

WHAT IS GOOD ENGLISH TODAY?

THE question of good English is one of the conversational topics that can be depended upon to set off a debate at any time. Editorials are written about every phase of it. Teachers are deluged with letters asking them to referee disputes over some particular locution. Even our statesmen have manifested a consistent interest in the problem—it may be recalled that both Benjamin Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt tried to reform our spelling. All agree that good English should be taught, but there are many different views about what is and is not Good English.

In all this diversity of opinion, two diametrically opposed attitudes may be discerned. At the one extreme there are those who look to the conventional rules of grammar, to dictionaries, to lists of frequently mispronounced words as absolute authorities. This attitude of dependence upon authority, since it implies a belief that a language may arrive at and maintain a relatively static condition, in other words that it may be kept *pure*, is usually spoken of as *purism*.

During the last twenty-five years, however, there have been indications of a change of attitude toward good English and its teaching, both in the schools and among competent linguists. There has been formulated what may be called for want of a more accurate term a "liberal" attitude toward language directly opposed to many of the tenets and practices of the purists. As with any liberal movement, this one has been accompanied by much misunderstanding as to its aims and methods. There are abroad sinister rumors that "anything you hear is right" and dire forebodings of future generations whose verbs and nouns will not agree.

It is important to the general success of the English language program in our schools to clear away some of the erroneous

conceptions associated with linguistic liberalism. In doing so, I shall treat only one aspect of this broad question, namely grammar in its more restricted sense, although what I have to say may be applied in most cases to problems of pronunciation and vocabulary as well.

To explain, first of all, the rise of the liberal attitude toward a standard of good English, we must examine briefly the history of the rules found in the grammars today. For the most part, they originated with certain English grammarians of the eighteenth century, notably William Ward, Robert Lowth, and James Buchanan, men not as interested in codifying actual spoken English of their time as in setting up an ideal language. This language was based in part upon the rules of Latin grammar, for the eighteenth century revered the classics, and in part upon what seemed to be a rational arrangement for a language, for the eighteenth century was also an age of reason.

In the two hundred years which have elapsed since the formulation of these rules, we have learned much concerning this aspect of human behavior. The eighteenth century grammarians assumed that language was static, that it might reach and be kept at a state of perfection. Later we learned to apply the evolutionary concept to language as well as to botany and zoölogy, and we came to see that language is not stationary, that it is in a state of continuous development, that standards which may hold good for one century are not necessarily applicable to another.

Along with this conception came the realization that many of the rules of so-called correct English did not reflect actual speech habits but set up standards which were not only absent from spoken English but virtually foreign to the genius of the language.

In 1926, the late Professor S. A. Leonard and Professor H. Y. Moffet began to study this problem. They selected from typical school text-books 102 expressions con-

demned as incorrect and submitted these to a jury composed of 225 eminent linguists, authors, editors, business executives, teachers of English and of speech. This jury was asked to rate the 102 condemned expressions as acceptable, questionable, or illiterate. It was found that more than 40 of the 102 expressions were considered acceptable by over 75 per cent of the linguists, and many others were held by them to be matters of divided usage. Among the expressions condemned by the text-books and accepted by the jury were: "This is a man I used to know," "That will be all right," "You had better stop that foolishness." The first of these omits the relative pronoun; the second uses the term "all right" to which some grammars object; in the third the locution "had better" is at times condemned by text-books as a colloquialism. All of them are obviously in current use to-day.

It is interesting to read what an eminent British linguist, Professor J. H. G. Grattan, has said on this subject. He writes, "The attitude of the American schools is, so far as the English language is concerned, ultra-conservative. . . . Indeed, by American standards, many idiomatic usages long sanctioned in Great Britain are still bad grammar."

This immediately raises the question: If the rules of grammars can not be held to constitute a valid standard of good English, what standard can be set up in their place? The liberal grammarians answer: The history of most modern languages shows that from generation to generation and from century to century there has been in existence an accepted or standard form of that language—English, French, or whatever it may be—and that such a standard form has been based upon the speech of the class and section of the country politically, economically, and culturally dominant at the time. London English, one of the many English dialects, became the standard speech of English chiefly because the city

of London rose to a position of prime importance in the affairs of the English-speaking people. The same was true of the language of the Ile de France and of the Kingdom of Castile. If this is generally the case, why should we not then consider as the standard of present day English that speech which is in actual use by the large group who is carrying on the affairs of the English speaking people? An attitude of this kind is usually spoken of as a doctrine of usage.

Suppose, however, the usage of this dominant group is not wholly in agreement on all points. Suppose some of its members occasionally use a split infinitive while others do not. Here again we may have recourse to the history of our language. A study of the forms of the English language during the last 1,000 years indicates that certain inflectional and syntactical features have been constantly expanding and developing, while others have been disappearing. If it is possible from an examination of what has gone on in the past to make a reasonable prediction as to what will come about in the future—and we assume this with most studies—then, in the case of a divided usage, let us choose that form or construction which seems to be in accord with the developing tendencies of the language. To return to the split infinitive, since a careful examination of the English of the last 500 years shows such a construction to have been in constant use and to have arisen from a desire to speak English naturally and clearly, the least we can do is to allow it equal rank with the alternative construction; to favor it when it seems better to perform the function of communicating the idea involved, to rule it out when it does not express the thought as clearly.

It is often asked if such a doctrine means that any sort of English heard in the street is good English, that if an expression is used, no matter where or by whom, it must then necessarily be correct. The answer is no. The doctrine of usage does not legalize

the language of the gutter, for that is not the English apt to prevail as a standard. It is true that upon occasion certain expressions and modes of pronunciation have spread from one social class to another, frequently from a higher to a lower, at times from a lower to a higher. The broad *a* sound in such words as *past* and *half*, now considered ultra-refined by many, is a case in point, for in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth it was, as a dictionary of the time puts it, "the sound used by the vulgar but not the polite and learned world." But these occasional cross currents do not justify an acceptance of wholly uncultivated speech as a norm. By virtue of the historical principle upon which the liberal grammarians proceed, they are still committed to the speech of the people who direct the affairs of the community as a standard. However, since the English speaking countries are democratic in character, the limitation of the speech standard to the narrowest top layer of the social order is also precluded.

Another aspect of linguistic liberalism which frequently troubles the layman is fear that the lack of ironclad rules will lead to eventual disintegration. Again history shows such fears to be unfounded. It has been pointed out that rules for the speaking of correct English date chiefly from the beginning of the eighteenth century. They have existed only 200 years of the 1500 since English was first spoken in the British Isles. Accordingly, one is inclined to feel that these rules have had relatively little effect in either hindering or accelerating the main trends of development.

Moreover, we can never be too sure as to just what is meant by disintegration of a language, which innovations are bad and which are good. As one eminent linguist has written, "To the conservative grammarian all change is decay. Although he knows well that an old house often has to be torn down in part or as a whole in order that it may be rebuilt to suit modern conditions, he

never sees the constructive forces at work in the destruction of old grammatical forms. He is fond of mourning over the loss of the subjunctive and the present slovenly use of the indicative. He hasn't the slightest insight into the fine constructive work of the last centuries in rebuilding the subjunctive."

At present the greatest need confronting those entrusted with the teaching of our language in the schools is for new textbooks which describe accurately the language of those now carrying on the affairs of the English-speaking people, grammars which record the forms and syntax of present-day American English. A most significant beginning in this direction has been made by the National Council of Teachers of English which, in November, 1932, sponsored the publication of *Current English Usage*. The volume is in reality a continuation of the survey begun by Professors Leonard and Moffet, which has for its purpose a codification of the usages of present day English.

We can only hope that this forward-looking work will serve as an impetus to others, that the fine scholarship and the scientific zeal which is so clearly reflected here will find their way into the dozens of texts adapted to classroom use which must be written in the next five or six years.

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YOUTH TO SAVE THE DAY

ON a recent trip west of Chicago, on a Burlington train a well dressed gentleman across the aisle, on learning that I was engaged in educational work, asked why high school and college students were so disloyal and "red." I asked how many. "All," he said. Then I asked how he knew it. Well, he knew it. "Magazines say so and nobody denies it."

This talk was given over the NBC network as one in the series on "Our American Schools."