584). Unfortunately, while many languages share properties, Fisher's belief in a universal grammar fails to account for what she already knew: English grammar could not be mapped upon Latin grammar and therefore, while languages may share characteristics, their grammars are not identical.

Education for Men and Women

Fisher believes that a knowledge of proper English grammar was necessary for a good reputation and social position and for earning a living (Cajka "Ann Fisher..." 585). Radically, Fisher stated that women's lack of education and not their "inherent mental deficiency" kept them from choosing reading material more difficult than popular romances (589). Education brings "economic power and social standing" and is necessary for women to raise themselves and their families honorably (595), so Fisher added evening hours to her school and marketed her services to both the affluent and less affluent families in Newcastle, England, as well as to males and females (590).

Fisher was not the sole female grammarian. Percy writes about Ellenor Fenn (1743-1813) an author of a “long list of numerous titles written” for the teaching of children (Percy “Disciplining Women?” 109). Her pedagogical approach is one of “controlled incremental progress” (qtd. 110) in an easily acquired and rational system (120) through which a mother teaches basic English grammar through toys (such as grammar boxes), the use of older children (particularly the daughters), and graded children’s texts (110) to create an idealized vision of domestic order for a rising middle class that “expressed anxiety about discipline” (111). Fenn was not the first to recommend mothers teach their children; Locke, Greenwood, Gildon, and Ash all did the same (111). Fenn uniquely provided both the method and resources for mothers to actually accomplish the task (111).

Fisher’s work, though, was the product of her unconventional lifestyle outside of domestic issues (Rodriguez-Gil 25). She married at the rather late age of thirty-two (and had nine daughters) (note 30), and with her husband, Thomas Slack, ran a printing press and book shop, printed a newspaper (the *Newcastle Chronicle*) (31), promoted and hosted a salon for “litterateurs, artists, actors, and politicians” (27), taught a ladies school with extended hours for at least five years (28), and created a series of books to aid both males and females in learning to speak and write English correctly (30).

Fenn’s *The Child’s Grammar* (1798) and *The Mother’s Grammar* (1798) introduce the idea of using females to civilize males (Percy “Disciplining Women?” 109). In contrast to Fisher’s unconventional lifestyle, Fenn promotes grammars as a means for women to *remain* within the domestic sphere while influencing the development of males before they are sent to school and exposed to potential vices. Her most repeated reasons for teaching mothers and girls grammar is to introduce their male offspring to grammar in preparation for the prescriptive, Latinate

grammars (like Lowth's) and the study of Latin itself and to give women a means of employment as teachers in case their own husbands squander the family money or they themselves never marry (125).

But this idea of females learning grammar, even couched within the domestic sphere is as radical as Fisher's work. Fenn inverts the idea of "private" and "female" with "public" and "male" (Percy "Disciplining Women?" 130) by demonstrating the need for women's grammatical education not for the purposes of effeminizing (130) or repressing (127) men but as a new femininity that reprograms (127) *children's*, especially *boys'*, leisure time as self-disciplined and responsible (126) in preparation for dealing with society.

The Spread of Printing

Despite the acceptance of Ann Fisher's series of grammars and its pedagogy of descriptive grammar (Rodriguez-Gil 12), the public wanted to know how to speak and write better English. Yáñez-Bouza examines printing records by country, county, and city and by geographical and chronological distributions in the Eighteenth Century English Grammars (ECEG) database to determine patterns of growth in the grammars market that corresponded to an increase in potential customers, entwining the history of the book trade with the history of grammar writing to show the channels used publishing to disseminate English grammars during the codification of English (Yáñez-Bouza "Ann Fisher..." 58). She explains the importance of provincial cities in the publication of grammars and the tie between grammar writers and their lives as educators and the reduction of restrictions on publication that legalized printing outside of London (59). Newcastle, Fisher's location for her printing press, book shop, and teaching, is the second most prominent location for printing, behind only London (63), and is but one of several provincial centers

where “consortia of printers (and booksellers)” (60) created communities of thought regarding the codification, distribution, and teaching of standardized English.

Fisher’s *A New Grammar* (1745) had thirty-two editions (Rodriguez-Gil 13). Her grammar was pirated so much that she created a note with her signature at the end of the preface to warn readers against piracy (12). Boston, Philadelphia, and Dublin followed Newcastle with thirty, twenty-seven, and twenty grammars, respectively (13). Fenn’s *The Child’s Grammar* (1798) and *The Mother’s Grammar* (1798) were also popular with twenty-six and twenty-one editions, respectively (Percy “Disciplining Women?” 110), but Lowth’s and Ash’s grammars were more popular with at least forty-seven and fifty printings, respectively (qtd Rodriguez-Gil 2). Despite being more popular grammarians such as Ash admit that Fisher’s arguments for descriptive grammar are valid (15).

Grammars as a Commodity to Attain Utopia

In a capitalist society all things are cultural products that can be commodified (Bronner 47). This embedding of cultural value occurred in the creation of grammars in the eighteenth century, when conditions coalesced so that the Industrial Revolution and British imperialism created not only an emerging middle class that desired social mobility but had the money and leisure to achieve that mobility. The grammar text was a commodity (21) from its very inception (81), and its use as a means of self-improvement was a regulative ideal (75) of a utopia that the middle class strove for. The fully literate print culture that developed as a result of “a revolution in the book trade” (Yáñez-Bouza “Senses” 941) gave rise to this commodification and was of great value to consumers who feared *impropriety* and had new funds to attain *correctness* of living. Politeness involved knowing how to speak and write according to a genteel norm for participation in society, acquiring new skills, or moving upward socially and economically.

Grammars became more complex in the second half of the century to cater to the expanding middle class (Yáñez-Bouza “Senses” 915). Publisher John Marshall “exploited and intensified the middle class obsession with education” for social advancement and defense against males’ uncivilized ways which propelled women into teaching (Percy “Disciplining Women?” 125). The literate and becoming literate public viewed grammar as “a way of ordering language” and “a symbolic instrument for ordering society” (116).

Kenneth Burke’s philosophical vision in the twentieth century is that language is a “form...of symbolic action” (Burke 633). In other terms, language could become a method of achieving agency, “a vehicle of resistance” (Bronner 47). For grammars in the eighteenth century, this *agency* is literally the case. Yáñez-Bouza shows how the production of grammars exponentially increased during that time. Through the symbolism of language, grammars then embed cultural value (Burke 648), and the person who reads a grammar experiences success and becomes an agent in his (or her) own awareness (648).

Unconventional Women, Conventional Culture

Percy discusses the “leisured mother,” a product of this new, upwardly mobile middle class, and how Fenn’s writings represent “expensive things” (Percy “Disciplining Women?” 113). Thus, Fenn’s audience has money to spend on leisure, but Fenn criticizes leisure as extravagant and unnecessary (114). She uses her time to print for those “ladies who have less leisure than myself [sic]” (128), indicating her disdain for unoccupied and unproductive time. A good mother “invest[s] both her leisure and her wealth in her children’s early education” to enhance the family’s social status (115), ensure the sons become self-disciplined (120) instead of profligate (118), and the daughters learn grammar for home use (117).

While Fenn promotes unconventional ideas for women to be positive influences as mother-teachers and sister-teachers in the domestic sphere, she commodifies her work by publishing (Percy “Disciplining Women?” 110). This commodification caters to the middle class’s fears of being unproductive (124). Fenn follows Fisher’s earlier commodification of her grammar series (Rodriguez-Gil 30) to aid in the attainment of an education, specifically a grammatical education that would increase one’s “economical power and social standing” (Cajka “Ann Fisher...” 595) and call for highly moral grammar instructors to positively influence students (587).

The Self-Learned Man

Percy also sets Lowth’s “Critical Notes” within this context of commodification and increased historical criticism (Percy “Robert Lowth...” 15). Self-learned men like Lowth could apply a scholarly approach to both biblical and secular literature (21). Indeed, the creation of the book review, a new commodity necessary with increased printing, gave prestige to Lowth’s grammar and helped integrate the public into conflicts “between reviewers and authors or other reviewers” (18). Lowth’s readjustment of footnotes to demonstrate grammatical errors of nonliving writers (Percy “Robert Lowth...” 9) builds on Fisher’s introduction of bad grammar examples for correction that already existed in biblical criticism (10) and the prior use of footnotes to criticize living authors, such as Warburton’s criticism of Bentley’s works (15). By using dead authors for critical review, Lowth avoids footnote wars that Pope parodied in *The Dunciad* (17). But Lowth’s critique of the age’s best writers shows that even “polite company” and “reading great authors” could not help the “culturally literate write correctly” and offered the sole solution of *purchasing* his grammar (Percy “Robert Lowth...” 21).

This utopia of a “vibrant public sphere” (Bronner 81) gave men and women opportunity to participate in a culture industry of happy consciousness (87) where all views of grammatical

correctness helped codify the English language in order to realize a profit (Yáñez-Bouza “Senses...” 914; Percy “Robert Lowth...” 21). And what happened after the codification of the language? It was standardized into prescriptive grammars where authors condemn grammatical mistakes and the barbarism that ensues from grammatical (moral!) permissiveness (Tieken-Boon “The Usage Guide...” 22).

Tieken-Boon discusses how English is still in its final stage of standardization (Tieken-Boon “The Usage Guide...” 21). She often classifies Lowth as a prescriptivist, but she demonstrates that even Lowth was aware of a grammar different from what he prescribed when he informs his readers that prepositions should not be used at the end of a sentence and that “This is an idiom which our language is strongly inclined **to**” (qtd. 21, emphasis added). Lowth recognized, then, that a variety of commodity forms of grammar existed; it just so happened that his was one of the most popular.

Discourse Communities

One of these other types of grammar is the prescriptivist usage guide of which Baker’s *Reflections on the English Language, In the Nature of Vaugelas’s Reflections on the French* is the first (Tieken-Boon “The Usage Guide...” 16). Tieken-Boon connects Baker’s 1770 work to Simon’s 1980 *Paradigms Lost* (16) and Truss’ 2003 *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (19) as a discourse community separate and ongoing from the grammarian tradition begun in the eighteenth century. Baker, Simon, and Truss each confide to the reader that they are not experts in their fields but nonetheless condemn grammatical mistakes (19) and the barbarism that ensues from grammatical permissiveness (18) while being entertaining in the process (21), as Truss is when referencing the joke “So a panda walked into a bar...” The point, for Tieken-Boon, is that prescriptivist

grammarians (or normative linguists) saw (and still see) a market for preserving a standard described by earlier grammarians (22).

Often viewed negatively, prescriptivists are simply a different discourse community from descriptivists within linguistics, “each [community] with their [sic] respective interests, goals [sic] and beliefs” (Tieken-Boon “The Usage Guide...” 22). Tieken-Boon’s purpose in 2010 is to show that Lowth was part of a prescriptivist community of thought. But in writing about James Merrick in 2016 she persuades her audience that Lowth was not the prescriptivist scholars believe him to be (Tieken-Boon “James Merrick...” 22).

Tieken-Boon analyzes the eighteen extant letters (Tieken-Boon “James Merrick...” 41) between Lowth and James Merrick to determine whether Lowth was a modern linguist, or descriptivist. She concludes that Lowth, referring to *custom* (usage) instead of *propriety* (correctness), becomes more prescriptivist between his first and subsequent editions of his *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762). She posits this as a result of correspondence initiated by Lowth (40) with Merrick through letters written between December 1761 and October 1765 (41). According to Tieken-Boon, Merrick discusses grammatical matters more abstractly and with more weight on customary usage, making Merrick a more modern (and descriptivist) linguist (51) and Lowth a prescriptivist who felt “Duty bound to abide by these Principles” of “repell[ing] the invasions of [the] enemy [permissiveness in grammatical form] to the utmost of [his] power” (qtd 48). Despite his correspondence with Merrick and other grammarians, Lowth and the “Learned Gentlemen” who critiqued his grammar (40) did not form a community of practice (54), particularly given Lowth’s insistence on saving the English language from its enemy, usage, and on ensuring that *correctness* prevails (41).

Complications within the Grammars Dyad

Percy places Lowth within the broader context of literary criticism begun before Lowth's own grammars career and which he participates in as a biblical poetry scholar and critic (Percy "Robert Lowth..." 10, 12). Lowth's participation in the literary criticism of biblical translation places him at the center of eighteenth century scholastic work. His interest in grammar is a result of his attempts to clarify the biblical translations that were already archaic by the eighteenth century. This furthers the idea that language changes, an idea Lowth admits to while at the same time prescribing standards for the English language (Tieken-Boon "The Usage Guide..." 22). Thus while standardization is important, it is also important to understand that the English language changes and that both prescriptive and descriptive grammars are important.

Tieken-Boon's inability to decide on Lowth's situation in the prescriptivist - descriptivist dyad makes Wilton's work especially important. He provides a spectrum on which to organize eighteenth century grammarians and their grammars given the grammarians' stated intentions and the actual usage of their texts. This would prevent scholars like Tieken-Boon from flip-flopping on the descriptions of grammarians like Lowth whose motivation and methodology create a "fuzzy" area (Wilton 46) that the dyad is unable to accurately account for.

Wilton uses a qualitative method to distinguish Lowth's and Joseph Priestly's grammars in terms more refined than *prescriptive* and *descriptive* (Wilton 38). Instead, Wilton divides grammarians' writing into methodology (normative / non-normative) and motivation (aspirational / observational) and compares Lowth's and Priestly's grammars for double negation, subjunctive-only use of *wert*, and preposition stranding (39). Wilton concludes that the combination of motivation and methodology in the terms *prescriptive* and *descriptive* creates problems (46) for classifying grammars as many grammars are both prescriptive and descriptive and that the traditional dyad creates debate instead of better methodologies for determining the standards of

“good” English (46). His solution is to evaluate individual grammars and their authors in relation to each other.

Students often complain about prescriptive grammar rules not making sense, and I often find myself explaining that in order to meet the “proper” grammatical (or in Wilton’s terms, *aspirational*) standard, we must follow certain rules. Thus, my own teaching involves prescriptions about correct grammar so that my students will speak and write as educated citizens. However, I follow descriptivism when I agree that some rules are ridiculous because they blatantly disagree with what is commonly accepted in written and spoken English, such as preposition stranding. Thus, most grammarians’ work is not either prescriptivist or descriptivist, but a combination of methodology and motivation. Understanding this will aid me as I teach my students what makes for “good” English through this spectrum of methodology and motivation, with my methodology as a college professor being aspirational and my motivation moving between normative (“This is how it’s always been done, and I see no need for change) and non-normative (“This is how it was done done when my parents were in school, but I have seen the language change, and this other way may be the norm when your children are in school”). The inability to decide on Lowth’s situation in the dyad supports Wilton’s work but also shows that it is both standardization (prescriptivism) and usage (descriptivism) that drive the grammatical educational process.

For the Future: More Research into the Past

The eighteenth century was a unique time, and Britain was a unique location for the creation of a standardized language. British imperialism, the Industrial Revolution, the new middle class, and aspirational desires to move upward created a unique set of circumstances in which the public decided it needed to learn how to be *proper*. By the 1770s and 1780s people realized that a knowledge of vernacular grammar served a function similar to Latin: It distinguished some peo-

ple as better than others (Percy “Disciplining Women?” 116). Language happened to be the means by which the public choose to become educated, and since learning Latin and Greek were necessary languages for boys of rank to become educated, the application of Latin rules in particular to the standardization of English makes sense; latinizing English would make learning Latin itself easier for those boys who were able to receive an education beyond the primary home education. The acceptance of Fisher’s and Fenn’s grammars maintained the masculinity of grammar (Percy “Disciplining Women?” 112) while allowing women entrance into an educational system that could potentially keep them from penury and demonstrated that grammarians understood differences in grammatical methodology and motivation.

But there are many gaps in my knowledge. First, my knowledge of James Merrick (1720-1769), who was mainly a poet and scholar, is limited (Tieken-Boon “Robert Lowth...” 54). Secondly, pronunciation and usage guides are part of the Eighteenth Century English Grammars (ECEG) database, among the 123 items other than grammars which deserve attention to create a fuller picture of language development in the 1700s. Thirdly, Ann Fisher, her fellow anti-Latinate grammarians, their *dissenting* grammars schools (indeed, the schools themselves) deserve my additional consideration as, it is my understanding, that these schools became the basis for public education. With a bachelors in English and a masters in education, studying the creation and distribution of these schools and their relationship to the creation of the public school system in the United States is of considerable importance to my further development as an educator. Finally, David Wilton’s method of analyzing grammars deserves significantly increased attention as it creates a framework for ending disciplinary “language wars” and for creating additional scholarship regarding prescriptivism and descriptivism as entwined fields within linguistics.

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