Intermediate course

19-1-11

Two hours

LANGUAGE AS A LIVING THING

By David Brazil

1-A group of scholars, calling themselves the philosophical society, decided in 1858 that the time had come for a new dictionary to be compiled. They set themselves the tremendous task not only recording every word to be found in English writings from about the year A.D.1000, but also tracing the history of each from its first appearance in manuscript, and showing the changes it had undergone in form, spelling and meaning. In this way they planned to illustrate the use of the word by quotation from various writers, and to present a whole series of quotations for each word to show its complete recorded history.

2-Progress in compiling the dictionary was, naturally, slow. Three different editors had a hand in the task before the first installment was published in 1884-and that installment covered part of the letter A. It was not until 1928, just 80 years after it was started, that the final section of the new dictionary came out. It filled ten large volumes and dealt with 240,165 main words-the greatest dictionary of any language in the world.

3-One valuable product of this enterprise was that it provided us with a new way of thinking about language problems and “rules”. The emphasis here was upon history. The compilers did not pretend to lay down a certain “correct” way of using a word, but showed us the various uses to which it had been put at various times in the past. They bring home to us the idea of language as a living, growing thing, not as some “fixed” thing that can ever be “fixed”.

4-This new approach had some important results. The grammarian now can regard it as his business to examine the way in which the language works and to describe what he finds. Such descriptive grammar is sometimes at odds with that of the prescriptive grammarian who sets out with a set of rules and uses to argue what ought to be. The prescriptive grammarian will tell us what we ought to say: “It is **I** you have to thank”, because the verb “is”, like other parts of the verb to be, must be followed by what, in Latin, is called the nominative case of the pronoun. The descriptive grammarian says that in ninety -nine cases out of a hundred what in fact we do say is: “It is **me** you have to thank**”** , and that this fact alone is a satisfactory reason for continuing to do so.

5-To say that the second approach is often more helpful is not, of course, to say that everyone should be permitted to treat the language as he chooses, or to suggest that ”Whatever is, is right”. In these days, when new words are coined on the least provocation, whether the need for them exists or not, and when the loosest of controversial expressions are put into print, one can argue that far more thought should be given to what is and what is not acceptable

1. What exactly the scholars set out to do?

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1. What makes that new approach of scholars different from previous approaches?

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1. What was the aim of their approach?
2. From paragraph three, we can infer that the approach of previous dictionary compliers is ----------------------------------------------------------------------
3. Point for one difference between descriptive and prescriptive grammar

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1. The article is:
2. Linguistically oriented
3. Philosophically oriented
4. Scientifically oriented
5. Psychologically oriented
6. It took the scholars eighty-five years to complete their project. True or false. ---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
7. The project progressed slowly because of the amount of work involved. True or false. ----------------------------------------------------------------------------------
8. The writer did not like the idea of coining new words. True or false. ---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
9. “In this way”, line ---, refers to --------------------------------------
10. “the task”, line -----, refers to ----------------------------------------
11. “this fact”, line -----, refers to ----------------------------------------
12. Locate one cause and one effect in the text

Cause ---------------------------------------------------

Effect ----------------------------------------------------

1. Translate these words and expressions to Arabic:
2. Installment: ---------------------------------------------------
3. Far more: ----------------------------------------------------
4. Set out with: -------------------------------------------------
5. On the least provocation: ----------------------------------
6. Undergo a change: ----------------------------------------------

GOOD LUCK