

## FEWER AND FITTER WORDS

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THE quality of the speech of to-day is not strained. If it had been, perhaps it might have proved purer; but, tested in the crucible of time, our simple words still remain what they have been since the days of the Saxon kings. The homely phrases we use are all of the Saxon type, and even when our emotions are under great stress the Anglo-Saxon word serves our purpose best. It bears the stamp of our early culture, to which we have given a literary tone by drawing from the other languages of the world, and appropriating therefrom such terms as best serve the purposes of the mind. This draft upon foreign sources has brought within the pale of our speech many terms with which we could dispense without loss to the language. The fact is that we have made an overdraft upon the treasury of words.

We live in an era of the most reckless abandon in so far as corruption of our native tongue is concerned. Such an era has followed every great war. A public overwrought by unusual strain seeks an outlet in expression as well as in action. Pent-up emotions throw off all restraint of customs in language as well as of morals in conduct. People feel entitled to coin any word, any expression that they want to, regardless of whether there is sanction for it in grammar, literature, or logic. So there you are, and that's how "So's your old man" sprang upon us.

Far be it for me to pose as a pestilential reformer because I make a plea for fewer and better words. The man who starts a reform invariably believes that he is the only man to enforce it except Volstead, and I do not aspire to even his distinction, although my name begins also with a "V."

It is true that those of us who confine our speech to the daily needs of home or business miss the fine adventures that we may have with words, and such of us as do this suffer from a restricted vocabulary, but that vocabulary is a vocabulary of strong words. The strength of the speech of the plain people is shown by the words that they use in daily life—words that every schoolboy knows and which every girl understands. John Addison Alexander, an almost forgotten American poet, of Philadelphia, a century or more ago, made a strong plea for plain speech:

"Think not that strength lies in the big, round word,  
Or that the brief and plain must needs be weak,  
To whom can this be true who once has heard  
The cry for help, the tongue that all men speak  
When want, or woe, or fear is in the throat,  
Or that each word gasped out is like a shriek  
Pressed from the sore heart, or a strange, wild note  
Sung by some fay or fiend? There is a strength  
Which dies if stretched too far or spun too fine,  
Which has more height than breadth, more depth than  
length.  
Let but this force of thought and speech be mine,  
And he that will may take the sleek, fat phrase,  
Which glows and burns not, though it gleam and shine,  
Light but no heat—a flash but not a blaze."

Living in an age in which the spirit, "every one for himself and the devil take the hindmost," seems to rule our daily lives, we are suffering linguistically from a license universally assumed of creating new words with no other apparent object than to avoid the usual and appropriate term, and also from the habit that some of our great men have of playing the part of body-snatcher and digging out of their graves dead words which they try to reanimate by blowing the breath of their lives into them. With some of our writers the general affectation of foreign terms has become an infectious disease. My stand is for simplicity and purity of language as opposed to weak sophistry, covered by redundancy of words selected less for their import and application than their unusual and extraneous character. It is true that language purifies itself, but it is also true that one of the difficulties with which the modern lexicographer has to contend is to select from the superabundance of word-coinage only such terms as have a true ring.

Many years ago an eminent philologist told us that a dictionary ought to know its own limits, not merely as to what it should include, but also as to what it should exclude. The practise of

indiscriminate inclusion was one for which Samuel Johnson was taken to task. He opened wide the leaves of his book to many terms that were not needed in his day, and there is scarcely a page of his *magnum opus* that does not contain words that have no business there. This work, which scanted the barest necessities that such a work should possess, contained within a page and a half such choice additions to the English language as *zeolitiform*, *zinkiferous*, *zinky*, *zoophythological*, *zumometer*, *zygodactylous*, *zygomitic*, and more than twenty others of the same kind. Some rare grammatical terms, still found in our dictionaries, also occur in this famous work, such as, *polysyndeton* and *zeugma*. Then there is the *auxesis* of rhetoric, and a number of medical terms, some of which may be found in the dictionaries of to-day, as, *aegilops*, *parotitis*, *ecphractic*, *meliceris*, *stratura*, supplemented by an extraordinary wealth of zoological and botanical terminology which runs up into thousands, to which Todd thought it needful to add largely, but both of them were completely outdone by Noah Webster.

There is not the least doubt that much harm is done by drafting into dictionaries vast cohorts of technical terms that have been invented deliberately as the nomenclature of some special art or science, beyond the pale of which they have never passed nor mingled with the general family of words. Additions of this kind are made cheaply. I recall one collection of several hundred terms submitted to me many years ago. This collection related to rocks. It was a treatise based upon an ideal mineralogical composition, and not a real one. As explained at the time, it was founded on a chemical analysis of the rock on the supposition that the only minerals which enter are those of a certain artificially selected list. In view of this fact, and of the fact that the classification had not been generally accepted, the nomenclature was omitted from the New Standard Dictionary, although it is to be found in another work. It is simplicity itself to draw from modern treatises of our later sciences vast vocabularies that did not exist fifty years ago.

Any one who knows the history of Sir James A. H. Murray's great work, the "New English Dictionary on Historic Principles," knows that the Philological Society planned the book in 1856, but not until twenty-three years later was work actually begun upon it. It has not yet reached completion. In the meantime, a vast collection of terms that are frequently looked for in dictionaries—terms in aeronautics, aviation, electricity, chemistry, eugenics, radiology, surgery and what-not—have been coined but do not appear in this work, for it was impossible for the lexicographers to keep pace with the growth of the language. This is not to say that every term in these sciences should be included, but that a select glossary of those in more common use should be included in a supplemental volume. The inclusion, however, must be done judiciously, for one has but to turn to any of our modern text-books, and treatises on the different sciences, to find terms by the hundred, or even by the thousand, with which one could inflate the vocabulary of any dictionary.

When it is not based on judicious selection, the boast of an increase of words over a competitor is an empty one. The recovery of twenty-five genuine English words, that have been either overlooked or crowded out, or lost in the maze through which every lexicographer must travel, is a far more important advance toward the completion of our vocabulary than the addition of a thousand terms of the other kind.

A supplement to the "Dictionary of the French Academy," which was published seventy years ago, contained a very large number of technical terms that properly belong, not to a dictionary of the language, but to glossaries of each of the technical branches of which they are part. The practise of lumbering up the pages of a book designed for the public in general with the dry bones and ashes of speech, for the benefit of the few students we have of philology, is a vicious practise.

As the years have passed we have lost some strikingly expressive terms, such as, *clutch-fist*, *pinchpenny*, *witwanton*, *need-not*, and *kindle-coal*, but there is ground for congratulation that certain other ill-sounding and malformed words have passed not only out of use, but also out of the dictionary. In a lexicographical

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