I

CHARLES DICKENS

(1812–1870)

Dickens founded *Household Words* in 1850 when his fame as a novelist was already secure. In this contribution he brings together a substantial number of the facts and ideas about the history of the English language that were familiar to the reading public around the middle of the nineteenth century. He applies the facts and ideas, which are almost all about vocabulary alone, to standards of English style, especially among the great figures in English literature. He begins and ends with the cardinal criterion: intelligibility.

‘Saxon-English’

(*Household Words*, vol. 18, 1858)

When a man has anything of his own to say, and is really in earnest that it should be understood, he does not usually make cavalry regiments of his sentences, and seek abroad for sesquipedalian words. We all know that an Englishman, if he will, is able to speak easily and clearly; also he can, if he please, write in such a manner as to send the common people to their dictionaries at least once in every page. Let him write Saxon, and the Saxons understand him; let him use Latin forms that have been long in use, and they will also understand him; but let him think proper to adopt Latin or Greek expressions which are new, or at all events new to the many, and they will be puzzled. We can all read with comfort the works of Thomas Fuller, Swift, Bunyan, Defoe, Franklin, and Cobbett; there, sense is clear, feeling is homely, and the writers take care that there shall be no misunderstanding. But in Robertson, Johnson, and Gibbon, one word in every three is an alien; and so an Englishman who happens to have, like Shakespeare, ‘small Latin and less Greek,’ is by no means quite at home in their society.

Two hundred years ago, Dr. Heylin remarked, ‘Many think that they can never speak elegantly, nor write significantly, except they do it in a language of their own devising: as if they were ashamed of their mother tongue, and thought it not sufficiently curious to express their
fancies. By means whereof, more French and Latin words have gained
ground upon us since the middle of Queen Elizabeth's reign than were
admitted by our ancestors, not only since the Norman, but the Roman
conquest.' And Sir Thomas Browne, who was himself a great Latinist,
says, 'If elegance still proceedeth, and English pens maintain that stream
we have of late observed to flow from many, we shall, within few years,
be fain to learn Latin to understand English, and a work will prove of
equal facility in either.'

Our language has gone through its changes. Spenser resisted affecta-
tions of Italian speech, and went out of his way to be Saxon. Our best
authors, except Milton, have all been maintainers of Saxon: but the
Latin taste, of which Heylin complained, which Milton supported, and
which overran much of our literature in Queen Anne's time, after pas-
sing through various stages, is only in our own generation yielding
before a restored love of books written in Saxon-English, which will
conquer in time even the affectations of the ignorant, and the tardier
literary perceptions of the man of science.

It must not, however, be supposed that the mere use of Saxon words
can stand for a token of good writing; many a common word of Latin-
English is known better than the corresponding Saxon. But if a man
wishes to write for all, he must know how to use the speech of all, and
he will come nearest all hearts with words that are familiar in every
home, and find their way even into the prattle of the nursery.

During the last twenty or thirty years great attention has been paid
by scholars, both in England and in Germany, to the youth of our
language; its mother, its nurses, and its schools, have been looked up,
and we know more than we did about its origin. We are beginning,
in fact, to understand the History of the Language: and it may be
worth while to take a rapid view of the facts now most commonly
received.

Although we often speak of the Saxons or Anglo-Saxons as the
invaders of Britain in the fifth century, yet it must not be forgotten
that other tribes, such as the Jutes and Frieslanders, came over, too.
Foremost, however, were the Angles and the Saxons, and these two
names appear side by side in various ways; the Angles gave their name
to the country, Engla-land; and the Saxon version of the gospels is
headed, 'That Godspell on Englise.' But, on the other hand, to this day
the Welsh call the English language Saeson-aeg, or the Saxon speech;
and the Scotch Highlanders call an Englishman, Sassenach. Some have
maintained that a few of the tribes, and particularly the Jutes, were
Scandinavians; but it is admitted that the greater part of the invaders were men of Teutonic (or Dutch) race, who came over from the North of Germany, or the South of Denmark. In the widest sense, we may look on the terms German, Teutonic, and Dutch, as all meaning the same thing: and we may say that the same Teutonic race inhabits Europe from the Alps to the North Sea, between the Rhine upon the west, and the Elbe, or even the Vistula, upon the east. This race includes Austrians, Tyrolean, Northern Swiss, Bavarians, Prussians, Hanoverians, Hollanders, Flemings, and others: but when speaking without reference to politics, they are to be divided into High and Low Dutch; Dutch of the highlands of Southern Germany, and the Dutch of the low lands of Northern Germany. High Dutch happens to have become the polite dialect, the language of German literature; and Low Dutch, fallen into disrepute, is cultivated now in Holland only. But to Low Dutch belongs honour, as the parent of our modern English. Our very sailors who trade to Rotterdam or Hamburgh, cannot help being struck with the likeness of the two languages, and their conclusion is, that ‘after all, Dutch is only a sort of broken English.’ English, in truth, is a sort of broken Dutch. The Dutch skippers (that is, shippers) who trade to Liverpool or Whitehaven, have no great difficulty in understanding our own northern dialects. A Lancashire boy, who was sent to school at Hamburgh, happening to land on a very hot day, went up to some maid-servants who were drawing water at a fountain, and said, ‘Will you give me a drink?’ ‘Wat sagt-en?’ was the reply, ‘Will you—give me—a drink?’ he repeated. ‘Ja, ja, du kannst drinken,’ (Yea, yea, thou canst drink), was the ready answer. The broad Lancashire and the broad Dutch were soon at home together.

The Angles, the Saxons, and other Teutonic tribes, made sundry descents on the kingdom of Britain for about one hundred years, and at last conquered a large part of the country, driving the native Britons (whom they called the Welsh, or foreigners), to the fastnesses of Wales, to Cumberland, and the Strathclyde.

They held possession till the year one thousand and sixty-six; and as they adopted few Welsh words, it follows that a pure Teutonic was spoken in England for six hundred years. It is true that divers dialects of the same language were current in divers parts; and it seems that the Angles, who were settled in the north and east, spoke in a broader dialect than Saxons who lived in the south and south-west. To this day, therefore, the pronunciation common in the North of England remains broader and more open than that of the South. But probably the tribes
could understand one another, as well as in our day a Yorkshireman can understand a Somersetshire peasant.

This language, commonly called the Anglo-Saxon, was cultivated with great diligence, especially from the time of King Alfred, who laboured hard to promote the cause of native literature. The laws were written in that language; and useful books were translated, in order that a love of learning might be fostered among the people. Some few Latin words were adopted; but in most cases the foreign terms were translated into the mother tongue; the Evangelium was the God-spell, that is, good-spell, or good-tiding; the Saviour was the Haelend, or Healer. In speaking of God, they called him not only the Ael-mihtig, or all-mighty, but likewise the All-walda, or all-wielder, and the Ael-craeftig, or all-skilful. For infinite, they said Un-ge-end-ed, that is, un-ended or unbounded; and consciousness was the in-witness.

We may thus see, that in Anglo-Saxon there was not only a power of making compound words, but a habit of translating Latin or Greek compounds into the corresponding Saxon; and the same principle was carried out in all the sciences, as far as the learning of the time extended. Astronomy was Star-craft; literature was Book-craft, and a literary man was a Book-man; botany was Herb-craft; magic was Witch-craft; and even yet, the labour of the hands is said to be used in a Hands-craft.

This Teutonic, or Anglo-Saxon language, prevailed for about six hundred years; but, when the Normans came over and subdued the country, they made great changes. Thenceforward, while Saxon was the language of the common people, French was spoken by their lords and masters. This French, which is a sort of corrupt Latin, was taught in the schools, spoken in the courts of justice, and used in the drawing up Acts of Parliament. And so, from the Conquest till the time of Henry the Third, there were two distinct languages in the country, both undergoing change in their own way: the Saxon losing the purity which it had in Alfred’s days; the French of London failing to keep pace with the French of Paris. But the common people did not give up their own language; and they have retained for us some very pure fragments of it in our country dialects.

Thus, for about three hundred years, the two languages went side by side, though both were changing,—drawing closer to each other. The changes undergone by Saxon, are seen in the later portions of the Saxon Chronicle, which was a note-book kept through a long series of years, until the reign of Henry the Second, and also in poems of a later time. As for the French, Chaucer tells us that the French spoken in the
neighbourhood of Stratford-le-Bow was no longer recognised at Paris: for, when describing the Prioress, in his Canterbury Tales, he says:—

And French she spake ful fayre and fetisly
After the schole of Stratford-atté-Bowe;
The French of Paris was to hir unknowne.

Victors and vanquished were to speak one tongue; the groundwork of it and the grammar remained Saxon; but a large number of words, particularly of compound words, were French; for the custom of translating Latin into Saxon ceased. And thus, towards the end of these three hundred years, a language was formed, which was intelligible both to the gentry and the common people.

Dean Trench, in his valuable work on the Study of Words, has considered the relations of the Saxon and Norman occupants; and thinks, that from an intelligent study of the contributions which they have severally made to the English language, we might almost get at the main story of the country, even though we had lost our written records. He observes, that at one period there would exist duplicate terms for many things; but that when a word was often upon the lips of one race, while its equivalent was seldom employed by the other, the word frequently used would very probably be handed down, and its equivalent would be forgotten. In other cases, only one word may have existed; inasmuch as the thing which it represented was confined to one half of the nation, and remained strange to the other.

He also remarks that our words which denote dignity, state, or honour, are mostly derived from the Norman-French. Such words are, sovereign, sceptre, realm, chancellor, palace, &c., whence we may infer that the Normans were the ruling race. For the word king, which is an exception, he gives an ingenious explanation. On the other hand, the objects of nature, the affairs of daily life, the ties of domestic life, are denoted by Saxon terms. "The palace and the castle may have come to us from the Norman, but to the Saxon we owe far dearer names,—the house, the roof, the home, the hearth. The instruments used in cultivating the earth, the flail, the plough, the sickle, the spade, are Saxon; so, too, the main products of the earth, as wheat, rye, oats, &c. And observe, that the names of almost all animals, so long as they are alive, are Saxon, but, when dressed and prepared for food, become Norman; a fact which we might have expected beforehand; for the Saxon hind had the labour of tending and feeding them, but only that they might appear at the table of his Norman lord. Thus ox, steer, cow, are Saxon,
but beef, Norman; calf is Saxon, but veal, Norman; sheep is Saxon, but mutton, Norman; so it is severally with swine and pork, deer and venison, fowl and pullet. Bacon, the only flesh, which, perhaps, ever came within his reach, is the single exception.'

We may remember also the anecdote told about the order of the Garter, and the remark ascribed to King Edward the Third, 'Honi soit qui mal y pense,' a motto which still remains upon our coat of arms, and which, like Dieu et mon droit, is a daily memento that the ruling race formerly spoke in the French language. But we hear a different speech in the mouths of the commons under Wat Tyler and John Ball, with their popular outcry:—

When Adam dalf and Eva span,
Where was then the gentleman?

or as the Germans still have it in almost the same words:—

Als Adam grub und Eva spann,
Wo war da der Edelmann?

The best and most agreeable way of learning the state of the English language, as it existed during the latter part of the fourteenth century, is to read John Wycliffe's version of the New Testament, and Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. In these works the two streams combine, though perhaps not in equal proportions; for the writings of Wycliffe, being designed for the people, contain a larger proportion of Saxon words; and those of Chaucer, composed for readers who were not unacquainted with the French metrical romances, include a number of terms used in romance and chivalry; and, as we have seen, most of these terms were Norman. It is to be regretted that more attention is not paid by English readers to Wycliffe and Chaucer.

It unfortunately happens that Chaucer's English is just old enough to require the aid of a glossary, and yet not difficult enough to confer upon those who master it, credit as linguists. Many a person would not refuse to spend several hours upon a hundred lines of Ariosto or Tasso, who would grudge equal labour to a tale of Chaucer's; for, after all, Chaucer is only an Englishman, and we feel that we have a birth-right to consider ourselves English scholars. As reader of Italian, one can make some pretence of the accomplishments. But if any one caring to work at English, should desire to render his course of study easy, he would find it worth while to study with care Wycliffe's version of St. John's Gospel; he would then be prepared, in some measure, to go on with Chaucer's.
Canterbury Tales; and, after reading two or three thousand lines, he would be surprised to find himself almost as much at home with the father of English poetry, as he can be with Shakespeare or with Milton. At the same time he may find it good suggestive work to compare the original of the Knight’s Tale, or the Wife of Bath’s Tale, with modernised versions of the same by Dryden and Pope.

In examining the words of Wycliffe and Chaucer, we find that most of them are either Saxon or French, and that a few are derived directly from Latin. Sometimes Wycliffe employs a Latin word, as Resurrection, at other times he translates it, the Agen-rysynge (or again-rising); so also the word Except appears as Out-taken, thus, Out-taken women and children, for Except women and children.

From the fourteenth century until the Reformation, the language received constant accessions of Latin words, particularly in works which treated of art or science, law or religion. For as the authors had all studied in Latin, they were apt to introduce school phrases whenever they attempted to convey their thoughts in English. And when, after the fall of Constantinople, and the consequent dispersion of the Greeks, old Greek literature released from the ban first set on it, began to attract notice in Western Europe, it became the fashion to imitate the languages of classical antiquity, and to regard Teutonic literature as barbarous. This influence was very strongly felt between the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and Charles the First.

The Reformation worked both ways: on the one hand it aroused a desire of translating the Bible into English, and the translators had a direct object in using words which the common people could understand; but, on the other hand, the religious disputes which ensued, caused many theological and scholastic terms, such as justification, sanctification, transubstantiation, consubstantiation, and others, to become part of our ordinary language.

Hence it is, that we find Latimer, Bishop Hall, and Bunyan, addressing themselves to the plain intelligence of the people; while Hooker and Jeremy Taylor, adopting a much more ambitious style, wrote for the educated classes in society.

Roger Ascham has, however, well observed, that a good writer must speak as the common people do, and think as wise men do; for so shall every man understand him, and the judgment of wise men approve him.
HENRY SWEET
(1845–1912)

Sweet was a pioneer student of the English language who did much to further knowledge of both its history and its living structure. (Henry Higgins, of Shaw’s Pygmalion, is modelled on him in some measure.) In this essay he seeks to correct the exclusively retrospective orientation of linguistic science in his own day, and the mistakenly Latinate treatment of traditional descriptions of English grammar, by postulating a new analysis of the materials. He begins with the phonetic level and shows, among other things, the independence of phonetic and logical systems in language. From this he goes on to a broader consideration of the logical side and the relation between linguistic categories and natural categories, which he finds also to be independent. In his last section he proposes at length a classification of the parts of speech on purely formal (inflectional and positional) criteria. (The section on ‘Logic and Language’ is here omitted.)

‘Words, Logic and Grammar’
(Transactions of the Philological Society, 1876)

Introduction

One of the most striking features of the history of linguistic science as compared with zoology, botany and the other so-called natural sciences, is its one-sidedly historical character. Philologists have hitherto chiefly confined their attention to the most ancient dead languages, valuing modern languages only in as far as they retain remnants of older linguistic formations—much as if zoology were to identify itself with palaeontology, and refuse to trouble itself with the investigation of living species, except when it promised to throw light on the structure of extinct ones.

Philologists forget, however, that the history of language is not one of decay only, but also of reconstruction and regeneration. These processes are of equal, often more importance than those by which the older languages were formed, and, besides, often throw light on them.
They have further the great advantage of being perfectly accessible to the observer. Thus the growth of a language like English can be observed in a series of literary documents extending from the ninth century to the present day, affording examples of almost every linguistic formation.

But before history must come a knowledge of what now exists. We must learn to observe things as they are without regard to their origin, just as a zoologist must learn to describe accurately a horse, or any other animal. Nor would the mere statement that the modern horse is a descendant of a three-toed marsh quadruped be accepted as an exhaustive description. Still less would the zoologist be allowed to ignore the existing varieties of the Equidae as being ‘inorganic’ modifications of the original type. Such, however, is the course pursued by most antiquarian philologists. When a modern language discards the cumbersome and ambiguous inflexions it has received from an earlier period, and substitutes regular and precise inflexions and agglutinations of its own, these formations are contemptuously dismissed as ‘inorganic’ by the philologist, who forgets that change, decay and reconstruction are the very life of language—language is ‘inorganic’ only when it stands still in its development.

The first requisite is a knowledge of phonetics, or the form of language. We must learn to regard language solely as consisting of groups of sounds, independently of the written symbols, which are always associated with all kinds of disturbing associations, chiefly historical. We must then consider language in its relation to thought, which necessitates some study of the relation of language to logic and psychology. Such investigations, if carried out consistently, will greatly modify our views, not only of English, but of language generally, and will bring us face to face with many of the ultimate problems of language, which have hitherto been rather shirked by philologists. Such problems are those which I propose to discuss in the present paper. I begin with the important question of sentence-, word- and syllable-division, beginning again with the purely formal, or phonetic criteria.

Sentence- and word-division

The first and most obvious is the organic necessity of taking breath—we are unable to utter more than a certain number of sounds in succession without renewing the stock of air in our lungs, which unavoidably necessitates a pause. Speech in its simplest form consists mainly of short
questions and answers expressed in simply constructed phrases—in this case there is not merely a pause, but an absolute cessation of voice.

Within these ‘breath-groups,’ or phonetic sentences, there is no pause whatever. This is important to observe, as many people, misled by our ordinary word-division, imagine that they make a pause at the end of every word. But a very little observation will be enough to convince them that the words of a sentence run into one another exactly in the same way as the syllables of a word do. This coalescence is most readily observable in the stopped consonants, which, when sounded alone, or at the end of a sentence, end in a marked explosion of breath, which is sometimes called the ‘organic recoil.’ Now if we compare such a sentence as ‘he took off his hat’ and ‘he took his hat off,’’ we see that this organic recoil is quite wanting in the second sentence, the t in ‘hat off’ being pronounced exactly as in the single word ‘hatter.’

The second criterion is force or stress—the most important element in the synthesis of speech-sounds. We will now examine some simple sentences, writing them provisionally without division into words or syllables, and see what light is thrown on their structure by the degrees of force with which their elements are pronounced.¹ Let us take the sentences (kømtɔmorou) and (henrikieimhounyestəde). It is at once evident that certain syllables are pronounced with greater force than others; marking force provisionally by the use of italics, we have therefore (kømtɔmorou) and (henrikieimhounyestəde), disregarding minuter shades of force for the present. We find, in short, that every sentence can be analyzed into smaller groups characterized by one predominant stress-syllable, round which the others group themselves. In our first sentence there are two such stress-groups, in the second four; and if we consider the meaning of these two sentences, we see that the number of stress-groups agrees exactly with that of the words they contain—a word is, phonetically speaking, a stress-group. It must now be observed that the stress, although it tells us how many words there are in a sentence, does not tell us where the words begin. Thus in our first sentence

¹ In the phonetic notation I have here used, the letters are employed as far as practicable in their original Roman values, arbitrary combinations being excluded as much as possible. Words and sentences written phonetically are enclosed in parentheses.