

Twenty years that changed the English language

Professor David Crystal takes a look at the 18th-century self-appointed arbiters of good grammar, received pronunciation and exemplary etiquette.

If you were to ask me what were the most important 20 years in the history of English, I'd have no trouble answering. I would say the two decades between 1755 and 1775, because this is when three firsts took place.

Johnson, Lowth and Walker

The first was the appearance in 1755 of Dr Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*. This was an amazing work. It was the first dictionary to try really hard to cover all the words in the language – the everyday words such as *do*, *what*, and *he*, and not just the 'hard words' that had been the focus of most previous dictionaries. When people talk about Johnson's dictionary, they tend to draw attention to the lovely words that no longer exist today, such as *fopdoodle* ('a fool; an insignificant wretch') or *nappiness* ('the quality of having a nap'). But most of his words are still around today, and his dictionary is the first to show the way they are actually used, giving many quotations from famous authors. Within a few years people were calling him 'Dictionary Johnson'.

Seven years later, we find Robert Lowth, professor of poetry at Oxford and Bishop of London, writing the first influential school grammar book, a *Short Introduction to English Grammar*. It went into 45 editions by 1800, and was the inspiration behind an even more widely used book, Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* of 1795, which sold over 20 million copies. Twentieth-century school grammars – until the 1950s – would all trace their ancestry back to Murray.

Prescriptivists invariably hate other prescriptivists

The third first was twelve years later, in 1774, when John Walker published his idea for an English dictionary of pronunciation. It took him a while to complete the project. His *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* didn't come out until 1791; but when it did it was immensely popular, and had over 100 editions. People started to call him 'Elocution Walker'.

Prescriptive and Proscriptive

The one thing all three of these authors had in common was their approach to usage, which since the 1930s has been called **prescriptive**. This word doesn't appear in Johnson's *Dictionary*, presumably because it was just arriving in English at the time, and it escaped his net. Certainly he used it himself several times in later years. It seems to have had mainly a legal and political force, but in an edition of the *Trifler* periodical in 1788 we see another sense emerging: 'Prescriptive rules for the preservation of health'. Prescriptive rules tell you to do things. (The medical sense of the noun prescription is of course the everyday sense today.) **Proscriptive** rules tell you *not* to do things. That word is first recorded in English in 1757, just after Johnson's *Dictionary* came out. Both terms are often encountered in language study nowadays.

The prescriptive/proscriptive tone comes out most strongly in Lowth, whose taste makes him condemn virtually the whole of English major literary output to date:

The English language as it is spoken by the politest part of the nation, and as it stands in the writings of our most approved authors, oftentimes offends against every part of grammar.

No one was exempt, including all who had in earlier times been critical of contemporary usage and put themselves forward as models of excellence. Prescriptivists invariably hate previous prescriptivists. His book was less than 200 pages, but he manages to criticise the language of Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Addison, Swift, and others, each of whom, in his opinion, had offended. They had all failed in their efforts to speak or write properly.

Pronunciation – 'Received' and 'Vulgar'

Walker carries on this tone in his approach to pronunciation. He knows where the best model of pronunciation is to be found: in the capital.

though the pronunciation of London is certainly erroneous in many words, yet, upon being compared with that of any other place, it is undoubtedly the best; that is, not only the best by courtesy, and because it happens to be the pronunciation of the capital, but the best by a better title – that of being more generally received.

'Received' – an early use of the term which would become a dominant feature

QUIET PLEASE
AFTERNOON TEA EXAM
IN PROGRESS

Another
Cuppa...
(oops)... Cup of
Tea, my dear?

0/10

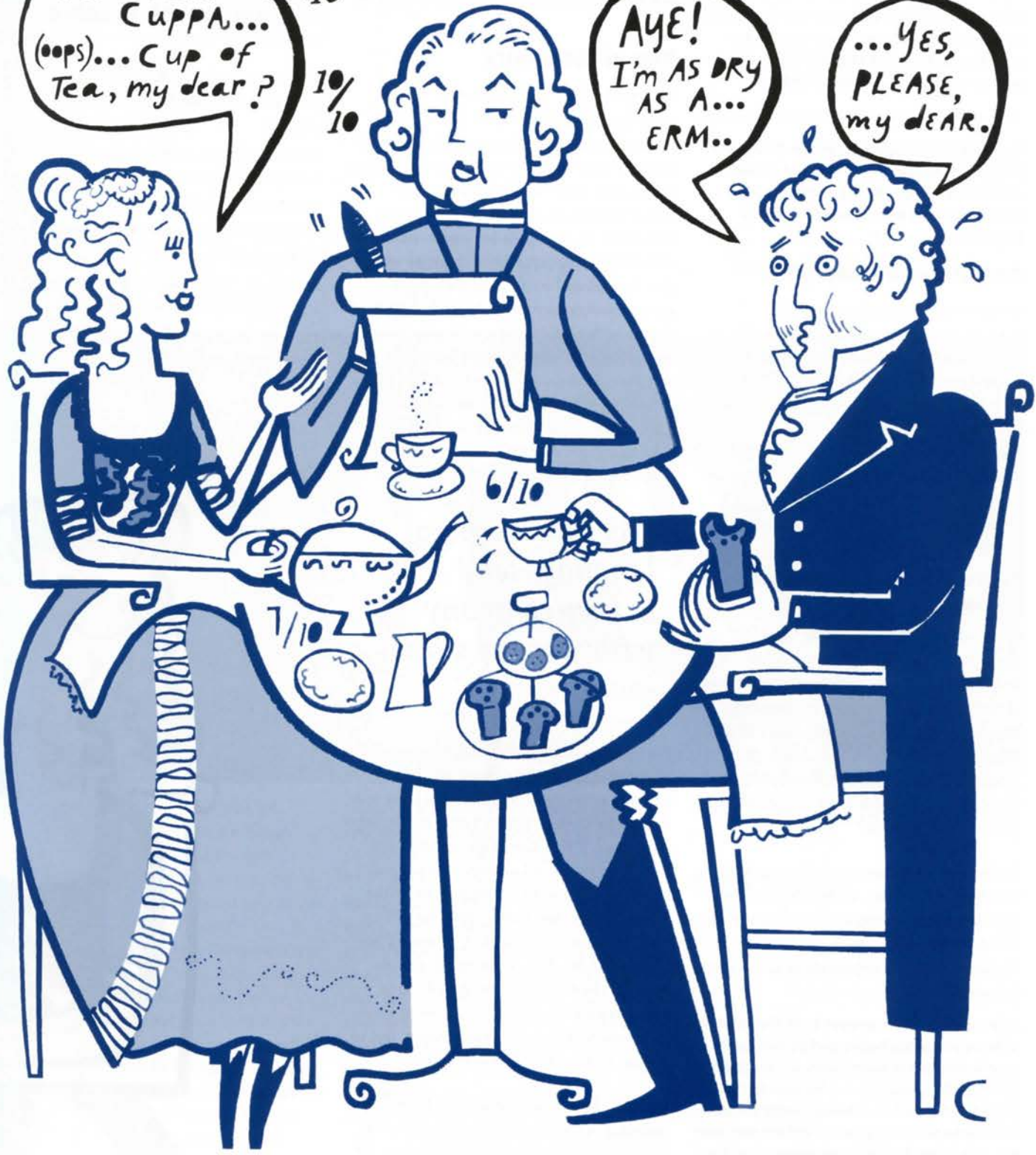
10/10

Aye!
I'm AS DRY
AS A...
ERM..

0/10

...YES,
PLEASE,
my dear.

10/10



of later pronunciation studies. He means 'received among the learned and polite' – the cultured society which made up the universities, the Court, and their associated social structure. Today, we remember it in the term 'Received Pronunciation'.

What about everyone else? Walker sees them as inhabiting a pronunciation wilderness. The further away they live, the worse their situation:

those at a considerable distance from the capital, do not only mispronounce many words taken separately, but they scarcely pronounce, with purity, a single word, syllable, or letter.

He is particularly hard on Cockney speakers:

the vulgar pronunciation of London, though not half so erroneous as that of Scotland, Ireland, or any of the provinces, is, to a person of correct taste, a thousand times more offensive and disgusting.

Anarchy vs Dictatorship

To understand prescriptivism, you have to really grasp the mindset of the eighteenth century. For many in those middle decades, the language was indeed seriously unwell, suffering from a raging disease of uncontrolled usage, and it needed professional help if it was to get better. In November 1754, Philip Stanhope, Lord Chesterfield, wrote a letter to the *World* periodical, in which he sums up the linguistic mood of the time:

It must be owned that our language is at present in a state of anarchy.

What was wanted was 'polite language' – an adjective which was much broader in meaning than we find today. Dr Johnson's definition of *politeness* was 'elegance of manners; gentility; good breeding'. 'Polite language' was thought to be a use of English which was widely intelligible and acceptable – polished, elegant, correct. How was it to be acquired?

People looked to the language writers to tell them what to do. Chesterfield makes a remarkable statement illustrating the mindset of his age. We must choose a 'dictator', he says, to provide order in the language, and

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 freeborn 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.

In *Letters to his Son* he takes up the cudgels himself, giving the lad a good telling off for his poor spelling:

You spell induce, *enduce*; and grandeur, you spell *grandure*; two faults, of which few of my housemaids would have been guilty. I must tell you, that orthography, in the true sense of the word, is so absolutely necessary for a man of letters, or a gentleman, that one false spelling may fix a ridicule upon him for the rest of his life; and I know a man of quality, who never recovered the ridicule of having spelled *wholesome* without the *w*.

Rise of the Gentry

Who were these 'men of quality'? They were the new businessmen, merchants, and industrialists, an increasingly powerful sector of society as the Industrial Revolution progressed. They were an increasingly literate section of society: by 1700 nearly half of the male population and a quarter of the female population of England were able to read and write. And they were an increasingly genteel section of society. The growth of the gentry, a class below the peerage, became a major feature of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century life. But many of them came from a working-class background, and they were unsure how to behave in aristocratic society. They needed help.

Worries about language tend to keep company with worries about manners

Books of etiquette, conduct guides, and courtesy manuals came to be written, defining gentility. One influential book was written by George Savile, Lord Halifax, who wrote *Lady's New Year's Gift; or, Advice to a Daughter* (1688). All aspects of behaviour had to be dealt with – how to bow, shake hands, wear a hat, hold gloves, eat with a fork, pour tea, use a napkin, or blow your nose in public. Also, what not to do: no spitting, chewing with the mouth open, eating with your hands. And how to speak and write so as not to appear vulgar, not to offend, were critical considerations.

Worries about language tend to keep company with worries about manners. It would be the same in the 2000s. What did Lynne Truss do after she wrote *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (2003)? She wrote a book on

etiquette called *Talk to the Hand* (2005). What did Henry Hitchings do after writing *The Language Wars: A History of Proper English* (2011)? A book on etiquette called *Sorry! The English and their Manners* (2013). Language issues and social issues are two sides of a single coin.

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