Lexicon in Early Modern English: the Inkhorn Controversy

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The English lexicon has been modified during the Early Modern English Period (1476-1776), characterised by the revival of Classical culture and the learning of Greek and Latin in schools, at universities and in jobs. Some authors support the inclusion of loanwords from Latin and Greek as “the English vocabulary was not sufficient to express all the ideas found in the rapidly increasing knowledge of the Renaissance” (Jones, 1953, p. 68). Conde-Silvestre and Hernández-Campoy point out that “the use of English was restricted to Britain […] while Latin was an international language” (2006, p. 142).

Specialists […] defended borrowing by appealing to the lack of exact or equivalent technical terms in English. Latin was the lingua franca of international science and scholarship […]. In the period of intense borrowing of Latin terms, it was the fields of medicine, zoology, botany (animal and plant names in particular) and theology that gained most (Nevalainen, 1999, p. 365).

Nonetheless, some authors defended the use of English as “[the] social and occupational groups which had little or no Latin, but which were eager to read and to learn, […] wanted books in English” (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009, p. 186). Thomas Elyot defends in Castle of Health (1534) that

If physicians be angry, that I have written physicke in englische, let them remember that the grekes wrate in greke, the Romains in latine, Avicenna […] in Arabike, whiche were their own proper and maternall tongues. And if thei had bene as muche attached with envye and covetise […] they wolde have devised some particular language, with a strange cipher or forme of letters, wherin they wold have written their scyence, whiche language or letters no manne should have knowen that had not professed and practised physicke (Adapted from Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 192).

One of the consequence of this argument was the Inkhorn controversy, which consisted of the overuse of Latin words “where perfectly good English expressions already existed” (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009, p. 190). As Thomas Wilson mocked in The Arte of Rhethorique,

Some seeke so far for outlandish English that they forget altogether their mothers tongue. And I dare swear this, if some of their mothers were aliuie, thei were not able to tell what they say: […] the vnlearned or foolish phantastical, that smelles but of learning […] wil so Latin their tongues, that the simple cannot but wonder at their talke, and thinke surely they speake by some reuelation (Adapted from Millward & Hayes, 2012, p. 226).

References