

Richard Hoggart

**Everyday  
& Language  
Everyday  
Life**

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# Everyday & Language Everyday Life

Richard Hoggart

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2003 by Transaction Publishers

Published 2017 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2002075517

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hoggart, Richard, 1918-

Everyday language and everyday life / Richard Hoggart.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-7658-0176-0 (acid-free paper)

1. English language—Spoken English—England. 2. Aphorisms and apothegms—History and criticism. 3. English language—Social aspects—England. 4. Proverbs, English—History and criticism. 5. English language—Variation—England. 6. English language—England—Idioms. 7. English language—England—Usage. 8. Working class—England—Language. 9. Speech and social status—England. 10. England—Social life and customs. 11. Maxims—History and criticism. 12. Figures of speech. I. Title.

PE1074.8 .H64 2003

306.44'0942—dc21

2002075517

ISBN 13: 978-0-7658-0176-0 (hbk)

In loving memory  
of our sister, Molly



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For last year's words belong to last year's language  
And next year's words await another voice.

(*Little Gidding*, T. S. Eliot)





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## Acknowledgments

The works of most of the authors quoted here are out of copyright.

The few quotations from more modern authors are so small as to fall well within normally accepted limits for this kind of book. I am, of course, glad to acknowledge those authors (or executors) and publishers: Alan Bennett and the BBC, Jonathan Coe and Viking, the Executors of T. S. Eliot's Estate and Faber and Faber, Tony Harrison and Penguin, the Executors of Nancy Mitford's Estate and Hamish Hamilton, the Executors of George Orwell's Estate and Gollancz, and Alan Watkins and Duckworth.

As so often, I owe a great debt to Geoffrey Goodman, Stephen Hearst, and John Miller, all of them gifted readers and critics; and to Stephen Jones, without whom there would have been near chaos.

My warmest thanks are due also to Irving Louis Horowitz and Mary Curtis and all at Transaction Publishers for unstinting support over many years.

Last and as always, but no less deeply meant for that, my love and thanks to all the family and, in particular, to my wife Mary.



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## Preface

About a year ago, whilst looking rather casually through the preface to an earlier book, *A Measured Life* (1994), I came upon this sentence: 'You could write a book about the English character, warts and all, simply by putting together in thematic groups the traditional cant expressions that lubricate our daily life'.

I had entirely forgotten the idea, and did not even remember it throughout the year in which the present book was being written. Obviously, it had been lying dormant somewhere at the back of the mind. During that year, one part of the suggestion proved ill-judged: such a task is not at all a 'simple putting together'. It may begin in that way but it soon branches into its own complexities.

One thing was clear from the start. Such a book would best begin with the daily, conventional speech habits of a particular people in time and place, not with a scouring of dictionaries and linguistic records. If the examination of idioms, as they were habitually used, was to be revealing it should be rooted in a known, felt life. For me, that had to be the daily life of the Northern English working class from the 1930s onwards. So that was where I began; but did not remain.

I soon recovered from memory about one hundred and fifty common sayings of that period and class. But many, it was plain to see, were used also by people of other classes. Was there being illustrated here an aspect of the unity of English culture, a unity we sometimes claim, readily and with a certain pride, as strong and enduring?

That thought had some validity, but on further examination, not much. My class-of-birth used some sayings almost uniquely. More important, whilst they used some sayings they shared with other groups, they used certain of them more often and with greater stress than those other groups. Such sayings spoke most directly to them. Repetition and emphasis became defining characteristics.

A simple example: other groups occasionally used cant expressions about the experience of being 'hard up', on their 'beam-ends';

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Originally, the Preface was intended for the American edition. However, Transaction, through its distributor in the United Kingdom—Eurospan—is publishing this original work on a worldwide basis in English.

they did not use them as often and with as much force as working-class people. It would have been odd, against experience, if they had. And so, my first substantially descriptive chapter is about 'poverty and its languages' as I had directly experienced them.

Then the broadening began. This being England, very many of those favourite sayings were rooted in the sense of class. But that is a portmanteau expression. Opened, it contains something of your assumed place in society, where you are and usually expect to remain in the pecking order—as defined by birth, education, occupation, even geography. It helps to form your sense of yourself, of your status as felt on the pulses.

At this point it seems to me that this book, which must at first sight be thought to be about things foreign to American readers, though perhaps interesting—as Lionel Trilling, in particular, found the jungle of English class habits—it might, in fact, be extremely relevant to their own world. That is why I used the word 'status' at the end of the preceding paragraph, in the conviction that the sense of status plays in American life something of the part played historically by the sense of class in England.

If that is so, then the role(s) played by conventional phrases may be powerful in the USA, as in England. But an American writer setting out to examine that hunch will first have the job of ground-clearing, which has hardly affected me.

As a society that publicly insists so much on its egalitarianism, America has produced a thicket of habits, phrases, styles of greeting, all of which are meant to insist on that, on the classless nature of U.S. society. There is some truth in the powerful assertions, but Americans, especially those eating low down on the hog, know their limits. An American writer will have to cut through that thicket carefully and surgically if the complex meanings of American conventional expressions at all levels are to be explored.

For studies in either nation, the next step, upon which I touch only slightly towards the end of this book, is to examine the ways in which new linguistic practices are beginning to replace the old linguistic worlds. Key elements in the persuasive mass media world are 'sound bites' and their short successive lives, and many other related offerings. Their socio-psychological role is insistently to offer all their 'consumers' a new sense of 'togetherness' within their society, and a new sense of their happy roles within it.

*Richard Hoggart*

## Introduction

The origins and nature of this book are explained more fully in the first chapter. It emerged from my suddenly realising to how great an extent most everyday speech moves not by whole sentences but by a hopping from one ready-made phrase to another.

If one examined the phrases—epigrams, apophthegms and the like—most used by any single class of people at any one period, would the patterns reveal how, and how differently, distinct groups saw their lives?

I decided to look in this way at the favourite maxims of working-class people, as they were to be heard in Leeds during the twenties and thirties. Inevitably, the canvas broadened. For example, many of the expressions are still used by people whose parents and grandparents were indisputably working-class, but who might not identify themselves in that way today. Many such phrases were and still are used in other classes. But emphases may differ. So the field spreads outwards.

I put down from memory the bulk of those sayings. I refreshed memory by looking at various books of reference; and, as is always the case when you are pursuing a theme, more items kept coming into view by chance, from casual conversations as well as from general reading. The test for entry was that, if any item came to the surface by whatever means, I then realised that it had all the time been somewhere in my memory, chiefly from the prewar years. Once tapped, the reclaiming of such items was like the action of a trawl-net in the deep sea of memory.

I have used inverted commas around most of the phrases, but sometimes the narrative flowed better without them, so they were incorporated without the commas. Similarly, I have used demotic rather than 'educated' language when that seemed fitting; and used also some local as well as public forms.

Even the most tired writing, full of clichés, may serve a purpose at some time in our lives; as stepping stones. When the Fourth Form



in my grammar school was taken for a week's camping at Stratford on Avon, to see several of Shakespeare's plays, I was asked to write a report on the visit for the school magazine. I looked at it again some time ago. It was crammed with what then seemed fine writers' phrases. They were in fact banal images and locutions picked up from the local newspaper and the popular magazines which occasionally came into our bookless house.

They had been adopted because I was becoming mildly drunk with language, like a boy on shandy; or like someone still unable to distinguish between cheap booze and fine wine. I could write neither plain, nor complex, English. Later, Samuel Butler and George Orwell helped me to some extent towards acquiring the first.

In more than one book I have included anecdotes about my own earlier life, especially in Hunslet. Given the nature of this book it was unavoidable that a few of them, especially those which illustrate the local use of language, should be repeated here. If this irritates any readers, I am sorry.

Apart from a brief introduction to the role of the mass media in a mass society, this may be my last book. It is certainly the last to be largely centred on the Northern English working class. Enough is enough.

# 1

## Beginnings

*How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?*

—E. M. Forster (attributed)

### Approaches

I belatedly realise that, if only half-consciously, I have been registering for years the oddity of one common speech habit. That is: the fondness for employing ready-made sayings and phrasings whenever we open our mouths; a disinclination to form our own sentences ‘from scratch’, unless that becomes inescapable.

How far do the British, but particularly the English, share the same sayings right across the social classes; and if each group uses some different ones (though, on a first look, probably not many), are those differences decided by location, age, occupation and place in the social scale? Within each group, what decides which forms of conventional speech are most used and with what, if any, different degrees of emphasis?

The next step was to enquire whether, by looking at a particular group’s phrasings, one might understand better how its members saw or simply responded to the most important elements in their lives. Did such sayings, taken together, indicate some of the main lines of their culture, its basic conditions, its stresses and strains, its indications of meaning, of significance, and so on.

To do that for a whole society would be an enormous undertaking, would mean sifting and ‘better sifting’ (to adopt a popular working-class formulation) through hundreds of sayings until, one might hope, the shape of a particular but very complex and varied set of overlapping cultures emerged. That could be a lifetime’s work even if one restricted it to a small country such as England. But ‘small’ there obviously gives a false perspective. Though small in size, En-

gland manifestly has a long and rich history, and its language reflects that. Best—essential, for an amateur without access to elaborate computers—to narrow the focus. In my case, to focus on the Northern English working class of my childhood.

My memory is still full of their patterns of speech; some I still use day-by-day. How did we characteristically talk to each other in Hunslet, Leeds, and what did our talk tell about the ways we responded to our common experiences? What psychological shape did it all make; what did it reveal about our hopes and fears and our responses to them? I expect to stray widely on the way; especially into the war years and after; and will, as the material prompts, move across different social classes.

But that was how this book began, by looking at the prewar Northern working class; and that is also why the next chapter, the first of single-minded substance, is about being poor at that time and place. Behind that and other chapters, all the time, is the question of how much of that habitual speech survives into the very different circumstances of today; and what those sayings which are retained and those newly minted tell us. Towards the end that matter of the newly minted will be broached, but only lightly.

In *A Short Walk Down Fleet Street*, Alan Watkins has a nice observation on what has elsewhere been called 'breeze-block speech', by which we put our conversation together as a series of loosely linked, immediately-to-hand chunks: 'Real writers write in words; most literate people in recognisable blocks of words; and politicians, commonly, in whole prefabricated sentences or sometimes paragraphs'.

Most of us fall into a sub-division of the third group, into a simpler and less self-conscious version, as befits those who are not politicians or other kinds of public figures. Our speech is like a verbal equivalent of those snakes that children make with dominoes on a table, or interlocking parts in a very long but thin jig-saw, or a kind of continuous-prefabricated-strip of sticky verbal labels. Many of us rarely utter a sentence which has an individually chosen subject, object and verb; or includes one simple adjective to indicate a quality or characteristic; nor would we often venture on a free, self-chosen adverb. We move by jumping as if over a very tricky stream from handy metaphor or image to handy borrowed phrase; spoken hopscotch. It is both time- and worry-saving, and usually livelier, to say: 'It's like finding a needle in a haystack'; or: 'They're leaving in

droves'; or 'That's just the tip of the iceberg', rather than putting together the necessary syntactical, non-metaphorical, bits and pieces.

All this is most helpful at grave or embarrassing moments, when we wish to skirt round a naked harsh truth. We would prefer not to say, straight: 'He is very old indeed and not likely to see the year out', since that can leave us feeling slightly rude and crude. We take refuge in a range of euphemisms, such as 'He can't be very long for this world'. That is only marginally softer than the more direct form, but it serves. It serves better than the blunt: 'He's on his last legs'. You would not use that in talking to one of his relatives; you might in the streets.

Evasion is naturally demanded at the death-bed. Auden deliberately avoided it. He used to tell how he went into the room where his father was dying and said: 'You know you are dying, father'. That would have been thought cruel in our district. It may be that Auden, as a devout and direct Christian, went on to suggest a proper Christian way for his father to pass his last hours; that that was more important to him than equivocation.

In other circumstances we may not be wholly evading. We may be merely lazy; or wish not too obviously to be 'laying it on the line'; or, conversely, may prefer to use an image sharper than our own speech to do our work for us. We are greatly 'taken by' alliterative couplings: 'fish, flesh, fowl or good red herring', 'hale and hearty', 'kith and kin', 'safe and sound'.

We do not say directly: 'She is a very proud woman' but 'She's as proud as a peacock'; that is usually simple laziness, almost a tic, taking the bit from the box. We avoid saying: 'He is a greedy child', which is hard to utter politely; oddly, we may prefer 'His eyes are bigger than his belly'; which strengthens the accusation, but can be safely invoked as a piece of acceptable, as much indulgent as rude, folk-language. Of a mean man the choice might well be: 'He wouldn't even give you the skin off his rice pudding'; which is pictorially witty; the homely comic touch slightly leavens the unavoidable harshness of a straightforward 'mean'. We hesitate to say flatly: 'He's a crook', even though he clearly is; instead, we say, 'He'd rob you as soon as look at you', which is both witty and cogent.

It is easy to identify evasion and laziness. Less common is that search for jokiness and colour, which are almost always borrowed from unknown wordsmiths. Old or new, all have to have at least one kind of attraction. The best are neat beyond all substitution. 'Wise