

9. Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension

(In every country in the world in which literature holds a place, the name of George Bernard Shaw is well known. No other writer, except, perhaps, Shakespeare, has earned such world-wide fame. The following text, which the literary genius prepared and spoke on a 'gramophone' recording for the Linguaphone Institute, is loaded with characteristic Shavian wit, but with serious purpose behind it all. The provocative ideas are couched in a simple but sparkling rhetorical style)

I am now going to suppose that you are a foreign student of the English language; and that you desire to speak it well enough to be understood when you travel in the British Commonwealth or in America, or when you meet a native of those countries. Or it may be that you are yourself a native but that you speak in a provincial or cockney dialect of which you are a little ashamed, or which perhaps prevents you from obtaining some employment which is open to those only who speak what is called "correct English". Now, whether you are a foreigner or a native, the first thing I must impress on you is that there is no such thing as an ideally correct English. No two British subjects speak exactly alike. I am a member of a committee established by the British Broadcasting Corporation for the purpose of deciding how the utterances of speakers employed by the Corporation should be pronounced in order that they should be a model of correct speech for the British Islands. All the members of that Committee are educated persons whose speech would pass as correct and refined in any society or any employment in London. Our chairman is the Poet Laureate, who is not only an artist whose materials are the sounds of spoken English, but a specialist in their pronunciation. One of our members is Sir Johnston Forbes Robertson, famous not only as an actor but for the beauty of his speech. I was selected for service on the "Committee because, as a writer of plays I am accustomed to superintend their rehearsals and to listen critically to the way in which they are spoken by actors who are by profession trained speakers (being myself a public speaker of long experience). That committee knows as much as anyone knows about English speech; and yet its members do not agree as to the pronunciation of some of the simplest and commonest words in the English language. The two simplest and commonest words in any language are "yes" and "no". But no two members of the committee pronounce them exactly alike. All that can be said is that every member pronounces them in such a way that they would not only be intelligible in every English-speaking country but would stamp the speaker as a cultivated person as distinguished from an ignorant and illiterate one. You will say, "well that is good enough for me" that is how I desire to speak. "But

which member of the committee will you take for your model? There are Irish members, Scottish members, Welsh members, Oxford University members, American members; all recognizable as such by their differences of speech. they differ also according to the country in which they were born. Now, as they all speak differently, it is nonsense to say that they all speak correctly. All we can claim is that they all speak presentably, and that if you speak as they do, you will be understood in any English-speaking country and accepted as person of good social standing. I wish I could offer you your choice among them as a mode; but for the moment I am afraid you must put up with me-an Irishman.

As a public speaker I have to take care that every word I say is heard distinctly at the far end of large halls containing thousand of people. But at home, when I have to consider only my wife sitting within six feet of me at breakfast, I take so little pains with my speech that very often instead of giving me the expected answer, she says "Don't mumble; and don't turn your head away when you speak I can't hear a word you are saying." And she also is a little careless. Sometimes I have to say "What?" two or three times during our meal; and she suspects me of growing deafer and deafer, though she does not say so, because, as I am now over seventy, it might be true.

No doubt I ought to speak to my wife as carefully as I should speak to a queen, and she to me as carefully as she would speak to a king. We ought to; but we don't. (Don't," by the way, is short for "do not".)

We all have company manners and home manners. If you were to call on a strange family and to listen through the keyhole - not that I would suggest for a moment that you are capable for doing such a very unladylike or ungentleman like thing; but still - if, in your enthusiasm for studying languages you could bring yourself to do it just for a few seconds to hear how a family speak to one another when there is nobody else listening to them, and then walk into the room and hear how very differently they speak in your presence, the change would surprise you. Even when our home manners are as good as our company manners - and of course they ought to be much better - they are always different; and the difference is greater in speech than in anything else.

Suppose I forget to wind my watch, and it stops, I have to ask somebody to tell me the time. If I ask a stranger, I say "What O'clock is it?" the stranger hears every syllable distinctly. But if I ask my wife, all she hears is 'cloxst.' That is good enough for her; but it would not be good enough for you. So I am speaking to you now much more carefully than I speak to her; but please don't tell her!

I am now going to address myself especially to my foreign hearers. I have to give them another warning of quite a different kind. If you are learning English because you intend to travel in England and wish to be understood there, do not try to speak English perfectly, because, if you do, no one will understand you. I have already explained that though there is no such thing as perfectly correct English, there is presentable English which we call "Good English"; but in London nine hundred and ninety nine out of every thousand people not only speak bad English but speak even that very badly. You may say that even if they do not speak English well themselves they can at least understand it when it is well spoken. They can when the speaker is English; but when the speaker is a foreigner, the better he speaks, the harder it is to understand him. No foreigner can ever stress the syllables and make the voice rise and fall in question and answer, assertion and denial, in refusal and consent, in enquiry or information, exactly as a native does.

Therefore the first thing you have to do is to speak with a strong foreign accent, and speak broken English: that is, English without any grammar. Then every English person to whom you speak will at once know that you are a foreigner, and try to understand you and be ready to help you. He will not expect you to be polite and to use elaborate grammatical phrases. He will be interested in you because you are a foreigner, and pleased by his cleverness in making out your meaning and being able to tell you what you want to know.

If you say "Will you have the goodness, Sir, to direct me to the railway terminus at Charing Cross," pronouncing all the vowels and consonants beautifully, he will not understand you, and will suspect you of being a beggar or a confidence trickster. But if you shout, 'please! Charing Cross! Which way!' You will have no difficulty. Half a dozen people will immediately overwhelm you with directions.

Even in private intercourse with cultivated people you must not speak too well: Apply this to your attempts to learn foreign languages, and never try to speak them too well: and do not be afraid to travel. You will be surprised to find how little you need to know or how badly you may pronounce. Even among English people, to speak too well is a pedantic affectation. In a foreigner it is something worse than an affectation: it is an insult to the native who cannot understand his own language when it is too well spoken. That is all I can tell you: the record will hold no more. Good-bye!