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SOME NOTES ON THE LIFE AND WORK OF JOHN MINSHEU (1560–1627)*

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1. *Minsheu's biography*

Historians of English lexicography are generally familiar with the dictionaries of John Minsheu, but the numerous studies of his work, to a large extent by Spanish authors, are usually devoted to commentaries on the etymology of individual words as proposed by Minsheu (but cf. Lucas 2002). What is lacking is any examination of the socio-linguistic context in which he was working as well as any attempt at a biography, however superficial, other than the minimum of information obtainable from the prefaces to his publications.

Minsheu's curious name is used only by Minsheu himself. It has been assumed to be of foreign origin, comparable with Fr. *feu, peu* and *bleu.* It seems strange because it does not follow the normal English convention of replacing final *u,* in the rare cases where it occurs, by *w* as Mulcaster (1582: 136) noted: "*au* and *ou,* with the single *u*, end no word". If therefore Minsheu had adopted a spelling *Minshew* it would have appeared as an ordinary English word. The question is: Why did he not do so? One answer may be that he wanted to appear foreign, as he described himself as a 'professor' of languages; and Williams notes that he deliberately chose variant spellings of *Minsheu* when inscribing copies of his magnum opus, *The Guide into Tongues* (1617) for some of its purchasers, e.g., *Minxu* and *Minchal.* These spellings are not exotic; as was noted at the time, *x* was

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acceptable in Spanish and *ch* in French to represent *sh.* An alternative explanation is that it was a variant spelling for a different name altogether, i.e., *Minshal,* which is recorded in the minutes of a meeting of the Benchers of the Inner Temple in 1611. Minsheu had asked the Benchers for financial support, which would allow him to publish *The Guide,* but, at a Benchers' meeting, they opposed the grant of any such award so that the minutes of the meeting had to record that "Mr. Mynshals" request was "altogether disliked" (Indervick 1896–1901 II, p.59)

The differences between *Minsheu* and *Minshal* lay in the occurrence of final *l* in the latter and the inconsistent use of letters of the alphabet to denote ə in the second syllable. The addition of final *l* may be explained with reference to the function of *l* in syllable closure — a situation still common at the present day in some mainly western areas of the British Isles and especially in Bristol (Strang 1974: 117), where many native speakers of the local dialect are unaware that they are actually uttering *l*. It was, of course, the normal practice at the time to adopt variant spellings for personal names, so that *Minsheu, Minshew, Minshul* and *Minshal*, are not only variant spellings but are also variants of the rare form *Mynshon*. A good example of variant spellings, which all clearly apply to the same person, is *Anthonye Mynshawe*: the bearer of this name married *Mary Gawle* on 30 November 1561. When their son Thomas was baptized his name was recorded as *Mynsall;* when Anthonye himself was buried, on 28 October 1563, his name was recorded as *Mynchshawll.* So problematic was the name that one editor of the Harleian Society Registers gave up any attempt in the Index to his volume to distinguish between the names, simply noting *Minshall* or *Minshaw* as the same name. The form *Minsheu* was not used for the burial record of Minsheu himself and his wife, *Mynshawe* being preferred. An extensive search of London parish registers has not discovered any other instances of the spelling.

Unfortunately, we know nothing of Minsheu's early years except that he was christened in 1560 in the church of All Hallows, London Wall and was buried there in 1627. Nothing is known either of Minsheu's parentage or education, although the wide range of his reading, as demonstrated in *The Guide,* would suggest that he at least attended a local grammar school. There is no record of his attendance at either Oxford or Cambridge, but he may have been excluded from university as a potential Catholic because an Edward Minshall, who died in 1617, was a Benedictine monk (Snow & Birt

1970 [1913]). In view of his professed enthusiasm for learning foreign vernaculars, he may well have been an autodidact. As a young man he travelled widely in order to fulfil his 'great desires' of acquiring languages. Explaining how he was able to do so he tells his readers that 'in my yonger time' which was about 30 years previously, in 1587, through the good offices of some "*worthy* merchants", he had first been "furnished" to travel and to "*get the knowledge of some of the* Tongues", the first of which would seem to have been Spanish, the language of his first publication. Using the imagery of seafaring, he expresses his great respect and gratitude to those merchants who assisted him by conveying him from place to place in their ships, even though he endured "*many tempests in* an Ocean of trauailes, troubles, *and* hard sufferings, *and* wants". "Now", he reports, his "*tossed Barke" (the Guide)* had arrived home safely although it was some 20 years before his work appeared in print (Minshew 1617: sig. A4r.)

Between 1587, when he set out on his travels, and 1597, he visited several foreign countries, but before he could return to England, he was taken prisoner, probably by the Spanish, eventually being brought home with — yet again — the assistance of friendly merchants. His imprisonment does not imply any wrongdoing on his part; he was only one of the large numbers of English travellers who fell into the hands of the Spaniards owing to religious, political and commercial hostility. For both religious and political reasons, when Philip of Spain came to the English Court, he regarded himself as the champion of Catholic Europe; after the death of his wife Mary I of England (1516–1558), her successor, Elizabeth, came to be regarded as leader of the Protestant opposition. Even their nationality did not save English travellers from the Inquisition, some, like the merchant John Frampton (1577?–1596), being imprisoned for religious reasons. When he was finally released he spent some time translating religious works and travel literature from Spanish, for example, his *Joyful Newes out of the Newe Founde Worlde* (1577). Other English travellers were imprisoned for political or commercial reasons associated with English piracy in the Caribbean, or nearer home. In 1564, for example, thirty ships were impounded and a thousand English sailors imprisoned in the dungeons of Cordoba, or even sent to the galleys. Minsheu's merchant friends supported him until they were able to bring him back home.

After returning to England, Minsheu established himself as a 'Professor of Languages' in London and was no doubt well qualified as a result of his

years of study abroad, the only printed sources of information about Spanish for English students being little more than phrasebooks and not available much before 1550. When seeking funding to assist him in printing his textbooks, Minsheu admits that teaching was his only source of income so that he could not have had particularly lucrative employment. However he enjoyed the good will of, and some financial support from, his pupils to whom he expresses his gratitude in a foreword to his grammar of Spanish. He addresses them as 'gentlemen students' of Gray's Inn, where perhaps he may have performed some of his duties. As well as teaching he was engaged in writing linguistic textbooks, the earliest being a dictionary of Spanish based on another, though smaller, dictionary by one Richard Percyvall (1550–1620), who had fled to Spain, it appears, to escape serious disagreement with his father. His textbook, entitled *Bibliotheca Hispanica,* contained a Spanish-English dictionary and a grammar of Spanish. Both of these works were revised and augmented by Minsheu (1599a,b), who was able to find a publisher for them, but was not so successful with his other enterprise *The Guide* which eventually he had to publish "at his own charges" as he admits on the Title Page. His problems have been discussed by Schäfer in the essay which accompanies the facsimile edition of *The Guide* (Minsheu 1978), and no modern scholar can read this account of his efforts without both sympathy and admiration.

Of Minsheu's private life little is known, though he tells us that he had a 'cousen germaine' (first cousin) who lived at Tainton near Oxford. His name was Robert Veysey (or Vazie) and he had a brother William, who was married to the daughter of one Thomas Minshull, who also lived near Oxford in a village named Chimney. (He notes the relationship in a list he made of purchasers of *The Guide*, in a leaflet bound into some copies.) He married a woman named Margerie, who died in 1617, and they had several children who were supported after his death by the Stationers' Company. They made over to Edward, apparently the oldest child, and his siblings the proceeds from the sale of half a dozen volumes published between 1626 and 1639. Minsheu seems to have been distressed by the hostility shown towards him by what he describes in his *Spanish Grammar* (1599a: 80) as 'the greater sorte', which, he claims, "neuer sawe any thing of my dooing in their life, or hearde mee speake". This unpopularity was probably due to his proposal, implemented in his *Spanish Grammar* (1599a: 80), to publish cribs for difficult passages in classical or contemporary texts. No doubt the attacks by

'the greater sorte' were due to their belief that such cribs could lead to loss of employment. Minsheu also believed that he had done a good deal of work from which others had profited. He did succeed, however, in publishing some specimen translations in a format which suggests a link with *The Guide*. More serious in its way was the attitude which Minsheu developed towards his other work. As a young man he enjoyed studying languages, but after more experience he discovered that "searching words for a Dictionarie" was "the most vnprofitable and vnpleasant" occupation, which had become "a candle to light others, and burne out my selfe" (Minsheu 1599b: sig.A2r). Samuel Johnson and James Murray would have agreed with him.

In spite of the extensive literature on Minsheu over the years (e.g., Williams, 1948, Lucas 2002) nothing so far has been discovered about the region where his family originated, but it is possible to make an informed guess that his predecessors came from Cheshire, since they bore the name of a village, Church Minshull, already established there in the Middle Ages or even earlier. No doubt some younger sons and Minsheu's forebears left Cheshire to move to London to find employment; one such was probably Laurence Minshull, who came to the capital towards the end of the 16th century and obtained a post as servant to the Recorder of London (a legal position). Searching for the provenance of John Minsheu's family among the numerous families of the name in Cheshire, one finds a possible link, in the book trade, between the families in London and in Cheshire.

As a travelling bookseller in the last years of his life, and earlier as an unsuccessful applicant to the Stationers' Company for funds, John seems to have had no special connection with any of the Cheshire family but at least two of his sons or grandsons did. John was apprenticed in London to Francis Thynne (1545?–1608), otherwise known as Potevile or Bodeval, a man of some eminence because of his father's editing the works of Chaucer in 1532. After the Great Fire of London in 1666, Potevile himself moved to Chester and John Minshal purchased his freedom from apprenticeship with the Chester Stationers in 1674. From about 1675 he became a bookseller in Bridge Street Chester. Another son or grandson, William Minshew, was also apprenticed to a bookseller and purchased his freedom in 1634. He then became a bookseller in Chester some time during the Commonwealth (i.e., 1649–1660), and he apparently had a very successful career, travelling from place to place and selling school textbooks wholesale (Plomer 1922: 208). Another Minshall, Thomas, probably a brother of John, is notable for having

employed, in 1666, the first woman known to be formally apprenticed to a bookseller (Plomer 1907, 1922). This was one Joanna Nye, daughter of an Essex clergyman (Blagden 1960: 162). On 17 July 1655, William was given a pass to go to Holland, and he did so in company with two important men in the book trade. Although all three were described as booksellers on their passes, one of them, Samuel Mearne, was also in later years bookbinder to King Charles II while another, Cornelius Bee, was a frequent traveller to the continent where he attended important book fairs. William's association with such eminent men suggests that he was very successful in his calling. London parish registers for the 16th and 17th centuries show the names of many Minsheus (spelt variously as Minshull, Minshall, Minshaw and Minshew) and a few of these people obtained a small degree of fame, e.g., Elizabeth Minshull (Bank & McDonald 1998) who became in 1662 the third wife of no less a person than John Milton, to whom she was introduced by a member of the Cheshire Minshulls, while Francis Minshull became an orange merchant in the days of Nell Gwynne (c.1650–1685), mistress of Charles II of England.

Although we know nothing directly of Minsheu's appearance we have a description of him as immortalized in Sir Philip Sidney's *Old Arcadia* where he is named as *Dametus,* a herdsman; and it was said of him by Ben Jonson (1925: 154) that Minshew was "the very liuing image of Syr Philip Sydneys Damætus". The description is not very flattering:

> He was a short lean fellow, of black hair […] one of his eyes out, his nose turned up to take more air, a seven or eight long black hairs upon his chin, which he called his beard; his breast he ware always unbuttoned for heat, and yet a stomacher before it for cold; ever untrussed, yet points hanging down because he might be trussed if he list; ill gartered for a courtlike carelessness; only well shod for his father's sake, who had upon his death bed charged him to take heed of going wet. […] Neither was there any humour in which her husband and she [his wife] could ever agree, but in disagreeing […] yet he was favoured by the Duke [Basilius Sidney?] who took his rudeness for plainness. His silence grew wit, his bluntness integrity, his beastly ignorance virtuous simplicity […] his tongue [was] the valiantest part of him. (Sidney 1973[1593]: 30–33)

Minsheu died in 1627 and was buried on April 12th in the parish of All Hallows, having succeeded in publishing the second edition of the *Guide*, reduced in size, in 1625, with further title pages printed in 1626 and 1627.

His reputation grew as the years passed, and his work became greatly esteemed by scholars such as Bishop Matthew Wren of Ely (1585–1667) who augmented and annotated one or possibly two copies of the *Guide* so devotedly that nearly every margin was covered with his suggestions for improvement. Minsheu also won the respect of the eminent lawyer William Somner (1598–1669) whose copy is preserved in the library of Canterbury cathedral. Somner was interested only in legal terminology but several general lexicographers, such as Stephen Skinner (1623–1667) and Thomas Blount (1618–1679), have acknowledged their indebtedness to him, although Skinner was sceptical, saying "Industriam ejus probo, Judicium & Fidem non probo" (1671: C4v).

2. *Minsheu and the Study of Spanish*

In the second half of the 16th century English interest in Spanish increased, for political and economic reasons, what is probably the first published notice of the language appearing around 1550. This was in the form of a few lines of Spanish in *The Fyrst Boke of the Introduction of Knowledge,* by a former monk, Andrew Borde (1490?–1549), whose comments on the nations of Europe and their languages were intended as guides for Englishmen travelling overseas. Altogether, Borde refers to some dozen regions, and in doing so may perhaps have provided a model for Minsheu who likewise refers to an extensive range of languages in the *Guide*. The elementary nature of Borde's comments is demonstrated in the verses accompanying his illustrations (Borde 1542: sig. Li–ii):

> I am a spaynard and castylyon I can speke
> I do vnderstande castylion but I cannot speke it.
> Syr God geue you a good day.
> Senyor dios es be bonas dias.
> Spayne is a very poore countrey.

At the time, other languages were held in higher esteem for their literature, particularly French and Italian. In due course, Anglo-Spanish relationships in the reign of Queen Mary, as well as the growth of translations from Spanish, led to a demand for textbooks of Spanish for Englishmen. It was remarked on at the time by one James Lea in a prefatory verse in Percyvall's Grammar addressed to "the Practitioners in the Spanish".

> Though Spanish speech lay long aside within our Brittish Ile,
> (Our Courtiers liking nought saue French, or *Tuscane* stately stile)
> Yet now at length, (I know not how) steps *Castile* language in
> And craues for credit with the first though latest she begin.

Borde's little handbook was followed by two phrasebooks (Roberts 1970), *The Boke of Englysshe and Spanysshe,* (Anon.a 1554) aimed more particularly at merchants, and including a chapter entitled "Of speeches" with the useful phrase, "Speake that I may [be able to] vnderstand thee". The other phrasebook was entitled *A very profitable boke to lerne the maner of redynge, writing & speakinge English & Spanish* (Anon.b 1554) This too is orientated towards the needs of merchants, including, not only "the maner of byenge and sellynge" but also the less friendly phrase "the ways of callynge vpon your debtors". The two phrasebooks were followed by a grammar (1586) compiled by a Spanish Protestant divine, a refugee from his own country who eventually became pastor of the Spanish congregation in London. Antonio del Corro's (1527–1591) grammar was useless to Englishmen wishing to learn the language because the work was written in Spanish and French, although it was an excellent grammar for the time. It was soon translated as *The Spanish Grammar* (1590*)* by an Oxford friend of Corro's, John Thorie or Thorius (fl. 1590–1611) also from a Protestant refugee family. The next grammar was compiled by Richard Percyvall in 1591, and 'augmented' by Minsheu in 1599. This was published as *Bibliotheca Hispanica,* and contained a dictionary in addition to a grammar.

Among the problems of language teaching which concerned Minsheu was that of the choice of method. One practice supported by language teachers at that period was the teaching of two languages simultaneously. Describing his method, Minsheu states explicitly that he has "in the examples following, set downe the *Italian*, that the vnderstander of both tongues, may with one labour (and yet at his ease) see the difference, the one from the other, and be hereby able […] to practise either of them". On the other hand, the procedure was attacked by John Thorie, who explains his own views on the subject: "This Grammar was first written the greater part of it in Spanish, and a litle of the ende in French […] in such manner that none could reape any benefit by reading of it, but such as were acquainted with both the foresayd languages" (Thorie 1590: Epistle to the Reader). Nevertheless, the practice continued into the 17th century, as Padley notes (1988: 191), citing Lorenzo Franciosini's (1600?–1645?) *Grammatica Spañola* (1624).

A second issue debated by Minsheu and his contemporaries was whether it were better to teach language by following explicit rules, or by making use of the 'immersion method' of learning a language by living for some time among native speakers. Among those who favoured rule-based learning was Corro whose grammar of Spanish is entitled *Reglas gramaticales para aprender la lengua Española y Francesa.* The problem here, as Thorie remarked, is the difficulty of actually discovering the rules. Writing as a translator, he confesses "I doubt whether a man may set downe any rule, when it [i.e., a personal pronoun] ought to be written with the verb, and when not. For I haue asked of some men that were very skilfull in the French toong, and they could not tell me: and therefore it must be learned by vse" (1590: 72).

Another topic of special interest in Minsheu's grammar is the function of pronouns, Minsheu claiming that it is "one of the difficultest things in the toong to haue the true vse of them, and whereby a stranger or the vnlearned in his speech or writing, shall soonest discouer himselfe to the naturall or learned in the toong" (Minsheu (1599a: 17). Since the treatment of pronouns is the aspect of grammar in which Spanish and other vernaculars are perhaps most independent of Latin, Minsheu's comments are worth reporting, although they are indebted to the grammar of Richard Percyvall:

> The Spanyard and Italian accounteth it a disgrace to speake to any man in the second person singular either in the Nominatiue *Tu,* or in other cases *Ti* or *Te,* except it be to his Neager, his slaue, his lackie, horsekeeper, or to some of base & vile account. To their seruants of the better reckoning, and to artificers and such like persons they speake in the seconde person Plurall as *Traéd aqui*, 'bring hither', &c. *Yréys* a mi capitéro, you shal goe to my shoomaker, Direys que me haga unos borzeguis, and you shall tell him that he make me a paire of buskins. To all others they vse the third person, as *Quiere V. M. andár,* will your Mastership go […] I intreat your Mastership that you doe me this curtesie &c. And whereas Englishmen say *you* the French *Vous*, the Spanyard and the Italian speaketh in the third person singular, as V. M. V. S. your Mastership, or worship. (Minsheu: 1599a: 16–17).

On possessive pronouns, he remarks that "the learner in the Spanish must note, the manner how the Spaniard vseth these Possessiues, Mi, mio, Tu, tuyo, Su, suyo: and when he ought to vse them in speech or writing otherwise straight he will bewray himselfe in vsing vnproperly the toong" (ibid.).

This is only one of the topics which Minsheu touches on in his grammar. Others include:

1. Alphabetisation of dictionary entries. Minsheu refers on several occasions to this topic. For instance, he points out that he has annexed to his grammar "an ample English Dictionarie, alphabetically set down" though he laments the "good deale of time and paines [I spent] in bringing the wordes into the Alphabet, I heere vse in this booke". Yet he himself was not afraid of using the alternative arrangement of material when it suited him to do so, bringing together words into semantic groups (Minsheu 1599b: sigA3r; cf. Hüllen 1999 on 'Topical Groups')
2. A second subject meriting further discussion is his account of the dialects of the Peninsula as examined in the Proeme to his Grammar and elsewhere, producing *Generall obseruations from the Latine for the framing of Spanish* in which he is able to demonstrate the regularity of sound change.
3. He calls attention to certain defects in the English pronunciation of Spanish, discussing them in relation to the diphthongisation of some long vowels in English, due to the Great Vowel Shift which, of course, did not operate in Spanish. He points out that English speakers pronounce words like *Vida* as if the central vowel were like that in *Wine*, and get laughed at for their pains.
4. He explains that in order to ensure the intelligibility of Latin in different European countries, schoolmasters in France, Italy and Spain teach a common standard Latin which all can comprehend. This situation merits further enquiry.
5. Finally among the many topics worth examining by historians of linguistics is that of Minsheu's relation to the universal language movement of the 17th century, a relationship not hitherto noticed. Like so many participants in the movement, Minsheu was concerned with the problem of memory. He hit upon a "*method* most helpfull to memory", his plan being to create a vocabulary in such a way that the name of an object or concept should indicate the characteristics of the item named. As he claimed in the prefatory matter of *The Guide* "vnder the *name* the *Nature* of all things is directly *described*, differing from all dictionaries ever heretofore *set forth"* (Minsheu 1617: Title page). He specifies that the created name should show *properties, qualities, matter, form, fashion, condition, effect* or *ende.* What we have here is a proposal for

the invention of 'iconic' or 'technical' words, which decades later, were to form the basis of John Wilkins's *Essay towards a Real Character* (1668).

3. ***Concluding remarks***

Further research into local archives, such as apprenticeship records, would no doubt reveal more about Minsheu and his family relationships, but all that is relevant here are the dates of his birth and death and the minimum of information about his background provided above.

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SUMMARY

John Minsheu (1560–1627) has long been known to historians of lexicography as the author of an impressive comparative and etymological dictionary, *Ductor in Linguas* (1617). Less well known is his grammar of Spanish (1599), which is unusual for its time in displaying interest in sociolinguistic issues. This paper is intended to stimulate interest in the neglected grammar and to propose a solution to the mystery of Minsheu's biography — a topic likewise overlooked in the literature. The paper ends with a set of proposals for further research.

RÉSUMÉ

Les spécialistes en histoire de la lexicographie savent de John Minsheu (1560–1627) qu'l a écrit un excellent dictionnaire comparé et étymologique, *Ductor in Linguas* (1617). On connaît moins bien sa grammaire espagnole (1599), remarquable pour son époque parce que l'on y traitait de questions socio-linguistiques. Cet article a pour but de susciter de l'intérét pour cette grammaire négligée et d'offrir une solution au problème de la biographie de

Minsheu, un autre sujet négligé par l'érudition. L'article se termine par un ensemble de suggestions quant aux recherches futures.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

John Minsheu (1560–1627) ist Historikern der Lexicographie schon lange als Author eines beeindruckenden vergleichenden und etymologischen Wörterbuchs, des *Ductor in Linguas* (1617), bekannt. Weniger bekannt ist seine Grammitk des Spanischen (1599), welche insofern ungewöhnlich für ihre Zeit war, als sie ein Interesse an soziolinguistischen Fragen zeigte. Der vorliegende Beitrag beabsichtigt, das Interesse an dieser wenig beachteten Grammatik zu wecken und gleichzeitig Aufklärungen zu Minsheus bisher dunklen Biographie zu liefern, ein Thema das gleicherweise bisher in der Literatur vernachlässigt worden ist. Der Artikel schließt mit einer Reihe von Vorschlägen für weitere Untersuchungen.