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The building of English language identity through dictionaries and grammar books: Two case studies

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ABSTRACT

The present paper focusses on the role the British lexico-grammatical tradition has had in shaping the identity of the English language through the centuries, shifting its focus gradually but steadily from Latin to English. To do so, attention will be drawn to the works of two scholars who contributed to the advancement of English in their own original way; specifically, the 16th-c. lexicographer Peter Levins who authored the first English-Latin rhyming dictionary, and the 19th-c. grammarian Percival Leigh who published two comic grammars, one for Latin and one for English. Their works will be analysed as case studies testifying to the changes undergone in the 'power-relation' between English and Latin from the 16th to the 19th century.

Keywords: historical English lexicography, historical English grammars, English identity, Peter Levins, Percival Leigh.

1. Introduction

Since its early stages, the English language has been nurtured by scholarly studies that have helped its growth and contributed to its spreading both in England and abroad. Indeed, through the centuries, glossaries, dictionaries, grammar books and educational treatises of various kinds have been walking by the side of English, first to aid the British people in the comprehension and learning of Latin and of other classical languages, then to improve the English language skills of native and non-native speakers throughout the world.

The English Renaissance, in particular, witnessed a wide-ranging socio-cultural awakening that linguistically marked the flourishing of studies on English, thus giving birth to the first full-fledged bilingual English dictionaries, on the one hand, and to grammar writing, on the other (Padley 1985; Starnes – Noyes 1991). During the following centuries, language scholars did their best to free English from its early dependence on Latin; indeed, though still relying on Latin, their works proved that English grammar was far more than the application of Latin norms to the vernacular and that it was worthy of the same respect that Latin had enjoyed over the centuries. By the 19th century, the shift from Latin to English was complete and writers could indulge in focussing not only on the English language as such (Michael 1987), but also on its users (and misusers) both in Britain and in America (Dierks 2009; Schultz 1999); indeed, as aptly remarked by Schweiger (2010),

[t]he social history of English grammar tells how the ancient reverence for the power and mastery of language moved within reach of all ranks of society in the nineteenth century. Plain, cheap, and plentiful, English grammars pulled the ancient traditions of Latin grammar and its associations with gentility and learnedness into a new century, extending the possibility of eloquence to ordinary readers. (Schweiger 2010: 554-555).

Bearing this in mind, in the present paper I will first overview how and to what extent the British lexico-grammatical tradition has contributed to shaping the identity of the English language. Then, I will focus on a lexicographer and a grammarian, respectively Peter Levins and Percival Leigh, as two case studies from two different historical periods; in particular, 16th century Peter Levins authored the English-Latin *Manipulus Vocabulorum* (1570), the first rhyming dictionary ever published in England, and *The Pathway to Health* (1587), a medical book totally written in English. In turn, 19th century Percival Leigh wrote two complementing works, *The Comic Latin Grammar* and *The Comic English Grammar*, both published in 1840. The works of these two scholars bring to the fore the change in the ‘power relationship’ between English and Latin from the 16th to the 19th century, testifying – through their lexico-grammatical works – the steadily increasing role of the vernacular at the expenses of what for centuries had been the European working language.

2. British lexico-grammatical tradition and the shaping of English identity

Since early Anglo-Saxon England, between 600 and 700 A.D., Latin glosses of religious and practical treatises had appeared with the primary purpose of explaining difficult Latin words. These glosses soon came to be written in the vernacular (Fernández Cuesta – Pons-Sanz 2017) and then were often collected in glossaries which evolved into authentic Latin-English dictionaries, arranged either alphabetically or under classified entries, whose object was essentially to provide a Latin dictionary for the use of Englishmen (see Stein 1985, 1990, 2017; Considine 2014; Bailey 2019; among others).

Between the 15th and the 16th century, English-Latin dictionaries began to enrich the scene (Stein 2014); their aim was turned from Latin to English, since they were mainly concerned with glossing English entries. Indeed, it is generally acknowledged that the first English-Latin bilingual dictionaries were more innovative in approach than their Latin-English counterparts, which were heavily indebted to earlier monolingual Latin works and often simply glossed the works of previous scholars. In contrast, most English-Latin dictionaries drew on material from a greater number of sources; for example, John Withals' *Shorte Dictionarie for Yonge Begynners* (1553) had at least twelve sources, including previously published dictionaries as well as scientific and literary treatises of his century; Withals also registered proverbs, wise sayings, legends, and myths. This enhanced attention for the English language and culture contributed to making the 'vulgar idiom' less 'vulgar' (in lay terms) and 'more idiom', in so far as the nobility first and the gentry afterwards were more and more accustomed to reading and writing the language they used in their everyday life, while at the same time they perceived both French and Latin as more distant languages (Joby 2017; Adams 2003).

In 16th and 17th century Britain, glossaries and vocabularies gradually gave way not only to monolingual, bilingual and polyglot dictionaries, but also to indexes and glossaries appended to grammar books (and vice versa) for pedagogic reasons, thus paving the way for a productive work of both grammarians and lexicographers (Keener 2018; Mitchell 2001). The practice of appending small dictionaries and indexes to textbooks was explicitly welcomed by Richard Mulcaster and William Bullokar¹ who, as teachers,

¹ Richard Mulcaster published a handbook to good practice in English language teaching 1582 (*Elementaire*, 1582), while William Bullokar authored the first published grammar of English (*Bref Grammar for English*, 1586).

insisted on the importance of joining a dictionary to a grammar book. A few years later, in 1594, Paul Graves published his *Grammatica Anglicana*, which contained, for the first time, also a *Dictionariolum of English words with their Latin equivalents*.

Graves and those who followed him were far from being inclusive in their works and quite often ended up writing simplified indexes for the use of their students; however, this custom of merging grammatical notes with glossed English entries along with their translation into Latin testified to the need of educators – and of the British cultural world in general – to mould a more educated ‘English’ society, aware of the potentialities and applications of what by then had become their official language.

In a specular way, the shift of focus from Latin to English that had involved lexicographers affected grammarians as well, who started to tread the British scene in the 16th century. At first, they generally assumed that, since Latin was still the official language taught at school, what was pertinent to the description of Latin would be equally pertinent to the description of English. Due to this belief, their books were often devised in a Latinised framework and turned out to be little more than Latin grammars in disguise. Indeed, at that time there was still no codified set of rules for the English language; nor did anyone officially question the authoritative Latin tradition, which had its main representatives in Varro, Donatus, and Priscian.

William Lily was one of these early grammarians and his Latin grammar *Rudimenta Grammatices* (ca. 1540) became so popular that in 1542 it was imposed by the Tudors as the only ‘authorized grammar’; as such, all subsequent grammarians had to come to terms with its overriding importance and often published merely approving annotations of the same text. No doubt, at that time the publication of translations, elucidations and supplements of this book was, as pointed out by Padley (1985), partly a subterfuge allowing publication, which would otherwise have been thwarted by the royal privilege enjoyed by Lily’s grammar.

Meanwhile, however, English evolved into a national language and England itself was becoming a ‘nation’. London grew as the political and commercial centre of the country and a standard variety gradually emerged², crossing lands and oceans with its speakers via colonialization.

² Although the Chancery Standard has long been acknowledged as the dialect that almost exclusively contributed to the Standardization of the English language, recent studies challenge this orthodox view testifying to the fact that Standard English largely stemmed from a phenomenon of supralocalisation driven by language contact occurring all over the country (Wright 2020).

The process of English overriding Latin in grammar books was embodied and symbolized by the shift from William Lily's Latin grammar to Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* (1795) which was widely published and re-edited not only in Britain but also in its colonies. By that time, English had functionally diversified so as to be used for a wide range of purposes and had become the favourite language of science, culture, administration and colonization.

Between the 18th and 19th century, grammarians openly devised their grammars with full sections on orthography, etymology, syntax, and prosody of English rather than of Latin; they codified rules and prescribed norms of use in a variety of communicative domains; they fixed and codified spelling in their dictionaries and contributed to incrementing the English lexicon (Görlach 2001; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2009); they even proscribed and stigmatized the linguistic misuses in speaking and writing (Sundby et al. 1991).

So, the attitude of English language scholars gradually changed from hesitantly nurturing the language to overtly imposing its culture on the peoples and places where the British spread and settled. Christopher Cooper's *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae*, published in 1685, was the last English grammar written in Latin; between 1750 and 1799 the number of English-related language books had more than quadrupled compared to the previous fifty years. This officialization of English grammars in schools and the flourishing of manuals in the vernacular gave the final boost to English's coming of age.

In the following sections, attention will be drawn to the works of two scholars who contributed to this advancement of English in their own original way: the 16th century lexicographer Peter Levins (Section 3) and the 19th century grammarian Percival Leigh (Section 4). Their works will be analysed as case studies testifying to the above-mentioned changes in the 'power-relation' between English and Latin.

3. Peter Levins' lexicographic zest for the English language

Peter Levins (or Levens) was a 16th century scholar and "eminent physician" (Wood 1813: col. 548) who wrote two books:

- *Manipulus Vocabulorum. A Dictionarie of English and Latine wordes, set forthe in suche order, as none heretofore hath ben, the Englishe going before the Latine, necessary not onely for Scholers that want varietie of words, but also for such as use to write in English Meetre* (1570).

- *A right profitable Book for all Diseases, called the Pathway to Health; wherein are most excellent and approved Medicines of great virtue; as also notable Potions and Drinks, and for the distilling of divers Waters, and Making of Oils, and other comfortable Receipts* (1587).

In the Preface to the *Manipulus*, Levins highlights the originality of his manual as the first rhyming dictionary, “the gathering of oure Englishe wordes, and deviding of the same into this alphabet order of the last sillable being a trade not of any man afore attempted” (Levins 1570: 6). When reprinting the book in 1867, the Camden Society qualified it as a “curious work” due to its arrangement by the ending of the words rather than by the beginning. Yet it is this “curious” aspect that has helped scholars understand how English was written and spoken in the 16th century, when orthography and pronunciation were still fluctuating in a sea of variants, while grammar books were timidly setting off their boats to navigate that sea. By the 19th century, the key role of both Levins’ dictionary and of those who had followed him along his path³ had become clear to many, including John Wheatley who, in his Preface to the 1867 edition of the book, wrote:

- (1) A Dictionary arranged according to endings is especially likely to contain a number of words which are otherwise unregistered, for the rhyme must have naturally brought to the recollection of the compiler many words of frequent use in conversation, which had not found their way into books. (Wheatley 1867: Preface)

Indeed, Wheatley hit the target in attributing to Levins the scouting role of listing words that had apparently been left unregistered by previous lexicographers; up to 266 new terms were first mentioned in the *Manipulus*, some of which appear only in Levins’ book, while others have survived up to the present time (Facchinetti 1996).

Levins was also the first to include word-formation as an integral part of his dictionary, listing inflectional and derivational suffixes as headwords together with a description of their function (Facchinetti 1996). Though some of these qualifications may have been both ingenuous and incorrect,

³ The following rhyming dictionaries were published between the 16th and the 18th century: Thomas Willis’ *Vestibulum Linguae Latinae* (1651), Joshua Poole’s *The English Parnassus* (1657), Edmund Bysshe’s *The Art of English Poetry* (1701), Edmund Bysshe’s *The British Parnassus* (1714), John Walker’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1775), Le-Tans’ur’s *The Beauties of Poetry* (1776), and J. Trusler’s *Poetic Endings* (1783).

we must acknowledge his key role in laying a new stone in the path of the development of the English language, and in the shaping of its identity as the general language of communication and knowledge transmission.

As a matter of fact, Levins' role as a forerunner lies not only in his "firsts" in the phonological, morphological and lexicographic fields, but also in HOW he conveyed such "firsts" to the general public. Indeed, his dictionary is English-Latin rather than Latin-English, that is, Levins presents English entries first, with their meanings and etymologies, while Latin follows in a merely complementing way:

- (2) There be many other in able, deriued of Englishe verbes, almost as many as there be verbs, which are only formed by putting too Able at the ende of the English terme, as these that folow, and such other, whose latin is in *bilis*, & do signifie, that a thing is conuenient, mete, fit, apt, worthy or able to be done, as,
 EATABLBE, méet or fit to be eaten
Comestibilis, bile.
 TREATABLE, worthy, or able to be treated upon.
 [...]
 These maye also be written in abill, as, Laudable, or Laudabill, &c.
 Loke in (ill). They bee deriued of Verbes, and haue theyr latine in *lis*.

In some cases, as in *treatable* above, Levins even drops the Latin translation. Here, Latin appears to be ancillary to English, often needed only to complete Levins' notes on the English words, and thus testifying to the shift in perspective dealt with in Section 2 above that was groundbreaking in Levins' times.

Moreover, while listing words of the same endings, Levins is careful enough as to clarify their grammatical functions in English, for example introducing verbs with *to* ("to WALE, wéepe, lugère, plangère"), placing the indefinite article form *a* before common nouns ("A BYNAME, épithelon"), leaving proper nouns with no article ("GALINGALE, herb, acorus, I"), or mentioning English phrases and collocations ("to GALE for colde, algère"). Such practice, which is largely employed by Levins throughout the book, testifies to his care for English and for its practice and for the need he felt to transmit it to his readers.

Levins' second book, *The Pathway to Health*, is the natural consequence of the *Manipulus*, since in the *Pathway* he totally drops Latin in favour of English. *The Pathway to Health* deals with illnesses and their remedies and is mentioned here only on account of its introductory Epistle, which is of great

importance to our purpose, since in his introductory words Levins justifies the use of English as the only language of the book:

- (3) I have given the onset to publish in our own Natural Tongue this most excellent work for all Diseases, for the which cause it should not bee the lesse esteemed, although some more curious then wise esteem of nothing but that which is most rare, or in hard or unknown Languages. Certainly, these kind of People cannot abide that good and laudable Arts should be common to many, fearing that their Name and Practise should decay, or at the least should diminish: the intention truely of such persons seemeth much like them that gape for all, and would have all, leaving nothing to anybody, but that which they must needs forgo, considering that we are not born for our selves only, as Plato saith, but for the profit of our Country. (Levins 1587: Epistle)

Levins advocates the use of “our own natural tongue” rather than of “hard or unknown languages” and remarks that those who prefer other difficult languages to English prefer to keep knowledge for themselves rather than sharing it with others. To him “all Arts and Sciences may bee published in that Tongue which is best to be understood”; indeed:

- (4) If then the intent of all that ever set forth any notable Study, have been to bee read of as many as would, what reason is it that we should keep secret among a few the thing that was to be made common to all?
[...]
it is exceeding damnable and devillish, to debar the fruition of so inestimable benefits, which our heavenly Father hath prepared for our comfort. (Levins 1587: Epistle)

The English language is considered by Levins a way to disseminate culture and knowledge to the masses. Hence, writing in English is religiously and ethically justified, while the use of other languages is condemned. This attention of Levins to the use of English makes him one of the earliest and keenest contributors to the spreading of the language throughout England to all levels of British society.⁴

⁴ In this endeavour Levins should also be contextualized within the process of democratization of learned medical knowledge that led to the increased use of the English language and to the production of vernacularisations (Sanderson 1999; Fissell 2007).

4. Percival Leigh and the English language growing of age

By the 19th century, English was spoken not only in the British Isles but also, notably, in America, and it was starting to spread to other parts of the world as a result of massive colonialism, which, as is well-known, contributed to further changes and to the remodelling of the language itself. In an enlightening study which correlates 19th century grammarians' views with actual phenomena of language change, Anderwald (2016: synopsis) discusses 258 19th century grammar books from Britain and North America and illustrates how grammar writers of the time reacted to language changes. In some cases, they simply acknowledged them (like the variable past tense forms and the GET-passive); some forms were refused (i.e. the rise of the progressive passive), while others were welcomed (i.e. the rise of the progressive). Hence Anderwald concludes that "eventually prescriptivism had only a small-scale, short-term effect on the actual language used".

Still, prescriptive and proscriptive writers were more than a rarity in the 19th century and found manifold ways to convey their views, not least of which through humour and satire towards linguistic 'wrong-doing'. This is the case, for example, with Percival Leigh, a physician turned writer and language expert. His *The Comic Latin Grammar. A new and facetious introduction to the Latin tongue* and *The Comic English Grammar. A new and facetious introduction to the English tongue* are two specular books both published in 1840. The texts complement each other in so far as they appear to be two faces of the same coin, the coin being the English language.

The introductory illustrations of both manuals are particularly telling of the author's attitude; indeed, in the Latin grammar, the teacher is portrayed as an old schoolmaster waging his stick at bored, unhappy children, some of whom poke fun of him behind his back – possibly symbolizing the utmost effort to safeguard the respect for a dead language whose time had passed by then. In turn, in the English grammar, the portrayed teacher hides his face under a smiling mask and leisurely reads a book to amused and relaxed children – possibly signifying the positivity of teaching and learning what had by then become their national language.

So, well aware that Latin has become far too difficult a subject for British schoolboys, Leigh justifies the comicality of his Latin grammar with the need to make a hard topic more palatable. In turn, the English grammar is meant to be comic in so far as it identifies and stigmatizes whoever does not abide by Lindley Murray's well-established English

language rules.⁵ By targeting “the violations of grammar”, “evil speaking”, “incorrect phraseology” and “the vices of speech” of his society “in their naked deformity” (Leigh 1840b: x), Leigh testifies to an array of linguistic idiosyncrasies and social prejudices of his time that provide a remarkable snapshot of Victorian society, as well as of its language use and apparent misuse.

When dealing with Latin, Leigh focusses on word classes and their declensions, on verb moods and their tenses, on cases and their concords, on prosody and its different verse types. All examples – be they idioms, phrases or full sentences – are followed by their English equivalents. Moreover, rules are often accompanied by comments on life, customs, religion, politics or ethics, as in Figure 1, where he teaches the concord between nominative case and verb:

**THE FIRST CONCORD;
THE NOMINATIVE CASE AND THE VERB.**

Where there is much *personality*, there is generally little concord.
However, a verb personal agrees with its nominative case in number and person, as *Sera nunquam est ad bonos mores via*, The way to good manners is never too late. Mind that, brother Jonathan.



Figure 1. The first concord (Leigh 1840a: 49)

⁵ Lindley Murray’s *English Grammar* (1795) was widely used in British and American schools especially during the first half of the nineteenth century. The text enjoyed numerous editions, not only in Britain and America, but also in Canada, France, Germany, Portugal, and India (Alston, 1965: 92-96, 1966: 189). Leigh’s grammar is one of the four known parodies of the book, two of which were written by anonymous writers, *The Illustrated English Grammar; or, Lindley Murray Simplified* (c. 1843) and *The Comic Lindley Murray; or, The Grammar of Grammars* (1871) and one by Alfred Crowquill, *The Pictorial Grammar* (1842).

Here the comment on “personality” is followed by the remark on “the way to good manners” stigmatizing the portrayed “American gentleman” who indulges in smoking and drinking.

‘Chauvinistic’ remarks on “Yankees”, Dutch, Italians, Russians, and French, to name only a few, are particularly outspoken in the English grammar. To Leigh, American English is “comic English in a ‘pretty particular considerable tarnation’ degree” (Leigh 1840b: 15), since “when the Americans revolted from the authority of England, they determined also to revolutionise their language” (Leigh 1840b: 60), and even created comic verbs, called “Yankeeisms”, exemplified in “I calculate”, “I reckon”, and “I guess”. In turn, the French are considered vain, light people, who dedicate themselves to “exquisite and nimble dances” and talk inarticulately.

Leigh’s bias is sharpened by the illustrations provided by his friend and caricaturist John Leech, who portrays

- (5) that great warrior Napoleon Bonaparte standing agin a tree with his hands in his pockets, *him* taking good care to keep out of harm’s vay”, while the Duke of Wellington boldly treads on the French flag “amidst the red-hot cannon balls, *him* not caring von straw. (Leigh 1840b: 130)

Even the facetious way he adopts in presenting rules is justified in the English grammar with the need to respect the attitude of the British; to Leigh, the British are a people with a “comic character” and a “comical mind”, which, “like the jaundiced eye, views everything through a coloured medium. Such a mind is that of the generality of Britons” (Leigh 1840b: 11). This peculiarity – he writes – cannot be found either in the Germans or in the French. By stressing cultural differences between the British and other populations as well as the negativity of employing non-English words and phrases in everyday speech, Leigh underpins his feeling of personal belonging to his nation and his desire to give prominence to English as a further characterization of national identity.

Leigh invites schoolboys not to mix languages when they talk, as in “nous voulons dire” or “avec un poco”, and warns them to avoid foreign languages in general, including “latinised English”, that is a kind of fine English that is not the proper language to be spoken “especially when applied to the purposes of common discourse; as (...) ‘Are your corporeal functions in a condition of salubrity?’” (Leigh 1840b: 15). Most notably, he remarks that

- (6) There is nearly as much difference between Latin and English substantives, with respect to the number of cases pertaining to each, as there is between a quack-doctor and a physician; for while in Latin substantives have six cases, in English they have but three. But the analogy should not be strained too far; for the fools in the world (who furnish the quack with his cases) more than double the number of the wise. (Leigh 1840b: 58-59)

Though parodical as it is, the downgrading of Latin to the language of “the quack” and the upgrading of English to the language of “the wise” is particularly telling of the changed attitude towards Latin compared to that of his predecessors.

When his eye turns from foreigners to his compatriots, however, Leigh is not lenient and becomes a strict schoolmaster teaching “proper English”. He mentions the linguistic idiosyncrasies of the “ignorant and degraded” costermongers, of the heavy drinking draymen, of weavers, tailors, quack doctors and beadles, not to mention dust-men, milk-women, pot-boys, fruiterers, hearth-stone-vendors, ballad-singers, last-dying-speech-hawkers and old clothesmen itinerant, hackney-coachmen, cabmen, lackeys, turnkeys, thieves, lawyers’ clerks, medical students, and more generally the mob. All of them, he remarks, are amusing like “monkeys and such like animals at the Zoological Gardens” (Leigh 1840b: 221); they are to be looked at through the bars of their cages, but – he warns – familiarity with these people breeds contempt, on account of their modes of expression which we should not imitate. Compared to his predecessors, the shift in focus is overt: Leigh’s aim is no longer to teach just English, but rather proper English and, most of all, to teach proper English no longer just to the nobility or the gentry, but rather to the whole of British society. To this aim, as a keen teacher, he also dedicates great attention to idioms and phraseology:

- (7) When a thief pleads “Guilty” to an indictment, he is advised by the Judge to recall his plea; as if a trial were a matter of sport, and the culprit, like a fox, gave no amusement unless regularly run down. This perhaps is the reason why allowing an animal to start some little time before the pursuit is commenced, is called giving him *law*» (Leigh 1840b: 10)

Some say that words are but wind; for this reason, when people are having words, it is often said, that “the wind’s up”. (Leigh 1840b: 32)

Similarly, when dealing with interjections he remarks that

- (8) though unprovided with a Johnsonian title to a place in the English vocabulary, they have long been recognised by the popular voice; and let it be remembered, that as custom supplies the defects of legislation, so that which is not sanctioned by magisterial authority may nevertheless be justified by vernacular usage. (Leigh 1840b: 41)

It is this strong focus on English language use as opposed to Latin outdated and forced teaching that makes Leigh's texts particularly important in forging the minds of his British compatriots as English speakers rather than Latin admirers. Both in the Latin grammar – where he presents Latin as a foreign language – and in the English grammar, where the use of foreign words rather than English ones is marked as indicative of a corrupt way of thinking and speaking – Leigh no longer hides behind the Latin tree but rather strides boldly on the English language ground, well aware of the full-fledged national identity that such language has achieved in his country and abroad.

5. Conclusions

When Levins and Leigh wrote their textbooks, many a century had already gone by since the time of the first Anglo-Saxon glosses written interlinearly or in the margins of Latin manuscripts to explain and translate unknown words. A lot had changed also from the first topical vocabularies of Medieval times, listing words classified according to their meanings and semantic fields, which had been greatly employed by students when learning their mother tongue.

In Levins' times, English was already gaining prominence and prestige; with his *Manipulus Vocabulorum* (1570), this lexicographer gave his own contribution to the process. Indeed, moving away from the Latin-centred tradition, he indulged here more in the detailed analysis of English pronunciation and its inflectional and derivational suffixes than in the well-established Latin terms and rules. Most of all, in the *Pathway to Health* (1587), he insisted on the social, ethical and religious value of disseminating knowledge to the general public in native English instead of keeping science and culture in secret closets at the mere disposal of the few who could master foreign languages such as Latin, Greek or French.

Early Modern England saw an interplay between grammar writings and dictionary compilations whereby 17th century grammar books often included lexicons and 18th century dictionaries also included grammars, largely taking on their shoulders the task of further “codify[ing] and standardis[ing] the English language” (Michell 1994: 551).

In the 19th century, in a ‘less scholarly’, though equally effective way, the grammarian Percival Leigh further insisted on differentiating English from Latin and on showing respect to his mother-tongue, adding, for example, that

- (9) the structure of the ancient verse [...] is preserved, but the quantity of which is regulated in accordance with the spirit of our own language. (Leigh 1840b: 212)

Indeed, by Leigh’s times, the shift from Latin to English had been fully accomplished and for scholars it was no longer a matter of choice between Latin and English but rather of discussing the many socio-geographical variants and professional jargons of their official language. Hence, Leigh juxtaposes serious indications with insightful remarks, mocking the socio-historical plateau of mid-19th century England; the very examples he draws from everyday speech faithfully reflect the language spoken and written by all classes of English society at that time. The English language had come of age and its identity had reached centre stage.

Later on, the intertwining of political, social and economic factors further contributed to consolidating the leading role of English in the international arena; yet little could possibly have been done without lexicographers and grammarians like Peter Levins and Percival Leigh, whose pivotal role in shaping the English identity certainly exceeded what they could have imagined.

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