

# PSYCHOLOGY OF ENGLISH

*Why We Say What We Do*

MARGARET M. BRYANT

*Professor of English, Brooklyn College  
The City University of New York*

and

JANET RANKIN AIKEN

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## PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

**EVEN THOUGH** more than two decades have passed since *Psychology of English* was first published, in preparing the new edition it seemed best to leave the original text largely intact, the only exception being that it has been brought up to date. The thesis that the English language and grammar are the products of the group thinking of billions of people whose minds have worked psychologically rather than logically still holds true. This group thinking and acting which has made English what it is today will continue to operate and will continue to modify it in the future. A selected bibliography has been added for those who wish to find out more about the workings of the language and better understand why we speak as we do. It is to be hoped that this text will give its readers a greater knowledge of the English language and will encourage them to an active observation of the language and a further study of it.

This edition is dedicated to the memory of my co-author and friend, Dr. Janet Rankin Aiken of Columbia University, who had a great love for the English language and continued the study of it unto the end of her life. She would have indeed been happy, had she lived, to see a new edition of this text appear.

M. M. B.

New York, N. Y.  
November, 1961

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MARGARET M. BRYANT  
JANET RANKIN AIKEN

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**O UNDERSTAND the significance of the present study it will be necessary to sketch briefly certain recent developments in human thinking; for human thought and language, even the English language with which we shall deal, are fundamentally interdependent. We cannot speak or write, to a considerable degree we do not think, apart from language; hence language is peculiarly bound up with our thought processes, and the two must be analyzed together rather than separately.

Now much of the intellectual theorizing, to say nothing of the educational and social practice, of the past century has been directed against the domination of logic. Logic, as first formulated by Aristotle and later developed by Bacon, Mill, Spencer, and a host of others, rests upon the endeavor to define and apply to thought certain fixed rules or principles. Logic is orderly analysis; it rests on the assumption or faith that such orderly analysis is possible and true; it might be called the science of certainty. It involves exact definitions, rigid classifications, and neat patterns, schemes, systems, or colligations of related groups of phenomena.

During more than two thousand years, from the time of Aristotle until the middle of the nineteenth century, logic reigned supreme, forming an indispensable part of the intellectual equipment of any scholar or scientist. Not only that, but to a very great degree logic was determinative in every field of knowledge, contributing to those other sciences the methods and the principles by which alone, it was felt, science could stand. Science was regarded in effect as a body of provable knowledge based upon fixed laws from which all facts and

phenomena might be deduced and to which they might be referred.

Scholarly controversy in this earlier period was not wanting; in fact, it was probably more intense than it has been in recent times. But such controversy concerned the precise formulation of these fixed principles, not the question of their existence. Linguists, for example, might debate perennially over the precise theory—bow-wow, ding-dong, pooh-pooh, yo-he-ho, goo-goo—which would explain satisfactorily the problem of the origin of language; but that such an explanation existed and was capable of formulation was not questioned. It was not until the twentieth century that the whole matter was relegated to amateur standing as probably incapable of solution and not worth solving in any case.

The logical theories of this earlier period, moreover, were at one in encouraging their proponents to point back through causative principles to a great First Cause to which all logic in whatever department of study might ultimately be referred. Thus they occupied ground in common with religion, and the marriage of science and faith was largely unassailed by doubt from within or skepticism from without. There was controversy, plenty of it, between rival systems of religion; but this controversy concerned itself with differing formulations of principles, not with the possibility of certainty in itself.

During the nineteenth century there arose two prophets of what looked like a new order of thinking; and their iconoclastic influence has perhaps never been more potent than it is today. Oddly enough, neither attacked logic directly, and both were probably unaware of all the implications of their teachings; but together they have contributed the very strongest impetus toward the downfall of logic. These two prophets, needless to say, are Charles Darwin and Karl Marx.

What Darwin did was to formulate a law, principle, or theory which was so completely at variance with certain beliefs previously held that in assailing these former beliefs it seemed to confute the whole system of religious faith, thus destroying the former certainty and substituting for it a plan of causation, far less "logical," and seeming far less to require the postulation of a First Cause. Somewhat hastily the converts to Darwinism concluded that there was



not room enough in their thinking for both God and natural selection. The increase of atheism which followed had its effects upon the systems of logic currently taught, by weakening their hold on the many sciences where evolution now became utilized as an explanation of natural phenomena.

Similar to Darwin's unorthodox view of the origins of human life was Marx's novel approach to history in his theory of economic determinism. His belief was that history must be interpreted, not through the machinations and statecraft of the so-called ruling classes, but through the conditions and methods of commodity production and the economic relations resulting from these conditions. This belief gave a sense of self-importance to the producing and laboring masses and tended equally with the doctrine of evolution <sup>Blair</sup> to discredit many of the orderly, settled concepts of earlier generations.

Economic determinism substitutes human reactions for scientific certainty; it is personal rather than impersonal. And a by-product of the Marxian doctrine, possibly not contemplated by the Father of Communism, is the denial of fixed principles of human conduct, that opportunism so strikingly exemplified in the statecraft of the Marxists themselves. Certainty in human conduct has gone with belief in the traditional social order.

Perhaps it has not been generally recognized how deeply modern science has been affected by this drift away from certainty. Logic is now a neglected study in our colleges and universities; where psychology classes are crowded, logic is offered perhaps in one section every other year. The very word *science*, with its implication of fixed laws, is today avoided by many contemporary psychologists, economists, and others, who prefer to call their crafts by such names as "the study of human behavior" or "the study of the production and distribution of wealth."

Glance into a textbook of the 1880's, compare it with a manual of today, and the difference will be immediately apparent. Where the older, for instance, psychology began with sets of definitions, distinctions, classifications, and generalizations, the newer book ventures tentative explanations of the subject matter of psychology, perhaps also a distinction between man and his environment, but

as soon as possible it is off on the series of statistics, references, and case histories which make up its bulk. General principles are either omitted or proposed with reservations and apologies. By and large, the modern textbook comes more and more to constitute an anarchy of individual instances.

It is not our primary purpose either to defend or attack this very general modern drift away from logic. Quite possibly we moderns are merely tearing down what needs to be torn down, and when the dust settles we may be able to see more clearly the true certainties remaining. Such a readjustment is, at any rate, what we hope to accomplish through this book, which it must be admitted is to a considerable extent a book against logic, a book in the modern tradition of uncertainty. For what we propose to do here is to separate the logic of English from the great mass of linguistic material which is not logical, but psychological, analyzing the latter under appropriate heads.

There is nothing new or revolutionary about such a purpose even as applied to the English language. Many courses on the psychology of language are offered today; however, these usually disregard grammar in favor of vocabulary. In the realm of meanings, or semantics, the attack on logic has been waged already with considerable vigor by such gentlemen as Count Alfred Korzybski, author of *Science and Sanity* and *General Semantics*, and his followers: Stuart Chase, who attempted to popularize Korzybski's ideas in the fields of law, government, economics, and sociology; S. I. Hayakawa and Irving J. Lee, writers of popular texts expounding Korzybski's principles for laymen; and by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, authors of the much discussed *The Meaning of Meaning*. These writers demand of every usable word that it possess a "referent" or original, which is tangible and concrete. In Korzybski the process of abstracting was explained and the dangers of abstractionism pointed out, thereby showing the thinker how to make his thinking progressively more concrete and thus more effective.

Grammar is among the last strongholds of the logician, the last of the sciences where certainty is thought to reign. Remarks one observer, "grammatical expression is logic made audible and

visible,"<sup>1</sup> and except for the author's use of "and" where "or" would have been more logical, we can find no fault with the expression of the sentiment. Says another, "The rules of Logic . . . are found to permeate the entire grammatical structure,"<sup>2</sup> while another ventures to defend that limbo of heterogeneity, the English idiom, in the words, "Beneath a surface of apparent whimsicality there is a deeper, finer logic in our English idioms."<sup>3</sup> Some similar statement will probably be found in whatever grammar you may choose to examine.

Now we agree that there is a certain orderliness about English grammar, a certain framework or pattern to which it conforms, which will be described in a future chapter and which might loosely be called logical. But even this pattern seems to be largely fortuitous. It is not found *in toto* in any other language even within the Indo-European family. It has no symmetry or balance of parts such as one could expect from an artificially created system. It seems to be unconsciously or socially rather than logically produced.

So this is our thesis: the English language and grammar are the products of the group thinking of billions of people whose minds have worked psychologically rather than logically; and the fruit of this group thinking is a system which reflects behavioristic patterns rather than formal regularity. It will be our endeavor in this book to trace out the sort of group thinking and acting which has given to English the kind of grammar it has today and which will continue to modify it in the future.

In this endeavor we shall not have to start from zero. One great linguistic principle, psychological in nature, called the principle of analogy, has already been formulated and used to explain items of both "correct" and "incorrect" grammar—for so-called incorrect English has just as much of a grammar as the classicalities of Addison or Dryden. To this principle or explanation which is called analogy we shall attempt to add other factors so as to cover the main aspects of an exceedingly broad subject.

Fortunately, all or most of the material we shall require has been

<sup>1</sup> John B. Opdycke, *Get It Right!* New York, Funk and Wagnalls, 1935, p. xi.

<sup>2</sup> Mason Long, *A College Grammar*, New York, The Ronald Press, 1928, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> C. A. Lloyd, *We Who Speak English*, New York, T. Y. Crowell, 1938, p. 124.

collected and stored in compendiums any one of which contains all of the facts which would be required to make several volumes as large as this one. Such manuals merely skim the surface of a pond whose depths contain bios which will well repay dredging, sorting, and decomposing. To dismiss, for example, *I only want two* as a solecism is flippancy, and most rhetorics and grammars are flippant after just that fashion. To understand *I only want two* is an education, and that is the sort of education we are trying to secure as well as to impart.

It cannot be gainsaid that ours is an inglorious doctrine by contrast with those which teach that language, the product of the group mind, somehow escaped from the foibles and deficiencies of that mind to make of itself a perfect system, chaste and austere as a table of logarithms, lofty and unassailable as Euclid. Yet however intellectually satisfying the logician's view of English grammar may be, however much of a shock to discover that another prop to our orderly universe has been knocked out, still, if a thing is not true it is not true, and it is not correct to identify English with logic, as the present study will attempt to prove.

For this purpose we shall make no distinction between what is called "good" and what is called "bad" grammar. As already suggested, the word *ungrammatical* is a contradiction in terms, since all expression must be referable to some explanation, and grammar is simply that explanation of the way we talk. Thus *it's them, ain't got no, many a, and neither are* are all referable to their proper plan of grammar, conventional or not as the case may be, but still a plan. All are parts of English, all are readily understood, and hence all are to be included here.

While we propose to deal largely with English grammar, as the phase of the subject which has been least explored, still it is impossible to draw a hard-and-fast line between grammar and words themselves; and we shall not try to do so, but shall include semantic material wherever it seems appropriate. A certain amount of repetition is inevitable in a study such as the present one, and we offer no apologies for its presence.

The source material for our study is simple and readily accessible; it consists of the manuals of grammar and rhetoric which are

used currently in teaching this subject. Linguists have occupied themselves largely with recording the endless material for linguistic analysis, rather than with the analysis itself. An outstanding example of such recording is *The American Language*, by H. L. Mencken,<sup>4</sup> whose index of words and phrases alone runs to some seventy pages of three columns each, and which, it is safe to say, represents the collection of more linguistic facts than have ever been assembled outside a dictionary. To this volume he has added *Supplement I* (1945) and *Supplement II* (1948). It is no wonder that Mr. Mencken did not do much analyzing of his astounding collectanea.

True, we have found that such books tend to disregard certain expressions which are very common and puzzling in nature; such expressions have been added freely from personal experience. But the merit of our investigation, if it has any, lies not in its discovery of new facts but in its new interpretation of old facts.

<sup>4</sup> Fourth edition, corrected, enlarged, and rewritten, New York, Knopf, 1936.

## GRAMMAR AS A STUDY

**T**HE GENERAL BACKGROUND and purpose of this study having been stated, our next task must be to define and explain the most important terms which are to be used. Here definition is less essential than explanation; everyone has a fair working notion of the meaning of such words as *grammar*, *science*, *logic*, and so forth, but fewer realize fully the implications and the consequences of these significations.

The simplest definition of grammar is the one found in many of the nineteenth-century textbooks: "Grammar is the science of the sentence." This definition reflects the rigidity of the Era of Certainty, and while the present century has seen few or no attempts to disprove it, it seems to have lost place gradually and naturally, until today it is seldom encountered in grammar textbooks, which indeed infrequently attempt a definition of their subject.

But apart from its present unpopularity, the definition of grammar as the science of the sentence seems obviously wrong. In the first place, it is difficult to justify including grammar among sciences, for the reason that it is not sufficiently universal. One cannot imagine a science altering or becoming invalid at racial or national frontiers, as grammar does. Chemistry, biology, botany could not be formulated so differently by Chinese, Basques, Finns, Turks, and Englishmen.

True, the older linguists and some of the newer ones are prone to assert or to imply the existence of a "universal grammar," a norm or super-system which will comprehend all the various local

systems. But it has been demonstrated conclusively, by Jespersen among others, that no such synthesis can validly be made. Science is international; grammar is not. Grammar is a local or national system rather than "a connected body of demonstrated truth" or "observed facts . . . brought under general laws."<sup>1</sup> Nothing in any specific grammatical system has validity for all the world, unless it is the central aim and purpose of all language, that is, communication; and that one common element scarcely serves to justify calling grammar a science.

So it would appear that we must reject the word *science* in the older definition of grammar. And the other key word, *sentence*, is no more acceptable upon close scrutiny. For this word embodies one of the most crucial ambiguities in all the present-day study of grammar, and its use in this definition is impossible to square with its use in other grammatical connections.

Obviously the word *sentence*, as used in the definition under consideration, must mean any communication using words. Thus *Oh!* would constitute a sentence, or *Goodbye*, or the name on an envelope or calling card, since all these unquestionably are complete and communicate. But elsewhere in grammars the term *sentence* is used to designate communications having subject and predicate, and students are even warned away from writing (and presumably from saying) anything but sentences of this second sort. This second "sentence" is of course limited in its application to languages where subject and predicate exist as grammatical concepts, but within these it is ordinarily found with this limited meaning. Thus its use in the general sense of "communication" is fundamentally misleading and renders the "science of the sentence" definition of grammar doubly defective.

One is tempted to look farther back than the "older" grammarians, farther than Kirkham, Brown, and Lindley Murray, to Samuel Johnson and his forebears, even as far as Aristotle and Quintilian, all of whom regarded grammar, not as a science, but as an art, the art of speaking and writing correctly. Certainly a great part of grammar teaching is devoted to the attainment of correctness; but it seems not quite accurate to include all grammar with corrective

<sup>1</sup> Definitions of science in the *New English Dictionary*.

or remedial grammar after this fashion. The defining and recognition of a verb, for example, is not a matter of art, but the result of study of a linguistic plan or system. For the "art" aspect of grammar English has developed a different word, rhetoric, or perhaps several different words, since *composition*, *elocution*, and *speech* all name studies akin to the "art" of grammar.

As the beginning of a definition, then, we may agree to call English grammar, not a science or an art, but a study or a system, depending upon whether we look at it from the educational or the objective angle. It is, says the *New English Dictionary*, "the system of inflexions and syntactical usages characteristic of a language," or it is, in its other aspect, "that department of the study of a language which deals with its inflexional forms or other means of indicating the relations of words in the sentence, and with the rules for employing them in accordance with established usage; usually including also the department which deals with the phonetic system of the language and the principles of its representation in writing." With the substitution of "in communicating" for "in the sentence," this definition appears adequate.

Such a definition is broad enough to include logical as well as psychological explanations and to cover all the varied material of the present book; but before we leave it and proceed to further explanation it may be helpful to consider another relevant statement: "English grammar is at bottom chiefly a study of the relations of the ideas comprehended in a thought . . . It is not itself a study of pure thought . . . but it may be made a first step toward logic."<sup>2</sup> This statement leads naturally to a consideration of the relation of English grammar to logic and necessitates some definition of the latter word.

The definers of logic cannot seem to make up their minds whether it is a science or an art. The *New English Dictionary* itself defines it as "the science or art of reasoning," while other authorities give definitions such as "the science of reasoning" (Jevons), "the science of the general principles of good or bad reasoning" (Adam Smith), and "the science of proof or evidence" (Mill). Perhaps the best

<sup>2</sup> Blount and Northup, *An English Grammar*, New York, Holt, 1914, pp. 6-7. Quoted by permission.



definition is one of the others given in the *New English Dictionary*: "that branch of philosophy which treats of the forms of thinking in general, and more especially of inference and the scientific method."

Now languages, the English language in particular, are far from being a help to logical reasoning; every student who has tried to use or to formulate logical categories will be found complaining that language is actually a hindrance to his endeavor. The Greek language, the French language, are now and then preferred to English as better media for logical scientific reasoning; but more and more science appears to be turning away from language and adopting mathematical formulae as the least ambiguous and misleading statements of its findings.

In vocabulary a difficulty arises from the facts that words usually have not one but several meanings and that within a single meaning are to be found connotations and implications which are distracting if not actually deceptive to the reader. A very common instance, which Lester F. Ward, the classic sociologist, mentions again and again, is such words as *purpose, aim, end*, and the like, all of which are teleological in their implication of a conscious will, making it impossible for the scientist to indicate result independent of will. It is safe to say that the inadequacies of language constitute one of the greatest obstacles in the way of scientific reasoning.

And it is not alone a matter of vocabulary; English grammar has its definite failings and ambiguities as a medium for logical expression. Our system of personal pronouns, for instance, is seriously defective logically. The word *we* may mean *you and I, he and I, they and I*, and so forth. The word *you* is incapable of distinguishing between singular and plural. *He, she, and it* must show the presence or absence of gender, whether or not gender is involved; and it is impossible to refer to, say, a motorist by a singular pronoun which will leave sex out of consideration. On the other hand, *they* cannot show gender even if it is desired to do so. It is only the fact that the pronouns are seldom crucial in scientific reasoning which keeps them from being more often inveighed against by scientists.

It is not only the pronouns which are calculated to make havoc of logic. Everyone knows how easy it is to write a sentence with