

# VARIETIES OF ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

By G. L. BROOK, M.A., Ph.D.

SMITH PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND MEDIEVAL ENGLISH  
LITERATURE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

## I

FROM time to time popular books on English grammar are published with titles like *Is It Good English?* and even more frequently newspapers publish letters from readers who express their loathing of this or that feature of pronunciation or syntax. From such publications one might gain the impression that there are only two varieties of English: the good and the bad. This is a serious over-simplification. Many criticisms of linguistic habits arise from a failure to realize that there are several varieties of English and to recognize the characteristics of each variety. Thus, conversation is sometimes criticized because it does not conform to the rules of the written language, and British readers have condemned Americans because they choose to write in American English rather than in British English. A slightly less naive type of criticism recognizes the existence of British and American English as varieties, each with its right to exist, but raises an outcry if there is any sign of borrowing between the two varieties. Attempts to resist such borrowing are pointless and doomed to failure. Just as English has borrowed words from many different languages, words and usages will continue to be borrowed from one variety of English into other varieties. Such borrowing can be carried out clumsily with incongruous results, but that is not a good reason for trying to avoid all borrowing. Another group of ill-founded criticisms results from a failure to recognize that a variety of English may have several subdivisions. Many letters to newspapers condemn as American importations linguistic constructions that are simply vulgarisms, which an educated American would avoid just as firmly as an educated Englishman would.

One group of varieties of language has long been known and frequently studied: the varieties known as dialects. A dialect

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 11th of December 1968.

may be defined as a subdivision of a language that is used by a group of speakers who have some non-linguistic characteristic in common. The most common shared characteristic is a regional one : people who live in the same place tend to talk alike. The link, instead of being regional, may be social or occupational. Sometimes a variety of language seems to depend not on the people using it but on the occasion when it is used. Such varieties have sometimes been called *situational dialects*, but the term *register* has recently been suggested to describe varieties of this kind.<sup>1</sup> The same man will use widely different varieties of language in speaking on the telephone, in addressing a public meeting, and in talking to his wife, and, if he fails to make any distinction, his wife is likely to call attention to his failure. The category described by the term *register* is undoubtedly important and the term is convenient, but there are some varieties which can be regarded either as occupational dialects or registers. The distinction should perhaps depend on the extent to which their use becomes habitual. Liturgical language or the language of legal documents can best be regarded as examples of register, but if a parson asks you to pass the salt in musical bell-like tones that indicate his profession, he may be said to have acquired an occupational dialect.

Professor Strevens<sup>2</sup> suggests a third category beside dialect and register, to describe the linguistic effects of the social relation between speaker and hearer. To these varieties of language he tentatively gives the name *style* or *manner of discourse*. Such varieties of language as respectful or patronizing speech come under this heading. Social relationships undoubtedly have their effect on language, but it is doubtful whether it is necessary to make a separate category of them ; they can very well be included under register. On the other hand, it seems necessary to add to dialect and register a third category of varieties, which Professor Strevens does not mention : those to be associated with idiolects. There are linguistic characteristics shared by large numbers of people who seem to have no other characteristics in common. For example, it would be hopeless to assign the

<sup>1</sup> See P. D. Strevens, "Varieties of English", in *Papers in Language and Language Teaching* (O.U.P., 1965), pp. 74-86.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 84.

various pronunciations of *gaseous* or *inveigle* to any regional or class dialects. Similarly, readiness to use slang, euphemism or swear-words is to some extent a question of register, but it is also a question of idiolect, a matter of personal preference. Dialect has been the subject of frequent comment, whereas register and idiolect have received little attention. In this lecture, therefore, I want to say something about these two varieties of English and their numerous subdivisions.

Beside the three categories of dialect, idiolect and register, each of which comprises several different varieties, there is one distinction that cuts across all of them : the medium of expression. There are at least three such media, namely speech, writing and gesture, but in English the third of these is comparatively unimportant. Most varieties of language can be expressed in either speech or writing, but each variety is more at home in one or the other. Thus, in present-day English at least, regional dialects are much more at home in the spoken language, although it is possible, by means of a number of compromises with spelling, to write poems and stories in dialect. On the other hand, the language of literary criticism or of scientific writing belongs more properly to the written language. Legal language finds expression in both writing and speech, in the language of legal documents and the conventional formulas used in a court of law respectively.

Each of the two media of speech and writing has produced a group of varieties whose characteristics have arisen from the nature of the medium. For example, the limited capacity of the human lungs imposes a strain on a speaker who tries to utter long sentences without pausing for breath. Largely for this reason, sentences in the spoken language tend to be shorter than in the written language, and even in the middle of a sentence a speaker will often pause to refill his lungs without realizing that he is doing so. The pauses lessen his discomfort, but a good speaker gets into the way of using them to make his speaking more effective ; frequent pauses lessen the strain on the hearer as well as on the speaker. Every sentence, except the very shortest, has a number of points, not always indicated in writing by punctuation marks, at which a slight pause will hardly be noticed or may be

a positive advantage. For example, in the present sentence the gaps indicate points where slight pauses would hardly be noticed. A speaker may intend that a pause *should* be noticed, and he can achieve this result by prolonging the pause or by deliberately choosing to pause at a point where a pause would not naturally be expected. Young preachers often give an impression of earnestness by pauses of this kind, and another type of pause, much used by radio announcers, indicates that the word which follows would in the written language be enclosed between quotation marks. The most important difference between spoken and written English is that the former can draw on a much wider range of methods of expression. Some important aspects of speech, such as stress and intonation, are capable of almost infinite variation in the spoken language, whereas in the written language they are hardly expressed at all. The word "hardly" is necessary, since very obvious variations in stress and intonation can be expressed very clumsily in the written language by means of such devices as punctuation. Italics can be used to show that a word is strongly stressed ; an exclamation mark indicates a sharp rise in pitch, a question mark a less violent rise, and a full stop falling pitch. Variations of tempo are used to express meaning in speech more frequently than we realize. Gestures and facial expression are also used in speech : a smile may be used to tone down an insult, and frowns and uncomprehending expressions all play their part in the exchange of ideas. Before speaking to anybody we generally try to catch his eye to make sure that he knows that he is the person addressed, and, when this is impossible, many people are guilty of the practice, which causes much embarrassment to the blind, of speaking about a blind man in his presence as though he were incapable of speaking for himself : " Does he take sugar in his tea ? "

In the comparison between spoken and written language the advantages are not all on one side. Writing has obvious advantages not as a rule shared by speech : reader and writer do not have to be in the same place at the same time, whereas, until recently, speaker and hearer had to be ; a reader can choose his own speed, re-reading the difficult passages and skimming lightly

over the parts that seem to him unduly prolix. Most important of all, writing is more permanent than speech. For most of the purposes for which language is used, permanence would be a real drawback, and we should all be much more taciturn if we thought that our trivial remarks were being recorded to be studied by others. Inventions of the last century have done something to lessen the disadvantages of the spoken, as compared with the written, language : radio has lessened the limitation of place and the gramophone and tape-recording machine have lessened that of time. No doubt we are only at the beginning of an era of the preservation of recorded speech, but the student of literature will always depend heavily on the written word. On the other hand, the written language has a few devices that help to make one's meaning clearer. Some homophones are distinguished from each other by differences of spelling, like *sow* and *sew*, *metal* and *mettle*, *flour* and *flower*, *sun* and *son*, but these do not amount to much since the context usually makes it easy to tell which word is meant. For the most part punctuation marks indicate rather crudely variations that can be indicated more subtly and effectively by the human voice, but quotation marks are perhaps an exception to the rule that speech can indicate such differences more efficiently than writing. A skilful speaker can make it clear by his intonation that he is quoting, but some speakers have little confidence in their power to do this, with the result that we get clumsy devices like " and I quote " or the reporter's " quote " and " unquote " to mark the beginning and the end of a quotation. One university teacher had a habit, which many of his students found endearing, of indicating a quotation by raising both hands to the level of his head and twiddling his fingers to represent the shape of quotation marks, but this was an individual eccentricity. A device that has become common among radio news-readers is to pause slightly before a word that would in the written language be enclosed within quotation marks. The device can become a way of expressing distaste for what one is reading ; the reader uses the pause to disclaim responsibility for a word that he regards as badly chosen.

John Gunther's *Inside Europe* was one of the most successful books published during the first half of the twentieth century, and

it was followed by similar books on other continents. A cartoon of the period showed a wife saying to her husband "Isn't it about time another of John Gunther's 'Insides' came out?" The devices of the written language made this remark appear less bloodthirsty than it seems in speech.

In early times the written language had little influence on the spoken language; with the spread of literacy the influence has become greater. Perhaps the most noticeable result of this influence has been the spread of spelling pronunciations. A less common result is the practice of spelling out some of the abbreviations commonly used in writing, such as *i.e.* and *e.g.*

The context in which a word is used has an effect on the meaning that is usually taken for granted. A favourite word in stamp auctioneers' advertisements is "important". The man who does not collect stamps is liable to think that this is the last word that he would use to describe a collection of stamps, but the compiler of the advertisement knows that he is writing for collectors who admit the distinction between an important and an unimportant collection. A man who has broken his collar-bone while hunting may be said to be comfortable and his condition described as satisfactory. One would have thought that only the fox could derive any satisfaction from the condition of a huntsman with a broken collar-bone, and the patient himself would probably regard "comfortable" as a singularly ill-chosen word, but the words are chosen not by the patient but by those who are looking after him, and they have their own standards of comparison. As a result of frequent use in a particular kind of context, words change their meanings, and such a change is affecting the word "satisfactory". Students who have been told that their essays are satisfactory are sometimes hurt by this faint praise and ask indignantly what is wrong with them.

Some words and phrases occur in more than one context with a difference of meaning. For some people Easter is primarily a religious festival, while for others it is primarily a bank holiday, and the two groups give a different meaning to the phrase *Easter Saturday*. Those for whom Easter is primarily a religious festival, think of Easter week as beginning with Easter Sunday, and for them Easter Saturday is the Saturday of Easter week, i.e. the

Saturday after Easter Sunday. Those who think of Easter as first and foremost a holiday are liable to think of Easter Saturday as the day before Easter Sunday : one of the days in a holiday week-end.

The use of an inappropriate variety of speech for a particular occasion may be deliberate. A customer in a bank, feeling that he was being neglected, was able to secure the speedy attention of a counter-clerk by calling out "Shop!" in a loud, clear voice. The counter-clerk was resentful but the customer felt much better. More often, the use of an inappropriate register is the result of a lack of linguistic tact and it arouses contempt or embarrassment in the hearer. The American dramatist Moss Hart describes a conversation with a fellow-guest about his collaborator George Kaufman :

"What I really want to know," she said, "is, aren't you frightened to *death* of him? You've written all those plays together and I don't see *how* you do it. Truly, Mr. Hart, aren't you scared of George Kaufman? Just a little teentsy-weentsy bit? 'Fess up, now!"

I suppose, at least I have thought since, that it was the phrase "'Fess up, now", that made me behave so badly. For I proceeded to behave very badly indeed, and I am not, as a rule, a rude person. I can, on occasion, summon up a passive resistance that will see me through even the dullest of dinners. But at the combination of "teentsy-weentsy" and "'Fess up, now", something snapped inside.

Dream Girl either heard the snap—it seemed to me quite audible—or was aware of it physically, for she turned on the teeth again and said : "Am I boring you, Mr. Hart?"

This time I didn't hesitate. "Frankly, yes", I said. "You are boring the living b'jesus out of me!"

The smile froze on her lips.<sup>1</sup>

## II

There are people who declare proudly that they speak only when they have something to say. They clearly think that such a policy is both logical and praiseworthy, but they are the cause of a lot of unnecessary suffering, because their silence is liable to be misunderstood by those who have a different attitude towards language. Most people like to exchange a few words with their acquaintances when they meet them, not with a view to conveying

<sup>1</sup> *Six Plays By Kaufman and Hart* (New York, Modern Library edition, 1942), pp. xviii-xix.

or eliciting information but simply to show that they are well-disposed towards the person whom they meet. This practice has become so widespread that silence on such an occasion is often interpreted as a sign of hostility. Even when it is recognized that silence has no hostile cause, failure to exchange greetings is generally resented and the word "hazing" is used to describe the offence. The exchange of remarks purely from the motive of friendliness is known as phatic communion. Convention plays a large part in the choice of greetings. When relations between the two people concerned are rather formal, "Good morning (or afternoon or evening)" is usual; less formal is "Hello" and young people often prefer "Cheerio" or "Hiya". A brief comment on the weather sometimes serves as an alternative to these greetings. Here too there are degrees of formality, "Turned out nice" is rather staid; "Is it warm (cold) enough for you?" is familiar. In regional dialects one often hears "It's a warm (cold) 'un", to which the answer is "It is an' all".

After the weather, enquiries about health are the most frequent conversational counters. These enquiries must not be taken too seriously. One of the many definitions of a bore is that he is a man who, when asked how he is, tells you. Fairly common replies are "Not so bad" and "Just middling"; the important thing is to avoid detail. The conventional nature of the enquiry is most obvious at a formal introduction, when the normal response to the enquiry "How do you do?" is to repeat the question.

In communities, such as colleges, where people are constantly meeting one another, phatic communion may fall into disuse, though its place may be taken by a slight relaxation of the rigidity of one's face. Academic people, whose thoughts are often far away, have the reputation of being indifferent to the social obligations of conversation, and some of them deliberately cultivate a reputation for taciturnity. On social occasions they are content to follow the example of Mr. Rochester (" 'Humph'! said Mr. Rochester, and he took his tea in silence," *Jane Eyre*, ch. 13). One unfortunate young lady, sitting next to an eminent scholar at dinner, got only two remarks out of him during the whole meal: "Is that so?" and "Is that so also?"



There is often some uncertainty whether a particular variety of language is to be associated with an occasion or with a group of people. When a barrister in a court of law speaks of another barrister as "my learned friend", the occasion is important, but the profession of the speaker is even more so. Judges are reported to have rebuked witnesses for using the phrase, since it is by convention reserved for the use of lawyers, and one witness did not make matters any better by saying, in reply to such a rebuke, "Well, can I just call him 'My friend' then?" The legal practice of using the pronoun "we" to emphasize the identity of interests of a lawyer and his client can have incongruous results, as when an obviously prosperous barrister declares "We are an undischarged bankrupt suing *in forma pauperis*". So, too, can the use of common words in a technical legal sense, as when an "infant" turns out to be six feet tall.

Lawyers firmly adhere to the "unreformed" pronunciation of the Latin phrases that are often used as technical legal terms. In the schoolroom *nisi* may be pronounced [ni:si:], but in the courts it is [naisai].

The written varieties of legal English are more widely known than the spoken. With luck, it is possible for a man to keep clear of a court of law for the whole of his life, but most of us from time to time see legal documents, such as insurance policies or the deeds of a house. To a layman the most obvious characteristic of legal documents is their prolixity, but there are good reasons for this. Sir Ernest Gowers, who cannot be accused of excessive tenderness towards verbosity, defends that of legal documents :

It is the duty of a draftsman of these authoritative texts to try to imagine every possible combination of circumstances to which his words might apply and every conceivable misinterpretation that might be put on them, and to take precautions accordingly. He must avoid all graces, not be afraid of repetitions, or even of identifying them by *aforesaid*s ; he must limit by definition words with a penumbra dangerously large, and amplify with a string of near-synonyms words with a penumbra dangerously small ; he must eschew all pronouns when their antecedents might possibly be open to dispute, and generally avoid every possible grammatical ambiguity.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sir Ernest Gowers, *The Complete Plain Words*, Pelican edition (1962), pp. 19-20.

In ordinary speech and writing we are willing to leave out phrases to be supplied by the intelligence and good will of the person with whom we are communicating, but the lawyers finds it best to take nothing for granted. Punctuation can lead to ambiguity and consequently lawyers generally avoid it. Legal documents generally deal with familiar situations and conventional formulas are therefore freely used. The prefixing and suffixing of prepositions is a common feature of legal English and we therefore find words like *aforsaid*, *hereby*, *hereunder* and *hereinafter*. The use of such words is necessary if precision is to be achieved. The fondness of legal draftsmen for such words makes them unsuitable for use in other contexts, because the use of legal-sounding language to a correspondent who is expecting an informal letter suggests that we don't trust him an inch. It is usually an easy matter to replace legal terminology by more colloquial language: *thereof* becomes *of it*, *therein* becomes *in it*, and some of the longer words can be omitted altogether.

Of the various registers of written English, journalese is the one that is used most widely. The most common type, with its short paragraphs, its piling-up of irrelevant adjectival clauses, its inversion, and its coining of blend-words, is most often to be found in newspapers with large circulations.

The chief cause of inversion is the journalist's desire to put words that are likely to catch the reader's attention as near to the beginning of the sentence as possible. The word "kitten" ranks high among such words, but one reporter paid a high price in order to give the word a prominent position :

A kitten was given priority when she took her eight-year old son for an X-ray examination at Alder Hey Children's Hospital, Liverpool, Mrs. Enid Parkes, 24, of Sunbeam Road, Liverpool, said last night.

(*Daily Telegraph*, 1 February 1968)

It is not until we reach the end of the sentence that we find out the real antecedent of "her" in the first line.

Even in a single issue of a newspaper the language is not homogeneous. There are certain parts of a newspaper, such as the sports and city pages, which can be almost meaningless to the uninitiated because of the special languages used. No great

harm is done ; regular readers understand the allusions and those who do not generally leave those pages alone. It is not merely a matter of technical terms, such as *bulls*, *bears* and *stags*, but of the idiomatic use of words and phrases whose meaning the reader thinks he knows. A single page of the *Daily Telegraph* (31 July 1967) speaks of a stock which “ went firmly ex-growth the same year ” and speculates whether anyone ever does “ buy the index ”. The writer may make the difficulty worse by literary allusion. Probably most English readers, even if they have not read *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, will understand the allusion when a stock is described as “ a prime example of a jam tomorrow stock ”, but if a foreigner fails to understand it, a dictionary will not help him.

The editors of city pages are fond of punning on the names or activities of the firms whose affairs they describe. The Rank Organization gets a headline “ Pulling Rank ”, while a firm of salt manufacturers receives the more complicated headline : “ Will this Salt Seller Regain its Savour ? ”

Journalists often have to be vague because they are not free to specify the exact source of their information or because they have very little real news with which to fill up the space that the importance of their subject is deemed to demand. Readers thus become familiar with phrases like “ a spokesman ” or “ usually well-informed sources in Paris ”. When they are freed from such restrictions, journalists often seem fond of quite irrelevant detail, such as the ages of minor participants in an incident or the tonnages of large steamships. It is reasonable to suppose that journalists know their own business and that such details are given because readers have made it clear that they want them. Some magazines owe their success to their readiness to provide masses of such facts, and there is a great sale for cheap booklets with titles like *A Handy Reference Book of Facts and Figures*.

Newspaper headlines are a category of their own. There are obvious differences between the styles of headlines used in different countries. In French newspapers sentence headlines are much more common than in British, while British headlines make frequent and sometimes puzzling use of nouns in apposition. It is not uncommon for four nouns in apposition to be

piled up, as in "Students Plan Grants Cuts Protest March" (*Daily Telegraph*, 19 March 1968). Until the reader realizes that "plan" is a verb, he may think that there are six nouns here, and some headlines are obscure because of the identity of form of many English nouns and verbs. One headline runs "£20,000 Range for Shooting Enthusiasts". It makes a lot of difference to the enthusiasts to know whether *shooting* is a present participle or a noun. Other ambiguous headlines are: "Blind Man Expected to Leave Gaol" (Is *expected* a preterite or a past participle?), and "£1,900,000 Paid to Attack Victims" (Is *attack* a verb or a noun?). The ambiguity is usually only temporary; all but one of the theoretical possibilities can generally be ruled out as being contrary to common sense. One reason for the piling up of nouns in apposition in headlines is that the practice makes for brevity, and convention demands that headlines should be short. The same need for brevity has led to the retention of a number of short words that are not in frequent use except in headlines: *weds* for *marries*, *probe* for *investigation*, *pact* for *treaty*, and *reds* to describe anyone whose politics are left of those of the newspaper in which the headline appears.

Commerce has developed its special varieties of both the written and the spoken language. The practice of dictating letters encourages the use of stereotyped formulas, and a kind of mechanical courtesy has its influence on the choice of clichés, with the result that a letter becomes an esteemed favour and there is much use of phrases that demand little thought but take up plenty of room, like "Assuring you of our best attention at all times". Conventions grow up, like that of using *ult*, *inst* and *prox* instead of the names of the last, the current and the next month respectively.

The use of the second person pronoun to a comparative stranger is for some reason often thought to be disrespectful. In some languages this feeling has led to the use of the third personal pronoun as a respectful form of the second person. In commercial English a similar feeling causes some writers of letters to replace *you* by *your goodself*, with *good* and *self* joined together as a single word, a practice of which one person addressed in that way was heard to say that it made him feel badsick.

Some of the features of commercial English are simply time-saving devices. It obviously takes time to fill in the dates on a batch of circulars, so some business man had the idea of transferring the responsibility to the post office by inserting the words "Date as postmark". The practice has little to recommend it, since it calls attention to the writer's unwillingness to take the trouble to add the date. It is least objectionable when used on a postcard, since the postmark is then not liable to be detached from the document to which it refers. A clear example of the misuse of the phrase was its use in a letter from a candidate applying for admission to a university. He had no doubt seen the phrase somewhere and thought it looked business-like.

Shops have developed their own language. With some of it one can sympathize. Most people feel that it is pedantic to insist that morning gives way to afternoon exactly at noon. For some hours in the middle of the day there is a period which may be called morning or afternoon according to the accident whether the speaker has had his lunch. Shop assistants save themselves and their customers a lot of trouble by using "Good day" as a form of greeting or farewell. It is less easy to sympathize with the snobbishness which rejects the everyday name of an everyday object in favour of some less familiar word. I have asked for socks and been shown what the shopkeeper described as hose. When I said that I wanted thick socks, he said disdainfully, "Ah, you want a pair of working socks". The word *shop* itself is sometimes avoided as rather vulgar, and in recent years some shopkeepers have begun, without shame, to describe their shops as *boutiques*. Not all shops can be so described: a boutique is usually small and is likely to contain expensive goods, such as antiques or fashionable hats. It is not certain whether it is admiration or derision that has led to such imitations as *beautique* for a hairdresser, *boatique* for a ship's chandler, *scootique* for a shop selling scooters and *shoetique* for a boot and shoe shop. Snobbishness usually leads to a reaction, and the term "the rag trade" is not confined to the selling of cheap clothes.

The two registers of journalese and commerce meet in the language of advertising. The advertiser sees his product through rose-coloured spectacles, and the public for whom he

caters get into the way of making allowance for his optimism. When a restaurant advertises a lunch consisting of "rich golden-brown sea-food with superfine French fried potatoes as a side-dish", a few moments of thought are needed before the customer realizes that what he has been offered is in fact fish and chips.

One of the wiles of the advertiser is to seek to impress the reader by the use of long words whose meaning he is not likely to understand. The story of the farmer who bought a field on being assured that it was richly megalithic is no doubt apocryphal, but it would be an easy matter to collect advertisements that give an air of glamour by using long words to describe commonplace properties of the product. The advertiser relies on the reader's quite reasonable refusal to confine his attention to literal statements of fact. One advertiser is said to have done quite well by inserting an advertisement consisting of the words "Only another three weeks to send your dollar" followed by his name and address.

Advertisers are sometimes ready to indulge in self-mockery, and readers who are unmoved by conventional approaches may fall victims to more sophisticated appeals like that in the dialogue: "Do you read the — advertisements?", "Yes, but I go on buying their product just the same".

Personal advertisement columns offer hospitality to many linguistic eccentricities. The advertiser is sometimes conscious that the advertisement is costing a fairly large sum per line, as was the man who described himself as a "fiercely prog. pacifist". An advertiser who admits to being not only educated but also yg. sks. 1/2 others to share a ft. (*Daily Telegraph*, 23 January 1968). Considerations of cost give way to a love of euphemism in an advertisement which declares "The fuller figure is no longer a problem". The English love of animals assures a good response to the advertisements inserted, no doubt with some assistance, by pets seeking new homes.

There are fashions in advertisement. At present the vogue-word in advertisements for secretaries seems to be "top". Five consecutive advertisements in one issue of a daily newspaper (*Daily Telegraph*, 15 January 1968) announce vacancies for "top secretaries", a "top flight secretary" and a "top shorthand/typist". Such frequency might lead one to think

that "top" is a technical term to describe a secretary in charge of an office, but another advertisement uses the word to describe the prospective employer: "Top advertising agency needs young secretary."

Until recently the impact of advertising on the average man was chiefly through the medium of the printed word. At fairs and in markets one could hear travelling salesmen extolling their wares in the manner of Dickens's Doctor Marigold, but these were not heard regularly by more than a small number of people. The coming of television commercials has greatly increased the use of the spoken word in advertising, and the results of the innovation are not always happy. Speakers in television commercials tend to exaggerate their effects and to speak with emotion dripping from every syllable, inducing in their more sensitive listeners a feeling of discomfort similar to that caused by the drawing-room performances of a child who has been praised for reciting with deep feeling.

### III

Idiolects are one of the most neglected subjects of linguistic study but the material for the study lies around us on every side. One's own linguistic peculiarities do not form a good starting-point: our own habitual use of particular pronunciations or idioms prevents us from realizing how unusual they are. When we are listening to a good lecture, we are too pre-occupied with the speaker's subject-matter to pay much attention to his manner of speaking, but a bad lecture provides ideal conditions for the study of the speaker's idiolect. The use of the term *idiolect* does not mean that each linguistic feature is unique, though no doubt each speaker is unique in the possession of a particular set of linguistic features.

A good example of a feature of idiolect is one that has taken its name from an individual who was addicted to it: the spoonerism, which consists of the transposition of the initial consonants of two adjacent words. The resultant groups of sounds may be nonsense or one or both of them may be words different from those intended by the speaker. If the transposition is too neat, one suspects that the spoonerism has been constructed deliber-

ately and artificially, as with *tons of soil for sons of toil*, but probably most people have come across examples that seemed genuine enough. One speaker said that she had often wondered what a *beaver's weam* looked like, and an excited examiner said that a candidate was no better than a *beery queta*, a phrase which appealed to his colleagues much more than the *query beta* which the examiner intended. It should perhaps be added that only the habitual use of spoonerisms is a feature of idiolect; a single instance, like any other isolated mistake, could not properly be so described.

There are phrases whose habitual use tells us a good deal about the character of the speaker. Such phrases are: "If I've told him once, I've told him a hundred times", "No one has ever succeeded in convincing me", "He got no change out of me", and "Whether you like it or whether you don't like it". Such phrases reveal the nagger, the man wise in his own conceit, the braggart and the bully, but these are not social groups and such phrases must be considered matters of idiolect.

Confusion is caused when speaker and hearer have different speech-habits. Most speakers who give a strong stress to words that are normally lightly-stressed, do so because they have some special reason for emphasizing those words. The most common reason for stressing an auxiliary verb is to reply to some contradiction or scepticism, actual or expected. But some speakers stress unimportant words for quite different reasons. For example, a man unaccustomed to speaking in public, when called upon to make a speech or an announcement, may stress words without realizing that he is doing so. I have more than once heard the announcement "There *will be* refreshments", with a stress, not intended by the speaker, that suggested that somebody had said that there wouldn't. Other speakers have a mannerism of stressing prepositions without implying the contrast that most speakers would intend if they stressed such normally unimportant words. Variations like these, though common, cannot be associated with a group or with a particular occasion, and so form a part of idiolect.

The degree of vigour with which people express their opinions is something that cuts across most class or occupational divisions.



It may be that those who have been expensively educated have been taught not to be too ready to express their opinions on any subject to strangers, but when they are together with others belonging to the same social class, some will express their views forcibly and others timidly at every social level. The difference is partly one of the tenacity with which views are held and partly one of the idiom in which those views are expressed ; only the second of these can properly be called linguistic. Academics are generally thought to be more ready than most people to weigh all the evidence before expressing an opinion, but even among academics one soon learns to recognize those whose contributions to a discussion begin " I feel very strongly " and those who begin " I should have thought ".

Another linguistic characteristic that must be considered as a feature of idiolect, though it may be more common among women than men, is the apology that is really a complaint. The words " I suppose that I owe you an apology " are often the prelude to an orgy of bickering and recrimination. The brief reply " I accept your apology " has the advantage of leaving the complainant feeling thwarted.

Prolixity is another individual characteristic. A public speaker who wished to make a short speech began by saying that profundity and wit are given to only a few but conciseness is within the reach of all. This is not strictly true. The ability to make a simple statement and leave it at that is really rather rare, and we probably all find that the form in which ideas come to us is at first needlessly prolix. It was no idle paradox that caused an author to say that he had written a long book because he hadn't time to write a short one. An extempore sermon is often a repetitive one, and a young clergyman who boasted to his bishop that he had vowed never to use notes received the unexpected reply " I absolve you from your vow ". Many sentences and most books could be shortened with advantage but the quest for conciseness can go too far. In a world in which prolixity and repetition are the rule, a man who insists too rigidly on saying things once only is liable to find himself little heeded, and the teacher especially finds it convenient to acquiesce in the maxim " What I tell you three times is true ".

Conciseness is not merely an intellectual virtue. Within certain limits, it shows respect for the person to whom one is speaking. This is especially true when an obligation is being conferred. We have all met the person who makes heavy weather of a trivial offer, thereby making it almost impossible to accept it: "Now, if you'd like milk in your tea, please don't hesitate to mention it. It won't be a bit of trouble for my husband to get the car out and drive to the farm for some more milk. . . ."

One of the circumstances that make the study of varieties of languages so complicated is that many varieties can be classified under more than one head. For example, swearing and the use of euphemisms and slang are often matters of register, but they are also often matters of individual preference. Some people never swear at all, others swear only when deeply moved, and others swear all the time. The sort of swear-word that one chooses is determined largely by class dialects with rapidly changing fashions. Bob Acres, in *The Rivals*, declared that "Damns have had their day"; today we might have to say the same of "bloodies", in the sense that the word "bloody" has lost much of the power to shock that it once possessed, but there are large social groups where the word still has a wide currency. One comment that has been made on Iona and Peter Opie's *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* is that it ignores the fact that much of the language of schoolchildren is not suitable for reproduction in a book. The same is true of much of the language of university students, though the scatological element is normally reserved for use within a homogeneous social group, and it may therefore escape the attention of those who are not schoolchildren or university students. Certain oaths have become old-fashioned: the cartoonist Low did much to associate "Gad, sir" with his Colonel Blimp, and the euphemistic "dashed" is similarly dated. Three public schoolboys who, in 1967, wrote a letter to a newspaper expressing an old-fashioned point of view, showed their recognition of this fact by describing themselves as "three dashed supporters of the British raj".

It happens that many of the words which the dictionaries describe as "not now in polite use" are words of four letters, and in recent years the term "four-letter word" has come into

use to describe words of this kind. The use of the term in this sense is recent, and I feel sure that it was not familiar to the organizers of a competition, held under the most respectable auspices, who invited members to see how many words they could write in a square inch. It was clearly desirable to find some way of avoiding the injustices that would arise from the varying length of words, and it was therefore stipulated that all the words should be four-letter words. Such words always cause trouble to the compilers of dictionaries, and Dr. Johnson took his revenge on a lady who congratulated him on having omitted such words from his Dictionary by saying: "You have evidently been looking for them, madam."

Fashion plays a large part in determining which words shall become taboo. By allowing Eliza Doolittle to use the word *bloody* in *Pygmalion*, Shaw caused a furore that we now find it hard to understand, and audiences find it hard to pay proper attention to the scene in which the word is used because they are waiting with such rapt attention for the heroine to say "Not bloody likely". At one cinema the advertisement of the film version of the play included the information: "The great moment of the film occurs at 3.15 p.m., also at 5.45, 8.15. . . ." The word is now much less offensive than it used to be; its chief function is to add mild emotional colouring to what one is saying, and the chief objection to its frequent use is that it shows a straining after effect rather than that it is an offence against public morals. Young people are perhaps more tolerant of over-emphasis than their elders, and when I was a student in a hall of residence the appeal "Make less noise!" was greeted with derision, whereas "Make less bloody noise!" generally produced results. The chief linguistic interest of the taboo on *bloody* is its arbitrariness. The word does not belong to any of the recognized categories, such as death or sex or drunkenness, which are generally the subject of euphemism. The theory that *bloody* is from *by our Lady*, and therefore the subject of a religious taboo, has little to recommend it.

Euphemisms quickly lose their euphemistic force and so pass out of use to be replaced by others. Several synonyms may continue in use simultaneously. A homosexual may be known as

a pansy, a fairy, a queen, a queer, a consenting adult or one of those. A water closet may be known as a W.C., the loo, the lavatory, the toilet or, by a piece of sophisticated self-mockery, the euphemism. A phrase is often preferred to a single word, and so we have *the smallest room*, *Let me show you the geography of the house*, and *Would you like to wash your hands?* A visitor to a college was once heard to say indignantly: "I'll never go there again. I told them that I wanted to wash my hands and they showed me into a room with twenty-four wash-basins."

To the number of ideas which attract euphemisms we must add any reference to age. It has been said that women are young, middle-aged or wonderful, and for both sexes *middle-aged* is used to describe an age well past the middle of one's life. *Elderly* is preferred to *old*. People are not only sensitive about being old; they don't like being reminded that they are young. For many years there was a popular radio programme called *Children's Hour*, but the name was dropped because children don't like being called children.

The use of euphemisms can lead to the growth of a kind of secret language which is perfectly intelligible to those who are in the know but which can be puzzling to those who are not. It is sometimes necessary to explain to foreigners that a special area is not especially attractive and that a boy who has attended an approved school is not necessarily better educated than one who has not.

In the Victorian period, when English linguistic taboos were stronger than they are today, distinctions were made according to the sex of the speaker. Certain words were forbidden to both sexes, but some mild oaths, euphemistic in origin, were permitted to men but not to women. A chorus in *The Gondoliers* emphasizes the distinction: the men sing "Don't be so deucedly condescending" while the women sing "Don't be so dreadfully condescending". Certain bodily functions were completely taboo, but others, such as sweating, might be mentioned by men but not by women, a convention which gave rise to the famous rebuke "Horses sweat; men perspire; young ladies glow".

Euphemisms are not confined to any one social class. Within the same week B.B.C. programmes presented two interviews.

One was with a highly-placed official who replied to an interviewer's question "Will people be sacked?" by saying "There will be some redundancies". The second interview was with a group of office cleaners who were asked how they would like their job to be described. One of the suggestions was "lady help". The cleaners were united in their dislike of the term "charlady", thus illustrating the common fate of euphemisms, since the earlier meaning of *charlady* was a lady who undertakes a piece of work of any kind. The general term was specialized to refer to a kind of work that people preferred not to specify, just as the word *undertaker* was specialized to refer to an occupation that people preferred not to mention. The second element of *charlady* is another euphemism, since one of the things that make the English language so difficult is that it is quite all right to call a man a man, but you have to be very careful before calling a woman a woman. The term *charwoman* was not even mentioned by the cleaners who were interviewed, but many people find it even more offensive than *charlady*.

The "Situations Vacant" column of a daily paper shows that domestic service produces a rich crop of euphemisms. People do not often advertise nowadays for a domestic servant or a maid; they get better results if they advertise for a domestic helper or a domesticated person.

In mentioning some of the non-dialectal varieties of English my aim has been to draw attention to approaches to the subject that have, in my opinion, been insufficiently explored. The study of varieties of English is important to all who use the English language and it is especially important to the teacher. In many parts of the world English is being studied as a second language, and those who have the responsibility of teaching it need to know what kind of English they are to teach. It is important for all of us to avoid judging one variety by standards that are relevant only to another. Both the teacher and the man who wants to use his own language effectively need to have clear ideas about the varieties of English that are appropriate for various occasions.