

THE STRUCTURE OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

by

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WITH A CHAPTER ON
AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS

BY

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Preface

This book was written to fill my own need for a suitable text to be used in an introductory course in the structure of English. It is intended for upper-division undergraduates and graduate students making their first acquaintance with the study of the English language as an end in itself. No previous training in linguistics is needed in order to use it. It does, however, make two important assumptions about the reader. The first is that he is what linguists call a *native speaker* of English, preferably American English—that is, one who learned it in infancy as his first language. As such he has a tremendous store of knowledge about it, much of which he is unaware of. One purpose of this book is to bring this fund of knowledge into awareness. The second assumption is that the student is prepared to approach the analytical study of his language with the same interest and open-mindedness he would bring to any other new subject. This means that he is asked to refrain from hasty judgments even when some of his most cherished notions about his native language seem to be called into question. Only so can the dispassionate inquiry which is essential to a scientific study be carried on.

The book is intended to provide the material for a rather full one-semester course, comprising half of the year's course in the English language which all English majors and candidates for the master's degree should have. It can advantageously be followed by a second semester devoted to the history of the language and the nature and sources of the vocabulary. Such a survey will give the nonlinguist an adequate idea of the nature of linguistic study

and what it can contribute to the myriad human activities in which language plays a part. A survey of that sort is essential for those who are going to teach English at any level; the final chapter is especially directed to them. It also is the best introduction to the subject for those who intend to go on to further linguistic study. In any case, an extra laboratory hour each week devoted to drill in phonetic and phonemic transcription is strongly recommended.

A word should be said about technical terms: No attempt has been made to suppress them in this book. Indeed, to have done so would have been a disservice to the reader, since a mastery of the terminology is an important part of the introduction to any new science. Where possible, new terms have been introduced in a context making their meaning clear, and have been printed in boldface type at their first appearance. In addition, the most important ones have been brought together and defined in the Glossary at the end of the text.

This book does not presume to present completely original material, although some new notions are put forward in the chapters on grammar and graphics. It is, instead, an attempt to bring together in one place a synthesis of current linguistic knowledge, especially as applied to present-day American English. This being so, my first and greatest debt is to the teachers who have made that knowledge available to me. Among these I should particularly mention Albert C. Baugh, Bernard Bloch, Hans Kurath, Robert Lado, Floyd Lounsbury, Albert Marckwardt, and the late P. V. D. Shelly. Not all of these will agree with all that is written here, any more than they would agree wholly with one another except on the one point on which all linguists are agreed—the fascination of the subject itself.

A second great debt is owed to colleagues, friends, and students who in question and discussion have helped me to formulate and clarify my material and my ideas. I want especially to thank those who have read all or part of the book in preliminary form and whose comments—often extensive, usually perceptive, and always honestly and straightforwardly expressed—have saved me from error. One or two of these are to me anonymous; the others are Harold B. Allen, Richard Beal, Dan Desberg, Robert J. Geist, Sumner Ives, Donald Lloyd, Albert Marckwardt, James Sledd,

Henry Lee Smith, Jr., and William J. Stevens. Needless to say, they cannot be held responsible for what I have written, and only they know what I had written before they set me right. My collaborator, Raven I. McDavid, Jr., has contributed much more than the chapter which bears his name; his responsibility, of course, ends with that chapter, though his influence has been felt in all the rest. His partner in scholarship, as well as in marriage, Mrs. Virginia Glenn McDavid, prepared the maps, and both of them read proofs on the entire book.

Finally I should like to thank those at Franklin and Marshall College who have made my task of writing easier. A. G. Breidenstine, former dean of the college, arranged that my teaching load should be reduced during the year when most of the writing was done. Both he and his successor, Dean J. M. Darlington, as well as Professor M. Ray Adams, chairman of the English Department, have been sympathetic and encouraging throughout the time the book was in plan and process. Valuable help has been given by the librarian of the Fackenthal Library, Herbert Anstaett, and his staff, and by the staff of the Recorder's office, especially Mrs. Marion M. Harper, who helped solve the problem of duplicating a preliminary version for classroom trial.

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**THE
STRUCTURE
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Chapter 1

Language, Languages and Linguistic Science

HUMAN SPEECH

Man is a talking animal. More precisely, man is *the* talking animal. Among all the creatures of the earth there is no other that uses articulate speech for communication. It is true that some animals use sounds to communicate, but their cries can hardly be called articulate. And while certain birds can produce an uncanny imitation of human speech, they communicate nothing by their parrotings. If man is to talk—and he seems unable to refrain from doing so—he is obliged to talk to his fellow man. Furthermore, he always will be. Astronomers assure us with virtual unanimity that none of the other planets of our system can be inhabited by any creatures higher in the scale of evolution than vegetation. And though the laws of probability make it virtually certain that somewhere in the unimaginably vast reaches of the universe there are other highly developed forms of life, the distances between the stars are so great that, notwithstanding the imaginative flights of the science-fiction writers, we shall never meet the inhabitants of other systems face to face. The human race is destined to spend the rest of its allotted span talking to itself.

In order to carry on this characteristically and uniquely human activity, man has developed an intricate apparatus made up of bits,

and pieces of anatomy whose primary functions are quite different from those they perform in speech. It will be our business in the next chapter to look at this apparatus in some detail; for the present we need only recognize that from the diaphragm to the lips, the various organs that take part in producing talk all have other work to do that is biologically more fundamental. So obvious are the primary functions of lips, teeth, and tongue, nose, throat, and lungs that there is no need to describe them here. "What about the vocal cords?" one may ask. Let him try to lift a heavy weight while singing or speaking, and he will soon find that the vocal cords—or **vocal bands**, as we shall henceforth call them—have as their primary function to shut off the windpipe so that the chest muscles may brace themselves against the compressed air of the lungs. Without them we should be even more feeble creatures than we are.

This kind of improvisation is, of course, not confined to man's speech organs. The whale's tail, the seal's flippers, and the bat's wing all remind us that it is Nature's way to patch up an astonishingly efficient mechanism out of organs whose original purpose was quite different, even as a boy makes a scooter out of soapboxes, old expresswagon wheels, and odds and ends of all sorts from behind the garage. Evolution cannot go to the hardware store and pick the parts it needs to produce the organs it has in mind because evolution doesn't know what it has in mind. It just seems to keep tinkering with what is there until something happens. In the case of the speech machinery it tinkered with a miscellaneous group of organs dedicated largely to the basic tasks of eating and breathing. Out of them and the very breath of life itself it made speech.

There is another and even more mysterious side to it. This complexly modulated stream of sound is not mere random or instinctive behavior. It is under the direction of the most remarkable of all Nature's patchworks, the brain. All but a minute fraction of speech—the cry or groan of pain, the grunt of extreme physical exertion—is purposive. It is produced to evoke a response, to assist man in his

lifelong task of controlling his environment. In order to do this, it somehow gets formed into patterns, which are themselves purely arbitrary, but which are associated in the brain with notions about the world around us and how it works. It is the business of the philosopher, not the linguist, to go into the question of the nature of these notions and the extent to which they are an accurate report of the environment. Here we shall simply remark that these notions exist, and that they are in some way related to infinitely complicated connections among the cells of that myriad-circuited switchboard, the cortex of the brain.

The switchboard itself is the province of the neurologist, who is coming to know quite a bit about it. He tells us, for instance, that some of its billions of circuits are already hooked up at birth. A new-born infant is a helpless thing indeed, but it is capable of doing a good many things that require considerable coordination, such as breathing, sucking, wiggling its hands and feet, and crying. It comes equipped with the ability to perform the fundamental acts which with practice and coordination will make up speech: it can make a sustained sound, and it can move various parts of its breathing and sucking apparatus in such a way as to modulate that sound. But not for a year or more does it turn these accomplishments to the task of speaking. The reason is a simple one: the circuits of the brain which will ultimately store a vocabulary of thousands of words, along with a complicated set of patterns of arranging them, are at birth completely nonexistent. The cells are there, but they are of no more use than disconnected wires on the floor of the telephone exchange. They must be hitched up into a network of interconnecting circuits whose complexity is beyond our power to visualize—which is only another way of saying that while voice and the capacity to articulate are inborn, *speech must be learned*.

Of course, it needs no neurologist come from the laboratory to tell us that. Most of us have watched a baby develop from crying to babbling, and from babbling to the momentous utterance of its "first

word" (which sounds like "mama" to Mama and like "dada" to Daddy). But because this process is going on at the same time that the baby is learning other things—to stand up, to grasp and hold, to fit together, and so on—we may not realize that it is really a different kind of learning. A baby kept alive by amiable apes or the traditional wolves would eventually learn to stand, to grasp, and to hold, but it would never learn to speak. The three areas of the left hemisphere of the cerebral cortex which are reserved for speaking would remain forever as blank as they were at birth, just like the corresponding areas on the right side, which none of us use unless a brain injury in infancy leads us to use them as substitutes.

Here, then, is a paradox. Speech, the universal human activity, the very mark and defining criterion of humanity and its unique possession, is not an innate part of man's nature at all. Each individual member of the race must experience in himself the task of learning it from other humans, with or without their conscious assistance. It is a tremendous task, and a magnificent accomplishment—nonetheless magnificent though all attain it. It occupies the center of our attention for several years in early childhood, and though it continues in greater or less degree through life, most of the work has been done by the age of six. Admittedly some few seem so exhausted by the task that they don't learn much else for the rest of their lives; but by learning to speak they have certified their humanity and claimed their place in society. Most of us take it for granted and go on to other things. But no matter what else we study and learn, all our life long we are aware—sometimes only dimly, sometimes with painful vividness—of our dependence on speech to get done the things we feel must be done. And yet, for all this unrivaled importance of speech in human life, most people really know very little about it, and a good deal of what they do "know" is wrong. It is the purpose of this book to correct some of that error and remove some of the fallacies upon which it is based

by bringing together some of the facts about language in general and the twentieth-century American brand of English in particular. We cannot hope to be complete in our investigations of the various facets of language study; in fact, so new is the scientific study of language that many interesting areas are as yet unexplored. But we can, perhaps, draw a sort of map of the territory, which will help each individual student to direct his own natural interest in language intelligently and efficiently.

LANGUAGE AS SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

The first point we must make about language, then, is that it is a *social*, rather than a *biological*, aspect of human life. The point is so important that it must be labored here, even at the expense of overstating the obvious. Let us define as biological those parts of our behavior which are concerned with preserving and prolonging our life, both as individual organisms and as a species. We need not go beyond the immediately obvious categories of breathing, eating, eliminating, reproducing, and nurturing the young. On the other hand, those parts of our behavior which are concerned with preserving and prolonging patterns of relationship among individuals can be called social. Here again the obvious list includes property arrangements, marriage, kinship relations, laws, and customs of all sorts. There is, of course, yet another group of actions which is concerned with what, for lack of a better term, we can call the *psychic* aspects of our life, both as individuals and as organized groups. Here belong religion, art, and, at least, of philosophy and learning. It is true that language is a fundamental part of our actions in this field, which we like to think of as embracing the "highest" qualities of our nature. But because the use of language in this field does not submit itself to the kind of analysis which the linguist uses, we must mark it as the province of the rhetorician, the philosopher, the theologian, and the literary critic. These experts

can profit by the linguist's findings, but they must go further by means of their own methods, which are not his.

Having neatly separated biological and social behavior, we must immediately set about to blur this oversimplified division. It is in the nature of man to mingle the biological and social aspects of his behavior in complicated combinations which are infinitely varied in different times and places. Thus we complicate the essentially biological act of eating by overlaying it with a more or less elaborate set of table manners, which are social in nature and origin. It is biologically more efficient to eat with the fingers; it is socially more acceptable to use a fork. Not even the most primitive of peoples treat sexual intercourse as a purely biological device for insuring the continuity of the species; all human societies make it part of an elaborate pattern of social customs and relationships which are intricately bound up with other forms of social structure and behavior. Most of them also add a third dimension of psychic events and concepts which are embodied in artistic and religious attitudes toward sexual love.

But in spite of these complications, it is always possible to separate the biological and the social aspects of any given kind of behavior, by taking thought and especially by making comparisons. We know that all people eat, so we must mark this down as a biological necessity. But if we have even the least bit of experience outside our own narrow circle, we know that different people eat different things in different ways, so we must attribute both the menu and the table manners to social custom. It seems to be natural for people to attribute to a biological basis many aspects of behavior which are really social. This may be one device by which we preserve and bolster up our social customs. Thus the average American is revolted by the idea of eating grasshoppers or other humans and feels that there is something essentially wholesome about drinking milk. In other words he feels that these preferences are biologically determined. It is only when he learns that there are people who consider

grasshoppers or human flesh great delicacies and others who are physically revolted by the idea of drinking milk that he comes to realize that these preferences and aversions are not part of inherent biological behavior at all, but of acquired social behavior. The revulsion may be none the less physical in nature for being social in origin. And not all people accept with docility all the dietary preferences of their society—which is a rather pompous way of saying that some Europeans and Americans never get up courage enough to eat their first oyster.

Simply stated, our point is this: Speech is a form of behavior which is social in origin and in application; it must be newly learned by each individual as part of his conditioning within the society to which he belongs; it varies arbitrarily from place to place and from time to time; in any group it is intricately bound up with other aspects of social behavior which make up the total repertory or *culture* of that society.

Some corollaries of these facts are important and will engage our attention at various stages of our survey of American English. Since some of them at least are contrary to many widely accepted ideas about language, they may at first appear questionable if not downright wrong. But they flow inevitably from the incontrovertible facts stated above, and upon them the whole substance of linguistic science, and hence of this book, is based. For that reason the more important ones will be brought together here, though the exploration of their implications may come much later.

1. There is no such thing as a “natural” language in the sense of one which is dictated by the nature of things. If there were, all men would speak the same language, instead of several thousand different ones. Each language is, thus, the artificial, arbitrary invention of a social group. This does not, of course, mean that the members of a given group all sat down one day and made up a language. The process is a gradual one, and largely unconscious. But it is nonetheless a process of creation, not of discovery. This is true in spite of the

fact that most peoples firmly believe that they have the secret of the *real* way to talk, while foreigners have more or less perverse and ridiculous caricatures thereof.

2. The nature and form of every language is adapted to the social requirements of the society that uses it. The Eskimos have no single word for what we call *snow*; instead, they have a series of words describing many different kinds of things which we lump together under this single term. These things obviously are central in their society but peripheral in ours. But when an American takes up skiing, he finds that he needs an elaborate vocabulary of snow terms because snow now has become central to him. He further finds that the subgroup of our culture that is interested in skiing has already made up the language of snow-as-it-pertains-to-the-sport-of-skiing. This language he will learn as an essential part of learning how to ski and to hold his own in the society of skiers.

3. It follows from the preceding that we must be very cautious about calling any language intrinsically better or worse than any other. Each language is "good" for the culture that uses it; in fact, it is the language best adapted to that culture. It may not, of course, be the best possible language for that culture, because no man-made things are perfect. To evaluate languages comparatively is, thus, impossible; they are on the whole incommensurable. Classical Greek was the "best" language for ancient Greece, Latin was the "best" language for Rome, American English is the "best" language for Americans, Hottentot is the "best" language for Hottentots. When we compare languages this way, we are really comparing cultures. To say that French is a better language than English is only to say that French culture is better than English culture. This in turn is probably only another way of saying that we like French ways of doing things better than English ways. It would be more accurate to say, for instance, that French is a better language than English for gourmets because French culture pays more attention to the preparation of food than does English culture. Or to put it another

way, the menus of stylish restaurants are full of French words for the same reason that their kitchens are full of French cooks.

4. Similarly, no one language is any more *beautiful* than any other. The question of whether there are any universal standards in aesthetics is one which I gladly leave to philosophers. But as a working principle I think it is safe to say that a large proportion of our aesthetic preferences and judgments, which we consider to be universally valid, are simply expressions of our mastery of the aesthetic standards of our own culture. Again comparisons bring this out very clearly. Certainly there is a vast difference between the Chinese, the American, and the Zulu view of what constitutes a beautiful girl, a beautiful song, or a beautiful view. Our judgments in these areas are dictated almost wholly by what we are used to and what we have been taught, and hardly if at all by any appeal to absolute standards. It is, of course, true that a member of one culture can liberate himself from slavish adherence to its standards. He can, in other words, become a cosmopolitan, who can appreciate the beauty of Zulu drum-beating and Scottish bagpipe music in the same way, though perhaps not to the same degree, that he does a string quartet or a hot trumpet. Similarly, the speaker of English may come to have an aesthetic feeling for Italian, or Chinese, or Hottentot poetry. But he is unlikely to get completely over the feeling that no speech is capable of matching his mother tongue in beauty. Yet the source of this pleasure is almost entirely the associated meanings rather than the sounds themselves. "*Spit* is an ugly word," the advertisements used to say. What this means really is that the act of spitting is frowned upon by our culture for a complex of reasons. But the sounds of the word itself are not ugly when we find them embedded in a word like *hospitable*, which refers to a trait that our culture approves of.

5. Finally, as the last corollary of our acceptance of the social nature of language, we are obliged to assume that there is no standard by which we can judge language other than an estimate of its success in accomplishing the social functions that are demanded of it. This