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MacMillan, Ronald George

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ENGLISH ACADEMY

Falling Standards in English at Schools and Universities

by R. G. MACMILLAN

DETERIORATION in the use of the English language is a world-wide problem. It is necessary then to attempt some analysis of those aspects which are more general and those which are more peculiar to the multi-lingual society in which we live.

In 1943, the English report on "Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools" stated:

> "Weighty evidence presented from various quarters, and sometimes conflicting in other respects but agreeing in this, points to the need for improvement in the training given in English."

The Report goes on

> ". . we are here confronted with a serious failure of the Secondary Schools. The complaint briefly is that too many pupils show marked inability to present ideas clearly to themselves, to arrange them and to express them clearly on paper or in speech; they read without sure grasp of what they read, and they are often at a loss in communicating what they wish to communicate in clear and simple sentences and in expressive and audible tone."

The Harvard Report says ". . . most college teachers and this seems to be true in virtually every country, complain that the high schools do not equip their students to write their own language clearly and grammatically." The Hulton Readership Survey of 1948 showed that about 12% of the English population of over 16 years of age did not read at all. The Women Conservatives Annual Conference (1961) asked for a working committee to be set up to inquire into the methods of teaching English in view of the low standards of written and spoken English.

These examples serve to indicate that the problem appears to be part of the pattern of modern urban and industrial life.

It is important, as well, however, to the emergent nations of a continent like Africa. In West, Central and East Africa there is a close and growing concern to ensure that children, particularly those of secondary school level, obtain a sound grounding in English.

In 1952, a UNESCO Conference of linguistic scholars was held in Nigeria to discuss the relationship between English and the African vernaculars; the Binns Commission devoted a very important chapter of its report to language; Ghana in 1956 carefully studied the problems of the use of English as medium of instruction in the primary schools. In 1958, an important conference on the Teaching of English in African Schools was held in Salisbury, and later, one at Makerere.

These are but evidences of a determination to do something about the situation; a recognition that a new type of English is developing, which institutions beyond the school must endeavour to influence. North of South Africa the realisation is strong that English is vitally necessary, firstly, as a lingua franca in a continent of many hundreds of dialects; secondly, as the road to technological knowledge, and lastly, as one of the chief means of contact with world thought and culture.

These thoughts apply with equal force to South Africa. There are many in this country who preach that English is not necessary except as a mechanical means of communication for commercial and like purposes. This is its utilitarian and lowest form of use. Language is culture and through it the hopes, beliefs, joy, despair and faith of a people are expressed. Through English literature we are bathed in spiritual and moral values hammered out on the anvil of some two thousand years of experience. It is vital that the many races of South Africa should share this, not to make them Englishmen but to make them feel part of what this international and growing language has, at its best, to offer. This does not detract in any way from pride of vernacular and the building up of your own literature and culture if it be other than English.

As part of the preparation of this paper, I corresponded and had discussions with a number of leading teachers of English in South Africa. One must keep in mind that many of the complaints against English as such are part of the dissatisfaction with education as a whole, but one must also remember that English as home-language is a touchstone, not being merely a subject, but one through which most subjects are learned. There is a lesson here for those whose home language is not English when one notices that the book lists at a leading Afrikaans-medium university are overwhelmingly English.

Falling Standards ?

I have found no lack of opinion on the question of falling standards in English but little evidence which can be regarded as conclusive. Experienced teachers of the subject whose views and judgment

R. G. MacMillan is Professor of Education at the University of Natal.

I respect expressed views as follows: ". . . the whole problem of language study is a far more involved business than anyone has ever given it credit for being—that most of the pronouncements about it are made by people who know little of its complexity and that measuring language proficiency or the lack of it is like trying to measure butterflies for boots."

"A couple of years ago the Transvaal Teachers' Association Education Committee was given the task of writing a memorandum on it, but was forced to throw in its hand simply for want of satisfactory evidence."

"I have no doubt that standards of English are declining in the schools not adequately supplied with properly trained English-medium teachers."

"Standards are poor," said another. Another stated, however, ". . . there has been no deterioration in the last ten years. Examiners' reports repeat the same old 'cracks' and faults, but there is no worsening. The standards, however, are not very good."

When I came to look at statistical and other evidence, however, I found myself in difficulty. Matriculation marks are "adjusted" to a curve of distribution. This adjustment has the effect of concealing true standards and tends to base standards upon averages over a number of years. These averages, in the case of English, are affected by pupils who write English Higher but whose home language is other than English.

The medium point in English Higher in the various Senior Certificate examinations varies from 49% to 56% with the majority round the 50-52 mark; the variation from year to year is relatively small. Failure rates are low—two to three per cent. being the average (16-20% fail the whole examination); marks are bunched round the average so that the examinations fail to discriminate between good and poor candidates; the proportion of distinctions is very low.

In 1956, the Education Bureau of the Transvaal Education Department was asked to ascertain experimentally whether the standards of the home languages in Transvaal schools had deteriorated or improved. Standardised tests applied in 1938 and 1948 were re-applied. The tests proved that Afrikaans as home language had reached a higher standard in 1956 than in either 1938 or 1948. In regard to English as home language, the 1956 pupils were able to hold their own up to and including Standard VI, but the results in the high school left little doubt that the standard of English between 1938 and 1956 had deteriorated. In the Overseas Language Tests (Northumberland and Australian Council of Educational Research) the Transvaal pupils held their own against the United Kingdom pupils but were out-scored by the Australians.

Some years ago objective-type tests were given to first-year students at Otago University and a South African university. On the average, the South Africans scored 11% less than the New Zealanders.

In 1953, the Public Service Commission conducted an inquiry into the standards of language as revealed, particularly, in the Entrance Examinations. This committee commented on the grave decline in the standards of English. When efforts were made to obtain a copy of this report, I was informed that it was confidential, had not been published and copies were not available. Why, unless political capital could have been made out of the report, it should be veiled in secrecy I fail to appreciate.

Mr. W. Waldman, an examiner in English literature at Senior Certificate level in the Transvaal, listed a number of common errors in one hundred essays to which 35% of the possible marks had been awarded. He did this on a number of occasions between 1945 and 1955, the results in those years being as follows, five most typical errors being selected:

(i) The relationship of the Participial Phrase to the subject of the sentence (Increase of 50%).
(ii) The tense of the verb in the Adverbial Clause of Condition where the past perfect tense is required (Increase of 150%).
(iii) The case of the relative pronoun in the Adjectival Clause (Increase of 100%).
(iv) Essential Punctuation (Increase of nearly 100%).
(v) Spelling (Increase of 100%).

The incidence of these errors is both interesting and illuminating.

During 1961, the Natal Teachers' Society discussed the prevalence of slovenly English with the Director of Education. This in a province where the standards of English are generally thought to be good! Much play is also made of the complaints of businessmen in regard to standards of English revealed by the products of the schools.

Most Frequent Faults

What are some of the faults most frequently cited? Generally, a lack of ability to express themselves through the medium of the mother tongue. Examiners complain of a lack of background which reveals itself in not only a lack of understanding of books and poems, but of a lack of imagination, of feeling and love for the language, a lack of sensitivity in regard to the functions of words and sentences. Content is generally known but language papers are criticised, grammar being for one reason or another either ineffectively taught or almost completely neglected. Vocabulary is poor; spelling weak; tenses are muddled; punctuation badly used, e.g. "Gardens, are a source of delight," or, the apostrophe is disregarded or indicates the plural. Slang is frequently used and expressions

like "Give me the latest dope", "met up with", "these eats", "how come", "swim gala" occur regularly. Highly-coloured adventures of the "Superman" variety can be conjured up but little from their own experience.

The impact of these weaknesses and deficiencies is felt throughout our society, but nowhere more than at university level where the clear divergence in aims between school and higher study is most apparent. Universities expect students to be able to use the various tools of learning in order to think abstractly about problems. The students should be reasonably literate, able to read books in a range of subjects with comprehension and be able to express themselves through written and spoken language in such a way that they can be clearly understood.

Instead, we find that English students have a "resistance" to writing; that we assume that they have a knowledge and ability which they do not possess; that the universities can no longer rely upon aids like Latin, French, and so on, which gave the student a framework of linguistic training; that they can take the content out of a book without understanding the significance of that content—a kind of technical process of extraction; that there is little feeling for the language in all its subtlety and beauty; that the universities need to **teach** composition and reading, which is not their function; that every teacher of any language wastes time doing work which should be done earlier. The universities, in turn, refuse to lower standards and therefore slaughter first-year groups, the average failure rate being a reasonable 20%, but running as high as 60%. These students are usually studying their mother tongue, have studied it for twelve years **before** coming to the university and have passed the required entrance examination!

It is plain to see that a proportion of students are not up to standard, but does not some of the fault lie in the universities themselves? Many university teachers do not use good teaching techniques, despise "method" openly and plead "academic standards" when challenged. There is need, at university level, for close study of syllabuses, standards, examinations and, in particular, methods. This criticism is in no way directed at those many university teachers who struggle with themselves and their students to improve the standards of language and who are acutely aware of their own deficiencies.

It must be appreciated that weakness and failure in English in English-medium institutions has a cumulative effect which reveals itself in many other subject-fields.

Some of what has been pointed out is new, some old, some ephemeral and some permanent but it is all cause for concern.

The evidence I have collected is but indicative of broad trends, being too flimsy and limited to warrant any dogmatic conclusions. What can be said, however, is that there is a well-qualified experienced body of opinion which holds that standards of English are declining, the basis of this opinion being largely empirical. Secondly, there is little evidence of a reliable statistical nature available. Thirdly, there is a serious lack of experimentation in this field and little research work being done. In order to establish, scientifically, that a decline had taken and was taking place, it would be necessary to conduct widespread tests of different kinds. Comparison with similar work and tests in the English-speaking world would be essential.

Why the decline?

Much of what we are experiencing is due to the changes which are being brought about in Western society as a whole. Developments in the fields of science and technology have caused a drift from aesthetics to communication at an utilitarian level. The levelling of social classes, the compulsory provision of educational facilities, increasing equality of opportunity in the schools and media of mass communication all lead to a standardisation of language as of other matters. Dialects and regional differences tend to disappear. The problem is what is being born? The social environment of the child is changing rapidly with the result that fewer children listen to nursery rhymes and stories as was the case years ago. The home environment, too, does not create and foster an atmosphere of learning and culture, however simple. The living language, studded with idiom, was used in the home and the child was inducted in its use through precept and example. Common questions asked in my home today of my small son are "What should you say instead of 'shined', 'writhed', etc?" At school, the foundations laid at home were built on, but nowadays the home seldom supplies these foundations. Those who came from homes where poor English was spoken soon took on the colouring of their surroundings; but a new-type bilingualism has now developed—school (academic) language and the language of the child's other activities. At school, teacher shortages and poorer teaching, albeit improved techniques, have become the hallmark of state education. In no area is this more important than that of English instruction.

It is true that **what** you say may be more important than **how** you say, but there are nonetheless minimum requirements before you can be understood. After all, it is a matter of communicating thoughts from one mind to another. The key is articulateness. Words tend in our day to become fixed in meaning, to become labels rather than instruments and symbols of thought expressing nuances of meaning through a logical structure of language. Our tradittions have come down to us largely through the word; we are in danger of

losing tradition then when we lose regard for our language.

Rapid changes are taking place in our lives and ways of thought, but no language can be really standardised either as a matter of tradition or as a matter of revolution. It is a living, vital thing and a mirror of environment. Attitudes towards language, particularly amongst teachers, vary from the "Do you expect us to use the language of the Authorised Version when the New English Bible is a best-seller?" to those who demand correct language usage on all occasions.

The schools are a tremendous force in the braking and directing of language change. Language is for living people who will change it to suit their needs, but human beings will usually hesitate before offending against well-tried linguistic rules and will recognise the need for laws governing the use of language. Just as an example, I should think that "Lay low in the water, girls" spoken by a teacher at the swimming baths is not acceptable, even in a changing world.

What was considered elegant usage 70 years ago may be pure pedantry today and rightly so. It is important, therefore, that teachers not capitulate to the demands of the streets, but also not become rigid pedants out of touch with a living, growing, changing situation. This requires knowledge, balance, enthusiasm and direction, constant study and sympathy for young people. What Eric Partridge said should be kept in mind:

> "The shifting, developing forms assumed by living thought demand the plastic medium of a living language."

Let us therefore accept change in language but as sensibly and sensitively as we would wish our pupils to do. If we look upon words, syllabuses, methods and staffs as evolving constantly but always upwards and onwards, then we shall not go far wrong. We must not confuse falling standards with changing standards although they are frequently synonymous.

An understanding is needed of what is toward in our efforts to educate **all** people, especially now at secondary level. For the first time in history, universal, compulsory schooling has reached the middle-secondary school and is likely to go higher. The flooding of the schools with the children who would have left school for work years ago complicates teaching and lowers standards. Homogeneous ability grouping and alternate schemes which all involve differentiation of one kind or another are steps in the right direction. This is a revolution in education and we are not sure how to handle it. We must face up to the fact, however, that children who cannot express themselves adequately suffer from inadequate development of their sensibilities which affects their capacity for imagination and their ability lo think. This is all the more important in a society in which, because of man-power problems, the young people handling jobs today will come increasingly from a lower strata of intelligence and ability than was the case in the past.

Local Problems

The influences and trends I have dealt with are at work in South Africa also but **we** suffer from a number of problems and aspects of them which increase our vulnerability in regard to English. First of all we are a multi-lingual community, with the impact of other languages upon English and vice-versa becoming steadily stronger as education and a higher standard of living spreads throughout the whole community. It is fundamental, in my view, that we do not think of English as isolated but as an integral part of a whole, each part contributing to the cultural life of the people, however different concepts and practice may be.

Secondly, bilingualism (meaning English and Afrikaans) is often blamed for the decline of English in South Africa. To what degree this is true or otherwise is not known. Work already done would seem to indicate that the early introduction of the second language does not affect the home-language adversely. Much more research work is necessary, however.

The general practice in South Africa is to introduce the second language as early as possible and to continue it throughout the child's school career. A matriculant may have spent upwards of 1,400 hours learning Afrikaans. Can we say that we are satisfied with the result? I contend that far too much time is spent on the learning of Afrikaans. This is not said in any racialistic spirit. I am bilingual and proud of the fact, but I did not learn to speak Afrikaans at school. Generally speaking both the attitudes and attainments of English-speaking school-leavers in regard to Afrikaans leaves much to be desired. I had a Cape Coloured batman during the Second World War who learned to chatter away in Italian in six months. Professor Fletcher has said that three months is long enough for an English-speaking lecturer to obtain a reasonable working knowledge of the language used in an African training college. I quote these instances because I think that our views on what **can** be done are too set.

At primary school level in South African schools approximately 20-24% of the time-table is devoted to mother-tongue; in Australia and Scandinavia it is one-third. This means that in the course of a single year these pupils have over 100 hours more tuition in their mother-tongue. Are we surprised that our standards are not high enough? Some argue that the second language helps the first; I have yet to be persuaded.

What really strikes one is the uniformity of practice in a country with the diverse problems of South Africa. Why is there no experimentation

in this field or has all been solved and decided? I was once principal of an English-medium school in a bilingual environment where it would have been better to leave the introduction of Afrikaans to Standard III or even later. Why not experiment, in monolingual areas, with the introduction of the second language (i) at the beginning, (ii) midway and (iii) not at all, in the primary school?

More research work into the field of method is necessary in order to give the teaching of Afrikaans in English-medium secondary schools more purpose and punch. Conditions vary a great deal in South Africa, and the necessary flexibility should exist so as to ensure that children get the best and do not waste their time. In South Africa language problems have revolved to too great an extent about the relationship between the two languages, with the result that the importance of that most cherished possession, the mother-tongue, is being forgotten.

There is, too, great need for English-speaking teachers in Afrikaans-medium secondary schools where English is badly taught, and where the attitude towards English could possibly be changed by the right kind of teacher. In African schools, the situation is appalling, a large proportion of failures being in English, the standards of spoken and written English being low indeed.

The cultivation of good English should be seen as a whole, from infancy to maturity. From the common trunk of the years of childhood there should be the development of strong branches, no one differentiated course in the years of adolescence being inferior to any other, and certainly not all having a pre-university flavour. Language is of the people — this approach should be encouraged. How many of the world's present and past great writers and poets attended a university? It is important to see the study of English as a whole, too, in the sense of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Children should be read to and their spelling and punctuation cannot just be "picked up." Fundamental to good English is sound speech.

Flora Robson, when asked what she would do with a large sum of inherited money, said, "Put a speech training teacher into every school." Spoken speech, dramatic movement, mime and written work should all be linked. I am quite sure that as the years pass, we will have to give increasing attention to speech. The average person spends a great deal of time speaking and he should be encouraged to use this gift well. Bad speech means frustration, social bitterness and often failure in obtaining and holding jobs. Should not speech form an essential part of the examination, and should it not be included in university courses? At the University of Natal students in the departments of accounting and architecture take courses in speech work, why not then the students of English themselves?

Reading is the cornerstone of progress in language. "South Africans do not read," "Pupils are semi-literate," and so on, are the usual cries. Much of this we accept as part of the price to be paid for living in a young, vigorous country with its delightful climate, but need we leave it there? Once more we find uncertain aims and confusion. Learning to read is an intricate process but nonetheless a mechanical one dependent for its degree of success upon many factors like intelligence and environment. Eclectic methods are used to-day but one is far from assured of their success when one hears a secondary school teacher roundly condemn "look and say." It is true that good readers often emerge from the schools in spite of, rather than because of, what they have been taught. Censorship should be of a natural order; my own reading at school-level made me thrill with excitement at times, sobered me, shocked me—all helping to educate me. Extensive reading tests carried out at first-year university level would be both interesting and discouraging. Here again is a rewarding field of experimentation and research.

When the pendulum swung against formal grammar, the general interpretation was that **no** grammar should be taught. Now the pendulum is swinging back. The old-fashioned grammar was a deadhand upon creative language, was taught too early with resultant resistance of a "halo-effect" type throughout the study of English on the part of pupils. It is essential, to my mind, that adolescents need to know **how** language works. Such study should not be intensive but the rhythm and balance of language should be studied without destroying the delight in giving thought adequate clothing. Children study hygiene, to learn how their own bodies function; science, where cause and effect are basic; yet in language study we jib at building patterns of linguistic structure. The correct arrangement and use of words is a form of design which everybody has some interest in as Punch illustrated when the sergeant said to the recruits: "Them as 'as boots wot don't fit 'em and don't want 'em, 'and 'em over to them 'as 'asn't wat does."

The Crux of the Matter

This brings me to the crux of the whole matter, and that is—the teacher. In 1960, 19.8% of practising teachers and 18.5% of teaching in training in the Transvaal were English-speaking at a time when the percentage of English-speaking people stood at some 39% of the White group. It is my view that those who teach English as mother-tongue should be English-speaking, as a rule, yet, one can cut the accent of many primary school teachers with a knife. Daily, in the Transvaal particularly, Afrikaans-speaking men are put to teach in English-medium schools because there is a shortage of English-speaking men. The attitude

of the Department of Education appears to be that, so long as the overall supply is adequate, there is no need to worry.

The English-speaking community has failed bitterly to provide those who carry the English South African culture and traditions in their hands. This task is being placed in the hands of others, who, however well-meaning and responsible, cannot succeed. Any human group that wishes to preserve its identity and culture and to make provision for progress **must** provide teachers from its own ranks and among these must be a good proportion of the best representative of that culture. This has not been the case, the shortage of staff creeping up through the school system and now being felt in the university. It is not enough to talk about man-power shortages and dismiss it at that. The English-speaking group has its fair share of doctors, engineers, accountants and what have you, but not enough teachers.

There is no danger that English as such will perish in South Africa but there **is** danger that it will become merely a useful commercial means of communication divorced from its rich power of expression, its spirituality, its morality, its logic. Whilst we are able to read English literature the great lessons of human endeavour may be taught us; when we cease to read and use only the minimal patterns of communication, then indeed we are in danger. Hence the importance of a strong English-speaking teacher group. Before that can be, however, there is need for an awareness of the situation we are in to penetrate the English-speaking home. What I would like to see is a large-scale migration of men and women from commerce and industry into teaching. Believe me, much that goes on in South Africa under the guise of educational policy could and would be held at bay by a powerful group of teachers representative of the best in the English-speaking community. We who have tried to present the problems of our group in the past have been all too conscious of the thinness of our battle-line.

Teacher Training.

It is my view that there is much wrong with teacher-training. I have had the opportunity of working at the heart of a provincial training college and of a university department of education. One can see so much of what should be reformed but who listens? The state departments of education, monolithic administrative fortresses if there ever were such and the rigid pattern of university organization and the void that exists between the two types of training institution makes effective **"whole"** change very difficult to bring about. If the teaching profession is to become a true professional body, then teacher-training must be linked in some manner to the university. Otherwise it will remain a group, the centre of gravity of which lies with the two-year trained teacher; a body which both academically and professionally is not sufficiently qualified for the very serious tasks facing it in this changing world. I speak with knowledge of what I am talking about and great regard for the many teachers who do such sterling work in our schools, but they are using muskets when the need is for more modern weapons still to be invented. I am deeply conscious here, too, of my own deficiencies, but I can see the road ahead, however dimly.

There is great need, however, for specialists trained in the field of English Method. How to teach language under the present changing and difficult conditions is a challenge worthy of anyone's steel. Training colleges have such people but the universities, by and large, do not yet see the point of such study. Method should be given its place in the study of any language. Part of our difficulty to-day is that methods in education have not kept pace with changes outside educational institutions and that the time-lag in the application of new ideas is too long. The universities could also give a lead by furthering studies in grammar particularly.

Experimentation must be encouraged and research work fostered. Where, however, are the bursaries and grants in the humanities like those available from the C.S.I.R. to science students doing relatively unimportant bits of research? We lack both trained personnel and the money to carry out research. A determined effort should be made to send half-a-dozen leading and interested teachers of English overseas to study new approaches to the teaching of English and the setting up of experiments. Such personnel should not, however, suffer financially for their initiative and ambition, but should be supported. Upon return let them come to the universities and the training colleges, their salaries being paid on a fellowship basis for several years until they are absorbed into new posts created for the purpose.

One cannot end without saying that much depends upon the morale of the English-speaking community. Stout hearts will bring us through the underbrush of confusion and uncertainty. Many will say "Why bother about new ideas, English is finished in South Africa." That is dangerous nonsense and merely serves to take the heart out of people. I believe in my traditions which are slowly becoming part of the mosaic which is South Africa. The English language and traditions add beauty and lustre to the pattern. Let those of us who are English-speaking never cease to proclaim our beliefs but always in a spirit of compromise, co-operation and understanding. If we allow our own tongue and culture to wither for lack of care and nourishment we are poor indeed, but, in addition, we render a serious disservice to the Afrikaans- and the Bantu-speaking peoples.