

A Comprehensive Guide TO GOOD ENGLISH

By

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RAND McNALLY & COMPANY

CHICAGO

NEW YORK

THE INTRODUCTION

AIM AND CONTENT

This book is called *A Comprehensive Guide to Good English* because it takes account of many different aspects of the life and practice of the English language. It is devised not merely as a reference book, like a dictionary, but as a book for reading, study, and reflection. Its purpose is to encourage direct observation of the varied possibilities of English speech as it appears in living use, spoken and written, and, as a consequence of such observation, to enable readers to make for themselves independent and sensible judgments in the practical use of the English language. It is not a book for babes and sucklings, but for persons who have arrived at the age of discretion and are capable of making choices and judgments of their own.

The materials of the book consist of details concerning which doubt and uncertainty are likely to be experienced in the practical use of the English language. It discusses, therefore, only debatable points; that is, points which from time to time call for special choice and decision. It considers not merely questions of correctness, but also some of the finer adjustments of speech.

Perhaps in nine-tenths of our linguistic life we go forward uninterruptedly, without any doubts or hesitations. Such words as *stone, wood, horse*, such sentences as *I saw your friend Jones yesterday*, raise no questions in our minds, and it is of just such words and sentences that nine-tenths of our language activity is composed. But the remaining one-tenth, though relatively small in amount, is not small in importance. It is made up of those problems and difficulties in language which now and then arise at the most unexpected moments. They may be comparatively insignificant matters in themselves, but even a small

obstruction can completely stop the working of the delicate machinery of language. Until the obstruction is satisfactorily removed, the speaker or writer can not go ahead.

These obstructions form the subject matter of this book. The great body of the uses of the language, those colorless, subconscious habits of speech that come to everybody alike and as second nature, are not our present concern. This instinctive body of use will be taken for granted, and, as contrasted with it, certain special and often conscious uses which have characteristic colors and values, and which therefore call for special adaptations, will be examined.

Another body of uses which will not be treated in this book consists of those obvious blunders and errors in English which no person even slightly interested in maintaining the purity of his speech would be likely to fall into. It is not at all probable that any person who may be led to consult this book will do so in order to find out whether *I seen him* or *He done it* is permissible English for *I saw him* and *He did it*. Everyone who knows anything about English knows they are not. This book has not been prepared for the public that needs to be protected against the use of such crudities of expression. It is a vast public and in pitiful need of help, in the most elementary simplicities, however, not in the shadings of the English language.

THE VARIABILITIES OF GOOD ENGLISH

The aim of the book is to apply, or to enable the reader to apply for himself, quickly and decisively the proper critical term to each of the many aspects of debatable English here gathered together. Obviously, however, the critical terms must be accurately distinguished if they are to be practically useful. But before proceeding to this endeavor, a preliminary word or two of caution seems necessary. And first comes the caution against the supposition that any single aspect of an instance of usage in the lan-

guage is the sole and absolutely right one, all variations therefrom being consequently wrong and bad. The more reasonable attitude is that which assumes a usage to be good and right when it is appropriate to its circumstances. Thus the forms of colloquial English, *he isn't*, *they won't*, and countless similar contractions; familiar intensives, such as *awfully sorry*, *terribly run down*; or the continually recurring conventional adjectives of approval, such as *nice*, *fine*, *wonderful*, *lovely* (in feminine English)—all these, and many similar usages, are appropriate enough in everyday cultivated spoken English, even though they are not appropriate in all other situations. In fact, they are not only the appropriate forms of colloquial speech, but the necessary forms. Colloquial speech must be colloquial to retain its proper tone or color. Always to speak formally and precisely and weightily would be to destroy the spirit of social intercourse through language. Every person's world is made up of a number of smaller worlds, and each world, in speech as in everything else, calls for its special adaptations.

A second caution must be directed against the assumption that the categories or groupings of words and usages in the language, in accordance with the descriptions about to be given, must necessarily appeal to all persons in exactly the same way. These varying usages may be described as the different climates of the English language, and everybody knows that the same climate is not always felt in exactly the same way by different people. Climate is not merely a matter of the thermometer, not a matter of absolute mathematical statement. So also in language, different temperaments will feel the temperatures or climates of language differently. What seems to one person ordinary colloquial English—for example, *He backed out of his agreement*—to another person may have the color of slang. For the most part, indeed, the categories will be clear and definite, but at the edges a twilight zone of uncertainty is likely to appear where one category passes

over into another. Here, again, a plea must be entered for liberty of judgment. The decisions put down in this book are not to be regarded as absolute and final. They are merely the judgments which the author, with such wisdom as he possessed, felt it incumbent upon him to make. Any person with more wisdom should certainly be permitted to differ from these judgments.

THE TERMINOLOGY OF ENGLISH USAGE

With these preliminary cautions, we may now proceed to a definition of the various terms which have been attached to the words discussed in the body of the book.

Colloquial. This term means that a usage thus designated is a general custom of cultivated spoken English, but that it has distinctly the flavor of spoken English. Manifestly it is not a term of condemnation. It is merely a word to indicate the linguistic and social temperature or climate of the uses thus designated. In colloquial English, contractions like *He isn't*, and the others mentioned above, are the normal and expected forms of the language. In giving a friend an informal invitation to call, one might well say, *Drop in when you have a chance*. There are times when it is proper to be informal as well as times when it is proper to be formal.

Low colloquial. This term applies to those usages which are current mainly in spoken English but are characteristic of the speech of persons who may be broadly described as uncultivated. For example, *He isn't* might come from the lips of the most highly cultivated person, but not *He ain't*. So also any person might say *He doesn't*, but to many critics of speech *He don't* implies an ignorance of the conventionally accepted customs which characterize cultivated society. A person who has little appetite may be described as *off his feed*, but not in the language of cultivated colloquial discourse. The phrase has a different flavor, which compels one to designate it as low colloquial.

Literary. A literary usage is one that carries with it distinctively the color and connotation of literary style. As colloquial English is typically characteristic of spoken English, so literary English appears in those occasional devices of writers which give to the writing in which they appear a special and artful character. And as the term *colloquial* carries with it no condemnation, so also the term *literary* carries with it no general approval. It is not the ideal of all speech that it should be literary. On the contrary, even in literature literary style obviously literary is not always, is not often, an advantage. Even in writing a good writer strives to seem natural, not artfully ingenious. As the term *literary* is used here, however, it means just those words, forms of phrasing, and other devices of style which carry with them a positive literary flavor, a quality that appears only in writing or in formal literary spoken style. Of course a phrase like *He is not* can not be regarded as such a device. *He ain't* may have a low colloquial flavor and *He isn't* may have a general colloquial flavor, but *He is not* has no special literary or artful flavor. It is merely the ordinary, colorless usage of the language which raises no question of special class or category. But a construction like *Were I to tell you all the details, you would not believe me*, for *If I were to tell you all the details, you would not believe me*, has a special literary flavor. Perhaps one might write it, but only a literarily minded person would speak it. So a word like *doff*, as in *He doffed his hat*, might be written in a literary style, but *doff* has practically disappeared from the general language. The general colorless phrase would be *He raised his hat*. In what class does the phrase *He tipped his hat* belong?

Some journalistic writers, but usually not those of extensive journalistic experience, are much given to the use of literary words and phrases, such words as *pact* for *agreement* or *treaty*, *to ban* for *to forbid* or *to exclude*, phrases like *to plight their troth* for *to be married*, *genial Boniface* for *landlord*, *fatal affray* for

street fight, and many others which will be found in the body of the book.

Vulgar. This term is applied to those uses which connote something offensive to good taste. Thus the word *sweat* is now frequently avoided as an unpleasant word, and *perspire*, *perspiration* is preferred instead. The vulgar word usually implies something offensive in the thought it expresses or in the general temper of the person who uses it. The stronger expletives and oaths fall in this class.

Dialect. *Dialect* is a term applied to words and other uses which are distinguishing for a particular geographical region or for a particular cultural level. The implications of the term are that uses thus designated are less admirable and acceptable than other more highly approved standard forms of speech. Dialect speech is thus either provincial or the speech of a special class. The word *calculate*, meaning *think*, *suppose*, suggests a rustic New England dialect. The dialect of the vegetable stand is suggested by *sweets* for *sweet potatoes* and *cukes* for *cucumbers*.

Local. *Local* is a term of not quite so wide application as dialect. It implies that a usage thus designated is current in particular localities, but not necessarily that it is a mark of cultural provincialism or of limited social experience. Thus the phrase *you all* for *you* is a localism of the South, and so also is *reckon* for *suppose*. In New England *down east* for the eastern seacoast is a localism. A western localism is the word *draw* for a gully or hollow between two hills. Every locality is likely to possess a number of such forms of speech. In a broad way, Americanisms and Britishisms are localisms, *baggage* being local American English and *luggage* a local Britishism, *booking office* and *ticket office* being respectively local British and local American English.

Standard. *Standard* is a term applied to those forms of speech generally current which receive the stamp of approval when the question of their use arises. Manifestly standard speech is not

all of one type, for a usage may be standard colloquial, like *He isn't*, or standard literary, as in those constructions peculiar to the style of writing in prose and verse. But low colloquial, dialectal, ungrammatical, slang, inaccurate, and other similar usages would rarely or never be regarded as standard, for when the question of approving them arises this question is answered in the negative, or with such extensive qualifications as to remove the usages from the body of standard speech.

Correct and incorrect. The terms *correct* and *incorrect* as applied to language imply that the usages thus designated conform or do not conform to some rule of language ordinarily accepted as authoritative by the person who applies the rule. In many instances these rules are generally accepted by all persons who hold to any opinions at all concerning the use of English. Thus a construction like *you was* would be characterized as incorrect, perhaps without any question. But in some instances difference of opinion may well exist with respect to the authority of certain rules, and when it does the question of correctness can be decided only by determining which rule one wishes to follow. A stock example is the construction *It is me*. According to the rule that a copulative verb is followed by a nominative, this construction is incorrect. But some grammarians would make for this construction a new rule of its own, by virtue of which *It is me* would not be incorrect. Correctness and incorrectness are therefore not absolute qualities inherent in language, but are applications merely of the rules which grammarians and others have made for the language.

Idiom. The terms *idiom* and *idiomatic* as here employed apply to constructions in good general use which do not conform to the customary analogies of the language. An idiomatic phrase must often be taken as a whole, without analysis into its parts, for when thus analyzed such phrases are often absurd or meaningless. For example, the phrase *stand in awe*, as in *He stood in awe of*

his father, is unquestionable English, but unintelligible logic if one attempts to take the phrase literally.

Trite. This term applies to words and phrases which have become commonplace and threadbare from too constant use, as, for example, referring to one's bed as *a downy couch* or to a bullet as *a deadly missile*. There is nothing improper in such phrases from the point of view of correctness, but from the point of view of style they are worse than incorrect—they are evidences of an effort and a failure to attain animation and originality in expression. They differ from ordinary everyday expressions, many of which may be used even more constantly than the trite expressions, in that the everyday expression makes no special bid for attention, whereas the trite expression is supposedly ingenious and worthy of note. Some of the phrases given and characterized as trite are ultimately derived from the writings of classic English authors, but even a passage from Shakspeare may become cheap and commonplace if it is quoted too constantly. Some of them are proverbial sayings, those bits of obvious popular wisdom which often come in very patly, but chiefly because they are so obvious. The point at which a word or phrase becomes trite of course is not fixed. Opinion here is determined by taste, but it is a safe rule for every person to be on guard against the too constant use of pet phrases, of favorite sayings and quotations.

Ungrammatical. This term is self-explanatory. But the category obviously overlaps other categories. Ungrammatical English may be characterized as incorrect, or also as low colloquial or dialectal. The sentence *Them boards is too short* is both ungrammatical and low colloquial. *I knows what I'se doin'* is ungrammatical negro dialect.

Slang. *Slang* designates a large department of specially colored English. Here again categories overlap, and some slang may also fall under the head of vulgar or low colloquial, or one may

even be in doubt at times whether to describe a particular usage as slang or as merely colloquial. Undoubtedly certain slang words and phrases by much use have lost their peculiar quality as slang, and some have even become permanent additions to the general uncolored idiom of the language. The definition of slang, however, does not turn on particular words, but on the feeling or linguistic climate which always characterizes the experience of slang when it occurs. The main elements of this feeling are a sense of vivid expressiveness, in which there enters a degree of fancy, humor, extravagance, and always an implication of exceptional social intimacy and patness. Slang is above all the language of highly self-conscious social groups, of smart people, of flippant people, of sporting people, or at least of people who have smart, flippant, or sporting moments. The phrase mentioned a moment ago, *He backed out of his agreement*, is scarcely slang. It is too mild to be called slang, and has become merely colloquial. But *to pass in one's checks* and *to kick the bucket* for *to die* are phrases, no matter how old, which still exhale the aroma of slang. The ordinary intensives of colloquial speech, such as *nice, fine, wonderful, or awful, terrible, horrid*, are not slang. They are merely the present-day colloquial conventions in conversational emergencies which, to use a slang word, can not be side-stepped. But these conventional emergencies may also be met with slang words, such as *scream*, for example, as a general term of approval, or *fierce* or *a frost* as terms of disapproval. Not every vigorous or metaphorical expression, however, is to be taken as slang. Strong and homely English is full of animation and color, and the fear of slang should not lead one to cultivate merely a cold and lifeless English.

Humorous. Certain uses in language which have not the currency or smartness of slang have, however, a share of the fancy and playfulness of slang. Such terms are best described as humorous. Of this nature are intentional language mutilations or inven-

tions, such as *skiddoo*, *skedaddle*, *dinky*, *do-funny*, and dozens of words like these. In the same way stately words are often used familiarly with humorous intent, as calling the remains of a meal *the débris*, or one's house *a domicile*. This is a stylistic device conveniently known as **Polysyllabic Humor**.

Newspaper style. This is a current critical term of long standing, but one which calls for a little defining. Newspapers are by no means uniform in style, for some are well written and some are badly written. A newspaper that is well written, it need scarcely be said, is not written in newspaper style. This term is usually applied as an adverse criticism to certain kinds of newspaper writing, especially to the use of high-sounding, ornate, and pompous terms when simpler words would do as well, or to the use of particular devices of style, as in headlines, which through long association immediately suggest the mannerisms of journalistic writers. Good newspaper writing has no greater occasion or justification for being manneristic than any other kind of good writing.

Awkward. This term applies to English which is heavy, crude, and lumbering. Redundancy is one of the commonest causes of awkwardness, as in the sentence *The reason why he was late was because his watch had stopped*. In most instances awkward English can be improved only by rephrasing.

Inaccurate. Inaccuracy usually consists in the indiscriminating use of words. A *circumstance* is an attendant detail, but loosely the word is often used to mean an incident, as in *A friend of mine told me of a circumstance that he had witnessed*. The word *witness* is sometimes loosely used in the sense of *see*, *observe*, as in *Forty thousand spectators witnessed the football game*.

Technical. Technical language is the special language of a trade, occupation, or profession. The stock market, banking, and high finance in general have a rich vocabulary of this sort. Some of it passes over into current slang, as, for example, *a freeze*

out, to be long or short on some thing or other. But within the profession, and in their professional uses, such terms are not slang. They are merely the technical accepted words for the ideas. Almost every activity has its special uses of this kind. On large cattle ranches, to certain men is assigned the task of *riding the fence*, that is, of riding along the fences to see where repairs are necessary. The fence rider then reports to the work gang, which makes the repairs. Only the person who knows technical ranch English could know what it means to ride the fence.

Archaic. Archaic words are those which still linger in use but which have about them the flavor of antiquity. They are the disappearing words of the language, kept alive only by some strong surviving interest, usually a literary interest. To most persons *albeit* for *though* would seem archaic. Or the word *mine* in a phrase like *mine host of the inn*, or *Shall I not take mine ease in mine inn?* is an archaism. It might be used in modern English, as in *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord*, but only with the flavor of an antique word.

Obsolete. Obsolete words are words no longer current either in spoken or in written use. They have only historical significance, and naturally are brought to the modern person's notice only under very exceptional circumstances.

Poetical. This term is self-explanatory and designates those uses which are peculiar to poetry and to similar elevated discourse, forms like *thou hearest*, *he heareth*, words like *dwell* for *live*, *oft* for *often*, *perchance* for *perhaps*, *maybe*. A great many poetical uses are at the same time archaic.

When a usage is not specifically described by the term *colloquial*, *literary*, *slang*, or some other of the terms just defined, the intention is that the usage shall be understood to be a good general custom of the language, not ordinarily open to criticism or objection.

AMERICAN ENGLISH AND BRITISH ENGLISH

The question of the relation of English in America to English in England calls for a moment's attention. In the main, good English in America is also good English in England. The great body of the language, especially the vocabulary and the written language, is the same in both countries. But if all the details in which American English differs from British English were gathered together, the collection would make a book certainly as large as this volume. This volume is not to be regarded, however, as primarily a dictionary of Americanisms and Briticisms. It has been written frankly from the American position, and only those points of peculiarly British usage have been adverted to which might reasonably be expected to fall within the range of experience of the persons for whom the book has been prepared.

The examples of usage in this volume have been collected during a long period of years and from a great variety of sources. Among the sources the most important has been the author's direct observation of speech and of writing. But grammars, rhetorics, dictionaries, and similar works without number have also been consulted. In the list of these the first place is easily taken by the *New English Dictionary*. This book is an extraordinary and indispensable storehouse of information, on usage as on any other aspects of the history of the English language. But the *New English Dictionary* as it stands can not quite be taken as a guide to present usage. For one thing, the publication of it began a generation and a half ago, the date of the first volume being 1888. The later volumes are more nearly contemporary, but a great and elaborate work like this can never be closely contemporary. Moreover, the *New English Dictionary* is specially unsatisfactory as a guide to good usage from the American point of view. The editors indeed appear to have taken only a vaguely discriminating attitude toward American English. Time and again a word is described in the dictionary as "dial. and U. S.," that is dialectal

in England but English without qualification in the United States, as though whatever occurred in the United States occurred everywhere in the United States. And in general the *New English Dictionary* makes little effort to distinguish the differing values of English in the United States, though in reality a usage which is questionable in England is likely to be questionable also in the United States. To an Englishman who considers all English in America to be dialectal, these American distinctions may seem to be not very important. To Americans, however, they are of the greatest importance, for very few Americans estimate and establish their speech only by comparison with the use of the English language in England. It is desirable for Americans to know the usage of English writers and speakers, but conceivably it is also desirable for Englishmen to know the usage of speakers and writers of English in America. But above all it is desirable for Americans to know the usage of the English language in America.

PRONUNCIATION

Pronunciations have been indicated only in words in which uncertainty or diversity of practice exists. Pronunciations indicated by respelling have been inclosed within parentheses, as in *culinary* (kū'lināri), not (kūl'-)

VOWELS

The vowel sounds in these parenthesized forms are indicated as follows:

(ā) as in *fade* (fād)

(ǎ) as in *fad* (fǎd)

(ah) as in *palm* (pahm)

(ār) as in *care* (kār)

(aw) as in *all* (awl)

(ē) as in *meet* (mēt)

(ě) as in *met* (mět), *perish* (pěr'ish)

- (er) as in *pert* (pert)
 (i) as in *mile* (mīl)
 (ɪ) as in *mill* (mīl), *spirit* (spɪr'ɪt)
 (ir) as in *first* (fɪrst)
 (ō) as in *note* (nōt)
 (ö) as in *not* (nöt), *soft* (söft)
 (ōr) as in *pore* (pōr)
 (ör) as in *fort* (fört)
 (oi) as in *boil* (boil)
 (ū) as in *use* (ūz)
 (ü) as in *but* (büt), *burro* (būr'ō)
 (ur) as in *fur* (fur)
 (oo) as in *boot* (bōot)
 (oo) as in *book* (böök)
 (oor) as in *boor* (boor)
 (ow) as in *crown* (krown)

The vowel of an unstressed syllable in a respelled form with no mark of pronunciation above it is pronounced as an obscure sound, like the first vowel of *around*, *about*. **This applies to all unmarked vowels in unstressed syllables.** Thus the several unstressed and unmarked vowels in the following words are all pronounced with the same sound, the sound of *a-* in *around*; *scallop* (sköl'op), *scintilla* (sintil'a), *sesame* (sēs'amɪ), *sacrilegious* (säkrilē'jus), *surveillance* (survā'lans).

But though these vowels of unstressed syllables all have the same value in customary colloquial speech, they have not ordinarily been respelled for the reason that the manner of pronunciation of them may vary considerably according to the degree of formality of the pronunciation. Thus in a formal reading or elocutionary pronunciation, *scintilla* might be pronounced (sintil'ah), *sesame* might be pronounced (sēs'ämě) or (sēs'ämɪ). But the only rule that can be given for all such syllables is the one based on the

usual custom of colloquial speech, by which standard the vowels in them, as the language is spoken at the normal rate of rapidity of connected discourse, would ordinarily have the obscure value of the unstressed vowel of *around*, *about*. Any more distinctive quality they may have will vary in degree with the formality or artificiality of the pronunciation, and these variations may be so numerous as to make it impracticable, as it is unnecessary, to record all of them.

Words with an unstressed *e*, whether before or after the stressed syllable, often exhibit considerable variation in pronunciation. Thus a word like *debated* may be pronounced (debāt'ed), with the obscure vowel in both unstressed syllables, or (dībāt'īd), with a very lightly stressed (ī) in both, or it might even be pronounced formally as (dēbāt'ēd), with a lightly stressed (ē) in the initial syllable. The word *basket* might be pronounced (bās'ket), and this may be characterized as the normal pronunciation, or it might be pronounced (bās'kīt), or still more formally (bās'kēt). No effort has been made to record all these variabilities of pronunciation in the present volume. For the most part, indeed, they fall outside the task here undertaken, which is to take account only of those elements of English speech which are likely to disturb the equanimity of a speaker or writer in the practical use of the language. The distinctions that have just been discussed are not unimportant, but they are refinements of pronunciation which must be left for specialized treatment in studies of English phonetics. When an unstressed syllable clearly calls for the indication of a more definite vowel sound than the obscure vowel, however, this more definite vowel has of course been given. Thus the word *exhort* can not be pronounced (egzört') in speech that must pass the test as standard, but must be (ēgzört'), or less commonly (īgzört'), and *motive* can not be (mō'tiv), but must be (mō'tiv), *cottage* can not be (kōt'aj), but must be (kōt'īj), or very formally (kōt'āj).

CONSONANTS

The consonant spellings are as follows:

- (b) as in *bat* (băt)
- (d) as in *did* (ďďd)
- (f) always as in *wife* (wīf)
- (g) always as in *go* (gō)
- (ng) as in *bring* (brīng)
- (h) as in *heavy* (hěvī)
- (j) as in *judge* (jűj)
- (k) as in *keep* (kēp)
- (l) as in *late* (lāt)
- (m) as in *mate* (māt)
- (n) as in *not* (nőt)
- (p) as in *pot* (pőt)
- (r) as in *rain* (rān)
- (s) as in *send* (sěnd)
- (t) as in *top* (töp)
- (v) as in *wives* (wīvz)
- (w) as in *way* (wā)
- (wh) as in *why* (whī)
- (y) as in *yet* (yět)
- (z) as in *prize* (prīz)
- (ch) as in *child* (chīld)
- (sh) as in *shield* (shěld)
- (zh) as in *occasion* (okā'zhn)
- (th) as in *thing* (thīng)
- (dh) as in *that* (dhăt)

Accent. Main stress is indicated by the acute accent, as in *albumen* (ălbū'mīn). A somewhat lighter degree of stress is indicated by the grave accent, as in *acorn* (ā'kōrn). Still lighter stresses are not marked, but to a certain extent are implicit in the markings of the vowels. Only very light syllables can have