

THE
MOTHER
TONGUE

ENGLISH &

HOW IT GOT THAT WAY

B I L L B R Y S O N

W I L L I A M M O R R O W

A N D C O M P A N Y , I N C .

N E W Y O R K

1.

THE WORLD'S LANGUAGE

MORE THAN 300 MILLION PEOPLE IN the world speak English and the rest, it sometimes seems, try to. It would be charitable to say that the results are sometimes mixed.

Consider this hearty announcement in a Yugoslavian hotel: "The flattening of underwear with pleasure is the job of the chambermaid. Turn to her straightaway." Or this warning to motorists in Tokyo: "When a passenger of the foot heave in sight, tootle the horn. Trumpet at him melodiously at first, but if he still obstacles your passage, then tootle him with vigor." Or these instructions gracing a packet of convenience food from Italy: "Besmear a backing pan, previously buttered with a good tomato sauce, and, after, dispose the cannelloni, lightly distanced between them in a only couch."

Clearly the writer of *that* message was not about to let a little ignorance of English stand in the way of a good meal. In fact, it would appear that one of the beauties of the English language is that with even the most tenuous grasp you can speak volumes if you show enough enthusiasm—a willingness to tootle with vigor, as it were.

To be fair, English is full of booby traps for the unwary foreigner. Any language where the unassuming word *fly* signifies an annoying insect, a means of travel, and a critical part of a gentleman's apparel is clearly asking to be mangled. Imagine being a foreigner and having to learn that in English one tells *a* lie but *the* truth, that a person who says "I could care less" means the same thing as someone who says "I couldn't care less," that a sign in a store saying ALL ITEMS NOT ON SALE doesn't mean literally what it says (that every

item is *not* on sale) but rather that only some of the items are on sale, that when a person says to you, "How do you do?" he will be taken aback if you reply, with impeccable logic, "How do I do what?"

The complexities of the English language are such that even native speakers cannot always communicate effectively, as almost every American learns on his first day in Britain. Indeed, Robert Burchfield, editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, created a stir in linguistic circles on both sides of the Atlantic when he announced his belief that American English and English English are drifting apart so rapidly that within 200 years the two nations won't be able to understand each other at all.

That may be. But if the Briton and American of the twenty-second century baffle each other, it seems altogether likely that they won't confuse many others—not, at least, if the rest of the world continues expropriating words and phrases at its present rate. Already Germans talk about *ein Image Problem* and *das Cash-Flow*, Italians program their computers with *il software*, French motorists going away for a *weekend break* pause for *les refueling stops*, Poles watch *telewizja*, Spaniards have a *flirt*, Austrians eat *Big Mäcs*, and the Japanese go on a *pikunikku*. For better or worse, English has become the most global of languages, the lingua franca of business, science, education, politics, and pop music. For the airlines of 157 nations (out of 168 in the world), it is the agreed international language of discourse. In India, there are more than 3,000 newspapers in English. The six member nations of the European Free Trade Association conduct all their business in English, even though not one of them is an English-speaking country. When companies from four European countries—France, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland—formed a joint truck-making venture called Iveco in 1977, they chose English as their working language because, as one of the founders wryly observed, "It puts us all at an equal disadvantage." For the same reasons, when the Swiss company Brown Boveri and the Swedish company ASEA merged in 1988, they decided to make the official company language English, and when Volkswagen set up a factory in Shanghai it found that there were too few Germans who spoke Chinese and too few Chi-

nese who spoke German, so now Volkswagen's German engineers and Chinese managers communicate in a language that is alien to both of them, English. Belgium has two languages, French and Flemish, yet on a recent visit to the country's main airport in Brussels, I counted more than fifty posters and billboards and not one of them was in French or Flemish. They were all in English.

For non-English speakers everywhere, English has become the common tongue. Even in France, the most determinedly non-English-speaking nation in the world, the war against English encroachment has largely been lost. In early 1989, the Pasteur Institute announced that henceforth it would publish its famed international medical review only in English because too few people were reading it in French.

English is, in short, one of the world's great growth industries. "English is just as much big business as the export of manufactured goods," Professor Randolph Quirk of Oxford University has written. "There are problems with what you might call 'after-sales service'; and 'delivery' can be awkward; but at any rate the production lines are trouble free." [*The Observer*, October 26, 1980] Indeed, such is the demand to learn the language that there are now more students of English in China than there are people in the United States.

It is often said that what most immediately sets English apart from other languages is the richness of its vocabulary. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* lists 450,000 words, and the revised *Oxford English Dictionary* has 615,000, but that is only part of the total. Technical and scientific terms would add millions more. Altogether, about 200,000 English words are in common use, more than in German (184,000) and far more than in French (a mere 100,000). The richness of the English vocabulary, and the wealth of available synonyms, means that English speakers can often draw shades of distinction unavailable to non-English speakers. The French, for instance, cannot distinguish between house and home, between mind and brain, between man and gentleman, between "I wrote" and "I have written." The Spanish cannot differentiate a chairman from a president, and the Italians have no equivalent of wishful thinking. In Russia there are no native words

for efficiency, challenge, engagement ring, have fun, or take care [all cited in *The New York Times*, June 18, 1989]. English, as Charlton Laird has noted, is the only language that has, or needs, books of synonyms like *Roget's Thesaurus*. "Most speakers of other languages are not aware that such books exist." [*The Miracle of Language*, page 54]

On the other hand, other languages have facilities we lack. Both French and German can distinguish between knowledge that results from recognition (respectively *connaître* and *kennen*) and knowledge that results from understanding (*savoir* and *wissen*). Portuguese has words that differentiate between an interior angle and an exterior one. All the Romance languages can distinguish between something that leaks into and something that leaks out of. The Italians even have a word for the mark left on a table by a moist glass (*culacino*) while the Gaelic speakers of Scotland, not to be outdone, have a word for the itchiness that overcomes the upper lip just before taking a sip of whiskey. (Wouldn't they just?) It's *sgriob*. And we have nothing in English to match the Danish *hygge* (meaning "instantly satisfying and cozy"), the French *sang-froid*, the Russian *glasnost*, or the Spanish *macho*, so we must borrow the term from them or do without the sentiment.

At the same time, some languages have words that we may be pleased to do without. The existence in German of a word like *schadenfreude* (taking delight in the misfortune of others) perhaps tells us as much about Teutonic sensitivity as it does about their neologistic versatility. Much the same could be said about the curious and monumentally unpronounceable Highland Scottish word *sgiomlaireachd*, which means "the habit of dropping in at mealtimes." That surely conveys a world of information about the hazards of Highland life—not to mention the hazards of Highland orthography.

Of course, every language has areas in which it needs, for practical purposes, to be more expressive than others. The Eskimos, as is well known, have fifty words for types of snow—though curiously no word for just plain snow. To them there is crunchy snow, soft snow, fresh snow, and old snow, but no word that just means snow. The Italians, as we might expect, have over 500 names for different

types of macaroni. Some of these, when translated, begin to sound distinctly unappetizing, like strozzapreti, which means "strangled priests." Vermicelli means "little worms" and even spaghetti means "little strings." When you learn that muscatel in Italian means "wine with flies in it," you may conclude that the Italians are gastronomically out to lunch, so to speak, but really their names for foodstuffs are no more disgusting than our hot dogs or those old English favorites, toad-in-the-hole, spotted dick, and faggots in gravy.

The residents of the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea have a hundred words for yams, while the Maoris of New Zealand have thirty-five words for dung (don't ask me why). Meanwhile, the Arabs are said (a little unbelievably, perhaps) to have 6,000 words for camels and camel equipment. The aborigines of Tasmania have a word for every type of tree, but no word that just means "tree," while the Araucanian Indians of Chile rather more poignantly have a variety of words to distinguish between different degrees of hunger. Even among speakers of the same language, regional and national differences abound. A Londoner has a less comprehensive view of extremes of weather than someone from the Middle West of America. What a Briton calls a blizzard would, in Illinois or Nebraska, be a flurry, and a British heat wave is often a thing of merriment to much of the rest of the world. (I still treasure a London newspaper with the banner headline: BRITAIN SIZZLES IN THE SEVENTIES!)

A second commonly cited factor in setting English apart from other languages is its flexibility. This is particularly true of word ordering, where English speakers can roam with considerable freedom between passive and active senses. Not only can we say "I kicked the dog," but also "The dog was kicked by me"—a construction that would be impossible in many other languages. Similarly, where the Germans can say just "ich singe" and the French must manage with "je chante," we can say "I sing," "I do sing," or "I am singing." English also has a distinctive capacity to extract maximum work from a word by making it do double duty as both noun and verb. The list of such versatile words is practically endless: *drink, fight, fire, sleep, run, fund, look, act, view, ape, si-*

lence, worship, copy, blame, comfort, bend, cut, reach, like, dislike, and so on. Other languages sometimes show inspired flashes of versatility, as with the German *auf*, which can mean “on,” “in,” “upon,” “at,” “toward,” “for,” “to,” and “upward,” but these are relative rarities.

At the same time, the endless versatility of English is what makes our rules of grammar so perplexing. Few English-speaking natives, however well educated, can confidently elucidate the difference between, say, a complement and a predicate or distinguish a full infinitive from a bare one. The reason for this is that the rules of English grammar were originally modeled on those of Latin, which in the seventeenth century was considered the purest and most admirable of tongues. That it may be. But it is also quite clearly another language altogether. Imposing Latin rules on English structure is a little like trying to play baseball in ice skates. The two simply don't match. In the sentence “I am swimming,” swimming is a present participle. But in the sentence “Swimming is good for you,” it is a gerund—even though it means exactly the same thing.

A third—and more contentious—supposed advantage of English is the relative simplicity of its spelling and pronunciation. For all its idiosyncrasies, English is said to have fewer of the awkward consonant clusters and singsong tonal variations that make other languages so difficult to master. In Cantonese, *hae* means “yes.” But, with a fractional change of pitch, it also describes the female pudenda. The resulting scope for confusion can be safely left to the imagination. In other languages it is the orthography, or spelling, that leads to bewilderment. In Welsh, the word for beer is *cwrw*—an impossible combination of letters for any English speaker. But Welsh spellings are as nothing compared with Irish Gaelic, a language in which spelling and pronunciation give the impression of having been devised by separate committees, meeting in separate rooms, while implacably divided over some deep semantic issue. Try pronouncing *geimhreadh*, Gaelic for “winter,” and you will probably come up with something like “gem-reed-uh.” It is in fact “gyeeryee.” *Beaudhchais* (“thank you”) is “bekkas” and *Ó Séaghda*

("Oh-seeg-da?") is simply "O'Shea." Against this, the Welsh pronunciation of *cwrw*—"koo-roo"—begins to look positively self-evident.

In all languages pronunciation is of course largely a matter of familiarity mingled with prejudice. The average English speaker confronted with agglomerations of letters like *tchst*, *sthm*, and *tchph* would naturally conclude that they were pretty well unpronounceable. Yet we use them every day in the words *matchstick*, *asthma*, and *catchphrase*. Here, as in almost every other area of language, natural bias plays an inescapable part in any attempt at evaluation. No one has ever said, "Yes, my language is backward and unexpressive, and could really do with some sharpening up." We tend to regard other people's languages as we regard their cultures—with ill-hidden disdain. In Japanese, the word for foreigner means "stinking of foreign hair." To the Czechs a Hungarian is "a pimple." Germans call cockroaches "Frenchmen," while the French call lice "Spaniards." We in the English-speaking world take French leave, but Italians and Norwegians talk about departing like an Englishman, and Germans talk of running like a Dutchman. Italians call syphilis "the French disease," while both French and Italians call con games "American swindle." Belgian taxi drivers call a poor tipper "un Anglais." To be bored to death in French is "être de Birmingham," literally "to be from Birmingham" (which is actually about right). And in English we have "Dutch courage," "French letters," "Spanish fly," "Mexican carwash" (i.e., leaving your car out in the rain), and many others. Late in the last century these epithets focused on the Irish, and often, it must be said, they were as witty as they were wounding. An Irish buggy was a wheelbarrow. An Irish beauty was a woman with two black eyes. Irish confetti was bricks. An Irish promotion was a demotion. Now almost the only slur against these fine people is to get one's Irish up, and that isn't really taken as an insult.

So objective evidence, even among the authorities, is not always easy to come by. Most books on English imply in one way or another that our language is superior to all others. In *The English Language*, Robert Burchfield writes: "As a source of intellectual

power and entertainment the whole range of prose writing in English is probably unequalled anywhere else in the world." I would like to think he's right, but I can't help wondering if Mr. Burchfield would have made the same generous assertion had he been born Russian or German or Chinese. There is no reliable way of measuring the quality or efficiency of any language. Yet there are one or two small ways in which English has a demonstrable edge over other languages. For one thing its pronouns are largely, and mercifully, uninflected. In German, if you wish to say *you*, you must choose between seven words: *du*, *dich*, *dir*, *Sie*, *Ihnen*, *ihr*, and *euch*. This can cause immense social anxiety. The composer Richard Strauss and his librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, were partners for twenty-five years and apparently adored each other and yet never quite found the nerve to address each other as anything but the stiff "Sie." In English we avoid these problems by relying on just one form: *you*.

In other languages, questions of familiarity can become even more agonizing. A Korean has to choose between one of six verb suffixes to accord with the status of the person addressed. A speaker of Japanese must equally wend his way through a series of linguistic levels appropriate to the social position of the participants. When he says thank you he must choose between a range of meanings running from the perfunctory *arigato* ("thanks") to the decidedly more humble *makotoni go shinsetsu de gozaimasu*, which means "what you have done or proposed to do is a truly and genuinely kind and generous deed." Above all, English is mercifully free of gender. Anyone who spent much of his or her adolescence miserably trying to remember whether it is "la plume" or "le plume" will appreciate just what a pointless burden masculine and feminine nouns are to any language. In this regard English is a godsend to students everywhere. Not only have we discarded problems of gender with definite and indefinite articles, we have often discarded the articles themselves. We say in English, "It's time to go to bed," where in most other European languages they must say, "It's *the* time to go to *the* bed." We possess countless examples of pithy phrases—"life is short,"

“between heaven and earth,” “to go to work”—which in other languages require articles.

English also has a commendable tendency toward conciseness, in contrast to many languages. German is full of jaw-crunching words like *Wirtschaftstreuhandgesellschaft* (business trust company), *Bundesbahnangestelltenwitwe* (a widow of a federal railway employee), and *Kriegsgefangenanentschädigungsgesetz* (a law pertaining to war reparations), while in Holland companies commonly have names of forty letters or more, such as Douwe Egberts Koninklijke Tabaksfabriek-Koffiebranderijen-Theehandel Naamloze Vennootschap (literally Douwe Egberts Royal Tobacco Factory-Coffee Roasters-Tea Traders Incorporated; they must use fold-out business cards). English, in happy contrast, favors crisp truncations: IBM, laser, NATO. Against this, however, there is an occasional tendency in English, particularly in academic and political circles, to resort to waffle and jargon. At a conference of sociologists in America in 1977, love was defined as “the cognitive-affective state characterized by intrusive and obsessive fantasizing concerning reciprocity of amorous feelings by the object of the amoration.” That is jargon—the practice of never calling a spade a spade when you might instead call it a manual earth-restructuring implement—and it is one of the great curses of modern English.

But perhaps the single most notable characteristic of English—for better *and* worse—is its deceptive complexity. Nothing in English is ever quite what it seems. Take the simple word *what*. We use it every day—indeed, every few sentences. But imagine trying to explain to a foreigner what *what* means. It takes the *Oxford English Dictionary* five pages and almost 15,000 words to manage the task. As native speakers, we seldom stop to think just how complicated and illogical English is. Every day we use countless words and expressions without thinking about them—often without having the faintest idea what they really describe or signify. What, for instance, is the *hem* in hem and haw, the *shrift* in short shrift, the *fell* in one fell swoop? When you are overwhelmed, where is the whelm that you are over, and what exactly does it look like? And why, come to that, can we be overwhelmed or under-

whelmed, but not semiwhelmed or—if our feelings are less pronounced—just whelmed? Why do we say *colonel* as if it had an *r* in it? Why do we spell *four* with a *u* and *forty* without?

Answering these and other such questions is the main purpose of this book. But we start with perhaps the most enduring and mysterious question of all: Where does language come from in the first place?