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**“The example of the French”: the influence of French normative ideas in 18th-
century Britain.**

The eighteenth century in Britain has been almost universally portrayed as an era of prescriptive ideology with regard to language, when, to use Leonard's (1929) term, a 'doctrine of correctness' prevailed. Although social and political explanations for this rise in normative attitudes have been put forward (Crowley 1991, 2003), a case can also be made for seeing this as a necessary stage in the standardisation of English, that of *codification*, which, in Haugen's (1972) paradigm, follows the *selection, acceptance and elaboration of function* of a standard variety.

Discourse about language in eighteenth-century Britain was dominated by the 'complaint tradition', whereby authors bemoan the barbarity of their language as it is used by the 'best' speakers and writers. As was the case with the earlier 'complaint' tradition of the sixteenth century (Jones 1953), this involved comparisons with other languages against which English was seen as deficient. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, English scholars and literati such as John Dryden and Daniel Defoe began to make explicit comparisons between English and French, and to call for an academy to regulate English usage on the model of the Académie Française. This was taken up by Jonathan Swift, who, in an address to the Prime Minister, suggested that a body of persons be set up for 'correcting, enlarging and ascertaining' the language and that such persons would 'have the example of the French before them' (1712: 6, 30). As Flasdieck (1928) and Read (1938) have demonstrated, such calls for an English (or British) Academy continue throughout the eighteenth century, but no such body was ever established. Instead, as Finnegan notes, 'the codification of English usage' was carried out 'not by an official academy, but by a disparate band of independent entrepreneurs' (1998: 536). Alongside calls for an academy, we also see throughout the eighteenth-century a strong counter-current of arguments that such a body would be ill-suited to the British ideal of liberty, together with criticism of the Académie as ineffectual against the inevitability of linguistic change.

In this paper, I shall trace and illustrate the development of arguments for and against an English Academy in the eighteenth century and place these in the wider context of attitudes to France and the French language in this period when the two nations were often engaged in conflict.

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