Early Modern English

Interpreting New Words
Dictionaries of Hard Words

• 1604: The Table Alphabetical of Hard Words by Robert Cawdrey. It contained 3,000 terms.

• 1658: New World of Words by Edward Phillips

• There were others.
The Appeal
To Authority
1650-1800

• In Literature and life, this was an age that desired “an orderly universe.”
• Rationalistic spirit desired to solve problems by reason and logic.
• English grammar and spelling still not regularized.
The Desire to “Fix” the Language

• Early movement for an English “Academy” was defeated.

• 1755: A Dictionary of the English Language by Samuel Johnson.

• Johnson labored alone for 7 years.
18th Century Grammarians

- 1762: Robert Lowth published *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*.
- Lowth was a clergyman.
- Rules often based on Latin grammar as Latin was deemed a “more perfect language.”
Beginnings of Prescriptive Grammar

- Goal was to determine correctness.
- Other “grammarians” included Lindley Murray, and Noah Webster.
- These men had no qualifications for the task, but their ideas were embraced.
The Legacy

- Basing rules on “logic”, prescriptive grammar evolved.
- 2 negatives = a positive, so double negative is condemned.
- Use of shall and will, between and among.
- Use of comparative and superlative.
Weakness Of Grammarians

• They failed to recognize USAGE as true arbiter.
• Language may appear capricious.
• They believed language “problems” could be resolved by logic and reason.
Vocabulary Reform

• Attempts to keep English “pure” continued.
• Not all “new” words have survived, but many have.
19th Century and Beyond

- Growth of Science, especially medicine, has introduced new words.
- Automobile, film, radio, TV, Internet produced more new words.
- Language as a mirror of progress.