

## THE PERILS OF SMALL TALK.



THE term «small talk» covers not merely the conversation of those who are supposed to lead the way in the regulation of what may be called polite speech—the flood of smart things and brilliant repartee, sprinkled with *bons mots*, and punctuated by the toe of a slipper or the end of a fan, as in other days by the tap on a jeweled snuff-box: it has a wider significance, and must be used to define the vapid and lazy speech of the world at large. If it were possible to report exactly the verbal intercourse of a small community, say for a day, and afterward to tabulate the different words and calculate their number, the result would probably be most curious, in showing not only the paucity of forms of expression, but the general intellectual atony which exists, except in a very limited direction. This scarcity of ideas and limitation of expression is of course most to be remarked in isolated localities where the happenings are of an ordinary kind. In such circles habitual salutations; unthinking inquiries as to health, which are repeated in the same form at nearly every meeting; inconsequential comments upon the weather, which are not always pertinent and are often grossly inappropriate; and other wordy exercises into which thought does not fully enter, form the basis of daily communication. One who is obliged to listen to the conversation of people in public conveyances, in places of entertainment, and in elevators, cannot fail to be impressed with this extremely limited use of words and the adoption of catch-phrases and slang, as well as with the vast amount of thought-saving expression, word repetition, and inapplicable phrasing employed.

While it is true that slang at times, as Buckle has said, becomes incorporated and eventually forms a part of the «active strength» of our language, it cannot be gainsaid that much evil is done during the preliminary stages of its introduction, and in its epidemic adoption it consists largely of what South calls «rabble-charming words,» which make only an acoustic impression. The foreign words, too, that garnish the small talk of a certain class of people are so common and so much in demand as to require in most English dictionaries many pages for

their listing; and it is not unusual for persons who aspire to be what are known as «elegant conversationalists» to memorize, as a part of their social equipment, the phrases that have been so carefully selected for them by the lexicographer. There are, moreover, always one or two cant phrases that from time to time become fashionable and for the moment crowd out equally expressive and honester words of the native tongue. Some ear-pleasing expression is thus continually tossed about in the glib stream of chatter. The talker enjoys his new possession, and with the spirit that causes some people to repeat and coddle their own jokes, like a music-box playing the same tune over and over, the word or series of words eventually becomes so automatically and indiscriminately used that the speech-centers of the brain apparently act without inhibition or regulation, and undergo a species of local paroxysm, so that speech even becomes at times unconscious. In the ordinary talk of this sort figure largely habitual expressions betokening satisfaction, detestation, or some emotional condition, and these are the result of intellectual idleness or disease. Careless words of exclamation often give rise to absurd mistakes, as in the instance of the speaker who, in addressing a meeting of enthusiasts, exclaimed, «Thank God! I am an atheist.» Much of this laxity of speech is due to a condition of affairs which denotes that conversation has drifted into channels where the chatterer meets with the least resistance; a part is explained by the desire to say something, no matter what, because the maintenance of silence implies stupidity or a failure to rise to the requirements of the occasion.

Dr. William James, in his admirable «Psychology,» has called attention to the mental condition of the person who uses words which have no adequate connection with ideas, the sole purpose being to group them together in certain conventional ways, the form of expression alone being kept in mind; and he instances the exhorter who uses cant phrases for the purpose of producing desired oratorical effects. To this class belong the politician whose peroration is filled with florid and random figures of speech; the maid-servant who invariably «takes her pen in hand»; the stupid letter-writer who is well and expresses a dull hope as to the equal standing of health

of his correspondent; the gallant who has at the tip of his tongue a stock of repeated compliments; and persons whose intelligence or line of thought is limited—in short, all those whose speech is not silver, but leaden.

Speech is of course always the most important method of communication, embodying as it does the expression of ideas which are clothed in symbols and are the product primarily of visual, auditory, and other sensory perceptions and conceptions, and through the means of articulation and phonation are conveyed in a more or less impressive form and with greater or less facility. Eventually the extended vocabulary of the individual enters into conversation in a more or less automatic way, and it is only when it becomes hyper-automatic that a loss of control, with consequent disorder, ensues. There can be no doubt that the variety and number of word-images are proportionate to the intricacy and fullness of thought, although such thought may be at times disorderly. Moreover, the facility of expression and word selection is connected with certain anatomical variations of development of a demonstrable kind. According to Lombroso and others, in the brains of Gambetta, Wülfurt, and Huber the speech-centers (which are situated in the left third frontal convolution) were greatly developed; and this, in fact, is the case in men of genius generally, especially in those whose oratorical gifts and powers of expression are remarkable. In idiots and degenerates whose speech is limited the converse is true, and the emotional speech or unintelligent use of words is found. What has been known as «emotional speech» enters largely into small talk; it is only to a slight degree intellectual, and is apt to be reflex or automatic, and largely connected with gesticulation. A low grade is that used by animals to express their feelings, and which consists in certain noises adopted to give vent to feelings of pleasure, pain, or disappointment, and is characterized by a certain uniformity. Kussmaul has pointed out the fact that certain human exclamations, accompanied by appropriate motions of the mouth, are of this nature, indicating feeling without any very great intellectual participation. «Oh, my!» «Dear!» «Pooh!» «Ah!» «Tush!» and words of this kind, enter largely into the intercourse of many people. He whose pastime is small talk is prone to apply to his expressive needs the help of gesture, which usually lacks the coherency of the signs of the deaf-mute, or the elaborate movements of the clever mime, who actually

learns a written part and expresses it by appropriate gestures, the word-symbols being ever before the mind's eye. The speech of such a one is trivial, and he gradually grows to express his emotional exuberance in gestures which cloak the real paucity of thought-speech.

The indiscriminate use of adjectives and interjections which supply the place of words of delicate comparison is a vice which betokens the abolition or impairment of healthy thought-speech function, and in the disease known as aphasia is very marked. The activity of the acoustic reflex explains the fondness for loud-sounding words of ignorant people, who imitate others and adopt such words or phrases without any apparent knowledge of what they mean.

How much actual cerebral deterioration is the result of effortless speech must be a matter of speculation; of course mere loquacity is unattended by proper cerebral exercise or intellectual effort, and even if a variety of words be used, such are not the product of healthy cerebration. Those who see much of the insane recognize under certain conditions the significance of such volubility, for it is often the precursor of mania or other mental disturbances. It is rather the province of the writer to show the actual involution that accompanies an improper or careless use of the speech-centers in the apparently healthy person, than as an expression of brain-disease. A number of polysyllabic words are used to express the disturbances of speech that follow the misuse of the mental and mechanical apparatus concerned in its production. These include the transposition of words or syllables, the grammatical vices, or the exaggeration of emotional speech. Under some circumstances the resulting disorders may closely resemble those due to actual structural disease of the brain, attended by disorganization of the speech-centers; but usually the perversion is functional, though obstinate, and bears the same relation to organic speech-defects that hysteria or other functional nervous conditions do to real disease. Some of this morbid derangement, when there is hyper-automatism, resembles certain well-known forms of «cramp» due to the repetition of such acts as writing, or those of a limited kind among artisans or musicians, where a small group of muscles is the seat of spasm; and these forms are designated as writers' cramp, telegraphers' cramp, violinists' cramp, etc. Under such circumstances there is usually little participation of thought in the oft-repeated act,

which becomes habitual, and the directing power is of an unconscious kind. The so-called «baby-talk» of silly people, the form of trivial conversation which consists in the use of diminutives and is employed especially by young lovers or by those who for the first time stray into the devious and flowery paths of matrimony, are examples of this defect which supplants the vigorous and wholesome expression of genuine feeling. This condition of affairs may sometimes amount to more than a mere eccentricity, and indicates a real failure upon the part of the individual to keep his word-symbols well in mind and in order.

«Thematic paraphasia» is the term applied to express the sudden digression by those whose minds are dominated by hobbies, and whose storehouse of ideas is almost empty except for one assertive train of thought which makes itself felt in a way to surprise the listener. These defects and others which are unmentioned do not prove an advance beyond the limits of ordinary mental health, but may simply indicate the formation of careless and often incurable habits; in other words, they need not be pathological, yet to those who witness the influence of bad habits of other kinds in the production of local disease they are alarming: possibility often becomes probability, and an actual mental involution may be detected. The continued disuse of a limb by a hysterical person results in a real paralysis or contraction, or something worse; the persistence of an improper muscular habit may end in actual abolition of function; so, too, the misuse of the speech-organs may engender grave disorders. If the effort be not made to clothe thought in proper language, it will be at the expense of the former; for words not only form «the link between the object and the memory of it,» but thoughts unassociated with words very soon die away from the memory.

What, then, is the remedy? The cultivation of deliberation and originality, and the *encouragement of occasional silence*. To do this is sometimes difficult, for it implies the mending of long-existing habits, and in some measure the very loss of individuality; for many of us are apt to take refuge in conversation behind phrases and tricks of speech that have served us well in the past. Good listening is conducive to expressive speech, and the words that are formed from violent impressions are not those betokening the exercise of clear thought.

When bad habits of speech do not mirror thought or more or less deliberate cerebration, there may be a distinct intellectual weakness approaching the dignity of disease; so, too, the conjugation of strong verbs with a weak inflection may constitute a depraved condition. The attempt to speak without sufficient attention to the subject-matter results in paraphasia where the sentence is transposed. In other words, this is often the result of an attempt of the person to keep his mind upon more than one thing at the same time; as, for instance, the embarrassed speech resulting from a piano-player's efforts to answer questions while he is playing, or the delightful scene in the first act of the «Professor's Love Story,» which is so well acted by Mr. Willard. The perfunctory consolation of the tired clergyman, the careless repetition of the question by the bored doctor, and the curious blunders of all those whose speech is that of the lips and not of the heart or brain, maybe, and often are, examples of paraphasia, and from time immemorial have furnished material for Joseph Miller and others, whose witticisms have been recalled at the expense of worthy professional men.

The exercise of understanding and reason in restraining the feelings does more than anything else to form intelligent speech. The selection of good and simple English words of the most pregnant expressiveness will do much to keep the thought-speech centers in order. How far the use of slang is defensible is a matter of speculation. There is a constant injection into our language of terse expressions, many of which take their origin in the gutters and jails. So-called «Americanisms» not only find a place in the most serious utterances of statesmen and jurists and clergymen, but they are embalmed in kinds of literature where they would least be expected. Often they are utterly devoid of philological character, and at best they are adopted because they are phonetic or associated with some contemporaneous occurrence. It is to be deplored that in this country, as well as elsewhere, there is such a difference of character between the written thought and the conversation. The technical exactness of expression which is found in some of the best things we read shows that the supposed culture has not always molded the inner man. An instance of this is the disappointment we often feel in listening to the small talk of one who perhaps has hitherto been our literary idol.

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