

THE KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH

BY

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PREFACE

A SINGLE but ample purpose has determined the choice of the materials that have gone to the making of this book. This purpose has been to indicate a manner of reducing to some kind of intelligible order the tangle of opinion and of unconscious habit which is present in the minds of English speaking persons in the practical command of their native idiom. The field under observation has been the use of the native idiom not merely in writing but also in speech, and not merely at painful moments of indecision, but also when no hesitations attend the words and phrases of tongue and of pen.

That this purpose is ample appears even from so brief a statement. Perhaps it is a purpose too ample for adequate realization. Such a realization would imply a complete psychology of the English language, a task which a bold professional psychologist might well hesitate to undertake, and one certainly which does not appeal to the student of language either as practicable or eminently useful. A danger of formal elaboration, especially in so complicated a matter as language, lies in the temptation to subdue concrete detail to the demands of beauty and order in the system. For the present purpose, it has seemed advisable to approach the subject not as a system, but from several different directions, each more or less independent, but each also leading to a general understanding of the subject which will result in the end, one may hope, in making clear at least a reasonable attitude of mind towards the many and variegated problems presented by the English language in its practical applications. A final solution of all difficulties is hopeless, but a sensible apprehension of each new problem as it challenges attention is not an impos-

sibility. The method employed entails a certain amount of repetition, but repetition is not altogether without its compensations.

That the subject of this book is as important as its inclusiveness calls for no extended demonstration. Our English speech is not only our most constant companion, but likewise the mental activity upon which, from childhood to maturity, we speculate most abundantly. Ever since the beginnings of general education in this country, speech has been a matter of public concern, and it has been made the foundation for training in the kind of civilization we have been trying to realize. What has been the drift of this training? Why do we devote so much time to English, and what light do our endeavors in this direction throw upon the whole course and intent of our aspirations? Have we an intelligible program back of our activities in speech, or are we following blind impulses? These are but a few of the many far-reaching questions that may be asked. And of course our interest in English is not limited merely to the spoken word. From the beginning of the modern era, the culture of the world has been becoming more and more a literary culture. Ours might well be called a pen and paper civilization. In all this there is much that is admirable. It has provided the world with a new form of expression. Everybody reads nowadays, and almost everybody writes, or tries to write. The number of prospective short-story writers in America today is probably larger than the number of prospective politicians. The students who would have aspired to be orators a generation or two ago, now study composition. Writing is no longer the distinction of a limited professional class, it is one of the universal forms of expression. In business, in social intercourse, in all callings, the ability to use the written forms of the language adequately has become an elementary necessity. Modern life cannot be limited to those close contacts which called for no communication beyond the spoken word. We must now have long-distance communication, less intimate and personal than the spoken word,

but gaining by way of compensation in permanency and in extent of appeal, and above all in an increase of critical self-consciousness on the part of the users of the language. Nobody can write what he has to say without knowing himself better as a consequence of this endeavor. It is infinitely easier to deceive oneself in speech than it is in writing, infinitely easier to get along with half-spoken utterances than with half-formulated written expression.

The purpose of this book being to call attention specially to underlying principles, this purpose necessarily implies certain exclusions. The book is not a pronunciation guide, a rhetoric or a handbook of composition. It does not attempt to enforce a particular style of writing or of speaking. It is not concerned with the technical rules of punctuation, paragraphing, sentence structure, and the other minutiae of rhetorical instruction. That these technical details are important goes without saying. At the very moment of speaking and writing, the particular technical device to be employed is of the utmost importance. One chooses one's tools for their appropriateness to the work in hand. Yet the choice always implies something antecedent to the handling of the tool, and it is mainly with these antecedent choices that this book is concerned. A fair case might even be made for the position that clearness of mind in choosing the direction of one's endeavors is more important than the specific methods to be employed in expressing what one has to say. The person who knows clearly what he wants to say and why he wants to say it will not often be greatly troubled by the difficulties of the forms of language. He will certainly be in a more promising way to express himself adequately than the speaker or writer who conceives that effective use of the language lies in the application of rules of composition mechanically acquired. For after all, language is never merely a tool, never merely a mechanical implement which does its work exactly in the same way for one person as for another, but always it is besides a part of the living personality of the one who uses it.

If this book is not a rhetoric, neither is it a dictionary. It would have been easy to load the pages of the book with an infinity of illustrative examples. In this respect it has seemed that moderation was desirable in order not to distract attention too much from the real purpose of the book, which has been, if the repetition be permitted, to call attention to general principles rather than to make exhaustive collections of specific instances. Sufficient examples have been cited to make the points clear, but any reader who has got the points will have no difficulty in adding abundantly to the number of the illustrations. And perhaps the author may be permitted in this connection to call attention to another work of his, *A Comprehensive Guide to Good English* (Rand McNally and Company), in which some thousands of examples of debatable English speech have been assembled. Any student may profitably make similar collections of his own, for it is by just such accumulations of detail that the knowledge of English best prospers and grows.

Still another aspect of the English language is treated only in outline in this volume, but again not because of its unimportance. This is the kind of study which has to do with the historical development of the language. The English language, as one regards this term in all its implications, is seen not to be merely a useful invention, devised for the satisfaction of immediate needs and desires, or even for the realization of disinterested and lofty literary aspirations. It is that, and as we shall continually insist, the English language of today is most importantly that. But the English language is something more than a handmaiden to make profitable, or instructive, or pleasing, the immediate concerns of present life. It is besides, one may say, a monument of civilization. The English language has a past as well as a present. Here again it must be said that the past of the English language does not fundamentally concern the unreflecting person — or for that matter any person — in acquiring a practical knowledge of English. Certainly it does not directly concern any person at the very moment of the urgent use of language.

Like the knowledge of the foundation principles of mental habit that underlie the effective use of the language, the knowledge of the past of the language is supplemental to that direct kind of knowledge which attends immediate experience.

Though it is supplemental to direct experience, the knowledge of the past of the language is by no means unimportant for the critical student. The bearing of tendencies in present English is often made more evident by an examination of the developments that have taken place during the earlier stages of the language. Things seen in perspective often take on different and more intelligible appearances than when they are viewed only close at hand. A knowledge of the historical forms of the language will therefore often be found to have a value in comprehending the significance of the practical applications of English in the present. Even if it had no such value, however, the critical student would not be deterred from examining the past of the English language. Matters of knowledge may have an interest in themselves and apart from their practical applications. It is certainly no unreasonable expectation to suppose that a lover of English speech should want to know as much about the language as he can, not only the language into which he is born and in which he has his being, but he will also want to know what the nature of this language was in the days of his near and even of his more remote ancestors. When one goes into them in detail, however, these historical matters call for a special treatment, for a different method and emphasis from those employed in the present volume. They must be left, therefore, merely with an indication of their extent and character, and with a recommendation that they be not neglected. Attention is called to the reading lists at the end of the volume, where those inexperienced in the historical details of the language will find the titles of books that should prove helpful in carrying forward the study of this important branch of the knowledge of English.

Certain chapters in the latter part of the book are concerned with some of the more significant problems of contemporary style.

The discussion of style is commonly considered to be one of the branches of rhetoric. Yet rhetoric itself is merely a branch of the general study of the language. No rhetorical effect can be produced without the use of language, and the study of style on its formal side is nothing more than the examination of those devices and manipulations of language which are employed to attain the desired end in the art of expression. It is important therefore that the relations of style to the whole body of habits and associations of which the language is composed should be clearly realized, and the chapters on style in this book have been included for the purpose of calling attention to the fact that style is not a thing apart, but as essential and as implicit as any other aspect of speech in the knowledge of English.

The reading lists at the end of the volume will provide materials for further study in a variety of directions. They have also served the purpose of freeing the text from a multiplicity of bibliographical references. These lists will indicate in some degree the dependencies of this book upon other writings and the differences between the opinions expressed in it and those that have been held by others.

In slightly different forms, the chapters entitled *A Touchstone for English*, *The Plea of Poetic License* and *Writing as a Fine Art* have already appeared in print, the first in *The American Mercury*, the two others in *The Forum*. Acknowledgment is made to the editors of these magazines for their courteous permission to use this material.

G. P. K.

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I

NATURE AND NURTURE

“WHY should I study English?” objected a rebellious youth, “I know English. I am English.”

But not everyone who is English really knows English, nor is knowing all of the same kind. A professional ball player may know how to pitch a curve. A physicist may know the same thing, but he will know it in quite a different way. His way of knowing will be better, for though he may not be able to pitch a curve as well, yet other things being equal, if he spent as much time in practice as the professional player, in all likelihood he could pitch a better curve. In other words, analytic knowledge is an aid and support to experimental knowledge.

Such at least is the conviction with which this book on the English language has been written. In the courtly debates of other days it was a common subject for disputation whether man derived more from birth or from training, from nature or from nurture. The youth who has just been quoted evidently assumed that his English came to him as a perfect gift of nature. But of course no one is born in possession of the English language, or of any other language. Every normal person is born with the necessary organs, lungs, vocal chords, tongue, lips, and prospectively teeth, which make the acquisition of language possible. Language itself, however, is not a natural gift, but even in its rudimentary forms it is an acquired accomplishment. Without training and

discipline, no one would ever achieve a language, just as, without training, no one could acquire the skill to play on the violin. One may have the best natural equipment in the world for playing the violin, but without discipline in the technical art of playing the violin, whether self-applied or imposed, all this natural gift will not make a violinist.

And yet, though language is not simply a gift of nature, neither is it on the other hand altogether an acquired technical art, certainly not altogether the result of discipline and training consciously applied. There is a great difference between the method by which one acquires a knowledge of a language and the method by which one acquires a knowledge of the skill required to play the violin. It does not even follow that a conscious or theoretical knowledge of the language is a necessary precedent to a fairly high degree of practical command of good English. The power to use the language grows as an accompaniment of the experiences of living, and any person who leads a normal life acquires in the process a not inconsiderable knowledge of the language. The professional ball pitcher, of whom we have spoken, and the unanalytic author, of whom there have been many, both prove that critical discipline is not indispensable as a creative force. In fact, so far at least as language is concerned, it is quite the other way round. It is impossible to have an analytic and theoretical knowledge of good English without first having a realization of the thing itself. The experience of good English must come before the analysis of it. How is it possible to know that any English is good until it has satisfied that first and final demand of all good English, the demand of meeting

adequately the linguistic situation in which it occurs? Good English cannot be known merely by definition, it must be known also by experience. English which satisfies a notion of what English ought to be but does not satisfy the vital linguistic moment in which it actively appears, certainly cannot be called good. Theoretically correct English is not necessarily good English — it may indeed be very bad English. On the other hand, can that English be called good which satisfies the needs of the practical linguistic moment but does not satisfy the critic's notion of what good English ought to be? Can English be theoretically incorrect and still be good?

These are manifestly debatable questions and they will be discussed at further length in later chapters of this book. The point of view of the book may be stated here at the start, however, and the assertion made that the only sound test of the goodness of a linguistic action is to be found within the action itself. To judge a form of speech not by what it has done, but by what some other form of speech might have done, is like taking one set of laws and applying them to conditions with which they have nothing to do.

If one cannot be aware of good English until after the event, then it is manifestly too late, so far as any specific linguistic act is concerned, to worry whether the English is good or bad. And if this is so, the question naturally arises, why trouble at all to know English analytically and critically? Was he not right then, the rebellious youth mentioned at the opening of this chapter? Why not simply forge ahead, speaking and writing from the heart out, doing the work of each moment as the moment

calls for it, and never troubling about past errors except to efface them by new efforts that are not errors?

Whether or not one regards this as a proper attitude of mind, it is in reality the attitude which everybody for the most part instinctively assumes in the simpler activities of speech. The occasions when one stops to consider are few in number. The situations in which doubt and uncertainty arise as to a proper form of language to use are relatively infrequent. Much the larger part of every person's use of language comes in response to instinctive habit. This is, one may say, the natural and normal life of language. It is like good health in the bodily existence. Good health is the rule, and sickness the exception. So in language, the unimpeded flow of speech, the perfect marriage of language and occasion, this is normal and healthy. Hesitation and uncertainty between two or more possible choices in speech is a kind of disease in language. It afflicts some people more than others. Those who always see things in simple and concrete aspects rarely know these doubts. It has been said of a famous orator, more famous for his eloquence than for his subtle reasoning, that he never paused for a word in his life. The reflective and philosophical, on the other hand, are sometimes so beset by hesitations that they practically lose the power of speech.

It does not follow, however, that occasions requiring an act of critical judgment in speech are unimportant because they are relatively infrequent. Sickness is less general than health, but to the one suffering, his sickness is of the greatest importance. He wants to know in what way he is sick and how he can become well. Likewise in language, the speaker or writer who suddenly

finds his forward progress obstructed by some unsolved difficulty of structure, pronunciation, syntax, or vocabulary, cannot go on his way rejoicing until he knows how to remove his difficulty. He must feel the full satisfaction of knowledge before he can be restored to the happy state of confidence which alone can give him assurance that his use of speech is adequate. Nor does this simile of sickness and health exhaust the interests of the critical attitude in speech. One may be concerned not merely with removing obstructions to healthy action, but with the endeavor to discover new paths, to bring something into existence in the use of language which had not existed before. If one wanted to carry on the simile of sickness and health, one might say that the genuine critical student is interested not only in the therapeutics but also in the eugenics of language.

But the question still recurs, if it is possible to speak well and to write well without a critical knowledge of the language, why should anyone bother about the critical side of the language at all? The answer to this question is, that things which are possible are not always expedient. There is no telling how much more easily and effectively the person without critical knowledge who speaks and writes well might have acquired his command over language if he had been able to direct his own growth by a competent self-analysis. And certainly it is not the wisest method to turn the inexperienced adrift with the hope that they may blunder along and in the end learn by their own mistakes what good English is. This is too costly a procedure. For the one who might come safely through, hundreds would fall by the wayside. The better plan is to provide some kind of intelligent direction

for those seeking guidance, not in order to save them from exerting themselves, but to show them where and how best to expend their energies.

There is then a certain body of knowledge with respect to the English language of which serious students of the language may reasonably be expected to be aware, and concerning which they may be expected to have intelligent opinions. Intelligent opinion is one that answers on first-hand information both the question what is right or important and the question why it is right or important. The blind follower of authority, no matter how lofty or numerous his authorities, can never be an intelligent person. He may be a learned person, but to be intelligent he must follow his own and not somebody else's judgment — always supposing of course that he has acquired the foundation of information which is necessary to support a judgment. Sound information is an inescapable prerequisite for sound judgment, and an adequate knowledge of the English language implies a knowledge both of the background and of the immediate life of English speech.

Especially is it incumbent upon persons who undertake to impose upon themselves or others any kind of formal discipline in the language to know the grounds upon which their pronouncements are based. Even though they mean well, if they do not know well, such persons must be counted among the evil doers. The greatest obstacle to the dissemination of the knowledge of good English is the bland evasion of all independent criticism of speech by obedient adherents to authority. In spite of their comfortable assurance of virtue, they are of those who vainly attempt to pass on the torch of knowledge

without themselves adding any fuel to keep the flame burning. His own heart's blood must enter into every man's knowledge of good English. To be merely a conserver and transmitter of a tradition of good English is therefore impossible. English is good only when it experiences a new birth and a new life, when it becomes genuinely a part of the person who uses it.

All the interest of speech, moreover, is not consumed in the practical activities of communication by means of the voice in speaking or by means of the pen in writing. One may wish to know the English language from a disinterested love of truth, from mere love of knowledge. No human activity is more remarkable, more constantly and universally with us than speech. No man can know himself without knowing his speech. One who has honestly analyzed the elements of his speech has at the same time gone a long way in analyzing the elements of his character and of the character of the society in which he lives. To know the English language is therefore by no means an ignoble desire on the part of those who express their lives in the forms of English speech.

These then are the two benefits which this book seeks to impart, an increase of knowledge and an increase of effectiveness in the use of the English language. The two purposes move side by side, and as one succeeds, the other will succeed. The awareness of good English will serve as a guide and support to the practical habits of the hand as it writes and of the tongue as it speaks. Thus critical intelligence and active skill should become helpful complements to each other, and the person who finds this intelligence and this skill in his own experience fruitfully combined, the person in whom nurture assists nature,