

Strategies of Canonisation / Standardisation in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*

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Résumé : *Je me suis proposé d'examiner quel fut le rôle du Dictionnaire de Samuel Johnson (The Dictionary of the English Language, 1755), l'un des textes les plus représentatifs des Lumières britanniques pour la mise en forme du discours de canonisation. Johnson est le premier auteur qui grâce à son Dictionnaire transforme un modèle lexicographique en un standard. Le Dictionnaire de Johnson reste intimement lié au canon littéraire établi par son auteur. Mon étude est centrée sur le parallélisme (ou les points de convergence) entre le modèle lexicographique et le canon littéraire johnsonien présent dans Les vies des Poètes (Lives of the English Poets). J'ai tenté de faire ressortir les stratégies utilisées par Johnson pour ranger son dictionnaire dans le discours de la standardisation ainsi que le lien qui s'établit entre les stratégies de la standardisation lexicographiques et celles de la canonisation littéraire à la faveur de la dimension d' «histoire intellectuelle» (intellectual history) que l'auteur prête à son dictionnaire. Ces stratégies une fois mises en évidence, une meilleure compréhension sera possible des mécanismes qui ont permis de concevoir ce Dictionnaire comme un texte appartenant au discours de la modernité.*

Keywords: *modernity, lexicography, intellectual history, re/decontextualization, standardisation/canonisation*

Identifying the task of order as one of the (impossible) tasks that modernity sets for itself and the eighteenth century as the age responsible for a decisive discursive rupture between modernity and premodernity, the present paper attempts to analyse the mechanisms responsible for enthroning Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language, 1755* as one of the main ordering tools of the modern discursive practices underlying the British Enlightenment. My aim is to show that the strategies responsible for establishing Johnson's *Dictionary* as one of the canonical texts of the British eighteenth century are inevitably connected to the strategies at the basis of Johnson's literary canon, best represented by the *Lives of the English Poets*, a literary history that combines biographical and critical components. However, while emphasising the obvious connection between Johnson's linguistic standard, set by the *Dictionary of the English Language*, and his literary canon, I will try to illustrate the manner in which Johnson's lexicographic model departs from the "intellectual history" dimension that is one the premises of its creation and acquires a distinct identity. It is precisely the interplay between the encyclopaedic dimension and the linguistic dimension that turns Johnson's *Dictionary* into one of the canonical texts of classical modernity. The investigation that I propose thus deals with the part played by the lexicographic model in the ordering of

knowledge and attempts to lead to the better understanding of the lexicographic strategies responsible for the discursive authority that establishes the episteme of modernity.

Ordering the world

The dictionary can be seen as an actualisation of the encyclopaedic optimism of the eighteenth century. Thus, it belongs in the same category with the encyclopaedia, the memoir, the biography or the literary history. Both the *Lives* and the *Dictionary* are books made of other books and have to be seen as ordering tools that define the constants of authority in the British eighteenth century. Like the newspaper, the dictionary is an illustration of the modern tendency of containing the word, but while the newspaper seeks to capture the transient, the dictionary is meant to fix and secure against oblivion. Its canonical dimension thus comes necessarily from its responsibility of being a preserver of the past and a controller of the present. As in the case of the encyclopaedia, its task of containing the constants of knowledge has to be confronted with its other task, that of compressing knowledge, as a quintessence of information. The second task is possible only due to a strategy of decontextualisation.

As in the case of another quintessence of information, the newspaper, decontextualisation is the governing principle of organisation of the lexicon, making the insertion of words possible. "The dictionary heightens emphasis on individual words, and it... disseminates the illusion.... that words have a meaning apart from a statement.... The dictionary provides a space in which words come truly into their own..." (Anderson 72).

Johnson's *Dictionary* is established as an authoritative text of the British Enlightenment. This is due to the fact that it is the first English dictionary that tries to compress the English language and contain it within the limits of a systematic model. Unlike previous monolingual lexicons, which met only purely explanatory needs (hard word dictionaries), Johnson turns his dictionary into one of the main guardians of the standard of the English language, selecting words and making distinctions among word meanings, adding the use illustrative examples to this operation of selection and discerning. Johnson's is the first English dictionary that uses illustrative examples in a systematic manner, in order to support the meaning of a word that his definition tries to contain. The use of illustrative examples can be seen as an attempt to recontextualise the words that remain stranded in the space created by his lexicographic model. The strategies of recontextualisation are to be seen as directly linked to the first task of the lexicon, the memorial one, that of creating a standard that should secure words against oblivion.

Johnson supports the definitions of the words in the dictionary by examples connected to a group of authors that he takes as a point of reference. His linguistic standard is thus established due to the strategies of recontextualisation that connect the text of the *Dictionary* to that of Johnson's literary canon, through an operation of reference.

Where the literary canon meets the linguistic standard

"Words should not draw attention to themselves which they should transmit to things" says Johnson in "The Life of Dryden". This statement, which is directly connected to Locke's

approach on language where words are “signs of ideas”, is based upon the hypothesis of linguistic transparency, characteristic for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is the dichotomy that opposes words, as transparent body, to things, which are seen as the spirit that this body must clearly reveal and not obscure, that supports the obvious interdependence between Johnson’s linguistic standard and his literary canon.

In spite of the decontextualisation that the introduction of words in a dictionary operates, Johnson’s words can’t exist independently, without examples that the author considers significant. The author doesn’t intend for them to “draw attention” just to themselves and thus a complete separation from a higher meaning of the discourse that they actually belong to is for him impossible. His linguistic prescriptivism is inevitably linked to his critical authority. The *Preface* of the English *Dictionary* clearly underlines this fact:

The chief glory of every people arises from its authours....I shall not think my employment useless or ignoble, if by my assistance foreign nations, and distant ages, gain access to the propagators of knowledge, and understand the teachers of truth; if my labours afford light to the repositories of science, and add celebrity to Bacon, to Hooker, to Milton, and to Boyle. (Johnson, *Preface*)

It is through the presence of the authors that the dictionary acquires value, since Johnson sees authors as the “teachers of truth”. The literal presence of English authors in Johnson’s *Dictionary* is the component that connects the words in the lexicographic space to truth. Thus, the presence of illustrative examples in the dictionary should be seen as meant to reverse the operation of decontextualisation that their introduction in the lexicographic space presupposes.

The illustrative examples are not used by Johnson only to support the meaning of words, as in contemporary dictionaries, but to recontextualise them in an attempt to recuperate the signification of the discourse associated with the word. Thus, if we look at the definition of a word such as “memory”, we can see that the quotations from Locke and Addison add a more complex dimension to the general definition as mere retention that Johnson gives:

MEMORY

1. The power of retaining or recollecting things past; retention; reminiscence; recollection

“Memory is the power to revive again in our minds those ideas which after imprinting, have disappeared, or have been laid out of sight” Locke.

“The memory is perpetually looking back, when we have nothing present to entertain us; it is like those repositories in animals that are filled with stores of food, on which they may ruminate if their present pasture fails.” Addison’s *Spectator* (Johnson, *Dictionary*)

The dictionary is not meant to be an instance of pure “grammaticality” precisely because the dimension of pure grammaticality becomes possible only within the paradigm of linguistic evolutionism that is built in the nineteenth century. “A dictionary like Johnson’s which

incorporates extensive quotations from written texts necessarily exerts an unusual pressure away from the purely semantic and into the cultural reality of knowledge and reference” (Reddick 27)

In Johnson's eyes the *Dictionary* becomes useful only if it adequately serves the encyclopaedic project that it is inscribed in, that of “propagating knowledge”. And, as the first excerpt that I discussed emphasises, it only through the presence of other authors in the dictionary that this can be done. Here, due to the literary history component, one could perceive similarities between Johnson's *Dictionary* and Pierre Bayle's “*Dictionnaire historique et critique*”. In a context where pure grammaticality isn't allowed, the dimension of intellectual history that Johnson gives his dictionary is inseparable from the linguistic dimension. Thus the linguistic standard set by Johnson's eighteenth century dictionary can exist only in connection to a literary canon.

Johnson's own brand of order: Gothicism and Refinement

Johnson's remarks on literary works were often shaped by an overreaching *agon* between the general and the particular, the grand and the small, the exemplary and the singular, the species and the individual. (Brody Kramnick 195). Imlac's words in Johnson's novel *Rasselas* underline the fact that the only way to evaluate a literary work is to empty it of concretion and to achieve the right degree of “generality” that is given by the response of the reader :

“The business of a poet is to examine not the individual but the species, to remark general properties and large appearances: he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades of the verdure in the forest. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind.” (Rasselas)

“poetry cannot dwell upon the minuter distinctions by which one species differs from another without departing from the simplicity and grandeur which fills the imagination; nor dissect the latent qualities of things, without losing its general power of gratifying every mind by recalling its conceptions” (Rambler 37)

Poetry can acquire worth only by its ability to go beyond specificity due to a process of cultural recollection. Its function is that of “recalling the original to every mind” in the same way as the function of words has to be purely referential, that of “transmitting attention to things”. The ideal of linguistic transparency can't be seen otherwise than correlated with that of literary transcendence. According to several critics, the crux of Johnson's theory of canonicity is memory, which is not mere retention or reminiscence, but according to a Lockean definition, has the power of reviving formerly imprinted ideas absent from the mind. “Simply summarized, the *Lives* develop a critical interest in memory as a fictive paradigm by which the relationship between life and literature can be understood. Works of “nature” occupy a permanent present through their relationship to history and language; however works of

“manners” are felt to have slipped from public consciousness and so have to be recollected.” (Clingham 13) Johnson’s authority is thus established in the liminal space between the general and the particular. In the *Lives* it mediates between two discourses, the life and the work of the writer, while in the dictionary it mediates between the generality of the definition and the particularity of the quotation.

Johnson’s theory of canonicity is based upon a rejection of both “gothicism” and “refinement”, as Brody Kramnick underlines. The parodic figure in his *Idler* Essays, Dick Minim commits the grievous critical error of bringing together the two positions that are in clear opposition to one another:

“When he is placed in the chair of criticism, he declares loudly for the noble simplicity of our ancestors, in opposition to petty refinements, and ornamental luxuriance. Sometimes he is sunk in despair and perceives false delicacy daily gaining ground, and sometimes brightens his countenance with a gleam of hope, and predicts the revival of the true sublime.” He then fulminates his loudest censures against the monkish barabry of the rhyme; wonders how beings that pretend to reason can be pleased with one line always ending like another.....and rejoices that genius has, in our days, shaken off the shakles which had encumbered it so long.” (Johnson, *Idler*)

Minim’s critical error is double since he doesn’t even make a choice between the two extreme positions that mirror an ongoing controversy between the ancients and the moderns, but adopts them alternatively. His fake canon embodies the mistakes that Johnson’s own canon will seek to avoid. Both language and literature are appraised in terms of the memorial perpetuity of the speakers’/readers’ response. The authorities that Johnson judges the most adequate to supplement the authority of the examples in the English dictionary belong to the period stretching between 1580 and 1660. The Elizabethan diction is to be seen as pure because it is characterised by nobility of thought (since words are just signs of ideas, nobility of thought means nobility of language) and also since it is neither too remote nor too specific. It is used continuously enough to be recognisable by readers (it doesn’t belong to the Old English and Middle English past – seen as the time of “rudeness”) and it is not too attached to the particular moment of its production, defined as the singular “mingling”, or “false refinement” that characterises the Restoration. It thus avoids both gothicism and refinement, finding its legitimacy in the Golden Age of the English Renaissance. The two opposed dimensions above set the boundaries of a literary canon that is meant to support the linguistic standard promoted by the dictionary.

So far have I been from any care to grace my pages with modern decorations, that I have studiously endeavoured to collect examples and authorities from the writers before the restoration, whose works I regard as the wells of English undefiled, as the pure sources of genuine diction..... But as every language has a time of rudeness antecedent to perfection, as well as of false refinement and declension, I have been cautious lest my zeal for antiquity might drive me into times too remote, and crowd my book with words now no longer understood. I have fixed Sidney’s work for the boundary, beyond

which I make few excursions. From the authours which rose in the time of Elizabeth, a speech might be formed adequate to all the purposes of use and elegance. If the language of theology were extracted from Hooker and the translation of the Bible; the terms of natural knowledge from Bacon; the phrases of policy, war, and navigation from Raleigh; the dialect of poetry and fiction from Spenser and Sidney; and the diction of common life from Shakespeare, few ideas would be lost to mankind, for want of English words, in which they might be expressed. (Johnson – *Preface*)

It is through this very diachronic pattern, through this temporal framework, that Johnson paradoxically “dehistoricizes” the examples that he provides in his dictionary and with them the very presence of the writers that these examples belong to. Precisely as in the case of *The Lives of the English Poets*, where an attempt to contain the biographies of different authors within the covers of the same book projects an all-encompassing atemporality, Johnson voids his illustrative examples of specificity. As Krammick justly argues, the Johnsonian canon exists only as a “version of the past secured by consumption”. This notion has to be extended to his linguistic standard, where linguistic reality becomes acceptable only due to a process of negotiation between the relevance of the present (what is recent, without being superfluous) and the continuity of the past (checking the evolution of a language).

The ideal of linguistic refinement had thus emerged as entwined with that of literary refinement, since in the primarily aristocratic system of letters the notion of polite conversation had a central part in the process of canonization/standardization. As Johnson's approach to the words in the *Dictionary* suggests, there are however not only positive connotations to refinement. Although, as Johnson's *Preface* to the *Dictionary* emphasises, a language has to be refined in order to be removed from barbarity, a “refiner in language” can be not only an “improver in elegance”, but also someone who invents “superfluous subtleties” and, as underlined by a quotation taken from Addison's work, someone who doesn't see “the truth of things”. In a passage of a former aristocratic system of letters to a new print-based literary system, the legitimisation of a standard consists of frugality that avoids excessive refinement of the sprightly sociolect of coffee-house parlance and the barbarity of former ages at the same time. As critics such as Lawrence Klein and Michelle Cohen have convincingly argued, due to the changes in authority associated with the modern paradigm in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the mid-eighteenth century is marked by a decisive replacement of the former discourse of courtly refinement with a linguistic norm of the Port Royal type, motivated by consensus that is rooted in the inner logic of language. Literary transcendence, which takes the reader beyond the mere discourse of manners, emerges thus as interconnected with the dimension of linguistic frugality that is opposed to the dangerous effeminacy brought about by excessive refinement.

Where the linguistic standard takes a different path

Andrew Kippis, the divine and biographer, complained in the 1760s that “Johnson's *Dictionary* is rather a history than a standard of our language. “He hath shewn by whom words have been used, and in what sense; but hath left the readers to determine what authority they

have.” According to Kippis, Johnson has failed to be prescriptive, especially in terms of word usage. Johnson is also criticised for quoting passages without making the significance “the authority of the passage” clear. Kippis’s attitude seems to anticipate Robert De Maria’s critical opinion, who starting from Umberto Eco’s assumption that dictionaries are to be seen as closely related to encyclopaedias, has argued that Johnson’s dictionary can be seen as nothing more than an “encyclopaedia in disguise”.

While we have emphasized the interdependence between the lexicographic component and the intellectual history dimension, the functioning of the dictionary as a liminal space built due to the intercrossing of the “barren deserts of philology” with the verdure of literature, it is however important to underline that Johnson’s dictionary exists primarily as lexicographic space. In spite of the attempt to achieve total recontextualisation, which had been one of the initial premises of the dictionary, the dictionary exists mainly due to an interplay between the encyclopaedic and the grammatical. The original declamatory meaning of the dictionary “is virtually held in abeyance, estranged from context and clear reference and signification. (Reddick 71)” Thus, the presence of the quotations achieves only a partial recontextualisation, as Allan Redick argues, the counter-pressure pulls the rhetoric of the text, specifically the quotations, more towards the aphoristic, underlining the obvious kinship between Johnson’s Dictionary and the common place book of the Renaissance. Thus, the reader is left to question the efficacy of the quotations to refer to external themes. Johnson himself is aware that, in spite of his initial intentions, the dictionary is marked primarily by decontextualisation, a component of the lexicographic space that he sees as equivalent to mutilation:

When first I collected these authorities, I was desirous that every quotation should be useful to some other end than the illustration of a word; I therefore extracted from philosophers principles of science; from historians remarkable facts; from chymists complete processes; from divines striking exhortations; and from poets beautiful descriptions. Such is design, while it is yet at a distance from execution. When the time called upon me to range this accumulation of elegance and wisdom into an alphabetical series, I soon discovered that the bulk of my volumes would fright away the student, and was forced to depart from my scheme of including all that was pleasing or useful in English literature, and reduce my transcripts very often to clusters of words, in which scarcely any meaning is retained; thus to the weariness of copying, I was condemned to add the vexation of expunging. Some passages I have yet spared, which may relieve the labour of verbal searches, and intersperse with verdure and flowers the dusty deserts of barren philology.

The examples, thus mutilated, are no longer to be considered as conveying the sentiments or doctrine of their authours; the word for the sake of which they are inserted, with all its appendant clauses, has been carefully preserved; but it may sometimes happen, by hasty detruncation, that the general tendency of the sentence may be changed: the divine may desert his tenets, or the philosopher his system.

The linguistic standard exists precisely due to a memorial interplay between recuperation and mutilation, dimensions that mirror the double lexicographic of encompassing and compressing. Thus, Johnson's lexicographic authority is the result of a process of complex negotiation between authority and authorities, the product of the tension between definition and quotation. In this respect, the dictionary departs from a purely encyclopaedic dimension. The authority that the group of authors in the *Dictionary* provide is chiefly linguistic, while not entirely subordinated to the word, however depending upon it, as a main point of reference within the heterogenous space of the dictionary. It is paradoxically the very desire to make the dictionary subordinate due to the reference to more prestigious previous texts that makes the dictionary an independent canonical text. As in the case of the *Lives*, Johnson's authority is consolidated due to the presence of other authorities that are subjected to selection, to new ordering. But while the *Lives'* purpose is that of evoking the authors that it contain, establishing a direct link to the external texts of the life and work of the authors, the *Dictionary*, a manufactured product that is partly machine-age production, ends up by containing only traces that retain only the promise of their referents.

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