

GROWTH AND STRUCTURE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

V. E. Pronyaeva

Loan-words have been called the milestones of philology, because in a great many instances they permit us to fix approximately the dates of linguistic changes. But they might with just as much right be termed some of the milestones of general history, because they show us the course of civilization and the wanderings of inventions and institutions, and in many cases give us valuable information as to the inner life of nations. When in two languages we find no trace of the exchange of loan-words one way or the other, we are safe to infer that the two nations have had nothing to do with each other. But if they have been in contact, the number of the loan-words and still more the quality of the loan-words, if rightly interpreted, will inform us of their reciprocal relations, they will show us which of them has been the more fertile in ideas and on what domains of human activity each has been superior to the other. If all other sources of information were closed to us except such loan-words in our modern North-European languages as piano, etc., we should still have no hesitation in drawing the conclusion that Italian music has played a great role all over Europe. Similar instances might easily be multiplied, and in many ways the study of language brings home to us the fact that when a nation produces something that its neighbors think worthy of imitation these will take over not only the thing but also the name. This will be the general rule, though exceptions may occur, especially when a language possesses a native word that will lend itself any special effort to the new thing imported from abroad. But if native word is not ready to hand it is easier to adopt the ready-made word used in the other country; nay, this foreign word is very often imported even in cases where it would seem to offer no great difficulty to coin an adequate expression by means of native word-material. As, on the other hand, there is generally nothing to induce one to use words from foreign languages for things one has just as well at home.

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