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LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: SAMUEL JOHNSON'S DICTIONARY AND THE BOUNDARIES OF REFINEMENT

Abstract: Identifying the eighteenth century as the period when the ideal of what Habermas calls the “public sphere” arose in its classic form, the present paper aims to investigate the part played by Johnson’s Dictionary in the movement towards the articulation of this ideal. Essential in the construction of a communicatively achieved agreement, politeness and its conceptual neighbour, refinement, emerge as the core notions contributing to a communicatively achieved agreement, relying upon the dynamics of conversation as their master metaphor. Emphasising the status of Johnson’s Dictionary as an instrument of this conversible world, as an instrument meant for ordering, the paper attempts to investigate the boundaries that this model sets to this process of refinement. My goal is to show how the ideal of linguistic refinement delimited by Johnson’s Dictionary emerges not only as an expression of eighteenth century patterns of polite conversation, but also as a standard of correctness that launches systematic lexicographic authority. However, while refinement emerges as the main coordinate in the creation of a standard linguistic and cultural identity of the English nation, excessive refinement is set outside the boundaries set by the dictionary. Thus, the paper attempts to show how the dictionary emerges as a model meant to establish communicative identity by fixing the boundaries of adequate refinement through the rejection of linguistic and cultural alterity either as barbarity or as excessive luxury.