THE STORY OF ENGLISH

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When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who, being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay . . .

Dr Samuel Johnson, from his Preface to *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755

A living language is like a man suffering incessantly from small haemorrhages, and what it needs above all else is constant transactions of new blood from other tongues. The day the gates go up, that day it begins to die.

H. L. Mencken, from *The American Language*, 1919

Introduction

SPEAKING OF ENGLISH

"The English language", observed Ralph Waldo Emerson, "is the sea which receives tributaries from every region under heaven." On a much smaller scale, the same might be said of this book, which is published to coincide with a television series. Its authors have drawn on a wealth of original material collected during the making of the films, together with a wide range of published and unpublished sources, to tell the story of our language. To adapt Shakespeare slightly, we have been "at a great feast of language and stolen some of the scraps". Our work has been inspired by first-hand sound recordings of a great variety of contemporary English – in the United Kingdom and Ireland, in North America, in Australia, in the Caribbean, in India and South-East Asia, and in post-colonial Africa. We have been fortunate enough to have an experience of the living language across the world that is denied to many scholars and we have incorporated the highlights of our research, recorded on film and sound tape in the years 1983–5, into the text.

We have tried to tell the whole story. Some academic studies tend to dwell on the catalogued literary past rather than on the messier, teeming present, on Chaucer and Noah Webster at the expense of Caribbean creole or space-speak. Until recently, the focus of scholarship has been on the Anglo-American story, and while giving proper weight to this main narrative, we have also explored some of the newer sub-plots of the language, in places like China, Singapore, Holland and West Africa. A more accurate title for this book might have been *The English Languages*, an idea to which we shall return in the final chapter.

We have also paid attention to the everyday spoken English of fishermen, wheelwrights, cowboys, folk singers, priests, doctors, sugar planters, computer hackers, etc., talking about their work in their own variety of the language. This approach emphasizes an important truth about language which the fixity of print can sometimes obscure: that it is always in flux, and that its form and expression are beyond the control of schoolteachers or governments. What is more, when you look at language under a microscope, you can see it changing almost as you watch it: words and phrases, pronunciations and rhythms become widely imitated at astonishing speed. Watching the rough-cut of the programme about Black English, one of our production assistants was amazed to discover that her ten-year-old son was imitating the latest slang from the Philadelphia ghettos – in London.

We know that for many people English has become synonymous with English Literature. While focusing on the spoken word, we have also looked to the literary innovators of our language and quoted their opinions. In some cases their views on English emerge as asides in well-known novels or essays. It has been one of the pleasures of the research to consider the canon of English and American writing from a new perspective. (The "bel canto" English and American writers have tended to be the most perceptive in their comments on the language. Charles Dickens says more than Jane Austen, Mark Twain more than Henry James.) The balance between the spoken and the written is partly shaped by the story itself. The first Anglo-Saxons were illiterate. The present generation of English users have more ways to write and record it than ever before.

The English language surrounds us like a sea, and like the waters of the deep it is full of mysteries. Until the invention of the gramophone and the tape-recorder there was no reliable way of examining everyday speech. Anyone who has spent time with the quasi-scientific writings of the phoneticians could be forgiven for thinking that their laborious notations hardly explain the mysteriously fluid substance they are trying to analyse. The music of our language eludes transcription. Similarly, written English has always been the preserve of the educated minority, and gives us tantalizingly few clues about the English of earlier centuries. English is – and always has been – in a state of ungovernable change, and the limits of scholarship are demonstrated by phrases like the famous "Great Vowel Shift", hardly more informative than the "unknown land" of early cartography.

There is another part of language that is almost impossible to analyse: its genius. When William Morris – idealizing the German and Scandinavian roots of English – proposed the replacement of lieutenant by *steadholder*, grotesque by *whimwork*, and omnibus by *folkwain*, his suggestions were seen for what they were, a new romanticism. The absurdity of such usages comes partly from their artificiality and partly from an intangible sense of language appropriateness. The essayist and Anglophile Logan Pearsall Smith, who wrote one of the best books on the language, courageously faced up to the inexpressible side of this subject in some memorable paragraphs about "the genius of the language", which he defined as, "the power that guides and controls its progress", a passage that should perhaps be pinned up in Departments of Linguistics throughout the world.

> 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, for instance, that it is now wrong to say "much" rather than "many thanks", though Shakespeare used the phrase; that "much happier" is right, though the old "much happy" is wrong, and that *very* must in many cases take the place once occupied by *much*. We say a picture was *hung*, but a murderer was *hanged*, often, perhaps, without being conscious that we make the distinction. . . .

> Grammarians can help this corporate will by registering its decrees and extending its analogies; but they fight against it in vain. They were not able to banish the imperfect passive, "the house is being built", which some of them declared was an outrage on the language; the phrase "different to" has been used by most good authors in spite of their protests; and if the Genius of the Language finds the split infinitive useful to express certain shades of thought, we can safely guess that all opposition to it will be futile.

Second only to the mystery of the subject, and related to it, is the sheer difficulty of writing about the English language. Treating it as a science is deadening for most people. Treating it, as we have done, as a mixture of social history, literature and linguistics still does not overcome the problem that language is also gesture, tone and context. We hope that constructing each chapter in the shape of a journey moving through time and space gives our subject a touch of the colour and drama that it sometimes seems to lack.

True to the popularizing credo of the television series, we decided that the world was our oyster (or *erster*, as they are alleged to say in Brooklyn), a phrase whose origins have become buried, like so much of our language, in the whispers of the past. We have relished the challenge, and our aim has been to make this book a straightforward narrative that ranges widely over the numerous varieties of English. In the same spirit, we have tried to give the chapters a sense of *place* – our experience of language and the laws governing its evolution suggests that geography is one of the fundamental factors: the English–Gaelic division of the Scottish Lowlands and Highlands is a case in point. For those who want to go further into the by-ways and backwoods of language, there are extensive notes and source materials at the end. In the same spirit of accessibility and readability, we have avoided using technical jargon and phonetic symbols, and we have also tried to steer clear of what the late American journalist Peter Lisagor of the *Chicago Daily News* used to call "out of town words", for example *polymorphic*, *isogloss* and *homophone*. (We should, in passing, add that this book does not address itself in any serious sense to the *theory* of language, though some linguistics is implicit in most chapters.)

The logic of this global approach has led us to make a basic descriptive decision: rather than talk about *accents* and *dialects* of English, we talk of *varieties*. Again and again we found that the line between *accent*, *dialect* and *language* is not a sure or a steady one and is often disputed, even by specialists. Is Scottish English, for instance, a language or a dialect? The experts find it hard to be certain. It has been said that "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy", but *my* accent often turns out to be *your* dialect. There are other problems. If we say that an accent is a set of sounds peculiar to a region, and that a dialect includes peculiarities not only of sound, but also of grammar and vocabulary, the definition excludes what is often the *class* basis of an accent, irrespective of locality. The English language is a continuum of speech. Using *variety*, we avoid the pejorative overtones of *dialect*. As countless scholars have pointed out, Standard English is itself only a dialect, albeit a prestigious one. On the other hand, there is no point in pretending that certain kinds of English are not *perceived* to be

superior. Many Americans, for instance, will tell a speaker of British English that his or her speech is "better" than theirs. The news readers of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation seem to parody BBC English in an attempt to emulate the British model. Inverted snobbery makes a middle-class British rock star like Mick Jagger adopt what he thinks is a "Cockney" accent. In the South and West of the United States, it is currently fashionable to adopt "country" usages and rhythms.

If our approach seems more journalistic than scholastic, we felt this was appropriate for a subject that, unlike many academic studies, is both popular and newsworthy. Hardly a week goes by without a news story, often on the front page, devoted to some aspect of English: the "decline" of standards; the perils and hilarities of Franglais or Japlish; the adoption of English as a "national" language by another Third World country. For all the dry connotations of the word, "language" is good box-office. Inside the newspapers – of Britain and the United States especially – columns on language generate, as in the case of William Safire on the *New York Times*, the paper's biggest mailbag.

English has also become big business, perhaps the United Kingdom's richest natural resource, marketed with considerable skill and professionalism throughout the world, from Australia to Zanzibar. Denis Forman, Chairman of Granada Television, expressed an aspect of this idea in his McTaggart Lecture at the 1984 Edinburgh Festival:

> Of [English] assets, Shakespeare is the greatest. His value on the national balance sheet can be computed by assessing the total profit of the Shakespeare industry in the current year in terms of domestic and foreign trade and grossing this up over, say, twenty years, thereby reaching a current market valuation ... If then the government were to pass a bill privatizing the full range of Shakespearian copyright, it could even be that the capital value of Associated Stratford Industry plc would considerably exceed the £297 million set as the price for British Leyland's Jaguar.

In the last ten years, the global selling of the language has reached astonishing proportions, from China's revolutionary English language policy, to the publication of the *MacQuarie Dictionary of Australian English*, to the near-total anglicization of international trade and politics, from OPEC to summitry.

We have tried to reflect the fact that language belongs to each one of us, to the flower-seller as much as to the professor, which is of course the explanation for such popular interest: everyone uses words, even if, at first, they don't stop to think about them. But when they do, language can generate an astounding amount of heat. What is it about language that makes people so passionate, and so curious? The answer is that there is almost no aspect of our lives that is not touched by language. We live in and by language. We all speak and we all listen: so we are all interested in the origins of words, and their rise and fall. How did *nice* once mean "foolish or wanton"? Why did we never adopt *neverness* as a synonym for "eternity"? We travel more and more: so visitors to London are intrigued to discover that Rotten Row is a corruption of *la route du roi* (the King's way). We are all in some senses political, and so is

language. People have been killed in Northern Ireland for their pronunciation of the ABC. In Canada, STOP signs get repainted ARRÊT by the Quebecois. Sexual identity has become a political issue, and so have titles like *Mr*, *Mrs* and *Ms*. In Britain, some women have become *wimmin*, to avoid the "sexist" use of the word "men". National pride will stimulate arguments about Franglais, or AmerEnglish. As citizens of a constantly changing world, which is revealed in language, we can become irrationally aggressive or defensive about usages like "hopefully" and "gay", or rival pronunciations like "con'troversy" versus "contro'versy", to name a famous one. People tend to fasten their anxieties about the changing world on to words. In the right context, a split infinitive can look like the end of civilization as we know it.

The heat of language is matched by its myths. From the hoary old chestnut that Shakespearean English is alive and well and living in the Ozark mountains, to the belief that the speech of Merseyside is attributable to bad colds and blocked noses, to the racist slur that Blacks speak the way they do because they have thick lips, there are several popular superstitions which we have, where possible, tried to demolish. In the process, we may have fallen victim to a few myths ourselves, probably the inventions of a local informant with a taste for mischief. In our efforts to be truthful and accurate, we have at times sympathized with Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "It is perfectly phrased, and quite as true as any observation in civilized life should be." In the end, truth and untruth, legends and apocryphal tales, all go to make up what W. H. Auden once called "our marvellous native tongue".

None of this would have come to anything, either on television or in print, without the practical help and guidance of a number of people, whom we would like to thank. Above all, this project is the brainchild of Brian Wenham, then Controller of BBC2, who first responded to the idea, commissioned a pilot programme and arranged for co-production finance. If Brian Wenham was the godfather, Roger Laughton in the Department of Network Features was the midwife, seeing the series through some difficult times at the BBC, and bringing some characteristically distinctive ideas to the project during its long gestation. The television series is also indebted to the co-producers, MacNeil-Lehrer-Gannett Productions in the United States. Both the book and the series owe a special thank you to Matthew Evans, Chairman of Faber and Faber, for his generous support and encouragement from first to last.

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