

Margaret M. Bryant's Work in Linguistics*

WHEN ONE CONSIDERS the full range of Miss Bryant's activities – her administrative work, her committee work, her arranging of programs, her world-wide travels with lectures on the way, her sponsoring of innumerable projects and causes – it seems incredible that she should also have had time to be a scholar. And yet in the long run she will no doubt be known for her scholarship.

Time and again her early work has been brought back into print. This is true of her earliest book, *English in the Law Courts*, first published in 1930, and then reprinted in 1962, in response to continued demand both from the legal profession and from linguists. The particular amalgam that has characterized Miss Bryant's work can be seen in this first volume. This "amalgam" consists, in my opinion, of her mixture of the concrete and the abstract: she has the superlative skill of taking a great mass of concrete detail, organizing it into a reasonable pattern, and drawing generalizations from it. In this first book her concrete details were taken from judicial decisions on word use, and yet the result was the delineation of the principal "form-words" of English. "Form-words" had not received much attention up to that time, and yet later they were shown to be central to the system of Charles C. Fries and other structuralists.

Few scholars have had such good fortune in studying an area so central to their interests in their doctoral dissertations. This set the groundwork, so that she went forward to produce her *Functional English Grammar* 15 years later. Though the winds of grammatical doctrine have been blowing hither and yon for the past three decades, this work of Miss Bryant's has maintained a solid position. It is difficult to supersede a work that records the facts of structural relationships in an orderly way.

In the Preface to her *Grammar* she noted one of the difficulties that she had while writing it. As she said, "While attempting to present the grammar of Modern English against its historical background, which is the only method leading to adequate comprehension, I have attempted to exclude instruction properly belonging to a textbook on the history of the English language." She filled out this second area three years later when she published her *Modern English and Its Heritage*, which went into its second edition 14 years later, in 1962. This established her reputation not only in grammar and usage, but also in the external

* Remarks given at the luncheon in honor of Margaret M. Bryant, April 24, 1971, at the St. Regis-Sheraton Hotel, New York City.

history of English, in word formation, and in phonology. Along with her handling of technical elements with her usual competence, she infused the work with a love of language and a respect for the heritage of the English-speaking peoples. Such study, she said in the last sentence of the book, is "essential as one of the steps toward promoting that good will of which the world is so badly in need today." I am sure she would extend that "today" of 1948 to 1971 also.

Miss Bryant's studies of the relation of language to the social setting out of which it springs led to another remarkable book, done in collaboration with Janet Rankin Aiken, their *Psychology of English*. While she can simplify abstruse subjects in a skillful way, this book shows that she does not over-simplify. Its constant theme was the complexity of human motivations. In chapter after chapter she challenged the reader to contemplate the multiple ways in which the human mind manifests itself in its use of language. I have found, for instance, that her treatment of what she called "long-cutting" cannot be duplicated anywhere else. In it she demolished the principal theory of George K. Zipf, who held that the inevitable tendency in language is toward shortening. However, she pointed out that the opposite is true, too – that people love to extend words and phrases just for the fun of it. The word *redundancy* was not yet in vogue when Margaret wrote, but she described the principle.

Miss Bryant's scholarship came to its height in her studies of English usage. Year after year she contributed dozens of studies on various points of usage. They are not important for their number, great as that is, but for the method that she constantly dinned into her fellow teachers. The facts of usage must be looked at objectively, and she inspired many others, particularly in the National Council of Teachers of English, to go ahead with their observations. In 1962 all this work came to a head in her book, *Current American Usage*. No matter how much usage may change in the future, this book remains a monument for its methodology. She knows how important it is to be basically data-oriented, and work like hers cannot be superseded: it can only be supplemented.

I have now mentioned the four principal areas in which Miss Bryant is best known: grammatical structure, historical background, psychological motivation, and the analysis of usage. But other areas remain, and if you follow the journals you will know how she has enriched many fields. One of them, for instance, is onomastics or name-study. Her contributions here were recognized by her election to the presidency of the American Name Society.

Another of her fields is that of lexical collecting. She is alert to the language around her wherever she goes. Her sojourn as a teacher in Vermont resulted, for instance, in her study, "Maple Sugar Language in Vermont," which appeared in the *Publication of the American Dialect*

Society. She is constantly alert to new developments in word coinage. The Tokyo publication, *Study of Current English*, of the Kenyusha Publishing Company, has published several series of her collections, on affixes, blends, fashion words, and others.

So far I have not yet mentioned a field in which Miss Bryant has acquired an international reputation. This is the field of folklore. In the very first issue of the *New York Folklore Quarterly*, for February, 1945, she wrote on "The People's Sayings: How You Can Help Record Them." Her pamphlet for the American Dialect Society on how to collect proverbs has been widely used to inspire younger workers. Her own work here is an ongoing enterprise, and I feel sure that we have not heard the last of it, as her files are crammed full of material that cries out to be made public.

I could fill all the time at my disposal, and much more, simply by recounting the titles of Miss Bryant's productions over the years; but the titles can best be studied in a printed list.

Altogether, her scholarship is in the firm and gracious tradition of her teacher George Philip Krapp, and I feel sure that if he could survey the full range of her scholarly career, he would be very proud of her. Can any other scholar match her life-long devotion to sound scholarship in language? I do not know who he or she could be. We can only be humble in contemplating the record that has been spread before us.

Allen Walker Read

Columbia University

NECROLOGY

The Secretary-Treasurer regretfully announces the deaths of the following members:

- Arthur R. Dunlap (cf. p. 128)
- Atcheson L. Hench (August 9, 1974)
- Petros Odabashian
- Jack A. Smith (May 25, 1974)
- Taylor Starck