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The Problem of Joseph Priestley's Descriptivism

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<u>Introduction</u>

Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) was remarkable for making significant contributions to a large number of very different intellectual fields, even allowing for the fact that he was working in an age when disciplinary boundaries were much less fixed than they are at present. He was a dissenting minister who wrote numerous pamphlets on important theological issues. Between 1761 and 1767 he taught at Warrington Academy, and he retained a lifelong interest in pedagogy, publishing a number of works on the subjects.[1] In 1766 he was made a fellow of the Royal Society for his work on electricity, and in 1774 became the first person to isolate 'dephlogisticated air', later renamed oxygen by Lavoisier. Between 1773 and 1780 he was librarian and companion to the later Prime Minister Lord Shelburne (1782-1783), and he mixed with many of the leading political figures of his day, including Edmund Burke and Benjamin Franklin. He contributed influential political tracts to the debates surrounding both the American and French Revolutions, eventually emigrating to America because his support for the French Revolution had made him a target for political persecution in England.

It was during his years as a teacher that he published Rudiments of English Grammar (first edition 1761, second substantially revised edition 1768). Taken together with two other linguistic texts written during this period, A Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language, and Universal Grammar (printed for private use in 1762 but not published during Priestley's lifetime)[2] and A Course of Lectures on Oratory and

Criticism (written in 1762 although not published until 1777), Rudiments has often been interpreted as demonstrating that Priestley took a descriptive approach towards the study of language at a time when most of his contemporaries adopted much more prescriptive approaches. This article argues that such a characterisation of both Priestley's work and that of his contemporaries is fundamentally misleading, and that important aspects of Priestley's work have been overlooked because they do not fit comfortably with this schematic "prescriptivist versus descriptivist" account. In the first section, I review the way in which eighteenth-century language study has been described, and argue that such descriptions often tell us more about how modern linguistics chooses to define itself than about the eighteenth-century field of investigation. In the second section I focus on the way in which Priestley has frequently been posited as an important exception to the tide of prescription, but note that a few scholars have categorised him among the prescriptivists, and that it is possible to find quotations within his work to support either view. In the third section I argue that Priestley's apparently self-contradictory views become coherent once the idea of linguistic perfectibility is recognised as central to his linguistic theories, and I compare his views of language change to those of both Jonathan Swift and William Godwin. In the fourth section I note that, contrary to the tendency to see eighteenth-century language studies as a prescriptive monolith, all writers on language during this period drew upon a range of different materials, and that it is possible to find competing purposes and traditions even within individual grammars. In the fifth and final section, I explore the two editions of Priestley's grammar in more detail, and argue that they reveal a writer who was deeply engaged both with the important linguistic issues of his day, and with the pedagogical practice of communicating useful knowledge to students. In conclusion, I argue that Priestley's linguistic

writings become much more coherent, and even more interesting, when they are read within their historical context, rather than being analysed simply to prove whether he did or did not prefigure modern descriptive linguistics.

Prescriptivism versus Descriptivism

Eighteenth-century linguistic thought has often been depicted as a battle between the dark forces of prescriptivism and the enlightened forces of descriptivism, with prescriptivism easily dominating the field. S.A. Leonard was particularly influential in establishing this characterisation.[3] In the first chapter of The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage (first published 1929, reprinted 1962) he writes that:

> In dealing with problems of language, one of two basic and contrary principles is generally adhered to; in the eighteenth century the two are clearly differentiated. The one assumes the power of reason to remold language completely, and appeals to various principles of metaphysics or logic, or even makes pronouncements on mere individual preference posing as authority, in the endeavour to "correct, improve, and fix" usage. The other, while admitting the usefulness of purism in recommending what may be regarded as improvements, recognizes language – even cultivated language – as a vastly complicated and often haphazard growth of habits stubbornly rooted [...] Adherents of this second principle are primarily interested in studying the facts of usage [...] (1962: 13)

Leonard's semantic choices reveal where his own sympathies lie: on the one side there are those who give authority to "mere individual preference", on the other there are those who "recognize" the real nature of language, and attempt to study the "facts". A few sentences later, Leonard writes reprovingly that "a sufficient basis for beginning a scientific study of English on this second principle was actually available to eighteenth-century scholars", and points to a range of material that should, in his opinion, have provided sound starting points for eighteenth-century linguistic work:

> Quite perspicuous statements that usage is the "sole arbiter and norm of speech," in the classical writers and later, were generally known and indeed often quoted. Moreover, the philosophy of John Locke furnished an ample reinforcement of this fundamental principle. And grammars of Anglo-Saxon and texts in this and other Germanic languages were already available. 1962:13)

But, Leonard writes, scholars were held back by political conservatism and ignorance:

> But the eighteenth-century grammarians and rhetoricians were mainly clergymen, retired gentlemen, and amateur philosophers like the elder Shandy, with an immense distaste for Locke's dangerous and subversive doctrines. Though more or less conversant with classical texts, they had little or no conception of the history and relations of the classical or other languages, and of course no equipment for carrying on linguistic research or even for making valid observations of contemporary usage. (1962: 13-14)

Leonard's account of the study of language in the eighteenth century is thus a heavily Whiggish one, in which the discovery of proper "linguistic research" was inevitable, but sadly delayed by the prejudices of its Locke-fearing would-be practitioners.

Leonard's account needs to be understood within its historical and intellectual context. Saussure's Course on General Linguistics was published just thirteen years before it, arguing for a descriptive and synchronic approach to the study of language. The first chapter of the Course begins with a brief account of the history of Linguistics, which can be summarised as follows: the Greeks initiated the study of "grammar"; in the late eighteenth century the philological movement was developed by Freidrich August Wolf, and in 1816 Franz Bopp developed a comparative linguistic approach; this paved the way for the emergence of a fully scientific study of language at the end of the nineteenth century (1974: 1-5). Saussure thus finds that the genesis of twentieth-century linguistics lies in the rejection of eighteenth-century grammar, and he states dismissively that traditional grammar "lacked a scientific

approach and was detached from language itself. Its only aim was to give rules for distinguishing between correct and incorrect forms; it was a normative discipline, far removed from actual observation, and its scope was limited." (1974: 1) Saussure's definition of "grammar" as intellectually limiting and politically conservative serves to define the modern scientific study of language in contradistinction as intellectually expansive and politically liberal. In The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage, Leonard elaborates upon Saussure's account, reading eighteenth-century grammar through the lens of the emerging discipline of structural linguistics, and finding in it everything that modern linguistics is not.

As a number of linguists have pointed out in recent years, however, the distinction between prescriptivism and descriptivism within contemporary linguistics is not as clear cut as Saussure and Leonard suggest. While modern linguists may aim at pure description, they find it almost impossible to avoid prescription in practice. Talbot Taylor, for example, argues that purportedly descriptive statements, such as OED word definitions, "are not descriptions of facts, but rather citations of norms" and that presenting them as descriptive "amounts only to a deceptive way of attempting to enforce their normative authority". (1990: 24-25) Deborah Cameron notes that the prestige of "science" itself makes it difficult to maintain a strict boundary between description and prescription: "Because science itself has authority in modern society, while at the same time the discourse of value remains a highly salient one for everyday talk about language, the absolute distinction between observing norms and enforcing them cannot be maintained in practice." (1995: 8) Edward Finegan makes the point that description is much easier in some contexts than in others: "pure description of language use is a recent and more abstruse enterprise than prescription,

and it is carried out by and for scholars typically treating languages remote from their own and often lacking traditions of literacy" (1998: 545) In the face of these arguments, Leonard's claim that the two approaches to language were "clearly differentiated" in the eighteenth century begins to look rather questionable.

Indeed, detailed engagements with the texts and contexts of eighteenth-century grammars by a number of scholars have shown that many of Leonard's claims about eighteenth-century grammar writing are fundamentally flawed, not least his assumption that it was conducted by "mainly clergymen, retired gentlemen, and amateur philosophers". For example, Carol Percy shows that a significant minority of grammarians of the period were in fact female (1994).   Maria Rodriguez-Gil's detailed study of Ann Fisher describes a pedagogically informed and commercially astute writer, whose gender is perhaps the least significant of the many ways she differs from Leonard's characterisation of the typical grammarian (2002). Joan Beal's work on Thomas Spence's 1775 Grand Repository of the English Language explores the relationship between Spence's profound political radicalism and his writing of a pronouncing dictionary, showing that the two were far from being mutually contradictory (1999). Carey McIntosh summarises the situation as follows: "the immense task of bringing the English language into the domain of consciousness was shared by all kinds of writers in many different genres" (1998: 178).

Despite the fact that Leonard's account does not hold up to scrutiny, it has proved to be remarkably enduring. As long ago as 1964, Redding S. Sugg Jr began an article:

> The oversimplification incident to the revision of tradition has produced a cliché which associates "eighteenth–century English grammar" with unenlightened prescriptivism. The notion is abroad that the eighteenth century wrote grammar entirely, as it were, in the imperative mood. The period is accused of having

saddled its posterity with a prescriptive grammar against which contemporary linguistics has had to react in a spirit not unlike that in which the Romantics attacked poetic diction. The purpose of this essay is to reverse the perspective in order to see the complex reality more clearly. (1964: 239)

Writing three years later, Scott Elledge was disappointed to find that Leonard's book ("full of interesting data and false conclusions") had recently been reprinted, because he felt it to be "one of those works whose pre-emption of the field has prevented a second attempt" (1967: 280). Nevertheless he was confident that Sugg's article had "done all that should be necessary to correct the common notion that eighteenth-century grammars were unusually prescriptive and were also the source of the benighted, unscientific concepts of language from which modern linguists have freed us" (1967: 284). Even so, Yusef Azad, writing his PhD thesis on grammar in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries over twenty years after Elledge's article, found that "the 'prescriptive-descriptive' model of eighteenth-century linguistics" continued to dominate the field, and argued that it was "seriously misleading and has frequently produced incorrect interpretation of texts" (1989: 2). Fifteen years later still, Joan Beal observed that it was still the case that in many histories of English "the main or even the only issue discussed in chapters devoted to the eighteenth century is the emergence of prescriptive grammars" (2004: 89). Despite each of these attempts at overturning Leonard's characterisation of eighteenth-century grammar, his book retains its position as the most commonly cited text in the field. For example, even though Edward Finegan is careful to problematise the categoric distinction between descriptivism and prescriptivism in his chapter on "English Grammar and Usage" in CHEL IV, he unreservedly recommends Leonard's book as providing "a detailed account of the eighteenth-century doctrine of correctness" in the further reading section (1998: 587).

The myth of the prescriptive eighteenth century seems to have an ongoing appeal, partly, as has already been argued, because it provides an attractive version of history for modern linguistics, but also, as Sugg suggests, because it fits tidily with another remarkably resilient historical myth: that of the conservative eighteenth century, which was revolutionised only by arrival of the politically radical Romantic movement. These two myths come together in Olivia Smith's The Politics of Language 1791-1819 (1986, first printed 1984), which firmly casts some writers, notably Robert Lowth, Samuel Johnson and James Harris, in the role of villains intent upon creating and sustaining "a hegemony of language" in order to disenfranchise the lower orders, while casting others, such as Thomas Paine, William Hone and John Horne Tooke, in the role of heroic liberators (1986:3). Smith's account is not given much serious weight within the field of the History of Linguistics, but it remains remarkably influential within the disciplines of English Literature and History, and occasionally crosses disciplinary boundaries to re-emerge in linguistic contexts.[4] One of the reasons for the enduring appeal of this version of eighteenth-century linguistic history is because it links the emergence of a scientific study of language with political progress in an uncomplicated way, allying modern linguists with eighteenth-century radicals in opposition to the arbitrary authority of linguistic tyrants, both past and present.

Priestley as Grammatical Abdiel

Within the overarching narrative of eighteenth-century prescriptivism, Joseph Priestley has often been afforded a special role. Leonard, for example, finds that

Priestley was a lone prophet of descriptivist linguistics in the wilderness of mid-eighteenth-century prescriptivism:

> Only one writer, Joseph Priestley, appears to have held to a clear conception of the force of usage, as presented by Horace and Quintilian and by Locke and his followers. His work, marred of course by his lack of training for specifically linguistic research, is, almost alone in the eighteenth century, a precursor of modern study of these problems. It was, however, so remote from the general trend of thought in his time that it was without important influence. (1929: 14)

Here, Priestley functions rather like Abdiel, the angel who withstood Satan's temptations in Milton's Paradise Lost: his ability to choose the "right" side serves to condemn all other grammarians because it proves that their errors were of their own making. Baugh and Cable follow Leonard, finding that Priestley "stands alone in his unwavering loyalty to usage", and comparing him favourably to George Campbell: "whereas Campbell expounded the doctrine of usage with admirable clarity and then violated it, Priestley was almost everywhere faithful to his principles" (1993: 279). Here again, Priestley's steadfastness stands as a rebuke to others (even though some doubt is registered by the fact that he is only "almost everywhere faithful to his principles"). Tony Crowley follows suit, finding Priestley's work to be "[a] notable exception to the prevailing fashion in the study of language" and describing him as adopting "an anti-prescriptive stance" (2003: 108). Indeed, the view that Priestley was the one grammarian to resist prescriptivist doctrines is so well established that Linda Mitchell introduces him as follows: "Joseph Priestley, a descriptivist, believed that language cannot be fixed." (2001: 36). In this instance, Priestley's descriptivism is presented as a self-evident fact, not as something that needs to be argued for or established.

Priestley's most recent biographer, Robert Schofield, has, however, suggested that this kind of account maybe the product of wishful thinking: "[o]ne may reasonably doubt that Priestley's grammatical writings would have achieved so much currency with modern grammarians had he not gone from grammar to science" (1997:101). Certainly this kind of charge seems justifiable in the case of Baugh and Cable who make the case that:

> [Priestley's] voluminous writings on chemistry, natural philosophy, theology, and politics have overshadowed his contributions to the study of language. In this field, however, as in all others, he was independent and original, and in his Rudiments of English Grammar (1761) he repeatedly insisted upon the importance of usage. (1993: 278)

Although Baugh and Cable suggest that Priestley's contributions in other spheres have led to his linguistic work being overlooked, it seems equally possible that the influence runs in the opposite direction: knowing of his reputation in other fields, readers are predisposed to find independence and originality in his writings on language. Indeed, Priestley seems to be almost ideally designed to function as the sole representative of descriptivism in the eighteenth century. As the scientist famous for discovering oxygen, it seems entirely fitting that he should bring the scientific method to bear on language; while as a radical political writer whose house was burnt down by a mob because he supported the French Revolution, it seems appropriate that he should rebel against the arbitrary reign of prescriptivism.

Not everyone has, however, been unanimous in finding Priestly to be a descriptivist. Lynda Mugglestone, for example, writes that:

> While Renaissance debates about the status of English as a language for intellectual expressions exemplify, for instance, the increasing consolidation of one variety alone in the functional roles by which a standard may be determined, but they also, and more pertinently, reveal advances in

accompanying ideologies, whereby this one variety of the language comes to be conceived as the language itself, and as exemplifying its 'best' qualities. Joseph Priestley, scientist, theologian, and grammarian, likewise reveals the operation of exactly these ideas in his eighteenth century conviction that the standard variety emerges not as a result of external circumstance (the prominence of London as capital, the role of the Chancery, Caxton's decision to set up his printing press outside Westminster), but rather as the consequence of some superior merit and inherent value intrinsic to this one variety. (2003: 12)

For anyone accustomed to hearing Priestley revered as the one grammarian who resisted prescriptivist dogma, it is somewhat surprising to find him cited as a leading proponent of the Standard Language Ideology. Olivia Smith similarly finds that Priestley's views were not that dissimilar from those of his contemporaries. She acknowledges his reputation, but chastises him for his distaste for vernacular English

Joseph Priestley, famous as a scientist, educator, philosopher, and radical, criticizes other grammars for their disregard of 'spoken and written' English (p. x). None the less, he was not entirely free of the prevailing disregard of the vernacular language. In his grammar, he condemns 'mere native English' as he calls it, for being incapable of sufficient cadence and sufficient intellectual precision. (1986: 10)

Neither Smith nor Mugglestone are specifically interested in Priestley, and they mention him in passing rather than analysing his views in detail. One reason for their dismissal of Priestley as a serious descriptivist may be because the historical narratives that they develop do not require a mid-eighteenth-century Abdiel figure, and the demotion of Priestley to run-of-the-mill prescriptivist actually simplifies the picture in both cases. Mugglestone explores the rise of Received Pronunciation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and as such is more interested in finding continuities within prescriptivism rather than rebellions against it. Smith is concerned with locating rebellions against prescriptivism, but links these to the political upheavals in Britain which were sparked off by the French Revolution, and so finds her linguistic heroes in later figures such as Paine, Horne Tooke and Hone.

Nevertheless, it is striking that Priestley's writings contain such apparently

contradictory statements, and that it is possible to find quotations that make him

sound like an elitist prescriptivist, as well as quotations that make him sound like an

egalitarian descriptivist. Crowley quotes from Priestley's A Course of Lectures on the

Theory of Language and Universal Grammar in order to support his claim that

Priestley attacked the assumptions behind prescriptivism:

> In modern and living languages, it is absurd to pretend to set up the composition
> of any person or persons whatsoever as the standard of writing, or their
> conversation as the invariable rule of speaking [...] The general prevailing
> custom, where ever it happen to be, can be the only standard for the time it
> prevails. (Priestley 1762: 184, quoted by Crowley 2003: 108)

Here, Priestley appears to anticipate the contemporary linguistic doctrine that no one

form of a language is inherently superior to any other. However, Mugglestone

chooses a passage just four pages earlier in support of her claim that Priestley believes

that a standard language will emerge because of its inherent superiority:

> the best forms of speech, the most commodious for use, and the most agreeable
> to the analogy of the language, will at length establish themselves, and become
> universal, by their superior excellence. (Priestley 1762: 178-179, quoted by
> Mugglestone 2003: 12)

In this extract it seems clear that Priestley does presume that some forms of the

language are qualitatively better than others. This raises serious questions about

Priestley's oft-assumed descriptivism: is it genuine, or simply a product of selective

reading and quotation?

Priestley and Linguistic Perfectibility

John Barrell goes a good way towards resolving Priestley's apparent inconsistencies in the second chapter of his book English Literature in History 1780-1830: an equal, wide survey (1983). Barrell explores eighteenth-century analogies between language and law, focusing in particular on the concept of "common usage". He demonstrates that although to modern readers "common usage" may appear to be an inherently democratic idea, in practice it gained a distinctly conservative force during the eighteenth century, becoming equated with the language of "the polite". Analysing the way in which the concept functions in Priestley's writings, Barrell judiciously makes that point that although Priestley is often championed as "the most convinced advocate of the authority of custom in the decades after Johnson", his endorsement of "common usage" is in practice "much qualified" (1983: 161). Furthermore, he notes that there is an apparent conflict between Priestley's support for "usage" on the one hand, and his support for the "analogy" of the language on the other, or, to put it another way, "between his democratism and his rationalism" (1983: 162). In fact, as Barrell demonstrates, this apparent conflict is not realised in practice because Priestley's defence of usage is predicated upon the inherent rationality of humankind:

> He is a rationalist, whose standard is usage only insofar as it is the usage of the free and rational man, and whose faith in the triumph of the best forms of speech is based on a faith in the progressive realization of a free and rational society, which he no doubt believes – one can imagine Johnson or Burke shuddering at the comparison – will be achieved as society is 'perfected' as a manufacture is, and as the language will be, in response to a 'great demand'. (1983: 163)

Priestley believes that "the best forms of speech" will emerge naturally in a "free and rational society". This means that the apparently contradictory quotations from Priestley's writings cited by Crowley and Mugglestone resolve themselves as part of a coherent concept of language: for Priestley there is simply no contradiction between

believing that some forms of language are better than others, and believing that such forms will establish themselves by common consent without the adjudications of grammarians.

Notwithstanding Barrell's elucidation of Priestley's position, writers have continued to categorise Priestley as either descriptivist or prescriptivist. Indeed, the passages quoted above from Baugh and Cable, Crowley, Mitchell, Smith, and Mugglestone were all published after the publication of Barrell's book.[5] In part their failure to acknowledge Barrell's account of Priestley's linguistic thinking may again be attributed to the enduring appeal of the "prescriptivist versus descriptivist" version of eighteenth-century linguistic history. However, I would argue that it also results from the fact that Barrell himself does not really explore the implications of his findings: he observes Priestley's confidence in linguistic perfectibility, notes that it leads him to adopt a "guarded attitude to custom" (1983: 165), but does not consider what this might mean for our understanding of eighteenth century linguistic history.

In an unpublished doctoral thesis that deserves to be much more widely read, Yusef Azad considers the implications of Priestley's rather more fully. Azad, like Barrell, explores the way in which the concept of common usage functioned during the eighteenth century, but, unlike Barrell, he relates this much more directly to the question of descriptivism versus prescriptivism. He notes, for example, that Horace's dictum "si volet usus, quem penes arbitrium est et ius et norma loquendi" ("if it be the will of common usage, in the power of whose judgment is the law and the standard of language") has often been read by twentieth century linguists as straightforwardly endorsing a descriptive position. These linguists have therefore taken eighteenth-

century linguists to task for invoking Horace's dictum in theory, but failing to respect its force in practice. However, Azad argues that the translation of "usus" as "common usage" is far from straightforward, and that it is simplistic to read Horace's dictum as directly anticipating modern linguistics (1989: 4-5). Crowley makes a similar point about Quintilian when looking for precursors for Priestley:

> [...] Priestley had classical guidance for citing 'usage' as the standard to be followed since Quintilian (one of the most frequently quoted references in eighteenth-century linguistic text books) had likewise done so when he had argued that 'usage however is the surest pilot in speaking, and we should treat language as currency minted with the public stamp' (Quintilian, Book I, v. 72 – vi.4). This apparently concurs with Priestley's anti-prescriptivist stance and yet this concurrence is merely superficial since Quintilian's own linguistic views were prescriptive. [...] Quintilian's exclusion of the 'barbarisms' of the uneducated or the mob and his preference for the language agreed between educated men (as seen in their practice) were generally followed by the eighteenth-century prescriptivists. (2003: 108-9)

Crowley dismisses Quintilian's apparent descriptivism as "superficial" and points to the fact that his underlying prescriptivism was replicated by most eighteenth-century grammarians. Nevertheless, he still treats Priestley as an exception who is able to see past Quintilian's disguised prescriptivism and develop a genuinely descriptivist position. By contrast, Azad convincingly argues that no eighteenth-century writer, including Priestley, understood "common usage" in precisely the same way as twentieth century linguists, and that the opposition between "description" and "prescription" is a false one within the context of the eighteenth century:

> Priestley's concept of usage is not that of modern descriptive linguistics but quite consistent with that of his contemporaries. Moreover, grammarians never advocated a modern view of authoritative usage only to ignore it and 'prescribe' instead. To prescribe correctness was to describe usage [...] the two concepts were inextricably linked in a complex and subtle model of linguistic identity and progress. (1989: 3)

The point Azad is making here is not just that it is always hard to maintain an absolute distinction between description and prescription in practice, but that for eighteenth-century grammarians such a distinction would have been meaningless. Priestley, like other grammarians of the period, is convinced that some forms of language are "better" than others, and he has firm opinions as to what makes a language "better": "[t]he more consistent are its principles, the more it is of a piece with itself, the most commodious it will be for use [...]"(1762: 185). However, Priestley differs from most of his contemporaries in his understanding of how the best possible forms of English are to be established. Whereas a grammarian such as Lowth believes that one of the tasks of the grammarian is to legislate as to the preferable form when there are conflicting forms in use, Priestley believes that the best possible form will establish itself naturally through the processes of time, and all that a grammarian can do over contested issues is to present the available evidence: "to analyze its parts, to show distinctly what are the materials and composition of it, and thereby to make the whole structure perfectly understood." (1762: 181-182). Priestley's linguistic beliefs are contradictory only if we insist upon viewing the relationship between language and politics through contemporary frames, in which a belief in "the best forms of speech" is incompatible with a belief in the validity of "common usage".

Roy Harris, in his brief but interesting introduction to Priestley's Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar, argues that Priestley's linguistic writings reveal someone who was attempting to bring the rigour of scientific

investigation to language, but could not quite shake off his inherited preconceptions in order to do so:

> We see here a stage in the evolution of linguistic thought where, as it were, the possibility of a comparative linguistics is already within sight; and yet there is as yet no notion of erecting comparison into a criterion for the evaluation of linguistic hypotheses
> It would be a mistake to think the explanation lies in Priestley's acceptance of the notion that languages are capable of improvement, and even perfection. (Thus a language which eliminates superfluous marking of plurals in adjectives might be seen to be more 'advanced' than one which is still encumbered with this pointless distinction.) For Priestley's concept of linguistic change is still the old-fashioned one of progressive 'corruption' through ignorance. (1993 x-xi)

Harris briefly alludes to Priestley's idea that languages can improve over time, but denies that it has any real significance. This denial seems superficial, however, given that the idea of the perfectibility of language is so central to Priestley's linguistic thinking.[6] Harris also seems to assume that Priestley should have discovered comparative linguistics and that his failure to do so requires "explanation". Hence, although Harris disagrees with those writers who have insisted that Priestley did anticipate modern linguistic thinking, he does not challenge the terms of the debate: Priestley's work is still evaluated according to modern criteria, and he is accused of being "old-fashioned" because he employs the concepts of his own time rather than drawing on the ideas of the future.

Nevertheless, Harris is right to point out that many of Priestley's ideas are very much within the mainstream of eighteenth-century thinking. For example, Priestley describes the life-cycle of a language as follows:

> The progress of human life in general is from poverty to riches, and from riches to luxury, and ruin: in Architecture structures have always been at first heavy, and inconvenient, then useful and ornamental, and lastly real propriety and magnificence have been lost in superfluous decorations. [...] Stages of a similar

nature may be observed in the progress of all human arts; and language, being liable to the same influences, hath undergone the same changes. Whenever a language hath emerged from its first rough state of nature, and hath acquired a sufficient copia of significant and harmonious terms, arbitrary and whimsical ideas of excellence have been superadded to those which were natural and becoming, till at length the latter have been intirely sacrificed to the former. (1962: 173-4)

A very similar account of the life cycle of languages was offered fifty years earlier by Jonathan Swift in A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue (1712). Both Swift and Priestley find connections between the government of a country and the state of its language. Swift, for example, writes that one of the reasons for the decline of Latin was "the Change of their Government into a Tyranny, which ruined the Study of Eloquence" (1712: 13), and Priestley similarly finds that the "the dissolution of the commonwealth" in Rome initiated the decline of its language, which was completed by "the irruption of the northern barbarians" (1762: 175). However, Priestley ties the improvements made to a language to the political state of the nation much more explicitly than Swift:

The time in which a language arrives at its perfection, it is natural to conjecture, will be when the people that speak it have occasion to make the greatest use of it; which will be when their power and influence abroad, and when arts, sciences and liberty at home are at the greatest height. (1762: 177)

Priestley looks forward and is optimistic that "the English seems to be as near to its meridian as possible" (1762: 284) while Swift looks backwards and argues that English was at its height during the ages of Queen Elizabeth and Charles I, writing that: "From the Civil War to this present Time, I am apt to doubt whether the Corruptions in our Language have not at least equalled the Refinements of it" (1712: 18) Swift believes that English will only be perfected by the creation of an authoritative body of "such Persons, as are generally allowed to be best qualified for such a Work, without any regard to Quality, Party, or Profession" (1712: 29). He sees

no reason to believe that it will happen without intervention, and makes no suggestion that political freedoms will result in linguistic improvements. Priestley argues that the English people will naturally improve their own language if left to their own devices, and he uses the vocabulary of political liberation to describe this process: "the body of a people, who, in this respect, cannot but be free, will certainly assert their liberty in making what innovations they judge to be expedient and useful" (1762: 184). Although Priestley and Swift share a similar model of what language is and how it behaves, the way that they apply that model and the political implications that they draw from it are very different.

It is instructive to compare Priestley's ideas with those of another eighteenth-century radical: William Godwin. Godwin was the author of the radical political treatise An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793), and he is often credited as being the first person to articulate an Anarchist political philosophy. In his 1797 essay "Of English Style", Godwin considers the development of English style, with an aim to establishing when the English language was 'written and spoken in the greatest purity and perfection'. He writes:

> The stream of opinion seems to be unfavourable to the age in which we live. The judgment of Swift and the most eminent writers in the first part of the present century, seems to have been, that the period of queen Elizabeth was the golden age of the English language. Ask the scholars and men of taste of the present day; they will perhaps for the most part give the suffrage to the reign of queen Anne. [...]It may be allowable to suspect the justice of this invective, when it is recollected, how universally the prejudice has spread, in favour of former times and distant ages. (1797: 369)

For a moment it appears that Godwin might be about to reach the modern conclusion that language change is, in Jean Aitchison's words, neither progress nor decay.[7] As an

eighteenth-century political philosopher and firm believer in the perfectibility of the

human race, however, he reaches a rather different conclusion:

> It is pretty generally acknowledged, that science and the improvement of the human mind, are in a progressive state. It has come to be vehemently suspected, that the political maxims and moral conduct of our ancestors, were not altogether so perfect as they have been represented. May it not then happen, that the opinion in favour of their language may prove equally hasty and unfounded?
>
> It is the purpose of this Essay to show, that the English language was never in so high a state of purity and perfection, as in the present reign of king George the third. (1797: 369-70)

Godwin, like Priestley, finds the highest state of English to be that of his own time.

He links political progress to linguistic development very explicitly, writing that:

'"The spirit of philosophy has infused itself into the structure of our sentences" (1797:

474). In order to demonstrate the continued improvement of English, he provides

sample passages from the most famous prose writers from each era, starting from the

Elizabethan age, as represented by Sidney, Shakespeare and Hooker, and finishing

with the age of George the II, as represented by Middleton, Sherlock, Fielding and

Smollet. Each passage is marked with asterisks to indicate where, in Godwin's

opinion, linguistic errors occur. A passage from Addison receives the following

treatment:

> A Man of Honour and Generosity considers *it would be miserable *to himself to *have no Will but that of another, though it were *of the best Person *breathing, and for that Reason *goes on as *fast as he is able to *put his Servants into independent *Livelihoods. (1797: 441)

The sheer profusion of asterisks without any kind of explanation makes it rather

difficult to discern what is being objected to in each case and the Monthly Review

suggested that the asterisks "…may, in some cases, be assuming too much on one

side, and expecting too much on the other" (1797: 300). Nevertheless, Godwin's essay is notable as a very early instance of a writer attempting to illustrate the development of the English Language by offering a series of examples, and providing a commentary upon them.

Godwin's essay has generally received very little critical attention. It is sometimes discussed in passing by Godwin's biographers, such as Don Locke (1980: 126), and receives a brief mention in Olivia Smith's The Politics of Language 1791-1819 (1986: 18), but it has not been studied in depth. In part this is may be due to the fact that it is hard to take such a circular method of investigation seriously: to a modern reader it seems obvious that, if you define the current age as the highest standard which the English Language has yet attained, and then provide a series of texts that illustrate the various stages of the language over the past three hundred years, that those examples will gradually become more and more like the current "high" standard. Furthermore, Godwin's essay does not fit neatly with a version of eighteenth-century linguistic history that pits elitist prescriptivists against egalitarian descriptivists: Godwin's radical credentials are, if anything, even more impeccable than those of Priestley, yet his censorious sprinkling of asterisks makes it very clear that he believes that some forms of the language are better than others.

Nevertheless, the similarities between the linguistic ideas of Godwin and Priestley suggests that neither writer is an anomalous one-off, and that the way in which modern historians conceptualise the link between political ideology and linguistic theory in the eighteenth century needs rethinking. Both Godwin and Priestley reject the idea that the English Language is decaying from a previous high standard, and they offer a new, and politically radical, way of thinking about language change. The

fact that they did not succeed in fully anticipating modern linguistics does not mean that their work should be dismissed as invalid or conservative. In some ways their work could perhaps be seen as an significant step in the development of linguistics, because it marks a point where linguistic commentators were becoming dissatisfied with the contemporary model of linguistic change, even if their response was to try to reverse the terms of the model (so that language change equals progress, not decay), rather than to develop a new model. However, as has been previously argued, evaluating such writers simply on the basis of their contribution to the current state of the subject can be rather reductive (indeed, it has some curious echoes of Godwin presenting examples from the History of English only to show that they gradually become more like present day English). These writers must be understood in their own terms, not graded for their apparent "descriptivism" or "prescriptivism".

Polyphony within the work of Priestley

In this section I will suggest that we need to recognise not only that that the categorisation of individual eighteenth-century writers as "descriptivist" or "prescriptivist" is much less useful than it initially appears, but also that within the work of individual writers there is often evidence of contesting ideas. In a 1996 article that draws upon the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Katie Wales points out that literary guides and grammars are:

> [...] polyphonic repositories of quotations, of attested usages, from speakers and writers in a variety of registers, non-literary and literary. And behind these English grammars are other voices, of classical grammars with Latin usage as a model of "good style" and "correctness" (1996: 208)

Prescriptivist grammars and rhetorical handbooks may aspire to describe a single, monologic ideal of language, but they are themselves fundamentally heteroglossic

texts. This can occur, as Wales suggests, through the incorporation of quotations and attested usages, but it can also occur in more subtle ways. Individual texts often show the influence of multiple different traditions of writing about language, and may rest upon a number of conflicting authorities. Sometimes such patchworks are very obvious. Eleanor Fenn, for example, explicitly presents her *Mother's Grammar* as a digest of other people's material, designed to save time for "those ladies that are engaged in tuition, and consequently have not much leisure to turn over various authors in search of further information upon any subject than is immediately required" (1798: iii). Fenn explains that "sometimes two or three passages are quoted to the same effect" in order to "vary the expression" as well as "corroborating one authority by another" (1798: iv). This sounds like fair pedagogical practice, until examples such as this are encountered:

> The Participle is often an adjective derived of a verb; as, from the verb to love we derive the participles loved and loving. Ash
> The participle is a mere mode of the verb; for it signifies being, doing, or suffering, with the designation of time superadded. Lowth
> The participle is a word partaking at once of the quality of a noun or verb. Johnson
> When a verb is expressed in a form in which it may be joined to a noun, as its quality or accident; partaking thereby of the nature of an adjective, it is called the participle, as, loving, a loving father. Many words are participles when they imply any notion of time; but adjectives when they denote a quality simply without regard to time.
> Fenn 1798: 48

Such a treatment seems unlikely to leave either the child or the mother "who may not have attended to the Subject herself" much the wiser (1798: 3). Is a participle to be understood as a verb, a noun or an adjective? Fenn herself refuses to acknowledge that her citations seem contradictory, preferring instead to meld the definitions together into an unwieldy whole. As a result, the polyphony of voices on which she rests her authority threatens to undermine her whole project.

Priestley himself shows a much stronger awareness of the dangers attendant on incorporating other voices within his writings upon language. In the preface to the first edition of his Rudiments of English Grammar, for example, he writes that:

> It is not denied that use hath been made of other Grammars, and particularly of Mr. Johnson's, in compiling this: But it is apprehended, that there is so much that is properly original, both in the materials and the disposition of them in this, as is more than sufficient to clear a work of such a nature from the charge of plagiarism. (1761: iv)

Many other writers of grammars were considerably less scrupulous, borrowing heavily from other writers, often without acknowledgement. Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade has assessed the question of plagiarism in the grammars of Murray, Johnson and Greenwood and concluded that the accusation of plagiarism is misleading: "They all seem to be acting in good faith; no devious motives appear to have been involved in borrowing the work of their predecessors." (1996: 83). However, Priestley's specific use of the word "plagiarism" suggests that for him at least such borrowing could be viewed as problematic, and he is anxious to claim originality for his work, although the verb 'compiling' simultaneously acknowledges the extent to which his grammar draws upon earlier works.

Within the grammar, Priestley uses few example sentences in comparison to his contemporaries, and all such sentences appear to have been invented by him rather than imported from other texts. In the main text, Priestley describes the English language concisely and clearly. However, he does not find it possible to banish all competing voices from his grammar, and he frequently uses footnotes to engage with those voices. For example, on p.15 he provides a simple table showing conjunctive preter tense (in modern terminology, the subjunctive past tense).[8] Underneath there is

a lengthy (around 300 word) footnote justifying his decision on this controversial issue, and weighing the evidence provided by "Mr. Johnson", "analogy", "some writers of the present age", and "our forefathers".[9] Finally, he resolves the question through recourse to "a familiar example" and the concept of "ellipsis" in order to explain the apparent irregularity in the language (1761: 15-16). At this moment, two versions of Priestley appear on the same page: at the top, Priestley the writer of a pedagogical grammar provides straightforward instruction in the correct use of the language; beneath, Priestley the natural scientist sorts through the evidence and engages with other experts. Of course the problem of trying to provide clear guidance for students while not over-simplifying complex issues is far from being peculiar to the eighteenth century, and modern teachers of linguistics frequently find themselves in the ideologically contradictory position of marking an essay down because of prescriptivist assumptions, while also marking it down because the writer uses possessive apostrophes incorrectly. Nevertheless, Priestley's split voice in his grammar serves as a reminder that the writing of grammatical texts was not the monolithic task it is sometimes assumed to be. Grammars were written both to instruct students and to develop a better understanding of the language, and even these two very similar purposes could pull the text in opposing directions.

Priestley's The Rudiments of English Grammar

As Priestley makes clear in the Preface to the first edition The Rudiments of English Grammar, Adapted to the Use of Schools with Observations on Style, the book is intended to be a practical guide for learners: "[t]he author hath no higher views in what he now presents to the public, than to give the youth of our nation an

insight into the fundamental principles of their own language" (1761: v).

Nevertheless, Priestley uses the Preface to make a number of important statements about language, and the similes that he uses about the study of language are particularly revealing. He writes, for example, that:

> Grammar may be compared to a treatise of Natural Philosophy; the one consisting of observations on the various changes, combinations, and mutual affections of words; and the other of the parts of nature: and were the language of men as uniform as the works of nature, the grammar of language would be as indisputable in its principles as the grammar of nature: but since good authors have adopted different forms of speech, and in a case that admits of no standard but that of custom, one authority may be of as much weight as another; the analogy of language is the only thing to which we can have recourse, to adjust these differences; for language, to answer to the intent of it, which is to express our thoughts with certainty in an intercourse with one another, must be fixed and consistent within itself. (1761: vi)

At the start of this paragraph it sounds as though Priestley is adopting a modern descriptivist position, in which language is a naturally occurring phenomenon to be studied by the impartial scientist. However, as the paragraph progresses it becomes clear that while Grammar "may be compared" to a treatise of Natural Philosophy, this does not mean that Language itself is a natural phenomenon. Language is found to differ from Nature in two important ways: it is less "uniform" than Nature, and it has an "intent", which is "to express our thoughts with certainty". Two paragraphs later Priestley introduces another simile, writing that: "A manufacture for which there is a great demand, and a language that many persons have leisure to read and write, are both sure to be brought, in time to all the perfection of which they are capable." (1761: vii) Language is here figured as a conscious human activity, although significantly it is one that is best left to natural market forces, not one that requires direct intervention from a public body. This model of language as a self-regulating "manufacture" is echoed elsewhere in the Preface: when accounting for the "simplicity" of English grammar, for example, Priestley ascribes it partly to the fact

that the severity of the English climate meant that its inhabitants had "little leisure for polishing" their language (1761: v). It is also, of course, on this basis that Priestley denies that there is any need for a public academy (1761: vii-viii).

The main body of the first edition of Priestley's grammar runs to just 38 pages, presented in question and answer format. Priestley focuses on the parts of speech and their correct use, allowing only short sections on Syntax, Prosody and Figures. The volume also includes an appendix of irregular verbs, a twenty page essay "Observations on Style" and a selection of "Examples of English Composition", including passages from the Bible, Swift, Pope, Addison and Shakespeare. The grammar does not represent a major innovation within the grammatical tradition, although some of his decisions have been admired by later commentators: Ian Michael, for example, applauds Priestley as one of only a very few grammarians who "understood what they meant by tense" (1970: 405).[10]

In 1768 Priestley published a second edition of his grammar, in which he substantially revises many aspects of the original text. He discards "Observations on Style" and "Examples of English Composition", and adds a lengthy (140 page) section "Notes and Observations, for the use of those who have made some proficiency in the language". He begins this revised "Preface" by explaining why he felt motivated to change his text: the first text, he writes, was intended simply for use in schools. Afterwards he took "a more extensive view of language in general, and of the English language in particular" (partly, presumably, while composing his Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language, and Universal Grammar) and "began to collect materials for a much larger work upon this subject" (1768: v). However, he found himself unable to complete the proposed "much larger work" and so decided to republish an improved

version of the original work, together with "so much of the materials I had collected for the larger, as may be of practical use to those who write the language" (1768: vi).

The revised Preface is, in general, rather more combative then the original on a number of points. Whereas in the 1761 Preface Priestly simply observes that "Technical terms have neither been affected nor avoided", in the 1768 Preface he expresses his surprise at seeing "so much of the distribution, and technical terms of the Latin grammar, retained in the grammar of our tongue" (1768: vi-vii), and he complains that insufficient attention to "inflections" leads to the grammar of a language becoming "clogged with superfluous terms and divisions" (1768: viii). In the 1761 Preface he suggests that the words borrowed into English from other languages have "added considerably to the bulk and gracefulness of our language; but have made no alteration in the simplicity of its original form" (1761: v-vi). This passage remains in the 1768 Preface, but there is also a passage where Priestley prides himself on having detected "a very great number of gallicisms, which have insinuated themselves into the style of many of our most justly admired writers; and which, in my opinion, tend greatly to injure the true idiom of the English language" (1768: x). He also suggests that because he has collected examples of English from "modern writings" it will be possible to "see what is the real character and turn of the language at present" and to "perceive which way it is tending, and what extreme we should most carefully guard against" (1768: xi). In this passage Priestley almost sounds like Swift, warning that English must be actively preserved against damaging innovation, rather than celebrating the innate linguistic potential of a free people.

Nevertheless, it is not the case that the 1768 edition represents a move towards a more prescriptive position. For a start, much of the original Preface remains

alongside the new material: the passages where language is likened to "a treatise of Natural Philosophy" (1768: xvii) and "a *manufacture*" (1768: xix) remain, as does Priestley's staunch opposition to a national Academy. Priestley may complain about injurious "gallicisms", but he still celebrates the "bulk and gracefulness" that foreign words have brought to English; indeed, any apparent contradiction disappears when it is recognised that these "gallicisms" are problematic because they are grammatical not lexical (they damage the language because they are "contrary to its most established analogies" (1768: x)). Priestley also strengthens his earlier commitment to common usage, making it clearer that he considers the spoken language to be primary: "It must be allowed, that the custom of speaking is the original, and only just standard of any language." (1768: ix). And he offers an optimistic vision of the future of English: if only "all persons who are qualified to make remarks upon it" will participate in investigating the structure of English then "the best forms of speech, and those which are most agreeable to the analogy of the language" will rapidly establish themselves (1768 xv-xvi). Taken as a whole, the 1768 Preface shows Priestley offering a more robust version of the ideas contained in his 1761 Preface, not a retraction or significant modification of them.

However, the references that Priestley makes to other grammarians in the 1768 Preface suggest that he had become less satisfied with the state of English grammar during the intervening years. Whereas the 1761 Preface simply notes that use has been made of Johnson's grammar, the 1768 Preface laments the fact that, despite his "admirable dictionary", Johnson "had not formed as just, and as extensive an idea of English grammar" and expresses a hope that Johnson may yet

turn his "distinguished abilities" to the project (1768: xxii). Priestley also refers to

Lowth's recently published grammar, and acknowledges that he has "taken a few

of his examples", although the fact that Lowth's grammar is mentioned

immediately after the wish for a Johnsonian grammar implies that Priestley does

not consider Lowth to have offered the last word on the subject (1768: xxiii).

Priestley offers Lowth and other grammarians the right to make use of his own

examples to in return, and argues that it is only by "an amicable union of labours"

that knowledge of English will be increased (1768: xxiii).

In the main body of the 1768 grammar Priestley makes numerous minor

adjustments to his original text. To give just some examples: he adds short

sections on the letters of the alphabet and on transitive and neuter verbs; he offers a

slightly modified definition of the adverb; he renames subsections to make it clear

that he is discussing the inflections of the various parts of speech; and he moves

material on the use of articles and auxiliary verbs to a separate section. Perhaps

the most significant change, however, is that the footnotes that offered a running

commentary on the main text are banished: some are incorporated in the main text,

and others are moved into the "Notes and Observations" section. Pedagogically

the creation of this new section is in many ways a good decision: as I argued in the

previous section, the qualifications and deliberations offered in the footnotes

tended to undermine the simple explanations offered in the main body of the 1761

text. By collecting the annotations together, Priestley can first present a

straightforward account of the subject for beginners, and then offer a discussion of

more complex issues for more advanced students.

However, the two resulting parts are very unbalanced in terms of length: "Notes and Observations" is almost three times as long as the main grammatical text. This unintentionally points to the fact that there are a great many exceptions to general grammatical rules, and indeed the "Notes and Observations" offers a wealth of material about the way in which the spoken and written language fails to fit neatly with the model that Priestley offers in the "Grammar" section. In dealing with these exceptions Priestley at times sounds like a caricature prescriptivist, determined to lay down the law of the language. He writes, for example, that:

> Many persons are apt, in conversation to put the oblique case of the personal pronouns, in the place of these and those; as Give me them books, instead of those books. We may, sometimes, find this fault even in writing. Observe them three there. Devil upon Crutches. (1768: 91).

At other times, however, he acknowledges that, despite the "analogy of the language" and the best efforts of grammarians, custom will prevail:

> The word means belongs to the class of words which do not change their termination on account of number; for it is used alike in both numbers. Lest this means should fail. Hume's History, vol. 8. p. 65 Some persons, however, use the singular of this word, and would say, lest this mean should fail, and Dr. Lowth pleads for it; but custom has so formed our ears, that they do not easily admit this form of the word, notwithstanding it is more agreeable to the general analogy of the language. (1768: 64)

It is noticeable in these two examples, and throughout the "Notes and Observations", that Priestley is much more prepared to accept the idiosyncratic dictates of custom when it tallies with his own variety, and is less sympathetic to custom when he is not familiar with the form in question. Nevertheless, the "Notes and Observations" leaves an impression of Priestley struggling to deal impartially and scientifically with a mass of intractable data that refuses to resolve itself into a comprehensible pattern.

It is perhaps desirable to reconsider some of the statements that Priestley makes in the 1768 Preface in the light of the bulky "Notes and Observations". For example, it seems possible that he was unable to complete his proposed "larger work" on English grammar not because he was "so much employed in studies of a very different nature" (1768: vi) but because he was unable to find a form that would allow him to make sense of his collected material. Furthermore, his call for "all persons who are qualified" to participate in the study of English and his desire for "an amicable union of labours" sound less like optimistic predictions about the ease with which English can be catalogued, and more like a desperate calls for help. What Priestley's revised Grammar perhaps finally demonstrates that is that while it is easy to praise good descriptivism and condemn bad prescriptivism from the privileged perspective of the twenty first century, for a grammarian struggling with the complexities of the English language in the eighteenth century, these issues looked very different.

Conclusion

There is perhaps some irony in the fact that contemporary linguistics is quick to defend and celebrate linguistic diversity, but has been slow to recognise the diversity of thinking about the English language that existed in the eighteenth century. As I have argued here, rather that seeing the period as being dominated by a restrictive prescriptivism which was only challenged by the arrival of comparative linguistics, the period is better characterised as one within which ideas about language were very much contested and debated. Joseph Priestley wrote within this context of contest and debate, sharing much in common with his

predecessors and contemporaries, but also trying to formulate a way of thinking about language that did not hark back towards a long-lost golden age, but instead reached forward to a bright future in which political freedoms would enable the people of Britain to further improve upon their language. This was by no means a straightforward proposition.

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Notes

[1] Warrington Academy was a liberal Dissenting academy, established in 1757 by private subscription. When Priestley arrived in 1761 approximately thirty students were attending. See Schofield 1997: 87-90.

[2] Scott Elledge suggests that these Lectures were available to later grammarians (1967: 286), but Robert Schofield finds that "the only clear line of transmission of many of Priestley's ideas on the nature of language in general is that in the 1768 preface to the Rudiments" (1997: 102-3).

[3] Leonard's influence on later accounts is discussed by Scott Elledge (1967: 280), Yusef Azad (1989: 1) and Joan Beal (2004: 89).

[4] In her introduction to The Cambridge History of the English Language: Volume IV, 1776-1997, for example, Suzanne Romaine quotes approvingly and at length from the historian Gwyn Williams, who identifies Lowth, Harris and Johnson as writing a "trinity of texts" which "made the 'national language' into a class language" and thereby "enforced submission and dependency upon most of those who used it" (Romaine 1998: 8, citing Williams 1989: xvii). An investigation of Williams' sources reveals that he is paraphrasing from Smith.

[5] Smith's The Politics of Language 1791-1819 was first published in 1984, allowing her little time to incorporate Barrell's ideas into her own text. Nevertheless, Smith does include Barrell's book in her 'selected bibliography'.

[6] Indeed, James Hoecker points to the fact that the idea of the perfectibility of human nature was central to much of Priestley's thinking on broad political and educational issues (1987).

[7] See Jean Aitchison Language Change: Progress or Decay? (1981).

[8] Ian Michael (1970) reviews the treatment of the category of mood in English grammars before 1800 (pp. 424-435), finding that grammarians were hampered by their dependence upon the Latin tradition, as well as by the fact that only a few could recognise the fundamental distinction between formal and semantic criteria. Michael writes of Priestley that he "would have liked to deny English any moods but was too honest to do so" (p. 426).

[9] Barrell cites part of this footnote as an example of the way in which "Priestley's appeals to analogy are often also appeals to usage" (1983: 163). However, Barrell offers a slight misquotation of Priestley in support of this interpretation.

[10] For a list of some of other commentators who have admired aspects of Priestley's grammar, see Schofield 1977 101-2.