

THE WORDS THEY KNOW

The writing of simplified English presents a number of problems. One of them is certainly the choice of vocabulary. In order to solve it, it is possible to rely upon subjective judgment as to suitable words, or on one or more of the various word-lists which have been compiled,¹ or on both. Here I simply wish to present a few considerations which it may be useful to bear in mind whatever method is followed.

Education or communication

In the first place we must decide whether the main purpose of our piece of literature in simplified English is intended to be educational or informative. In other words, is it intended to be a textbook for teaching students a better knowledge of English, possibly as a stepping-stone to reading normal written English, or is it simply intended to convey a message to people with a limited knowledge of English? It is obvious that in the former case care will be taken to introduce useful words in contexts where they will be fairly well understood, in order to enrich the reader's vocabulary as he goes along. Moreover it will be assumed that the reader is eager to learn and will have other aids to this end. In the latter case, however, every effort will be made to keep within the vocabulary already known to the reader. Since the present comments are being made especially with simplified versions of Scripture in mind, we will here confine our attention to this second kind of simplified English, for the chief purpose of such versions is to communicate the Gospel, and any educative value they may have is purely incidental.

The intended reader

If we wish to remain within the vocabulary of our reader, we must clearly bear in mind the public for whom we are writing. There is, of course, a need for simplified English on the home market in America, Britain, Australia, etc., for children and the less well educated. However, in this article we have chiefly in mind the 'overseas' English spoken and read by millions of people in Africa, Asia, etc., for whom Scripture portions and much other literature is being prepared at the present time.

However, we should probably be mistaken in thinking that such overseas English is at all homogeneous. Just as there are considerable differences between American and British English, especially on the more colloquial level, so there are bound to be differences between different communities in Africa and Asia who speak English. It would be ideal if suitable literature could be produced locally, or by someone who has a good knowledge of local conditions. A missionary who has worked for a number of years amongst English literates in a particular area will probably have developed an intuitive sense of the vocabulary used and understood by the people, though a scientific study of the local vocabulary might in some cases serve

¹ Cf. the useful list in 'Word-Lists in English' by Herbert Dennett, *The Bible Translator*, April 1963. The whole article is a valuable contribution to study on this subject.

to sharpen his awareness of local usage. Yet there are many kinds of literature for which it would be quite uneconomical or even impossible to write for only one area, for example, simplified versions of Scripture. For such publications, therefore, and also for radio broadcasts, it is desirable to use the vocabulary basic to users of the language in all the areas under consideration.

Besides geographical differences there are, of course, bound to be various levels of overseas English. The African or Asian who has studied for several years in Britain or America will often gain a high proficiency in the language, equivalent to that of better educated British or American people themselves. At the other end of the scale will be those who speak little more than a pidgin form of the language, whilst in between will be a host of different grades of proficiency. Obviously neither of the extremes are likely to be served by texts in simplified English. The highly educated will not need them, and the speakers of pidgin will probably need their own version. It is therefore the mass of people in between the extremes whom we have chiefly in mind in this article.

Probably the most important category of those who speak overseas English are all those who speak the language in daily life because it is an important language of government and education in their land, even though it may not be their mother tongue. Such people are likely to be fluent in the language, even though in a limited form, and will be particularly appreciative of reading materials within their grasp. Quite possibly they will also have a fairly well defined basic vocabulary. Those who only learn the language as a school subject, whilst not having much opportunity of practising it, will in general be much more limited in their grasp of the language and will be in greater need of reading materials in the language(s) which they know better. Also there are likely to be much greater differences in the vocabulary known. When we proceed to consider the various existing word-lists, therefore, we shall specially bear in mind the category of people who speak English in daily life, though materials in simplified English will doubtless be read and appreciated by others also.

Word-lists

As is clear from the above, what we need is a list of the words known by a fairly well defined category, probably the largest also, of those who speak overseas English. Let us now see how far some of the existing lists can help us. It is immediately obvious that lists which set out to define the vocabulary of some other group, e.g. schoolchildren in one of the 'home countries', are of little value to us. Any similarity which there might be to the vocabulary of overseas speakers of English is bound to be more or less incidental. After a small number of basic words needed for all human communication, great divergences are likely to be found. There are, however, three lists which have been compiled specially for overseas English. Though not actually based on the usage of the speakers, these lists can be valuable as a check on purely subjective judgment. If we bear in mind the methods used in compiling the lists, and at the same time various other factors which are important in forming a judgment, we can with benefit make use of these

lists. Therefore we shall consider them first one by one, and thereafter relate our further comments to these lists by concrete examples.

1. The Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection

The full title of this work explains its purpose: *The Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection for the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language*.¹ It is clearly intended to be the basis of educational rather than purely communicative writing. On the first page it is explicitly stated that 'the report does not deal with what is sometimes called simplified English . . . it is concerned with the simplification of teaching, not the simplification of language'. However, this book is of great interest for our purpose, and the introductory pages touch on a number of topics which are important for our subject. Although the frequency of words in normal written English was taken as a starting point, many other considerations also influenced the inclusion or rejection of words in the list. In general it would seem to contain more words than will be generally known by the constituency we have in mind. The list contains about 2,000 entries, and several related forms and divergent meanings are often to be found under one head.

2. List compiled by Dr F. Laubach

The great literacy expert, Dr F. Laubach, has compiled a list for use in connection with literacy work. Apparently he has revised this list at different times or for different purposes. In this article when we refer to Laubach we shall refer to his list of 1,600 words.² This list is composed of the Thorndike-Lorge list of highest rating (i.e. most frequently used) words plus 600 other highly useful words. The combined list serves two purposes: (a) the Thorndike-Lorge list enables a reader to *recognize* about 80 per cent of the words in an ordinary newspaper; (b) the other 'most useful words' enable a person to express most everyday ideas he may desire to put into words. It is in the region of these 'most useful words' that the various editions of the list differ. It should be noted that this list includes a number of proper nouns, and also that allied forms count as separate words. Unfortunately no attempt is made to indicate homonyms or shades of meaning intended. Anyone using this list should therefore be careful not to use the words it contains in less common senses. Also a number of comparatively difficult words are included in the 'most useful words'. Apart from these limitations, this list would appear to be quite a useful guide to overseas English, as one might expect from a man of such experience.

3. Word-List of Simplified English

The most recent addition to the company of word-lists is a tentative list under the above title by H. Dennett.³ This list, unlike the others already

¹ London, P. S. King & Son, 1936.

² This list is published in *Teaching the World to Read*, New York, Friendship Press, 1947. A mimeographed list published by the Committee on World Literacy and Christian Literature, New York, in 1953, contains 1,867 words.

A shorter list of 1,500 words occurs in *Towards World Literacy*, Syracuse University Press, 1961.

³ This list is at present circulated privately by the author, H. Dennett, 51 Oakwood Avenue, Boreham Wood, Herts., England. Background information concerning the list is to be found in the article mentioned in footnote 1, p. 35.

mentioned, is not aimed to be a stepping-stone to a wider knowledge of English, but is intended to form a self-contained medium of communication, whilst presenting the least possible learning load. The list contains 1,000 words in the General List, and about 200 more in Special Lists. However, related forms and close derivations are counted under one head, so that the list probably compares in real content with the 1,600-word list by Laubach. This list is particularly useful in that homonyms, parts of speech, shades of meaning, etc., are indicated in the General List. The words have been selected mainly by means of carefully devised frequency counts of their occurrence in various kinds of written material; borderline cases are judged on their 'operative value'.

The purpose of the list is clearly not to discover the existing vocabulary of overseas English, but rather to define a minimum vocabulary which may be used by writers for this public. For our purposes it would seem that this list, in its tentative form, contains a number of words that are rather difficult for overseas English speakers, while it does not take into account a number of words which they are likely to know. In particular it is worth noting that many of the words in the Special Lists belong to the hard core of vocabulary which every speaker of English knows, whilst some others are of a much more specialized character. Allowing for these factors this list will prove to be of value, especially in combination with that of Laubach.

The frequency principle

All the above lists depend to some extent on word-counts to establish the frequency with which words occur in (mostly written) normal English. However, this has its disadvantages. It is perfectly possible to *know* a word and its meaning without using it at all frequently in writing or even in conversation. For example, it is likely that every normal person in Britain knows the meaning of the word 'pray', yet there will be large groups of the population who hardly ever use the word themselves, and who seldom come across it in the kind of literature they read or the social group among whom they live. The same might be true of the word 'dance' for another group of people. Probably upon investigation quite a number of words would turn out to be almost universally known, though very seldom actually used or read by large groups of people. In fact there are words which we all know but mostly do not frequently use, for example: thunder, lightning, earthquake, ant, spider, moon, blackboard, chalk. This is simply because the contexts which call for them are common to most people, but do not occur frequently for the majority.¹

Therefore in making use of word-lists in which the frequency principle has been employed, a word which does not appear on the list should not automatically be rejected simply because it does not appear on the list. First one should consider whether there is a good chance that the word is none the less known by the constituency for whom one is writing. For example, the word 'moon' does not appear on the tentative 1,000-word list by Dennett, yet it is undoubtedly widely known. Similarly the word 'spider' does not appear in any of the lists, though it may well be widely known.

¹ This is not quite so true nowadays regarding the word 'moon'!

Colloquial language

It appears that up till now word-lists have been chiefly or exclusively based on written materials. Yet a moment's reflection will serve to show that the words with which we are most familiar are those connected with our daily life and conversation, and it will be observed that these do not all occur equally frequently in written language, certainly not in books. They are therefore especially prone to be omitted from lists based on frequency counts of usage in literature. As a simple illustration to show how misleading frequency counts of literature might be, it is interesting to note the number of occurrences of the following well-known words in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible: fly (= noun) 1, egg 7, nose 12, babe (the form 'baby' does not occur) 15. It is unlikely therefore that these words would attain to the most frequent thousand occurring in the R.S.V., which is quite a substantial amount of literature, yet they should undoubtedly gain a place in any word-list of overseas English (except, of course, that the form 'baby' should replace 'babe').

Such words are connected with topics such as the human body, food, clothing, human relations, weather, work, etc. If we glance at our three word-lists, it is not difficult to discover a number of words which are omitted yet are very well-known. For example, omitted from Laubach, 'win'; from Dennett, 'belt', 'hammer'; from Dennett and Laubach, 'shave'; from all three, 'beer', 'cigarette', 'football', 'flea'. These are random examples. From our point of view it is simply important that we should be aware of this category of words which may easily have been omitted from the lists, and yet which it may be quite safe to use for overseas English literates.

Difficult concepts

On the other hand it must be borne in mind that some words which have a high frequency rate in normal English writing and conversation are likely to be little known and probably even less understood amongst the English literates we have in mind. For example, the words 'art', 'nature' (in Laubach 'natural') and 'morals' occur in all three lists under consideration, yet their meaning is by no means simple. Proper comprehension of these words is only possible against a background of abstract thinking which may be quite foreign to many English literates in various parts of the world. It is therefore particularly important to bear in mind the complexity of meaning of the words we use, especially rather abstract concepts. The following words all occur in one or more of the lists under consideration: horizontal, occasion, patriotism, philanthropy, peculiar, principle, represent, reproduce, standard. Surely we should be very cautious of using these words, however 'useful' they may be, and however necessary they may be for reading normal English writing.

Another related problem is that of comprehension. A person may recognize and even use a word regularly without having a full understanding of what it means. For example, a man who has lived all his life in a village may hear of such things as a factory or even a university in a neighbouring town; he may have seen the buildings when visiting the town; he may tell you that people from his village have gone to work in the factory and study at the university; but it is perfectly possible for him to have only a very vague idea

of what goes on in a factory or university. This problem becomes of burning importance when related to terms used in teaching the Christian faith: sin, repentance, conversion, faith, grace, spirit, soul are all fundamental terms of the Christian faith, but without experience of the reality to which they refer, they can produce at the best only nominal Christianity. We cannot here go into this subject at any length, for it hinges on teaching the faith 'in the power and demonstration of the Spirit' more than on vocabulary. None the less, if possible we should seek to use words which are within the comprehension of our readers in a non-Christian context, so that the Spirit can better convey the spiritual meaning as well.

Geographical and cultural differences

It is obvious that geographical conditions will influence certain areas of the vocabulary used by any community of people. Words such as 'snow', 'sea' and 'mountain' will be relatively less used and comprehended in areas where these natural features do not occur. There is little that can be done about these limitations in many cases, though such words can sometimes be replaced in figures of speech. However, there are many other differences which may be borne in mind and doubtful words avoided. For example, species of flora and fauna with a limited distribution may be replaced by more generic words: 'lilies' by 'flowers', 'foxes' by 'thieving animals', etc.

On the other hand, some words which are relatively unusual in the home countries may be quite well-known in overseas areas because the things to which they refer are more common there, for example 'locust', 'scorpion' and 'earthquake'.

Besides geographical differences there are also cultural differences which may influence vocabulary. These are sometimes a result of the geographical differences, though they are not limited to this. For example there may be wide differences in food (e.g. rice instead of bread), clothing (sandals instead of shoes), pastimes, etc. A striking example of a purely cultural difference reflected in a word-list is the fact that Laubach includes the word 'baseball' but excludes 'football'! Or again words such as 'idol' and 'temple', which appear in neither Laubach nor Dennett, may be widely known in Africa and Asia.

A further difference which it may be useful to bear in mind is that between rural and urban communities. In general far more words relating to simple forms of agriculture, the countryside, etc., will be known to speakers of overseas English than are likely to be found in the lists. An example not occurring in Dennett or Laubach is 'mud'!

Conclusion

From the above it will be seen how many factors must influence a responsible choice of vocabulary for simplified English. Doubtless there are others which we have not mentioned. Whether an entirely suitable word-list could ever be compiled taking all these factors into account I do not know. If the attempt were made, it would be of great importance to investigate the vocabulary of selected representative speakers of overseas English. It should be possible to make tape-recordings of interviews in which carefully chosen questions covering a wide range of topics are put to a number of representa-

tive persons in various areas. Obviously the reliability of the results would depend upon the amount of material gathered and very careful selection of both individual speakers and the topics raised. The material would then have to be analysed and correlated. Only then would it be possible to see whether there is a sufficiently wide basic vocabulary common to all speakers and areas for a single list to be compiled, and whether such a list would contain sufficient words for adequate communication.

If such a field investigation were impracticable, it might be possible to compile a tentative list based on those already available, modified in the light of such principles as those outlined above. This list could then be used as the basis for trial portions of literature which could be tested in various parts of the world. Those who received such trial portions could be asked to underline all words which gave them difficulty. This would probably be a less costly procedure than the investigations suggested in the previous paragraph, and might lead to quite valuable results.

Until such time as a list is compiled on one or other of these two methods, those writing for overseas English literates will have to make use of existing materials but at the same time exercise a great deal of discretion. If this paper has served to stimulate thought on these lines, it will have achieved its purpose. The author is conscious of having no practical knowledge at all of overseas English and will be only too glad if more competent people correct and amplify the comments made above.