

INTRODUCTION TO  
THE *English Language*

❧❧ ALBERT H. MARCKWARDT

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

NEW YORK

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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ELEVENTH PRINTING, 1957

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

## Introduction

In 1928 the National Council of Teachers of English, realizing that, 'for more than a century, *good English* has been one of the major concerns of our educational system,' appointed a committee of nine prominent linguistic scholars 'to study the problems of the English language courses in our universities and colleges.' The report of this committee, published in the December 1928 issue of the *English Journal*, made the following general statement of policy:

It is clear that training [in the English language] is deficient unless it includes adequate study of the historical development of English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. To acquire a scientific point of view toward language and a true conception of the real nature of language is of course far more important than learning any particular facts. A knowledge of the principles of general linguistics is of greater value . . . than a knowledge of the details of the history of the language. But general linguistics cannot be studied *in vacuo*, and a knowledge of the principles of general linguistics can only be acquired through the detailed study of linguistic facts.

Although agreeing with his colleagues in principle, Professor Robert L. Ramsay of the University of Missouri in an appended statement suggested certain modifications

and additions to the specific recommendations made by the committee as a whole. These are indicated by the following excerpts from his minority report:

For . . . most students, I believe it desirable that Modern English, in its linguistic aspects, be studied distinctly and separately. The recognition of Modern English as a distinct field for language study, and its addition as an essential supplement to the traditional scheme which has so long confined the formal study of the English language to its two earlier periods, is in accordance with the most progressive tendencies of modern linguistic scholarship, and its insertion in the curriculum is long overdue.

I am disposed to question that part of the report which deals with the arrangement of subjects. The logical order, it is stated with obvious truth, is to take up first phonetics and then Old and Middle English, ending with Modern English. But what is good logically is not always good pedagogically, and few subjects have suffered more in the past from what may be called the 'curse of logic' than the teaching of English. I think much may be said in favor of beginning with Modern English and proceeding backward. It is perfectly true that a student who has already studied Old and Middle English will be better prepared to understand the problems of Modern English; but it is also true that a student who has first gained some insight into the nature of a living language will be more ready to realize that Old and Middle English were once living too. The four aspects of Modern English which I have listed as specially important, namely phonetics, vocabulary, dialects and language kinships, and grammar, can be fairly well approached without any previous study of Old or Middle English; and there is always a certain value in proceeding from the known to the unknown.

The present textbook has been planned to meet the needs of precisely the kind of course in the English language visualized by the members of this forward-looking committee. It is in keeping with the general spirit and educational philosophy expressed by the report of the whole group, and with the specific procedure suggested by Professor Ramsay. Consisting in large part of sets of exercises, directing the student to close observation and analysis of the facts of the language, it encourages him to formulate his own rules and generalizations about linguistic developments and the structure of present-day English. Modern English is given its due recognition as a field for language study in that fully one-half of the textbook is devoted to it. The crabwise progression from the English of the present day to that of King Alfred and his contemporaries constitutes the fundamental scheme of its organization.

The present work does not pretend to be a new 'history of the English language' or a definitive treatment of any single division of that broad subject. There are available at present several adequate and admirable works of that nature by scholars of eminent authority, and there would be little justification for adding to the already existing number. Frequently, however, such scholarly works, excellent though they may be, are lacking in a sufficient amount of exercise material to aid the student in grasping the linguistic principles which they so ably set forth. Moreover, they often proceed upon the assumption that the student has an unlimited amount of time to devote to historical language study.

This book pretends to little, if any, original contribution

to the total of our present linguistic knowledge. It is designed, rather, to present on a college classroom level a synthesis of the most important results of linguistic investigation and grammatical speculation. To a greater extent than most treatments of phonetics or Old or Modern English grammar, this book is based upon induction as the fundamental activity in the learning process, particularly in connection with the acquisition of languages and the formation of linguistic concepts. For this reason, every section devoted to a discussion of some particular topic is followed by a series of study questions which are designed not only to reinforce but to extend the conclusions which have just been presented. The student is encouraged to observe the language about him, that which he hears and that which he reads. Moreover, in connection with the study of earlier stages of the English language, a number of illustrative selections from Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Old English have been included to serve as material for observation.

Another important aim of the present work is to familiarize the student with the most authoritative books in every field of language study. Accordingly, there is appended to the discussion of every topic a list of references for further study, and not infrequently some of the study questions are based upon the material in the references. This may constitute a difficulty in colleges where the library facilities are limited. However, almost every reference list includes a reference to the Preface to Webster's *New International Dictionary*, which is a highly useful compendium of linguistic information, and there are few chapters where the Webster reference alone will

not furnish a good part of the information needed. In fact, one of the specific aims of the author has been to impress upon students and teachers alike the value of the dictionary, not merely as a handy authority for pronunciation and meaning, but as a general source book for language study, a record not only of living speech but of the language of former centuries as well. It has been generally assumed also that a copy of the *Oxford English Dictionary* will be available.

In a treatment so comprehensive as this, designed at the same time to serve as an introduction to the study of the English language, a certain amount of simplification is necessary and, indeed, almost inevitable. This may be justified in part by the fact that a general statement formulated by the student as a result of his own observation will undoubtedly be retained longer and be of more service than the same rule with its possibly confusing exceptions presented in the conventional textbook manner.

In accordance with the policy of simplification just expressed, the phonetic alphabet adopted here is distinctly 'broad,' making use of a minimum number of characters. Because the form of the International Phonetic Alphabet employed by workers on the *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada* and by the journal *American Speech* seems well on its way to universal acceptance throughout this country, it has been adopted here with one or two minor changes.

The first approach to the study of phonetics here is through the ear: that is, the student is given a command of a phonetic alphabet and is taught to transcribe not only isolated words but connected discourse before the prob-

lems of dynamic phonetics are considered. The phonetic definitions, conventional though they are, do not indicate any intention on the part of the author to overlook the extremely complicated nature of every speech sound that is uttered. The individual teacher is left free to emphasize, to whatever degree he wishes, the work and conclusions of those experimental phoneticians who are inclined to quarrel with the conventional terminology.

In the amount of space given over to the subject, it is impossible to do adequate justice to Modern English grammar. In planning this material three considerations were constantly kept in mind. First, it is necessary for every student of the English language, and particularly the prospective teacher of English, to master the traditional and conventional grammatical terminology which is still used in elementary and secondary school textbooks. Second, it is desirable that he be made aware of the newer approaches to grammar as exemplified in the works of Sweet, Jespersen, and others. Finally, he must be constantly impressed with the fact that there is a grammar of Spoken English as well as of Written English, and that the two will not coincide in all points. The topics for discussion are sufficiently flexible so that the emphasis may be placed where it will best fit the needs of the particular class.

Unfortunately, however, considerations of time and space forbade the inclusion of those problems of diction and construction which are primarily rhetorical rather than linguistic. For example, the sources of our vocabulary and the meaning of our derivative prefixes and suffixes are essentially a part of the science of language. On



the other hand, the question of the effectiveness, in a specific context, of a plurisyllabic word of Latin origin as compared with a shorter word of Teutonic derivation is a problem of rhetoric, of the art of language rather than the science, and accordingly was considered outside the scope of this book. So too were such problems as parallelism in sentence structure, the placing of sentence modifiers for stylistic effect, and types of procedure in paragraph writing, important as these topics are in other connections.

There is very little agreement, even among the most competent authorities, about the pronunciation of Early Modern English. Accordingly, the phonetic transcription of Hamlet's first soliloquy represents what appeared to the author to be a judicious combination of the views of Viëtor, Zachrisson, and Wyld. The amount of space devoted not only to the sounds but to the inflections and syntax of this period of our language constitutes one of the most striking departures from the conventional survey of the English language. Usually this period is slighted in favor of Old and Middle English, even though some of the most important phonetic and grammatical developments occurred at this time.

The material devoted to Middle English needs no explanation (however, see footnote 19, p. 247), but some aspects of the approach to Old English must be accounted for. Most of the illustrative selections are taken from the Old English translation of the Gospels, particularly those passages which can be comprehended with the aid of a Modern English Bible, and indeed the student should be encouraged to do this. This material does not aim to give

the student a fully rounded vocabulary or a memorized knowledge of the details of Old English inflections. Some matters that may seem of considerable importance in a graduate Old English class are passed over rather hastily here. Everything is subordinated to the chief purpose of demonstrating to the student those grammatical features of Old English which have been retained in Modern English, those which have disappeared, those which may be present in sub-standard English but not in the standard language. In other words, those facts of Old English which have some bearing upon the evolution of the English language are constantly stressed. It must be borne in mind, moreover, that the illustrative selections from Old English, and from the subsequent periods as well, were chosen not on the basis of their literary merit, but because they contained apt illustrations of the significant features of the English language at the time at which they were written.

The thoroughness with which this book can be covered will depend, of course, upon the length of time which can be devoted to it and upon the intellectual maturity of the class. It is designed with the idea of a full year course for third and fourth year undergraduates. If it is used in a somewhat less leisurely manner, whole sections can be omitted, or only the broader and more significant questions of every exercise can be assigned. For example, in a single-semester course in Modern English, only the first three chapters need be used. Or for a one-semester historical survey, the instructor may, after a brief consideration of the phonetic alphabet, omit the first two chapters and confine himself to the last four. Although it is the

general plan that each set of exercises constitutes a normal assignment for a single recitation, the difficulty of using the text with less advanced students can be met by parceling out the various questions of any one exercise for individual reports.

To sum up the whole matter, this is probably not the textbook that I should write if conditions for teaching the history of the English language were ideal. It is a book designed to help the instructor make the necessary adjustments for teaching, within the limits of a short space of time, a subject which might easily demand two or more years of study.

I wish to express my appreciation to Professor Albert Elsasser of Princeton University for the many suggestions which followed his careful reading of the manuscript, to Professor Howard Lowry, also of Princeton and formerly of the Oxford University Press, and to Mr. William M. Oman of the Oxford University Press for their encouragement and assistance in the preparation of the manuscript.

A.H.M.

*University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan*

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# **INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE**





# *The Sounds of English*

## I. SOUND AND SPELLING

The study of language is a science. The student of language, that is to say the grammarian in the broadest sense of the term, is a scientist. The method of all sciences is similar in that the scientist first observes the phenomena with which he is concerned; then, he classifies the results of his observation; and finally, he draws certain general conclusions from the material before him. This is the method of the botanist, the geologist, the chemist; it is necessarily also the procedure of the student of language.

The English language is to be our particular field of observation. We must begin then by observing it; but naturally we shall want to know what to observe and what there is about it to be observed.

Speech is one important aspect of language. It consists of sounds put together in such a way that they have significance for speaker and hearer. Our observation could, therefore, begin with the sounds of the English language —



or, to bring it even closer home, with the sounds of our own language, the sounds we use in our daily intercourse. What sounds do we use? How many sounds are there? How are they made? These are all questions which must be answered at the very outset of our work. The branch of language study which concerns itself with such questions is called *phonetics*.

In the exercises which follow, and which form the major part of this textbook, you will be asked to engage in exactly the same activities which occupy the scientist: to observe, to classify, and to generalize. You can learn more about the English language from your own observations, from the work you do yourself, than from what any author can tell you, because you are in a better position to examine your own speech. You must try to make yourself language-conscious in the best, the scientific, sense of the word.

You are to begin by examining a list of words that have been selected because they contain all the simple vowel and consonant sounds of present day or Modern English. Your task is to find out what these sounds are. You will have to pronounce the words aloud many times to determine which sounds are alike and which differ from one another. Remember that speech cannot be studied in silence.

Naturally you will also want to know something of the relationship of our system of spelling to these sounds, for we shall be writing and talking about language a great deal in the course of our observation. In doing so we must be certain that we all understand the same thing when a letter such as *e*, *i*, or *g* is referred to. It is important