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Institutions with a language-critical agenda in the UK

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Abstract. Since its beginning in the 15th century, the standardisation of English in Britain has largely been carried out without governmental control. Thus, there has never been any language institution comparable to the Italian *Accademia della Crusca* and the *Académie Française* in Britain, despite several attempts at establishing one in the 17th and 18th century. Nevertheless, the cultivation and codification of the English language was supported by a number of influential academic societies. The general tradition in Britain is, however, largely in favour of descriptivism rather than prescriptivism of language norms, even though individuals and societies voicing prescriptive attitudes have always been present. The ability for expressing oneself in "correct" English if the situation requires it thus remains to be of high social significance.

General

As official or semi-official institutions, either under the control of the government of a country or by the initiative of an influential academic elite, language academies are part of the practices of active language policies (Spolsky 2004). This means, they typically fall into the realm of language standardisation "from above". Since its beginning in the 15th century, the standardisation of English has, however, largely been characterised by a lack of institutional control from above (see Busse, Möhlig-Falke & Vit 2018). Even though there were calls for an *English Academy* after the model of the Italian *Accademia della Crusca* (founded in 1582/83), and the *Académie Française* (founded in 1635) especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, these plans for an institution that fostered and preserved English comparable to the language academies in Italy and France were never realised (Flasdieck 1928, Brede 1937, Read 1938, Mugglestone 2006).

Historical

The failure to establish an English Academy was never due to a lack of appeals and initiatives in that direction: Amongst the advocates of such a language academy following the model of Italy and France are, for instance, authors such as Simon Daines (1640) and Daniel Defoe. In his *Essay Upon Projects* (1697), Defoe proposed a language "legislative", whose task it should have been to "polish and refine the English tongue, and advance the so much needed faculty of correct language … to purge it from all the irregular additions that ignorance and affectation have produced" (quoted from Ross 2004: 26). The attempt to standardise the correct usage of the English language and to improve it was also reflected in the foundation of the *Royal Society* in 1664. For a short time, England had a committee for the "improvement of English" (McCrum et al. 1992: 132).

In his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712) Jonathan Swift demanded a regulation of English and called for a dictionary of the English language: "[W]hat I have most at Heart is, that some Method should be thought on for *ascertaining* and *fixing* our language forever" (quoted from Crystal 1995: 73).

All these attempts at permanently establishing an English Academy failed, however, and it never came into being. The various attempts and initiatives were never supported by the Crown and the government, but they were undertaken and promoted by private societies or individuals who were concerned with the language on all its levels – lexis, grammar, pronunciation, spelling, and usage – with a focus on different levels at different times. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that one of the main aims of the language academies in the neighbouring countries – the creation of a dictionary that preserved and standardised the national language – was successful in England without governmental support: In 1755 Samuel Johnson published his *Dictionary of the English Language* in two volumes and thus paved the ground for the codification and fixing of the English language. In the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, numerous dictionaries of English were published for various purposes. Next to establishing and spreading the linguistic norm, there was, however, also a growing interest in describing dialectal diversity. Thus, after the foundation of the *English Dialect Society* in 1873, dialect dictionaries were published for numerous regional varieties of the British Isles, which helped to

create an awareness of acceptable regional differences in pronunciation and lexis (see Busse, Möhlig-Falke, Vit & Mantlik 2017).

This descriptive attitude towards language also became evident when in 1884 the *Philological Society* launched an initiative that resulted in the publication of the *New English Dictionary*, driven by the discontentment with existing dictionaries that did, for instance, not contain any (reliable) etymological information. The *New English Dictionary* aimed at remedying these deficits. It is the precursor of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (http://oed.com/), which has continuously been revised and updated since its first publication in 1928 and which may be considered to be the most comprehensive dictionary of the English language available today, due to its descriptive agenda.

Apart from dictionaries, numerous grammars of the English language as well as usage guides for various purposes were published in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries. These met with great interest by the reading public. Like the dictionaries, they promoted the development and spread of an awareness of a standardised linguistic norm and stimulated public discourse about "correct" and "proper" English. Being addressed at various audiences, they functioned as sociolinguistic guidebooks for polite and socially acceptable language use and were thus helpful for social advancement (e. g. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008, 2018; see also Busse, Möhlig-Falke, Vit & Mantlik 2017; Busse, Möhlig-Falke & Vit 2018).

Present

The 20th century has also seen initiatives that aimed at cleansing and preserving the English language, such as the *Society for Pure English* (founded in 1913), or the *Queen's English Society* (https://queens-english-society.org; founded in 1972). These private initiatives that campaign for the care of the English language (norm) have usually lived by the voluntary commitment of smaller groups of educated people, such as authors, teachers or other individuals with an interest in the English language, but they were never officially supported by the government and did not have any direct influence on standardising the English language.

An awareness of existing language norms has also been promoted by the *BBC* (*British Broadcasting Corporation*), especially with respect to

correct pronunciation, since its foundation in 1920 (Schwyter 2016, Allen 2018). The concept of "BBC English", or "RP" (Received Pronunciation), has formed a model for a British standard pronunciation, with traditional sociolinguistic parameters like social class, region, and education playing a role (Mugglestone 2006, 2008). This model has, however, lost much of its influence over the last decades, also supported by the kind of 'language policy' followed by the BBC itself. Thus, in the BBC *Voices Project* (http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices/), citizens from all regions of Great Britain were asked to document their dialect or sociolect, which sharpened the public awareness of the benefits of different coexisting dialects and sociolects and for the creative aspect of language contact, thus helping to remove reservations and negative attitudes towards non-standard language use.

To conclude, the influence of institutions with a language-critical agenda on English in Britain has been comparatively small throughout history and up to today. This of course disregards educational policies for schools and universities, which are, however, a different topic. Critique of language usage and language norms has been voiced mainly on the part of individuals or smaller groups of self-appointed activists for the purity of language, whose representatives are often members of the educated middle class. Just as in the late 18th and 19th centuries, the concept of Standard English thus still seems to be closely linked with a personal awareness of social class, confronted with ever new challenges at the beginning of the 21st century, and in conflict between conservative and more liberal ideals of language and society. The norms of Standard English have rather been shaped and spread by the countless usage guides. These have mostly been written by representatives of the educated middle class, and they are popular guides for correct language use up to today (see e. g. Pullum 2018, Straaijer 2018; Tieken-Bonn van Ostade 2018).

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