

The Reader Over Your Shoulder

*A Handbook for Writers
of English Prose*

Robert author of
I. Claudius
Graves &
Alan
Hodge

Second Edition, revised and abridged by the authors

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of English Prose*

SECOND EDITION
Revised and Abridged by the Authors

ROBERT GRAVES
AND
ALAN HODGE



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Part I

THE
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The Peculiar Qualities of English

The most ancient European languages—those that have longest avoided infiltration by other languages—are the most complicated in their grammar and syntax. The age of a language can be roughly guessed by a count of its declensions, conjugations, moods, tenses, voices, cases, genders and numbers. Latin is clearly less ancient than Greek, since it has no 'middle voice', no 'dual number' and no 'optative mood'¹—thus in Latin at least seven words are needed to express the sentence 'If only you two thieves had drowned yourselves', but in Greek only four. French is clearly less ancient than Latin, since it has no separate neuter gender and does not decline its nouns; also, its conjugations are far simpler. English is clearly less ancient than French: except for its pronouns, it is free of gender differentiation.

Grammatical simplicity is the mark of a vernacular. The word 'vernacular', formed from the Roman historian Varro's phrase *vernacula verba*, 'unliterary expressions used by slaves or serfs', has often since been used loosely to mean 'the native language of a peasantry'; but few of Varro's slaves can have been native Italians—they may have been Greeks, Bithynians, Africans or Germans—and the language they spoke among themselves was a mixed lingo, sometimes called 'camp Latin', which later developed in Italy into modern Italian, in Spain into Spanish, in France into French. Properly speaking, then, a vernacular is a lingo, or language of domestic convenience, compounded of the languages spoken by master and alien

¹These denote respectively: action done for oneself (between the active and passive *voices*); reference to two people (between the singular and plural *numbers*); expression of a wish (supplementing the indicative and subjunctive *moods*).

slave. It has a less complicated grammar and syntax than the languages from which it springs, but rapidly accumulates words as the slaves become freedmen, and their children are born as freemen, and finally their great-grandchildren, marrying into their masters' families, are accepted as cultured people with full rights as citizens. The historical origins of German, which is not very primitive in structure, are obscure; modern German, however, is not a vernacular in Varro's sense, but a late artificial compound of several kindred dialects, with a far smaller vocabulary of early borrowings from the Latin and Greek than the other languages of Western Europe.

English is a vernacular of vernaculars. It began in the eleventh century as the lingo used between the Norman-French conquerors and their Anglo-Saxon serfs, and though it became a literary language in the fourteenth century has never crystallized in the way that Italian, French and Spanish have done. A proof of this is that no writer of English would be credited with a perfect literary style merely because he had exactly modelled himself on some native paragon—say, Addison in England, or Emerson in the United States—as Italians, Spaniards and Frenchmen might be after modelling themselves, respectively, on Boccaccio, Cervantes and Bossuet. To write English well, it is generally agreed, is not to imitate, but to evolve a style peculiarly suited to one's own temperament, environment and purposes. English has never been jealously watched over by a learned Academy, as French has been since the seventeenth century; nor protected against innovations either by literary professionalism, as with Italian, or, as with Spanish, by the natural decorum of the greater part of those who use it. It is, indeed, an immense, formless aggregate not merely of foreign assimilations and local dialects but of occupational and household dialects and personal eccentricities.

The general European view is that English is an illogical, chaotic language, unsuited for clear thinking; and it is easy to understand this view, for no other European language admits of such shoddy treatment. Yet, on the other hand, none other admits of such poetic exquisiteness, and often the apparent chaos is only the untidiness of a workshop in which a great deal of repair and other work is in progress: the benches are

crowded, the corners piled with lumber, but the old workman can lay his hand on whatever spare parts or accessories he needs or at least on the right tools and materials for improvising them. French is a language of fixed models: it has none of this workshop untidiness and few facilities for improvisation. In French, one chooses the finished phrase nearest to one's purpose and, if there is nothing that can be 'made to do', a long time is spent getting the Works—the Academy—to supply or approve a new model. Each method has its own advantages. The English method tends to ambiguity and obscurity of expression in any but the most careful writing; the French to limitation of thought. The late Sir Henry Head was once preparing an address on neurology for a learned society in Paris. He wrote it in what he hoped was French, but took the precaution of asking a French professor to see that it was correctly phrased. The manuscript was returned marked: '*pas français*', '*pas français*', '*pas français*', with suggested alterations; but almost every '*pas français*' could be matched with a '*pas vrai*', because the amendments in *français* impaired the force of the argument.

As for the view that English is illogical: it certainly differs greatly in character from French, Italian, Spanish and German, which are claimed to be logical languages. These are all able codifications of as much racial experience as can be translated into speech: theoretically, each separate object, process or quality is given a registered label and ever afterwards recognized by label rather than by individual quality. Logical languages are therefore also rhetorical languages, rhetoric being the emotionally persuasive use of labels, with little concern for the things to which they are tied. English has always tended to be a language of 'conceits': that is, except for the purely syntactical parts of speech, which are in general colourless, the vocabulary is not fully dissociated from the imagery out of which it has developed—words are pictures rather than hieroglyphs.

Matthew Arnold, who as a critic did insufficient justice to the peculiar genius of the English language, suggested in his essay on the 'Influence of Literary Academies' (1875) that:

'The power of French Literature is in its prose-writers, the power of English Literature in its poets. While the fame of

many poets of France depends on the qualities of intelligence they exhibit, qualities which are the distinctive support of prose, many of the prose-writers . . . depend wholly for their fame on the imaginative qualities they exhibit, which are the distinctive support of poetry.'

The truth is, that the French are not plagued by their metaphors tending to get out of hand and hamper the argument; whereas English writers of prose or poetry find that, so soon as a gust of natural feeling snatches away the merely verbal disguise in which their phrases are dressed, the pictorial images stand out sharply and either enliven and enforce the argument or desert it and go on a digressive ramble. English writers seldom have any feeling for purity of literary form in the Classical sense: it is both their strength and their weakness that imaginative exuberance breaks down literary restraint.

'Fixed' English, which may be dated from Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary*, completed in 1755, fulfils the need of a safer, less ambitious language arranged on the same system and dedicated to the same uses as French—a language of agreed preconceptions. 'Fixed' English makes possible a French-English, English-French, or a German-English, English-German dictionary. Each foreign label has its English counterpart: 'Glory' is matched (not very satisfactorily) with '*la gloire*' and '*der Ruhm*'; '*le matelot*' and '*der Matrose*' with 'sailor'. 'Fixed' English compares well enough with other languages, but is often more mechanically, and therefore more correctly, employed by foreigners than by those whose mother-tongue it is and who are always inclined to slip back into free English. 'Fixed' English is an easy language to learn, like colloquial Arabic; but of free English, as of scholarly Arabic, no wise person will ever claim final mastery—there is no discovered end to either language. 'Fixed' English is never more than momentarily fixed. The conventional, hotel-manager English that foreigners learn is always a little stilted and a little out of date by the time that the book from which they learn it is published; and twenty years later the book will read very quaintly.

English, whether 'fixed' or 'free', has certain unusual advantages in structure. In the first place, it is almost uninflected and

has no genders. The Romance and Germanic languages, not having had occasion to simplify themselves to the same degree, still retain their genders and inflections. There is no logical justification for genders. They are a decorative survival from a primitive time when the supposed sex of all concepts—trees, diseases, cooking implements—had to be considered for the sake of religious convention or taboo. Yet even new scientific words have to decide, so soon as coined, on their hypothetical sex. Writers of the Romance and Germanic languages have an aesthetic objection to a genderless language. But when a language is used for international exchange of ideas the practical disadvantages of gender are generally admitted to outweigh its decorative qualities. Gender is illogical, in being used partly to express actual sex, e.g. *le garçon, la femme*, and partly to dress words up, e.g. *la masculinité, le féminisme; le festin, la fête*. If one does wish to give sex-characteristics to concrete objects or abstractions (as, for example, masculinity to 'sword' and 'pen' and femininity to 'Parliament'), the existing gender is an actual hindrance to any such renewal of mythology. An inflected tense has a certain beauty from which writers in these languages refuse to be parted; but, for merely practical uses, an inflected tense such as *je serai, tu seras, il sera, nous serons, vous serez, ils seront* seems unnecessary to Britons and Americans, particularly since the French have dropped noun and adjective inflections almost as completely as they have.

The eventual disappearance of Norman-French from England after the Conquest was never in doubt once Anglo-Saxon had been simplified to meet the needs of the French-speaking invaders. Anglo-Saxon was deficient in words to fit the new methods of trade and government, and these had to be borrowed from French, which had a closer connexion with Rome, the source of all contemporary civilization. Passing the stage of Broken Saxon, the new vernacular developed an easy grammar and syntax, a modification of Anglo-Saxon, but with French turns wherever a legal or literary subtlety was needed. The vocabulary, though enormously enriched with Norman-French and Latin words of advanced culture, remained Anglo-Saxon in foundation: English words of Anglo-Saxon origin, though not half so numerous as Romance words, are used about five times

as often. One feature of the happy-go-lucky development of English was that adjectives were made to do service for nouns, nouns for verbs, and so on; until by Elizabethan times it could be said that all parts of speech in English were interchangeable.

This interchangeability is a great help to accurate expression; for example, where an adjective formed in the usual way from a noun has wandered slightly from its original sense. If one wishes to discuss the inflections of a verb and does not wish to write 'verbal inflections', because 'verbal' means 'of a word' rather than 'of a verb', one is free to write 'verb inflections', using a noun for an adjective.

Further gains to English in this early period were: the wide choice of prefixes and suffixes which the pooling of the wealth of both languages gave, the use of auxiliary words to help out the verb tenses, and the new freedom won by prepositions. There is a greater richness of prepositions in English than in any other language of Western Europe: for instance, the French *de* has to bear the whole burden of the English prepositions 'of', 'from', 'out', and *à* of 'at', 'to', 'till', while German has no separation between 'of' and 'from'; 'into' and 'out of' are double prepositions with no equivalent in either French or German.

The British have long been conscious of the extreme subtlety of their language. James Clarence Mangan, in his humorous essay *My Bugle and How I Blow It*, published in the early 1830's, wrote about one use of the preposition 'in':

'I am the Man in the Cloak. In other words, I am by no manner of means the Man *of* the Cloak or the Man *under* the Cloak. The Germans call me "*Der Mensch mit dem Mantel*", the Man with the Cloak. This is a deplorable error in the nomenclature of that otherwise intelligent people: because my cloak is not part and parcel of myself. The cloak is outside and the man is inside, but each is a distinct entity. I admit you may say, "The Man with the Greasy Countenance", thus also Slawken-Bergius (*vide* "Tristram Shandy") calls his hero "The Stranger with the Nose", for, however long, the nose was an integral part of the individual. With me the case is a horse of a different colour. I do not put my cloak on and off, I grant, but I can do so when I please: and therefore it is

obvious to the meanest capacity that I am the Man in the Cloak and no mistake.'

Mangan's objection to the German idiom could have been strengthened by an opposite objection to the French *'l'homme à la redingote'*, where greater emphasis is laid on the cloak than on the man. Mangan, as he says, is not 'the Man of the Cloak'; yet, *'l'homme dans la redingote'* is no more French than *'Der Mensch in dem Mantel'* is German. And nearly three centuries before Mangan Sir Philip Sidney had written in his *Apology for Poetry*:

'English giveth us great occasion to the right use of matter and manner, being indeed capable of any excellent exercising of it. I know some will say that it is a mingled language. And why not so much the better, taking the best of both the other? Another will say it wanteth Grammar. Nay, truly it hath that praise, that it wanteth not Grammar, for Grammar it might have, but it needs not; being so easy of itself and so void of those cumbersome differences of Cases, Genders, Moods, and Tenses, which I think was a piece of the Tower of Babylon's curse, that a man should be put to school to learn his mother tongue. But for the uttering sweetly and properly the conceits of the mind, which is the end of speech, that it hath equally with any other tongue in the world: and is particularly happy in compositions of two or three words together, near the Greek, far beyond the Latin: which is one of the greatest beauties can be in a language.'

The growth of English as a common language of conqueror and conquered had one great disadvantage: the slowness with which it arrived at a common convention for the pronunciation and spelling of words. Neither the French nor the Anglo-Saxons could form their mouths properly for the management of the others' language, particularly of the vowels; yet the French scribes had to write Saxon words in their legal records, and the Saxon scribes in submitting accounts in writing had to adopt a convention of spelling which their masters would understand. Each district, too, had its different dialect. East Midland finally became the dominant one, but words were brought into it from

other dialects with different spelling conventions; when at last a general convention was agreed upon, it was (and remains) a tissue of inconsistencies—the most serious handicap to English as a language for international use.

The termination *-ough*, for instance, occurs in words as differently sounded as 'rough', 'bough', 'cough', 'thorough', 'though', 'through', and 'hiccough': the *gh* represents what was once an Anglo-Saxon guttural corresponding with the Greek letter *chi*. This guttural the Norman-French could not, or would not, pronounce: either they made an *f* sound of it or they sounded the vowel and left out the consonant altogether. It is probable that this habit became fashionable among people of Saxon blood who wished to pass as members of the ruling caste, and except in the North, where it lasted much later and still survives in many dialect words, the *gh* passed out of the spoken language and, in the written, remains merely as an historic relic. To the different pronunciation of vowels in different parts of the country, these *-ough* words are sufficient witnesses; as in the *ch* in 'Church', 'Christian', 'chivalry' and 'pibroch' to the inconsistency of the spelling convention. The trouble was that the scribes had only twenty-six letters (of which *x*, *k*, and *q* were redundant) to express forty-three common sounds. They tried various methods, such as doubling a consonant to show that the vowel which came before was short, e.g. 'batter', and putting a final 'e' after a consonant to show that the vowel was long, e.g. 'bone'. None of these methods could be used consistently while the pronunciation was still so various; and the scribes did all that could be expected of them, short of inventing a new alphabet.

Spelling conventions have changed continually ever since and are not yet stabilized. The word 'mutton', before its spelling was thus fixed early in the reign of James I, had been spelt: 'moltoun', 'motoun', 'motone', 'motene', 'motonne', 'motton', 'mouton', 'muton', 'muttoun', 'mutown' and 'mutton'. 'Button', stabilized at about the same time, had had a still greater range of spelling variations including 'botheum' and 'buttowne'. Yet even after this newly borrowed Romance words in *-on* were not similarly Englished as *-on*: *balon*, *marron*, *musqueton*, *salon*, were spelt 'balloon', 'marroon', 'muskatoon', 'saloon'. This 'oo',

which also represented the narrow vowel in the word 'good', was then confused with the broader 'oo' sound as in 'food' and 'moon'. In more recent times the English have either spelt and pronounced the newly borrowed words in *-on* in the French way, if they are words of limited use, such as *soupçon* and *raison d'être*; or, if they are words capable of popular use, they have Englished them much as they did the words first borrowed. So *bâton*, as in 'conductor's baton', is made to rhyme with *fatten*; and on the barrack-square *échelon* has come to rhyme with 'stretch along'. However, on the whole the English-speaking peoples have become more willing to pronounce and spell foreign words as they are spelt and pronounced in their countries of origin. Broadcasting assists this tendency: for example, 'gar-ridge' for 'garage' would have become general in Britain but for the French pronunciation insisted on by the B.B.C. This new respect for accuracy of pronunciation has made things rather worse than before. For instance, the Irish word 'lough', not long borrowed, has added one more pitfall to the pronunciation of words in '-ough'. Conscientious English travellers to Ireland try to manage the sound, but the dictionaries compromise by directing that it shall be pronounced 'lok'—'k' is at any rate a guttural and nearer to the original sound than 'f'.

Certain advantages have been derived even from these confusions. Where there has been more than one pronunciation of a word, it has very often been split into two words, each devoted to a different sense and usually spelt differently. 'Through' and 'thorough' provide an instance of differentiation both of spelling and pronunciation; 'flower' 'flour' 'gest' and 'jest' of differentiation in spelling only. It sometimes happens that the same word is borrowed more than once from the same language, the first borrowing having already changed in sense. Thus the second borrowing becomes a new English word and, the spelling convention having meanwhile also changed, is easily distinguished from the early borrowing. The word 'saloon' was the eighteenth-century English equivalent of the French *salon*, meaning a reception-room in a palace or great house. In early Victorian times it began to be vulgarized, and now has come to mean merely a large room in a commercial establishment. *Salon*, borrowed again, means the reception-room of a

lady of fashion, where wits and notabilities assemble for mutual entertainment. Similarly, 'antick', with its more modern forms 'antic' and 'antique', present very different views of things antiquated.

In accepting English, one must accept the inconsistent spelling cheerfully, not only for the practical service it has given in the differentiation of meaning, but on its own account, as one learns to accept and even love the irregularities of a friend's face. There is to the English eye something distasteful in phonetic spelling. Attempts to force it upon the language, though supported by all the logic in the world, are unavailing—'because of the ugly look the words have—too much "k" and "z" and "ay".' One would have less objection to phonetic or 'simplified' spelling if it could be introduced retrospectively in one's grandfather's days; but nobody likes to make such sacrifices for the sake of his grandchildren.

As the regularizing of spelling and pronunciation on a rational basis has never succeeded, so the permanent limiting of particular words to particular senses, the fixing of English, has never come to much. There have been professorial panjandrums who have undertaken the reformation of the language as their life's task; there have even been short periods, usually after a time of national disturbance, when the governing classes have had fits of tidiness and thought about putting the dictionary into better order. But English has always resisted attempts to cramp its growth. Alexander Gil (Headmaster of St. Paul's School when Milton was a pupil) wrote in 1619 in his *Logonomia Anglica* to complain of the 'new mänge in speaking and writing', for which he held Chaucer originally responsible.

'O harsh lips! I now hear all around me such words as *common, vices, envy, malice*; even *virtue, study, justice, pity, mercy, compassion, profit, commodity, colour, grace, favour, acceptance*. But whither, I pray in all the world, have you banished those words which our forefathers used for these new-fangled ones? Are our words to be exiled like our citizens? Is the new barbaric invasion to extirpate the English tongue? O ye Englishmen, on you, I say, I call in whose veins that blood flows, retain, retain what yet remains of our native speech, and