

The English Language

LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH

With an Epilogue by

R. W. CHAPMAN

Second Edition

LONDON
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW YORK TORONTO

First published in 1912, and reprinted in 1917, 1918, 1919, 1921, 1922, 1924, 1925 (twice), 1926, 1927, 1928 (twice), 1930, 1934, 1938, 1941, and 1942. Completely reset in 1944, and reprinted in 1948 (twice) and 1950.

Second edition 1952 reprinted in 1956

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

CONTENTS

I	THE ORIGINS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE	I
II	FOREIGN ELEMENTS	17
III	MODERN ENGLISH	38
IV	WORD-MAKING IN ENGLISH	51
V	MAKERS OF ENGLISH WORDS	70
VI	LANGUAGE AND HISTORY—THE EARLIEST PERIOD	82
VII	LANGUAGE AND HISTORY—THE DARK AND THE MIDDLE AGES	100
VIII	LANGUAGE AND HISTORY—THE MODERN PERIOD	123
IX	LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT	141
	EPILOGUE 1951. <i>By</i> R. W. CHAPMAN .	165
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	173
	INDEX	175

CHAPTER I

THE ORIGINS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

AMONG the many living forms of human speech, and those countless tongues which have arisen and perished in the past, the English language, which has now spread over so large a portion of the world, is as humble and obscure in its origin as any other. It is, of course, in no sense native to England, but was brought thither by the German tribes who conquered the island in the 5th and 6th centuries; and its nearest relations are to be found among the humble dialects of a few barren islands on the German coast. When our Anglo-Saxon ancestors came first to ravage Britain, and finally to settle there, they found the island inhabited by a people weaker, indeed, but infinitely more civilized than themselves. For several centuries the Celts in England had enjoyed the benefits of Roman government, and shared in the civilization of the Roman Empire; they lived in walled cities, worshipped in Christian churches, and spoke to a certain extent, at least, the Latin language; and it is possible, if this Teutonic invasion had never happened, that the inhabitants of England would be now speaking a language descended from Latin, like French or Spanish or Italian. It is true that English has become almost a half-sister to these 'Romance languages', as they are called, and a large part of its vocabulary is derived from Latin sources; but this is not in any way due to the Roman conquest of

Britain, but to later causes. In whatever parts of Britain the Teutonic tribes settled, the Roman civilization and the Roman language perished; and we find at first a purely Germanic race, a group of related tribes, speaking dialects of what was substantially the same language—the language which is the parent of our present English speech. This Anglo-Saxon or (as it is now preferably called) ‘Old English’ language belonged to the great Teutonic family of speech, which in its turn was separated into three main families—East Germanic, now extinct; Scandinavian, or Old Norse, from which Icelandic, Danish and Swedish are descended; and West Germanic, from which are derived the two great branches of High and Low German. High German has become the modern literary German; while Low German has split up into a number of different languages—Frisian, Dutch, and Flemish. It is to the last of these groups that English belongs, and its nearest relatives are the Frisian dialect, and Dutch and Flemish.

But the Teutonic tongues themselves form one branch of another great family, the Aryan or Indo-European, which is spread from India in the East to Ireland in the West, and includes Sanskrit, Persian, Greek, Latin, Celtic, and several other languages. The grammatical structure of English and German, and a large element of their vocabularies, prove their relationship to these other tongues, though in the course of their wanderings from their primitive home, forms were changed or dropped, the pronunciation of some of the vowels and consonants shifted, many old words perished, and many new ones were acquired. The study of the relationships between these various

languages forms the subject of the science of Comparative Philology, a science almost entirely based in its turn on what is called 'Phonology', the study of changes in sound, and the elaborate laws by which they are governed. It is only, indeed, since the discovery of these laws that the science of language or 'linguistics' has become possible, and it is on the careful and accurate study of sound-changes that is founded the modern historical conception of English, its relationship to other languages, and its development from the early speech of our Anglo-Saxon ancestors.)

This early speech was, as we have seen, a Teutonic or German language. Although our modern English has been derived from it by a regular process of change, it was in its character more like modern Dutch or modern German. Its vocabulary was what is now called a 'pure' one, containing few foreign words, and its grammar was even more complicated than that of modern German. It retained the elaborate system of genders; its nouns were masculine, feminine, or neuter; they had four cases and various declensions, and the adjectives, as in German, agreed with the nouns, and were declined with them; and in the conjugation of the verbs there were twice as many forms as in modern English. It was, therefore, like Latin and Greek and German, an inflected language; while in modern English inflections have almost disappeared, and other means of expressing grammatical relations have been devised.

As this loss of inflections is one of the main characteristics of modern English, and illustrates a tendency of language which has been carried further in English than in any other form of European speech,

it will be well, perhaps, to say a few more words about it. To the older philologists, when the change of language, from the earliest tongues down to the present day, was at last unfolded before their eyes, the long and uninterrupted history of grammatical losses which they found, the perishing of one nice distinction after another, seemed to them an uninterrupted process of ruin and degeneration. But this view of the history of language—a continuous advance, namely, in richness and accuracy of expression, accompanied and produced by a continual process of decay—is too paradoxical to be maintained, and it is coming to be realized more and more that the disappearance of grammatical forms is not a loss, but a gain; and that they have been superseded by a means of expression which renders them more or less superfluous, and is itself vastly more expressive and convenient. This means of expression is called 'analysis', and consists in stating the relations once expressed by verbal terminations by separate words of an abstract character; by prepositions for the cases of nouns, and by auxiliaries for the tenses of the verbs. If we look in a Latin grammar we shall find, for instance, that to translate one Latin word, *fuissem*, four words, 'I should have been', are used in English; that is to say, the different notions combined by inflection in one Latin word are taken out from the conglomerate whole by analysis, and are expressed each of them by a separate word.

The development of analysis in language, the habit of using a separate word for the expression of each separate element in a complex notion, is one that we can trace throughout the whole history of language. In primitive forms of speech whole complexes of

thought and feeling are expressed in single terms. 'I said it to him' is one word, 'I said it to her' another; 'my head' is a single term, 'his head' a different one. My head is, of course, to me an enormously different thing from his head, and it is an immense advance in the clearness of thought when I analyse the thought of 'my head' into its different parts, one of which is peculiar to me, and named 'mine', the other that of 'head', which I share with other human beings. Simplicity of language is, in fact, like other kinds of simplicity, a product of high civilization, not a primitive condition; and the advance of analysis, the creation of words expressing abstract relations, is one of the most remarkable triumphs of the human intellect. This development of analysis had already, of course, reached a high point in languages like Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon; but it has been carried even further in modern forms of speech, and reaches, in Europe at least, its furthest limit in modern English. We see it, in the first place, in the greatly increased use of prepositions, *of*, and *to*, and *for*, and *by*, and still more in the use of the auxiliary verbs *have*, and *do*, and *shall*, and *will*, and *be*, by means of which we are now able to express almost every shade of thought which was formerly rendered by changes in the form of the verb.

Along with this creation of new grammatical machinery, modern English is remarkable for the way in which other superfluous forms and unnecessary terminations have been discarded. In the first place, we must note the loss in English of grammatical gender. The absence of this in English is more extraordinary than we always realize. For this irrational distinction, which corresponds to no

distinction in thought, and capriciously attributes sex to sexless objects, and often the wrong gender to living beings, is yet found, as a survival of barbarism and a useless burden to the memory, in all the other well-known languages of Europe. With the loss of gender we have also discarded the agreement of adjectives, of possessive pronouns and the article, with their nouns. An Englishman can say, for instance, 'my wife and children' while the Frenchman must repeat the possessive pronoun, as in *ma femme et mes enfants*. If we regard it as the triumph of culture to fit means perfectly to ends, and to do the most with the greatest economy of means, we must consider this discarding of the superfluous as a great gain in modern English.

Another great characteristic of modern English, as of other modern languages, is the use of word-order as a means of grammatical expression. If in an English sentence, such as 'The wolf ate the lamb', we transpose the positions of the nouns, we entirely change the meaning of the sentence; the subject and object are not denoted by any terminations to the words, as they would be in Greek or Latin or in modern German, but by their position before or after the verb. This is one of the last developments of speech, a means of expression unknown to the rich and beautiful languages of antiquity. This tendency to a fixed word-order was more or less established in early English, as it is in modern German, in spite of the richness of inflections in these languages; and it is a debatable point whether the decay of inflections made it necessary, or its establishment made the inflections superfluous, and so brought about their decay. Probably each acted on the other; as the

inflections faded, a fixed word-order became more important, and the establishment of this order caused the inflections to be more and more forgotten.

How is it, then, that these amazing changes, this loss of genders, this extraordinary simplification, have happened in our English speech? For five hundred years after the invasion of England, the language of our Anglo-Saxon ancestors remained, as far as we can judge, practically unchanged. Then a transformation began, and in three or four centuries what is practically a new language somewhat suddenly appears. In the first place, as an answer to this question, is the fact that simplification is the law of development in all languages, and has influenced more or less all European forms of speech. At the time that English changed, the other languages of Europe were changing too. That this process was carried further and proceeded faster in England than elsewhere is not, however, due to any special enlightenment or advance of civilization in the English nation. For, as a matter of fact, education, culture, and enlightenment, although they help progress in other ways, are intensely conservative in matters of speech; and while for their own purposes the educated classes have to connive at changes in vocabulary, any grammatical advance is opposed by them with all the powers they possess. We know how intensely repugnant to them are any proposals for the reform of our absurd and illogical system of spelling, and we can imagine the outcry that would arise, should any one dare to suggest the slightest and most advantageous simplification in English grammar. In our plurals *these* and *those*, for instance, we retain, as Dr. Sweet pointed out, two quite useless and

illogical survivals of the old concord of attribute-words with their nouns. For if we do not change our adjectives or possessive pronouns for the plural, and say *his* hat and *his* hats, why should we change *this* and *that* into *these* and *those* in the same positions? And yet the whole force of education and culture would furiously oppose the dropping of these superfluous words, if, indeed, it could be brought to consider any such proposal. As a matter of fact, the progress in English is due not to the increase of education, but to its practical disappearance among those who used the national speech. It is the result, not of national prosperity, but of two national disasters—the Danish invasion and the Norman Conquest.

The first district of England to attain any high degree of civilization, according to the standards of that time, was the north, where Christianity and culture were introduced from Ireland, where literature and scholarship flourished, and where the local or Northumbrian dialect seemed likely to become the standard speech of England. It was, indeed, from the Angles settled here and their Anglian dialect, that our language acquired the name of 'English', which it has ever since retained. This Northumbrian civilization, however, was almost utterly destroyed in the 8th and 9th centuries by a new invasion of pagan tribes from across the German Ocean. The Danes, who now came, like the Angles and Saxons, first to harry England and then to settle there, were near relatives of the inhabitants they conquered, and came from a district not far from the original home of the earlier invaders. Their language was so like Anglo-Saxon that it could be understood without great

difficulty; so when the two races were settled side by side, and when before long they became amalgamated, it was natural that mixed dialects should arise, mainly English in character, but with many Danish words, and with many differing grammatical forms confused and blurred. As there was no literature nor any literary class to preserve the old language, the rise of these mixed dialects would be unchecked, and we can safely attribute to this settlement of the Danes a great influence on the change in the English language. It is in the districts where the Danes were settled that the English language became first simplified, so that in the process of development their speech was at least two centuries ahead of that of the south of England. But this effect was only local, and did not at first affect the language as a whole. When the Northumbrian culture was destroyed, the kingdom of Wessex became the centre of English civilization; and under the scholarly influence of King Alfred, and the revival of learning he promoted, West-Saxon became the literary and classical form of English, and almost all the specimens of early English that have been preserved are written in this dialect. Classical Anglo-Saxon, therefore, with its genders and its rich inflectional forms, was not affected by the Danish invasion; and had it suffered from no further disaster, English would probably have developed much as the other Low German forms have developed, and we should now be speaking a language not unlike modern Dutch.

But for the third time a foreign race invaded England, and the language of Wessex, like that of Northumbria, was in its turn almost destroyed. The effect, however, of the Norman Conquest, although

quite as far-reaching, was more indirect than that of the Danish. The Normans did not, like the Danes, break up or confuse Anglo-Saxon by direct conflict; but their domination, by interrupting the tradition of the language, by destroying its literature and culture, by reducing it to the speech of uneducated peasants, simply removed the conservative influence of education, and allowed the forces which had been long at work to act unchecked; and English, being no longer spoken by the cultivated classes or taught in the schools, developed as a popular spoken language with great rapidity.

Each man wrote, as far as he wrote at all, in the dialect he spoke; phonetic changes that had appeared in speech were now recorded in writing; these changes, by levelling terminations, produced confusion, and that confusion led to instinctive search for new means of expression; word-order became more fixed; the use of prepositions and auxiliary verbs to express the meanings of lost inflections increased, and the greater unity of England under the Norman rule helped in the diffusion of the advanced and simplified forms of the north. We even find, what is a very rare thing in the history of grammar, that some foreign pronouns were actually adopted from another language—namely, the Danish words *they*, *them*, *their*, which had replaced the Anglo-Saxon forms in the north, and were gradually adopted into the common speech. From the north, too, spread the use of the genitive and plural in *s* for nearly all nouns, and not only for those of one declension.

Although the development of English was gradual, and there is at no period a definite break in its continuity, it may be said to present three main periods

of development—the Old, the Middle, and the Modern, which may be distinguished by their grammatical characteristics. These have been defined by Dr. Sweet as first, the period of full inflections, which may be said to last down to A.D. 1200; the period of Middle English, of levelled inflections, from 1200 to 1500; and that of Modern English, or lost inflections, from 1500 to the present time.

Although the grammar of the language by the end of the Middle English period was fixed in its main outlines, there has, nevertheless, been some change and development since that time. Thus the northern *are* for *be*, spread southwards in the early part of the 16th century, and became current towards its end, where it appears in Shakespeare and the Authorized Version of the Bible, and it has now in modern times almost supplanted the southern *be* in the subjunctive mood. The use of auxiliary verbs to express various shades of meaning, although it had begun in the Old, and developed in the Middle English period, has been greatly extended in modern times. The distinction in meaning between *I write* and *I am writing* between the habitual and the actual present, is a modern innovation; and another modern development which expresses a useful shade of meaning is that of the emphatic present with the auxiliary *do*, 'I do think', 'I do believe', as contrasted with the less emphatic 'I think', 'I believe'. Both forms existed in Old English, but until the 17th century no clear distinction was made between them, as we see in the biblical phrase, 'and they did eat and were all filled'. The 17th century saw also the adoption of the neuter possessive pronoun *its*, which is first found in 1598, but which is not used in the Bible of 1611, nor in

any of Shakespeare's plays printed in his lifetime. The use of nouns as adjectives, the 'attributive noun', as it is called, as in 'garden flowers', 'railway train', etc., is a new and most useful innovation, which has come into use since the period of Old English, and has been greatly developed in modern times. There is nothing quite like it in any other language except Chinese, and it is a great step in advance towards that ideal language in which meaning is expressed, not by terminations, but by the simple method of word position. And following also this line of development we find a curious case in modern English when the termination used for inflection, the *s* of the English genitive, has become detached from its noun and used almost as a separate word. This is the group genitive, as in 'the King of England's son', instead of 'the King's son of England', and in colloquial speech we can even use a phrase such as 'the man I saw yesterday's hat'. Here the *s* of the genitive has become detached from its noun, and made into a sign with the abstract character of a mathematical symbol. One of the most modern developments of English grammar, which dates from the end of the 18th century, is a new imperfect passive, as in the phrase 'the house is being built', for the older 'the house is building', or 'is a-building'.

These modern instances will prove that the development of grammar is not a matter entirely depending, as has sometimes been thought, upon historical causes, or upon phonetic change. Historical accidents, and the decay of terminations, no doubt help in the creation of new forms, but are not themselves the cause of their creation. Behind all the phenomena of changing form we are aware of the

action of a purpose, an intelligence, incessantly modifying and making use of this decadence of sound, this wear and tear of inflections, and patiently forging for itself, out of the debris of grammatical ruin, new instruments for a more subtle analysis of thought, and a more delicate expression of every shade of meaning. It is an intelligence which takes advantage of the smallest accidents to provide itself with new resources; and it is only when we analyse and study the history of some new grammatical contrivance that we become aware of the long and patient labour which has been required to embody in a new and convenient form a long train of reasoning. And yet we only know this force by its workings; it is not a conscious or deliberate, but a corporate will, an instinctive sense of what the people wish their language to be; and although we cannot predict its actions, yet, when we examine its results, we cannot but believe that thought and intelligent purpose have produced them. This corporate will is, indeed, like other human manifestations, often capricious in its working, and not all its results are worthy of approval. It sometimes blurs useful distinctions, preserves others that are unnecessary, allows admirable tools to drop from its hands; its methods are often illogical and childish, in some ways it is unduly and obstinately conservative, while it allows of harmful innovations in other directions. Yet, on the whole, its results are beyond all praise; it has provided an instrument for the expression, not only of thought, but of feeling and imagination, fitted for all the needs of man, and far beyond anything that could ever have been devised by the deliberation of the wisest and most learned experts.

When the early physicists became aware of forces they could not understand, they tried to escape their difficulty by personifying the laws of nature and inventing 'spirits' that controlled material phenomena. The student of language, in the presence of the mysterious power which creates and changes language, has been compelled to adopt this medieval procedure, and has vaguely defined, by the name of 'the Genius of the Language', the power that guides and controls its progress. If we ask ourselves who are the ministers of this power, and whence its decrees derive their binding force, we cannot find any definite answer to our question. It is not the grammarians or philologists who form or carry out its decisions; for the philologists disclaim all responsibility, and the schoolmasters and grammarians generally oppose, and fight bitterly, but in vain, against the new developments. We can, perhaps, find its nearest analogy in what, among social insects, we call, for lack of a more scientific name, 'the Spirit of the Hive'. This 'spirit', in societies of bees, is supposed to direct their labours on a fixed plan, with intelligent consideration of needs and opportunities; and although proceeding from no fixed authority, it is yet operative in each member of the community. And so in each one of us the Genius of the Language finds an instrument for the carrying out of its decrees. We each of us possess, in a greater or less degree, what the Germans call 'speech-feeling', a sense of what is worthy of adoption and what should be avoided and condemned. This in almost all of us is an instinctive process; we feel the advantages or disadvantages of new forms and new distinctions, although we should be hard put to it to give a reason for our feeling. We know,