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English Present and Future

1. *The History of the English Language as a Cultural Subject.*

It was observed by that remarkable twelfth-century chronicler Henry of Huntington that an interest in the past was one of the distinguishing characteristics of humans as compared with the other animals. The medium by which speakers of a language communicate their thoughts and feelings to others, the tool with which they conduct their business or the government of millions of people, the vehicle by which has been transmitted the science, the philosophy, the poetry of the culture is surely worthy of study. It is not to be expected that everyone should be a philologist or should master the technicalities of linguistic science. But it is reasonable to assume that a liberally educated person should know something of the structure of his or her language, its position in the world and its relation to other tongues, the wealth of its vocabulary together with the sources from which that vocabulary has been and is being enriched, and the complex relationships among the many different varieties of speech that are gathered under the single name of the English language. The diversity of cultures that find expression in it is a reminder that the history of English is a story of cultures in contact during the past 1,500 years. It understates matters to say that political, economic, and social forces influence a language. These forces shape the language in every aspect, most obviously in the number and spread of its speakers, and in what is called "the sociology of language," but also in the meanings of words, in the accents of the spoken language, and even in the structures of the grammar. The history of a language is intimately bound up with the history of the peoples who speak it. The purpose of this book, then, is to treat the history of English not only as being of interest to the specialized student but also as a cultural subject within the view of all educated people, while including enough references to technical matters to make clear the scientific principles involved in linguistic evolution.

2. *Influences at Work on Language.*

The English language of today reflects many centuries of development. The political and social events that have in the course of English history so profoundly affected the English people in their national life have generally had a recognizable effect on their language. The Roman Christianizing of Britain in 597 brought England into contact with Latin civilization and made significant additions to our vocabulary. The Scandinavian invasions resulted in a considerable mixture of the two peoples and their languages. The Norman Conquest made English for two centuries the language mainly of the lower classes while the nobles and those associated with them used French on almost all occasions. And when English once more regained supremacy as the language of all

elements of the population, it was an English greatly changed in both form and vocabulary from what it had been in 1066. In a similar way the Hundred Years' War, the rise of an important middle class, the Renaissance, the development of England as a maritime power, the expansion of the British Empire, and the growth of commerce and industry, of science and literature, have, each in their way, contributed to the development of the language. References in scholarly and popular works to "Indian English," "Caribbean English," "West African English," and other regional varieties point to the fact that the political and cultural history of the English language is not simply the history of the British Isles and of North America but a truly international history of quite divergent societies, which have caused the language to change and become enriched as it responds to their own special needs.

3. *Growth and Decay.*

Moreover, English, like all other languages, is subject to that constant growth and decay that characterize all forms of life. It is a convenient figure of speech to speak of languages as living and as dead. Although we rarely think of language as something that possesses life apart from the people who speak it, as we can think of plants or of animals, we can observe in speech something like the process of change that characterizes the life of living things. When a language ceases to change, we call it a dead language. Classical Latin is a dead language because it has not changed for nearly 2,000 years. The change that is constantly going on in a living language can be most easily seen in the vocabulary. Old words die out, new words are added, and existing words change their meaning. Much of the vocabulary of Old English has been lost, and the development of new words to meet new conditions is one of the most familiar phenomena of our language. Change of meaning can be illustrated from any page of Shakespeare. *Nice* in Shakespeare's day meant *foolish; rheumatism* signified a cold in the head. Less familiar but no less real is the change of pronunciation. A slow but steady alteration, especially in the vowel sounds, has characterized English throughout its history. Old English *stān* has become our *stone; cū* has become *cow*. Most of these changes are so regular as to be capable of classification under what are called "sound laws." Changes likewise occur in the grammatical forms of a language. These may be the result of gradual phonetic modification, or they may result from the desire for uniformity commonly felt where similarity of function or use is involved. The person who says *I knowed* is only trying to form the past tense of this verb after the pattern of the past tense of so many verbs in English. This process is known as the operation of *analogy,* and it may affect the sound and meaning as well as the form of words. Thus it will be part of our task to trace the influences that are constantly at work, tending to alter a language from age to age as spoken and written, and that have brought about such an extensive alteration in English as to make the English language of 1000 quite unintelligible to English speakers of 2000.

4. *The Importance of a Language.*

It is natural for people to view their own first language as having intrinsic advantages over languages that are foreign to them. However, a scientific approach to linguistic study combined with a consideration of history reminds us that no language acquires importance because of what are assumed to be purely internal advantages. Languages become important because of events that shape the balance of power among nations. These political, economic, technological, and military events may or may not reflect favorably, in a moral sense, on the peoples and states that are the participants; and certainly different parties to the events will have different interpretations of what is admirable or not. It is clear, however, that the language of a powerful nation will acquire importance as a direct reflection of political, economic, technological, and military strength; so also will the arts and sciences expressed in that language have advantages, including the opportunities for propagation. The spread of arts and sciences through the medium of a particular language in turn reinforces the prestige of that language. Internal deficits such as an inadequate vocabulary for the requirements at hand need not restrict the spread of a language. It is normal for a language to acquire through various means, including borrowing from other languages, the words that it needs. Thus, any language among the 4,000 languages of the world could have attained the position of importance that the half-dozen or so most widely spoken languages have attained if the external conditions had been right. English, French, German, and Spanish are important languages because of the history and influence of their populations in modern times; for this reason they are widely studied outside the country of their use. Sometimes the cultural importance of a nation has at some former time been so great that its language remains important long after it has ceased to represent political, commercial, or other greatness. Greek, for example, is studied in its classical form because of the great civilization preserved and recorded in its literature; but in its modern form as spoken in Greece today the Greek language does not serve as a language of wider communication.

5. *The Importance of English.*

In numbers of speakers as well as in its uses for international communication and in other less quantifiable measures, English is one of the most important languages of the world. Spoken by more than 380 million people in the United Kingdom, the United States, and the former British Empire, it is the largest of the Western languages. English, however, is not the most widely used native language in the world. Chinese, in its eight spoken varieties, is known to 1.3 billion people in China alone. Some of the European languages are comparable to English in reflecting the forces of history, especially with regard to European expansion since the sixteenth century. Spanish, next in size to English, is spoken by about 330 million people, Portuguese by 180 million, Russian by 175 million, German by 110 million, French by 80 million native speakers (and a large number of second-language speakers), Italian by 65 million. A language may be important as a *lingua franca* in a country or region whose diverse populations would otherwise be

unable to communicate. This is especially true in the former colonies of England and France whose colonial languages have remained indispensable even after independence and often in spite of outright hostility to the political and cultural values that the European languages represent.

French and English are both languages of wider communication, and yet the changing positions of the two languages in international affairs during the past century illustrate the extent to which the status of a language depends on extralinguistic factors. It has been said that English is recurringly associated with practical and powerful pursuits. Joshua A.Fishman writes: "In the Third World (excluding former anglophone and francophone colonies) French is considered *more suitable* than English for only one function: opera. It is considered *the equal of English* for reading good novels or poetry and for personal prayer (the local integrative language being widely viewed as superior to both English and French in this connection). But outside the realm of aesthetics, the Ugly Duckling reigns supreme."[1] The ascendancy of English as measured by numbers of speakers in various activities does not depend on nostalgic attitudes toward the originally English-speaking people or toward the language itself. Fishman makes the point that English is less loved but more used; French is more loved but less used. And in a world where "econo-technical superiority" is what counts, "the real 'powerhouse' is still English. It doesn't have to worry about being loved because, loved or not, it works. It makes the world go round, and few indeed can afford to 'knock it.'"[2]

If "econo-technical superiority" is what counts, we might wonder about the relative status of English and Japanese. Although spoken by 125 million people in Japan, a country that has risen to economic and technical dominance since World War II, the Japanese language has yet few of the roles in international affairs that are played by English or French. The reasons are rooted in the histories of these languages. Natural languages are not like programming languages such as Fortran or LISP, which have gained or lost international currency over a period of a decade or two. Japan went through a two-century period of isolation from the West (between 1640 and 1854) during which time several European languages were establishing the base of their subsequent expansion.

6. The Future of the English Language.

The extent and importance of the English language today make it reasonable to ask whether we cannot speculate as to the probable position it will occupy in the future. It is admittedly hazardous to predict the future of nations; the changes during the present century in the politics and populations of the developing countries have confounded predictions of fifty years ago. Since growth in a language is primarily a matter of population, the most important question to ask is which populations of the world will

[1] Joshua A.Fishman, "Sociology of English as an Additional Language," in *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures,* ed. Braj B.Kachru (2nd ed., Urbana, IL, 1992), p. 23.

[2] Fishman, p. 24.

increase most rapidly. Growth of population is determined by the difference between the birth rate and the death rate and by international migration. The single most important fact about current trends is that the Third World countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America have experienced a sharp drop in mortality during the twentieth century without a corresponding drop in the birth rate. As a result, the population of these areas is younger and growing faster than the population of the industrialized countries of Europe and North America. The effect of economic development upon falling growth rates is especially clear in Asia, where Japan is growing at a rate only slightly higher than that of Europe, while southern Asia—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh—is growing at a rate more than twice as high. China is growing at a moderate rate, between that of Europe and southern Asia, but with a population in excess of one billion, the absolute increase will be very high. According to a recent United Nations analysis, by 2050 the United

States will be the only developed country among the world's twenty most populous nations, whereas in 1950 at least half of the top ten were industrial nations. The population of the less developed countries is expected to grow from 4.9 billion in 2000 to 8.2 billion in 2050, while the more developed countries will hold at 1.2 billion.[3] India is expected to replace China as the world's most populous nation in half a century, with a concomitant growth in Hindi and Bengali, already among the top five languages in the world. The one demographic fact that can be stated with certainty is that the proportion of the world's population in the economically developed countries will shrink during the next half century in comparison with the proportion in the presently developing countries. Since most of the native speakers of English live in the developed countries, it can be expected that this group will account for a progressively smaller proportion of the world's population. Counteracting the general trend somewhat is the exceptional situation in the United States, the only country among the more developed ones that is growing at slightly more than a replacement rate instead of actually declining.

If the future of a language were merely a matter of the number who speak it as a first language, English would appear to be entering a period of decline after four centuries of unprecedented expansion. What makes this prospect unlikely is the fact that English is widely used as a second language and as a foreign language throughout the world. The number of speakers who have acquired English as a second language with near native fluency is estimated to be between 350 and 400 million. If we add to first and second language speakers those who know enough English to use it more or less effectively as a foreign language, the estimates for the total number of speakers range between one and one and a half billion. In some of the developing countries that are experiencing the greatest growth, English is one of the official languages, as it is in India, Nigeria, and the Philippines. The situation is complex because of widely varying government policies that are subject to change and that often do not reflect the actual facts (see § 229). Although

[3] Barbara Crossette, "Against a Trend, U.S. Population Will Bloom, U.N. Says," *New York Times* (February 28, 2001), Section A, p. 6.

there are concerted efforts to establish the vernaculars in a number of countries—Hindi in India, Swahili in Tanzania, Tagalog in the Philippines—considerable forces run counter to these efforts and impede the establishment of national languages. In some countries English is a neutral language among competing indigenous languages, the establishment of any one of which would arouse ethnic jealousies. In most developing countries communications in English are superior to those in the vernacular languages. The unavailability of textbooks in Swahili has slowed the effort to establish that language as the language of education in Tanzania. Yet textbooks and other publications are readily available in English, and they are produced by countries with the economic means to sustain their vast systems of communications.

The complex interaction of these forces defies general statements of the present situation or specific projections into the distant future. Among European languages it seems likely that English, German, and Spanish will benefit from various developments. The breakup of the Soviet Union and the increasing political and economic unification of Western Europe are already resulting in the shifting fortunes of Russian and German. The independent states of the former Soviet Union are unlikely to continue efforts to make Russian a common language throughout that vast region, and the presence of a unified Germany will reinforce the importance of the German language, which already figures prominently as a language of commerce in the countries of Eastern Europe. The growth of Spanish, as of Portuguese, will come mainly from the rapidly increasing population of Latin America, while the growth in English will be most notable in its use throughout the world as a second language. It is also likely that pidgin and creole varieties of English will become increasingly widespread in those areas where English is not a first language.

7. *English as a World Language.*

That the world is fully alive to the need for an international language is evident from the number of attempts that have been made to supply that need artificially. Between 1880 and 1907 fifty-three universal languages were proposed. Some of these enjoyed an amazing, if temporary, vogue. In 1889 Volapük claimed nearly a million adherents. Today it is all but forgotten. A few years later Esperanto experienced a similar vogue, but interest in it now is kept alive largely by local groups and organizations. Apparently the need has not been filled by any of the laboratory products so far created to fill it. And it is doubtful if it ever can be filled in this way. An artificial language might serve some of the requirements of business and travel, but no one has proved willing to make it the medium of political, historical, or scientific thought, to say nothing of literature. The history of language policy in the twentieth century makes it unlikely that any government will turn its resources to an international linguistic solution that benefits the particular country only indirectly. Without the support of governments and the educational institutions that they control, the establishment of an artificial language for the world will be impossible. Recent history has shown language policy continuing to be a highly emotional issue, the language of a country often symbolizing its independence and nationalism.

The emotions that militate against the establishment of an artificial language work even more strongly against the establishment of a single foreign language for international communication. The official languages of the United Nations are English,

French, Russian, Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic. Since it is not to be expected that the speakers of any of these six languages will be willing to subordinate their own language to any of the other five, the question is rather which languages will likely gain ascendancy in the natural course of events. Two centuries ago French would have appeared to have attained an undisputed claim to such ascendancy. It was then widely cultivated throughout Europe as the language of polite society, it was the diplomatic language of the world, and it enjoyed considerable popularity in literary and scientific circles. During the nineteenth century its prestige, though still great, gradually declined. The prominence of Germany in all fields of scientific and scholarly activity made German a serious competitor. Now more scientific research is probably published in English than in any other language, and the preeminence of English in commercial use is undoubted. The revolution in communications during the twentieth century has contributed to the spread of several European languages, but especially of English because of major broadcasting and motion picture industries in the United States and Great Britain. It will be the combined effect of economic and cultural forces such as these, rather than explicit legislation by national or international bodies, that will determine the world languages of the future.

Since World War II, English as an official language has claimed progressively less territory among the former colonies of the British Empire while its actual importance and number of speakers have increased rapidly. At the time of the first edition of this history (1935), English was the official language of one-fourth of the earth's surface, even if only a small fraction of the population in parts of that area actually knew English. As the colonies gained independence, English continued to be used alongside the vernaculars. In many of the new countries English is either the primary language or a necessary second language in the schools, the courts, and business. The extent of its use varies with regional history and current government policy, although stated policy often masks the actual complexities. In Uganda, for example, where no language is spoken as a first language by more than 16 percent of the population, English is the one official language; yet less than one percent of the population speaks it as a first language. In India, English was to serve transitional purposes only until 1965, but it continues to be used officially with Hindi and fourteen other national languages. In Tanzania, Swahili is the one official language, but English is still indispensable in the schools and the high courts. It is nowhere a question of substituting English for the native speech. Nothing is a matter of greater patriotic feeling than the mother tongue. The question simply concerns the use of English, or some other widely known idiom, for inter-national communication. Braj B.Kachru notes that it is a clear fact of history that English is in a position of unprecedented power: "Where over 650 artificial languages have failed, English has succeeded; where many other natural languages with political and economic power to back them up have failed, English has succeeded. One reason for this dominance of English is its propensity for acquiring new identities, its power of assimilation, its adaptability for 'decolonization' as a language, its manifestation in a range of varieties, and above all its suitability as a flexible medium for literary and other types of creativity across languages and cultures."[4] Kachru left open the question of whether the cultures

[4] Braj B.Kachru, "The Sacred Cows of English," *English Today,* 16 (1988), 8.

and other languages of the world are richer or poorer because of "the global power and hegemony of English," and he called for a full discussion of the question.

Recent awareness of "endangered languages" and a new sensitivity to ecolinguistics have made clear that the success of English brings problems in its wake. The world is poorer when a language dies on average every two weeks. For native speakers of English as well, the status of the English language can be a mixed blessing, especially if the great majority of English speakers remain monolingual. Despite the dominance of English in the European Union, a British candidate for an international position may be at a disadvantage compared with a young EU citizen from Bonn or Milan or Lyon who is nearly fluent in English. Referring to International English as "Global," one observer writes: "The emergence of Global is not an unqualified bonus for the British… for while we have relatively easy access to Global, so too do well-educated mainland Europeans, who have other linguistic assets besides."[5]

A similarly mixed story complicates any assessment of English in the burgeoning field of information technology. During the 1990s the explosive growth of the Internet was extending English as a world language in ways that could not have been foreseen only a few years earlier. The development of the technology and software to run the Internet took place in the United States, originally as ARPANET (the Advanced Research Project Agency Network), a communication system begun in 1969 by the U.S. Department of Defense in conjunction with military contractors and universities. In 2000 English was the dominant language of the Internet, with more than half of the Internet hosts located in the United States and as many as three-fourths in the United States and other English-speaking countries. The protocols by which ASCII code was transmitted were developed for the English alphabet, and the writing systems for languages such as Japanese, Chinese, and Korean presented formidable problems for use on the World Wide Web. The technology that made knowledge of English essential also facilitated online English-language instruction in countries such as China, where demand for English exceeds the available teachers. However, changes in the Internet economy are so rapid that it is impossible to predict the future of English relative to other languages in this global system. It is increasingly clear that online shoppers around the world prefer to use the Internet in their own language and that English-language sites in the United States have lost market share to local sites in other countries. In September 2000 Bill Gates predicted that English would be the language of the Web for the next ten years because accurate computerized translation would be more than a decade away. Yet four months later China announced the world's first Chinese-English Internet browser with a reported translation accuracy of 80 percent.[6]

8. *Assets and Liabilities.*

Because English occupies such a prominent place in international communication, it is worth pausing to consider some of the features that figure prominently in learning English as a foreign language. Depending on many variables in the background of the

[5] Michael Toolan, "Linguistic Assets," *English Today,* 15.2 (April 1999), 29.
[6] AP Online, 12 September 2000; Xinhua News Agency, 15 January 2001.

learner, some of these features may facilitate the learning of English, and others may make the effort more difficult. All languages are adequate for the needs of their culture, and we may assume without argument that English shares with the other major languages of Europe the ability to express the multiplicity of ideas and the refinements of thought that demand expression in our modern civilization. The question is rather one of simplicity. How readily can English be learned by the non-native speaker? Does it possess characteristics of vocabulary and grammar that render it easy or difftcult to acquire? To attain a completely objective view of one's own language is no simple matter. It is easy to assume that what we in infancy acquired without sensible difficulty will seem equally simple to those attempting to learn it in maturity. For most of us, learning any second language requires some effort, and some languages seem harder than others. The most obvious point to remember is that among the many variables in the difficulty of learning a language as an adult, perhaps the most important is the closeness of the speaker's native language to the language that is being learned. All else equal, including the linguistic skill of the individual learner, English will seem easier to a native speaker of Dutch than to a native speaker of Korean.

Linguists are far from certain how to measure complexity in a language. Even after individual features have been recognized as relatively easy or difficult to learn, the weighting of these features within a single language varies according to the theoretical framework assumed. In an influential modern theory of language, the determination of the difficulty of specific linguistic structures falls within the study of "markedness," which in turn is an important part of "universal grammar," the abstract linguistic principles that are innate for all humans. By this view, the grammar of a language consists of a "core," the general principles of the grammar, and a "periphery," the more marked structures that result from historical development, borrowing, and other processes that produce "parameters" with different values in different languages.[7] One may think that the loss of many inflections in English, as discussed in § 10, simplifies the language and makes it easier for the learner. However, if a result of the loss of inflections is an increase in the markedness of larger syntactic structures, then it is uncertain whether the net result increases or decreases complexity.

It is important to emphasize that none of the features that we are considering here has had anything to do with bringing about the prominence of English as a global language. The ethnographic, political, economic, technological, scientific, and cultural forces discussed above have determined the international status of English, which would be the same even if the language had had a much smaller lexicon and eight inflectional cases for nouns, as Indo-European did. The inflections of Latin did nothing to slow its spread when the Roman legions made it the world language that it was for several centuries.

[7] See Vivian J.Cook, "Chomsky's Universal Grammar and Second Language Learning," *Applied Linguistics,* 6 (1985), 2–18, and her *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching* (2nd ed., London, 1996).

9. *Cosmopolitan Vocabulary.*

One of the most obvious characteristics of Present-day English is the size and mixed character of its vocabulary. English is classified as a Germanic language. That is to say, it belongs to the group of languages to which German, Dutch, Flemish, Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian also belong. It shares with these languages similar grammatical structure and many common words. On the other hand, more than half of its vocabulary is derived from Latin. Some of these borrowings have been direct, a great many through French, some through the other Romance languages. As a result, English also shares a great number of words with those languages of Europe that are derived from Latin, notably French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. All of this means that English presents a somewhat familiar appearance to anyone who speaks either a Germanic or a Romance language. There are parts of the language which one feels one does not have to learn, or learns with little effort. To a lesser extent the English vocabulary contains borrowings from many other languages. Instead of making new words chiefly by the combination of existing elements, as German does, English has shown a marked tendency to go outside its own linguistic resources and borrow from other languages. In the course of centuries of this practice English has built up an unusual capacity for assimilating outside elements. We do not feel that there is anything "foreign" about the words *chipmunk, hominy, moose, raccoon,* and *skunk,* all of which we have borrowed from the Native American. We are not conscious that the words *brandy, cruller, landscape, measles, uproar,* and *wagon* are from Dutch. And so with many other words in daily use. From Italian come *balcony, canto, duet, granite, opera, piano, umbrella, volcano;* from Spanish, *alligator, cargo, contraband, cork, hammock, mosquito, sherry, stampede, tornado, vanilla;* from Greek, directly or indirectly, *acme, acrobat, anthology, barometer, catarrh, catastrophe, chronology, elastic, magic, tactics, tantalize,* and a host of others; from Russian, *steppe, vodka, ruble, troika, glasnost, perestroika;* from Persian, *caravan, dervish, divan, khaki, mogul, shawl, sherbet,* and ultimately from Persian *jasmine, paradise, check, chess, lemon, lilac, turban, borax,* and possibly *spinach*. A few minutes spent in the examination of any good etymological dictionary will show that English has borrowed from Hebrew and Arabic, Hungarian, Hindi-Urdu, Bengali, Malay, Chinese, the languages of Java, Australia, Tahiti, Polynesia, West Africa, and from one of the aboriginal languages of Brazil. And it has assimilated these heterogeneous elements so successfully that only the professional student of language is aware of their origin. Studies of vocabulary acquisition in second language learning support the impression that many students have had in studying a foreign language: Despite problems with *faux amis*—those words that have different meanings in two different languages—cognates generally are learned more rapidly and retained longer than words that are unrelated to

words in the native language lexicon.[8] The cosmopolitan vocabulary of English with its cognates in many languages is an undoubted asset.

10. *Inflectional Simplicity.*

A second feature that English possesses to a preeminent degree is inflectional simplicity. Within the Indo-European family of languages, it happens that the oldest, classical languages—Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin—have inflections of the noun, the adjective, the verb, and to some extent the pronoun that are no longer found in modern languages such as Russian or French or German. In this process of simplifying inflections English has gone further than any other language in Europe. Inflections in the noun as spoken have been reduced to a sign of the plural and a form for the possessive case. The elaborate Germanic inflection of the adjective has been completely eliminated except for the simple indication of the comparative and the superlative degrees. The verb has been simplified by the loss of practically all the personal endings, the almost complete abandonment of any distinction between the singular and the plural, and the gradual discard of the subjunctive mood. The complicated agreements that make German difficult for the non-native speaker are absent from English.

It must not be thought that these developments represent a decay of grammar on the one hand or a Darwinian evolution toward progress, simplicity, and efficiency on the other. From the view of a child learning a first language, these apparent differences in complexity seem to matter not at all. As Hans H. Hock and Brian D.Joseph put it, "the speakers of languages such as English are quite happy without all those case endings, while speakers of modern 'case-rich' language such as Finnish or Turkish are just as happy with them."[9] However, it is worth trying to specify, as ongoing research in second language acquisition is doing, those features that facilitate or complicate the learning of English by adult speakers of various languages. To the extent that the simplification of English inflections does not cause complications elsewhere in the syntax, it makes the task easier for those learning English as a foreign language.

11. *Natural Gender.*

English differs from all other major European languages in having adopted natural (rather than grammatical) gender. In studying other European languages the student must learn

[8] See Gunilla M.Andeman and Margaret A.Rogers, *Words, Words, Words: The Translator and the Language Learner,* especially Paul Meara, "The Classical Research in L2 Vocabulary Acquisition," pp. 27–40, and Peter Newmark, "Looking at English Words in Translation," pp. 56–62 (Clevedon, UK, 1996). See also John Holmes and Rosinda G.Ramos, "False Friends and Reckless Guessers: Observing Cognate Recognition Strategies," in *Second Language Reading and Vocabulary Learning,* ed. Thomas Huckin, Margot Haynes, and James Coady (Norwood, NY, 1993), pp. 86–108.

[9] *Language History, Language Change, and Language Relationship* (Berlin, 1996), p. 144.

both the meaning of every noun and also its gender. In the Romance languages, for example, there are only two genders, and all nouns that would be neuter in English are there either masculine or feminine. Some help in these languages is afforded by distinctive endings that at times characterize the two classes. But even this aid is lacking in the Germanic languages, where the distribution of the three genders appears to the English student to be quite arbitrary. Thus in German *sonne* (sun) is feminine, *mond* (moon) is masculine, but *kind* (child), *mädchen* (maiden), and *weib* (wife) are neuter. The distinction must be constantly kept in mind, since it not only affects the reference of pronouns but also determines the form of inflection and the agreement of adjectives. In the English language all this was stripped away during the Middle English period, and today the gender of every noun in the dictionary is known instantly. Gender in

English is determined by meaning. All nouns naming living creatures are masculine or feminine according to the sex of the individual, and all other nouns are neuter.

12. *Liabilities.*

The three features just described are undoubtedly of great advantage in facilitating the acquisition of English by non-native speakers. On the other hand, it is equally important to recognize the difficulties that the foreign student encounters in learning our language. One of these difficulties is the result of that very simplification of inflections which we have considered among the assets of English. It is the difficulty, of which foreigners often complain, of expressing themselves not only logically, but also idiomatically. An idiom is a form of expression peculiar to one language, and English is not alone in possessing such individual forms of expression. All languages have their special ways of saying things. Thus a German says *was für ein Mann* (what for a man) whereas in English we say *what kind of man;* the French say *il fait froid* (it makes cold) whereas we say *it is cold*. The mastery of idioms depends largely on memory. The distinction between *My husband isn't up yet* and *My husband isn't down yet* or the quite contradictory use of the word *fast* in *go fast* and *stand fast* seems to the foreigner to be without reasonable justification. It is doubtful whether such idiomatic expressions are so much more common in English than in other languages—for example, French—as those learning English believe, but they undoubtedly loom large in the minds of nonnative speakers.

A more serious criticism of English by those attempting to master it is the chaotic character of its spelling and the frequent lack of correlation between spelling and pronunciation. Writing is merely a mechanical means of recording speech. And theoretically the most adequate system of spelling is that which best combines simplicity with consistency. In alphabetic writing an ideal system would be one in which the same sound was regularly represented by the same character and a given character always represented the same sound. None of the European languages fully attains this high ideal, although many of them, such as Italian or German, come far nearer to it than English. In English the vowel sound in be*lieve,* re*ceive, leave,* ma*chine, be, see,* is in each case represented by a different spelling. Conversely the symbol *a* in *father, hate, hat,* and many other words has nearly a score of values. The situation is even more confusing in

our treatment of the consonants. We have a dozen spellings for the sound of *sh: shoe, sugar, issue, nation, suspicion, ocean, nauseous, conscious, chaperon, schist, fuchsia, pshaw*. This is an extreme case, but there are many others only less disturbing, and it serves to show how far we are at times from approaching the ideal of simplicity and consistency.

We shall consider in another place the causes that have brought about this diversity. We are concerned here only with the fact that one cannot tell how to spell an English word by its pronunciation or how to pronounce it by its spelling. English-speaking children undoubtedly waste much valuable time during the early years of their education in learning to spell their own language, and to the foreigner our spelling is appallingly difficult. To be sure, it is not without its defenders. There are those who emphasize the useful way in which the spelling of an English word often indicates its etymology. Again, a distinguished French scholar has urged that since we have preserved in thousands of borrowed words the spelling that those words have in their original language, the foreigner is thereby enabled more easily to recognize the word. It has been further suggested that the very looseness of our orthography makes less noticeable in the written language the dialectal differences that would be revealed if the various parts of the English-speaking world attempted a more phonetic notation on the basis of their local pronunciation. And some phonologists have argued that this looseness permits an economy in representing words that contain predictable phonological alternants of the same morphemes (e.g., *divine~divinity, crime~criminal*). But in spite of these considerations, each of which is open to serious criticism, it seems as though some improvement might be effected without sacrificing completely the advantages claimed. That such improvement has often been felt to be desirable is evident from the number of occasions on which attempts at reform have been made. In the early part of the twentieth century a movement was launched, later supported by Theodore Roosevelt and other influential people, to bring about a moderate degree of simplification (see § 231). It was suggested that since we wrote *has* and *had* we could just as well write *hav* instead of *have,* and in the same way *ar* and *wer* since we wrote *is* and *was*. But though logically sound, these spellings seemed strange to the eye, and the advantage to be gained from the proposed simplifications was not sufficient to overcome human conservatism or indifference or force of habit. It remains to be seen whether the extension of English in the future will some day compel us to consider the reform of our spelling from an impersonal and, indeed, international point of view. For the present, at least, we do not seem to be ready for simplified spelling.

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