Gulliver’s Travels and the Language Debates of Swift’s Time

Anne Mulhall

DOI: 10.4000/books.puc.360
Publisher: Presses universitaires de Caen
Place of publication: Presses universitaires de Caen
Year of publication: 2002
Published on OpenEdition Books: 20 December 2012
Serie: Littérature et civilisation irlandaises
Electronic ISBN: Littérature et civilisation irlandaises

http://books.openedition.org

Electronic reference

The text is a facsimile of the print edition.
**GULLIVER’S TRAVELS**

AND THE LANGUAGE DEBATES OF SWIFT’S TIME

In a sermon delivered at the funeral of John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury, Gilbert Burnet praises the churchman’s facility with language:

Together with the Pomp of Words he did also cut off all Superfluities and needless Enlargements: he said what was just necessary to give clear Ideas of things, no more … the whole Thread was of a piece, plain and distinct. No affectations of Learning, no squeezing of Texts, no superficial Strains, no false Thoughts nor bold Flights, all was solid and yet lively, and grave as well as Fine.

Extolling the late archbishop’s use of language, Burnet also offers to posterity a summation of the virtues of linguistic best practice as it was understood in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. He emphasizes the values of clarity and perspicuity; he expresses a fashionable contempt for the use of ornament and unchecked verbosity, and rejects forced and artificial interpretations of texts. In *Gulliver’s Travels*, Gulliver praises the writing style of the Brobdingnagians in similar terms:

Their Stile is clear, masculine, and smooth, but not Florid; for they avoid nothing more than multiplying unnecessary Words, or using various Expressions.

There were good reasons for the advancement of such aesthetic principles, reasons that went beyond concern merely for stylistic finesse. In advocating a simple plainness, the Anglican and Latitudinarian divines were reacting to what they perceived as the dangerous excesses of the former age, an age

---

which had been scarred by civil war and political upheaval. The disputes about language and interpretation that arose in later seventeenth-century England were a response to political and social pressures; they were also inextricably linked to efforts in that period to establish a new basis for religious and scientific knowledge and truth. In this essay, I discuss the nature of those linguistic disputes and the ways in which they are addressed by Swift in *Gulliver’s Travels*.

As I indicated, for the Anglican Church, a logical connection was felt to exist between a rhetorical and a doctrinal mean, between aesthetic correctness and moral rectitude. The abuse of words was a clear indication of moral degeneracy. In order to counteract the respective defects of, on the one hand, the overly literal mindset of the Dissenters and, on the other, of the allegorically inclined Romanists, Anglican divines such as Robert South, John Tillotson, and Edward Stillingfleet advocated a *via media* between the immoderation attendant on either a doggedly Spartan or a fancifully overwrought mode of discourse or interpretation.

As we might expect, this view – that a corrupted language belied moral and intellectual corruption – was deeply felt by Swift. This belief informs the writer’s engagement with the problems endemic to language, whether spoken or written. There are many ways in which language can degenerate, not least of them the infractions made by the vagaries of historical accident and the passage of time on the stability of a language. These forms of linguistic corruption much exercised Swift, as they did several of his contemporaries and near-contemporaries.

---

3. The Anglican Church emerged as the “orthodox” voice of Protestantism after the Restoration of the monarchy in England in 1660. The Latitudinarians were within this fold, but are usually differentiated from their peers by their more marked insistence on the power of reason to bring to light the truth of Scripture. Both Anglicans and Latitudinarians were opposed to the Puritans or Dissenters, those sects which had broken away from the “mainstream” of English Protestantism and whom Cromwell had led to victory over the Royalist forces during the English Civil War. After the collapse of the Commonwealth established by Cromwell and the Restoration of Charles II, the established church was determined to defuse any further threat represented by the dissenting sects.


Swift’s concerns about the degeneration of the English language are apparent in *Gulliver’s Travels*. In the “Letter from Captain Gulliver to his Cousin Sympson”, Gulliver bemoans the rapidity with which language changes:

> Sea-Yahos are apt, like the Land ones, to become new-fangled in their Words; which the latter change every Year; insomuch, as I remember upon each Return to mine own Country, their old dialect was so altered, that I could hardly understand the new. (xxxv)

Gulliver makes a similar observation while visiting Luggnagg, where the Struldbrugs, who have the dubious gift of immortality, are a living testament to the impermanence of linguistic meaning:

> The Language of this Country being always upon the Flux the Struldbruggs of one Age do not understand those of another; neither are they able after two Hundred Years to hold any Conversation (farther than by a few general Words) with their Neighbours the Mortals. (205)

These concerns had been voiced earlier in Swift’s career, in *A Proposal for the Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712), a public letter addressed to Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford. According to Swift, English was at its most perfect during the reign of Elizabeth I; its descent into its current state began with the Civil War. He explains why the ascendance of the Puritan forces had such a detrimental effect on the language:

> During the Usurpation, such an Infusion of Enthusiastick Jargon prevailed in every Writing, as was not shaken off in many Years after. To this succeeded that Licentiousness which entered with the Restoration; and from infecting our Religion and Morals, fell to corrupt our Language. 7

The extremes of Puritan zeal and Restoration bawdiness conspired to hasten the deterioration of the language. The implicit connection between

---

religion, morality and language could hardly be made more explicitly. As a panacea to counteract this degeneration, Swift suggests the establishment of a body along the lines of the Académie française that will regularize and stabilize the language, protecting it from the whims of fashion and what Swift regards as the invidious processes of change over time.

What is the “Enthusiastick Jargon” condemned by Swift, and why is it subject to his censure? To understand what Swift is railing against, it is necessary to gloss briefly the different methods of reading the Bible that arose in the mid 17th century and that endured into the 18th century. Perhaps the most pronounced feature of pre-Restoration Protestant exegesis was its insistence on the literal and historical senses of Scripture, a reaction against the mystical, allegorizing interpretation of Scripture favored by Roman Catholicism. However, this emphasis on the literal meaning of the Bible tended to result in Millenarian interpretations of Scripture as prophetic of the immediate historical moment. For instance, David in the Old Testament was understood to be prophetic of Cromwell in mid 17th century England; Cromwell was the fulfillment of God’s promise to his Chosen People. As David had led the Israelites, so Cromwell was leading his people to the Promised Land. This tendency of Puritan exegesis to ascribe literal truth to what were essentially allegorical readings of Scripture is well evidenced by the writings of various preachers and divines. In *The Gospel-Treasury Opened* (1653), to take one such example, John Everard, a Puritan divine, explains the contemporary relevance of sacred history:

> What is all this long History to us? But that in this History and the rest, and so in all other Scriptures, either Promises or Threatnings, we may see they are made to us, as well as to the people to whom they were immediately spoken: Let me tell you this comfortable word, that in this very History, there is a *Good Land* promised to us, as well as to those *Israelites*.¹

The effect of this concentration on the part of many Protestant sects on the historical “truth” of Scripture was not to establish a uniform and incontrovertible interpretation of Scripture; rather, it created a diversity of interpretations which were highly speculative and, as such, politically dangerous. After the Restoration, Anglican divines were understandably wary of such potentially subversive readings of Scripture. Gerard Reedy describes their reaction:

They feared a recurrence of privatistic and sectarian scriptural interpretations that had characterized, for the divines, the Interregnum, and that were thought to legitimize sedition.\(^9\)

As a counter-movement to such dangerous extremity, Anglicans attempted the middle way; “their hermeneutics”, Paul Korshin explains, “concentrated on obtaining a proper balance between the mysteries and literalism”, that is, a \textit{via media} between, on the one hand, the mystical, abstract interpretation of Scripture imposed on its adherents by the Catholic hierarchy and, on the other hand, the interpreting frenzy of the Dissenters sanctioned by the “private spirit”.\(^10\)

The issues involved in determining the correct mode of reading Scripture raise a fundamental linguistic problem, that is, the tension between the spoken and the written word. For Roman Catholics, ultimate doctrinal authority resides in the oral tradition of the church rather than in the written word of Scripture; for Protestants, such authority is to be found in the Bible, and not in any orally transmitted tradition.\(^11\) However, a number

11. On the issue of the written text versus oral tradition, see Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, \textit{An Exposition of the Doctrine of the Catholic Church in Matters of Controversie}, 5th ed., London, [no imprint], 1685, pp. 34-40; Louis Maimbourg, \textit{An Historical Treatise of the Foundation and Prerogatives of the Church of Rome, And of Her Bishops}, London, Joseph Hindmarsh, 1685, pp. 72ff. [John Gother], \textit{A Papist Misrepresented and Represented: Or, A Twofold Character of Popery}, [no imprint], 1685, pp. 27-38. On the Protestant side, see Edward Sillingfleet, \textit{A Rational Account}, in \textit{Works}, 6 vols, London, George and Henry Mortlock, 1709-10, vol. IV, pp. 156-95; John Tillotson, \textit{The Rule of Faith}, in \textit{Works}, 3 vols, 4th ed., London, J. Round et al., 1727, vol. I, pp. 533-37 and passim; John Tillotson, \textit{A Discourse Against Transubstantiation}, 4th ed., London, Brazabon Aylmor, 1685, pp. 4-20. The dichotomy between oral and written forms of language surfaces in Part IV when we learn that the Houyhnhnms communicate solely by means of speech; they have no form of written signification. We are told that “the Houyhnhnms have no Letters, and consequently their Knowledge is all traditional” (265). For Terry Castle, the fact that their culture is exclusively oral leads to the conclusion that Swift holds to a Platonic “grammatology”, whereby orality is given priority over speech; the written word is merely a shadow of the ideal, the spoken utterance. “Part Four of \textit{Gulliver’s Travels} is, in one reading”, Castle alleges, “a complex meditation on the problematic nature of writing and the possible corruption implied by the Text.” (“Why the Houyhnhnms Don’t Write: Swift, Satire, and the Fear of the Text”, in \textit{Gulliver’s Travels}, Christopher Fox (ed.), Boston and New York, Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1995, p. 381). Marcus Walsh, however, has convincingly refuted this assertion:
of difficulties arise from this reliance on the authority of the text. It brings up the problems attendant upon the translation of texts from one language into another; questions about the authenticity of the text must also be met. Father Richard Simon, in his controversial work *A Critical History of the Old Testament* (1682), addresses the problems of Scriptural translation and interpretation. Protestantism, having jettisoned the oral tradition of the Catholic Church, stands in need of a univocal written authority. In their concern to establish such an authority, the Protestant churches are obliged to smooth over the inaccuracies of the Biblical text:

> Considering they allege the Scripture to be the only Rule of their Religion, they had reason sometimes in their Translations not to take notice of the different significations of the Hebrew words. This Method could only make the people doubt of the certainty of their Religion, which was grounded upon so uncertain a Principle. On the contrary, the Roman Church, who besides Scripture acknowledges true Tradition as a Principle of its Religion, is not ashamed to confess that the Hebrew Text of the Bible may be interpreted several ways by reason of the Equivocation of Hebrew words.  

Furthermore, as every reading of a text may result in a different interpretation of that text, establishing a univocal, authoritative textual meaning becomes fraught with difficulty.

As Swift makes clear in *Gulliver’s Travels*, the disputes between the churches that resulted from conflicting interpretations of Scripture and tradition were by no means confined to the realm of theological disputation. Such disagreements had very real and measurable consequences. It is, for instance, a doctrinal dispute of absurd triviality that leads to the long-standing war between Lilliput and Blefuscu in Book I of *Gulliver’s Travels*. An edict commanding that all Lilliputians should henceforth break their eggs at the smaller end heralded the beginning of the “Big-Endian” controversy, which has resulted in six revolutions (encouraged by the kingdom of Blefuscu, proud upholder of the “Big-Endian” doctrine), the death of one emperor and the dethronement of another – a clear analogy to the course of British history since the Reformation:

---

It is computed, that eleven Thousand Persons have, at several Times, suffered Death, rather than submit to break their Eggs at the smaller End. Many hundred large Volumes have been published upon this Controversy: But the Books of the Big-Endians have been long forbidden, and the whole Party rendered incapable by Law of holding Employments. (36)

Furthermore, the Lilliputians stand accused by the Emperors of Belfuscu of making a Schism in Religion, by offending against a fundamental doctrine of our great Prophet Lustrog, in the fifty-fourth Chapter of the Brundecral (which is their Alcoran). This, however, is thought to be a mere Strain upon the Text: For the words are these; That all true Believers shall break their Eggs at the convenient End: and which is the convenient End, seems, in my humble opinion, to be left to every man’s Conscience, or at least in the power of the chief Magistrate to determine. (37)

Language and the way we interpret it can have fatal consequences. The interpretation of texts, specifically the text of Scripture, can lead to schism and sedition, even if disputed points of doctrine bring us into the realm of the ridiculous. Linguistic reformation was, then, not merely an end in itself. There were urgent political reasons for restricting the powers of the word. "Sick of the religious controversies that had brought so much woe in their wake", R.F. Jones has remarked, "men were beginning to discover in language the cause of the evil".13 A second point raised by Swift is the power of such controversies to spawn a nightmarish brood of treatises, tracts, and pamphlets – a phenomenon well evidenced by the disputes between the Catholic and Protestant churches during the late 17th century.14

The link between interpretation and false knowledge is not confined to the religious sphere. This implicit connection likewise infects the realms

14. Clear evidence of the sheer volume and seriousness of these debates is provided by the disputes between Anglican churchmen and their Catholic counterparts on points of doctrine during the 1680s. For a comprehensive listing of the literature, see Thomas Jones (ed.), A Catalogue of the Collections of Tracts For and Against Popery (Published in or about the reign of James II), 2 parts, Publications of the Chetham Society, vol. 48, 1859 and vol. 64, 1865. Swift’s point about the effects of the easy production of printed matter recurs later in Part III, chapter 5, in the monstrous form of a machine that produces texts by a random assembly of words.
of politics, philosophy and poetry. The “anagrammatick method” described by Gulliver in Part III offers us a particularly jaundiced view of the malleability of the relationship between signifier and signified, between a word and its meaning. The written word is easily made the instrument of evil designs. When certain parties conspire to achieve their ends, they first must decide “what suspected persons shall be accused of a plot”:

Then effectual Care is taken to secure all their Letters and other Papers, and put the Owners in Chains. These Papers are delivered to a Set of Artists very dexterous in finding out the mysterious Meanings of Words, Syllables, and Letters. For instance, they can decypher a Close-stool to signify a Privy Council; a Flock of Geese, a Senate; a lame Dog, an Invader … a Broom, a Revolution … a broken Reed, a Court of Justice; an empty Tun, a General; a running Sore, the Administration. (183)

In a similar, albeit less pressing fashion, the interpreters of Homer and Aristotle have done a disservice to poetic and philosophical knowledge through their wrong interpretations of those two towering figures. While in Glubbdubrib, where one can meet the spirits of the dead, Gulliver summons Homer, Aristotle and the crowded ranks of their commentators. Neither of the ancients have ever met their interpreters:

these Commentators always kept in the most distant Quarters from their Principals in the lower World, through a Consciousness of Shame and Guilt, because they had so horribly misrepresented the Meaning of those Authors to Posterity. (189)

The Brobdingnagians, whom we meet in Part II, represent the measured attitude toward the written word and its interpretation that Swift, in common with his Anglican peers, holds as a standard. That Gulliver disapproves of the Brobdingnagians’ discerning reserve in matters of language, learning and interpretation, is itself a sign of their wisdom in the eyes of the author. “The Learning of this People is very defective”, Gulliver tuts, “consisting only in Morality, History, Poetry, and Mathematics.” Furthermore, the king’s library, the largest in the kingdom, holds only a thousand books. As to the law, the Brobdingnagians observe a commendable brevity of expression in their legal discourse. “No Law of that Country must exceed in Words the Number of Letters in their Alphabet”, Gulliver reports,

which consists only in two and twenty. But indeed, few of them extend even to that Length. They are expressed in the most plain and simple Terms, wherein those people are not Mercurial enough to discover above one Interpretation. And, to write a comment upon any Law, is a capital Crime. (125)
A world where all expression is limited to the clear and succinct, and where all attempts at individual interpretation is a high crime, must have held considerable attractions from the Anglican point of view. It is precisely the sort of situation aimed at by the Anglican rule of faith, according to which the letter of the text is sufficient to the revelation of truth; there is no reason to scramble after hidden meanings, nor is pained exegesis of obscure passages necessary or even desirable. The surface of the text contains its meaning; Scripture is clear and its sense in plain view.

It is difficult to overstate the influence of the new empirical science on attitudes toward language in Swift’s time. The empirical method was inherited from Francis Bacon, the “father” of the empirical philosophy, and emerged in the later 17th century. In order to arrive at scientific truth, it was necessary, Bacon argued, to amass as large a body of evidence as possible. Bacon, like the later empiricists, emphasized the importance of the evidence of the senses; scientific truth could only be reached by an examination of the concrete, material world. The correlation with the Anglican insistence on the clear and plain meaning of Scripture is obvious. Similarly, the purge of ambiguous language and rhetorical excess advocated by the men of the Royal Society evidently met with the approval of Anglican and Latitudinarian churchmen. 15 In its place, the new scientists called for clear, unambiguous language as a fit means of expression for the new learning. Moreover, for many of their number, the material, empirical basis of the evolving new science provided a means of clarifying theological issues. The works of Robert Boyle and John Locke, for example, witness the shared concerns of the man of science and the man of God; in addition to their scientific and philosophical pursuits, both men wrote extensively on theological issues. Michael McKeon has noted that religious and scientific issues were not considered mutually discrete:

The reliance of Protestant thought on the figurative language of the Bible as the one true sense and “literal” Word of God is profoundly analogous to the new philosophical argument that in nature’s book was to be found the register and signature of divine intent. Contemporaries certainly

15. The Royal Society of London was established in 1660. It aimed to reform knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, by way of the empiricist method of observation and collection of information. This new method would, it was hoped, put paid to what they believed were the empty speculations of Aristotelianism.
understood that the exegetical commitment to "one sense of Scripture, the literal sense", was informed by a commitment to the evidence of the senses.16

The dual effort – the reformation of philosophical knowledge, the correction of exegetical excess – required, or so many adherents of the new science insisted, a corresponding purge of linguistic corruption. According to A.N. Whitehead, the rejection of medieval realism had far-reaching consequences for both the religious and scientific spheres:

In religion it meant the appeal to the origins of Christianity; and in science it meant the appeal to experiment and the inductive method of reasoning.17

The conflict between nominalism and realism dominated late medieval theology and contributed to the eventual discrediting of Scholasticism. The realist doctrine held that universals or abstractions have an existence independent of the particulars or individual things in which those abstractions are manifested. Aquinas’s “moderate realism” qualified the realist conviction in so far as Aquinas rejected the notion that abstract concepts exist apart from the particulars in which they are embodied. The nominalist position – the position ascribed to Bacon and upheld by the later empiricists – denies the real existence of abstract concepts. Universals are not discovered in nature, but are created in the human mind. For the realist, language is “natural”; there is a natural relationship between the word and what it signifies. Words express something essential about their objects; they express the innate quality of the things they name. For the nominalist, on the other hand, the relationship between word and thing or concept is arbitrary and manmade.18 Language is therefore potentially an interloper between us and our understanding of the world. Words impart at best an imperfect knowledge of things, because words deal in their most readily apprehended surfaces and fail to describe their distinctive natures. "Words mark the most visibly obvious, not the most explanatorily significant differences between things", Antony Quinton remarks during his discussion of Bacon’s mistrust of words. He continues:

As well as words that are "confused, badly defined and hastily and irregularly abstracted from things" there are words that stand for nothing, like "Fortune, the primum mobile, the planetary orbits, the element of fire, and the like fictions".19

According to this account, language stands in an arbitrary and even hostile relation to things. There is no natural or innate or perhaps even meaningful correspondence between word and thing. Meaning is not contingent on reality, but on the mind of the language-user. The mercurial nature of language means that it is necessarily inimical to truth; instead, it services the abstractions, obscurations and untruths of the Schoolmen and their like.

In the later 17th century, the question of whether language is natural or conventional – that is, realist or nominalist – was perhaps most visible in the arguments about whether a clear and unambiguous language could be rediscovered or whether it could be created anew. The period witnessed a surge of attempts either to rediscover the lost original language spoken by Adam or to create a universal language or character that would purge language of any ambiguity and forge a stable relationship between the sign and what it signifies.20 The Adamic doctrine held that language is divine and natural. The original tongue to which all the various languages of man can be traced is the language first spoken by Adam when he named the animals. This unitary, universal language was lost after the confusion of Babel; thereafter, humanity descended into a multiplicity of tongues. The universal and philosophical language projectors, on the other hand, usually believed language to be arbitrary and conventional. Adamicism aimed at the recovery of a lost correspondence between language and

nature; attempts to develop a philosophical or universal language sought to mimic or accurately represent – in language or by means of some other arbitrary sign system – the coherence of the natural order of the world.

An interesting aspect of the Adamic doctrine and of the schemes for a universal or philosophical language is the symbiosis they achieve between scientific and religious concerns. Thus for Wilkins, his philosophical language will cleanse religion of the errors to which it has been prey, most notably at the hands of high-sounding words which hide their falsehood under a sham profundity and mysticism. The new language will contribute much to the clearing of some of our Modern differences in Religion, by unmasking many wild errors, that shelter themselves under the disguise of affected phrases; which being Philosophically infolded, and rendered according to the genuine and natural importance of Words, will appear to be inconsistencies and contradictions. And several of those pretended mysteries, profound notions, expressed in great swelling words, whereby some men set up for reputation, being this way examined, will appear to be either nonsense, or very flat and jejune. 21

The reconciling of religious difference is put forward by Wilkins as a primary motive for the universal language scheme. James Knowlson makes the point that most of the language planners entertained little sympathy for the mystic overtones of those scholars who sought to rediscover the language of Adam. They were conscious that they were pursuing a related path but in a quite different spirit. 22

And yet, it is true that the urge behind both linguistic efforts was fundamentally the same; that is, the imposition of order where order apparently eludes human capability. The Adamic doctrine, as well as the mania for universal characters and the like, expresses a yearning for a unitary source of meaning in a society dogged by schism and conflict. As such, the search for a universal language, for a written form that will provide an infallible and univocal connection between words and objects, seems a peculiarly Protestant quest, even if at the heart of such language schemes there lies a certain desolation. As Murray Cohen observes, what he calls the Baconian tradition

shaped the practical alterations they proposed according to an unprecedented ideal they often despaired of finally effecting.23

Swift was no great lover of the new science and had little patience for theoretical debate of any sort. His most virulent invective against both abstract thinking and the new science is saved for the third book, in his descriptions of the Laputians and of the Academy of Projectors. The Laputian men are rendered dysfunctional by their preoccupation with the life of the mind. Conversation or indeed any form of verbal communication is stunted by their detachment from the physical and social aspects of life. The absurdity of a life spent in total indifference to the physical world or the pleasures of human society is apparent in the need for servants, “flappers”, who rouse their masters from their lofty thoughts with a sort of rattle:

It seems, the Minds of these People are so taken up with intense Speculations, that they neither can speak, nor attend to the Discourses of others, without being rouzed by some external Taction upon the Organs of Speech and Hearing. (149)

Their sole interests are mathematics and music, interests which have clearly tipped over into a deranged obsessiveness which is autistic in its exclusion of everything else. Even at the dining table these obsessions obtrude, with meat and bread being carved into mathematical and musical symbols and figures.

The Laputian obsession with mathematics is apparently purely theoretical; any material thing which requires mathematical exactitude for its execution is inevitably botched by their workmen. Clothes never fit, despite the trouble taken with calculating measurements. Likewise, their architecture is afflicted by their contempt for applied mathematics. Notwithstanding his growing impatience with his distracted hosts, Gulliver also describes physical objects in mathematical terms. For instance, when describing the movement of the floating island of Laputa over Balnibarbi, Gulliver’s attempts at a scientific clarity are somehow ludicrously the opposite of perspicuous. This is just one example of Gulliver’s characteristic register throughout the narrative. As Frederik N. Smith observes, Gulliver’s style is clearly a parody of the Royal Society’s *Philosophical Transactions*.24

Thus at the end of his narrative, Gulliver protests that he is no mere fabricator of marvellous stories. Rather, he is writing in the spirit of the new science, and writes according to their standards of clarity and simple plainness. The familiar catchphrases come naturally to him. “I have not been so studious of Ornament as of Truth”, he assures us. He continues:

I could perhaps like others have astonished thee with strange improbable Tales; but I rather chose to relate plain Matter of Fact in the simplest Manner and Style; because my principal Design was to inform, and not to amuse thee. (283)

The Academy of Projectors on Balnibarbi is clearly a parody of the Royal Society, or at least of the more abstruse and pointless aspects of its activities. The projectors, we are told, have a partial and inaccurate grasp of the principles of mathematics, derived from a visit some forty years ago to the “airy region” of Laputa. Dissatisfied with the state of their knowledge and with their accomplishments in the various disciplines, they “fell into Schemes of putting all Arts, Sciences, Languages, and Mechanicks upon a new Foot. To this End they procured a Royal Patent for erecting an Academy of PROJECTORS in Lagado” (169), and such was the vogue for this new learning that subsequently such academies were established throughout the kingdom. Unfortunately, the zeal with which they pursued their various projects was not matched by skill or even common sense; in fact, the activities of the projectors have reduced the kingdom to ruin, starvation and general misery.

By all of which, instead of being discouraged, they are Fifty Times more violently bent upon prosecuting their Schemes, driven equally on by Hope and Despair. (169)

However, it is with the “advancers of speculative learning” that the odious influence of the projectors on the world of words and letters become most apparent. Again, Swift is eager to expose the scientists’ betrayal of their own governing principles. Instead of reforming knowledge or conveying such knowledge in the clear and plain style which they themselves advocated, they have apparently wreaked more havoc than the most obscurantist Scholastic. In a brilliant parody of the universal language

projects, Swift targets the empiricist – more precisely, the Lockean – view that reality is not a condition of words but of things and concepts. Hans Aarsleff describes Locke’s theory of language and some of its implications:

For Locke language was not divine and natural, but made by man and conventional … It was made according to need for the convenience of communication with “ease and dispatch.” It is a social institution that reflects the world of its speakers, hence Locke’s insistence on linguistic relativism … The relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary, contrary to the central assertion of the Adamic doctrine. Owing to the impenetrable subjectivity of ideas to which words are tied, each individual has a radically private language that virtually precludes all hope of perfect communication.25

In the misguided search for just such easy, efficient and unambiguous communication as Locke hankers after, Swift’s language projectors attempt to circumvent the pitfalls of orthodox sign systems by eradicating the signifier entirely. To this end, they have devised “a Scheme for entirely abolishing all Words whatsoever”, which, as well as making discourse more plain and perspicuous, will have the added benefit of preventing corruption of the lungs:

An Expedient was therefore offered, that since Words are only Names for Things, it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such Things as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on … which hath only this Inconvenience attending it; that if a Man’s Business be very great, and of various Kinds, he must be obliged in Proportion to carry a greater Bundle of Things upon his Back, unless he can afford one or two strong Servants to attend him … Another great Advantage proposed by this Invention, was that it would serve as a universal Language to be understood in all civilized Nations, whose Goods and Utensils are generally of the same Kind, or nearly resembling, so that their Uses might easily be comprehended. And thus, Embassadors would be qualified to treat with foreign Princes or Ministers of State, to whose Tongues they were utter Strangers. (pp. 177-78)

Both Locke and, until late in his career, Wilkins, opposed the notion of an Adamic language. According to Hans Aarsleff, much of Locke’s Essay is a refutation of the Adamic theory of language that enjoyed enduring popularity. Locke is adamant in his repudiation of the doctrine:

25. Hans Aarsleff, From Locke to Saussure…, p. 27.
To conclude; what liberty Adam had at first to make any complex Ideas of mixed Modes, by no other Pattern, but by his own Thoughts, the same have all Men ever since had. And the same necessity of conforming his Ideas of Substances to Things without him, as to Archetypes made by Nature, that Adam was under, if he would not wilfully impose upon himself, the same are all Men ever since under too. The same Liberty also, that Adam had of affixing any new name to any Idea; the same has any one still…  

There is no “original language”. All languages are equally imperfect and inadequate. Aarsleff believes that one of Locke’s primary concerns in the Essay is to refute the notion of an Adamic language. Locke is at least consistent in so far as he rejects any possibility of a universal language, whether spoken or written, divine or created by man. John Wilkins, author of the best-known of the universal language projects, performed something of a volte face late in his career on the subject of universal languages. Having put considerable effort into discrediting the Adamicist John Webster, Wilkins in his Essay on a Real Character and Philosophical Language (1668) attempted to create a substitute for the lost original language. Wilkins was part of a sizeable trend, of course. For example, attempts were made at the time to construct new sign systems from hieroglyphics, Chinese ideograms, Arabic numerals and mathematical symbols. While Wilkins hoped his new philosophical language would eventually lead to an accurate and scientific codification of knowledge, it is clear that such apparently “scientific” projects masked a desperation for the sort of meaning and coherence allegedly lost with the mythical, mystical first language. Nicholas Hudson tells us that Wilkins’s Essay “crowned the Royal Society’s ambitions for a philosophical language”. On the other hand, Aarsleff believes that its publication compromised its author’s reputation:

The publication of the Essay put the Royal Society in a difficult situation. Written by one of its best-known members, encouraged and published under its auspices, it caused a crisis of prestige.

Like Wilkins, Swift’s projectors end up falling prey to the very attitudes of mind to which they are ostensibly opposed. The projectors are

like Gulliver too, who – while assuring us that his is a true and objective account conveyed in a clear, plain and unambiguous style – is himself the prime example of the ways in which assertion and enactment, precept and practice, can be in contradiction. The gap between the claims made by the Royal Society’s Fellows for their endeavors and the actual results of the more fanciful aspects of the new learning are here exposed as one of the main targets of Swift’s satire.

Anne Mulhall

National University of Ireland, Galway