



# English

AN INTRODUCTION TO LANGUAGE

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# PREFACE

This book is intended to be a concise and practical introduction to the many facets of the English language. In the current period of controversial linguistic scholarship it sets forth what its writers believe to be matters of permanent value without committal to any particularism, though with full recognition of, and sincere admiration for, what is new and good.

Eclectic in both choice of materials and in its methods of presenting those materials, the book concentrates on what seems most significant for the beginning student of language—specifically, his own language. It attempts to bridge the credibility gap between what has often been traditionally taught and what the student can himself observe about language in daily use, by providing a modern and realistic understanding of how the language functions as well as, briefly, how it developed. Such a comprehension of basic linguistic phenomena is conducive to a clearer understanding of practically all else worthy of study—whether it be for more specialized work in whatever turnings linguistic study is likely to take in the future; for prospective teachers of English or language; or simply as a background for writing, reading, and evaluating in other fields of knowledge. Exercises in practical application are interspersed liberally throughout the text to enable the student to test his own understanding.

The entire text was read in its original draft by William H. Cullen of the State University of New York, College at Potsdam, Faye L. Kelly of the American University, and Charles B. Martin and Carroll Y. Rich, both of North Texas State University. Various chapters were also read and critically appraised by Philip Bradshaw, Richard A. Dwyer, Patrick M. Geoghegan, Jayne Crane Harder, Melvyn New, and Joel H. Siegel, all of the University of Florida. From all these preliminary readers have come valuable suggestions for improvement, which have been gratefully adopted. Such sins of omission and commission as remain are no fault of theirs and must be ruefully acknowledged as our own. Finally, we owe a special debt of gratitude to Adele Algeo for her work on the index and for putting a large part of the text into typescript.

T. P.  
J. A.

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Harvard accent, so greatly admired by his followers, was caricatured by entertainers and derided by those who disapproved of the late president and his policies. Few were really indifferent to it.

## THE DISCIPLINE OF LINGUISTICS

Though not totally immune to such attitudes, most professional students of language—that is, **linguists**—as a rule avoid them, much as doctors avoid any emotional approach toward the symptoms that they diagnose. But, as every doctor must be aware, many persons who are otherwise intelligent and even highly educated have altogether fantastic notions about physiology and pathology, notions that they express vehemently, sometimes even to experts. After all, everyone has a body of one sort or another. And everyone has language of one sort or another.

Thus it is not too surprising that so many people should fancy themselves authorities on the language that they themselves speak and write constantly and sometimes quite effectively, and often on other languages as well, if they have had even a smattering of schoolroom instruction in them. Linguists are likely to find themselves soundly resented by otherwise well-informed laymen, who set forth in the most authoritative manner their opinions about language, or more often about what they fancy language is or, still more often, ought to be. The linguist's claim to a special understanding of the phenomena of language is, it should be said, not nearly so widely respected as that of the doctor in his special field. For one thing, the doctor has had a high, not to say glamorous, status for a long time, and he is concerned with considerably more crucial phenomena—matters of life and death, in fact—than any possible linguistic ones.

As we shall see, the study of language—that is, **linguistics**—is a discipline at least as rigorous as the study of any other branch of learning—medicine, philosophy, literature, architecture, and so on. Moreover, it is a discipline whose mastery—assuming that it is ever really mastered—does not necessarily confer upon the linguist a command of literary style; otherwise linguists would write and speak more stylishly than many of them do. But a discipline it is, and it cannot be acquired by intuition, any more than we originally acquired our native language by intuition; we have merely forgotten the hard work, joyously undertaken in childhood, that went into the process of acquiring it.

### Exercises

1. How do people react to forms of English other than their own? What explanation can you offer for such reactions?

2. How reliable a guide to a man's character is his speech? Explain your answer.
3. The word *linguist* has two meanings. One is illustrated in the fourth paragraph of this chapter; the other is synonymous with *polyglot*. What are these two meanings? Can a person be a linguist in either sense without being one in the other sense of the term?

## PRONUNCIATION AND SPELLING

The confusion of speech with **writing**, the graphic symbolization of speech, has given rise to many mistaken notions, among them the notion that if English spelling were to be reformed to eliminate all ambiguities of a given symbol and all "silent letters"—not a bad idea if it were possible—the language itself would somehow be vastly improved, and furthermore, foreigners would have comparatively little difficulty in learning it. Such confusion has led to the naive concoction of new English alphabets and at least one "global alphabet."

Another manifestation of this confusion is the notion of many literate people who fancy that English words should be pronounced as they are written, thus giving rise to what are called **spelling pronunciations**. This notion is by no means new; it is in fact perfectly natural that a rather large percentage of younger speakers should have restored the long-lost sound symbolized by the *t* in *often* (though it has not as yet been restored in *soften*) because that is the way they have learned to say the word; but the pronunciation with *t* nevertheless began as a spelling pronunciation and is not really very old.<sup>1</sup> It is similar to the reanalysis of the previously amalgamated compound *forehead*, with secondary stress on *-head*—a pronunciation not even

<sup>1</sup>G. H. McKnight, *Modern English in the Making* (New York, 1928), p. 568, cites the following dialogue from what was in 1928 a recent English novel:

"What sort of people are the Herberts? Is Mrs. Herbert a lady?"

"She is the sort of person who pronounces the 't' in 'often.'"

Poor Mrs. Herbert is thus obliquely condemned as "no lady." Her then crude spelling pronunciation has since, however, become widespread in socially and intellectually exalted circles for more than a generation.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (the relevant section was published in 1902) notes that the pronunciation with *t*, though "not recognized in the dictionaries, is now frequent in the south of England, and is often used in singing." It recognizes, that is, records, only the traditional pronunciation without *t*. This great scholarly monument, hereafter referred to as the *OED*, attempts to give the complete history, so far as it is known, of every word entered. The first section was published in 1884; the last, in 1928. A supplementary volume appeared in 1933. The work was previously titled *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, but since 1933, when it was reissued with a new title page reading *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the older abbreviation *NED* has given way to *OED*.

noted by the *OED* (the section listing the word appeared in 1897), but now usual among younger-generation speakers, even though it spoils the children's rime about the little girl with the little curl right in the middle of her forehead who, though at times she behaved very well indeed, was horrid when she misbehaved.<sup>2</sup> The standard American pronunciation of *Norwich* as the name of the Connecticut town likewise ruins the old nursery rime about the man from Norwich who ate some porridge. Before Yankee know-how, fortified by book learning, got to work on the place name, *Norwich* and *porridge* were exact rimes.

Examples of spelling pronunciations are not hard to find; for instance, *breeches* traditionally rimes with *riches* and *clapboard* with *scabbard*. The initial *h* sound in *humor*, *host*, and *hostel*—words that come into English from Old French—is due entirely to the spelling with *h*; *humor* wavers between pronunciation with and without the initial breathing, which, incidentally, never occurs in *honor*, *honest*, *heir(ess)*, and *hour*. The *h*, of course, has never had any phonetic significance in either Old or Modern French; its occurrence in the spellings represents a remodeling of early Old French spelling on the basis of the Latin originals. Many pronunciations based upon written forms have long been universal, for instance that of *author* with the middle consonant as in *ether*; the word appears in late Middle English (from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century), taken from Old French without the written *h*, which was latter inserted in a misguided effort to make the word look more “learned.” Ultimately the pseudo-learned spelling effected the change in pronunciation, with the written *th* being interpreted as a spelling for the sound that it usually represents in English. The same thing is now happening to *thyme*.

The confusion of writing with speech is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the layman's concept of languages as being “phonetic” or “unphonetic.” The terms are frequently so used; thus, one may be informed that Spanish is a “phonetic language,”<sup>3</sup> whereas English is not. What is meant by such absurd statements seems to be simply that the spelling conventions of Spanish symbolize the pronunciation of Spanish more satisfactorily than do our own spelling conventions that of English, about which we shall have much more

<sup>2</sup>The jingle ran something like this:

There was a little girl  
 Who had a little curl  
 Right in the middle of her forehead;  
 And when she was good  
 She was very, very good;  
 But when she was bad she was horrid.

It may no longer be very widely current in juvenile circles.

<sup>3</sup>It is, according to Miriam Chapin, “easy, phonetic, musical” (*How People Talk* [New York, 1947], p. 136).



2. forscor and seven yeers agæ our fathers braut forth on this continent a nue næshion, conseevd in liberty, and dedicæted tō the proposishion that aull men ar creæted eekwal.

Sir James Pitman's Augmented Roman or Initial Teaching Alphabet.

3. Forskor and sevn yeerz agoe our faadherz braut forth on this kontinent a nue naeshon, konseevd in liberti, and dedikaeted to the propozishon that aul men ar kreaeted eequel.

R. E. Zachrisson, *Anglic* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1932), p. 76.

4. Foarscore and seven years ago our faadhers braught forth on this continent a new nation, conceevd in liberty, and dedicated to the propozition that aul men ar created equal.

Axel Wijk, *Regularized English* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1959), p. 333.

5. The following words have both traditional and spelling pronunciations. Underline the part of each word that is sometimes repronounced from the spelling. Use a dictionary if you are unsure.

- |           |               |                 |           |             |
|-----------|---------------|-----------------|-----------|-------------|
| 1. arctic | 3. conduit    | 5. handkerchief | 7. kiln   | 9. wont     |
| 2. brooch | 4. forecastle | 6. hover        | 8. schism | 10. worsted |

## SOME COMMON LINGUISTIC FALLACIES

The widespread belief that languages somehow have souls and that they in some way reflect the racial, national, and even spiritual characteristics of those who speak them cannot be supported by any available evidence. It is obvious that the technological, economic, and cultural development of a people is reflected in the word stock of its language; one would not expect to find words meaning 'nail' in languages spoken by those who live in thatched lean-tos or igloos, or a word meaning 'God' (in contrast to 'god') among those who are polytheistic, or for that matter words designating any of the material and spiritual phenomena peculiar to Western European culture among those who have no concern whatever with this particular culture. But the presence or absence of specific vocabulary items is no real test of linguistic soul—whatever that may mean—nor of the efficacy of a language for those who speak it.

When the great Danish Anglicist Otto Jespersen declared that "as the language is, so also is the nation," it is doubtful that he had vocabulary items

in mind. Nevertheless, he was to some extent considering matters that really have nothing to do with language per se, but rather with matters of style. English is, he said, "methodical, energetic, business-like and sober," not much given to "finery and elegance," and opposed to pedantic restrictions of any sort—thus evincing the very characteristics that he saw, or fancied he saw, and admired in the English nation.<sup>4</sup> It is highly doubtful that the linguistic characteristics that he so admired in English reflect in any way the collective soul—if we can conceive of such a thing—of the English-speaking peoples of the world, or even those who have chosen to stay at home in England.

It is unlikely, however, that when he was writing in 1905 Jespersen had in mind anything quite so specific as Edmund Wilson's belief that, just as the will of the ancient Jewish people "finds expression in the dynamic verb forms [of classical Hebrew], so the perdurability of the people is manifested in what may be called the physical aspects of the language."<sup>5</sup> Nor would Jespersen, it is needless to say, have been astonished, as was V. S. Pritchett, that in Germany "agreeable, straightforward people speak German, a language bursting with grammatical complexities, and not a nonchalant, grammarless tongue like our own."<sup>6</sup> We can forgo here any detailed comment on Pritchett's identification of grammar with a particular system employing a comparatively high degree of **inflection**—the modification of the form of words, usually by means of endings, to indicate grammatical relationships. To suppose, however, that English is grammarless because it has considerably fewer such inflectional modifications than German is to be unaware of the manifold other grammatical devices by which we communicate with one another—quite aside from the fact that any language must have grammar, which is to say a system.

T. R. Fyvel, writing in the *Spectator* (London), shows an even more extreme disapproval of the German language, believing it to be partly responsible for the rise of Nazism: "to explain how the scum of the earth came to seize control in Germany must lead one far beyond the unemployment days and Versailles, deep into the nature of the German romantic movement and the structure of the German language . . ."<sup>7</sup> Somewhat more vehement toward yet another language is Miriam Chapin in *How People Talk* (p. 86):

Quite a case could be made out for the assertion that if the Japanese had not spoken such a thoroughly cussed language, they would never have let their rulers embark on such a career of conquest. . . . If the

<sup>4</sup>*Growth and Structure of the English Language*, 9th ed. (New York, 1956), p. 17. First published in 1905.

<sup>5</sup>"On First Reading Genesis," *The New Yorker*, May 15, 1954, p. 119.

<sup>6</sup>"Germany," *Holiday*, May 1959, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup>March 13, 1961, p. 301.



ordinary Japanese had spoken Chinese, had known his sensible, rather godless neighbor, he could hardly have accepted so readily the doctrine that China must be bombed and bayoneted into the East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere.

The connection that these authors so clearly see between language and political philosophy, of course, exists only in the realm of linguistic folklore; nevertheless, for the linguist to doubt the existence of such a connection is to bring down coals of fire upon his head, so deeply rooted are such notions. An amateur linguistic judgment that is at least partly accurate is the bromide attributed to Queen Victoria, to the effect that although German is a very difficult language, German children seem to have no trouble speaking it.

This leads us into another tenet dear to the hearts of those who are fond of speculating about language—that some languages are intrinsically more difficult than others. While it is perfectly true that an English-speaking adult would have more difficulty learning a totally unrelated tongue (say Turkish or Chinese) than a closely related one (say German or Dutch) or even a more remotely related one (say Russian or Greek), it does not follow that Turkish and Chinese are intrinsically more difficult languages than those belonging to the great Indo-European family of languages, to which English also belongs. The fact is that Turkish and Chinese children have acquired a certain mastery of the grammatical structure of their languages at about the same stage of life as American and English children—at five years or a little earlier. And this is true of all children all over the world. It must be stressed that we are here referring to **grammar**—the system by which we communicate orally—not to vocabulary items, which we go on acquiring all our lives. At the age of five we were all able to say all we wanted to say, without knowing such elegant items as *charisma*, *mystique*, and *viable*; and if at that tender age we used forms like *you was*, *swang* (for *swung*), and *don't never*, we were not using un-English forms at all, as the history of our language shows, but merely currently unfashionable ones.

Aesthetic judgments of a language or a dialect are completely subjective and hence can have no real validity; they merely indicate what one likes to hear. Such judgments are therefore eschewed by the linguist. It is, however, widely believed that certain languages are more “beautiful” or more “musical” than others—for instance, that Italian is somehow more beautiful, more musical than other languages. When a well-known professor of Italian descent was asked in a television interview (no more ill-informed than most such interviews that deal with language) what was the most beautiful language, he attempted, quite correctly, to evade the question; when the interviewer came forth, as was practically inevitable, with the question “Isn’t Italian the most musical language?” the good professor, realizing that this was no occasion for disputatiousness, would say no more than, Well, he supposed