TEACHING
English Usage

TEACHING ENGLISH USAGE

by

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Preface

This book is the product of twenty years of reading, teaching, and writing in the fascinating area of English usage. A considerable part of the content has appeared earlier in professional journals, or in pamphlets or books now out of print. Chapters I and II were written for *English Usage: A Teaching Problem*, a pamphlet publication of the Wisconsin English Teachers' Association released in 1934. Chapter III appeared first in *Educational Method* for March, 1937. Chapter IV was published as an article in the *English Journal* for January, 1945, at the request of the editor. Chapters VI, VII, and VIII are adapted from *Grammar and Usage in Textbooks on English*, Bureau of Educational Research Bulletin No. 14, August, 1933. Grateful acknowledgment is made to the editors and publishers concerned for permission to reprint the materials here. Other specific acknowledgments are made in footnotes.

In a work of this kind practically every paragraph is shaped by the conscious or unconscious influence of a writer or teacher in the field of usage. To the hundred or more writers who are quoted the author expresses his deepest appreciation for their share in his task. For laying the foundations of his interest in English usage, the author expresses gratitude to the late Professor Sterling Andrus Leonard, to the late Professor William Ellery Leonard, to Professor E. A. Cross, and to Professor Miles

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PART I

THE BACKGROUND OF CORRECT USAGE

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I

The Problem of Correctness

"The Bible is written in very poor English, isn't it?" remarked a grade-school child to his father, as they walked home from church.

"What makes you say that?" inquired the astonished parent, for whose ears the musical dignity of the King James Version approached the perfection of English prose.

"Well, our teacher said it was bad English to begin sentences with 'and.' But almost every sentence the minister read this morning began with 'and,'" replied the child.

The father smiled as he recognized the accuracy of the child's observation. The reading had been from the eighth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew; it was true enough that almost every sentence began with "and." He thought a moment longer before he spoke. "Your teacher has made a natural mistake," he began. "In trying to give good advice to boys and girls just learning to write, she has made a rule about 'and.' The rule is too big. People who know how to write well use 'and' correctly and effectively at the beginning of sentences. On the other hand, boys and girls in school use 'and' too much. Your teacher's purpose in trying to help you was good, but the rule she stated is untrue."

In this trifling episode may be found the epitome of the problem of correctness in English. It lies in the recur-

rent conflict between rule and practice. Rules of usage are usually made to cover specific situations, to govern the use of language at a certain time for a certain purpose. Gradually, as the rule is taught and applied, the specific purpose for which it was created is forgotten, and the rule is applied universally, often in defiance of a language custom centuries old. Take, for example, the much taught but erroneous rule that "a sentence must not end with a preposition." Or, as one grammar is supposed to have stated it, "A preposition is a bad thing to end a sentence *with*." In certain types of formal, literary English the terminal preposition is considered undesirable because of the rhetorical looseness it gives to the style. Because certain formalists disliked the construction, the rule was created. It was repeated, copied, placed in school books. Teachers unaware of the reason behind the origin of the rule, taught that a sentence must *never* end with a preposition. Teachers are still teaching this rule. Yet English for centuries has been idiomatically and correctly expressed in such sentences as: "Where are you from?" "I didn't know whom to give it to," "John will go, but I don't expect to," "What city has he lived in?" To apply the rule to such sentences as these, which are characteristic of informal or colloquial English, is to make an absurdity of a caution. Many such absurdities have been created and are being perpetuated through honest but misguided zeal.

In contrast to an example of this type is the undisputed fact that many people use forms of English which are universally deplored by all who are sensitive to good English. He done it, we have went, them books, where was you? are defended as correct English by no one. Yet these faults and many similar ones appear with regrettable persistency in the speech and writing of high-

school students. Obviously correct usage must be taught and taught thoroughly to break down bad habits and substitute acceptable language patterns. Right here we face the difficulty. Some forms of usage must be taught so thoroughly that bad habits of speech and writing are entirely eradicated. Other forms of usage are best left untaught, or if mentioned at all, should be presented as cautions for specific types of writing and speaking. It is the purpose of this book to show what items of usage need to be taught, and in what manner to most effectively improve patterns of speech and writing. A parallel purpose is to show what obsolete "rules" can be safely ignored, and why they can be ignored. Furthermore, the purpose is to describe and illustrate borderline cases, and to present the principles governing sound judgment in such cases.

Even more important than the analysis of specific items of usage is the development of a linguistically sound attitude toward problems of usage. One of the most perplexing problems of the English teacher today is to determine a valid and workable theory of correct English. It is obvious to any cultivated person that society demands certain standards in language usage, the observation of which marks a person of education and culture. It is equally obvious to the enlightened observers that many of the rules of the textbooks on grammar and guides to good English are in some instances only partially right and in others unquestionably wrong and misleading.

These discrepancies between rule and practice have led in recent times to two extreme attitudes, each unfortunate in its results. New attitudes toward usage, only partially understood, have led to perfectly understandable confusion. One group of teachers, made uneasy by

the way in which revised ideas about correctness seem to tolerate all sorts of carelessness, feel that the remedy lies in a renewed emphasis on all the rules and a stiff course in grammar to support them. The other group, quite rightly finding some of the rules obsolete or invalid, tend to throw out all rules and even the teaching of all usage, feeling that no standard is better than a faulty standard. There is a middle ground, however, between purism and anarchy, upon which English teachers may safely stand in dealing with questions of usage. It is the over-all purpose of this book to point out the way to a sound and tenable theory of correctness in English usage, to resolve specific problems of usage in the light of this theory and to present practical classroom methods for instruction in usage all the way from the grossest errors of grammar to the subtle refinements of literary style.

II

Historical Backgrounds of English Usage

The English language in the Elizabethan period underwent an enormous expansion in its vocabulary. From travelers on the Continent and in the New World, from the scholars of the classical languages in the universities, and from experiments among English writers there poured in a flood of words, most of which became assimilated into the language. Part of the effervescence of the Elizabethan era found its vent in the game of words—not before or since has English witnessed such absorbing interest in words and their meanings, nor such an enormous increase in the number of words. Grammar, on the other hand, attracted little attention and was taken for granted. While the major outlines of English grammar had become fairly fixed by the time of Shakespeare and were essentially the grammar we know today, it was a popular or traditional, rather than a formal, grammar. A study of the usage of Elizabethan dramatists, for example, reveals far greater freedom in number agreement, in double comparatives, and in double negatives than is tolerated in current writing. Elizabethan dramatic literature, in short, is a faithful reproduction of the normal speech of Elizabethan gentlemen, who wrote as they spoke, unhampered by considerations of formal correctness.

The verbal enthusiasm of the Elizabethan era was followed by a natural reaction toward restraint. From the beginning of the seventeenth century there appeared a critical attitude toward English, voiced at first by a few scattered writers who felt that English was an uncouth and disorderly language, lacking the beauty and regularity of Latin and Greek. Gradually the idea of the impurity and irregularity of English came to be commonly accepted, so that by the end of the seventeenth century the interest in language had shifted almost entirely from vocabulary to grammar and syntax. This change of interest was accompanied by a zeal for reform and by a great increase in the numbers of books on the English language. Prior to 1700 there were few books devoted to language criticism; in the first half of the eighteenth century approximately fifty such books appeared, and in the succeeding half century over two hundred were published. These figures reveal the tremendous interest in language which characterized the latter part of the eighteenth century.

The same spirit which brought about the Augustan Age of English literature, the "improving" of Shakespeare and the editing of Milton, accelerated the purifying and correcting of English. That a large part of the critical work in English was beneficial to the language cannot be denied, but unfortunately there was much bad mixed with the good. Many of the writers on language were retired clergymen and country philosophers, who, though possessing some skill in the classics, had no conception at all of the history of English or the methods of linguistic research. Too frequently their statements on English usage were the product of false philology or of personal prejudice. Moreover, the philosophy of the age was inimical to scientific research in language; the prevailing

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