

INTRODUCTION

THE CONCEPT OF ORACY

THE spoken language in England has been shamefully neglected. Some of the reasons for this will be examined in this book. One, certainly, is that teachers and educationists have not considered it important. Of the oral skills reading aloud (which few people are ever called upon to use) has had some attention in the classroom, usually for the wrong reasons. But the ability to put one word of one's own next to another of one's own in speech, to create rather than to repeat, a skill which everybody is exercising most of the time, has not been regarded as worthy of serious attention.

Official reports have varied in their concern. In the early part of the century the urge to give every child a basic literacy took precedence over everything else. The Board of Education Circular 753, *The Teaching of English in Secondary Schools* (1910) devotes a whole sentence to "oral composition" (without defining it) as a preliminary to written composition. *The Teaching of English in England* (1921) proclaims, "the first and chief duty of the Elementary School is to give its pupils speech" (p. 60), but the advice offered to achieve this does not inspire confidence. Young children should "associate each sound with a scientific symbol" (p. 65); and the opinion of one witness that children "should be read to rather than talked to, in order that they may be saved from the meagre vocabulary of the teacher" is quoted with approval (p. 71). The Hadow Report, *The Education of the Adolescent* (1926) has more confidence in the teacher's ability "to set an example in making use of good English" and thinks that sound exercises and the elements of phonetics are desirable. The Hadow Report on *The Primary School* (1931) avoids advocating "speech training", and suggests that children should be "encouraged to express themselves freely" (p. 156), but little guidance on this is given. The 1937 *Handbook of Suggestions for Teachers* suspects that a knowledge of voice production is necessary for the teacher, sees speech in the context of the classroom, and makes some well-balanced statements upon it. Its tone of placid optimism is in marked contrast to that of the Norwood Report on *Curriculum and Examinations in*

Secondary Schools (1943) which finds that children "read without sure grasp of what they read, and they are too often at a loss in communicating what they wish to communicate in clear and simple sentences and in expressive and audible tone". Norwood comments: "The evidence is such as to leave no doubt that we are here confronted with a serious failure of the Secondary Schools" (p. 13). Doubtless the schools were to blame to some extent, but so was officialdom. In none of the reports had there been a sense of the magnitude of the problem, or its underlying causes; in none of them that sense of urgency, that awareness of priorities, which would have been so valuable in tackling it. Norwood itself makes no specific recommendations: "We content ourselves with recording our belief that no school is doing its duty by the community which does not do everything in its power to bring its pupils to use such speech that everything they say can easily be apprehended in any part of the country" (p. 96). Norwood however did open men's ears to the problem, and the MacNair Report on *Teachers and Youth Leaders* (1944) advocated that every teacher training institution "should pay attention to the speech of every student, and every area training authority [should] include in the assessment of a student's practical teaching ability to use the English language". Even so remarkably little has been done in this direction.

Post-war reports have been more helpful to the teacher. The Ministry of Education Pamphlet No. 26, *Language: Some Suggestions for Teachers of English and Others* finishes for good, one hopes, the official flirtation with formal speech training, sees good speech as coming mainly from practice in situation, and thinks "something more systematic is needed than random debates and discussions" (p. 75). Nevertheless there is a certain grudging note detectable: "Speaking and listening, therefore, however important in their own right, must be judged to some extent by their contribution to standards of written composition" (p. 75). Despite the qualifying phrases there is a subtle denigration of oral skills here; the underlying assumption seems to be—if it were shown that children could write well without them then a large part of their value would have gone. And it has been left to the Newsom Report, *Half Our Future* (1963) to recognise the development of powers in the spoken language as one of the central concerns of education (para. 86) and to relate it unequivocally to the human condition:

There is no gift like the gift of speech; and the level at which people have

learned to use it determines the level of their companionship and the level at which their life is lived (para. 330).

This matter of communication affects all aspects of social and intellectual growth. There is a gulf between those who have, and the many who have not, sufficient command of words to be able to listen and discuss rationally; to express ideas and feelings clearly; and even to have any ideas at all. We simply do not know how many people are frustrated in their lives by inability ever to express themselves adequately; or how many never develop intellectually because they lack the words with which to think and reason. This is a matter as important to economic life as it is to personal living; industrial relations as well as marriages come to grief on failures in communication. (para. 43)

This is the view of speech taken in this book; that it is a central factor in the development of the personality and closely related to human happiness and well-being.

Between *Language* and *Newsom* came the Crowther Report, 15 to 18 (Vol. I, 1959). This named two qualities as desirable in the educated person; *numeracy* and *literacy*, the former characterised by the ability to understand the scientific approach and to think quantitatively; the latter by a feeling for language, and an ability to appreciate through it "great writers and thinkers whose work is a permanent enlargement of the human spirit" (para. 400). No consideration is given to speech as such; it is slipped in as one more characteristic of the enlarged concept of literacy—"the ability to speak and write clearly" (para. 399). It is doubtful whether the word can bear for long such a heavy load of meanings; indeed there are signs that it is reverting to its more radical associations in usage. In any case education in the spoken language, though obviously related to literacy (and numeracy for that matter) is far too important to be considered as a subsection of it. That Crowther can offer those two terms only shows how academic are the assumptions we make in education: literacy relates men to books, numeracy relates men to things; neither in the direct sense relates men to men, which is one of the prime functions of speech.

The neglect of speech in our training of young people is only too obvious when one attempts to get a vocabulary in which to describe its various aspects. For instance there exists no term for the ability to use the oral skills of speaking and listening; and conversely the fact that no term exists for the concept has meant that people have been unaware of its importance. Indeed, as far as one knows, only one person has ever felt the need for any such term. This was T. H. Pear, who in 1930 suggested that a word was needed for

“deliberate adequate verbal expression”. On analogy with “aphasia” and “dysphasia” (speech disorders from brain damage) he coined the word *euphasia*. Unfortunately this will not do; despite its impeccable Greek ancestry it sounds like some terrible disease. Further it only describes one half the oral skill we are interested in—speaking, but not listening—a defect it shares with existing words such as “eloquence” and “fluency”, which have specific usages and are thus limited (and are in any case somewhat tainted nowadays). The term we suggest for general ability in the oral skills is *oracy*; one who has these skills is *orate*, one without them *inorate*. An educated person should be numerate, orate, and literate. These are the NOL skills; NOL are to our age what the Three Rs were to the nineteenth century, fundamental objects of educational effort.

From now on in this book *oracy* (*inoracy*), *orate* (*inorate*) will be used as connoted above. The study of linguistics is concerning itself with the contemporary spoken language, and some terms employed will be those used there; *register* and *style* are examples. Others have been devised when there seemed to be a need, to avoid circumlocutions for instance; thus *utterance* has been used for “a passage of spoken language”. Terms such as *reciprocity*, *reciprocal speech situation* (RSS), *formal speech situation* (FSS) are similarly used for convenience and to give stature to the concepts they represent. A third group of terms has had a limited circulation in scholastic circles, but deserve to be better known; *phatic communion* is a case in point. Words and phrases of these three kinds are defined where used in the text; in addition they are collected together for ease of reference in a Vocabulary at the end.

This book suggests that two modifications of our current assumptions in teaching are desirable, for without them education lacks a dimension. (i) The first is concerned with the *functions* of the spoken language in relation to personal development; that we must widen our concept of the educated person to include *oracy* as well as literacy and numeracy. It must be emphasised that *oracy* has merely been given a name here. The task ahead is to define it in terms of particular skills and attainments, for different ages, groups, circumstances; to discover the best methods of teaching it; to bring it into synthesis with other work, especially that designed to promote literacy. A few suggestions are offered on these problems, in Chapter III for instance, with reference to the secondary level of education in particular, but at all levels the work remains very much to do.

(ii) The second is concerned with the *nature* of the spoken

language; that we must take into account that this language is something rather different from what we have hitherto believed. The coming of the tape-recorder has had a similar effect on men's hearing to that produced on their vision by the cine-camera. In the nineteenth century artists such as Stubbs painted galloping horses with legs stretched out fore and aft; and such paintings were praised for their verisimilitude. The cine-camera showed that they did not in fact gallop like this at all, but with their legs "tucked up" under them. In the same way the tape-recorder has made us realise that people do not speak in the way that novelists and other writers (even those praised for their "good ear") represent them as speaking. Of course there have been, before the coming of tape, some people, particularly students of linguistics, who realised speech was otherwise; just as there must have been people earlier who realised that a horse would fall down if it ran as the painters represented it. But in neither case were such views general.

The contributors to this book share a common attitude towards English teaching. They have worked together as a team on Listening Comprehension tests for the Department of Education and Science; and stand very much in one another's debt for countless informal discussions lasting seconds or hours. However the final responsibility for an individual chapter rests with its author. The writers are very conscious of the tentative nature of their observations, and offer them merely as an early contribution to a debate of Spoken English which it is hoped will be very fruitful.

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