

## The Language of Language

The reader of this issue may feel he or she is entitled to plain English, considering its subject. In this there may be disappointment, for along with many passages of striking lucidity there are also many here of some difficulty, where the pace is slow, the waters deep, and the current of thought, it seems, flows contrary to the way the reader wishes to go. And this is inevitably so, because in spite of the time that has passed since teaching of the vernacular began, it is only recently that a beginning has been made in understanding the operations of language and correspondingly the operations by which one acquires a capability in it.

The cry for “plain English” is a cry from the soul of each one of us, to see or hear all vagueness, uncertainty, and complexity reduced to plain matter plainly expressed. Yet when matters are by no means plain — and these matters are not — their reduction to plain expression is simply misrepresentation, however consoling it may be to listen to. There is a good deal of that sort of thing around. We seem to be going through a bout of linguistic hypochondria, and any quack who can muster an authoritative manner and a fund of alleged howlers will command our anxious attention in the public prints, in fear that we shall find — and we always do — some symptom of the disease in our own system of speech.

If it seems strange, and somehow reprehensible on someone’s part, that more progress has not been made in illuminating an important activity on which so much time is being spent during schooling, we should perhaps consider why it is that we formerly acquiesced for so long in a state of affairs in which such things were not really understood. Of course, there has always existed a considerable body of folklore about the workings of language and what it is necessary to study. There is the folklore that language is a system of signals separate from mental operations, that thoughts have to be “put into” words, and that ideas are to be “conveyed” by sentences and hence delivered, whole and en-

tire, into the empty mail-box of someone else's mind. There is the folklore that this separate system exists outside ourselves as a part of the social culture that we are born into, and with other aspects of the culture must be preserved like property against damage and loss; all change is inevitably a decline from the remembered standards of the past. It follows, in the folklore, that this system is best studied objectively, in the manner of other subjects; there must be steps in it, of knowledge of some sort, by which one may struggle to higher levels of knowledge; and the skills that knowledge yields will lead to mastery, or should do. (Nobody ever wondered why so many excellent writers were so young, and why so few of them knew any grammar at all.) For reading literature, however, the folklore has it that to read well one should emulate the leading critics, and study their principles; it is unsound to have confidence in one's own untutored judgment.

All these pieces of folklore and others, which formed a provisional kind of understanding for English studies up to very recently, fail to stand up to closer scrutiny, and many are disposed of incidentally in the articles that follow. A question must remain for the practical-minded observer, nevertheless. If this provisional understanding was so wrong, how is it that the practices of teaching on which it was based did not collapse long ago under the burden of inevitable failure?

The answer is that the failure, on a huge scale, was always there, but society was formerly better equipped to tolerate it. A matter that is plain enough if you think of it, but that was never really part of the folklore, is that children learn the kind of language their parents speak, and it is the milieu of their family and friends that determines the quality of their speech. What little a school ever did to affect that quality, with all but the brightest of pupils who learn in their own way, depended on the degree to which the school achieved a homogeneity with that social milieu; hence the ease with which public schools and, later, grammar schools in England could maintain the high degree of suavity in language that characterizes the cultured and leisured classes which patronised and staffed them.

So long as classes in society kept more or less to their respective territories things were felt to be going tolerably well. It did not matter much that all but the very best teaching had no real effect on the pupils' language. But times have increasingly forced an intermingling of the classes, and the explosion in the technology of communications has exposed everyone's language to everyone else. There is a recurring relationship between the impact of such phenomena and a vociferously expressed public discontent with the quality of language that people find other people using. The overtones of superiority, contempt, and fear are unmistakably those of anxious self-defence: how can I live and work with people with whom I cannot share my meaning? What are the schools doing?

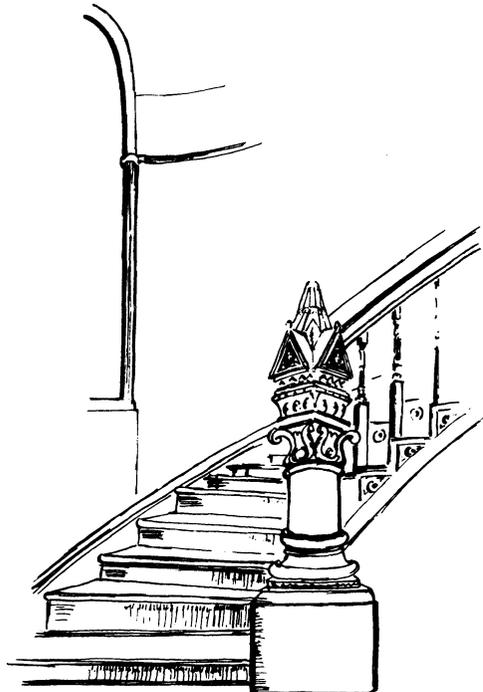
If there is one statement that suggests the fundamental problem of teaching

in the mother tongue, it is that language is a process, not a product. The product of the process of language is meaning, and that is why we have language — to arrive at meaning. Meaning itself is a difficult enough concept to talk about; I. A. Richards once wrote a fascinating but difficult book called *The Meaning of Meaning*. The difficulties for the reader in this issue, correspondingly, might be called those of the language of language.

J.K.H.

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