

THE GROWTH OF ENGLISH

AN ELEMENTARY ACCOUNT OF THE
PRESENT FORM OF OUR LANGUAGE,
AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

A SHORT HISTORY OF ENGLISH.
With a Bibliography of Recent Books
on the Subject and Lists of Texts and
Editions.

**THE PLACE OF THE MOTHER
TONGUE IN NATIONAL EDUCA-
TION. Paper covers.**

PREFACE

THIS book is obviously a book for beginners. It may serve for Secondary Schools, should some of these institutions find it convenient to include such a study of the native language as is here proposed in their curriculum; but the work is primarily intended for Training Colleges. Those who are preparing intending teachers for their profession will find that a very large part, at least, of the Board of Education Regulations for the study of the *English Language* is here covered.

My experience leads me to believe that it is hardly possible to state things too simply or too plainly in a work designed for beginners, and I think that the following short account of the elements of phonetics, and of English pronunciation in particular, will be found an intelligible and useful starting-point for those who approach these subjects for the first time. If beginners will take the trouble to master thoroughly Chapters I. to IV., they will find it easy to grasp a much more advanced treatment of the subject. My

own opinion is that this elementary phonetic training ought to begin at the age of ten or twelve, and I have tried to make the opening chapters suitable to children, as well as useful for students of the ordinary Training College age.

After much consideration, I resolved to try the experiment of using the ordinary English spelling throughout the book, instead of adopting an exact phonetic notation. The latter course would have been, in some respects, more convenient, but the essential point is to teach people to think clearly about speech sounds, and to use a terminology sufficiently exact to express those phonetic facts which are within their knowledge.

A few words are necessary as to the general scope and plan of the book. The fundamental point from which I start is that the beginner's attention must be directed to the *familiar facts of his own speech*, and that he must learn to observe these accurately. I have therefore selected in a systematic manner certain phenomena of English speech which come within every one's experience, and while directing attention to them, have used them to interpret and express some of the most fundamental facts in the life of language. When the beginner has learnt to observe dialectal variation all round him, when he has become aware that his own speech, and that of

his associates, is in process of transformation, he can understand that a language which has a *Future* must also have had a *Past*—he has seen and realized those forces actually at work which shape what we call the History of Language.

In dealing specifically with the History of English, I have tried to relate it in a vital way to the facts and phenomena of Present-day English, and, further, to indicate broad principles rather than merely isolated facts which are the partial expression of these principles.

It is my earnest hope that those chapters especially which deal with the varieties in modern English speech may not only prove interesting to students, but may suggest to their teachers further developments of what I can but believe are fertile and really educative lines of instruction. To many lecturers in Training Colleges the methods here suggested will doubtless be novel, but if they will give them an honest trial, they will find that to deal in this way with living and familiar realities will not only excite the interest of their pupils, but will also develop in these the faculties of observation and intelligence. I would venture to suggest to those Training College lecturers who use the book that the first seven chapters might form the basis of a First Year's Course, to be amplified and illustrated from the

experience of the teacher, with the co-operation of the pupil's own efforts. If properly treated, the ground here covered will form an excellent preparation to the elementary historical study contained in the remaining chapters, which might with propriety be left to the Second Year. If the historical part of the course be accompanied by the study of a portion of Chaucer, as suggested in my pamphlet, *The Place of the Mother Tongue in National Education*, the whole subject will be illuminated by actual experience, at first hand, of an earlier form of English.

HENRY CECIL WYLD.

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NOTE ON SECOND IMPRESSION

In the present impression, it is hoped that most of the misprints have been corrected. I may call attention in particular to the explanation of *jaw* and *jowl*, p. 142, which was wrongly given in the former edition. One or two suggestions made by critics have been adopted. At the suggestion of various readers an index has been added.

H. C. W.

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THE GROWTH OF ENGLISH

CHAPTER I

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

THE word 'language' is used in English in several senses. We speak of *Sign Language* or *Gesture Language*, meaning those movements of the fingers, the hands, or the head, which are used by some savages, or by the deaf and dumb, to convey to others their thoughts and wishes. But by language we generally mean those sounds which we make in speaking. If we call this kind of language Speech there is no doubt as to what we mean. This is the kind of language with which we are now going to deal. We all of us use it constantly, and could not carry on our lives without it. It is by means of language or speech that we let other people know what we are thinking, what we want, what we like and dislike. Some unfortunate persons are unable to speak. We speak of these people as being 'deaf and dumb.' This usually means that they are *deaf*, quite deaf; either from their birth or from a very early age. It is because they are unable to hear that these people are dumb, or unable to speak; for we learn to

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

speak, as very small children, by hearing others do so, and imitating them.

Now, to all ordinary people language, or the power of speech, is such a natural thing, and so familiar, that they do not think very much about it. If they were asked, 'What is language?' most people would not be able to give a very clear answer.

And yet language, although it is so common, is a very wonderful and precious thing, one which is well worth thinking about. We therefore surely ought to be able to say exactly what language is, seeing how familiar it is to all of us, and what an important and necessary thing it is in our lives. Let us try and understand exactly what language is.

We have said that we can express our thought by gestures or signs. Most people use some gestures while they are speaking, but in many cases it would be hard to say what exactly is the meaning of these gestures. But in England, at any rate, everybody understands, even if nothing is *said*, that when a man nods his head he means 'yes' and that when he shakes it from side to side he means 'no.' In fact, these two gestures are just as full of meaning as the two words just mentioned. We see, then, that gestures of this kind serve the same purpose as ordinary language or speech—that is, they express our meaning. In fact, deaf people and many savage races can carry on long 'conversations'—that is, can ask questions and answer them, can *express their meaning*—by means of signs and gestures alone, and without any spoken words.

Language, then, whether it consist of gestures or of what we call 'speech,' is a means for letting others

know what is in our minds, what we are thinking of, or feeling, or what we desire.

We want just now to consider more especially what that way of expressing our thoughts is that we call 'speech,' or 'language,' in the usual sense of the word. Now, speech is *heard*, and therefore consists of *sounds*. When we speak we make certain sounds which for ourselves and our friends have a meaning.

How are these sounds produced? If we watch a person who is speaking, or look at ourselves in the looking-glass while we are speaking, we can see that the lips move to a certain extent, and also that the mouth is sometimes more or less open, sometimes almost or entirely closed. We cannot see, however, what is going on inside the mouth, still less what is going on lower down in the throat.

As a matter of fact, three very important actions besides the movements of the lips and jaws are carried out in the act of speech. First, in the mouth, the *Tongue* is moving rapidly from one position to another; secondly, in the throat, two small membranes called the *Vocal Chords* are alternately made tight, and are loosened; thirdly, the air which is breathed into the lungs is being expelled, passing through the throat and mouth.

The sounds which we make in speaking are due to these movements of the vocal organs. We can therefore define speech as the expression of thought or feeling by means of sounds produced by the vocal organs. It is well to add that these sounds are *deliberately and intentionally* uttered for this purpose, because there are other vocal sounds or cries which may be uttered *unintentionally* by the vocal organs,

under the influence of certain strong emotions such as joy, fear, anger, and so on. The emotional cries are mechanical and instinctive, and are not included under the term 'language.' Now, from what has been said, we see that there are two sides to language: what we may call the inner side, which is the meaning which we wish to express, and the external side, which consists of the *speech sounds* whereby we express that meaning.

We cannot tell what is passing in the mind of another by looking directly into that mind, nor can others know what is in our own minds, except by means of some *symbol*, whether a picture, a statue, a gesture or a sign, or, as in the case of spoken language, by means of certain sounds, which are the outward *symbols* of what is inward, and of the mind. A symbol stands for something else, and those who are familiar with the symbol and the particular way of using it recognize and understand it. Some symbols, such as pictures or statues, have a meaning for everybody: there is no need to make a special study of them before we can understand them. Thus, a picture of a horse or a tree will at once convey to anyone who has ever seen these objects the idea of 'horse' or 'tree.' But those symbols which are the sounds made by the organs of speech do not possess the same general significance. Therefore, until we have learnt a language, and have found out the meanings which the speakers attach to each particular sound, or collection of sounds—that is, words—we do not understand it; it conveys no meaning to us. For there is no absolute reason why the group of sounds which go to make up such

a word as 'horse' should necessarily convey the idea of a particular species of four-footed animal. Every Englishman at the present day, however, attaches practically the same meaning to the word; whenever he hears it he takes it for granted that the speaker refers to the same thing as that with which the sounds are associated in his own mind, and he knows that when he uses the word it will call up in the minds of his hearers the same picture which exists in his own.

To learn a language, therefore, means to learn a particular set of sounds, and groups of sounds, and to learn also what are the ideas, thoughts, and feelings for which they stand, of which they are the symbols, in the minds of the native speakers of the language.

We learn our own language very gradually, by hearing our parents, nurses, and teachers, repeat a word a great many times, and seeing them point to the thing or person for which the word stands. In this way we learn first the names of the most familiar concrete objects, and much later we gradually form some conception of abstract ideas, and learn their names. *Mother, Father, Dog, Tree, Grass, Flower*, and so on, are easily understood by the child, but it takes him much longer before he grasps the meaning of *Hope, Truth, Evil*, and so on.

It is of the highest importance, if we wish to understand the real nature of language, to realize fully that words consist of *sounds*, which are *uttered* and *heard*, and not of *letters*, which are looked at.

Owing to the large part which books play in education, people have come to hold strange views

concerning language, and some actually think that the *letters*, which make up the written word on paper, are the real language, and that the sounds, which we can hear, are only of minor importance. It is probable that we should find it easier to grasp the real external facts of language, which are its sounds, if we knew nothing about writing and spelling at all, and could only think of language as being uttered sounds. A little consideration of the question shows us that the letters are very unimportant compared with the sounds, and that when we study a language, it is the sounds and their meanings which must mainly concern us.

Let us think for a moment of the relation of the written word to actual speech.

Language, of course, existed and was handed on for ages before writing was invented, and there are plenty of races at the present day who have fully developed languages in which they can express everything that is in their mind, but who have no system of writing. Even in England and other highly civilized countries there are still old people who never learned in their youth either to read or to write. For such people as these it is clear that language only exists as something which is spoken. We see, then, that the life of language may be quite independent of writing and spelling.

What is writing? It is simply a clever and convenient device by which certain symbols, which we call *letters*, are used to represent the sounds of speech. Words are built up of a collection of several sounds, and so when we write we are supposed to use a letter for each sound of which the word is composed.

Letters in themselves are not language, but merely symbols which are used for the sounds of which language is composed. There is no life or meaning in written symbols by themselves; but they must be translated, as it were, into the sounds for which they stand before they become language or have any meaning. We become so accustomed to the look of letters, in groups to represent words, that we learn to read them off quite rapidly into the sounds for which they stand. Even when we read silently, without pronouncing the words aloud, we carry out the process mentally, and often unconsciously, of turning the letters into the sounds which each represents, and in this way we get at the meaning of what is written.

We have already said that the sounds of speech themselves are only the symbols of thoughts, not the thoughts themselves. Written words, however, are still further away from the thoughts and ideas than spoken ones, for they are only the symbols of these—that is to say, they are symbols of symbols.

Spoken language, then, comes first, and is the reality of speech; written words are a late invention, and have no life beyond that which the reader puts into them, when he pronounces the sounds for which they were written.

You sometimes hear it said that we ought to pronounce in such and such a way, because the word is so written. But this is putting the cart before the horse. It would be more correct to say that when words were first written, they were written in such and such a way, in the attempt to put down as accurately as possible, by means of the written

symbols, the sounds which occurred in living pronunciation. You may ask, 'What, then, does decide how a word is pronounced?'

It will be easier to explain this later on, when we have said something about what is called the history of language; but in the meantime it will perhaps be clear if we say that the pronunciation of a language changes slightly from age to age, and that, as a matter of fact, a word is pronounced in a certain way at a certain time by a given set of people. Why it is that the word is pronounced just in this particular way at a given time, must be explained later on, but we may be sure of this, that as a rule the spelling has absolutely nothing to do with the pronunciation. This is due to quite other causes. *We do not pronounce as we do because of the spelling.* We shall soon see that in English at any rate the spelling which we learn as correct appears to be but very slightly connected with our usual pronunciation of the words. Indeed, if we were to try to carry out the rule of pronouncing as we spell, we should produce a very strange language, which no one would understand.

We must banish from our minds any idea that pronunciation follows spelling; this is a very wrong and silly idea, and if we hold it, we shall have a very false impression of what language really is. Throughout this book, unless otherwise stated, when we speak of *Language*, or the *English Language*, we mean real, spoken language which can be heard, and not language written on paper, which is only a makeshift for the real thing.

We need think very little about spelling, but very

much about speech sounds, if we want to understand the many interesting things which there are to learn about language. When a word is referred to, you must think of the sound of the word, not of the look of the word when written.

You will perhaps find that you really know very little about the *sounds* of the words in your own pronunciation; but this is just what is important for you to think about. And you will probably find, also, that the less you think, or perhaps, even, the less you know, about the spelling of a word, the easier it will be for you to discover what sounds you really pronounce in it. Many people, who think only of the spelling, believe that they pronounce an 'l' in the word 'colonel,' or in the word 'alms,' but you would find that a person who had not learnt English spelling carefully would never think of writing an 'l' in these words if he came to write them for the first time, without ever having seen them spelt. A very important lesson, which most people have to learn, is to keep their ears open, and *listen* carefully to the language which they hear around them, and which they speak themselves.

In this chapter we have tried to make clear the following points: (1) Language, or speech, is a means of letting others know what we are thinking, or feeling; (2) language consists of sounds which for ourselves, and others, have a meaning; (3) the sounds of speech are made by the movements of certain organs in the throat and mouth, known as the organs of speech; (4) in speech, these sounds are deliberately and intentionally uttered, and are not mere cries; (5) these sounds are the outward symbols of what is