

# JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, GRAMMARIAN

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Most people associate the name Joseph Priestley with chemistry or theology. However, for scholars of the history of English, the first thing that comes to mind upon hearing his name is a book called *The Rudiments of English Grammar*. Priestley was a polymath and it should come as no surprise that, in addition to all his other work, he also wrote an English grammar.

Priestley originally composed the text of his grammar book for his own use in the school he ran during his ministry at Nantwich, Cheshire in the late 1750s. So from the start, Priestley's grammar was intended as a school grammar. Although Priestley most likely did make some use of his grammar, it was not published until he was appointed tutor of languages and belles-lettres at the prestigious dissenting academy at Warrington. Possibly this was done to boost his public profile in order to help the financially struggling academy.

The main source Priestley used for his grammatical text was the grammar in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*,<sup>1</sup> which had been published just a few years earlier. At times, Priestley leaned heavily on Johnson. A good example is his definition of *etymology*, for which Johnson has the following:

Etymology teaches the deduction of one word from another, and the various modifications by which the sense of the same word is diversified; as, *horse, horses; I love, I loved*" (Johnson 1755: sig. a2v)

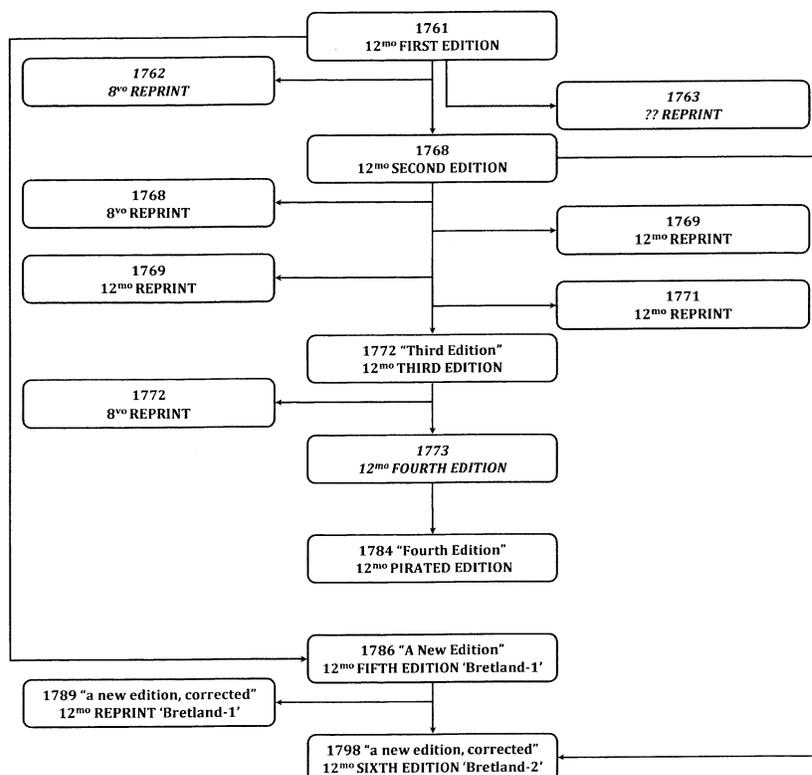
Priestley defines etymology in almost exactly the same words as Johnson, even to the point of using the same examples:

Etymology is that part of Grammar which teaches the deduction of one word from another, and the various modifications by which the meaning of the same words is diversified; as *Horse, Horses; I love, I loved* (Priestley 1761a: 2).

For the final book, Priestley included a long list of irregular verbs extracted from John Ward's *Four Essays upon the English Language*,<sup>2</sup> a section called 'Observations on Style' and fourteen 'Examples of English Composition'. The 92-page book was published in 1761 by Ralph Griffiths in London.<sup>3</sup> It was not an overwhelming commercial success, but did well enough to be reprinted twice after its initial publication. In the meantime, being prodded on by his publisher Joseph Johnson, Priestley was working on a second edition. The new edition was significantly different from the first. Although the grammatical section remained, Priestley removed the sections on style and composition and replaced them with a lengthy section called 'Notes and Observations'. This section forms about two-thirds of the book and reads more like a usage guide than a grammar. Counting 200 pages, the second edition of *The Rudiments of English Grammar*<sup>4</sup> is more than twice as big as the first. Published in 1768 by Joseph Johnson, the second edition is the book that most people who are familiar with Priestley's grammar know. All subsequent editions were in some way based on this edition. Copies of a third edition, published in 1772 have come down to us, and there was likely also a fourth edition, for which there is only indirect evidence in the form of advertisements for it in Priestley's other works.

By the late 1770s, however, Priestley had lost most interest in grammar and was working hard on his experiments and publications on chemistry. It was most likely the publisher Joseph Johnson who took care of the editions published after 1768, with the exception of an illegal pirated edition published in Dublin in 1784. Consequently, the text remained the same for more than a decade. It was in the early 1780s that Priestley's friend Joseph Bretland planned to republish the grammar for use in his own school. Bretland went back to the first edition, enlarged a few sections here and there and removed the 'Observations on Style'. He possibly felt that this would make the book more suitable for school use. The result was published in 1786 as "a new edition", the first 'Bretland' edition. Bretland most likely also compiled the last edition of *The Rudiments of English Grammar* to appear during Priestley's lifetime. This 1798 edition<sup>5</sup> incorporates the text of the first 'Bretland' edition, as well as the *Notes and Observations* from Priestley's 1768 edition. Running to 246 pages, it is the most extensive version of the grammar in existence.

Between 1761 and 1798, Priestley's grammar ran to at least fifteen editions or reprints with a total of between five and fifteen thousand copies having been printed. The diagram below gives an overview of its various editions and reprints. The text in the boxes gives in the first line the year of publication, then (if applicable) the description of the edition as it occurs on the title page between quotation marks, followed on the second line by the size of the book: duodecimo (12<sup>mo</sup>) or octavo (8<sup>vo</sup>) and the edition or reprint. The text is in italics for editions of which no copies have come down to us.



Priestley's *Rudiments of English Grammar* was not immediately a commercial success, but it did exert significant influence. The American grammarian Lindley Murray borrowed extensively from Priestley for his *English Grammar, Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners*,<sup>6</sup> that was reprinted many times and became perhaps the most influential English grammar of all time.

### References:

1. Johnson, Samuel. *A Dictionary of the English Language*. London: printed by W. Strahan, for J. & P. Knapton; T. & T. Longman; C. Hitch & L. Hawes; A. Millar; and R. & J. Dodsley, 1755.
2. Ward, John. *Four Essays Upon the English Language*. London: printed for John Ward, 1758.
3. Joseph Priestley. *The Rudiments of English Grammar; adapted to the Use of Schools*. London: printed for R. Griffiths, 1761.
4. Priestley, Joseph. *The Rudiments of English Grammar, Adapted to the Use of Schools; With Notes and Observations, for the Use of Those Who Have Made Some Proficiency in the Language*. London: T. Becket & P.A. De Hondt; J. Johnson, 1768.
5. Priestley, Joseph. *The Rudiments of English Grammar, Adapted to the Use of Schools; with Examples of English Composition: to Which Are Added Notes and Observations, for the Use of Those Who have made some Proficiency in the Language*. London: J. Johnson, F. & C. Rivington, G. G. & J. Robinson, J. Nichols, W. Lowndes, 1798.
6. Murray, Lindley. *English Grammar, Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners*. York: printed and sold by Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1795.