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An appeal for a reappraisal of the role of linguistics and traditional grammar in the secondary school is made in this article. A case is made for a return to traditional grammar in the teaching of English at all levels prior to graduate school. Five writing models with student assignments based on creative imitation illustrate the kind of stylistic achievement which is attainable with the use of traditional grammar. The importance and possibility of achieving good literary style and punctuation habits through grammar study are stressed in contrast with the limitations of linguistics in this domain. Structural linguistics in the classroom is criticized for its lack of simplicity, consistency, and stability. (AF)

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Grammar and Linguistics: A Contrast in Realities

Don M. Wolfe

No battlefield is more vital, perhaps, to the English teacher than that on which the grammars are arrayed. This article is an argument that traditional grammar is more useful in teaching than structural linguistics. Dr. Wolfe, a well-known author of language textbooks, is a professor of English at Brooklyn College and general editor of The Complete Works of John Milton, now in preparation for the Yale University Press.

For many years leaders in the National Council deplored the emphasis given to formal grammar throughout the nation. Almost every teacher knew grammar; very few teachers felt the competence or the enthusiasm or the energy to teach writing. The very schedule of English teachers, five or six classes daily, two hundred pupils a week, made writing assignments impossible to cope with. The fault with the teaching of grammar was the failure to apply grammatical knowledge to punctuation and style. Many critics felt, indeed, that no great amount of grammar teaching could be applied to style. Hence the teaching of grammar as such was discouraged. To such an extent as the leaders of the Council held to a party line, it was a hard position against formal grammar; indeed the teaching of any grammar was in the minds of many somewhat suspect. Grammar appealed to a small intellectual part of a student only; it did not take into account his need for letting his deep feelings and thoughts flow into language. When grammar flourished in the classroom, the sympathies of both teacher and students somehow dried up; before such a limited analysis of the power of language the student stood alien and hostile to the teacher's idea of English. The deep and violent emotional life of the high school student found in many if not most English classrooms no link to expressive reality as encouraged by the teacher. The more grammar, the less self-expression; it was grammar that defined the student's attitude toward English, not themes which opened the deep streams of his life and let them flow into burning images. Life seldom invaded the classroom; it was a separate compartment of cars and girls and friends and midnight hours.

Nevertheless, many gifted teachers combined expert teaching of grammar with remarkable power to draw forth the student's deep thoughts. They saw that once a grammatical concept was taught, the student should immediately use his own prepositional phrases in a story, his own predicate adjectives to express his moods, his own participles, infinitives, and adverbial clauses. When thus taught, grammatical constructions became personal possessions that found continuing expression from theme to theme. Many teachers assigned grammatical autobiographies to combine mastery of grammatical concepts with self-expression.[1] Meanwhile they assigned themes from week to week which tapped the explosive powers of self-expression about those topics that the *student*, not the teacher, defined as experience with deepest meaning. In such a teacher's classroom, learning grammar was not inconsistent with the flow of original thoughts and feelings. To such a teacher the relation between the teaching of grammar and the teaching of writing

[1]See Don M. Wolfe, "A Grammatical Autobiography," *English Journal*, 49 (January 1960), pp. 16-21.

was not one of mutual hostility and rejection; the student accepted both. Indeed the more personal became his weekly themes, the more grammar took on new and vital significance.

Then came linguistics, or a new zeal for linguistics, an interest in which was fostered by outstanding college professors and leaders within the National Council. To almost every enthusiast for linguistics, traditional grammar had failed to describe the language with those minute and accurate qualifications necessary to scientific analysis. Unlike the traditional grammar, the new science incorporated the sounds of language as well as the function of each element of structure. Instead of eight parts of speech, the linguists followed Fries in defining four parts of speech as Class 1, Class 2, Class 3, and Class 4 words and denominating fifteen to seventeen groups of structure words. In the midst of proliferating linguistic theory, Paul Roberts and others attempted in a series of books to bring linguistics within reach of the average classroom teacher. Lou La Brant in her exciting series, *Your Language*, adopted and expanded the new linguistic terminology. If the terminology of the old grammar was antiquated and inexact, the terminology of structural linguistics was so extensive and so difficult to define that even those teachers most eager to comprehend the new science found it impossible to adopt in the classroom or teach with any degree of assurance, especially in the midst of a new surge of the writing and usage assignments to college-bound students. When an eager classroom teacher tried to teach linguistics to a class oriented in traditional grammar, he more often than not found the task baffling and fruitless. Indeed he was now taking a dozen-fold as much time to teach a new grammar as he had taken to teach the old, meanwhile neglecting his far more important task of assigning college essays and analyses of great books to those students preparing for college. If the old grammar brought lethargy and boredom to the classroom, the new grammar to some teachers brought sickness of spirit and a more colossal waste of precious time than the old grammar had ever mustered. Meanwhile, where was English? What new insight did linguistics bring to an appreciation of style, to the rhetoric of beautiful sentences? Where was the visualization of the incandescent moment from a great book, from the student's life—a moment of fear, hope, happiness, despair, discovery?

My own view is that those who believe in structural linguistics for the average classroom must show how the new science can be used to improve both punctuation and style: the same tests that they justly believed should be applied to the teaching of grammar. I believe that traditional grammar has a hundred times more potential for improving punctuation and style than has structural linguistics. I wish to present again some concrete principles by which formal grammar can be used by the average teacher. I am not defending grammar as a wholly economical resource; I am defending it as a resource of limited benefits that no person of professional training can afford to dispense with. Consider the five sentence patterns below and the classroom assignments based on them. Traditional grammar can help the student to understand these patterns. Creative imitation of these sentences can enhance the student's comprehension of grammar while improving his appreciation and command of literary diction.

Pattern 1. Introductory Prepositional Phrases for Background

On the pleasant shore of the French Riviera, *about halfway* between Marseilles and the Italian border, stands a large, proud, rose-colored hotel.

—*F. Scott Fitzgerald*, from *Tender Is the Night*

Assignment: Describe a building you know in a sentence constructed like the one above. Begin with a background image in a prepositional phrase naming state or country or town; then, as Fitzgerald does, use another prepositional phrase to identify the place more exactly. Finally, use the verb and subject of the sentence, with the subject at or near the end.

Example: Among the mountains of West Virginia, on a steep road between Elkins and Parsons, stands a lonely, roofless house of gray stone.

Pattern 2. An Adjective Following the Subject

A half moon, *dusky-gold,* was sinking behind the black sycamore tree.

—D. H. Lawrence, from *Sons and Lovers*

Assignment: Write a sentence like this one in construction and intensity of diction. In your imitation use two color adjectives following the subject, as Lawrence does; also use one other color in your sentence.

Example: A high sail, chalk white, was dipping toward the blue water.

Pattern 3. A Past Participle Following the Subject

The lazy October afternoon, *bathed in a soft warmth of a reluctant sun,* held a hint of winter's coming chill.

—Ruth Firor

Assignment: Describe an afternoon, a morning, a house, a yard. In your imitation try for personifying words such as *lazy* and *reluctant.*

Example: The raw December air, showered with gusts of swirling snow, swept down the long alley.

Pattern 4. Two Participles; Two Verbs; a Simile

Streaming with perspiration, we *swarmed* up the rope, and coming into the blast of cold wind, *gasped like men plunged into icy water.*

—Joseph Conrad

Assignment: Write a sentence with grammatical elements parallel to the one above, opening with a participle as Conrad does, using two verbs as visual and dynamic as *swarmed* and *gasped.* Conclude your sentence with a simile as intense in diction as Conrad's.

Example: Shivering with cold, I jumped into bed, and wrapping myself in the warmth of the blanket, drew my head under it like a turtle shrinking back into its shell.

Pattern 5. Adverbial Clause Followed by an Absolute Phrase

Even as she was falling asleep, head bowed over the child, she was still aware of a strange wakeful happiness.

Katherine Anne Porter, from "Maria Concepcion"

Assignment: Opening with an *as* clause, as in the sentence above, use an absolute phrase to give an image of the person, as Katherine Porter does.

Example: As he stood before the class, head tilted toward the window, the sunlight brightened the brown of his freckles and the blue of his eyes.

By analyzing these five patterns and then writing sentences containing for each pattern the same sequence as in the original, the student is required to use grammatical elements in a way that makes them memorable. The principle of creative imitation, a highly neglected art of explosive possibilities, relies here upon a realistic knowledge of grammatical elements. They become memorable to him because they are combined with intense diction. In order to do well, the student must use a verb or an absolute phrase or a participle as electric as the original words. The teachers who have tried this method know that each sentence imitation in-

stantly shows both the good taste and the grammatical knowledge of the pupil at work. Is there any element of structural linguistics that makes such a direct application of theory to style as is found in this application alone of traditional grammar?

The principle applied above to short sentences may be further extended to passages like the one below from Thomas Hardy:

SPHERES OF THISTLEDOWN

> And in autumn airy spheres of thistledown floated into the same street, lodged upon the shop fronts, blew into drains; and innumerable tawny and yellow leaves skimmed along the pavement, and stole through people's doorways into their passages with a hesitating scratch on the floor, like the skirts of timid visitors.
> —*Thomas Hardy, Mayor of Casterbridge*

Merely analyzing this passage for its remarkable resources, its use of background, middleground, and foreground images, its use of the blending elements of the spheres of thistledown and the flying leaves, its images of color and sound and touch, its simile at the end: all of this is not enough. The teacher must then ask the class to write a sentence similar step by step in grammatical construction to Thomas Hardy's original. Once a student has used his own diction, his own visualization, in constructing a sentence exactly like Hardy's in grammatical order, he has applied grammar to style in the most realistic way possible:

IN THE WINTER DUSK: IMITATION OF HARDY

> And in the winter dusk, long gusts of wind whispered secrets to the windows, wailed under the door, sighed across the carpet to the fires; and delicate purple-white snowflakes danced around the treetops, pitted the roof, and trickled down the cottage with wistful resignation, like the tears of silent lovers.
> —*Frances Dyller*

The student perforce extends his command of grammar for style in imitating this sentence: by the use of three parallel verbs in the first independent clause as electric as those of Hardy; by the use of parallel prepositional phrases in each clause. Meanwhile he tries in his own diction for a combination of consonant sounds as beautiful as the *l*'s, *m*'s, and *n*'s in "innumerable tawny and yellow leaves" or the use of the *s* sound in such words as *passages*, *scratch*, *skirts*, and *visitors*. The beginning of the achievement is the student's ability to imitate the structure of the sentence; the end is beauty of rhetoric and diction.

This approach to style we have described presupposes a long apprenticeship in the elements of grammar. This apprenticeship is often wasteful of time and energy that might be devoted to writing experiences without emphasis on variety of sentence structure or punctuation according to grammatical rules. However, for that increasing proportion of students who intend to go on to college, the knowledge of grammatical constructions for both style and punctuation is in the opinion of many college teachers indispensable. The more the student aspires to attend college or prepare for a profession, the more he needs a knowledge of elementary grammar in both speech and writing. If the student is not going on to college and does not expect to enter a profession, certainly he does not need a knowledge of grammar. He can get along perfectly well in conversation. Even though he punctuates incorrectly, he can write letters well enough to make himself understood. He can, indeed, make his meaning clear without punctuating sentences. The growing acceptance, however, of the necessity of some college work in addition to high school for the average student makes a knowledge of elementary grammar increasingly vital as the years pass.

Value of Traditional Grammar

For whatever purposes the teacher uses grammar, whether or not the time she spends on it is justified, she needs a stable and consistent description of the language. Traditional grammar provides such a classification, however weak and inconsistent much of its terminology and applications. Traditional grammar presents a crude and often inconsistent classification of word function. As Verna Newsome points out in *Structural Grammar in the Classroom*, the word *brother's* in such a phrase as "My brother's classmate" defies exact analysis in terms of formal grammar. Certainly fundamental grammar is a crude instrument. It depends for definition now upon meaning, as in definition of nouns, and now upon structure, as in definitions of adjectives and adverbs. Nevertheless, despite such weaknesses this grammar *does* function better than *any other* because it is simpler, it has fewer terms, it has a long history of pragmatic effectiveness. Moreover, its Latin-derived description of language is used not only by teachers of English, but also by teachers of French, German, Spanish, and Italian. Each of these languages has roughly the same formal classification of the parts of speech. So far there is no attempt in any of the European countries to make a new science of structural linguistics a substitute for formal grammar in the secondary schools. This fact alone should give pause on the American scene to those scholars now attempting to make structural linguistics a consistent system of language analysis to replace formal grammar on the high school level.

One of the curious deficiencies of some structural linguists is their refusal to recognize the intricate difficulties of descriptions of structure in which scholars of the new science take refuge. May I call attention, for example, to a sentence in one of the great works on structural linguistics, Fries' *The Structure of English* (p. 183):

> The subject itself is simply that Class 1 word that is bound to a Class 2 word to form the basic arrangement of the sentence, and it is identified and distinguished from other Class 1 words not by meaning but by certain contrastive arrangements.
>
> —Charles Carpenter Fries, *The Structure of English*

How anyone involved in a classroom situation could explain to the class such a sentence as this, or paraphrase the sentence in understandable diction, I cannot see. Fries, it is true, did not intend this sentence to be used in a high school classroom. He was writing for scholars who would, in turn, translate his principles into comprehensible terms. Nevertheless, the very nature of the principles involved in structural linguistics, of breaking down the old terminology and substituting new terms for old conceptions, makes it difficult for the scholar to devise a nomenclature as simple and easy to use as the old one.

Is there any teacher in a practical classroom situation who prefers the term, "Class 1 word," to the word *noun* or the word *pronoun*? Is there any teacher in a practical teaching situation who prefers the term, "Class 2 word," to the word *verb*? Whatever may be the deficiencies of such terms as *noun*, *pronoun*, *verb*, or *adverb*, are they more vague or difficult to teach than such terms as "Class 1 word," *determiner*, *intensifier*? Each time the structural linguist adds a new term to his description of the language, he may be adding new knowledge to the world of subtle and sophisticated scholars. Necessarily, however, he is reducing the area of fundamental communication of language principles in the average classroom situation. Whereas structural linguistics shows the weaknesses of the simple classification of parts of speech, at the same time it

provides a dramatization of the dangers of a complex, highly rarefied nomenclature which only a few scholars can be expected to understand fully.

Whatever the weaknesses of formal grammar, the terminology is at present to many teachers more consistent and stable than the terminology of structural linguistics. If it is uneconomical of time and energy to apply formal grammar to style, as many of its critics claim, then it is many times more uneconomical to apply structural linguistics to style. Indeed I have not found, among the many proponents of structural linguistics, any claim that it can be applied realistically to classroom writing for college-bound students. Every new book on structural linguistics presents the teacher with new terms, often new terms for old concepts, new terms which she is forced to translate into terms provided by traditional grammar. All the objections that the opponents of traditional grammar have made to a nomenclature barren of stylistic fruitfulness can be applied a hundredfold to the nomenclature of structural linguistics in terms of the average high school classroom. One cannot find in the history of English teaching on the American scene so many conceptions on a high intellectual level set forth and described with so little effective application to classroom writing problems as in the many books written on structural linguistics. This does not mean that the study of structural linguistics is barren or fruitless for advanced students of language. Indeed this is where the study of linguistics belongs—in the comparative study of language on the graduate level.

Structural linguistics belongs to those scholars who have a profound knowledge of the roots of English in Anglo-Saxon and Norman French and Latin, to those teachers who have lived for years in each of several European countries, mastering the spoken tongue. Structural linguistics involves inherently a knowledge of phonetics which is virtually useless in the average high school classroom. It involves a comparative evaluation of speech sounds in various languages, an evaluation totally foreign to the problems of the average English teacher. Indeed there is no department of structural linguistics that the average high school teacher can take hold of and make practical in her own classroom.

Problem of Terminology

Those who have, like Mr. Roberts, applied structural linguistics to classroom teaching have been most successful in this effort when they have returned bluntly to traditional grammatical terms. They have been most unsuccessful when they have been drawn into strange terminology for old principles. Almost all the vocabulary of structural linguistics can be translated into the traditional vocabulary of grammar. Why, then, do we need a new vocabulary at all? We need rather to simplify the terminology of traditional grammar and agree upon nomenclature, as has been done in France. Instead of reducing the nomenclature, however, to a minimum number of terms agreed upon by publishers, scholars, and textbook writers, we are expanding grammatical nomenclature by leaps and bounds. The proliferate nomenclature of structural linguistics alone is sufficient reason why it cannot become an effective instrument of classroom teaching on the American scene. Only in the teaching of traditional English grammar is it possible to prepare the student for his increasing need to learn foreign languages. The nomenclature of structural linguistics has no counterpart in the teaching of French, Spanish, German, or Italian. This does not mean that structural linguistics is a useless pursuit. It is extremely useful, as I have suggested, for advanced scholars of comparative languages.

There is more waste of time and ener-

gy in the teaching of grammar than in any other aspect of American education. Our problem, however, is not to abolish traditional grammar in favor of a rarefied new science, but to devise new ways of dramatizing the parts of speech and the grammar of the simple sentence in daily lessons of *one year* or *one semester*. Let us have the help of a gifted cartoonist, an artist of the quality of Bill Mauldin, to help us dramatize grammar. Let us have dedicated teachers who *know* they can make grammar stick. Each of us can call back a time when *one* teacher and one classroom made grammar become a reality. Only one such teacher is needed.

In some excellent New England high schools years ago, grammar was taught as a separate subject to those going on to college. The basic course should always be a separate subject. We have the resources to make traditional grammar a workable reality. Meanwhile, let those scholars who believe in structural linguistics continue their quest, not to make the new science a high school resource, but to trace on the postgraduate level a more complete and accurate description of the language, spoken and written, than any group of scholars has thus far created.