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COMMON ERRORS
IN ENGLISH

COMMON ERRORS IN ENGLISH

Their Cause, Prevention and Cure

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTORY

ENGLISH is the mother tongue of 200,000,000 people, of many races and nations. Their countries are vast in area and rich in resources, but even so commercialism has driven these people overseas so that there are communities of them, sometimes large and always influential, in every continent. No language, ancient or modern, can be compared with English in the number or geographical distribution of the homes, shops, factories and offices in which the language is spoken, written and read. Three hundred million Chinese speak dialects as mutually incomprehensible as Danish and Dutch; one hundred million Russians speak a language which is a rarity outside the borders of the Soviet Republics; Latin—to seek a parallel in the past—was acquired by many but was the mother tongue only of the few. English alone can boast of a world-wide distribution and an overwhelming numerical superiority.

For though English is vastly important as a great and powerful vernacular it is even more important as an instrument of world exchange. European and non-European peoples all over the earth are making increasing use of English as their 'second language' because, for them, English and information are inextricably interwoven; perhaps one-half of mankind have chosen English to communicate with those who do not speak their own language. The total number of persons who speak English, or are learning to speak it, or desire to speak and read it, is beyond computation.

There have been world languages in the past, when the

world was smaller. Each owed what universality it possessed to the military power of its original speakers—Greek in the empire of Alexander; Latin in the empire of Rome; and so with the ancient dominations. When the imperial authority broke, the language broke with it; into derivative tongues to which time has added still greater diversity. But it is otherwise with English. English has behind it the thrust not of one but of several of the most influential peoples in the world, similar in political aspiration, friendly in policy, interlocked economically. Furthermore, English is not threatened with that disintegration which reduced ancient languages to families of dialects, as vulgar Latin gave birth to the Romance languages. English is unified and stabilized by the printing press, the speaking cinema, by radio and by easy air travel. If England sank beneath the sea, English would continue to spread.

The commercial weight, the technical importance and the cultural content of English both in the original and in translation from other tongues explain the world-wide acceptance of the language as the medium of intellectual exchange. A trading concern finds its business curtailed and its development hindered if its executives are ignorant of English; and the language is quite indispensable to the serious student of politics, of economics, of science, of engineering technology or of religion. No nation to-day, however great or however isolated, dares to rely altogether upon its own indigenous share of social, cultural and technical invention and development. The English language, possessing comprehensive literatures, American and British, ancient, modern, and current, and a wealth of translation far greater than those of any other language, provides the whole world with a common storehouse and a common exchange which can be utilized in every field.

A well-informed guess¹ puts the number of would-be learners of English every year at twenty millions, and this demand for instruction, great as it is, increases faster than trained teachers can be supplied to meet it. These twenty million learners have isolated this language from the other subjects in their school curriculum. They place English in the category of what they want, distinguishing it from those other subjects which are in the category of what teachers think is needful. They accept mathematics, history, geography and the rest with degrees of tolerance which vary, according to taste, from enthusiasm to dumb and pained endurance. But in the English class there is a strenuous and undefeatable desire to learn. This subject, the pupil thinks, has solid values; and the study of it leads directly to a clear and worth-while objective. And he is prepared to go to considerable lengths to ensure that his desired objective is attained. He will submit readily to a heavy allocation of time; he resents listless and inefficient tuition; he is quick to recognize successful teaching and to respond to it with enthusiasm and gratitude.

But still he makes mistakes. It was such a pupil that once wrote (in an examination paper the present author had to mark) this description of a pagan people:

'Being they are savages they do not know religion. And when we send them a Reverence to make them holy lives they killed him and devoured the flesh, having fried.'

¹ H. E. PALMER, *This Language Learning Business*.

CHAPTER TWO

ERRORS

INSTRUCTION in any subject if it so far fails to reach its simplest objective that it results in a stream of flagrant errors, is a grievous waste of effort. Every teacher of English overseas realizes this and labours long and unremittingly to circumvent the 'common errors' which he knows are prompt upon the very tips of his pupils' tongues and pens. Seeking a root and general cause, he thinks he finds it in the particular construction and idiom of the regional vernacular.¹

'Between any two languages whatever, there is a wide gulf of difference; differences of construction, of word-order, of idiom; there are differences even so subtle that they appear wholly to defy formal definition. In acquiring the habit of linguistic expression in a foreign tongue, our constant difficulty is the deep-seated linguistic habits already acquired.'²

'Cross-associations arise simply from the fact that each idea that comes into our minds instantly suggests the native expression of it, whether the words are uttered or not and however strongly we may stamp the foreign expression on our memories, the native one will always be the stronger. This is proved by the well-known fact that in moments of great excitement we invariably fall back on our native language or dialect.'³

¹ F. G. FRENCH, *Common Errors Due to Burmese Usage*.

BROWN and SCRAGG, *Common Errors in Gold Coast English*.

WATSON HYATT, *Notes on English Syntax (errors in) (for Malaya)*.

² KITTSOON, *Language Teaching*, p. 20.

³ SWEET, *The Practical Study of Languages*, p. 198.

Every writer on the teaching of languages emphasizes this point, generally in that part of his discussion which deals with the problem of translation and its evil effects in multiplying errors and preventing the use of the correct English form.

It is neither possible nor worth while to print the evidence in full, but a careful examination of lists of errors thought by those who collected them to be peculiar to their own regions, and to be directly due to cross-associations and interference of their local vernaculars, has not substantiated that assumption. The reader can form his own judgement by applying to his own experience, whatever the region in which he is interested, these examples collected from Japan, China, Burma, India, the Gold Coast, Tanganyika, Hawaii, the Philippines and Malta. The selection was made haphazard:

By which road did you came?

I forgot to set homework yesterday, didn't I? Yes,
you didn't.

He asked me that where is the post office.

He gave me some good advices.

I did all my works.

She has black hairs.

I haven't some.

He is much-tired by walking.

First I saw him he was too young.

I have been in this school since two years.

The man whom you wounded him was died.

This is the man you married his daughter.

That is the king's horse which he rides it.

Being she was a clever girl she did it for three times.

He replied me that he do not know.

I told him I do not know how old was it.

He blowed me with his fist.

He knows you, isn't it?

This fruit is not good to be eaten.

He made me to know.

The teacher explained me for four times.

At London.

Is it in the box? It is in. Then give me the another one.

I like to do my homework to-morrow please.

I shall tell you if he will come.

They gave me some fruits as oranges and mango.

It is too hard that I cannot do it.

My father is clerk.

He took my only one book.

He is a best boy in our class.

I had this book last three years.

I am very much thankful.

I didn't laugh, only I smiled.

A few number of boys are absent.

They went some places.

The hundreds of 'common errors' of which the above are only samples are met with in regions thousands of miles apart. The argument here presented is that if errors are due, as unmistakably as the best authorities would have us believe, to cross-association, then the Japanese form of error should be one thing and the Bantu form quite another. But the plain fact is that Japanese and Bantu alike say 'Yes, I didn't', and they have scores of other errors in common. If dressing English words in vernacular patterns is indeed the root of error, then a Maltese pupil, whose language has ancient Semitic affinities, should produce mistakes markedly unlike those produced by, say, a Philippino pupil. But that is not the case. And it is to be noted that pupils everywhere have no difficulty at all in suppressing their vernacular word-order in favour of English word-order. The collection of 'common errors',

of which those in the list above are only a sample, proves that the errors which exasperate teachers of English are indeed 'common'. And all the world is mystified by the English tenses. Even to the native Englishman using it colloquially, 'I have been had' looks queer in cold print.

A few errors, of course, are purely regional and do in fact arise from the cause advanced by linguistic authority. Perhaps only on the Gold Coast 'This box is long past all' is offered for 'This is the longest box'; perhaps only in Burma and Siam are we told that 'Men cannot stay without eating'; and perhaps only in India 'Our teacher has a chair to sit'. But errors far more numerous than these and far more varied in type are found to be common all over the world, without regard to vernacular, social and domestic environment, or methods of teaching. Furthermore, and this is of the greatest importance to teachers, mistakes which are common to all regions are found everywhere to be more resistant to efforts to remove them than mistakes which are traceable to a particular vernacular. The origins of the latter are easily discovered and drills to remedy them are easily devised. The French pattern for number, 'quatre-vingt-douze', is easily suppressed by quite short practice from 'four-twenty-twelve' in favour of the English pattern 'ninety-two'; and though other cross-associations may require a little more care to diagnose and a little more drill to eradicate, they are not ineradicable—as 'common errors' seem to be, at least in the school years.

Thus in seeking the source of error in the vernacular, the teacher is searching in the wrong field. The fact that the errors are common indicates that they have a common cause. That common root is not to be found in a wide variety of languages exhibiting innumerable differences in syntax, accident and idiom. Explanation does

not lie in cross-association and instinctive translation of the mother-tongue, but in the usages of English itself; for these usages provide the only factor which is common to all regions, all students and all methods.

If the teacher can stifle his exasperation and will examine the blue-pencilled pages of his pupils' exercise books dispassionately, he will find that most of the 'common errors' are not the result (as he may have thought) of forgetfulness, carelessness and indolence, but have been committed in all honesty of endeavour. As we have seen, the pupil does *want* to learn English and there is less indolence in this subject than in any other. The pupil, in his own interest, will at least try to follow his instructor's exhortation to 'use his brains'. Stating what he knows to be a fact, he writes, 'My sister's hairs are black.' If some dim memory makes him hesitate between 'hair' and 'hairs', his doubts are resolved by the obvious social disadvantages of alleging that his sister has but one solitary hair on her head. Indeed, the struggle to make the English effort 'look right' is so much keener than the temptation merely to copy his mother tongue that the pupil discards his vernacular pattern even when by so doing he unwittingly commits a greater error. In English we say:

(i) The sparrow is a small bird;

but also

(ii) Sparrows are small birds.

Since the statements are exactly parallel, the second one should be

(iii) The sparrows are small birds.

In Burmese, for example, the patterns for these expressions are:

Sa gale thi	nge thaw	nget	pyit thi.
(The sparrow)	(small)	(bird)	(is)

and in the plural

Sa gale mya thi nge thaw nget mya pyit kya thi.

(The sparrows) (small) (birds) (are)

Observe that the second, plural, form—except for word-order which the learner disposes of without difficulty—is exactly of the English form (iii) above; yet the pupil discards even this, although it contains only one mistake, and he produces instead the ‘common error’

The sparrows are the small birds,
just as the Frenchman says:

Les moineaux sont des petits oiseaux.

He sees a parallelism, not between the English form and his own idiom, but between ‘sparrows’ and ‘birds’. Discarding his vernacular in all respects, he ‘uses his brains’ and sets out what he imagines to be a safe, logical and grammatical arrangement:

the sparrows . . . the birds

One further example. Every teacher of English overseas knows the difficulty experienced with the relative possessive construction as in the sentence

I saw the man whose dog is dead.

The Frenchman, although he has the possessive relative ‘dont’, rejects it idiomatically and prefers to say

J’ai vu l’homme qui a perdu son chien.

In Maltese, the idiom is far removed from the English arrangement:

Jena	rajt	ir-rajel	li	mietlu
(I)	(saw)	(the man)	(who)	(died-for-him)
		il	keeb.	
		(the)	(dog)	

In Urdu, the idiom contains a sense of the relative:

Us admi ko	jiska	kutta	margaya hai
(That man)	(of whom)	(dog)	(dead is)
	hamne	dekhe hain.	
(I)	(saw)		

In Burmese, there is no relative idea at all:

Kwe the thaw lugyi thi chunok myin thi.

(Dog-died-man) (the) (I) (saw)

Word-order is entirely different in all five languages. The idiomatic pattern relating the four ideas

(man) ('s) (dog is dead) (I saw)

is also different in all five vernaculars. If error arises from translation, or from confusion with the vernacular, pupils in Malta, India and Burma should produce three quite different types of mistake in the use of the relative pronoun. But the fact is that, as in the case of 'The sparrows are the small birds', all pupils, everywhere, discard the thought-pattern of the mother tongue and arrange the English words in what appears to them to be reasonable and 'grammatical' construction, proof against the teacher's censure. Thus the 'common error' in non-European regions for a relative such as

I spoke to a man whom I had never seen before,
is

I spoke to a man who I had never seen him before.
'Who' is regarded in its connective function and the reason for the appearance of 'him' is neither carelessness nor indolence, but a very prudent and praiseworthy distrust of the vacuum at the end of the transitive phrase

I had not seen... (before).

When it is a question of tense, the pupil very advisedly hesitates to use a verb-form which, professing to explain a given time-relation, apparently states the exact reverse of what it means; so that the vernacular does not enter into the matter at all when the pupil has doubts between

If an elephant jumps through that window to-morrow,
and

If an elephant jumped through that window to-morrow;
and decides to employ the straightforward statement of

the supposition that the elephant *will jump* through that window to-morrow.

Further evidence comes from those who possess English as their mother tongue. Exercises of 'Correct the following sentences' type are as popular among teachers in America and Britain as they are overseas. (In the opinion of the writer such exercises constitute a grievous error in teaching technique, at least with foreign pupils; but no matter.) If sets of those exercises could be interchanged between classes at home and abroad, neither side would find much novel in them; for American, British and foreign students have 'common errors' in common. Every teacher of English to foreign students will recognize old acquaintances in the examples following, though these are taken from American and British class books only:

They have (a, an) awning for (there, their) back porch and it looks (gaily).¹

She looked (prettily) and she sang as (good) as ever.¹

Each of the pupils (have) chosen (there, their) favourite books.¹

Do you prefer football (than) cricket?²

(Being a wet day) we wore raincoats.²

Here there is no question of vernacular interference. Native-born and foreign students fall together into the same pitfalls.

The reader may clinch the matter for himself by consulting his own list of mistakes, which every teacher of English overseas compiles at some time or other in self-defence. He will find that by far the greater number of items in it, and those the most stubborn against remedy, come under the heading 'Errors due to applying

¹ TEUSCHER (pupil's book), *Junior Language Skills*, Chicago, U.S.A.

² CLAY, *English Exercises*, Ages 11-13, London, England.

rules and analogies in the wrong places', and only a small minority under 'Errors in which only vernacular, not English, analogies apply', and fewest of all under 'Errors due to sheer laziness'. Even 'He go' is on the pattern of 'I go; to go; will go; must go', and the pupil has heard and used the form 'go' a hundred times for every once that he has heard or used the exception 'goes'.

It is neither the idiom of his mother tongue nor school-boy indolence, but stark common sense, that makes it hard for the pupil to remember that the correct answer to 'Surely nobody helped you?' is 'No'; that whereas 'I saw him at the church' is correct, and 'I saw him at church' is correct also, nevertheless 'I saw him at bazaar' merits rebuke.

If English could be taught to a chimpanzee, the animal would produce all the 'common errors' and could not be blamed for snarling at its instructor when informed that the tense is wrong in 'I wish it is Sunday to-day'.

The reason why instruction in English results as often as not in a stream of errors is not to be found in cross-association with any vernacular.