

OUR SPOKEN LANGUAGE

by

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Corporation*



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And thus, when substantialness combineth with
delightfulness, fullness with fineness, seemliness
with portliness, and courrantness with staidness,
how can the language which consisteth of all
these sound other than most full of sweetness ?

RICHARD CAREW

*Epistle on the Excellency of the
English Tongue.*

INTRODUCTION

MAN is the speaking animal. He is what he is because he speaks ; and he speaks because he is what he is. A great authority on the mechanism of speech, Dr. E. V. Negus, says, " There is no doubt in my mind that many of the steps by which Man evolved can be traced accurately from the evidence of the larynx." Man is not alone in the animal world in the possession of an apparatus capable of speech. Animals that have lungs, throats, mouths, tongues, teeth, lips, nose, and ears have all the requisites. Most, if not all of them, make noises of some kind, for noise is a useful and common device, and there are not many members of the animal kingdom which spend their lives in utter silence. The mechanism by means of which most of them make their noises was not designed for the express purpose of noise-making, which is, so to speak, a side-show. The mechanism has other and more important duties to perform, the task of maintaining life being its principal function ; but in its spare time it is at hand for the additional purpose of making noise—a pastime that enjoys a remarkable degree of popularity. The young animal stumbles upon this ability to make noise very early in his career, and having once dis-

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covered it, he gives it little rest during waking hours. But it is, none the less, a side-show, and those whose business it is to study Man and his noises would do well never to forget that fact.

Of all the animals, Man is the one that has carried the noise-making to the highest pitch of development. He and it have grown up together, so to speak ; what he has contributed to it, and what it has contributed to him are possibly equal factors. How he came to do this trick better than the rest of his early kinsmen is not our purpose to discuss, even if we could ; we must be content to accept the fact that Man, and Man alone, is the speaking animal, and that wherever Man is found, even the most primitive type of Man now on earth, there also is speech found. There is no evidence that he has progressed at the technique of the game since he started. The noises that the primitive races of the earth make as they speak are in essence the same as those made by Cabinet Ministers and University Professors. Indeed, he seems to have lost some of his skill, for the African often uses a greater variety of noises in his speech than we do.

We are not very much concerned in this book with the purpose of speech, but we might all remember one thing about it. A moment ago we said that the main purpose of the speaking mechanism was to keep the body alive. In its spare time it also keeps the mind alive, through Speech and Language. For mental life depends upon Speech and

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Language, just as bodily life depends upon food and fresh air. So let us leave it at that for the moment, remembering that speech is probably the greatest achievement of Man, the one thing that raised him from the level of the beast, that made him little lower than the angels ; and it still remains to most of us a complete mystery. We accept it as we accept the air we breathe, being unconcerned unless and until something goes wrong. We never question it, and seldom seek to inquire into its nature or constitution, or to examine either the mechanism of it or the raw material of which it is made.

Most of us spend the greater part of our waking lives in speaking or hearing others speak, and much of our sleep in dreaming, either silently or audibly ; yet we never trouble to ask ourselves the simplest question about our speech.

We can do great things in the world outside us ; we can fly to Australia in a few days, or send a message round the world in less than a second. But ask us to make a new speech sound and we are more helpless at thirty than we were at the age of three. We have in our lives made certain speech noises thousands of times ; but we should be very hard put to it to describe any one of them. Intelligent people, who have made it their business to study some part of this speech activity, *e.g.* for singing, or for describing a strange language, often make the most ludicrous statements concerning speech noises. Respectable and reputable men of letters abuse one

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another in the Press over so simple and silly a question as the pronunciation of this word or that. The attitude of most of us towards anything to do with speech can only be compared with the attitude of the primitive man towards nature ; it is compounded of ignorance and superstition, of taboo and fetish. Magic still holds the field in language, as it once did in the realm of science.

It is the purpose of this book to suggest that speech furnishes the focus for a wide and interesting variety of study, ranging from physics to social psychology, and that it can be studied in all those aspects. It is generally agreed that the more we know about a subject the better it is both for the subject and for us, and since there is no subject that plays so great a part in our lives as Speech, and no subject about which we know so little, it follows that ignorance of this subject is more serious than ignorance of many another.

There are three subjects upon which the intelligent man of to-day considers that he has the right to form his own opinion—Religion, Politics, and his Mother Tongue ; but whereas our bookshops are bursting with popular guides to matters religious and political, there are very few popular guides to the mother tongue, with the result that there is prevalent an abundance of elementary thinking in matters linguistic that has long since disappeared from the realms of politics and religion. In language we still cling to the old ideas implanted in our minds

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by the grammarians, the etymologists, the elocutionists, and those who believed that the only model of speech was the printed word. There was truth in the doctrines of all these teachers, but it was neither the whole truth nor nothing but the truth, for they lived in the days before science revealed to us what passes muster as modern knowledge, modern thought, the modern outlook upon Man, his environment, and his social habits. To imagine that we can now think about questions of speech without reference to individual and social psychology, or that we can discuss, for example, the position of dialect speech oblivious of the fact that there is such a thing as broadcasting, is only to be compared with the idea that we can now discuss questions of transport without reference to the internal combustion engine, or design a system of street lighting without reference to gas and electricity.

We cannot think about speech as our parents did, and we must set about acquiring a new outlook ; we shall not find this an easy task, for there are lions in the path. There are old-fashioned ideas, which we all share, which must be swept away ; there are deep-rooted prejudices to be destroyed ; there are sincere emotional associations to be broken. " The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth " is a magic formula, and they who pledge themselves to it are perjured before they open their mouths ; for no scientist would dare to say that he

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could, concerning any fact, report either the truth, the whole truth, or nothing but the truth.

The whole truth about speech will certainly not be found in this book. But it is to be hoped that what is here written may not inappropriately be described as an attempt to remove some of the obstacles in our way, to slay some of the lions in our path, to charm away some of those cherished prejudices that most of us love more than the whole truth.

CHAPTER I

LIGHT AND SOUND IN LANGUAGE

THE first great lesson to understand is that civilized man has developed two kinds of language. The one, the discovery of which took place probably hundreds of thousands of years before there is any historical record, is speech. How or when he discovered, developed, and perfected this we do not know. The languages that we now have up and down the earth throw some light on the relations of large masses of the world's population; but they only take us back a few thousand years. All that we now know for certain is that wherever Man is found, in no matter how primitive a condition, there also is speech found. We know that there is a measure of similarity between the members of certain language families, as we call them; that French is very like Italian, English like German, etc. We know that the greater portion of the languages now spoken in India and Europe go back to one ancestor; but this ancestor was not the first. We believe that Chinese has nothing in common with

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Malay, and that Telugu has nothing in common with any language found on the mainland of Africa.

Such evidence as we have from the languages that are spoken in the world to-day tells us nothing about the birthplace of human civilization, and certainly does not justify the assumption that speech was born in one place. The probability is that the speech trick developed independently in several different parts of the earth's surface. There are several hundreds of different languages spoken to-day throughout the world ; they belong to many quite distinct language families. But they all contain something in common, because Man is Man no matter where he lives and no matter in what state of development he is. All the world over he uses the same apparatus, and performs the business of speaking in more or less the same way, for the simple reason that there is no other way in which it can be done. What this way is we shall discuss in another chapter, but what we want to get hold of at the moment is this : that speech is the beginning of language. Speech precedes writing. Man had probably progressed a very long way indeed, and was very expert in the speaking business before he hit upon the trick of making his speech permanent on clay, or sand, or bark, or stone. And just as we believe that speech developed independently in several places on the earth, so we believe that the trick of writing, or carving language on stone, and stamping it on clay, developed in many places inde-

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pently. The form that developed in China does not appear to have anything in common with the form that developed in Babylon.

Now here is the subject of a series of fascinating lessons that can well be joined up with history and geography. What effect, for example, did the Roman conquests in Europe have upon the languages of the conquered countries? Why is the English language so closely related to Dutch and German? What is Welsh, and why is it spoken in the mountain fastnesses of Wales? Which language has made the greatest progress in the world in the last few centuries? Take out an atlas and find out the places on the world's surface in which English is spoken. Never learn the name of any country or its inhabitants without learning the name of the language they speak. What languages are spoken in India? Name any language spoken in Africa.

History and geography are very much concerned with language, and the history of the English language reflects the history of the nation. Colonial expansion has carried our language to the far corners of the earth, so that what was a small dialect a thousand years ago, in danger of extinction by foreign invaders, has now become the greatest language the world has ever seen. That is in itself a romance; and it should be carefully instilled into the hearts of our children that they, and they alone, have the English language in their keeping.

But let us revert to this important question of

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Speech and Writing, for upon a clear understanding of the relationship that exists between these two forms of language rests much of our work. And here we plunge into another branch of human knowledge—Physics.

Speech is an affair of sound ; and sound is the name given to that aspect of Nature which Man perceives by means of his ears. Those whose ears do not function cannot perceive sound, and so they are cut off from the world of speech ; they have to have a form of language designed for them that is not dependent upon sound. How we make the sounds that we use for speech we shall learn in a later chapter ; all we want to do here is to suggest that a little elementary instruction upon the nature of sound and some of its properties is a very good introduction indeed to the study of speech. We live nowadays in a world in which sound plays a much bigger part than it did a century ago. What greater romance can there be than the study of the wonderful inventions that have been devoted to nothing but matters of speech. Think of the telephone, that extends the range of the human voice, so restricted and narrow without the aid of electricity, so that we can now speak from England to America as easily as we can speak to one another in the house. Think of the gramophone, the wonderful machine that preserves the voice, puts it on to a shellac or metal disc, so that we can reproduce it as often as we please, even long after the