

Standards of Speech and Their Values

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STANDARDS OF SPEECH AND THEIR VALUES

It should be clear at the start that the question of the way in which standards in speech are established and the question of the values of these standards are not one and the same but two separate and distinct matters. In determining standards one has to do with objective facts, like the descriptive material of geological science; but in determining values, our concern is with matters purely relative, with conclusions that must be based upon opinions and judgments and which need not necessarily appeal to all men in the same way. The naïve observer of language simplifies matters by assuming that when he has established his standard he has also established his test of values. The custom of his own group is for him the only standard, and also the ultimate test of right and wrong. And this naïve sense of satisfaction with what is familiar runs through all stages of language from the highest to the lowest. The shining member of "good society" needs no proof that the customs of his speech are the best, and the country yokel is just as sincerely convinced that the stranger from the city makes a fool of himself every time he uses a word out of the local manner. Kaffir children, we are told, are fond of playing at being missionaries, and one of the most amusing features of the game to them consists in speaking the native idiom with a missionary accent. The boys and girls of Siena, doubtless also of other places much frequented by travelers, have a somewhat similar game. They like to play at being tourists, and they show their contempt for the outsider's Italian and their superiority over him by substituting the infinitive for all the inflected forms of the verb.

The formation of standards is a necessary and a continual process in the growth of language. It is a first condition of speech that it shall be intelligible, and, as consequent to this, that there shall be a degree of common understanding as to the forms and the meanings of the elements of the language. But after the mere necessities of intelligibility have been satisfied there is still another unifying influence to be added. This is the universal human passion for

57]

homogeneity, the instinct for imitation and repetition, which, though never carried out to the end of absolute regularity, continually tends in that direction. These two influences work together to bring about uniformity in language; first, the necessity of a common and accepted understanding of the forms of language, and second, the tendency or habit of mankind to repeat actions as exactly as possible and thus to reduce the number of actions from complete heterogeneity to groups of at least approximate similars.

Complete homogeneity is probably never attained in any group of actions, nor is it demanded by the practical requirements of the use of language. Communication takes place to a large extent through the suggestive power of the symbols of speech, not through any absolute meaning which might be supposed to be inherent in them. The actual understanding of speech is thus effected through a subjective synthesis which each person under every differing set of circumstances makes for himself. The speaker or writer strives to use such terms as will cause the hearer or reader to make a synthesis like his own, but a very little experience in the analysis of language tells him that the most he can attain is a general similarity, that his speech never can have the precise and exact meaning of an algebraic formula. In all practicable use of language there is, therefore, in the act of communication what might be called an area of negligible variation. Communication is not perfect, but the imperfections of it may be ignored in favor of that sense of sympathy and harmony which arises when two people think they understand each other, when they are agreed to assume that the subjective synthesis which each makes is the same.

By looking at language in some such way as this we are prepared to consider the questions how and why standards of speech arise. Every man is necessarily a member of some community group, and yet no group is absolutely homogeneous. Since absolute homogeneity is wanting, there can be no such thing as absolute standard and regularity. The question of standards is one of the degree of unity and regularity, and, by consequence of the extent of this area, of negligible variation.

Now in the establishing of the customs and habits of speech, it is a general law that the degree of homogeneity or unity varies

inversely to the extent of the area over which the fact of language under consideration is spread. This law becomes apparent by illustration. The greatest degree of similarity in the use of language is manifestly to be found in the most closely united social group, say in the family. Among members of such a group, the subjective synthesis which makes for understanding in language is most complete. Certain forms of speech will be used only among the members of the family in their family relations, and these will often be the very forms which give the group its deepest sense of intimacy and unity. But enlarging now the limits of inclusion so as to take in the customs and habits of the speech common not merely to the members of a family but to the citizens of a town, obviously we arrive at a new standard of homogeneity which has been attained by excluding from the standard the various distinctive uses which give the members of the smaller groups, the families, their peculiar sense of unity and homogeneity. The standard of the town includes a larger circle of speakers, but the ideas which it is able to express are correspondingly broader and more general, and in pronunciation the cadences of speech and the colors of sounds are less numerous and individual. Extending the circle of inclusion still farther, one may establish a grouping of similars in speech habits which will include many towns, all the speakers of a certain region, or all the speakers of a country. Every extension of the limits of inclusion geographically and numerically, however, carries with it a limitation of the number of speech habits which the members of the groups have in common. A standard of national use in speech means a grouping of those features of speech which the nation as a whole possesses in common. By the aid of these features the citizen of the nation acquires a means for expressing a feeling for a national unity, for a race. This feeling is also the result of a subjective synthesis, and it arises in the same way as the feeling for the unity of the family. But how vastly greater is the area of negligible variation in arriving at the feeling for a national or race unity, as compared with the feeling for family unity! In both instances we arrive at a standard by combining those similarities of speech which together make up the common speech habits of a group. The standard is therefore not an artificial system of regulations placed upon the language from

without, but its artificial character consists merely in that it states formally and analytically those habits which have worked themselves out unconsciously in the daily practice of speech. The question of the following of models, of right and of wrong, has consequently very little to do with the formation of standards of speech. These latter grow automatically in the practical everyday world of pleasure and business, they are the machinery of habits which men form in order to reduce the unavoidable friction of social intercourse. The machinery may be of very slight grasp, but capable of correspondingly fine workmanship; or its grasp may be practically coextensive with the limits of the speech, and then its powers will be wide rather than deep.

It will not have escaped the observation of the student of language that the processes which have been indicated as the method of the formation of standards are precisely the processes of the growth of dialects. In its popular sense, the term dialect is understood to mean a group of speech characteristics differing from, and inferior to, an approved standard. A derogatory sense has thus attached itself to the term. No one wants to confess that he speaks a dialect, although he may agree that all his neighbors do. But scientifically it is obvious that there is no difference between a dialect in the popular sense and a standard of speech, that is, a group of related speech customs, except that sometimes the standard may be made an object of conscious reflection and acceptance. But any dialect if it is thus treated may manifestly become a standard.

The same principles of inclusion and of negligible variation apply to dialects as to standards. No completely homogeneous dialect can be supposed to exist. The unity of the dialect must be found either in the personal sense of harmony of the users of it, or in the theoretical classifications of the student, who groups together those similars which he regards as characteristic and makes them the base of his artificial dialect divisions. And in the same way, the greater the comprehensiveness of the dialect, the less its intimacy and the complexity of its powers of expression. The English language as a whole has a unity of its own. Certainly it is distinct from French and German, and if in no other way than relatively, the English-speaking person acquires a feeling for a general language homo-

geneity. But imagine anyone trying to speak this standard unified English! Since it must include only those elements which are common to all English-speaking peoples, it must exclude everything which is distinctive of any minor group, of the Englishman as distinguished from the American, of the Devonshire Englishman as distinguished from the standard Englishman, of the Virginia American as distinguished from the standard American, and so down through an almost unlimited series of exclusions. When all these exclusions have been made, something will remain, in fact a good deal will remain. There will be left that central core of linguistic correspondences by virtue of which English is a language distinct from all other languages. The exclusions would represent the destructive habits, the differentiating tendencies of the speech, but the central body of standard usages would represent the homogeneous customs and habits by virtue of which a feeling for the language as a whole has been kept alive. This central body of standard uses is in modern times obviously more an eye standard than an ear standard, and, in practical speech, significant more as an ideal than as something actually to be realized.

From this extreme standard English dialect, which distinguishes English as a language from other languages, and which is established on the principle of the maximum of inclusiveness, that is, the greatest number of language forms common to the greatest number of English-speaking people, the limitations proceed down through many degrees. The standard British dialect by the same principle would be speech made up of the greatest number of forms common to the greatest number of dwellers in Britain, the standard American, by the common speech of the greatest number of Americans, the standard Virginian, by the common speech of the greatest number of Virginians, and so through all the countless groups which have in varying degrees a feeling for a homogeneous speech community.

Dialects or standards based upon geographical distribution are, however, not the only kinds that may be established. Within one and the same geographical area there exist necessarily different strata or groups of speech customs which have indeed more practical significance in the daily use of the art of language than the larger and more general distinctions which give rise to local dialects. And

each member of a community individually assumes from time to time different standards in his own speech, dependent upon the demands of varying purpose and circumstance. These different planes of speech are all English, but not the same kinds of English. The most apparent difference of kind is that between spoken and written English, each of which has its own peculiar laws and manners. Other groupings arise from an infinite variety of differing associations and ideas. The merchant meeting his fellow-merchant talks the merchant's dialect; the two instinctively feel themselves in the same group by the possession of common symbols of expression. If a politician enters into the conversation he will speak his dialect and immediately two groups will be established. The three can remain within one group only so long as they enlarge the circle of their speech to include only those ideas for which all three have a common vocabulary of expression. But the speech of the merchant in his character of merchant, of the politician, of the "educated" man, of the "uneducated," of the man of taste and of "good society," of the cosmopolitan man of the world, of the plain man of the streets, of every man within the round of his customary activities, will each have its own definite and distinguishing peculiarities. The merchant manifestly need not always speak as merchant; he may enter into various groupings, may speak the language of the man of taste or any other language. But each part as he assumes it will necessarily carry with it an appropriate set of speech habits. Instinctively we choose our groups, and instinctively we judge every man who addresses us by putting him into his group. A mere word, or an inflection in pronunciation will often suffice to lead us to a subjective synthesis of harmony or of discord. We draw the speaker into our group for the time being, or ruthlessly expel him from it; we grapple him to our souls with hooks of speech, or with the bitter instinctive hatred of tribal hostility, we push him beyond our circle of linguistic sympathy.

Such are, in brief, the ways in which standards of speech arise. They take their origin from the unconscious imitative tendencies of differing groups of people. Like other habits and customs, they are the necessary result of man's gregarious mode of life; they are the bonds of similarity by means of which each group interprets to

itself its own unity and homogeneity. In most instances the usages of standard speeches thus established by custom never raise the question of their values. They are assumed to be right because they are so, and supposedly always have been so. Long-continued habit prevents any skeptical attitude toward them by removing the necessity or occasion for skepticism. The question of values arises when one set of customary habits in speech demands attention by coming into conflict with another and differing set. Such a conflict of habits may occur as the result of a great variety of conditions. The members of two speech communities of wide geographical separation, each of which has its own distinctive habits, through conversation or through the printed page, may be brought into relation to each other. If the good will of each toward the other is sufficiently great, each side in the communication may so extend the area of negligible variation as to include the other within its circle of sympathetic unity. Or one or the other, as frequently happens, may be so unobservant of the habits and customs of others, so absolutely centered in its own habits and customs, as not to perceive those differences when they exist. This blind and comfortable state of mind always prevents any question of values from arising. But whenever a sensitive appreciation of the differences between two standards of speech is found, there also the question of the right or wrong of one or the other is bound to present itself. Whether the differences of standard are those due to geographical considerations, to social, professional, or educational, as soon as one instinctive speech habit, one of the symbols by aid of which the subjective synthesis of understanding is secured, is called in question by another, the result is always the pricking of the bubble of unity and homogeneity. The skeptical spirit enters and asks the speaker whether he has been really using the right symbol for the accomplishment of the complete and harmonious understanding which he supposed he had always been able to bring about. He is compelled for the moment to try to see himself as others see him, to discover if he has not been living in a fool's paradise of false certainties. Such questions once raised must be decided one way or the other, for only by deciding them can the speaker continue in the assumption of intelligibility and sympathy, without which effective communication is impossible.

From Horace and Quintilian down to the present day this question of the conflict of standards has been usually answered by the rule that custom is the only law of speech. Now custom is a term practically equivalent to standard. It means the accepted practice of a group of speakers whose habitual acts we are for the moment observing. And the second term of the definition obviously means the same thing. No one supposes that a law of speech has any external or autocratic authority. Linguistic laws are merely the generalizations derived by the observation of customary practice; they are the groupings of similars caused by the common human habit of imitation. The Horatian maxim therefore really begs the question in that it merely says that the standard of the speech is the law of the speech. Now it cannot be supposed that there is only one standard for a speech. On the contrary, it has been shown above that in every speech there are many standards. The real question of values consists in determining which standard under a given set of circumstances is the one to apply, and in the case of the conflict of two standards, which is to be accepted as good.

The endeavor to discover appropriate standards in speech is very similar to the task of the judge in pronouncing the law. The judge does not make the law; he has no authority to do so. His task consists in discovering the law, which itself arises from that custom or practice of the people with respect to a certain kind of action, which satisfies the sense of justice. Any arbitrary decision which transgresses the common sense of justice can maintain itself only temporarily by the power of authority, and must in time yield to the common-sense demand that the law shall not impose a judge's sense of right upon the people except when that sense of right is well founded in general human experience. Law becomes thus customary and standard practice, and is recognized as law only after the practice itself is well on the way to becoming established. In fact law, like standards in speech, becomes a matter for special attention only when there is a conflict of laws, a litigation. And again like speech, thousands of habitual human actions never become matters of law because they fall within the broad regions of negligible variation. Law, in the formal sense, consists of that whole body of custom which has been stated in definite terms as result of trial and examination.

Yet all instances of difference of opinion as to rights that may arise in the relations of men to each other are not included within the body of formulated law. The important responsibility of the judge is to find the law in each specific instance, whether it is expressed by precedent or whether it can be arrived at only by the combination of different principles hitherto not brought to bear upon the situation.

The task of scholarship in both the judge of law and the critic of speech is to place each individual instance as it comes into question in its proper place, to find the justice of its situation as the sense of justice is determined, not by the theory of the judge or the critic, but by the sound and long-continued customary practice of men. When Horace says that custom is the law of speech, he says nothing more than what everyone instinctively believes and practices, and what everyone wishes to practice when the matter becomes conscious and didactic. The difficulties consist in finding the true custom, not in imposing it upon the speech.

Whenever it becomes necessary to determine the values of standards it is apparent that a choice must be made between two or more standards. The mere descriptive statement of a custom in speech does not automatically carry with it the solution of the problems of right and wrong in speech. After the standards have been determined, there still remains the task of choosing from the standards just the one which satisfies the sense of justice for each separate instance. The choice is not always easy or simple. It depends frequently upon the observation of details which do not lie on the surface, but which are perceived only by one who has acquired skill and experience in the analysis of the activities of language relations. A broad theoretical solution of the difficulties is of little practical help. One may say that the best custom in speech is a national custom. But all speech and writing are not national in their appeal. If they were we should be limited to what would soon come to seem a very formal and flavorless expression. All we can say is that the best national custom in speech is the one that is national. When one wishes to be intimate and personal, a generalized national speech cannot help him far along his way. The defense may be made that in advocating a national speech, the speech of the greatest number, as a standard for all, we shall keep, at any rate, on

safe ground, that national usage is never bad usage. But this is a way of disposing of difficulties merely by evading them. If one will limit his speech to those things which the national speech is capable of expressing, he will never need any other than the national standard. Unfortunately, however, men must be individuals before they can become members of states.

Another absolute standard often proposed is the authority of good writers. In essence this theory implies that good writers present a kind of code of all the possible customary practices of the language. Whenever any question of practice is to be decided, all we need do is to go to the body of good literature and search it diligently. Imbedded in it some place, one will find the custom or practice which he may apply then as governing the special instances.

Now it is manifestly possible to define good use in such a way as to include only those forms of language which have had the good fortune to receive their credentials, so to speak, by being taken into the favor of some good writer. Other forms of speech which have not been thus ennobled may do very well in their way, but they cannot enter the inner circle of good use until they receive the stamp of literary approval. We may group them under the head of probationary use, if we will, but may not accept them unreservedly until we have sanction for so doing. But the arbitrariness and narrowness of such a theory of good use immediately secures its rejection. A more reasonable defense of the authority of good writers may be made on the ground that their writings are not a dogmatic, standardizing authority, but that they embody in themselves a code of use which is merely formulated practice, like the codified bodies of civil laws. It is hardly necessary to attempt to discuss here who "good writers" are, or just what are their chronological and other limitations. On such points, two opinions will never agree. Nor need we pause to show that good writers offer a body of usages almost as extensive and varied as those of spoken language, in the complexities of which it is quite as easy to lose oneself, nor that if a good writer is a dogmatic authority in favor of a good use, he is just as strong an authority in favor of the instances of bad use which are bound to occur in his pages. It is more to the purpose to call attention to the fact that all communication is not written and literary,

and that a literary standard, like the national standard, has value only when it is appropriate to the purpose in view. The authority of good writers is powerful when it comes to the question of determining the historical practice of good writing; under other circumstances it carries no weight at all, unless indeed one assumes the ideal attitude that it is the whole duty of every man to become a good writer and to rule his life accordingly. Even so it might be questioned whether the following of literary models would be the best means of attaining the end.

Whatever absolute standard we may attempt to establish, whether it be the standard of education, of literature, of "good society," of official society, of the "upper class" in general, we shall find that in the end our standard can only be partial. The actual practice of language shows that the values of standards are always relative, that a custom is good only so long as it fits the circumstances in which it has developed. Theoretically and ideally we may wish that one set of customs, the one naturally of which we approve, should replace another, and we may even strive to bring this about. In that case, however, we are not really changing custom, but changing the constitution of the groups of people by whom customs are made. It becomes apparent that each custom in speech, having arisen in answer to the needs of speech, is good for its own purpose. One good and effective custom cannot be transferred to another group of activities and remain equally effective. The values of speech habits are immediate and practical. The merchant talking to the merchant may meet all the requirements of the situation and may thus realize everything that speech under the circumstances can do. His language may be a complete economic adjustment of means to an end, and more than this we cannot ask of any man's language. If the merchant falls into conversation with the man of taste he may lay himself open on various sides to scorn and criticism; but his failure to maintain his own is not due to the fact that his customs of speech are intrinsically wrong or bad, but that the economic adjustment between the two is imperfect—as though a trotting and a galloping horse were being driven together.

However desirable it might seem from the point of view of theory to have such a rule, there is consequently no one rule for determining

the values of standards of speech. This question of values is indeed the question of values throughout the whole art of speech. The colors of words, their powers of suggestion, their associations, their history, origin, etymology, all these enter into the determination of the worth of the elements of language. Obviously not all persons are affected in the same way by the different aspects of language. A sensitive ear pays more heed to mere sound and the groupings of sounds than an insensitive one. A widely read speaker or writer with a good memory cannot help hearing and using words with a broad penumbra of literary associations. The historical student, on the other hand, sees words through a still wider perspective. The literal contemporary meaning of words is often qualified in his mind by the historical changes which have preceded the contemporary meaning. Who would dream of trying to fit definite standards of speech to different temperaments, or to the changing moods of daily life? We are always striving to strike the responsive chord, to bring about the subjective synthesis of sympathy and understanding. But we know that this cannot be done by any rule of thumb. It is a delicate and difficult matter, and no one, not even the most successful, always succeeds in it. And in this very difficulty lies the whole problem of getting at the heart and life of language. It may comfort some philosophers to think of a system of human ideas and emotions each of which has its final assigned place and value in the scheme of things, and which therefore may have its definite and completely adequate expression in language. An algebra of language would be quite possible with such a system. But this experiment has been tried often enough by the advocates of a universal philosophical language, and happily has been found wanting. Much of the fascination and the joy in the use of language lies in the fact that it is elusive and uncertain in its values. To be able always to say precisely what we meant and to be sure also that what we said would always be understood precisely as it should be, would make this indeed a dull world. Better occasional misunderstanding, with the play of energy and imagination necessary to prevent misunderstanding, than a smooth level of absolute certainty.

One final question of a less practical kind than the foregoing discussion of values in the habits of speech presents itself. Grant-

ing all the present diversity of standards in speaking and writing, and granting also the impossibility of dogmatic statement of the values of any custom other than that its value is dependent upon its usefulness, there still remains the question of individual attitude toward standard. For after all, standards and customs must be maintained, since it is only by the possession of symbols of homogeneous and unified expression that language is able to attain its end of communication. And moreover customs in speech are merely an index to those necessary general social customs of all kinds which make up the sum of conduct of each respective personality. But what homogeneity shall each personality set up for itself? Are there any general ideals that can be said to have any prescriptive significance? Should we strive to further consciously a national type of conduct, an educational, or the cosmopolitan one of polished society?

These questions are too difficult to answer. Every reflecting man will of necessity consider such matters from time to time, but his decisions will be very little dependent upon what someone else tells him he ought to do. The morals of language are as incapable of universal statement as the morals of other social habits. At the one extreme, we find those who feel no need at all of rules of conduct in language. "We artists," says Lamartine to Victor Hugo, "do not need to know language according to principles. We must speak as the word comes to our lips." At the other extreme stands the grammarian and rhetorician, who can give you a rule for every dot and every letter, and who is sadly given to anathematizing if you fail to follow his rules. Each practitioner in the art of language must find his own place within these two extreme limits. The speaker or writer who feels the need of the moral support of the rhetorical straight-jacket, who would rather believe a dictionary than his own judgment, may be following the best and quickest way to personal independence and certainty in his command over language. His danger is that a cold and commonplace legality may come to seem the only ideal worth striving for. On the other hand, the speaker or writer who follows mere instinct, who speaks as the words come to his lips, may be on the road to slovenliness or to eccentricity and excessive individuality in language. Therefore a

safety device of some kind is necessary for all, and we may find this in academic authority, if we are willing to submit to that kind of authority, or, if not, we must find it in the no less certain compulsion of social responsibility. Innovation and differentiation there must be, always tending toward the breaking-down of established customs and standards, and perhaps for the welfare of the speech and certainly for the heightening of its interest, the ideal attitude may be stated as that which shall lead to the highest degree of differentiation compatible with sympathetic communication. Beyond this limit lies anarchy, and on the hither side, the tendency toward the formal, indiscriminated, general, and conventional. But the maximum of individuality compatible with effective communication is a safe if broad rule. It is difficult of successful application only because it calls for several exceptional virtues in both those who hear or read and those who speak or write. In the former it calls for charity and openness of mind, and in the latter for sensitiveness in observation and discreet judgment in practice. The rule is not a magic formula opening the doors of success in expression, but its practical value is perhaps for that reason the greater. For it is the universal testimony of the masters in the art of language that excellence in the practice of that art is not easily attained, and that one man's rule is likely to prove another man's undoing.

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