

Achmanova, Ol'ga Sergejevna

## What is the English we use?

*Brno studies in English*. 1969, vol. 8, iss. 1, pp. [27]-29

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/118034>

Access Date: 30. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

# WHAT IS THE ENGLISH WE USE?

OLGA AKHMANOVA

*Moscow University*

The metalinguistic situation being what it is, one naturally begins by explicating the terms. 'English' ('the English language') is a vastly diversified natural language used not only for intranational, but also, and increasingly so for international communication. 'We' are the 'foreigners', the 'linguisticians', who habitually employ the aforementioned language—more particularly, those whose profession it is to train Anglists, both as research workers and teachers. The verb *to use* denotes the employment of English by the aforesaid persons—mainly in connection with their professional activities.

The different kinds or varieties of English have long been known as 'British', 'American', 'Australian', 'Canadian' etc., and, more recently, as 'West African', 'Indian'—even 'Scandinavian' or 'German'. Of these only the American variant was at one time proudly and romantically described as a separate 'language': the lower we go down the scale, the more preposterous the term becomes. The term 'dialect' would suggest the existence of a more acceptable form of the language and is therefore inapplicable to 'British' or 'American' English. It is therefore quite natural that the difference should be specified as 'accent', for this is the only peculiarity of the different kinds of English that immediately strikes the eye.<sup>1</sup>

To return to the 'foreign linguisticians'. Even if we assume that he has successfully made his choice of 'accent' (including the 'mid-atlantic' compromise—perhaps the English of the future, most suitable not only for sport round-ups on the radio, for example, but international scientific conferences as well) the question in the title will still remain unanswered. Even in its oral form, speech implies choice and combination of words, their arrangement into sentences and supraphrasal unities. In writing the niceties of enunciation do not figure at all. What, then, is the English we use when we write? Or rather, what is the English we use in intellectual international communication, predominantly in its written form? Are there any varieties to choose from? If so, are they 'national' ones? Territorial and historical, or functional and synchronic?

The 'linguistics of speech'—*la linguistique de la parole*—has been neglected too long for a consistent metalanguage to be available in discussion of linguistic performance: it is hard to state in so many words what it is that makes a particular sentence sound 'un-English'. Perhaps the only way to try and make the point is to adduce a few examples of word-combination and sentence-construction out of the millions of instances so lavishly supplied by users of scientific English all over the world (for obvious reasons the sources will remain unnamed):

1. *We touched three topics during the lecture.*
2. *We examined the degree in which they had assimilated the language.*

3. *We verified the hypothesis that the language patterns of the articulation and tonation of an individual are definitely fixed in the ages from 5—6 to 13—14.*
4. *There are many homonyms obstructing communication in Modern English.*
5. *The discrimination of homonyms is influenced by the user's knowledge.*
6. *Few homonyms have no clue of discrimination.*
7. *We laid a stress on the meanings and feelings of the words and surveyed the following points through opinionaires.*
8. *In order to achieve clarity and quick orientation of discussion, and in order to make this partial task stand out...*
9. *Construction A is counterposed to construction B.*
10. *Their names are worthy of memorising.<sup>2</sup>*

The linguistics of speech is by no means the only neglected domain among the numerous disciplines concerned with human communication. Very little is known about the mutual relationship of thought and language—especially in the case of abstract 'scientific' thinking. Does one go on thinking in one's native language even when the subject matter is not only general and impersonal, but also one regularly and habitually dealt with in all kinds of linguistic garb? If so, then the question is best discussed in terms of 'translation', for this is the term which most naturally comes to mind when another language, a different semiotic system, is to be substituted for the original one.

Like most linguistic terms, 'translation' is polysemantic. Of its different meanings the one most immediately relevant here is N 2 in the *Dictionary*—'conveying the information, contained in a given corpus (proizvedeniye reči) by means of a different language or semiotic system.<sup>3</sup> If that other 'language' is a natural one, does translation always imply travesty, does it always result in something that is not only unlike, but also inferior to the original?

In recent years the different aspects of translation were discussed mainly in connection with the various projects of mechanical retrieval of information. In this connection it has been repeatedly proclaimed that change from one language to another can be effected with speed and efficiency provided the niceties of linguistic expression are jettisoned from the start: a translation must be intelligible to those who possess the necessary specialized knowledge in the particular special subject, no more. Thus, for example, it is assumed that the sentence 'Moreover, is recommended all cables of antenna rigging reliable to insulate from other cables adjacent with them' can be with a considerable degree of probability be comprehended by the specialist! If the algorithm is still further improved and the most obvious 'non-grammaticalities' eliminated, the sentence 'Moreover, it is recommended to insulate reliably all cables of antenna rigging from other cables adjacent to them' will be regarded as acceptable without qualification.<sup>4</sup>

What, then, is the English we use? And, above all, what is the English we ought to use? Have we really made up our minds and decided to free ourselves from the conventions of 'good' 'idiomatic' etc. English, no longer even to attempt to produce the genuine article?

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'It is not common to speak of "British dialect" in reference to cultivated English speech, and Americans are generally resentful of being told they speak "American dialect" when reference is had to the speech of educated people... It is quite different with the word "accent": an American

may inoffensively be described as having a "New England accent" or a "Southern accent", and of course, all Americans speak of the English as having an "English accent". Einar Haugen, 'Dialect, Language, Nation', *American Anthropologist* 68.4. 924 (1966). '... American varieties of English, if they use Standard English, can be regarded as the same dialect with a different accent. Indeed it can be maintained that educated American usage is no more different from educated English usage than educated Scottish is.' P. D. Stevens, 'Varieties of English' *Papers in Language and Language Teaching* 83 (Oxford, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> The following is a 'translation' of the above sentences into what the author thinks is 'English' in the ordinary sense of the term (provided, of course, that the purport of the sentences has been correctly apprehended):

1. We touched on three subjects (covered three topics?) during the lecture.
2. We tried to establish the degree to which the language had been assimilated.
3. We tested the hypothesis that an individual's articulation and intonation patterns become fully established between the ages of 5-6 to 13-14.
4. A considerable number of homonyms in Modern English hinder understanding (interfere with communication).
- 5, 6. The discrimination of homonyms reflects the user's knowledge of the language. Normally the discrimination of homonyms is made possible by various linguistic means. Few homonyms offer no clue whatsoever.
7. We concentrated (we were particularly concerned with) the meanings and connotations of words; we checked on the following points by means of opinionaires.
8. Construction A is set against construction B.
9. For clarity and to assist discussion, as well as to bring out this particular point...
10. Their names deserve to be remembered.

<sup>3</sup> O. S. Akhmanova, *Slovar' lingvističeskich terminov* 316-7 (Moscow, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> *Mašinnyj perevod i prikladnaja lingvistika* 10. 131-2 (Moscow, 1967).

## RESUMÉ

### Jaké angličtiny užíváme?

Pro mezinárodní vědecké styky má velký význam angličtina. Termínu „angličtina“ se však užívá stále méně a méně přesně: má se pod „angličtinou“ rozumět „přirozený“ semiotický systém, který se realizuje v projevech vzdělaných „přirozených“ nositelů, nebo má být rozšířen natolik, aby bez rozlišení pokrýval všechny „náhražky“ angličtiny, jichž přibývá současně s jejím rozšiřováním? Článek se snaží otázku přesněji zformulovat s přihlédnutím k lingvistickým vzorům a s odkazem na literaturu předmětu.

