Academies and attitudes

NIGEL J. ROSS

The roles, the activities and the attitudes to English of some key language academies

BOOKS about the history of English, papers analysing change and development in language, academic treatises about lexicography, as well as an assortment of other publications, frequently make references to language academies. The lack of an official (British or American) language academy is regularly compared to the situation in France with its time-honoured *Académie Française*. All too often, however, a passing imprecise reference is made to the French Academy; all too often it is lumped together with other academies; and all too often the true nature of the work of such academies is ignored. This paper is an attempt to shed a little light on the matter. It takes a closer look at some of the foreign academies, considers why there is no academy in Britain or America (though we came close on a few occasions), discusses the only existing official academy of English (based in South Africa), and considers foreign academies' attitudes to English.

Introduction

Many English-speaking people only know of the *Académie Française*, wrongly believing that it is something more or less unique to the French. And, with characteristic Anglo-Saxon arrogance, they chalk it up to typically Gallic quirkiness. Instead, it is the English-speaking world that goes against the grain; language academies abound for other languages large and small.

In Europe, apart from France, there are for example language academies in Spain (for Castilian and Basque), Italy, Belgium (for Dutch), the Netherlands (for Frisian), Hungary, Romania and Sweden. In Ireland, the *Údarás na Gaeltachta*'s Language and Culture Development Department (*Rannóg Forbartha Teanga agus Cultúir*) has special responsibility for all aspects of Irish Gaelic language and culture, acting as something of an official academy.

In the Middle East, Arabs and Jews have their language academies, with the main Arabic academy in Cairo and the Academy of the Hebrew Language in Israel. The Persian Language Academy is based in Iran, and in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia the Academy of Malay Studies promotes Malay language and culture. In India, various languages, such as Urdu, Tulu and Kodava, have their academies, though from time to time the government puts forward plans to cut some of these costly organizations. In Spain, the Spanish (Castilian) Academy co-operates with twenty-one other Spanish-language academies throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Language academies are therefore a global phenomenon, except for the English-speaking world.

The *Académie Française*

It is the French Academy, however, that is generally seen as the world's official language academy *par excellence*. It is famed as the most authoritative, the most venerable and the most anti-English. One of the five societies of the *Institut de France*, it arose out of a series of

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informal meetings held in Paris in the 1630s among men of letters who got together to discuss rhetoric and other aspects of language. Recognized by Cardinal Richelieu, the organisation received the royal letters patent in 1635, becoming known as the *Académie Française*.

The academy has a particularly exclusive membership of 'forty immortals' who pontificate on all things to do with the French language, though the academy itself cannot legislate on language matters. The main task of the French Academy has always been that of preparing and revising the official French dictionary (first published in 1694, now in its 9th edition) and supervising official works on the grammar and rhetoric of the French language. In addition the academy awards literary prizes, distributes grants and charitable payments, and encourages debate and interest in the French language. The *Académie Française* describes its role as a double one: *veiller sur la langue française et accomplir des actes de mécéna* ('to watch over the French language and to carry out acts of patronage').

Much of the scorn levelled at the French Academy by outsiders stems from its rather conservative, aloof stance on a variety of issues: 'Judging by the experience of the French, who have an academy, the *Académie Française*, which adjudicates over matters of linguistic usage, and whose findings have been made law in some cases, the result is a waste of time' (Aitchison, 1991:218). Its conservatism is in-built, so to speak, in that it is foreseen in its statute: *La principale fonction de l'Académie sera de travailler, avec tout le soin et toute la diligence possibles, à donner des règles certaines à notre langue et à la rendre pure, éloquente et capable de traiter les arts et les sciences* ('The Academy's main purpose will be to work with all possible care and diligence to provide sound rules for our language and to render it pure, eloquent and suitable for artistic and scientific expression').

In recent years, the Academy has seemed to be waging a campaign against the use of English: *le rayonnement de la langue française est menacé par l'expansion de l'anglais* ('the resplendence of the French language is threatened by the expansion of English'). Partly because of such a stance, the French government passed a law (the so-called 1994 *Loi Toubon* 'Toubon law') to encourage the use of French in signs, official documents and contracts, conferences, the media and also in public services. A special committee was also set up (*Commission générale de terminologie et de néologie*: 'General Committee for Terms and Neologisms') in which the Academy plays a major role, the aim being to create new terms, to recommend French words to replace English ones and to take steps to ensure that the French alternatives are employed. In this province, success has been only limited.

The French Academy sees itself as the upholder of the purity of the French language: *élaborant son dictionnaire qui fixe l'usage de la langue* ('developing its dictionary that sets language usage'), seeking to maintain French's role as the international language of the elite: *depuis deux siècles le langage des élites du monde entier* ('the elite language of the whole world for the last two centuries'). In its quest to set language standards, to contrive French words to replace English ones, to provide rules and judge linguistic usage, the Academy can be thought of as still keeping to a rather prescriptive approach – in other words it still tends to 'lay down the law'.

The *Accademia della Crusca*

Although the French Academy is often thought of the oldest and most venerable of official language academies, it is the Italian *Accademia della Crusca* which has the honour of being the first language academy. Much like its French equivalent, it developed from an informal gathering of five Florentine men of letters who first met between 1582 and 1583, fifty years earlier than their French counterparts. Outsiders mocked at the way the early members tried to polish up the Italian language, their efforts at resolving microscopic linguistic quibbles being compared with a laborious cleaning of the husk (*crusca* in Italian) from the grain. In typical Italian fashion, the nickname fondly stuck.

The statute of the *Crusca* (as the Academy is familiarly known) differs quite significantly from that of its French cousin. The mission of the organization is given in the very first article of the statute: *L'Accademia della Crusca, … destinata da sempre a promuovere e agevolare lo studio della lingua italiana, procura l'edizione critica di testi importanti, pubblica i risultati di ricerche originali sulla storia e la struttura dell'italiano, dedica particolari cure al mantenimento e al rinnovamento delle sue antiche tradizioni nella lessicografia* ('The *Accademia della Crusca*, … as part of its ongoing aim to promote and encourage the study of the Italian

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language, commissions critical editions of important works, publishes the results of original research into the history and structure of Italian, and dedicates special care and attention to maintaining and renewing its ancient lexicographic traditions'). While the *Crusca* also published (between 1612 and 1923) a rather ponderous dictionary of the Italian language, the Italian academy has long abandoned any of the prescriptiveness of the *Académie Française*. Today the activities of the *Crusca* centre on three research areas (philological studies, lexicographic studies, and grammatical studies), and the attitude of Italians to their academy remains one of indulgence and slight indifference, in marked contrast with the situation in France.

The position of the *Crusca* towards English also differs remarkably from that of the *Académie Française*. In examining how the word "walking" is used in Italian, for example, the *Crusca* first defines it as 'the sporting activity that involves walking at a brisk, constant pace' and then compares 'walking' to 'jogging' and also contrasts 'wellness' to 'fitness', offering all four English terms with no apologies for a lack of purity. When writers such as Simon Winchester tell us that 'English is not to be regarded in the same way as, say, French or Italian, and in one crucially important way. It is not a *fixed* language, the meaning of its words established, approved and firmly set by some official committee charged with preserving its dignity and integrity' (Winchester, 2003: 27), he is doing the *Crusca* – and probably also the French Academy, up to a point – a gross disservice. It is a complete injustice to state that, for example, the *Crusca* urges upon the Italians 'the need for linguistic stability and an abhorrence of change' (Winchester, 2003: note on p. 29).

The *Real Academia Española*

The third of Europe's great language academies is the Royal Spanish Academy. The *Real Academia Española* was founded in 1713, its aim being: *fijar las voces y vocablos de la lengua castellana en su mayor propiedad, elegancia y pureza* ('to set the words and terms of the Castilian language in utmost congruity, elegance and purity'). In true fighting spirit, the Spanish Academy originally sought to wage war on anyone or anything that might demean the refinement and purity of the Spanish language, to prevent any possible decline from the heights the language had reached in the 16th century.

The academy has changed its tune – perhaps a little reluctantly – over the years, *adaptando sus funciones a los tiempos que le ha tocado vivir* ('adapting its role to the times in which it has to live'). The Spanish Academy seems to ride a mid-course between the still rather prescriptive approach of the French Academy, and the much easier-going stance of the Italian Academy. The first article of the *Real Academia Española*'s statute tells us that its main aim is to *velar porque los cambios que experimente la Lengua Española en su constante adaptación a las necesidades de sus hablantes no quiebren la esencial unidad que mantiene en todo el ámbito hispánico* ('ensure that changes that the Spanish language may undergo in its constant adapting to the needs of its speakers do not damage its basic unity in the Spanish-speaking world as a whole').

Indeed the Spanish Academy, taking a more global approach and co-operating with other Spanish academies throughout the world, looks to Spanish-speakers worldwide. Through its dictionaries and highly-respected grammar and style guides, the *Real Academia Española* tends to exercise a fairly conservative influence on the language, though without excessive prescriptivism.

In its approach to English, the Spanish Academy also takes a fairly pragmatic approach, not seeing the invasion of English as a threat to Spanish integrity, but aiming to help Spanish speakers who wish to assimilate English words into the language they speak. Rather than through official policy, this attitude – as for the *Crusca*'s attitude – can best be seen when looking at individual instances. For the word 'aerobic', for example, the Spanish Academy sanctions the English version 'as is' and also a Spanish-ized version with an accented 'o': *aeróbic*, explaining that, simply because the latter is more widely used, it is preferable. Spanglish is not seen as a real threat.

Endeavours for an English Academy

England came close to having its own language academy on a number of occasions. Many an informal gathering of linguists took place in England similar to those that gave rise to the Italian and French Academies, but they never became officially recognized. In 1664 the Royal

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Society set up a short-lived committee 'for improving the English language' (McCrum *et al* 1992:132). Daniel Defoe campaigned for an academy, stating in 1697 that 'The English Tongue is a Subject not at all less worthy the Labour of such a Society than the French, and capable of a much greater Perfection' (as quoted in McArthur 1992:8). Swift likewise put much effort into his petitions for an English Academy, advocating in 1712 that a certain number of qualified persons 'should assemble at some appointed Time and Place, and fix on Rules by which they design to proceed. … But what I have most at Heart is, that some Method should be thought on for *ascertaining* and *fixing* our language for ever' (as quoted in Crystal 1995:73). Swift (in league with Pope, Congreve and others) had political backing for his project, and if political events – partly determined by the untimely death of Queen Anne in 1714 – had been different, English may have found itself establishing its own academy more or less at the same time as the Spanish.

Where the English failed, the Americans almost succeeded. Proposals for an 'American Society of Language' were put forward from 1774 onwards, and a bill for a national academy was even put before Congress in 1806. Only in 1820, however, did the dream temporarily become something of a reality. An association was formed in New York calling itself the American Academy of Language and Belles Lettres, with John Quincy Adams as its president. One of its aims was to 'promote the purity and uniformity of the English language' (Crystal 1995:81) and plans were drawn up for a traditional-style dictionary containing none of the new-fangled words being coined in the United States at the time. Despite its promise and its intentions, a lack of government support and a lack of general interest led to the whole scheme being abandoned after just two years. It is soberingly clear, however, that if any of these British or American attempts had borne fruit, the English-speaking world would have found itself with an official organization, at least as prescriptive – and haughty – as the French Academy in its early days.

Mention has already been made of various unofficial societies and associations in Britain and America with a great interest in language, its purity, its development. And in many ways these unofficial organizations have played the role of the language academies in other countries. Philological Societies existed on both sides of the Atlantic – though the American society based in New York with Noah Webster as one of its prominent members only had a brief history. The London-based Philological Society, on the other hand, was founded in 1842 and has been in existence ever since. Worried by the state of available dictionaries at the time, the Philological Society set up the Unregistered Words Committee in 1857 and this, eventually, after vicissitudes varied and frequent, gave rise to what we now know as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Just like the *Crusca*, then the French and Spanish Academies, a scholarly, authoritative dictionary was produced for the language, but, in the case of English, on a broadly unofficial basis. And still today, private companies and organizations – such as the *OED*, Oxford University Press's OWLS (Oxford Word and Language Service) and even journals such as *English Today* – carry out some of the tasks that academies elsewhere undertake.

The English Academy of Southern Africa

Founded in 1961, the English Academy of Southern Africa 'is an association dedicated to promoting the effective use of English as a dynamic language in Southern Africa.' Like the European academies, the South African Academy promotes research and debate and makes awards for literary and other merits. In more recent years it has played an important part in determining the role of English in the newly democratic republic. An English-language advisory service known as *Grammarphone* is particularly popular, and allows members of the public to phone specialist consultants for help with any language-related matter – except for anything connected with school homework, the service points out very clearly. In line with the general aims of the Academy, the service has no intentions of prescribing usage or style, and warns would-be users that: 'We are advisors, not instructors. We don't lay down the law so much as chart a course avoiding the rocks of grammar and syntax.'

In promoting its Grammarphone service, the South African English Academy refers to an editorial from the *New York Sun* (of September 1922), later quoted by H. L. Mencken in *The American Language*, 4th edition, 1936: 'The excellent tribe of grammarians, the precisians and all others who strive to be correct and

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The English Academy of Southern Africa

TOM McARTHUR

The following text, which complements Nigel Ross's remarks on the English Academy in the accompanying article, is a section with the same title in 'Towards an autonomous South African English', a report to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Pretoria, submitted on completing a visit of several weeks to South Africa in September 1998

The organization which invited me is unique. No other Anglophone country has established such an institution, apart from some half-hearted efforts in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – a frustrated response to the growing prestige of the French Academy (founded 1634). But nothing was done and when from time to time over the years the question of the missing Academy has come up, authoritarians have deplored and libertarians have applauded its absence. Such academies are not part of the tradition of the English-speaking world, and to be invited to speak at a conference run by the only organization with such a name anywhere was unexpected, intriguing, and in truth rather strange.

This Academy is not however much like the Académie française. That institution and others like it are associations of eminent (generally elderly and male) littérateurs, academics, and others officially appointed to refine, sustain, defend, and strengthen the high literary and public form of a language, usually as part of the cultural apparatus of a nation-state. Such Academicians, because they have had a penchant for enshrining – even embalming – the spirit of the times in which the institutions were set up, have tended to be prescriptive, proscriptive, puristic, nationalistic, and socially remote; and, where nations with academies have possessed empires and colonies, they have tended to lay down the law regarding the sociolinguistic primacy of the mother country, its élite, their literature, and their ways of speaking and writing the language in question.

The EASA has certainly in nearly forty years of existence had its prescriptivist and purist dimension, but it has lacked the statutory role and recognition that consolidate élitism – and, notably, its prime mover was not a man: Professor Gwen Knowles-Williams of the University of Pretoria. The Academy came into existence in 1961 in response to sociopolitical pressure perceived as dangerous for the status and security of English as an official language – most particularly in terms of Afrikaans. Its members therefore tended to be more reactive and defensive ➳

correctors, have as much power to prohibit a single word or phrase as a gray squirrel has to put out Orion with a flicker of its tail.'

Conclusion

Such a pragmatic attitude is not so far removed from the way that Britain and America have managed quite successfully without language academies. When language academies suffer from a general ineffectuality, at times restricted by antiquated statutes, at times campaigning against the natural dynamism of the language, they become aloof, conservative institutions, out of touch with the real world.

Probably with some such fears in mind, even the French Academy in recent years seems to have felt the need to keep in touch more with language change and development, in particular with the use of English terms in French, seeing its role more and more that of following usage than determining it: in other words, taking a descriptive rather than a prescriptive approach. The Academy has not always been in agreement with the French Government's language policies and has on the one hand conservatively opposed government-sponsored spelling reform and anti-sexist usage, and on the other shown some far-sighted opposition to the government's anti-English crusade.

The Academy is at pains to point out that while English words used in French have increased from around 2.5% in 1900 to around 4.5% today, most such words are scientific and technical terms and are not widely used. Furthermore, it points out that the 'English invasion' is limited to vocabulary. Although it continues to castigate the vast numbers of unnecessary borrowings which have fashionable or snob value, and notes, not without criticism, how adolescent jargon uses words like 'speed' and 'cool', the *Académie Française* is in fact quite kindly disposed to English words such as 'comfortable', which it considers 'very necessary' to the French language, since there

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than reactionary and authoritarian, although memories of empire and kin, and awareness of the international eminence of English, may have played a part in their attempts to sustain BBC English in South Africa in much the same way as the Queen's English Society in the UK. The QES, however, is a grass-roots group that lacks support from scholars of language, whereas such scholarly participation has always been central to the activities of EASA.

Conditions have greatly changed since the founding years of the EASA. Yet it seems to me that, in South Africa as elsewhere, out of difficult and confusing situations groups may creatively evolve, with consequences that may be beneficial even for people who have questioned their reasons for existing. Despite my initial caution, by the time I left I had become aware that the EASA is significant in both actual and potential terms in southern Africa's complex linguistic situation. It seems to be less a unilingual crusade than a multicultural service, a point which the mission statement in the 1998 conference handbook underlines:

> The English Academy of Southern Africa is concerned with all forms and functions of English in southern Africa and internationally, and with all literatures written in English. It exercises this concern by interesting itself in English in education; promoting research and debate; organizing lectures; making representations; presenting awards; and in other ways fostering the creative, critical and scholarly talents of users of English. It does this while respecting the multilingual heritage of southern Africa.

As a consequence, the EASA can be an integrative and empowering resource, given interest throughout Africa in English as a vehicle of modernity, prosperity, competence, and international communication rather than rejection of it as a medium of racist oppression and aggrandisement. Nor need development of the Academy's role be a heavy burden on public funds, because it is a voluntary NGO which already has ties with a number of universities which house a range of centres and projects for the study of English and other languages.

English, it seems to me, is as secure in today's South Africa as anywhere on earth, despite anxieties about its role and condition. An indicator of this security is the extent to which the 1998 conference attracted participants from other sub-Saharan countries – and would have attracted more if funds had been available. If there is to be any kind of 'African Renaissance' in which South Africa figures strongly, English will be a prime medium for it, and the Academy – with a sufficiently large and wide-ranging membership, and adequate national recognition – could be a key channel for linguistic developments of all kinds. □

is no French equivalent. Academies and attitudes, just like the language, are apt to change. ■

Notes, references and further reading

The websites of the language academies are the easiest sources for descriptions, roles, statutes, etc. All information and quotations relating to the academies are from their websites, unless otherwise stated. Thanks are due to Gina Maneri for her perspicacious comments on the translations given from Spanish.

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The *Real Academia Española* <www.rae.es>
The English Academy of Southern Africa <www.englishacademy.co.za>

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