

JANUARY 22, 1954

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## English People Speaking

THE sound of human voices is never stilled. All around us the hum goes on; and sometimes, on train or bus, we hear a single voice coming through with a remark about the weather, the state of a garden, a game of football or cricket, a political event, and so on. The involuntary eaves-dropper may, if he is lucky, hear something pithy, but he is more likely to hear phrases which would look strange in a straight report. Out of all the talking that goes on endlessly, not much is worth preserving. Good talk can be good prose, but it needs to be worked upon a little before it can wear well in print. Therefore, it is not surprising to find, in a book which shows the movement of English speech from the 15th Century to the present day,\* that some of the best passages are from plays, novels, memoirs and biographies. Material has also been taken from court records, but much of it has passed through an editor's hands.

Although good prose draws heavily on common speech, it can seldom be merely a report of what has been heard. John Hilton, a popular pre-war broadcaster, explained from the BBC in 1937 how much art is needed to make a talk sound "natural." It is not merely a matter of looking for simple words: there is an idiom behind both "popular" and "good" English—"perhaps not 'true to life,' but something better; truer than life. It's a choice of word and a turn of speech that, if only you can get it, reflects the very soul and spirit of our language." Hilton's broadcast is in *The Oxford Book of English Talk*, but few of the other modern pieces are comparable in vitality with earlier passages. Perhaps we are too close to present-day speech to be able to judge it fairly. If the common talk of Tudor times, unsifted in the streets, could be heard and

understood today, it might sound as unsatisfying as our own. Yet the raw material has become finer than it used to be, and the loss of a coarser grain seems to have meant also a loss of vigour. Here is Thomas Tyndale, one of John Aubrey's acquaintances, looking back from 1670: "You see in me the ruins of time. The day is almost at an end with me, and truly I am glad of it: I desire not to live in this corrupt age. I fore-saw and foretold the late changes, and now easily foresee what will follow after. Alas! O'God's will! It was not so in Queen Elizabeth's time; then youth had respect to old age."

A modern playwright could make an aged man speak as convincingly; but to do so he would have to use an idiom borrowed from the past. The best part of speech is what is old, and that is because only good concrete words are able to survive constant use. Much language today is the waste product of a civilisation which moves on machines; but in the midst of technical and abstract terms are the old words, often with new meanings and in new combinations, yet keeping their freshness. Thus, in addition to such horrors as "activable" and "allocatee," there are words as crisp and expressive as "air lift," "break-out," "crackup," "flatspin," "gatecrash" and "know-how." Sometimes these words, even in their present meanings, are older than they seem. A dictionary of new English words recently included "ditch," and gave as its first meaning an Air Force colloquialism for the English Channel or the North Sea. But Cromwell used it in the same way nearly 300 years ago: "You have accounted yourselves happy," he said to Parliament in 1658, "on being environed with a great ditch from all the world beside." And so the stream flows on, sometimes with froth and rubbish on the surface, but with a current too strong to be harmed by the shallows and the mud along its banks.

\*The Oxford Book of English Talk, edited by James Sutherland; Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, English price 18/6.



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