

The Other Samuel Johnson's English Grammar¹

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) is best known among English historical linguists as the author of the famous *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755 by a conger of booksellers, the most important of whom was Robert Dodsley. The dictionary also included a grammar, which was criticised at the time because of its scant treatment of syntax, but today also because of its reliance on an earlier grammar of English. This earlier grammar, called *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae* (1653), was written by John Wallis, Savilian professor of geometry at the University of Oxford from 1649 until his death in 1703.² I have written about all this in *The Bishop's Grammar: Robert Lowth and the Rise of Prescriptivism* (2011) because in 1762 Dodsley published Lowth's grammar, too, a grammar that succeeded where Johnson's had failed. Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* would set a standard for many years to come, but it also owed its popularity to the critical footnotes in its chapter on syntax, where he called attention to grammatical mistakes by 'our best Authors'. However, I have always been puzzled by an entry in Alston's *Bibliography of the English Language*—an indispensable source for my book—that lists an anonymous grammar, published a few years after the one by Lowth, that was called *The First Easy Rudiments of Grammar, Applied to the English Tongue* (1765). Alston attributed authorship to Samuel Johnson, but noted that no copy of the grammar (which had been published in America) could be located, neither of its first edition, nor of the second edition dating from 1771.³ Surely this was not the same Johnson as the lexicographer?

When visiting New College Library in July 2022, I found information in one of the items of the recently donated Keynes Collection that confirmed (for me at any rate) the existence of this other Samuel Johnson.⁴ Johnson (1696–1772) was not only the author of the *The First Easy Rudiments of Grammar*, but had also been the first President of King's College, New York, founded in 1754 and today known as Columbia University.⁵ The book in question is called:

The Life of Samuel Johnson, D. D. The first President of King's College, in New-York . . . by Thomas Bradbury Chandler, D. D. . . . To which is added, An Appendix, containing Many original Letters, never before published, from Bishop Berkeley, Archbishop Secker, Bishop Lowth, and others, to Dr. Johnson (New York, 1805) [emphasis added].

My interest in the Keynes Collection was primarily motivated Robert Lowth's grammar, of which it includes an astounding 31 copies. But to find a reference to letters by Lowth in Johnson's biography as the above title indicates was an important additional discovery: I had been hunting for letters by or to Lowth ever since the start of a research project that resulted in *The Bishop's Grammar* in 2011, and I had managed to identify as many as 250 so-called out-letters and 80 in-letters.⁶ Letters, however, continued to surface unexpectedly, and for my retirement lecture from the University of Leiden in 2020 I discussed the ones that had come to light in the nearly ten years

¹ Thanks to fellow Lowth scholar Carol Percy for suggesting the title of this piece, and to Rare Book Librarian Jane Siegel for most generously providing me with access to material relating to this 'other' Samuel Johnson as well as Lowth in Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

² *Geometry and Astronomy in New College, Oxford: On the Quatercentenary of the Savilian Professorships 1619–2019*, ed. William Poole and Christopher Skelton-Foord (Oxford: New College Library & Archives, 2019), pp. 24–7.

³ See volume 1 of R. C. Alston's bibliography, called *English Grammars Written in English and English Grammars Written in Latin by Native Speakers* (Leeds: E. J. Arnold, 1965), p. 49.

⁴ The Keynes Collection is an outstanding collection of items relating to Robert Lowth, his life, and his publications (see Christopher Skelton-Foord, '[Some Notable Acquisitions and Associations from 2020](#)', *New College Notes* 14 (2020), no. 8).

⁵ See the articles on Johnson in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the *American National Biography*. Neither article, however, mentions the grammar.

⁶ *The Bishop's Grammar* is not an edition of Lowth's correspondence; instead, it analyses Lowth's private language as found in the letters in the light of the linguistic rules presented in his grammar.

since the publication of the book.⁷ Two of these proved to have been in the possession of my own university library, but were only catalogued in the spring of 2021 (at my request) when I was working on the lecture. I had come across four more letters in various places, plus a scrap of one that I bought on eBay, as well as, spectacularly, 32 autograph letters and four copies of letters that were acquired by New College Library and Archives in December 2020. New College, as I discovered during my visit, already possessed three letters by Lowth, addressed to the warden of the college, John Oglander (1737–1794), and two from Oglander to him, so that now, thanks to an additional four letters by Lowth reproduced in Johnson's biography we know of the existence of as many as 300 out-letters and 82 in-letters (two more in-letters will yet be added to this inventory, as I will discuss below).

Three of the four letters by Lowth in Johnson's biography are addressed to Johnson himself and date from 3 May 1768, 15 May 1770, and 16 May 1771; the fourth was written in 1775, after Johnson's death, and does not concern us any further here. The first letter in the Lowth–Johnson correspondence is of particular interest for my (continued) research on Lowth's grammar, since it contains the following sentence:

I beg likewise your acceptance of a **small Treatise on English Grammar** [emphasis added]; which I should not have presumed to have troubled you with, had I not seen that, while you were employing your pains on the most ancient and important of the learned languages [i.e. Hebrew], you did not think the cultivation of our own [i.e. English] unworthy of your labours.⁸

Lowth evidently sent Johnson a copy of his *Short Introduction to English Grammar* because he had somehow learnt about Johnson's interest in the grammar of Hebrew as well as of English, an interest that had led to the publication of a combined English and Hebrew grammar by Johnson, published in 1767 in London. There is a copy of this grammar in the database Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO), along with a copy of the second edition, published in 1771, and its title reads: *An English and Hebrew Grammar, being The First Short Rudiments of Those Two Languages, Taught Together*. The words 'First . . . Rudiments' in the title remind us of the grammar by Johnson which Alston had originally been unable to trace (see above), and the date of that grammar's similarly unattested second edition is identical to that of the second edition of the combined English–Hebrew grammar in ECCO (1771). Do we perhaps have to do with the same English grammar here, the one published in New York, and the other, as part of a combined Hebrew and English grammar, in London? There is also Lowth's puzzling use of the word 'likewise' in the above quotation from his first letter to Johnson. As I will show below, it may be read as a clue about how he had learnt about Johnson's English–Hebrew grammar.

It so happens that the university library of Cologne possesses a Xerox copy of Johnson's *The First Easy Rudiments of Grammar*.⁹ Its original is in the library of Columbia University, where we learn from its catalogue that the grammar was part of the fourth edition of *A Short Catechism for Young Children* published in 1765;¹⁰ this may have been why Alston had at first been unable to locate any copies of the grammar. In an updated version of the bibliography published in 2008, he noted

⁷ Ingrid M. Tieken-Boon van Ostade, *Nóg meer brieven van Lowth?!* (Leiden: Universiteit Leiden, 2021), pp. 4–5: <<https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/handle/1887/3160707>>. A copy of this retirement lecture is also held at New College Library, Oxford, NC/LOW.

⁸ Letter from Bishop Lowth, from London, to Dr. Johnson (3 May 1768), printed in Thomas Bradbury Chandler, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, D. D.* (New-York: Printed by T. & J. Swords, 1805), pp. 201–203, at p. 202.

⁹ I am very grateful to Sophie Du Bois from the University of Cologne for allowing me to have a look at this copy of the grammar.

¹⁰ Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University Libraries: <<https://clio.columbia.edu/catalog/15265495>>. ESTC also lists a copy of the grammar, with its separate title page, at the end of *A Short Catechism for Young Children*, 4th ed. (New-York: Printed by J. Holt, 1765), at the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University: <<https://hdl.handle.net/10079/bibid/1277390>>.

that he had meanwhile identified this publication as a source for a copy of the first edition of Johnson's grammar.¹¹ The Columbia University copy bears a provenance mark explaining that the grammar was presented to the library by the descendants of Samuel Johnson and his son William Samuel Johnson (1727–1819); this was in 1914, according to the library catalogue. Comparing this copy with the English grammar that is part of the combined Hebrew–English grammar in ECCO shows that apart from a few minor differences the text of the *First Easy Rudiments* is substantially the same. Most chapters in the dual-language grammar alternate between English and Hebrew, treating related topics in separate chapters for each language, while the final two chapters, on particles and on syntax, respectively, deal with both languages together. It thus appears that *The First Easy Rudiments* formed the basis for the combined English–Hebrew grammar that was published two years later. This, as we will see below, was indeed confirmed to be the case by Johnson himself.

But the Columbia University copy of *The First Easy Rudiments* is of further interest: it is marked throughout with annotations in the author's own hand. The annotations look like corrections for an intended second edition, as is confirmed by the handwritten phrase on the title page: 'The second Edition corrected & emended'; there is, moreover, a comment at the end that reads: 'N.B. The marked Lines [which occur throughout the text] only note which should be got by heart & need not be regarded in the reprinting', and it is followed by an instruction to the typesetter to 'insert this [i.e. the table of contents] at p. 9. of the Gram.'. Even more striking is a handwritten comment at the bottom of the first page of the Preface, as a note to a passage in the main text which reads: 'The best Grammar of our Language that I have seen, is a late one dedicated to our present Queen, called *The British Grammar*'. This is a reference to the grammar by James Buchanan, published in London in 1762 and, indeed, dedicated 'To Her Most Excellent MAJESTY, CHARLOTTE, QUEEN OF GREAT-BRITAIN, &c. &c.', as the copy in ECCO confirms. The mark † inserted at the end of the sentence in question takes us to a note in Johnson's hand at the bottom of the page, where we read: 'I since find Bp Lowth's much better'. Both grammars, Buchanan's as well as Lowth's, had been published in 1762, but Johnson only learnt of the existence of Lowth's grammar when its author sent him a copy in 1768.¹²

But despite Johnson's praise of Lowth's grammar, and his declared (if belated) preference of it to Buchanan's grammar, the annotated text for the second edition shows that he did not substantially alter the text of his *English and Hebrew Grammar*. The reference to Buchanan in the preface, for instance, remained unchanged. Even if Johnson had wanted to do so, he would have had to make more than accidental changes and revise the grammar completely. On page 6 of the English grammar, we read that the grammar dealt with only 'three distinct Sorts of Words, or Parts of Speech; *Nouns, Verbs, and Particles*'; the sentence is repeated verbatim on page 12 of his combined English–Hebrew grammar. In Ian Michael's account of the systems of parts of speech attested in English grammars before 1800 this would be System 22, a modified system compared to the Latinate systems adopted by Buchanan (System 7) and Lowth (System 10), which distinguished eight and nine Parts of Speech, respectively.¹³ Michael does not list Johnson (1765) among the few grammars that drew on the same system (there were two only): his study, published in 1970, was based on Alston's bibliography of 1965, which noted the inability to trace a copy of Johnson's grammar.

By Johnson's own admission, his grammar would have much profited from Lowth's if he had been in a position to read it beforehand. We know this because Columbia University possesses the other half of the Lowth–Johnson correspondence: two letters by Johnson addressed to Lowth, dated 25 June 1767 and 25 October 1768. The letters are part of a letter book in which Johnson

¹¹ See the extensive entry for Johnson's grammar in the Eighteenth-Century English Grammars (ECEG) database: <<https://eccg.iatext.ulpgc.es/grammar?grammar=333>>.

¹² Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University Libraries, JOHNSON BK811J63 Q5 13V.

¹³ Ian Michael, *English Grammatical Categories and the Tradition to 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), chapter 8.

customarily wrote his draft letters, addressed for example to the archbishop of Canterbury, Frederick Cornwallis, on 1 November 1768 and 20 September 1769. The two draft letters to Lowth allow us to reconstruct the sequence of the correspondence between the two men, which was initiated by Johnson, as the opening lines of the first letter demonstrate:

I humbly beg y^r. L^dships Candor & Goodness to excuse the Liberty I am presuming to take of writing to y^r. L^dship, having not had the Hon^r of being known to you.¹⁴

The letter continues by thanking Lowth for meeting his son¹⁵ and discussing Hebrew with him, and Johnson explains that he had published ‘a little Hebrew Gram[m]ar ~~to go in~~ to go side by side with the first Rudiments of an English Gram[m]ar ^{that they} [i.e. young learners of Hebrew] ^{might study ym} [i.e. them] ^{both together}’.¹⁶ Johnson next asked Lowth for advice on books that might be suitable for the study of Hebrew by ‘young beginners’. Lowth was an established scholar of Hebrew: he had been professor of poetry at the University of Oxford between 1741 and 1751, and had published *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum praelectiones* in 1753. This book, Johnson wrote, he had also ‘had ^{the great pleasure} ^{to} read’, noting the work’s ‘Admiration of all the Learned in Europe’.

Along with the letter, Johnson appears to have sent Lowth a copy of this dual English–Hebrew grammar, which had just come out. This is clear from Johnson’s second letter, in which he acknowledged the receipt of Lowth’s letter of 3 May 1768 (i.e. Lowth’s first letter to Johnson in the correspondence, see above), writing: ‘[I] thank you for your kind Acceptance of my Gram[m]’.¹⁷ This, then, was how Lowth had learnt about its existence, and it explains why he decided to send Johnson a copy of his *Short Introduction*—he did so ‘likewise’, he noted in his letter, as a reciprocal act.

In this second letter to Lowth, Johnson also expressed his highly favourable opinion of Lowth’s grammar: ‘I am likewise **unspeakably** obliged to y^r L^p for y^r kind present of y^r. **most excellent** Eng. Gram^r. wth. which I am **greatly pleased**’ (emphasis added), saying that he wished he ‘had been so happy as to have seen it before I made mine, which ~~would~~ might have been much the better for it, as well as’. Reading the grammar had also made him turn to ‘Mr. Harris’s ^{most excellent} Hermes which I have ^{seen} since . . .’.¹⁷ James Harris’s *Hermes*, a so-called philosophical grammar, had been published in 1751, and in the preface to his own grammar Lowth recommended those ‘who would enter more deeply into this Subject’ to read the work as well.¹⁸ Johnson, moreover, did not fail to pick up one of the innovative features of Lowth’s grammar, considered by many readers to be one of its most intriguing parts, i.e. the critical notes in the chapter on syntax (see above): ‘I could not have imagined that so many of our best writers could have been convicted of false Gram[mar]’. Johnson ends the letter by entreating Lowth—as bishop of London—to use his influence to try and strengthen the position of the Church of England in America, ‘that we may be provided for with Bps, without which Sa[c]red order the Ch[urc]h in these parts, must soon sink’.¹⁹

It would be interesting to speculate about what Johnson’s English grammar (and the subsequent dual-language grammar) would have looked like if its author had been in a position to read Lowth’s *Short Introduction* and Harris’s *Hermes* in preparation of it. The correspondence in

¹⁴ Johnson to Lowth (25 June 1767), Samuel Johnson papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University Libraries, MS 0679, letter book, f. 113.

¹⁵ Samuel Johnson Jr. had received a doctorate in civil law from the University of Oxford in 1766, as noted in Robert M. Calhoon, ‘Johnson, William Samuel (1727–1819)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (14 November 2018) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/68691>> (Accessed: 12 December 2022).

¹⁶ Johnson to Lowth (25 June 1767), letter book, f. 114.

¹⁷ Johnson to Lowth (25 October 1768), Samuel Johnson papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University Libraries, MS 0679, letter book, ff. 117–8.

¹⁸ Robert Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar: With Critical Notes* (London: Printed by J. Hughs; for A. Millar in the Strand; and R. And J. Dodsley in Pall-Mall, 1762), pp. xiv–xv.

¹⁹ Johnson to Lowth (25 October 1768), letter book, f. 118.

effect describes the difficulty for Americans like Johnson of keeping informed about recent publications on the subject in England. Johnson appears to have drawn on the only grammar of English that was available to him, Buchanan's *The British Grammar*, published in the same year as the one by Lowth, though the latter soon became state-of-the-art in the field of English grammar. Johnson's grammar was the first grammar of English that was published in America, as Alston's bibliography shows; the first (though unauthorised) American edition of Lowth's grammar dates from 1775,²⁰ three years after Johnson's death. Many more were to follow, most famously those by Noah Webster, published in 1784 and 1790.²¹

To conclude this journey of discovery on both sides of the Atlantic, it is thanks to the magnificent donation of books by Randal Keynes to New College Library two years ago that four more letters by Robert Lowth have come to light, and to further research based on these letters that produced two further letters addressed to him by Samuel Johnson, not the famous English lexicographer but the author of the first grammar of English published in America in 1765. Analysing the correspondence showed that the two men exchanged copies of their grammars with each other, and that Johnson thought so highly of Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) that he wished he had known of its existence before embarking on his *First Easy Rudiments of Grammar* (1765). Two years later Johnson published his *English and Hebrew Grammar* (1767), and a comparison between the two showed that earlier grammar formed the basis of the later dual-language edition. That this was indeed the case is confirmed by Johnson in his second letter to Lowth.

The original letters by Lowth have not survived, but those by Johnson have, in the form of draft letters written in a letter book in the possession of the library of Columbia University, in New York. The library also possesses one of the two identified copies of Johnson's *First Easy Rudiments*, something which only came to light well after the publication of volume 1 of Alston's *Bibliography of the English Language* in 1965. That Alston had originally been unable to locate a copy of the grammar does not mean that he had not searched hard enough—the grammar, comprising 39 pages only, had been published bound up with another book. At the time he did the research for his *English Grammatical Categories* (1970), Michael was thus unaware of the existence of copies of Johnson's grammar. Because we are now in a position to analyse the grammar, we may add one item to his overview of systems of parts of speech: apart from the grammars by Gill (1619) and Douglas (c. 1720?), Michael's System 22 now also includes the much later Johnson (1765). It may have been an uncommon system, but it was not altogether ephemeral. Had Johnson had access to Lowth's grammar at the time, however, he might well have adopted a different system of parts of speech, or even adapted the grammar substantially when deciding to produce his English–Hebrew grammar. But he was 71 when the dual-language grammar came out, and as he explained in his first letter to Lowth, he had retired from King's College, 'being weary of that laborious station, too tedious for my advanced years'.²² But he did feel 'still very desirous to promote the Study of the Heb. Scriptures', and that is what he did by publishing the English–Hebrew grammar, though with the English part in it largely unchanged.

All this confirms the importance of contextualising the publication history of English grammars by taking into account the personal circumstances under which grammarians worked. It is thanks to the contents of the Keynes Collection that I am able to continue doing so for Lowth and his *Short Introduction*, learning about its reception in America, but also that I have been able to

²⁰ Alston, *English Grammars*, p. 44. A copy of this first American edition is part of Bryan Garner's grammar collection, as shown in Bryan A. Garner, *Taming the Tongue: In the Heyday of English Grammar (1711–1851): 100 Items from the Garner Collection* (New York: The Grolier Club, 2021), p. 25. The copy itself can be consulted in ECCO.

²¹ See Sophie Du Bois's PhD study, currently carried out in the context of the HeidelGram research project at the University of Cologne. See also Rosemarie Ostler, 'American Grammars and Usage Guides', in *Oxford Bibliographies*: <www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199827251/obo-9780199827251-0235.xml> (Accessed: 28 December 2022).

²² Johnson to Lowth (25 June 1767), letter book, f. 114.

learn more about the 'other' Samuel Johnson, and consequently to throw some more light on the relationship between the two grammars he published towards the end of his life.

Ingrid Tiekens-Boon van Ostade
Professor Emeritus of English Sociohistorical Linguistics
Leiden University Centre for Linguistics