

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

by

C. L. Wrenn

*Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of
Anglo-Saxon in the University of Oxford,
sometime President of the Philological Society*



METHUEN & CO. LTD, LONDON
36 Essex Street, Strand, WC2

First published September 22nd, 1949
Reprinted, with minor revisions, May 1952
Reprinted three times
Reprinted 1960

PREFATORY NOTE TO 1952 REPRINT

The opportunity afforded by the reprinting of the book has been taken to correct some errors and misprints. For pointing out these I am most grateful to several friends and reviewers. Occasional additions have also been made to the Select Bibliography: but I have not thought it wise to include works in foreign languages other than French in a book of this kind.

I am very conscious that the book might have been improved by a far more drastic revision: but I have preferred to postpone this till the public, and especially teachers, have had a longer experience of using it.

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CATALOGUE NO. 4454/U

**PRINTED BY JARROLD AND SONS LIMITED, NORWICH
AND BOUND BY BURN AND CO. LIMITED, ESSEX**

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

LANGUAGE is the expression of human personality in words, whether written or spoken. It is the universal medium alike for conveying the common facts and feelings of everyday life and the philosophers' searchings after truth, and all that lies between. Like any other way of expressing the human mind, it must, by the very nature of its being, be both inaccurate and incomplete: and for this reason some modern philosophers have doubted its validity or usefulness for the attempt to convey any kind of truth other than that which pertains to material things. Yet thinkers as well as poets have always assumed that language can be the bearer of all kinds of truth and the imager of every sort of reality; nor can mathematical or other scientific symbols take the place of language among any but a highly technical group of specialists: and even these will probably only manage to substitute one unfamiliar and equally inaccurate series of signs for the shortcomings of that most intimately known and felt complex of verbal signs which is language. It will be taken for granted, therefore, in what follows that language as defined above is the normal, natural and enduring method of expressing the human mind which is the nearest to universal.

But because of its universality and the consequent almost limitless variety of its uses, language may be looked at in many distinct ways; and no book which

pretends to treat of this subject can avoid confining itself to only a comparatively small and select portion of these uses.

For instance, language may be thought of in general terms, as opposed to the particular words of a given speaker or writer in a known context: or a particular language may be considered either as one learns of it through grammars and dictionaries and textbooks, or as it is encountered in a special situation, a known speaker and a remembered occasion. From this standpoint, the one has been termed 'language', and the other 'speech'. 'Language', then would mean both language in general and any particular language considered quite apart from any actual speaker or situation: 'speech' would mean the words used by some individual in a more or less precisely known situation or context. Or again, this distinction between 'language' and 'speech' has been drawn in a slightly different way by some scholars as a difference between the 'outer' and the 'inner' language. The 'outer' language is speech or writing as we view it from the outside, without consciousness of any particular individual or situation; while the 'inner' language is that of a particular speaker or writer in a set of known circumstances or in a given context. One might say, quite broadly, that 'language' or 'outer' language is viewed from the outside, while 'speech' or 'inner' language is seen or heard from the inside—from an actual human being as distinct from merely assumed groups or types of speakers. Thus it may be said that the French *cheval*, the Italian *cavallo* and the Russian *kon'* all mean 'horse' and that this is a fact of 'language' and of 'outer' language: for the French, Italians and Russians all share a common

body of intuited knowledge with the British, and the words for 'horse' can be interchanged in translating from one of their languages into another. But when one remembers how differently this same general notion of 'horse' is inwardly felt and apprehended by different nations—how differently the Frenchman, Italian, Russian and Englishman *feel* towards this animal, one can see that from the standpoint of the 'speech' or 'inner' language, the four words cited for 'horse' are not really interchangeable in translation at all. And if we were to carry the illustration farther afield to countries in Asia or Africa, we should find the differences in the 'inner' language about the horse were far more marked. Clearly, however, such distinctions are only to be employed when one is dealing with the more specialized and technical aspects of language: and in this book—which seeks only to present a general conspectus of the more important facts about the English language—we must confine our study for the most part to 'language' or 'outer' language. Yet the distinctions should never be forgotten.

Another recent approach to the study of language has sought to divide it into 'indicative', that is the language used to state facts, and the 'emotive', the language which seeks to arouse feeling or suggest an emotional attitude. From this standpoint, the 'emotive' language is often held to have no real meaning as an expression of truth. Indeed Shelley's famous lines

'Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of eternity,'

have been held to be meaningless except for their emotional suggestion. But it is only on the assumption

that there is no truth beyond the purely material world that the 'emotive' type of language can be wholly rejected as a possible vehicle of truth: and as has been said already, poets as well as thinkers have usually been supported in a normal and natural way in their assumption that what they say or write may be the valid expression of something real or true. In other words, the distinction between the 'indicative' and the 'emotive' in language is one which oversimplifies and may mislead: for there may be factual matter conveyed emotively, just as there may be meaningless statements made in apparently 'indicative' language. We shall not, therefore, observe at all this kind of distinction in this book, though most of the account of the English language in so brief a compass is likely naturally to treat of 'indicative' language. But the work of great poets like Shakespeare and Milton, who have left by their influence some permanent imprint upon the language, must not be left out of the account in any balanced study of the language as a whole. A possible third type of language which might be added to the 'indicative' and the 'emotive', is what may be termed the 'symbolic'. Since language has come into existence mainly as the needed means of expressing material facts and conveying information about the material world, it follows naturally that such reality or truth as may be outside our experience of the world of phenomena or matter, should find its expression in the form of symbols which describe, for instance, spiritual things which are beyond physical observation by symbols which liken them to the most comparable things in our phenomenal world. Now when this is done without indicating that a comparison is

being made, when the things of this world are merely being used as substitutes or symbols of realities outside the sphere for the description of which language has grown up, the resulting language may properly be called 'symbolic'. Goethe, for example, in his drama *Faust*, has made a character exclaim that 'All theory is grey, and the golden tree of life is green'. The meaning of this is quite clear, though the words used are almost entirely symbolic. This aspect of language will, naturally, only appear incidentally in what follows.

Nothing is known for certain, though very much has been speculated, of the origin of language. This is partly because thought and language cannot clearly be separated, since the one can scarcely seem to exist without the other. Therefore the origin of language seems to be bound up with that of human thought. We must decide when and how man began to think, to know of the beginnings of language; and we must know when and how he began to speak, to decide on the origins of his existence as a thinking being. The Greeks implied and included in their word *logos* both the power of speech (what the Latins termed *oratio*) and that of thought (the Latin *ratio*): and in St. John's statement at the opening of his Gospel that 'In the beginning was the word' (the Greek *logos*), he may be held to have indicated that in the mind of God there co-existed from the beginning thought and language. The theory of the evolution of man as known to scientists, then, must find a place for the emergence of man as a possessor of language as distinct from the so-called 'highest' species of anthropoid apes whose varied cries are not language (which implies thought), but only very fully developed conditioned reflexes.

The gap between the highest anthropoid ape and the most 'primitive' man has not yet been bridged from this point of view of the emergence of language in what may be called 'homo loquens', which is really the same thing as the familiar 'homo sapiens'. The hypothesis of some kind of creative act, therefore, may still be tenable in default of a better in considering the origin of language.

2. GENERAL CHARACTER OF ENGLISH

The English language is spoken or read by the largest number of people in the world, for historical, political and economic reasons; but it may also be true that it owes something of its wide appeal to qualities and characteristics inherent in itself. What are these characteristic features which outstand in making the English language what it is, which give it its individuality and make it of this world-wide significance? Some of the more obvious of these are the following. First and most important is its extraordinary receptive and adaptable heterogeneousness—the varied ease and readiness with which it has taken to itself material from almost everywhere in the world and has made the new elements of language its own. English, which when the Anglo-Saxons first conquered England in the fifth and sixth centuries was almost a 'pure' or unmixed language—which could make new words for new ideas from its own compounded elements and had hardly any foreign words—has become the most 'mixed' of languages, having received throughout its history all kinds of foreign elements with ease and assimilated them all to its own character. Though its copiousness of

vocabulary is outstanding, it is its amazing variety and heterogeneousness which is even more striking: and this general receptiveness of new elements has contributed to making it a suitable and attractive vehicle in so many parts of the world.

A second outstanding characteristic of English is its simplicity of inflexion—the ease with which it indicates the relationship of words in a sentence with only the minimum of change in their shapes or variation of endings. There are languages such as Chinese, that have surpassed English in the reduction of the language in the matter of inflexions to what looks like just a series of fixed monosyllabic roots: but among European languages, taken as a whole, English has gone as far as any in reducing the inflexions it once had to a minimum. A natural consequence of this simplifying of inflexion by reduction, however, is that since the relationship of words to each other is no longer made clear by their endings, this must be done in other ways.

A third quality of English, therefore, is its relatively fixed word-order. An inflected language like Latin or Russian can afford to be fairly free in the arrangement of its words, since the inflexions shew clearly the proper relationship in the sentence, and ambiguity is unlikely. But in a language which does not change the forms of its words according to their relationship in the sentence-significance, the order of the words is likely to be relatively fixed; and a fixed word-order in relation to meaning in the sentence takes the place of the freedom made possible by the system of inflexions.

Another consequence, fourthly, of the loss or reduction to the minimum of the inflexions which English

once had, is the growth of the use of periphrases or roundabout ways of saying things, and of the use of prepositions to take the place of the lost inflexions. The English simplified verb uses periphrases and compound tenses made with auxiliary verbs to replace the more elaborate system of tenses that once existed (though tenses had already become fairly simple before the Anglo-Saxons came to England). Similarly, English, which once had nearly as many case-endings as Latin, has come to use prepositions instead of these, as can easily be seen if one translates any piece of Latin into English.

A fifth quality of English—though this, like the loss of inflexions and its consequences is shared with some other languages—is the development of new varieties of intonation to express shades of meaning which were formerly indicated by varying the shapes of words. This is perhaps somewhat comparable (though only in a small way) to the vast use of intonation in Chinese as a method of expressing meaning in sentences which would otherwise seem like series of unvarying monosyllabic roots. Consider, for instance, the wonderful variety of shades of meaning we may put into the use of the word 'do', merely by varying the intonation—that is the pitch and intensity, the tone of the voice.

Not all the above qualities are in themselves necessarily good, nor have they all contributed to the general success of English. But it seems probable that of them all it is the adaptable receptiveness and the simplicity of inflexion that have done most in this regard. On the other hand, the very copiousness and heterogeneousness of English leads to vagueness or lack of clarity. Its resources are too vast for all

but the well educated to use to full advantage; and such phenomena as 'pidgin English', 'journalese', jargon, woolliness of expression and slatternly speech and writing, are everywhere likely to be met with. It may fairly be said that English is among the easiest languages to speak badly, but the most difficult to use well.

What, then, is the place of this English among the world's languages? To what family, so to speak, does it belong? And who are its relations?

3. THE INDO-EUROPEAN FAMILY OF LANGUAGES

If one compares a number of languages, it probably soon appears that some of them have some sort of relationship to one another, while others may seem quite isolated. If then we are able to trace a group of these apparently related forms in several languages to a common ancestor by means of older writings, it may sometimes become almost certain that these forms must be branches, as it were, from a common root. By going further back, we may sometimes be able to compare a number of early forms each of which is the ancestor of later developments in the different languages, so as to establish a strong probability that they in their turn must all be descended from a common prehistoric original. This supposed original will be much older than the earliest written languages, so that it can never be verified with absolute certainty, but must remain only a strongly supported hypothesis. But if other qualities in the languages we are comparing corroborate the relationship and common ancestry which we have arrived at by the above method, we may find ourselves well on

the way to being able to construct a genealogy of our languages—in other words to classify them into families. For example, if we take the words for 'is' in some of the better known European and Asiatic languages, we may reconstruct with fair probability the ancestral prehistoric word from which all must be descended: and this relationship will be found to be confirmed by other evidence. Latin *est*, Greek *esti*, Sanskrit *asti*, Russian *est'* [*jest'*], German *ist*, Italian *é*, etc. Now by studying the earliest forms and the later history of each of these languages, we can be pretty sure that the ancestral form from which all descend was **esti*. We know, for instance, that in Sanskrit an original *e*-sound became *a*, and that the Italian pronunciation reduced the earlier Latin *est* to a form indicated by the modern spelling *é*. Thus, such forms as **esti* should always be written with an asterisk to remind all concerned that they are only probable reconstructions of ancestral or primitive forms as distinct from those attested by writing. Though such 'starred forms' are necessary to the speculative specialist in the early history of languages and in classification, for the student who is primarily only dealing with English, it is clear that the fewer of them he uses, the better.

English belongs, in all its stages, to the *Indo-European* family of languages, formerly called *Indo-Germanic*, and still earlier *Aryan*. 'Indo-European' is the name given to the set of linguistic forms from which nearly all European languages as well as those of Persia and a very large part of India can be shewn to have descended. We do not know that all these prehistoric forms co-existed or that they can properly be said to have been collectively an actual language:

for languages and parts of languages change at differing speeds. Nor would it be right to assume that there was necessarily ever a race or people who spoke this Indo-European as their language. Race, culture and language need not always correspond or be coextensive, as may be seen in modern Switzerland.

'Indo-European' is used because it merely suggests that the languages it comprises cover most of Europe and India, or that Europe and India mark the length of its confines. The predominance and pioneering position of the German philologists of the nineteenth century sufficiently accounts for the earlier term 'Indo-Germanic'. 'Aryan' was the name (from the Sanskrit *aryas* 'noble') which the fairer-skinned bringers of the Hindu civilization to India from the North gave themselves to distinguish them from the darker and less cultured peoples whom they largely conquered: and the belief among the predecessors of the more scientific German philologists that Sanskrit, with its remarkably full inflexions, was the ancestor of all the then studied European and Asiatic languages, may explain the use of the term 'Aryan' for what we now call Indo-European.

Beginning at some period several thousand years B.C., this 'Indo-European', starting perhaps at a point in Southern Europe near the Asian border, spread itself both East and West. As it spread, with the changing needs of its speakers for different homes, it mixed with many 'non-Indo-European' tongues and was modified by them variously at different stages. As speakers spread farther and farther from the starting-point, their kinds of Indo-European developed more and more qualities which made them different

from their ancestor. In some such way, very broadly, may be described the gradual growth through successive stages of what have become the modern languages of Europe, Persia and India as we know them.

There are eight main groups of Indo-European languages all traceable back to the Indo-European primitive ancestor. These are divided into roughly an Eastern and a Western set of groups. The Eastern set comprises four groups of languages, which have in common certain basic changes from the original system, such as a general shift in the pronunciation of the so-called 'guttural' consonants *g* and *k* to a 'palatal' position. Thus, for instance, the Indo-European assumed primitive form for the numeral 100 is *km̥tóm*: but whereas languages of the Western set of groups such as Latin (*centum*) retain the original *k*-sound, Sanskrit has changed the *k* to an *sh*-sound [*ś*] (*śatám*) and Russian has the word as *sto*. For this reason, the Western languages are commonly referred to as 'Centum-languages' and the Eastern—after the old Persian or Iranian form of the word—as 'Satem-languages'. The four Eastern groups are: *Balto-Slavic*—including all the Slavonic tongues ancient and modern and the related languages of Baltic countries such as Lithuania and Latvia; *Indo-Iranian*—including the languages of old and new India of which Sanskrit is the type and of Iran-Persia; then *Armenian* ancient and modern with its various dialects; and finally *Albanian* which is only spoken over a relatively small area but forms a separate group by its nature none the less. The Western groups are *Greek*, ancient and modern with their many dialects, *Latin* and all its derivatives, *Celtic*

which survives in ancient inscriptions and in the mediaeval and modern languages of Wales, Ireland, the Scottish Highlands and Brittany, and formerly existed in Cornwall and the Isle of Man; and finally the *Germanic* group, which comprises the languages of Germany, Scandinavia, Holland and the Flemish parts of Belgium as well as English, and includes these in some ancient and mediaeval forms also. It is only with this last, the *Germanic* group, that we are here concerned. But what is it that makes this Germanic, and therefore English, Indo-European?

Indo-European is but one of a number of families into which the world's languages may be divided; and it must be remembered too that there are still many languages, and even whole groups, that have not been examined scientifically or committed to writing yet, and hence cannot be fitted into any scheme of classification. Broadly speaking, it may be said that two outstanding characteristics indicate the 'Indo-Europeanness' of a language; its structure and its vocabulary. Indo-European languages generally lend themselves in structure, at least if one knows something of their historical development, to that description of forms invented by the ancient Greeks and named by them 'Parts of Speech'. A language may have inflexions fully retained relatively from the original Indo-European, like Russian, or it may have lost most of its distinctive word-endings like modern English: it may, as the grammarians say, be 'synthetic' with full inflexions or 'analytic' with few or none. But if we can think of its forms fairly readily as nouns, verbs, etc., that is to say under the traditional classical terms of 'Parts of Speech', it will probably be found to be Indo-European. Chinese, with its