Wilkins, John

An Essay towards a real character, and a philosophical Language

London 1668
Res/2 Graph. 47
urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10867019-0
who have been for several years engag'd in this Work, I cannot con-
jecture. 'Tis related of Chipherick King of France, that he did, for the com-
pendiousness of writing, add to the French Alphabet these five Letters, S. x. v. E. 4, injoying by a strict and solemn Edict the reception and
use of them through his Dominions; and that in all Schools Youths
should be instituted in the use of them. And yet, notwithstanding his
Authority in imposing of them, they were presently after his death laid
aside and difused.

As to our own Language, several persons have taken much pains about
the Orthography of it. That Learned Knight Sir Thomas Smith, Se-
cretary to Queen Elizabeth; and sometime her Embassador into France,
hath published an elegant Discourse in Latin, De recta & emendata Lin-
gua Anglicana scriptione. After him, this Subject was in another Discourse
prosecuted by one of the Heralds, who calls himself Cheffer, who was
followed by one Wade, that writ to the same purpose. After thefe, Bub-
laker endeavoured to add to, and alter divers things in those others that
preceded him; who was succeeded in the same attempt by Alexander
Gill, in his English Grammar. And yet so invincible is Custom, that still
we retain the same errors and incongruities in writing which our Fore-
fathers taught us.

CHAP. V.

1. That neither Letters nor Languages have been regularly established by
   the rules of Art.  II. The natural Ground or Principle of the several
   ways of Communication amongst men.  III. The first thing to be pro-
   vided for in the establishing of a Philosophical Character or Language,
   is a just enumeration of all such things and notions to which names
   are to be assigned.

From what hath been already said it may appear, that there are no 3. I.
Letters or Languages that have been at once invented and established
according to the Rules of Art; but that all, except the firsts, (of which
we know nothing so certain as, that it was not made by human Art upon
Experience) have been either taken up from that first, and derived by
way of Imitation; or else, in a long tract of time, have, upon several
emergencies, admitted various and casual alterations; by which means
they must needs be liable to manifold defects and imperfections, that in
a Language at once invented and according to the rules of Art might
be easily avoided. Nor could this otherwise be, because that very Art
by which Language should be regulated, viz. Grammar, is of much la-
ter invention then Languages themselves, being adapted to what was al-
ready in being, rather then the Rule of making it so.

Though the Hebrew Tongue be the most ancient, yet Rabbi Judah
Ching of Fes in Africa, who lived A.D. 1040, was the first that reduced it
to the Art of Grammar. And though there were both Greek and Latin
Grammarians much more ancient; yet were there none in either, till a
long time after those Languages flourished; which is the true reason of

D 2
all those Anomalies in Grammar; because the Art was suited to Language, and not Language to the Art. Plato is said to be the first that considered Grammar: Aristotle the first that by writing did reduce it into an Art: and Epicurus the first that publicly taught it amongst the Grecians.

And for the Latin, Crates Malloketis, Embaassador to the Roman Senate from King Attalus, betwixt the second and third Punic War, presently after the death of Ennius, U. C. 583, was the first that brought in the Art of Grammar amongst the Romans, faith Suetonius.

These being some of the Defects or Imperfections in those Letters or Languages, which are already known, may afford direction, what is to be avoided by those who propose to themselves the Invention of a new Character or Language, which being the principal end of this Discourse, I shall in the next place proceed to lay down the first Foundations of it.

§. II.

As men do generally agree in the same Principle of Reason, so do they likewise agree in the same Internal Notion or Apprehension of things.

The External Expression of these Mental notions, whereby men communicate their thoughts to one another, is either to the Ear, or to the Eye.

To the Ear by Sounds, and more particularly by Articulate Voice and Words.

To the Eye by any thing that is visible, Motion, Light, Colour, Figure; and more particularly by Writing.

That conceive which men have in their minds concerning a Horle or Tree, is the Notion or mental Image of that Beast, or natural thing, of such a nature, shape and use. The Names given to these in several Languages, are such arbitrary sounds or words, as Nations of men have agreed upon, either casually or designedly, to express their Mental notions of them. The Written word is the figure or picture of that Sound.

So that if men should generally consent upon the same way or manner of Expression, as they do agree in the same Notion, we should then be freed from that Curfe in the Confusion of Tongues, with all the unhappy Consequences of it.

Now this can only be done, either by enjoying some one Language and Character to be universally learnt and practised, (which is not to be expected, till some person attain to the Universal Monarchy; and perhaps would not be done then:) or else by proposing some such way as, by its facility and usefulness, (without the imposition of Authority) might invite and ingage men to the learning of it; which is the thing here attempted.

§. III.

In order to this, The first thing to be considered and enquired into is, Concerning a just Enumeration and description of such things or notions as are to have Marks or Names assigned to them.

The chief Difficulty and Labour will be to contrive the Enumeration of things and notions, as that they may be full and adequate, without any Redundancy or Deficiency as to the Number of them, and regular as to their Place and Order.
Chap. V. The first Principle of Communication.

If to every thing and notion there were assigned a distinct Mark, together with some provision to express Grammatical Derivations and Inflexions; this might suffice as to one great end of a Real Character, namely, the expression of our Conceptions by Marks which should signify things, and not words. And so likewise if several distinct words were assigned for the names of such things, with certain invariable Rules for all such Grammatical Derivations and Inflexions, and such only, as are natural and necessary; this would make a much more easy and convenient Language then is yet in being.

But now if these Marks or Notes could be so contrived, as to have such a dependance upon, and relation to, one another, as might be suitable to the nature of the things and notions which they represented; and so likewise, if the Names of things could be so ordered, as to contain such a kind of affinity or opposition in their letters and sounds, as might be some way answerable to the nature of the things which they signified; this would yet be a farther advantage superadded: by which, besides the best way of helping the Memory by natural Method, the Understanding likewise would be highly improved; and we should, by learning the Character and the Names of things, be instructed likewise in their Natures, the knowledge of both which ought to be conjointed.

For the accurate effecting of this, it would be necessary, that the Theory itself upon which such a design were to be founded, should be exactly suited to the nature of things. But, upon supposal that this Theory is defective, either as to the Fulness or the Order of it, this must needs add much perplexity to any such Attempt, and render it imperfect. And that this is the case with that common Theory already received, need not much be doubted; which may afford some excuse as to several of those things which may seem to be less conveniently disposed of in the following Tables, or Schemes proposed in the next part.

The End of the First Part.

The