Traditional grammar and corpus linguistics
'with critical notes'

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Abstract

After Robert Lowth published his A Short Introduction to English Grammar: With Critical Notes in 1762, no one who took a serious interest in the subject could not have seen that he had changed the definition and practice of this subject forever. The purpose of this study is to show how he did it.

I defend Lowth against the oft-levelled charges of lack of grammatical competence and acumen, arbitrariness, and disregard for usage; above all, for his desire to 'regulate' the English language by prescribing arbitrary rules, which would at the same time proscribe errors.

He is shown as highly competent in the field of grammar and literary criticism, and displays considerable originality, ingenuity and skill in the fashioning and application of his rules, based on the meta-principle of Strict Construction. Far from imposing a Latinate grammar on English, he sought to eliminate, among other constructions, the non-native Latinisms, imported into English during the English Renaissance (1550-1660) through the medium of the Periodic Sentence. He also judged improper those native English syntactic forms which also violated the principle of Strict Construction. In this regard he represented the 18thC purist view of English that replaced the looser construction of earlier generations with a more refined, more construable prose, epitomized by Samuel Johnson.

Lowth is far from perfect, and neither is his English Grammar, but most present-day critics write about myths and inventions of their own, instead of studying Lowth’s life and works for what they represented to the scholars and educated classes of his day, who regarded him highly as a respected officer of the Church and a distinguished man of letters.

Ask, and it shall be given you;
seek, and ye shall find;
knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

For everyone that asketh receiveth;
and he that seeketh findeth;
and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

Jesus, Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 7:7-8; Luke 11:9-10
I shall only remark here, how easily men take upon trust, how willingly they are satisfied with, and how confidently they repeat after others, false explanations of what they do not understand.\(^2\)

\begin{quote}
Dans les champs de l'observation,
le hasard ne favorise que les esprits préparés.

'In the field of observation, chance favours only the prepared minds. '
Freely: "In the empirical sciences, only prepared minds are favoured by chance discoveries."
— Louis Pasteur (1822-1895), French chemist and biologist. Address given on the inauguration of the Faculty of Science, University of Lille, 7 December 1854.
\end{quote}

Sat. 16 [June 1770]— … In the afternoon I looked over Dr. Priestley's English Grammar. I wonder he would publish it after Bishop Lowth's.\(^3\)

Preface

In this little jeu d'esprit, I defend Robert Lowth against the oft-levelled charges of lack of grammatical competence and acumen, arbitrariness, and disregard for usage; above all, for his desire to 'regulate' the language, i.e., set up rules for it (cf. Latin \textit{regula} 'rule'), to prescribe English usage by arbitrary rules, which would at the same time proscribe errors.\(^4\)

He is shown as highly competent in the field of grammar and literature, and displays considerable originality, ingenuity and skill in the fashioning and application of his grammatical rules. Far from imposing a Latinate grammar on English, he sought to eliminate, among other constructions, the non-native Latinisms, imported into English during the English Renaissance (1550-1660), that, as he thought, rightly or wrongly, disfigured the language, especially of the earlier generation of post-Restoration writers, even the most eminent. He also judged improper those native English syntactic forms that violated the principles of Strict Construction. In this regard he represented the 18thC purist view of English that replaced the looser construction of this and earlier generations with a more refined, more construable prose. Samuel Johnson epitomizes this carefully crafted new prose style, based on the periodic sentence.

Lowth is far from perfect, and neither is his \textit{A Short Introduction to English Grammar: With Critical Notes} (1762), but most present-day critics, from the depths of their abysmal ignorance of what Lowth actually says and does, and their \textit{a priori} prejudices and lack of analytical understanding, write about myths and inventions of their own,\(^5\) instead of studying Lowths life and works for what they represented to the scholars and educated classes of his day, who regarded him highly as a respected officer of the Church and a distinguished man of letters.