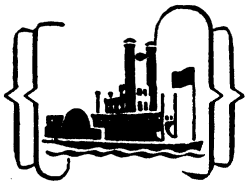
# HOW BASIC IS BASIC ENGLISH?

RUDOLF FLESCH



IF I were Mr. Churchill, I would not like being reduced to calling Hitler *a very bad man*, or a bomber *an air plane sending down hollow balls full of a substance with a tendency to go off with a loud noise.* But maybe Mr. Churchill did not quite realize these implications when he endorsed Basic English in his Harvard speech last September.

"Here you have," he said, "a deftly wrought plan for an international language capable of very wide transactions of practical business and of interchange of ideas. . . . It would certainly be a grand convenience for us all to be able to move freely about the world—and to find everywhere a medium, albeit primitive, of intercourse and understanding."

The next day newspapers ransacked their morgues for material on Basic English, feature articles appeared and called forth letters to the editor, and a fourteen-year-old controversy came to life again. Once more the public read about that amazing 850-word vocabulary serving all practical purposes, about Basic's eighteen verbs to end all verbs, about Basic texts and translations for foreigners studying English and for Englishmen and Americans studying simplification. Enthusiasts were answered in due course by critics who talked about "linguistic imperialism"; and finally those who should have been asked first, the scientific linguists, had their say. Their reply was cold. "Basic English," one of them wrote in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, "does not stand today in high favor with scientific linguists. . . . It is a kind of quack based on a faulty analysis of the language process."

To those familiar with Basic English and the record of its inventor, C. K. Ogden, such an attitude is not surprising. Ogden is no run-of-the-mill philologist. He is a Cambridge University philosopher of world fame, co-author (with I. A. Richards) of that bible of semantics *The Meaning of Meaning*, editor of the *International Library of Psychology, Philosophy, and Scientific Method*—in short, one of the most brilliant intellectual leaders of our time. Such a mind treats the drab, painstaking methods of modern linguistics with impatience and scorn. "Word-counters and text-graders" Ogden calls, in his *System of Basic English*, the compilers of vocabulary statistics, laughing at their "parrot-mentality." For him, the philosophical approach to language is as natural as the exact observation of linguistic facts is for the research scientist.

To the outsider all this looks like one more example of the familiar conflict between the professional expert and the amateur genius. The outsider usually puts his money on the amateur genius, and usually he is right. But before we jump to conclusions in this case, let us look a little closer at the facts.

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## II

THE Basic English controversy is, actually, not one controversy but a tangled web of five different problems. Let us consider them one by one.

First, there is the question whether an international language is desirable at all. This is very much like asking whether peace is desirable, or good will, or friendliness. It is a question only in the sense that every human effort has to conquer a corresponding amount of human inertia.

Second, if an international language is to be chosen, shall it be English? This claim is usually countered by the cry of imperialism; but as long as hundreds of millions eagerly try to acquire English as their second language, the counter-argument seems absurd. It certainly did not deter such masters of the English language as Mme. Chiang Kai-shek, Jawaharlal Nehru, or Jan Masaryk. As matters stand now, English has a long head start as the coming international language, and it looks as if it would win the race.

Third, is Basic English the shortest route to English? This, of course, is purely a question of language pedagogy. Basic enthusiasts swear by their method; other teachers prefer their own. Right now our Army teaches successfully dozens of exotic languages, using methods not at all similar to that of Basic English. We may leave the final choice to the teachers.

Fourth, how about Basic itself as an international language? But how could it possibly compete with English? How could anyone expect an intelligent Russian, Dane, or Thailander to stop at the 850-word limit, instead of going on to the language of Hollywood and the short-waves? With all respect for Mr. Churchill, the idea of Basic as a world language is absurd. If adopted, it would always remain a mere bridge to English.

Fifth, is Basic a successful simplification of English? Here, underneath the four other layers, is the heart of the problem. If it is a reliable tool for making things plain, then indeed Basic English fills a great need. If everything can be made simple by using this limited idiom, why, then, don't we put everything into Basic that has to be read and understood by foreigners, by children, by the uneducated? Why don't we forthwith translate into Basic our laws, our textbooks, our technical manuals, our philosophy, and our science? Why don't we give Basic English the central function it should have in our civilization? Why don't we adopt it officially as simplified English?

The adherents of Basic say, of course, that this is just a matter of time and spreading the gospel. Possibly—but only if the premise is true that Basic is simpler than English.

But, then, what do we mean by simplicity in language?

## III

IN A recent radio discussion, a Chinese scholar, Dr. Lin Mou-sheng, said rather casually that Chinese would be a good choice for a simple world language. This was amusing news to *Time* magazine, but it could not possibly be news to any scientific linguist. Chinese is by far the simplest of all the great languages. It has almost no grammar, no complex sentences, no tenses, moods, or inflections, no separation between verbs, nouns, and adjectives. A system of one-syllable words, the forms of which are never changed, it expresses meaning solely by word order. Skillfully manipulating a thousand or two of his little syllables, a Chinese can talk about everything under the sun. No wonder he considers his language superior to all others. It is.

Let us look at an example. A well-known Chinese fairy tale begins with these words:

> There was a young man who was a simpleton. His father and mother were sorry that he was stupid, gave him money, and told him to leave home in order to learn manners.

The original Chinese version reads somewhat like this:

> Have one year-few man be stupid. He father mother sorrow he stupid, give he silver, tell he out-go learn manner.

Such amazing simplicity of structure is matched by a wealth of picturesque expressions and idioms. Lin Yu-tang quotes the Chinese translation of: "How could I know what is going on in his mind?" It is: "Am I a tapeworm in his belly?"

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Why, then, is Chinese not used as a model for other languages? Why don't we adapt, for instance, the principles of Chinese grammar and expression for English? The answer is, of course, that this is being done every day by those millions in the South Seas and Eastern Asia who use Pidgin English. Recently, with the campaign in the Pacific, Pidgin English has broken into the news. One writer found that its "most important rule is to keep all sentences short and simple, and never to try to make a sentence express more than one thought." And he dug up the following charming version of the Commandments in Pidgin:

Keep Sunday. Hear for papa and mamma. No kill. No make bad. No thief. No lie. No want other man his mary.

But we don't have to go to the South Seas to find simple sentences filled with short concrete words. Every skilled writer of simple English prose naturally tends toward this "Chinese" mode of expression. Here is, for instance, a recent headline:

NAZIS STIFFEN IN ITALY BUT ALLIES GAIN
BERLIN CLAIMS CAPTURE OF ISLE OF KOS
FRANKFORT BOMBED 2D TIME IN A DAY

Or the next day's:

U. S. NAVY AND PLANES POUND WAKE
5TH ARMY CROSSES THE VOLTURNO
GERMANS REPORTED SACKING ROME

Or let us look for a moment at the simple style of *True Story* magazine:

The first time our eyes met I felt lost. I had never met a man like him before. He was bluff and hearty, brimming over with good humor. He was good looking, with black hair and dark eyes. When he smiled you felt the force of his personality. . . .

Or, finally, let us see how a great writer tells a story for children. This is the beginning of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling":

It was glorious out in the country. It was summer, and the cornfields were yellow, and the oats were green; the hay had been put up in stacks in the green meadows, and the stork went about on his long red legs and chattered Egyptian, for this was the language he had learned from his good mother.

What all these simple passages have in common is, mainly, the short simple sentences, the large number of verbs, the reliance on word order rather than word forms, the concreteness, the vivid imagery, and the human touch. It is perfectly feasible to define statistically these and other characteristics of simple language. Much of this has been done already by those word-counters and text-graders who drew the contempt of Basic English's inventor. Simplicity, it appears, is mainly a question of sentence structure and concreteness of expression. It can be achieved by following these five rules of thumb:

Use sentences rather than clauses.
Use word order rather than word forms.
Use verbs rather than nouns.
Use nouns rather than adjectives.
Use words about people rather than things.

Let us keep these rules in mind for our appraisal of Basic English.

## IV

ACTUALLY, Basic English has very little to do with the known facts about simple language. Ogden deliberately avoided the scientific approach, and he was not lucky enough to find the key to simplicity by accident. In fact, his two main principles make it literally impossible to be simple in Basic.

The pride and centerpiece of Basic is the elimination of verbs, with the exception of eighteen "operators." To be sure, most grammatical complications are related to the use of verbs. But to do away with them in order to save all that trouble is like throwing the motor out of a car because that's where all the nuisance comes from. Verbs, as we have seen, make for simplicity; if they are eliminated, substitutes have to be found, and the linguistic structure becomes more difficult instead of easier. That is one of the things that happen continually in Basic English. In endless repetition, one has to be, get, give, take, have, and put. The Basic speaker cannot sleep, awake, kick, jump, laugh, or act,—he has to *be sleeping*, *get awake*, *give a kick*, *take a jump*, *have a laugh*, and *put on an act*.

The second main element of Basic is even more absurd: I mean its limited vocabulary of 850 words, the famous list that goes on a single printed page. Such a listing may be possible for the machinery of language, the tissue which makes an

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understandable whole out of a heap of words—like *the*, *which*, *an*, *-able*, *out*, *of* in this sentence. But to select 200 "picturable words" for the countless picturable things mankind has cared to name seems an incredible folly. Here are a few concrete examples:

In the Basic Noah's Ark, there are *cows*, *goats*, *sheep*, *pigs*, *horses*, *cats*, and *dogs;* but there are no lions, foxes, and wolves, not to speak of giraffes, kangaroos, or baby pandas.

The Basic diet consists of *milk*, *eggs*, *bread*, and *butter* (for breakfast), *soup*, *meat* or *fish*, *potatoes*, *rice*, and *cake* (for dinner), supplemented by such extra snacks as an occasional *apple* or *orange*, *cheese*, *jelly*, *berries*, and *nuts*. All this is wholesome food, to be sure, but no dietitian would fail to point out the lack of essential vitamin sources like tomatoes, cabbage, spinach, carrots, broccoli, or liver.

The Basic home is furnished with a *bed*, a *table*, a *chest* of *drawers*, and a *dresser*. But it lacks such homely items as a chair, a lamp, a rug, or a bookcase, and it is not equipped with closets, a bathtub, or a kitchen sink.

And Basic England, oddly enough, would have an *army* but no navy.

Possibly, such a tool may be used to simplify very difficult English prose to some extent; but if applied to everyday colloquial English it will produce a maze of bizarre circumlocutions.

Meet my cousin Mary

becomes

*Come across Mary, my father's sister's daughter*

and a sentence like

We ate an old-fashioned holiday dinner with turkey and pumpkin pie

changes into

*We took as food a chief meal of a day of rest from work, not in the taste of the present day, with a great bird and a great round yellow fruit with hard skin and a great number of seeds, covered with paste and cooked in the oven.*

The simple statement

I have a steady job as file clerk with a stockbroker

appears in Basic as

*I have well fixed regular work as an office worker on boxes for keeping papers in order, with a man whose business is trading in equal parts of the money with which a company's business was started and which give the owner a right to a part in the company's profits.*

One would think that such obvious shortcomings of Basic would have been noted long ago by its brilliant inventor. But C. K. Ogden seems to suffer under the typical blindness of doting parents for the deficiencies of their children. Even in his own sample selections he includes such monstrosities as the Basic Englishman who, bravely avoiding the forbidden word *spinach*, translates *Crème aux épinards* as "*a milk soup made from that plant with dark green leaves which go almost to nothing on boiling.*" (With a distinct sigh of relief, he then continues: "*Potage parmentier* is *a potato soup.*")

Recently the undaunted Basic partisans have invaded some of the long-settled territories of languages. I need not discuss here I. A. Richards's translation of Plato's *Republic*, since he found it necessary to abandon strict Basic and to choose an "ampler medium" for his purpose. But let us look at the Bible in Basic English, the most ambitious translation project ever undertaken in that language. We may note in passing that in this Bible God says to Adam:

*With heat-drops on your face will you get your bread*

and Ruth invokes the Lord:

*. . . if anything but death makes a division between us.*

And to taste the curiously tame, pallid, evasive flavor of the Basic New Testament, let us now compare the King James and the Basic version of a passage from the Sermon on the Mount:

King James version:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery:

But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

Basic version:

*You have knowledge that it was said, "You may not have connection with another man's wife": but I say to you that everyone whose eyes are turned on a woman with*

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*desire has had connection with her in his heart. And if your right eye is a cause of trouble to you, take it out and put it away from you; because it is better to undergo the loss of one part, than for all your body to go into hell.*

Finally, let us see how a simple Shakespearean passage would look in Basic. Let us try to translate, for instance, Portia's famous lines:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,
Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd;
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest. . . .

Using Ogden's *General Basic English Dictionary*, we find:

quality: one of the 850 Basic words
mercy: *keeping from giving pain which one has right, power, to give*
to strain: *get tightly stretched; be pulling at; get twisted from true sense of purpose*
to drop: *come down in drops; have a fall*
gentle: *quiet, kind, soft*
rain: a Basic word
heaven: *the sky; living-place of the Highest Being*
place: a Basic word
beneath: *under, lower than*
twice: *2 times*
blessed: *completely good, very happy; greatly valued*
to bless: *give approval or help to, make happy*
to give, to take: Basic words
mighty: *of great size*

We may now write our Basic version.

Or, on second thought, we may not.

## V

To sum up, Basic English is neither Basic nor English. But, in our amusement at its freakish aspects, let us not forget that Basic is still a thousand times better than the academic or bureaucratic jargon we have to wade through every day; that it is the first attempt in the history of mankind to create a simplified language within a language; that its analysis of word meanings is an indispensable technique that will have to be taken over by whatever system of simplified English we are going to adopt.

For simplified English is bound to come. In another generation or two, it will be quietly added to the list of our commonplace miracle-gadgets, and used wherever it can help foreigners, school children, and adult students.

Basic English, like other outdated pioneer ventures, will by then be buried and forgotten.

I mean, of course, *put in its last resting-place*, and *not kept in memory*.

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