

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE PREFACES OF 18th CENTURY ENGLISH GRAMMARS¹

Dolores Fernández Martínez
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria
dfernandez@dfm.ulpgc.es

In the 18th century, the interest in vernaculars and the awareness about the correct use of the language as a feature of social distinction led to the publication of many English grammars. In order to match the demands of the increasingly competitive editorial market, their prefaces emerged as rich fields of discursive exploration in which linguistic structures functioned as highly persuasive instruments. Priestley's and Lowth's grammars epitomized, respectively, the two main trends of grammatical tradition, namely descriptivism and prescriptivism. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the identification systems and transitivity structures used in both prefaces in order to represent the different individuals or participants involved in the text, especially, the author and any potential readers. This work will try to establish to what extent both grammatical movements determined the role assigned to participants through these linguistic devices. This analysis will also illustrate how eighteenth-century grammar writers claimed their authority and ultimately, the influence of the prefaces on the popularity of their grammars.

Keywords: discourse analysis, systemic grammar, English grammars, 18th century.

1. Introduction

The 18th century was a crucial period in the process of codification of the English language when rules were laid down to define standard and non-standard English. The interest in vernaculars together with an increasing awareness about the correct use of the language as a feature of social distinction led to the publication of many English grammars which became instruments of instruction and subjects of study in themselves. The demanding dimensions of the new editorial market justified the necessity of preparing convincing prefaces that exposed the positive qualities of their adjacent grammars. Prefaces appeared, thus, as rich fields of discursive exploration in which linguistic structures functioned as highly persuasive instruments. They were introductory material used by the authors to explain in greater detail the process of elaboration of the grammar, to justify the need for that specific grammar, and even to specify the intended readership. The 18th century English grammatical tradition has received growing attention in recent years (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008, 2009; Hickey 2010). However, discourse analysis still remains as a relatively unexplored area of research in this context, which has led some authors to express the need for further studies in this direction (Watts 2008: 55).

The purpose of this work is to carry out a discourse analysis on the prefaces of two of the most important English grammars of the period, namely Robert Lowth's (1762) *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* and Joseph Priestley's (1761) *The Rudiments of English Grammar*.² Priestley's grammar has usually been ranked on the same level as Lowth's in the popular press (Straaijer 2011: 130). Both authors represent two opposite positions, prescriptivism and descriptivism, respectively, within the

practices of 18th century grammarians. Prescriptivism embodied the doctrine of correctness; descriptivism exemplified the doctrine of usage. Prescriptivism tried to lay down grammatical rules to which usage must conform, whereas descriptivism focused on usage and custom.

20th century historical linguistics accepted the dichotomy between prescriptivism and descriptivism, although nowadays, strongly opposing views are no longer acceptable. Far from the prescriptive-descriptive polarization, the difference between Lowth and Priestley could be regarded as one of emphasis (Beal 2004: 111). Prescriptive grammar offers relevant insight into descriptivism and there seems to be a blend of prescriptive and descriptive language accounts in 18th century English grammars (Rodríguez-Gil 2003). Straaijer (2009) asserts that there is a prescriptive-descriptive continuum, rather than a dichotomy; Priestley's and Lowth's grammars "are neither completely prescriptive, nor completely descriptive" (Straaijer 2011: 257). Thus, it could be assumed that neither Priestley nor Lowth had the intention to be descriptive or prescriptive in the sense that these terms have been understood.

This paper aims to analyze how both prefaces depict the different individuals or participants involved in the text, especially the author and potential readers. Relying on the flexibility of systemic grammar to be applied to earlier periods of the English language, we will examine how participants are presented both as a centre of structure and action through Martin's (1992) identification systems and Halliday's (2004) transitivity structures. Martin's system of identification examines the way in which language is structured to refer to the participants in discourse as well as the relevance attached to them in terms of the referential chains they generate: "The more central the participant ... the more likely it is to provide a referent for a phoric item ..." (Martin 1992: 107). As regards the role of individuals as a centre of action, Martin (1992: 129) comments on the role of the participants as agents within Halliday's transitivity design: "The entry condition for the identification network ... was participant, where this can be defined as a person, place or thing, abstract or concrete, capable of functioning as Agent or Medium in transitivity ..." Halliday's (2004: 168-305) transitivity scheme depicts reality in terms of the three components of participants, processes and circumstances. Transitivity structures sustain the function of the clause as representation in order to give a picture of reality as a complex of processes associated to some participants and circumstances.

Scholars have commented on the traces of authority exhibited by both Lowth and Priestley in their works. Lowth has been regarded as an authoritarian bishop (Tienen-Boon van Ostade 2009: 78, 2010: 2). Likewise, Priestley felt that although languages change by being used, the grammarian had a leading role in the maturation process of the English language (Straaijer 2011: 174). By using the instruments of analysis mentioned, we will argue the way in which Lowth and Priestley impose their authority on their respective grammars, how they construct a role for themselves as textual mediators for the potential readers and how they encourage them to value the process of construction of the grammars. This work will try to establish to what extent both grammatical movements determined the role assigned to participants through the linguistic devices mentioned and, ultimately, the influence of the discourse employed in the preface on the popularity of the grammar.

2. Analysis

On a first approach to the identification systems employed in both prefaces, it can be stated that Lowth's prescriptive text shows a more complex system of personal

references. They highlight the importance of author and readers as continuous agents of transitivity structures, but also allow them to display different roles throughout the text in a strategic way. The presence of participants as a focus of structure in Priestley's preface is not so prominent and they appear mainly as elided agents in the many passive structures which dominate the text. This fact evinces the interest of the text in the presentation of individuals as centres of action. The identifications systems enacted in both prefaces could be summarized as follows:

Lowth (1762):

First person singular (*I*): author

First person plural (*we*): implicit *we* involving author and reader

Third person: potential reader

Second person (*you*): reader

Third person (+superlative): neither reader nor author (referential system to emphasize authority)

Priestley (1761):

Third person elided as agent in passive structures: mainly author, but also reader

Third person as agent in active structures: reader

First person plural (*we*): implicit *we* involving author and reader

Third person singular (*author*): author

First person singular (*I*): author

Third person (+/-superlative): neither reader nor author (referential system to emphasize authority)

Lowth's preface initiates by stating that although the English language has been much cultivated during the last two hundred years, no advances have been made in grammatical accuracy. Subsequently, he refers to Swift following a recurrent pattern of third person reference combined with superlatives which highlights the validity of the author's statements: "one of our most correct, and perhaps our very best prose writers" (p. ii). This structural pattern is completed with a further combination of first person singular (*I*) which inserts the author as a significant centre of reflection: "Indeed the justness of this complaint, as far as I can find, hath never been questioned" (p. ii).

Next, the first person plural is introduced: "let us consider, how, and in what extent, we are to understand this charge brought against the English language" (p. ii). Through the implicit first person plural, involving both author and reader, associated to a process of cognition, Lowth turns the addressee into an accomplice to his commitment and responsibility as regards the necessity of establishing a new English grammar.

The references to the third person combined with superlative forms repeat themselves throughout the text: "Language as it is spoken by the politest part of the nation, and ... our most approved authors, oftentimes offends against every part of grammar?" (p. iii). They may be valued as quality referents who, combined with the authority of the first person singular as a centre of reflection ("I am afraid" (p. iii), "I am persuaded" (p.iii)), support Lowth's call for a regular syntax.

A joint commitment with the reader pervades the text through the first person plural. Although Lowth admits the difficulty of the task ("nothing is commonly ... more difficult, than to give a Demonstration" (p. v)), he deplores the neglect of grammar. At that point, the first person *we* takes control of the system of personal references. By means of transitivity patterns of material, mental and relational verbs, *we* establishes as an agent of processes of doing, sensing and being. *We* is a senser of cognitive verbs

("we should find ourselves under a necessity of studying it with more care and attention" (p. vi), "we take it for granted" (p. vi), "we do not perceive them" (p. vii)), carrier of circumstantial relational process ("we stand in need of them" (p. vii)) and actor of material actions which describe their experience with the language ("we pass thro' in our childhood" (p. vii), "we apply ourselves to it" (p. vii)). These different sides of experience impose a grammatical challenge on the readers as individuals negatively affected by the linguistic situation denounced by the author.

The text proceeds by making use of the third person plural + superlative: "the greatest Critic and most able Grammarian ... was frequently as a loss" (p. viii) and "our best Authors ... have sometimes fallen into mistakes" (p. ix). They describe a deficient situation which Lowth contrasts with a desirable presentation of *we* in the future ("if we would attain to a due degree of skill in it" (p. viii)), also reinforced through the description of a third person system representing the reader in a similarly satisfying situation in the future: "every person of a liberal education ... every one who undertakes to inform or entertain the public, that he should be able to express himself with propriety and accuracy" (p. viii-ix). Lowth continues describing the likely reader through a combination of both first person plural and third person in the second half of the text.

Lowth invites the third person to reflect, "to admonish those ... that they would do well to consider ... to be able to judge" (p. x). Afterwards, the third person prevails in the text portraying a state of linguistic excellence which propagates the benefits of this new grammar: "all those who are initiated in a learned education ... to furnish themselves with the knowledge of modern languages" (p. xi), "he has a competent knowledge ... he then will apply himself with great advantage to any foreign language" (p. xii). Thus, the author tries to set up the behaviour of the reader as a centre of action by means of different systems of identification which refer mainly to an ideal future context. Almost at the end of the preface, the references to the reader take the form of the second person *you* which is used as a more direct and persuasive way of appealing the addressee: "would you go about to explain it to him?" (p. xii). Meanwhile, the author continues interspersing his authority in the text as a centre of reflection through the first person singular ("I believe" (p. ix), "I think" (p. xi)).

In Priestley's preface, the passive voice dominates the text in different forms, but mostly, by locating the author as the elided agent of actions performed in the elaboration of this grammar: "care hath been taken" (p. iii), "are laid down in a methodical manner" (p. iii), "avoided" (p. iii), "judged" (p. iii), "observed" (p. iii). The author lays more emphasis on himself as a centre of action so as to focus the reader's attention on the description of the construction of his grammar and especially, on the reflexive and conscious tasks entailed in this process, as evinced by mental verbs in transitivity structures.

Priestley hardly uses the third person as agent in active structures which describe the potential reader ("young persons of both sexes take a pleasure in learning ... more easily obtain clear ideas" (p. iii-iv)). He prefers to stick to the passive with constructions made up of cognitive processes. By means of them he tries to lead the judgements of the receiver when reading his grammar: "If it be considered ... it will not be deemed an imperfection" (p. iv).

The presence of the first person singular as a centre of reflection is not very common ("I think" (p. vii), "I believe" (p. viii), "I believe" (p. ix)). Contrasting Lowth, Priestley employs the third person singular to refer to himself: "The author hath no higher views in what he now presents to the public, than to give the youth of our nation"

(p. v). This kind of structure allows him to establish an explicit and persuasive connection with the reader.

The first person plural *we* places the reader in a historical context, describing his deficient past experience with the language: “we are indebted to the long continued barbarism of the people from whom we received it” (p. v). The default past facilitates the placement of the first person plural in a future context, with transitivity structures which try to control and establish his behaviour: “we can have recourse, to adjust these differences” (p. vi). Priestly also influences the reader through the attachment of cognitive verbs to the first person plural (“We need make no doubt but that the best forms of speech will, in time, establish themselves” (p. vii)).

As in Lowth’s preface, Priestley makes use of the third person to reinforce his arguments, although not always combined with the superlative form: “since good authors have adopted different forms of speech ... one authority may be of as much weight as another” (p. vi). The third person + superlative also appears, but not as agent of actions: “the best and the most numerous authorities have been carefully followed” (p. vii). Sharing Lowth’s strategy, Priestly places the third person again in an ideal linguistic state (“a language that many persons have leisure to read and write” (p. vii)). Unlike Lowth, he finally specifies the referents within an educational context: “All the skill that our youth at school have in it” (p. viii), “youth may be led” (p. ix) and “every teacher’s own judgement will direct him” (p. xi), “any teacher to supply the want of them” (p. xi), “requiring his pupils to point out” (p. xi).

At the end, the implicit *we* imposes on the reader the obligation to use the grammar: “we must introduce into our schools” (p. ix). In order to strengthen the effectiveness of his command, the author, represented by the third person singular, is assigned a combination of material, existential and mental processes which underline the success of his grammar: “the author of this attempt is not without hopes of better success” (p. x), “he hath been apprized of those faults, hath endeavoured to avoid them, he flatters ...” (p. x).

3. Conclusion

Lowth’s and Priestly’s convincing arguments to support their grammars rest on a systematic use of identification systems and transitivity structures which present participants in a strategic way. They specify the intended readership by assigning different roles to them, and they also construct a role for themselves as textual mediators for the potential readers. They encourage the reader to value the process of construction of the grammar and the need for that specific grammar. Nevertheless, the discursive methods of Lowth and Priestley to present participants in the text are divergent. Lowth depicts participants as subjects of transitivity structures, whereas Priestley focuses on their actions mainly through passive structures with elided agents. Lowth’s preface is a discourse of participants as a centre of structure and action. Prescriptivism through Lowth’s preface uncovers more richness of referential systems which embody individuals in different roles. By means of them the author tries to convince the reader of the convenience of establishing rules. In contrast, Priestley’s preface relies on participants as a centre of action. He is mainly concerned with describing the process of elaboration of the grammar and the experience of the readers with the language. However, despite the conclusions obtained from this study, further work remains to be carried out so as to discern if the results provided by the analysis of these two texts could also be applied to the rest of prefaces labelled either as descriptive or prescriptive.

Notes

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2. The editions consulted in this article have been taken from *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (ECCO).

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