

SIMEON POTTER

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# Our Language

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A popular study of the English  
language – its sources, its history,  
its peculiar genius,  
and how it is and should be used  
in speech and writing



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'... the language which so many love  
and so few know how to use.'

R. W. CHAPMAN

Last S.P.E. Tract, 1948

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex  
U.S.A.: Penguin Books Inc., 3500 Clipper Mill Road, Baltimore 11, Md  
AUSTRALIA: Penguin Books Pty Ltd, 762 Whitehorse Road,  
Mitcham, Victoria

First published 1950  
Reprinted 1951, 1953, 1954, 1956, 1957, 1959

Made and printed in Great Britain  
by William Clowes and Sons Ltd  
London and Beccles

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Can we ever know too much about the words we use every day of our lives? It is the purpose of this book to present a clear and up-to-date picture of the English language as it is spoken and written in all its amazing variety and complexity. Dr Potter, who has written these chapters specially for the Pelican series, is a university teacher of wide experience and a well-known authority on the history of English. He believes that more people to-day are interested in speech than ever before and that a new spirit of linguistic enterprise and adventure is afoot. All of us, both British and Americans, are becoming more conscious of our mother tongue as something living and changing and amenable to our corporate will. The story of our language, to be sure, is one of gain and loss. Its peculiar structure and its superabundant vocabulary are the outcome of long centuries of growth. To-day English is both strong and rich but, even at its best, it is far from perfect. Is it beyond the wit of man to remedy manifest deficiencies in its inherited mechanism? Can we make the English language of to-morrow yet more effective as a means of communication? These, and scores of other similar questions, will readily occur to the intelligent reader of this book.

'The author is brilliantly successful in his effort to instruct by delighting. He has only 200 pages at his disposal, yet he contrives not only to give a history of English, but also to talk at his ease on rhyming, slang, names, spelling reform, American English, and much else. The book is admirably clear in its main outlines, but its interest for the common reader derives from the wealth of examples at every point: the chapter on names is particularly well done. Altogether a fascinating book.' - *Higher Education Journal*

## CHAPTER I

### *Introductory*

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WE cannot know too much about the language we speak every day of our lives. Most of us, it is true, can get along fairly well without knowing very much about our language and without ever taking the trouble to open a volume of *The Oxford English Dictionary*. But knowledge is power. The power of rightly chosen words is very great, whether those words are intended to inform, to entertain, or to move. English is rapidly becoming a cosmopolitan means of communication and it is now being studied by numerous well-trained investigators on both sides of the Atlantic. It is highly exhilarating to contemplate the progress made in the study of English since the opening years of this century, when Henry Bradley of Oxford and Otto Jespersen of Copenhagen were writing those admirable introductions which have become classics of their kind: *The Making of English* and *Growth and Structure of the English Language*. To men like Bradley and Jespersen we all owe much, both for their tangible contributions to learning and for that new spirit of enterprise and adventure with which they have imbued English studies. That assertion, too often repeated, that Englishmen are not really interested in their own language, is no longer valid. At last we English are showing an awakened interest in our mother tongue as something living and changing and amenable to our corporate will. This we see in many differing spheres: in national and local government, in business and journalism, in film and radio, in school and university. Let us all join freely



in the quest and let us share gladly in that intellectual joy of linguistic exploration which is ours for the seeking every day of our lives.

Our language belongs to the great Indo-European family, and it is therefore related to most of the other languages of Europe and Western Asia from India to Iceland, and to this vast region we must now add Australia and New Zealand on the east, North and South America on the west, and parts of Africa on the south. These languages, nearly or distantly related, all derive and descend from that parent language (called Indo-European, Indo-Germanic, or Aryan) which was spoken five thousand years ago by nomads living in the plains of what is now the Ukraine and Southern Russia. Their starting-point or first home is not readily ascertainable. Recently discovered records of Tokharian and Hittite promise to tell us, in the not distant future, something more than we already know about these ancestors of ours. From 6000 to 4000 B.C. settled life in cities had certainly begun in the river valleys of the Euphrates and the Indus. But perhaps there never was a time when men and women speaking Proto-Indo-European lived as one community within a definable geographical region. We may imagine them in the neolithic period wandering about over the Great Lowland Plain from the Rhine to the Aral Sea, or, restricting the picture a little, from the Vistula to the Dnieper. We may fairly regard our ancestral home as a much-extended Lithuania, that medieval Lithuania which, in fact, reached from the Baltic across the Ukraine to the lower waters of the Dnieper. At once we may be reminded that of all the living languages of Europe Lithuanian is the most archaic, preserving in its structural pattern the primitive features of Indo-European most faithfully. That is why the comparative philologist is as much interested in Modern Lithuanian as he is, say, in Sanskrit or Ancient Greek. Hindi and Modern Greek have changed so much more rapidly than Lithuanian, spoken by a people whose homes were shut off for many centuries from

the outside world by primeval forests and impassable marshes. Lithuanian still preserves seven case-forms in its nouns, four tenses and four moods in its verbs, an elaborate series of participles and a highly involved system of inflexions. The distinguished nineteenth-century philologist August Schleicher (1821-68), of the University of Prague, used to spend his summer vacations talking to Lithuanian farmers and recording songs and tales from their lips. He tried hard to reconstruct Indo-European on the basis of Sanskrit for the consonants, Greek for the vowels, and Lithuanian for the inflexions. He had the greatest difficulty, as he himself confessed, with the links or connecting words. Nevertheless, with more zeal than discretion, Schleicher published his nine-line fable of the Sheep and the Horses, *Avis akvasas ka*, in what he conceived to be the 'Aryan primal speech'. The attempt was laudable but temerarious, and it was soon criticized by the *Junggrammatiker*, or Neogrammarians, Brugmann, Osthoff, Paul, Delbrück, and others. Most 'comparatists' to-day, I suppose, would write \**oṽis ekuōs que* as the most likely forms for 'sheep and horses' in Proto-Indo-European, and they would follow convention by marking the phrase with a star to denote that the forms are hypothetical and that they merely represent assumed forms which may have to be modified later in the light of new knowledge. Yet Schleicher's methods were sound. He proceeded from the known to the unknown, and by talking with Lithuanians he was able to acquire a feeling for a more highly inflected language than his native German and to gain a deeper insight into the earlier stages of Indo-European than most of his contemporaries.

Because Indo-European was an inflected language, word order was free and the division of the sentence into subject and predicate was not so clearly marked. Let us take a simple illustration from Latin. I can say in Latin *Taurus puerum fugavit*, 'The bull chased the boy', and *Taurum puer fugavit*, 'The boy chased the bull', without changing the order of the two

substantives, but by varying their inflexions. Or, again, I can vary the word order in either sentence and achieve slightly different shades of emphasis which would be best shown in Modern English by intonation: *Taurus puerum fugavit*, *Puerum taurus fugavit*, *Taurus fugavit puerum*, *Puerum fugavit taurus*, *Fugavit taurus puerum*, *Fugavit puerum taurus*, and so on. In Old English I can do this also to a limited extent, but I cannot do it in Modern English without ambiguity. The poet may be willing to run this risk. So, for example, Gray wrote in his *Elegy*—

And all the air a solemn stillness holds

— and the more thoughtful reader may well wonder whether *air* or *stillness* is the subject, while realizing that the meaning is little affected either way.

From Indo-European to Modern English by way of Common Germanic, West Germanic, Anglo-Frisian, Old English and Middle English, our language has shown a gradual process of simplification and of the breaking down of inflexions. The development has been, for the most part, in one direction all the time: from *synthesis* to *analysis*. There have been both gain and loss. We need not assume too readily with Jespersen that this analytic process has meant unqualified *progress in language* or that our forebears of five, four, and three thousand years ago were less gifted linguistically than we. Think what linguistic alertness and precision are required of those speakers who wield an elaborate system of inflexions effectively and faultlessly! The language of twentieth-century London and New York may become a very fine and delicate instrument in the hands of accomplished masters, but its qualities and potentialities are different from those of, let us say, Periclean Greek. How much Sir Walter Scott regretted that he knew so little Greek! As Gilbert Murray has so well said (in *Greek Studies*), the Greeks had 'built up a language amazingly capable of expressing the various requirements of the human mind: the precision of prose, the magic and passion of poetry, the

combination of exactitude and far-flung questioning that constitutes philosophy, the jests refined or ribald that make men laugh two thousand years after. Can one see by what efforts or what accidents this came about; or what actual phenomena of language have led to this strange power? One point seems to be clear, that it depends on a richness of inflexions which enables a speaker to vary greatly the order of his words in the sentence and thus to capture whole territories of emphasis and suggestion that are barred out to the uninflected languages.'

Classical Greek and Common Germanic were roughly contemporaneous and they were alike descended from parent Indo-European. Without mixing metaphors unduly, it may be said that a family has branches and that branches have divisions. The Indo-European family had eight branches of which Greek and Germanic were two, the other six being Indo-Iranian, Armenian, Albanian, Latin, Celtic, and Balto-Slavonic. Germanic (also called Teutonic or Gothonic) later showed three geographical divisions: East Germanic (Burgundian, Vandal, and Gothic); North Germanic (Norwegian, Icelandic, Swedish, and Danish); and West Germanic (German, Dutch, Flemish, Frisian, and English).

When Tacitus wrote that well-known description of the Germanic nations and their institutions called *Germania* in the first century after Christ, those nations were still on the move and that tripartite linguistic division into East, North, and West was in progress. *Germania* extended from Scandinavia in the north to the Ore Mountains in the south and from the Rhine in the west to the Vistula in the east. No Primitive Germanic writing of any kind is extant and the forms of words assumed for that language are just as hypothetical as those postulated for Indo-European. In our search for the earliest of all Germanic recorded forms we must go north to the runic inscriptions of Scandinavia, the most ancient of which, according to Otto von Friesen, date from the third century. In order to find the most ancient literary records,

however, we must look to East Germanic, to the Biblical translations of Wulfila (311-83), Bishop of the Visigoths, who, to escape persecution, led his congregation in the year 348 across the Danube into the Roman province of Lower Moesia, now Bulgaria. Bishop Wulfila continued to lead his people in their new home for a third of a century and during that time he translated the greater part of the Bible into Gothic. This translation was used and revised after his death and some parts have survived from each of the Gospels and from the thirteen Pauline epistles, as well as fragments of Ezra and Nehemiah and a few pages of the *Skeireins* or Commentary. Gothic was still spoken in the seventeenth century in the Crimea, and we know something about this Crimean Gothic because some sixty words of it were noted by a Fleming named Ogier Ghislain van Busbecq, Charles V's envoy from the Low Countries to Constantinople, and published by him in Paris in 1589. It is easy to see why Gothic is valued so highly by the advanced student of English. Wulfila's Bible is the oldest Germanic document, three centuries older than anything in Old English and four centuries older than anything in Old High German. It is the nearest thing to Common Germanic. Without it the 'Anglicist' would be at a yet greater disadvantage than he is already as compared with advanced students of French, Spanish, and Italian who have their Common Italic or Romanic in the form of Latin with its superabundant testimony preserved in the most extensive literature of antiquity.

What proportion of words in present-day English can be traced back with a fair measure of certainty to Indo-European? To this apparently simple question there is no ready answer. Even if we eliminate all those words which, after a little thought, most of us would recognize as non-Indo-European - such words, I mean, as *cherub* and *seraph* from Hebrew, *zenith* and *nadir* from Arabic, *coffee* and *kiosk* from Turkish, and *bamboo* and *sago* from Malay - we are left with many forms

whose ulterior etymology is obscure and whose geographical range is surprisingly limited. As we shall see in a later chapter, new expressions may appear overnight as if coming from nowhere. These *ex nihilo* forms may be the deliberate creations of one man or of one social group or of a whole community. Words denoting the closest family relationships, *father* and *mother*, *brother* and *sister*, *son* and *daughter* (but not *husband* and *wife*) go back to the parent language, as we should expect. So, too, do the names of parts of the human body, like *arm*, *ear*, *eye*, *tooth*, *heart*, *foot*, *nail*, and the numerals from *one* to *ten*; *night*, *star*, *dew*, *fire*, *snow*, *thunder*, and *wind*; *feather* and *nest*; *beaver*, *cow*, *goat*, *goose*, *hound*, *mouse*, *ox*, *steer*, *sow*, and *wether*; *door*, *timber*, *thatch* (but not *window*); *axle*, *nave*, *wain*, *wheel*, and *yoke*. As we contemplate that most peaceful of all scenes, a flock of sheep grazing on a hillside, we may reasonably surmise that *ewe*, *lamb*, and *sheep* are all three ancient words, 'as old as the hills'. Yet, as C. T. Onions has recently reminded us (in *The Character of England*), *ewe* alone is of Indo-European range, *lamb* is unknown outside Germanic, and *sheep* is limited to West Germanic. The ewes or yowes of Isobel Pagan's song which so haunted the imagination of Robert Burns -

Ca' the yowes to the knowes,  
 Ca' them where the heather grows,  
 Ca' them where the burnie rows,  
 My bonnie dearie

- are very near to Indo-European *ouis* which we encountered earlier in this chapter in the title of August Schleicher's fable. English *lamb* has its counterpart in Swedish and German *Lamm* and Danish and Dutch *lam*, because these four languages are Germanic, but search where we will - French *agneau*, Spanish *cordero*, Italian *agnello*, Russian *baráshék*, Czech *iehně* - we find other roots or etyma outside Germanic. Dutch *schaap* and German *Schaf* are clearly our *sheep*, but in the

Scandinavian languages we find Danish *Faar* and its variants, reminding us that the Faeroes are probably the Sheep Islands.

I have just glanced at the morning newspaper and I have been joyfully reminded of happy ski-ing holidays by an attractive photograph of the *Langlauf* at St Moritz. *Langlauf* is 'long leap', but *leap* meant 'dance' and 'run' rather than 'jump' in older English. This picture shows the winning-post of the famous Swiss cross-country race. It is *-lauf* and not *-laup* because *-p* is subject to a special change known as the Second or High German Sound Shift seen, for example, in German *Schiff* as compared with English *ship*. We think of Dutch *loop* and then of other similar trios in German, Dutch, and English which show a comparable vowel harmony: *Baum - boom - beam* (our *boom*, like so many other naval terms, is from Dutch; the meaning 'tree' is preserved in *hornbeam*): *Auge - oog - eye* (but Scottish *ee*): *Rauch - rook - reek* (meaning 'smoke' - Edinburgh is 'Auld Reekie'): *Hauf(e) - hoop - heap* (German again shows the Second Sound Shift; Dutch *hoop* lives in English in 'forlorn hope' for 'forlorn heap' or 'troop'), and so on. Dutch is nearer to English than German is, and Frisian is nearer still. The Frisians, who still inhabit parts of the Dutch province of Friesland as well as the islands along the west coast of Schleswig, were the neighbours of the Angles and the Saxons in the fifth century. There are strong reasons for regarding Anglo-Frisian as one language at that time. Procopius mentioned the Frisians among the early settlers of Britain. They were then a great maritime power with a centre at Dorestad near Utrecht and with colonies in Scandinavia.

Of all the tongues descended from Indo-European, English has had most contacts with its kindred near and far. Leaving their continental homes, the English entered a land inhabited by Celts and they have had Celts as their neighbours ever since. With the coming of Christian missionaries they were brought into close contact with those who spoke Latin and,

after the Norman Conquest, with those who spoke various forms of a language derived from Latin. To Latin Greek was added with the revival of learning and, later still, by their memorable political association with India, the English lived and worked for nearly two centuries with peoples whose languages were descended from the oldest and most easterly branch of all.



## CHAPTER II

### *Old English*

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CERTAIN movements or events stand out in the history of English: the settlement in this island of Jutes, Saxons, and Angles in the fifth and sixth centuries; the coming of St Augustine in 597 and the subsequent conversion of England to Latin Christianity; the Scandinavian invasions in the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries; the Norman Conquest in the eleventh; the revival of learning in the sixteenth; and the migration of English-speaking people to North America, Australasia, and South Africa mainly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Of all these movements the first was clearly the most decisive. Our knowledge of it is derived from *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which was written in Latin by the Venerable Bede about 730, nearly three centuries after the first Jutes, Hengist and Horsa, landed at Ebbsfleet in the Isle of Thanet in 449. Bede did not mention the Frisians, as Procopius had done, but he drew a fairly clear picture of the settlement of Britain by these three related 'nations' or tribes: the Jutes who came first and settled in Kent, Southern Hampshire, and the Isle of Wight; the Saxons who afterwards occupied the rest of England south of the Thames, and then the Angles or English, who founded homes in regions north of the Thames. The Jutes came from Jutland, the Saxons from Holstein, and the Angles from Schleswig. Doubtless the Angles took their name from that *angle* or corner of land which juts out slightly into the Southern Baltic between the modern towns of