

WHAT IS CORRECT ENGLISH?

Colloquial language is that which appears in good conversation, but not in formal writing. Both colloquial and formal English are "correct,"—each in its own sphere of use.

ENGLISH maintains its place as the most frequently required subject of our school and college curricula because of the unanimous support given it by both the general public and educational authorities. This support rests upon the general belief that the mastery of good English is not only the most important asset of the ambitious but also an obligation of every good citizen.

But what is "good English?" There are today two widespread viewpoints. The conventional point of view assumes not only that there is a correctness in English language as absolute as that in mathematics but also that the measures of this correctness are very definite rules.

The following quotations from R. G. White's *Words and Their Uses* represents dozens of similar statements:

The truth is, however, that authority of general usage, or even of the usage of great writers, is not absolute in language. There is a misuse of words which can be justified by no authority however great, and by no usage however general.

According to this conventional point of view, only two kinds of forms or usages exist—correct forms and mistakes. In general, the mistakes are thought to be corrupt forms of the correct expressions.

Opposed to this conventional point of view is that held by the outstanding scholars of the English language during the last hundred years. I shall call it here the "scientific point of view." A typical expression of it is found in *Elementary Lessons in*

English Grammar by H. C. Wyld, who writes:

A grammar book does not attempt to teach people how they ought to speak, but on the contrary, unless it is a very bad or a very old work, it merely states how, as a matter of fact, certain people do speak at the time at which it is written.

Such authorities believe that it is unsound to take the rules of grammar as the necessary forms of correct English and to set out to make all usage conform to those rules. In typical expressions of the scientific view there is, also, a clear affirmation of the fundamental principle that usage or practice is the basis of all the correctness there can be in language. From this scientific point of view, the problem presented by the differences in our language practice is by no means a simple one.

All of us upon occasion note and use for the purpose of identification the many differences in the speech of those about us. By certain characteristic differences of pronunciation and of grammar, the speech of "Amos and Andy" as it comes over the radio makes us visualize two uneducated Negroes. Through the speech of "Clara, Lu, and Em," we see three women of little education who have had a very limited range of social contacts. In similar fashion, we should with very little difficulty recognize the speech of a Scotchman like Harry Lauder as differing from that of a native of Georgia or Alabama.

Constant change is the outstanding characteristic of a live language used by an intellectually active people. Historical changes do not come suddenly, nor do they affect all the users of a language equally. Thus at any time there will be found those who cling to the older methods and those who use the newer fashion. Many of the differences we note in the language of today find their explanation in this process of historical change. These older forms constitute a fairly large proportion of the materials usually called errors by those who maintain the conventional point of view. The so-

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called double negative, as in "They didn't take no oil with them," is a perpetuation of an old practice exceedingly common in the English language for centuries. It was formerly the normal way of stressing a negative.

The form *foot* in such an expression as "He is six foot tall" is again the perpetuation of an old practice in the English language which modern fashion has abandoned. It is an old genitive plural following the numeral. A few other examples out of dozens of such historical differences are *clomb*, usually spelled *clum*, as the past tense of the verb *climb*, instead of *climbed*; *wrought* as the past tense of the verb *work*; *stang* as the past tense of the verb *sting*, instead of *stung*. Such differences belong not only in this group called "historical differences," but often also to one of the other groups to be mentioned.

One of these we may classify as regional differences. In the language practice of the United States, *gotten* as a past participial form of *get* is fairly general; in England it seldom appears. *You all* as a plural of *you* is especially characteristic of southern United States. In some colleges, one takes a course *under* a professor; in others it is *from* one; in still others it is *to* one.

Some of the differences we note in language practices find their explanation in the fact that the fashions in one community or section of the country do not develop in others. *Lumber* to most of us in the United States means *timber*; in England it still means *rubbish*. The part of an automobile that is called a *hood* in the United States is called a *bonnet* in England. That which they call the *hood* in England we call the *top*. In some sections of the United States a paper bag is usually called a *sack*, in others a *poke*. Such regional differences become especially noticeable when a person from one section of the country moves into another bringing with him the peculiar fashions of the district from which he comes.

In the new community, these language differences challenge attention and give rise to questions of correctness and preference.

In the third place, there are literary and colloquial differences. The language practices of conversation differ in many subtle ways from those used in formal writing. Most apparent is the abundance of contractions in the language of conversation as opposed to that of formal writing. Apparent, too, though less obvious, are the differences between conversation and formal writing in the matter of sentence completeness. Conversation abounds in groups of words that do not form conventionally complete and logical sentences. In formal writing, most of the sentences satisfy the demands of a conventional grammatical analysis. Less apparent but not less real are the differences which arise out of the fact that many perfectly familiar expressions occur practically only in conversational situations and are found very seldom in literary English, unless in attempts to report conversation. Occasions seldom arise in anything except conversational situations to use *Who (or whom) did you call?* or *It is me (or I.)*

Many assume that the language practices of formal writing are the best, or, at least, that they are of a higher level than those of colloquial or conversational English. When, therefore, they find an expression marked "colloquial" in a dictionary, as is the phrase "to get on one's nerves" in Webster's *New International Dictionary*, they frown upon its use. As a matter of fact, thus to label an expression "colloquial" is simply to say that it occurs in good conversation but not in formal writing. Unless one can assume that formal writing is in itself more desirable than good conversation, the language practices peculiar to conversation cannot be rated in comparison with those of formal writing. Each set is best in its own special sphere of use; one will necessarily differ from the other.

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