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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Cant

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Keywords

Controversy

Conversation

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Abstract

In the eighteenth century, 'cant' was a word widely used in controversies to disqualify the opponent's language and rhetoric. It first referred to the secret language of thieves but then was used to criticise an excessive use of ready-made phrases. Accusations of 'cant', *i.e.* of hypocrisy, flourished in a century that saw the development of new models of sociability relying on fashion and informality as well as of emotional preaching.

Nowadays, 'cant' is used in English to refer to professional jargons, but the word was more widely used in the long eighteenth-century to speak of different types of specialised languages and of different forms of sociability or of anti-sociability linked with them. The first recorded uses of 'Cant', from the Latin *cantare*, 'to sing', date from the sixteenth century, according to the *OED*. The word originally referred to the cryptic language that beggars were supposed to use to beguile honest citizens and was therefore associated with the fear of an underworld that might threaten the social fabric. In the seventeenth century, with

the rise of religious tensions and the civil wars, ‘cant’ came to be used to satirise the preaching of Puritans and non-conformists and what was considered by Royalists and defenders of the established Churches as hypocritical perversions of language. In the long eighteenth century, the two meanings co-existed, as exemplified by Johnson's entries concerning the term in his *Dictionary of the English Language*¹, and the word was used in several controversies so as to present the opponent's rhetoric as a counter-model to the ideal sociability brought about by clear and rational language.

The evolution of the meaning of ‘cant’ can be better accounted for by considering that the political and religious changes of Britain in the long eighteenth century were constantly accompanied by linguistic reflections.² The wish to preserve the social order after the *interregnum* (1649-1660) justified attempts at fixing the rules of language so as to guarantee sociability. The aim was to get rid of ‘abuses of words’.³ Jonathan Swift, in 1712, published a letter addressed to Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, in which he warned his readers against the potential decadence of the English language if it were to imitate the French language too much: ‘the *French* [language] [...] appears to be declining by the natural Inconstancy of that People, and the Affectation of some late Authors to introduce and multiply Cant Words, which is the most ruinous Corruption in any Language.’⁴ As for [Johnson](#), his dictionary was explicitly presented as an attempt to save the English language which had ‘been hitherto neglected; suffered to spread under the direction of chance, into wild exuberance; resigned to the tyranny of time and fashion; and exposed to the corruption of ignorance, and caprices of innovation.’ (Johnson, ‘Preface’)

Fashion was therefore deemed susceptible to threaten the English language as new linguistic usages originating in religious enthusiasm or in the criminal underworld were adopted. ‘Cant’ became a useful rhetoric tool to present one's opponent's language as unworthy of any consideration. Moreover, denunciations of linguistic perversions were quite appreciated by the general public and could afford interesting commercial opportunities. In 1760, Samuel Foote's comedy entitled *The Minor*, in which George Whitefield's mannerisms and appearance were mocked by the author/actor was a huge success. In Foote's play, the terms ‘New Birth’ and ‘Regeneration’, widely used in [Methodist sermons](#), become obscene as they are spoken by Mrs. Coal, who owns a brothel. Many publications ridiculing the ‘cant’ of Methodists and their excessive moral preoccupations and hypocrisy appeared in the following decade.⁵ In 1769, for instance, Isaac Bickerstaffe published a new adaptation of Molière's *Tartuffe* (1669) and of Colley Cibber's *The Non-Juror* (1717), entitled *The Hypocrite* in which the eponymous character was now called ‘Dr. Cantwell’.⁶

Due to the links between ‘cant’ and hypocrisy, the notion played an important role in debates about sincerity, sensibility and authenticity in social interactions during the long eighteenth century. Ideal models of sociability required trust in the means of communications. Such things could however be easily manipulated and the development of sociability went together with a rise of suspicion concerning hypocrisy and the use of ‘cant’.⁷ If emotional transports could be performed, just as religious transports, then the fear of ‘cant’ entailed the existence of a paradoxical discipline of sociability. Social rhetorics that tended to be too emotional or too full of sensibility could be considered to border on ‘cant’, yet dry and over-rational discourses were also frowned upon as going against the ideal of polite sociability which,

according to Laurence Klein, ‘was associated with a revolt against rigidity, solemnity, ceremoniousness, and formality.’⁸

Moreover, the interrogations about hypocritical and religious ‘cant’ did not erase the older meanings of the term. As satires ridiculing moral hypocrites were published throughout the century, so were dictionaries of ‘cant’, that is, lexicons of slang aiming at uncovering the dirty secrets of the criminal underworld. Francis Grose, for instance, tried to justify his interest in colloquial language:

‘The Vulgar Tongue consists of two parts: the first in the Cant language, called sometimes Pedlar’s French, or St. Giles’s Greek [...]; as many of these terms are still professionally used by our present race of free-booters of different denominations, who seem to have established a systematic manner of carrying on their business; a knowledge of them may therefore be useful to gentlemen in the commission of the peace.’⁹

In spite of this justification, Grose’s *Dictionary* was mostly motivated by commercial opportunism as books dealing with the underworld and its excesses were extremely popular.¹⁰ The literature dedicated to the ‘canting crew’, *i.e.* beggars and thieves, was also considered as a remedy to hypocrisy. In order to reach the ideal *via media* in which sociability could thrive, the rude and obscene ‘cant’ of the criminals was paradoxically needed to counter the religious and moral ‘cant’ of the Methodists, on the one hand, and the fashionable ‘cant’ of sentiment, on the other hand.

That interest in vulgar language and pastimes flourished in the last years of the long eighteenth century, as the French Revolution and its aftermath threatened to redefine British politics and sociability completely. Vic Gattrell has called the years 1789-1837 ‘the age of cant’ to highlight the fact that controversies on morality and language raged in the Revolutionary era and afterwards.¹¹ French political philosophy and moral preoccupations were deemed unmanly and characterised by their fraudulent language. The ‘new morality’ derided by periodicals such as *The Anti-Jacobin*¹² appeared to Tories and opponents to the Revolution as a perversion of true British manners and sociability. They followed in that Edmund Burke, one of the main inspirers of the renewal of conservative political philosophy, who had famously called the British ‘men of untaught feelings’ in his [*Reflections on the Revolution in France*](#)¹³ and had qualified the rhetoric of the French revolutionaries about *the constitution civile du clergé* in the following terms:

‘They [the ears of the people of England] hear these men [the French revolutionaries] speak broad. Their tongue betrays them. Their language is in the *patois* of fraud; in the cant and gibberish of hypocrisy. The people of England must think so, when these praters affect to carry back the clergy to that primitive evangelic poverty which, in the spirit, ought always to exist in them, (and in us too, however we may like it) but in the thing must be varied, when the relation of that body to the state is altered; when manners, when modes of life, when indeed the whole order of human affairs has undergone a

The history of the word 'cant' in the long eighteenth century highlights several controversies and questions about the new models of sociability and the role played by formal and linguistic rules. The same word was constantly used from the Restoration (1660) to the end of the Georgian era (1830) to attack all the languages that were not deemed compatible with genteel sociability. Impostors, crooks, cheats, enthusiasts, Methodists, Jacobins and sentimentalists were all named 'canters' at one moment in the century, thereby revealing that the promotion of a British model of sociability based on politeness and sincere exchanges was far from peaceful. Counter-examples to be excluded from the sphere of ideal sociability were needed, and 'cant' proved to be the perfect word to disqualify the outsiders.

1. 'CANT. 1. A corrupt dialect used by beggars and vagabonds. 2. A particular form of speaking, peculiar to some certain class or body of men. 3. A whining pretension to goodness, in formal and affected terms. 4. Barbarous jargon.' Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* [1755], The sixth edition (London, 1785).
2. For more details on the relationship between religious and rhetorical changes within the Church of England in the late seventeenth century, see Stephen Taylor and John Wash, 'The Church and Anglicanism in the 'long' eighteenth century' in Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (eds.), *The Church of England, c. 1689-c. 1833: from Toleration to Tractarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 42.
3. Improper uses of words are considered by John Locke as one of the main reasons for controversies and errors. See for instance John Locke, 'Of the Abuse of Words', *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [1690], ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) p. 490-491.
4. Jonathan Swift, *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue* [1712] in Valerie Rumbold (ed.), *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 136.
5. For a complete list of anti-Methodist publications in the eighteenth century, see Clive D. Owen, 'Anti-Methodist Publications in the Eighteenth-Century: A Revised Bibliography', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* (vol. 73, n° 2, 1991), p. 159-280.
6. See Isaac Bickerstaffe, *The Hypocrite: a Comedy* (London: W. Griffin, 1769).
7. For further details on the fear that sensibility could be performed rather than authentically experienced in the eighteenth century, see Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), more specifically p. 180-181.
8. Laurence E. Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', *The Historical Journal* (vol. 45, n° 4, Dec. 2002), p. 869-898, p. 879.
9. Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London: S. Hooper, 1785), 'Preface', p. ii-vi.
10. See for instance: 'It was not until the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that there was a renewal of interest in the production of original cant lists. Some claim to be based on independent research into the language of thieves, and some actually are. This fascination with cant corresponds with an increasing interest in criminal biography and coincided with a general sense that crime rates were increasing. It was during this period that the publication of condemned prisoners' confessional autobiographies became a profitable venture for successive chaplains of Newgate prison. Seeing their success, others followed suit with single criminal biographies and collections, and cant lists were not infrequently appended as extra inducements to buy.' Julie Coleman, *A History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries*, vol. 1: 1567-1784 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 147.
11. See Vic Gatrell, 'The Age of Cant', *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), p. 435-482.
12. See George Canning, William Frere et al., 'New Morality', originally published in *The Anti-Jacobin* (n° XXXVI, 9th July 1798), reprinted in William Gifford (ed.), *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin* [1799] (London: J. Wright, 1801), p.

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[A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue \(1712\)](#)
[Reflections on the Revolution in France \(1790\)](#)