# WORDS AND THEIR WAYS IN ENGLISH SPEECH

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New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

LONDON: MACMILLAN & CO., LTD.

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# PREFACE

THE practical man, who rides in electric cars, talks by the long-distance telephone, and dictates his letters to a stenographer, seldom has time to think that he is the heir of all the ages. Yet, however busy he may be, there are moments when the amazing phenomenon of articulate speech comes home to him as a kind of commonplace miracle. To answer some of the questions that occur to one at such moments is the main purpose of this book.

Chapters XIII and XIV are an essential part of the treatment, but have been so adjusted that the reader who finds them abstruse may skip them without scruple.

Obligations are thankfully acknowledged to a long line of etymologists, lexicographers, and philologists, whom it would be mere pedantry to call by name. The writers find themselves especially indebted to the great Oxford Dictionary, to the publications of Professor Skeat, and to the etymological work of Professor Sheldon in Webster's International Dictionary. Thanks are also due to A. C. Goodell, Esq., Albert Matthews, Esq., and Professor Sheldon for particular favors.

J. B. G.
G. L. K.

# WORDS AND THEIR WAYS IN ENGLISH SPEECH

## ABBREVIATIONS

*A.N.*, Anglo-Norman.
*A.S.*, Anglo-Saxon.
*Fr.*, French.
*Ger.*, German.
*Gr.*, Greek.
*Ital.*, Italian.
*L.*, Latin.
*L.L.*, Low Latin.
*O. H. Ger.*, Old High German.
*O.N.*, Old Norse.
*Pg.*, Portuguese.
*Sp.*, Spanish.

Set up and electrotyped July, 1901.
Twelfth Printing, 1958

SET UP AND ELECTROTYPED BY J. S. CUSHING CO.
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY BERWICK & SMITH CO.

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# WORDS AND THEIR WAYS

## CHAPTER I

### THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

THE expression of our thoughts by means of language is a practice of so long standing that we accept it almost as an instinctive performance. Nobody can remember when or how he learned to talk. Indeed, it is seldom possible to recall even those moments in later life when, after the art of speech had been acquired, we became familiar with particular words which, as we know well enough, must have been from time to time added to our personal vocabulary. We can, to be sure, remember when we were first introduced to the technical language of some particular science, as mathematics or medicine or political economy. We may even recollect the person from whom we first heard a new phrase which has since become a part of our habitual stock. And all of us are aware of specific additions to our vocabulary from that ephemeral element in everyday speech known as 'slang,' which is constantly providing us with strange terms that force themselves upon our attention because everybody employs them, and that rapidly die out only to be replaced by equally grotesque novelties. But the sum-total of our retrospect accounts for only the minutest fraction of

our whole outfit of words and phrases. And were it not for our observation of infants, who cannot speak at all, and of young children, who are painfully learning the art of speech, we should inevitably believe that the expression of our thoughts in language was spontaneous action, quite independent of our own will and exertions, like breathing or the circulation of the blood.

Yet no phenomenon is more amazing than that of speech. Nor can any process be imagined more complicated than that by which the vocabulary of a highly developed language, like English, comes into existence and fits itself to the multifarious needs of civilized man in the utterance of thought and emotion. If to the process of oral speech we add the corollary processes of reading and writing, we have a series of phenomena which no thinking man can contemplate without a kind of awe.

Language is the expression of thought by means of words; that is, by means of signs of a peculiar sort made with the vocal organs. Since the tongue is one of the most important of these organs, and since we are habitually conscious of using it in articulation, we often call our language our 'tongue,' — and the word *language* itself is derived, through the French, from *lingua*, the Latin name for that organ.[1]

The origin of language is an unsolved problem. It was once supposed that man was created a talking animal; that is to say, that he could speak immediately on his creation, through a special faculty inherent in his very nature. Some scholars maintained that our first parents were instructed in the rudiments of speech by God himself, or that language *in esse* was a gift bestowed by the deity

[1] M.E. *langage*, from Fr. *langage*, from L. *lingua*.

immediately after Adam was created. Along with these opinions went, in former times, the opinion that Hebrew, the language of the Jewish Scriptures, was the primitive tongue of mankind. None of these views are now in favor, either with theologians or with philologists. However we conceive the first man to have come into existence, we are forced to believe that language as we know it was a human invention. Not language itself, but the inherent power to frame and develop a language was the birthright of man. This result, it will be seen, is purely negative. It defines what the origin of language was *not*, but it throws no light on the question what it *was*, and no satisfactory answer to the question has ever been proposed. Some scholars believe that human speech originated in man's attempt to imitate the sounds of nature, as if a child should call a dog 'bow-wow,' or a cow 'moo.' No doubt such imitation accounts for a certain number of words in our vocabulary, but there are great difficulties in carrying out the theory to its ultimate results. All that can be said is that the 'bow-wow theory,' as it is jocosely called, has never been driven from the field. Another view, which may be traced without any great difficulty to Herder's attempt to explain 'the speech of animals,' has found a warm defender in Max Müller. According to this view, which has a specious appearance of philosophical profundity, the utterances of primitive man were the spontaneous result, by reflex action, of impressions produced upon him by various external phenomena. Though the 'ding-dong theory,' as it is derisively called, is now discredited, and, in its entirety, is hardly susceptible of intelligible statement, it may, after all, contain a grain of truth.

Another partly discredited theory seeks the origin of

language in such involuntary exclamations as *oh! bah! pshaw!* and the like. Hence it is often called the 'pooh-pooh theory.'

The upshot of the whole discussion is a confession of ignorance. The impossibility of arriving at the truth is more and more evident, as the stupendous length of man's residence upon this planet before the dawn of history is more and more clearly recognized. We do not know, and we can never know, how language began. Yet we can study some of the processes of its development in form and in meaning for a period extending over several thousand years, and we find these processes essentially identical with those that we can imperfectly observe within the limits of our own lifetime.

Well-chosen words, arranged in a felicitous order, have a peculiar cadence which pleases the ear, irrespective of any meaning which they convey to the mind.[1] If the cadence is sufficiently measured, the result is verse or, to use the popular term, poetry. Now it is a familiar fact of literary history that good poetry always precedes good prose in the order of development. Indeed, the art of writing unmetrical language in a forcible and pleasing style is one of the latest achievements of any literature.

In the eighteenth century, when much attention was given to literary and linguistic origins, but when these were investigated on a basis rather of sentimental prepossession than of scientific reason, and when the body of material available for evidence was extremely scanty and had not been properly sifted, a peculiar theory of

[1] This is shown by the popularity of nursery rhymes and similar nonsensical jingles. Compare also 'The Hunting of the Snark,' and Aytoun's parody on Tennyson: 'Worship Mighty Mumbo Jumbo in the Mountains of the Moon.'

the connection between language and poetry gained very general favor. It was expressed in a taking form by Hamann, whose celebrated dictum, 'Poetry is the mother tongue of man,' was taken up and enforced by Herder in a way that gave it a commanding influence on contemporary thought, — an influence, indeed, which it has not altogether lost, even in the present age, whose tendencies are so different from those that prevailed a hundred years ago.

Primitive man was conceived by the romantic imagination of the eighteenth century as leading an ideal existence. Uncorrupted by contact with civilization, he lived near to nature, and all nature spoke to him in a voice more immediately intelligible than we can now conceive, even in the case of a poet like Wordsworth. Thus sympathetically impressed by natural phenomena, man gave utterance to the thoughts and feelings which they produced within him in melodious sounds, which instantly took shape as poetry. In short, according to this conception, language and song are inseparable, and our poetry is nothing but a survival, under more artificial conditions, of the primitive language which mankind uttered in the Golden Age.

Such theories are now known to be based on a false conception of the history of mankind as well as of the nature of articulate speech. Yet, like all theories that have at any time commanded the assent of thinking men, they must embody, in an imperfect expression, some quantum of truth. Primitive man may not have sung like the birds, but there is certainly a natural rhythm in language to which the mind and feelings immediately respond, just as there is a natural rhythm in the beating of the heart, the drawing of the breath, and even in

many movements of the body which we call 'voluntary and regard as arbitrarily controlled by the individual will. Language, that is to say, may not be poetry *in esse*, but it is always potential verse. From another point of view, too, the saying of Hamann may be justified if we interpret it with the license that all oracles demand. There is no process of figurative language, no device of grammar or rhetoric, no whim even of pedantic theorizers on eloquence, which does not find its parallel over and over again in the unstudied processes of our ordinary speech. It is profoundly true that 'all language is poetry.'[1]

[1] For further remarks on the origin of language see p. 391.

## CHAPTER II

### LANGUAGE IS POETRY

WHEN we examine the dictionary of any highly developed language like English, we are impressed not only with the enormous extent of the vocabulary, but with its infinite variety. There are plain words for common things (as *bread*, *stone*, *house*, *child*, *horse*) and simple physical acts (as *eat*, *drink*, *run*, *climb*); there are formal or dignified or poetical words for equally simple conceptions (like *residence*, *progeny*, *quaff*, *masticate*); there are vague words (like *thing*, *affair*, *matter*, *act*, *do*) and scientific terms of rigid exactness (like *oxygen*, *atmosphere*, *chloride*, *carbon*, *inoculate*); there are abstract terms for mental and moral qualities (as *sagacity*, *carelessness*, *probity*, *honor*) and adjectives describing persons who exemplify these qualities (as *sagacious*, *careless*, *honest*, *honorable*); there are words of a distinctly undignified character (like *chum*, *crank*, *bamboozle*, *blubber*, *bawl*, *fizzle*), others so dignified as to be uncommon in familiar talk (as *remunerative*, *emolument*, *eleemosynary*, *recalcitrant*) or so high-sounding as hardly to be allowable even in elaborate writing (as *exacerbate*, *cachinnation*, *adumbrate*), there are words which have poetical associations (as *golden*, *roseate*, *silver-tongued*, *gambol*, *soaring*, *eterne*), and others so prosaic that every poet avoids them (as *fry*, *exchequer*, *discount*, *cross-question*, *extra*, *medium*, *miscellaneous*); there are words so technical as to be understood by specialists only (as *elec-*

*trolysis*, *cotyledon*, *ontology*, *quaternions*), and others so childish as to be confined to the dialect of the nursery (as *naughty*, *mammy*, *dad*, *dolly*).

Frequently, too, we find a number of different words ('synonyms,' we call them) for what is essentially the same idea:[1] *ask*, *request*, *beseech*, *pray*, *beg*, *petition*, *supplicate*, *entreat*, *implore*, *solicit*, *crave*, *importune*; *angry*, *wrathful*, *incensed*, *irritated*, *vexed*, *resentful*, *enraged*, *furious*, *indignant*, *exasperated*, *irate*, *hot*, *infuriated*; *join*, *unite*, *associate*, *unify*, *link*, *connect*, *couple*, *combine*.[2]

The same marvellous variety shows itself when we study the different meanings of a single word. Thus *figure* may be equally well applied to a person's form, a polygon, a numerical sign, an elaborate drawing or picture in a book, a metaphor or simile; *energy* may be used in a general sense or in the technical language of science ('the conservation of *energy*'); *property* may be a quality, one's possessions, or (in theatrical language) a thing or utensil used in setting the stage; *character* may refer to one's personal qualities, or it may denote a mark or sign in writing or printing, or it may be colloquially used for an eccentric person.

The question is immediately suggested: Whence does a nation provide itself with this enormous mass of words, with their multifarious meanings so aptly differentiated as to express all the aspects of any conception that can occur to the mind of civilized man?

In the first place, no people is perfectly homogeneous,

[1] So-called synonyms almost always differ from each other in some shade of meaning, or in emphasis, or at all events in their connotations.

[2] The reader may easily multiply examples by collecting, for instance, the synonyms for *awkward*, *beautiful*, *healthy*, *strange*, *throw*, *go*, *law*, *sin*, *people*, *custom*.

and this is strikingly true of the English nation, which is 'Saxon and Norman and Dane,' as Tennyson wrote, and Celtic as well. Each component part of the population contributes its proportion of words, — small or large, but always characteristic, and distinct in many particulars from the contributions of all the rest. Then, too, all cultivated languages have borrowed much from outside nations with whom they have come in contact in war or trade or literature. Our own language, as we shall see, has enriched itself in this way from every quarter of the globe.

The varied materials thus brought together are constantly subjected to what may be called mechanical processes of growth.[1] Every language has its machinery of prefixes and suffixes and compounds, by means of which a single word may become the centre of a considerable group of related terms: as, *true*, *tru-th*, *tru-ly*, *un-true*, *un-tru-ly*, *tru-th-ful*, *tru-th-ful-ness*, etc.

But these causes are not sufficient to explain the richness and complexity of our speech. Such a result was achieved only when this great mass of variously derived material had been subjected for centuries to the language-making instinct; that is, to the poetic faculty of man. The dictum that 'all language is poetry,' then, if properly understood, goes far toward answering the question with which we are concerned.

The essentially poetical or figurative character of language may easily be seen by comparing a number of passages from the poets with ordinary prosaic expressions.

When Wordsworth writes, in Laodamia, —

> The gods approve,
> The *depth*, and not the tumult of the soul,

[1] These processes will be studied in Chapters XIII, XIV