

Hookworm Attitude In English

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Several years ago, the Rockefeller Foundation, with a view to arresting the ravages of Hookworm, then very prevalent in the mountains of Kentucky, sent a group of investigators into the state to talk with the afflicted mountaineers and to gather first hand [sic] scientific data concerning the disease. Much to its surprise, a stolid indifference and an utter unwillingness to co-operate by giving information or by answering any questions were what the commission encountered.

One investigator, however, managed to secure an expression from a sufferer afflicted with the malady, who seemed to represent the spirit of the mountaineers. "This," he said very frankly, "is our Hookworm, it ain't hurtin' nobody but us, and we don't think you fellas from New York ought to come down here to meddle with it."

Too frequently, I fear, this is the attitude which a teacher of English is likely to find even among students of High school age. There seems to be a feeling that speech is one's personal property, to do with as he chooses, and that if one manages to make himself intelligible to any degree, howsoever clumsy the fashion of it may be, he is justified in the use of any kind of language that will accomplish his purpose.

The High school problem in English is at base the creation of a sentiment in favor of a speech that is clear, pleasant, and graceful.

To develop such a sentiment is not an easy matter, when we reflect that there is today in the minds of many students a stigma on good language. Boys and girls in school actually hesitate to show any signs of the training in speech that they have received. It is not ignorance nor illiteracy, but a kind of defiance of standards. Bad articulation, bad grammar, bad voice, these seem to be the popular thing. If a High school girl met another and asked, "Have you dined?" and received the answer, "No, have you?" it ought to seem quite natural. But this is what one hears, this is the accepted jargon,— d'jeat?" "Naw, d'jew?"

There is a case on record of a girl in a western school who was cruelly hazed because she spoke correct English and had

a pleasing voice. Her classmates were quite sure that no one could speak as she did without being dreadfully affected.

We are looking forward to a time when we shall all feel the same pride in fine speech that we do in fine clothes. Very few of us object to an improvement in our wearing apparel. We do not object to a finer house than our neighbors. Why are we so concerned that our speech should be a little less than his [sic]? Why do we like to appear poor in speech?

Speech is a matter of habit and environment. It is a difficult matter for the teacher, in the few hours of the school day, to uproot the habits of a life time [sic], formed outside the school. The home, the church, and other social agencies must also develop pride in speech before we can expect to secure the best results from our teaching.

Along with our Flag, our language is a portion of our precious national heritage which it is our duty to keep unimpaired "in vigor, in variety, in freshness and in nobility."

To this end may we all . . . subscribe to the following creed and make it a rallying cry to the standard of better speech:

"I believe that my mother tongue is worthy [of] my admiration, respect and love.

"I believe that it is possible for me to speak my native language correctly, fluently and elegantly.

"I believe that this takes time, patience and care.

"I believe that slang is language in the making and that until it is made, it is not proper to use.

"I believe that the use of slang kills one's power to speak fluently.

"I believe that the proper accompaniment to pure, clearly enunciated language is a musical voice.

"I believe that this voice can be cultivated, for it is every one's right by inheritance.

"I believe it is possible to live up to this creed.

"I believe it is worth while [sic].

"I believe I'll try it."¹

NOTE

1. S. P. Davis, "Hookworm Attitude in English," *The Sumner Courier*, April 1920, 7.