

The Bookman
June, 1921

The American Language

THE Franz Bopp and Sir William Jones of the American language, the least dead of all the tongues of man, is Gilbert M. Tucker, of Albany, New York, a gentleman turned seventy-three by the family Bible, but still full of philological zeal and vigor, and even (anon and anon) not above a certain fine bellicosity. His first formal treatise upon the subject was written so long ago as 1882; now, thirty-nine years afterward, he returns to it with a full-length book, by name "American English". It is a good book—shrewd, learned, painstaking, amusing. It is full of sly touches, wise little discussions, all the marks of complete and unfaltering competence. I believe that Mr. Tucker knows more about the American dialect than anyone else in the world, and what he knows he unloads easily and gracefully and without making horrible faces. Needless to say, he is not a professor of English. His actual profession, unless I err, is that of editor of an agricultural journal.

The first part of his volume is devoted to a gallant and devastating attack upon the professorial doctrine that English is degenerating in America—that there is something mysteriously immoral about the fact that, as year chases year, we speak and write the language less and less like the English. Well, he says, what if we do? Is there an ordinance of God against it? Or even a principle of philology or rule of taste? Nay, not so. As a matter of fact, American English is not only not inferior to British English, but, in more than one way, palpably and overwhelmingly its superior. It is more natural, more resilient, more hospitable to ideas, tremendously more vivid and brilliant. All the qualities that Dr. Robert Bridges and the Society for Pure English try to bring back into the English of London and Oxford—its Elizabethan picturesqueness of trope and phrase, its eager borrowing of dialectic novelties, its voracious appetite for loan-words, its disdain of all the snuffling imbecilities of grammarians—these qualities are the very hall-marks of the English of Chicago and New York.

What I refer to here, of course, is the spoken language—the everyday discourse of ordinarily educated folk—neither the jargon of intellectual snobs nor the gibberish of the vulgar. As phonology gobbles grammar, this spoken language takes on more and more importance; once more the dog begins to wag the tail. But even in the written forms American has certain salient superiorities over standard English. It is looser and more comfortable; it is livelier and more alert; its clichés are less ponderous and banal; above all, its spelling tends to be more logical. What could be more idiotic than the supernumerary *e* that the English attach to such words as *ax*, *annex*, and *form*? Why cling to *centre* when *center* is so much simpler and better? Why two *g*'s in *wagon* and two *l*'s in *traveler*? Why *kerb* in the face of *to curb*? Why *plough* for *plow*? Why *gaol* for *jail*? Even the *-our* ending, as Mr. Tucker shows, is illogical and nonsensical. If *honour* and *neighbour* are correct, then why do the English write *exterior*, *ancestor*, and *mirror*? The common notion that the *-our* is preserved for etymological reasons—to indicate loan-words from the French—is quite absurd. *Harbor* is not from the French, and yet the English put a *u* into it;

superior comes direct from the French and yet they leave out the *u*. Moreover, the French ending is *-eur*, not *-our*. If it is moral to drop the *e*, then why cling to the *u*? The English themselves, in fact, begin to ask such questions. They already omit the *u* from many derivatives, e.g., *honorary*, *arboreal*, and *humorous*. Soon or late, they will have to go the whole hog—as, indeed, the London “Nation” has already gone. Twenty years hence, I daresay, the only guardians of the *-our* ending remaining in the world will be a few American Anglomaniacs.

In his discussion of this subject of spelling Mr. Tucker is particularly well informed and penetrating. He is full of sense, too, when he discusses idioms; one always gets the feeling that he exposes but half of his materials, that his store of knowledge is prodigious. But I have a notion that he sometimes goes aground when he tackles specific American words. Here, following Lounsbury, he tends to make his definition of Americanism too narrow. Why should he bar such a word as *moccasin* from his list on the ground that it is also used in England? So is *caucus*, but it is as surely an Americanism as *sky-scraper* or *joyride*. Again, it seems to me that he is too hostile to such compounds as *office-holder*, *fly-time*, and *parlor-car*. True enough, their materials are good English, but it must be plain that they were put together in the United States, and that the Englishman always sees a certain strangeness in them. So with such archaisms as *to guess*. It is idle to prove that Chaucer used *to guess*. The important thing is that the English abandoned it centuries ago, and that when they happen to use it today they are always conscious that it is an Americanism. *Baggage* is in Shakespeare, but it is not in the London “Times”; the “Times”, save when it wants to be American, uses *luggage*, as do the fashionable shop-keepers along Fifth Avenue. Here Mr. Tucker allows his historical principles to run away with his judgment. Worse, he is sometimes recreant to them, and very disconcertingly. If *office-holder* is not an Americanism, then why is *apple-butter* one? And *back-country*, and *ash-cake*, and *congressman*, and *clingstone*? If *moccasin* is barred because the English have adopted it and have no other word for the object, then why are *creole*, *buffalo*, *hickory*, and *prairie-dog* admitted? If *drawing-room car* (does he mean *parlor-car*?) is omitted on the ground that “inventors have certainly the right to name their products, and if the English choose to call them something else, that change cannot make any sort of ism of the original appellation”, then why admit *patent-outside*? This *patent-outside* is obviously a slip of the pen; the correct name is *patent-inside*. I note some other errors. *P.D.Q.* is defined as an abbreviation of “pretty *deuced* quick”, which it certainly is not by a hell of a sight. *Passage* (of a bill in Congress) is listed as an Americanism; it is actually very good English, and is used in England every day. *Standee* is defined as “standing place”; it really means one who stands. *Sundae* (the soda-fountain mess) is misspelled *Sunday*; it was precisely the quaint spelling that gave the word vogue. *Mucker*, a brilliant Briticism, almost unknown in America, is listed between *movie* and *muckraker*.

But these are small errors; any collection of the same length would show as many. The value of the book is not appreciably diminished by them. Even the author’s narrowness in the matter of his categories does not destroy the value of his inquiry, for he states his views clearly and so it is possible for those who dissent from them to allow for them. A capital bibliography crowns his five long and extremely interesting chapters. He has done a good job.

(Source: UNZ.org: <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Bookman-1921jun-00353>)