English Purist Tendencies in a Comparative Perspective

András Cser
Pázmány Péter Catholic University

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present and explain the contrast between the purist tendencies (here narrowly defined as the replacement of loanwords with lexical material based on native resources) that existed in England and those that existed in the speech communities of smaller European languages. It is well known that in the case of English, purist tendencies were by and large unsuccessful (Barber 1976, Görlach 1991:154 ff., Nevalainen 1999:358 ff.), but the opposite is true for smaller languages like Hungarian or Czech, as well as some of the major European languages, like German (Gardt 1999, Cser 2006). To understand why, two types of purist attitude have to be distinguished both typologically and historically (strictly in early modern and modern times). The first type is isolated and typically earlier, the second type (typically later) is intimately connected to institutional aspects of the speech community's life, such as the expansion of schooling and universities and academies, the use of standardised textbooks, and the emergence of a literary canon. First, a number of definitions will be cited to show how the very notion of purism has been captured by various authors. Its typology will be briefly discussed. Finally, its diachronic aspect will be touched upon and the central issue, the difference between the two modern sub-periods of purism, will be explicated.

2. Definitions

First of all, let us look at some of the definitions of purism, just to take a selection from the many possible sources. Adamson in her summary devoted specifically to the Early Modern English lexicon defines purism as "the deliberate attempt at reducing the number of foreign words or avoiding their use altogether" (1999:479). Renate Bartsch gives (1987:66) the following description: "Language purists and entire puristic movements try to keep [the standard language,] this symbol of national- and group-identity free from outside influences. They try to open native sources for lexical elaboration (preferably from earlier stages of the language and not from 'vulgar' regional or social varieties) instead of non-native resources" — this is found in a book devoted in its entirety to the issue of linguistic norms and standardisation, cf. the qualifications referring to the standard and to the exclusion of regional varieties, not in fact warranted by the various forms of purism all over Europe. The reference to "native sources for lexical elaboration" highlights what is probably the most spectacular aspect of purism, the replacement of borrowed vocabulary by what is (perceived to be) native, inherited lexical material. David Crystal in his *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* defines *purism* as "a school of thought which sees a language as needing preservation from the external processes which might infiltrate it and thus make it change, e.g., the pressures exercised by other dialects and languages (as in loan words) and the variations introduced by colloquial speech…" (Crystal 1991, s.v. *purism*)

The last definition proper is from Thomas (1991:12), the seminal work on purism. It is by far the most detailed definition that can be found in the literature; Thomas, characteristically, proposes it as a working definition only, which he then elaborates throughout the book.

Purism is the manifestation of a desire on the part of a speech community (or some section of it) to preserve language from, or rid it of, putative foreign elements or other elements held to be undesirable (including those originating in dialects, sociolects and styles of the same

language). It may be directed at all linguistic levels but primarily the lexicon. Above all, purism is an aspect of the codification, cultivation and planning of standard languages. (Thomas 1991:12)

The last citation is from the *Art of English Poesie* (1589; uncertain ascription to George Puttenham):

[there are] many polysillables to sixe and seauen in one word, which we at this day vse in our most ordinarie language, and which corruption hath bene occasioned cheefly by the peevish affectation not of the Normans them selues, but of clerks and scholers or secretaries long since, who not content with the vsual Normane or Saxon word, would conuert the very Latine and Greeke word into vulgar French, as to say innumerable for innombrable, reuocable, irreuocable, irradiation, depopulation and such like, which are not naturall Normans nor yet French, but altered Latines… which therefore were long time despised for inkehorne termes, and now be reputed the best and most delicate of any other.

Examples include Sir John Cheke's *gainrising* (=*resurrection*, sixteenth century), William Barnes's *fireghost* (=*electricity*) or *gleemote* (=*concert*, nineteenth century), or the Modern French neologisms *courriel* (← *courrier* 'mail' + *électronique* 'electronic') for *e-mail* and *pourriel* (← *poubelle* 'trash' + *courriel* or *pourri* 'rotten' + *courriel*) for *spam*, the latter actually proscribed by the *Académie française* but embraced by the *Office québécois de la langue française.*

By the term *purism* I mean a narrower aspect of purism than is frequently thought of; I will not be concerned with its various stylistic and literary manifestations, but will concentrate on the puristic tendency to replace perceived foreignisms in the word stock.

3. Typology

Several typologies of purism have been proposed in the literature, the most complete being perhaps that in Thomas (1991). The basic types or, I should rather say, attitudinal components he distinguishes are the following (based on Thomas 1991:76–82):

archaising, which relies on linguistic material from the past

ethnographic, which relies on rural dialects as its main source, such as the Finnish movement is reported to be

élitist, which focuses on the aesthetic, prestige aspect of language and is characterised by a negative attitude to substandard and regional varieties

reformist, which is concerned with coming to terms with resources accrued in earlier periods, adapting language to modern needs, and is forward-looking

xenophobic, whose goal is the eradication of foreign elements or, perhaps more accurately, the eradication of what are perceived to be foreign elements, since, as is well known, the two are not the same

These attitudes are defined by three intersecting parameters or "axes", the social, the temporal and the perspectual. The two endpoints of the social axis are élitist and ethnographic purism, the former focusing on the language use of the highest sections of society and that of the most highly educated circles, whereas the latter focusses on rural dialects. The two endpoints of the temporal axis are archaising and reformist, that is, backward-looking and forward-looking or modernising purism. The two endpoints of the third, the perspectual axis are xenophobic and non-xenophobic, of which the latter is not in fact a purist attittude at all.

There is, in fact, one point at which an addition needs to be made to this picture, and that is the role of institutions. Comrie hints at the role of schools in his review of the book (Comrie 1994:845), and it is crucial to an understanding of the nature of the English purist efforts, because — and this is a point I will come back to a little later — the lack of a specifically dedicated institutional background is one of

the main reasons purism never grew into an effective movement to shape the English language, as opposed to other languages in the east and north of Europe.

4. Diachrony

This question takes us to the next point, the historical stages of purism. The historical transformations of purism have been documented in the relevant literature, and its many forms and variants have been shown to be proper to certain periods of (especially European) history.[1] If we now disregard the earliest forms of purism, the medieval tendency to nativize the Latin word stock as done by Alfred and Ælfric, I think in early modern and modern times there are only two fundamentally different types of purism (among the many forms it took over the centuries), and the main difference lies in the extent to which the instigators of the puristic ideas were isolated as against the extent to which their efforts were channeled into and propagated through institutional forms. To exaggerate things a little, the typical form of purism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was that of solitary heroes, i.e., teachers, educators, Bible translators and the like, who were not necessarily *socially* isolated — often just the opposite — but their relevant activities did remain isolated. The typical English examples are John Cheke, Roger Ascham and George Puttenham (if he was the author of *The Arte of English Poesie*) the typical East European (in this case Hungarian) example is János Apáczai Csere, a Transsylvanian protestant teacher, who lived in the mid-seventeenth century, and who wrote an encyclopedia completely in Hungarian in which he translated the entire terminology of most of the sciences (especially natural sciences and philosophy). Part of the reason that his efforts remained ineffectual was that he died at the age of 35, but his story is typical of the age.

This early form of purism contrasts with the more organised, institutionalised forms of eighteenth and nineteenth century purism as represented among others by Otto Sarrazin (1842–1921) who, as a high-ranking government official responsible for the construction and management of the railway system, created or commissioned the creation of the German railway vocabulary in the nineteenth century. His creations include:

> *Abteil* 'compartment' (for *Coupé*)
> *Bahnsteig* 'platform' (for *Perron*)
> *Fahrgast* 'passenger' (for *Passagier*)

Another, even more important institutional channel was the educational system. As Comrie says, "it is perhaps not surprising that the successful instances of linguistic purism in the nineteenth century coincide with the development of mass education" (1994:845). But Comrie is wrong in restricting this explanation to the nineteenth century. The tendency is already evident in the eighteenth century, although for different reasons in different places. A parallel can be again given from Hungary, where the first really successful wave of nativising the scientific vocabulary was in fact instigated and carried out by the Society of Jesus, who had many schools in the country, and worked with a relatively uniform syllabus and set of textbooks, so when they decided to use Hungarian in teaching and write Hungarian textbooks accordingly, the first really significant battle was essentially won within a matter of decades (e.g., *hullám* 'wave' from *hull* 'to fall', *ásvány* 'mineral' from *ás* 'to dig', mid-eighteenth century).

When we talk about the role of institutions within puristic movements, what immediately comes to mind is the renowned academies, beginning with the Accademia della Crusca (1572, Florence) and the Académie française (1635), up to the nineteenth-century academies established in eastern Europe or the Persian Academy (1935). It has long been known, however, that — with one or two notable exceptions — these academies were singularly ineffective in influencing the development of the vocabulary and channelling puristic movements. The English — perhaps wisely — refrained from establishing such an academy, or were unsuccessful at any rate. The French academy has always enjoyed great prestige, but its effects on the development of the French vocabulary have been minimal. The Hungarian Academy was established in 1830, ten years after the most intensive period of the puristic movement was over,

---

[1] See again Thomas (1991:188 sqq., esp. 209–214) for an excellent summary.

although its role in the codification of spelling and certain matters of technical vocabulary was not insignificant. But what mattered more was the increasing reach of mass education with centrally organised curricula also involving the newly established literary canons, which in turn included many puristic and reformist poets and writers.

The place of English purists in this broad diachronic typology is fairly clear. Those representing the first kind (non-institutionalised purism, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) are more or less like their counterparts all over Europe, though details differ from country to country. Moore characterises this period thus: "As a matter of fact there were no purists — only Latinists of varying degrees of purism" (Moore 1910:46) — and this is underscored by the fact that next to *bitter taunt* for *sarcasmus* and similar items, *The Arte of English Poesie* includes translations like *qualifier* for *epithet*, apparently without reservations about translating a Greek term by a word of Latin origin.

These highly educated men, imbued with various forms of humanistic ideas, were experimenting with the possibilities of their native languages and attempted to adapt them to the new demands of the classical arts (like George Puttenham and Thomas Wilson for rhetoric) or of the emerging and rapidly developing natural sciences (like Arthur Golding for medicine). The more modern forms of purism, however, are completely absent from England, and this is the important point. The eighteenth and nineteenth century purists are mavericks outside of the mainstream of the intellectual climate, so to say, (e.g., William Barnes) and were seen as such by society in general.

5. The puristic movements in the 18th and 19th centuries

As I said earlier, the chief reason for the difference in the effectiveness of the English in comparison to many continental variants of purism lies in the lack of institutional background. By institutions we do not mean the academies in the first place; their significance is less than one would assume. I mean institutions like the organisation and the schools of the Society of Jesus in many parts of Europe (absent in England for obvious reasons) or like the German Ministry of Public Works (the institution responsible for the railway system, where Otto Sarrazin worked in the late 19th century). It goes without saying that some institutions — especially educational — did have puristic traits in the very general sense of the word in England too; there were, however, no institutions that were dedicated specifically to lexical purism in the same sense or to the same extent as those continental ones mentioned above.

The presence or absence of institutional background is not the only reason, however. There are more general ones involving what is called in a different context the climate of opinion: as is well known, the great 19th century continental purist movements were intimately linked to the nationalist movements, which did not appear in England.

This is distantly related to a third point here: the full functionality of the English language was no longer an issue in the 18th and 19th centuries, whereas on much of the continent (especially in the East and North) vernacular languages were still hardly used in administration, legislation, education, science, journalism and most forms of serious writing.

The fourth point, which is to the best of my knowledge absent from the literature on the topic, but I have a sneaking suspicion may have some importance, is related to the morphological character of the relevant languages. As is known, even in English, the overwhelming majority of puristic neologisms applies transparent morphology, that is, they were formed mainly via affixation (like Cheke's *moond* 'lunatic' or *gainrising* 'resurrection') and compounding (like Golding's *fleshstrings* 'muscles', Lever's *witcraft* 'logic' or Barnes' *earthtillage* 'agriculture'). It is clear that agglutinating languages like Finnish or Turkish or Hungarian lend themselves much more easily to these processes than languages like English or French in that in languages of the former type it is relatively easy to produce highly transparent lexical material in large quantities. Slavonic languages are, of course, not agglutinating in the sense in which Finnish or Turkish are, but large parts of their vocabularies display a fairly recognisable prefix–base–derivational suffix pattern, so it comes as no surprise that most neologisms follow that pattern (e.g., Polish *podomka* for earlier *szlafrok* 'dressing gown' or Russian *preobraženie* for 'transfiguration' cf. also Czech *podpovídka* lit. 'sub-short-story', an innovative term for Karel Čapek's indeed very short stories published in the 1920s and 30s). It appears that the highly successful

East European (i.e., Slavonic and Hungarian) puristic movements were based on, but also reinforced, the relatively productive and transparent derivational morphology of these languages.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, my point is that while there is a wealth of literature on the English purists, some points have been neglected or not duly emphasised, and comparative perspectives have often played little role in their discussion. From an external aspect, the most important is perhaps the role of institutions, typically lacking in England. From the internal aspect, it is possible that the morphological character of the relevant languages also played a role, though this is a point that certainly requires further research.

References

Adamson, Sylvia. 1999. Early Modern English Lexis and Semantics. In: *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, vol. III., ed. R.Lass.

Barber, C. L.. 1976. *Early Modern English*. London: Deutsch.

Bartsch, Renate. 1987. *Norms of Language*. London and New York: Longman.

Comrie, Bernard. 1994. Review of Thomas. 1991. *Language* 70, 844–6.

Crystal, David. 1991. *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Cser, András. 2006. A magyar nyelvtudomány történetének áttekintése. In: Kiefer (ed.) *Magyar nyelv*. Budapest: Akadémiai.

Gardt, Andreas. 1999. *Gechichte der Sprachwissenschaft in Deutschland*. Berlin and New York: Gruyter.

Görlach, Manfred. 1991. *Introduction to Early modern English*. Cambridge: CUP.

Lass, Roger. 1999. *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, vol. III. Cambridge: CUP.

Moore, J. L.. 1910. *Tudor and Stuart Views on the Growth Status and Destiny of the English Language*. Halle: Niemeyer.

Nevalainen, Terttu. 1999. Early Modern English Lexis and Semantics. In: *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, vol. III., ed. R. Lass.

Thomas, George. 1991. *Linguistic Purism*. London and New York: Longman.

Selected Proceedings of the 2008 Symposium on New Approaches in English Historical Lexis (HEL-LEX 2)

edited by R. W. McConchie, Alpo Honkapohja, and Jukka Tyrkkö

Cascadilla Proceedings Project   Somerville, MA   2009

Ordering information

Orders for the library binding edition are handled by Cascadilla Press.
To place an order, go to www.lingref.com or contact:

Cascadilla Press, P.O. Box 440355, Somerville, MA 02144, USA
phone: 1-617-776-2370, fax: 1-617-776-2271, e-mail: sales@cascadilla.com

Web access and citation information

This entire proceedings can also be viewed on the web at www.lingref.com. Each paper has a unique document # which can be added to citations to facilitate access. The document # should not replace the full citation.

This paper can be cited as:

Cser, András. 2009. English Purist Tendencies in a Comparative Perspective. In *Selected Proceedings of the 2008 Symposium on New Approaches in English Historical Lexis (HEL-LEX 2)*, ed. R. W. McConchie, Alpo Honkapohja, and Jukka Tyrkkö, 36-40. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

or:

Cser, András. 2009. English Purist Tendencies in a Comparative Perspective. In *Selected Proceedings of the 2008 Symposium on New Approaches in English Historical Lexis (HEL-LEX 2)*, ed. R. W. McConchie, Alpo Honkapohja, and Jukka Tyrkkö, 36-40. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. www.lingref.com, document #2164.