

# VOLUNTARYISM AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

spontaneous a. resulting from  
natural impulse; not forced  
suggested or caused from outside  
not deliberate or laboured. spontaneity n.

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## ENGLISH IS A CRAZY LANGUAGE

Language is not only one of mankind's oldest social and cultural phenomena, but, as George Orwell and others have pointed out, it is also one of the most subtle and powerful means of social control. The development of language, its evolution, and its transmission by conquest, assimilation, migration, and other ethnic movement, is a complex and enigmatic process. Viewed historically, the evolution of the English language is one of the best examples of voluntaryism. English is clearly a "crazy" language just because no one person or group of people ever sat down and decided to invent it. It is one of those institutions which, as Friedrich Hayek has described, is "the result of human action but not human design". Language, like money, falls in the realm of "the spontaneous order" because by its very nature it is a growing, evolving thing. It may be studied and cultivated, but it may not be fixed without stifling and killing it. The balance of this article will present an overview of the history of the English language (and some of its related areas, such as English dictionaries and grammatical rules) in an effort to demonstrate how one of the world's longer uninterrupted experiments in voluntaryism has proceeded.

The tone for this stage of our inquiry is taken from Rich Lederer's new book *Crazy English* (1989). Well into the book (but after many, many examples of crazy English), he asks us to consider the foreign couple who decided to name their first-born daughter the most beautiful English word they had ever heard. They named the

child Diarrhea. Despite this *faux pas*, the fact is that English is probably the most widely spoken language in the history of our planet. That, however, does not keep it from being full of paradoxes and vagaries. How can a darkroom be lit, silverware be plastic, or tablecloths be made of paper? Why do we drive in the parkway but park in the driveway? Why does your nose run, but your feet smell? Why do we fill out a form by filling it in, or chop a tree down and then chop it up? Why do alarm clocks go off by going on?

The English language is a crazy "quilt" because it was created by great numbers of people over the course of nearly two thousand years. No one sat down with the purpose of inventing it. Consequently, our language reflects the creativity and asymmetry of the large part of the human race that uses it. One out of seven people in the world speaks, writes, or reads it; half the world's books, and the majority of international telephone calls are made in English, sixty percent of the world's radio programs are written in English, and seventy percent of all international mail is written in English. Perhaps one cause for this widespread usage of English is that it has the largest vocabulary of any tongue on earth. *The Oxford English Dictionary* documents over 500,000 words, of which nearly one-half are still in use. By contrast, French speakers have access to less than a third of that number, while Russians made do with only a quarter. Primitive peoples, in comparison, make do with vocabularies of about 20,000 words.

## THE ORIGINS AND ROOTS OF ENGLISH

From where do our words come? They come from almost everywhere. Robert Claiborne, in his handbook of word origins *The Roots of English* (1989), cites the following examples: "Alcohol" and "alkali" come from Arabic; "amok" from Malay; "bizarre" from the mysterious Basque tongue of northern Spain. "Coach" comes from a Hungarian town; "parka" from the Samayedes of the northern Urals; "skunk" and "chile" from the Native Americans; and "taboo" from Tahitian. "Okay" was brought into English by slaves from West Africa; "corral" by Mexican cattlemen - who learned it from Portuguese sailors, who learned it from the Hottentot herders of southern Africa.

But though English has plundered the whole earth for words, such exotic birds of passage account for only a small fraction of its oversized lexicon.

The large majority of English words have come from three root sources. These are: Primitive Germanic; Latin and its descendants, the Romance languages; and Greek. The first of these, Primitive Germanic, is the ancestor of English, as well as modern German, Dutch, Yiddish, and the Scandinavian tongues. It is responsible for giving us words for body parts (arm, head, eye, brain), family terms (brother, sister, etc.), many of our everyday verbs (have, be, come, go, etc.). Latin, the language of the Roman empire, has given us French, Spanish, and Italian, and through these sister languages, has contributed more than half of the words in the English language. The third root of English is the Greek language, which was spoken in the eastern Mediterranean during the Roman era. Greek indirectly influenced English by way of Latin, but also had a direct effect by being the source of most of our medical and scientific vocabularies.

The interesting feature of these three roots is that they, themselves, can be traced back to a common origin. At least half of the languages spoken today (mostly those in the western world, including the Indian sub-continent) can be traced back to a remote ancestor language. This common taproot has contributed at least eighty percent of the words in English. Since this parent language was never written down, for ages it was lost to scholars. Its modern rebirth began with Sir William Jones, a man of letter and an English judge in India during the late 18th Century. Jones was interested in Sanskrit, and also knew Latin and Greek. As his linguistic studies progressed, he could not help but notice many similarities among the three. The Sanskrit *trayas* (three), the Latin *tres*, and the Greek *trias* all resembled one another, as did the Sanskrit *sarpa* (snake), and the Latin *serpens*. The Sanskrit word for god, *devas*, was close to the Latin *divus* (divine). Sir William found hundreds of other parallels, which led him to conclude that there had been some "universal" language, which later philologist termed Indo-Euro-

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pean. Since then, scholars have identified some of its oldest components: Sanskrit, Hittite, Old Latin, Gothic and Old English.

The ancient Indo-Europeans probably lived in the area of the valley of the middle Danube and flourished in the centuries after 6000 B.C. They were farmers, raising grain crops, vegetables, and domesticated animals. Archeological evidence indicates that they were among the first people to use animal power to till their fields. By 3500 B.C., groups of Indo-European migrants had spread all over northwestern Europe, and by 2000 B.C. they had conquered what we now refer to as Greece, Italy, and the rest of the Mediterranean basin. As they fanned out toward Asia Minor and India, they took their native language with them, but their tongue split into dialects, which eventually evolved into the distinct languages, some of which were the direct precursors of our modern day English.

## THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH

The English language of today has been in the development stages for over a score of centuries. The political and social events that have affected the English peoples in their natural life have also affected their language. Celtic (a kin of modern Welsh and Breton) was probably the first Indo-European language spoken in England, around 2000 B.C. Several centuries later, the Norsemen conquered a large part of northern and central Britain. Being outnumbered by the natives, they learned their language, though there existed a considerable infusion of Norwegian words. Similarly, Latin was introduced when Britain became a province of the Roman empire during the first century A.D. Many new words, particularly in the fields of warfare, trade, cookery, and building were contributed by the new invaders.

With the decline of the Roman empire, groups of Germanic tribes living along the North Sea were able to migrate into the island of Britain. They brought their own Germanic speech ashore during the invasions of the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. The migrants were drawn from three main tribes - the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes - and the language they spoke was called Old English. The Christianization of England at the end of the 6th century A.D. and the settlement of most of England and Scotland by the Anglo-Saxons resulted in further changes to the language of the continent. Old English, which lasted from about 450 A.D. until about 1150 A.D., began to develop regional dialects of its own. They were West Saxon, Kentish, Mercian, and Northumbrian, and differed from each other mostly in pronunciation.

The end of the Old English period was marked by the Norman Conquest of 1066. This invasion of Frenchmen had a substantial effect on the English language, more than any other event in its history. Since the new governing class in both church and state were made up of the new conquerors, their effect on the native language was far out of proportion to their numbers. By the time their assimilation was complete, some two centuries later, English was greatly changed in both its form and vocabulary.

By the end of the Middle English period (1150-1500), the influence of French was on the wane. One of the effects of the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) was to bring about the decline of French, which, after all, was still the language of an enemy people. At the same time, the appearance of the Black Death ensured the economic importance of the native laboring class (workers were in great demand due to the shortage of hands caused by the plague), and with it the importance of the English language which they still spoke. Nevertheless, there were many important changes in the grammatical structure of English as well as a considerable transference of words from French to Middle English.

The Modern English of today, which we recognize as Standard English, dates from about the beginning of the 1500s. The dialects which had developed at the end of the Old English period and which continued to evolve during the following centuries became dominated by the language spoken in the East Midland district, in which London, the political capital and commercial center of the country, was located. The district itself was centrally located between northern and southern England and was the most populous and most agriculturally important region of England. Furthermore,

the presence of the new universities of Oxford and Cambridge contributed to the rise of Standard English. This became known as the London standard. The press became another powerful force in promoting a standard, uniform language throughout the land. By 1640 (the printing press had been introduced in England by William Caxton in 1476), over 20,000 books and pamphlets written in English had been printed. Other factors contributing to the diminution of regional dialects were the spread of popular education, the rising literacy of the population, and the development of rapid means of communication and transportation.

## LANGUAGE STANDARDS AND THE ACADEMICS

Although all of these elements have contributed to modern English, there are still three broad types of English. They are the *spoken standard*, which is the language heard in the conversation of educated people; the *written standard*, the language of prose and poetry found in books; and the *vulgar or illiterate slang* of those who are ignorant or indifferent to the ideals of correctness by which the educated are governed. The interesting thing about these types of English is that none of them is wrong. The spread of English to North America and Australia has affected standard English. Even the spoken standard, or as it is sometimes called, the *received standard*, is something that varies in different parts of the English-speaking world.

Unlike French or Italian, the English language is anarchic in the sense that there has never existed one central authority to determine the standard language. In France in 1647, the grammarian, Vaugelas, had defined good usage as the speech habits of the sounder members of the King's court, as well as conformity to the practice in writing of the sounder contemporary authors. In 1653, Cardinal Richelieu had authorized the formation of the Academie Française, composed of writers, bookish nobles, magistrates, and amateur men of letters. Its principal function was to give exact rules of language. The Academie became the Supreme Court of the French language, and set itself the task of preparing a dictionary. Work began on the dictionary in 1639, but it was not published until 1694. In Italy, the Academy della Crusca was founded even earlier, in 1582. Its purpose, too, was to purify the Italian language. In 1612, it published a dictionary, *Vocabolario Degli Accademici Della Crusca*, which became the standard of the Italian language.

The earliest calls for a language academy in England were voiced during the last half of the 16th century. A proposal was made in 1660, for an academy "to purify our Native Language from Barbarism", and in 1664, the Royal Society voted that there should be a committee for improving the English language. John Dryden, the famous English poet, was a member. Though nothing came of the committee meetings, by the end of the century another notable writer, Daniel Defoe, was agitating for an academy for England. In his 1697 *Essay Upon Projects*, he concluded that it should be "as criminal to coin words as money". A decade later, Jonathan Swift published *A Proposal For Correcting, Improving, And Ascertaining The English Tongue*, because he saw "no absolute necessity why any language should be perpetually changing". Though not proposing a formal academy, Swift suggested that His Majesty appoint a society to govern the language, but no such institution was established.

By the mid-1700s, various writers in England such as Alexander Pope, William Washburton, and Samuel Johnson were thinking about the compilation of a new English dictionary based upon the usage of recognized authorities. Pope drew up a list of writers whose works he thought should be examined, and somehow this list fell into the hands of Samuel Johnson. This was the impetus for Johnson's famous dictionary which was published in 1755. In the preface to his *Dictionary*, Johnson noted his objections to Dryden's and Swift's idea for an English academy to "fix" the language:

[foreign] academies have been instituted, to guard the avenues of their languages, to restrain fugitives, and repulse intruders; but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been vain; sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by strength. ... If an academy should be established ... which I, who can

never wish to see dependance multiplied, hope the spirit of English liberty will hinder or destroy [it].

### ENGLISH CAN TAKE CARE OF ITSELF

In 1761, Joseph Priestley echoed Johnson's negative view by inserting the following passage in his *Grammar*:

As to a public Academy, invested with authority to ascertain the use of words, which is a project that some persons are very sanguine in their expectations from, I think it is not only unsuitable to the genius of a free nation, but in itself calculated to reform and fix a language. We need make no doubt but that the best forms of speech will, in time, establish themselves by their own superior excellence: and, in all controversies, it is better to wait the decisions of time, which are slow and sure, than to take those of synods, which are often hasty and injudicious.

In effect, Priestley and others were recognizing that good usage does not depend on the force of law and language academies, but rather must be based on rational principles and rules, which are generally known and accepted. The so-called laws of language are simply brief, summary statements of accepted usage. Since no one has been appointed to be the supreme arbiter of the English language, standard English must rest upon the sanction of custom and good sense. As the English language has evolved, there is no absolute standard of rightness. Each speaker or writer recognizes that usage is his or her own affair, with due regard to the usage of other good writers and speakers. The duty of determination falls upon each of us, just as it does in every other affair of life. As Ayn Rand once said: "Who is the final authority in ethics? ... Who 'decided' what is the right way to make an automobile ...? Any man who cares to acquire the appropriate knowledge and to judge, at and for his own risk and sake."

As Bloomfield and Newmark, in their book *A Linguistic Introduction to the History of the English* (1967), have put it, the linguistic authoritarian laments the corruption of English and tends to disapprove of any changes except perhaps for words labelling new inventions. On the opposing hand, the linguistic libertarian "feels that English can take care of itself, as it did for hundreds of years before people in the seventeenth century began to worry about the state of English." English-speaking people have always struggled with spelling and grammatical rules, but it was not until the 1600s that anyone recognized the importance of setting down "rules" for good usage. Rules for the use of shall/will, should/would were said to have been laid out by the 17th Century grammarian, John Wallis; that about the meaning of a double negative by John Lowth in 1762. In 1765, William Ward, in his *Grammar of the English Language*, drew up the forerunners of the rules which are found in modern grammar books.

A major force behind a standardized grammar and spelling in England were the commercial printers and publishers. It was they who led the way to orthographical regularity in the 17th and 18th Centuries. Formal spelling "reform", however, did not really get underway until the 19th Century. The development of several forms of shorthand, the interest of both English and American Philological Societies in the 1880s, and the formation of the American Spelling Reform Association in 1876, all contributed to a concern for a more consistent and simplified spelling. In 1906, Andrew Carnegie funded a quarter of a million dollars to the Simplified Spelling Board. The main purpose of most of these movements was to eliminate some of the most obvious anomalies in the traditional system. Generally speaking, though, they all relied on voluntary means, and neither the English nor the American public was ever persuaded of the value of their suggestions.

### THE DICTIONARY

One consequence of the absence of any central authority to set up and enforce spelling or grammatical standards in the language, is that English writers and speakers give their dictionaries and grammar books an aura of authority and a degree of respect unknown or rare among people using other languages. The dictionary and the traditional prescriptive grammar have been made the final arbiter

of correctness in English, and although they have represented quite a unifying force, there are often numerous differences between authoritative and reputable dictionaries. The controversy surrounding the appearance of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*, in the early 1960s, is some indication that not all dictionaries are considered equal. Many commentators thought that the compilers' permissive attitude represented an abdication of their responsibility to judge good English usage.

English lexicographers, until the mid-19th Century, considered it to be their role to register words only deemed "good" for literary usage. The first effective protest in England against the supremacy of this literary view of dictionary-making was made in 1857 by Dean Trench, in a paper he read before the English Philological Society. His point was that the dictionary maker should be a historian and not a critic of good language usage. The philologist's view is that the dictionary should be a record of all the words - current and obsolete - of that language, with all their meanings and uses. This view emphasizes the fact that languages continually grow and progress.

The first work to carry the title of *The English Dictionary* was produced in 1623 by Henry Cockeram. Up until then the chief motive behind dictionary-making in England was to assist the students of foreign languages. For the next century, English lexicography concentrated on dictionaries of hard or difficult words. The first attempt to list all the words in the language was made by Nathaniel Bailey, when he published his *Universal Etymological Dictionary* in 1721. This was followed by Samuel Johnson's dictionary in 1755. Although marred by errors, Johnson catalogued the English vocabulary much more fully than had ever been done before, and supplied thousands of quotations illustrating the use of words.

### THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

The next major advance in dictionary-making did not come about until the late 19th Century. In 1888, the first volume of the monumental *Oxford New English Dictionary, On Historical Principles* appeared, under the editorship of James Murray. Murray himself was an extraordinary dictionary-maker, but his compilation (not to be completed until after he died, and made with the help of other editors and hundreds of other helpers) has yet to be outdone. Murray's task was to trace the life history of every English word in use or known to have been used since 1150 A.D. By the time the project was completed in 1928, the dictionary contained 15,488 pages covering more than 400,000 words and phrases (by comparison, the recently published second edition contains 21,728 pages and defines more than half a million words).

One of the main differences between Murray's dictionary (referred to hereafter as the O.E.D.) and others is that in all modern dictionaries, except the O.E.D., the quotations are used to help make the definitions clearer or to provide information about the entry under which it appears. In the O.E.D., quotations are used to show the historical development of the different significations of the word under which they are given. Other special features of the O.E.D. are the completeness with which variations in orthography are given, the full and scientific etymologies, the phonetic precision with which British pronunciation is given, and the elaborate subdivisions of meaning.

The original idea for the O.E.D. came from the English Philological Society, which was founded in 1842. The object of this organization was to investigate the structure, affinities, and history of language. In 1857, the Society began collecting words which had not been included in Johnson's work of 1755, or a more recent work by Dr. Charles Richardson, whose *New Dictionary of the English Language* appeared in 1837. The Society invited the public to help in assembling these new words, and the project was so successful that some members thought it would be wise to compile a new dictionary altogether. In early 1858, the Society adopted this idea, and for the next twenty years, volunteer editors and researchers worked on the project. Although headway was made in collecting materials, it was not until the University of Oxford's Clarendon Press agreed to pay an editor, James Murray, who began working full-time on the dictionary in 1879, that real progress began.

From a voluntarist viewpoint, the most interesting aspect of the work of the O.E.D. was that although the work was of national, and even international importance, it was basically a private undertaking, spurred by the hope of commercial profit. James Murray had no formal university training or degree, but did have a formidable knowledge of world-wide languages. One of his biographers referred to him as the “most learned bank clerk in England”. Brought up on the English-Scottish border, Murray was struck from childhood with the failure of political boundaries between languages (what linguists refer to as an isogloss). By the time he took over the reins of the dictionary project, he had worked in the international department of a British bank, and then taught in a private school for a number of years. He had also been an active participant, writer, and researcher for the Philological Society.

Rather than dissipate his energies on a number of smaller projects, he decided to devote all of his time to the dictionary, in an effort to do one big thing well. The dictionary became his life’s work, and was not only a labor of love, but one of near-martyrdom, due to the strenuous efforts he put forth on its behalf. Murray’s only involvement with the English government was his being awarded a Civil List Pension of £250 a year, beginning in 1884. Although Murray had help from nearly 1000 voluntary helpers, and eventually from a number of assistant editors, nearly half of the work of the O.E.D. was done by him before his death in 1915. It was his obstinate resistance to all the pressures upon him to stop short of excellence which insured the lasting quality of the O.E.D. His efforts surely proved that what is worth doing, is worth doing well, and that good work, once in print, becomes an eternal inheritance which remains of value for generations to come.

#### LANGUAGE AND POLITICAL CONTROL

It is fortunate for English-speaking people the world over that Murray and others devoted their lives to the publication of the O.E.D. No matter what changes the English language undergoes in the future, the O.E.D. will remain a monument to its inherently voluntarist history. One of the most likely shifts is an increasing tendency away from unrestricted evolution toward increasing political control over it wherever it is spoken. Indeed, both linguists and political thinkers have recognized the important relationship between language and political control. Naom Chomsky has noted that, “in a State such as the United States, where the government can’t control the people by force, it had better control what they think.” Indeed, one of the ways to control what people think is to control the language and concepts they use to express political ideas. The purpose of Newspeak in George Orwell’s novel *1984* was to not only set up a means of communication, but to act as a subtle, yet effective, means of oppression. Newspeak eliminated “undesirable” words, and by diminishing the breadth of the vocabulary, diminished the range of thought. All this was done to make “all heretical, unorthodox thinking literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words.” Orwell realized that “freedom cannot endure without a highly developed language” to express a broad range of ideas.

Language is one of the most important and the most powerful weapons in the hands of a State that is dedicated to controlling and transforming human beings into slavery. As Orwell put it, the purpose of language and thought control is as “an instrument with which to express the philosophies and thoughts that are permitted”, and to make “all other sorts of thinking impossible”. In a recent book, *Cogs in the Wheel* (1988), about “The Formation of Soviet Man”, Mikhail Heller has observed that Soviet language is being “used to destroy the capacity for logical thought and to shut people’s eyes to the true nature of things”. As Orwell predicted, (the Soviet) language is one of the most important means of preventing people from acquiring more knowledge than the State wishes. The Soviet State does this by deciding what a word means and the circumstances in which it can be used. This is accomplished by possessing absolute power over the word and the means of transmitting it. This is why censorship was introduced in the Soviet Union ten days after the beginning of the October Revolution in 1917. Within the space of a year, all non-Communist periodicals and newspapers were shut down, and total control over the printing press was established. As Lenin asked in 1920, since

“ideas are much more fatal things than guns, why should a man be allowed to buy a printing press and disseminate pernicious opinions calculated to embarrass the government?”

Soviet censors regard the world as a semantic system in which the information that is let through is the only reality. Instead of expanding vocabulary and accuracy of thought, emphasis is put on reducing independent thinking. In terms of truth or falsehood, the objective sense of the world no longer exists. Instead of dealing with real things, the censor hopes that his world view will be accepted. Only what the censor approves is said to exist; what he disapproves has no independent existence. To illustrate the effects of language control in the Soviet Union, Heller relates a story by a Soviet author who writes about a leader who possesses magical powers. The politician declares a river’s water to be vodka. “But the people who drink the water complain that though it tastes like vodka, it doesn’t make them drunk.” Language control in the Soviet Union is designed to make people accept anything the authorities want them to believe.

#### LIBERTY THE MOTHER NOT THE DAUGHTER OF ORDER

Fortunately for the human race, there always seem to remain some hardheaded realists that insist on maintaining contact with reality and thinking for themselves. At least these people, however few they might be, realize that appearances are not always what they seem to be. It is these people who appreciate the fact that though diversity appears to spawn chaos, it is usually out of the voluntary-ist vortex of great diversity that true order springs.

The absence of compulsory standards has not hindered the development of English. As this overview of its history demonstrates, this is why English is such a rich, vibrant, “crazy” language. Just as “Liberty is the mother of order, not the daughter of order”, so voluntarism has been the mother of our English tongue. Lacking any official or centralized standards, English has evolved to become one of the world’s most widely used languages. A clear parallel exists between English and other categories of the spontaneous order. The lack of a centralized, monopolistic justice system (police, courts, and law) would not impede the development of “common law” and “order” in a voluntarist society. Just as dictionary-makers compete to provide their customers with the best possible rules and service at the lowest possible price.

Among many of the important institutions comprising the spontaneous order, one of them has remained largely unsullied by statist intervention. Voluntarism has dominated the English language for most of its history (fortunately the teaching of language by the public schools only began two or three centuries ago). Money, another major institution of the spontaneous order, has been under the thumb of statist control almost since its very inception. If the history and present status of these two institutions is compared, is there any doubt about which institution works more smoothly, and whether voluntarism or statism is a better method on which to base our social life?

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