

THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE BY H. L. MENCKEN

The Fourth Edition and the Two Supplements, abridged, with annotations and new material by Raven I. McDavid, Jr., with the assistance of David W. Maurer, New York. Knopf. 1963, \$ 12.95. 777 pp. List of Words and Phrases. Index. (Review)

As Raven I. McDavid, professor of English at the University of Chicago points out in his editorial introduction, this latest one-volume Mencken is a distillation and condensation of the three earlier books: (a) Mencken's *The American Language*, Fourth Edition (1936), (b) Supplement One (1945), and (c) Supplement Two (1948).

The task of merging and condensing these three hefty volumes into one must have been enormous because of the huge quantity of material hoarded in them and the difficulty of selection.

Speaking about recent developments affecting the language McDavid says:

"These continuing changes in the language and in the culture the language reflects, added to the history of *The American Language* as an evolving work, confronted me with an inescapable dilemma in my role as editor of the abridgment. If I considered *The American Language* an inspired text, to be abridged but never altered, I would abdicate my responsibility as a scholar and offer a dated work; if I tried to recognize all the major linguistic discoveries and social changes of the past fifteen years, I would inevitably alter what Mencken had written, sometimes beyond recognition. In the interchange between editor and publisher that accompanies the progress of a book toward print, it was finally and amicably agreed that this book should be simply an abridgment and condensation of Mencken's three volumes, with updating where necessary and editorial commentary at critical points."

The new material is usually included in editorial brackets. Mencken's phraseology has been left unchanged as far as it has been compatible with the work of abridgment.

If we compare Mencken's one-volume work with McDavid's, we find that the language of the latter is much terser, more sober, more matter-of-fact, indeed, more to the point.

The Abridged Edition cannot, of course, be as complete as the original work in three volumes. So the essence of the informational material has been kept, but the illustrative matter has been reduced. On the other hand, we have, in the abridged work, a more up-to-date and scientifically more exact collection of data.

The arrangement of the material in chapters is the same as in the original Mencken volumes except for the following details:

To *Chapter VI, American and English* two subdivisions have been added, to wit, 6. *Jargon and Counter Words* and 9. *Terms of Abuse*. This is a new and better arrangement of the material than what one finds in the Supplements.

Chapter XII, *The Future of the Language*, with its two subdivisions 1. *The Spread of English* and 2. *English or American?* was contained in the Fourth Edition but not included in Supplement Two. The new Abridged Edition has included it again in its material. — On the other hand, the copious lists of American slang given in Supplement Two have been omitted in the Abridged Edition, partly for lack of space, partly because lists of any completeness must necessarily be relegated to dictionaries of slang.

Again, it has been deemed better to omit the Appendix of the Fourth Edition dealing with the "non-English dialects in American" (!) And rightly so, for the study of German, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Yiddish, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian, Czech, Slovak, Russian, Ukranian, Serbo-Croat, Slovene, Lithuanian, Polish, Finnish (Finglish), Hungarian, Gaelic, Arabic, Greek, Chinese, Japanese, Armenian, Hawaiian, Gypsy, there treated, properly belongs to the study of the above-mentioned languages, not to the study of the American language which, after all, is a type of English. German, Dutch, etc. as spoken in America are still German, Dutch, etc. respectively, even though heavily laden with borrowings from American English; they are not "non-English dialects in American" but non-English dialects in America. Not even "Finglish", which shows interesting grammatical changes from Finnish, is an exception.

Within each separate chapter of the Abridged Edition the material of the Fourth Edition, combined with the material of the two Supplements, is enriched with new material by McDavid, usually in editorial brackets, while the order of the subject matter is in the main the same as in the earlier books. Rearrangement of the material within a chapter is comparatively rare. It is perhaps the chapter on the pronunciation of American that has been changed most through rearrangement and updating of the material. So for instance the sounding or the omission of *h* in words spelled with *wh* has been put in a new light with the help of more modern research and in accordance with the Linguistic Atlas.

The book presents such a comprehensive view of the development of the language and such a variety of opinions that it is not only highly instructive but also extremely delightful to read and makes one think. Thus, in connection with the treatment of *t* "as a kind of *d*", the reader may ponder how this is related to British speech, for this phenomenon is by no means exclusively American; it is common in western English speech as well and occurs also in other speech areas in Southern England.

Mencken's views have not been altered in the book. Indeed, McDavid says in the introductory part: "... this is not a revision of *The American Language*, and never could be." Mencken states for instance: "English usage prefers a *tu* sound in *actual*, *punctuate*, *virtue* and their like, but in America the *tu* tends to become *choo*". To this we might add that the tendency is the same in England and a true *tu* is an affectation and only the product of a conscious effort, but hardly anybody will pronounce so when he is speaking naturally, minding only *what* he is saying, not *how* he is saying it.

Anyway, re-editing Mencken's work in one handy volume was a necessity. Not only because there was a demand for Mencken's work, but also because the material of the three original volumes had to be transformed into a more systematic whole.

It is not surprising that the work of rearrangement and modernization was done by McDavid; he is one of the most competent scholars in America today where American language is concerned, especially in the field of pronunciation and dialect

tology. While Mencken was still living, McDavid corresponded regularly with him and Mencken used much of the data furnished by him.

The chapter on slang was abridged and edited by David W. Maurer, professor of English at the University of Louisville and America's leading authority on slang.

With the ever-increasing importance of the American variety of English it is imperative that students of English all over the world should read this comprehensive work which healthily counterbalances the too one-sided knowledge of and admiration for "Received Standard English".

The American Language as abridged by professor McDavid is particularly suitable for use at universities, and, I think, wherever teachers of English are trained, this book should figure on the list of compulsory literature in the curriculum, for no teacher can have unbiased views regarding the two major branches of the English language if he is not acquainted with the many divergent opinions and historical data cited in this work.

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