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Reviews

Linguistics, Morphology, Semantics and Usage

> There are two things which I a confident I can do very well: one is an introduction to any literary work, stating what it is to contain, and how it should be executed in the most perfect manner; the other is a conclusion, showing from various causes why the execution has not been equal to what the author promised to himself and to the public.
>
> *(Samuel Johnson)*

Randolph Quirk, *The Linguist and the English Language.* Edward Arnold, 1974. v, 181pp. Paperback £1.75.

Anyone delving into works on linguistics could be excused for wondering if he could ever get out again. All too often he is engulfed in theories and postulates that cut him off from the realities of existence, from the way in which language functions in a living community. The situation worsens when trying to extricate oneself from the labyrinths of structuralism, formalism, semantics, and semasiology. The light of common day never penetrates to that Stygian darkness. It should be clear that somewhere along the line of linguistic theory there has to be a point of relevancy, a connection with the context of words and their meaning. Professor Quirk provides that relevancy and connection. His book deals with the way in which words have achieved their effects at various stages of their historical usage. In short, he shows what has been done and what can be done with the English language.

Professor Quirk begins by glancing at some of the eighteenth-century writers who concerned themselves with the rational use of language, writers such as Greenwood,Priestly, Tooke, and Bentham. In referring to Bentham, Professor Quirk remarks that he was 'concerned with the social basis of language and drew the distinction — so fruitful for later semantic studies — between the referential and emotive use of symbols' (p.4). Strictly speaking, the emphasis in Bentham's study of language was on the

use of fictional entities. In his *Theory of Fictions* (1814), from which Professor Quirk could profitably have quoted, Bentham argues that language is fundamentally metaphorical in structure. Consider, for example, the statement that 'this body is at rest'. Bentham comments:

> To say that this body is at rest is as much as to say — Here is a body, and it will naturally be supposed a fixed body, and here is another body, meaning the real existing body, which is *at* that first-mentioned body, i.e. attached to it, as if the fictitious body were at a stake, and the real body a beast tied to it.
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> (*Theory of Fictions,* ed. C.K. Ogden)

Bentham's subsequent division into referential and emotive symbols derives from this idea of fictional entities, and such a division strongly influenced I.A. Richards in his experiments with the Prac. Crit. method of analysis.

The two major creative writers from whose works Professor Quirk draws his illustrations to show how words are used in an historical context are Shakespeare and Dickens. It is interesting to see how Professor Quirk tries to adhere to the linguistic creed formulated by de Saussure (i.e. that the linguist can only study language by completely suppressing the past) and yet show the relevance of the phrases used by Shakespeare and Dickens to their age. The effect produced is rather like watching someone trying to have his cake and eat it. When Professor Quirk approaches Shakespeare's use of language in its living context, he makes the important point that such an approach involves a threefold distinction between English as it was about 1600, Shakepeare's interests in his language, and Shakespeare's unique use of English. This type of division seems to have more in common with the modern idea of stylistics than the traditional concept of linguistics.

In approaching Dickens, Professor Quirk recalls an anecdote by W.P. Frith concerning a conversation between Dickens and his friend Augustus Egg at a dinner party they were attending:

> Dickens proposed to thank the cook personally. "'Let us have her in, bless her! and I will address her in appropriate language." "No doubt you would," said Egg; "but, like most good cooks, she has an uncertain temper, and I shouldn't advise you to try it — she wouldn't understand your

> 'appropriate language' as meant seriously, and she might resent it in her own language, which, I believe, is sometimes described by her kitchen companions as 'bad language'."
>
> (p.1)

The use of appropriate language is one of the reasons for so much that is sentimental in Dickens's novels. He knew that in certain situations his characters had to emote so he let them do it. Professor Quirk shows how this sort of turgid prose is really a form of bad blank verse by quoting extracts from *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Little Dorrit.* At his best, Dickens is second to none in English fiction when using language at its most imaginative level. How he attains that level is examined through his use of words for individualization, for typification, as well as structurally and experimentally. The use to which Dickens put foreign dialects is illustrated by reference to the delightful verbal passage of arms between Podsnap and the French guest in *Our Mutual Friend:*

> "I Was Inquiring", said Mr Podsnap ... "Whether You Have Observed in our Streets as We should say, Upon our Pavvy as You would say, any Tokens" — The foreign gentleman with patient curiosity entreated pardon; "But what was tokenz?" "Marks", said Mr Podsnap; "Signs, you know, Appearances — Traces". "Ah! of a Orse?"inquired the foreign gentleman. "We call it Horse", said Mr Podsnap, with forbearance. "In England, Angleterre, England, We Aspirate the 'H' and We Say 'Horse'. Only our Lower Classes Say 'Orse!' " "Pardon", said the foreign gentleman; "I am alwiz wrong!"
>
> (p.19)

A close examination of typographical and stylistic techniques in this passage indicates how well Dickens was able to express the tempo, stress, pitch, and rhythm of the speaking voice.

Foreign languages and their translation are dealt with by Professor Quirk in a disappointingly brief chapter. With so much experimentation in translation by computers, which is of special interest to bilingual countries, he might have said something about this activity. He has chosen to discuss two schools of thought regarding translation as they are expressed in the works of G.W. Dasent and W. Morris. The best-known of Dasent's works is his

translation of the *Njála* Icelandic saga, that of Morris is of his translation of the *Eyrbyggjasaga,* another Icelandic saga. Dasent translated the Icelandic tongue into the contemporary English of the late nineteenth century; Morris tried to capture the spirit and tone of the past in somewhat archaic English. Which is preferable? Professor Quirk feels that it would be invidious to take sides in the matter, though his preference seems to be for Morris:

> We would not wish to grade these two great translators, and we could not if we wished. Their public and their disciples and their disciples' public have amply demonstrated their recognition and appreciation of both approaches to translation. Dasent's sensitive attempt at equivalence of effect, Morris's equally sensitive attempt at transmitting the experience of a scholar-poet reading the literature of a people and an age that he loved.
>
> (p. 109)

The variety of linguistic activities that Professor Quirk discusses in this book makes it a comprehensive and detailed study of its subject. But its value lies, not so much in comprehensiveness and detail, as in the sensitive awareness of literature in context. It is an admirable example of the best in language studies.

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The Public Service Commission, *Talking about English,* Vol. 3, no. 1, November 1976.

In our September 1975 issue I expressed the hope to see more of this readable and instructive aid to the correct use of English in the Public Service. This wish has been granted in the November 1976 issue of *Talking About English*.

The Editor of this leaflet, which laces learning with laughter, quite obviously subscribes to the view that acceptable writing can be acquired without tears. His avowed aim in this issue is to