

ON THE PRACTICAL CHARACTER
OF
THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

When we speak, we make audible what we think and feel; therefore I guess to be right in meaning, that every individual's intellectual peculiarity will appear in his language. But what we now said of the individual may, without any doubt, likewise be said of a totality of individuals, we call a nation. Each of these totalities has its peculiar language which organically develops itself. Comparing these languages each other although we shall find some congeniality amongst many of them, yet it may not be denied, that every language being spoken on Earth has something particular, by which it differs from all other languages. This peculiarity we speak of depends of the peculiar character of the whole group of individuals speaking the same language. On that account we may say: *The character of a nation will appear in its language.*

Viewing now the English people from the earliest time of its history till now we cannot help testifying, that it showed itself a very practical people, wherever it made its appearance. The character of the whole Anglo-Saxon race is a practical one. The forefathers of the present English, when they were still living on the Continent, are represented by the historians as practical men in every respect. The remainder of the Anglo-Saxon literature will verify this statement.—And the descendants did not loose the character of their ancestors. He who would dare to contradict is, you may be sure, unacquainted as well with the history of the European culture, as with that of the English people. The English with good reason may lay claim to be called the forerunners or pioneers of the practical culture of all countries of the European Continent. — Forbearing myself from entering into particulars I remember but transitorily of all that our native country is owing to the Englishmen in practical culture. As to gas-lighting, aqueducts, hydraulics, pavements of the streets, agriculture, highways and railroads, steam-engines, post-improvements, telegraphs, newspaper-presses, tunnels — the Englishmen have been our masters, from whom we learn still now-a-days. But yet in many other respect, as in law, parliament, jury,

constitution and self-government we imitate that practical neighbouring nation; — in navigation, sea-trade, in retail and commerce at large, in manufactories and all business and commercial affairs we endeavour to follow the standard being carried before us by the Englishmen. I think, every one will assent us. No wonder, when this practical character, we must impute to the whole English nation is conspicuous in their language too, since we may see in every other language, that the national character has a very great influence on the character of the language. I make mention but of the Latin, Grecian and French language. Whoever is acquainted with these languages will find out, that each of them breathes the spirit characteristic to that people which engendered, formed and cultivated the language. In Latin it is the haughty, imperious spirit of the Romans who were wont to prescribe laws to the other nations, in the Grecian language the poetical and philosophical spirit of the Greek, fond of arts and liberal sciences, to whom *το καλόν* and *τὸ ἀγαθόν* were synonymus notions, in French the quick spirit of the gallant Frenchmen who like cheerful conversation and polite manners above all.

But before we prove the character of the English language as a practical one, it seems to be necessary to get a firm and solid basis for our demonstration. We shall find, methinks, this basis, when we become acquainted with the development of the English language, when we learn, in which manner the present English by degrees was formed. Therefore a few only remarks on this point. It is notorious that in the fifth century the old Britons, being vexed by the Picts and Scots, called for assistance from Germany the Anglo-Saxon, who defeated these peoples, but then conquered a great deal of Britain. For some time a great number of small separated Anglo-Saxon reigns existed, which were united into one Kingdom by Egbert, a West-Saxon prince. Since this union the West-Saxon dialect got by little and little the superiority and became the only scriptural language. Afterwards the Danes invaded England, but being far inferior to the Anglo-Saxon race in civilization they did not influence the Anglo-Saxon language. The last Anglo-Saxon king, having died without having left any heir, the Normans came over and subdued the English country. The subdued Anglo-Saxon, however, despising the language, manners and laws of the Norman invaders with the greatest tenacity were firmly adhering to their native language, although the French language by and by was introduced as court and judicial language. In church and in the schools too the Norman invaders attempted to naturalize their language. In consequence of this some French words were mixed with the Anglo-Saxon language, but the German character of it was by no means altered. In the reign of the French king Philippe Auguste the English kings having lost their native province in France, and the communication between England and

France having been stopped, the French language in England by and by degenerated and the Anglo-Norman literature began to expire. At that time John Lackland oppressed his Norman barons and so enraged them that a powerful combination was raised against him. The barons being aware of wanting the assistance of the common people, in order to succeed, entered into intimacy with the Anglo-Saxon, from whom separated they had lived many years, they endeavoured after learning their language, and the common people too by degrees complied with getting acquaintance of the language of the Norman nobles. Thus a mixture of two different languages took place, from whence a new language resulted; the Anglo-Saxon element, however, was prevalent in it, although the Norman population was far superior to the common people in civilization. Comparing this new language with a building, the remark, methinks, is not inconvenient: The exterior of this building shows us the greatest simplicity without any superfluous ornaments and decorations, but in the interior of it we find a beautiful harmony and suitableness to the purpose. The builders, who must acknowledge, were practical workmen; for the greatest part they belonged to the Anglo-Saxon race famous for its practical character. That the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of England have been the principal builders of that building nobody will deny, who has a superficial knowledge of the English language. Those parts of speech which are most in use and therefore of most importance, have an Anglo-Saxon origin, for instance the Articles and definitive Pronouns (*a, an, the, this, that, these, those, many, few, some, one, none*), the Adjectives forming irregularly the Comparative and Superlative, the words *more* and *most*, by means of which in the English language the degrees of comparison are formed as often as by the syllables *er* and *est*. Likewise all personal, possessive, relative and interrogative Pronouns, almost all verbs, we call irregular, inclusively all verbs auxiliary (*have, be, shall, will, may, can, must*), by which most moods and tenses are formed, also all Adverbs most in use, and the Prepositions and Conjunctions, a few only excepted, are of Anglo-Saxon origin. These instances, we alledged, may suffice in order to prove that the Anglo-Saxon population had a very great influence on the formation of the English language; we would be able, however, to add to these a good deal more. That the character of this Anglo-Saxon population had been a practical one, we above mentioned and proved. Let us now try to prove, that the character of the English language too, the formation of which especially has been influenced by the Anglo-Saxon race, is a practical one.

Whoever has studied the English grammar must know the principles, the English people made use of in forming their language. The one of them is: If there be two ways leading to the same end, the shorter and more convenient way is to be preferred

to the longer and more impracticable one. The other principle, no less practical, is this: Of two forms signifying the same notion you may choose that, which is most suitable to the notion. — It is not difficult to discern the employment of these two practical principles, when we reflect upon the grammar of the English language. —

The roots of the nouns express the notion with all its essential attributes, hence it is not absolutely necessary for the understanding, that we discern from the signification, whether the object, which the noun means, be good or bad, fine or ugly, male or female or neuter. Of these attributes most languages rendered conspicuous especially the gender of the notion, distinguishing between Substantives of masculine and feminine and neuter gender. In most languages the Substantives signifying male beings have the masculine gender, the Substantives signifying female beings the feminine gender, and the Substantives signifying objects naturally destitute of any sex, have not the neuter gender, but are either masculine or feminine or neuter. — In English you find the three genders too, but here the form of the Substantive is in true, full harmony with the meaning of it, the Englishmen having observed the simple practical rule: „the gender of the Substantive may agree with the natural sex; all nouns, signifying an object destitute of any sex, may be neuter.“ The observing of this rule is nothing else but the following of the above mentioned practical principle: „the shortest and most convenient way is the best.“ As to the gender it is evident that the procedure of the Englishmen was a very practical one. In learning this language you meet no difficulties, but learning the German or Latin, Grecian or French language you must spend much time and study in order to be able to know the gender of the single Substantives.

Considering now the formation of the Plural Number in English we find likewise a very easy and practical method. The roots of the Substantives are not changed as in our German language in many words (*Water* — *Wäter*), several terminations are not used for the formation we speak of, as in Greek and Latin (*æ, i, es, a, us, ei, ai, oi, es, æ*), but we meet a method as simple as possible. To the unchanged root of the Substantive „s“ only is annexed, the pronounciation of which letter is very sharp, in order to prevent any mistake. We call this simple method of forming the Plural number a practical one, because by the Englishmen *one* medium is employed for *one* purpose, other peoples employing *several* mediums, but of no use, since intelligibility thereby does not increase in the least.

We proceed speaking of the arrangement of the words in sentences. No doubt, in English it is a practical one too, since according to the logical laws. It is true, we discern in this point the French influence, but the practical Englishmen did per-

fectionate what they met in the French language. The Subject takes the first place, then the Predicate succeeds, then the Objects dependant on it. Such an arrangement is adequate to the principle: „The form must agree to the substance.“ Therefore it is easy and simple and deserves the approbation of every cogitative being. We call this arrangement a practical one also on that account, because it makes the declension of the Substantives nearly superfluous. Here the Subject is distinguished from the Object by the arrangement, therefore a distinction by peculiar forms is unnecessary, for instance: „The teacher punished the scholar.“ The form of the Subject „teacher“ and of the Object „scholar“ is identical, but a mistake is not possible. — Even though two Objects depend on a Verb, it is not necessary in English to distinguish these two Objects by a different form. The arrangement is sufficient for the distinction. The Dative precedes the Accusative. — „The father gave the child a book.“ — In this sentence „*the father*“ is Nominative, „*the child*“ Dative, and „*a book*“ Accusative, but you find no difference respecting the form. We may therefore state: The English language has originally but two different forms, in order to signify four Cases, one for the Nomn., Dat. and Accus., and another for the Genitive (*father's*, a remnant of the old Anglo-Saxon language). Afterwards the Englishmen made use of the French declension too, forming the Genitive Case by means of the Preposition „of“ (de), and the Dative Case by prefixing the Prepos. „to“ (à). But you may not suppose that they were induced to that imitation by some urgent necessity. I remember of the dialects in Low-Germany, where you find still now-a-days the same peculiarity as in English, but, you may be sure, nobody will feel the necessity of a distinction between Dative and Accusative, I remember of the uncultivated people, that, speaking the High-German language, very often confound these two Cases without being misunderstood.

I cannot help adding but a few words about the above mentioned Genitive-form, a remnant of the old Anglo-Saxon language, in order to prove the practical character of the present English. In the Anglo-Saxon language the Genitive Case was formed by different forms. Of these different forms the English language retained only one form according to that practical principle: For one purpose different means are not necessary, one is sufficient.

Some remarks about the Article may follow.

The English language has a definite and an indefinite Article, like our German language, but the English Article is entirely unchangeable, neither the gender nor the number nor the Case of the Substantive have any influence on its form. No doubt, this phenomenon too makes evident the practical character we impute to the English language. I for my part do not perceive, of what use the different forms of the

Article are in our German language. To intelligibility they do not contribute any thing. It may be allowed, that in German the gender of the Substantive is to be made cognoscible by the Article. But why do we signify quite different genders, numbers and Cases by one and the same form of the Article? I remember but of our German „*der*“ which signifies Nomn. Sing. Mascul., Gen. Sing. Femin., Dat. Sing. Femin., Gen. Plur. Mascul. Fem. and Neutr. — That this signification is a practical one, nobody will assert. — In English the number of the Substantives being made cognoscible by the termination, the gender by the notion, and the Case either by the position or by the termination of the Substantive, nothing else at all is necessary. Therefore I think, the unchangeability of the Article in English is practical, since one form renders as much service as six different forms in German. As to the use of the Article likewise the practical character of the English language appears. In English the Article is used, when its use is necessary, when an individual is to be noted as known or as especially distinguished from others. But in our German language the Article sometimes seems to be unnecessary and superfluous; at least its use does not give a clear idea of the character of that part of speech.

Like the Article in English also the Adjectives are unchangeable respecting the gender, number and case, wheter used as attribute or as predicate, that makes no difference. In logical respect we do not want any inflection of the Adjectives; its various terminations, we meet in other languages, are not essential. For Adjectives always relate to a Substantive or a noun supplying its place. The gender, number and case of these Substantives, we above mentioned, being signified otherwise, a signification by the termination of the Adjective too is unnecessary and superfluous; therefore the practical Englishman abstains from any inflection of the Adjectives.

Forming the degrees of comparison (Comparat. and Superlat.) the Englishman follows sometimes the Anglo-Saxon, sometimes the French formation, according as the law of euphony prescribes. In this regard too the practical character of his language is to be seen. It is true, the Anglo-Saxon and the French elements are the principal elements of the present English, but far from being a promiscuous mixture of both these elements the English is rather a very practical combination of them.

After considering the nouns capable of being declined let us examine the Verb, that is, we know, in all languages capable of being conjugated. The practical Englishman, we have seen, having very much simplified the declension we may presuppose the same as to the conjugation. Indeed according to the above mentioned practical principles in conjugation too the Englishman has removed whatever is not absolutely necessary for understanding. There are three, in many Verbs but two different forms;

if you know these, you are able to form all other tenses and moods (to call, called — to speak, spoke, spoken). You do not meet any terminations to distinguish the Number, because the preceding Subject always makes it cognoscible. You meet but a few terminations to distinguish the single persons (2 p. Sing. Præs. Ind. Act. st and 3 p. S. Præs. Ind. Act. „s“). But even these two terminations are not necessary, and I cannot help accusing the practical Englishman, having not removed these terminations too, of inconsequence, which, however, may be excused, when we consider, that the inflected form of the second person of Sing. Præs. Ind. since several centuries at least in common life no more is in use. We know the form of the second person of Plur., having no inflection, supplies its place. As to the third person of Sing. Ind. Præs. inconsequence less easily may be excused.

The Conjunctive mood in most cases is identical to the Indicative, the practical Englishman having thought a distinction not always necessary, because the Conjunctive commonly is dependant on conjunctions, the notion of which turns the notion of the Indicative into that of the Conjunctive. If necessary, the Verbs auxiliary *may* and *should* are at hand in order to paraphrase.

In regard of the Futur-tense the English language, no doubt, is superior to other languages in spite of the want of terminations for conjugating, since it applies various paraphrases. Speaking of the English conjugation I must mention the practical use, the Englishman makes of his participle terminating in *ing*, by means of which the English language has obtained a superiority even to the ancient classical languages. This use indeed much contributes to the practical character, we impute to the English language. In order to prove that character I remind moreover of the easiness, which appears in forming Verbs from Substantives. Every Substantive may be transformed into a Verb without any alteration (*help Hülfе, to help helfen* etc.).

Finally the practical character of the English language is to be known in the use of the prepositions. Like in Greek you may in English put close together two prepositions, from whence a wonderful acuteness and logical consequence is resulting, you will hardly meet in other languages. On the contrary you meet sometimes a striking logical inconsequence. — In English all original prepositions without any exception govern the Case Objectivus, in order to signify the state of repose and of motion different prepositions commonly are used, in French no distinction at all taking place and in Latin and German different Cases being applied.

So much in order to prove my proposition. I omit to relate and refute what perhaps may be objected to me, being persuaded, that a great deal of those who are acquainted with the English grammar will assent to me.