

# How to Speak and Write Correctly

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## Chapter I

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### REQUIREMENTS OF SPEECH

#### Vocabulary—Parts of Speech—Requisites

It is very easy to learn how to speak and write correctly, as for all purposes of ordinary conversation and communication, only about 2,000 different words are required. The mastery of just twenty hundred words, the knowing where to place them, will make us not masters of the English language, but masters of correct speaking and writing. Small number, you will say, compared with what is in the dictionary! But nobody ever uses all the words in the dictionary or could use them did he live to be the age of Methuselah, and there is no necessity for using them.

There are upwards of 200,000 words in the recent editions of the large dictionaries, but the one-hundredth part of this number will suffice for all your wants. Of course you may think not, and you may not be content to call things by their common names; you may be ambitious to show superiority over others and display your learning or, rather, your pedantry and lack of learning. For instance, you may not want to call a spade a spade. You may prefer to call it a spatulous device for abrading the surface of the soil. Better, however, to stick to the old familiar, simple name that your grandfather called it. It has stood the test of time, and old friends are always good friends.

To use a big word or a foreign word when a small one and a familiar one will answer the same purpose, is a sign of ignorance. Great scholars and writers and polite speakers use simple words.

To go back to the number necessary for all purposes of conversation correspondence and writing, 2,000, we find that a great many people who pass in society as being polished, refined and educated use less, for they know less. The greatest scholar alive hasn't more than four thousand different words at his command, and he never has occasion to use half the number.

In the works of Shakespeare, the most wonderful genius the world has ever known, there is the enormous number of 15,000 different words, but almost 10,000 of them are obsolete or meaningless today.

Every person of intelligence should be able to use his mother tongue correctly. It only requires a little pains, a little care, a little study to enable one to do so, and the recompense is great.

Consider the contrast between the well-bred, polite man who knows how to choose and use his words correctly and the underbred, vulgar boor, whose language grates upon the ear and jars the sensitiveness of the finer feelings. The blunders of the latter, his infringement of all the canons of grammar, his absurdities and monstrosities of language, make his very presence a pain, and one is glad to escape from his company.

The proper grammatical formation of the English language, so that one may acquit himself as a correct conversationalist in the best society or be able to write and express his thoughts and ideas upon paper in the right manner, may be acquired in a few lessons.

It is the purpose of this book, as briefly and concisely as possible, to direct the reader along a straight course, pointing out the mistakes he must avoid and giving him such assistance as will enable him to reach the goal of a

correct knowledge of the English language. It is not a Grammar in any sense, but a guide, a silent signal-post pointing the way in the right direction.

## The English Language in a Nutshell

All the words in the English language are divided into nine great classes. These classes are called the Parts of Speech. They are Article, Noun, Adjective, Pronoun, Verb, Adverb, Preposition, Conjunction and Interjection. Of these, the Noun is the most important, as all the others are more or less dependent upon it. A Noun signifies the name of any person, place or thing, in fact, anything of which we can have either thought or idea. There are two kinds of Nouns, Proper and Common. Common Nouns are names which belong in common to a race or class, as *man*, *city*. Proper Nouns distinguish individual members of a race or class as *John*, *Philadelphia*. In the former case *man* is a name which belongs in common to the whole race of mankind, and *city* is also a name which is common to all large centres of population, but *John* signifies a particular individual of the race, while *Philadelphia* denotes a particular one from among the cities of the world.

Nouns are varied by Person, Number, Gender, and Case. Person is that relation existing between the speaker, those addressed and the subject under consideration, whether by discourse or correspondence. The Persons are *First*, *Second* and *Third* and they represent respectively the speaker, the person addressed and the person or thing mentioned or under consideration.

*Number* is the distinction of one from more than one. There are two numbers, singular and plural; the singular denotes one, the plural two or more. The plural is generally formed from the singular by the addition of *s* or *es*.

*Gender* has the same relation to nouns that sex has to individuals, but while there are only two sexes, there are four genders, viz., masculine, feminine, neuter and common. The masculine gender denotes all those of the male kind, the feminine gender all those of the female kind, the neuter gender denotes inanimate things or whatever is without life, and common gender is applied to animate beings, the sex of which for the time being is indeterminable, such as fish, mouse, bird, etc. Sometimes things which are without life as we conceive it and which, properly speaking, belong to the neuter gender, are, by a figure of speech called Personification, changed into either the masculine or feminine gender, as, for instance, we say of the sun, *He* is rising; of the moon, *She* is setting.

*Case* is the relation one noun bears to another or to a verb or to a preposition. There are three cases, the *Nominative*, the *Possessive* and the *Objective*. The nominative is the subject of which we are speaking or the agent which directs the action of the verb; the possessive case denotes possession, while the objective indicates the person or thing which is affected by the action of the verb.

An *Article* is a word placed before a noun to show whether the latter is used in a particular or general sense. There are but two articles, *a* or *an* and *the*.

An *Adjective* is a word which qualifies a noun, that is, which shows some distinguishing mark or characteristic belonging to the noun.

## Definitions

A *Pronoun* is a word used for or instead of a noun to keep us from repeating the same noun too often. Pronouns, like nouns, have case, number, gender and person. There are three kinds of pronouns, *personal*, *relative* and *adjective*.

A *verb* is a word which signifies action or the doing of something. A verb is inflected by tense and mood and by number and person, though the latter two belong strictly to the subject of the verb.

An *adverb* is a word which modifies a verb, an adjective and sometimes another adverb.

A *preposition* serves to connect words and to show the relation between the objects which the words express.

A *conjunction* is a word which joins words, phrases, clauses and sentences together.

An *interjection* is a word which expresses surprise or some sudden emotion of the mind.

## Three Essentials

The three essentials of the English language are: *Purity*, *Perspicuity* and *Precision*.

By *Purity* is signified the use of good English. It precludes the use of all slang words, vulgar phrases, obsolete terms, foreign idioms, ambiguous expressions or any ungrammatical language whatsoever. Neither does it sanction the use of any newly coined word until such word is adopted by the best writers and speakers.

*Perspicuity* demands the clearest expression of thought conveyed in unequivocal language, so that there may be no misunderstanding whatever of the thought or idea the speaker or writer wishes to convey. All ambiguous words, words of double meaning and words that might possibly be construed in a sense different from that intended, are strictly forbidden. Perspicuity requires a style at once clear and comprehensive and entirely free from pomp and pedantry and affectation or any straining after effect.

*Precision* requires concise and exact expression, free from redundancy and tautology, a style terse and clear and simple enough to enable the hearer or reader to comprehend immediately the meaning of the speaker or writer. It forbids, on the one hand, all long and involved sentences, and, on the other, those that are too short and abrupt. Its object is to strike the golden mean in such a way as to rivet the attention of the hearer or reader on the words uttered or written.