Linda C. Mitchell
University of Southern California

Inversion of Grammar Books and Dictionaries in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Abstract

During the seventeenth century in England, grammar books often included lexicons, and dictionaries hardly existed. But by the eighteenth century, it was instead the dictionaries which included grammar, while grammar books had become nearly irrelevant. I want to argue that in the context of early modern England the enterprises of grammarians and lexicographers were distinct, and that the developments in the relations of grammar and lexicography do not constitute a progression so much as they do an inversion: in the beginning, grammar embraced lexicography, and later, lexicography embraced grammar.

1. Introduction

I want to begin with a simple observation. During the seventeenth century in England, grammar books often included lexicons, and dictionaries hardly existed. But by the eighteenth century, it was instead the dictionaries which included grammar, while grammar books had become nearly irrelevant. It is possible to explain this change as a simple development in the emerging field of lexicography: from within the large and loosely defined group of grammarians there slowly emerged a smaller group of increasingly well-defined lexicographers. But to do so, I think, reduces my earlier observation to an exercise in taxonomies by assuming that grammarians were lexicographers by another name. I want instead to argue that in the context of early modern England the enterprises of these two groups were distinct, and that the developments in the relations of grammar and lexicography do not constitute a progression so much as they do an inversion: in the beginning, grammar embraced lexicography, and later, lexicography embraced grammar.

2. Stage one: grammar embraced lexicography

In the early modern period grammar books, which were in Latin with some explanation in the vernacular, covered a wide range of language-related material. The term 'grammar' could mean anything from hard-word[1] lists, spelling, pronunciation, synonyms, homonyms, etymology, and Latin-English dictionaries to poetry, logic, rhetoric, and Scripture lessons. For centuries grammar had been part of a classical education, forming the trivium with logic and rhetoric. Because of grammar's traditional authority,

it held the right to make language decisions. This responsibility was taken so seriously that William Lily's *Introduction of Grammar* was granted exclusive right to be used in the schools; this right was established by Royal Edict in 1547. It was not until the mid-seventeenth century that grammarians like Charles Hoole worked around the edict and modified classical models to make Latin grammar more accessible with bilingual translations.[2]

Grammar books used a variety of methods to lay a foundation of grammar and vocabulary, and they often concerned themselves with lexicography. For example, Comenius used pictures to connect the names of objects with their referents. He said that "words should not be learned apart from the objects to which they refer; since the objects do not exist separately and cannot be apprehended without words, but both exist and perform their functions together."[3] Comenius demonstrated his method by writing the popular *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1658), a staple of many schoolrooms. The book consists of a series of drawings in which each picture has numbers affixed to things he wants to name. Below the drawing the numbers are listed with vocabulary to correspond to the picture. He adds an extra touch by incorporating emotions, feelings, and other abstract concepts. The picture becomes not only a vocabulary lesson, but a visible means of teaching all subjects: grammar, science, biology, mathematics, history, religion, and literature. In this sense, *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* functions as an early dictionary, although Comenius would not have called it that.

Elisha Coles in *You Shall Make Latin* (1675) not only presents clear rules in English with Latin examples, but he also employs a lexicographical format to do so. He places an English word by a small drawing of the object, then the word is used in a quote from the Bible, first on the left side in English, then on the right side in Latin. This text served to teach grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, etymology, and biblical lessons. Connecting words with pictures established a method of teaching language that is still used today.

In the early seventeenth century, lexicons, or dictionaries, were rudimentary in form. Lists of Latin words had been around for several centuries. Dictionaries in the vernacular, however, were just now evolving from simple hard-word lists to accommodate people who did not know the meaning or the spelling of a word. Because the vernacular was just replacing Latin, the lexicon had not stabilized and lexicography had not been developed as a skill. Literary works and official business transactions were done in Latin so that dictionaries of the vernacular were not in demand. There was no need for an exhaustive survey of English in the seventeenth century, since it was not the language of the educated. Latin was transmitted by grammarians, and people still looked to grammarians for linguistic decisions.

Grammar books had an edge over dictionaries in decision making about language. Grammar books had Latin-English word lists, while dictionaries had English-English listings. In the seventeenth century, grammar books

were still all Latin, even when written in English, even when they were called 'English grammar' in their titles. It was the job of dictionaries to focus on short definitions for the convenience of the user. For example, in *A Table Alphabeticall* (1604) Robert Cawdrey lists "hard usuall English Wordes" that the reader may come across in Scriptures, sermons, or other places or that they may use with confidence. One of the reasons for the publication of hard English words was to promote the reading of sermons and the Bible. In *The English Dictionarie* (1623), Henry Cockeram's goal is to interpret hard words so that the reader can gain competence in the vernacular when he is reading, speaking, and writing. Cockeram claims to be publishing thousands of words never published before. Grammar books could not make that claim because of space limitations; they were increasingly concerned with explaining Latin grammar rules in the English vernacular. This bilingual format meant that any definitions had to be listed twice.

To illustrate the blurring of grammar and lexicography, Edmund Coote's *The English Scholemaister* (1596) is listed in modern bibliographies as a work of lexicography, yet it was used at the same time as a grammar text. The book includes speech, spelling, etymology, punctuation, hard word lists, and a teacher's guide. It went through many editions and was used throughout the seventeenth century and even into the eighteenth century because of its comprehensive treatment of language.

Grammar embraced lexicography in the early seventeenth century. Grammarians had held authority to make language decisions since the Roman world; lexicographers had not yet emerged as a distinct group. This imbalance of power begins to shift in the second stage as the lexicon of the vernacular becomes part of the educated language world.

3. Stage two: lexicographers make a bid for linguistic authority

In the early eighteenth century English grammar books about English were being published, which added a greater demand on vocabulary in the vernacular. This demand increased even more as the vernacular lexicon began to stabilize and the dictionary–type material outgrew the parameters of grammar books. Dictionaries, however, were still elementary, with only a short meaning, synonym, or commentary on a word. Grammar books still included pronunciation, meaning, parts of speech, etymology, spelling, and usage, and it was grammarians who were still making decisions about language usage.

Grammarians, however, had been experiencing conflicts within their own ranks for some time. Arguments about whether to teach grammar with Latin or English models, whether to continue the practice of translation and imitation, and whether to learn grammar first in Latin or the native tongue caused dissension. There was no academy like the one in France to legislate linguistic matters. Many linguists were afraid that the English language would be corrupted, and some even expressed the concern that what was

being written at that time would be unrecognizable to future generations. Lexicographers took advantage of the moment and began to set the standards of the language. The dictionaries, however, were at times misleading because they were incomplete documents of the language with inadequate histories of words and word families, unrepresentative examples of earlier words, and unclear definitions of meaning.

One such person who made a bid for lexicographical authority was the familiar figure of Samuel Johnson, who represented himself as both a scholar and a grammarian. Afraid that language would change beyond recognition, he set about to do what grammar texts could no longer accomplish: codify and standardize the English language. He created the role of the dictionary editor: someone who has the authority to legislate rules of language, an image that dictionary editors still have today. According to Johnson, it is the responsibility of lexicographers to record anomalies so that they are not perpetuated and reinforced. Johnson stated in the preface of his dictionary that "every language has likewise its improprieties and absurdities, which it is the duty of the lexicographer to correct or proscribe."[4]

Another change that gave dictionaries a central role in language was that grammar books were beginning to play a stronger pedagogical role. With the increase in availability of public education, the lower and middle classes were filling classrooms, and grammar texts had to make these people literate. Also, the increased need for skills in the commercial world forced authors of grammar books to teach such formats as business letters and receipts. Hence, grammar texts were being forced to move in other directions to satisfy curricular requirements, while dictionaries were able to focus on the lexicon.

Thus while grammarians were battling over teaching methods and grammatical theory, lexicographers focused on setting standards. Grammarians had argued over custom and usage versus authority without reaching a decision. Lexicographers, however, had a stronger base from which to impose 'correctness' on the vernacular: research. Eighteenth-century lexicographers were inventorying definitions, pronunciation, and various forms of spelling. John Kersey (*A New English Dictionary*, 1702), Edward Cocker (*Cocker's English Dictionary*, 1704), and Nathan Bailey (*An Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, 1721) helped establish the dictionary as an authority. It would be the editors of dictionaries, not the authors of grammar texts, who would become the guardians of English, formalizing it and protecting it from decay.

In the early eighteenth century, then, the acceptance of the vernacular as the language of the educated forced grammarians to assume a pedagogical role. As the lexicon stabilized, it was lexicographers who improved dictionaries. In the seventeenth century, their entries had been unreliable, but now they were documenting inventoried lists with some degree of historical accuracy.

4. Stage three: lexicography embraces grammar

The stage in which lexicography embraces grammar is still with us, thus making this last stage harder for us to see. The landmark is Thomas Dyche and William Pardon's *New General English Dictionary* (1735), the first dictionary to have a compendium of grammar. Dyche, also a grammarian, was able to see the necessity of such an inclusion.[5] He claimed that his work was for those who wanted to write "correctly and elegantly," and he covered difficult words, technical terms, spelling, accents, and pronunciation.

The publication of Dyche and Pardon's dictionary meant that grammarians lost a battle they were unaware they were fighting. Lexicographers were working with historical and empirical data and keeping abreast of linguistic changes. Grammarians, on the other hand, were pedagogues, teaching students how to use language and publishing little–changed textbooks. The decline in status of the grammarian was evident by the middle of the eighteenth century. In *A New General English Dictionary* (1744) Dyche and Pardon denigrate the grammarian as a person who spent time on insignificant niceties. Dyche and Pardon were both grammarians–turned– lexicographers. The responsibility for protecting the standard of English usage from corruption and deterioration had moved from the one to the other, a transfer that is still in force today though still not fully recognized. Grammarians who had in ancient times been eminent were now criticized and questioned for their pedagogy and theories, while lexicographers were looked upon as authorities.

Lexicography was also able to embrace grammar because it had the advantage of clarity. An example of this can be found in *A Pocket Dictionary or Complete English Expositor* (Anon., 1753), which more clearly identifies usage errors and gives the preferred usage more coherently and concisely than grammar books. This dictionary combines functions which were once separate. The author claims that his text "contains only those more difficult words which occur in sensible genteel company." The first chapter, however, launches into a general, but detailed, view of English grammar. He discusses the inflections (nouns, adjectives, verbs, pronouns) and parts of speech without inflections (adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, interjections). The next section, "Of the signification and Use of Certain Words," describes the custom and the best writers in determining usage. The third section of this chapter gives examples of incorrect word order and preferred order. The other chapter on grammar, "An Account of the most usual Mistakes in English Grammar," clarifies structure and grammatical problems. This particular dictionary also added such information as the part of speech each word belonged to, shades of meaning, and etymology. It even included a history of the English language. Although the anonymous author thinks custom and usage should determine rules, he thinks (wistfully, perhaps) that the grammarian should share in the responsibility of fixing the meaning and use of words. Otherwise, "he has nothing left him belonging to the Language,

but the Inflections, which are extremely few; and the Order in which Words are placed in a Sentence." This is what happened.

Several lexicographers went beyond the dictionary to cover both grammar and lexicon. In *A New Dictionary of the English Language* (1773) William Kenrick includes with his entries, information on their orthography, etymology, and idiomatical use in writing, all items that had appeared in grammar books in the seventeenth century. Now dictionaries were fulfilling that function in the eighteenth century. He also gives the correct pronunciation according to the "present practice of polished speakers in the Metropolis," further proof of the increased focus on communication at that time. He includes what he calls a "rhetorical" grammar that will help people with contemporary speech and communication. Two other publications aimed at the lower and middle classes are James Barclay's *A Complete and Universal English Dictionary on a New Plan* (1774) and John Ash's *The New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language* (1775). Both lexicographers include grammar and communication skills. Barclay also adds an outline of ancient and modern history, and Ash includes some linguistic essays.

Lexicographers were also more alert than grammarians in responding immediately to issues of propriety, that is, a sense of language in social situations. For example, John Entick promises in *The New Spelling Dictionary* (1765) to help the reader "write and pronounce the English tongue with ease and propriety." He also offers the user help in accenting for correct pronunciation, the distinguishing of the parts of speech, and the convenience of pocket reference. Entick claims that his grammatical introduction will facilitate the user's proficiency in English. The middle-class citizen needed to communicate effectively and correctly in order to succeed; a man's character was partially centered in his language. Entick's dictionary helps him to gain necessary social and linguistic competence.

To summarize my third point, when lexicographers included grammar, they were unaware that they were gaining an advantage over grammarians as to standardizing the language. While grammarians served as pedagogues, concentrating on classroom exercises, lexicographers inventoried and researched usage.

5. Conclusion: lexicographers as guardians of language

The transfer of linguistic authority from grammar books to dictionaries was complete in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Dictionaries now held linguistic authority, while grammar books served a pedagogical role. Controversies over grammar had been carried into dictionaries, and the battles are now fought there. The battles are not just about a word change but about who controls language, who is included and excluded. Once grammar books, such as Lily's grammar, had the power to decide those issues. As dictionaries became more powerful and were able to reach more people,

they began to dominate the linguistic sphere. They could encode values and reflect current language usage. Language is power; and dictionaries wielded that power by standardizing language.

Notes

1 Hard–word lists were a challenge for grammarians. These lists were supposed to include those words which a normal reader did not know, but determining exactly which words were little known was not an easy task for early grammarians playing lexicographers.
2 *The Latine Grammar* (London, 1651).
3 *Reformation of Schools* (London, 1642) p. 14.
4 *Preface to The Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1747).
5 The grammar text is *Youth's Guide to the Latin Tongue* (London, 1735).

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