The Tradition of the English Language

(The full text of the recent Sunday evening talk by ANDREW MORRISON, Lecturer in Speech and Music at Trinity College of Music, London, and current examiner for the College in New Zealand)

TO-NIGHT I should like to talk to you about one of our British traditions. When people discuss British traditions they frequently feel compelled to talk pious and comfortable platitudes. I hasten to reassure you. I feel no such compulsion. I am proud of my British citizenship on many grounds—all of them solid and factual. I should be ashamed to think that any one of them required the upholstery of a cliche. I have isolated one of these grounds this evening. I have isolated the tradition which above all others I am proudest to inherit and I should like to focus your attention for a few minutes on the tradition of the English language.

We accept our language—not so much without argument as without very much thought—as a thing of wonder and beauty. We acknowledge it as the tongue that Shakespeare used, as the language that bore the thundering periods of Milton. We remember—maybe we are a little surprised to find how hard it is to remember—the glories of our romantic poets. Yes, we say, this is the language of the Bible as we know it. This is the language of Hume and Berkeley, of Darwin and Huxley. It is the language that has formulated our laws and frames our constitutions. It is the basis of our contacts with society. No language has a richer or more expressive vocabulary.

And this is the language that you and I speak. Or is it?

Here is the answer that one literary man would give to that question, and I quote from a recent book by Mr. L. A. G. Strong.

> To hear the majority of educated Englishmen use their language, anyone accustomed to listen would suppose it to be a mean and unresonant dialect, poor in vocabulary, limited in expression, graceless in sound, fit only as a medium for the scanty and utilitarian utterances of a race of savages. He would conclude that they were incapable of emotion and moronic in range of interests; that they could not open their mouths more than half an inch, that their labial muscles were atrophied, their nasal passages blocked and that they were afflicted with chronic shortness of breath.

This would not hurt so much if it were not so true. Think of the range of the average vocabulary. Think of the pitch—the deadly level—of the average conversation. Think of the agonies we have all suffered at the feet of public speakers who just could not speak.

I remember—painfully—the embarrassment I felt when, on a day shortly before the war, I took a friend (a Frenchman) to the House of Commons. Admittedly the day was hot and the topic was Drains, or some such unpromising subject; but the fact remained that my friend, although foreign, spoke English far more correctly and fluently than most of the gentlemen who addressed us from the floor. Pausing in the threshold as we left he observed sadly, "The tragedy, of course, lies in this. If these gentlemen ever had anything to say, they wouldn't know how."

From that day, I have thought a great deal about the paralysis that overtakes our private and public speech.

Clean Speech, Healthy Voices

I am convinced that the progressive deterioration in our speaking of English is one of the chief disasters that is overtaking our British way of life. No less. I don't greatly care whether you hold it possible or even desirable to aim at a Standard English. Although I assure you that the acquisition of a Standard English is not only a mere matter of training but that it need not rob the voice of the local colour and natural speech-rhythms when these are required for "home consumption."

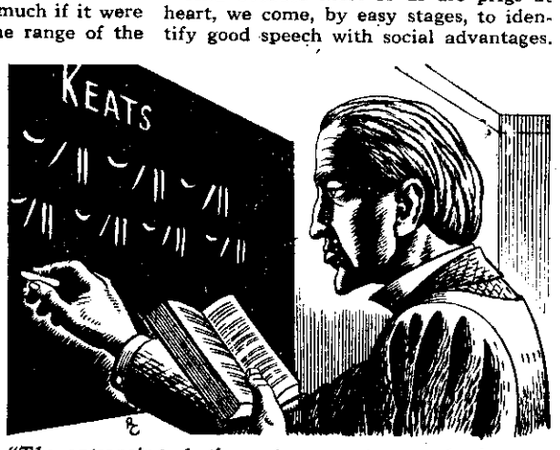
But I do greatly care that our English—Standard or Local—should be clean and careful, that our voices should be healthy and that we should command a vocabulary whose resources are not immediately exhausted by a discussion of the weather.

The free and uninhibited use of the voice together with a command of vocabulary that will ensure self-expression—are not these things in themselves desirable?

The advantages that they entail are, of course, manifold.

In spite of the decay of the expressiveness of our speech most of us retain the glimmering of a conviction that somehow the voice is—or should be—an index to the personality of the speaker. We assess character quickly—frequently too quickly. And we cap our judgments with phrases like "he seems so sincere" or "he sounds so reasonable." We, consciously or unconsciously, give a man *credit* for a pleasant voice as for a pleasant disposition. And how many men have said "Oh! She's attractive enough—as long as she doesn't speak."

And because most of us are prigs at heart, we come, by easy stages, to identify good speech with social advantages.



"The entrancing rhythms of our poetry are destined to produce little crooked symbols of desiccation that we call scansion"

Step by step, we reason in our misguided way towards a conclusion that good speech is the prerogative of the "upper classes" (if I may use that expressive archaism). Speech, the most essentially democratic of all God's gifts has become a shibboleth that divides men from men. And this attitude towards speech effectively makes a nonsense of all our ideological talk about "equality of opportunity"—until we admit universal speech training as basic in all education.

This is a hard fact and merits the bluntest statement.

This attitude to speech, this curious snobbery, prevails in our society. Yet we continue to send our children out to meet it—vulnerable, incapable of expressing their personalities, with rudimentary vocabularies, with coarse unresonant voices and with so many inhibitions about their speech as to amount to partial-paralysis of their speech-organs. Why do we do this?

A Communal Responsibility

The child with an impediment or disease in any other part of his body receives the best attention that medical science can provide. But the child with a hesitancy, with nasty flat vowel sounds, with an ugly nasal quality or with any other of the defects that afflict the majority of our children, the child so afflicted is almost certain to achieve his adult state still in unhappy possession of his handicap. Why?

Chiefly because we as a community are indifferent to his problems. We as a community, I say. It is nothing less than a communal responsibility. I cannot agree with those who would cast the blame on the "Education Authorities." A society gets the government it deserves, so we say. It certainly creates its own education departments—and their policies. If contemporary education is largely a matter of technical training—if the conception of a liberal education featuring language, music and rhetoric has been ousted from our society, the fault is ours. We have created the conditions that demand this drab technical training.

Nor can I agree with those who say that the problem is exclusively one for those who are in daily contact with children. The ideals of Adult Education are great ideals—and they are based on very different conceptions of education. Yet I note with alarm that the recently published Report on Adult Education in New Zealand contains no reference to any form of speech-training. Are our adults, too, to be technically-trained *ad nauseam*?

There is a third class with whom I disagree—those who say that we are idle in these matters because of our