CHAPTER 4

Johnson and Language

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Johnson's approach to, and treatment of, language has long been a site of fertile debate. His *Dictionary of the English Language*, first published in 1755 (a fourth revised edition appeared in 1773), can be seen as marking a newly modern lexicography, characterized by his attentive collection and scrutiny of evidence alongside a detailed engagement with contextual nuance as a way of deriving meaning and sense.[1] Conversely, Johnson is often remembered for his contribution to prescriptive (and proscriptive) linguistics – a domain in which the dictionary-maker's remit is interventionist and normative, drawing on models established by the *Vocabulario* of the Accademia della Crusca in 1612 and the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (first edition, 1640). That Johnson "fixed" English spelling is another commonplace assumption in this respect.

Johnson's partisan prejudices present other well-established narratives in which, for example, French or Scottish resistance is seen as imbricated in the *Dictionary* as text, offering subjective testimony where modern reference works prefer a stance of unwavering impartiality. Johnson's definition of *oats* ("A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people") remains a well-rehearsed set-piece. Nevertheless, antecedents in earlier lexicography are plain ("it is forage for Horses in all places; and in some, provision for Men," wrote Richard Hogarth in his *Gazophylacium Anglicanum* [1689]). Plain, too, is its assimilation into eighteenth-century lexicography more widely. "In most parts of England, and in others, as also in Scotland, the chief support of the people," wrote Nicol Scott in his *New Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1755). The geographical specificities embedded in the definition of *kohlrabi* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* ("cultivated as food for

[1] Patrick Hanks, "Johnson and Modern Lexicography," *International Journal of Lexicography*, 18:2 (2005): 243–66.

cattle in England, and as a vegetable in India and Germany") have, in comparison, attracted far less attention.

"Every other authour may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach, and even this negative recompence has been yet granted to very few," Johnson presciently observed in the Preface to his *Dictionary* (*EL*, 73). This chapter will explore language and lexicography in Johnson's hands from a range of perspectives while examining the basis, and rationale, of the assumptions discussed above. Formally hired in 1746 for a fee of £1,575 by Robert Dodsley (and other members of the booksellers consortium with which the dictionary project originated), it is, for example, undeniable that Johnson's work was, from the beginning, embedded in the impulse to codify an authoritative (and national) model of English. Over 650 dictionaries involving English were, in reality, already in existence. Johnson's popular status as "the father of the dictionary" is tenuous at best. Nevertheless, an English dictionary with a normative remit like those produced by academies abroad was, Dodsley stressed, "a Work which of all others we most want"[2] – and would undoubtedly "be well received by the publick" (*Life*, 1: 182). Advertising in 1749 drew further attention to ambitions of this kind: "It is hoped, that our language will be more fixed, and better established when the publick is favoured with a new dictionary, undertaken with that view," the *Gentleman's Magazine* announced.[3]

Johnson's *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* (printed in 1747 and dedicated to Lord Chesterfield) expressed similar attitudes. Earlier lexicography was subject to critical review. "The title which I prefix to my work has long conveyed a very miscellaneous idea," Johnson stated: "they that take a dictionary into their hands have been accustomed to expect from it, a solution of almost every difficulty" (*EL*, 30). Instead, a detailed focus on documenting words rather than things, alongside core elements of prescriptive rhetoric, took precedence. "My idea of an English dictionary," Johnson notes toward the end of the *Plan*, is one "by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated; by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained, and its duration lengthened" (*EL*, 57). That the *Plan* was itself an advertisement, reissued as publication of the *Dictionary* approached, is a further strand in the prescriptive positioning of Johnson's text.

[2] [Robert Dodsley], "Review of *The Plan* of a DICTIONARY of the EL," *The Museum: Or, the Literary and Historical Register*, 3 (1747): 385–90.
[3] [Dodsley], "Review."

Johnson's original "idea of a dictionary" had, however, been somewhat different. Modern scholars of Johnson are fortunate in the number of working documents for Johnson's *Dictionary* that remain extant. One of these is a manuscript "Fair Copy" – an antecedent version of the *Plan*, written by an amanuensis and replete with annotations in various hands. It offers not only an illuminating account of Johnson's early thinking on what a record of English might be but an explicit consideration of the challenges that linguistic control presents. As Johnson admits, stasis – and the kind of linguistic certainty advocated by popular prescriptivism – is a tantalizing prospect. "Desires" of this kind readily conceive a state in which the "fundamental atoms of our speech might obtain the firmness and immutability of constituent particles" such that words might "remain essentially the same" (*EL*, 461–62).

Even so, certain reservations are already clear. Such "Desires," as Johnson notes, are also "Phantoms" – the products of "Imagination," alluring but ultimately insubstantial. In the "Fair Copy," their opposition to what he terms the "shackles of Lexicography" is made overt (*EL*, 461). Johnson, in this early draft, contemplates two irreconcilable trajectories while delineating what is, in essence, a fundamental crux in practical lexicography. If the "Phantoms of Desire" are pursued, this is, critically, at the expense of the "shackles of Lexicography" that bind the dictionary-maker to his craft, and the discipline that this requires.

Exploratory thinking of this kind, long before the final text of the *Dictionary* took shape, presents an interesting challenge to familiar narratives by which Johnson, seen as originally prescriptive in aims and thinking, acquires descriptive wisdom from his experience of practical lexicography such that, by 1755, fixity as aspiration is overtly shed. Instead, across his work on the *Dictionary*, we can detect marked continuities in his thinking about language and the problematic nature of linguistic control. In his "Preface" to the completed *Dictionary*, for example, Johnson's metaphors reprise those of the "Fair Copy." As the "slave of science," the dictionary-maker is shackled once more, committed to the pursuit of knowledge about words and meaning in which fancy plays no part (*EL*, 73). Meanwhile, the "Phantoms of Desire" take the form of the "elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years" (*EL*, 105) – a prospect that meets marked skepticism on Johnson's part. Its linguistic counterparts fare no better:

> with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases

> from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, and clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affectation. (*EL*, 105)

Johnson's "Phantoms of Desire" might now exist in a canceled passage in the "Fair Copy," but their salience across his work is clear.

The *Plan* can seem outwardly prescriptive. As Reddick notes, in the transitions between "Fair Copy" and published text, the normative agenda is clearly sharpened.[4] Contributions by Chesterfield himself, as well as other critical readers, were incorporated in ways that steered Johnson toward the ambitions with which the project began. An originally expressed tolerance for the current state of spelling ("settled with such propriety that it may be generally received") disappears, for example, in response to Chesterfield's criticism and the need for greater regulation (*EL*, 385). Other annotations (in an unknown hand) urge the need to "brand with some mark of reprobation" variations in sound or form (*EL*, 436). Even so, the echoes of the "Fair Copy" are not entirely displaced. "Who upon this survey can forbear to wish, that these fundamental atoms of our speech might obtain the firmness and immutability of the primogenial and constituent particles of matter," Johnson declares. But, as he adds, wishes, however widespread, cannot always be granted:

> This is a privilege which words are scarcely to expect; for, like their author, when they are not gaining strength, they are generally losing it. Though art may sometimes prolong their duration, it will rarely give them perpetuity, and their changes will be almost always informing us, that language is the work of man, of a being from whom permanence and stability cannot be derived. (*EL*, 44)

Johnson both advances and undercuts the fixity that popular language attitudes desired.

The real matter of the *Dictionary* lies, of course, within the entries themselves and the evidence they contain. Here, too, surviving archival materials are illuminating. While the French Academy had adopted the authoritarian "on dit" ("one says") in specifying recommended norms, Johnson embarked on what he described as a series of "excursions into books" (*EL*, 84). Armed with black-lead pencil, he marked out words and meanings in use, underlining potential headwords and carefully

[4] Allen Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary, 1746–1773* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 18.

demarcating the textual boundaries of citations that might be used in documenting particular words or senses. The fourteen marked-up texts that survive are testimony to the industry required by practical dictionary-making in Johnson's hands. While his reading is piecemeal – some pages are densely annotated, others pristine – his chosen methodology reflects a determination to engage in primary research rather than relying on work done by his lexicographical predecessors. Earlier dictionaries were consulted but, Johnson points out, their "deficiency" in collecting evidence was "immediately apparent" (*EL*, 84). Their inclusion of words for which he could find no supporting use raised critical apprehensions. The label "*Dict*.," subjoined to words such as *omniferous* ("all-bearing") or *pedaneous* ("going on foot") served to remind readers of the limits of lexicographical authority. "Of these I am not always certain that they are seen in any book but the works of lexicographers," he wrote (*EL*, 87). Words might exist in the dictionary – but this did not guarantee their existence in the realities of use.

"To attain *clear* and *distinct* Ideas of what we read or hear, we must search the *Sense of Words* . . . We must consider in what Sense the same Author uses any particular Word or Phrase," Isaac Watts advised in his *Logick: or, The Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry after Truth*. The eighth edition, published in 1745 and preserved in the British Library, is one of Johnson's surviving marked-up texts.[5] As Johnson's in-text annotations confirm, Watts's words were taken to the letter, yielding citations, for example, for *delusive* ("one great part of the *Design of Logick* is to guard us against the delusive Influences of our meaner Powers, to cure the Mistakes of immature Judgment"), or *judgement* ("Judgement is that Operation of the Mind, whereby we join two or more Ideas together by some Affirmation or negation"), or *speaker* ("In Conversation or Reading be diligent to find out the true sense or distinct Idea, which the Speaker or Writer affixes to his Words"), as well as evidence for phrasal structures such as *strip off* or *take off*, or the pragmatic familiarities of *pencil*. *Dictionary*, too, in the finished text of 1755, is documented courtesy of Watts, as part of Johnson's lexical and semantic anatomization of his work. "An army, or a parliament, is a collection of men; a *dictionary*, or nomenclature, is a collection of words," an illustrative citation affirmed. Johnson's model of an authoritative dictionary, as his annotations indicate, was a literally collective process, founded on the creation of an extensive citation file and

[5] Isaac Watts, *Logick: or, The Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry after Truth* (London: T. Longman, 1745).

the scrutiny of words in use. Some 114,000 citations appear in the print text of 1755. As the surviving marked-up texts confirm, Johnson in fact gathered far more.

Johnson, in the *Plan*, stressed his commitment to the eighteen canonical writers originally suggested as source-texts by Alexander Pope (*EL*, 55). Nevertheless, as his reading of the dissenting preacher Isaac Watts's works suggests, the realities of dictionary-making involved documentary practices that ranged far outside this selective grouping. Johnson's "excursions into books" were, he confirms, both "fortuitous and unguided," while the "feasts of literature" originally envisaged were displaced by the pragmatic necessities of locating evidence (*EL*, 84, 100). "Words," he reminded his readers in 1755, "must be sought where they are used; and in what pages, eminent for purity, can terms of manufacture or agriculture be found?" (*EL*, 94). The *Dictionary* as text is indeed replete with citations from canonical writers such as Shakespeare, Dryden, and Pope, but, within individual entries, Milton can find himself located next to William Hale, a writer by no means commended for the excellence of his prose (but attentively read by Johnson), while Walter Raleigh (firmly excluded by Pope) is used some 700 times in 1755 as under *diet*, *gluttonous*, *facility*, and *harpy*, among others. Other writers on Pope's list who gained merely qualified approval as "authorities for familiar dialogue" – such as Vanbrugh, Congreve, and Ben Jonson – secured extensive representation. So, however, did writers such as the physician John Arbuthnot, and John Mortimer, a well-established writer on agriculture and husbandry, or the Royalist surgeon Richard Wiseman, or the cleric William Holder, whose work on language was used, for example, under *language*, *labiodental*, alongside his *Discourse Concerning Time* (see, e.g., *decade*, *fathom*, or *noctidial* ["Comprising a night and a day"]). Evident, too, is Johnson's attentive observation of modern novelists such as Defoe, Richardson, or Swift (in particular *Gulliver's Travels*), alongside women writers such as Jane Collier, Anne Morton, Charlotte Lennox, or Margaret Cavendish in domains of evidence certainly never contemplated by Pope. At least traditionally, women, as in Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall* (1604) or Thomas Blount's *Glossographia* (1656), were deemed the recipients of lexicographical authority rather than writers by whom usage might be exemplified and derived. Johnson's female citations might be relatively few (see, e.g., *just* [sense 10], *perish*, *marital*, *prink*, *starry*, *unravel*, *uncle*), but they represent, even so, a significant shift in both practice and visibility.

While the *Dictionary* is, for many critics, hallmarked by its use of "great writers," Johnson's interest in their ordinary use, traced across the private

communications of Swift and Pope, John Donne, the writer Richard Steele, the physician John Arbuthnot, or the cleric Thomas Pierce (among many others), cannot pass unremarked. "A great beauty of letters does often *consist* in little passages of private conversation, and references to particular matters," a letter from the poet and politician William Walsh affirms, for example (used in illustrating sense 3 of *consist* [v.]). Johnson's entry for *letter* is appropriately accompanied by an extract from a missive from Swift in 1728 ("Mrs. P. B. has writ to me, and is one of the best *letter* writers I know; very good sense, civility, and friendship, without any stiffness or constraint"). Other letters by Swift were appropriated in documenting the colloquial *blab* ("I should have certainly gone about shewing my letters, under the charge of secrecy, to every *blab* of my acquaintance"), while the letters of the writer and critic John Dennis (1657–1734) pithily document *gambado*, glossed as "boots worn upon the legs above the shoe" ("The pettifogger ambles to her in his gambadoes once a week"), or *leash* ("Thou art a living comedy; they are a *leash* of dull devils") or, say, *unbacked* in the sense "untamed" ("They flinch like *unback'd* fillies") as well as *bawdy-house*. Pope's own letters – commended by Johnson for their "epistolary excellence" (*Lives*, 3: 1122) – presented a plentiful source of evidence. Relevant citations are marked by their idiomatic vigor: "You'll say the whole world has something to do, *something* to talk of, *something* to wish for, and something to be employed about; but pray put all these somethings together, and what is the sum total but just nothing" (s.v. *something*); "I am satisfied to trifle away my time, rather than let it *stick* by me" (s.v. *stick*). Similar is *scrap*, attested by an extract from a letter to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu during her stay in Constantinople ("I can never have too many of your letters: I am angry at every *scrap* of paper lost"). Letters, writes Cusack, are "substitute speech."[6] Material of this kind, in lexicography and language history, remains highly valuable.

Words, for Johnson, were not merely atomistic units even if their alphabetical organization in a dictionary might foster impressions of this kind. Instead, context and register – how and where words are used – contribute decisively to the polysemies he strove to record. "Being arbitrary," he later wrote in his *Life of Cowley*, words "must owe their power to association, and have the influence, and that only, which custom has given them" (*Lives*, 1: 76). Formal specifications of register – the situational

[6] Bridget Cusack, *Everyday English 1500–1700: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 190.

diversities of use – are, for example, apparent across many entries. An *annulet* is used "in architecture" and *remission* "in physick" when signifying the point "when a distemper abates"; meanwhile, *peccant*, meaning "injurious to health," is "chiefly used in medical writers"; *brace*, meaning "A crooked line inclosing a passage, which ought to be taken together," is used "in printing"; while *degradation* gains specific meanings "in painting" ("A term made use of to express the lessening and rendering confused the appearance of distant objects"). Tone demanded similar consideration. Denotatively, a word such as *stargazer* might be synonymous with *astrologer* or *astronomer*. Connotatively, it was, Johnson noted, freighted with "contempt" in ways that underpinned both usage and meaning. Similar is, say, the metalanguage of age. A *graybeard* might be glossed as "old man," but "contempt" is integral to its use.

At the other end of the scale were, say, the "low" and "ludicrous." What is deemed "ludicrous" might, to modern ears, sound pejorative. "Burlesque; merry; sportive; exciting laughter," Johnson conversely explains. His labels offer a form of pragmatic marking. The ludic pertained to verbal play and humor such that *devil* is "a ludicrous term for mischief" ("A war of profit mitigates the evil; / But to be tax'd, and beaten, is the *devil*," states a supporting citation from the poet and playwright George Granville). *Deadly* likewise gains an incongruous playfulness. "It is sometimes used in a ludicrous sense, only to enforce the signification of a word," Johnson comments, using a quotation from Roger Boyle in illustration ("Mettled schoolboys set to cuff, / Will not confess that they have done enough, / Though *deadly* weary"). "Low" and "cant," in similar ways, referred to slang and the vigorously colloquial, as in *flapdragon* ("to swallow") or *lace* meaning "sugar." As Johnson's comments clarify under *bamboozle* (v.), the word is robustly familiar, inappropriate for formal occasions ("a cant word not used in pure or grave writings"). Cant has, in other respects, its own polysemies, referring, for example, to the in-house slang of various activities as a further aspect of register (*dawk* is a "cant word among workmen"). Johnson's evidence was testimony to a spectrum of styles, vividly exhibiting the diversity with which English could be used.

Associative meanings of this kind widely reflected Johnson's interest in what he defines as "applied" use. He might, for instance, initially explain *absurdity* (n.) as "The quality of being absurd." But, he continues, the nature of such absurdity varies depending on the context such that it signifies "want of judgment" when "applied to men" but "want of propriety" when "applied to things." Across the *Dictionary*, he teases out these

prosodies of use. As he observes, *anguish*, in general, means "excessive pain either of mind or body," but "applied to the mind, it means the pain of sorrow, and is seldom used to signify other passions." In similar ways, *haul* (v.) gains a general definition of "To pull; to draw," even if Johnson immediately points out its inadequacy; "applied to things, [it] implies violence" but when applied "to persons," associative meanings instead incline to "aukwardness or rudeness." Six illustrative citations enabled readers to examine these patterns for themselves. As Johnson confirmed, "those quotations which to careless or unskilful perusers appear only to repeat the same sense, will often exhibit, to a more accurate examiner, diversities of signification . . . different shades of the same meaning" such that "one will shew the word applied to persons, another to things; one will express an ill, another a good, and a third a neutral sense" (*EL*, 97).

Earlier dictionaries had exhibited relatively little sense-differentiation. Nathan Bailey, in his *Universal Etymological Dictionary* (1721),[7] had, for example, defined *clear* (adj.) in a single line of text as "fair, fine, pure." Johnson's corresponding entry spanned seventeen separate sense divisions, actively drawing on evidence from the citation file he had assembled. He carefully disambiguated the adjectival clustering on which Bailey relied. Johnson's sense 2 hence focuses on *clear* in the sense "Free from clouds; serene, as a *clear* day." The state of being "Without mixture; pure; unmingled" is detailed in sense 3. Other sense divisions turned to *clear* as signifying that which is "perspicuous; not obscure; not hard to be understood" (illustrated by citations from Temple and Locke), or its use in referring to that which is "indisputable; evident" and hence "undeniable" (exampled by Milton's *Paradise Lost*), or, in sense 10, *to clear*, meaning "free from deductions or incumbrances" – a sense illustrated from Johnson's reading of Locke, Swift, and Jeremy Collier. He probes, too, the ways in which, when used with *from*, it signifies "free, guiltless," or, when used in conversation, and with reference to individual people, it means "distinguishing" and "judicious." Spoken as well as written uses can, as here, attract attention.

In this interest in multiple patterns of signification, Johnson's model of ascertainment moved away from the ambitions of rigid fixity and stasis with which the dictionary project began. What is "sometimes" used is a property of many entries. Variation can be conspicuous, whether of co-existing spellings (*jail*/*gaol*, *frenetick*/*phrenetick*, *risk*/*risque*; *screen*/*skreen*) or

[7] Nathan Bailey, *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (London: E. Bell, J. Darby, A. Bettesworth, et al., 1721).

specifications of sound. "Our authors write almost indiscriminately *embassador* or *ambassador*, *embassage* or *ambassage*," he noted under *embassy*; "This word, with many others of the same termination, are indifferently written with *ance* or *ence*, *ancy* or *ency*," his entry for *dependency* observes. An interest in *acceptance* ("the meaning of a word as it is received or understood") or what he termed *acceptation* ("The meaning of a word, as it is commonly received") was part of this. As Johnson explains, it is by "common talk" that "*fowl* is used for the larger, and *bird* for the smaller kind of feathered animals" (s.v. *bird*). Other communalities underpin the difference, say, between *forge* and *smithy* such that, in "common language," "we use *forge* for large work, and *smithy* for small" while, as under *fair* (adj.), gendered prosodies meant that "*fair* seems in the common acceptation to be restrained, when applied to women, to the beauty of the face." If, as under *buffoonery*, we are told that "*Dryden* places the accent, improperly, on the first syllable," the normative judgment derives from the norms of "common speech," just as an *admirer* is, in "common speech," deemed delicately euphemistic for "a lover." What is "common" is usual and widespread. Johnson's *Dictionary* is often seen in relation to the exceptional and difficult, as in words such as *depascent* ("feeding greedily") and *traducible* ("Such as may be derived"), or his decision to define *poultice* (n.) as "a cataplasm; a soft mollifying application" (or *nose* as "The prominence on the face ... the organ of scent and the emunctory of the brain"). However, as his iterated interest in what "we say" affirms ("we say, *girded* for the battle" (s.v. *brace*); "We say, properly, the *shore* of the *sea*, and the *banks* of a *river*, *brook*, or small water" (s.v. *bank* (n.), sense 1), it is also rooted in the familiar and the shared practices that define a language and its use. Johnson's entries also include *cheesevat* and *poulterer*, *brick-dust*, *gingerbread*, and *apple-tart*. *Stewpan* ("A pan used for stewing") is added in the fourth edition.

That words such as *quietude* ("rest; repose") were "not in common use" is equally important. The tensions of a language that, as the Preface affirms, is always "budding" and "falling away" even as dictionaries "hasten to publication" (*EL*, 110), often claim attention. "Disused" or "antiquated" words and senses – no longer common but preserved in earlier texts – attract careful elucidation. *Gloom* as verb, however eloquent it might have been ("to shine obscurely, as the twilight," Johnson notes), is "not now in use." *Ope* for *open* is likewise "scarcely used but by old authors"; *wrack* is fading into obsolescence ("the later writers of prose commonly [use] *wreck*"). Johnson's interests in temporality, and the dictionary as a form of historical narrative, underpin other aspects of his exploratory thinking.

Other forms of restricted currency attract comment, too. The standard variety – delocalized in use – is at the heart of his text. But localized uses such as *cibol* (described as "a small sort of onion used in sallads" and "common in the Scotch dialect") or *laird* (defined as "The lord of a manor in the Scottish dialect") attract careful observation. Similar is Johnson's account of *mortal* as used "in the middle counties" where, he states, it functions as "a particle of amplification; as, 'mortal tall,' 'mortal little,'" or of *deemster*, explained as "yet in use" in Jersey and the Isle of Man (in preference to standard English *judge*). Differences of this kind confirmed other aspects of the arbitrariness of the sign and the play of convention in space and place.

Literary texts could present more troubling instances of restricted currency. Shakespeare, for example, might be one of Johnson's most cited sources. But citation does not always mean endorsement. Usage can be anomalous. Johnson can hence direct attention to uses that require explication, but which are by no means representative. *Dear* "seems to be sometimes used in Shakespeare for . . . sad; hateful; grievous," he notes, separating this from the core meanings anatomized under this entry. "In *Shakespeare* it seems once to signify *abhor*," he stated under *despise* (v.), providing evidence accordingly. Lexical and semantic outliers, they are included when Johnson judges it useful or necessary. As under *model* (n.), senses 5 and 6, they are "unexampled uses" – forms for which evidence, here in Shakespeare, can be found, but which are not, to Johnson's knowledge, "exampled" elsewhere. These might be defined, at least conjecturally ("Something formed or produced"; "something small and diminutive"), but "common acceptation" is different and must take precedence.

Even so, the limits of literary innovation can, at times, prompt a conspicuous lapse in neutrality. "Freshness; coolness. A word foolishly innovated by Dryden," Johnson states under *fraischeur* (n.), defined as "freshness." *Falsify*, used (again by Dryden) in the sense "to pierce, to run through" (on the basis of Italian *falsere*), is similar. Johnson provides Dryden's justification and defense: "Why am I forbidden to borrow from the *Italian*, a polish'd language, the word which is wanting in my Native Tongue?" he had stressed: "I used the word *falsify*, in this place, to mean that the shield of Turnus was not of proof against the spears and javelins of the Trojans, which had pierced it through." Johnson remained unconvinced. "*Dryden*, with all this effort, was not able to naturalise the new signification, which I have never seen copied, except once by some obscure nameless writer, and which indeed deserves not to be received," he declared

under this entry. Dryden's use of *perfectionate* (another "word proposed by *Dryden*, but not received"), *renounce* in the French-derived sense of "to declare renunciation," or *rapport* (given as introduced by Sir William Temple but "not copied by others") provide other examples. As Johnson indicates, assimilation – and the communality of use – was key. In ways that also impact on the dictionary enterprise more widely, individuals, as Johnson stresses, cannot change language on their own.

These liminal territories were, however, undoubtedly difficult to negotiate. Like *gout* in the sense "taste," many forms of this kind were fashionable and elite code-switches – and dismissed by Johnson as part of "affected cant [i.e., slang] use." As in Dryden's *fraicheur*, "Frenchness" could be precisely the point. Words of this kind were indeed on the borders of discourse. Spatial metaphors by which forms such as *finesse* are depicted as "creeping into the language" can suggest a form of surreptitious invasion. *Finesse*, another loan from French, is "unnecessary," Johnson declares, even as his present progressive ("is creeping") verifies the fact of change. The critical reception accorded to non-native uses of this kind clearly contributes to other well-established stereotypes in which patriotic lexicography in Johnson's hands not only aimed to reclaim the "palm of philology" from the "nations of the continent" (*EL*, 109) but to protect English from the unwarranted incursion of foreign forms. "Preserving the purity" of English was, as we have seen, an early aspect of Johnson's thinking (*EL*, 379). This might, he admitted, "seem to require nothing more than that our language be considered so far as it is our own" (*EL*, 29). Nevertheless, here, too, reality was more complex. To exclude all "foreign words" would, he pointed out, produce a work "little regarded, except by critics, or those who aspire to criticism" (*EL*, 30).

Instead, in the metaphors of citizenship he adopts, some words are "denizens" and, irrespective of etymology, indistinguishable by "common" use from the original inhabitants of the native tongue. Spanish *chocolate* and *renegade*, *peccadillo* and *matadore* ("A hand of cards so called from its efficacy against the adverse player") are recorded with impartial hospitality, alongside, say, *devise* and *devotee* (from French), *broccoli* and *magnifico* (from Italian), and *ogle* from Dutch. Others, however, remain as "aliens" – "auxiliaries" rather than "subjects" in the state of language (*EL*, 31). Conceptions of this kind underpin what Johnson variously describes as *Latinisms* ("A Latin idiom; a mode of speech peculiar to the Latin") or *Gallicisms* ("A mode of speech peculiar to the French language: such as, he *figured* in controversy; he *held* this conduct; he *held* the same language that another had held before"), just as an *Anglicism* is "A form of speech peculiar

to the EL; an English idiom." Comments such as "merely French," as under *delices* ("pleasures"), or "scarce English" under French-derived *trait*, might therefore seem to possess proscriptive force. But, as accompanying evidence suggested, considerations of usage often intervene. "Neither this word, nor *adroit*, seem yet completely naturalized into English," Johnson notes, for example, under *adroitness*, providing evidence from Charles Jervas's translation of *Don Quixote* (posthumously published in 1746). His insertion of "yet," however, deftly reminds of the possibility of change and the ongoing negotiations that must take place between words and use.

Even so, descriptive and prescriptive can, at times, present a complex interface in which subjectivities (of reception, or acceptability, or grammaticality) can be superimposed on the objectivities of evidence so carefully assembled. Loanwords such as *ruse* ("A French word neither elegant nor necessary") were, for Johnson, seen as both redundant and undesirable. Idioms such as *to make bold* or *spick and span* elicit resistance. "This word I should not have expected to have found authorised by a polite writer," he writes of the latter. To make bold is "not grammatical" (if "common"), Johnson declares; "To *be bold* is better," as in "I was bold to speak." *Would* in the sense "wish" likewise "ought not to be imitated" even if "used in good authors." Seen quantitatively, Johnson's own prescriptive comments are relatively limited. The "Phantoms of Desire" might, as we have seen, formally have been elided. But, as here, their legacy can remain, influencing Johnson's sense of the language and the boundaries it ought, preferentially, to observe.

Johnson's role as lexicographer can, as such, remain conflicted in ways that contribute to the conflicts of interpretation with which we began. The 1755 Preface (in reality, the final part of the *Dictionary* to be composed) nevertheless reflects his wider conclusions, both on the inevitability of linguistic change and the innovations it brings, as well as the fallibilities by which the dictionary-maker is constituted as a border-guard, repelling intruders or impeding words that might, for various reasons, be departing. Discourses of power again intervene. So do Johnson's metaphors of slavery and submission, alongside a firm reminder of the distance between what is, in language, achievable and what merely desired:

> With this hope, however, academies have been instituted, to guard the avenues of their languages, to retain fugitives, and repulse intruders; but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been vain; sounds are too volatile and subtile for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength. (*EL*, 105)

Johnson's critical engagement with his own discipline, and its imperfection, remains an arresting aspect of his work. While his *Dictionary*, in important ways, reflects his dedicated acts of reading, it is characterized, too, by the honesty with which human desire, linguistic pragmatism, and the real demands of lexicography are both confronted and deftly anatomized.