

LANGUAGE MYTHS IN LORD CHESTERFIELD'S 1754 LETTERS TO THE WORLD

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Abstract: Taking the approach proposed by Watts (2011) as a point of reference, we aim to examine some of the “language myths” that have helped to construct the history of the English language ideologically (Watts 2011), focusing on two Letters (the *World*, No.100, November 28, the *World*, No. 101, December 5) sent by Lord Chesterfield to the *World* in 1754. These Letters announce the publication of a significant text in the history of the English language, Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755). The purpose of the article will be to show that the use of language myths in the Letters reflects the shifting relation between “politeness” and “correctness” in the second half of the eighteenth century (Klein 1994, Fitzmaurice 1998) and an emergent “conceptualization of a legitimate form of English” (Watts 2011).

Keywords: language ideology, language myth, polite language myth, legitimate language myth

1. Introduction

Two letters written by Lord Chesterfield, announcing Samuel Johnson's forthcoming *Dictionary of the English Language*, were published in November and December 1754 in the *World* (No.100 and No.101, November 28 and December 5), a popular periodical of the eighteenth century, to which Chesterfield had made several contributions. Robert Dodsley, the publisher of the *World*, was also the publisher of the *Dictionary*, which appeared in 1755 and, according to previous scholarship, he is likely to have encouraged Chesterfield to write in order to advertise Johnson's work. Chesterfield's contributions to the *World* were initially published anonymously, but their authorship was made public in the same year, when they were reprinted by the *Scots Magazine* in December and also by the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *London Magazine* in the same month (Boulton 1995: 15).

The well-known 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, which Chesterfield's essays announced, needs no further introduction. An iconic text in the history of English lexicography, the *Dictionary* was canonized as one of the most significant points of reference of English prescriptivism and its famous author is still regarded as a prototypical “verbal hygienist” (Cameron 1995).

Johnson's relationship with Chesterfield has been extensively discussed. Formally the aristocratic patron of the *Dictionary*, Chesterfield had not shown particular interest in the *Dictionary* between 1747 and 1755, the time it had taken Johnson to compile this work. Johnson's famous letter, written on February 7, 1755 after the reading of Chesterfield's 1754 essays, rejects Chesterfield's patronage, complaining of the lack of interest the earl had shown in the compilation of the *Dictionary*.

Since Chesterfield's 1754 Letters to the *World* are meant to recommend to the public a text which was to become one of the points of reference in the codification of

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English, they present this *Dictionary* as a necessary instrument for language regulation. As they underline the necessity of the *Dictionary* by emphasizing its role as a remedy for linguistic confusion, the Letters should be regarded as relying upon a strong “language complaint” (Milroy and Milroy 1999) component, as texts that are part of the tradition dealing with the so-called misuse and decline of language (Milroy and Milroy 1999) and which play an essential part in the development of the “ideology of standardization” (Milroy and Milroy 1999).

Envisaging standard language as an ideological project (Milroy and Milroy 1999), standardization as an on-going process (Milroy and Milroy 1999) and language ideologies as relying on “language myths” (Watts 2011), I aim to examine the myths in Chesterfield’s Letters, myths which became instrumental in the creation of the language ideological discourse of the second half of the eighteenth century.

Regarding the development of the ideology of standard English in the eighteenth century as falling within the wider scope of the “ideology of politeness” (Watts 2011) and the eighteenth century as responsible for establishing the ideology of standardization (Milroy and Milroy 1999), this article attempts to examine the way in which the “language complaint” dimension of Lord Chesterfield’s 1754 Letters to the *World* draws upon myths such as “the myth of the homogeneous language”, “the myth of the polite language” and “the myth of the legitimate language” (ultimately relying on the “true statements” generated by the conceptual metaphor A LANGUAGE IS A HUMAN BEING, Watts 2011).

Emphasizing the role of “politeness” as a keyword in the eighteenth-century discourse of standardization, I take the view (expressed by previous linguists), that there is an important rift in the linguistic thinking of the eighteenth century (Klein 1994), that opposes the first half of this century to its second half. The first half of the eighteenth century is envisaged as a period that valorizes the judgments of generalists and amateurs (Klein 1994), as a time when the ideal of “polite English” still relies on an ideal of “metropolitan sociability” (Fitzmaurice 1998). Often called “the era of grammarians” in previous works centering on the history of the English language, the second half of the eighteenth century is seen as a period of emerging specialists and experts (Klein 1994) and of the beginnings of “prescriptivism”, in the context of the “fossilization” of the concept of “politeness” as “correct English” (Fitzmaurice 1998).

Further exploring the relation between the “myth of the polite language” and the “myth of the legitimate language” (Watts 2011) in the second half of the eighteenth century, I will attempt to show that the language myths employed in Chesterfield’s mid-eighteenth century texts underline a passage from the former era of “polite English” to the emerging era of “legitimate English”, where “linguistic politeness becomes prescriptive, concerned with rules of usage” (Fitzmaurice 1998: 312). The article represents a further development of previous work on Chesterfield’s 1754 texts announcing the *Dictionary* (Vişan 2009, 2014), where I focused on the relations between refinement and copiousness, refinement and politeness, politeness and pedantry and on the relevance of such keywords for the eighteenth-century discourse of standardization.

2. Language myths

Ideological analysis relies upon the rationalization of the doctrines of linguistic correctness/incorrectness and upon examining the correlation of such doctrines with the “doctrines of the inherent representational power, beauty, and expressiveness of language as a valued mode of action” (Silverstein 1979, quoted. in Woolard 1998: 33). In Watts’s (2011: 9) sociocognitive approach, language ideologies are constructed “by discourses that have language (language, attitudes, beliefs, opinions and convictions about language) as their central themes”. According to Watts (2011: 16), the basis of language ideology are language myths, which he defines as “communally shared stories that, regardless of their factual basis, are believed and propagated as the cultural property of the group”.

Drawing upon Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) well-known theory of conceptual metaphor, Watts sees myths as based on underlying conceptual metaphors which yield true metaphorical statements, the fundamental anthropomorphic metaphor A LANGUAGE IS HUMAN BEING yielding metaphorical statements such as <a language is noble/homogeneous, corrupt>. Metaphorical statements engender myths: a metaphorical statement such <as a language is homogeneous> underlies a myth, namely the *myth of linguistic homogeneity*. The myths, which are envisaged as forming a nexus, help drive forms of ideological discourse and to construct discourse archives (Watts 2011: 3). Discourse archive is a term that Watts borrows from Michel Foucault’s works, in order to refer to “the general system of formation and transformation of statements or the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events” (Watts 2011: 18).

This is how Watts (2011: 200) defines the relationship between conceptual metaphors, myths and the discourse archive which the nexus of myths contributes to create:

Myths draw on common conceptual metaphors to create stories that are then produced and reproduced socially through discourse. The stronger the myths become or the more support one myth draws from others the greater the likelihood that language ideology will emerge. If this ideology becomes part of the dominant hegemonic discourse of a social group, it will give rise to statements that are equivalent to laws, thus constructing an archive of what can and what can’t be said or believed in.

Among the interrelated language myths identified and studied by Watts (2011), (conceived of as a nexus, are “the myth of homogeneity”, “the myth of the polite language”, “the myth of the legitimate language” or “the myth of the superiority of English”. While some of these myths – the myth of homogeneity, the myth of legitimacy and the myth of the superiority of English – are seen as central in the nexus, others are envisaged as supporting more central myths: the central myth of linguistic homogeneity being supported, among others, by myths such as the myth of purity, the myth of the perfect language or the myth of immutability (Watts 2011: 137).

Watts studies a historical trajectory of myths, showing how interrelated myths supporting the myth of homogeneity appear in fourteenth-century texts such as Ranulf

Higden's *Polychronicon*, while myths such as the myth of greatness or the myth of creolization can be ascribed to the twentieth century.

According to Watts (2011: 187), the polite language myth (or the myth of the polished language) comes into force in the eighteenth century, becoming part of a nexus of myths “guiding an ideological discourse on standardization that was soon to develop into a discourse archive during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries”. The myth of the legitimate language is seen as emerging between the 1750s and the 1850s, a reconceptualization of the earlier eighteenth-century myth of the polite language.

3. Chesterfield's Letters: Purity, politeness and legitimacy

An examination of Chesterfield's texts (written in the 1750s) allows us to identify some of the language myths the author employs in order to make the language complaint that enables him to advertise Johnson's *Dictionary*. The opening paragraphs of the first letter to the World (published on November 28, 1754), frame the text as a “complaint”, due to the use of the verb “lament”. The reference to Swift's famous language complaint, the 1712 *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, further reinforces the connection between Chesterfield's text and other texts within the language complaint tradition.

It is relevant to see that Chesterfield uses the term “standard”, which had begun to be employed concerning prestige varieties of English as early as the first decades of the eighteenth century (Bailey 1991: 3):

I heard the other day with great pleasure from my worthy friend Mr. Dodsley, that Mr. Johnson's English Dictionary, **with a grammar and history of our language prefixed**, will be published this winter, in two large volumes in folio.

I had long lamented that we had **no lawful standard of our language set up**, for those to repair to, who might chuse to speak, and write it **grammatically** and **correctly**: and I have as long wished that either some one person of distinguished abilities would undertake the work singly, or that a certain number of gentlemen would form themselves, or be formed by the **government**, into a society for that purpose. The late ingenious Doctor Swift proposed a plan of this nature to his friend (as he thought him) the lord treasurer Oxford, but without success; **precision** and **perspicuity** not being in general the favourite objects of ministers, and perhaps still less so of that minister than any other (Chesterfield 1995: 95, *First Letter*) [My emphasis].

According to Chesterfield, a dictionary accompanied by “a grammar” and “a history” is needed in order to set “a lawful standard” of language, standard which is equivalent to speaking and writing “grammatically” and “correctly”. The phrase “precision and perspicuity” is used in the text as an equivalent for “speaking grammatically and correctly”. The *Dictionary* is thus from the very beginning presented

as a necessary instrument in the process of standardization, as an authoritative point of reference in terms of “correctness”, a keyword which receives a range of (near) synonyms, such as “grammaticality”, “precision” or “perspicuity”.

It is not random that the author chooses the adjective “lawful” as a modifier for “standard”. Chesterfield’s use of the phrase “lawful standard” underlines that the author employs here what Watts (2011) envisages as an emergent language myth in the second half of the eighteenth century, namely the myth of the legitimate language. Chesterfield’s reference to the “government” forming a “society of gentlemen”, namely an academy for the regulation of the English language underlines the fact that the *Dictionary* is to be seen as having a similar function to that of a language academy.

The myth of the legitimate language is recurrent in the text, as Chesterfield refers (albeit ironically) to Johnson’s lexicographic authority as to a “dictatorship” and presents the *Dictionary* as preventing the “state of anarchy” of the English language. A legitimate language is regarded as equivalent to a legitimate state, which succumbs to anarchy if deprived of lawful authority:

It must be owned that our language is **at present in a state of anarchy**; and hitherto, perhaps, it may not have been the worse for it. During our free and open trade, many words and expressions have been **imported, adopted, and naturalized from other languages**, which have **greatly enriched** our own. Let it still preserve what **real strength and beauty it may have borrowed from others**, but let it not, **like the Tarpeian maid, be overwhelmed and crushed by unnecessary foreign ornaments**. The time for discrimination seems to be now come. **Toleration, adoption and naturalization** have run their lengths. **Good order and authority are now necessary**.

But where shall we find them, and at the same time the obedience due to them? We must have recourse to the old Roman expedient in times of **confusion**, and **chuse a dictator**. Upon this principle I give my vote for Mr. Johnson to fill that great and arduous post. And I hereby declare that **I make a total surrender of all my rights and privileges in the English language, as a free-born British subject, to the said Mr. Johnson, during the term of his dictatorship**. Nay more; I will not only obey him, like an old Roman, as my dictator, but, like a modern Roman, I will implicitly believe in him as my pope, and hold him to be infallible while in the chair; but no longer. More than this he cannot well require; for I presume that **obedience** can never be expected when there is **neither terror to enforce, nor interest to invite it** (Chesterfield 1995: 95-96, *First Letter*) [My emphasis].

With rhetorical flourish, Chesterfield, a peer of the realm, makes a show of surrendering his rights and privileges of the English language to the dictatorship of a lexicographer. I will come back in the next section to the opposition between what Chesterfield frames as dictatorship of the grammarian and what he presents as the position of the polite gentleman. Here it is relevant to note the way in which Chesterfield correlates a representation of the legitimate state with that of a legitimate language.

The underlying conceptual metaphors in the text above are “a language is a state” (political harmony is synonymous with linguistic harmony), “a state is a human being” – hence “a language is a human being”. According to Watts’s (2011) analysis, a true statement that can be derived from the conceptual metaphor “a state/language is a human being” is “a human being is unruly/undisciplined” (a human being has a body). The body needs to be disciplined in order to overcome its unruliness and this is why, as Chesterfield underlines, “good order and authority” are necessary concerning the anthropomorphized language/a state. A legitimate language is a language that does not display unruly behaviour (it has been adequately disciplined); expressions that have been “imported, adopted, and naturalized” from other languages are, in Chesterfield’s view, a potential source of richness/beauty, but also a potential source of disorder or heterogeneousness

Other statements derived from the central anthropomorphic metaphor A LANGUAGE IS A HUMAN BEING are “a language is rich/a language is beautiful”. While Chesterfield presents borrowings (foreign ornaments) as having contributed to enhancing the richness/beauty of the English language, he also presents them as a potential source of excess (of illegitimacy and heterogeneousness) – as unnecessary ornaments overwhelming and crushing the native words, as intruders which should not be tolerated, adopted or naturalized, but lawfully expelled from the English language. Here Chesterfield makes a connection between the myth of the legitimate language and another prominent myth, that of the homogeneous language (which ultimately relies on the myth of the pure language, Watts 2011). A legitimate state is based on good order and authority which should prevent foreign elements from tainting the imagined purity of the nation-state.

Homogeneity, together with its connection with legitimacy, hence its antonymy with linguistic heterogeneousness or anarchy, also comes into play in the following excerpt. A standard of language is characterized by order, discrimination, homogeneity and is supposed to be served by a dictionary (not by a mere word book, where words have been jumbled indiscriminately together). Homogeneity equals legitimacy: a heterogeneous dictionary (a mere word book) is not an adequate representation of the legitimate state, but a “disgrace” to the nation it is supposed to represent. As we can see below, Chesterfield’s text relies upon another significant conceptual metaphor, namely “a dictionary is a language”. If “a dictionary is a language” and “a language is a state”, then the legitimate state can be represented only by a legitimate dictionary:

I cannot help thinking it a sort of disgrace to our nation, that hitherto we have had no such **standard of our language**; our **dictionaries** at present being more properly what our neighbours the Dutch and the Germans call theirs, **WORD BOOKS**, than dictionaries in the superior sense of that title. **All words, good and bad, are there jumbled indiscriminately together**, insomuch that the **injudicious** reader may speak, and write as **inelegantly, improperly, and vulgarly** as he pleases, by and with the authority of one or other of our WORD-BOOKS (Chesterfield 1995: 96, *First Letter*) [My emphasis].

Chesterfield’s use of antonyms for adjectives such as “elegant”, “proper” or “vulgar”, as well as the representation of an opposition between miscellaneous “word

books" and superior "dictionaries" also emphasizes his reliance upon the eighteenth-century ideal of order, translated into notions such as decorum, symmetry or politeness. In this manner, the text also articulates an essential myth for the eighteenth century, namely "the myth of the polite language" (Watts 2011).

In Chesterfield's earlier remarks, "grammaticality" and "correctness" were correlated with "precision" and "perspicuity". In order to codify a language in a dictionary, that language has to be purified or sifted:

Many people have imagined that so extensive a work would have been best performed by a number of persons, who should have taken their several departments, of **examining, sifting, winnowing** (I borrow this image from the Italian Crusca) **purifying**, and **finally fixing our language** [...] (Chesterfield 1995: 95, *First Letter*) [My emphasis].

Here the myth of linguistic purity (emphasized by the use of the keyword "purifying"), a myth which underlies the more encompassing myth of linguistic homogeneity, shows its affinity with the "myth of the perfect language" (Watts 2011). A language should be pure (a statement also based on an underlying anthropomorphic metaphor) and is also in constant need of improvement in order to come closer to perfection, having to be ordered, examined, sifted, winnowed as was done in other countries, such as Italy, by academies created for this very purpose. There is also a connection with "the myth of immutability" (Watts 2011) in the text, since a dictionary is meant to make the language immutable, to fix it in a certain state that should, ideally, be maintained unaltered for generations to come.

Attempting to "perfect" a language also means attempting to "polish" that language – to polish language also means to make that language "polite", "polish", being part of the original meaning of the word "polite", with significant eighteenth-century dictionaries such as Bailey's, Martin's or Johnson's illustrating the connection between the literal meaning of "polite" and its derived meanings (apparent in phrases such as "polite conversation", "polite nation" or "polite English").

4. Politeness, correctness and legitimacy

Previous sociohistorical analyses have discussed the importance of the ideology of politeness for the eighteenth century, emphasizing that it is through the ideal of polite conversation that the discourse of standard English begins to take shape. Analyses such as Klein (1994), Fitzmaurice (1998), Watts (2003), Nevalainen and Tissari (2010) have focused on the keyword "politeness" in the eighteenth century and on its relevance for the ideology of standardization. Originally applied in its literal sense, with reference to polished physical objects, "polite" comes to be figuratively applied from the seventeenth century onwards in order to cover a wide range of meanings which designate the behavioral standards of the members of the elite (Nevalainen and Tissari 2010: 133). An analysis of the representation of the meanings of the keywords "polite"/"politeness" in

the English dictionaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is to be found in Vişan (2014).

The eighteenth-century concept “polite English” is envisaged as relying upon texts such as the literary periodicals *The Spectator* and *The Tattler* or upon works such as the treatises of the third Earl of Shaftesbury (Klein 1994, Fitzmaurice 1998, Watts 2011). Notions such as “beauty”, “symmetry”, “decorum” promoted by works such as those above are seen as key components of the polite language myth (Watts 2011: 199).

The relation between the keywords “politeness” and “correctness” is a complex one in the eighteenth century. Previous authors have underlined that, in the works of late seventeenth-century writers such as Defoe or of early eighteenth-century writers such as Jonathan Swift, a polite or polished language could be equated with correct language, purified language, language in which no change is condoned (Watts 2011: 186, 187). In the early eighteenth century, politeness and correctness could thus be used interchangeably. Chesterfield himself uses words such as “inelegantly”, “improperly” or “vulgarly” as synonyms in the 1754 Letters, which suggest that “polite English” could be seen as equivalent to “proper English”.

Lawrence Klein has shown that in the first half of the eighteenth century, the nearest antonym for “politeness” was “pedantry”, not “vulgarity”, the English of the generalist and of the amateur being valorized against that of the specialist and expert. According to analyses such as Klein’s, in the first half of the eighteenth century, a standard of English was provided by gentlemanly conversation, thus by non-specialists who were to avoid technical subjects and technical language (Klein 1994: 38). Klein sees the second half of the eighteenth century as marked by an opposition from the first: the second half of the century is perceived as an era of emerging specialists and experts, which is set in contrast with the earlier period, where the linguistic judgments of generalists and amateurs were valorized.

While the first half of the eighteenth century focuses on politeness as a synonym for correctness, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the polite English characterizing gentlemanly conversation is no longer seen as such. “Polite” is no longer precisely the same as “correct” and, as the eighteenth century progresses, a generation of prescriptivists is formed (grammarians such as Dr Lowth) who, as specialists, start pointing out what correct English is/is not, by emphasizing that even the texts of the most polite writers can contain improprieties (Fitzmaurice 1998). Lawrence Klein envisages the second half of the eighteenth century as synonymous with the beginnings of the era of specialists, who replace gentleman-amateurs in providing a standard of English (Klein 1994), while Watts (2011: 95) talks about the “policing of polite authors”.

It is important to see that Chesterfield’s text makes a point of underlining that “politeness” (based on the polite conversation of elites) and “correctness” (based on the judgments of the grammarian/lexicographer) are not precisely the same: “And indeed I am well aware of the difficulties he would have to encounter, if he attempted to reconcile the polite, with the grammatical part of our language”(Chesterfield 1995: 95) – see Vişan 2014 for a more detailed discussion of the tension between “politeness” and “pedantry” in the text.

In the second letter to the *World*, published on December 5, 1754, Johnson is (condescendingly) warned of the fact that in order to establish a lawful standard of

language, the norms of proper English that the dictionary attempts to impose will have to take into account the English of polite society. Johnson, the grammarian/the pedant is definitely not envisaged as a member of the polite elite:

We have at present two very different orthographies, the PEDANTIC, and the POLITE; the one founded upon certain dry crabbed rules of etymology and grammar, the other singly upon the justness and delicacy of the ear. I am thoroughly persuaded that Mr. Johnson will endeavour to establish the former; and I perfectly agree with him, provided it can be quietly brought about. Spelling, as well as music, is better performed by book, than merely by the ear, which may be variously affected by the same sounds. I therefore most earnestly recommend to my fair country-women, and to their faithful, or faithless servants, the fine gentlemen of this realm, to surrender, as well for their own private, as for the public utility, all their natural rights and privileges of mis-spelling, which they have so long enjoyed, and so vigorously exerted (Chesterfield 1995: 99, *Second Letter*).

The opposition that Chesterfield makes between politeness and pedantry shows that he is well aware of the fact that the polite English of the gentlemanly elite is no longer the same as the legitimate English of the newly-appointed lexicographers and grammarians.

As was discussed by Vişan (2009), Chesterfield makes an ironic opposition between two conventions of usage. Polite orthography is presented as based upon “the justness and delicacy of the ear”, while pedantic orthography is disparagingly presented as founded upon “certain dry crabbed rules of etymology and grammar” (Vişan 2009: 204). The tension that Chesterfield presents in his second letter is one between a Johnsonian type of discourse, depicted as advocating “the grammatical part of language” and one promoted by the elites who represent “the polite part” of it.

What is significant here is the way in which Chesterfield makes use of the connections between the polite English myth and the legitimate language myth. On the one hand, he advertises Johnson's Dictionary as a guardian of legitimate English (a remedy for a state of anarchy/heterogeneousness). On the other, Chesterfield makes use of an early eighteenth-century contrast, that between politeness and pedantry (Klein 1994) in order to intimate that the grammarian who seeks to impose a standard of English on the members of polite society is not himself a member of that polite society, but a mere pedant.

Chesterfield creates an opposition between the artificiality of grammar and the naturalness of politeness (Vişan 2009, Vişan 2014), between the feminine (the ladies of polite society) and the masculine (a male Tarquin forcing himself on linguistic femininity), which is meant to show that Johnson's grammatical dictatorship may very easily turn into a system of tyranny if his authority is not endorsed by the members of polite society:

And indeed I am well aware of the difficulties he would have to encounter, **if he attempted to reconcile the polite, with the grammatical part of our language.** Should he, by an act of power, **banish and attain many of the favourite words**

and expressions with which the ladies have so profusely enriched our language, he would excite the indignation of the most formidable, because the most lovely part of his readers: his dictionary would be condemned as a **system of tyranny**, and he himself, like **the last Tarquin**, run **the risque of being deposed** (Chesterfield 1995: 97-98) [My emphasis].

Chesterfield's use of the opposition male/female in the representation of linguistic authority in the 1754 Letters and the importance of gender metaphors in the discourse of standardization of the eighteenth century have been already discussed in Vişan (2009). As can be seen from the keywords employed in the excerpt above, Chesterfield is aware of a tension between the English of polite society and that of grammarians (politeness/versus/grammar; politeness/versus/pedantry). He concedes that Johnson's authority is necessary, due to the state of anarchy of the English language (as the excerpts discussed earlier have shown). A legitimate state thus needs to be correlated with a legitimate version of language, with Johnson as the chosen representative of the legitimate rights of English citizens ("I hereby declare [...]").

However, while Johnson's authority is seen as a necessity, the legitimacy of this authority can spring, in Chesterfield's view, only from a reconciliation of this authority with that of polite society. It is polite society, through Chesterfield himself (the aristocratic patron of the dictionary) who endorses Johnson as an authority concerning the English language. Johnson's response to Chesterfield's condescending attitude is a well-known one and has been extensively discussed in previous scholarship: in a famous Letter written in February 1755, Johnson proclaims his independence from his aristocratic patron.

As can be seen, Chesterfield draws upon the myth of the polite language and on its connection with the myth of legitimacy. While the authority of the lexicographer is based upon the rules of grammar (a first source of legitimacy), this authority can become truly legitimate only through a connection with the polite English of elites (the second source of legitimacy). The connection between politeness and legitimacy in Chesterfield's texts can be summarized as follows:

- (i) A language can be made legitimate only by a dictionary (a legitimate state= a legitimate language = a legitimate dictionary/grammar); "our language is at present in a state of anarchy".
- (ii) A language can be truly polished only by a dictionary/grammar (a polite nation = a polite language); speakers should not be allowed to express themselves "inelegantly, improperly, vulgarly".
- (iii) Polite English (that of elites) is not precisely the same as grammatical English (that of pedants/grammarians); "to reconcile the polite, with the grammatical part of our language".
- (iv) Polite society should submit to the legitimate dictatorship of the pedant/grammarian (a representative of the middle classes); "we must [...] chuse a dictator".
- (v) The dictatorship of the grammarian/the reign of correctness is made legitimate only if polite society agrees to be placed under the authority of the middle-class grammarian; "I hereby declare that I make a total surrender of all my rights and

privileges in the English language, as a free-born British subject, to the said Mr. Johnson, during the term of his dictatorship”.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the meaning of “correctness” gradually moves further away from that of “politeness”. Initially seen as a form of “pedantry” (the antonym of “politeness”), “correctness” develops in the course of the eighteenth century into a concept different from (yet related to) the early eighteenth-century politeness, grammatical English becoming synonymous with legitimate English.

Chesterfield's letters emphasize that, as linguists such as Klein (1984, 1994) or Fitzmaurice (1998) have shown, in the last decades of the eighteenth century and the early ones of the nineteenth century, “correctness” becomes the province of grammarians such as Dr. Lowth or Dr. Johnson, who, as experts, come to have more authority concerning “good English”, than (amateur) members of the elite (see also Vişan 2014).

Fitzmaurice (1998: 314) has shown how the second half of the eighteenth century is marked by changes in the social meanings and functions of politeness, polite English turning into the standard modern English of prescriptivists:

Instead of signifying a set of social practices regulated by mutual considerateness and cooperation, it begins to describe more narrowly a mode of behaviour and a variety of language prescribed as correct and appropriate for middle-class speakers. In the course of the latter half of the century, the notion of politeness is fossilised, and fixed to the social class that was most anxious to be thought polite.

Fitzmaurice (1998) speaks of a fossilization of politeness into correctness in the second half of the eighteenth century, while Watts (2011) sees the second half of the eighteenth century as a commercialization of polite English (Watts 2011: 196) or as an institutionalization of the ideology of politeness/standard English (Watts 2011: 201). According to Watts (2011: 202), it is in the course of the eighteenth century that the ideology of politeness is transformed into a discourse archive, namely a “hegemonic discourse that is open to reproduction, transformation and change”, the discourse of standard English feeding upon the ideology of politeness and, due to this, creating “the discursive means through which that ideology was able to transform itself”:

This process can be observed throughout the eighteenth century with the overall effect that by the turn of the nineteenth century a belief in standard English had successfully been constructed and conceptualisation of politeness had changed in the process. The development can be observed in the extraordinary rapid institutionalisation of the “legitimate” language, standard English, after 1750 in the education system and, in particular, in the very large numbers of grammars, dictionaries, pronouncing dictionaries and books teaching good style that flooded the market. In this process, the notion of the polite language slipped into the background (Watts 2011: 202).

Chesterfield's 1754 Letters to the *World*, which are written in the second half of the eighteenth century, advertising Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, a text which was going

to become significant for the discourse of standard English, illustrate that “a rapid institutionalization of the legitimate language” (Watts 2011: 202) was taking place in the 1750s. Despite the fact that the polite conversation of aristocratic society is still taken as a point of reference, as is underlined by the opposition between politeness and correctness (correlated with naturalness versus artificiality), Chesterfield’s texts indicate that standard English was rapidly growing to be the province of lexicographers and grammarians, who were beginning to act as linguistic dictators. The fact that Johnson is urged to reconcile politeness and grammaticality, indicates that “correctness”, which early eighteenth-century authors such as Jonathan Swift saw as a synonym for “politeness”, comes to be perceived as a different notion from the former, more inclusive ideal of “politeness” promoted by the early eighteenth century (Vişan 2014: 255-256).

5. Conclusions

Watts (2011: 207) has shown how, in the discourse of standard English, the eighteenth-century myth of the polite language gradually makes room for the myth of the legitimate language, which becomes dominant by the turn of the nineteenth century. We have to do with a transference from the polite language myth, focused on those social values defining the gentry, to the legitimate language myth, i.e. the institutionalized English of grammars, of dictionaries and of the middle class (Watts 2011), the ideology of politeness in the years between 1750 and 1850 being transformed “into the ideology of the superiority of standard English via the legitimate language myth” (Watts 2011: 207).

Written in 1754, Chesterfield’s texts, which focus on the relation between politeness and correctness, in order to advertise a forthcoming dictionary of the English language, show how “the myth of the polite language” (Watts 2011) gradually makes room for the new myth, of the legitimate language, which “became a major force in the construction of a dominant ideology out of which arose a discourse archive that survived till the time of the Second World War in the twentieth century” (Watts 2011: 212). Not coincidentally, the dictionary that Chesterfield advertises, Samuel Johnson’s 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, has been canonized as one of the main guardians of linguistic legitimacy, both monument and defender of the imagined homogeneity of the British empire.

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