CURRENT ENGLISH

A STUDY OF PRESENT-DAY USAGES AND TENDENCIES, INCLUDING PRONUNCIATION, SPELLING, GRAMMATICAL PRACTICE, WORD-COINING, AND THE SHIFTING OF MEANINGS

BY

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GINN AND COMPANY

BOSTON · NEW YORK · CHICAGO · LONDON · ATLANTA · DALLAS · COLUMBUS · SAN FRANCISCO

The Athenæum Press
GINN AND COMPANY · PRO-
PRIETORS · BOSTON · U.S.A.

And whan I had aduyſed me in this ſayd bo
ke . I delybered and concluded to tranſlate it in to englyſſhe
And forthwyth toke a penne & ynke and wrote a leef or
tweyne /whyche I oueraw to correcte it/And whā
I ſawe the fayr & ſtraunge termes therin/I doubted that it
ſholde not pleaſe ſome gentylmen whiche late blamed me
ſayeng ỹ in my tranſlacyons I had ouer curyous termes
whiche coude not be vnderſtande of comyn peple /and deſired
me to vſe olde and homely termes in my tranſlacyons. and
ſayn wolde I ſatyſfye euery man/ and ſo to doo toke ay olde
boke and redde therin/and certaynly the englyſſhe was ſo ru
de and rwood that I coude not wele vnderſtande it. And alſo
my lorde abbot of weſtmynſter dyd ſende to me late certa
yn euydences wryten in olde englyſſhe for to reduce it in to
our englyſſhe now vſid/ And certaynly it was harder in
ſuche wyſe that it was more lyke to dutche than englyſſhe
I coude not reduce ne brynge it to be vnderſtonden/And cer
taynly our langage now vſed varyeth ferre from that. Wh
che was vſed and ſpoken whan I was borne/ For the en
glyſſhe men/ben borne vnder the domynacyon of the mone.
Whiche is neuer ſtedfaſte/but euer wauerynge/wexynge o
ne ſeaſon/ and waneth & dyſcreaſeth another ſeaſon/ And
that comyn englyſſhe that is ſpoken in one ſhyre varyeth
from a nother.

Facsimile of a portion of William Caxton's prologue to his translation of a French version of the Æneid, published in 1490. For a modernization of this passage see pages 144–145

PREFACE

THIS book has been planned with a view to encouraging a more broadly comprehensive study of Current English by the college student and the general reader who may have had only the usual elementary training in pronunciation and spelling, grammar in its ordinary essential features, and practice in the composition of good literary English; it is for readers who have not had much opportunity to make a systematic and comprehensive survey of that subject which should be regarded as one of the most important in any curriculum — the English language.

No attempt has been made to introduce new and untried ideas on the subject; rather it has seemed that there is need of a more compact and concise presentation of a wealth of material gathered by various able scholars during the last few decades especially. But so rich is the material available, and so varied are the purposes and ideals of those who have provided it, that there is need to define carefully at the very outset the purpose and method of the book, in order that there may be a clear understanding, on the part of the reader, of the reasons for including some materials and excluding others.

In the first place, the purpose of the present study is chiefly scientific rather than artistic; the author has endeavored to present the facts of Current English usage for consideration by the thoughtful student of English, but he has not attempted to select the best usage in every instance. That is the business of those who are concerned with the art of speaking and writing good English, equally important but quite different in method of approach, since the scientific study of the English language examines all usages, good or bad, while the artistic study of the language is concerned chiefly with finding out the best in every instance. The one study is descriptive, the other prescriptive.

However, in spite of the author's desire to avoid prescriptive grammar, it has seemed his duty to set forth here and there throughout the book the preferences of those who use the best English; and in order that such matters may be readily available for teachers and students of English usage, a "Concise Index to Questions of Good Usage" has been compiled. This is offered as a concession to those readers who may come to the book seeking guidance in matters of usage; it is not a complete guide to good usage in English. Those who desire more guidance than can be found in the following discussions must rely upon the excellent handbooks and guides which have been especially prepared for the perplexed speaker and writer.

In the second place, the plan of this book is such as to provide for all the various phases of the study of present-day English as far as possible in a relatively brief treatment of the subject. English has been studied from various points of view, — phonological, etymological, inflectional, syntactical, semasiological, and so on, — and each is important for an understanding of our language. But it is difficult to do justice to any one phase of the study of English and at the same time take cognizance of all others, fully and adequately. Hence most of the studies of recent decades have been intensive and special and limited in scope. In this book all important branches of the scientific study of the language have been included, although the discussions have had to be restricted in many instances to mere statements of essential facts.

An attempt has been made to clear up some of the seeming inconsistencies in grammatical classification by examining certain linguistic usages from several different points of view. Methods of classification must vary according to the point of view of the surveyor of linguistic usage, and it should be emphasized that any scheme of classifying is largely a matter of convenience and by no means final. Despite the fact that an able committee has recommended a terminology for philological study, one is inclined to differ at times with the committee concerning some of its recommendations, and consequently most new grammars make some little offerings of new terminology, which usually encumber and make worse

the present system. Even the carefully worked-out phonetic alphabet recommended by the International Phonetic Association does not fit every need of every language student; and almost every book on phonetics that has appeared during the past few decades has had slight differences of its own in phonetic symbols, which is not surprising if the further fact is recalled that no two people pronounce the sounds of English exactly alike or hear them alike when others pronounce them. It is hard to determine, for example, the length of some vowels or their distinctive qualities. Moreover, grammarians differ still as to the number of the parts of speech and as to their subdivisions. Sound changes are not consistently classified; some are named according to cause and some according to effect. Case and conjugation are controversial matters today because to some grammarians they mean form; to others, use. Even the reformers of English spelling have several quite different methods to offer for the improvement of our spelling.

And, finally, this is, for the most part, a study of the English of the present day, and historical considerations have been admitted only when they have seemed to be needed for the fundamental understanding of the language of today. It is hoped that a careful study of Current English will arouse an interest in the history of the language sufficient to induce the student to go on and make further philological studies. It is hardly conceivable that one should make a thoroughgoing study of the many and interesting aspects of Current English and not feel the need of more careful study of the English language of the past.

It has been the ambition of the compiler to make a book which might serve two somewhat different purposes. In spite of its size, it is hoped that it may be useful as an elementary introduction to English philology and may assist in promoting a more general study of the language from this point of view in colleges and universities than now prevails. It is apparent at this time that a college course of study is seriously needed which will of necessity be elementary in character because of the general abolition of "grammar" from the schools, and it seems desirable to make such a course so widely comprehensive

that it will be more practical and at the same time more interesting than the older, more restricted grammar course, which has fallen into such desuetude. However, in attempting such an "omnium-gatherum", the author has greatly enlarged the book by including lists and examples which the general reader might wish to refer to from time to time. In thus combining the elementary textbook in English philology with the handbook for general reference, the author has, of course, sacrificed to some extent that consistency of attitude and treatment which would have been possible in the one type of book or the other, if either were taken by itself. So many students and teachers, however, are asking for one book which will satisfy a great variety of linguistic needs that the author has ventured to undertake a compilation which will be in some measure a response to that demand. Comprehensiveness cannot fairly be expected and at the same time such thoroughness as will be satisfying to all users of the book.

Hence a bibliography, subdivided according to the various chapters and sections, is offered to those students who may become interested in pursuing in more minute detail the study of the topics discussed in the chapters and sections. It contains not only the titles referred to in the text of the book but also a number of others likely to prove useful to persons desirous of reading more widely and thoroughly on the subject of Current English.

The sample list of words immediately following the bibliography can be utilized for further word studies. If each word in the list be analyzed according to the plan given at the head of the list, practically every topic in the book will receive further illustration, and the student will at the same time have greatly improved his understanding of his own vocabulary. Word studies can be started while the book is being read, if it seems desirable, although greater profit and satisfaction will probably be derived from the word studies if they be deferred until the reading of the entire book shall have been completed.

No provision has been made for other exercises bearing on the matter contained in the book. If the reader desires further

practical application of the principles set forth in the various chapters, and also an examination of his own linguistic habits, he might select a passage of standard literary prose of some nineteenth-century essayist and rewrite it in colloquial English and also in current slang; rewrite in phonetic spelling any passage of English; list the words marked "Variables" in Chapter VI and seek to determine the best pronunciation in each instance; analyze the names in a page of the local telephone or college directory; experiment with eliminating as much inflection as possible from some passage of contemporary prose; and try out some scheme of spelling reform in still another prose selection. Such exercises would stress the arts of English speech and writing in a manner not otherwise provided for in this book.

As it is, the book has become somewhat larger than was originally intended. Such expansion, however, could not very well be avoided, since, in the course of a comprehensive survey of the various aspects of the English language of today, numerous important details have quite inexorably demanded a place in the discussion. The sixth chapter, on pronunciation, for instance, may seem too ponderously detailed; but inasmuch as the study of sounds lies at the very root of the study of any language such as English, apology need not be made for a careful and detailed laying of the foundation upon which the following word studies necessarily rest. It is likely that there will be more occasions to regret necessary omissions than to justify the inclusion of the many details that have found a place in the book.

It would be impossible to express adequately the obligation of the author and his indebtedness for the ideas and materials that have been incorporated in this book. A glance at the Bibliography will show that many contemporary scholars have been relied upon, as well as the older students of the English language. In view of the already expressed purpose of the author of this compilation to utilize the wealth of material that has been provided by many scholarly writers on the subject, it is hardly necessary to emphasize further his indebtedness for such help.

Special acknowledgment should be made, however, for aid and counsel received from various colleagues and students of English, particularly in the Department of English of Stanford University. The manuscript has been very carefully and helpfully criticized by Professor J. M. Steadman, Jr., of Emory University, and several readers and editors associated with the editorial department of Ginn and Company have contributed much scholarly and constructive criticism while the book has been in process of publication. The author is also indebted to Miss Evelyn C. Johnson for painstaking and thoughtful assistance in the planning and compilation of the indexes, and to members of his family for their interested collaboration in providing illustrative matter. The facsimile which serves as a frontispiece has been secured through the generosity of the Trustees of the British Museum.

And, finally, to various publishers gratitude should be expressed for permission to quote passages from their publications: to the G. & C. Merriam Co., publishers of the Webster dictionaries; to the Funk & Wagnalls Company and Dr. Frank H. Vizetelly, for passages from the Standard dictionaries and other books listed in the Bibliography; to the Columbia University Press and earlier publishers of *American Speech*, to which periodical this book is especially indebted for much illustrative matter which could hardly have been found elsewhere; to Little, Brown & Company, publishers of Lucy Furman's *The Quare Woman*; to the Director of Publication of the Bell Telephone Laboratories; and to the Secretary of the Simplified Spelling Board, for material pertaining to spelling reform. To many other publishers and authors indebtedness has been indicated by the listing of books and articles in the Bibliography at the end of the text.

THE AUTHOR

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CURRENT ENGLISH

CHAPTER I

PHILOSOPHICAL INTRODUCTION

A PHILOSOPHICAL introduction to the study of a language may lead to vague and endless discussion unless the term *philosophical* be defined at the very beginning in such a manner as to distinguish clearly and emphasize those general laws of cause and effect that are involved in the growth and use of language. The student of the English language must have a fairly systematic body of general conceptions or principles[35]* and must also know how to make a practical application of each one of them if he wishes to go somewhat farther in his understanding and appreciation of his language than do those uncritical and shortsighted users of English who are ordinarily content to rush off to "the dictionary" or to the nearest authoritative teacher of English whenever any linguistic problems arise. Of course a person cannot expect to go very far in acquiring a philosophy of language until he has collected an orderly array of facts with which to philosophize; but a few outstanding considerations and principles should be presented early in order that he may organize his thinking on the subject and try out the linguistic facts as he goes along. Most important, at the outset, are the considerations of the purpose of all language, the physiology and psychology of speech, the relation of form to use, linguistic terminology, the various speech units, causes of linguistic change, the varying levels assumed by language in different social classes, and the

* The superior figures scattered through the text refer to items in the Bibliography, pp. 619–648.

standards that should be set up for judging the quality of one's speech. Hence this first chapter must concern itself with these considerations before we can proceed to gather in orderly sequence the groups of facts that make up philological science.

1. *The Purposes of Language*

The chief purpose of language is the conveying of thought or emotion from one individual to another. There is no doubt that as a means of providing the necessities of life and the security and satisfaction of social intercourse, language is of the greatest value. But it is well to remember also that it is through language very largely that we make our impressions upon others for either good or bad. As we rise in the social scale, we watch more and more the effects that we produce in the use of language; and probably it is safe to assert that most of the instruction in English speech and composition in the high school and the college has for its purpose the making of favorable impressions almost as much as the conveying of thought. We preen and prune and polish linguistically in order to make a better showing -- or shall we say, audition?

As a result, however, of an increasing recognition of this second purpose, not only is language, and more especially written language, used as an effective instrument for making a generally favorable impression upon hearers and readers, but journalistic and advertising writers have become much more aware of its usefulness in effecting sales of newspapers, magazines, books, and all the goods that may be offered for sale on a large scale. Indeed, more and more emphasis has been laid upon this journalistic and advertising style of using language; and because this purpose is largely mercenary and not much concerned with the more remote future, some very questionable linguistic practices have almost inevitably arisen, such as the exploiting of "headline English", the coining of freakish trade names, the exaggerated use of adjectives, and the flaunting of highly colorful idioms and phrases. For the purposes of publicity much writing is done which has only the ephemeral purpose of attracting the attention of the un-

thinking person and thereby selling goods, and not at all does the writer attempt to permanently establish ideas and induce thinking.

Indeed, as a result of this growing emphasis upon the immediate effects of language, there are nowadays two fairly distinct schools of writers — and speakers —, namely, those who employ the highly impressive style of the journalistic writer to produce immediate results, both good and bad, and those who prefer the more conservative style of the purveyor of sound and thorough thinking. And so the language that one uses should be judged both as to the effectiveness with which it expresses thoughts and emotions and also as to the impression that it makes upon other people.

2. *Physiology versus Psychology of Speech*

Language is not merely a matter of making use of the human organs of speech, on the one hand, or of thinking thoughts and shaping them into sentences, on the other. But the student of language must appreciate both the physiology and the psychology of speech if he is to understand the many changes that occur in his language even during a single decade, to say nothing of the changes that centuries bring to a language.

From the time of his first utterances, all through life, a man's speech is subject to the physical limitations imposed by the very nature of his vocal organs: he cannot round his lips and produce a vowel like the *a* in *father*; he cannot hope to pronounce well the nasals *m* and *n* if he has a bad cold in the head; he never keeps the vowel length in *the* and *you* in hurried and careless speech; and he is likely to drop out the *e* when he says *traveling* and *covering*. Probably the greatest difficulty that a child has in learning to speak the speech of his parents comes from the fact that he does not know how to place his tongue in order to produce a given sound. It is not strange, for example, that a certain child's earliest efforts to say *light* once resulted in the strange pronunciation *gite*, when the tongue positions for *l* and *g* are so relatively near to each other.

On the other hand, the psychological or mental influences that are at work constantly through life direct the growth of the language of the individual and modify little by little the speech of the entire race, often overcoming and even markedly counteracting the influence of the physical conditions of speech. Gradually, by a strong effort to imitate the sounds and words spoken by his parents, the child is able to speak very nearly as they do; and later he modifies the language that he learned by conscious imitation, introducing conscious innovations of his own, as when he shortens his mother's dignified *afternoon* to his own impatient *aft*; often, if he is not corrected by those who use the conventional but more irregular English, he will work according to the great principle of analogy and make the irregular individual word conform to the more usual group, pluralizing *man* as *mans* to conform to *pans, dogs, doors*, spelling *coming* as *comming* to conform to *humming, running*, forming the past tense of *blow* and *throw* as *blowed* and *throwed* through the influence of *rowed* and *snowed* and the hundreds of other regular verbs that take *-ed* in the past tense as a matter of course, and even saying *in regards to* because he has frequently heard *as regards* and *give my regards to your father*; confusion will cause him to etymologize *asparagus, chaise longue*, and *Welsh rabbit* as *sparrowgrass, chaise lounge*, and *Welsh rarebit*, and choose *audience, infer*, and *except* when he means *spectators, imply*, and *accept*; and, finally, as his mind becomes accustomed to working rapidly and without his conscious direction, by a peculiar kind of contamination or anticipation he may find himself hurriedly writing such strange expressions as 'a historical study would *haved showed* them', '*natury history*', '*Knoll all* men by these presents', involving a bank in a mad search for bookkeeping errors at the end of a busy day by writing *$216.16* instead of *$210.16*, or entertaining his hearers by such "Spoonerisms" as have recently been culled by the *Manchester Guardian*[64], notably from the man who interchanged his *b* and *r* so that he claimed to have traveled carrying 'two *rags* and a *bug*' and from that other person who hoped that the congregation would be 'filled with fresh *veal* and new *zigor*'.

To sum up the situation as regards the physiological and psychological elements in language, it may be said that the physiological is unchanging and permanent, determined from the very beginning of the life of the individual by the shape and relations of his various organs of speech; whereas the psychological, or mental, element varies and changes and grows according to the intellectual conditions of the individual, from day to day and year to year. The current of one's speech is very like that of some great river, which can never change the substantial facts of water and sand, but which nonetheless can overflow its banks or cut deeper its channel according to the general conditions of seasons and weather, throwing up sand bars here and there in very different places and times. The current of thought goes steadily on, but the details of the language change always and often. For thinking determines the language, but the language does not have an equally lasting or remarkable influence on the thinking. The general course remains through the centuries about the same; and while a sand bar of language may temporarily divert the current of thinking, sooner or later the current will eat away the sand bar and throw up a new one elsewhere in its course.

3. *Form versus Use*

An appreciation of the interrelation of form and use in language is also necessary for a proper understanding of the changes that are taking place in the English language of the twentieth century. But to gain the necessary perspective, in viewing some of the changing aspects of the present, it is helpful to glance at the language in some of its earlier stages of development. Anglo-Saxon, or Old English (before *c.* 1100), was a language of many inflectional forms; Modern English has almost none. Anglo-Saxon had, at a rough estimate, some thirty thousand words; Modern English dictionaries boast of more than five hundred thousand words and phrases. As the many inflectional endings disappeared, syntactical combinations and greater rigidity in word order were made use of more and more to accomplish what inflection had hitherto