

**THE USE OF  
ENGLISH**

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**F. T. WOOD**

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## PREFACE

THIS book is intended primarily for sixth-form pupils who are preparing for the paper on the Use of English, recently instituted as a requirement for university entrance, though it is hoped that it may be found suitable for other groups also. It deals with the various ways in which language is used (and misused), with essay-writing, with the study and criticism of prose passages and with points of English syntax and usage in general. A few of the passages for study and criticism come from older writers, but most are from more recent sources, and they have been selected so as to exemplify differences of subject, interest, style and treatment. Some of them should also supply the pupil with information and ideas which he will find useful for other purposes.

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**PART I**  
**LANGUAGE, THOUGHT AND STYLE**





## THE USES OF LANGUAGE

LANGUAGE is a means of communication. Primarily it is something that is spoken (the word itself is derived from the Latin *lingua* = tongue); the written form is only a substitute, though a useful, and in the modern world an indispensable, substitute for the spoken form. Without language there could be no community or society in any meaningful sense of the words, for no one would be able to make contact, even on the lowest intellectual level, with anyone else. He would be unable to convey his thoughts to them or to share their thoughts. We may wish to tell a person something, ask him something or give him an instruction, but, whichever it is, we must use language to do it. It is true that there are other means of communication — gestures, for instance — but their usefulness is very restricted, as anyone travelling in a foreign country will know if he has tried to inquire the way to the railway station, or to tell a shopkeeper he has overcharged him, merely by the use of gestures. And, in any case, it is probable that where we do attach a meaning to a gesture we do so by translating it, mentally, into words. When we see someone beckoning to us it is as if we heard him saying, 'Come here!' The various signals of the policeman on point-duty suggest to our mind the words 'Stop', 'Go', 'Turn this way', and so on. A gesture is a symbolic way of expressing a notion which we should normally convey by speech, just as writing is another symbolic way; but with gestures the notion can be only simple or rudimentary, whereas with writing it can be very complex, more complex, indeed, than in speech, as anyone will realise who has listened to a difficult lecture and then read the printed text. Rather complicated structures, which may be quite clear on the printed page or in written form, may not be nearly so clear when they are spoken. This is a

fact that all who write papers for oral delivery should bear constantly in mind.

Of course, spoken words are themselves only symbols of something else. They are combinations of sounds which have come to be accepted amongst a particular group of people (a nation in the case of a national language, or a smaller group in the case of dialect, jargon and slang) as denoting some object, activity, relationship or other idea. There is no 'natural' or essential connexion between a word and the thing that the word stands for, or its 'referent', to use the technical expression. Probably without thinking very much about it, people often assume that there is. The writer of the first chapter of the Book of Genesis fell into this error when he declared, 'God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night', as though the name for the 'thing' had been bestowed upon it from the beginning by God; that therefore it must be the 'proper' or 'natural' name for it, and any other name would be unthinkable.<sup>1</sup> And there is the story of the small girl who, when asked why, in giving the various animals their names, God had called a cow a cow, replied, 'Well, because it looked like a cow, of course. What else could he have called it? He couldn't mistake it for a pig, could he?' This piece of childish question-begging may amuse us, but it is nevertheless instructive. Assuming, for the sake of the argument, that God did give the animals their names, he could quite well have 'mistaken it for a pig', to use the small girl's own words, for there is nothing about the word *cow* that makes it any more 'natural' as a name for the creature to which we apply it than *pig* would be. The animal that our ancestors of a few centuries ago called a coney, we call a rabbit. To many children it is a bunny, and one is no more the 'real'

<sup>1</sup> For obvious reasons we give the English translation here (from the Authorised Version), but the comment actually applies, of course, to the equivalent words in the language in which the story was originally written. This, however, does not invalidate the point that the writer implied that the words used in *his* language for the light and the darkness respectively were the natural names, given them by God; or at least that God gave them *some* names which meant 'light' and 'darkness'. No doubt he thought that everything else also had a name from the very beginning, bestowed upon it by the Creator.

name than either of the others. It is merely that each has come to be accepted by those who use it.

It is true that we can trace an obvious connexion between many of the words used to express a particular notion in the various languages within a related group (e.g. German, English, Dutch and the Scandinavian languages, or Latin, French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese), and most present-day words in any language, except for fairly recent coinages, can be traced back to earlier forms from which they are derived (e.g. Modern English *stone* from the Old English *stān*, and the present-day verb *to eat* from the Old English *ētan*), but even so, it is still true that the meaning they have at any time is dependent upon usage and acceptance. And they take on new meanings when people are willing to accept them in a new sense, just as they become obsolete or archaic when people reject them either in favour of some other word to express the same idea, as *coney* became obsolete when it was superseded by *rabbit* (though it is still retained as the name of a kind of fur), or because, with material changes and changes in social habits, the ideas for which they once stood become modified or die out. Up to about 1953 the word *square* would never have been applied to a person, as it would have conveyed no meaning. We should have said that a particular geometrical figure was a square, but not that a person was a square. Then it began to be used as a term in the jargon of rock 'n roll; that is to say, it was given a new meaning within a restricted circle, but outside that circle this new use of it was regarded as a barbarism. Now it has become accepted as a colloquialism (though perhaps in a semi-jocular spirit) in a much wider circle. There seems nothing particularly appropriate about the word *square* to denote the kind of person to whom it is applied, unless it is that it suggests that he is a square peg in a round hole, i.e. someone who does not 'fit in'. There are a number of others which might have been equally suitable, but someone thought of *square*; it was accepted and taken up, and so *square* it had to be. How long it will survive we do not know. It might turn out to be a new word (or a new meaning of an old word) that the short-lived 'rock 'n roll' craze has

added to the English language. It certainly seems to fill a gap in that it enables us to express an idea for which no single word existed previously.

Now this leads us on to a point of considerable importance in the study and use of English (or, for that matter, of any other language). We have said that language is a means of communication. The purposes of communication may be many, but the *things* that we communicate may be broadly classified under two general heads: facts on the one hand, and feelings on the other, though often, of course, a particular communication will display a combination of the two. Scientific and mathematical statements are usually statements of fact; so are the statements, 'The battle of Waterloo was fought in 1815', 'I was the youngest child of a large family', 'God made the heavens and the earth, and all that therein is', 'On the night before Christmas, Father Christmas comes down the chimney when children are asleep, and leaves them presents'. ('Fact' is here used, not in the sense of something that is true, but something that, within a particular context or situation, is intended to be taken as true, and does not reflect, or is not coloured by, the speaker's own feeling or attitude.) The most obvious examples of language used to express feeling are interjections and exclamations of various sorts, swear-words (though often these are used as mere expletives which express no feeling), imperative sentences uttered with a particular emphasis or intonation which suggests importance, annoyance, anger, fear, urgency, etc., and direct statements of the speaker's feeling, e.g. 'I am sorry if I have offended you', 'I am ashamed of you', 'I am so glad you have been able to come'.

It is very easy to slip imperceptibly from the one to the other. If we say, 'Grass is green', we are stating a fact. If we say, 'How green the grass is!' we are introducing feeling, for what we are really concerned with communicating to the other person is not simply a fact about the grass, but that the greenness of the grass has aroused a certain feeling in us — a feeling of pleasure, surprise, wonder or amazement. Here it is the exclamatory form of the sentence that conveys the feeling;

but a rhetorical question may serve a similar purpose. It is often said that a positive rhetorical question is a substitute for a negative statement, and vice versa; but this is not entirely true. One conveys a fact, the other a feeling about, or attitude to, the fact. 'That is no use to me' is simply a factual statement, but 'What use is that to me?' suggests contempt, irritation, annoyance, perhaps even indignation, according to the circumstances.

Factual language tells us something about the external thing or phenomenon; the language of feeling tells us something about the speaker or writer or is directed to affecting emotionally the person to whom it is addressed, that is, the listener or the reader. It frequently happens that we suppose we are using the first when actually we are using the second. For instance, if we say, 'This room is square', 'This room is the biggest in the house', 'This room was added to the building in 1926', we are making a purely factual and objective statement about the room. But if we say, 'This room is stuffy', 'This room is dismal-looking', we are speaking, not of the room itself, but of the way it affects us, or the impression it makes on us. When a person who has witnessed an accident remarks, 'It was a ghastly sight', he has not really told us anything about the accident at all; he has told us something about himself — how he was affected by the sight of it. Two people may see a drunken man staggering across the road. One may describe the sight as amusing, the other as disgusting. Which of them is right? Both are, for neither is really telling us anything about the sight as such; each is telling us his own reaction to it. A few paragraphs above we referred to the recent use of the word *square* to describe a person; but actually it does not describe him, for it tells us nothing about the person himself; it merely reveals the speaker's attitude towards the person.

Of course, there is not necessarily any harm in our expressing our feelings; very often it is as well that other people should know them, while there are times when it would be wrong to conceal or to fail to express them. Nor is it necessarily illegitimate to seek to influence the feelings of others;

it has often been the first step towards the removal of social evils and the reformation of abuses. But we should be aware of what we are doing, or of the way in which we are being influenced; we should realise what *kind of feeling or emotion* a speaker, writer or propagandist is attempting to play upon or to stir up within us, and if it is an *unworthy one*, resist it; we should ask ourselves whether the matter is one where the appeal to feeling, even if it is to one of the nobler feelings or emotions, is legitimate, or whether our emotions are merely being exploited; we should learn to recognise the difference between reason and sentiment, and between sentiment and sentimentality.<sup>1</sup> And above all we should learn to distinguish impressions on the one hand from facts on the other. In their book *English for the Living*, Part II, chapter iii, R. O'Malley and Denys Thompson quote the following passage from the first Lord Baldwin (formerly Mr. Stanley Baldwin, Prime Minister of Britain, 1923, 1924-29, and 1935-37):

'Shakespeare was one of those few poets in whom we find the magic that comes straight from heaven, and which is the prerogative of the very greatest: such magic as we find in the poetry of Keats, in the first scene of the last act of *The Merchant of Venice*, and throughout the sonnets.'

As the authors of this book justly observe, 'Whatever the intention of the writer, we are not told anything about Shakespeare or his plays: "magic", in this context, describes, not the poetry, but the way in which it affected Lord Baldwin'. To say this, however, is not to condemn the passage; after all, nearly all aesthetic judgement must necessarily be subjective; it is a field where feeling and emotion legitimately hold sway. The important thing is that we should be able to distinguish between a purely subjective judgement or expression of opinion on the one hand and an objective one on the other, and that we should not mistake an expression of personal feeling for a statement of fact.

The special province of the language of feeling is, of course,

<sup>1</sup> John Macmurray (*Reason and Emotion*, Faber, 1935) defines *sentimentality* as 'emotional insincerity'.

poetry. Indeed, in his well-known Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) Wordsworth declared that one of the marks of the poet was that he was 'a man . . . endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness [than most other men], who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him'; and he then went on to contend that the poet's chief function is to communicate these 'passions and volitions' to others, so that they too may experience them, if only at second-hand. Today not everyone would accept Wordsworth's theory of poetry (he himself departed in certain respects from it later), but the expression and communication of feeling has always been an important aspect of poetry.

Let us take a few examples. First a well-known poem by Wordsworth himself.

She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of Dove;  
A maid whom there were none to praise,  
And very few to love.

A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
Fair as a star, when only one  
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;  
But she is in her grave, and oh,  
The difference to me!

How much does this tell us about Lucy? Very little. We gather that she lived a simple, secluded life in a remote spot, and that she is now dead. We can infer that she was quite young when she died, though this is not definitely stated. The poem is concerned chiefly with the expression of what the poet felt *about* Lucy, and the sense of loss and desolation

he experienced after she died. About her appearance, her temperament, her daily occupation, how she passed her life, what her feelings for Wordsworth were (if, indeed, she knew of his existence and his interest in her) we know nothing. The very metaphor and simile in the second stanza reveal the impression she made upon the poet; they are not a factual statement of the kind of person she really was; and the whole point of the poem is expressed in the last line, 'Oh, the difference to me!'

Now a poem from an earlier period — one by the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century poet, Henry Constable.

Diaphenia like the daffadowndilly,  
White as the sun, fair as the lily,  
Heigh ho, how I do love thee!  
I do love thee as my lambs  
Are belovèd of their dams;  
How blest were I if thou wouldst prove me.

Diaphenia like the spreading roses,  
That in thy sweets all sweets encloses,  
Fair sweet, how I do love thee!  
I do love thee as each flower  
Loves the sun's life-giving power;  
For dead, thy breath to life might move me.

Diaphenia, like to all things blessèd  
When all thy praises are expressèd,  
Dear joy, how I do love thee!  
As the birds do love the spring,  
Or the bees their careful king:  
Then in requite, sweet virgin, love me!

Here we learn even less about the young lady in question than we do in Wordsworth's poem; indeed, we learn nothing at all. The very name Diaphenia (presumably an invented one) suggests something rather insubstantial. The entire three stanzas are taken up with an expression, through a series of similes, of the poet's love for his mistress. It may be objected



that the style is artificial and follows something of a convention of the day; that in actual life no one in love with a young lady would ever address her in this way; that not all the similes are very apt — can the flowers, for instance, be said to 'love' the sunlight in the way that a man loves a woman, since flowers, so far as we know, have no consciousness, and are not endowed with emotions? All this we may grant; but then all forms of art have to adopt means of expression that are unnatural, and to convey one idea through the medium of another. Besides, despite the opening, this poem is not really addressed by the poet to his mistress, or indeed to anyone; it is merely an outpouring of his feelings about a young lady (real or imaginary) and the way her presence, or the thought of her, affects him.

As a third example we will take a more recent and a very different kind of composition — W. B. Yeats's *An Irish Airman Foresees his Death*. For the benefit of younger readers it should be explained that the poem was written during the First World War (1914-18), before Ireland had gained her independence and when she was still a part of Great Britain. Irishmen were fighting with the British armed forces against Germany, though in Ireland itself England was widely regarded as the real enemy and there was mounting unrest, which culminated in the rising of Easter 1916. A young Irishman who is serving with the Royal Flying Corps (as it then was) is speaking.

I know that I shall meet my fate  
Somewhere among the clouds above;  
Those that I fight I do not hate,  
Those that I guard I do not love;  
My country is Kiltartan Cross,  
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor;  
No likely end could bring them loss  
Or leave them happier than before.  
Nor law nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,  
A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;