

ENGLISH WORDS AND THEIR BACKGROUND

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PREFACE

THIS book aims to introduce the reader to what has been called "the interesting World of Words." The study of words is not exclusively a study of roots and stems, of prefixes and suffixes, as is too frequently supposed. On the contrary its range of interest is as wide as life itself. It may be made to illustrate the cultural progress of the race, not only the development of the material elements of civilization, but the progress in knowledge and the changes that have affected modes of thought. But, above all, words are interesting on account of the human nature revealed. In the creation and use of words there appears not only the sense of beauty and the sense of humor, but a human fallibility exhibited in inexactness of knowledge and in seemingly capricious modes of procedure. In fact the variety of interest to be found in words corresponds with the variety of interest in complex human nature. All in all, the history of words introduces so much of the unexpected and strange that the subject matter becomes often less that of science than of romance.

But along with the interest and entertainment richly afforded by word-study as a science, there is a practical side, a side of value to one interested in language as an art. In order to operate an instrument efficiently one must be acquainted with the nature of its mechanism. In the same way in order to have an effective command of the resources of the English vocabulary, one must know about the materials of which the vocabulary is composed and the processes by which its words have reached their present meanings.



The customary method of studying synonyms and questions of purity and propriety is but a superficial one. A satisfactory understanding of the nature of words may best be reached through a knowledge of the underlying causes and the ability to answer the question, Why?

In one other way the subject of words challenges attention at the present time. There are now under way remarkable changes in the use of words, changes which reflect the changing conditions in the modern world. These modern features of the subject are made prominent in the present work, not only on account of their own interest, but because of the belief that the general principles that govern the use of words may best be observed in present-day, living language. Throughout, accordingly, an emphasis is thrown on the tendencies apparent in the language of our own time. The changes that are going on under one's own eyes are made to serve in the explanation of features in the language of periods more remote.

In the preparation of this work my obligations have been many. In its chapters will be found many a twice-told tale. To the stimulating works of Archbishop Trench, now more than half a century old, every student of words is indebted. To the remarkably sane work of Greenough and Kittredge I am indebted in ways which even the many references to that work fail fully to indicate. To the admirable works of Weekley, not least of all his *Etymological Dictionary*, my debt has been heavy. Mencken's *The American Language* and L. P. Smith's *The English Language*, and the various works of Skeat, Jespersen, Emerson, Hirt, Schrader, Bradley, and Brander Matthews have provided much material for which I wish to acknowledge indebtedness. All of the great English dictionaries have yielded information, but particularly the Oxford Diction-

ary, without which the present work could hardly have been composed.

Finally, I wish to make grateful acknowledgment for aid from several of my friends and colleagues. Professors G. M. Bolling and M. Percival have read much of this work while in manuscript, and Professors J. V. Denney, G. M. Bolling, and R. E. Rockwood have read several of the chapters in proof. For many helpful suggestions received from them I wish to record my thanks.

G. H. McK.

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ENGLISH WORDS AND THEIR BACKGROUND

CHAPTER I

STANDARD ENGLISH

No cultivated ear is required to distinguish different English-speaking peoples by their manner of speech. An Irishman, an Englishman, a Scotchman, or an American may be distinguished by speech more readily than by manner or appearance. With literary English the case is different. Cultivated Scotchmen from Hume to Stevenson, cultivated Irishmen from Swift to Shaw, cultivated Americans from Cotton Mather to Henry James, have written in a language hardly to be distinguished from that of contemporary cultivated Englishmen. A literary language with few deviations from uniformity belongs not only to England, but to the various parts of the English-speaking world.

The history of the rise of this standard form of English makes an interesting story. A search for beginnings leads one back more than five hundred years, to the second half of the fourteenth century, the time of Wycliffe and Chaucer. Long before the time of Chaucer, to be sure, as early as the ninth century, in the Anglo-Saxon period, a literary standard had been formed. Largely due to the literary activities of Alfred the Great and the political supremacy reached by his kingdom of Wessex, in the South of England, the language of Wessex became accepted as the standard

form of language in literary composition. Even works composed at an earlier date in other parts of England, such as the *Beowulf* and the poetry of Caedmon and Cynewulf, composed in the North, have come down to us in the standard language of the Old English period, the Southern dialect of Wessex.

The Norman Conquest, however, soon led to the loss of this English standard of speech. Following the Conquest, the English-speaking element in the population became so reduced in station that the English language had little literary importance. The real literary language of England was not English, but French, or Latin. For three centuries little was written in English, and the little produced was written in the form of speech natural to the writer and varying, therefore, with the section of the country to which the writer belonged. There was entire absence of controlling standard. In the matter of language, anarchy prevailed.

language
loyalty
The development of the standard languages of the world closely accompanies the development of national feeling. In England the growth in national feeling, that becomes more and more apparent in the victorious reigns of Edward I and Edward III, was accompanied by development of feeling hostile to the use of French then firmly established in the use of the ruling and the cultivated classes of England, and favorable to the renewed use of the native English language then occupying a lowly station. The result was that in the second half of the fourteenth century the English language came once more to its own, into use not only in Parliament and the law courts and in schools, but in the literary productions composed for English cultured society.

In the revival of literature in the English language, the form of language adopted was the dialect of the East Midland district at that time not above the level of other dialects of England. A variety of reasons led to this choice. This dialect served as an effective compromise between its

neighboring dialects on the north and on the south. It was the dialect of centers of culture such as Oxford and Cambridge. It was the dialect of London, the metropolis and the center of official life. Finally, as the dialect of London, it was the form of speech native to Chaucer, the first great literary artist to write in English for more than four centuries. As the language of Oxford, it was used by Wycliffe in preference to his native Yorkshire dialect. As the dialect of London and the English court, it was used by Chaucer's contemporary, Gower, in preference to his native Kentish dialect. The influence of Chaucer and Gower led to its use by their disciples, Occleve and Lydgate, and the influence of the language of this school of writers is apparent in practically all of the writers of the following century. The second half of the fourteenth century, therefore, is the time of the beginning of Standard English, a beginning made when the East Midland dialect, that of London, became fixed on as the form of English for general literary use. It is from this dialect of English, once used only in a comparatively small part of England, that in the course of several centuries developed the cultivated language now the standard for literary use throughout the English-speaking world.

An important element in the charm of Chaucer is the colloquial freshness of his language. The language of literature was not far removed from that in colloquial use. The spelling adopted was not, like that of modern English, determined by any rule or tradition, but was governed by the desire to represent by means of letters the natural pronunciation. In other words the spelling was in general phonetic. The constructions used, also, were not artificial ones imposed by grammatical law, but were for the most part those of natural usage. A consequence of the absence of grammars and dictionaries and spelling books was that the language underwent rapid change. A hundred years

later, when Caxton was confronted with the problem of determining the form of English to be used in the printed books now for the first time issuing from his press, he found that the English of his time was much changed from that used in the writings of Chaucer and his contemporaries. The necessity of adopting a form of English intelligible to his fifteenth-century readers, led Caxton in his printed books to conform to the mode of speech current in his time. The literary language in this way kept pace with the progress in colloquial speech.

In the following century, however, a combination of causes contributed to check the rapid change in the language. In the first place the influence of the books, now printed for the first time, and issued in relatively large editions, aided in fixing the form of the language. A second influence contributing toward the same effect was the activity, springing from the Reformation, in translating the Bible into English. The language of the Authorized Version of King James, issued in 1611, is in general that determined by the translators of the first half of the sixteenth century. The invention of printing, then, and the translation of the Bible, did much toward determining the final form of literary English.

The language of the sixteenth century, however, was by no means as definitely fixed as that of the present day. Its lack of regularity in spelling, in vocabulary, and in grammar was perhaps more than compensated for by the freedom enjoyed by writers of that period in the adoption of new words and the combination of existing words in word-compound and in phrase. The expressive power of present-day English owes an incalculable amount to the phrase-making power of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in a period when the language was in a more fluid state.

The order and regularity lacking in sixteenth-century

English, was contributed in the course of the two following centuries. In the seventeenth century the words so freely imported and manufactured in the preceding century were subjected to a sifting process, and most of the words that survived to the end of this century have remained permanently in the language. In the eighteenth century, especially near the end, the influence of grammars and dictionaries made itself fully felt. Words admissible into literary use were registered with their meanings in dictionaries, which also more and more undertook to indicate the pronunciation. English grammar became a subject for school study, and conformity to the use authorized by dictionary and grammar became the test of cultivation in language.

Such, briefly told, is the story of the rise of Standard English. One of several vulgar dialects of the fourteenth century has, by cultivation, been raised to the position of the literary language of the English-speaking world.

In the nature of its origin and development the English standard language is not exceptional. Its history is paralleled in the case of most of the other great literary languages of the modern world. Literary German is called High German because developed from the speech native to Southern or High Germany. The elevation of this dialect gained at the same time literary and religious sanction through its adoption by Luther for his Bible translation in the sixteenth century. In the same way literary French is developed from the speech native to that part of northern France of which Paris is a center. The speech of the South of France offered a certain amount of rivalry. This Provençal speech was effectively developed for literary use in the Troubadour poetry of the twelfth century, and in our own day has served as the literary instrument for Mistral, one of the most eminent of modern French poets. The prevailing form of literary French, however, is that

based on the dialect of the northern district, the *langue d'oïl* as distinguished from the Provençal *langue d'oc*.

In Spain again it is the dialect of the kingdom of Castile, of which Madrid is the center, at one time only one of several independent Spanish kingdoms, that has come to serve as the literary language of the entire nation. In Italy it is the dialect of Tuscany, the district including Florence and Siena, that has been thus elevated. Dante and Petrarch, who only a short time before Chaucer began to write in London English, adopted the Tuscan dialect for Italian literary use, contributed greatly toward developing the literary value of this dialect and giving it its prestige. In Holland a literary language was formed from the various Low German dialects of the Netherlands, with the Frankish element, however, dominating. This standard form of speech not only serves as the literary language for Holland and its colonial settlements in South Africa and the East Indies, but in the nineteenth century, in the face of much opposition from supporters of local dialects, became adopted as the official language for the Flemish element in the population of Belgium.

Considerably more recent in its development is the literary language of Russia. In earlier times the literary language of Russia was a compromise between old Slavonic and Russian.¹ The break with the past came at the end of the eighteenth century, when the literary language now in use was formed with the current spoken language as its basis. The direct reflection of the Russian spirit and of Russian life which distinguishes modern Russian romance, is said to be due to the close relation of the literary language to everyday speech.

A still more recent instance of the rise of a new literary language is to be found in Norway and is explained, as in almost all instances, by a rise of the spirit of nationalism.

¹ Meillet, p. 228.

In Norway the growth of nationalism in the nineteenth century, which led to the separation from Sweden, also led to a revolt from the use of Danish, the language hitherto used by Norwegian writers, including the world-famed Björnson and Ibsen, and the language used in the social intercourse of cultivated people. The new spirit of nationalism led to the re-creation of a national Norwegian language, called the *landsmaal*, "country speech," which now shares with the Danish language the place as official language of the country. This new Norwegian national language, however, differs from the other national languages in that it does not come from the elevation of a single one of the native dialects officially recognized, but is supposed to be a reconstruction of the original Norwegian language from elements derived from the many separate dialects native to the isolated districts of that sparsely settled country.

Even in our own day, we are told, in the country with the most ancient civilization, in China, there is in process of formation a new standard language. This language is intended to provide a common linguistic medium for the various people of that vast country now separated from each other by difference of dialect. It is also intended to absorb names for features of Western civilization unprovided with names in older Chinese.

In estimating the value of the different literary languages, an important matter to be considered is the relation of the literary standard to everyday speech. In the case of Russian, it has been pointed out that this relation is exceptionally close. The case of Modern Greek will illustrate the reverse situation. In the formation of the modern literary language of that country it is natural that there should have been felt sentimental consideration for the Greek past. In consequence the *Romaic*, or modern Greek, used in literature is closely related to classical

Greek. One acquainted with ancient Greek can without great difficulty read a modern Greek newspaper. In the case of the everyday speech of the modern Greek the situation is different, and in consequence there is wide divergence between the written and the spoken form of modern Greek. The cultured term in use for bread, for example, is *artos*. In order, however, to make oneself understood at a bakery, in asking for bread, one needs to use the vernacular term *psumé*. The name *hudor*, for water, which goes back to classical Greek, appears on the labels of water bottles, but in asking a waiter for water, one needs to use the vulgar term *nero*.²

Not unlike is the divergence which, in later stages of English, has come about between the cultivated literary language and the mode of speech natural among uncultivated people. Let us take by way of illustration a bit of colloquial American of the kind everywhere to be heard on the lips of unschooled American youth. *Them guys ain't got no pep*. The expression belongs to the language of the street, or, as some may prefer to say, of the gutter. At the same time it is straightforward speech; its meaning is plain and unambiguous. The objection to it is that it does not conform to the tests applied to Standard English. The first word is ungrammatical; the second, slang; the third, bad grammar again; the fourth, redundant and colloquial; the fifth, illogical; the sixth, slang once more. To sum up, judged by accepted standard, not one word is left of six monosyllables in a sentence the meaning of which is clearly and forcefully conveyed.

Obviously there is a deep chasm between standard English and certain forms of popular speech. Standard English, like standard modern Greek, is an artificial product. It stands aloof from the popular elements that appear in uncultivated speech. New words such as

² G. H. Moses, *National Geographic Magazine*, October, 1915.

josh, v., *jolly*, v., *spiel*, *stunt*, *jay*, *jazz*, are branded as slang. Homely old words such as *chuck*, v., *chunk*, *chore*, *peek*, v., *bust*, v. are condemned as dialectal or provincial. Pronunciations such as *bile* (for boil), *restin* (for resting), *nater* (for nature), *tay* (for tea), *chayney* (for China), *wound* (for wound), in preceding centuries accepted more or less in cultivated use, are rated by the modern censor of speech as vulgar, or at least old-fashioned. Spellings such as *licour*, *ayre*, *floare*, *musick*, are condemned as grossly incorrect, although these four words thus spelled appear in the writings respectively of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Samuel Johnson. Much of the energy devoted to the cultivation of so-called "Good English" is devoted to the task of eliminating features like those cited above, which do not conform with the artificial standard, a prodigious task in dealing with persons not reared in surroundings where the cultivated standard speech naturally prevails.

It is, perhaps, not the part of wisdom to minimize the advantages accruing from the uniformity and regularity the lack of which was felt in earlier periods. That in the course of the last centuries the English language has gained in precision, will hardly be denied. It must not be lost sight of that language is not created for the single individual, but is a social instrument for communication between many individuals. It is important that the language medium should offer as little as possible resistance to the thought current, and this end is attained only when the symbols of language are ones that convey precisely the same meaning to all who use the language.

There is, however, reason for questioning the limits to which the process of standardization may profitably be carried. In the language of Shakespeare, it has been clearly shown, the popular speech of the time has everywhere given the pattern. In the cultivated language of