Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949)
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EDITORIALS AND REVIEWS

'THE LOOM OF LANGUAGE'

WHAT WOULD one say of a chemical textbook sponsored by an authority on the history of music and written by a man who had made extensive use of paints, drugs, and cosmetics, but had never troubled himself to acquire so much as the rudiments of chemistry? What publisher, indeed, would think of issuing such a book, what critic of seriously considering its merits? To a student of language it is shocking and humiliating to see how little of the results of linguistic science has reached even the upper levels of our culture. The methodical and cumulative study of language, dating from about the year 1800, is approximately as old as that of chemistry. Its results have been plentiful and often unexpected. Here perhaps more than at any other point of attack, science has gained systematic and other than trivial knowledge about specifically human behavior—a notable result, since the study of language seemed at first to hold out no such promise.

The book here under review[1] intends to inform the general reader about language. Its author is evidently an educated man with some knowledge of several European languages. His book is recommended and prefaced by an eminent man of science (in another field, of course), it is being energetically distributed by a reputable publisher, and it has been praised by critics who know nothing about its subject. If one were willing to ignore the tiresome, sciolistically facetious, and repetitious style of this book, its total lack of clarity and structure, and the errors and misunderstandings in which it abounds, there would remain the fact that in the state of its information it lies some decades behind Whitney's excellent popular books, *Language and the Study of Language* (1867) and *The Life and Growth of Language* (1874).

Franz Bopp, the pioneer of comparative grammar, receives some mention, and there is frequent reference to the Indo-European family of languages—to be sure, under the once customary name of 'Aryan,' which in present-day terminology applies only to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family. Nevertheless, the reader learns almost nothing of the results of comparative and historical linguistics, and what little he gets is largely wrong. Absent also are the results of the later directions of linguistic research: dialect geography and descriptive analysis.

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1. *The Loom of Language.* By Frederick Bodmer. New York, W. W. Norton and Company, [1944]. x, 692 pp., illustrated.

This last omission is especially striking, since one of the chief aims of the book is to help the reader to 'learn' foreign languages. This application of linguistic science is the subject of Henry Sweet's classical treatise on *The Practical Study of Languages* (1900). In place of what is there set forth and of what has since been learned, the present book offers a jumble of haphazard fantasies, untried and untriable, such as might occur to anyone who started from scratch to improvise upon this theme. So far as the present reviewer can see, this book would not help, but only befuddle a person who wanted to study a foreign language.

Another principal aim of the book concerns the social significance of language. The author understands this only as it is understood in the popular view of our time. He dwells upon Basic English and upon artificial languages, in the usual hope that some kind of linguistic invention will overcome the social barriers of language. He does not speak of the fundamental and pervasive role of language in human behavior as it has occupied linguists during the present century, although he names Sapir's *Language* (1921) in one of the apparently otiose lists of books which come at the ends of some chapters.

Confusion of writing with language appears in many passages. The terms 'self-expression' and 'correspondence' play a big part in the advice for 'learning' foreign languages; apparently one is to find a foreigner who is willing (and able) to correct one's mistakes in letters (of all things) which one is to write in his language. The difference between complex and simple sentences is illustrated (on pages 165 and following) by two versions of a before-and-after testimonial about a young woman who was greatly benefited by reading *The Loom of Language;* among other things, she started writing to a 'boy friend' in Sweden.

On page 71 there is a table of the English vowels in 'phonetic script': *a* as in *hat,* and so on; the example for *ai* is the name *Einstein.*

Humboldt's distinction (1836) of 'isolating,' 'inflectional,' and 'agglutinative' languages, with 'incorporating' languages as a supplementary type, still appears (page 209) in this very form, except for a strange but characteristic miscomprehension:

> At one time comparative linguists distinguished an *incorporating* or *holophrastic* type to accommodate the Amerindian languages, which illustrate another peculiarity of sound pattern. It is extremely difficult to recognize where one word begins and another ends in the language of the Greenland Eskimo. The same is true of a great variety of indigenous, totally unrelated, vernaculars of the American continent. How far people distinguish one word from the next, especially in rapid speech, varies from one dialect to another within a small group. In a large family such as the Aryan, we find examples of highly holophrastic languages such as French or highly staccato languages such as German.

There is much sprightly reference to 'grammarians,' 'grammar books,' and the like; indeed, the author seems dimly to realize that linguists have ceased to force the description of languages into the framework of traditional Latin grammar. Ignorant, however, of descriptive linguistics, he gives only a garbled version of this same traditional doctrine. His sketches of the principal Romance and Germanic languages amount to no more than a hurried and jumbled summary of what is more clearly stated in any school grammar. This confusion is increased by occasional attempts at dealing with more than one language at a time; for instance (page 270): '. . . *telefoneeren* (Dutch), *telefonieren* (German). German and Dutch verbs of this class have past participles without the *ge-* prefix, e.g. *ich habe telegrafiert*' (this, of course, is not true of Dutch). Elsewhere, also, Dutch fares pretty badly; page 283: '*ik leer, ik leerde; ik lach, ik lachte.* The past participle is formed by putting *ge-* in front of the root and adding *-d* or *-t* . . . *ik hab geleerd*' (read *heb;* the past participle of *lachen* is *gelachen*); page 282; '*kammer—kammers*' (meaning 'room—rooms'; read *kamer—kamers*). Instead of warning the reader against trying to study more than one language at a time, the author, irresponsibly and in the face of all experience, goes so far as to tell him (page 8) that he may 'benefit by trying to learn German along with Dutch.'

Although most of the book consists in tramping round and round again over a dozen or so of trivial topics, a student of language will find much comic relief: queer misconceptions, alternating attempts at jocularity and at improvisation of scientific judgments, and a generally bizarre and cock-eyed picture of the world of language in which he spends his working days.

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SOMETHING ABOUT TWO TERMINATIONS

THE PRESENT tract of the *Society for Pure English*[1] falls into two parts. The first part deals with what happened to French *-é* in English; the second part, with the pronunciation of *-th* in plural formations. In part one, the author points out that French *-é* may be represented by *-y* or *-ee,* or may be lost altogether; in words not fully naturalized the French form *-é* is commonly kept, accent and all. In the legal terms *puisne* and *visne,* from OF. *puisné* and *visné,* the *-e* has been kept, but hast lost its accent; it is pronounced as if it were spelt *-y.* In one word,

1. *The Fate of French -é in English; The Plural of Nouns Ending in -th.* By C. T. Onions. S.P.E. Tract No. LXI. Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1943. 28 pp.