

THE USE OF ENGLISH*

Tonight I am going to address you on The Use of English, with special reference to the needs of Afrikaans-speaking students in general and cost accountants in particular. I propose, however, to range more widely than this. So if at first you feel that I am not affording you that practical help which you think I should do in a lecture addressed to practical men, please bear with me until I reach that part of my address dealing more specially with your own immediate needs.

First of all, I want to touch on the vexed question of academic versus professional courses, of cultural versus practical, especially in the universities of this country. Let me briefly put the case for each, taking the second first; that is, the professional or practical approach.

Supporters of this view, and there are very many in a country as new and pragmatic as South Africa, maintain that in the interests both of the country and of the individual it is essential to specialise as soon as possible. Hence it is necessary to break up a cultural, aesthetic, literary and linguistic discipline like English into smaller units conveniently labelled "Language", "Literature" or "Set Books", and above all "Practical" or "Special" English. To its adherents, the provision of instruction in so-called "Practical English" at university level causes neither surprise nor dismay. They maintain that the university must inevitably develop on lines best suited to a changing world, even if in the process the university should change its ancient character of a seat of learning and become a semi-technical institution. So much for the pragmatists.

Now for the traditional approach: that of those who favour a training on the lines of the old-time liberal humane education, provided even today in the grammar schools of Great Britain. Briefly, their considered view is that such a training in basic values, while not directly orientated to professional needs, provides so thorough an intellectual discipline that the pupil is furnished, not only with a foundation of knowledge, but also with a trained mind. Thus, they maintain, he

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is later enabled to apply his knowledge by using his mind, adapting himself without difficulty to a specialised line of work, whatever it may be, and picking up the required technicalities in a short space of time.

Those are the two basic points of view. Although I myself incline to the traditional liberal education viewpoint, I have seen fit for the past fourteen years to provide special "technical" English classes for B.Com. and Education courses in this University. I may in fact claim to have been a pioneer in the development of such courses. The reason is plain. One has to be realistic in trying to make efficient bilingual citizens out of human material which has seldom received an adequate grounding in the language, which is by no means always of a sufficiently high level of intelligence to merit further study in the university, and which is nearly always in a hurry to acquire the necessary degree or diploma to consider itself qualified to earn a living.

Some six years ago Professor Guy Butler, then recently appointed to the Chair of English at Rhodes University, wrote to ask me whether he should accede to the request of the Faculty of Commerce to institute a "Special English" course for B.Com. students. I replied emphatically "No"; and he followed my advice, based as it was on the vital difference between a first-language course at Rhodes and a second-language course at Potchefstroom. Whether or not he has subsequently changed his mind I cannot say.

It has to be borne in mind that in a bilingual country such as this, the first language has to be taught differently from the second in order to achieve the best results. This is a large question, into details of which I cannot now go; but it bulks largely in any consideration of language teaching in South Africa and other bilingual countries. To teach a second language demands quite as much knowledge, and considerably more teaching skill, than to teach a first language. Towards the end of my paper I shall have something to say about a suitable English syllabus for Afrikaans-speaking Commerce students at university level.

Latin was always considered a basic study for a liberal humane curriculum; with the almost complete eclipse of Latin in South African education, an additional burden has fallen on the teachers of English, which has become the cornerstone of an Arts training in the university.

Before I leave my first point, that of cultural versus professional training in the university, I would like to tell you a story that was

current during the final years of the old University of South Africa. It was said that whenever it was found that students could not pass courses in, let us say, Psychology and Sociology, application was immediately made for the introduction of "applied" courses in "Sociological Psychology" and "Psychological Sociology." And remember that any "practical" or "special" course in English is necessarily an applied course. At any rate, we have not yet descended to either "Anglicised Afrikaans" or "Afrikanerised English"—though much of the language written by some of our students would qualify for a gold medal in both.

Before I pass on to the writing of English, I must point out what I consider the vital difference between undergraduates and men like yourselves who have undertaken courses of study while you are engaged in earning a living. That difference is surely that you know what you want; whereas the undergraduate engaged in full-time study is seldom sure of what he wants. For part-time students like you the pragmatic approach of "Give us only what is necessary in as short a time as possible" has a good deal of justification.

Of the writing of English, I would say at once that there is no one way to write English. Everything depends on the intention: whether it be that of a poet attempting to express a profound thought in sublime words, or that of a reporter attempting to describe an everyday incident in clear language. Their intentions are different: hence their English should be different. To creative writer, in exploring the higher possibilities of the language, is always seeking new patterns of language, new rhythms. I shall refrain from quoting examples of literary English by eminent authors, because my time is necessarily limited and I want to assist you as directly as I can. If you want to hear what language at its highest sounds like, read a Shakespeare play aloud.

It is admitted on all sides that much modern English is bad, and the reason for this is the lack of any precise intention on the part of the writer. Plainness or clarity should be the intention of all who write, whether they write a letter, or a report, or an article.

But plainness or clarity is the last quality aimed at by the average writer. Rather, if he is not trying to be pretentious by using high-sounding words the meaning of which he does not understand (like Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's *Rivals*), he is not trying to do anything beyond clothe his meaning in the shoddy, worn-out expressions which come most readily to mind, and which he can produce from memory

without ever having to think about them. Such a writer is not so much a master of the cliché as the cliché is a master of him. Many expressions of this kind have lost their meaning through years of abuse by well-intentioned but thoughtless people all over the world.

Language is primarily a social manifestation, as scholars have now realised. It is not static, but organic, reflecting the life of the times in which it is spoken. But unfortunately language today has come to reflect faithfully the mental vacuity of so much modern life. Mental laziness and plain foolishness are the real reasons why so few people write sound, workmanlike English. Their minds are lazy, their thoughts are foolish: their written compositions consist thus of foolish thoughts lazily expressed. No wonder so much modern English is not worth reading.

I say again that the primary aim of all writing, and of course speaking, is clarity. And clarity in either writing or speaking comes only from clarity in thinking. Here, apart from the intention to be clear on the part of the writer or speaker, there is the question of natural ability. Some unfortunates may try to write clearly, but possess little ability to do so because they cannot think clearly. About this, unfortunately, nothing can be done: a stupid person remains a stupid person, and is best written off. But the great majority of people who write lazy English are not stupid at all: they are just unthinking, muddled people. And no one with a muddled mind can express himself in any but a muddled way, whether he be speaking or writing. If he is speaking, he can usually get away with it, because most conversations are foolish anyway. I am, of course, referring to sober conversations, not the kind one hears at cocktail parties, which are sometimes so sublimely foolish as to make one wonder if perhaps there isn't something in them after all—a sort of mad logic such as one finds in *Alice in Wonderland*. But it is in his written words that a man is found out; unless, which often happens, the people who read him are equally muddled and never stop to ask themselves just what he really means.

Bad English is so widespread today that one finds examples of it even in writings of eminent authors. One frequently finds it in that of well-educated people; and the so-called "business English" of all branches of commerce and industry is appalling. It is claimed that such business English is short, crisp, and effective; actually the reverse is true: much of it is long-winded and hopelessly inefficient. Of this "commercialese" or "officese", it has in all fairness to be said that

the men most in need of educating are often the heads of business firms, directors, managers, *et hoc genus omne*. What typist does not know of the boss who devotes finicky attention to matters of minor detail, like a misplaced comma, in her draft copy of his letter; and yet remains perfectly satisfied with the letter itself, devoid though it is of any coherently expressed thought?

Civil service English is equally loathsome to anyone with a sense of the dignity and beauty of words. The English of journalism, though it has evoked the epithet "journalese", is kept within some bounds by the necessity of conserving space. Legal English stands apart: for the *sine qua non* of legal English is the necessity of stating precisely what it means. In the process, it has through the centuries evolved its own verbal formulae, without the use of which I defy anyone to write his will or buy a house. However aesthetically unpleasing such grotesquely cumbrous legal jargon may be, it has become something of a *lingua franca*, and is ultimately justified by the vital role it plays in the lives of all of us.

To return for a moment to the world of commerce, you may well find yourselves in the unfortunate position of working for a linguistically inefficient chief who would prefer you to write this sort of long-winded, incompetent twaddle to something plain and clear:—

"We are in receipt of your favour of the 9th inst. with regard to the estimate required for the removal of your furniture and effects from the above address to Burbleton, and will arrange for a representative to call to make an inspection on Tuesday next, the 14th inst., before 12 noon, which we trust will be convenient, after which our quotation will at once issue."

As Sir A. P. Herbert, from whom I have taken the quotation, points out, the above so-called "business letter" contains 66 words (292 letters). He shows how a reduction of 33% can be achieved by a little thought; and how, if one does not follow the lay-out of the letter, one can express the same ideas in 35 words (157 letters), thus saving nearly 50% of dictation-time, typewriter ribbon, carbons, paper, envelopes, and all else beloved of the "scientific coster".

Let me now give you an intelligent version of the verbose, inelegant, and time-wasting business letter I have just quoted. It would run thus:—

"Thank you for your letter of 9th May. A man will call next Tuesday, forenoon, to see your furniture and effects, after which, without delay, we will send our estimate for their removal to Burbleton."

Sir A. P. Herbert's delightful book, "What a Word!", is, I think, now out of print, but it has become a classic of its kind and is so outstandingly sane and witty as not to be easily forgotten. One example of "jungle English" contained in it has remained in my mind for the past twenty years. It is this:—

"Translate into modern Jungle English the following passages from the **Shorter Catechism**:

"My duty towards my neighbour is to love him as myself, and to do to all men as I would they should do unto me . . . to learn and labour truly to get mine own living and to do my duty in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call me."

"In connection with my co-citizens a general standard of mutual goodwill and reciprocal non-aggression is obviously incumbent upon me . . . the main issue for the individual seems to lie in some degree of concentration upon the securing of economic independence and an adequate standard of life by means of intensive education and 100 per cent. efficiency in the trade or industry adopted, as the case may be, respectively."

Ever since I first read A. P. Herbert I have tried my best to avoid "cannibal English", especially the word "bombshell" and the phrases "centre round", „in connection with", and "face up to". I can thoroughly recommend *What a Word!*, if you can find a copy of it.

Ivor Brown gives a striking example of the changing fabric of language in the following modern version of the famous words of Thomas Paine, "My country is the world and my religion is to do good." Listen to this:—

"There are for me no hegemonous communities but only the bonds of a cosmopolitan association which serves to relieve humanity from the psycho-physical maladjustments of nationalistic sectionalism. The pursuit of conduct orientated towards complete social synthesis and ethical holism, thus identifying the personal interest with the common benefit, has replaced, in my judgment, the dictates of an antiquated and doctrinal theology based on a supra-natural revelation and sanctioned by a striking divine *imprimatur*."

There is an excellent essay on Bad English by the late George Orwell. It is called "Politics and the English Language", and is contained in the author's *Selected Essays* published by Penguin Books this year. Here Orwell points out the staleness of imagery and the lack of precision in so much modern English, which is becoming increasingly slovenly and vague. He states that "the great enemy of clear language is insincerity"; and gives us an interesting "catalogue of swindles and perversions", explaining the various linguistic tricks by which the

average writer avoids thinking. He discusses "Dying Metaphors," "False Verbal Limbs," "Pretentious Diction," "Meaningless Words,"; and concludes his essay with some very sound advice to writers of English:—

- "i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- iii) If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
- iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent."

There are certain other books which every real student of English should possess. One of them is *The Reader over your Shoulder*, by Robert Graves and Alan Hodge. Here examples of modern writing by eminent writers are subjected to intense critical scrutiny. A number of tests for clear, sound prose writing are given. There are twenty-five different principles which the authors insist should be followed if anyone is to write competent English.

Another book well worth possessing is *The Plain Words*, by Sir Ernest Gowers, published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Sir Ernest stresses the importance of choosing the exact word, and discusses the elements of good writing. He says: "Be simple. Be short. Be human. Be correct." His chapters include "The Choice of Words", "The Handling of Words", and "Punctuation". The book contains a useful bibliography.

Before I pass on to mention some other books which deal less directly with jargon, I have with regret to state the indubitable fact that Afrikaans has of recent years shown a regrettable tendency to follow the bad example of English, and to become verbose and inefficient in the hands of the average writer and speaker. It is something of a tragedy that a young and virile language like Afrikaans should be in process of abandoning its greatest quality, that of vivid directness, to follow the tortuous, badly constructed, ill-lighted path of so much modern English prose.

Other useful books on the writing of English are Fletcher's *Manual of Modern English*, published by Maskew Miller; and, more obliquely for your purposes, the works of Eric Partridge. You must possess a dictionary, and of these I consider the Oxford dictionaries the best. For usage, Fowler's *Modern English Usage* is indispensable; and you may as well buy yourselves a copy of *Introduction to Modern*

English Usage, by E. Davis (not me!), published by the Oxford University Press and sold by the Central News Agency at 1/6d. This is a very useful introduction to Fowler. **The A.B.C. of English Usage**, by Treble and Valins, is another good guide. Then there is Roget's **Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases**, an indispensable manual whenever one is trying to find a synonym or a related word. So much for some of the books which you will find helpful in that most difficult of tasks, the writing of English.

Lastly, I come to a consideration of a suitable course in English for Commerce students at university level. I spoke earlier of the suggestion made some years ago that a "Special English" course for English-speaking students be instituted at Rhodes University. Last year the University of the Witwatersrand did just this. My colleagues and I have studied the Wits. syllabus, and found there a naturally greater emphasis on ideas rather than form. I say "natural", because the average English-speaking student there has a considerably better command of English than has his Afrikaans counterpart here; and his teachers are therefore freer to concentrate on subject-matter instead of expression.

As regards our own B.Com. English syllabus, I shall read you the relevant extract from the University calendar, not to make propaganda for my Department, but because I think that our course is a sound one, based as it is on fourteen years' experience of the needs of Afrikaans-speaking students of Commerce. The relevant section reads as follows:—

- “1. Modern English usage; idiom; essentials of grammar; style; spelling; punctuation.
2. Business English; principles of composition; tone and approach; commercial and financial terms and abbreviations.
3. Types of business letters: application, acceptance, resignation, introduction, testimonial, reference, recommendation, inquiry, sales, orders, collection, remittance.
4. Indexing and summarising of correspondence.
5. Business reports.
6. Meetings: notices, agenda, minutes.
7. Advertising; printed matter; proof-reading.
8. Problems of bilingualism.
9. Public speaking: elementary principles.
10. Tutorial classes in written and spoken English, with special attention to the needs of Afrikaans-speaking students. Such classes will include conversations, extempore speaking, discussions, debates, and regular written exercises.

This is a one-year course. The examination consists of a written paper and an oral test."

Mr. Prinsloo, who does this work, expressed our aims well in an article he wrote for a recent issue of *Die Veteraan*, a publication devoted to the interests of past students of the University. Let me give you a short summary in English of his article, written originally in Afrikaans:—

At the beginning of 1957 basic revision of the existing syllabuses for B.Com. as well as for the University Lower Education Diploma was undertaken. The basic difference between the old and the new approach is the acknowledgment of the principle that a study of language is also a study of civilization. Here an opportunity is offered for some study of the rich English tradition, of the Englishman as a human being, and of English as a way of life. English is particularly important in South Africa in view of our isolation from the culture of Western Europe and our lack of knowledge of its major languages, French and German. The Department of English (continues the article) is trying also to make the student critically conscious of the distortions of so much modern newspaper reporting and advertising, by close verbal analysis of representative extracts. Particular stress is laid on the effective use of language as an instrument of thought, in an effort not only to exercise the student in the mechanical processes of language, but also to prepare him for his role in the business world. A couple of literary works which combine literary value with narrative interest have for the first time been prescribed.

It remains only for me to summarise for you the content of my lecture, so that you may have a clearer idea of the ground I have covered.

I began by touching on the vexed question of academic versus professional courses in the university. Then I dealt as fully as I could with the writing of English, indicating the mental vices from which so many of us moderns suffer and the consequent low standard of our written compositions, which consist largely of platitudes loosely expressed. "Business English" came in here for particularly heavy castigation. The cardinal virtue of clarity was stressed, and the need for a clear intention in writing or speaking.

I passed on to a consideration of some very useful books on the writing of English, mentioning in particular those of Sir A. P. Herbert, Sir Ernest Gowers, George Orwell, and Graves and Hodge.

Finally, I had something to say in conclusion about our own course for B.Com. students, and the ways in which we are still trying to evolve an English course which will not only be a training in the mechanics of the language, but which will also be a training in what may broadly be called civilization.

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P.U. for C.H.E.