

THE VIRGINIA TEACHER

Volume XIII

APRIL, 1932

No. 4

EFFECTIVE COLLOQUIAL LANGUAGE

AS HAS been announced, I am speaking to you as a representative of the National Council of Teachers of English. But, it should be added, I am not authorized by the Council to present the particular point of view of this address. I am here dealing with a somewhat controversial topic, and the National Council of Teachers of English as a body has not committed itself on these or similar points. Individual members of the organization would probably agree with much that I shall say, but the Council itself should not be thought of as standing sponsor for it.

I am to speak to you on effective colloquial language; on what is colloquial language and what are its qualities of effectiveness.

Many people have the notion that colloquial language is by its very nature inferior or incorrect; that when a word or phrase is dubbed "colloquial" it is outlawed from respectable speech. Indeed, I have frequently heard teachers state that an expression should not be used because the dictionary ranks it "colloquial."

Now, colloquial language is conversational language. It is the mode (or code) of communication used normally and appropriately in all the informal social situations of life. It is not inferior to any other style of language. As a matter of sober fact, colloquial language at its best should be regarded as the standard or norm for most kinds of speaking, as well as for much writing. The language of textbooks, the technical language of the trades and professions, and the language of literature are variations from this norm. They are special dialects; they

are off-shoots from the parent stem. We are in serious and in ridiculous error when we rate these special dialects as superior to colloquial speech.

It is probable that ninety-nine per cent of all our language should be colloquial. Any other, any more studied style of speech is inappropriate, unnatural, socially and linguistically out of place—off key, off color. In conversation, discussion, informal argument and explaining, in story telling, in intimate letters; in all small groups and circles and in the highly socialized situations in life, effective colloquial language is the most normal means of communication. It is probably the most desirable style of language for our schoolrooms, as well as for dining-rooms and drawing-rooms. Our typical schoolroom English is dull, drab, and stilted; it is, to use the expressive current slang, "stuffy."

The schools have held up a standard of language which is far too stiff and academic, far too hifalutin and high-brow, far too pedantic and scholastic. We shall never have the right attitude toward language until we see that its basis is idiomatic speech, the vernacular, the free-and-easy, animated style of good conversation.

But it is not to be inferred from what has just been said that approved colloquial language may be the incorrect, crude, slouchy, slipshod speech of the back-alley. If one's language is rough and offensive, if it is marred by frequent glaring blunders—it is inadequate, ineffective, unsocial, no matter how "natural." *Good* colloquial speech requires much care and discrimination, makes many fine distinctions; it deserves and rewards thought, study, and practice.

What, then, is effective colloquial English?

In the first place, effective colloquial Eng-

An address given over radio station WOR, Newark, N. J., on March 8, 1932.

lish in this country is not English at all, but American. That is to say, good conversational language in the United States should be in line with the established usages and practices *within this country*. We should use those pronunciations and expressions that are in good use within these United States, blandly ignoring what our cousins across the water or across the Canadian border might prefer. There is no reason why we should say "sweets" instead of "candy," "shop" instead of "store," "cinema" instead of "movie," "luggage" instead of "baggage." There is no earthly reason—certainly, no divine reason—why we should say "änt" instead of "ant," "nevüe" instead of "nefew," "been" instead of "bin," "cemetery" instead of "cemetery." It is entirely an academic question whether the British words or pronunciations are more desirable than ours, more euphonious, or more firmly established historically. The only criterion is what is now approved usage in the United States. We shall gain nothing by affectation, by aping what is naively supposed to be a superior type of speech. Other things being equal—if they ever are—the more natural and the more national our language is, the less cluttered up by unusual, artificial usages that focus attention on themselves, the better.

Another problem of effective colloquial language comes under the spotlight when we turn to grammar and idiom. In general, the schools, the makers of textbooks and courses of study, editors of certain so-called "Good English" magazines, and grammarians and rhetoricians have been ultra-conservative with regard to grammar; they have multiplied petty and puerile distinctions between Tweedledum and Tweedledee; they have insisted upon usage that is highly "precious" and puristic. For example, most grammar texts and handbooks present elaborate and intricate distinctions between *shall* and *will*, distinctions which perhaps never have been made except by

the gerund-grinders, and which certainly would never be bothered about in colloquial speech. We are not really troubled by the difference between *shall* and *will* in conversational language. We should never use in idiomatic English that much-quoted sentence, "I *will* go; no one *shall* prevent me"; it would be recognized at once as an extremely artificial, un-English statement. We would probably say "I'm going to go—that's certain; no one can stop me"; or "I'm going, that's settled; there is no use to try to stop me"; or we would show the difference between volition and futurity by stress and intonation of voice. In short, there are made in grammar books detailed and difficult distinctions which are never observed in good colloquial language. We can blur almost all the shades of meaning between *shall* and *will* and never be conscious of a loss in clearness. We don't need to learn that un-English question "Shall you go?" because we should normally say "Are you going?" or "Do you expect to go?"—Thus the grammar racketeers manufacture empty, theoretical distinctions, at the same time ignoring urgent problems of colloquial speech.

The same pedantic point of view is illustrated by the common statement that one must not use a preposition at the end of a sentence—a preposition to end a sentence *with*. Users of effective colloquial language have no respect for such a statement. Prepositions often fall naturally at the end of sentences; indeed, such sentence structure is natural, almost inevitable, in colloquial language. It may be said in passing that prepositions often come at the end of sentences in the best literary language as well. This is merely another of those false rules made by grammarians.

Still another of the expressions insisted upon by the formalists and rejected by the advocates of good colloquial speech is illustrated by adverbs ending in *ly*. Purists and pedants insist, for example, that we should

say "go slowly," whereas the common and appropriate expression among good speakers—and writers—and on the sign-boards is "go slow." They have the same attitude toward words like "sure" and "fine." They fuss and fume because we say "Why sure I'll do it"; and would school-master us to say "Why surely I will do it." We must not say "That will do fine," but "That will do finely." Good colloquial practice pays no attention to such finical rules. It obeys, rather, the great "laws" or "drifts" of the language, the tendencies that make for reasonable naturalness, appropriateness, and democracy.

Effective colloquial speech is particularly rich in words and expressions which are direct, forceful, figurative, pictorial, humorous, emotional, which smack of the soil, which have color and warmth. The principles of effective colloquial speech are stubbornly set against fussy, fuzzy expressions. There is no reason why one should say "pass away" instead of "die," "mortician" instead of "undertaker," "cemetery" instead of "graveyard"—(I don't know why I am drawing all my illustrations from such sombre associations, unless it is that such affectations lead me to think of dealing out death and destruction.) Neither is there any reason why we should not use the normal, natural, commonplace expressions sanctioned by years of good usage. No one need hesitate to say "lots of people," even though the handbooks and rhetoric books "rage and imagine a vain thing," namely, that one should say "a number," or "a quantity."

Another example: Some time ago I noticed in a test a sentence which is said to contain three errors. The sentence is "At about eight o'clock one morning in late summer with a crowd of twenty-five people I started out on a sightseeing expedition." The maker of the test assures us that "at about" is not as good usage as "about" would be; that "crowd" is erroneous for

"party," "group," or "company"; and that "started out" is a crudity when used for "set out" or "set off." This is a good—or a horrible—example of the hair-splitting that has gone on for many years. And it suggests one reason why our English courses have not taught children to speak and write with force, freedom, and naturalness. (I suppose I shouldn't have said *reason why: reason that* is the rhetorical substitute. Isn't it piffle?) Really, we seem scared (or should I say "afraid") of the natural, expressive words of everyday life; we are easily shocked by words that have vitality and vigor. Recently, for instance, I heard a teacher object to a child's saying, "I stuck my hand in my pocket." She stated that *stuck* was rough and colloquial, and preferred "I *put* my hand in my pocket." The child's feeling for effective colloquial speech was better than the teacher's. Schoolmarms—of both sexes—seem to get nervous and fidgety in the presence of anything natural and robust.

One of the difficult phenomena of colloquial speech is slang. Perhaps I can do no better than repeat here what I said some time ago on this subject. Because we have held up literary, or rather, bookish, language as the model for everyday intercourse, and because, naturally and properly, slang is barred from literary and bookish language, we have jumped to the conclusion that slang is a linguistic crime, always to be condemned and punished. Purists argue that slang is coarse and vulgar. *Some* slang is coarse and vulgar, and many words in thoroughly approved usage, not slang at all, are coarse and vulgar; naturally one should avoid such words, whether slang or not. But many words which we stigmatize as coarse are, in reality, strong, vigorous, direct. "Beat it," "that's the limit," "I'm on to you," "punk," "swell," "swat," "scoot" are brusque, terse, forceful modes of expression; they are, to my way of thinking, better conversational English than their

more staid and dignified literary synonyms. "Cut it out" is more graphic than "eliminate it"; "butt in" is more expressive than "intrude"; "spill the beans" is more picturesque than "injure the cause."

The pedagogs inform us that "slang impoverishes the language." Why, of course, if a girl calls everything "swell" and a boy terms everything "rotten," neglecting the synonyms that express the finer shades of meaning, they do impoverish their language, they make it poverty-stricken indeed. But this tendency is not peculiar to slang; many persons weaken their language through overworking certain words which are in well-established usage. We can, and many of us do, overwork "nice" and "fine." I met recently an intelligent woman who was "impoverishing her language" by calling everything "sweet." Almost everyone I know overworks the word "thing," employing it as synonymous with "idea," "thought," "plan," "point," "cause," "circumstance," "situation," instead of reserving it to designate a material concrete object. This is "impoverishing the language": to use frequently a broad, general, inexact word when we should use a narrow, specific, precise one, whether that general word is a waif from the music hall and the East Side or a highly respected child of Noah Webster's own lineage.

And in this connection we need to remember that slang has enlarged and enriched and strengthened our language, that thousands of words and phrases now in established use, rendering stout and gallant service in expression, have come into English through the door of slang. In fact, the refreshing and renewing springs of language are, first, creative literature and, second, colloquial speech. Our patrician language would find its blood running thin and its vital forces ebbing low, if it did not continually bring into the family the strong, crude offsprings of plebeian slang.

But of course I realize that a slang phrase

often becomes so popular that it displaces many useful words. "I'll say so," "You said it," "What do you know about that?" wear us out with their mere reiteration. Fortunately they wear themselves out and disappear like popular songs and novels—without leaving any trace upon the language. The fact of the matter is, many young people bandy about current slang phrases just to be in style, to be up to the minute, precisely as they wear the latest monstrosities in clothes. Some of our youthful friends wear nothing but the extremely and strangely modern in clothes and approve and use nothing but the very latest Parisian models in slang. Of course, that kind of slang and that kind of dressing are silly; but still I doubt whether we would seriously consider doing away with slang—or clothes—because some young people show no discretion in their use. Some one—doubtless some wiseacre from a college English department—has suggested that slang be not used by anyone under forty years of age. That *would* solve it. In the same way we could remove all the risks from dancing, automobiling, bathing, even from courting and marrying.

We must learn to use common sense and discretion in slang as in other arts and activities. We should regard slang as we regard other language phenomena. Some slang is cheap and coarse, some slang is rich and vivid; some slang is inane and pointless, some slang is apt and striking; but no slang, however novel and picturesque, should be permitted to become the dominant quality in our speech. I would not warn against all slang; I would warn against undesirable and excessive slang. I would not discriminate *against* slang expressions; I would discriminate *among* them.

Nothing that I have said about colloquial language will be construed, I hope, as meaning that there are not uses for the more formal and dignified types of speaking and

writing, or as meaning that effective colloquial speech may be devoid of nicety and distinction. Quite as much care and discrimination is needed in learning a natural effective colloquial style as in learning the more formal or the more literary style. And when learned, it serves as the basis of all successful language.

WALTER BARNES

THE ROLE OF EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

ONE of the major problems now confronting American secondary education is the making of a scientific curriculum adapted and adjusted to the needs of modern youth in our dynamic social order. Attention to the high school curriculum has revealed a need for a clearer conception of the rôle of extra-curricular activities in the program of secondary education. It is beginning to be apparent that no high school curriculum can be considered adequate that fails to make provision for these activities. As a result of changes in the character of American society that place new responsibilities on the high school, the extra-curriculum of the school has become an important educative agency, an agency to furnish those activities which were formerly provided for in large measure by the home, church, and community but are now cared for in the regular curriculum, and which give the basis for growth in effective ways of living. The extra-curriculum should be an essential part of the regular curriculum for it has, like the regular curriculum of the school, the function of providing significant activities and experiences. The activities and experiences of the regular curriculum are usually considered as formal in nature under the direction and control of the school; the activities and experiences of the extra-curriculum may be considered as informal in nature under pupil direction and control but school su-

pervision. Both of these curricula are agencies to common ends—social efficiency and individual development. They are complementary the one to the other and there is no real distinction between the two. The principles for curriculum-making are the same as the principles for the making of the extra-curriculum. The criteria for the selection of subject matter are the same for both. The rôle of the extra-curriculum is identical with the rôle of the regular curriculum of the school.

Until the time arrives when the activities and experiences of the high school curriculum includes the present so-called extra-curricular activities, it will be necessary for the school to set up a program for the organization, administration and supervision of the extra-curriculum. Some of the principles which should govern this program may be stated as follows:

1. Pupils should participate in those activities that make strongest appeal to their interests, needs, and tastes.
2. The program of activities should, at least, embrace those fundamental activities that boys and girls engage in and each pupil should participate in at least three activities including one in literary or forensic endeavors; one in health; and one in his avocational, vocational, or social interests.
3. These activities should be so arranged and classified that they may be attached to the regular departments of the school. If this be done a proper balance will be secured between curricular and extra-curricular offerings.
4. The extra-curricular activities should be under pupil direction and control, and under teacher guidance and supervision.
5. The participation of a pupil in an activity should be based on his interest, ability, and good will; and no one should dominate. It should not be determined by his scholastic standing.