

John Locke's Educational Theory on Gentlemen's Language Learning

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Abstract—Classical languages represented by Latin and Greek have always been an essential part of gentlemanly education. However, with the rapid development of the bourgeoisie and the rise of empirical science in the 17th and 18th centuries, social needs began to change, and traditional learning courses could not adapt to society's development. John Locke conceives that the focus of language learning should be shifted from classical languages to English. An English gentleman should learn his own mother tongue. Moreover, English learning is not only about grammar but also about propriety and civility. English is not only a tool to learn knowledge but also a symbol of one's social rank. Therefore, a gentleman should show his propriety in the conversation.

Index Terms—Locke, gentleman education, language, empiricism, propriety.

I. INTRODUCTION

John Locke (1632-1704) was a great British philosopher and educator. His *Some Thought Concerning Education* (1693) was designed for educating the young gentleman. For the gentry, the study of languages is essential. That is because the most considerable part of gentlemen's business is "to be done with their Tongues, and with their Pens" [1]. Locke was correct that the English gentry both urban and rural were getting away from physical labor. The sway of Renaissance was fully felt in the eighteenth-century England and the greatest contribution of any educated citizen was to do with the Crown. As the leading class of society, the gentlemen need to work for the government and serve their motherland. Therefore, they rely on their eloquence and clerical skills to persuade the public, to obtain a career and reputation. When a gentleman can no longer be a knight, when warfare can no longer be a way of life, he has to turn to public service, law, or parliament. These positions all require literate men. Some educators began to believe that the son of a nobleman is "born a Gentleman and bred up a scholar" [2]. Well-born boys are educated and are supposed to possess courteous behavior and academic achievement. The gentleman is obliged to earn his living by his wits— as a scholar.

There are mainly two pieces of advice for obtaining languages in *Some Thoughts*: shorten the process of learning classical languages, mainly Latin and Greek; and put more emphasis on English. Locke here defends an innovative theory since it has a long history for educators to persist in

promoting the idea that young gentlemen should learn Latin and Greek. Scholars traditionally use these languages in many fields of knowledge.

II. SCHOLARS' LANGUAGES

Since the period of the Renaissance, Latin and Greek had been the key to knowledge, the vital requirement of scholarship and the instruments for humanists' inquiry into the revival of learning. The courses in Court schools at that time for young gentlemen were based on learning Latin and Greek. As scholars' "secret tongues", Latin and Greek forged an exclusive network of elite boys, displaying their social superiority and gender hierarchies. By contrast, there was a prejudice that English could not express the abstract ideas and the range of thought embodied in the ancient languages [3]. For most educators, the English language seemed immature, unpolished, and limited in resources, hence it was not a formal way of instructing a young gentleman.

For instance, by the time Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) went to grammar school, at the very end of the sixteenth century, the higher education of England was conducted entirely in Latin, which was still the universal language (spoken as well as written) of the educated classes across Europe. In 1607 Hobbes was recommended by the Principal of the Hall to Lord Cavendish (shortly to become Earl of Devonshire). As a tutor in this aristocratic family, the education Hobbes offered for the young gentleman was an excellent example of a late Renaissance course of study. During the long eighteenth century, the school standardized curriculum still focused on the classical languages. At Eton, boys spent twenty-one hours per week studying Latin and Greek.

Apart from Latin and Greek, young gentlemen in England were also supposed to learn French. They were compelled to forsake their own language and construe their lessons in French after the Normans came into England. The Norman Conquerors left the native English language chiefly to the lower social classes. This action introduced the idea that English is "crude and barbarous" [3]. French became the language of the noble.

In the wake of the English Civil War (1640–1660), in which the King of England was executed, and a Cromwellian interregnum was established, there has been a highly concentrated public awareness of language. Some scholars advocate new pedagogic methods to replace traditional rigid teaching methods. As Locke criticizes grammar schools in *Some Thoughts*: teachers use corporal punishment to force children to master Latin and Greek.

These pupils are “scourged” to learn [1].

To begin with, Locke declares that as an English gentleman, since he “continually uses English,” so it is English that he should master. “This I think will be Agreed to, That if a Gentleman be to study any Language, it ought to be that of his own Country” [1]. Because the young gentleman will serve the English government, this idea is long acknowledged.

The first English humanist to display a wholehearted commitment to writing in the vernacular is Sir Thomas Elyot (1490-1546). He compiles the first Latin-English dictionary (1538), and his medical book *The Castel of Health* (1534) is written in English. His using English as an academic language caused controversies. Elyot defends himself on the grounds that: Everyone can write in their mother tongues, just as the Greeks write in Greek and Romans write in Latin. In 1531, Elyot publishes the first book on education printed in English. His writing exhibits an early example of an attempt to improve the significance of English learning for young gentlemen.

Locke further emphasizes the significance of English. He criticizes that the teacher who only knows to teach his pupil “all the Latin and Logick,” will not be qualified to make his pupil a “fine Gentleman” [1], specifically, a gentleman of refined manners and tastes. So the parents should be careful while choosing a tutor for their children.

However, even in Locke’s era, “if anyone among us have a facility or purity more than ordinary in his Mother Tongue, it is owing to Chance, or his Genius, or anything, rather than to his Education or any care of his Teacher” [1]. Tutors’ negative attitudes toward English lead to students’ ignorance of their mother tongue. Because in the eyes of those tutors, Greek and Latin are the learned languages fit only for learned men to grasp; English is the language of the illiterate vulgar.

Locke refutes such prejudice by arguing that the Romans pay lots of attention to their mother tongue. Those noblemen use their language, Latin, every day. For them, their mother tongue is representative of their identity and status. Even though these great scholars “borrowed their learning and philosophy from abroad,” they still regard other languages as barbarous and inferior to Latin. What is more, their government set colleges and stipends to bring Latin into public care, to stimulate and reward the improvement of their language. So the notion of polishing and enriching Latin is fixed in these people’s minds. Locke conceives that this was the exact reason why the Roman had a splendid culture and could spread their native language widely. The prosperity and popularity of French are also closely related to the promoting measures adopted by the government. On the contrary, in England, not only was English deprecated by scholars, but the young gentlemen were required to master Latin, Greek, and French. Consequently, English people should learn from other countries and study their mother tongue like a great instrument and standard to unify society.

III. EMPIRICAL PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE, AND LANGUAGE

In the seventeenth century, science exerts a significant influence on education. With Francis Bacon (1561-1626) as

its harbinger, forerunners of empirical philosophy advocates that English should be used as the medium for all instruction. First, the access to knowledge has changed. Scholars could obtain knowledge from experiment and observation instead of delving into classical literature. Classical languages could no longer accurately represent the truths of nature. Meanwhile, classical languages are difficult to learn; thus, scientists resent spending so much time on the study of arcane words. Since man’s knowledge can be gained through observation and experience and is in no way increased by the mere knowledge of language, sense realists believe that little time should be spent on classical languages. The most striking point is that adoption of emergent scientific and social studies greatly outweighs the former excessive devotion to linguistic studies [4].

Locke criticizes acrimoniously classical languages as “dead languages”, and he even complains that it is meaningless for young gentlemen to sacrifice seven or eight years of their precious youth to learn them. Classical languages such as Latin and Greek are at odds with the development of society. These languages are energy and time consuming, they hinder the rapid spread of science and new knowledge. So they are obsolete. New knowledge and methods for teaching the young gentlemen are required. Locke believes the intensive and extensive cultivation of classical languages in schools and universities is mostly responsible for the retarded development of the vernacular and the new science.

However, that does not mean that Latin and Greek will be expelled from Locke’s curriculum for young gentlemen. Locke says that “of a gentleman, to whom Latin and French, as the World now goes, is by every one acknowledged to be necessary” [1]. Nevertheless, the young gentleman may learn them after mastering English. English should be their top priority of learning. What is more, for sons of merchants who do not need them in later life, they should quit the ordinary road of learning Latin and Greek because these learned languages are useless for them. In a industry that devotes particular attention to productiveness and profit, the plain language is effective and efficient for the businessmen. The merchants do not have to bother to speak dead languages because of the possible obstacles to understanding.

Such skepticism towards language and the spirit of utility also prevailed in the Royal Society. In the 1660s, the Royal Society, which served as coordinator and clearinghouse for English scientific endeavors, proposed a solution in which the English language should play a crucial role. Thomas Sprat (1635-1731) speaks of the attempt of the new scientists to reduce their style to “a mathematical plainness” [5].

The scientists’ position was that the truth of ideas regarding nature is dependent upon the accuracy of language and that the advancement of science must necessarily depend on the introduction of greater precision and clarity in the use of words. Reformers demand that words be precisely and strictly defined and that they are equal to what they represent. These proposals became a credo of the Royal Society, and these principles influenced the intellectuals’ efforts to design universal languages. All this bespeaks an intense awareness of the importance of language in almost

every sphere of politics, society, and culture.

Like Locke, the scientist Boyle discusses comprehensively the defects of language, especially Latin. He criticizes the irregularity and complexity of Latin, craving for words that can be concise as numbers, to erase the suffering of Babel.

As a member of the Royal Society and a friend of Boyle, Locke also argues that English should be precise, concrete, and transparent. Therefore, it is not enough for an English gentleman to merely understand his language. He must learn the grammar of English to achieve exactness and propriety with acute consciousness, since the want of propriety, and grammatical exactness stand for lower breeding and worse company, which is thought extremely improper of the noble rank. Gradually, grammatically acceptable “means socially acceptable” [6].

IV. MAN OF CONVERSATION AND CIVILITY

Learning languages is for “the ordinary intercourse of Society and Communication of thoughts in common Life” [1]. To achieve effective communication, the gentleman’s tongue is distinguished not merely by its correctness and conciseness but by its graceful manner and polish. That is the reason why Locke asserts children should be hindered from the frequent conversation with the servants: the language of these “unbred or debauched” servants will “horribly” infects children “both in Civility and Vertue” [1].

From Locke’s perspective, good breeding is “peculiarly the effect of education.” “Civility,” in fact, is “nothing but a care not to show any slighting, or contempt, of any one in Conversation”. Hence, one of the first rules for a polite conversation guide is to respect and show a good “judgment”: listen calmly with attention, do not interpose opinions until you are asked to do so. It is the rudest thing to interrupt another in the current of his discourse, which will reveal one’s “Pride and Self-conceitedness”. The ultimate aim of politeness and civility was to please and to make oneself agreeable. Nevertheless, Locke adds, it does not mean that a gentleman could not propose different opinions during a conversation. Otherwise, the gentleman may face the risk of being an “ingenious company”, and society will be deprived of the most significant advantages benefited from different sides of things. The most important thing is the manner in which a gentleman expresses himself. The manner lacking civility and decency will neither strengthen the speaker’s reason nor enhance his credit. Instead, the listeners will even have “an ill opinion of the Man”, even if he wins the debate. All in all, a man who “shocks his hearers” with “frequent interruptions in arguing and loud wrangling” ceases to be a gentleman, and such “barbarity” should be imputed on “Neglect in Education” [1].

A gentleman, “or man of conversation”, the most necessary talent for him, is “a good judgment” in a conversation, declared by Richardson Steele (1672-1729). Specifically, a gentleman is a man of superior understanding, realizing how to be on a level with his companions. He enters into a conversation with “readiness and alacrity”; he denies what he does not care to engage in, in a convincing and acceptable manner. He is wisely aware of how to strike a balance between listening and speaking, between

problem-finding and problem-solving. Therefore, a gentleman with such “sweet disposition” turns his conversation with others into “a continual feast”. Steele describes a gentleman named Sophronius as an example to demonstrate his thoughts. All the capabilities, as mentioned above, make Sophronius “the darling of all who converse with him, and the most powerful with his acquaintance of any man in town”. Steele gives an example of how a gentleman can use language to achieve social and professional success. Steele concludes, in such a manner, the equality of society is perfectly kept up, and every man obliges as much as he is obliged [7].

As Locke emphasizes, as long as young gentlemen are set right by the education they received, they will “quickly bring all the rest into Order” [1]. If a gentleman is a man of conversation, what the gentlemen say and behave will affect the whole society, then reforming the languages and manners in conversations of gentlemen becomes the *sine qua non* for reforming society.

In 1635, the Académie Française was established in France by King Louis XIII (1601-1643). But in England, there is no such institution to fix and standardize the English language. This could explain the reason why from the late seventeenth century, a number of authors and scholars who have the “spirit of scientific rationalism” and a “desire for system and regularity” [3], among whom included Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) and Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), called for the reform and the refinement of the English language and for the setting up of a state supported English academy to implement it. In fact, the concern about the language was not solely “linguistic”, but had a moral underpinning, since it was assumed that changes in language were inseparable from changes in manners and morals.

For Defoe, it is the rational soul cultivated by education that distinguishes gentlemen from brutes. Without the polish from education, the soul will remain like a “rough diamond”, and the luster of reason will never appear; without liberal education, even a gentleman of good birth could not be called a “complete gentleman” [8].

As a “complete gentleman”, his mind is fortified with “virtue and solid judgment against the fopperies and follies of the age”. He should have “agreeable behaviour,” “good humour”, and great stock of common knowledge, which includes knowledge of several modern languages, and his school learning” [9]. In terms of language learning, first of all, the English gentlemen should study English well. Defoe denounces the practice of teaching in Latin, then general at grammar schools and the Universities¹, observing that if “science and all the liberal arts” were taught in English, this would greatly help to soon do away with the ignorance of the gentry [9]. Men can take a more direct route to knowledge by studying subjects such as astronomy, philosophy, and natural science through English, in that there is a good translation of all preeminent Latin and Greek volumes. Even these gentlemen do not possess much knowledge about Latin or Greek, as long as they master the required knowledge in English, will they deserve the title of

¹ The subjects taught in public schools up to Defoe’s time, and indeed much later, were almost exclusively the dead languages, Latin and Greek, and in the upper forms, sometimes Hebrew and Arabic.

“scholar”² [10].

Furthermore, Defoe condemns the “ornate style” of language. Gentlemen should get rid of these “foolish flourishes” and “ridiculous flights of jingling bombast” in style. Instead, they should use natural, understandable, and concise language in English. The purpose of speech is to make oneself understandable to another; that speech, which is “most easily understood, is the best” [9].

Novak reminds the reader that Defoe’s emphasis on the English language is unique and outstanding because it represents his “first conscious training as a writer” [11]. It cannot be ignored that Locke made a similar claim more than 30 years previously. Defoe was more prescient when he suggested that the academy for women should be set up, and that gentlemen should learn the polished and refined English tongue from women’s conversation, since it was naturally polite, elegant and delicate.

Jonathan Swift had read Locke and was quite aware of his commanding presence in the Augustan intellectual scene. Locke influences some of Swifts’ views on language. Swift directly points out that to improve and ascertain the English tongue “was not a new thought, just then started by Accident or Occasion” [12], but a long reflection that has long been discussed. English learning carries significance for English gentleman education, but it is “extremely imperfect,” and “its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions.” Therefore, a proper person should be chosen to correct, enlarge, and ascertain English. It will be the best way to improve knowledge and politeness”. Swift associates the propriety of one’s language with that of a gentleman’s behavior. Swift echoes Locke by advocating a vernacular and concise style of English instead of “Flowers of Style”. Besides, English should not be spelled as the way people have spoken. For Swift, language is not “wholly perfect” [12]; it is perpetually changing. Swifts’ proposals inherit predecessors’ viewpoints, and he puts forward his innovative ideas.

In eighteenth-century literature, propriety became a sign of the connection between language, society, and moral behavior. In the novels of Jane Austen (1787 -1809), “the novelist of propriety”, readers could perceive how verbal performance becomes the hallmark of social accomplishment, along with good sense and virtue.

V. CONCLUSION

On the whole, there is striking modernity in much of what John Locke writes: his emphasis on the vernacular, English, and the need for clarity and propriety of expression. His empirical philosophy leads to the depreciation of traditional scholar’s language, Latin and Greek. Meanwhile, the yelling for a universal language in the seventeenth century gives Locke a sense of mathematical precision applied to his language reformation theory. To give the English language a

polished, rational, and permanent form was desired in the eighteenth century. The following century ushers in the modesty, elegance, and restraint advocated by neoclassicism. Undoubtedly, Locke’s thoughts on language learning are very advanced, and his theories had a profound influence on the English gentleman’s language education.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yueyue Li conceived the idea of the study, designed the study, performed the research, collected materials, and wrote the paper.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Yueyue Li would like to express sincere appreciation to all those who helped her in the process of writing, including my teachers, family members, and friends. Yueyue Li gratefully acknowledge the advice and support from supervisor, Xu Xiaodong. He is an erudite and amiable professor who gives me guidance as well as encouragement. Yueyue Li is similarly indebted to professor Yin Qingping and professor Guan Nanyi. Yueyue Li has been fortunate to study under such an excellent faculty of Hangzhou Normal University.

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² Defoe exalts the educational system established by Charles Morton (1627-1698). Morton sets up the English Academy for instructing gentlemen. All the subjects are conducted entirely in English, and the pupils are also asked to express themselves fluently and elegantly in their native language. In brief, Morton demands his students, the gentlemen, to exercise and perform in English.