‘Telling people how to speak’
Rhetorical grammars and pronouncing dictionaries*

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It is a commonplace to say that notions of standards in language became associated with social differentiation in the 18th century and that prescriptive attitudes among writers on language came to the fore. In both grammar and pronunciation many features which are still found in present-day vernacular English were commented on negatively, leading to their subsequent stigmatisation. This is true of such features as negative concord (multiple negation) or doubly marked comparatives. Other features, such as preposition stranding or split infinitives, became established in standard speech but nonetheless still appear in discussions of ‘putative’ correct usage to this day.

In the area of pronunciation the strictures of 18th century authors are especially interesting. Above all, the works of Thomas Sheridan and John Walker offer many insights into ongoing phonological change of their day. Furthermore, their preference for certain pronunciations and their condemnation of others are illuminating in view of the later development of English in the 19th and 20th centuries. In this contribution, the works and views of both Sheridan and Walker are viewed closely and the legacy of both and their possible influence on English subsequently are considered in detail.

1. Language variation before the 18th century

Already by the second half of the 16th century, John Hart (d. 1574) in
An orthographie of English (1569), offered a reformed spelling of English so that ‘the rude countrie Englishman’ can speak the language ‘as the best sort use to speak it’. (Mugglestone 2003 [1995]: 13). George Puttenham (d. 1590) in The arte of English poesie comments that ‘After a speach is fully fashioned to the common vnderstanding, & accepted by consent of a whole countrey & nation, it is called a language’. He then proceeds to mention that he regards the prime form of this language as ‘the vsuall speach of the Court and that of London and the shires lying about London within lx. myles and not much aboue’ (Mugglestone 2003 [1995]: 9). About a century later, Christopher Cooper in his Grammatica linguae anglicanae (1685) stated that he regarded London speech as ‘the best dialect’, the ‘most pure and correct’, but he was quite liberal towards variation: ‘Everyone pronounceth them (words) as himself pleases’.

What is common to all these statements, as scholars in the field have noted, especially Lynda Mugglestone and Joan Beal (Mugglestone 2003 [1995]: 65, Beal 2004a: 168-70), is that the authors are content to note differences in pronunciation but do not offer a social evaluation of them. As far as pre-1700 writers are concerned, pronunciation does not seem to have been used as a yardstick for social evaluation. Whether people in the early 1700s had a different attitude to pronunciation is difficult to tell. It may well be that the concern with fixing English was one specific to major writers who wanted their own works to have a maximum shelf life by being written in language which was not going to change appreciably in coming generations.

This latter attitude is clearest with Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), Anglo-Irish satirist and political pamphleteer, who was considered one of the greatest masters of English prose by his generation and those immediately following him. Robert Lowth in the preface to his famous grammar of 1762 writes: ‘Swift must be allowed to have been a good judge of this matter (i.e. the imperfect state of our language – RH); to which he was himself very attentive, both in his own writings, and in his remarks upon those of his friends: he is one of the most correct, and perhaps the best of our prose writers’ (Lowth 1995 [1762]: vi). Swift was careful about language and had decided views on the state of English in his day as can be seen from the famous passage on the matter in A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Language (1712).
... what I have most at Heart is, that some Method should be thought on for ascertaining and fixing our Language for ever, after such Alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite. For I am of Opinion, that it is better a Language should not be wholly perfect, than it should be perpetually changing; and we must give over at one Time, or at length infallibly change for the worse...

Much has been made of the fact that Swift and other Augustan writers were concerned with ascertaining (i.e. codifying, see Beal 2004a: 91) and fixing the English language (note the italics in Swift’s original). Their comments about language are directed against change, but not against socially determined variation.

2. The rise of prescriptivism in the early 18th century

Swift, like Daniel Defoe (1660?-1731), favoured the establishment of an academy to protect English from further ‘corruption’, i.e. change. But the academy was not to be. After the publication of Samuel Johnson’s monumental dictionary in 1755 and with the large number of grammars published in the 18th century, the need was not felt so strongly, though Sheridan was in favour of an academy. English pronunciation was not a concern of Swift, perhaps because as someone who grew up in Ireland, his pronunciation would, by nature, have been different from that in the polite English society of his time.

What Swift demanded in his proposal was delivered by others in the realm of grammar. A generation after his death authors appeared who were instrumental in the codification of English grammar, above all Robert Lowth (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, forthcoming). Whether their writings were as prescriptive as they were later taken to be is a matter of debate. The extent to which Lowth and other similar authors may have reflected current usage, e.g. in the demise of double negatives,
rather than dictating it, is not entirely certain. Contemporary scholarship (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2006a: 241) chooses to speak of ‘codification’ in this context.

\[2.1. \textit{Codification and education}\]

Several reasons can be given for the drive towards codification in the 18th century. A concern with a standard form of English to be used in education is recognisable from the relevant literature. Whatever writers thought, school-teachers had a very practical interest in the teaching of a unified grammar. This applied across the entire British Isles. For instance, there was a movement in Scotland to ensure that standard English of the south become the norm north of the border. James Buchanan was a prominent Scot who represented this view, see his \textit{British Grammar} of 1762 (Beal 2004a: 96). The Irishman Thomas Sheridan (see section 6. below) had brought a book with a similar title in 1756. The use of the labels \textit{British} and \textit{Britain} carried clear undertones here: they referred to linguistic usage and educational practice across the entire English-speaking population in the British Isles. The insistence on standard English became a political statement in favour of the union of Scotland with England and of Ireland with England. Recall that, as of 1707, the entire island of Britain was unified as The United Kingdom of Great Britain. In 1801 this was expanded with the union of the British and Irish parliaments to become The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

\[2.2. \textit{Broader social developments}\]

The 18th century was a period of transition. Towards the end of that century the Industrial Revolution took place leading to a density of population in cities hitherto not present in England. Beal (2004a: 6f.) notes the significance of urbanisation in the 18th century as well as the increase in transport and communications. One could add that the pressure for a standard increased given that, with the rise of cities, lower and middle classes lived side by side. This was very different from the earlier situation of ‘rustics’ living far from the capital (see the
A standard in pronunciation had the added usefulness that it was immediately available for social evaluation (as opposed to grammar which does not share this function to the same degree). For instance, pronunciation was useful when judging the nouveau riche who were still recognisable by their accent, e.g. by their lack of initial /h-/ in unguarded moments. The upward mobility of a section of society and the linguistic insecurity which this engendered (Beal 2004a: 93) meant that the demand for published literature on putative standard English increased considerably. And it was the mastery of such standard English which came to split British society into a group which had a command of the standard and one which did not. This development meant that by the late 19th century Benjamin Disraeli could speak of the social situation in Britain with ‘two nations ... who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners’.

§3. The emerging standard of English

The emerging standard of English in the 18th century can be characterised in a variety of ways. The standard functioned as a yardstick allowing varieties of English to be compared, but also to be assessed with the labelling of those different from the standard as non-standard and soon to be regarded as sub-standard. The standard also came to be seen as a prerequisite for social advancement. The view that mastering the standard improved one’s lot in life became increasingly apparent during the 18th century. Some of the authors of this era explicitly recognise this, for instance, female grammarians, such as Anne Fisher (Fisher 1745), Ellin Devis (Devis 1775) and Eleanor Fenn (Fenn 1798, 1799), as well as male authors like Thomas Spence (Beal 1999) and William Cobbett (Cobbett 1818).

The standard came to be viewed as a variety of language free of all traces of regional origin. Writing in the early 19th century, Benjamin Smart (1836) claimed that ‘The common standard dialect is that in which all marks of a particular place and residence are lost, and nothing appears to indicate any other habit of intercourse than with the
well-bred and well-informed, wherever they be found’. This is not that far removed from what sociolinguists of our day regard a ‘standard’ to be: it is ‘an idea in the mind rather than a reality – a set of abstract norms to which actual usage will conform to a greater or lesser extent’ (Milroy and Milroy 1999: 19).

An almost inevitable consequence of the functions which the standard was adopting was its further use as an instrument of social exclusion. If a standard is no longer regionally bound then it will not correspond to any variety typical of a given area and will not be spoken by anyone by virtue of growing up in a certain locality. Instead of location, it is social class which determines whether one speaks the standard. In addition, a standard can show a number of lexicalised irregularities which are not easily mastered by those for whom it is not their native mode of speech. The distribution of /æ/ and /ɑː/ in present-day Received Pronunciation illustrates this quite clearly. One has RP grant with /ɑː/ but grand with /æ/, dance with /ɑː/ but cancel with /æ/. This type of distribution is difficult to master and getting it wrong would exclude one from the group of RP speakers, even if one pronounces everything else as expected in this variety of English.

4. A close look at pronunciation

It is not a coincidence that the remarks on the standard so far concern pronunciation. This is a sensitive an issue for speakers. Pronunciation is a largely unalterable part of one’s linguistic makeup. It is different from vocabulary. You can choose what words you use, now these, now others. But pronunciation is much more intimately connected with oneself. Because speakers’ sensitivity to pronunciation is considerable, to criticise someone’s pronunciation is a much greater intrusion on their privacy than it is to complain of them using some word or other. This fact helps to explain why 18th century works on pronunciation exercised a considerable influence among the general public.

The key to remedying socially unacceptable pronunciation is to engage in elocution. This is a means of teaching speakers ostensibly correct diction. Originally it was about clarity of delivery, but it came in
the 18th century to be concerned with instructing non-standard speakers in how to pronounce the standard variety of the language in question. The two most notable elocutionists of this period are Thomas Sheridan (1719-88) and John Walker (1732-1807) who wrote widely on the subject and who will be dealt with in more detail below.

There are unintended side-effects of attempting the standard when it is not one’s native mode of speech. Non-standard speakers invariably overshoot the mark when dealing with features they know to be different from their vernacular, i.e. their speech is marked by hypercorrection. Then as now, this was a feature of many individuals and groups. In a well-known passage from James Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) the famous lexicographer, talking about variation, is quoted as saying:

‘... what entitles Sheridan to fix the pronunciation of English? He has, in the first place, the disadvantage of being an Irishman; and if he says he will fix it after the example of the best company, why they differ among themselves. I remember an instance: when I published the plan of my Dictionary, Lord Chesterfield told me that the word *great* should be pronounced so as to rhyme to *state*; and Sir William Yonge sent me word that it should be pronounced so as to rhyme to *seat* and that none but an Irishman would pronounce it *grait.*’

Thomas Sheridan in his *Rhetorical Grammar of the English Language* (1781) notes that educated Dubliners often pronounce words like *great, swear* and *bear* as if they were written *greet, sweer* and *beer* respectively.

5. Aids to mastering the standard

The title of this chapter refers to rhetorical grammars and pronouncing dictionaries. What the latter are, is fairly self evident, but what the
former actually refer to, is perhaps not so clear, especially given that in
the second half of the 18th century the label *rhetorical grammar* was
almost lexicalised and referred to a specific genre of prescriptive book
on language. Rhetorical grammars were designed to produce ‘propriety
of pronunciation’ if the readers followed their stern recommendations to
the letter. They were born of the desire to have for pronunciation as
codified a standard as was being attempted for grammar by other
authors on language.

While rhetorical grammars are quite discursive with much text
and discussion of side-issues, pronouncing dictionaries are clearly
reference works. However, their ideology is the same: they are
concerned with specifying clearly how the standard is pronounced. The
basis for pronouncing dictionaries begs a large question: can the
standard be fixed in this way? If the standard is based on the shifting
sands of real speech then this is obviously not the case. And authors
like John Walker, authoritarian as they may have been, were
nonetheless aware of the paradox of speaking of a fixed standard and
handling variation, especially when this occurred in the speech of the
upper classes who were to be emulated by the rest of society.

Pronouncing dictionaries were in keeping with social attitudes
of the later 18th century. One’s superiors were to be emulated, in
language as in other aspects of social behaviour. Attitudes elsewhere
were notably different. In America, Noah Webster complained about
the self-appointed persons ‘who dictate to a nation the rules of
speaking, with the same imperiousness as a tyrant gives orders to his
vassals’. Webster also notes that ‘even well-bred people and scholars,
only surrender their right of private judgement to these literary
governors’. Despite such reasonable voices, prescriptivism prevailed in
Britain. This meant that the regional accents were condemned
accordingly, it was a common opinion that ‘a strong provincial accent ...
destroys all idea of elegance’ (Roscoe in Mugglestone 1995: 43). A
non-standard accent greatly reduced acceptance in society. Hence the
need for rhetorical grammars and pronouncing dictionaries to purify
one’s speech.

18th-century prescriptive authors were often prolific in their
publications. Not just a dictionary but books on grammar and elocution
came from the pens of these writers. Consider the following trio of
authors each of whom published at least two prescriptive works.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dictionary</th>
<th>Rhetorical grammar</th>
<th>Work on elocution</th>
<th>Provenance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sheridan</td>
<td>1780</td>
<td>1781</td>
<td>1762</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenrick</td>
<td>1773</td>
<td>1784</td>
<td>-- --</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walker</td>
<td>1791</td>
<td>1785</td>
<td>1781</td>
<td>London</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Key language studies in the late 18th century

The practice of publishing such a triptych (dictionary, grammar and elocution guide) was actually continued in the early 19th century: Benjamin Smart, in the early 19th century, produced all three types, just as Sheridan and Walker had done. Here there was keen competition between authors, with many trying to outdo their predecessors. For instance, the competition between Walker and Sheridan is matched by a similar rivalry between Samuel Johnson and Benjamin Martin, though the latter was never to achieve anything like the popularity and renown of the former.

For the next two sections of this chapter a closer look at two of the above-mentioned writers will be taken and their work will be examined in some detail.

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6. Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788)

Thomas Sheridan was born in Co. Cavan in 1719, grew up in Dublin and died in London in 1788. Sheridan enjoyed a diverse career as actor, lecturer and writer. Significantly, he was the godson of Swift and produced *The Works of Swift with Life* (18 volumes) in 1784. As a dramatist Sheridan is known for one play, the farce *Captain O’Blunder or The Brave Irishman* (1754), which he wrote in 1740 as an undergraduate. He was also manager of the Smock Alley theatre in Dublin (Benzie 1972, Sheldon 1967) where he worked for some years. However, the plays of his son Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816)
were better known in his day and were regularly produced in London at Covent Garden and at the Drury Lane theatre. In his writing Sheridan apparently decided to concentrate on matters of language and education on which he wrote extensively. The publishing time span for Sheridan’s works covers some 30 years, from *British Education* (1756) to *Elements of English* (1786). The first work is a book some 536 pages in length. The full title already betrays Sheridan’s concerns in this work and later works.

*British Education:*

Or, the Source of the Disorders of Great Britain,

being

An Essay towards proving, that the Immorality, Ignorance, and false Taste, which so generally prevail, are the natural and necessary Consequences of the present defective System of Education with

An Attempt to show, that a Revival of the Art of Speaking, and the Study of our own Language, might contribute, in a great measure, to the Cure of those Evils.

The tone of this work is typical of Sheridan: he set out on a mission to rid British society of its evils and the cure he is offering lies in proper pronunciation and awareness of ‘correct’ language. This is the agenda which he was to follow with determination from them on.

In discussions of Sheridan’s work, e.g. Mugglestone (2003), the question is not asked whether he was sincere in his concern for standards of education and language use. From an Irish point of view he could be accused of mimicking the mores of the received English classes in a manner which could be interpreted as a desire for acceptance by a society to which he did not belong by birth. It is an open question whether such a ‘post-colonial’ interpretation of Sheridan’s work is justified. What is clear is that he enjoyed to the full the advantages in English society which his writings brought him, e.g. by giving lectures in Oxford and in general by being feted as an authority on matters of language. But in the final analysis Sheridan was regarded as an outsider. It is a telling comment by Samuel Johnson (see quotation above) that Sheridan’s Irishness was a disadvantage when pronouncing on the English language. His nationality also worked
against him posthumously: during the 19th century it was not Sheridan but the Englishman John Walker who was accepted as an authority on language use.

Leaving Sheridan’s nationality aside, one can see him as a man of his age. His concern with education was typical and the decidedly censorious language which he used was also to be found among other prescriptivist writers of the 18th century (Beal 2004b), though Sheridan is less condemnatory in his strictures than others (in particular, Walker).

Some six years after the appearance of British Education Sheridan published A Course of Lectures on Elocution (1762). This increased the demand for him as a touring lecturer: he toured all over Britain as a self-appointed authority on the English language, lecturing by invitation at Oxford and well paid for it at that, no mean feat for a Catholic Irishman without an upper-class background.

Sheridan’s main publishing achievement is certainly his dictionary which appeared in 1780. The time difference of some 18 years since the book on elocution appeared betrays the effort which went into this substantial, two volume work. It went through several editions with slightly altered contents and titles.

### 6.1. Sheridan’s system of pronunciation

Both Sheridan and Walker admit that the lexical information in their dictionaries is lifted straight out of Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language (1755). Note here that Johnson had considered adding the pronunciation to words in his dictionary but decided not to in the end as this area was too much in flux. This was a niche which others gladly filled.

Thus what is special in the dictionaries of both Sheridan and Walker is that pronunciation guides are given, both in the form of a long preface to each dictionary and in the discussions in many of the entries. Sheridan published the long preface to his dictionary in an expanded form the following year (1781), this time with a publisher in Dublin.

In order to describe the sounds of English Sheridan employs a system of notation in which the five vowel graphemes (and _yaw) are used together with a number (from 1 to 3) as a diacritic over the vowel
symbol in question (Walker uses a similar though not identical system). Sheridan organises the vowel values into three columns as follows. If we add the phonetic values which we can deduce from Sheridan’s descriptions, the resulting table looks like the following

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{First} & \text{Second} & \text{Third} \\
\text{a} & ha^{1t} \ [æ] & ha^{2te} \ [e:] & ha^{3ll} \ [æ] \\
\text{e} & be^{1t} \ [e] & be^{2ar} \ [e:] & be^{3er} \ [i] \\
\text{i} & fi^{1t} \ [i] & fi^{2ght} \ [ai] & fi^{3eld} \ [i:] \\
\text{o} & no^{1t} \ [o] & no^{2te} \ [o:] & no^{3ose} \ [u:] \\
\text{u} & bu^{1t} \ [ʌ] & bu^{2sh} \ [o] & bu^{3e} \ [u:] \\
\text{y} & love-ly^{1} \ [i] & ly^{2e} \ [ai] & \\
\end{array}
\]

(Sheridan 1781: 151)

Sheridan also has a table in which he shows how he classifies the consonants of English.

The labial are four, eb ep ef ev.
Dental eight, ed et eth eth.
Palatine four, eg ek el er.
Nasal three, em en ing.

(Sheridan 1781: 10)

In some respects his classification is still acceptable, e.g. the terms labial, nasal and dental are still used. But the additional term ‘palatine’ to refer to /g, k, l, r/ is not intuitively obvious. It is not certain what phonetic features are shared by these four sound which would then justify their appearance as a group in Sheridan’s classification.

§2 6.2. Early sociolinguistic assessment
The pronunciation guidelines provided by Sheridan are of interest when looking at the pathways of phonetic variation in 18th century English and some of these will be commented on when considering Walker below. Being Irish, Sheridan was somewhat conservative in his preferences, e.g. for merchant with [ar] and for syllable-final /-r/. But he also had the sharpness typical of a colonial observer. Sheridan was among the first to remark explicitly on the deletion of initial /h-. In his *Course of Lectures* (1762: 113-5) he writes: ‘The best method of curing this (h-deletion, RH) will be to read over frequently all the words beginning with the letter H and those beginning with Wh in the dictionary, and push them out with the full force of the breath, ‘till an habit is obtained of aspirating strongly’.

The lack of initial /h-/ goes back far in the history of English (Milroy 1992: 136-45) and early examples attest to it, e.g. the phrase to eat humble pie which shows a hypercorrect /h-/ as the phrase comes from umble pie, i.e. a pie of inferior quality made from umbles ‘animals’ entrails’ (a late Middle English attestation). But it is significant here that Sheridan sees the deletion of /h-/ as contrary to the standard of English in his day, that is, he sees is as socially stigmatised.

§7. John Walker (1732-1807)

John Walker was born in north London in 1732. Like Sheridan he was engaged in acting in his early life and, again like Sheridan, he became interested in questions of language use in his late thirties and early forties. In 1774 he published an outline for his dictionary with his *Rhyming Dictionary of the English Language* appearing the following year. A rhetorical grammar dates from 1785 and the work on which his later reputation was largely based – *A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language* – appeared in 1791 and went through over 100 editions during the 19th century, the last of which was published in 1904 (Beal 2004a: 129). Walker died in London in 1807.

The writing careers of Sheridan and Walker show a clear overlap, one which was initially to Walker’s disadvantage. In the
following table one can see that while Walker published his plan for a pronouncing dictionary in 1774, Sheridan overtook him and published his complete dictionary in 1780. It took Walker a further 11 years, i.e. 17 years after his plan had appeared, for his own dictionary to be published (1791).

Sheridan:
1762  *A Course of Lectures on Elocution.*
Walker:
Sheridan:
1780  *A General Dictionary of the English Language, One Object of Which is to Establish a Plain and Permanent Standard of Pronunciation.* 2 vols.
Sheridan:
1781  *A Rhetorical Grammar of the English Language*
Walker:
1781  *Elements of Elocution*
Walker:
1785  *A Rhetorical Grammar or Course of Lessons in Elocution.*
1791  *A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language.*

It is obvious that both authors were aware of each others’ work and understandably in a field in which the two were vying for chief position Walker was concerned to show that he was the superior authority. Consider the following comments in the first edition of his dictionary:

‘It must, indeed, be confessed, that Mr. Sheridan’s Dictionary is greatly superior to every other that preceded it, and his method of conveying the sound of words, by spelling them as they are pronounced, is highly rational and useful. — But here sincerity obliges me to stop. The numerous instances I have given of impropriety, inconsistency, and want of acquaintance with the analogies of the Language, sufficiently show how imperfect I think his Dictionary is.’

Walker (1791: iii)
In his pronouncing dictionary Walker sets out two main principles which he regards as essential when determining which pronunciations are to be recommended:

1) Keep pronunciation as close to orthography as possible
2) Abide by analogy (< Latin *analogia* ‘proportion’) by which was meant regularity and conformity to general patterns and a correlation or correspondence between components of language.

Despite his predilection for regularity and general patterning, Walker is occasionally prepared to accept that analogy is overridden by usage as can be seen in his comments on the following item.

*Impugn* /ɪmˈpʊn/ ‘to attack, assault’

Notwithstanding the clear analogy there is for pronouncing this word in the manner it is marked, there is a repugnance at leaving out the *g*, which nothing but frequent use will take away. If *sign* were in as little use as *impugn* we should feel the same repugnance at pronouncing it in the manner we do. But as language is association, no wonder association should have such power over it.

The technical terms he uses differ from later phonetic labels, but are nonetheless understandable in context: *sink* ‘delete’, *sharp* ‘voiceless’, *flat* ‘voiced’, *mute* ‘stop’, *hissing* ‘fricative’, *lisp* ‘interdental fricative’, *gutteral* ‘velar’.

The entries in his dictionary are a mixture of description and prescriptive comment. Walker’s language is, to put it mildly, highly judgemental. In his time this would have been quite usual in educational works, but is far removed from present-day practice and the censorious attitudes which he adopted are in no small measure responsible for the dictionary’s final demise at the beginning of the 20th century. As a sample of his style, consider the following instances: (i) ‘This proneness of the *e*, which is exactly the slender sound of *i*, to coalesce with the succeeding vowels, has produced such monsters in pronunciation as *jogography* and *jommetry* for *geography* and *geometry*, and *jorgics* for
georgics.’ (Walker 1815: 34). (ii) ‘This contraction of the participial ed (as in filled, pronounced [fild] – RH), and the verbal en, is so fixed an idiom of our pronunciation, that to alter it, would be to alter the sound of the whole language. It must, however, be regretted, that it subjects our tongue to some of the most hissing, snapping, clashing, grinding sounds, that ever grated the ears of a Vandal: thus rasped, scratched, wrenched, bridled, fangled, birchen, hardened, strengthened, quickened, &c. almost frighten us when written as they are actually pronounced, as raspt, scratcht, wrencht, bridl’d, fangl’d, birch’n, strength’n’d, quick’n’d, &c ...’ (Walker 1815: 55)

Like all authors of his time, Walker was confronted with variation in the speech of his contemporaries. Here he grudgingly accepts the speech habits of educated, upper-class speakers where he does not basically agree with these. For instance, when talking about the shift of velar to alveolar nasal in present participles he remarks: ‘instead of singing, bringing, and flinging our best speakers are heard to pronounce sing-in, bring-in and fling-in’ (Walker 1815: 62).

§7.1. Walker on variation and authority

Despite the difference in nationality, Walker and Sheridan share a keen ear for minor differences in speech and were both attuned to ongoing change in the English of their time. Sheridan had the useful distance of the outsider while Walker had the sensitivity of one who was outside the class which he aspired to as Joan Beal has observed (Beal 2003: 102). Here is an instance of Walker’s powers of observation.

Duke: /dju:k/ versus /dʊk/ versus /dʒʊk/

There is a slight deviation often heard in the pronunciation of this word, as if written Dook; but this borders on vulgarity; the true sound of the u must be carefully preserved, as if written Dewk. There is another impropriety in pronouncing this word, as if written Jook; this is not so vulgar as the former, and arises from an ignorance of the influence of accent.’

Walker shows deference to authority and quotes a number of authors when discussing matters of dispute. Whether this was due to insecurity
on his part or to the wish to increase his own stature by association is
difficult to determine. The main authors he quotes are James Buchanan,
Samuel Johnson, William Johnston, William Kenrick, Robert Nares,
William Perry, William Scott, Thomas Sheridan. The following is an
example of this practice:

Imbecile: /ɪmˈbiːsəl/ versus /ɪmˈbiːsɪl/
Dr. Johnson, Dr. Ash, Dr. Kenrick, and Entick, accent this
word on the second syllable, as in the Latin *imbecilis*; but Mr
Scott and Mr. Sheridan on the last, as in the French *imbecille*.
The latter is, in my opinion, the more fashionable, but the
former more analogical. We have too many of these French
sounding words; and if the number cannot be diminished, they
should, at least, not be suffered to increase.
This word, says Dr. Johnson, is corruptly written *embezzle*.
This corruption, however, is too well established to be altered;
and, as it is appropriated to a particular species of deficiency,
the corruption is less to be regretted.

Walker is prepared to bow to authority if there is no choice. But the
authority must clearly be that of an accepted group in society. Here is
an instance where he is ready to accept usage found with major writers.

Horizon: /ˈhɔrɪzn/ versus /ˈhɔːrɪzn/
This word was, till of late years, universally pronounced, in
prose, with the accent on the first syllable; and that this is most
agreeable to English analogy cannot be doubted (see words like
venison – RH). But Poets have as constantly placed the accent
on the second syllable, because this syllable has the accent in
the Greek and Latin word; and this accentuation is now
become so general as to render the former pronunciation
vulgar.

The authority need not be that of accepted writers, but of one’s social
superiors. His attitude towards English nobility might strike us today as
somewhat obsequious. For instance, when discussing the pronunciation
of the second syllable in *oblig* he says that if Lord Chesterfield could
use [əɪ] in *oblig* then that was acceptable to him although Walker
himself would prefer [i]. But one should state that in this respect he was no different than his contemporaries. James Beattie, a Scot writing on language in the late 18th century, thought that it was natural to ‘approve as elegant what is customary among our superiors’ (Mugglestone 2003 [1995]: 14).

In other instances where no authority can be quoted, he is resigned to widespread change, though not without taking a swipe at it: ‘The latter of these words (jorgics for georgics) is fixed in this absurd pronunciation without remedy’. At a later point he even says ‘Georgic is always heard as if written jorgic, and must be given up as incorrigible’ (Walker 1815: 47).

§7.2. Walker and on-going change

There are many instances where Walker comments on ongoing change. The following provide examples of his style (taken from the 15th edition of his dictionary which appeared a few years after his death). Here he is discussing short o: ‘This letter, like a, has a tendency to lengthen, when followed by a liquid and another consonant, or by ss, or s and a mute. But this length of o, in this situation, seems every day growing more and more vulgar; and, as it would be gross, to a degree, to sound the a in castle, mask and plant, like the a in palm, psalm &c. so it would be equally exceptionable to pronounce the o in moss, dross and frost as if written mawse, drawse, and frawst.’ (Walker 1815: 39)

Walker was also aware of the low-rhoticity which had become established by the mid 18th century in the south-east: ‘In England, and particularly in London, the r in lard, bard, card, regard, &c. is pronounced so much in the throat as to be little more than the middle of Italian a, lengthened into laad, baad, caad, regaad; while in Ireland the r, in these words, is pronounced with so strong a jar of the tongue against the fore-part of the palate and accompanied with such an aspiration, or strong breathing, at the beginning of the letter, as to produce that harshness we call the Irish accent’ (Walker 1815: 63).

When tracing changes which became relevant for later forms of English, sources like Walker are of particular relevance. Again, his sensitive ear meant that he commented on linguistic variation and change in a manner which allows present-day scholars to establish
relative chronologies for many shifts. The following three phenomena are instances of phonetic changes which were present in 18th-century English and which Walker felt called upon to refer to.

CATCH-raising. Under the heading *Irregular and unaccented Sounds* Walker notes: ‘There is a corrupt, but a received pronunciation of this letter in the words *any, many, Thames*, where the *a* sounds like short *e*, as if written *enny, menny, Tems. Catch*, among Londoners, seems to have degenerated into *Ketch*;’ (Walker 1815: 29). It is not until the mid 20th century that this raising of [æ] is reversed, yielding the present-day tendency to have a lowered vowel in the TRAP lexical set (Bauer 1994: 120f.).

HAPPY-tensing. Walker writes: ‘The unaccented sound of this letter (*y*, RH) at the end of a syllable, like that of *i* in the same situation, is always like the first sound of *e*: thus *vanity, pleurisy*, &c. If sound alone were consulted, they might be written *vanitee, pleurisee*, &c.’ (Walker 1815: 44). This comment clearly suggests that so-called HAPPY-tensing (Beal 2000) is not an innovation, but rather that the use of [i] as a realisation of the second vowel in HAPPY is an innovation in Received Pronunciation, i.e. that the change is what could be called HAPPY-laxing.

The BILE-BOIL merger. A merger is generally taken to be irreversible because for a later generation it is not possible to recognise that a single pronunciation for two words may have originally consisted of two different pronunciations (Hickey 2004). There are cases which seem to contradict this, however. For instance, the realisation of *boil* and *bile* as */baɪl/* is a merger which was reversed because it did not occur in all varieties of 18th century English for which it is reported. The pronunciation */baɪl/* was re-established for *boil* because speakers had access to varieties of English in which this still occurred. Walker provides confirmation of the variation in the BOIL lexical set: ‘The general, and almost universal sound of this diphthong, is that of *a* in *water*, and the first *e* in *metre*. This double sound is very distinguishable in *boil, toil, spoil, joint, point, anoint*, &c. which sound ought to be carefully preserved, as there is a very prevalent practice among the vulgar of dropping the *o*, and pronouncing these words as if written
bile, tile, splice, &c.’ (Walker 1815: 50).

§2.7.3. Walker and regional variation

Given that a major thrust of prescriptivist commentary in 18th century England was the elimination of regionalisms, it is not surprising that rhetorical grammars and pronouncing dictionaries contained sections entitled ‘Rules to be Observed by the Natives of X’. In Sheridan’s case sections are available covering phonetic ‘improprieties’ in Ireland, Scotland and Wales (Sheridan 1781: 140-6; 146-9; 149-50 respectively). Walker has a section on Ireland where he mentions such features are the schwa epenthesis in final -rm and -lm clusters.

It may be observed too, that the natives of Ireland pronounce \( rm \) at the end of a word so distinctly as to form two separate syllables. Thus storm and farm seem sounded by them as if written staw-rum, fa-rum; while the English sound the \( r \) so soft and so close to the \( m \), that it seems pronounced nearly as if written stawm, faam.

(Walker 1815: 14)

But as a Londoner, Walker was in a strong position to comment on non-standard features in this city and his section ‘Rules to be Observed by the Londoners’ contains comments on a number of ‘faults’ which are known to be, or have been, features of popular London speech.

SECOND FAULT – Pronouncing \( w \) for \( v \), and inversely.

The pronunciation of \( v \) for \( w \), and more frequently of \( w \) for \( v \), among the inhabitants of London, and those not always of the lower order, is a blemish of the first magnitude.

THIRD FAULT – Not sounding \( h \) after \( w \).

The aspirate \( h \) is often sunk, particularly in the capital, where we do not find the least distinction of sound between while and wile, whet and wet, where and were, &c.

FOURTH FAULT – Not sounding \( h \) where it ought to be sounded, and inversely.

A still worse habit than the last prevails, chiefly among the
people of London, that of sinking the *h* at the beginning of words where it ought to be sounded, and of sounding it, either where it is not seen, or where it ought to be sunk.

Apart from the features, i.e. the ‘types’, the phonetic instances, i.e. the ‘tokens’, are of interest because many of them reflect usages which failed to establish themselves in standard British English. For instance, contrary to present-day usage, Walker suggests that *hospital* and *humble* are properly pronounced without initial */h/- (Walker 1815: 59).

Walker is furthermore aware of the special situation of London in the linguistic landscape of Britain and acknowledges that non-standard speech there is viewed differently from that in other parts of the country (‘the pronunciation of the capital ... [is] more generally received’, Walker 1815: 17). Consider the following comment: ‘in other words, though the people of London are erroneous in the pronunciation of many words, the inhabitants of every other place are erroneous in many more.’ (Walker 1815: 17)

§7.4. What Walker does not mention

There are quite a number of features which Walker does not allude to, either in the preface to his dictionary or in individual entries or in his comments on London speech. For instance, there is no reference to T-glottaling – as in *water* [ˈwɔːtər] – none to TH-fronting – as in *think* [θɪŋk] – and no mention of L-vocalisation – as in *milk* [mɪlk] – or HAPPY-laxing – as in *really* [ˈrɛli]. As mentioned above, the last phenomenon is probably a 19th century development in Received Pronunciation. But TH-fronting is widely attested in other varieties of English (see Hickey 2007: 77 for archaic speech in the south-east of Ireland) and T-glottaling is also found in many varieties of considerable vintage, e.g. Dublin English (Hickey 2005: 41f.). For these and similar reasons one cannot conclude that the absence of linguistic comment by Walker and other commentators of the 18th century implies that certain features did not exist in non-standard speech in 18th century Britain or Ireland.
8. The legacy of Sheridan and Walker

In attempting an assessment of the legacy of either Sheridan or Walker one should bear in mind the attitude towards them in the late 18th and in the 19th century. Both were held in great esteem and their influence can be recognised in the revamping of the originals which occurred in the 50 years or so after their deaths, e.g. of Sheridan by Jones (1798) and of Walker by Smart (1836).

At the outset of the Victorian era one finds statements like ‘A Pronouncing Dictionary is almost a necessary appendage to every library’ (Booth 1837 in Mugglestone 2003 [1995]: 40). In our time it is difficult to imagine the esteem in which Walker’s dictionary was held. At the beginning of the 19th century it was claimed to be ‘a glorious monument of human genius’ (Russel in Mugglestone 2003 [1995]: 41). and by the last third of the 19th century it could still be claimed that ‘the name of Walker, as one of our earliest orthoepists, is known and duly appreciated wherever the English language is spoken’ a statement by Peter Nuttall who prepared several editions of Walker between the mid 1850s and mid 1870s (Mugglestone 2003 [1995]: 41). Indeed in terms of shelf life, Walker’s dictionary must be one of the longest running books on language. As mentioned above, it went through over 100 editions between 1791 and 1904, only to be finally replaced by more contemporary works, above all by Daniel Jones’ *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1917).

Did the strictures of Walker or Sheridan (Sheldon 1947) influence the later pronunciation of standard British English? The answer to this question must be ‘no’. In some cases Walker, as opposed to Sheridan, backed a winning horse. For instance, he favoured the pronunciation *merchant* for earlier *marchant* and this did indeed become standard. Other changes which he favoured happened anyway, but not because of his opinion. Consider this statement by Walker: ‘*Gold* is pronounced like *goold* in familiar conversation; but in verse and solemn language ... ought always to rhyme with *old, fold, &c.*’ (Walker 1815: 39). The [goild] pronunciation was his preference (for end-rhymes in verse), but it established itself because of phonetic analogy in everyday speech and not because of its use in ‘solemn language’.
In many respects, Walker was swimming against the tide of language change. His insistence on maintaining regular patterns of pronunciation across the language (his ‘analogy’) and, above all, his view that the spoken word should be close to the written word, meant that he favoured archaic pronunciations. His view that syllable-final /r/ should be pronounced was already conservative in his day.

The legacy of both Sheridan and Walker should be seen in more general terms. Even if their individual recommendations were not accepted into standard British English, both were responsible for furthering general notions of prescriptivism. And certainly both contributed in no small way to the concern with pronunciation which characterises British society to this day.

The work of Sheridan and Walker is also relevant to present-day scholarship for another reason. Their work is a source of information on language change in British English in the last two centuries. Certain much debated dynamic features of present-day British English, such as H-dropping, non-rhoticity, YOD-coalescence, HAPPY-tensing, T-glottaling, L-vocalisation can be given historical depth by studying the statements of 18th century prescriptivists. They also throw light on variation and on how apparent mergers did or did not take place. Furthermore, Sheridan and Walker lived at the time when the anglophone southern hemisphere was beginning to be settled by people from the regions of the British Isles (Hickey 2004). Hence information on the pronunciation of English in their day can prove useful in determining whether the input to these overseas varieties contained features which may or may not be typical of them today.

*My thanks go first and foremost to Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade for her suggestions concerning this paper and for the work in the preparation of this volume. Two anonymous readers are also to be thanked here. Any remaining shortcomings are, as always, the author’s own.

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