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Abstract proposal for AIA Conference XXIX Padova, 5-7- September 2019, *Thinking Out of the Box in Language, Literature, Cultural and Translation Studies: Questioning Assumptions, Debunking Myths, Trespassing Boundaries*

Title of the contribution: “GRAMMAR, or the Consideration of LANGUAGE”¹: metalinguistic assumptions in 18th-century British dictionaries of arts and sciences”

“GRAMMAR, or the Consideration of LANGUAGE”¹:

metalinguistic assumptions in 18th-century British dictionaries of arts and sciences”

Elisabetta Lonati

Abstract

Background. At the start of the Eighteenth century, a new emerging genre helped change the representation, the conceptualisation, and the vernacularisation of the world: this turning point was marked by the publication of *universal dictionaries of arts and sciences*, or encyclopædias, arranged in alphabetical order. These reference works were mainly addressed to a lay, non-expert audience of educated readers, and promoted the dissemination of traditional ‘knowledges’ and new ideas in eighteenth-century British society and across Europe (Yeo 1991, 1996, 2001, 2003; Kafker 1981 and 1994a-b). The alphabetical order made topics easily retrievable, and a complex system of cross-references established connections between terms and disciplines. Language and metalinguistic issues – terminology and ideas – represent one of the major fields of interest, due to the contemporary debate on variation and variants vs. regularisation and standardisation.

Aims and method. The general aim of this paper is a survey of the most relevant headwords/entries concerning language and metalinguistic awareness. The starting point are general notions as defined and discussed within individual entries, e.g. s.v. *language, grammar, English, dialect, idiom, word, syllable, letter, vowel, consonant, pronunciation, writing, orthography*, etc. across encyclopædias. A further step would emphasise the network of ideas established by cross-references, to make a more comprehensive discourse on (meta)language emerge, and to verify traditional approaches vs. innovations throughout the century.

Sources (*British dictionaries of arts and sciences* published between 1704 and 1788). The following works are the most relevant over the century, and the main focus of the study: Harris’s *Lexicon Technicum* (1704, 1-folio vol., hereafter *LT*), Chambers’s *Cyclopædia* (1728 [1727], 2 in-folio voll., hereafter *Cy*), *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1768-1771, 3 in-quarto voll., hereafter *EB*), and Rees’s *Cyclopædia* (1778-1788, 5 in-folio voll., hereafter *ReCy*). The reference is usually to the first edition of the preceding works, where different, it will be marked by a left superscript number (e.g. ^{5th}*Cy*, ^{5th}*LT*).

Discussion. The discussion will include extracts drawn from paratextual and prefatory matter, this section mainly concerns the general principles. More detailed examples will be drawn from the main body, that is to say the entries (see above). This will highlight both specific contents and (meta)language issues, and intra-textual connections to further headword/entries, in order to systematise an apparently fragmented discourse on (the English) language.

¹ Chambers’s *Cyclopædia* (1728), Preface, p. vi.

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