Lesson 1

Pub Talk and the King's English

Pub Talk and the King's English

Henry Fairlie

1 Conversation is the most sociable of all human activities. And it is an activity only of humans. However intricate the ways in which animals communicate with each other, they do not indulge in anything that deserves the name of conversation.

2 The charm of conversation is that it does not really start from anywhere, and no one has any idea where it will go as it meanders or leaps and sparkles or just glows. The enemy of good conversation is the person who has "something to say." Conversation is not for making a point. Argument may often be a part of it, but the purpose of the argument is not to convince. There is no winning in conversation. In fact, the best conversationalists are those who are prepared to lose. Suddenly they see the moment for one of their best anecdotes, but in a flash the conversation has moved on and the opportunity is lost. They are ready to let it go.

3 Perhaps it is because of my upbringing in English pubs that I think bar conversation has a charm of its own. Bar friends are not deeply involved in each other's lives. They are companions, not intimates. The fact that their marriages may be on the rocks, or that their love affairs have broken or even that they got out of bed on the wrong side is simply not a concern. They are like the musketeers of Dumas who, although they

lived side by side with each other, did not delve into each other's lives or the recesses of their thoughts and feelings.

4 It was on such an occasion the other evening, as the conversation moved desultorily here and there, from the most commonplace to thoughts of Jupiter, without any focus and with no need for one, that suddenly the alchemy of conversation took place, and all at once there was a focus. I do not remember what made one of our companions say it—she clearly had not come into the bar to say it, it was not something that was pressing on her mind—but her remark fell quite naturally into the talk.

5 "Someone told me the other day that the phrase, 'the King's English,' was a term of criticism, that it means language which one should not properly use."

6 The glow of the conversation burst into flames. There were affirmations and protests and denials, and of course the promise, made in all such conversation, that we would look it up in the morning. That would settle it; but conversation does not need to be settled; it could still go ignorantly on.

7 It was an Australian who had given her such a definition of "the King's English," which produced some rather tart remarks about what one could expect from the descendants of convicts. We had traveled in five minutes to Australia. Of course, there would be resistance to the King's English in such a society. There is always resistance in the lower classes to any attempt by an upper class to lay down rules for "English as it should be spoken."

8 Look at the language barrier between the Saxon churls and their Norman conquerors. The conversation had swung from Australian convicts of the 19th century to the English peasants of the 12th century. Who was right, who was wrong, did not matter. The conversation was on wings.

9 Someone took one of the best-known of examples, which is still always worth the reconsidering. When we talk of meat on our tables we use French words; when we speak of the animals from which the meat comes we use Anglo-Saxon words. It is a pig in its sty; it is pork (*porc*) on the table. They are cattle in the fields, but we sit down to beef (*boeuf*). Chickens become poultry (*poulet*), and a calf becomes veal (*veau*). Even if our menus were not written in French out of snobbery, the English we used in them would still be Norman English. What all this tells us is of a deep class rift in the culture of England after the Norman Conquest.

10 The Saxon peasants who tilled the land and reared the animals could not afford the meat, which went to Norman tables. The peasants were allowed to eat the rabbits that scampered over their fields and, since that meat was cheap, the Norman lords

of course turned up their noses at it. So rabbit is still rabbit on our tables, and not changed into some rendering of *lapin*.

11 As we listen today to the arguments about bilingual education, we ought to think ourselves back into the shoes of the Saxon peasant. The new ruling class had built a cultural barrier against him by building their French against his own language. There must have been a great deal of cultural humiliation felt by the English when they revolted under Saxon leaders like Hereward the Wake. "The King's English"—if the term had existed then—had become French. And here in America now, 900 years later, we are still the heirs to it.

12 So the next morning, the conversation over, one looked it up. The phrase came into use some time in the 16th century. "Queen's English" is found in Nashe's "Strange News of the Intercepting of Certain Letters" in 1593, and in 1602, Dekker wrote of someone, "thou clipst the Kinge's English." Is the phrase in Shakespeare? That would be the confirmation that it was in general use. He uses it once, when Mistress Quickly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* says of her master coming home in a rage, "…here will be an old abusing of God's patience and the King's English," and it rings true.

13 One could have expected that it would be about then that the phrase would be coined. After five centuries of growth, of tussling with the French of the Normans and the Angevins and the Plantagenets and at last absorbing it, the conquered in the

end conquering the conqueror, English had come royally into its own.

14 There was a King's (or Queen's) English to be proud of. The Elizabethans blew on it as on a dandelion clock, and its seeds multiplied, and floated to the ends of the earth. "The King's English" was no longer a form of what would now be regarded as racial discrimination.

15 Yet there had been something in the remark of the Australian. The phrase has always been used a little pejoratively and even facetiously by the lower classes. One feels that even Mistress Quickly—a servant—is saying that Dr. Caius—her master—will lose his control and speak with the vigor of ordinary folk. If the King's English is "English as it should be spoken," the claim is often mocked by the underlings, when they say with a jeer "English as it should be spoke." The rebellion against a cultural dominance is still there.

16 There is always a great danger, as Carlyle put it, that "words will harden into things for us." Words are not themselves a reality, but only representations of it, and the King's English, like the Anglo-French of the Normans, is a class representation of reality. Perhaps it is worth trying to speak it, but it should not be laid down as an edict, and made immune to change from below.

17 I have an unending love affair with dictionaries—Auden once said that all a writer needs is a pen, plenty of paper and "the best dictionaries he can afford"—but I agree with the person who said that dictionaries are instruments of common sense. The King's English is a model—a rich and instructive one—but it ought not to be an ultimatum.

18 So we may return to my beginning. Even with the most educated and the most literate, the King's English slips and slides in conversation. There is no worse conversationalist than the one who punctuates his words as he speaks as if he were writing, or even who tries to use words as if he were composing a piece of prose for print. When E. M. Forster writes of "the sinister corridor of our age," we sit up at the vividness of the phrase, the force and even terror in the image. But if E. M. Forster sat in our living room and said,

"We are all following each other down the sinister corridor of our age," we would be justified in asking him to leave.

19 Great authors are constantly being asked by foolish people to talk as they write. Other people may celebrate the lofty conversations in which the great minds are supposed to have indulged in the great salons of 18th century Paris, but one suspects that the great minds were gossiping and judging the quality of the food and the wine. Henault, then the great president of the First Chamber of the Paris Parlement, complained bitterly of the "terrible sauces" at the salons of Mme. Deffand, and went on to observe that the only difference between her cook and the supreme chef, Brinvilliers, lay in their intentions.

20 The one place not to have dictionaries is in a sitting room or at a dining table. Look the thing up the next morning, but not in the middle of the conversation. Otherwise one will bind the conversation; one will not let it flow freely here and there. There would have been no conversation the other evening if we had been able to settle at once the meaning of "the King's English." We would never have gone to Australia, or leaped back in time to the Norman Conquest.

21 And there would have been nothing to think about the next morning. Perhaps above all, one would not have been engaged by interest in the musketeer who raised the subject, wondering more about her. The bother about teaching chimpanzees how to talk is that they will probably try to talk sense and so ruin all conversation.

(from *The Washington Post*, May 6, 1979)

Aids to Comprehension

About "Pub Talk and the King's English"

"Pub Talk and the King's English" is a piece of expository writing. The thesis is expressed in the opening sentence of Paragraph 1: "Conversation is the most sociable of all human activities." The last sentence in the last paragraph winds up the theme by pointing out what is the bane of good conversation—talking sense. The title of the piece is a bit misleading, making the readers think that the writer is going to demonstrate some intrinsic or linguistic relationship between pub talk and the King's English, whereas the writer, in reality, is just discoursing on what makes good conversation by using the King's English as an accidental conversation topic. The writer feels that bar conversation in a pub has a charm of its own and illustrates his point by describing the charming conversation he had with some people one evening in a pub on the topic, "the King's English." "The Art of Good Conversation" would, perhaps, have been a better title for this piece. Paragraph 5 is a transition paragraph. The writer now passes from a general discourse on good conversation to a particular instance of it. But one feels the transition a bit abrupt. It could have been a bit smoother. Furthermore, in a short expository essay one does not expect to find an abundance of simple idiomatic expressions side by side with copious literary and historical allusions. However, on reflection one might conclude that the writer deliberately wrote this piece in a conversational style to suit his theme. Hence we have his loose organization—title, transition paragraph, his digressions (his reflections on the history and meaning of "the King's English," his love for dictionaries and the salons of 18th century Paris). We have his highly informal language—abundance of simple idiomatic expressions cheek by jowl with copious literary and historical allusions, and even a mixed metaphor in Paragraph 2.

For a better understanding of this kind of style one might aptly quote some of the points emphasized by the writer in this text. The writer states: "The charm of conversation...as it meanders or leaps and sparkles or just glows." (This explains the looseness of organization.) He goes on to say: "The enemy of good conversation is the

person who has 'something to say.'" Conversation is not for making a point. (This explains the digressions.) As for language he affirms: "Even with the most educated and the most literate, the King's English slips and slides in conversation. There is no worse conversationalist than the one who punctuates his words as he speaks as if he were writing, or even tries to use words as if he were composing a piece of prose for print." (This explains the informal language.)

Finally, the writer concludes: "the King's English...is a class representation of reality." He means that "the King's English" is used and held up as a model by the ruling class, the educated people, whereas the working people (underlings) mock and jeer at it.

Notes

1 **Henry Jones Fairlie:** Born in 1924 in London, England, Henry Jones Fairlie was a British political journalist and social critic who died in 1990 in Washington, D.C. Best known for coining the term "the Establishment," an analysis of how "all the right people" came to run Britain largely through social connections, he spent 36 years as a prominent freelance writer on both sides of the Atlantic, appearing in *The Spectator*, *The New Republic, The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, and many other papers and magazines. He was also the author of five books, most notably *The Kennedy Promise*, an early revisionist critique of the US presidency of John F. Kennedy.

In 2009, Yale University Press published *Bite the Hand That Feeds You: Essays and Provocations*, an anthology of his work edited by the *Newsweek* correspondent Jeremy McCarter.

2 **pub (Title):** The public house—known as the pub or the local—is a center of social life for a large number of people (especially men) in Britain. Pubs, besides offering a wide variety of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks and providing (in increasing numbers) hot and cold food, serve as places for

meeting friends and for entertainment. Many have, for instance, television sets, amusement machines and juke-boxes and provide facilities for playing darts, billiards, dominoes and similar games. Some also employ musicians for evening entertainment, such as piano playing, folk singing and modern jazz.

3 **musketeers of Dumas (Para. 3):** Characters created by the French novelist Alexandre Dumas (1802–1870) in his novel *The Three Musketeers.*

4 **Jupiter (Para. 4):** Referring perhaps to the planet Jupiter and the information about it gathered by a US space probe.

5 **descendants of convicts (Para. 7):** In 1788 a penal settlement was established at Botany Bay, Australia by Britain. British convicts, sentenced to long-term imprisonment, were often transported to this penal settlement until 1840. Regular settlers arrived in Australia about 1829.

6 **Norman conquerors (Para. 8):** The Normans, under William I, Duke of Normandy (former territory of Northern France) conquered England after defeating Harold, the English King, at the Battle of Hastings (1066).

7 ***lapin* (Para. 10):** French word for "rabbit"

8 **Hereward the Wake (Para. 11):** Anglo-Saxon patriot and rebel leader. He rose up against the Norman conquerors but was defeated and slain (1071).

9 **Nashe (Para. 12):** Thomas Nashe (1567–1601), English satirist, was born in Lowestoft in 1561, and educated at St John's College, Cambridge. After graduating in 1586, he became one of the "University Wits," a circle of writers who came to London and wrote for the stage and the press. Although his first publications appeared in 1589, it was not until *Pierce Penniless, His Supplication to the Devil* (1592), a bitter satire on contemporary society, that his natural and vigorous style was fully developed. His other publications include *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, *The Unfortunate Traveler*, and *The Isle of Dogs*.

10 **Dekker (Para. 12):** Thomas Dekker (1572–1632?), English dramatist and pamphleteer. Little is known of his early life or origins except that he frequently suffered from poverty and served several prison terms for debt. From references in his pamphlets, Dekker is believed to have been born in London around 1572, but nothing is known for certain about his youth. His last name suggests Dutch ancestry, and his work, some of which is translated from Latin, suggests that he attended grammar school. Publications: *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, *The Seven Deadly Sins of London*, *The Gull's Handbook*, etc.

11 **"here will be an old abusing" (Para. 12):** From Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act 1, Scene 4, Lines 5–6.

12 **Angevins and the Plantagenets (Para. 13):** Names of ruling Norman dynasties in England (1154–1399), sprung from Geoffrey, Count of Anjou (former province of Western France).

13 **Elizabethans (Para. 14):** People, especially writers, of the time of Queen Elizabeth I of England (1533–1603).

14 **Carlyle (Para. 16):** Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), English writer born in a village of the Scotch lowlands. After graduating from the University of Edinburgh, he rejected the ministry, because he was determined to be a writer of books. In 1826 he married Jane Welsh, a well-informed and ambitious woman who did much to further his career. They moved to Jane's farm at Craigenputtoch where they lived for 6 years (1828–1834). During this time he produced *Sartor Resartus*, the book in which he first developed his characteristic style and thought. In 1837 he published *The French Revolution*, a poetic rendering and not a factual account of the great event in history. His other works include *Chartism*, *On Heroes*, *Hero Worship*, *the Heroic in History*, and *Past and Present.*

15 **Auden (Para. 17):** W. H. Auden (1907–1973), British-born poet, educated at Oxford. During the Depression of the 1930s he was deeply affected by Marxism. His works of that period include *Poems* and *The Orators*, prose and poetry, bitter and witty, on the impending collapse of British middle-class ways and a coming revolution. Auden went to the US in 1939 and became an American citizen in 1946. In the 1940s he moved away from Marxism and adopted a Christian existential view.

16 **E. M. Forster (Para. 18):** Edward Morgan Forster (1879–1970), English author, one of the most important British novelists of the 20th century. Forster's fiction, conservative in form, is in the English tradition of the novel of manners. He explores the emotional and sensual deficiencies of the English middle class, developing his themes by means of irony, wit, and symbolism. Some of his well-known novels are *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *The Longest Journey*, *A Room with a View*, *Howard's End*, and *A Passage to India*.

17 **Henault (Para. 19):** Charles-Jean-Francois Henault (1685–1770), a French historian and president of the First Chamber of the Paris Parlement.

18 **Paris Parlement (Para. 19):** The "sovereign" or "superior" court of justice under the ancient regime in France. It was later divided into several chambers.

19 **Mme. Deffand (Para. 19):** Deffand, Marie De Vichy-Chamrond, Marquisse Du (1679–1780), a leading figure in French society, famous for her letters to the Duchesse de

Choiseul, to Voltaire and to Horace Walpole. She was married at 21 to her kinsman, Jean Baptiste de la Lande, Marquis du Deffand, from whom she separated in 1722. She later became the mistress of the regent, Philippe, duc d'Orleans. She also lived on intimate terms with Jean-Francois Henault, till his death in 1770.

Words & Expressions

musketeer (Para. 3)	a soldier armed with a musket (a smoothbore, long-barreled firearm, used especially by infantry soldiers before the invention of the rifle) 火枪手
alchemy (Para. 4)	a power or process of changing one thing into another, especially a seemingly miraculous power or process of changing a thing into something better; medieval alchemists tried to change metals into gold
Saxon churl (Para. 8)	a farm laborer or peasant in early England; a term used pejoratively by the Norman conquerors to mean an ill-bred, ignorant English peasant
rift (Para. 9)	a situation in which two people or groups have begun to dislike or distrust each other, usually caused by a serious disagreement
scamper (Para. 10)	to run with quick short steps, like a child or animal
tussle (Para. 13)	(*informal*) to fight or struggle without using any weapons, by pulling or pushing someone rather than hitting them
dandelion (Para. 14)	a wild plant with yellow flowers and white balls of seeds that travel a long way in the air 蒲公英
pejoratively (Para. 15)	disparagingly or derogatorily
facetiously (Para. 15)	jokingly or trying to be jocular, especially at an inappropriate time
edict (Para. 16)	an official public proclamation or order issued by authority; decree; any command or order
ultimatum (Para. 17)	a final offer or demand, especially by one of the parties engaged in negotiations, the rejection of which usually leads to a break in relations, and unilateral action
chimpanzee (Para. 21)	黑猩猩

Exercises

I. Oral Presentation

Make a five-minute presentation in class based on your close reading of the text.

Suggested topics:

1. What is the theme of the essay "Pub Talk and the King's English"?
2. How is the essay organized?
3. What is the main idea of each part?

II. Questions

A. Questions on the Content

1. What, according to the writer, makes good conversation? What spoils it?
2. Why does the writer like "bar conversation" so much?
3. Does a good conversation need a focal subject?
4. Why did people in the pub talk about Australia? Why did the conversation turn to Norman England?
5. How does the use of words show class distinction?
6. When was "the King's English" regarded as a form of racial discrimination in England?
7. What is the attitude of the writer towards "the King's English"?
8. What does the writer mean when he says, "the King's English, like the Anglo-French of the Normans, is a class representation of reality"?

B. Questions on Structure and Style

1. What is the thesis statement of this expository writing? Where is it stated?
2. What is the function of Paragraph 2?
3. Point out the literary and historical allusions used in this piece and comment on their use.
4. What is the function of Paragraph 5? Is the change from "pub talk" to "the King's English" too abrupt?
5. Why does the writer introduce the topic about dictionaries in Paragraph 17?
6. What is the main idea of Paragraph 18?
7. Does the writer reveal his political inclination in this piece of writing? How?

III. Paraphrase

Explain the following sentences in your own words, bringing out any implied meanings.

1. And it is an activity only of humans. (Para. 1)

2. Conversation is not for making a point. (Para. 2)
3. In fact, the best conversationalists are those who are prepared to lose. (Para. 2)
4. Bar friends are not deeply involved in each other's lives. (Para. 3)
5. …it could still go ignorantly on. (Para. 6)
6. They are cattle in the fields, but we sit down to beef (*boeuf*). (Para. 9)
7. The new ruling class had built a cultural barrier against him by building their French against his own language. (Para. 11)
8. …English had come royally into its own. (Para. 13)
9. The phrase has always been used a little pejoratively and even facetiously by the lower classes. (Para. 15)
10. The rebellion against a cultural dominance is still there. (Para. 15)
11. There is always a great danger, as Carlyle put it, that "words will harden into things for us." (Para. 16)

IV. Practice with Words and Expressions

A. Look up the dictionary and explain the meaning of the italicized idiomatic phrases.

1. …their marriages may be *on the rocks*… (Para. 3)
2. …they *got out of bed on the wrong side*… (Para. 3)
3. The conversation was *on wings.* (Para. 8)
4. …the Norman lords of course *turned up their noses at it*. (Para. 10)
5. …we ought to think ourselves back *into the shoes of* the Saxon peasant. (Para. 11)
6. …English had *come royally into its own*. (Para. 13)
7. …we *sit up at* the vividness of the phrase… (Para. 18)

B. Discriminate between the following groups of synonyms.

1. ignorant, illiterate, uneducated, unlearned
2. scoff, sneer, jeer, gibe, flout

C. The following sentences all contain metaphors or similes. Explain their meaning in plain, non-figurative language.

1. …no one has any idea where it will go as it meanders or leaps and sparkles or just glows. (Para. 2)
2. …that they got out of bed on the wrong side is simply not a concern. (Para. 3)
3. They are like the musketeers of Dumas who, although they lived side by side with each other, did not delve into each other's lives or the recesses of their thoughts and feelings. (Para. 3)
4. …suddenly the alchemy of conversation took place… (Para. 4)
5. The glow of the conversation burst into flames. (Para. 6)

6. The Elizabethans blew on it as on a dandelion clock, and its seeds multiplied, and floated to the ends of the earth. (Para. 14)
7. I have an unending love affair with dictionaries… (Para. 17)
8. Even with the most educated and the most literate, the King's English slips and slides in conversation. (Para 18)
9. Otherwise one will bind the conversation; one will not let it flow freely here and there. (Para. 20)
10. We would never have gone to Australia, or leaped back in time to the Norman Conquest. (Para. 20)

V. Translation

A. Translate the following sentences into Chinese.

1. However intricate the ways in which animals communicate with each other, they do not indulge in anything that deserves the name of conversation. (Para. 1)
2. Argument may often be a part of it, but the purpose of the argument is not to convince. There is no winning in conversation. (Para. 2)
3. Perhaps it is because of my upbringing in English pubs that I think bar conversation has a charm of its own. (Para. 3)
4. I do not remember what made one of our companions say it—she clearly had not come into the bar to say it, it was not something that was pressing on her mind—but her remark fell quite naturally into the talk. (Para. 4)
5. There is always resistance in the lower classes to any attempt by an upper class to lay down rules for "English as it should be spoken." (Para. 7)
6. Words are not themselves a reality, but only representations of it, and the King's English, like the Anglo-French of the Normans, is a class representation of reality. (Para. 16)
7. Perhaps it is worth trying to speak it, but it should not be laid down as an edict, and made immune to change from below. (Para. 16)
8. There is no worse conversationalist than the one who punctuates his words as he speaks as if he were writing, or even who tries to use words as if he were composing a piece of prose for print. (Para. 18)
9. When E. M. Forster writes of "the sinister corridor of our age," we sit up at the vividness of the phrase, the force and even terror in the image. (Para. 18)
10. There would have been no conversation the other evening if we had been able to settle at once the meaning of "the King's English." (Para. 20)

B. Translate Paragraphs 9-11 into Chinese.

Read, Think and Comment

Study the model given below. Then read the next two paragraphs and explain how coherence and unity is improved by the use of transitional devices.

Model: But this is only one aspect of the problem. Another, no less essential, is the wider gap between generations since the rate of social development has speeded up. The tastes and habits of young people today differ markedly from those of the young people of the thirties, let alone of the twenties. Still influenced by the tastes and habits of their own youth, the "fathers" are inclined to think these habits and tastes are absolutes and to deny their children the right to independent creativity which they demanded from their own parents. Hence the artificial conflicts, in which a dance or the width of trousers is elevated to the dignity of crucial issues.

The writer uses the following transitional devices:

1) Transitional words and expressions—
   but, another, still, hence
2) Pronoun reference—
   those, their, these, they
3) Repetition of important words—
   tastes and habits, young people

And since we (teenagers) are so new, many people have some very wrong ideas about us. For instance, the newspapers are always carrying advice-columns telling our mothers how to handle us, their "bewildered maladjusted offspring," and the movies portray us as half-witted bops (hoodlums); and in the current best sellers, authors recall their own confused, unhappy youth. On the other hand, speakers tell us that these teen years are the happiest and freest of our

lives, or hand us the "leaders of tomorrow, forge on the future" line. The general opinion is that teenagers are either car-stealing, dope-taking delinquents, or immature, weepy adolescents with nothing on our minds but boys (or girls as the case may be). Most adults have one or two attitudes toward the handling of teens—some say that only a sound beating will keep us in line; others treat us as mentally unbalanced creatures on the brink of insanity, who must be pampered and shielded at any cost.

As of today, I am fed up with the food served in the campus dining hall. My disenchantment started in September—the day I bit into a hamburger to find myself staring at a long strand of grey hair that trailed out of the meat, through the mayonnaise, and over the edge of the bun. After that, I was not much surprised by the little things I came across in October and November: bugs in the salad and a bobby pin in the meatloaf, for example. Then in December the food was worse—and a little dirtier. For Christmas dinner, for instance, the cook gave me a thin slice of rolled turkey, straight out of the can, and dished up a cockroach in my pudding. Even that was excusable (nobody is perfect), but what happened today is not: I had already eaten most of my clam chowder before I found it, at the bottom of the bowl, nestled among the diced potatoes and the chopped onions: one band-aid, slightly used.