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ABSTRACT

Many English handbooks and "grammars" fail to offer sound advice to writers about matters of exactness in diction and precision in sentence structure. A gap between linguists and English teachers, the literary bias of most graduate departments of English, and a national obsession with the all-powerful capabilities of common sense, have allowed a fundamentally anti-intellectual situation to develop. Notions of exactness in diction--an important matter of semantics--tend to be articulated in vague terms in recent editions of popular handbooks and writing guides. Few handbooks recognize the fact that stylistic and/or semantic difficulties are bound up with syntactic difficulties. They also fail to discuss what appears to be the incorrect use of connectives that represent, in reality, failure to use the sentence rather than the clause as a unit of composition. What appears to be a structural problem (that of inappropriate yoking of clause information) is often also a semantic problem. Clearly, this type of linguistic analysis offers insights that are germane to the teaching of composition. (NH)

EXPLOITING THE THEME VAULT: OR, LEARNING FROM EVERYBODY'S MISTAKES

By

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While few deny that it is possible to offer sounder advice to writers about matters of exactness in diction and precision in sentence structure than that given in many handbooks and "grammars", fewer yet have spelled out for us the useful forms such advice might take. Specifically, the gap between linguists, on the one hand, and English teachers, on the other hand, contributes to a situation in which the experts on language structure are often denied a voice in what goes on in the composition classroom. It is curious but perhaps very American that such a fundamentally anti-intellectual situation has been allowed to develop. The quintessentially literary bias of most graduate departments of English certainly plans a role in this situation. A national obsession with the all-powerful capabilities of common sense also plays a role. Recent occurrences within my own department bear witness to the influence of literary artists and advocates of a "common-sense"

*This paper was prepared for presentation at the 1979 meeting of the South Central Modern Language Association

approach to questions of language analysis.

Howard Nemerov read poems and answered questions on my campus two weeks ago. In response to one question, he offered this observation about linguistics:

> Well, of course you have to be careful about taking things too seriously. Take structuralist linguistics. If you learn all those terms you'll be in good shape for about ten years, then something new will come along and everybody will decide that structuralism is all wrong, and you'll have to learn a new bunch of terms.

And Edwin Newman spoke at a writing symposium sponsored by my department last week. He advocated at one point that we learn Latin (he never did) and revive sentence-diagramming. This comments sparked new interest in my Modern English Grammar course. For that I was grateful, though I felt constrained to suggest that the subject matters of most disciplines are better studied from their own perspectives, not those of literary composition or news-broadcasting, however interesting those activities are intrinsically.

Of course Nemerov and Newman are both right, in one sense. As we continue to learn more about the nature of language, we modify our theoretical frameworks. And many students would be infinitely better off learning Latin and sentence-diagramming

than what they are or are not learning. It would be even better, however, if they would learn more specific techniques for improving their own writing of English. We are all aware that the generally antiprescriptivist view of notions of English grammar on the part of linguists has been largely responsible for the antipathy of many composition teachers to the findings and application of "linguistics" to the classroom experience. Gleason's statement of more than a decade ago remains largely true:

> The first introduction to linguistics for most English teachers was in the context of controversy, first over authoritarianism, then usage, and later broadened to include the content of grammar instruction. The opponents of the old doctrine of correctness had brought in the "findings of linguistic science" as the chief witness for the prosecution. It was perhaps inevitable that, for many teachers, linguistics should be rather narrowly identified with antiprescriptivism. In the heat of battle both friends and foes emphasized certain features of linguistics disproportionately. As a result, much of the English profession got a constrained and distorted view of the scope and significance of the science. For some it was merely an ally ready to provide arguments with an aura of scientific authority. For the conservatives--including a large segment

> of the general public--it was merely a pseudoscience created to justify permissiveness in language and to undercut standards. (Gleason 1965: 22-23)

Linguistics is not, of course, either a pseudoscience nor a matter of neologisms. We know more about how language operates today than we did twenty or thirty or forty or fifty or one hundred years ago. The implications of the findings of linguistics for the composition teacher are most profound in the areas of syntax and semantics, and it is to these areas that I would like to address the remainder of my remarks this morning.

Notions of "exactness" in diction-surely an important matter of semantics--tend to be articulated in relatively vague terms in the resources normally available to the English teacher. A survey of recent editions of popular handbooks and writing guides yielded such representative guidelines as the following:

1. Select words that are exact, idiomatic, and fresh (Hodges and Whitten 1977:205)
2. To write with precision, you must know both the denotation and the connotation of words (Leggett, Mead, and Charvat 1974:333)
3. Use words that convey your meaning exactly and idiomatically (Kierzek and Gibson 1965:350)
4. Choose the right word, consulting a good dictionary if necessary (Gorrell and Laird 1973:166)

Some handbooks, including some of the above contain longish

sections on diction, sections which are subdivided into such categories as Slang, Jargon, Plain and Ornate Diction, and Levels of Style (Meyers 1974:368-372), or, perhaps, Abstract language, Concrete language, Connotation, Metaphor, Tone, and Jargon (Hairston 1974:347), or even, perhaps, Words and Implications, Jargon, Euphemisms, Pompous Words, and Words and Grammatical Context (Jacobs and Jacobs 1973:146-155), of which more anon.

The above statements are certainly true, a far as they go, but they often appear to fail to instruct the student faced with the task of "correcting" such sentences as these:

5. Hawthorne was also among the new genre of authors to begin dealing solely with American subject matter.
6. On the day of the house's debut Colonel Pynchon dies, apparently of a curse placed on him by Maule at the time of his execution.
7. These works of art subject themselves to laws, while the main characters sin unpardonably so that they swerve aside from the truth of the human heart.

I would like to suggest that stylistic studies which distinguish between semantically incorrect and stylistically inappropriate choices may offer the composition teacher more informative ways of discussing "exactness" problems with composition students. In the above examples, for instance, genre and debut are clearly wrong, semantically, while swerve aside is highly inappropriate, though semantically within the realm of possibility. And the

difference between semantic correctness and stylistic appropriateness seems to me to offer clearer guidelines than statements about the relationship between connotative and denotative meanings, though the two sets of relationships are certainly related.

Stylistic and/or semantic difficulties are often bound up with syntactic difficulties, of course. Few handbooks recognize this fact or deal with it in any sensible way. The section in Jacobs and Jacobs (see above) on Words and Grammatical Context stands in rich contrast to most other books on the market. The authors explore the nature of semantic rules of the type which prevent one from creating such sentences as "She composed a novel"; they then suggest ways in which a native speaker of the language may ascertain which unwritten "rules" of English have been broken when speakers or writers create such sentences as these:

8. The boycott method was proved in a strike organized by Chavez and the Farm Workers Union.
9. The purpose of the Inquisition was to investigate heresy, contended to be brought about by contacts with non-Christians.
10. Kissinger did not contend the glorification of war.
11. The nature of the soul in Plato's Republic is secondary but vital aspect in his discussion of justice.

These corrections are suggested:

12. The boycott method was proved/proved effective in a strike organized by Chavez and the Farm Workers Union.

13. The purpose of the Inquisition was to investigate heresy, which, the Inquisition contended, had been brought about by contacts with non-Christians.

And these probable rules are elucidated:

14. This usage of prove requires a statement of what is proved. You cannot prove a thing, only a statement about a thing.

15. The verb contend is often used to mead "advance an opinion in an argument." It must normally be followed by that, not a noun [or nominalization, as in (10)], and not an infinitive with to, as in (9). In complicated sentences like (9) it is easy for a writer to lose his language feel. You can use argue instead. The strangeness of this sentence might have been more evident had it been read aloud.

16. The word aspect normally takes the preposition of: an aspect of Plato's thought. However, this word is frequently used wrongly as a general term meaning topic, theme, or concern. (153-154)

It is possible to go further, I think, and classify the following kinds of problems as problems of "exactness":

17. Apparent content or stylistic errors (particularly

involving homophones and always involving misspelling).

18. Apparent wrong use of connectives (student is using the clause, rather than the sentence, as the unit of composition).

19. Inappropriate yoking of clause information.

The apparent content or stylistic errors grow principally out of the fact that English has homophones. I mention them here only to make the point that it seems futile and self-defeating to mark "errors" resulting from the confusion of "to", "too", and "two", for instance, or "threw" and "through" in the same way that we mark genuine semantic errors or stylistic inappropriatenesses.

Much more serious, I think, is the matter of an apparent wrong use of connective, often I think, the result of the fact that the writer is using the clause, rather than the sentence a the unit of composition. The kind of expository prose produced by a writer who is doing this is a kind of Standard English written in what at first glance appear to be sentences. In the example, the student is discussing Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility:

20. Marianne's strength of emotion is further shown by her non-attempt to eat anything at breakfast, a point which Mrs. Jennings fails to note due to Elinors [sic] steadying hand being able to get Mrs. Jennings to devote her attention to Elinor during it. (Turner

1973:231)

This is a kind of writing which goes largely undiscussed in handbooks. A stylistician analyzes it thus:

> The chief weakness is in connectives. Apart from which, an element in the colourless complex connective a point which, only prepositions and participles are used, so that a clotted collection of frozen nominal groups takes the place of finite verbs. The use of simple conjunctions (because rather than due to...-ing, 'when she does not attempt' rather than 'by her non-attempt') is a first step to lucidity. There are further awkwardnesses in pronoun reference and the precariously metaphorical 'steadying hand'. The sentence needs recasting. Since Marianne's emotion is already (as we see it from the word further) the topic of discourse, it need not be mentioned again. The main new statement seems to be that Marianne does not eat breakfast and so we may begin (keeping the student's present tense) 'Marianne eats nothing at breakfast...' We now find that it is not easy to 'correct' a sentence like this, because we must make it more precise, and we have insufficient guidance. 'A point which' requires a conjunction to replace it, either but or though according to what was meant. Perhaps '...but Mrs. Jennings does not notice because Elinor diverts her

attention' omits nothing of value in the rest of the student's sentence. What seemed complicated was really a simple statement, capable, if necessary, of further modification. (Turner, p. 232)

By inappropriate yoking of clause information, I mean, among other things, the conjoining of clauses from such disparate metaphysical spheres as to be inappropriately linked together in a single sentence. Consider again sentence #7: <u>These works of art subject themselves to laws</u>, while <u>the main characters sin unpardonably so that they swerve aside from the truth of the human heart</u> (main clauses underlined). One effect of the conjoining in this sentence is to leave the reader reeling with the suspicion that the writer means us to picture "works of art," on the one hand, busying themselves about something, while, at the same time, "main characters," on the other hand, busy themselves about their own, separate activities. The impression of simultaneity is particularly jarring since it stands in contrast to other possibilities, either an impression of generalized sequentiality or the kind of implied cause-and-effect relationship that is generally perceived as implicit in an embedding, as opposed to a conjoining situation. Thus what appears to be a structural problem, that of inappropriate yoking of clause information, is clearly also a semantic problem. If we applied the Jacobs' technique to rule-writing to this sentence "error," we might offer the following correction, ignoring for

the moment the problems implicit in the use of the phrase "swerve aside":

> 21. These works of art reveal their dependence upon universal moral laws in that the ultimate effect of the commission of unpardonable sins by the main characters is the hardening of their hearts to human love.

This "correction," though, presents problems. We have had to do an enormous amount of interpretation to indicate cause-and-effect relationships within the sentence. The root of the problem here probably lies in the fact that the student does not yet know what s/he wants to say. The sentence is, in effect, an announcement of an intention to say something about the actions of the main characters in the book. The statement has not yet been made, however.

Time is short this morning, and the necessity of going on precludes the possibility of attempting even a partial model of linguistic analysis of the sort very tentatively suggested here. I think it is clear, though, that the insights offered by linguistic analysis are germane to the teaching of composition.