

ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

A LECTURE, DELIVERED BEFORE THE MEMBERS OF THE
AYLESBURY MECHANICS' INSTITUTE, ON TUESDAY,
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THE ARCHDEACON spoke nearly as follows:—

I respond with pleasure to the request made to me by the Committee of your Institution, that I should give a lecture on such subject as I might think best calculated to instruct and interest you. I thought that the English Language, our mother tongue, would not be an inappropriate subject on which to address a Mechanics' Institute. But since I selected my theme, I confess I have been at times inclined, if not to bewail my folly, at least to wonder at my presumption, in supposing that I could, in the compass of a popular lecture of this kind, present you with anything like an adequate survey of so wide and complicated a subject. Let me first, therefore, claim your kind indulgence for the remarks I am about to make; in the next place, let me ask you to remember that what I am going to say will be rather in the way of what is elementary and suggestive, than in the hope that I shall within the space of an hour, or an hour and a quarter, be able to satisfy your desires or your expectations. That is my object this evening, and if you will kindly bear with me, I will endeavour that what I may say shall be clearly put before you.

What is Language? That is the first question which we touch in approaching a subject of this kind. Is Language a production of nature, or is it due to the art of man, or is it a Divine gift? There are those in the present day who have revived the old and (as I had supposed) exploded theory, that man is only the higher development of mere animal life. Those, of course, who take that view of the origin of man, take a view of the origin of language in accordance with it; and I suppose that, according to their theory, language may be considered as originating in rude inarticulate sounds and the imitation of natural cries, or something of that kind; and that, by degrees, as man developed to a higher condition, language took a higher form, and that thus it was the combined result of a natural power and of human skill.

I may say at the outset that I have no sympathy with views of that kind. I take my stand on what I believe to have been the acknowledgment of the greatest and wisest of men—I speak not merely of Christian men, as St. Basil and St. Augustine, but of the greatest philosophers of all ages, Plato for example—who maintain that language was given by a Supernatural Power; that language is the gift of Him who granted reason to man, and who in giving him reason gave him the power to express his ideas by articulate sounds. I do not mean that man was furnished at once with the power of expressing himself fully and accurately on every subject; but I imagine that there was a Divine power imparted to man, and that man gradually evolved a language by using that Divine gift which the Creator imparted to him. I am sustained in this view by the intimation in Holy Scripture, that the Almighty Himself first gave names to certain objects in nature, and that after Adam was created, the Divine gift was evoked, and animals were brought to our forefather to see what he would call them.* I may remark that this is the grand distinction between man and the brute creation; that man is able to abstract, the brute cannot. The brute is certainly capable of reasoning to a limited extent, and I do not think that the ordinary distinction, that man has reason, and the brute only instinct, is quite sufficient. Both instinct and reason are shared in part by man and by the brute creation, and I do not think it possible by any metaphysical analysis to separate entirely between these two. There can be no doubt that man possesses instinct; why, else, do we speak of “the common instincts of humanity?” In the same way, the brute has a certain power of reason. I appeal to any one who has a favourite dog, whether that animal is not capable of a great deal of reasoning and very strong affection? And who that has ever been mounted on a high-bred horse, can doubt that the brute has also to a great extent the power of enjoying life? What, then, is the distinction between man and the brute? Man has language; the brute has no power whatever of abstraction, and no power of expressing what he feels excepting by inarticulate sounds. Language is thus the great barrier between man and the brute. And

* Gen. ii. 19.

so we come back to what I said before, that the Creator having imparted to man the gift of reason, has also given him the power of abstraction, and of expressing his ideas by means of articulate sounds. If the other view were true, how is it that we never find a race of men who cannot talk at all? I have read, as no doubt some of you have, in the remarkable work of Professor Max Müller, on "The Science of Language," the extreme indignation he expresses on finding in an American publication, no doubt to suit party purposes, a profile of the ape and the negro, in which the negro is made to appear a great deal more irrational than the ape. Let us be thankful that all our greatest philosophers are agreed as to this great fact of man being essentially distinct from the irrational creation, through his possession of the gift of language; and that they are agreed too, as to what I think is a most vital matter, the unity of the human race. I think these are matters of very great importance in the present day, when it is so necessary that we should have clear and rational views on such subjects, and should not be ashamed to express our opinions, in the full confidence that, if those opinions are wrong, they will be answered and refuted.

We come then to this fact—here is a race of beings brought into the world gifted by the Almighty with reason, and as a consequence of the gift of reason, with the power of expressing their ideas by means of articulate speech. As to language itself we find, that although there are very many languages—it is estimated that there are something like 900 known languages in the world—they are capable of being classified and grouped together in different families. It has been found by those who have studied the science of language—for, of course, viewing language in the light I have explained, I agree with those who treat it as a science—that all these hundreds of languages admit of being so grouped in families, by observing certain similarities, that tracing them upwards to their origin, we find there was a time when, in strict accordance with the statement of Holy Scripture, "the whole earth was of one language and one speech."* Languages have been classified in three great divisions, the Aryan, or Indo-European, the Semitic, and the Tura-

* Gen. xi. 1.

nian. I may dismiss the two latter very briefly. The Turanian languages are those spoken by the nomad tribes in the East and North of Asia; the Semitic family comprises the Hebrew, the Arabic, and the Syriac. The Aryan or Indo-European is a very wide group, including the ancient language of India, the Sanskrit, the Medo-Persic, the Celtic, the Greco-Latin family, the Teutonic, and the Slavonic. To this Indo-European group the English language is to be referred. You will ask, on what principle is it referred to this, rather than any other group? I cannot go fully into that question; I will only say that languages are grouped into families, not according to the sounds of particular words, but according to their grammatical construction. It is the grammar of a language which determines to which group it is to be referred. And on this principle, the particular branch of the Indo-European family to which the English language may be referred is the Teutonic.

But before we go farther into the question of the origin of the English language, I must remind you briefly of some facts in the history of our country, in order that we may see how that history has affected the progress of the language. The first known inhabitants of this island were a Celtic tribe, who came from the far East; and by the way, it is remarkable that the families of man seem, for the most part, to have travelled from East to West. The Celts were found in the island by Julius Cæsar when he visited us about 55 B.C. The Romans, after having been vigorously resisted by the aborigines, succeeded in conquering the island, and they retained possession until about A.D. 405.* After a short interval came the great Anglo-Saxon invasion, A.D. 450, and from that time to the Norman Conquest, A.D. 1066, the Saxons were rulers in this country; though from about A.D. 787 till the Norman Conquest the Danes had very great power. The Norman Conquest, we may say, was the last event which materially affected the spoken language of this country. You will observe, then, what elements have combined to form this English language of ours. First, there is the old Celtic, from which we gain many words in common use. I dare say I have used

* The last Roman legions left the island A.D. 409.

some Celtic words since I came into this room. I might mention *cart*, *basket*, *muggy* (which we all understand as applied to the weather), *billhook*, *mattock*, *flannel*, *cock-boat* (the *boat* being added afterwards, by way of distinction, when other objects came to be called by the same name), *flipp*, *gruel*, and many others, as Celtic words. A very interesting circumstance is this, that many of the names of natural objects are Celtic. We have the river *Ousel*, which divides Buckinghamshire from Bedfordshire, and the *Ouse*. Now, *Ouse* (*uisge*) is the old Celtic for water.* Thus, again, Exeter is simply the "city on the water."† Again, we have the old Celtic word *Tam*, or *Thame* (broad); and any one who has seen Lower Winchenden valley after a heavy flood, when it has received the various tributaries of that great watershed of Bucks, and observed the wide expanse of water, will see why it is called pre-eminently the *Thame*, or *broad water*. Where it joins the *Isis*, at *Dorchester*, it becomes the *Tam-esis*, or *Broad Isis*. We know that we stand on a safe foundation in studying the etymology of names of natural objects, because these, by the very nature of the case, are less liable to change.

So much for the influence of the Celtic, which has left its mark upon our language for some 2000 years.

What, in the next place, does our language derive from the Roman occupation of this country? Not much; though quite sufficient to show that there was a time when the Romans were masters of the island. The names of a great many places have the affix *castra* or *chester*, meaning a camp—such as *Colchester*, *Leicester*, *Cirencester*. Then, wherever we meet with the prefix *Pon*, as in *Pontefract*, we have a Roman derivation; and wherever, in a proper name, you have *Street*, that is from the old Roman *Strata*. So *Lincoln* from *colonia*, and *Bridport* from *porta*.

But the most important period for the history of our language is the Anglo-Saxon invasion. Nothing shows more the immense power of this race, than the fact that they not only conquered the island, but actually planted their language in this country. Generally speaking, when a body of people invade a country, their language becomes assimilated to the language of the

* *Usca* in Latin; *oise* in French. *Isis* has evidently the same origin.

† Exeter; *Caer-wisc*.

people to whom they come. But in this case the Celtic was thrust out, and the Anglo-Saxon language was firmly planted in its place. From that day to the present the Anglo-Saxon has been the staple of the English language. When I speak of the staple, I do not allude to the number of words ; I mean the grammar. The grammar of the English language is essentially Saxon. The joints, articulations, and inflections, all, in fact, that gives a distinctive character to the language, are Anglo-Saxon. From that time, amidst all the importations that have come to our language from the four quarters of the world, the Anglo-Saxon has held its own. I think I may venture to say that we are much indebted for this to one of the best of men and greatest of our kings—Alfred the Great. He was, as you know, very fond of literature, and a very good Latin scholar. I am inclined to think that we owe much to Alfred for the consolidation of our English language.

But we must look for a moment at the effect which the Danish invasion had on our language. From A.D 787 to 1066, this country was the scene of constant conflicts between the Saxons and the Danes. Alfred, you remember, was obliged for some time to remain in retirement, and at length recovered his power after gaining a victory over the Danish chief Guthrun. After a long and arduous struggle, a Danish dynasty was established, though its continuance was brief. I may mention that the Danish settlements in this country were chiefly to the North and East of the great Watling Street, the Roman road which runs from Dover to London, and so across the country to Chester. We might expect, therefore, to find here Danish names, and it is precisely so. On the borders of the Watling Street, we begin to find Danish terminations—Ivinghoe, Totternhoe, Farthinghoe ; *hoe* being the Danish for hill. Again, in the Midland counties, you will find the termination *by* to the names of many towns—Whitby, Rugby, Naseby ; *bye* being the Danish word for a village or town. I may observe that this is the origin of the phrase *bye-laws*—laws for a district or town. Our friend, *Mr. Thorp*, whom I see amongst us, may not be aware that his name is simply a Danish word for village. Proper names ending in *son*, *Thomson*, *Johnson*, *Jackson*, are Danish ; and it is remarkable that in Iceland,

a Scandinavian settlement, *Johnson* is one of the most familiar names.

We come at last to the Norman invasion, which, of course, was a great crisis in the history of our country, both in a political and religious point of view. This event affected our language materially. It was the means of introducing many words of Norman origin, but it did not alter the structure of the language. Although the land was in the possession of Normans, and French was the language spoken at Court for 200 years, and though foreign ecclesiastics brought over from France spoke in that language, still they could not alter the structure of the Anglo-Saxon language. It absorbed a great deal of the Norman language into its system, but continued to walk on its own sturdy joints and limbs. You may recollect in Archbishop Trench's excellent work on "Words," what is also mentioned by Sir Walter Scott, in "Ivanhoe," how Wamba, the jester, complains that while the names of living animals are Saxon (as *bull, cow, ox, sheep, hog*), the moment the meat is cooked it becomes Norman (*beef, mutton, pork*); and the only remaining Saxon word as applied to cooked meat is that on which the poor labourer chiefly subsisted, namely, *bacon*. So also the names of dignities (*duke, viscount, etc.*) are Norman, always excepting the good old Saxon word *King* (*Conyng, conning*). So also, such words as *sceptre, mansion, hall, palace*, are Norman, while names applied to persons or things of inferior condition are Saxon. But again, it is interesting to remember that if the Norman gives us *palace, mansion, etc.*, the words *hearth, home, house, husband, wife, father, mother*, are Saxon. The wife who stays at home to attend to her duties is the one who *weaves*; the husband is the *band* of the *house*. We may say, generally, that words which relate to home and the relations of simple domestic life are essentially Saxon.

It is remarkable how changes in the habits of the people have influenced our language. We are accustomed to look upon language as a fixed thing, but really there is nothing more unstable than language. Where there is no literature to fix it, it changes with great rapidity. There is an account of some gentlemen who went to Central America and tried to make a dictionary of one of the languages they found there. They returned ten years afterwards,

but found their dictionary all but useless, the language had so materially changed. Although our language is not subject to such a rapid change as that, yet changes are perpetually going on. Changes in habits and customs have a material influence on language. In times when the chief weapon in use was the *bow*, there must have been a number of artificers employed in making bows and arrows. Other weapons of war have now come into use; but the old custom still lingers in our language. If there is in this room a Mr. *Archer*, a Mr. *Bowyer*, a Mr. *Fletcher*, they will see that their names preserve a tradition of our national history; and if we had not that history before us, we should know that there was a time when the manufacture of bows and arrows must have been a very important trade. See, again, how many new words have come to us by railway. What did our ancestors know about *points*, *sleepers*, *shunting*? As I wish this lecture to be of general interest, I would venture to refer to a work to which I am indebted for much of the information I have laid before you to-night, namely, "Richardson's Dictionary." To show how completely the Anglo-Saxon is the very staple of our language, I would only ask any person to make the attempt to construct a sentence, or a few sentences, by the use of Latin words only. You will break down directly. But attempt the same thing with Saxon words, and you cannot possibly fail. I may mention one example, familiar to us all. The Lord's Prayer contains sixty words, of which only five are Latin, the rest Saxon. Some are very striking. *Father*, we have already seen, is Saxon. *Heaven* is that which is heaved or lifted up. *Earth* is a very old word—that which is "eared" or ploughed. It occurs in our authorized version of the Bible. In Joseph's time there was "neither *earing* nor harvest." Some might think that this refers simply to the corn coming into the ear, but in fact it means "neither ploughing nor reaping." *Kingdom* I have mentioned before. Those who have analyzed the Bible carefully, say that the proportion of Saxon words is ninety-seven per cent., while in Gibbon's "Decline and Fall" it is fifty-seven per cent. only. I may mention to the credit of our great living poet, Alfred Tennyson, that in his poem, "The Lotos Eaters," the proportion of Saxon words is eighty-seven per cent.; and I suppose it is mainly

to the skilful use of the short, terse, expressive Saxon that he owes that graphic power of description which is so remarkable in his writings.

There are two circumstances in our history, since the Norman Conquest, which have materially affected our English language. The first is the remarkable series of wars carried on by Edward III., in the fourteenth century, against France. Although afterwards he experienced reverses, yet at one time his conquests were considerable. Supposing that his victories had remained, it is possible that the Anglo-Saxon might have been absorbed into the Norman. As it turned out, these events grafted new stems on the Anglo-Saxon trunk, and tended to consolidate the language. The other event which exercised a great influence on the growth of the English language, (I speak of it, of course, only in a moral and political sense) was the Reformation. It is to the Reformation that we owe a boon which we cannot prize too highly, and which, I trust, we shall hand down unimpaired to future generations—our grand old English Bible, which, although revised in 1611, was really a revision of Tyndal's original Bible. Therefore, the book which we prize so much, and which has exercised so great an influence on our language, has been in our possession, almost in its present form, for between 300 and 400 years. Now let us consider for a moment how that circumstance has affected our language. A dead language (as we call it) is a language which is no longer spoken; there it lies, contained in some few books, unchanged from generation to generation. But a living, spoken language is constantly changing. Now, what is it that can arrest, can stop this incessant change in a language? Why, you must fix the language, stereotype it in some book, which shall be destined to have a great and permanent influence. That is a literary interference with the progress of a language, and everything depends on the precise time when such interference takes place. Now, in our case, the period of the Reformation was just the period when it was desirable to arrest our language, to fix it (so to speak) in amber. Had it been a little later, we should have been deluged with Latin words; had it come a little earlier, the Saxon language would hardly have reached its maturity. It is a most remarkable thing, that the time when the Reformation took place was the

very time when our language might be said to be in its greatest purity and perfection. And let us just observe the result. The Bible contains from 5000 to 6000 words, and, notwithstanding the shifting character of all language, not more than 300 or 400 of these words have become obsolete. The Authorized Version still represents and embodies the spoken language of our country, and has helped, in a great degree, to preserve to us the purity of our language.

I must now approach a subject on which I feel some delicacy; but it concerns us all to endeavour to guard the purity of our language. Now, a living language is always liable to deterioration; and our own language has suffered something from our intercourse with America, and has received several words from thence which ought to be driven off the stage as soon as possible. I do not see why a person should be always "guessing," or why he should "expect" something that has already passed. There is another Americanism which is very common,—to talk about people "progressing,"—but for this there is the high authority of Shakspeare:—

"Let me wipe off the honourable dew,
That silverly doth *progress* down thy cheek."*

So that we must acquit Jonathan of any great impropriety here. I think, too, that when an American talks of the poker being "het," he must be admitted to be only reviving an old form of the præterite. In the north of England we sometimes hear "singen" for "sing,"—a good old Saxon plural, the loss of which has left us without any distinction between the singular "I sing" and the plural "we" or "they sing." There is another form of plural in *e*, which you will find in the prologue to Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales:"—

"And smalle foules maken melodie
That sleepe alle night with open eye,"

which shows how much we lose by not being able to express the adjective plural. I may mention also the word luncheon, which is properly *noon-shun* or *nuncion*, but which has been confused with another word, "lunch," a piece, or lump, and the two notions have been mixed up with one another.

I need hardly stay to condemn instances of false

* *King John*, act v., s. 2.

grammar, or the use of high-sounding expressions, so common in inferior publications; still less the sins of omission and commission with regard to the ill-used letter "h." Nothing but downright laziness or utter want of capacity can account for the ill-treatment to which this unfortunate letter is constantly subject; and we who speak of the purity of our language ought, I think, to visit such a practice with a very severe rebuke.

I have noted down a few derivations of words connected with this particular neighbourhood. "Aylesbury" puzzled me for a long time, but at last, by the help of some friends, I was led to what I believe to be the true derivation—*Ecclesbury*, or *Æglesbury*, or *Church-bury*.* No doubt a fine church has existed on this high point for many ages past, which gave its name to the town. In the same way we get "Beccles"; *i.e.*, *Beau Eccles*. Again, there is "Wendover"; if any one will look at the country, he will find a remarkable dip in the Chilterns; and Wendover, as affording the easiest transit over the hills, is rightly named *Wend-over*. So also Puttenham comes from the old Saxon word *Putta*, a pond.

I should like, before I conclude, to add something with regard to the morality of words. Words have a striking relation to morality, in this way. It is a lamentable circumstance that words which originally had a thoroughly good meaning have degenerated, and come to possess a bad meaning. There is *knave*, for example, meaning originally nothing but a servant lad. I fear that the change to its present signification indicates that the condition of servant lads generally was not very good. *Villain*, again, means simply one who lives in the country; and *miscreant* which now is applied to a very bad doer indeed, was originally a mis-believer, showing that mis-belief is very apt to lead on to bad practice. *Libertine*, again, meant originally a "free-thinker"; but the meaning now attached to it is that of a person who has proceeded from a bad creed to loose living. *Saunterer*, again, comes from *sainte terre*—the Holy Land—to which at one period all pious eyes were turned. But in process of time, instead of a religious exercise, pilgrimage became a mere excuse for loitering, and so the word came to mean a mere idler.

* The foundations of the old Saxon Church have recently been discovered, in excavating a crypt under the Lady Chapel.—E. B.

Moody, again, should refer to all the moods of our mind, and not, as now, to our evil moods only. A *crafty* man is simply a person skilled in a craft, and I think I see signs that this word is coming back to its right use again. We ought to be ready to welcome words which have strayed from their proper use when they come back penitent, and ask to serve us in their right sense. *Maudlin*, as you may know, comes from the *Magdalen*; showing, in its present use, that there are such things as "crocodile tears" and a false sentimentality. *Tawdry* is said to owe its origin to a fair in honour of *St. Ethelred*. The lace sold at that fair got the name of "tawdry lace," and as the lace sold at fairs is not always the best, it came to have its present signification. *Tinsel* is used by Milton, in his *Comus*,* in the sense of sparkling and shining; but as it is "not all gold that glitters," it came to have its present depraved meaning. (The Archdeacon here read an extract from Tennyson's "Dream of Fair Women," illustrating the remarkable power and pathos which results from the use of Saxon words.)

I have now only to conclude this imperfect sketch of the English language. If I have succeeded in any degree in arousing the sympathy and interest of any one on this subject, my labour will be amply repaid. I, for my part, feel deeply indebted to the good providence of God for the possession of a language of so much beauty and power in which to express my thoughts; and I rejoice that it prevails over so wide a space. It is spoken from the equator to the poles. Men converse in it till the East again meets the West. Wherever commerce spreads, wherever human life exists in its greatest intensity, there the English language is found. It is a mighty and glorious instrument of human thought. Other languages have their beauties. The French is famous for its conversational elegance; the German for its massiveness and solidity; the Italian for its florid diction. But the English is a combination of excellences. It has gathered to itself the choicest fruits of other languages and assimilated them, while yet retaining its own articulations. It changes,

* "By Thetis' *tinsel-slippered* feet."—*Comus*, l. 877. This is a paraphrase of ἀργυρόπεζα, or *silver-footed*, the usual epithet for Thetis in Homer.—E. B.

indeed, but imperceptibly. It changes, and yet it holds its own, by the prescription of 1400 years. And, under the wholesome restraints of a Shakspeare, a Milton, and an Authorized Version of the Holy Bible, we may hope it will long continue the vehicle of thought for our race, and be a spoken language even till the great consummation, when the many tongues of earth shall once more blend together in one universal language, rising upwards in praise and adoration to our common Father for evermore.
