

WHY DO WE STUDY LANGUAGE

In answer to this question we may say there are three reasons that may be given that we may turn our knowledge of it to why we devote so much time to the study of language. We study language (1) that we may turn our knowledge of it to practical account; (2) in order that we may use it to help us in the investigation of other branches of knowledge; (3) for the sake of the intellectual drill and consequent intellectual development that it begets.

In the first of these our object is to attain a speaking knowledge of the language. This can, as a rule be attained only by constant use of it in our ordinary conversation. This speaking knowledge of language the methods of the schools will not give us. It can never be attained by the study of rules and idioms. We may in this way obtain a knowledge of the structure of a language and its points of contact with other languages, but the acquisition of a conversational use of a language by this method we regard as well nigh an impossibility.

The second reason why we study language is that we may use it as a key to unlock stores of knowledge that would otherwise be beyond our reach. For this purpose a good "working" knowledge of the language is all that is necessary. Some acquaintance with the principles of grammar, and a good vocabulary, will enable us to follow the thought of the writer, and thus master the subject matter of the work with which we are dealing. Such a knowledge of French and German, for example, would give the student access to the works on literature and science in the former, and to works on theology and philosophy in the latter. We are told that Robert Hall, the celebrated preacher, late

in life, and when in great physical pain, studied and mastered the Italian in order that he might test the correctness of Macaulay's estimate of the relative merits of the poetry of Dante and that of Milton.

When, however, the object of our study of language is mental drill and intellectual development, the method of study will, or ought to be, very different. Language is but the expression of thought, and the form of the thought bespeaks both the action and the character of the mind. The study of language properly directed becomes a study of mind. The distinctive type of the national mind is always mirrored in the nation's language. Again, the study of language, to be in the highest degree profitable, ought to be comparative. There are great underlying principles common to all languages. A knowledge of these principles will reveal the fact that the peculiarities that characterize different languages are reducible to a common law, and that those of one language illustrate and explain those of other languages. We venture to assert that the study of language carried on in this way will not only result in a quickening of the mental faculties, but will in itself become a delight. It would be difficult to imagine anything more barren and unfruitful, more utterly dreary and profitless than the study of language as it is usually carried on. The memorizing of rules, paradigms and vocabularies, and then the mechanical application of these in the construction of sentences is enough to dampen the enthusiasm and deaden the mental energies of the very best student. Is it not time we should call a halt and ask ourselves the question, "Why do we study language?"
