



TAMING THE TONGUE

IN THE HEYDAY OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR (1711-1851)

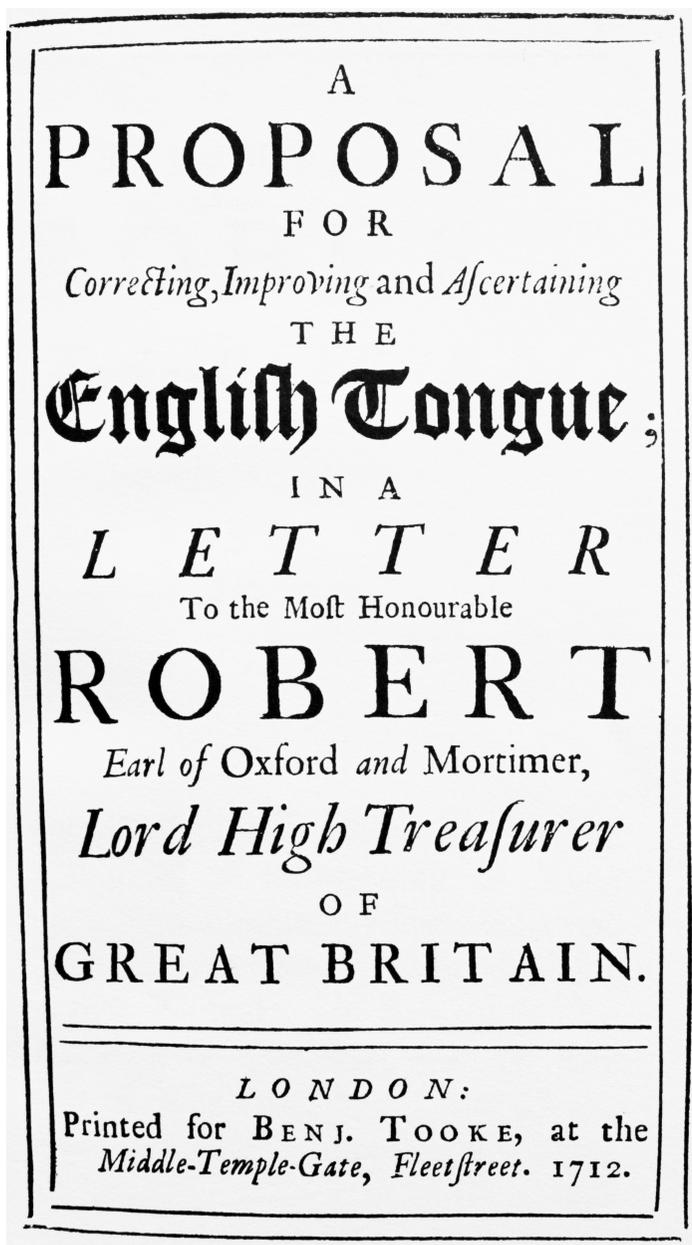
– EXCERPTS –

Bryan A. Garner

Earlier this year, Bryan Garner had an exhibition at the Grolier Club (an ancient society of bibliophiles) in New York City. It was a formidable display of grammar books from the 18th and early 19th centuries. In keeping with Grolier tradition, he produced a companion book – like a catalog, but longer and lovelier than most. We rarely write about Garner (which is odd, because we like to think we specialize in law and words, and he is the leading living scholar of law words). But Garner often writes for us (which is good, since we specialize in law and words, and he is the leading living scholar of law words). On rare occasions we even republish a morsel or two he has written for someone else (see, e.g., our summer 2013 issue), on the theory that journals with more gravitas than a lightweight bag will do the heavy lifting of providing platforms for important flyspeckers while we get on with the business of printing useful and entertaining scholarship. By now it's obvious that what we are doing here is introducing a couple of excerpts from Garner's Grolier book. They (and the whole book, really) are about a centuries-old puzzler: how to categorize the oddly shaped pieces of the English language. (The many unfamiliar – to most of us, at least – names mentioned here belong to long-dead grammarians whose works were on display at the exhibition.) We've eliminated references to parts of the book not reproduced here, added references to illustrations that we do reproduce from the book, and placed citations to authorities in numbered footnotes.

– *The Editors*

*Bryan Garner is the chief editor of Black's Law Dictionary and the author of many other works.
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The title page of Jonathan Swift's "Proposal" (1712)
(from page xix of "Taming the Tongue").

Taming the Tongue (excerpts)

PREFACE

[from pages xix-xx of *Taming the Tongue*]

IN 1711, JOSEPH ADDISON PROPOSES, in *The Spectator*, forming an English Academy along the lines of the Académie française – a committee of guardians for the language with the power to delineate the bounds of good English. The next year, his friend Jonathan Swift champions the proposal in a pamphlet titled *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712) (see previous page). One of the first grammarians whose work is displayed here, Charles Gildon, soon accuses Swift of stealing his idea for an Academy. Another, Elizabeth Elstob, essentially calls Swift ignorant about the whole subject. Hence the stage is set for more than a century of wrangling about English grammar.

The Academy never takes root. What happens instead is a feverish transatlantic competition as more than 200 grammarians enter the fray by 1851. Before the mass shipment of books is made possible by rail, schoolmasters all over England and America keep local printers busy with grammars to be used in local schools. It is at once a period of rampant plagiarism and bold originality.

This effervescent fascination with English grammar sees the genre begin in a rudimentary phase – in which English grammars are cursory works modeled closely on Latin grammars – and then mature into a phase in which hundreds of books of varying sophistication vie for commercial dominance. By the mid-19th century, the entrants are mostly confident about their grammatical positions, and traditional prescriptive grammars are at their zenith. Millions of copies – tens of millions – are sold. Taken together, grammars trail only the Bible in British and American book sales.

The idea behind this exhibit has been to retrieve a fascinating but little-known aspect of our intellectual history and to illuminate the personal struggles that individual writers endure as they wrestle with explaining the complexities of a language that seems intractable. These writers' idiosyncrasies and eccentricities often surface – and may even suggest outright personality disorders.

T H E
R U D I M E N T S
O F
English Grammar,
Adapted to the USE of SCHOOLS;
W I T H
N O T E S and O B S E R V A T I O N S,
For the USE of Those
Who have made some Proficiency in
the Language.

By JOSEPH PRIESTLEY,
LL. D. F. R. S.

L O N D O N :
Printed for T. BECKET and P. A. DE HONDT in
the Strand, and J. JOHNSON in Paternoster-Row.
M. DCC. LXVIII.

The title page of the second edition of Joseph Priestley's "Rudiments of Grammar" (1768; 1st ed. 1761) (from page 29 of "Taming the Tongue").

THE CASE OF THE
VARIABLE PARTS OF SPEECH

[from pages 183-187 of *Taming the Tongue*]

One pities the child who, after moving from one school to another, is put to the oral test: “How many kinds of words or parts of speech are there? Name them.” This suggested question derives from Haywood’s 1805 grammar, which cites 9. But grammars of that decade vary from 6 to 10, and the child might well have come from a school using a different system.*

What have grammarians finally said about the parts of speech?

Before seeing the answer, let’s recap what our grammarians from 1711 to 1851 say [described in detail by Garner on pages 3 to 182 of *Taming the Tongue*]. The low number is 2 (John Horne Tooke, together with William S. Balch), and the high is 33 (James Brown). Most put the number at 8 to 10.

The Classical grammarians Dionysius Thrax (2d century B.C.) and Aelius Donatus (4th century A.D.) both put the number at 8: Dionysius includes articles but not interjections, and Donatus includes interjections but not articles. Marcus Terentius Varro counts only 4: nouns, verbs, participles, and particles.

It is Joseph Priestley who in 1761 (see previous page) first lists the canonical 8 found in traditional English grammars:

* This actually happened to me. At age 12 in seventh grade, I learned a type of transformational grammar taught by a beloved English teacher, Mrs. McClure. In her lessons, articles were considered an independent word class. At age 15 in tenth grade, I enrolled in a high-school grammar class in which our teacher, Mr. Mantooh, taught the traditional approach – one previously unknown to us. In the first class meeting, he called on me to name the parts of speech. I recited nine, including articles. He rather sternly said I’d gotten it wrong: far from being a separate part of speech, articles are actually adjectives because they modify nouns. I respectfully disputed the point but was preemptorily squelched. The students were anxious about being untaught things we had once regarded as fundamental truths, and our teacher soon acquired a private moniker by way of translation into Greek: Mr. Anthropodont. You might very well think that this footnote – the only one in the book – explains a great deal. I couldn’t possibly comment. But I can confirm that I began collecting grammars before my 16th birthday.

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- A *noun* is a word by which a person, place, or thing is named.
- A *verb* is a word that asserts action or state of being.
- An *adjective* is a word that modifies a noun or pronoun.
- An *adverb* is a word that modifies a verb, adjective, or other adverb.
- A *pronoun* is a word used in place of a noun.
- A *preposition* is a word that connects a noun to the rest of the sentence and indicates the noun's relationship to other words.
- A *conjunction* is a word used to join words, phrases, clauses, or separate sentences.
- An *interjection* is a word used to express emotion or high feeling.

Even so, it takes another century or so for those 8 to be firmly accepted, doubtless because the categories fluidly relate to form and function. That is, some words are called *nouns* because they usually function that way, but of course they can often function as adjectives and verbs as well. And any part of speech can function as an interjection. So the taxonomy has never been regarded as perfect.

This exhibit only skims the surface. By 1801, there are 297 different listings of English parts of speech, accounting for a total of 58 varieties.¹

So what do modern grammarians say? In my own *Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation* (2016), I stick to the traditional 8 listed above. But that approach is hardly universal. Some grammarians say there are only 3: nouns, verbs, and modifiers.² Another says that there are “about 15,” noting that the precise number is still being debated.³ Still another says that “there is no definitive answer to how many parts of speech there are in any particular language.”⁴

The range in modern English grammars is from 3 to 19. Mario Pei (like me) puts the number at 8, Rodney D. Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum at 9, Robert W. Burchfield at 11, Randolph Quirk at 12, and James Sledd at 19. So categorization remains a problem, with no consensus in sight.

¹ Ian Michael, *English Grammatical Categories and the Tradition to 1800* (1987), 344.

² See, e.g., Ernest W. Gray, *A Brief Grammar of Modern Written English* (1967), 60.

³ R.L. Trask, *Language: The Basics* (1995), 37.

⁴ Laurie Bauer, *The Linguistic Student's Handbook* (2007), 31.

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Even if we can agree that James Brown was extravagant with his 33, we should sympathize not just with the 18th- and 19th-century students but also with the grammarians, who were among the earliest to grapple with the seemingly insoluble problem.

THE VARIOUS CONFIGURATIONS FOR PARTS OF SPEECH

Two

Nouns and verbs: Horne Tooke; Balch (with subclasses).

Four

- A. Names, qualities, affirmations, and manner words: Brightland & Gildon.
- B. Names, qualities, verbs (affirmations), and particles: Farro; Fisher.
- C. Names, qualities, affirmations, and articles: Woolgar.
- D. Nouns, verbs, adverbs, and particles: Martin.
- E. Noun substantives, noun adjectives, verbs, and participles: Dyche & Pardon.
- F. Nouns, adjectives, verbs, and particles: Gough & Gough.
- G. Nouns, verbs, articles, and conjunctions: Harris.

Five

Articles, nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and verbs: Johnson.

Six

- A. Nouns, articles, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, and abbreviations: Webster (from 1784 – but see other listing under “Seven”).
- B. Cormos, seramus, monoramus, duramus, subramus, and co-ramus: J. Brown (from 1836 – but see other listings under “Ten” and “Thirty-Three”).
- C. Nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, contractions, and prepositions: Cardell.
- D. Nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjuncts, prepositions, and contractions: J. Jones.

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Seven

Nouns, verbs, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions: Webster (with some terminological variation – but see other listing under “Six”).

Eight

- A. Nouns, pronouns, verbs, participles, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections: Lily; Elstob; Greenwood; Dilworth; Buchanan; Ward; Ross.
- B. Nouns, adjectives, verbs, pronouns, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections: Baskerville; Priestley; Teeters; Butler; Fowler.
- C. Articles, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, conjunctions, and interjections: Raine.

Nine

- A. Articles, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections: Lowth; R. Jones (he includes participles with adjectives); Shaw; G. Ussher; Murray; Burn; Cochran; Haywood (he includes participles with verbs); Lennie; Wilson; Cobbett; Matheson (adjectives were also called *adnouns*); Cramp; Brace; Leigh; Marcet; Crowquill; Cornwallis; Jamieson (adjectives were also called *adnouns*).
- B. Articles, nouns, pronouns, verbs, participles, adverbs, prepositions, interjections, and conjunctions: Adam.
- C. Nouns (names), adjectives, possessives, articles, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections: Sherman.
- D. Nouns, pronouns, *adnouns*, verbs, participles, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections: Smith.

Ten

- A. Articles, nouns, adjectives, pronouns, verbs, participles, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections: Hodgson; Ash; Devis; Rhodes; Miller; Coar; Bingham; Mackintosh; Gurney; Taylor; Harrison; Comly; Crombie; Gardiner; Hutchins; Grant; Barrett; J. Brown (from 1825 – but see other listings under “Six” and “Thirty-Three”); Greenleaf; Sutcliffe; Lynde; Ingersoll; Kirkham; G. Brown; Nutting; Greene; Anon.; Hull; Ells; Chandler; Stoddart.

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- B. Articles, adjectives, nouns or pronouns, pronominal adjectives or demonstrative possessive adjectives, verbs, participles, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections: Wilbur.

Twelve

Articles, nouns, pronouns, relatives, adjectives, verbs, participles, auxiliaries, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections: Earnshaw.

Thirty-Three

(1) Primary definer, (2) secondary definer, (3) helping definer, (4) pro definer, (5) synonymous definer, (6) active definer, (7) vital definer, (8) state definer, (9) general definer, (10) compound general definer, (11) positive definer (type 1), (12) positive definer (type 2), (13) contingent definer, (14) neuter definer, (15) methodical time definer, (16) secondary time definer, (17) numeral time definer, (18) local definer, (19) mode definer, (20) instrumental definer, (21) causative definer, (22) potential definer, (23) possessive definer, (24) exclamatory definer, (25) superfluous definer, (26) conjunctive definer, (27) comparative conjunctive definer, (28) contingent conjunctive definer, (29) conceding conjunctive definer, (30) causative conjunctive definer, (31) adversative conjunctive definer, (32) effective conjunctive definer, and (33) synonymous conjunctive definer: J. Brown (1820).



And, finally, a lagniappe from page 182
of *Taming the Tongue*. — *The Editors*

Wherever the preponderance of truth may lie, one ineluctable fact is that the heyday of English grammar, from 1711 to 1851, remains a dim memory on the literary landscape — an implausible past in which grammars were exceeded in sales only by the Bible.

