

P. G. Wodehouse Linguist?¹

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One of the world's great comic writers, "English literature's performing flea" (according to Sean O'Casey), a linguist? Surely not. In the first place, we Brits have traditionally been resistant to learning foreign languages (on the grounds that English should be good enough for everybody); in the second place, PG received the then-standard English public-school education, which stressed Latin and Greek but certainly not any living foreign languages; in the third place the only foreign countries he visited, as far as I know, were France, Germany (through no fault of his own), and the United States, which became his home. Critics have not to my knowledge ever thought of him as a linguist; when Thelma Cazalet-Keir says "For me it is in his use of language that Mr. Wodehouse appears supremely," she is thinking of his highly literary style and "concentration of verbal felicities."²

But linguists are born, not made, and this article will contend that PG had a natural gift for language, both for the almost endless variations on his own, and for a surprising number of foreign and pseudo-foreign tongues. He also wrote in several letters to Bill Townsend that he thought of his books as stage plays, which means he was listening to his characters speaking as he wrote. In his first published book, *The Pothunters* (1902), we can listen to schoolboys: "That rotter, Reade, [...] has been telling us that burglary chestnut of his all the morning. I wish you chaps wouldn't encourage him" (ch. 3), gamekeepers: "Got yer!" (ch. 8), a Scotland Yard detective, the local aristocrat Sir Alfred Venner, Dawkins the gym instructor and boxing coach: "The 'ole thing ... is to feint with your left and 'it with your right" (ch. 1), and assorted other low-class characters. A mixture of upper and lower

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class speech, in fact, which will be characteristic of nearly all the books to follow. And also like most of its successors, *The Pothunters* contains a surprisingly large proportion of reported speech, as compared to narrative.

1. British and American English

PG's variations on British English are legion; to name the most obvious: Scottish (most notably in Lord Emsworth's gardener McAllister), Irish (as early as the school stories), and a great deal of Cockney. Cockney servants deform words picturesquely, like the housemaid Elsie Bean's "Dishpot!"³ and the valet Augustus Robb's "Brekfuss."⁴ Londoners in the street say things like "E's the bloke wot 'it yer, Bill,"⁵ or "Mordee! Cummere! Cummere quick! Sumfin' hap'nin!"⁶ In the course of a discussion at a coffee stall among London cabmen we hear this: "Yus, I do wish I wos in Russher ... Because yer can wade over yer knees in bla-a-a-ad there."⁷ Perhaps the gem of the Cockney collection is pageboy Albert's recitation of Tennyson's "Maud":

'Wiv blekest morss the flower-ports
Was—I mean were—crusted one and orl;
Ther rusted nils fell from the knorts
That 'eld the pear to the garden-worll.⁸

Occasionally, important characters are Cockneys, like Syd Price and Ma Price in *If I Were You* and the butler Chippendale (actually a broker's man in disguise) in *The Girl in Blue*.

We also recognise a number of English country speech patterns, not always easily identifiable except for the Yorkshireman's "Ba goom!"⁹ Situation rather than form leads me to identify as country dialect Ukridge's Hired Retainer's "The 'ole thing 'ere ... is these 'ere fowls have been and got the roop,"¹⁰ and Constable Butt's report to Wrykyn, the substitute for PG's Dulwich in the early school books: "'Wot's this all about, I wonder?' I says. 'Blow me if I don't think it's a frakkus.'"¹¹ And PG's versatility produced hilarious examples of stuttering, Made-

leine Bassett's baby-talk, the tautology of crossword addicts ("I'm so sorry," she murmured. "So very sorry, grieved, distressed, afflicted, pained, mortified, dejected and upset"¹²), pseudo-medieval English ("Ytte was suche a dam near squeake as I never wante to have agayne in a month of Sundays"¹³), Lord Emsworth's pig-man with no roof to his mouth ("Wah yah dah" means 'What are you doing?'¹⁴), and the grandiloquent periphrases of the imaginary kingdom of Oom ("If you know a superior excavation, go to it"¹⁵). PG has a keen ear for the comic distortions of lower-class speech, as in "Wodyer mean, you didn't tavvernaccident? ... You muster radernaccident,"¹⁶ or, à propos of a damaged hat: "Here's your rat. A little the worse for wear, this sat is ... You can't step on a nat ... not without hurting it. That tat is not the yat it was."¹⁷

This is already impressive evidence of PG's mastery of the English language(s), I think. But he spent most of his life in the United States, and probably gives us as many varieties of American as of English. As well as the gangsters Chimp Twist and Soapy Molloy, who crop up in at least half a dozen books published over a 50-year span, we meet many other criminal types ("Ah chee! ... Quit yer kiddin'! What was youse rubberin' around de house for last night if you wasn't trailin' de kid?"¹⁸) as well as prize-fighters, New York Irish cops, one Negro elevator man ("Misto' Jeeves done give me them purple socks, as you told him. Thank yo' very much, suh!"¹⁹), an American 'synthetic Westerner': "The West! Why, it's like a mother to me! I love every flower that blooms on the broad bosom of its sweeping plains, every sun-kissed peak of its everlasting hills,"²⁰ and a female private eye whose speech sounds to me like nothing on this earth ("Gladda meecher, siz Pett. Mr Sturge semme up. Said y'ad job f'r me. Came here squick scould"²¹). Perhaps the book richest in a variety of American voices is *Psmith Journalist*, set in New York, in which we meet the office boy Pugsy Maloney, who rescues a cat ("Dere was two fellers in de street sickin' a dawg on to her. An' I comes up an' says, 'G'wan! What do youse t'ink you're doin', fussin' de poor dumb animal?"), the cat's owner, Bat Jarvis, leader of the Groome Street Gang ("Pipe de collar

... Mine, mister"), Kid Brady the boxer ("I ups with an awful half-scissor hook to the plexus, and in the next round I seen Benson has a chunk of yellow, and I gets in with a hay-maker ..."), an assortment of low-life characters, and some New York policemen.

Numerous books put both Brits and Americans on stage, either because the characters travel or because Americans are imported into England. To take only two examples, in *A Gentleman of Leisure* the action begins in New York, and when it moves to London imports the Bowery burglar Spike and the crooked cop McEachern into the society of Lords and baronets; and in *Bill the Conqueror* a quiet London suburb is invaded by American crooks, one of them a small boy (who pronounces Burgundy "Boigundy"). According to Richard Usborne, PG does not always clearly distinguish English and American—for instance, in *A Damsel in Distress*, George Bevan the American speaks just like a Brit,²² and this may well be true. But I find quite convincing both the times when characters who have been wearing a mask are forced to revert to their natural American speech (Mrs. Gedge in *Hot Water*), and the occasional exchanges about English and American, trousers vs. pants or tomato vs. tomatto (see Tubby and Pru in *Summer Moonshine*, ch. 24).

2. Foreign Tongues

But a linguist worth his salt, we feel, should also be at home in a few of the planet's 5,000 or so foreign tongues, and PG shows some familiarity with a surprising number of them. Apart from the frequent Latin tags and the fairly frequent French words and expressions, of which more anon, he gives us samples of real or pseudo-German, American Indian, Italian, Swedish, Hindustani, Cantonese, and possibly Swahili, besides charming examples of foreigners speaking English, like the Russian golf enthusiast in "The Clicking of Cuthbert" who says things like "Goot-a-bye," "Zank you" and "My friend Cootabout." And let's not forget the ostensibly Filipino footman in *Laughing Gas*, whose

“Excuse yes possibly ... chap at door” (ch. 11) and “Excuse yes, you come no, please undoubtedly” (ch. 18) turn out to be fake—we’re in Hollywood, and he’s hoping for a movie role.

It is not always easy to decide whether PG is genuinely knowledgeable about languages, or making them up as he goes along. We may be fairly sure that his samples of American Indian are not authentic, e.g.: “Comrade Windsor was known to the Indians as Boola-Ba-Na-Gosh, which, as you doubtless know, signifies Big-Chief-Who-Can-Hear-A-Fly-Clear-Its-Throat,”²³ and I would have assumed the same of: “‘Svensk!’ exclaimed Mr. Swenson, or whatever it is that natives of Sweden exclaim in moments of justifiable annoyance”²⁴—had not a helpful colleague informed me that *svensk* simply means ‘Swedish.’

PG’s Italian can sound convincing, but was obviously minimal; he is a past master at creating the impression of authenticity, as with the exclamation “Casta dimura salve e pura!”²⁵ which in fact makes no sense. In *The Adventures of Sally* (ch. 16) we witness an argument between two Italian waiters whose speech is a hilarious mixture of Italian and Spanish with a few odd words thrown in: “Batti, batti! I presto ravioli hollandaise,” says the first waiter. The second retorts “La Donna e mobile spaghetti napoli Tettrasina”; the first comes back with “Infanta Isabella lope [sic] de Vegas [sic] mulligatawny Toronto,” to be countered with “Funiculi funicula Vincente y Blasco Ibanez vermicelli sul campo della gloria risotto!” This is another excellent example of PG’s ear for phrasing and cadence—it’s gobbledydook, but read rapidly it sounds very much like Italian.

We come now to the most intriguing case, which strikingly demonstrates PG’s linguistic virtuosity: the numerous foreign words and expressions pronounced (or thought) by the retired British Army Captain Biggar in *The Return of Jeeves (Ring for Jeeves)*. Since at the end of the book the Captain is heard humming a Swahili wedding march, the reader might assume that he is speaking Swahili, and some words are at least close to those in the Swahili dictionary: “Mun py nawn lap lao!” for instance (ch. 14), or “Chang suark!” (ch. 59). However, other dictionaries tell us that a *gin pahit* is a genuine drink offered at the

Malay Club, that a *baht* is (or was?) the basic monetary unit of Thailand, and a *tical* a coin used in Thailand and Burma.

And the plot continues to thicken ... An Indian colleague informs me that in Hindustani *Ghazi* means a crusader, *Havildar* is a low rank in the British Indian Army, PG's "the bimbo or tall grass" (ch. 5) is probably the Indian plant *bimba*, and that "Yogi Tulsiram Jaginath" (ch. 8) is the name of a yogi or holy man. More tentatively, another advisor suggests that several expressions are Cantonese, including "Meh nee pan kong" (ch. 5) and "Ai deng" (ch. 12; "Ai" means 'love'). So PG is apparently doing here exactly what he did with 'Italian': juxtaposing words of different origins, which astonishingly seem to make up a coherent language. But what are all the unidentified words? Perhaps readers of *Connotations* can help unravel this puzzle.

Turning now to the languages PG obviously did know, German is not as often found as we might expect, probably in deference to the events of World War II. In *Summer Moonshine* he gives the comic name of Princess von und zu Dwornitzchek to one of his most unpleasant characters, and the apparently spoof book title *Die Zeitbestimmung des Tragbaren Durchgangsinstruments im Verticale des Polarsterns*²⁶ turns out to be an authentic astronomical work by one Wilhelm Dollen, first published in 1863. We hear the pronunciation of at least two German characters, a German servant named Adolf²⁷: "In dze garten zis morning, I did zee you giss Violed," and a German waiter²⁸: "Der gendleman ... haf everything exblained. All will now quite satisfactory be." This last example combines pronunciation and sentence structure, and the latter is the basis of the psychologist Schwertfeger's comments about the jilted lover²⁹:

Having round the corner nipped and the good, stiff drink taken ... the subject will now all food-nourishment refuse and in 87.06 per cent of cases will for a long and muscle-exercising walk along the high road or across country, at a considerable rate of speed and in much soul-agitation go.

This sentence shows a keen ear both for rhythm (verb at the end) and for German compounds ("food-nourishment," "soul-agitation").

There are two languages with which we would expect PG to be thoroughly familiar. The first is Latin, in which he obviously had a thorough grounding at Dulwich, and which he uses less than we might have anticipated—for fear of being thought an intellectual snob, perhaps? The books contain a scattering of Latin clichés, used much as the French authors of the *Astérix* comic books use them: *nolle prosequi, carpe diem, tempora mutantur* ... and half a dozen others including Jeeves's favourite: *rem acu tegisti* (= 'you've hit the nail on the head'). Anything less well-known is translated in the text: *Archilochum proprio rabies armavit iambo*,³⁰ *Aequam memento rebus in arduis servoare mentem*,³¹ *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*,³² and *Medio de fonte leporem surgit amari aliquid in ipsis floribus angat*,³³ obligingly translated by Jeeves for Bertie, who knows no Latin.

PG's insouciant rendering of these chestnuts shows the familiarity with Latin which we would have assumed (I leave aside the enumeration of the bacteria of milk in *Doctor Sally*, ch. 16: *Cavillus acidi lactici, Bacillus lactis acidi* and eight others, since no Latin is necessary to consult a reference work). All the more astonishing, then, is his first use of Latin, in the first book he published, *The Pothunters* (1902). This is a correct line and a half of Latin hexameter: *Conscia mens recti* ('a mind that knows what's right,') *nec si sinit esse dolorem* ('nor if it allows grief to exist') / *Sed revocare gradum* ('but to retrace one's path'; I am, as so often, indebted to the Classical expertise of my colleague Chris Brunelle), but there are two problems here.

First, this Latin quotation is attributed, not to any Latin author, but to "our friend Thucydides"—who wrote in Greek; secondly, it consists of a quotation from Ovid (the first three words), some words found nowhere in Classical Latin (the next five), and a quotation from Virgil. What is PG up to here? This first book is a school story and the speaker a schoolboy; in 1902 presumably a majority of schoolboys (the intended readers) knew Latin, so is this a puzzle intended to be solved? I confess bafflement.

Finally, let's come to the *bonne bouche*: PG's knowledge of, and use of, French. One of the early school stories already includes a French

boy whose English is problematic: "M'Todd, he is downstairs—but to wait? No, no. Let us. Shall we? Is it not so? Yes?"³⁴ and as early as *The Man Upstairs* (1914) there are three examples of characters using French.³⁵ Well over 20 books have at least a few words and phrases in French, usually of the basic kind ("faute de mieux," "joie de vivre," "noblesse oblige," "Mais oui, mais oui, c'est trop fort!"); the only French Bill Hollister knows in *Something Fishy* is "L'addition," and "Oo la la!"). PG was obviously familiar with French casinos, and fond of French food; I counted at least two dozen French menu terms ranging from *consommé aux pommes d'amour* to *ris de veau à la financière*, and not including some charming approximations ("le Bird of some kind with chipped potatoes").

As we might expect, PG has a very good ear for French people speaking English, especially Packy's friend the Vicomte de Blissac in *Hot Water*, and for characters pretending to be French, like Lord Biskerton in *Big Money*: "... is it that you could dee-reck-ut me to Less-esser Skervare?" He also rings variations on the Englishman trying to speak French, like Bingo in *Eggs, Beans and Crumpets* asking the hotel concierge: "Esker-vous avez dans votre hôtel ... un oiseau avec beaucoup de ... Oh hell, what's the French for pimples?" (The concierge, who no doubt speaks excellent English, supplies "boutons"). And *The Luck of the Bodkins* begins with Monty's attempt, mindful of the instructions of his fiancée Gertrude, to practice his French on a French waiter: "Er, garçon, esker-vous avez un spot de l'encre et une pièce de papier—note-papier, vous savez—et une enveloppe et une plume?" The waiter's fiancée, however, has told him that he must be sure to practise his English while working on the Riviera, so he returns to Monty with "Eenk—pin—pipper—enveloppe—and a liddle bit of bloddin-pipper." Later Monty rashly asks the same waiter if he knows how to spell 'sciatica,' which the waiter of course does—in French: "Comme ça, monsieur. Like zis, boy. Wit' a ess, wit' a say, wit' a ee, wit' a arr, wit' a tay, wit' a ee, wit' a ku, wit' a uh, wit'a a ay. V'là! Sciatique." While of no help to Monty, this once again shows up PG's phenomenally keen ear for language difference.

Bertie's Aunt Dahlia has a French chef, Anatole, to whose cooking Bertie is devoted, and who (alas, only once) is infuriated to the point of delivering a fierce tirade about the man making faces at him through the skylight of his room. Part of this tirade runs as follows:

Wait yet a little. I am not finish. I say I see this type on my window, making a few faces. But what then? Does he buzz off when I shout a cry, and leave me peaceable? Not on your life. He remain planted there, not giving any damns, and sit regarding me like a cat watching a duck. He make faces against me and again he make faces against me, and the more I command that he should get to hell out of here, the more he do not get to hell out of here. He cry something towards me, and I demand what is his desire, but he do not explain. Oh, no, that arrives never. He does but shrug his head. What damn silliness! Is this amusing for me? You think I like it? I am not content with such folly. I think the poor mutt's loony. *Je me fiche de ce type infect. C'est idiot de faire comme ça l'oiseau ... Allez-vous-en, louffier ...* Tell the boob to go away. He is mad as some March hatters.³⁶

This is only one of three superb paragraphs of French-flavoured English; later in the scene, after the man on the roof (actually Bertie's friend Gussie Fink-Nottle) has been let into the room, Anatole is so moved that he reverts entirely to French: "Words like '*marmiton de Domange*,' '*pignouf*,' '*hurluberlu*,' and '*roustisseur*,' were fluttering from him like bats out of a barn."

PG's preface to the 1974 reprint of *French Leave* tells us that in 1930-35 he lived near Cannes and tried to learn French in the local Berlitz school and by reading Colette, Courteline and *La Vie Parisienne*. He also says there: "I never succeeded in speaking French," but it's hard to believe that a man who could play with a language on the page with such a keen ear (Jerry Shoesmith in *Frozen Assets* is addressed by the French police sergeant as "Zoosmeet") could not also speak it. *French Leave*, not surprisingly, takes place mainly in France; it contains many phrases in French and a protagonist named Nicolas Jules St Xavier Auguste, Marquis de Maufringneuse et Valerie-Moberanne, who has a mundane job in a ministry as "*employé attaché à l'expédition du troisième bureau* (which means clerk)" (ch. 2).

3. Conclusions?

So may Wodehouse be justifiably referred to as a linguist? Not that Noam Chomsky or George Steiner would so recognise him, but if a linguist can also be someone with a phenomenal ear who likes nothing better than to play with how language sounds, and how to transfer that sound to the page, then I believe he qualifies. He can reproduce the effect of the languages he knows, British and American English, German, Latin and French, either in the original or in fractured translation; he can create the impression that he knows Swedish or Italian by stringing words together into (actually nonsensical) phrases; and he can dream up an entire 'language' which sounds authentic, out of words taken from who knows how many different ones, as he does with Captian Biggar's 'African.' Of course his books are also about funny situations, funny objects, and funny characters, but readers have not paid sufficient attention, I think, to the almost endless varieties of English and to the quite numerous real, imaginary and mangled foreign languages spoken by those characters. Anyone, no doubt, could learn enough French to reproduce PG's clichés and menu items, but only a natural-born linguist could render the rhythms of a foreign language in English, or play so successfully with a smattering of a given language to create an effect of mastery. Writing this article provided me with two surprises: the (so far unresolved) 'African' language problem, and the mystery of his first published sample of Latin. But it is surely no surprise that PG wrote so much for the theatre; he is constantly listening to his creations as they talk, and they talk, as I hope to have shown, hilariously.

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NOTES

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²In her introduction to *Homage to P. G. Wodehouse* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1973) 5.

³*Uncle Dynamite*, ch. 9.

⁴*Spring Fever*, ch. 2.

⁵*Psmith in the City*, ch. 15.

⁶*A Damsel in Distress*, ch. 3.

⁷*A Gentleman of Leisure*, ch. 9.

⁸*A Damsel in Distress*, ch. 9.

⁹*Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*, ch. 21.

¹⁰*Love among the Chickens*, ch. 9.

¹¹*Mike at Wrykyn*, ch. 9.

¹²*Meet Mr. Mulliner*, ch. 1.

¹³*The Luck of the Bodkins*, ch. 12.

¹⁴*Full Moon*, ch. 10.

¹⁵"The Coming of Gowf," in *The Clicking of Cuthbert*.

¹⁶*Summer Moonshine*, ch. 19.

¹⁷*Mr. Mulliner Speaking*, ch. 9.

¹⁸*The Little Nugget*, ch. 6.

¹⁹*The Inimitable Jeeves*, ch. 10.

²⁰*The Small Bachelor*, ch. 2.

²¹Miss Trimble in *Piccadilly Jim*, ch. 17.

²²Richard Usborne, *Wodehouse at Work to the End* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1976) 82.

²³*Psmith, Journalist*, ch. 11.

²⁴*The Girl on the Boat*, ch. 2.

²⁵*The Small Bachelor*, ch. 16.

²⁶*The Old Reliable*, ch. 17.

²⁷"Out of School," in *The Man Upstairs*.

²⁸*Psmith Journalist*, ch. 3.

²⁹*Hot Water*, ch. 17.

³⁰*The Girl on the Boat*, ch. 8.

³¹*The Girl on the Boat*, ch. 17.

³²*The Code of the Woosters*, ch. 9.

³³*Much Obliged, Jeeves*, ch. 17.

³⁴*The Gold Bat*, ch. 10.

³⁵In "Rough-hew Them How We Will," "The Man Who Disliked Cats," and "The Tuppenny Millionaire."

³⁶*Right Ho, Jeeves*, ch. 20.