

C. Abbott Conway

# The New Modest Proposal

## A Dialogue

**Dramatis Personae:** Torpens, an academic.  
Scholasticus, another academic.

**Time:** the Present.

**Place:** Quebec.

*Surely somewhere in the dustier recesses of McGill, in leather armchairs and under dim light, there lurk for long hours each day the originals of Torpens and Scholasticus, those learned figures whose leisurely discourse, conducted over glasses of something forever partly plenished, oscillates forever between the lucid and the ludicrous. And somewhere in the empyrean far above, the lounging members of an even more Olympian club quaff their nectar and look down with their infinite amusement at the everlasting sturdy polarities of French and English, locked like two polecats within one polity. Out of such oppositions may emerge truth; and Abbott Conway puts deftly paid in one dialogue to two enduring misconceptions about language, the one academic and the other politic.*

**TORPENS:** Well met, Scholasticus! And what would you be doing there?

**SCHOLASTICUS:** Why, my good friend Torpens! I am writing a letter to the Minister of Cultural Development.

**T:** Whatever for? I thought that since the French Language Charter became law, you and he had nothing further to talk about.

**S:** Oh, that was then. I have since been thinking deeply about the whole matter, and reluctant as I am to make such an admission, I have changed my mind. Now I have an idea for him, which I think he is bound to like. I call it my New Modest Proposal.

T: How does it go?

S: Well, you know how the Language Charter not only specifies which language is to be used in official circumstances, but also arranges to control the quality of that official language.

T: Yes, I do, but what has that got to do with your New Modest Proposal?

S: Everything! Here I had thought that the problem of the Charter was that it seemed to oust the English language. Now I see that its main failing is that it ignores it altogether. I mean, it is fairly clear about the conditions under which English (or any other language) may be used, but it is absolutely unclear about the kind of English that will be.

T: And you think that is a weakness?

S: Yes! And I think I can solve the problem. Here is the opportunity some of us have been waiting for, the opportunity to effect the same kind of reform of the English language as the Ministry obviously desires to see in the French. So I am recommending the establishment of an English Control Board. Naturally, I am nominating myself to sit at the head of it, and I look forward to some really stirring moments.

T: Tell me first the foundation on which you base your proposal.

S: Gladly. You are undoubtedly as aware as I am of the terrible way in which the language is deteriorating.

T: Well, one does hear about lower standards and the problem of illiteracy in the schools, but. . .

### **A permanent cultural force**

S: Exactly! Well, I have meditated deeply upon the whole matter, and have worked out the best and most logical answer. You see, first of all, the problem begins in the fact that there is no directing force. No one can stand as an arbiter of the English language. The result is that it endures forces that fracture and fragment it. The process is not directed from an intelligent point of view, but is left to wander about hither and thither in an entirely shapeless and chance-ridden way.

T: But everybody knows that drift is a normal part of the development of language. All languages change. They always have, and they always will.

S: But do you know *how* they change? Have you examined the principles by which speech and writing are altered from generation to generation?

T: You'd better tell me.

S: I will! It is error! Error pure and simple. Each generation comes along and is either too ignorant or too lazy to use words as words are taught them. If you could insist that the young people learned and used only the correct forms of words, then you could eliminate what you call drift forever, and fix the language as a permanent cultural force.

T: You mean you want to keep English as it is?

S: Oh, you are far too dull to see my point! That is the last thing I want to do, dear chap. If that were to happen, it would only arrest the infection, but the infection would be left to gnaw away beneath the surface at the heart of the language. I mean to go back to the beginning.

T: How do you mean?

S: Just this. If you apply what I have been saying in a logical way, then it follows that the speech of every generation is a corruption of that of the preceding generation. So twentieth-century English is a mangled form of the nineteenth-century variety, as I and my friends have ever been at pains to point out. I was stuck at that stage for years. It wasn't until I began systematically to examine what I was teaching that my Theory really shone forth. You see, we can go back century after century. Modern English represents a corrupted form of Shakespearean English; Shakespearean English is nothing but a decline from Chaucerian English; fourteenth-century English is a mongrel version of late Anglo-Saxon; late Anglo-Saxon is a corruption of the English of King Alfred's day; all Anglo-Saxon is a corruption of Lowland Germanic; the Germanic languages themselves are merely the result of somebody's inability to pronounce Indo-European, and for all I know Indo-European is itself merely a corruption of something else.

T: This is quite grotesque. You mean that all modern language is in a state of decline and fall?

S: Absolutely! During all its long years of development, language has done nothing but disintegrate and putrefy. Think of it. All those long, deteriorating centuries. And this is what we are left with, and call the English language.

T: All very well, but what do you propose to do about it? Surely you don't expect us all to go back and speak pre-Babelian.

S: Oh, Torpens, if only I could! No, but even logic has to bend itself to practicality. I know what is possible, and what is impossible, and I govern myself accordingly.

T: Well, I'm thankful for that! For a minute you had me worried. Tell me what you *do* propose to do.

S: If we assume that all English is in a state of corruption, then logic suggests that we correct that condition by going back to the earliest possible moment and establishing our language along rational principles from there. The earliest English text we have was produced in the eighth century. Unfortunately, it doesn't give us nearly enough material to base a whole language on. But we do have a number of tenth-century texts. I am therefore proposing, and am so writing to the Minister of Cultural Development, that we establish tenth-century Anglo-Saxon as the official English of Quebec. Brilliant, what!

### **Speech true and pure**

T: No, perverse. Good grief! What on earth has led you to that?

S: Think of it, dear chap. If you want pure English, that's where to find it! Oh, how wonderful it will be to restore the English language to a truly Teutonic state! First of all, we make illegal in any public utterance all words whose origin is non-English. That means any word with a Latin, Greek, French, Norse, or other root.

T: But Scholasticus! Surely you are breaking your own rule right now as you speak.

S: Of course I am, dear fellow. And if a Theoretician like myself must break his own rules to make his point, then it simply shows the magnitude of the problem.

T: But if you did succeed in doing this, then you'd rid yourself of most of the lexicon of the English language at a stroke.

S: And a good thing too! But we'd find words to replace them. There are fine old Saxon words which would do just as well. Bring them all back, I say. We would set our scholars to work composing government-approved word-lists, and my office would give information on correct and legal vocabulary to any citizen.

T: What a work-force you would need! And how then do you propose to talk about atomic reactors and supersonic jets?

S: Oh, that's not hard. We do as the Icelanders and others have done, pass a law that all new words must be made up from native roots. If that results in terms like 'fire-devil', or 'flying dragon', then it will only add to the colour of the language. I am not the first to think of it, you know. German philologists in the nineteenth century worked to transform the German lexicon; and there have been similar efforts made in England. I believe that Gerard Manley Hopkins and Thomas Hardy both were associated with movements that strove to purify the language. It is unfortunate that so few people listened to them.

T: Now let me get this straight. You propose, by an Act of the National Assembly, to abolish some vast percentage of the lexicon of the English language and restore a form of speech that was current one thousand years ago, merely to avoid corruption in the language. Who is going to understand this tongue?

S: Why, the people! We will have language overseers to make sure that public utterances in English accord with official prescriptions (I suppose the proper Anglo-Saxon punishment would be exile). For the rest, we will work through the school system to instil English in its purest, pristine form. Going back a thousand years may sound extreme to you, but I tell you that that is the measure of the state the language has been allowed to fall into. Besides, if you're going to be logical about a point of view, you might as well be logical all the way, or at least as far as you can be.

T: Tell me what you propose to do about grammar and syntax.

S: Oh, that too would be brought back to its earlier state. How lovely it will be to hear people speaking English with cases again!

T: And this is the proposal you are sending away to the Ministry of Cultural — I was going to say, Regression? Why here? Why now? Especially as you say nobody listened to Thomas Hardy.

S: This is a perfect moment in history to right the wrongs of time. And this is the right place to do it, because finally I have encountered people who understand the value of true and pure speech.

T: But who cares how true and pure it is, if nobody can understand it?

S: Who cares if anyone can understand it, so long as it be true and pure? The principle, after all, was not mine, but was discovered by the drafters of the Language Charter.

### **The people's drift**

T: Well, maybe you have a point. After all, some people say that the English-speaking population of Quebec are going to become so isolated that it may not matter to anyone else what language they speak. On the other hand, I do not think your proposal is going to make any difference. The official language will go one way, but popular speech will go another.

S: You mean to tell me that it may not be possible to exercise firm and rational control over the growth of the English language?

T: Precisely! Language drift is irresistible. It is especially so in English. Look at what happened to attempts in the eighteenth century to prescribe speech.

S: Yes, I suppose they tried and failed.

T: They certainly did! Even the mighty Dr. Johnson himself. And so have others. Fix what forms you will, language, with a mischief all its own, slips away and leaves you hanging. Look at Icelandic (since you brought the subject up). By governmental decree, I hear, the language remains as if it were Old Norse, the language of the Vikings. But just try to pronounce a written text out loud! Spelling has remained the same, but pronunciation has stolen away all on its own. You see, languages are not made by governments or universities, but on the lips and in the minds of people. Language is what people choose to speak, and what they understand. Certainly there are norms. But as habits change, as insights are altered, as new metaphors are perceived, words are used differently and pronounced differently.

S: But English is surely in this respect a strange and undeveloped tongue. I envy the French and their ability to legislate and direct the growth of their language. How can they do it? Are they better than we are?

### **Artifact or aggregate**

T: No! Neither better, nor worse, merely different. English and French have fundamentally different attitudes towards their own languages — or let me say, those who think as specialists do (since I hesitate to generalize). If more people understood this, there might be less pain about the Language Charter.

S: How do you mean?

T: When a French-speaker describes his language, what kinds of things does he tend to say?

S: Why, something like, 'French is a very precise instrument for articulating rational discourse.'

T: Yes! And do you often hear English-speakers saying the same thing?

S: Only when they're structuralists.

T: And we hardly need count *them*. What do you think such terminology implies?

S: I suppose, that the French-speaker views his language as a technical artifact somewhat distanced from himself.

T: That is perhaps stating it too crudely, but it follows the general drift of what I was looking for. What is implied is the intelligence first, and then the language that intelligence puts on in order to express its thought — with a kind of break between them.

S: I suppose then that the English-speaker does not perceive that same distance between himself and his language.

T: If my theory is correct, that is so. In fact, not only would he not perceive that same distance, he might not even be aware of any distinction between himself and his language. To him, language would be a revealer of self. Thought would be word, and word thought; rather than word being the form in which thought appeared. There is a subtle distinction, if you can catch it. The emphasis on individual diction especially in North America is one aspect of this notion of self and language. But let us go on a bit further. Suppose you have one community which regards its language as an artifact which is the possession of the culture, and another community which regards its language as the aggregate of its private forms of speech — now which community is going to pass a Language Charter?

S: Why the first community, of course. It will view its language as the common possession of the civilization, and something which may be regulated as any other aspect of the society might be. The second community would regard any law made about language as a law made about its inmost private self. If its people resented intrusions into their inmost private selves, then they would resent any law having to do with language.

T: Now you have it! And that explains part of the resentment towards the Language Charter. English-speakers feel that any law at all about language is an unwarranted infringement of personal freedom. French-speakers do not seem collectively to regard the question in at all the same light, and perceive no threat to their liberty. This law speaks not to themselves, but to the tool or instrument they use to communicate within the society, and as such may even be perceived as enhancing liberty.

S: And yet there are places where you cannot speak anything but English, or where you cannot enter if your English does not accord to a certain pattern. One can certainly describe desirable norms of spoken and written English.

T: Certainly, and French-speakers point to this as a situation that is no different in effect from a Language Charter — at any rate, the Language Charter is no worse. Moreover, I have heard it argued that at least a Charter spells out the rules. In English, as you well know, there are almost more exceptions than rules. It is very hard for an outsider to break in.

S: In a contrasting sort of way, I suppose you can encounter French-speaking communities where the norms are different from the standard, and where there is an individual spice and raciness to the speech.

T: Of course you can. It is one of the pleasures of Quebec French. The richness of the language does not begin and end in formal rules. Those who con-

sider form in each language simply emphasize contrasting aspects of language itself. Both tongues have considerable strength and beauty, and each has something to teach the other.

### **Collapse of stout party**

S: Well, at the very least, I must now go away and revise my Theory about pure English, and scrap my letter to the Minister.

T: Yes, I think you had better. Anglo-Saxon is a beautiful language, and to those who used it, conveyed a wealth of expression and imagery. But (to be academically 'French' about it for a moment) that language was designed to articulate concepts and perceptions common to those living in England before the Normans. It changed to meet new needs, and it adapted to new generations of speakers expressing new ideas. It changed again in the fifteenth century to accommodate the virtual loss of Medieval Latin as a living language. In every century between those eras and since them, it has changed continually, often imperceptibly but nonetheless surely. And so it shall go on.

S: I can see now that the language does thrive in a state of flux, but surely you are not asking me to abandon rules altogether.

T: Indeed not. There is always a creative tension between the free development of the language and the need to fix it in a standard form. As we consider the language at any given stage, we try to lead it towards a synthesis. This is necessary for there to be any common understanding among speakers. But just as one synthesis is achieved, it breaks up, and another must be formed. It is a constant struggle. Our norms and standards come from the living language, though. We can't go back to the tenth century, however attractive the vista.

S: No, perhaps you're right. Maybe I should start again. It is possible that I have let my logic carry me away. But in the meantime, can you suggest another way to keep the Anglo-Saxonists in business?