

Sparling, Don; Hladký, Josef

[Frank, Tibor, ed. **The origins and originality of American culture**]

Brno studies in English. 1985, vol. 16, iss. 1, pp. 159-161

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104472>

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Della Summers (ed.-in-chief), **Longman New Pocket English Dictionary**. Longman Group Limited, London 1984, 320 pp.

Another new member — a pocket English dictionary meant as a first monolingual learning dictionary — has recently increased the family of the Longman dictionaries. It offers definitions for about 10,000 words and phrases and presents them in clear and simple English, employing a limited vocabulary of 1600 common words. Numerous examples and even illustrations assist the learner in grasping the meanings defined.

The dictionary is an attractive booklet and very handy because of its truly pocket size. It may become a *vade-mecum* even for more advanced students, who could make use of it for simple definition practice, i. e. in learning how to define in a simple way the meanings of the most frequent English words, and for the exemplification of their employment. Students will appreciate that the examples adduced by the dictionary are different from those offered by the other Longman dictionaries.

The learner will use the dictionary preparatory to availing himself or herself of the *Longman Active Study Dictionary* and eventually of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* and other English dictionaries. In this way the new pocket dictionary fills a gap within the range of available monolingual English dictionaries. It will be welcomed even by those for whom it is not primarily intended.

Jan Firbas

Tibor Frank (ed.), **The Origins and Originality of American Culture**, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1984, 801 pp.

In April 1980 one of the more important international conferences on American studies held in Europe in recent years took place in Budapest. Over seventy literary scholars, linguists and social historians from Eastern and Western Europe, the Soviet Union and the United States presented papers on a wide variety of topics gathered loosely around the theme of the meeting, "The Origins and Originality of American Culture". Now these papers have been published and so made available to the general scholarly public.

The collection includes all the papers presented at the conference, arranged in fourteen sections. In fact the use of the term "American Culture" is somewhat misleading. The bias is heavily towards literature: twelve sections deal with literary topics (or view social and cultural phenomena through literature).

The linguistic papers in the volume fall under two headings — "Impacts and Influences" and "Theories and Theorists". The most interesting paper in the first group is Sándor Rot's discussion of lexical semantic fields (based on Trier's theory rid of its agnostic implications) in American neologisms from 1945 to 1975. Two other papers in the same group can also be considered as linguistically relevant and interesting — Veronika Kniezsa's treatment of expressions for 'playing truant' and László Pordány's analysis of borrowings from American in British English, including the influence of German on American English (one example, 'iron out', however, is recorded in the *OED*). The remaining three contributions in "Impacts and Influences" are not linguistic papers as such. Péter Medgyes argues which of the two variants should be taught at schools and, with various qualifications, favours Standard British English. John Odmark's discussion of relations between language and culture operates with imprecise and subjective notions, such as the vitality and originality of the American language, and Julio-César Santoyo's survey of Spanish loan-words is an emotional defence of Spanish-speaking settlers in the present USA based on arguments long since familiar from other authors.

In the second linguistic group, "Theories and Theorists", the most revealing, in the reviewer's opinion, are Messmer's and Kenesei's papers. András Messmer shows how advanced Whitney's approach to language was and István Kenesei's discussion of relative clauses is well founded and well balanced. In another paper, József Andor traces Chomsky's views back to early, especially European thinking. The remaining two papers by László Varga and Katalin E. Kiss deal with questions related to the theory of functional sentence perspective. The relation between stress, syntax, and semantics, discussed by Varga, is

after all one of the basic issues in the theory of FSP and the sensitivity to FSP has been demonstrated by Firbas even for English, where the dominant word-order principle is the grammatical principle. Kiss's category of topic-focus languages might indicate that there are languages where FSP does not operate. (As for the pioneering work of Sámuel Brassai, there exists a still earlier book, written by Henri Weil and published in 1844.)

Since any detailed commentary on the more than sixty papers focused on literature would be impossible here, I shall instead make some general observations on these papers as a whole, referring in the course of the discussion to some that seem to me to be of particular interest.

Two points should be made to begin with. The first is that, in terms of quality, the collection is very uneven. This is not so much a criticism as a comment on the democratic openness of the conference — contributors ranged from recognized experts in their fields to graduate students at the first stages of their scholarly careers. Hence great differences in quality and worth were inevitable — though it should be emphasized that it is not always the work of the young scholars that suffers in the comparison. None of them is responsible for anything resembling Eric Mortram's tendentious and slightly hysterical account of "Fears of Invasion in American Culture"; or Keith Keating's extraordinary grab bag of famous names in "Elizabethan Influences on American Language, Painting, and Music"; or Todor T. Kirov's confused attempt to link the English Renaissance and the "American style" (variously located in Whitman, Melville, Twain, London, Crane and Hemingway) in "The Origin of the Originality of American Literature". When read alongside pieces of this type, modest efforts of restricted scope take on a new value.

The second point worth noting is that the ostensible concern of the conference for "origins and originality" is only examined explicitly in a very few papers, and even here the concept is sometimes asserted more confidently in the title than argued in the text. This is perhaps understandable. The question of "origins" gets increasingly difficult to define as American culture takes on a distinctive shape and borrows less from outside itself, while "originality" is extremely hard to pin down — much harder than its opposite (how many millions of scholar-hours per year are devoted to sniffing out sources?). But in fact some of the best papers in the collection can be found in this small group. Warren Staebler, in "The Originality of Vision in the American Romantics", stresses the social awareness of the American Romantic writers — their intense consciousness of the principles on which the nation had been founded and the ideals it was intended to fulfil, as well as their habit of "nay-saying", their stance of high-minded social dissent, something marking them off clearly from other Romantics. Darlene Unrue sees both Henry James and William Faulkner as being driven by a need to explore the confrontations and contradictions between the past and the present, the American and (ultimately) European past and the American present in the case of James, the aristocratic Southern past and the defeated Southern present in the case of Faulkner, with each struggling against a superstitious overvaluation of the past. In an examination of Whitman's poetry, Clive Bush comes closest to unravelling the knotty "origins and originality" problem when he defines the latter as a local and personal response to a set of historical possibilities, in which the free process of choosing from these possibilities creates something new and distinctive. Discussing Whitman, he stresses his fascination with the English seventeenth century, his closeness to a certain tradition of "passionate, unstudied (religious) oratory", his love of Italian opera and the theatre, his instinctive attraction to oriental mysticism, his respect for the exactness of science, and his feeling for the language of the American street; his originality lay in finding ways of using these to open up poetry to the surrounding world and so to subvert the melancholy of the Romantic ego. Zoltán Szilassy has a useful descriptive summary of the European origins of happenings and new performance theories in American theatre. And finally, Péter Dávidházi contributes a crisp study of the development of René Wellek's thought and his critical theory and a perceptive evaluation of his contribution to American criticism.

As I have said, most of the papers are not devoted specifically to origins and originality, though in some of them these concerns are of peripheral importance and in others they are introduced in a rather forced way. The great bulk of the papers deal straightforwardly either with individual authors (usually their production as a whole rather than individual works, and ranging from the seventeenth century to the present) or with subjects taking in the whole history of American literature or culture (or, less commonly, some specific period). Several of the papers devoted to individual authors or books are rather perfunctory, and on a few occasions, where two or three authors are discussed in a paper, the links

between them seem very tenuous. Daniel Hoffman, however, offers a revealing analysis of "Poe's Obsessive Themes", pointing out Poe's obsession with the theme of some kind of forbidden knowledge whose attainment brings with it destruction, and examining the haunting fear of personal extinction pervading his tales. The relaxed ease of István Geher's "Reflections on Malcolm Cowley" corresponds perfectly with the humanistic and empirical approach favoured by Cowley in his own criticism. Myron Simon's reassessment of the modern myth of Thoreau as a democratic freedom-fighter in "Thoreau's Politics" (the longest piece in the book) argues persuasively that Thoreau's perfectionism and extreme individualism make it impossible for him to be tied down to any one particular stream of political thought and render him unsuitable as a guide to political conduct. Wilson J. Moses looks at the vision of America found in *The Melting Pot*, by Israel Zangwill (who actually invented the familiar phrase) and compares it with that in the novels of Sutton Griggs, shedding light on the "melting pot" theory of American cultural development and pointing out the crucial distinction here between race and ethnicity.

Although a few of the papers dealing with broader subjects betray strong elements of waffle, most manage to avoid the grand theorizing that is the endemic temptation in work of this kind. David Skilton chooses a very specific goal: in "Some Victorian Readings of American Fiction" he discusses very briefly what the Victorians saw as a new element in American fiction — its idealism, as opposed to what they felt to be the realism of Victorian fiction — and the difficulty they had in finding terms to describe the qualities in American fiction that they desired so much, but rarely found, in their own fiction. Paul Levine also limits his subject rigorously in "Recent Women's Fiction and the Theme of Personality"; seeing American literature as being about the marginal individual's search for self-realization, he contrasts the way that, in recent women's fiction, the question of leaving the family (a male-dominated tyranny) becomes an end in itself, whereas in traditional male fiction this is only a beginning: men escape not only from the family but also from the social world (both often seen as feminine). Josef Jafab, too, concentrates on a specific issue with wider implications in his "Black Aesthetic: A Cultural or Political Concept?", a balanced and clear-eyed examination of the claims of the Black Aesthetic ideologues that pinpoints both the strength and weaknesses of their arguments and suggests that current black literature has been both stimulated and hindered by the policies of Black Aesthetic.

Limitations of space having forced me to restrict my comments to only a dozen specific papers, I should stress that these are not, of course, the only interesting contributions. Far from it. Some, such as R. Anthony Arthur's "The Search for 'the Real' in American Fiction", offer a useful survey of some particular topic (in this case fiction in the 60's and 70's); others give a good close analysis of a particular work (for example Richard P. Sugg's paper on Crane's *The Bridge*); others again will perhaps reveal something new to the non-specialized scholar (Astrid Schmitt-v. Mühlenfels's examination of the seventeenth and eighteenth century New England elegy). And certainly no one will fail to be impressed by the vitality of American studies shown by the collection as a whole.

Don Sparling—Josef Hladký

