



# Lexical Prescriptivism in Eighteenth- Century Grammars

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*The author poses the question of when and how prescriptivism develops throughout the grammars of the eighteenth century. Eighteen grammars are examined to answer this question. The author finds that the first solid example of prescriptivism is from Lowth in 1762. This trend slowly develops leading to another flare of prescriptivism in 1785 by Ussher. The author suggests the next step to this research is to study how grammar books turn into usage manuals*

# Introduction

Standardization of the English language began to take place at an increasing rate during the early modern era. Many factors influenced this standardization, such as the invention of the printing press and the urbanization of London. Because English was gaining prestige by replacing Latin in courts, schools, and churches, people felt that rules and bounds (language planning) needed to be set in place. Therefore, during the eighteenth century, dozens of grammars were written to ensure understanding of the workings of the English language. By the twentieth century, presumably because of this trend toward codification and standardization, grammars gave way to usage manuals that dealt mostly with word meanings and rules for when to use which variants.

John E. Joseph discusses the reason for the emergence of these rules:

The awareness of variants seems inevitably to be accompanied by value judgment. . . . Wherever variants are in competition, one will always be preferred to the other, creating hierarchies which it is the task of language education to inculcate. The canonical form of such education is “Say *x*, not *y*” (Joseph 1987).

This formula, in other words, says to “use *x* (e.g., infer, imply, disinterested, etc.) and do not use *y* in this or that environment.” Another variation of the formula would be, “*this word* means *x* and does not mean *y*.” The purpose of this article is to investigate how often and in what contexts the authors of these popular grammars would include word meanings, lexical rules, or usage tips along with the basic grammar of English. How substantial were these prescriptive tidbits?

I will gather data by reviewing several grammars from the eighteenth century and citing how often this formula occurs and in what contexts. If a pattern unfolds in the findings, we will come to a greater understanding of when word meanings became more important to

compilers of usage manuals. In other words, we will gain insights about the process of prescriptivism and standardization in the eighteenth century.

## Literature Review

The eighteen grammars used for this paper range in publication date from 1654 to 1785. Most were written by British authors, but several were written by American authors. The longest grammar in the collection is 310 pages, written by James Greenwood in 1711. The shortest volume is 58 pages, written by Ralph Harrison in 1777. The table below shows the details for each book.

Author	Title	Pub. Date	# Pages
Jeremiah Wharton	<i>The English Grammar</i>	1654	109
Charles Gildon & John Brightland	<i>A Grammar of the English Tongue</i>	1711	180
James Greenwood	<i>An Essay Towards a Practical English Grammar</i>	1711	310
Michael Mairraire	<i>An English Grammar</i>	1712	272
Hugh Jones	<i>An Accidence to the English Tongue</i>	1724	69
Ann Fisher	<i>A New Grammar</i>	1750	158
Thomas Dilworth	<i>A New Guide to the English Tongue</i>	1751	154
James Gough	<i>A Practical Grammar of the English Tongue</i>	1754	128
James Buchanan	<i>The British Grammar</i>	1762	255
Robert Lowth	<i>A Short Introduction to the English Grammar</i>	1762	186
John Ash	<i>Grammatical Institutes</i>	1763	151
Daniel Fenning	<i>A New Grammar of the English Language</i>	1771	204

Author	Title	Pub. Date	# Pages
Anselm Bayly	<i>A Plain and Complete Grammar with the English Accidence</i>	1772	136
Ralph Harrison	<i>Institutes of English Grammar</i>	1777	58
Noah Webster	<i>A Grammatical Institute of the English Language (2 volumes)</i>	1783/ 1784	119/ 139
John Fell	<i>An Essay Towards an English Grammar</i>	1784	191
George Ussher	<i>The Elements of English Grammar</i>	1785	124

## Methodology

Each grammar was examined page by page to find examples of the author teaching or expounding word meanings instead of fundamental English grammar, specifically following the pattern expressed by Joseph. Since it was unknown what exactly would be gathered from such perusing, any instance of slight prescriptivism was noted in a spreadsheet. At first, there were only thirteen grammar books selected for the articles; however, no substantial pattern was found in the data, so more books were added to fill in some gaps in the timeline and to discover some more evidence of word meanings. The five books that were added to the original thirteen helped to solidify the results.

After all of the citations were recorded, a second run-through of the books was done to make sure that nothing was forgotten or missed. Usually, if an author gave many instances of word meanings or lists of commonly confused words, more attention was given to that book and greater care was taken when looking at each page for more examples. The books were then set aside so that the data could be filtered, taking out all citations that were not related specifically to lexical grammar and word meanings.

# Results and Discussion

In this section, we highlight the overall trends found in the data and give specific citations that exemplify the formula. All of this information answers the main question of how and when word meanings took their place in grammar books. The best way to discuss the results is to start with Wharton's grammar (published in 1654) and work down the list chronologically, concluding with Ussher's *The Elements of English Grammar* (published in 1785).

Jeremiah Wharton wrote *The English Grammar* to provide preparation for those that wanted to learn Latin. Most of his book focuses on the spelling and stress of English words; he does not talk much about grammar itself until halfway through the book. At the end of his book, from page 89 to 109, he gives "a collection of certain words Like in *Sound*, but Unlike in *Signification* and manner of *writing*; which being brought together into one short Sentence, the difference betwixt them is more easily and certainly discerned, and consequently their true manner of Writing" (Wharton 89). I believe this is the first step to introducing lexical prescriptivism into a grammar, but it is done in a very mild way. He does not offer opinions (so he is not following the formula), but he defines each word alphabetically in a contextual manner, so that the readers know the differences.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the data proves that lexical prescriptions and word meanings are minimal. Both Gildon and Brightland's grammar (1711) and Maittaire's grammar (1712) do not offer any prescriptive opinions or word meanings. Instead, they deal solely with teaching the rudiments of English to schoolchildren. Greenwood's *An Essay Towards a Practical English Grammar* (1711) avoids lexical prescriptivism, except in one instance. Starting on page 138, a table of irregular verbs is given, showing present tense, past tense, and past participle forms. This type of table is grammatical and normally would not pertain to this particular study, except that the authors put an asterisk next to each form that they deemed improper

or unusual. This is a varied version of the formula “use  $x$  and do not use  $y$ .” After this publication, lists and tables of this kind started showing up more frequently.

Even in 1724, when Hugh Jones published the first known English grammar in America, there are only hints of a prescriptive trend. He writes, “Therefore it is wished, that a Publick *Standard* were fix’d; as to *Touchstone* to true *English*, whereby it might be regulated, and proved, which alone might give License to *Persons*, and *Occasions* to make *Additions*, or *Corrections*” (Jones 1967). Although he states this wish, he makes no attempt to formulate rules that would regulate the language through the lexicon.

By the 1750s, there are more instances of authors either taking license to prescribe the lexicon or giving word meanings to dictate which variant to use. In her *A New Grammar* (1750), Ann Fisher gives an alphabetical list of “Words the same or nearly alike, in Sound, but different in Signification and Spelling” (Fisher 1968). Each word is defined so that readers know how to differentiate. In 1751, Dilworth followed suit in part two of his *A New Guide to the English Tongue*. His table spans from page 77 to page 84. Then again, in 1754, James Gough publishes his grammar and includes a table of “Words sounding alike, but differently written” (Gough 1967). His list is alphabetical, categorized by the number of syllables, and it spans thirteen pages. Here are some citations from his list: “*Pore* of the Skin, *Poor* needy, *Pour* out of a Vessel; *Eminent* famous, *Imminent* overhead” (Gough 1967). All three of these authors share several pairs, but each one also has words that the other two do not.

In the 1760s, prescriptivism became the norm, but still more so for grammar than for vocabulary. Buchanan’s *The British Grammar* is full of rules for when to use which pronoun, or which form of the verb, or this adjective over that adverb. However, it was Robert Lowth’s *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* in 1762 that allowed word meanings and lexical prescriptivism to truly blossom in grammar books. Lowth is unafraid to declare his opinion as the

rule, and he strictly follows the formula discussed earlier. On page 43, he states, “*Lesser* . . . is a barbarous corruption of *Less*, formed by the vulgar from the habit of terminating comparisons in *er*.” On page 71, he discusses the irregular forms of verbs and states his opinion about obsolete forms. Pages 75–77 give us the famous issues of *lie* vs. *lay*, *set* vs. *sit*, and *flee* vs. *fly*. In each of these citations, Lowth follows Joseph’s formula. Here is one more example that shows how strictly Lowth seems to use the formula: “The conjunction *because* used to express the motive or end, is either improper or obsolete. . . . We should now make use of *that*” (Lowth 1967).

After Lowth’s authoritative grammar, we see many of the same tables and lists as in previous grammars. From 1763 to 1784, there is not any real new material. Ash (1763) and Bayly (1772) discuss the proper use and place of relative pronouns with some passion (though that is more grammatical than lexical). Fenning (1771) gives a table of irregular verb forms in present, past, and participle tenses with some opinions about which form is preferred over another. Harrison (1777) publishes a grammar that is strictly descriptive, with no hints toward prescriptivism at all. Webster (1783) provides a table in the first volume of *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language* that depicts “Words, the same in sound, but different in spelling and signification” which takes up four pages. Fell (1784) follows in the footsteps of Ash and Bayly, discussing the same material. It seems that all authors felt Lowth had done a good enough job and that they did not have more to add.

It is not until George Neville Ussher’s *The Elements of English Grammar* in 1785 that we find a grammar book full of word meanings and lexical prescriptive rules. Even without an in-depth reading of the book, fifteen different instances of word meanings and lexical rules stood out. If more time could be taken to read thoroughly, more instances would be found. Ussher gave simple rules such as “*Aught* has no variation, and is sometimes improperly written *ought*” and “*Latter* and *last* refer to either time or place; *later* and *latest* to time only.” The following is an example of a rule that is more complex:

*Either* and *each* have different meanings. *Either* properly signifies only the one or the other of two things taken separately; . . . Instead of saying, *he shall not have any of my two horses*, we ought to say, *he shall not have either of my two horses* . . . *Each* signifies two or a greater number taken separately. . . . The following sentences are faulty: *The King of Israel and Jehosophat King of Judah sat either of them on his throne. Nadab and Abihu took either of them his censor. Either* in both places ought to be *each* (Ussher 1967).

Ussher spares no detail in clarifying each rule so that it would be understandable, and he does it throughout his entire grammar.

## Conclusion

Throughout the eighteenth century, grammars became increasingly prescriptive with two significant spikes: the first in 1762 with Lowth and the second in 1785 with Ussher. These two authors particularly followed all variants of the formula for usage prescriptions given by Joseph. Lowth is known for his authoritative stance in the English standardization process, so it logically follows that after the 1760s, word meanings would take a more prominent role in grammars. The next step in solidifying the answer to the question about grammars turning into usage manuals is to investigate nineteenth-century grammars to see how the trend continued.

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