«THE LINGUISTIC CONTENT OF THE POPULAR COMIC»

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Working on the assumption that English children, of both sexes, aged approximately between nine and fourteen, may be considered as a cultural minority, it is the object of this paper to offer the results of an analysis of the linguistic content of a popular comic directed towards this age-group, with the aim of evaluating its limitations and its possibilities and thence, of assessing whether or not this highly popular form of reading-matter can make any positive contribution to, or enlarge in any way, the linguistic experience of its young devotees—devotees being hardly an exaggeration in this context for, as the Opies point out in their classic study, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, «...children ... seem to have a chant on their lips as constantly as they have a comic in their hands...» (1), They likewise, in a later chapter dealing with the vocabulary of «swopping», record the children's affirmation that «Commonest swops are comics» (2).

The comic chosen for analysis is an inexpensive weekly publication called *The Beezer* (3), which has been appearing regularly since 1956, and which has a weekly sale in the United Kingdom of over 100,000 copies, as well as being sold in smallish quantities in all Commonwealth countries (4). In view of the «swopping» habit referred to above, these figures do not reflect the real number of readers, there being obviously more of these than purchasers. This comic was chosen because, unlike many such publications for younger readers, it does not appear to pursue any particular educational policy: it aims exclusively at providing effortless entertainment, and, in a word, is the sort of comic that children are more likely to buy for themselves than their parents to give them. Within its sixteen brightly-coloured pages, there appear regularly sixteen items featuring the same characters, although the episodes they appear in are generally self-contained. For the purposes of our study, an analysis was made of the linguistic content of twelve copies of *The Beezer*, dated between February and October 1979 (5).

Compared to the linguistic range covered by the more orthodox forms of literature —short stories, novels, poetry, etc.— which parents and teachers tend to put into the hands of this age-group, that of the popular comic is obviously very limited. Such limitation is imposed, above all, by the formal characteristics of the comic *genre* itself: the role of the verbal element in a comic is evidently subservient to that of the visual element in terms of sheer space, and precisely because the picture is primordial, it tends to condition the nature of the subject-matter depicted; the plot of the great majority of the episodes in *The Beezer* consists of a series of welldefined cause and effect physical actions which, at their most simple are so obvious as not to need, really, any verbal commentary at all. (Father is painting the ceiling— a well-meaning but calamitous child comes to help - he trips over the ladder - Father is left hanging on to the lamp - the lamp plus part of the ceiling comes away - etc.) In *The Beezer* there are practically no passages of verbal narrative or description at all, nor could a child who limited himself to comic-reading only, have any notion of the persuasive, polemical or emotive power of the written word. The verbal element in a comic such as *The Beezer* is confined to dialogue and the occasional internal momologue signposted *Thinks...* or graphically distinguished in some way. Such dialogue usually consists of short simple statements, questions or commands, in which subordinate clauses do not abound.

The need to economize space is also responsible for the notoriously exaggerated use, in comparison with literary texts or living speech, of a wide range of imitative or onomatopoeic lexical items which constitute a kind shorthand for the expressing of human and animal sensations or emotions and the denoting of the audible effects of physical collision. Where a novel might say, I «Ne was seized with terror» and a living speaker, «I was absolutely terrifield», *The Beezer* uses interjections such as *Eeek!* or *Yikes!* and when a Beezer character bursts into tears or is speechless with indignation, his emotions are registered as *Boo-hooo!* or *Grrr!* (6). The impact of solid or liquid bodies is indicated by onomatopoeic items such as *Zong! Bop! Splay! Clunk!* etc. (7). Other space-saving devices include the situating of a question or exclamation marks round the subject's head, like a halo, to express query, surprise or dismay and the conversion of nouns derived from dynamic verbs (8) into duly punctuated interjections with the aim of emphasizing the human reactions or actions represented in the pictures: *Pant! Moan! Snip! Squirt! Swipe!* In *The Beezer*, however such narrative short-cuts are differentiated graphically from the normal dialogue which is always framed, so that it is unlikely that a child would ever confuse the former with the latter.

In view, then, of the obvious limitations, and in some cases, artificiality, imposed on the language of a comic such as *The Beezer* by the conventions of the *genre*, it may reasonably be asked whether, in fact, this highly popular form of reading-matter can make any positive contribution at all to the linguistic experience of its young readers. On the basis of the evidence offered by the twelve copies of *The Beezer* analyzed, it would seem to me that at least two areas of linguistic behaviour are sufficiently well illustrated in this comic as to warrant an affirmative answer to this question.

In the first place, there is no doubt the child who reads this comic will be made aware that, as R. Quirk, etc. express it: «...on the one hand there is a single "English language" ... but ... on the other there are recognizable varieties» (9). Precisely because the verbal element in *The Beezer* is exclusively dedicated to transmitting dialogue, it may, and in fact, does, demonstrate the existence of varieties of Englich such as: regional dialect, class dialect, occupational dialect, children's language, idiolects, archaic English, English spoken by foreigners, etc., each of which will be used as a characterizing device in the same way as they are by novelists such as Dickens, G. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence or Allen Sillitoe (10), and will serve, therefore, to add a further dimension to the visual characterization presented in the pictures.

From the point of view of morphology and syntax, the dialogues in *The Beezer* which do not imitate a specific dialect, are conducted in Standard spoken English: contracted forms and clippings, such as *fridge* or *'cos* (11), are used in all situations where they would be so in informal conversation. From the lexical point of view, however, since in the majority of episodes juvenile speech is being recorded, *The Beezer* employs a much higher proportion of colloquialisms and slang expressions than are likely to be found in adult speech or in more conventional types of literature for children, and, in fact, these items —verbs such as *scram, scarper, shove;* adjectives such as: *tichy, barmy, rottan;* nouns such as *conk, nutter, pooch;* and mild imprecations and explotives such as *Drat! Crumbs! Golly!*— may be said to constitute the most characteristic feature of the idiolect of this particular age-group.

Regional dialect has been reflected for some months now in a regular feature concerning. «The adventures of two Lancashire Lads in Roman Britain», in which a little fellow called Ecbagoom and his Uncle Albert habitually worst the Emperor Julius Sneezer. Insofar as it is possible to do so orthographically, their dialogue does record some of the features most generally associated with Northern speech; phonological traits such as [u] for Standard [ʌ]; «*Get oop...*», loss of initial (h); «*By 'eck' e is!*», alveolar (n) for Standard velar (ŋ) in present participles, etc.; «*Good thinkin', lad!*» (t), for the definite article; «*t'Romans...*», and reduction of final consonant groups; *ol'*, an', etc.; morphological traits such as the use of the second person singular of the verb *to be;* «*art*», of substandard «*ain't*», of personal pronouns as demostratives; «*Get oop*

them stairs», «*Looks like they Romans...*», «*ye*» for «*you*» (subject), and «*were*» as third person singular; «*It were a real wet idea!*»; lexical items such as; *aye, lad,* (as a vocative), the interjection *Ee!* the adjective *grand* (=*nice, good,* etc.) and the emphatic tag *an' all.*

Insofar as class dialect is concerned, *The Beezers* consulted reveal few attempts to record lower-class or substandard speech: a burglar writes «*Me and Boss have gone*»... a patient complains «*It's me back today, Doctor*», and three different policemen «drop their aitches» in what may really be considered as constabulary clichés: «*What's this 'ere, then?*» «*'ere, you can't do that*» and «*'ello, 'ello, 'ello, what's all this here?*». There is, however, a regular feature in which the now dated sppech of the upper classes, of the type denominated by A.S.C. Ross as «U-speech» (12), is recorded and parodied, and contributes in great measure to the characterization of the speaker, Colonel Blink, a very short-sighted old gentleman. As G. L. Brook observes: «The pronunciations *huntin'*, *shootin'*, and *fishin'* have become notorious class-indicators; one sometimes hears *mornin'* for *morning*» (13). This pronunciation is habitual in Colonel Blink: «*Still admirin' the view?*». He likewise pronounces *bounder* as *baund a:h.* Syntactical characteristics of old-fashioned U-speech as used by Colonel Blink include: omission of the definite article: «*Bus is late this normin'*», and of the first person singular subject pronoun: «*Must remember...*». Lexical items include *hound* for any type of dog, *nag* for horse dated and depreciatory word *bounder* which, as A.S.C. Ross observes, sixty years ago was the antonym of *gentleman* (14). Since no other character of this class and period appears regularly in *The Beezer,* a number of lexical items are used by Colonel Blink which do not appear in other episodes: adjetives such as *blinkin', bloomin', perishin',* the initial and final tags *Oh, I say...* and *Eh, what!* exclamations such as *By jingo!, By thunder!, By George!* and a whole series of comic alliterative imprecations with a military flavour such as *Gallopin' Ghurkas! Blisterin' Buckshot* and *Howlin' Hussars!* as well as the interjection *Tut-tut!* and another expressing, presumably, complacent pleasure, *Arf! Arf!*

Examples of occupational dialect are occasionally to be found in *The Beezer:* there are the constabuluny clichés mentioned above, and a doctor says «*How are the feet today, Mrs. Smith?*» thus achieving an impersonal, professional distancing effect by the use of the definite article rather than the possessive adjetive. There is also a regular feature dedicated to the misdemeanours of a trio of would-be crooks, who frequently use an approximation to criminal slang, and talk, for example, of «*pulling a job*», of stealing «*fifty smackers*», and occasionally use American idioms to underline their Chicago-type aspirations: *I've boobed,* «*Their mate sure is a slippery customer*», etc. Their leader, incidentally, is called *Boss.*

The concept of idiolect is well illustrated in *The Beezer* in a regular episode featuring a toddler called Baby Crockett, whose speech contains both phonological and morphological peculiarities: he regularly replaces the voiceless and voiced dental fricatives (*θ*) and (*ʃ*) by, respectively, the voiceless and voiced labio-dentals (f) and (v): *Poor fing! ... nobody to play wiv,* and often uses alveolar (n) for veφlar (*ŋ*) in present participles. Morphological traits are: the use of *me* for *I.* «*Me can't jump very high*», a simplified negative: «*Me no like that programme*», and he occasionally, replaces demonstrative pronouns by personal pronouns: «*Me'll need ...to jump like them sheep*» Another infant in a different episode reveals the child's tendency to regularize anomalies by saying: «*Now me deal with those bad mans*» (15).

Examples of what R. Quirk, etc. define as variety according to subject matter (16) also occur in *The Beezer:* thus, for example, archaic English is featured in an episode in which a dustman is magically transformed into a mediaeval knight, and adapts his speech to his new historical context, using interjections like: *Gadzooks!* and *Forsooth!,* as well as lexical items such as: *my noble charger, my steed, fair maiden, craven coward, knavish knight, have at thee!* etc.

There is, of course, plenty of scope for parody in such contextual varieties of English: thus, in one episode, a «Texan evening» is organized to raise funds and there is a deliberate parodying of the commonplaces of cowboy speech; both phonological and lexical traits are involved:

Yippee! Folks (vocative), *tootin'*, *rootin'*, *shootin'*, *thankee kindly*, *Yuh mangy no-good son of a polecat!* etc. A similar parodic effect is achieved in the Roman Britain episodes referred to above, where, occasionally the Latin desinence —us is indiscriminately applied to English proper names, nouns, adjectives and even onomatopoeic items for comic effect: *Miserablius Sinnus*, *storius*, *rubbishus*, *plinkus-plonkus!* (of a harp).

Finally, *The Beezers* studied offered three illustrations of what R. Quirk, etc., define as varieties of English according to interference: that is, English spoken by foreigners, in which traces of their specific native language background are apparent (17). It is, above all, the native phonological patterns which tend to be thus imposed, and these are given orthographic approximations in the comic: thus, an Italian says: «*We gotta plenty spaghetti*» and «*He's eating all da spaghetti*», a Frenchman: «*And for ze Crockett group, feefty points*», and a German: *I haf...ze ball*», thus illustrating the Italian's dislike of monosyllables, the French tendency to lengthen short vowels, the German tendency to pronounce the grapheme *v* in English as it is in German, and the difficulty all three, races have with the ubiquitous English voiced dental fricative (δ).

The second area of linguistic behaviour which *The Beezer* may be said to successfully illustrate lates to the linguistic and semantic ingenuity (18) of the English language, with its abundant stock of homonyms and homophones and that capacity for semantic radiation, which makes it such an outstanding vehicle for word-play and verbal wit of all kinds.

In spite of the preponderance of the space given to the pictorial element in *The Beezer*, a fair amount of the entertainment in this comic is provided by word-play of one kind or another. Thus, puns are frequent and may range from the tolerable *Jest a hinute* (fo the name of a joke section) or «*It wasn't really your vault*» (said to a gymnast), to the excruciating «*You are a knotty boy*» (said to a child who is tied up), with its greater phonetic distortion. As in the novels of Dickens (19), such word-play includes a high proportion of parodic proper names, which suppose a familiarity on the part of the reader with the primary name or concept involved: thus, an insect football team is called *The Antchester United*, a first-aid fiend is called *First Ada*, a Roman Emperor, *Julius Sneezer*, and a constable, *P. C. Nabbem*.

Word-play involving homonyms is not infrequent: thus, after the Emperor Julius has enquired about the weather, he is answered «*No snow, Sneezer. Hail, Sneezer!*», and a cobbler affirms that he is «*faithful to the last*». The use of homophones as a comic device is even more frequent: the same cobbler exclaims «Upon my sole)», the aforementioned «*knotty*» boy is taught *knot* to meddle with skipping-ropes, whilst in the mediaeval episode referred to above, fun is had at the expense of the homophones *night/knight: «This is a terrible knightmare»*, says a terrified onlooker, and the challenge «*Have at thee, good knight*» elicits the perplexed response», *Eh, good night! It's still midmorning*». Proper names are sometimes exploited in the same way: thus, a football referee is called *Samuel Peeps*.

Such word-play is, of course, only incidental to the story-a sort of «fringe benefit» as it were-and, as we said, generally speaking, the text in a comic is subservient to the pictorial element; there is, however, one type of relatively frequent episode in *The Beezer* in which the very opposite obtains: this occurs in a type of episode whose principal objetive is, apparently, to offer as a comic device a concrete, visual interpretation of a figurative, and very often, colloquial, expression. In such cases, therefore, it is the *verbal* element which is the mainspring of the *pictorial* one. The «punchline», as it were, which figures in the last picture of a story concerning a character who has invented a glue dissolvent, and released torrents of glue, is «*By Gum! I'm in a sticky situation*», to which an irate companion adds «*He's going to get a pasting*». Similarly, when a criminal eludes a pursuing policeman by slipping down a manhole, the latter is informed that his chances of promotion «*have gone right down the drain*». This was only to be expected because the criminal in question is «*a slippery customer!*». Another criminal who gets his head stuck in a hollow tree trunk, is said to be «*barking up the wrong tree*», thus incliding, as

in the *By Gum!* example above, a punning element for good measure, whilst a footballer, accidentally hooked to the ceiling is said to be «suspended for a week», but to be «bracing himself». More simply, after overturning a smaller child's bench, a bully asks «Have I upset you?» As Simeon Potter has pointed out (20). «Down the ages, in most known languages, men have used... (the familiar names of parts of the human body) *metaphorically*», so it is not surprising that a high proportion of these literal depictions of figurative speech, should belong to this semantic category: a boy puts on enormous trick hands and feet in order to be able to say «*Would you like a hand?*» and «*I've grown a couple of feet*»; blows are rained on a character's neck so that another can say «*Dad's getting it in the neck*»; a calamitously clumsy child is told «*This time you can really watch your feet*», meaning, bend over to be thrashed) A child who accidentally spoils an old gentleman's wig is said to «*have got into his hair*», whilst other soot-covered children are said to be giving each other «*black looks*», and so on.

Summarizing then, it might, I think, be reasonably maintained that, although the reading of a comic such as *The Beezer* will probably not enrich a child's vocabulary, nor introduce him to the stylistic range of the more conventional exponents of the written medium variety of English, it can, however, on the one hand, acquaint him with some of the distintive peculiarities of a fairly wide range of spoken varieties, accustom him to identify such varieties with specific speakers and, indeed, contexts, as also familiarize with the device of characterisation through speech which he will recognize in novels, etc., and on the other, can, with the motivation offered by the kind of word-play that we have been mentioning, heighten his awareness of the complex relationships between form and meaning which make of his mother-tongue not only a vehicle of communication but also of wit.

REFERENCES:

(1) Iona and Peter Ppie: *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, 1959, Oxford University Paperback, 1973, p. 18.

(2) Ibid., p. 131.

(3) As the Opies point out (op. cit., p. 161) *Beezer* was a popular children's term of superlative approval in the 1950's. In fact, since March 1979, the comic has been called *The Beezer and Plug*, since a comic with the latter name merged with it on that date.

(4) Information received by the author of this paper in a letter from the editor of *The Beezer*, W. F. Swinton, dated 24th. October, 1979.

(5) The copies consulted were dated Feb. 3rd., Feb. 10th., Feb. 17th., March 3rd., April 21st., May 12th., May 19th., May 26th., June 2nd., Sept. 29th., Oct. 6th. and Oct. 13th.

(6) *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, by Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik, Longman, 1972, registers 16 such interjections (pp. 413-14) presumably as specimen examples. The copies of *The Beezer* consulted include 104 interjections.

(7) The copies of *The Beezer* consulted record some 80 onomatopoeic items of this kind.

(8) See R. Quirk et al., op. cit. p. 1011, on Verb — noun conversion (B).

(9) R. Quirk et al., op. cit., p. 7.

(10) See, for example, Randolph Quirk: «Charles Dickens, Linguist» in *The Linguist and the English Language*, Edward Arnold, 1974, pp. 1-36; G. L. Brook: «Dialect and Literature» in *English Dialects*, André Deutsch, 1963, pp. 184-209; Sebastian Balet: «The Relevance of "Register" in the Study of the English Literary Text» in *Estudios de Filosofía Inglesa*, Universidad de Granada, n.° 4-5, June 1978, pp. 81-91.

(11) *'Cos*, for example, features in Extract I of the chapter on «The Language of Conversation» in David Crystal and Derek Davy: *Investigating English Style*, Longman, 1969, p. 98, etc.

(12) Alan S. C. Ross: «U and Non-U» in *Noblesse Oblige*, Edited by Nancy Mitford, Penguin Books, 1959, p. 11.

(13) G. L. Brook: op. cit., p. 169. Also Alan S. C. Ross: op. cit., p. 30.

(14) Alan S. C. Ross: op. cit., p. 10n.

(15) See G. W. Turner: *Stylistics*, Penguin Books, 1977, p. 228.

(16) R. Quirk et al., op. cit., pp. 20-21.

(17) R. Quirk et al., op. cit., pp. 25-26.

(18) David Crystal and Derek Davy, op. cit., p. 19.

(19) Randolph Quirk: «Charles Dickens, Linguist», op. cit., p. 12.

(20) Simeon Potter: *Modern Linguistics*, André Deutsch, 1957, p. 154.

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