

SOME REFLECTIONS ON LANGUAGE*

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'I start my talk ...' 'I begin my speech ...' 'I commence my discourse ...' English is the only European language with such a diversity of ways of saying the same thing. This versatility is largely the result of a Norman French vocabulary being incorporated into an Anglo-Saxon vocabulary as a result of the Norman Conquest of 1066. For several centuries after the Conquest Norman French was the language of the rulers and of law and government, while Anglo-Saxon remained the language of the common people. When, in a remarkable development which I think is unprecedented in the history of language, Anglo-Saxon re-emerged as the language of all classes in society, it had changed considerably. This was not only as a result of having adopted many elements from Norman French but also in having shed the inflections of Anglo-Saxon to become a language (which we now distinguish by calling 'Middle English') where grammatical distinctions are achieved by word order rather than by inflections. ('John killed James' means something very different from 'James killed John' in virtue of the order of the words and not because of the endings of the two nouns. In an inflected language the words could be in any order with the word endings indicating who was the killer and who the killed.)

That Norman French was the language of the rulers and Anglo-Saxon that of the ruled is preserved to this day in the way we have different words for the same things. As Sir Walter Scott pointed out long ago, English uses different words for the animal tended in the fields and the animal served up for dinner. A cow or an ox becomes beef on the table, sheep become mutton, calves become veal, pigs become pork. The humble herdsman used the Anglo-Saxon words for the animals he tended while their Norman overlords used the Norman French words when they ate them. This distinction is unknown in other European languages. In many other areas a similar range of vocabulary occurs. A 'cavalier' is different from a 'horseman', and an 'equestrian' is different again. 'Chivalry' is different from 'horsemanship'; 'equine' is very different from 'horsey'. We have here in fact three different roots, Anglo-Saxon *hors*, Norman French *cheval* and Latin *equus*. Latin comes in as a deliberately introduced enrichment of the vocabulary, especially the literary vocabulary, first from ecclesiastical sources and then from secular literary sources in the Renaissance.

English is thus a language with a remarkably rich vocabulary and a potential for achieving the subtle gradations of meaning. I cannot say exactly, — I am unable to tell precisely — am incapable of specifying, the degree to which Shakespeare's vocabulary (now there's a fine Latin-derived word for 'store of words', Anglo-Saxon 'word-ward') exceeds that of, say, Racine, but I am sure that it is more than twice as large. The Teutonic, the Romance and the Latin elements combine in a most remarkable way to produce a language of great expressive potential.

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Languages change, and a living language continually throws up new developments. While it is fascinating to trace a word to its etymological roots, it would be pedantic to use etymology to define present meaning. 'Nice', now a general word of approval, began in English with the meaning of 'foolish' or 'stupid' (from the Latin *nescius*, ignorant); later it came to mean 'tender' or 'over-refined', and then 'fastidious', 'precise' (preserved in the phrase 'a nice distinction'). 'Hysteria' is derived from the Greek word for 'womb', but no one now uses the word to mean a feminine complaint connected with the womb. Changes of meaning represent part of the normal development of any healthy language.

There are problems. Passages in older literature can be seriously misread if the reader is not aware of changes in word usage since the date of the original composition. One of the functions of a teacher of literature is to draw attention to such shifts of meaning so that the reader can read the text properly. Change is a sign of health, but it does not follow that all changes are healthy. Some result from simple confusion. 'Disinterested' means impartial, not having a personal stake in the matter, and so is quite different from 'uninterested'. A judge must be *disinterested*—he is not an 'interested party' in the matter to be judged—but he must not be *uninterested* in the case he is trying. The collapsing of similar sounding words into one word with a single meaning can impoverish language intolerably. I have heard politicians say 'flaunt' when they mean 'flout' and 'refute' when they mean 'deny'. I have heard a Member of Parliament stand up in the House and say 'I refute this absolutely' and then sit down. To 'refute' is to disprove or to prove wrong, and simply to announce that you refute something is to say something quite meaningless. Such confusions diminish the expressive potential of a language, which is why I deplore them.

So we must distinguish between changes that add colour and expressive scope to language (as the introduction of slang words into regular speech can do) and changes that result from confusion and ignorance and so diminish expressive potential.

The history of certain words in the last few decades can tell us a lot about the world we live in. Take 'media'. I remember when it came into use, in the 1950s. People talked about 'the mass media of communication' to mean radio, television and the press. 'Medium' is simply the Latin for 'means'; its plural is 'media'. People might just as well have talked about 'the mass means of communication', but the sociologists who first used the phrase preferred the more pretentious Latin term. Now people use 'media' not as the plural of 'medium' but as a singular noun to denote the whole range of mass communication. 'The media is ...' Is it pedantic to insist that this is wrong, that the phrase should be 'the media are ...'? I remember as a schoolboy being told by my Latin master that in late Latin the plural of some second-declension neuter words (singular ending '-um', plural ending '-a') tended to be used as a feminine singular, ending in '-a'. This is what is happening to 'media', and while I don't like 'the media is', it is probably here to stay.

Another word that was introduced into English—first into American English—just after the war is 'hopefully'. Of course it isn't a new English word; it has long existed, to mean 'in a hopeful state of mind'. But under the influence of German refugees in New York it came to be used like the German *hoffentlich*, which means 'it is to be hoped', or 'let us hope'. 'Hopefully, I shall start a new job tomorrow' used to mean 'I shall start a new job tomorrow in a hopeful state

of mind'. It now means simply 'I hope that I shall start a new job tomorrow'. 'Hopefully, I shall start my new job hopefully', using the old and the new meanings together, would then mean 'I hope that I shall start my new job in a hopeful state of mind'.

The adaptation of the German *hoffentlich* reminds us that foreign words can be taken over in very different ways. It must be about forty years since the French word *expertise*—which in French means an expert's valuation—has been used in English to mean 'skill'. A *viveur* in French means someone who lives it up, leading what used to be called a 'fast' life; one who is fond of good living is in French a *bon vivant*. But in English today people use *bon viveur* (an impossible French combination) to mean *bon vivant*. What we call a *faux pas* is a gaffe; '*faire un faux pas*' in French means to stumble and metaphorically to make a slip. An interesting word that has emerged in modern times is 'empathy', which was used originally in aesthetic criticism as a literal rendering of the German *Einfühlung* but is now used interchangeably with 'sympathy'.

Words can take on new meanings when circumstances demand. Harvey discovered the circulation of the blood, and would never have thought of the circulation of newspapers. A circular, in the sense of something sent out to large numbers of people, is a product of modern communications. So is 'circulate' in the sense of sending copies round to many recipients. I notice that people are starting to use 'circulate' to mean 'communicate with', so that I read in the newspaper the other day that many people were *circulated* with a specific piece of information. This should literally mean that people were sent round and round. There is a recent word *circularise* which means 'informed by means of circulars sent round'. You *circulate* paper, but you *circularise* people. It makes for logic and clarity to keep this distinction, so that you should not say 'members will be circulated with the details' but 'members will be circularised with the details'. The details will be circulated.

Such distinctions however tend to be lost in the pressures of everyday speech. I notice that the distinction between 'less' and 'fewer' is disappearing, even among academics. '*Less* butter but *fewer* eggs' is what we were taught at school. But I have heard highly educated people talk of 'less people' when they meant 'fewer people'. I think the distinction is worth preserving.

An aspect of language that has fascinated me ever since I wrote my doctoral dissertation at Oxford on the methods and scholarship of the translators of the Authorised Version of the Bible is the relation between language and religion. The major religions practised in the Western world are based on texts written in languages of which the majority of believers are totally ignorant. The Old Testament is in Hebrew and the New Testament is in Greek, and most of the great divisions between different branches of Christianity result from different renderings of key passages in the original texts.

Some of the most often used words in religious speech have meanings unsuspected by many who use them. 'Hallelujah' means 'praise the Lord'—the imperative plural of the Hebrew verb 'to praise' with the suffix 'jah', which is an abbreviation of the name of God. 'Hosanna' means 'save, please', being the imperative of the verb 'to save' followed by the particle '-na', which indicates supplication. (It is really 'hoshana', but it became 'hosanna' in the Vulgate, Jerome's Latin rendering of the Bible, because there is no 'sh' sound in Latin: similarly 'shabbath' became 'sabbath'.)

'Hallelujah' is addressed to the people, telling them to praise God; 'hosanna' is addressed to God, asking him to save the people. The Bible is a remarkable anthology of religious literature written over a vast period of time, and the recovery of the original meaning of many of the words used is sometimes impossible.

The language that Jesus spoke was a Galilean dialect of Aramaic, a Semitic language that by his day had become the *lingua franca* of much of the Middle East. But the Bible Jesus used and quoted from was the Hebrew Bible, that we call the Old Testament. Now Aramaic is to Hebrew what Scots is to English. That is why the Lorimer translation of the New Testament into Scots seems to me to render (in the Gospels) the authentic voice of Jesus better than the high formal language of the Authorised Version. I think that the Gospels were originally written in Aramaic; the Greek version of the Lord's Prayer sounds impossibly artificial, but turn it back into Jesus's language, Aramaic, and it flows beautifully. Jesus was a popular preacher speaking to the people in their own vernacular, and the Lorimer Scots version indicates this.

Let me conclude by reminding this audience of physicians that the word 'doctor' originally meant 'teacher' (Latin *docere*, to teach) and became a common term for a medical practitioner only in fairly recent times. Of course there are many kinds of doctors these days—doctors of philosophy, doctors of law, doctors of science, and so on—but the popular use of doctor to mean physician is still widespread, even though the majority of general practitioners do not have a doctor's degree but are bachelors of medicine and surgery. And there is the interesting fact that surgeons are scrupulously called 'Mister' for complex historical reasons. I once addressed an audience of general practitioners in Sussex and was introduced as 'Dr Daiches—but not of course a real doctor'. I was in fact the only person in the room with a genuine doctor's degree. Which goes to show how ambiguous language can be.