

ENGLISH STUDIES : LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE¹

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The word "English" in academic usage is generally interpreted to mean the study of literature, with ancillary practice in the skills of literacy. I should like to give it a broader interpretation - to include the study of English as language, with developments in linguistics, both theoretical and applied. I am sure that, as English teachers, we would all agree that an educated person in the seventies should have an understanding of the nature and function of language in general and of the language he speaks in particular. Further, we expect him to have adequate control of its standard usage, whether or not he has studied a foreign language or ever been a candidate for an Arts degree.

Within the space allotted for such a brief article, it is possible only to sketch in some of the reasons for the past neglect of the study of language in the English curriculum, and merely suggest, on the other hand, reasons why we must now give more recognition to what linguistics has to tell us about the nature and function of language as a social phenomenon. To this end I have selected for mention four major shifts in the academic scene since World War II - changes which have been influential in turning our attention toward a more inter-disciplinary approach to English Studies.

Neglect of Language Study in the English Curriculum

The use of language is so fundamental a skill, so unconsciously acquired, that we tend to disregard it unless it interferes in some way with our students' overall success. The child speaks his mother tongue when he enters kindergarten and, in his native language environment, can understand and make himself understood with little difficulty. The school begins to worry as he needs to learn to read and write. The efforts toward achieving literacy are extended if his comprehension and expression are so sub-standard as to handicap his scholastic advancement, make him unintelligible, or mark him as socially disadvantaged. But language as behaviour is still viewed as a concern of "special education." The widespread awareness of dyslexia as an affliction of school children (20%

in the U.S. in 1969); the development of i.t.a. (initial teaching alphabet), A.P.S.L. (Alphabetic Phonetic Structural Linguistic) and other recent approaches to literacy; the realization that pupils with English as a second language have special problems which are not solved simply by exposing them to the unfamiliar language in regular classes - all of these are an indication of the growing appreciation at the elementary level of the meaning of "Language Arts" in its multisensory dimension.

However, in high school, the concerns of language have generally continued to be sub-ordinated to those of literature - with some attention given to improvement in the skills of literacy. The study material of secondary school English is more likely to follow the story line, with adventure tales and other "narratives" of presumed teenage appeal predominating. The young heroes and heroines caught up in the stirring plots of these sagas generally exemplify the virtues of a frontier life of another era. Their exploits inevitably involve questions of value which belong to a homilectic criticism no longer meaningful to contemporary mores or literary production. Organized around the study of genre, prosody and rhetoric, such a programme fails the student both as an introduction to literature and as a preparation for life.

Although the moral-of-the-story may not be stressed to the same degree in English at the university level, the almost exclusive preoccupation with its literary aspects persists. Except for the Freshman Composition course, and the occasional upper-division Introduction to Anglo-Saxon or Old English, there is almost total neglect of language. Not until recently has even the History of Language begun to appear commonly at the undergraduate level. The consideration of communication as subject matter for English Studies is so new as to be still suspect by those who man the ramparts of the established and respectably "rigorous" curriculum.

As a result of this limited treatment of language, university graduates - among them some English teachers - continue to accept, if not perpetuate, extravagant myths about language:

that "developed" societies are defined by their literacy rate (Is this any better recognition of human qualities or civilized ideals than defining them by their

Gross National Product?);

or that French is the most logical language, Italian, the most musical, German, the most scientific;

or that grammatical analysis helps in writing better (more logical) English;

or that reading speed and size of vocabulary correlate with intelligence;

or that learning languages develops ability to "think";

or that some languages are more "difficult" than others - Chinese being a favorite example of a "difficult" language.

These and various other popular misconceptions are inevitably part of our folklore as long as the study of the nature and function of language is relegated to that often misunderstood subject, Linguistics; as long as "studying English" continues to mean reading literature, and "studying language" is understood as learning to read foreign literatures.

Without at least some exposure to the wider concept of language as human behaviour, a university instructor of English (or French) may be entirely ignorant of linguistic matters outside the relatively narrow range of European culture and his own specialty, the literature which records it. He may be quite oblivious to the implications of such disturbing bits of information as that there are "wordless" languages (described by Sapir as early as 1920), and languages without tense and number as these exist in "our" grammar. Although he may have Asians and Africans in his compulsory first-year classes, he may be wholly unaware of the profoundly disparate perceptions of reality often experienced by these foreign students who may, consequently, have difficulty performing satisfactorily according to the rules of Western logic the instructor's demands for "critical" thinking. He may not have been alerted to the importance of such fascinating considerations as the different social attitudes which result from the inconsistent treatment of gender in languages as familiar as French and English.

Since most English instructors at the college level, with or without PhD's, are themselves products of the purely literary tradition in English Studies, they cannot be fairly blamed for lacking training they were not required to undertake as part of their own academic programmes. It is rather the responsibility of those who shape the graduate programmes in English not to neglect such an important phase of the subject. After all language, the stuff of literature, preceded it and clearly deserves closer and prior attention.

Relevance of Language and Linguistics to a Shifting Academic Scene

The continuation of this is rather circumscribed belletristic emphasis in English Studies is perhaps more understandable when one recalls that, until after World War II, only the elite (who presumably learned to speak and to write the King's English in prep school) had easy access to higher education. However, several developments have occurred since then to alter the situation. Four of the most influential of these might be summarized as follows:

1. The broadening of the base of education to include many more of those who speak (not to say write) something less than standard English - either as a Second Dialect (the severely deficient are referred to as "culturally deprived") or as a Second Language.

Immigrants who are "foreign students" in the so-called "advanced" English-speaking countries, or students who remain in developing areas where English is the official language of wider communication (LWC), and the language of instruction in the local school system; for example, in Anglophone Africa, are among those with less than acceptable native control.

2. The trend toward interdisciplinary studies, especially those involving the social sciences and communication.

As Marshall McLuhan has put it: "In education, the conventional division of the curriculum into subjects is already as outdated as the medieval trivium and quadrivium after the Renaissance. Any subject taken in depth at once relates to other subjects."

3. The university matriculation of the first TV generation of students, who come with a programmed distrust of,

and impatience with, book-learning as the documentation of an irrelevant past.

An affluent, activist group, they turn to building private record libraries for their recreation hours rather than the book collections their predecessors prided themselves in possessing. Who wants to read a book after an exhausting day on the picket line? Listening to hi-fi, the students say, is something you can do together, lying down comfortably with the lights off. Books for escape? The drug sub-culture shows its direction - escape for the young is within.

4. The student reform movement which has made it necessary to look again at the basic assumptions upon which the traditional curriculum is built.

Antagonism to the Viet Nam war and the consequent decline in nationalism - the new concern of the young, pollution, is clearly a global threat - brings up the issue of the exclusive study of one's own literary history as being genuinely irrelevant and jingoistic.

Various related, not always strictly logical, questions arise in this connection. Perhaps even "logical thinking" deserves reconsideration as a goal. Is it not an old-fashioned, culture-bound ideal? Modern man responds to psychological rather than logical persuasion, the Motivational Research people remind us. And how about the North American undergraduate in a world society having some exposure to literature of other, non-European cultures, even though the reading must necessarily be in English translation? He reads Shakespeare in translation, so why not Lady Murasaki or Kalidasa?

Shouldn't the student of English literature, if he is to pursue the subject as a major field of study, broaden the coverage to include literature written in English, whether in England, the U.S., Canada, Australia, India, S. Africa, or the Caribbean? And what of the period-type courses? The contemporary Freshman is forever lost to literature with the chronological survey approach. He is overwhelmed with its unfamiliar detail. Lacking the Classical background of earlier generations of students, he finds the reading of English literature (at least up to the Victorian period) incomprehensible without the explanatory footnotes which make heavy going of the most lyric passages. The argument that only in English literature can the values of his culture be found leaves him cold. These are the

very values he thinks had better be forgotten in the search for new standards. Indeed, and regrettably, today's student is in flight from the humanities as a whole. Let's face it. They seem to him dilettante, irrelevant, anemic, absurd. He is more keen to be involved in humanitarian, people-packed concerns. He wants to be where the action is - anti-war demonstrations, civil rights protests, poverty parades, abortion appeals. The social sciences are really his academic bag. We need only look at the course enrolment figures to be convinced. They tell the story.

If English were not a required subject, there is the imminent danger that it would, like the Classics, wither on the vine. The solitary literary scholar, immured in the library, exploring the past, is hardly the model for today's youth whose aspirations incline them rather to seek group activity and to glorify action figures from Nancy Green to Che Guevara. (Norman Mailer's prestige among college students has undoubtedly not been diminished by his antic involvement in New York politics.) Instead of panicking at the evident corruption and possible threat of dissolution of English as we have known it, our alternative might be an attempt to salvage what we can by meeting the learner at his own level of interest. We might as well resign ourselves - we may soon be compelled to anyway as the students have a louder voice in controlling the curriculum. The entire area of verbal behaviour and the manipulation of human beings by the word-juggler, even the ubiquitous "communication breakdown" blamed for everything turbulent in our society - racial confrontation, violence in the streets, political hanky-panky, academic revolt, marital failure, the generation gap - can be part of the English programme. Language as a social phenomenon can serve the English-speaking student as a fresh entrée to the more leisurely and lonely world of literature which he may ultimately be persuaded to explore, intrigued instead of baffled by the linguistic innovations of a James Joyce or Vladimir Nabokov, whose themes are bound to appeal to the purveyors of the "new morality". (What student can resist Nabokov's treatment of incest as the game the whole family can play?) If education is "civil defense against media fallout," as the author of Understanding Media says, perhaps we should give a more attentive ear (to use one of his preferred images) to his pronouncement.

Education has also been described by its critics as a subversive activity. If we are to give it appeal for the young of today, we might start with this approach. After

all English is, for students everywhere, the language of world revolution. Whether the shouts of protest against the strontium 90 in their bones arise along the Bismarkstrasse or echo through Morningside Heights, whether the parades march along the Champs Elysee or the Ginza, the confrontation, when it comes -- when students of the world unite -- will inevitably be in English, the only language they have in common. Just as the young now universally gyrate to the "body English" of the discotheque, so students everywhere in their forum of the future, will rely on the English language for international communication.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The Editor is on a working holiday in Goroka, Eastern Highlands. Hence no editorial for this issue. With the exception of Monika Kehoe's paper, all the articles are revised versions of papers presented at the Third Annual Congress of the Linguistic Society of Papua and New Guinea, held in October, 1969.

A second batch of papers presented at the same congress will appear in the next issue of KIVUNG.

The originality, brilliance and timeliness of the Kehoe article, presented at the Fourth Annual Congress of the Society in August 1970, seem ample justification for its inclusion as a lead article in the present issue.