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The social construction of Standard (Spoken) English: Eighteenth-century orthoepists as a “discourse community”¹

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ABSTRACT

In the pursuit of a standard form of spoken English, the second half of the eighteenth century was characterised by a proliferation of pronouncing dictionaries and manuals and – most importantly – by the publication of the ‘authoritative’ works by Thomas Sheridan (1780) and John Walker (1791). Pronouncing dictionaries offer important evidence of language change and of the fact that at this time provincial and vulgar pronunciations started to be marginalized and stigmatized (Beal 2004b and 2010).

By analysing the prefatory material of eighteenth-century pronouncing dictionaries, I aim to demonstrate how lexicographers and orthoepists, as “a discourse community” (Watts 1999), made an outstanding contribution to the social construction of the Standard ideology and its further reinforcement. Furthermore, reviews and advertisements of the aforementioned publications appeared in the daily press and periodicals; these, together with other news articles, will also be analysed to shed further light on the ‘debate’ which characterized the rise, in Mugglestone’s words (2003), of “accent as social symbol”.

1. Eighteenth-century pronouncing dictionaries

In her pioneering study on “pronouncing systems in eighteenth-century dictionaries”, dated 1946, Esther K. Sheldon pointed out that

¹ For the title of this paper I am very much indebted to Richard Watt’s study on eighteenth-century grammarians as a “discourse community” (Watts 1999).

The eighteenth century marks the beginning of a widespread interest in English pronunciation especially in ‘correct’ pronunciation, and also the appearance of the first pronouncing dictionaries, designed to satisfy this interest. (Sheldon 1946: 27)

However, it was especially the second half of the eighteenth century that was characterised by a proliferation of pronouncing dictionaries (cf. Mugglestone 2003. See also Beal 1999, 2009 and Jones 2006). For example, one could mention, among others, Buchanan (1757), Kenrick (1773), Spence (1775), Perry (1775), Sheridan (1780) and Walker (1791), with Walker actually dominating the scene and destined to be considered the ‘pronunciation bible’, and the ‘undisputed norm’ in matters of pronunciation, throughout the nineteenth century².

The high number of pronouncing dictionaries and, consequently, the progress and steady improvement of the same were a reflection of the public demands for “guidance in pronunciation” (Sheldon 1946: 39; cf. Görlach 2001: 89). As pointed out also by Beal,

such works were highly marketable because they provided the definitions and conventional spellings expected in a dictionary, with clear and detailed guidelines concerning the ‘correct’ pronunciation of every word. (Beal 2004a: 127)

What is more, in Prefaces and Introductions to the dictionaries and grammars another important feature is observed, i.e. the fact that it seemed quite a “common fashion” to criticise other people’s works, as Ann Fisher suggested in her grammar:

For I shall not run into that *ungenerous*, tho' *common* Fashion, of raising the Reputation of my *own* Book, at the *Expense* of my Brethren of the Subject, or start Objections to others for my own Advantage. (Fisher 1750: i; italics in the original)

² Walker’s influence ended with the publication of Daniel Jones’s *An English Pronouncing Dictionary*, which was first published in 1917, was regularly revised in the course of the twentieth century, and appeared in its 18th edition in 2011. The expressions “pronunciation bible” and “undisputed norm”, here applied to Walker’s dictionary, were used, respectively, by Windsor Lewis (1999: 225) and Monroy (2004: 275) to comment on Jones’s *English Pronouncing Dictionary* as a twentieth-century pronunciation authority (cf. Sturiale 2011: 208).

In addition, Kenrick (1784) may be used as an example of a generally negative attitude towards dialects and regional varieties, as these were seen to be in contrast with an idea of (and the desire for) a standard of 'proper' English. Here is Kenrick's judgement, one of the first promoters of the 'English is English' propaganda, in which, in matters of correct pronunciation, no saying was left to 'provincial' speakers, i.e. Irish and Scottish English native speakers:

There seems indeed a most ridiculous absurdity in the pretensions of a native of Aberdeen or Tipperary, to teach the natives of London to speak and to read.

Various have been nevertheless the modest attempts of the Scots and Irish, to establish a standard of English pronunciation. That they should not have succeeded is no wonder. Men cannot teach others what they do not themselves know: nay had these enterprising geniuses been qualified in point of knowledge, they seem to have been generally deficient in that of ingenuity; the methods most of them have hit upon, being but ill calculated to answer the end proposed. (Kenrick 1784: i-ii)

A few years earlier, in 1766, James Buchanan had expressed his perplexities about other studies previously conducted, but his tone and attitude were completely different from Kenrick's. Buchanan wrote:

Whoever has been conversant with gentlemen of polite learning, must have heard them expressing their surprize, that, for the honour of our country, no attempt had been made towards a Standard for the proper and uniform Pronunciation of the English Language, now so elegant and learned, as justly to attract the attention of all Europe.

Some years since, I have published an English Dictionary, with a view to obviate a vicious provincial dialect, and to remove the complaints of foreign gentlemen, desirous of learning English; several of whom, of a liberal education, then under my tuition, expostulated, that notwithstanding the difficulty in the acquisition of a proper English Pronunciation, yet there was no method exhibited directing to one just and regular. (Buchanan 1766: v)

In 1791 John Walker – often defined as the most influential of the late eighteenth-century normative lexicographers (see Lass 2000: 225 and Beal 2003) – briefly summarised the situation in his Preface to *A Critical*

Pronouncing Dictionary, where he also ‘praised’ those authors whose works and “endeavours” (Walker 1791: iii) had contributed to the improvement, reformation and amendment of the English language. He wrote:

The work I have to offer on the subject has, I hope, added something to the publick stock. It not only exhibits the principles of pronunciation, as others have done, divides the words into syllables, and marks the sounds of the vowels like Dr. Kenrick, spells the words as they are pronounced like Mr. Sheridan, and directs the inspector to the rule by the word like Mr. Nares; but where words are subject to different pronunciations, it shows the reasons from analogy for each; produces authorities for one side and the other, and points out the pronunciation which is preferable. In short, I have endeavoured to unite the science of Mr. Elphinstone, the method of Mr. Nares, and the general utility of Mr. Sheridan; and to add to these advantages, have given critical observations on such words as are subject to a diversity of pronunciation. How I have succeeded must be left to the decision of the publick. (Walker 1791: iv)

With the exception of Thomas Spence, who was the only lexicographer of the century to devise a phonetic alphabet to record pronunciation (see Beal 1999), orthoepists preferred to leave spelling unchanged and resorted to graves and acutes to mark accentuation, to italics to denote mute vowels (as in the case of William Perry, for example), and to diacritics and superscripted numerals to mark the various vowel sounds, which was the system used by Thomas Sheridan and John Walker (see *MERCHANT* in Table 1 below)³. Görlach has claimed that:

The eighteenth-century principle or orthoepy, unlike modern linguistics, backed the view that the written form took priority [...]. Orthoepy, the art of proper pronunciation, was related to, and dependent on, orthography. The mixing of the two levels necessarily led to unclear and contradictory terminology. (Görlach 2001: 88)

Undeniably, however, there was a perceived need to create a uniform, and non-localised, variety of pronunciation – a need which Thomas Sheridan

³ As for *MERCHANT* Perry (1775: s.v.) had: “*Mér´chant*, s., who trafficks to remote countries”. According to his “key” of the “different sounds of the vowels” (Perry 1775: liii) “é” corresponds to the /ɜ:/ sound, so his pronunciation is closer to Walker’s (1791) rather than to the one codified by Sheridan (1780), which contained the /a:/ sound.

tried to meet by publishing his 1780 dictionary, meant to be used “throughout the entire country” (Mugglestone 2003: 17). However, in pursuing this end, orthoepists added an extra flavour to the debate, that is what Holmberg (1964: 20) has defined as “the snob value of a good pronunciation”, a concept developed also by Mugglestone (1988: 176) when she writes that:

What is striking about comment on the spoken language, and reactions to it, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is *the rigorous approach* adopted towards notions of correctness, manifested in a social as well as a phonemic sense, as orthoepists attempted to codify the spoken language, according to *an increasingly class-based system of absolutes*. (My italics)

The stigmatisation of regional features was thus accompanied by an evaluation of the social status associated with them. See for instance the entry for *MERCHANT* as recorded by the two most influential orthoepists of the time, i.e. the Irish-born but London-based Thomas Sheridan (1780) and the English-born John Walker (1790) in Table 1 below:

Table 1. The entry for *MERCHANT* in Sheridan (1780) and Walker (1791)

Sheridan (1780)	Walker (1791)
<p><i>MERCHANT</i>, m_aˈr-tsh_aˌnt. One who trafficks to remote countries.</p>	<p><i>MERCHANT</i>, m_eˈr ˈtsh_aˌnt. One who trafficks to remote countries.</p> <p>☞ Mr. Sheridan pronounces the <i>e</i> in the first syllable of this word, like the <i>a</i> in <i>march</i>; and it is certain that, about thirty years ago, this was the general pronunciation; but since that time the sound <i>a</i> has been gradually wearing away; and the sound of <i>e</i> is so fully established, that the former is now become <i>gross and vulgar</i>, and is only to be heard among the lower orders of the people. (My italics)</p>

Walker encourages his readers to favour one variant over the other, in order to avoid the risk of sounding “gross and vulgar” and being associated to “the lower orders of the people”. As rightly pointed out by Beal (2003: 92):

Here, Walker not only tells us how the word *merchant* should be pronounced, but gives us a window into the sociolinguistic salience of

the alternative pronunciation and insight into the process of linguistic change that was in progress. (Italics in the original)

The relationship between accent and class had already been made explicit by Sheridan as well, back in the 1760s:

As the court pronunciation is no where methodically taught, and can be acquired only by conversing with people in polite life, it is as a sort of proof that a person has kept good company, and on that account is sought after by all, who wish to be considered as fashionable people, or members of the beau monde. (Sheridan 1762: 30)⁴

The Standard accent policy was characterised by the use of keywords like GOOD, PROPER, and CORRECT on one side of the argument, and their opposite BAD and WRONG on the other. Even more importantly, uses of PROVINCIAL or VULGAR were responsible for that shade of “class-based system of absolutes” which – as suggested by Mugglestone – characterised the debate; for example, Beal (2010: 24) informs us that VULGAR “appears ninety-six times in John Walker’s *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791), almost always with reference to the pronunciation of the lower classes”. Similarly, Sheridan, commenting on regional varieties (or “dialects”, as he called them), had stated that they “have some degree of disgrace annexed to them” (1762: 30).

In conclusion, though the ability of eighteenth-century orthoepists as ‘phoneticians’ is arguable, what is certain, as rightly demonstrated by Beal (2004b), is that eighteenth-century pronouncing dictionaries offer important evidence of language change and of the fact that provincial and vulgar pronunciations started at this time to be marginalized and classified as ‘marks of disgrace’. Among stigmatized features there are, for example, the absence of the FOOT-STRUT split, the presence of the ‘Northumbrian Burr’ or the notorious /h/ dropping (cf. Beal 2004b and 2010). Moreover, in the debate which characterised the proposal of a model for a ‘proper’ and ‘correct’ English pronunciation, the modern question of “which English” (Crystal 1994) also arose, and provincial orthoepists, i.e. Irish and Scottish ones,

⁴ The correspondence of “court pronunciation” and “polite pronunciation” is so explained by Sheridan (1762: 30): “In the very metropolis [i.e. London] two different modes of pronunciation prevail, by which the inhabitants of one part of the town, are distinguished from those of the other. One is current in the city, and is called cockney; the other at the court-end, and is called the polite pronunciation”.

ceased to be considered reliable models. Kenrick (1784), as we have already mentioned, may be seen as ‘a living proof’ of the general attitude towards dialects and varieties, which were perceived to be the very antithesis of an idea of and desire for a standard of ‘proper’ English.

2. Eighteenth-century orthoepists as a “discourse community”

As we have seen, by the end of the eighteenth century the Standard ideology was well established. However, its terminology (i.e. the keywords used in the debate to define pronunciation, and which, in Watt’s words, had characterised the “discourse community”) acquired new connotations. According to Watts (1999), a discourse community is:

a set of individuals who can be interpreted as constituting a community on the basis of the ways in which their oral or written discourse practices reveal common interests, goals and beliefs, i.e. on the degree of institutionalization that their discourse displays. The members of the community may or may not be conscious of sharing their discourse practices. Thus, a discourse community may show strong or weak member affiliation to the values of the community, and the community itself may only become ‘visible’ through the course of time. (Watts 1999: 43)

Swales (1990) defines a “discourse community” as follows:

1. it has “a broadly agreed set of common public goals”;
2. it has “mechanisms of intercommunication between its members”;
3. it “uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback”;
4. it uses and “hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims”;
5. it “has acquired some specific lexicon”;
6. it has “a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise”. (Swales 1990: 41)

A close analysis of pronouncing dictionaries and their prefatory material may help us find out how all these elements relate to each other. The fifth point above is of particular interest in this study, as it concerns the use of specific

lexicon on the part of the community. Following Watts (1999), Fitzmaurice has demonstrated how

Early eighteenth-century London was distinguished by a discourse community of essay writers and journalists whose conversations took place, not in the coffee houses and clubs frequented by the coalition and its supporters, but in the pages of the periodicals and pamphlets sold by printers and corners shops. (Fitzmaurice 2010: 107)

Similarly, I claim here that eighteenth-century Britain was “distinguished by a discourse community” of orthoepists and lexicographers that started their debate in the pages of their dictionaries and treatises. This was later transferred onto the pages of newspapers, thus reaching a wider readership and involving more people in the ‘standard accent’ debate. Finally, readers started to make personal contributions to the debate, shedding new light on the Standard ideology⁵.

In order to investigate this hypothesis, qualitative and quantitative analyses were carried out on the Introductions and Prefaces to the major eighteenth-century pronouncing dictionaries: though most of them are available on *ECCO*, other editions were consulted at the British Library. In addition, analyses were conducted on databases of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century newspapers where the publication of pronouncing dictionaries was advertised and where the works were reviewed⁶.

The main aim was to analyse all those expressions and noun phrases which were related to the standard language debate, such as:

- Standard Pronunciation;
- Vulgar Pronunciation;
- Provincial Pronunciation;
- Vicious Pronunciation;
- Elegant Pronunciation;
- True Pronunciation;
- Broad Pronunciation;
- Proper Pronunciation.

⁵ The role of newspapers as sources for sociolinguistic investigation has recently been discussed by Percy (2012: 191-210).

⁶ These include the *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Collection*, *British Newspapers 1600-1900* and the *19th Century British Library Newspapers*. Keywords were also searched for in the *OED* (online edition), in order to compare usage in quotations taken from literary texts.

Table 2. Summarises findings; owing to space constraints, only the most interesting data will be discussed below.

Table 2. Adjectives associated with pronunciation in the OED and in newspaper collections

Adjective associated with 'pronunciation'	17 th and 18 th Century Burney Collection*	British Newspapers 1600-1900	19 th Century British Library Newspaper	OED
Standard	13	46	33	16
Vulgar	7	55	48	4
Provincial	5	45	40	1
Vicious	628**	651	23	4
Elegant	4	43	39	1
True	266***	414	148	//
Broad	5	24	16	//
Proper	63****	383	320	//

* A search for 'pronunciation' has returned 3943 items.

** The first item recorded is dated 1707 and refers to the advertisement for Thomas Dyche's *A Guide to the English Tongue*, which, on the title page, has: "a particular care is had to shew the Accent for preventing of vicious pronunciation". Most instances refer to Dyche's and a certain Pardon's publications. The first item which does not refer to the aforementioned advertisements is item no 602, where one reads: "a pleasing Voice, and good Delivery, (though the English accuse him of a vicious pronunciation)" [...]. In item no. 616, taken from *World* (London), December 15, 1789, in the review of a theatrical performance we read: "Alckin maims much impression by vicious broad pronunciation of the letter A".

*** The high number of occurrences of "true pronunciation" is due to the fact that the phrase appears in several dictionaries, spelling-books and manuals. The first recorded advertisement is dated 1722 and refers to Thomas Dyche's *A Dictionary of all the Words Commonly used in the English Tongue*. The first recorded "news" item is dated 6 June 1724.

**** The first recorded item is dated 1727 and refers to the advertisement for Nathan Bailey's *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, first published in 1721. The title page of the dictionary did not contain the phrase "proper pronunciation", which was added in the advertisement. Instead, the phrase "proper pronunciation" occurs in William Perry's 1775 dictionary, the publication of which was widely publicised in the press. "Proper pronunciation" also appears in three items classified as "news", dated 1788, 1790 and 1795.

What is important to note here is that "vicious", as used by Dyche and other early eighteenth-century scholars, referred to 'unclear' articulation

of sounds or ‘incorrect’ pronunciation of classical languages, i.e. Latin and Greek. Towards the end of the century it started to be associated with regional accents or substandard varieties, as shown in the following examples:

Sheva seems needlessly deformed by *dialect*. But *Shylock* was formerly spoken in the manner of Duke’s place. But the truth is, that the observance of a vicious pronunciation checks the effusion of feeling – an actor may laudably forget it when he feels, for sentiment affects the heart, and dialect is only a clumsy supplement for wit and humour. (*Oracle and Public Advertiser*, London 22 September 1796)

The parts wherein he was least excellent were the soliloquies; he rather too much seemed to be addressing himself to an audience; and he sometimes had a vicious pronunciation, particularly of the words, die, (daye); by, (baye); friends, (fraiends); and memory, (mamory): but these slight errors, we trust, his good sense will soon enable him to correct. (*Courier and Evening Gazette*, London 27 October 1795)

The reference here is to a typical Cockney feature, i.e. the presence of the /eɪ/ diphthong instead of /aɪ/, already criticized by Sheridan in his *Dictionary* (1780). The *OED* gives us also another interesting example where a Cockney feature is stigmatised as ‘vicious’. This is the case of yod-coalescence:

One of the things on which I was always harping, was Kemble’s vicious pronunciation ... ‘Odious’ became ‘ojus’. (*OED online*, s.v.)

Together with book or theatrical reviews and advertisements, another newspaper section to consider is the one presenting ‘letters to the printer’⁷. Item 614 of ‘vicious pronunciation’ offers us the following example:

Sir, I have always had a particular aversion on any deviations from a rectitude in every respect. You will, perhaps, esteem me scrupulously nice, affectedly delicate, when I tell you that I cannot bear excess nor extravagance in behaviour, in dress or in food; nor yet misapplication in words, vicious pronunciation, or ungrammatical language in conversation. (*Public Advertiser*, London 8 October 1784)

⁷ Especially in the nineteenth century, this section quite often hosted contributions to the debate on standard pronunciation – see for instance Alexander Ellis’s letter to the *Daily News* dated 27 December 1875.

Another important key term in the debate is ‘provincial’. That some features of regional accents started to be stigmatised in the eighteenth century has already been highlighted; what I wish to point out here is that the issue of ‘provincialism’ led to the idea that ‘English is English’, as we have seen in Kenrick (1784), whose words find an echo in the following newspaper article of 1786:

[...] in an age like this, when attempts of a much more arduous nature are every day presented to our notice: when pigs are brought to exercise all the functions of rationality; and Hibernians profess to teach the true pronunciation of the English tongue. (*Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, London 14 December 1786)⁸

The ‘English is English’ propaganda, carried out by orthoepists in their pronouncing dictionaries, was further reinforced in the nineteenth century, and echoes of Kenrick’s ‘complaint’ were still audible also in newspapers, as shown in the example below:

English Pronouncing Dictionary. It is a curious fact that there is no English Pronouncing Dictionary compiled by an English-man. Stephen Jones was a Welshman, Sheridan was an Irishman, and Walker was a Scotchman [sic.]. (*The Age*, London 22 August 1841)

However, the marks of disgrace of a provincial accent could be adjusted by following the models offered, according to Perry and other orthoepists, by the educated speakers of London. As a result, following elocutionists and orthoepists, tutors and teachers started to advertise their method and schools offering a similar remedy:

Mrs B. [Beard] having received her Education at One of the first Boarding-Schools in the Metropolis, of which she is a Native, consequently divested of Provincial Pronunciation, presumes it will be no small Recommendation to Public Favour. (*The Leeds Mercury*, Leeds 29 March 1817)

⁸ The introductory note to the article reads: “The following is extracted from a periodical publication called the MICROCOSM, which we understand to be written by a young gentleman of Eton School; the sentiments, the reasoning and the diction, prove him to be a youth of great judgement and abilities”.

Indeed, the Scottish lexicographer William Perry, being himself a ‘provincial’ (see Sturiale 2006), made of the binomial class-education and accent a key point in his Preface when he claimed:

Mere men of the world, notwithstanding all their politeness, often retain so much of the provincial dialect, or commit such gross errors in speaking and writing, as to exclude them from the honour of being the standard of accurate pronunciation. Those who unite these two characters, and, with the correctness and precision of true learning, combine the ease and elegance of genteel life, may justly be styled the only true standard for propriety of speech. (Perry 1775: vi)

Interestingly enough, a century later it was still possible to read ‘a want ad’ addressed to any educated reader, i.e. “university man”, willing to help a “gentleman” divest him of his provincial pronunciation⁹:

TUTOR (University Man) desired in Worcester or suburbs, one hour alternate evenings, to read with Gentleman, for improvement, and to correct a provincial pronunciation. Terms must be moderate. Reading at Tutor’s home preferred. (*Berrow’s Worcester Journal*, 15 October 1881)

Crowley’s comment on provincialism and vulgarism is also worth mentioning here. He writes: “The provincialism is regional, the vulgarism class-bound, and it is always possible for a provincialism to become a vulgarism” (Crowley 2003: 151). This is precisely what happened in the period under investigation. The accent of the best speakers in the Capital, codified by orthoepists and promulgated by elocutionists, became not just a goal to pursue, but also a mark of class distinction. A final example can be found in an article published in 1837 by the *Cornwall Royal Gazette* about provincial features of “some of the inhabitants of London”, already in the process of being marginalised and stigmatised as vulgar:

One of the peculiarities of vulgar English pronunciation is to put the letter *r* at the end of words ending with a vowel [...]. Equally glaring is the taking away of *h* from places where it is required, and giving it

⁹ See also the obituary for the Devon-born actor Samuel Phelps, where, together with praises for his excellent qualities on the stage, his accent is mentioned: “His provincial pronunciation sometimes raised a smile, but that he was an actor of uncommon gifts no one ventured to dispute” (*The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, Bristol 8 November 1878).

where its absence is desirable. The termination of words ending in *ing* with a *k*, as *somethink*, is not less incorrect or less disagreeable.

3. Conclusion

This investigation has shown that, during the eighteenth century, the keywords related to the standard language debate did not only acquire new connotative meanings, but they also contributed to reinforce a ‘social divide’ which mirrored the desire of the middle class who – it should not be forgotten – represented the primary clientele and readership of pronouncing dictionaries and manuals. What had started as a ‘war of dictionaries’ between orthoepists and elocutionists, by the end of the eighteenth century had gone outside the scholarly confines and started to mark ‘a social discourse’ which justified and asked for prescriptive rules. It seems that newspapers offered the discourse community of orthoepists the opportunity, in Watt’s words (1999: 43), “to become ‘visible’ through the course of time” and, as a consequence, the community of readers could become “conscious of sharing their discourse practices”.

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