

# THE VOCABULARY OF JONATHAN SWIFT

LOIS M. SCOTT-THOMAS

IF, like his imaginary "man of wit", Dean Swift were to rise from the grave on purpose to compare our modern English language with that of his own times, what would he think of the innumerable "innovations", "abbreviations", and "elisions", both established and ephemeral, which have crept into our daily vocabulary and written records in the centuries between? Would he bitterly oppose them, as he did in his lifetime, and repeat his complaint that "we are already overloaded with monosyllables which are the disgrace of the language"?<sup>1</sup> Or, would he agree with Otto Jespersen that this marked love of monosyllables is largely responsible for the characteristically masculine quality of English, as compared with languages like French and Spanish?<sup>2</sup> Would he, perhaps, recognize that the liberties the Englishman takes with his language really reflect his innate love of democracy, his deep respect for the freedom of the individual? Certainly, Jonathan Swift would be very much astonished to learn how often he is cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*<sup>3</sup> for early uses of words, since he preached constantly against linguistic innovations, whatever his practice was. Perhaps the passage of time would justify his own sage observation:

"The latter part of a wise man's life is taken up with curing the follies, prejudices, and false opinions he contracted in the former."<sup>4</sup>

Among the words to which Swift objected so strongly were some which he speaks of as being introduced into English by the war with the French:

The war has introduced abundance of polysyllables, which will never be able to live many more campaigns. Speculations, operations, preliminaries, ambassadors, palisadoes, communications, circumvallations, battalions, as numerous as they are, if they attack us too frequently in our coffee houses, we shall certainly put them to flight, and cut off the rear.<sup>5</sup>

1. Swift, Jonathan, *The Tatler*, No. 230, Thursday, September 28, 1710.

2. Jespersen, Otto, *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, (New York, Appleton & Co., 1923), p. 16.

3. Henceforth referred to as the *O.E.D.*

4. Swift, Jonathan, *Works . . .*, (C. Bathurst, 1766), III, p. 275.

5. Swift, Jonathan, *The Tatler*, No. 230, Thursday, September 28, 1710.

It is difficult to know just what connotation these words had for Swift, since he does not use them in their contexts; but, if he referred to "speculations" in the sense of "a plan or scheme for some enterprise or undertaking", (*O.E.D.*), a sense in which the word was first used by Evelyn in 1667, so far as our records show, then he would have the satisfaction of knowing that now such a use of the word is obsolete. The first literary use of "operations" in a military and naval sense is recorded in the *O.E.D.* as being in 1749, the quotation being taken from Fielding: "She again began her operations." This use of the word is still common. "Preliminaries" was used as early as 1656; "ambassadors" is found in Chaucer in 1374, and in Shakespeare in 1602; "palisadoes" occurs in 1589, long before the Dean's day. "Communications", a word of Old French origin, was introduced into the English language as early as the fourteenth century. Of course, it later came to have new meanings, differing from the original, but it is impossible to tell which of these variations Swift condemned, since he gives no actual use of the word. Perhaps, however, he referred to its use in the sense of "means of communicating", which, according to the *O.E.D.*, was a new meaning, first recorded in 1715. "Circumvallations" was in existence as a recognized word in the middle of the seventeenth century; "battalions" dates back to 1589, though it is not until 1708 that we have it in the special sense of "a body of infantry composed of several companies and forming part of a regiment", (*O.E.D.*). Thus we see that many of these so-called "new" words, against which Swift waged such vigorous warfare, were already established in the language, though evidently unfamiliar to him; and those that were not, he failed to put to flight.

Among the words which the Dean declared to be "recent inventions of some pretty fellows . . . introduced to supply the want of wit, sense, humour and learning, which were formerly looked upon as qualifications for a writer", were "banter",<sup>6</sup> "bamboozle", "country put", and "kidney". In the "Apology" to his *Tale of a Tub*, (1710), he writes that banter "was first borrowed from the bullies in White Friars, then fell among footmen, and at last retired to the pedants". According to the *O.E.D.*, the origin of the word is unknown, but the verb was nearly forty years old when Swift spoke of the word as "struggling for the vogue", although it was probably regarded as

6. Swift writes in *The Tatler*, No. 230, p. 7: "I have done my utmost for some years past to stop the Progress of *Mobb* and *Banter*."

slang. "Bamboozle" appears about 1700, and is doubtless of cant origin, according to the same authority. In spite of Dean Swift's scorn of these two particular words, they are still familiar, but "country put", meaning a "rustic lout or greenhorn", (1700, *O.E.D.*), apparently did not survive long, and is now unknown. "Kidney" was used in the sense objected to by Swift as early as 1555, and had no less an authority for such usage than Shakespeare, who wrote in 1598, "Thinke of that, a man of my Kidney that am as subject to heate as butter", (*Merry Wives of Windsor*, III, v, 116).

Sir Walter Scott tells the following anecdote about Swift's never-ending war against "mob", an abbreviation for "mobile":

A lady who died in 1788, and was well known to Swift, used to say that the greatest scrape into which she got with him was by using the word "mob". "Why do you say that?" said he, in a passion: "Never let me hear you say that word again." "Why, sir," said she, "What am I to say?" "The rabble, to be sure," answered he.

Other "barbarous" abbreviations which Swift found very objectionable were "incog", for "incognito", "phiz", for "physiognomy", "hipps", for "hypochondria", "pozz", for "positive", "plenipos", for "plenipotentiaries", and "rep", for "reputation". "Sham", "hubble", "bully", "cutting", "shuffling", and "palm-ing" (the last three words presumably used with reference to card-playing) he felt to be insults to men of good taste like himself. In spite of his disapproval, however, they all survive to the present day, and it is interesting to note that Swift found occasion to use "bully" in his own works at least twice, once in his *Letters*, (1711), and once in his *A City Shower*, (1727). The common practice of omitting certain letters in words when writing, and substituting apostrophes, as "though" written "tho'", was in Swift's eyes an unpardonable sin. In view of such an ultra-conservative attitude to words and their ways, we are not surprised to find him writing to the Lord High Treasurer in 1711, requesting "that some method be found for *ascertaining* and *fixing* our language forever, after such alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite".<sup>6</sup> Imagine petitioning Parliament now to "fix our language forever"!

Yet, paradoxical as it may seem, we find our author violating his own principles by introducing new words into the lang-

6. Swift, *The History of Martin*, (Everyman's Library), No. 347, p. 134.

uage, and taking over loan-words from the Latin and French. The *O.E.D.* cites Swift as the first authority for the use of the word "prize-fighting". True, he is speaking ironically of the "origin of that genteel custom . . . well known and practised to this day among those polite islanders, though unknown everywhere else".<sup>7</sup> However, he is again cited as the first writer to use such words as "physico-logical", and "reincrudation", while "belles-lettres", "ex-cathedra",<sup>8</sup> "nota bene" (used substantively for the first time by Swift), "observandas", (more correctly "a"), and "opus magnum", all of which belong to the class of foreign words and phrases now an integral part of our language, owe their introduction into English literature to Dean Swift.

In his *Polite Conversations* we have a delightful satire on contemporary conversation, as well as an extremely useful work for anyone studying the vocabulary of that period. Among the words which either appear in the written language for the first time, or appear in a new sense, are "non-attention", "more-ish", the verb "to slobber", the nouns "compliments", (i.e. "formal respects, greetings, etc."), "annuals", (i.e. "anything that lasts only for a year"), "news", (i.e. "a newspaper, now rare"), "mouth-piece" ("in a jocular sense"), "trumpery", (applied to a person, especially a woman. This word is now obsolete (except in dialect), and "tea-tongs", along with such phrases as "on the high grin", (we now use the term "broad grin"), "the devil's books",<sup>8</sup> and the "Land of Nod". No modern reader needs to consult a dictionary in order to learn what the latter expression means, but "odd-come shortly", meaning "some day or other in the near future", is totally unfamiliar. The last record of this unusual form of diction is in Sir Walter Scott's *Letters*, (1821). In *Polite Conversations* we also find "provincial" for the first time applied to one who "has the manners or speech of a province or the 'provinces'".

In the introduction to "Simon Wagstaff's" *Three Dialogues* our author refers to the prevalent use of "can't, han't, shan't, didn't, cou'dn't, wou'dn't, isn't en't . . . jommetry for geometry, vardi for verdict, lard for lord, learnen for learning", and many other similar contractions. Though we occasionally hear

7. See *Tale of a Tub*, *Ibid.*, p. 62, *O.E.D.* first use noted, Scott, 1818.

8. This expression is not noted in the *O.E.D.*, but is certainly related to the expression "the devil's picture books", (i.e. playing cards), with which I am thoroughly familiar, as the phrase is commonly used,—or was—in the Ottawa Valley; but I can find no one in Nova Scotia who recognizes it.—Lady S. says, "Damn your cards . . . they are the devil's books." (*Everyman*, No. 347, p. 319.)

"ain't" to-day, we no longer use "han't", or "en't", nor do we write "vardi" for "verdict", or "learnen" for "learning"; but we have definitely accepted "can't", "shan't", "didn't", "couldn't", "wouldn't", and "isn't" into our speech, and would find ourselves lost conversationally, at least, if we had to eliminate them from our every-day talk.

Sometimes Swift combined verbs with adverbs or prepositions in order to obtain a new meaning. Thus we have him using the phrase "to close in with", as in the following sentence: "I do now gladly close in with my subject." This expression, however, does not seem to have been adopted by many other writers. Swift made use of a phrase, "to conjecture at", that perhaps was already dying out, as the last record of its use before his time was in 1646, and there is no record of a later use than his. In *The Tale of a Tub*, (1704), Swift writes, "To this system of religion were tagged several subaltern doctrines." Here we have a new use of the verb "tag". The *O.E.D.* cites Addison, writing in 1712, as the first authority for the use of the verb "to letter" in the sense of "to affix a name or title in letters upon (a book, a shop, etc.)". Swift's use of the verb occurs several years earlier in *The Tale of a Tub*: "You take fair correct copies well bound in calf's skin and lettered at the back." "Hecatomb", which had been already used as a substantive, Swift used as a verb in his *Miscellaneous Poems*. There is only one other instance, dated 1808, given in the *O.E.D.* of the verbal use of this word.

Swift seems to have been the only literary man to use "fly-bane" in the sense of "poison for flies". He is also credited with the first use of the rare word "spargefaction", which comes from the Latin "spargere", "to sprinkle", and "factio". One phrase which he coined, while not linguistically new, came to have a new significance for all English readers when Arnold took the expression "sweetness and light" from Swift, and immortalized its use and meaning in his *Culture and Anarchy*. "Astride" is yet another word to which our very conservative Dean gave a new shade of meaning.

Thus we see that Swift was all unconsciously doing what almost every other important writer did in his time, and has done, more and more, since. He was using words in a new sense, in spite of himself, and he was inventing or borrowing new words, coining new phrases, and generally adding to the ever-growing English language. Sometimes, too, he was holding fast to old

words that were disappearing from the language. The inimitable "Miss" of his *Polite Conversations* speaks of her clothes as "hanging by Jommetry", meaning "hanging in a stiff angular fashion", (*O.E.D.*). This phrase seems to have made its literary appearance first in 1622, and to have been bowed out of existence by Miss Notable.

In conclusion, it would appear that in asking for a standardized usage in English, Dean Swift was asking for the impossible, as his own works show. Like Benjamin Franklin on this side of the water, he was unable to practise what he so loudly preached. His simple, vigorous Anglo-Saxon mode of expression contains the very "innovations" against which he so vigorously inveighed. Nor is his style any the worse for it. Like the best of his literary countrymen, he struck out new paths when necessary, following the Englishman's unconquerable impulse to express himself freely and forcibly, which is the very life-blood of our language.