

# **Society for Pure English, Tract 01 (1919) eBook**

## **Society for Pure English, Tract 01 (1919)**

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## SOCIETY for PURE ENGLISH (S.P.E.)

The Society was founded in 1913, and was preparing to enter on its activities, when the declaration of war in Aug. 1914 determined the Committee to suspend proceedings until the national distraction should have abated. They met again after the Armistice in 1918 and agreed to announce their first issues for October 1919. Although present conditions are not as favourable as could be wished, it would seem that the public are disposed to attend to literary matters, and that the war has even quickened the interest and increased the number of those to whom the special objects of the Society will be most intelligible and attractive.

A false start is a misfortune, and recovery from its confusion must have an awkward appearance, for which it is needless to make further apology or explanation.

### 1. *The title of the society.*

In calling itself the Society for Pure English it was not overlooked that the word Pure might carry a wrong suggestion. It should be explained that it does not denote, as it is sometimes used to denote, the idea that words of foreign origin are *impurities* in English; it rather assumes that they are not; and the Committee, whether wisely or unwisely, thought a short title of general import was preferable to a definition which would misrepresent their purpose by its necessary limitations.

### 2. *Financial.*

The founders were originally confident that they could carry on their work without asking for any subscription from the members; and although the conditions of prices and commodities are now wholly changed and altogether unfavourable, they still hope that they may be able to keep to their scheme. If the publications of the Society are of sufficient merit, their profits should cover the expenses of an unsalaried staff; and though it shall be optional for their authors to retain a share of such prospective profits, it is hoped that most of those who contribute their work will be willing to allow all the profits to go into the funds of the Society. In the place of a small subscription, which it is as inconvenient regularly to collect as it is to pay, the secretary invites donations of any amount, great or small, which will be duly acknowledged and deposited in the Society's banking account. The sympathetic response to their prospectus warrants the belief that more donations will be forthcoming. The Society having a finite aim may, after a few years of activity, consider its usefulness to be at an end; and if, when it is wound up, it should have a balance in hand, the present Committee undertake to pay such a balance into the Pension Fund of the Society of Authors.

### 3. *Publications.*

The Society undertakes to publish a series of tracts on the subjects which it is founded to deal with.

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It is impossible to foresee the quality or amount of such expert contributions; but the Committee intend to issue at least a quarterly paper which shall contain a report of proceedings up to date. Meanwhile the two first tracts are sent gratis to all the present members. Later issues will be announced in the literary journals, and members will be expected to buy them unless they shall pre-contract to have them supplied as they are issued, which may be done by a donation to the Society at the rate of 10s. a year. The tracts will be issued by the Oxford University Press.

### 4. *Management.*

The original Committee will continue to carry on until it is convenient to call a meeting of the members to relieve them of their responsibility; and it is their plan that the members should ultimately decide the constitution of the Society. Meanwhile they guarantee the general soundness of the books and publications which will be advertised on their pages; but under no circumstances do they make the Society responsible for all the opinions of its contributors; they desire full discussion of all questions.

### 5. *Membership.*

The Committee invite the membership of all those who are genuinely interested in the objects of the Society and willing to assist in its work. They should send application for membership to the Honorary Secretary, Mr. L. Pearsall Smith, 11 St. Leonards Terrace, London, S.W.3.

### 6. *Original prospectus.*

The following is a reprint of the original prospectus as issued Oct. 1913:—

Literary education in England would seem in one grave respect to lack efficiency, for it does not inspire writers with a due sense of responsibility towards their native speech. In most European countries men of letters, and the better class of journalists, are trained to observe the changes of the language, and to assist consciously in its development, being guided by acknowledged principles of tradition and taste. But the English language, which is now rapidly spreading over the world, is subject to no such guidance, and to very little intelligent criticism. There is indeed occasional discussion, both in the journals and in table-talk, concerning the choice and use of special words and the standards of style; but this is mostly conducted by irresponsible persons, who have no knowledge of the history of English, and are even without any definite ideal or right conception of what the essentials of a good language must be.

It is therefore proposed that a few men of letters, supported by the scientific alliance of the best linguistic authorities, should form a group or free association, and agree upon a modest and practical scheme for informing popular taste on sound principles, for

guiding educational authorities, and for introducing into practice certain slight modifications and advantageous changes.

The promoters of this association (which calls itself the 'Society for Pure English') are of course well aware of the danger of affectation, which constitutes the chief objection to any conscious reform of language. They are fully on their guard against this; and they think that the scheme of activity which they propose must prevent their being suspected of foolish interference with living developments.

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The ideal of their proposed association is both conservative and democratic. It would aim at preserving all the richness of differentiation in our vocabulary, its nice grammatical usages, its traditional idioms, and the music of its inherited pronunciation: it would oppose whatever is slipshod and careless, and all blurring of hard-won distinctions, but it would no less oppose the tyranny of schoolmasters and grammarians, both in their pedantic conservatism, and in their ignorant enforcing of newfangled 'rules', based not on principle, but merely on what has come to be considered 'correct' usage. The ideal of the Society is that our language in its future development should be controlled by the forces and processes which have formed it in the past; that it should keep its English character, and that the new elements added to it should be in harmony with the old; for by this means our growing knowledge would be more widely spread, and the whole nation brought into closer touch with the national medium of expression.

The Society, therefore, will place itself in opposition to certain tendencies of modern taste; which taste it hopes gradually to modify and improve. Its object will be best exhibited by stating a few definite proposals which may be regarded as typical.

I. Literary taste at the present time, with regard to foreign words recently borrowed from abroad, is on wrong lines, the notions which govern it being scientifically incorrect, tending to impair the national character of our standard speech, and to adapt it to the habits of classical scholars. On account of these alien associations our borrowed terms are now spelt and pronounced, not as English, but as foreign words, instead of being assimilated, as they were in the past, and brought into conformity with the main structure of our speech. And as we more and more rarely assimilate our borrowings, so even words that were once naturalized are being now one by one made un-English, and driven out of the language back into their foreign forms; whence it comes that a paragraph of serious English prose may be sometimes seen as freely sprinkled with italicized French words as a passage of Cicero is often interlarded with Greek. The mere printing of such words in italics is an active force towards degeneration. The Society hopes to discredit this tendency, and it will endeavour to restore to English its old reactive energy; when a choice is possible we should wish to give an English pronunciation and spelling to useful foreign words, and we would attempt to restore to a good many words the old English forms which they once had, but which are now supplanted by the original foreign forms.

Other foreign denizens which are claiming naturalization we would encourage on the principle of preferring their more English forms. It would plainly be useful for writers to be acquainted with such matters; and a list of all such words with their English history would be a good example of the sort of academic service which this Society might render.



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II. The large and necessary importation of foreign words into the English language has undoubtedly weakened its ancient word-making powers; and while all fantastic and awkward inventions and ill-sounding compounds should be avoided, it seems desirable to give at least a fair chance to words formed out of English material. Such new English words, especially new English compounds, need, it would seem, to be used for some little time before we can overcome our dislike of them, while terms of Greek and Latin origin, however cumbrous and unsuitable they may be, are accepted almost without question. We would discourage such unimaginative and artificial formations, and on principle prefer terms made of English material, which are easily understood and naturally spoken by English-speaking people.

III. Until recent years English writers were in the habit of experimenting somewhat freely in language, and to their word-coining activity we owe many of our current and most useful terms. But since Carlyle there have been until lately few experiments of this kind. Many words are added every year to the English vocabulary, but they are for the most part the deliberate creations of scientific writers; while the very men who should concern themselves with this matter stand aloof, and leave it to those who by nature and profession are least sensitive to the aesthetic requirements. We would therefore encourage those who possess the word-making faculty to exercise it freely; and we hope in the future that suggestions from our members may help men of science and inventors in their search for new and appropriate names.

IV. Although men of letters may occasionally add to the resources of the language by word-coinage, their main activity is and must be one of selection. They are forced, for the most part, to choose their vocabulary from the supplies at hand, and by their choice they do much to give prevalence to the words which meet with their approval. Now, believing that language is or should be democratic both in character and origin, and that its best word-makers are the uneducated, and not the educated classes, we would prefer vivid popular terms to the artificial creations of scientists. We shall often do better by inquiring, for instance, not what name the inventor gave to his new machine, but what it is called by the workmen who handle it; and in adopting their homespun terms and giving them literary currency, we shall help to preserve the living and popular character of our speech.

V. The present spread of education, and the enforcement of a uniform and town-bred standard of speech throughout the schools of the country, is destroying dialects and local forms with great rapidity. These have been studied by specialists, and their value is fully recognized; but the attitude of the educated classes towards them is still contemptuous or indifferent. This ignorant contempt is to be regretted for many reasons. Not only is some knowledge of dialects

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needful for any true understanding of the history and character of our language, but the standard speech has in the past derived much enrichment and what is called 'regeneration' from the picturesque vocabularies of local vernaculars. The drying-up of these sources cannot but be regarded as a misfortune. We shall therefore actively encourage educated people, and, above all, teachers in country schools, to take a more sympathetic interest in the forms and usages of local speech. The Scotch Education Board has recently ordered that dialect should not be unduly discouraged in Scottish schools, and advised that children should be allowed some use of their natural speech in class. We hope that this example may be followed all over the country. We also believe that a knowledge of provincial pronunciation, and a familiarity with the richness and beauty of the vowel sounds which it often preserves, especially in the North, would be of value to those who speak the standard language, and would certainly lead to some correction of the slurred and indistinct way of speaking which is now regarded as correct English, and deliberately taught as such on the Continent.

VI. As to idiomatic pronunciation involving speech-rhythm. The literary taste of the eighteenth century, as typified in Dr. Johnson, consciously discredited idioms which it held to be ungrammatical; and this error persists. A simple instance is the growing loss of our enclitics. The negative *not* was enclitic after the verb, and this gave us our *shan't, don't, won't, &c.* Dr. Johnson held the *not* to be too important a qualification to leave unaccented. Again, where prepositions made a pronoun enclitic, the old accent is perishing. *For it*, which used to be pronounced *forrit* as one word, is now generally spoken *faw it*, as two. The result of such conscious pedantries is not only a great damage to the rhythmic beauty of our older literature, actually teaching the folk to misread the admirable prose of our Bible, but it is a bungling interference with the natural evolution of our sentences, as we mould them to our convenience. We would trust the general ear in such questions of syllabic rhythm, and would protect as far as possible the old harmonious cadences of our traditional speech.

We have no present intention of engaging in the vexed question of the illogical and often absurd orthography of English. Members of the Society would perhaps desire some relaxation of these bonds, but we think it better to concentrate on other profounder modifications of the language which, though of first importance, are receiving no special attention. We are aware that proposals for violent change often defeat their own end, and make all reform impossible. We shall therefore not insist on any doubtful or disputable detail as a rule of correctness; but we shall rely on suggestion, believing that we shall attain the best results by causing those who lead the fashion to consider the problems and think them out for themselves. We are convinced that by this means an ideal of self-harmonized speech will be gradually approved, and will spontaneously create a better standard of national taste, to which the future developments of the language may be safely entrusted.

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These proposals will be distributed and privately circulated from hand to hand. Sympathizers, especially writers and teachers, who find themselves in agreement with the main principles of the Society, and are willing, as far as convenience and current usage allow, to promote its aims by their example, can, for the present at least, join it by invitation from one of its members.

There will be no money subscription to this Society. A list of members, with their addresses, will be printed under the Society's initials; and this will be from time to time posted to all members, who may also obtain copies of the proposals to show to friends.

With so little machinery, it may be inquired how it is expected to accomplish anything. The idea is that all members will be guided by the principles of the Society, and committed by their membership to *active* promotion of its objects, one of which will be enrolment of recruits. Many of our members will be in a position to influence public opinion directly and daily. The fact that there will be a body of united opinion seems to us all that is needed: it is only required to marshal the forces.

Should the Society find sufficient support, it would be proposed that a small journal or occasional fly-leaves should be printed, in which questions of literary usage could be discussed in detail. The printing and distribution of useful papers by members able to help in this way could be easily arranged for by a small committee, which would be formed for dealing with this and other activities of the Society.

7. ORIGINAL COMMITTEE.

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**ROBERT BRIDGES**

**SIR WALTER RALEIGH**

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