

"BABU ENGLISH"

versus

"ENGLISH ENGLISH."

(BY PROF. J. C. BANERJEA, M. A.)

To me it is no small pleasure to find that, inspite of the lateness of the hour, our revered Principal has been pleased to grace our meeting with his inspiring presence. You will allow me to convey on your behalf and mine our best thanks to him for his kind condescension.

I need scarcely say it would be hardly possible for me to do anything like adequate justice to so large a topic as the one I have undertaken to discourse upon, in view of the fact that I must necessarily confine myself within the brief limits of an article intended for publication in your College Magazine. The subject has been to me, all through life, one of absorbing interest, and has always had for me a peculiar attraction, which to most of you might appear as altogether inexplicable, if not grotesquely absurd. Some of you will perhaps begin to ask yourselves, "why, in the name of goodness, should this fellow waste his time and ours, too, in discussing the niceties of English idiom, which even those to the manner born not unoften find it exceedingly difficult to make up their minds definitely about?" My only reason for taking up your time is that I firmly believe that whatever we intend to learn, we should learn as thoroughly as possible. Either do not attempt a thing at all, or if you do attempt it, see to it that your attempt is whole-hearted and genuine.

Of recent years, I regret to have to say, a fashion has sprung up in certain quarters of sneering at those who devote their time and energy to learning a correct pronunciation of English words or cultivating a fine ear for the niceties of English idiom. Pronunciation and idiom, our young men are taught by their elders, had best be left to take care of them-

selves, not being at all pertinent to the purpose. You are probably aware that in the early days of English education in this country, our people made it a point to speak and write like Englishmen, and a very large measure of success attended their honest efforts, so much so, indeed, that such efforts extorted the highest admiration of scholarly Englishmen both in this country and in England. They were giants in those days, men like Rajah Ram Mohan Roy, Dr. Krishna Mohan Banerjee, Ram Gopal Ghose, Kesav Chandra Sen, Harish Chandra Mookherjee, Krishnadas Pal, to mention only a few among a whole host of accomplished English scholars. Is there any good reason why we, their successors, should throw away with a light heart the priceless possession they have left behind? Why need we bother ourselves about the proper pronunciation and correct idiomatic use of a language which is not our own, is what is in everybody's mouth to-day? The advocates of the cultivation of our mother tongue, in their insensate zeal, would do away with English altogether, or relegate it to a position of secondary importance, clean forgetting that all the best writers in our own literature, for the last sixty or seventy years, have been men who were up to their lips in English culture, and thoroughly imbibed the spirit of English, and, in certain instances, of continental literature, the influence whereof has been responsible to a great extent for the peculiar cast and complexion of their immortal writings. What, for instance, would have been our Rabindra Nath of world-wide celebrity, had it not been for his extensive western culture? The same observation applies with equal force to Michael Madhusudan, Hem Chandra, Nabin Chandra, Girish Chandra, who have all shed an imperishable lustre upon their country's literature. When, these days, I hear my educated countrymen, especially those of the younger generation, speaking in terms of disparagement of correctness of pronunciation and accuracy of idiom, I feel strongly inclined to say—"Yes, ye wiseacres, grapes are sour; indeed!" Because,

unfortunately, ye cannot frame your tongue to a proper utterance of English words or pen a few lines, of ordinary English decently enough, such "unconsidered trifles," deemed as such by ye, must be thrown overboard, and our young men should content themselves with acquiring English of a sort, which is neither English, nor Vernacular, neither fish, nor flesh, a curious admixture impossible of a distinct nomenclature, y-clept "Babu English" by those who never miss an opportunity of raising a laugh at our expense. It causes me no small amusement to find that those very persons among us who are otherwise inordinately proud of their English, the moment they are brought to book for their none-too-rare lapses on the score of idiom, assume supercilious airs and begin to assure you solemnly that it being a foreign tongue, its niceties should not concern you, your only object being to express your ideas in a fairly intelligible manner. Expressing your ideas in an intelligible manner, forsooth ! How could you possibly expect to do so, if you make short work of the language in which your ideas are to be clothed ? Another important point to remember in this connection is that a decent knowledge of English is essentially necessary for every Indian if he is to earn his livelihood as a member of the various professions which are open to him, after his University career is over, for the simple reason that it is the language of the ruling race. Very often the Japanese parallel is brought in by our patriots, and the example of Japan is dangled before the eyes of our youth ; but they are quite oblivious of the fact that they, in the Land of the Rising Sun, are not under foreign domination, and have not the need to possess a certain equipment of a foreign language to earn their daily bread.

I fear, I have already taxed your patience by these lengthy preliminary observations. Before we are in a position to appreciate the exact relation in which "Babu English" stands to what is proudly styled "English-English," it may be as well to bear in mind that the former admits of two distinct

varieties, viz., what it actually is, or, in other words, what are some of the common errors to which even the best educated Indians are sometimes liable in their handling of English ; and what it is imagined to be, being a pure figment of the fertile brain of our malicious detractors among Anglo-Indians, and their confreres in the British Isles. Our concern, at present, is with the genuine variety. A few typical instances of the average Indian's occasional misuse of English idiom will suffice for our purpose. In this connection, it may be observed that it is rather singular that certain mistakes are common to English-educated Indians in every province. How they have arisen is almost inexplicable ; but they are there, no matter how they may have originated. Where the precious word "outbook" came from, or, for that matter, the phrase "silver tonic," I would not venture to take upon myself to determine. From one end of India to another, you hear of teachers recommending the reading of "outbooks" to their students. An advocate of the Patna High Court escaped with the skin of his teeth for having suggested in a public speech that a Sub-Inspector of Police sided with a certain Zeminder in consideration of "silver tonic", by which he meant a bribe. Fortunately for the Advocate, the presiding Judge let him off, for "silver tonic" was a phrase which was unknown to him, and, in his opinion, could not mean anything particular. I have heard the most educated among us using, in blissful ignorance of its true sense, the phrase "thick and thin" in a context like this :—"So-and-so and I were very *thick and thin* in our school days," meaning thereby "very intimate with each other." This is simply preposterous. For the English phrase "through thick and thin" means no more than "in spite of all difficulties and obstacles," as, for instance, when a man says—"I pledge you my word of honour that I shall stand by you *through thick and thin*." Colloquially, of course, to be *thick* with a man is to be intimate with him. "*Out of* etiquette" is no English at all; it should be "*against* etiquette." By the

hundreds for "by the hundred," as also, "form *a* part and parcel" for simply "from part and parcel," is equally unidiomatic. In English, it is not possible to "see a dream," the correct form being "*have* or *dream* a dream." Similarly, perhaps, you *have*, and not *take*, sleep. "I *had* (not *took*) a couple of hours' sleep and felt quite refreshed." Most people would swallow "perjurers and *forgerers*" without making a wry face. One who *perjures* himself is undoubtedly a *perjurer*, but one who forges a document is a *forger*, and not certainly, a *forgerer*. Perhaps, it is to the account of euphony that this rather amusing blunder is to be set down. "At the dead of night" is wrong; it should be either "at dead of night" or "in the dead of night." You simply emphasise "a statement," but never "emphasise *upon*" it. We either simply say "during the small hours" or "during the small hours of the *morning*," but never "during the small hours of the *night*." Never say "I have the strongest objection to *making friendship with* him," but say always "*being* or *making friends with* him." It is absurd to speak of a cloud *blowing over*: a storm is said to *blow over*, although a cloud may *be blown away* by the wind. "Last, but not least" or "last, though not least", is the correct expression, but some of our distinguished men are heard to say "last, but not *the least*," which is assuredly wrong. "I am not so *fool* as to be easily deceived" should be "I am not so *foolish* (or *such a fool*) as to be easily deceived." "What to speak of" (for "not to speak of") is a most common piece of *Babuism*. For instance, do not say—"What to speak of our youngmen, even elderly people among us are at times guilty of such grave irregularities": it should be *Not to speak of*. You never *avail* of an opportunity, but *avail yourself* of it. "He made a name in Bengali Literature" ought preferably to be "he made himself a name or made a name for himself." Cowed down is rather unusual, although, perhaps, it is not altogether wrong. The New Oxford Dictionary does not give a single instance of *cowed* being followed by *down*; it is

generally simply *cowed*. It is quite a common mistake to say — "he turned the tables *against* his enemy : " *against* should be *on* or *upon*. "Garment" has as its plural "garments," but "raiments" is absolutely wrong, even as "apparels." Both "rayment" and "apparel" convey a plural sense. Similarly, in modern English it would be incorrect to say "I have engaged all the leading *counsels* for my son's defence" : it should be "leading counsel", no matter what their number may be. A former Vice-Chancellor of our University beats every Babu hollow in unmitigated *Babuism*, as the following sentences will clearly show :—(a) "Dara *took up* (took) the offensive": (b) "They were once more able to present *a united face against* (a united front to) their foes : " (c) "It took place every year *at* (on) the two birth-days, solar and lunar, of the sovereign : " (d) "A series of forts were built *on* (at) strategic points : " (e) "*For* (? of) the march of Dara's army Mannucci has left a most vivid account : " (f) "The Gharwal Rajah refused to *undertake* (? incur) the sin and shame of betraying a refugee." You can unbind a man's chains, but you cannot unbind a man's chains *from him*. A teacher may *set*, but not *set up*, an example of honesty to his pupils. It is no use multiplying instances. After what has already been pointed out, it is not at all to be wondered at that our detractors should label our English as "Babu English." But the pity of it is that they, not exactly knowing what peculiar lapses in English idiom most of us are liable to be lamentably betrayed into, are driven, in their desperate effort to damn us, to draw liberally upon their fertile imagination in order to coin the most outlandish things imaginable, and try to pass them off triumphantly on their unsuspecting countrymen as unalloyed specimens of "Babu English." A few examples of their outrageously absurd coinages will more than suffice for our purpose. "Most Becile Sir" (an imaginary Babu is made to begin his application for a post with these these words). (b) One Babu

writing to another about the death of his mother is imagined to have written as follows :—“The same hand which rocked the cradle has kicked the bucket :” (c) “I do not know, how on this exiguous (small) salary, I can make the two ends of my grand-mother meet :” (d) “A female woman of the opposite sex :” (e) “He is well-petted and well breasted :” (f) “He had at present no son because his wife was impregnable.” These are monstrous fabrications, such as might naturally be engendered in the prolific brain of a shameless reviler, bent, at any cost, to furnish forth a fit of mirth to Babu-haters. With the exception of (b), the other five were invented by a gallant son of Mars, Lieutenant-Colonel Irvine for the edification of the readers of *The Nineteenth Century and After*, sometime in 1922. I may be permitted to quote a portion of what by way of reply I contributed in 1923 to the January number of *The Calcutta Review* (pp. 173—92). “While we cannot but admire the rare ingenuity of the gallant soldier for his clever attempt at fathering upon the luckless Babu a whole string of the absurdest phrases imaginable, minted in the darkest chambers of his preposterously quixotic mind, we, by no means, feel assured that these extravagant coinages of his will pass muster as genuine *Babuisms* with those who have even the slightest acquaintance with the real state of things relating to the English scholarship of Indian gentlemen who have received a fair share of English education.....It is true the Babu is occasionally liable to be betrayed into pitiable lapses in his honest attempt to tackle English idiom, but it may be confidently asserted that he does not, as a rule, sin against it to that extent to which the Saheb sins against it.....We do not pretend to a tittle of the inventive genius of our Colonel Saheb, who gives the freest reins to his imagination to regale his readers with specimens of *Babuism*, the like of which never were, nor ever shall be. Conscious as we are of the aridity of our brain, we must content ourselves

with placing before our readers specimens of what we may call *Britishism*, for which we need not draw upon our imagination, such delicate morsels of choice English being scattered broadcast over the pages of the annotated editions of English Classics given to the world by the most enterprising of publishing houses in the British Isles. We open, at random at page 119 of Wallace's edition of *The Princess*, and meet with a curious phrase calculated to set one's teeth on edge, to wit, "this *profusion of wordiness*." Need we say that it should be either *profusion of words*, or simply *wordiness*? At page 181, the writer speaks of "the gradual recovery of a stout man from a violent *attack* of laughter." *Fit*, we are inclined to think, is more usual than *attack*. At page 204. we read :—"The Prince means that he lay *shrouded round*, as it were, *with* his weakness." Would not the sentence read better, if it were—"The Prince means that he *lay shrouded*, as it were, *in* his weakness?" "*Shrouded round with* his weakness" is anything but happy. At page 213 we find—"These may seem to the careless eye to act as a support to her weakness, but in fact they sap her vitality and stunt her growth, as parasitic plants *do to* the trees round which they cling." How are we to construe "*do to* the trees round which they cling," unless *to* is replaced by *in the case of*, or some such phrase? *Do* here stands for "sap the vitality and stunt the growth;" that being so, *to* after *do*, grammatically considered, makes an awful mess of the sentence as a whole. A similar instance of defective grammar is noticeable in the following sentence :—"The ridiculous ideas she has cherished so long have eaten away her heart's vital and kindly elements, as a worm *does with* a nut, leaving nothing but dry and bitter dust." To make the sentence grammatical, its latter portion ought to be, "as a worm eats away the kernel of a nut. (P, 198)."

In Deighton's *Introduction* to his edition of Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part II*, we come across a few specimens of English which, we must confess, we do not know in what category of *isms* to include, unless we choose to place them under what, for want of a better expression, we may characterize as I. E. S.—*isms*. We are prepared to offer a prize to whoever among our college-goers will take the trouble to construe grammatically the following sentence :—“We first meet with Henry in the opening scenes of *Richard II*, where for his rivalry with the Duke of Norfolk *and in it* the disturbance of his country's peace, he is banished from England (page xlii).” The italicised portion, we candidly admit, is wholly beyond our humble capacity properly to construe. The removing of *and* and the placing of *involving* immediately before *in it* will make the sentence intelligible. The substitution of *the consequent* in place of *in it* will equally obviate the difficulty. A no less awkward sentence is the following :—“He knows what he wants, and *goes straight forward* to his point.”—(pp. xiii—xiv). To *go straight to one's point* is nothing unusual ; but it would be difficult to conceive of a queerer combination than to “go straight *forward* to one's point.” At page xvii, we find :—“With Sir John are his low associates who *on* (? in) the first scene in which the Prince comes before us, have arranged a robbery.” At page xviii, we come across the following :—“He is unable to resist the charm of his witty buffoonery, and cannot *for the life of it* take him altogether seriously.” What may *for the life of it* mean, we wonder ? “For the life of *him*” is what is apparently wanted here. At page 169, we find a curious expression :—“*His hand is all generosity*, when his heart is softened by a tale of distress.” “He is all generosity” would have been simply irreproachable ; but the temptation of the antithesis between *hand* and *heart*, apparently, proved too irresistible to the writer to make him think of the more usual form of the expression. If *his hand is all generosity* is to pass muster, then why not *his mind is all attention*,

instead of *he is all attention*? Here is a sentence from the same Editor's *Introduction* to his edition of *Coriolanus* (page xvii) :—"So pressing was the emergency that the Consul, Publius Servilius, was obliged to suspend the laws and liberate those confined *to* (? in) prison." A rainy day may confine a man *to* his house, or, for that matter, an attack of the gout ; but who ever heard of a man's being confined *to* prison?

In the *Introduction* to Mr. Egerton Smith's edition of Milton's *Sonnets*, we meet with the following sentence :—"He cried for freedom from the lower laws of the world in order to leave no obstacle in the way of implicit obedience *in* (? to) the higher laws (page 4)." Even an Indian school-boy knows that *obedience* is always followed by *to*, and, in no circumstances, by *in*. "In order to leave no obstacle" is not at all happy in the present context. The sentence needs to be recast :—"He cried for freedom from the laws of the lower world *in order to ensure* obedience to the higher laws that should govern it." At page 40, we read :—"Milton being deeply *read in* classical learning, etc." Is it ordinarily said that a man is "*read in* classical learning?" One may be said to be "*deeply read in* classical *literature*" or "*deeply versed in* classical *learning*."

In the learned *Introduction* to the well-known edition of the First Book of Spenser's *Fairie Queene* (Messrs. MacMillan & Co.), we come upon a wrong use of the Sequence of Tenses :-'Before Hurd rightly interpreted Spenser's meaning, critics *have* (? had) strangely misunderstood it (page lii)." At page xxix, occurs as clumsy a sentence as one can possibly think of :—"The hill of Aharlow became the stronghold of the Desmond rebellion, until routed out and hunted down by Lord Grey." We are puzzled not knowing what "routed" out and "hunted down" are to be taken along with? Is it "the hill," or "the stronghold," or "the Desmond rebellion?" Certainly, it cannot be "the hill"; it must either be "the stronghold" or "the Desmond" rebellion. "In either case the sentence must be said to be inelegant to a degree,

We are by no means clear that a *rebellion* can, with any the least pretence to elegance, be said to be *hunted down*, although, of course, *rebels* may be said to be *hunted down*. What are we to say of a *rebellion* being spoken of as being *routed*, or what is more preposterous still, as being *routed out*? If we choose to construe "routed out and hunted down" "along with "the stronghold," nothing could be more awkward. A band of *rebels* may *routed out* of a stronghold, but a *stronghold* cannot, at all, be said to be *routed out*, much less *hunted down*. If we are not much mistaken, "deference *for* women at page xxxiii" should be "deference *to* women." *Reverence* is always followed by *for*, but *deference* never, at any rate, in modern English."

So much for our I. E. S. men, presumably the finest products of British Universities. The Babu need not hang down his head in shame for occasionally sinning against English grammar and idiom, when he has so many delinquents in the ranks of English scholars, whose mother tongue is English, to keep him in countenance. Before I conclude, I shall show the utter hollowness of the pretensions of those who notwithstanding that they perk their "English English" in our face, are some of the worst sinners against that inviolable thing. Among them are some who are reputed to be the greatest masters of English style, such as, Lord Morley, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Robert Louis Stevenson, and others of equal note. I put together a few sentences in which the claims of "The King's English" have been ruthlessly sacrificed:—(a) The man ... *laid* (lay) dead, but still twitching: (b) At that another fellow, probably *him* (? he) who had remained below to search the captain's body, came to the door of the inn: (c) I's trying *on* (? to) a man, I know: (d) He was clothed *with* (? in) tatters of old ship's canvas. (e) But the look of them was more than enough to disgust me *of* (with) the landing-place: (f) The fellow carried all our luggage

and Allan's great coat *in* (into) the bargain : (g) There would be two souls saved—mine *to* (? in) all likelihood, his to a dead certainty : (h) I dashed out of the room into the clear sunlight. Some one was close behind, I knew not *whom* (? who) : these sentences are all from Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*. Let me quote a few from Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, the present King Edward VII Professor of English at Cambridge :—(a) He (the literary Artist) differs *in* (? from) the photographer in that he has a greater license to eliminate : (b) And then as already had happened to our Verse, *to* our Prose there *befel* (befell) a miracle : (c) Yet *the* (?) most of us have ears ; and I believe *the* (?) most of us can wonderfully improve our *talent* (? gift) of the ear : (d) "It is only when they din *upon* (into) us that the precedent sorrow claims precedence in honour, etc. (e) So Minos and his laws soon get left behind, and the talk—as so often *befalls* (? happens) *with* Plato is of the perfect citizen and how to train him : (f) Men—even the most reasonable among us—as they *take to heart* (take into their heart) such literature as the Homeric poems or the plays of Shakespeare, insensibly build nests in their hearts for Homer and Shakespeare : (g) They have a disposition to look askance *on* (? at) its refinements : " (h) You are as a commander *filing out* his battalion through a narrow gate : (*file out* is never, perhaps, transitively used : a battalion may *file out* of a narrow gorge, but for a commander to *file out* his battalion is most unusual : (? i) We, in our turn, having something to say in our span of time, say it worthily *dwindling* (? thinning) *out* the large utterance of Shakespeare or Burke (*dwindle out* is extraordinarily clumsy) : (k) I have mentioned a flood : but the immediate *causes* of these migrations or attempted migrations *was* (? were) not usually respectable enough to rank with any such act of God. *Causes* followed by *was* ! What had the proof-reader been doing when the book where it occurs passed through his hands ? Probably, he could not muster up courage

enough to draw his pen through the redoubtable Q.C's writing.

It will cause, I am sure, to my juvenile readers no small surprise when I point out to them how a great *litterateur*, like Lord Morley, occasionally fares in his rather culpable negligence in handling "The King's English", for which, perhaps, he affects a deliberate contempt, and naturally enough so, remembering that he has all his life been an uncompromising democrat :—(a) "Benfield did well in conniving with an eastern prince *in* (? at) a project of extortion against his subjects :—" (b) "Lamb's friendly remonstrance *on* (? against) one of Wordsworth's poems is applicable to more of them :—" (c) "It kindles in those who are capable of that generous infection a *respondent* (? responsive) sympathy :—" it need scarcely be said that there is a world of distinction between *respondent* and *responsive* : (d) "The name of Voltaire will stand out like *the names of decisive movement* (? the names of the pioneers of decisive movements) *in the* (? history of) *European advance* : (e) "Whether he was sure *in* (? of) hand and foot :—" (f) "It was decreed that some should be chosen out of mankind *to* (? for) everlasting salvation :—" (g) "The exaggerated words and dashing sentences of Macaulay are the fruit of deliberate *travail* (? deliberate effort or painful travail)." It fairly took my breath away when I chanced upon the phrase *deliberate travel*. Could a woman, in any conceivable circumstances, be said to have brought on herself the pangs of childbirth *deliberately*? What does not hold good literally cannot, certainly, hold good metaphorically. *Deliberate travail* is, accordingly, a most outlandish combination. Here we have one two strange metaphors, which it is next to impossible to make either head or tail of :—(1) "It was at those decisive moments when *the trembling balance hung on fortune in the battlefield*, that the captain turned the scale." No sense is to be got out of it, unless it is thus recast :—"It was at those decisive moments when fortune in the

battlefield hung tremblingly in the balance, etc," (2) "Schleiermacher opened the *sluices* of the theological *deep*, whether to deluge or irrigate." Is it possible even to imagine sliding-gates for adjusting the outflow or inflow of water being erected in the wide, wide sea? A glance at the above sentences, cited at random from the writings of three of the greatest masters of modern English prose, will leave scarcely any doubt on the minds of the readers of the College Magazine that there is not much to choose between the much-vaunted "English English" and the oft-decried "Babu English?"

Let me be not misunderstood. It is by no means implied that, because "English English" is at times on a par with "Babu English," as the latter actually is, and not what it is imagined to be, our young men should be indifferent to the acquisition of faultless English. On the other hand, it is highly desirable that they should try their very best to acquire a flawless English style, if only to wipe off, for once and all, the monstrously absurd charge that is so often laid at the door of the unfortunate Babu by the Britisher, notwithstanding that his own English is not only none of the best, but is, more often than not, such as any decently educated Babu may pick as many holes in as he chooses to. Let them give their days and nights to the writings of Hazlitt, De Quincey, Macaulay, among other masters of English prose, whose style is entirely free from blemishes of any kind. Their reading should be wide, but, at the same time, select; and they should write constantly; for the acquisition of a good style depends very much upon constant practice. As the poet beautifully puts it,

"True ease in writing comes by art, and not by chance,
As those move swiftest who have learnt to dance."