

THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE MOTHER TONGUE

AN INTRODUCTION TO PHILOLOGICAL
METHOD

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PREFACE

IN undertaking the task of writing such a work as the present small volume, I did not disguise from myself the difficulty of what lay before me ; now that I have completed it, I am in no way blind to the imperfections of the achievement. In a sense, the object of the book is a modest one—to give, not the history of our language, but some indications of the point of view from which the history of a language should be studied, and of the principal points of method in such a study. These methods are chiefly determined by the views which are held at the present time concerning the nature of language, and the mode of its development ; and such views, in their turn, are based upon the knowledge of facts, concerning the life-history of many languages, which have been patiently accumulated during the last eighty years. I have hoped, in the following pages, to prepare the way for the beginner, to the study of at least some of the great writers who have been the pioneers of our knowledge of the development of our own tongue, and of its relations to other languages, as well as the chief framers of contemporary philological theory. Thus the present work aims at no more than to serve as an introduction to the more advanced scientific study of linguistic problems in the pages of first-hand authorities.

Advanced text-books of the German type are naturally almost unintelligible to the beginner, who has not undergone some preliminary training in philological aim and method. Of the text-books published in this country, which are nearly all of a more popular description, some are—to our shame be it spoken—mere cram-books, which strive only to give such ‘tips’ as shall enable the reader to pass certain examinations, while several others, by writers of repute and learning, are lacking in any general statement of principles or reference to authorities, in case the student should by chance wish to pursue the subject further than the covers of this or that small if admirable book. Again, a serious defect, as it appears to me, of many of the best elementary books on the History of English, is that the bare facts are stated, dogmatically and categorically, without any suggestion as to the sources of information or the methods of arriving at the results stated. As a practical teacher of English to University students of various stages of knowledge, from beginners onwards, I know that intelligent students are often irritated, on the one hand, by not being told how certain facts concerning past forms of speech are arrived at, and, on the other hand, by finding no reference to authorities who might give them the information which the writer of the manual so often withholds.

The worst feature in the withholding of such information is that the solitary student, who has not access to University classes, after he has read the books and mastered the facts, has yet not received anything in the shape of a training in the actual methods of the science of language; he has acquired a knowledge of a certain number of facts,

but they exist in his mind isolated, and unrelated to anything else, least of all to a principle of wide application. Thus he acquires no new outlook upon linguistic phenomena, no method whereby he can pursue the subject for himself. It is believed that the chapters upon *General Principles* which follow, may be of use in putting the student upon right lines of further thought and study.

In dealing with general questions, I have sought as far as possible to illustrate principles by concrete examples drawn from the development of English.

In treating the more specific problems connected with the Aryan and Germanic languages I have sought, not so much to supplement the knowledge which it is possible to derive from the usual small work on Comparative Philology, as to make this clear on those points where I have found uncertainty to exist in the minds of students as to the precise bearing of this or that statement, and also to relate this part of the subject to general principles of the history of language on one hand, and on the other to the history of our own language. I thought it advisable to add a chapter on *Methods of Reconstruction*, since, although most of the small text-books teem with references to *Parent Aryan*, I have never yet found a student who had gathered from their pages how anyone knew what Parent Aryan was like. In this section, as throughout the book, I have striven to keep ever before the mind of the student the fact that we are dealing with changes in actual *speech sounds*, and not with *letters*, which is, unfortunately, too often the impression gathered from elementary manuals. I believed that a brief statement concerning the phenomena grouped together under the name *Ablaut* or *Gradation* would be

useful, seeing that any explanation of them is generally omitted in the kind of books referred to—even in the best.

The task of selection, in treating the development of English itself, was very difficult, and I do not claim to have accomplished it with perfect success. Among the books generally accessible to students who are compelled to tackle the subject without the help of an experienced and highly trained teacher, there are several which contain an admirable marshalling of facts. Since I believed it desirable to devote a large portion of so small a book as the present to general questions, space was not available to restate facts which are to be found in most other books corresponding in size to the present volume. I therefore tried to select such points as I have found are generally the least well understood by ordinary students with no special training, but which are, nevertheless, of the greatest importance to a proper understanding of the facts of present-day English. I have tried, amongst other things, to emphasize, rather more than is usually the case in books for beginners, the rise of double forms in Middle English, and to show how often both doublets survive, if not in standard English, then in the modern dialects—one type in this form of present-day English, another in that. It is desirable that students should realize that much that is considered 'vulgar' in English is merely so by convention—for the reason, that is, that the polite dialect has selected another form, but that a very large number of 'vulgarisms' are historically quite as 'correct' as the received form. This knowledge must tend to a saner and a more scientific view of what is 'right' or 'wrong' in speech. My debts

to other books of various kinds are, it need hardly be said, innumerable. I trust that I have made some, if not adequate, acknowledgment in the references given hereafter.

I am proud to acknowledge a special debt to Dr. Henry Sweet, one that is far deeper than any I could have contracted by the mere use of his books, great as that is. For many years past, the cordial personal intercourse which I have been privileged to enjoy with Dr. Sweet, has been an unfailing source of stimulus and enlightenment. I regret that this little work is not a worthier tribute to his teaching and influence. If the following pages should contribute at all to a wider adoption of Dr. Sweet's Phonetic and Historical Methods, in Training Colleges and in the upper forms of secondary schools, and among private students, it will help to bring about a sounder mode of study of our own tongue than that which is commonly pursued in the majority of such institutions.

It is a pleasant duty to express my gratitude to Miss Irene F. Williams, M.A., formerly Research Fellow of the University of Liverpool, who most generously undertook the laborious task of compiling the index to the present volume. This contribution, by an expert English philologist, must, I feel sure, materially increase the utility of the book.

HENRY CECIL WYLD.

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by Henry Cecil Wyld

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION ; THE AIMS OF HISTORICAL LINGUISTIC STUDY

THE practical study of language, or rather the study of language for practical purposes, is familiar to everyone, and plays, of necessity, a large part in all schemes of education. In infancy and childhood the mother-tongue is gradually, although instinctively, acquired. Later on, the native tongue becomes the subject of more deliberate study, and to this is added, for the most part, that of other languages, both living and dead.

It is convenient to consider as 'practical' that study of languages which has as its aim the mastery of tongues for the purpose of using them—that is, for the purpose either of speaking or reading them, or both.

From this point of view the schoolboy acquires, with various degrees of success, the pronunciation, the vocabulary, and the general structure of several languages, both ancient and modern. He is instructed in the rules of inflection and of syntax ; he masters many exceptions, which perhaps, in his eyes, hardly serve to prove the rule.

In all this study of Latin and Greek, English, French,

and German, which in this country occupies the chief energies of boyhood and early manhood, the view of language which is perpetually before the mind of the student is one and the same—namely, that of language in a state of suspended animation, stationary, and unchanging. That is to say, that the various languages are studied merely in the forms in which they exist at a particular period of their development. There is, as a rule, but little suggestion from the teacher that the language under consideration has developed from something very different; still less that, if it is a living tongue, it will probably change still further—that it is, in fact, in a constant state of flux. The literary form of language is that upon which the attention is almost exclusively concentrated, and the student naturally learns to regard language as something fixed and unchanging. He is not encouraged to ask the reason for the rules which he has to master, and must be content with the explanation which comes so readily from the teacher's tongue: that some apparent exception to the general rule was made—deliberately, for all that he hears to the contrary—‘for the sake of euphony.’ It is but rarely suggested that some puzzling rule of ‘letter’ change in Latin or Greek is based upon the speech habits of the Romans or Greeks hundreds—perhaps thousands—of years before the Classical Period of those languages, or that the conditions under which the ‘exceptional’ form occurs differ, in a way that can be ascertained, from those which produce the ‘normal’ form.

It is not intended, in the above remarks, to criticise adversely the methods employed in teaching the Classics to the very young; the age at which scientific explanations

of linguistic facts should be given is a question for educationists to decide. All that it is for the moment desired to emphasize is that the practical study of language differs very considerably from the historical study, in point of view and in method.

Every teacher of the history of English or of any other language knows how difficult it is to convey to young students at the University the first inkling of the historical point of view and method as applied to language.

Nor is this surprising when we consider how different is the way in which one trained in historical methods regards human speech, from that which is the natural standpoint of the practical and literary student of language. To take a few points: the schoolboy has been taught, 'We ought to pronounce as we spell'; when he begins to study the history of a language he is told, 'Not at all; we spell in such and such a way, because originally the pronunciation was approximately this or that.' He has hitherto believed that the written, literary form of language was the real language, and that uttered speech was a rather lame attempt to follow the former; instead of this view receiving confirmation from his new teachers, he is asked to discard it completely, to think of language as something which is primarily *uttered* and *heard*, and to banish, for the time being, from his mind the fact that writing has been invented. Again, whereas the young student has probably gathered that 'rules' of speech were made by grammarians, and therefore must be obeyed, he now hears that the grammarians have absolutely no authority to prescribe what is 'right' or 'wrong,' but can merely state what is the actual usage. and that they are

good or bad grammarians according as they report truthfully on this point.

To many people 'exceptions' to grammatical rules are as the breath of their nostrils, and 'irregularities' in language are a source of income. It is therefore disconcerting to a youth, hitherto bred up in an atmosphere of linguistic chaos, to be told that the entire conception of 'exceptions' upon which he has been nourished is fundamentally fallacious, that there is no such thing as real 'irregularity' in the historical development of speech, that anomalies are only apparent, that nothing occurs in language without a reason, and that this reason must be sought, even though, in many cases, it elude our pursuit. It is to be hoped that there is nothing unjust in this adumbration of the contrast between what we may call the popular or literary, (in this case they are the same thing) and the philological view of language. The examples given as exhibiting the point of view of one who has never approached the problems of the history of a language are all drawn from the personal experience of a teacher.

We may now endeavour to state rather more fully the main considerations upon which the method of historical linguistic study at the present time is based. The general method pursued is the outcome of the views now held concerning the nature of language, and the conditions under which it lives and grows.

By the history of a language is meant an account of its development in all its dialects, of all the changes which these have undergone, from the earliest period at which it is possible to obtain any knowledge of them, down to the

latest. This investigation demands the formulation, so far as possible, of the laws of change which obtain at any given moment in the language—that is, a statement of each tendency to change as it arises, and an examination of the factors and conditions of each tendency. Now, all knowledge of any period of a language other than the present, must necessarily be obtained from written documents. What we are investigating, however, is the life-history of the *language itself*—that is, of the feelings and ideas of the people, as they have been handed on and modified through the ages, and of one of the most direct and expressive symbols of these, namely, the various sounds formed by the organs of speech. Uttered speech is itself a mere set of symbols of certain states of consciousness; a mode of expression often less direct than a gesture, a picture, or a statue, since these can represent a passion, a wish, or a memory of an event in such a way that they may be of universal significance. The symbol in these cases is self-interpretative. The symbols of speech, however, are only intelligible to those to whom they have become familiar by custom, and who associate the same groups of ideas with the sounds. Uttered speech, therefore, is an indirect and symbolic mode of conveying impressions from one mind to another; but *written language* is more indirect still, for it is but the symbol of a symbol. Until the written record is interpreted, and converted into the sounds which it symbolizes, it means nothing; it does not become language.

This process of interpretation has to be carried out, and the veil of symbolism rent asunder, before we can arrive, in dealing with the records of the past, at the

actual subject of our investigation. We must never lose sight of the true aim of our search—the spoken sound, which is the outward and audible part of language. It is clear that the degree of success with which we reconstruct the earlier stages of a language, and therefore the measure of accuracy in our views of its history, depends to a very large extent upon our power of interpreting correctly the written symbols, and of making them live as sounds.

But, however successful may be our attempts at re-vivifying the past history of a language, so long as we confine ourselves to a single tongue the limits of possibility are reached comparatively soon—the record fails us often just when we most need it. In tracing back the history of English, we have a series of documents which stretch back for more than twelve hundred years. During this period the language has undergone many changes—in sounds, in vocabulary, in accidence, and in the structure of the sentence. The earlier writings, in so far as they are, within the limits of possibility, a faithful record of what was actually the condition of English at different stages of development, enable us to observe the rise and passing away of various habits of speech and tendencies to change. Thus, for instance, we can understand why ‘*breath*’ (brɛp) has a voiceless final consonant, and ‘*breathe*’ (brīð) a voiced, since we can show that the latter word had an earlier form, O.E. *bræþan* or *brēþan* (inf.), whereas the O.E. form of the former was *bræp* or *brēp*; and, further, that voiceless open consonants were voiced in O.E. medially between vowels, but remained voiceless when final. The voiced sound in ‘*breathe*’ is therefore due to a change which took

place hundreds of years ago, when the verbal forms still retained their suffixes, and when *p* was followed by a vowel. In the same way we need not go beyond our own language to understand the difference of vowels between the singular '*child*' and the plural '*children*.' In this case, as in the former, there is nothing in the spelling of the two forms to indicate a difference of pronunciation. In O.E. the singular was *cild*, which originally had a short vowel. Before the end of the O.E. period, however (by 1050 probably), short vowels were lengthened before the combination *-ld*. This old long *ī* developed quite regularly into our present diphthong (*ai*). This lengthening, however, did not take place when the combination *-ld-* was followed by a third consonant. The O.E. plural of this word was *cildru*, which in M.E. appears as *childre* side by side with the weak form *children*, both of which forms retained the old short *ɪ* sound. This sound has remained unchanged down to the present time. The differences between singular and plural here, therefore, are due to the presence or absence respectively, of the conditions of vowel-lengthening in O.E.

On the other hand, there is a vast number of phenomena whose explanation cannot be found within the history of English itself, because their causes lie further back than the period of the oldest English records. The substantive '*doom*' (*dūm*) is related to the verb '*deem*,' the former being normally developed from O.E. *dōm*, the latter from O.E. *dēman*. Here the difference exists already in the oldest form of English of which we have any direct knowledge. We might surmise, perhaps, that the relation of the two vowels (*ū*) and (*ī*) in these words was identical with