4.1

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Linguistic purism and language criticism in English

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Abstract. Linguistic purism refers to an activity which aims at cleansing a language from unwanted influences. However, what counts as an 'unwanted influence' usually rests on certain social ideals that are not necessarily shared by all members of a society. These ideals may be oriented towards a nostalgic conception of the past, towards certain ethnographic varieties, or towards the language usage of a conceived social elite. This article gives an overview of different language-purifying attempts made with respect to British English in the course of its history. In comparison with other languages, it is remarkable that purifying efforts have never exerted any larger or longer-lasting influence on the English language, despite or because of the diverse situations of language contact that it was involved in.

General

The English noun *purism* is a loan word from French and entered the English language only in the late 18th century to refer to the "[s]crupulous adherence to or insistence upon an ideal of purity or correctness, esp. in language or style; [a] strict adherence to a principle or doctrine", as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines it (OED s.v. *purism* n.). In a linguistic sense, *purism* refers to activities of cleansing a language from unwanted influences, usually in contexts of language contact or with respect to a chosen norm, such as the standard language (see Thomas 1991). Linguistic purism is classified as 'internal' when referring to attempts at cleansing the language from elements within the language, for example clearing the written standard from vernacular elements. 'External linguistic purism' refers to endeavours that aim at protecting the language from 'foreign' influences, such as loan words, foreignisms and internationalisms.

Different forms of linguistic purism may be distinguished depending on the various situations of language contact, multilingualism, attempts at standardisation, and language-political motives (see Geers 2005):

a) ›*archaising purism*‹ in which the vocabulary and word-formation elements of past stages of the language are favoured;

b) ›*ethnographic purism*‹, in which dialectal and vernacular elements are used as substitutes for loan words, foreignisms and internationalisms;

c) ›*elitist purism*‹, in which the language usage of a socially prestigious group (the 'elite') is preferred over other sociolects.

As a contextual phenomenon, *linguistic purism* is focused on all forms and functions of one or more languages in the same space. The metalinguistic evaluations that draw on the idea of a ›pure language‹ are determined by and vary according to social, political, economic, geographical, historical, and cultural conditions and factors (see Crystal [3]2010). The idea(l) of ›cleanness‹, as referred to by language purists, is equated with an ideal, God-given state, which is opposed to a 'barbarous', 'rude' or 'deficient' use of one of its varieties, which is usually its standard form. In this sense, *linguistic purism* can be understood as a language-ideological phenomenon and ›language criticism‹ as the practice by which the beliefs and attitudes about language usage and its speakers become manifest in discourse. When it comes to linguistic studies that investigate ›language ideologies‹ as the ideological basis upon which attempts of purifying language rest, Michael Silverstein's approach of *metapragmatics* is particularly noteworthy for its far-reaching influence in the field (1979, 1993).

Throughout the history of the English language many movements and forms of *linguistic purism* may be found. In general, academic linguistic purism must be distinguished from public discussions of language purism, but the boundaries are usually blurred, as the discourse about the English language in England has taken place mainly amongst the academic and literary elite since the 16th and well into the 20th century. Since the second half of the 20th century, in the course of the establishment of variationist linguistics and sociolinguistics (see e. g. Weinreich 1953, Labov 1972, Milroy 1992), it has become a general consensus in the discipline of English linguistics that prescriptive and puristic attitudes have no place in the academic study of language – unless as an object of study in itself (see e. g. Curzan 2014, Beal et al. 2008).

Historical

Until the end of the Middle English period (around 1500), English competed with French and Latin, which were the preferred languages of the Court and nobility, the government and administration, and the Church and scholarship. Since English had little prestige as a written language, puristic attitudes concerning English are hardly to be found in these times (see Görlach 1994). When the English nobility of Norman-French descent began to distance itself from France in the course of the Hundred-Years War (1337–1453), English began to emerge from the shadow of these two prestigious languages, which allowed the development of a national linguistic attitude and resulted in the subsequent development of Standard English between the 15th and 19th century. The gradual process of standardisation, which was never advanced by official institutions but unfolded amongst the (educated) population, also brought with it a growing awareness for the need to functionally elaborate English on the one hand and to establish conventions of usage to make it more regular on the other.

In the 16th century, puristic attitudes towards the English language may be found with Roger Ascham, Thomas Wilson and John Cheke, who strove to avoid fashionable and 'outlandish' words from the Romance languages, i. e. particularly Latin and French, and preferred to use native or well-integrated loan words instead, but who allowed for the adoption of scientific terminology from Latin (see Görlach 1994). In the famous *inkhorn controversy* of the late 16th century, John Cheke, for example, turned against the excessive and unnecessary use of Latin loan words or of word formations with Latin and Greek elements where a semantically equivalent native lexeme was available – a fashion followed especially by students from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge to express themselves in a markedly educated manner. This fashion was censured as 'peevish affectation' and publicly ridiculed.

A preference for the native idiom is further to be found in the Protestant and Puritan tradition, usually motivated by the need to popularise the language of the Bible for an audience that was not trained in Greek or Latin. A strict linguistic purism is, however, rarely found in England in the 16th and 17th centuries. The reactivation of archaic Anglo-Saxon and dialectal vocabulary, which Geers (2005) interprets as part of a 'xenophobic purism', must probably rather be seen within the context of the stylistic

model of *copia verborum* (copiousness of words) and the fashionable literary ideal to express a single idea by a multiplicity of synonyms, whose sources could be manifold, native or foreign.

By the end of the 18th century, English had gained prestige and was commonly considered to be so much refined that it could be used for any written and literary function. Linguistic purism now increasingly focused on a preservation of this 'state of perfection' and on delimiting the literary language of the educated elite from the vernacular of the common people. This conservative tendency was reflected in the codification of Standard English from the middle of the 18th century on. Amongst the many grammars, dictionaries, spelling guides, and usage guides of the 18th and 19th centuries which codified Standard English and defined 'correct usage', Bishop Robert Lowth's *A Short English Grammar* (1762) and Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) stand out for their far-reaching and long-lasting influence. Johnson may also be seen as a representative of a critical attitude against the influence of French on the emerging English standard. French had become increasingly influential as language of education of the courtly elite since the 17th century. However, several modern French loanwords that are attested in 18th-century texts are missing in Johnson's dictionary (Görlach 2001). It was the language of famous authors, such as Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, which was highly estimated as a model for an elegant and cultivated language style (see Görlach 2001). Swift may be seen as a representative of an elitist purism. In 1712 he wrote a plea for the establishment of an English language academy with the aim of preserving the English language and restoring it to its perfect state before the Civil War, a perfection mirrored in the works of great authors such as William Shakespeare and Sir Edmund Spenser (see Görlach 2001). Although no English language academy was ever founded, the idea that refining and polishing the English language was of national importance exerted a long-lasting influence throughout the 18th century.

The 19th century continued this elitist purism that aimed at preserving Standard English and cleansing it from vernacular and rural dialectal forms. In an era that had seen the social advancement of the middle classes since the early 19th century, correct language use was equated with correct, educated and gentlemanlike/ladylike manners and required for maintaining social status (see Görlach 1999). At the same time, a new

positive attitude towards the rural dialects had developed from the early 19th century on. In contrast to the newly developing urban dialects in the growing industrial cities, these rural dialects were romanticised as preserving pure and uncorrupted forms of language – and forms of living – by the educated middle and upper classes, which resulted, for instance, in an increasing popularity of dialect poetry in this time.

Present

The breakdown of the British Empire after the Second World War and the political emancipation of the former colonies from the British mother country have led to a rise of prestige of various national varieties of English, such as Australian and New Zealand English, since the second half of the 20th century. British English is nowadays increasingly found in competition with other larger varieties of English that have partly succeeded in developing their own national standards, such as American English (see Schneider 2007). The 20th century is marked by a long *complaint tradition* that laments the growing influence of American English on British English. Already after the First World War, between 1919 and 1943, the *Society for Pure English* published a large number of treatises which dealt with language purism, including debates of the alleged 'Americanisation' of British English, which was said to threaten its very existence. Mair (2006), however, points out that the subjectively felt influence of American English on British English may well be overestimated, and that, as a consequence of contemporary mediatisation and globalised communication, we may rather see a mutual process of linguistic levelling between the two varieties. The often deplored colloquialisation of the written language may also be seen in this light. New forms of communication, but also modern forms of society that strengthen the individual and weaken the influence of strict norms, conventions, and rituals, may eventually lead to a partial convergence of the written language and the spoken vernacular (see Mair 2006, 2013).

Language-puristic activities may have manifold aims. They may, for instance, serve a reformatory agenda, or they may represent attempts at defending the native language and culture from unwanted foreign influence. Linguistic purism may thus also be found in conservative and

nationalistic political movements, such as in the debate for a *National Curriculum* in the early 1990s, which aimed at establishing a unified, British Standard English and Christian school curriculum in order to guard British English language and culture from 'corruption' through pluralistic and multicultural influences and to preserve it from 'perversion' (see Cameron 1995).

Although, historically, debates of linguistic purism seem to have mainly taken place among small groups of literates, grammarians, philologists, and (later) linguists, arguments that draw on the idea(l)s of linguistic purism also regularly (re)occur in public debates that revolve around the issue of language change until today. Puristic arguments are then typically turned against ongoing changes that are perceived as corrupting the language and which are allegedly in need of correction.

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