Growth and structure of the English language

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GROWTH AND STRUCTURE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY

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PREFACE.

The scope and plan of this volume have been set forth in the introductory paragraph. I have endeavoured to write at once popularly and so as to be of some profit to the expert philologist. In some cases I have advanced new views without having space enough to give all my reasons for deviating from commonly accepted theories, but I hope to find an opportunity in future works of a more learned character to argue out the most debatable points.

I owe more than I can say to numerous predecessors in the fields of my investigations, most of all to the authors of the New English Dictionary. The dates given for the first and last appearance of a word are nearly always taken from that splendid monument of English scholarship, and it is hardly necessary to warn the reader not to take these dates too literally. When I say, for instance, that fenester was in use from 1290 to 1548, I do not mean to say that the word was actually heard for the first and for the last time in those two years, but only that no earlier or later quotations have been discovered by the painstaking authors of that dictionary.

I have departed from a common practice in retaining the spelling of all authors quoted. I see no reason why in so many English editions of Shakespeare the spelling is modernized while in quotations from other Elizabethan authors the old spelling is followed. Quotations from Shakespeare are here regularly given in the spelling of the First Folio (1623). The only point where, for the convenience of modern readers, I regulate the old usage,
is with regard to capital letters and \( u, v, i, j \), printing, for instance, \( us \) and \( love \) instead of \( vs \) and \( loae \). — To avoid misunderstandings, I must here expressly state that by Old English (O. E.) I always understand the language before 1150, still often termed Anglo-Saxon.

I want to thank Mr. A. E. Hayes of London, Dr. Lane Cooper of Cornell University, and especially Professor G. C. Moore Smith of Sheffield University, who has in many ways given me the benefit of his great knowledge of the English language and of English literature.

In the second edition I have here and there modified an expression, added a fresh illustration, and removed a remark or an example that was not perhaps very felicitously chosen; but in the main the work remains unchanged.

Gentofte (Copenhagen), September 1911.

O. J.
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Chapter I.

Preliminary Sketch.

1. It will be my endeavour in this volume to characterize the chief peculiarities of the English language, and to explain the growth and significance of those features in its structure which have been of permanent importance. The older stages of the language, interesting as their study is, will be considered only in so far as they throw light either directly or by way of contrast on the main characteristics of present-day English, and an attempt will be made to connect the teachings of linguistic history with the chief events in the general history of the English people so as to show their mutual bearings on each other and the relation of language to national character. The knowledge that the latter conception is a very difficult one to deal with scientifically, as it may easily tempt one into hasty generalizations, should make us wary, but not deter us from grappling with problems which are really both interesting and important.—My plan will be, first to give a rapid sketch of the language of our own days, so as to show how it strikes a foreigner—a foreigner who has devoted much time to the study of English, but who feels that in spite of all his efforts he is only able to look at it as a foreigner does, and not exactly as a native would—and then in the following chapters to enter more deeply into the history of the language in order to describe its first shape, to trace the
various foreign influences it has undergone, and to give an account of its own inner growth.

2. It is, of course, impossible to characterize a language in one formula; languages, like men, are too composite to have their whole essence summed up in one short expression. Nevertheless, there is one expression that continually comes to my mind whenever I think of the English language and compare it with others: it seems to me positively and expressly masculine, it is the language of a grown-up man and has very little childish or feminine about it. A great many things go together to produce and to confirm that impression, things phonetical, grammatical, and lexical, words and turns that are found, and words and turns that are not found, in the language. In dealing with the English language one is often reminded of the characteristic English hand-writing; just as an English lady will nearly always write in a manner that in any other country would only be found in a man's hand, in the same manner the language is more manly than any other language I know.

3. First I shall mention the sound system. The English consonants are well defined; voiced and voiceless consonants stand over against each other in neat symmetry, and they are, as a rule, clearly and precisely pronounced. You have none of those indistinct or half-slurred consonants that abound in Danish, for instance (such as those in hade, hage, livlig) where you hardly know whether it is a consonant or a vowel-glide that meets the ear. The only thing that might be compared to this in English, is the r when not followed by a vowel, but then this has really given up definitely all pretensions to the rank of a consonant, and is (in the pronunciation of the South of England) either frankly a vowel (as in here) or else nothing at all (in hart, etc.). Each English
consonant belongs distinctly to its own type, a \( t \) is a \( t \), and a \( k \) is a \( k \), and there an end. There is much less modification of a consonant by the surrounding vowels than in some other languages, thus none of that palatalization of consonants which gives an insinuating grace to such languages as Russian. The vowel sounds, too, are comparatively independent of their surroundings, and in this respect the language now has deviated widely from the character of Old English and has become more clear-cut and distinct in its phonetic structure, although, to be sure, the diphthongization of most long vowels (in \( ale \), \( whole \), \( eel \), \( who \), phonetically \( eil \), \( houl \), \( ijl \), \( huw \)) counteracts in some degree this impression of neatness and evenness.

4. Besides these characteristics, the full nature of which cannot, perhaps, be made intelligible to any but those familiar with phonetic research, but which are still felt more or less instinctively by everybody hearing the language spoken, there are other traits whose importance can with greater ease be made evident to anybody possessed of a normal ear.

5. To bring out clearly one of these points I select at random, by way of contrast, a passage from the language of Hawaii: “I kona hiki ana aku ilaila ua hookipa ia mai la oia me ke aloha pumehana loa.” Thus it goes on, no single word ends in a consonant, and a group of two or more consonants is never found. Can any one be in doubt that even if such a language sound pleasantly and be full of music and harmony, the total impression is childlike and effeminate? You do not expect much vigour or energy in a people speaking such a language; it seems adapted only to inhabitants of sunny regions where the soil requires scarcely any labour on the part of man to yield him everything he wants, and where life therefore does not bear the stamp of a hard
struggle against nature and against fellow-creatures. In a lesser degree we find the same phonetic structure in such languages as Italian and Spanish; but how different are our Germanic tongues. English has no lack of words ending in two or more consonants,—I am speaking, of course, of the pronunciation, not of the spelling—age, hence, wealth, tent, tempt, tempts, months, helped, feasts, etc. etc., and thus requires, as well as presupposes, no little energy on the part of the speakers. That many suchlike consonant groups do not tend to render the language beautiful, one is bound readily to concede; however, it cannot be pretended that their number in English is great enough to make the language harsh or rough. While the fifteenth century greatly increased the number of consonant groups by making the e mute in monthes, helped, etc., the following centuries, on the contrary, lightened such groups as -ght in night, thought (where the “back-open” consonant as German ch is still spoken in Scotch) and the initial kn-, gn- in know, gnaw, etc. Note also the disappearance of l in alms, folk, etc., and of r in hard, court, etc.; the final consonant groups have also been simplified in comb and the other words in -mb (whereas b has been retained in timber) and in the exactly parallel group -ng, for instance in strong, where now only one consonant is heard after the vowel, a consonant partaking of the nature of n and of g, but identical with neither of them; formerly it was followed by a real g, which has been retained in stronger.

6. In the first ten stanzas of Tennyson’s “Locksley Hall”, three hundred syllables, we have only thirty-three words ending in two consonants, and two ending in three, certainly no excessive number, especially if we take into account the nature of the groups, which are nearly all of the easiest kind (-dz: comrades, Pleiads;