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CHURCHILL'S "ANGLO-SAXON" WORDS

Louis Foley

When someone who has been astonishingly successful, whether in building an immense fortune or in some other form of activity, tells us the "secret" of his success, we may do well to take what he says with a grain of salt. It is not that he does not mean to tell the truth; no doubt he does. He may, however, have been guided by a sure instinct for the right thing to do, without really understanding why. When he attempts to explain it, his guess may be quite mistaken.

During World War II, some of Sir Winston Churchill's friends were comparing his manner of speech with that of Madame Chiang Kai-Shek. Anyone who paid attention to that distinguished lady's addresses must have been struck by her remarkable mastery of erudite and recondite terms which most English-speaking people never learn. It would have seemed unusual for a very well-educated American, to say nothing of a foreigner. In contrast, however, Sir Winston was quoted as saying: "My method is simple. I like to use Anglo-Saxon words with the least number of syllables."*

Now that great statesman's superb and extremely effective command of English is of course universally recognized. Nevertheless this statement of his involves some fundamentally false ideas about our language. They are merely conventional notions which carry on from year to year, though their inaccuracy is easy to demonstrate.

One of these is the uncritical supposition that short words are intrinsically more direct and easier to understand than long ones. Another is the idea that so-called "Anglo-Saxon" words are somehow more truly *English*, and therefore more forceful and effective, than other kinds of words in our language can possibly be.

Our brief quotation from Sir Winston should be almost sufficient in itself to demonstrate the inaccuracy of what it says. All the strength of its meaning is precisely in the words *method*, *simple*, *use*, *number*, and *syllables*, all of which came into English from French. As for the term "Anglo-Saxon" (improperly applied here, of course), it represents a purely *Latin* method of forming international adjectives, one which is often convenient nowadays in combinations like Franco-American, Greco-Roman, or Russo-Chinese. That peculiar manner

* Reported e.g. by Leonard Lyons, *Detroit Free Press*, May 26, 1943.

of compounding is not an Anglo-Saxon thing. But perhaps the best way to see the nature of the element in English which is arbitrarily called "native" will be to remove from Churchill's two short sentences everything *except* the Anglo-Saxon words. All that we have left is: "My — — is — — I like — — to — — words with the least — — of — —" In contrast to this vague and incoherent jumble, it will be perceived that the five French words, taken by themselves, *almost* suffice to express clearly and completely what the speaker wished to say: "Method simple—use (small) number (of) syllables." If one were sending a telegram, even the "of" might be dropped out. Moreover, though "of" is an old Anglo-Saxon word, this *use* of it clearly reflects a French idiom which our language had not yet acquired in Anglo-Saxon times.

Lest it be imagined that this statement was not typical of Churchill's style, we might examine a few other sentences, taken from some of his most celebrated public speeches. These will be chosen simply as outstanding and memorable utterances, important for the ideas which they effectively express. Consider for instance the first sentence of his address of June 25, 1940: "The House will feel *profound* sorrow at the *fate* of the great French *nation* and *people* to whom we have been *joined* so long in *war* and *peace*, and whom we have *regarded* as trustees with ourselves for the *progress* of a *liberal culture* and *tolerant civilization* in *Europe*." Here it is surely plain enough that the essence of the thought is practically covered by the italicized *non*-Anglo-Saxon words. Then in the short sentence immediately following, the burden of meaning is borne by the four French words: "There is no *use* or *advantage* in *wasting* strength and time upon hard words and *reproaches*."

In this sentence from the address of September 17, 1940, it is apparent that the idea resides in the three words from Latin and the five from French: "There are some *matters connected* with our *arrangements* under *air attack* which I should *prefer* to *discuss* in *private*." For a more concentrated but by no means unrepresentative example, we might turn to a short passage near the end of the speech of June 18, 1940: "I *expect* that the *Battle of Britain* is about to begin. Upon this *battle depends* the *survival* of *Christian civilization*." Indeed it is characteristic of his style, as it is rather characteristic of good English generally, that most of the real thought is expressed by words that came to our language from French, along with an occasional one from Latin. Only very rarely does one find a statement like this, which clearly says something almost purely in Anglo-Saxon

words: "If we can stand up to him [Hitler], all Europe may be free, and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands." Of course *Europe* and *move* are not Anglo-Saxon, but here they happen to be not particularly important to the meaning.

If one desired, however, to make out a case for Churchill as a user of Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, one might think of what is perhaps the most famous phrase associated with him: "blood, sweat, and tears." All four of these words are as definitely Anglo-Saxon in origin as any that we have.

In the speech as originally given, the phrase was "blood, toil, tears, and sweat." As is shown by plenty of evidence, Churchill was given to revising, revising, and *rerevising* his writings. Before each revision he insisted upon having printed proofs of the previous text, no doubt in order to judge it more objectively. *Life* (January 29, 1965) has told of the complications involved in the publishing by that magazine (1956-1958) of 14 installments of his monumental work, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*. Each contribution went through a series of revampings, each of which had to be set in type and returned to him for further alteration. Versions would come labeled "Provisional Final" or "Almost Final," and once even a "Final" text was followed by another labeled "Overtake." So it was quite in keeping with his method of composition that his original phrasing should evolve into the definitive form which he used as the title of the volume of his wartime speeches when it was finally published: *Blood, Sweat, and Tears*.

Evidently with thoughtful attention he saw clearly how his wording could be made more effective. The idea of *toil* was already symbolically represented by "sweat," so that the former word was redundant. He purified the poetic parallelism by simplifying the phrase to the three fluids which inescapably suggest elemental phenomena of human life. And "tears" comes appropriately at the end to represent the sadness, the sense of irreparable loss which comes *after* the heat of action and the immediate pain which keep us too busy for reflection.

This phrase is worthy of careful study, for it involves matters which go deeply into the nature of language, our own in particular. English words of Anglo-Saxon origin have certain typical qualities, and they tend to fall into rather definite classes. The commonest kind, those which immediately rise to the top in any word-count, are the mere grammar words such as articles, prepositions, conjunctions, or the colorless verbs which we repeat constantly as at most little more than auxiliaries. All these are words which stand

for nothing conceivable in themselves, but only help to mark direction or relationship of other words which do carry intrinsic significance. They are simply the general equipment which every language must provide for itself in one way or another, and the peculiar handling of which goes far toward giving to any language its idiomatic character, its own special system for combining ideas.

Otherwise, for the most part, our Anglo-Saxon words stand for primitive, elemental actions or things. They are generally rather loose or vague terms, anything but sharply defined. They vary widely in their meaning according to their combination or the circumstances in which they are used. What is more to the point is the fact that their value often depends very largely upon the tone or intonation with which they are uttered, or with which one speaks a sentence as a whole. Especially as regards its Anglo-Saxon components, the meaning of an English sentence is often not so much in the actual words as in how they are said. So our Anglo-Saxon words, to a very large extent, are much clearer in speech than in writing. They may be commonplaces of everyday talk, and attract no attention, or from the lips of a fervid orator they may stir up profoundly indeed. Since their content is often rather emotional than intellectual, they do not always carry over very reliably into cold print.

Now how about "blood, sweat, and tears"? Their emotional quality requires no pointing out, but their force was surely due in considerable measure to a particular occasion, to the effective voice of a great orator, and to the whole speech which built up a meaning for them and which they summarized. But this is not all.

It seems a reasonable guess that the word of this phrase which anyone would choose as most typically "Anglo-Saxon" is *sweat*. Ordinarily it is a commonplace, unattractive word, sometimes colorless and sometimes repulsive. Here it obviously acquires its impressive value by being lifted into a symbol and grouped with *blood* and *tears*. Its depth of meaning is largely the result of that unexpected combination, an unusual but telling arrangement of words such as only a gifted speaker has the insight to find. And there is a further lesson to be learned from this phrase. *Blood* and *tears* do not owe their power to being "Anglo-Saxon." They are truly classical, as they stand for timeless symbols which have belonged to the human race since as far back as we have any knowledge. They contain an appeal which can be readily translated into any language. Though, once more, their force is largely in their combination, and the content is emotional rather than intellectual, here we do have words of unmis-

takable meaning.

One is tempted to say that Churchill chose them because they were *not* characteristically “Anglo-Saxon” in anything but the mostly irrelevant etymological sense. Nor does such a conclusion seem at all implausible as we look at the *titles* of the fifty-two speeches included in the volume, *Blood, Sweat, and Tears*, and notice that virtually every title depends for its essential meaning upon a word or words from Latin or French.

Any modern language is naturally and necessarily a very complicated affair, like the complex human life which it expresses and reflects. Sweeping statements about such a subject must therefore always make allowance for exceptions here and there—which are usually quite understandable if one looks into them. Nevertheless certain generalizations stand out clearly as soon as one takes the trouble to consider our English language the least bit analytically. Its three important elements—Anglo-Saxon, French, and Latin—contribute their different functions to a united whole. The Latin element, which is indeed useful but remains the least indispensable, serves in the main to express impersonally intellectual abstractions. It is the vocabulary of scholarship which came into our usage from the study of books. The French element is more deeply imbedded in our tongue because it consists mainly of words which centuries ago came in orally as living speech. They represented definite ideas from continental Europe, advanced for their time, which the then more primitive English had not developed the means to express, or at least to express so exactly. The Anglo-Saxon part of our language is largely a matter of grammar and emotion. No one of the three main elements, however, in so far as its words really belong to our language, is either more or less truly “English” *now* than either of the others.

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