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THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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THE ROMANCE OF WORDS

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WORDS ANCIENT AND MODERN

A CONCISE ETYMOLOGICAL DICTIONARY OF MODERN ENGLISH

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By John W. Clark

A HISTORY OF BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH SINCE 1900

ERNEST WEEKLEY

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

WITH A CHAPTER ON
THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN ENGLISH
BY
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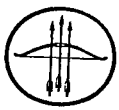

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PREFACE

This book was first published in 1928 by Messrs Ernest Benn. A few years later an American edition was produced by Messrs Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith. Both have been out of print for about twenty years. This new edition, which has the kind approval of the above-mentioned firms, has been carefully revised and brought up to date, many of the statements it contains have been somewhat amplified, and the book has been made more complete by the addition of an introductory survey of the subject, and of a chapter on American English kindly contributed by Professor John W. Clark of the University of Minnesota. The reading list has been revised and extended.

I wish to thank Mr. Eric Partridge, editor of the Language Library, for help with the proofs and for many helpful suggestions.

1952 E. W.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTORY

THE history of a language largely reflects that of the people who speak it. The most superficial study of French shows it to be almost entirely of Latin origin, from which it can be inferred that France was for a long time a province of the Roman Empire, and that during that period the Celtic dialects of Gaul had completely disappeared in favour of colloquial Latin. But a closer scrutiny reveals the existence of a small but important Teutonic element in French, consisting chiefly of words connected with war and administration, due to the Frankish conquest of Gaul in the fifth century, a conquest which actually changed the name of the country, while the adjective *franc*, with its suggestion of the free and noble, continues the tradition of a once dominant caste. The Teutonic conquerors, relatively few in number, gradually adopted the language of the conquered, just as, at a later date, the Norsemen did in Neustria, which they had transformed into Normandy. Beyond the Pyrenees we find another language of Latin origin, but so full of Arabic words as to prove that much of Spain must at one time have been under Moorish rule, a rule which was prevented from spreading to Southern France only by Charles Martel's great victory over the

Moslem invaders in 782. That Italian is a Latin tongue is an obvious historical development; but, crossing the Adriatic one comes to a country of which the name, Rumania, goes back to Trajan's Balkan conquests, while the language, though now inevitably impregnated with Slavonic, is still basically Latin in origin. The history of the German people and the German language, and even the history of Europe, might have been very different if the annihilation of a great Roman army by Arminius (Hermann) had not decided the Emperor Augustus to write off Germany as an unrewarding speculation. What few Latin words of early date are to be found in German are such as would naturally be picked up by frontier traders and officials.

Modern English is the result of three great invasions. The Anglo-Saxons did not simply contribute a limited vocabulary as the Franks had done in Gaul. Theirs was not merely a successful invasion, but a mass migration, resulting in the replacement of Ancient British by a number of Low German dialects, just as Gaulish had given way to Latin. From which it may be inferred that Celtic, unless protected by geographical conditions, such as the highlands and islands of Scotland and the mountains of Wales, is unable to resist the impact of another tongue. The Viking invasion, beginning as a series of raids, also developed into a mass migration and the acquisition of a large part of the country, the Dane-law, by the Norsemen, whom we usually call the Danes, their language gradually amalgamating with the related Anglo-Saxon dialects of the north and east. If the Battle of Hastings had merely resulted in winning a crown for William of Normandy, as the Frankish irruption had

done for Clovis, the French contribution to English might have been as limited and specialized as that of the Franks to what became French; but the King of England was still Duke of Normandy, vast regions of France were subject to English rule under the Angevin kings and during the Hundred Years War, there were continual commercial and political dealings between the two countries, and the great prestige of French medieval literature made the language almost international. It was in French that the first of the great European explorers, the thirteenth century Venetian Marco Polo, recorded his travels in China, where he spent some years with Kubla Khan, and in much of central and southern Asia. In England, towards the end of the Middle Ages, when the language was already virtually unified, it was the fashion to interlard one's conversation with tags of 'French of Paris'. It would be interesting to know who was the first English King to speak habitually the language of his own country. It was certainly in French that Edward III 'let the boy win his spurs' at Cressy and made his historic comment on the Countess of Salisbury's mishap with her garter. A fourth, but peaceful, invasion was that by Latin, which, starting with St Augustine, has continued to enrich English up to the present day.

* * *

With the passage of time languages develop as do human beings and other living growths. The chief characteristic of the development of English has been a constant shedding of the superfluous. Compared with other European languages, English might now almost be classed as uninflected. This process is the result of various factors. It is obvious that in a language compounded of four main

elements the retention of elaborate inflexions peculiar to any one of the four would be an impossibility. Other factors are that linguistic laziness which leads the Englishman to borrow a convenient word rather than make one for himself, the national impatience with what seems unnecessary detail and the national dislike for any kind of regimentation; in fact, a deeply-rooted instinct for 'muddling through' rather than 'planning'. No other language has had the common sense to replace grammatical gender by natural gender, to reduce the definite article to one form and to regard as unnecessary the agreement in gender and number of the adjective with the noun.

Modern English rarely retains two words where one suffices. From the noun *camb*, a comb, Anglo-Saxon formed, with vowel-mutation, the verb *cemban* (cf. German *kamm* and *kämmen*) of which the past participle survives in *unkempt*, but Middle English soon abandoned this for *comb*, as it did the Anglo-Saxon noun *coss* in favour of the mutated verb form *kiss*. To this tendency we partly owe the frequent use of nouns as verbs and verbs as nouns, nouns as adjectives and adjectives as nouns, of which some examples are given on pages 89, 90. Also perhaps the English habit of emphasizing the first syllable of a long word, leaving the remaining syllables to look after themselves in an indistinct murmur. Altogether, English in its simpler colloquial form aims especially at brevity, politely assuming a certain amount of intelligence in the person addressed. There can hardly be any other language which uses such constructions as 'Is Mr X *up* yet?' - 'Yes, he's *up*, but not *down*,' or 'Is Mr X in?' - 'No, he's *out*.' Nor does any

other language indulge in such brevities as *I'm, we're, you'd, they'll, isn't, shan't*, etc. or show such a predilection for clipped words (see pages 91-92). We often substitute an unrelated monosyllable for a longer word, *e.g.* modern youth describes a motion-picture as a *flick* and a telegram is now practically superseded by *wire.*

Some of our simplifications are really assaults on the very essence of linguistics. Such are the colloquial omission of the conjunction *that* and of the relative pronoun, as in 'He said he was tired' or 'The book I am reading.' I know of no parallel to the second of these two constructions, while the occasional omission of the conjunction in German is only allowed at the cost of a subjunctive complication. Another of our simplifications has made it possible for the same verb to be used transitively or intransitively, e.g. 'I wash my hands', 'I wash in cold water', 'I feel the cold', 'I feel ill'; 'He hid his money', 'He hid in a cupboard'; 'I'll open the door', 'The door opens'. This double function of the verb is due to the shedding, as superfluous, of the reflexive pronoun which all other languages retain, e.g. French *'je me lave'*, German *'ich wasche mich'*, etc. This failure to be explicit has sometimes actually changed the meaning of a verb, e.g. our *abscond* comes from Latin *abscondere*, to conceal. Originally the fugitive tried to 'abscond himself', i.e. to find a place of concealment; with the omission of the reflexive it describes the fugitive's departure.

A striking characteristic of English is a certain vagueness in the use of words, so unlike the neat lucidity of French. That remarkable Pole, Joseph Conrad, who knew no English until he was sixteen and then became a great English stylist, was often worried by this eccentricity

of his adopted language. It is interesting to take a 'pivotal' word like *stock*, with the original sense of something sticking up, and study the extraordinary multitude of meanings that it has acquired, or to trace the gradual process by which a verb properly used of an upright position has reached the figurative sense of paying for another person's liquid refreshment. A stock example of vagueness of meaning and economy of vocabulary is the verb to *get*, that stumbling-block of the foreign student of English. It is quite possible, with a little ingenuity, to give an account of a day's happenings without employing any other verb.

It may be to this vagueness that English owes much of its picturesque vigour and its unequalled fitness to be the vehicle of great poetry. Much of my life has been spent in teaching English students to write French and French students to write English. One of my favourite illustrations of the difference between the logical exactness of French and the free fantasy of English has always been concerned with the way in which the two languages describe entrance into a room. The natural French instinct is to use the verb *entrer*, elaborating any special feature of the mode of entry by the addition of an adverb or adverbial phrase. In English the adverb is, so to speak, contained in the verb, and this same verb often has no immediate connection with locomotion. We can *bounce*, *burst* or *bustle* into a room, *clump* or *creep*, *dart* or *drift*, *meander* or *mooch*, *saunter*, *sidle*, *slink*, *slouch*, *storm*, *waddle* or *wander*, to take a few random examples, to which it would be easy to add many more, ranging from *ambling* to *zigzagging*.

Anatole France once enumerated as the three essential

features of the French language – *d'abord, la clarté; puis encore, la clarté; et enfin, la clarté,* and it is true that only by the utmost ingenuity can one be obscure in French. But perfect clarity is not the essential quality of the most imaginative poetry. One does not want 'magic casements' to provoke the historic query, *'Qu'est-ce que cela prouve?'* A great French poet, Baudelaire, lays stress on that *'obscurité indispensable'* by which true poetry is characterized. It is perhaps owing to this dreamy vision of words that, in the opinion of a distinguished French critic, all other poetry is prose when compared with the great English lyrists of the nineteenth century.

On the question of admitting foreign words and phrases into one's national language two quite opposite views are held. Some maintain that the purity of the mother tongue should be protected against all intrusion, almost a comic formula when applied to such a composite language as English! Others favour the constant enrichment of the language by the adoption of expressive terms no matter from what source. In Germany there has been, since the eighteenth century, a tendency to practise 'speech-purification' by transforming essential foreign words into honest German currency, e.g. *fernrohr* (far-tube) for telescope and *regenschirm* (rain-defence) for umbrella; also, regrettably from the point of view of international science, *sauerstoff* and *wasserstoff* for oxygen and hydrogen. There have been similar, though less fanatical, movements in England, but these have been on the whole abortive, though the excellent Anglo-Saxon compound *folk-lore* has been widely adopted as an acceptable substitute for 'popular antiquities'.

The English practice has always been to borrow words

rather than coin them from native material. This is probably one more result of our uniquely mixed vocabulary. The Dutch settlers in South Africa made up good Dutch names for all the new animals and plants they found. One need only think of the *springbok* and so many other *boks* described by their characteristic features. We either adopt native names, such as *gnu*, *dingo* and *okapi*, or let somebody else, such as the above-mentioned Boers, do the naming. In Chapters Eight and Nine some indications are given of our very extensive borrowings of words from French and Latin. Even more characteristic of our readiness to annex the terse and effective is our adoption of innumerable phrases which express succinctly what would often require a wordy explanation in English. For instance, we may wish to speak of a play or novel of which the favourable reception is due rather to the high reputation of the author than to the intrinsic quality of the work, but the admirable French *succès d'estime* puts it in a nutshell. Equally admirable, though less familiar, is *esprit d'escalier*. There is no exact English equivalent for *arrière-pensée* and *faux pas*, while *coup d'état*, *sauve-qui-peut*, *pied-à-terre*, *tête-à-tête* and dozens more are useful acquisitions. In fact, the national attitude towards the whole question is dictated by practical common sense.

The abundance of our Latin phraseology, an abundance which has no European parallel, is an inheritance from the later Middle Ages, when every educated man could read and write Latin, the international language of the literate. Even now an author, correcting his proofs, instructs the printer with *dele* and *stet* and indicates an omission with a *caret*. Much of this phraseology derives from Law Latin and from the disputations of the school-

men. The following examples of Latin words might easily be multiplied a hundredfold. It would for instance be possible to compile an almost alphabetical list of words in *-us*, starting with *animus, bacillus, calculus,* and ending with *stimulus, tumulus, virus*. Many of the phrases in general use are really indispensable, e.g. *pari-passu, vice-versa, post mortem, mutatis mutandis, sub judice, ultra vires, quid pro quo, sine die,* etc. Even here English shows its love of ellipsis, e.g. *in statu quo* (*ante*), *non compos* (*mentis*), *sine qua non* (*causa*), or practises its habitual violence on words in *infra dig*(*nitatem*), *pro tem*(*pore*), *nem*(*ine*) *con*(*tradicente*), *ad lib*(*itum*), etc.

If English had remained a purely Teutonic language, it would presumably have developed very much in the same way as modern German has done. It would have continued to form compound words, e.g. our half-dozen compounds of *-sight* might have rivalled the formidable German list which begins with *absicht, ansicht, aufsicht, aussicht* and ends with *zuversicht:* but the introduction of French and Latin terms made such word-creation both difficult and superfluous. It could have retained its elaborate inflexions and those complications of word-order that make German prose a weariness of the flesh. It was the introduction of the lighter southern element which gave to English that flexibility which has made it the most expressive of all European languages. Good English prose, whether simple or ornate, can be read with as much æsthetic pleasure as good English poetry. It may not have the pellucid clarity of French, but it has other qualities, very real though hard to define, which that beautiful tongue lacks.

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