

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF
THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

APRIL 1963

Tom Soyer

The English language is generally regarded as the most widely used language in the world. The long-time commercial supremacy of the English-speaking peoples is certainly an important reason for this. The recent technological superiority of these same peoples (particularly the Americans) has increased the need for all peoples of the world to know and understand English. The intensive educational efforts of the Communist-bloc nations include accelerated emphasis on English. It is safe to say that at the present time more people speak English than ever before and the number of non-Anglo-Americans that do so is increasing at an ever-accelerated pace. English appears to be becoming an international language, assuming a position in the world of today much like Latin had in the church-oriented European community of the Middle Ages, and that French held in the diplomatic circles of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. With English well on its way to becoming a virtual international language, it may seem strange to find that signs of disintegration are appearing. Ironically enough, this disintegration is mainly appearing in the principal home of the English language, the United States.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine this disintegration. Tonight we shall look at some of the changes that are coming about in our written and spoken tongue. Our emphasis will be placed on changes which in the opinion of the writer are harmful.

APRIL, 1963

The writer, in order to forestall subsequent argument, hereby states that he freely admits that all change is not bad. In fact most changes in our language are probably for the better. The writer is not a purist. I applaud, rather than deplore, the near demise of grammatical fetishes such as the so-called error of the "split infinitive", the "who-whom" controversy and the "shall" versus "will" argument. Likewise I agree with Sir Winston Churchill that it is grammatically permissible to end a sentence with a preposition. (Churchill was once corrected on the floor of Commons for ending a sentence with a preposition. "Sir," he thundered, "that is the kind of arrant pedantry ^{up} ~~such~~ with which I will not put"). I am almost ready to accept "It is me", particularly since the efforts of English teachers to prevent the use of this phrase have resulted chiefly in causing young Americans to use terms like "between you and I", or have caused them to overuse the first person reflexive "myself" in such sentences as "Pete and myself will go". However, I am here tonight for a different purpose. I am here to point out certain other changes in our language, changes that I do not like and changes ^{that} I think should be resisted.

In taking this position I am defending a thesis that is ~~an~~ anathema to most authorities on modern linguistics, particularly those of them who are members of the so-called school of "Structural Linguistics". ~~The~~ Structural Linguistics is ^{the} study of a language as it is used rather than as it ought to be used. The Danish linguist, Otto Jespersen, is usually given the credit -

or blame -- for originating Structural Linguistics. Prior to Jespersen, who wrote in the late Nineteenth Century, Linguists usually contented themselves with ~~trying to~~ discover grammatical rules and ~~to describe~~ ^{trying to reduce a} language to a set of them. It was Jespersen's theory that this could not be done, that change in a language was continual and that this change was ~~usually~~ ^{usually} good. His theories blew like a refreshing breeze through the Nineteenth Century world of linguistics. ~~Where~~ ^{of that day} most scholars were still trying to fit English and other modern languages into strait jackets, assuming that because Latin could be so stratified all languages could. They overlooked the reason for this, namely that classical Latin had ceased to exist as a spoken language for over ten centuries. But like many theories, the theory of Structural Linguistics was over-extended by the disciples of its originator, much as the followers of Karl Marx ~~have~~ distorted his valuable theory of economic determinism. One thinks also of the ridiculous theories that have been developed from Sigmund Freud's brilliant studies concerning sex and the subconscious.

For the followers of Otto Jespersen began to say that whatever language was used was correct, or as they now prefer to put it "correctness rests upon usage". At the side of the Structural Linguists there appeared a powerful ^{ally} - the idea of democracy or egalitarianism. There was no elite, the democratic argument went; therefore, there was no elite to tell the rest of us how to speak or write. One man's usage was as good as another's. Full acceptance of the Structural Linguistic argument would mean that the language is on its way to complete

vulgarization. The flood gates are open and there are few to try to stem the tides.

One reason why there are so few is that the modern-day schools are turning out vast droves of students who are, if not illiterate, at best only semi-~~illiterate~~ ^{literate}. In 1961 the National Council of Teachers of English published a disturbing report entitled "The National Interest and The Teaching of English." According to it, four million American school children have reading disabilities; one hundred fifty thousand students failed college entrance exams in English in the year 1960; two-thirds of American colleges have found it necessary to provide work in remedial English. According to a report issued by the Council for Basic Education, thirty-five per cent (35%) of all American students were seriously retarded in reading. The Council blamed the "whole-word" or "look-say" method of reading instruction which has become standard in most American schools. Americans of an earlier ~~date~~ ^{day} learned to read by the "Phonic" method, in which the student learned the alphabet and its sounds and from them individual words. The "look-say" method requires that children learn to read by learning to recognize whole words by sight. (The term "look-say" comes from the technique used in this type of teaching; the child will "look" at a word and then "say" it). As one critic of the "look-say" method put it, "A student now learns, not his ABC's, but his AT-BAT-CATS". The trouble with the "look-say" method is that it requires one to actually learn from a teacher each and every word that he has in his reading vocabulary. Children taught by the "look-say" method when confronted with a new and unfamiliar word

are -- to use a phrase of Edward Phillips in a similar context -- "as much amazed as if they had met with a hobgoblin". (The problem is not new; Phillips wrote this in a book called "The New World of Words"; published ^{date} in 1658!). The "look-sayers", in order to prevent the traumatic experience of seeing an unfamiliar word in a book, have deliberately curtailed the number of words used in the basic text books. This, in the jargon of the pedagogues, is known as "Vocabulary Control". Advertisements for basic reading text-books brag about how few different words are used in the stories. The result is that by the third grade, the average American student, according to the above mentioned report of the Council for Basic Education, has a reading vocabulary of only 1,342 words. The average Russian student, according to a book by Dr. Arthur S. Trace entitled "What Ivan Knows That Johnnie Doesn't", uses a 2,000 word primer in the first grade. In the first grade Ivan is reading simple Tolstoy, while Johnnie is reading the fabulous adventures of Dick and Jane, who seem to spend most of their time running, looking at each other ^{run,} or questioning whether they or either of them can run. By the Fourth Grade Ivan has a vocabulary of 10,000 words; Johnnie by this time has graduated to reading such thrilling tales as "A Visit To The Fire Station With Uncle Charley". Can Johnnie be blamed for reading "Batman", or even for eschewing reading entirely for television -- the "vast wasteland" of Newton Minow?

So much for possible ^{causes} ~~courses~~ of the massive American illiteracy. Let us examine some specific ^{illustrations} ~~illiterations~~. In the February 4, 1962 issue of The New York Times, ^{Section 4} Bobk Review ~~Star~~

Edward D. Eddy, Jr., President of Chatham College, wrote: "The worst aspect of this approach is to instill in the college graduate the notion that somehow she or he is different than others."

I am sure that some of you here tonight were present at a high school graduation of several years ago when the principal address was given by the dean of one of our Kentucky colleges. The title of his speech was "Statistics" and it was necessary for him to use this word several times during the course of his oration. Each and every time, it came out "Statistics." I am sure we have all heard this word pronounced in this manner many times, (often by educated people) and if the Structural Linguistics experts get their way, perhaps at some time in the future, it will be according to their lights -- "correct." (I for one hope not; "stastistics" is for me a much more difficult tongue-twister than "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers"!)

A recent American President often spoke of "nucular" bombs, and pronounced "invidious" and "mischievous" as "inviduous" and "mischievious." Our current president converts soft "a's" at the end of a word to ^{an} "e-r" sound, in such words as "Cuber", "Africer", and "Asier." This, however, is more properly a question of dialect, rather than ^{one of} pronunciation; President Kennedy at least shows that he knows how to spell the words. And being a Southerner, and consequently from an area where words ending in a vowel, like "tomato" and "potato" are so often pronounced with an e-r sound at the end, I, for one, shall not cast the first stone at "Cuber", etc.

But let us return to the apostles of Structural

Linguistics and examine further the impact of their ideas. These gentlemen have not been content with merely locating and classifying erroneous, but common, ways of speaking and writing. They have ~~insinuated~~ ^{insinuated} that these ways are right. In the past, they were opposed by most literate people, particularly the English teachers and the writers of the dictionaries. Today, however, it appears that they have converted the authors of dictionaries to their own way of thinking. One of the last fortresses of correct English is in the hands of its enemies.

The Third Edition of Webster's New International Dictionary (Unabridged), published in 1961, (hereafter referred to as Webster's Third) shows how complete is the triumph of the Structural Linguists. For Webster's Third has all but completely abandoned the traditional job of a good dictionary -- settling arguments about words. Practically any word used by any appreciable number of persons is now accepted by Webster's Third. Webster's Second Edition, published in 1934, contained most of the same words as Webster's Third, but a great many of the words and expressions had "warning labels" attached to them -- labels like "slang", "colloquial", "erroneous", "incorrect" and "illiterate". Many of the words so labeled are now apparently completely acceptable. In fact, Webster's Third has practically abandoned the old warning labels. In their stead it has adopted two new warning labels, "Substandard" and "Non-standard". "Substandard" is defined as indicating "status conforming to a pattern of linguistic usage that exists throughout the American language community, but differs in choice of words or form from that of the prestige group in the community." This

is académesé for "not used by educated people" but it sounds more democratic. "Hissself" and "drowned^{ed}" are examples of such words. "Non-standard" is described as being "used for a very small number of words that can hardly stand without some status label but which are too widely current in reputable context to be labeled sub-standard." An example of such a word is "irregardless". The Webster's Second label for "irregardless" was "erroneous" or "humorous". In short, Webster's Third has almost dropped the idea of serving as a final authority on correctness -- almost anything goes. The Editor of Webster's Third, Dr. Phillip Göve, has set forth the theory that his staff used in the new dictionary. "A dictionary", he wrote, "should have no traffic with artificial notions of correctness or superiority. It must be descriptive and not prescriptive." ^{and quote} In other words the new dictionary merely reports what people say and write; it does not attempt to say whether what is spoken and written is correct.

The new Webster's Third relies heavily on quotations from various authors to show correct usage. These quotations are known in the trade as "citations" or "cites," for short. Almost all comprehensive dictionaries use cites. Webster's Second used cites but almost all of them were from standard authors. Webster's Third, since it lays such stress on modern usage, has updated many of the cites. Webster's Second illustrates the word "debonair" with a cite from Milton; Webster's Third elected to quote one H. M. Reynolds. "Jöcúnd" was illustrated in Webster's Second by a cite from Shakespeare; in Webster's Third, the cite is from Elinor Wylie. Other authorities on word usage listed in Webster's

Third are Billy Rose, Ethel Merman and Ted Williams. The word "enthuse" is labeled "colloquial" in Webster's Second, but Webster's Third has granted the word a perfect pedigree and gives as ~~support~~ a citation, a statement from a trade paper called "Fashion Accessories":

Fowler in his great work on English usage has a section entitled "Pairs and Snares." This section consists of a list of pairs of words that are commonly, though erroneously, used as synonyms. Fowler differentiated between "nauseous" (causing nausea) ^{and} "nauseated" (experiencing nausea). A distinction was drawn between "forcible" (effected by force) ^{and} "forceful" (full of force). The words "unexceptional" and "unexceptionable" were distinguished. The former ^{meant} ~~meaning~~ constituted no exception to the general rule, and the latter ^{meant "not of one opinion"} ~~meaning no opinion~~ or subject to objection. All of these "pairs and snares" of Fowler are rejected by Webster's Third; it says that these words may be used interchangeably. Two words so obviously different in meaning that Fowler did not even include them in ~~the~~ ^{his} list of "pairs and snares" are "disinterested" and "uninterested". The former means "impartial"; the latter, "not interested." Or at least these were the meanings before Webster's Third. It gives them as synonyms.

Webster's Second labels the use of the words "like" as a conjunction as "illiterate" or "incorrect"; adding that "in the works of careful writers it is replaced by the word "as". Webster's Third accepts the use of "like" as a conjunction as ~~stan~~ standard practice and illustrates the point with a cite from that

great American authority on English usage, Art Linkletter. The most familiar cite for this proposition, and one which doubtless will appear when Webster's Fourth is published, is the well-known cigaret jingle, "Winston tastes good like a cigaret should." The writer remembers seeing a Winston ad in a magazine which depicted a football player and a curvy co-ed sitting on the steps of an ivy-clad college ~~building~~ ^{library}. The co-ed and the football player have ~~apparently~~ just uttered the first half of the Winston jingle, "Winston tastes good." A college professor, incongruously clad in a gown and mortar-board, then chimes in, "As a cigaret should." The "as" is printed in red letters for emphasis. If the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, the makers of Winstons, had used crusading ad writers, it might have been possible for them to have converted Americans to using the correct "as" instead of the incorrect "like". But they too were victims of Structural Linguistics. The writer has the feeling that if the automobile had been developed in the 1950's instead of earlier, the ad men for General Motors would have despaired of educating the American people, and would have deliberately Anglicized the pronunciation of their best selling automobile, with the result that many of us here tonight would be driving Chevroletts!

Many of you may have the feeling that up to now I have dealt with trifling points. You may say, "Sure, some of our language is technically incorrect, but I know what the speaker or writer means." If that is your belief let us examine one more word as it is defined in Webster's Third. The word is "bi-monthly". Webster's Second defines it as follows:

once in two months." Webster's Third gives this as the first meaning but, plunging on, adds: "sometimes, twice a month."

Perhaps the "warning word" "sometimes" is sufficient but I would prefer a labeling^{of} "erroneous". How the same word can mean "every two weeks" and "every eight weeks" is beyond me. But such is the stuff of Structural Linguistics.

Before leaving Webster's Third perhaps we should close with ~~this~~^{one} last item. Earlier we have indicated that many words regarded by most people as slang are treated by Webster's Third as perfectly good words. This fact prompted the staid book reviewers of the New York Times to begin the book review of the new Webster's dictionary in this manner:

Quoted
"A passel of double-domes at the G. & C. Merriam Company joint in Springfield, Mass. (~~the editorial began~~), have been confabbing and yakking for twenty-seven years-- which is not intended to infer that they have not been doing plenty work-- and now they have finalized Webster's Third ~~New~~ International Dictionary, Unabridged, a new edition of that swell and esteemed word book."

Those who regard the foregoing paragraph as acceptable English prose will find that the new Webster's is just the dictionary for them." *end quote*

Point
Let us now turn our attention to another facet of modern English usage, the abolition of all poetry and imagery, wherever found, in the name of clarity. This trend also was started in the name of democracy. All writing must be "easy to read and understand." In short, if we may borrow a term from mathematics, all writing must be immediately understandable ^{to} the "lowest common denominator." We shall illustrate this point by a brief examination of the most popular revision of the Bible, the Revised Standard Version, published in 1952. We shall

We shall compare it with the classical King James Version. In my opinion and in the opinion of many other writers the King James Version comes out way ahead.

Time does not permit a discussion of how the King James Version was written. Furthermore, such discussion would be beyond the scope of this paper. In this portion of my paper I am not attempting to denigrate the Revised Standard Version. The R.S.V. makes a great contribution to Biblical literature. All scholars have applauded it for correcting certain mistranslations that the King James Revisers made in interpreting the earlier manuscripts, and for substituting modern terms in places where the meaning of the 17th century word used in King James has changed. With this type of revision, I have no quarrel.

But let us look at certain other changes that were made -- changes which add little or nothing to clearer understanding, but which rob the altered passages of their charm and beauty.

The Revisers have almost uniformly dropped the use of "thou", "ye", "thy", and "thine", and replaced them with "you" and "your". The old verb endings, "est", and "eth" are omitted. "Unto" becomes "to"; "whither", "where"; "whatsoever", "whatever", and so on. Surely this was not done for the sake of clarity, since any literate person has no difficulty whatever in understanding the old forms. The Revisers acted as they did, only to give the Bible a "modern" touch. Many of the passages lose their effect.

For example, "Thus ^(saith) saith the Lord" sounds more Lordly than "Thus says the Lord." The Ten Commandments are damaged when the awesome "Thou shalt not" is replaced by the querulous

"You shall not," (Perhaps in future versions of the Bible this will degenerate into the comparable modern phrase -- the permissive mama's "Let's not.") The Prophet Nathan's dramatic denunciation of King David, "Thou art the man," becomes "You are the man." Nathan is made to sound like a character on "Dragnet" identifying a petty criminal from a police lineup. The immortal phrase of Jesus, "Suffer the little children to come unto me", becomes "Let the little children come to me." One writer has suggested that this altered language sounds more appropriate for a mother at a neighborhood picnic.

Many of the changes destroy the rhythm or alliteration of the King James Version. The seriousness of this defect is magnified since the Bible is very frequently read aloud. In Matthew 11:28, the King James language "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden", becomes the overly brisk, "Come to me, all who labor." Presumably, this is not meant as an invitation to all pregnant women, but it still sounds as though the Revised Standard people were attempting to prepare a Biblical ^{verse} ~~phrase~~ to be sent as a telegram. The passage in Ecclesiastes, "Man goeth to his long home", is beautiful because of the repetition of the long "o" sound. The Revised Standard, however, believes in "spelling it out" and changes the sentence to "Man goes to his eternal home."

The Revised Standard attempted to preserve those ^{quotations} ~~phrases~~ ~~of~~ the Bible that have become common parlance. For example, they retained the famous phrase from the 23rd Psalm "through the valley of the shadow of death." This was quite a concession for

the Revisers to make, since most authorities on ancient languages agree that "darkness" would be a more exact translation of the ~~word~~^{word} used in the oldest known copies. But the Revised Standard Version changed "out of the mouth of babes and sucklings" to "by the mouth of babes and infants," and dropped the ~~famous phrase~~^{well-known} "whited sepulchres" in favor of "whitewashed tombs."

Thus, it seems that even our Holy Bible has been altered to conform to "modern usage". The sacrifice of beauty, imagery and poetry is disregarded. The Bible must be updated ~~to make it conform to the desires of those who read only to~~^{to} "find out what happened." The writer submits that it is a grave error to pander to the person who reads the Bible as he would a "B" grade detective story.

We have now come to the end of this paper. In it I have tried to show you some of the pernicious ~~trends~~^{trends} in modern-day speaking and writing. I fear that if the development of the English language continues in this direction, generations to come will be robbed of a great deal. If the ~~beatnik~~^{language of the}, in which the words "like" and "man" have become mere interjections, should become the language of our people, we may see a repeti-

tion of the occurrence at the Tower of Babel -- no one will be able to understand anyone else. Unless some efforts are made to hold the line against useless change, ~~writers~~ ^{readers} of the near future may be unable to read the Bible, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, except in translation. A growing, developing language has little use for purists, but we must not confuse the purists with the pure.

At any rate, I hope ^{"sorta"} "youse guys kinder like ^{ed} this here paper."

- 15 -

BIBLIOGRAPHY.

Certain essays of Dwight Macdonald collected in "Against The American Grain", Random House, New York, N. Y., 1962.