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# Letter to a Censor in the Age of Academies<sup>1</sup>

Mireille OZOUX

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- 1 Dear Jonathan Swift,
- 2 It is now a few months since I was officially entrusted with the mission of watching over the national idiom of my native country, and as a newly elected censor of the language, I have felt the need to share my thoughts with you – I hope you will grant me such honour, by reading the present letter.
- 3 Your concern for the state of the English language ran so deep that it often found expression under your quill (in a number of poems, sermons and essays), but it was most powerfully voiced in a letter you sent in 1712 to the then Lord Treasurer, Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, asking him to sponsor an English Academy. It was high time, so you said, an end was put to the incessant flux of the language; English should be ascertained and fixed, once and for all – and your views were shared by many contemporaries. This “project of my own,” as you called it, meant so much to you that when on May 17<sup>th</sup> you published your *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, you signed with your own name; in your private correspondence, several letters to Esther Johnson or to William King, Archbishop of Dublin, offer a lively and moving testimony to the energy and hope you put in the scheme – yours was a genuine endeavour, there is no denying it. I believe your passion for History played a key role: stabilizing the language would help get rid of the all too numerous linguistic corruptions (what you saw as the degeneration of the language) and allow for the historical and cultural transmission so dear to your conservative heart (and mine) – didn’t you seek the post of Historiographer Royal for that very reason, as early as 1710? Although the term “academy” doesn’t appear once in the thirty-page-long manuscript of your essay, the *Académie française* was the model to emulate; and if Voltaire’s laudatory words<sup>2</sup> are anything to go by, the prospective members (Prior, Congreve, Dryden, Pope, Addison and yourself, among others) would have even outdone the French body of censors.

- 4 Of course, you never openly proclaimed your ambition to become the English Richelieu (it would have been most politically incorrect in your days, when the anti-French sentiment was so strong) but your attitude towards language abuse was often that of the authoritative censor, wasn't it, Dr Swift? In several of your published pamphlets, as on more private occasions, you never missed an opportunity of commenting on a wide range of language misuses: sometimes the orthoepist<sup>3</sup> in you couldn't resist correcting the bad pronunciation of visiting clergymen in the pulpit; the emphasis you laid on a stabilized, regular reading code led you to chide your lady friends (if ever so gently) for the spelling mistakes in their letters – you went so far as to bicker with your best friend, the great Alexander Pope, over some false rhymes in his translation of *The Iliad*! Somehow, and beyond such anecdotal records, it seems that the English Academy you called for was consonant with your personality as “compulsive” censor; the official, state-sponsored institution was to grant eternal life to the English spoken and written word.
- 5 Now, I must beg your pardon Dr Swift, but this project of yours is something of a puzzle... It cannot but elicit wonder and astonishment when one thinks of the resounding condemnation of academies in your works: as early as 1704, *A Tale of a Tub* and its “Academy of Modern Bedlam”; much later, in 1726, *Gulliver's Travels* and the Grand Academy of Lagado... Your mock academies enact a hilarious but devastating satire on learning by ridiculing those illustrious figures of improvement, those champions of progress – the projectors, whom you ruthlessly picture as mentally deranged inmates of a lunatic asylum. You published other project pamphlets yourself, and yet you only reluctantly admit belonging to the breed of projectors, telling Harley at the end of your letter that this is “one of the last Characters under which I should desire to appear before Your Lordship.” So, there is something puzzling in your 1712 essay; it looks as if you were determined to found the English Academy, (unconsciously?) wishing the whole thing to founder at the same time. Is it because you were anxious to distance yourself from another famous projector, Daniel Defoe, that Whig, that Dissenter, that archetypal tradesman of lowly origin you despised all your life – who had also come up with a project for the English academy in 1697? (Having just become a full-fledged academician myself, I must admit it would be extremely helpful to understand your contradictions...). But no, maybe Mr Defoe should not take it personally, it is probably the whole race of projectors you had difficulty coming to terms with; after all, “PROJECTORS” is the only fully capitalized word in *Gulliver's Travels*: a word in capital letters, for a capital matter? From the early years of your literary career to the very last you were indeed acutely aware of the political relevance of the issue, projects and projectors being supported by the politically powerful – and after 1714 the Whigs, supported by the Hanoverian Georges, gained full authority to have such ideology of improvement carry the day... to your dismay and that of your Augustan friends. You feared the emergence of new norms and what you saw as their appalling effects on society; knowing only too well the power of words, you were particularly worried by the new linguistic norms, by the new “order of discourse” (to borrow a phrase from the 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Michel Foucault)<sup>4</sup> which such institutions as the London Royal Society had been championing since the late seventeenth century. In your *Gulliver's Travels*, the Grand Academy of Lagado houses linguistic projectors bent on finding the key to universal communication by means of a universal language. True, the people and institutions you chose as satirical butts belonged to your epoch, and yet their obsessive quest for a regular, rational, transparent language seems to have been an ever

enduring one -- as Umberto Eco reminded my contemporaries so well.<sup>5</sup> The cause for your anxiety (and mine) is that what is universal might be dangerously reductive: the too many linguistic reductions devised by rationalistic schemes threaten individuals with linguistic uniformity and its dreadful corollary... uniformity of thought. Isn't it what you hinted at with the book machine devised by a mad projector in the Lagadan School of speculative learning? I suspect you of having yet again literalized a metaphor -- the mechanical frame may very well be symbolical of the frame of mind you wish to expose; modern projectors and the ideology they embody are all guilty of dangerous mechanical reductions. This is perhaps what accounts for your (Lockean) uneasiness about the English Academy -- although imposing an interpretive frame on your multi-layered satire is one of the last things I should desire to be guilty of in your eyes. Finally, the Lagadan linguists' project to improve the language is a failure, the universal, purely rational idiom being a chimera, nowhere to be found except in Utopia, in Brobdingnag... or in the authoritarian, dystopian society of Houyhnhnmland. I conclude therefore that your mock academies symbolize the negative, dystopian view of the institution...

- 6 I try to comfort myself with the thought that your 1712 *Proposal for Correcting... the English Tongue*, on the other hand, vehicles a positive picture of what the English Academy would have been -- standing as it does for everything that the Lagadan Academy is not. Instead of promoting linguistic uniformity, you propose standardization, both linguistic and stylistic; the mission of the Academy, as you saw it, was to prescribe standards of correctness, propriety and elegance being much more desirable than reason and regularity. Incidentally, I know you had a *penchant* for the French idiom -- a brief look at the 1745 catalogue of your library will suffice to confirm it. Indeed you owned a copy of *Remarques sur la langue française : Utiles à ceux qui veulent bien parler et bien écrire*, by Claude Favre de Vaugelas; but I wonder why you didn't acquire so illustrious a work as the *Grammaire raisonnée et générale de Port-Royal*? Of course, the book may have been lost or stolen -- unless ... you destroyed it yourself with a vengeance, after reading this detestable, infuriating piece of Cartesian linguistics? Although René Descartes didn't write on language issues, it has been shown by later scholars (I am thinking of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century linguist Noam Chomsky<sup>6</sup>) that his rationalist frame of mind did inspire his contemporaries in Port-Royal and their quest for a universal grammar -- and you must have hated the whole scheme. Like Vaugelas, you were not interested in universal laws but in the richness of usage and the elegant beauty of language.
- 7 As for your prescriptions, the linguistic and stylistic norms you wished to promote, you must admit they are a little vague and only available, more often than not, through negative examples -- what you prescribe is to be derived from what you proscribe: abbreviations, phonetic spelling, neologisms... which all account for the language growing poorer and poorer. You were eager to set a frame on language, but it would be a flexible, discriminating one, devised by prudent linguistic and literary judges -- your academicians, unlike the proud, positive, authoritarian projectors, would be endowed with a learned, articulate mind, with a balanced sense of linguistic history, usage and syntax, and would forever fight against poor thought and expression.
- 8 The age of Queen Anne has been described as "the age of correctness" and your 1712 plan for an academy was a powerful answer to the ever-growing demand for linguistic prescriptivism; according to the Earl of Orrery, one of your early biographers, you even

composed a dictionary of “hard words” (those difficult terms derived from Latin and Greek) for the use of your feminine senate, indicating pronunciation as well as meaning -- thereby anticipating later works of linguistic codification by renowned lexicographers and orthoepists. But it looks as if all of these “projects” bore the seal of incompleteness: your dictionary was only for private use and the Academy was never founded (nor did you succeed in becoming Historiographer Royal...). Hence, I assume, a certain amount of self-derision when you had Gulliver admit, in 1726, that “*I had myself been a sort of projector in my younger days;*” or as late as 1738, when a new persona of yours, the hubristic, authoritarian Simon Wagstaff, coming up with his *Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation*, boasted that he would “*fix forever, the whole System of true Politeness, and Refinement in Conversation.*” Gravity is of the very essence of imposture – the words the Earl of Shaftesbury wrote in his *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708) must have been particularly meaningful to you, and particularly relevant in the Projecting Age<sup>7</sup> you lived in.

- 9 As this letter is now drawing to an end, I feel I understand your contradictions a little better... Rest assured, Dr Swift, even if England never set up its Academy, you may be proud of your invaluable contribution to improve and stabilize the English language: did you know that you are the third most frequent source for prose quotations in Samuel Johnson’s 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, after the Authorized Version of the Scriptures and Joseph Addison? So what carried the day was your passion for literature – not your trust in political institutions; your faith in the power of the text and its responsibility towards language.
- 10 Personally, I will endeavour to fulfil my mission of 21<sup>st</sup>-century linguistic and literary censor thinking of the academicians you dreamed of, and whom the French Academy made real – please don’t think I will end my letter with an intolerably chauvinistic note: this was also the opinion of the Argentinian writer and scholar Jorge Luis Borges, who believed that our institution succeeded in finding a perfect equilibrium between tradition and innovation.<sup>8</sup> I imagine you would be pleased to hear that one of your countrymen, Sir Michael Edwards, joined the Company in 2013 – how ironical... So I will take leave by quoting, if I may, the traditional motto in use among those of my kind: “*À l’immortalité !*” – and be certain, dear Dr Swift, that, as a great admirer of yours, I will never cease to listen to you with all the power of my eyes.
- 11 Your faithful and devoted French *Immortelle*,
- 12 Madame K. de Conti.

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## NOTES

1. “After 1700 a tremendous number of official academies and societies were founded in Europe (...). In reference to this growth, Bernard de Fontenelle coined the term ‘the Age of Academies’ to describe the 18<sup>th</sup> century.” Roy Porter (dir.), *The Cambridge History of Science*, Vol. 4, Cambridge UP, 2003, p. 90.

2. Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, Gallimard, 1986. « Sur les académies », pp. 150-155.

3. Orthoepist: An expert in orthoepy; a person who studies the pronunciation of words; spec. (hist.) any of a group of 16th- and 17th-century writers who sought to establish a standard pronunciation of English and usually to reform the spelling system in accordance with it. (OED)
  4. Michel Foucault, *L'Ordre du discours : leçon inaugurale au Collège de France prononcée le 2 décembre 1970*, Gallimard, 1971.
  5. Umberto Eco, *La Quête d'une langue parfaite dans l'histoire de la culture européenne : leçon inaugurale au Collège de France prononcée le vendredi 2 octobre 1992*, Collège de France, *Leçon inaugurale*, n° 116, 1993.
  6. Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics: a Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*, Harper and Row, "Studies in Language", 1966.
  7. "The Projecting Age": the phrase is Defoe's in the *Essay on Projects* (1697), but it was a commonplace. Swift uses it in the *Project for the Advancement of Religion and the Reformation of Manners* (1708).
  8. "The Concept of an Academy and the Celts," in Jorge Luis BORGES, *Selected Non-Fictions*, edited by Eliot Weinberger, Penguin Books, 2000, pp.458-463.
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Mireille Ozoux teaches phonetics, grammar and translation classes at Aix-Marseille Université as *professeur agrégée* and is currently preparing a PhD. Her field of research combines language, 18<sup>th</sup>-century linguistic thought and literature; her doctoral thesis focuses on Jonathan Swift's relationship to language and linguistic issues.