THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

VOLUME 2
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INTRODUCTION

The twenty-two essays in this book illustrate both the internal and the external history of literary English prose since 1858; that is, they are examples of the structure of the language and of attitudes towards it over more than a century. The points of view are those of both men of letters and linguists, and they represent something of the development and changing nature of English language study in the light of the growth of linguistic science. The order of selections is chronological, but readers may find other arrangements which correspond to their own interests, such as the idea of a ‘standard’ English, spelling reform, neologisms, the American language, grammar, lexicography, morphology or syntax.

Men of letters have long been the most articulate members of the linguistic community and the most readable and influential writers, and they provide revealing manifestations of the importance of linguistic resources and linguistic theory for literary style. But for the history of linguistic science, men of letters supply very imperfect illustrations, showing sometimes its motivating concerns, sometimes its published conclusions, more often only the gulf between professional writers and professional students of language. It is not difficult to see why such a gulf should have developed, if we briefly trace the development of linguistic science as a specialized intellectual discipline. A historical survey also shows why any book dealing with English language in the twentieth century has to look to linguists rather than to men of letters for the greater part of its information.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the only systematic research into the nature of language was being carried on in Europe. This was the long-established field of ‘comparative philology’, the historical study of language, which was primarily concerned to ascertain the earliest states and prehistories of the major European languages. Consequently it had very little to say about the English language, or any other, in its modern state. Nor did the foundation of learned societies to study language, such as the Philological Society in Great Britain (founded in 1842), stimulate much organized research into modern English structure—apart, of course, from the pioneer work in lexicography (see Essay 5 of this book). It was not until the twentieth century was well under way that comments on the contemporary state of the
language came more frequently from the linguist than from the man of letters. Henry Sweet, whose work is represented in Essay 2, was a central influence on English language research, especially in phonetics, but he was very much an exception. The majority of linguists were pre-occupied with matters of language history, and the ordinary user of language was on the whole quite satisfied with his traditional grammar books, in which English was largely described in terms originally devised and more appropriate for the analysis of Greek and Latin.

By the second decade of this century, the situation had changed. The work of Ferdinand de Saussure in Europe, and that of Edward Sapir (see Essay 10) among others in America, completely changed the orientation of linguistic study. The traditional historical view of language switched to a predominantly non-historical, or ‘synchronic’, view. Languages came under study in their modern states, regardless of their histories, and also in their own terms, regardless of the traditions suggested by classical language study. Speech was seen as more central to an understanding of the phenomenon of language than was writing. This was particularly the case in America, where the linguistic situation forced these priorities upon scholars. Here the stimulus for linguistic research was almost exclusively anthropological. In order to study the cultures of the dying American Indian tribes, it was necessary to master the tribal languages; and as none of these had ever been written down, the first thing which had to be done was to make an analysis of the tribe’s speech. Detailed phonetic transcriptions were made, and both Sapir and Bloomfield did pioneer work in developing linguistic techniques to handle material of this kind. It was thus in such a climate that the scientific study of language—which is what Linguistics is—evolved.

And while in these early days few scholars paid much attention to English, the theoretical principles and procedures which came out of the study of these languages were not long in being put to use in research on more familiar tongues. English, the native language of the majority of linguists, was used more frequently than any other language to illustrate theoretical points clearly, and accordingly benefited a great deal. It is now without doubt the most thoroughly studied language in the world, though much still remains to be discovered about it.

Early theoretical developments were the concept of the phoneme (the smallest contrastive unit of sound in a language) and, not long after, the analogous concept of the morpheme (the smallest contrastive grammatical unit): see Essays 10 and 17. Issues connected with the definition and application of these notions were argued at great length
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on both sides of the Atlantic. With the work of Bloomfield (see Essay 11), the major linguistic developments of the first thirty years of this century were presented in one volume, *Language* (1933), which proved to be the dominant influence on research for the next twenty years. His method for approaching the analysis of a language involved three main stages: first you studied the characteristics of the entire range of sounds which would be used (made a phonetic analysis); second, you grouped these sounds into contrastive units, distinguishing those sounds which could be used to make changes of meaning in utterances from those which could not (a phonological analysis); third, you made an analysis of the basic units of grammar (a morphological analysis). Afterwards, you went on to the rest of the language—to syntax (essentially, the way in which words and other grammatical units are arranged in sequences) and semantics (the study of linguistic meaning). The focus of attention was clearly on the first three aspects of language organization, however, and here it stayed until the late 1940s and early 1950s, when men like Fries (see Essay 15) began to explore the neglected area of syntax.

Linguistics, especially in its application to English language study, matured as an intellectual discipline during the post-war period in both Europe and America. Before the war, apart from the above developments, which were relatively slow in coming, and which were the work of a small number of scholars, there was little one could point to. A great deal of philological work continued to be done, naturally. Organized groups, such as the Society for Pure English (see Essay 7), produced numerous pamphlets, articles, and so on, but only a small number were of permanent importance, dealing with areas of English particularly neglected at that time (see, for example, Essay 14). Research into dialects and place-names (see Essay 12) proceeded rapidly, but in relative isolation from other developments. Some attempt was made to provide new methods of teaching English to foreigners. The most important advances were certainly the large-scale descriptive studies of English grammar by such men as Jespersen and Kruisinga.

The Second World War changed this situation, particularly in the field of foreign language teaching, where linguistic techniques had proved of value for the teaching of such esoteric languages as Arabic and Japanese. Immediately after, there was an influx of potential linguists, some already trained, into the universities; departments of Linguistics began to flourish; and, as a consequence, so did postgraduate research. Linguistics societies were inaugurated, and new
journals began to appear. More widespread communication between European and American schools of thought took place. Applications of Linguistics to new fields were discovered, making use of recent technical developments, particularly in computers and acoustics. Linguists began writing introductory textbooks on their subject. As a result of all this ferment, the 1950s saw a spate of grammars on English, mainly applying traditional linguistic approaches to the language, but spending more time on the syntax than hitherto.

In the late 1950s, a number of scholars, dissatisfied with the traditional methodologies of language analysis, introduced a completely different approach, known as generative grammar (see Essay 19). This departed from the phonetics–phonology–morphology approach to language study, and began with syntax, which these linguists felt was the core of language. Theoretical developments since have largely been in connexion with the views of this school. There have of course been other theories of language put forward; for example, the ‘tagmemic’ view, associated primarily with the name of Kenneth Pike, or the theories developed by J. R. Firth; and the relative merits and demerits of these theories are of considerable interest at the present time. In addition, a great deal of valuable work has gone on not attached to any of the major schools of linguistic thought, such as in dialectology (see Essay 20).

Most linguists still use English as the main language of exemplification for their theoretical notions, and scholars’ knowledge of this language is clearly in a state of flux at the moment. The subject of teaching English to foreigners is now an industry in itself, and a large number of other fringe areas have developed, such as stylistics, psycholinguistics and speech pathology. A great deal still remains to be done in the field of English Linguistics, of course. While the greater part of phonetics and morphology has been well studied, there remain many problems of syntax which have hardly been touched, and the whole field of the semantics of English (including the question of how English vocabulary is structured) awaits investigation. The lines of needed research for scholars over the next few years are clear, and an increasing number of people trained in the subject is appearing.

But the result of this rapid specialist development has its dangers too. As linguists study language in greater depth and with more precision, using specially devised theories, terminology and procedures, it is necessarily going to be the case that they leave the non-linguist further and further behind. The science of language, though much needed, has brought a gulf between the expert and Everyman’s natural interest in
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his own language, and this is a gap which needs to be bridged. It is to be hoped that the objective precision of the linguist and the sensitive response of the man of letters will come closer together as the subject of Linguistics becomes more widely known and its aims more generally appreciated.

This brief history outlines the ideas that controlled the selection of texts for this book. Some (including a number of ‘pivotal’ papers) were excluded because they duplicated those already chosen; some were too technical or unrepresentative; for some there was simply no room. A number of these rejected essays are referred to in the study questions. Except where otherwise noted, the texts are those of the first edition, save that obvious errors have been silently corrected, bibliographical ‘reading lists’ and irrelevant cross-references have been omitted, and a few small matters of style like footnote conventions and the use of inverted commas in quotations have been standardized. Although the texts have been set in the same type and have a uniform system of headings other original typographical features have been preserved. Neither the introductory paragraphs nor the study questions are exhaustive. The reader may find them a useful way of relating the texts to one another, or he may prefer to follow his own interests, using the topical index. Editorial footnotes provide translations and some other clarifications where necessary.