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Do We Teach English?

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Not long ago I listened to a speech by the mayor of one of the large cities of America. He gave a thoroughly interesting talk, one that held the rapt attention of an audience of six or eight hundred people. He was vigorous, fluent, concrete. But his language was marked by the syntax of a semi-literate person, though he is a college man. Such expressions as "he who I was the guest of" and "I was setting across the table from him" made one wince who was sensitive to correct English.

So far as I know, the mayor had never been trained in debating; but when I listen to the garbled English used by many of our intercollegiate debaters, and too often, I am afraid, allowed to go uncorrected by coaches and judges, I wonder if we teachers of speech are doing what we can to induce the use of correct and effective English.

I have just sat through the six rounds of a state debate tournament, in the capacity of critic judge. I kept a record of the objectionable English used by the debaters, jotting down verbatim the grammatical errors, the unclear sentences and clauses, the examples of typical debaters' jargon, the illustrations of locutions correct in themselves, but objectionable from too frequent use.

I think it might be helpful to try to classify, at least roughly, the types of error, as we can better teach our students good English if we can make them understand why certain expressions they use are objectionable. It may be helpful also for the benefit of students who are working to improve their English to suggest preferable methods of expression, where the error is not at once obvious. In the following paragraphs, I have so treated the errors I culled while listening to the six debates of the tournament.

In the first category are listed grammatical errors: failures to secure agreement between subject and verb, or between antecedent and pronoun, wrong use of verb tenses, wrong forms of relative pronouns, etc. Here are illustrations of this type of error:

"The taxes collected by these states *is* not as high as. . ."

"In a report from NEA News, *it* stated that. . ." (*it was stated*; better, A report in NEA News of such and such a date stated. . .)

"Equal educational opportunities *is* needed."

"The low educational figures in the South *is* due to. . ."

"It would be drawn up after all the data *was* in" (data is plural)

"They are not near-sighted enough to not want to improve the education of the people" (They are not so near-sighted as not to wish to improve. . .)

"The taxes that Ohio are not putting on the states are these" (These are the taxes that Ohio is not levying)

"States *who* because of inadequate financial

power" (*which---resources*)

In the second category, I place errors of diction. Here are illustrations:

"There are *inequities* in our educational system" (The context showed that *inequalities* was meant)

"The states are not *giving* as much *finances* to the cities as they could" (*financial help*)

"We believe that education is a states' right" (a function of the states)

"Let's take the control *angle*; let's see exactly what that means" (Let's take the argument that federal aid to schools would lead to federal control of the educational process)

"*irregardless*" (no such word: regardless)

"*maintainance*" (maintenance, accent on the first syllable)

"I have just proven the need, due to the shortage of teachers" (I have just called attention to the need for federal taxes which arises from the shortage of teachers)

"School equipment is in bad *shape*" (condition)

"The *amount* of dollars . . . *amount* of people" (number)

"the *amount* of control" (degree or extent)

"*subsidation*" (subsidization)

"*particulary*" (particularly)

"We *feel* that money is no criterion" (contend, maintain, insist, submit, etc. Many debaters use *feel* too much and too loosely)

"A large *portion* of her people come in from other states" (proportion)

"This is merely a scattered statement" (a vague, loose, or unsupported statement)

In the third category, I list a few expressions which seem to be peculiar to debaters:

"I have this quote of Benjamin Fine, in regard to . . ." (Here is a statement made by. . .)

"To quote Dr. Benson, *he* has stated. . . ." (*who* has stated; or better still, To quote Dr. Benson:)

"They must prove to *us*. . ." (Debaters are not required to prove things to their opponents; their arguments are addressed to the judge or the audience. The word *prove*, a very important one in the vocabulary of debaters, is generally abused by them. It means to generate conviction in the minds of the judge or audience. It is ridiculous and inaccurate for debaters to say, as they constantly do, "I have proved." Only the judge or the audience knows if you have proved. Better say, "I hope I have proved," or "I have tried to prove")

"I have pointed out" (Debate speeches often sound like exercises in the conjugation of "point out", I have pointed out, you have pointed out, he has pointed out, etc. There are many alternative expressions that may be used instead of "point out": show, argue, state, demonstrate, contend, etc. Occasionally the expression "point out" is used in a wrong sense, in the sense of "contend" or "argue": "Our opponents have pointed out. . . This is not true." The

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expression properly used implies that that which is pointed out is true.)

"There are great inequalities in the states that have not been taken care of." ("Take care of" is frequently used by debaters to mean "reply to" an argument: "Our opponents have not replied to our argument that great inequality of educational opportunity exists in the several states.")

"We find that 77% of the people are opposed" (Omit "we find." It is unnecessary, and it weakens the force of the statement by putting the more important idea in the subordinate clause.)

Of the final category of miscellaneous garbled and unclear expressions I shall list only a few. It would prolong this paper unduly to set down all I collected. Many of them are the result of the haste and excitement that often afflict the more inexperienced debaters. Others are the result of the too great brevity of style which debaters affect as a result of the fact that they are constantly discussing the same subject before their debate classes. Vague allusions to an idea that has frequently been discussed in the class are thought to be sufficient. The only way to overcome this type of looseness of expression is the practice of rigorous criticism by the debate teacher. Here are some illustrations of these garbled and loose expressions, or of expressions too compact to be clear:

"They brought up the political football argument" (They introduced the argument that a program of federal aid to education would become a matter of political manipulation)

"It is a problem of reorganizing things within the state" (The real problem to be solved is

the problem of improving the efficiency of the state educational systems).

"Education is being retarded because of this lack of money that is being placed in the hands of educators" (The chief need of education is a more adequate financing program)

"The teacher situation is very low" (There is a critical shortage of teachers)

"We have seen this work in foreign countries, which I have shown by England" (. . . as I have shown by citing the experience of England)

I am sure that the expressions I have listed as examples of the kind of English our debaters use are familiar to every debate teacher. I have suggested that one way in which we can secure a constant improvement in the use of English by our debaters is the practice of rigorous criticism. One thing else we can do, and that is to hold before our students the idea that it is vastly better to say a few things well than to say many things badly. Our debaters are too much obsessed with the notion that they will be judged by the amount of material, evidence, statistics, etc., that they can pour forth in ten minutes. Let us give them a different idea and a different ideal, the idea that quality counts more than quantity, and the ideal of English as a medium that can be beautiful as well as utilitarian, that can contribute to aesthetic appreciation and to understanding at the same time. We do not want to promote a formal or pedantic style, but we have a right to demand correctness, accuracy, and clarity in the use of language. The pleasure that the judge or audience may receive from listening to limpid and graceful language will be so much clear gain, even though the main end of the debater must always be to gain conviction.