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AMERICAN SPEECH AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY ARCHIBALD MARSHALL

ONE of the most amusing minor sports to be followed by an Englishman—like myself—travelling in America is to note and discuss the differences of speech and language that have come about between us. It can be pursued with urbanity, even where opinions differ as well as language, and there is no necessity to make an international contest of it. It is seldom even a question of right or wrong, or of one side giving in to the other. Differences may be expected to remain, and to increase, as each nation develops the speech we have in common to suit its own needs and according to its own temperament. That is only to keep a language alive; for no language ceases to grow until it ceases to live, and the accident of a language being used by two great nations—both very much alive themselves—makes its growth, upon parallel lines, all the more interesting to watch.

It must be confessed, however, that the subject has not always been treated with urbanity. From the time that John Pickering published his *Vocabulary of Americanisms*, in Boston, in 1816, and Noah Webster came back at him, the battle has been raging. Pickering was an American, who foresaw the time "when Americans shall no longer be able to understand the works of Milton, Pope, Swift, Addison and other English authors justly styled classic without the aid of a translation into a language that is to be called at some future day the American tongue!" Webster retorted that he "might oppose to this supposition another, which is nearly as probable, that the rivers in America will turn their courses, and flow from the sea to the top of the hills"; and boldly opened a counter-attack against English usage, which Pickering had too readily accepted as the only standard. "Let the English remove the beam from their own eye," he wrote, "before they attempt to pull the mote from ours; and before

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they laugh at our vulgar *keow*, *geown*, *neow*, let them discard their polite *keind*, and *geuide;* a fault precisely similar in origin, and equally a perversion of genuine English pronunciation."

"Brave and sensible words are these," comments Mr. Gilbert M. Tucker, in his *American English;* "their teaching may well be laid to heart to-day!" From which it may be seen that he approaches his subject in a fighting spirit, and is inclined to let nothing die—not even pronunciations that are now obsolete.

Mr. Tucker's is the latest shot to be fired in a battle that has been raging for over a hundred years. If it were only a question of fighting for one's own side it would be a powerful shot. He has collected many wounding and offensive pronouncements from English sources, and some of them are such as to make an Englishman sympathetic to America shake his head in distress. He has also collected many egregious mistakes from English writers of high repute, and their cumulative effect is such as to arouse the suspicion that England has become entirely illiterate since a date corresponding roughly with the Revolutionary War.

But one recovers somewhat from the sense of vicarious shame on considering that offensive pronouncements have not been confined to one side, and that from the beginning there have been Americans of eminence in letters and in philology who have ranged themselves on our (English) side. And as for the merry game of convicting respectable and even great writers of slovenly sin, you can play it with almost anybody, as the Messrs. Fowler, authors of *The King's English*, showed us some years ago. Mr. Tucker hardly seems to play it fairly when he takes instances from dialogue in novels; and his repeated example, "I have been to London," or wherever it may be, seems to need elucidation. If this is a blunder, as he takes for granted, it is one that has quite passed into currency in England, and gives no offense to any American I have asked about it.

About half of Mr. Tucker's book is taken up with an annotated list of "Exotic Americanisms"—"a list of more than eleven hundred expressions supposed by Bartlett, Farmer, Chapin or Thornton to be peculiar to this country, with evidence (generally in the form of a quotation from a British writer) that most of them are certainly, and all of them probably, of foreign origin."

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I am quite unable to understand Mr. Tucker's intention in printing this list as it stands. He is severe upon the collectors from whom he draws his examples for filling their books with "pseudo-Americanisms", and with justice. Bartlett, for instance, with his 5,600 entries, whose *Dictionary* was first published in 1877, was dealt with by Richard Grant White at that time. In eight articles in *The Atlantic Monthly,* White "disposed of nine-tenths of Bartlett's specimens, and called into question the authenticity of at least half that remained." The quotation is from Mr. H. L. Mencken's *The American Language,* but Mr. Tucker himself says that he thinks these 5,600 entries represent hardly more than "450 genuine and distinct Americanisms now in respectable use." Yet he has perpetuated in his own list a ridiculous number of these early errors. I need only give the following list of words under a single letter to show in what manner he is flogging a dead horse: Account (of no account), Alarmist, Alcoholism, Alligator, Almshouse, Along (get along), Apple-cart (to upset), A-tremble, Authoress. Surely it is waste of time to quote examples of such words used by English writers, since they are in commonest use everywhere!

In examining this list for information about words and expressions that may reasonably be taken for Americanisms, one is more struck by Mr. Tucker's diligence and zeal than by his judgment. "I should admire to go with you to Boston" is defended by a quotation from Chapman's Odyssey: "Your rapt eyes would then admire to see him use his thighs in strength and swiftness;" which hardly seems applicable. Still more remarkable is the defense of the adverbial use of the word "any", in such phrases as "being angry any." The quotation is from Shakespeare: "You are not to go loose any longer;" which is no defense at all. "Engineer," for the driver of a locomotive engine, is not supported by a quotation of 1839 referring to "engineers in His Majesty's ships", nor is "homely" for "ugly" by one of 1553 referring to the clothing of poor people. "Huggermugger" in English usage means "muddle", as it does in Mr. Tucker's quotation, "His uncle had saved money, and it was huggermuggered away." This is not "to keep concealed". "To locate oneself" is no defense of "to locate", used intransitively, nor

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do "quite a pleasing retirement", and "quite a comfortable dwelling", justify "quite a while", or "quite a house". "Squatter" has an entirely different meaning in Australia from that in use in America, and of course in England. In Australia it means a big landowner. It may be mentioned in passing that the word "graft", much in use in Australia, has the meaning of "hard work", with no significance of corruption. Mr. Tucker in his list of "Some Real Americanisms" gives the earliest use of it in the American sense as 1901. It would be interesting to trace its origin in both countries. It is a rare instance of a word coming to mean two opposing ideas in different parts of the English-speaking world. In England, if used at all, it is in the American sense.

To resume—it is absurd to quote Mrs. Trollope's *Manners of Americans*, of 1832, as an English instance of the word "stateroom", even though she did use it of the "packet that took her across the sea"; and equally absurd to ask, "Who ever heard the Army and Navy Stores in London called the Army and Navy Shops?" What is called in America a Department Store is called in England not "a store", but "the Stores". Single stores are called shops. Finally, how can the quotation, "Any truck or cart, sledge, wagon, dray," endorse the use of "truck" for a "two-wheeled vehicle"?

I have not criticized the American use of any of the above words, but see no offense in calling them Americanisms. Mr. Tucker does seem to make an offense of calling any word or phrase whatever an Americanism, except when he admits it so to be, when it immediately becomes an offense to criticize it. I don't see how he can have it both ways, but he writes under a sense of injury. If I may adopt an expressive Americanism, we have got his goat. I am sorry for it, because there ought to be some way of straightening out these matters to our mutual satisfaction, and he has given us a good deal of help, though he would have given us a good deal more if he had tried to compose the quarrel instead of keeping it alive.

He is most interesting when he deals with words and expressions in common use in America, which are undoubtedly of old English origin but have dropped out of use in England. But

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even here he is out to make trouble. Nobody who knows the English Bible and Prayer Book is likely to deny that the American use of the word "sick" follows the old tradition, while the English use has departed from it. "I guess" is as old as Chaucer, and common in Shakespeare. "Gotten" is unassailable English, although none of Mr. Tucker's quotations seem to have any bearing upon the use of it which is common in America though archaic in England. Nevertheless I hold the authors of *The King's English* absolutely right in their contention that these are now to be classed as Americanisms. If an Englishman uses them he does so because he has adopted American usage. And why not? He would be paying a compliment to American speech which Mr. Tucker withholds.

I have noted a few other words that have died out in England but are in common use in America, upon which Mr. Tucker throws light. "Bug," for any sort of coleopterous insect, goes back to 1642. "Chore" is an old English dialect word; so is "stunt", if it is to be considered the same word as "stent", as it probably is. But we have cordially adopted "stunt" in England, with many other Americanisms, which Mr. Tucker objects to our calling so. "Some" for "somewhat" seems to be justified by "My well-beloved is some kinder than ordinary", of 1636. We have adopted that too, at least as slang. "Mad," for "angry", Mr. Tucker traces back to 1320, but gives no quotations. "Bully," for "excellent", was used in 1681; but in the quotation from *Punch*, of 1883, it is obviously intended for an Americanism. Mr. Tucker is not softened by any acceptance of American usage on the part of England.

It is quite true that we do not use "did not have" in England, and also that it is an unexceptionable form of the negative preterite. The American use of the word "have" might have been more largely treated. I have noted in an American book upon etiquette, "We want to have you dine with us," which would not be expressed thus in England. Perhaps Mr. Tucker is justified in some of the heat he engenders upon the phrase "did not have". He seems to have missed the point that the English alternative to "I did not have it" is not "I had it not", but "I hadn't got it", or I fear that his contempt would have been

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positively blistering. Certainly here the American locution is the better; but other uses of the word "have" seem to stand in need of defense.

Mr. Tucker hits one nail squarely on the head when he complains of English critics comparing the educated speech of England with any peculiarity of American speech that may be found anywhere. "If the talk of street loafers in American cities," he writes, "and the verbal peculiarities that one may find in outlying regions of Texas, are to be counted as characteristic of American speech, we must also take just as careful account, in striking the balance, of the lingo of the slums of London and Edinburgh and Cork, and of the jargon of the most unprogressive counties of the three Kingdoms." This is quite true, and if the average were struck between the whole of the United States and the whole of Great Britain and Ireland we should come out of the contest very badly.

In the matter of pronunciation there is a sort of central speech in England to which all educated speech tends to conform. It is not necessarily that, as Mr. Tucker believes or affects to believe, of "the higher strata of London society", which have passing fads and fashions of their own. It is to be heard more widely in London than elsewhere, but on the other hand a touch of Cockney, which is the London "dialect", is considered more of an offense against it than a touch of provincialism, while a touch of Scottish or Irish is without offense at all. I advance the opinion, with some trepidation, that American educated speech is tending towards this centralization. It seems to me that it is distinctly nearer to ours than when I last visited the United States over twenty years ago; and at the time of writing I have not yet visited Boston, where I am told the approximation is closest, and sometimes aimed at. I am referring here only to intonation and pronunciation, and even Mr. Tucker seems to agree that the English common speech is pleasanter sounding than the American. But the change is noticeable even in the use of words. I came over here quite prepared to say *elevator*, *store*, *depot* and *baggage*, whenever it was necessary, and generally do so; but *lift*, *shop*, *station*, and *luggage* seem to be in fairly common use, especially in the East, which they were not when I was last here.

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Possibly this marks a tendency, but I would lay no stress upon it. If there is one respect in which differences are unobjectionable on either side, and in which they are bound to continue, it is in the names of things. Apart from the fact that they may indicate slight differences in the things themselves, one will be usually found to be as good as the other, and the best way is to follow the custom of the country in which you may happen to be.

There are, however, one or two differences that tend to misunderstanding. I have only recently discovered—and that only through discussing a mistake in Mr. Mencken's book—that the English and American ways of beginning a letter are in direct opposition. Mr. Mencken says that in English usage, "'My dear' is more formal than simply 'Dear'." This is quite wrong. "My dear" is almost affectionate, and would never be used formally. But I am told that in American usage it is the more formal of the two. And Englishmen do not address complete strangers by name. Therefore, "My dear Mr. ——," which I suppose is purely formal in America, always strikes an Englishman thus addressed as somewhat effusive on the part of a stranger. On the other hand I imagine that an Englishman addressing an American friend as "My dear ——," wishing to express cordiality, must appear over-formal.

An Englishman of good standing does not allude to his wife, or an Englishwoman to her husband, as "Mrs. ——" or "Mr.——," except to inferiors. They would say "My wife," or "My husband," unless they used the Christian names. One allows, of course, for the difference of custom, when one knows of it, but the "Mr." and "Mrs." always bring with them a faint shock.

"How?" or "How's that?" for something to be repeated, always strike an English ear as discourteous. But this seems to be dying out among educated people. The almost universal "Yah", for "Yes", is a trick that may also be expected to die out of educated speech in time. It is at the least a roughness, frequently heard from people who are not rough, and its reminder of German speech does nothing to recommend it.

If all this indicates an attitude of British superiority, it is not so intended. The important thing is to get a common ground of agreement. This will not be done by Mr. Tucker's method

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of adopting the same air of superiority that has been found so irritating upon our side, though that system may provide good fighting material if nothing but a continued fight is wanted.

I would lay down as a broad statement that English conservatism is a valuable preservative of the written language, and that American energy and invention are always likely to outstrip ours in directing the current of speech. I do not think that Mr. Tucker has proved his point, "that the mother tongue suffers far less in this country than abroad from freakish changes of fashion, whether in regard to the vocabulary itself or the significance attached to hundreds of words." He has certainly not done so by his list of "Exotic Americanisms", so many of which are not Americanisms at all; and a further pursuit of the argument would probably show that what he would call freakish changes of fashion in England would be defended as signs of living growth if they had occurred in America. The English language has gained very largely, especially of late years, from American inventiveness; innumerable words and turns of speech have been welcomed and adopted in England from American sources. There is no prejudice against them any longer, when they are really expressive, and indeed it is hardly too much to say that America has already captured the position and is the recognized leader in whatever tends to invigorate and develop our common speech.

This is much to have gained, and it has been gained in spite of the protagonists. Speech that is really alive cannot be confined in the channels of tradition, nor can it be forced upon unwilling ears. It flows where it will, and novelties quickly become authoritative, if there is any need for them. But it is right that novelties should be examined upon their credentials. A vigorous counter-attack has not infrequently repulsed a new-comer which has shown signs of universal acceptance, but which has wilted away because it has been proved to lack the qualities that would have justified it. I believe that in this respect the best English and American traditions are one, and that we are doing no disservice to our common tongue in holding the fort, even though we may be driven now and again from some of our positions.

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