

"The mother tongue: English and how it got the way" 研讀心得

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書 摘

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Book	The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way
Editor	Bill Bryson
Publisher	Harpercollins
Publishing Date	1996/03/01
Paperback	270
Price	446
Content Introduction	<p><i>The Mother Tongue</i> (ISBN 0-380-71543-0) is a book by <u>Bill Bryson</u> which wittily compiles the history and origins of the <u>English language</u> and the language's various quirks. It is subtitled <i>English And How It Got That Way</i>. The book discusses the <u>Indo-European</u> origins of English, the growing status of English as a global language, the complex <u>etymology</u> of English words, the <u>dialects</u> of English, <u>spelling</u> reform, <u>prescriptive grammar</u>, and more minor topics including <u>swearing</u>. Bryson's account is a popularization of the subject, designed to entertain as well as to inform, and the book is sprinkled with trivia and language lore.</p>

I. Introduction

The possession of language, perhaps more than any other attribute, distinguishes humans from other animals. To understand our humanity, one must understand the nature of language that makes us human. More than 300 million people in the world speak English and the rest, it sometimes seems, try to. It would be charitable to say that the results are sometimes mixed. The book explains English is widely used by most people in the world, but to be fair, English is full of booby traps for the unwary foreigner. The complexities of the English language are such that even native speakers cannot always communicate effectively, as almost every American learns on his first day in Britain.

II. Thesis

English is, in short, one of the world's great growth industries. English is just as much big business as the export of manufactured goods. It is often said that what most immediately sets English apart from other language is the richness of its vocabulary. The richness of the English vocabulary, and the wealth of available synonyms, means that English speakers can often draw shades of distinction unavailable to non-English speakers. Moreover, every language has areas in which it needs, for practical purposes, to be more expressive than others.

1. Pronunciation

Knowledge of a language includes knowledge of the morphemes, words, phrases, and sentences. It also includes the sounds of the language and how they put together to form meaningful units. The author provides the readers with funny and strange opinions. He explains the slight changes of the English.

1.1

If there is one thing certain about English pronunciation it is that there is almost nothing certain about it. No other language in the world has more words spelled the same way and yet pronounced differently. Consider just a few:

heard→*beard* *road*→*broad* *five*→*give* *early*→*dearly* *beau*→*beauty*

Furthermore, in English, pronunciation is so various—one might almost say random—that not one of our twenty-six letters can be relied on for constancy, as with the *c* in *race*, *rack*, and *rich*, or they sulk in silence, like the *b* in *debt*, the *a* in *bread*, the second *t* in *thistle*. In combination they

become even more unruly and unpredictable, most famously is the letter cluster ough, which can be pronounced in any of eight ways—as in through, though, thought, tough, plough, thorough, hiccough, and lough.

As with most things, shifting vowel sounds were somewhat hit or miss, often because regional variations disrupted the pattern. This is most notably demonstrated with the “oo” sound. In Chaucer’s day in London, all double *o* words were pronounced to rhyme with the modern word *food*. But once the pattern was broken, all kinds of other variations took hold, giving us such anomalies as *blood*, *stood*, *good*, *flood*, and so on.

2. Spelling

2.1

In comparison the Western way of writing begins to look admirably simple and well ordered. And yet in its way it is itself a pretty imperfect system for converting sounds into thoughts. English is particularly hit or miss. We have some forty sounds in English, but more than 200 ways of spelling them. We can render the sound “sh” in up to fourteen ways (shoe, sugar, passion, ambitious, ocean, champagne, etc.) But Simeon Potter believed that English spelling possessed three distinguishing features that offset its other shortcoming: The consonants are fairly regular in their pronunciation, the language is blessedly free of diacritical marks that complicate other language—the umlauts, cedillas, circumflexes, and so on—and, above all, English preserves the spelling of borrowed words, so that people of many nations “are immediately aware of the meanings of thousands of words which would be unrecognizable if written phonetically.”

2.2

A mere 3 percent of our words may be orthographically troublesome. Considering such anomalies as *colonel*, a word that clearly contains no *r* and yet proceeds as if it did, or *ache*, *bury* and *pretty*, all of which are pronounced in ways that pay the scantest regard to their spellings, or four and forty, one of which clearly has a *u* and the other of which just as clearly doesn’t. The author: Sometimes our curious spellings are simply a matter of carelessness. That is why, for instance, *abdomen* has an *e* but *abdominal* doesn’t, why *hearken* has an *e* but *hark* doesn’t.

2.3

The absence of a central authority for the English language for three centuries meant that dialects prospered and multiplied. When at last French died out and English words rushed in to take their place in official and

literary use, it sometimes happened that people adopted the spelling used in one part of the country and the pronunciation used in another.

2.4

In the seventeenth century the English developed a passion for the classical languages, certain well-meaning meddlers began fiddling with the spelling of many other words in an effort to them conform to a Latin ideal. In several instances our spelling became more irregular rather than less. Sometimes these changes affected the pronunciation of words, as when *describe* became *describ*, *perfet* became *perfect*.

2.5

A final factor in the seeming randomness of English spelling is that we not only freely adopt words from other cultures, but also tend to preserve their spellings.

3. Inflection and grammar

When students start learning English, almost every English teacher will teach grammars and force to memorize them in their mind. In the book the author uses contradictory and complicated ways to tell how they get the way. In Latin, the verb has up to 120 inflections. In English it never has more than five (e.g., see, sees, saw, seeing, seen) and often gets by with just three (hit, hits, hitting). In English, we possess a language in which the parts of speech are almost entirely notional. A noun is a noun and a verb is a verb largely because the grammarians say they are.

3.1

English grammar is so complicated and confusing for the one very simple reason that its rules and terminology are based on Latin— a language with which it has precious little in common. The early authorities not only used Latin grammar as their model, but actually went to the almost farcical length of writing English grammars in that language.

English is often commended by outsiders for its lack of a stultifying authority. Without an official academy to guide us, the English-speaking world has long relied on self-appointed authorities. They point out that there is a useful distinction to be observed between *uninterested* (不感興趣的) and *disinterested* (公正的), between *imply* (暗示) and *infer* (推斷), *flaunt* (炫耀) and *flout* (嘲笑), *fortunate* (幸運的) and *fortuitous* (偶然的), *forgo* (拋棄) and *forego* (領先), and *discomfort* (使不舒服) and *discomfit* (使為難), *stanch* (緩和) and *staunch* (止血).

One of the undoubted virtues of English is that it is a fluid and democratic language in which meanings shift and change in response to the pressures of common usage rather than the dictates of committees. It is a natural process that has been going on for centuries. To interfere with that process is arguably both arrogant and futile, since clearly the weight of usage will push new meaning into currency no matter how many authorities hurl themselves into the path of change.

III. Conclusion

For years, students in Taiwan are fearful of learning English in that they are forced to memorize many vocabularies and idioms. Most students have highly interests in English until they enter the junior high school. Teachers and parents have them keep English rules and formulas in their mind. However, they lose passion and patience eventually. In the book, we can find that English is not so complicated and boring, on the contrary, it' s even irregular and funny. From the sight of author, the rules of a language resulted from many people' s common consensus. Don' t feel frustrated and practice speaking English is your hobby in your living. It is not a tough work to develop your hobby despite using the wrong grammars. Imagining maybe the rules we know now is right, but they are bad many years ago.

Reference

- * Victoria, F., & Robert R., & Nina H (2002). An introduction to language (7th ed). Thomson Wadsworth .