

# A BRITON CONCEDES OUR LANGUAGE

**T**HE "JEALOUSY COMPLEX" which some of our writers are attributing to the English in their judgments of American books does not attach to all. Mr. E. B. Osborn is one of those who sees beauty and even interest in the American language, and does not merely wave it aside because it is not wholly English. His one impregnable point is that English and not American is the predestined universal tongue, and consequently dwellers in this land of ours must perforce learn English while his own countrymen will not be under the same obligation to acquire American, or "Statesish," if we go so far as to adopt so hideous a word. Mr. Osborn, who writes for the London *Morning Post*, is reconciled to the inevitable, and more or less enjoys the fulfilment of prophecies uttered in the early days of our life as a nation that "the language spoken by the American people would diverge widely from that spoken in England." For example:

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"The new circumstances under which we are placed," wrote Thomas Jefferson in 1813, 'call for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects. An American dialect will therefore be formed. And nearly a quarter of a century before this another famous American—Noah Webster—ventured upon a prophecy even more bold and specific. In his 'Dissertations on the English Language,' printed in 1789, and dedicated to Benjamin Franklin, that master of homespun speech, he formulated the following declaration of linguistic independence: 'Numerous local causes, such as a new country, new associations of people, new combinations of ideas in arts and sciences, and some intercourse with tribes wholly unknown in Europe, will introduce new words into the American tongue. These causes will produce, in a course of time, a language in North America as different from the future language of England as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from the German, or from one another.' These authorities, particularly Webster, did not make anything like a sufficient allowance for the various factors that were to put the brake on the process of divergence through a twofold change—twofold because English also is a living language with its own principles of growth. They did fully take into account the stabilizing influence of the books that are the common property of both peoples—the Bible which dominates the speech of either from the cradle to the tomb and, next in consequence, the works of the undying dramatist which are still so widely read on both sides of the Atlantic that there is even now much truth in the saying that English and Americans alike are 'the subjects of King Shakespeare.' One of the factors in question could not, of course, be foreseen by Webster and Jefferson. They never dreamed of that vast improvement in transoceanic communications which has brought New York relatively nearer to London to-day than it was to Boston or even

Philadelphia, when Jefferson was President, and has brought about a steady exchange of ideas, opinions, and the gossip which bears slang words and phrases in its petulant current. Then English authority, even when its influence is unconfessed, counts for a good deal. And, strange to say, the American politician, tho indulging in twisting the Lion's tail or 'defying the nations of Europe at a clam-bake' (like the statesman in George Ade's 'Fables in Slang') still uses the Johnsonian diction with the 'highly-charged and heavy-shotted' periods (to use Matthew Arnold's phrase) which was spoken in our political orations and written in our leading articles fifty or sixty years ago."

The Americans, Mr. Osborn admits, have now "an exuberant vernacular, which is more than a new dialect, if not yet a separate language." Taking Mr. H. L. Mencken's book on "The American Language" as his point of departure he brings out some interesting reflections on the comparative speech of the two nearly related peoples:

"The Americans have always coined new words and similitudes much faster and with more audacity than we do, and the result is that we really need a guide to their speech and grammar, such as Mr. H. L. Mencken, who has just published a revised edition of his famous treatise—a much more entertaining work than any lexicon that was ever compiled, not excepting Dr. Johnson's. Mr. Mencken's point of view closely resembles that of Mr. Dooley, who once said: 'When we Americans are through with the English language, it will look as if it had been run over by a musical comedy.' The vernacular of his compatriots, he thinks, is full of what Bret Harte called the 'sabre-cuts of Saxon.' When a new problem turns up for the word-smith, he believes that the Americans show superior imaginativeness and resourcefulness; for example, *movie* is better than *cinema*, and 'tis a gladder and a

wiser thing to call the fender in front of a steam-engine a *cow-catcher* than a *plow*. The American language, he insists, offers a far greater variety of synonyms than ours; to take a case in point, transatlantic equivalents for *drunk* are *piffled*, *spifflicated*, *awry-eyed*, *tanked*, *snooted*, *stewed*, *ossified*, *slopped*, *fidilled*, *edged*, *loaded*, *het-up*, *frazzled*, *jugged*, *soused*, *jiggered*, *corned*, *jagged*, and *hunned*. Farmer and Henley place only *corned* and *jagged* among English synonyms, and I think *tanked*, *loaded*, and one or two others have come to us through American humorists on and off the stage. Even in the matter of new drinks, surely an inspiring theme, we are inferior at finding picturesque names; thus we call a mixture of whisky and soda a *whisky-and-soda*, whereas in America it has the poetical

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name of *high-ball*. It is some consolation to know that, tho Americans may invent such pleasant appellations for cunning comminglings of 'hard' ingredients, as *golden-slipper*, *whisky-daisy*, *blue-blazer*, and *white-plush* (to give four names as yet unknown here), they will have to come to England to get a chance of drinking them! Often what seems an American neologism turns out to be the revival of an old English word or meaning (e. g., *mad* in the sense of *angry*), or a simple employment of that franchise of our language which many great authors have taken

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of drinking them! Often what seems an American neologism turns out to be the revival of an old English word or meaning (*e. g.*, *mad* in the sense of *angry*), or a simple employment of that franchise of our language which many great authors have taken advantage of (*e. g.*, the use of *tip-toe* as a verb which is found in 'Clarissa Harlowe,' where we are told 'Mabel *tip-toed* it to her door'). And we English may welcome, indeed we have welcomed, many of the terms which are translations of Indian words (*war-path*, *pale-face*, *fire-water*, &c., &c.). And I for one have a liking for the metaphorical phrases, familiar to readers of Bret Harte and Mark Twain, which recall memories of spacious days in the wild and wonderful West."

Mr. Osborn surrenders the British point of view and grants that nothing they can say "is likely to prevent the free development of the amazing tongue which one American authority—Mr. Rupert Hughes, wishes to call 'Statesish' or 'Statish.'" He knows—

"The Americans will go on incorporating the slang of their vast polyglot cities (*e. g.*, *guy*, which is the Jewish *goyim*) into their language, and inventing purely artificial words (*sock-dolager*, *rambunctious*, *scallywampus*, *exfluncticate*, and *guyascutis* are examples of those lang-nebbit terrors . . . one or two, such as *scrumptious* and *skedaddle* are now a part of English slang), and cultivating bad grammar (like the Governor of a State who used *has went* in a public oration), and reviving the multiple negatives which were a characteristic strange to say, of Old English (Mr. Mencken gives an example of a char-lady who asked a friend: 'You *don't* know *nobody* what *don't* want *nothing* done for them, do you?'). Nothing can prevent them—except the common sense they unquestionably possess—from creating a language which shall be an amalgam of all the slang of emigrants from every European land. But, since English is manifestly destined to become the universal language, they may have to pay a penalty for a policy which, to quote Mr. Rupert Hughes once more, is prompted by the desire to 'put off livery and cease to be the butlers of another people's language.' They will have to learn English in order to communicate with the rest of the world. But we, and other intelligent foreigners, shall not be compelled, heaven be praised for it, to plunge into the *cloaca maxima* of their polyglot speech—we shall be safe in refusing to learn 'Statesish.'"