



Samuel Johnson and the Journey into Words

Lynda Mugglestone

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Popular readings of Johnson as a dictionary-maker often see him as a writer who both laments and attempts to control the state of the language. Lynda Mugglestone looks at the range of Johnson's writings on, and the complexity of his thinking about, language and lexicography. She shows how these reveal him probing problems not just of meaning and use but what he considered the related issues of control, obedience, and justice, as well as the difficulties of power when exerted over the 'sea of words'. She examines his attitudes to language change, loan words, spelling, history, and authority, describing, too, the evolution of his ideas about the nature, purpose, and methods of lexicography, and shows how these reflect his own and others' thinking about politics, culture, and society. The book offers a careful reassessment of Johnson's prescriptive practice, examining in detail his commitment to evidence, and the uses to which this might be put.

Dictionary-making, for Johnson, came to be seen as a long and difficult voyage round the world of the English language. While such images play their own role in lexicographical tradition, Johnson would, as this volume explores, also make them very much his own in a range of distinctive, and illuminating, ways. Johnson's metaphors invite us to consider-and reconsider-the processes by which a dictionary might be made and the kind of destination it might seek, as well as the state of language that might be reached by such endeavours. For Johnson, where the dictionary-maker might go, and what should be accomplished along the way, can often seem to raise pertinent and perhaps troubling questions.

Lynda Mugglestone's generous, wide-ranging account casts new light on Johnson's life in language and provides a convincing reassessment of his impact on English culture, the making of dictionaries, and their role in a nation's identity. She ends by considering the power of Johnson's legacy and the degree to which his work continues to guide our attitudes to language and what we variously expect dictionaries to be and do.

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