

The Use of ENGLISH

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With Supplements by

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Preface

The Use of English began as a series of talks commissioned by the BBC and broadcast in the summer of 1961. On that occasion, as in the subsequent revision and expansion of the material, I enjoyed the co-operation of my colleagues, A. C. Gimson and J. Warburg, so that a wide coverage could be given to the many important aspects of the language and so that differing viewpoints might be presented on the complex instrument that is English. The aim has been to stimulate a mature and informed approach to our language, so that we can understand the nature of English, be encouraged to use it more intelligently, respond to it more sensitively, and acknowledge more fully the implications of its international use today. In short, this book seeks to satisfy our natural curiosity about language and to supply just such knowledge of the mother-tongue as R. G. Latham claimed (a century and a quarter ago) should be the familiar equipment of every educated person.

Nothing beyond such 'natural curiosity' and an ordinary working knowledge of English will be required in order to begin profitable work on the book. On the other hand, the range of the subject is vast—as is the range of the language itself. We have tried to provide for those whose interest may be limited to the practical everyday use of English as it impinges on the lives of us all. But we have tried to provide also for those whose interests will extend rather further. There is material in every chapter, as well as in the exercises at the end of every chapter, which will readily carry such students into advanced work both on the subtler use of language (as in literature) and on the contributions that modern linguistic science is making to the study of English. Moreover, in the Supplements, we have been able to give to topics of great importance a fuller and more specialised treatment than might have seemed appropriate in the body of the book.

One need hardly say that this volume does not attempt to be definitive or to provide a description of the manifold uses of English. It would be futile to have such aims in writing a book of these modest dimensions. What is more, it is only recently that scholars have begun to realise just how immensely complex the uses of English are. The present book sets out some provisional observations and suggestions, many of them made in the course of work upon the Survey of English Usage which is being conducted at University College London and which will eventually yield more precise and detailed information on the nature, use, and range of English than is at present available.

It would be impossible to do justice in a concluding paragraph to the many who have directly or indirectly contributed to this book. There is special pleasure in acknowledging the stimulus provided by Professor A. H. Smith, whose firm but friendly insistence, indeed, caused the book to be written. But warm thanks are due also to my colleagues on the Survey of English Usage (Anne P. Duckworth, J. P. L. Rusiecki, J. Svartvik) for lengthy discussions which have clarified many points; to Jean Rowntree and Rosemary Jellis of the BBC for much of the original conception of the work; to Roy Yglesias for guidance at every stage of the writing; to George Perren for numerous suggestions; to Donald J. Taylor, who has given a wealth of advice, especially on the exercises; to the lively students both in London and in Durham whose response to earlier versions of several sections has led to improvements in many respects; to scholars in English studies and linguistics all over the world, whose help and influence can to some inadequate extent be seen in the notes and in the bibliography; and finally to Jean and Eric Quirk for their devoted and skilful help in checking quotations, correcting typescript, and many another task cheerfully undertaken for all its tediousness. But of course no helpers, named or unnamed, are responsible for the blemishes that nevertheless remain.

R.Q.

University College London,
February 1962.

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1: *Who Uses English?*

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A BOOK on the 'use of English' may reasonably begin by discussing the use of the word 'English' itself. Certainly, there are two important uses of the word which we all too readily confuse, and, as we shall see, our perspective can be blurred in consequence. The two meanings in question can be illustrated by the following statements:

A: He is English

B: He speaks English

Now of course, we may say 'If A, then B', and this will not be denied. Indeed, a corresponding truth holds if we replace 'English' in A and B by many other words which are the names both of peoples and languages. 'If he is French, he speaks French'—and we may go on doing this in turn with 'German', 'Swedish', 'Spanish', and many others. But such a correspondence does not always hold, and an attempt to follow through with this experiment for a few minutes will help us on the road to getting rid of the identification of nation and language which causes a good deal of trouble in the world. One soon comes up against examples like 'If he is Swiss, he speaks—?', 'If he is Welsh, he speaks—?', 'If he is Belgian, he speaks—?', 'If he is Canadian, he speaks—?'.

So far as 'English' is concerned, therefore, the truth of 'If A, then B' simply points to one happy fact in our linguistic circumstances which is by no means paralleled in all countries: one way in which our national life is

not complicated as it is in many places. But the truth for us of 'If A, then B' is unfortunate to the extent that we are inclined to identify the name of our language with the name of one of the races using it: to think of English as the private property of the English. In other words, we are in danger of switching the argument to 'If B, then A'.

With the names of many languages and peoples, this order is sound enough. There are probably not a great many exceptions to the generalisation 'If he speaks Welsh, he is Welsh'—though, as we should have noted already, there would be many exceptions indeed if we were to say 'If he is Welsh, he speaks Welsh'. On the other hand, if we try 'If B, then A' with French, we see that this would be a very risky deduction, since parts of Switzerland, Belgium, Canada, and other countries are French-speaking without owing national allegiance to France. And of course, even many of us speak French without being French. A few interesting and highly informative minutes with a good encyclopedia are all that is necessary to fit us for arguing the probability or improbability of 'If B, then A' in relation to such languages as German, Finnish, Irish, Portuguese. For example, we may find that 'If he speaks *Hausa*, he is a *Nigerian* or a *Sudanese*'—and this of course would be excluding numerically smaller possibilities such as 'anthropologist' or 'former colonial civil servant'.

The desire to use language as a sign of national identity ('If B, then A') is a very natural one, and in consequence language has played a prominent part in national movements. Men have often felt the need to cultivate a given language to show that they are distinct from another race whose hegemony they resent. At the time when the United States split off from Britain, for example, there were proposals that independence should be linguistically

acknowledged by the use of a different language from that of Britain. There was even one proposal that Americans should adopt Hebrew! Others, again, favoured the adoption of Greek, though, as one man put it, things would certainly be simpler for Americans if they stuck to English and made the *British* learn Greek. In the end, as everyone knows, the two countries adopted the eminently practical and satisfactory solution of carrying on with the same language as before. For nearly two hundred years now, they have shown the world that political independence and national identity can be complete without sacrificing the enormous mutual advantages of what has remained in all but some trivial details a common language.

More recently, we have seen in Ireland a thorough-going attempt to make *linguistic* independence an emblem of political independence. In Czechoslovakia during the years before the Second World War, the fact of linguistic identity between residents in Sudetenland and Germany contributed powerfully to the events leading up to Hitler's annexation of the area. Since 1945, Norway and Yugoslavia are among the countries witnessing far-reaching attempts to establish a language which can identify the nation. At the same time, Afrikaans and English have continued to emphasise the division between races in South Africa, and in several parts of the Indian sub-continent there have been serious troubles arising from attempts to establish political entities where there are linguistic entities: language riots in Assam and Ceylon are followed by massive unease in the Punjab. Language again is an important factor in the problems which confront Italy in the German-speaking South Tyrol. Like religion, language is clearly a powerful unifying—and dividing—force.

As we have seen, however, there is nothing about lan-

guage as such that makes linguistic identity conterminous with national identity. 'If he speaks French, he is by no means necessarily French.' French is not the private property of Frenchmen, and still less is English the private property of Englishmen.

This should be obvious when one reflects that English is the mother-tongue in Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and many other areas of the world. Yet many of us still half-consciously feel that, when anyone other than an Englishman uses English, we have a special right to criticise his usage because he has been privileged to handle something which is in the Englishman's gift. We feel that he must necessarily look to us for a 'standard', because it is 'our' language. Quite frequently, in fact, such feelings are not merely half-conscious: they may be given full expression. Not long ago, an Englishman ended a letter to the press with the following uncompromising paragraph:

If other nations wish to borrow or adopt our language, it is up to them, but let it be understood that the language remains fundamentally ours. (*Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 1955.)

It is high time that such narrowly parochial and naïve notions about English were firmly scotched. They do not even remotely correspond to linguistic realities and they can do nothing but harm to the cause of human relationships and international harmony.

It is unreasonable to regard any language as the property of a particular nation, and with no language is it more unreasonable than with English. This is not to say that English is used by a greater number of speakers than any other language: it is easily outstripped in this respect by Chinese. But it is the most *international* of languages. A Dane and a Dutchman meeting casually in Rome will

almost automatically find themselves conversing in English. The crew of a Russian airliner approaching Cairo will use English to ask for landing instructions. Malayan lecturers use it as the medium of instruction when addressing their Malayan students in Kuala Lumpur.

Such examples are striking and significant because they show that the use of English in the world has no immediate connexion with the economic or political supremacy—past or present—of an English-speaking country. To people in Africa or Pakistan or Chile, English is the obvious foreign language to master, not merely because it is the native language in Great Britain and the United States, but because it provides the readiest access to the cream of world scholarship and to the bulk of world trade. It is understood more widely than any other language.

These points are made crystal-clear in the British Council's Annual Report for 1960-61:

It has been customary to speak of teaching English as a foreign language, often merely to emphasise that the process is by no means the same as teaching it to those who already have it as their mother tongue. More recently, the term English as a second language has been employed to describe English taught or learnt for practical and necessary uses of communication—whether to serve as the language of instruction in education, for specialised studies, or as a *lingua franca* among those to whom English is an acquired tongue. The distinction is important: for example, English in France or Germany is still largely learnt for reasons comparable to those for learning French or German in Britain—as a foreign language, as a humane discipline and as an introduction to a foreign culture. In many countries, however, the place of English in education may be more important, and indeed more fundamentally necessary, because it is either the medium of education itself or a necessary link with resources beyond the borders of the country where it is learnt. When it is used thus as a second

language English is not necessarily the vehicle of distinctively British or American cultural values; it may well be the means of expressing those of the country where it has been adopted. The educational use of English as a second language today varies from the level of the university to that of the primary school; its social or economic functions range from the needs of internal administration to those of external trade.

The importance and the international status of English today come home to us particularly clearly when we compare the use of English in Shakespeare's time. In 1600, 'He speaks English' and 'He is English' were very close to being interdependent statements: *if the one, then the other*. English was almost unknown outside the British Isles—and by no means universally spoken within the British Isles, as Richard Mulcaster tells us in 1582: 'our English tung is of small reatch, it stretcheth no further than this lland of ours, naie not there over all'. The number of English speakers in the world when Shakespeare was writing has been estimated at five million. The increase during the intervening years to the present is quite phenomenal. There are now something like 250 million people for whom English is the mother-tongue or 'first language': and this of course means, for the most part, their *only* language. If we add to this the number of people who have a working knowledge of English as a second or foreign language (many Indians, Africans, Frenchmen, Russians, and so on), we raise the total to about 350 million.

Such numbers are naturally difficult to estimate, and they must in any case embrace a wide range of competence. At one end are those with a native-like command of English, and at the other those with only a slow and painful reading-knowledge or even only a smattering of the language adequate for coping with tourists' needs.

To say that one 'speaks' a language may well relate more to the latter end of the range than the former, as any of us may testify who have been asked 'Do you speak French?' Certainly, if we answer 'yes', we know full well that 'yes' would have meant something very different if the questioner asked whether we spoke English.

The increase from five million to 350 million speakers has not come about because of any special merits in the language itself, but because of increases in the influence exerted by the speakers of English. It is to an important series of historical events that we must look in order to understand the development of English, and, although this is not a book to deal with history, we may pause to glance at one or two significant points.

Mulcaster explained the 'small reach' of English in 1582 (the year Shakespeare married Ann Hathaway) by saying that 'our state is no Empire'. But he was writing at the beginning of the settlement of America by English speakers—the greatest single event which has given English the enormous number of users it has today. Jamestown in Virginia was settled in 1607, and the Plymouth colony in Massachusetts was founded in 1620. In addition, Mulcaster pointed out that there was no valuable learning written in English that might stimulate foreigners to learn the language. We recall that as late as 1620 Francis Bacon felt it necessary to write in Latin when he was laying the foundations of modern science in such works as the *Novum Organum Scientiarum*, with its emphasis on the need for careful observation of natural phenomena: 'Naturae enim non imperatur, nisi parendo'—'For we cannot command nature unless we obey nature.'

But Bacon's successors in the sciences wrote in English and soon made Mulcaster's remarks obsolete in this field too. Within three or four decades of Bacon's death, the

Royal Society came into being, and it was in English that such foundation Fellows as Robert Boyle (of Boyle's Law) formulated and published fundamental theories. This is the form in which, about three hundred years ago, Boyle gave us the modern definition of chemical elements.

I mean by elements certain primitive and simple, or perfectly unmingled bodies which not being made of any other bodies . . . are the ingredients of which all those called perfectly mixed bodies are immediately compounded, and into which they are ultimately resolved.

From Boyle to Newton (who died in 1727); from Newton to Joseph Priestley (who died in 1804). By this time there was a great deal of such valuable learning in English as Mulcaster had missed in his time, and in consequence—true to the implication of Mulcaster's words—there were large numbers of foreigners eager to learn our language. In 1762, Thomas Sheridan (father of the dramatist who wrote *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*) published a book on the needs of such foreigners and the difficult problems involved in teaching English as a foreign language.

These needs have increased beyond all measure since Sheridan's time and innumerable books are being written on aspects of the problem of teaching the language. It is not generally realised that the English Departments of several universities in this country are deeply engaged in these problems, or that an important part of the British Council's work is concerned with supplying the desperate lack of English teaching all over the world. Nor is it generally realised how many and how attractive are the careers open to young men and women who have an interest in their language and in the cultural needs of their fellow-men abroad.

A measure of the importance of English today even in the highly developed countries of Europe can be seen in this: A Norwegian or Finnish scientist who a century ago might have published his work in French, and three centuries ago in Latin, will often today seek to achieve the maximum circulation of his ideas by publishing it in English. Swedish scientists in the distinguished and venerable University of Uppsala may be heard discussing atomic physics among themselves—in English, since English is the language they associate with such scholarship. Yet in Mulcaster's time there was scarcely any scholarship to be associated with English.

When Thomas Sheridan wrote his book on English for foreigners, another of the conditions noted by Mulcaster had changed likewise. Our state was by now an empire, and—again as Mulcaster had rightly implied—this had carried our language far and wide. One very important part of the empire was in fact just ripe for secession and soon became the United States of America. Within a very few years, the English language in America had been provided with grammars, spelling-books and even a dictionary—all, or nearly all, the work of the zealous and energetic Noah Webster.

In the eighteenth century, too, English was already firmly established in Canada, and English had spread to India. Before the century ended, it had spread to Australia and South Africa as well.

In most of these areas to which English had been newly exported, the situation was a fairly straightforward one. There was a large-scale settlement from the British Isles of people who took their language with them and who preserved that language (with varying degrees of adaptation) in an expanding colony of European people whose numbers and power made the language supreme there. India was different. Here was a very numerous and highly

cultivated native population, and no large-scale immigration of English speakers as colonists. English therefore remained the language only of trade and government, spoken by few Indians; there was no question of its becoming the first language of ordinary people throughout the sub-continent. It is for this reason that India became the first area to encounter the problem of using English as the commercial, educational and scientific medium in what are now called 'under-developed' countries: a problem which became acute by the middle of the twentieth century in many parts of the world.

The first man to grapple seriously with the question was Thomas Babington Macaulay. A Minute which he wrote in 1835 is of considerable historical importance and is worth quoting from at some length.

The problem in India [he says] is that we have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue. We must teach them some foreign language. The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West. It abounds with works of imagination not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us; with models of every species of eloquence; with historical compositions . . . ; with just and lively representations of human life and human nature; with the most profound speculations on metaphysics, morals, government, jurisprudence, and trade; with full and correct information respecting every experimental science. . . . Whoever knows that language has ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth which all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations . . . [English] is likely to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the East. It is the language of two great European communities which are rising, the one in the south of Africa, the other in Australasia. . . . Whether we look at the intrinsic value of our