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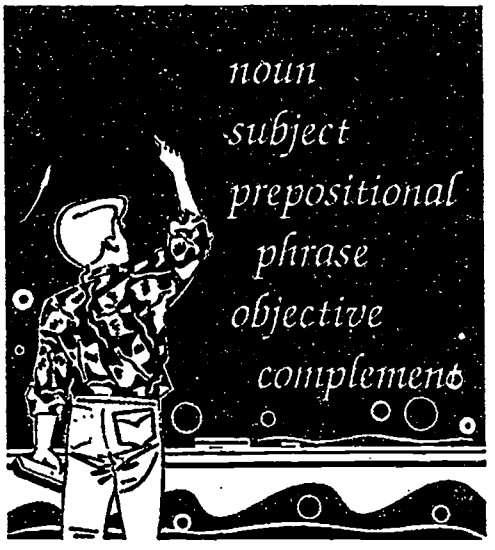
ABSTRACT

This journal article focuses on the return of grammar in composition teaching. After about 2 decades of virtual banishment from the higher reaches of English teaching theory, grammar has returned as a subject of serious discussion. This is the result in part of a new assertiveness by a group of people who never lost interest in grammar as part of the English curriculum and by better teaching methods. Another influence may be a growing interest in several aspects of composition that seem to require students to have at least a modicum of knowledge about grammar. One of these is stylistic grammar, which promises users a clearer, more graceful style and elimination of bureaucratese, sociologese, and other ridiculed styles. The most popular book of this kind of approach is Joseph Williams' "Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace." As teachers move away from the error-detection method of grammar, they will find new approaches available. First, there are several revisions of the old rules. In "Revising the Rules: Traditional Grammar and Modern Linguistics," Brock Haussamen takes a variety of traditional rules and shows that they do not really reflect how English actually works. Second, there is now the development of pedagogical grammar, a grammar designed to be both simple and accurate. Third, there are the new teaching methods to replace the "drill and kill" approach, such as those in Muriel Harris and Katherine E. Rowan's article, "Explaining Grammatical Concepts," which show, based on research in cognitive psychology, how to construct an elaborate, effective lesson around grammar. A list of pedagogical grammars is included. (TB)

Grammar making a comeback in composition teaching

Proposals for simpler, more accurate grammars show promise for improved teaching of correctness and style



Bill McCleary

It's b-a-a-a-c-k. (Sorry, but I couldn't resist.) Yes, after about two decades of virtual banishment from the higher reaches of English teaching theory (though not, of course, from most English classes), grammar has returned as a subject of serious discussion. For instance, Four Cs went from just one panel that mentioned grammar in its title in 1994 to no fewer than four this past March. The former Association of Teachers of English Grammar went from not even being able to get its resolutions voted on at NCTE to being accepted as an Assembly of NCTE. And we even have a trickle of books being published about grammar (rather than linguistics) for English teachers, including a couple from the unlikely sources of NCTE and Boynton/Cook-Heinemann.

Though the mainstream of NCTE seems to continue ignoring grammar (a quick search of the program for the upcoming NCTE convention revealed only one concurrent session [out of 360] with grammar in its title), the grammar pendulum elsewhere, like one for phonics and other language structures, seems to have reached its full upswing on the anti-structure side and begun its return. We can only hope that we have stretched this metaphor too far, and the downswing will result not in a return to rote learning of yesterday but to a saner, more useful vision of structure and its use in English classes, particularly in composition. The potential for real change is there for grammar (as well as for other structures like phonemics, morphemics, and genres).

One sign of real change could be seen in this past summer's meeting of the newly renamed Assembly on the Teaching of English Grammar. The presentations were uniformly professional. Gone were yesteryear's jeremiads against the supposed deterioration of the English language, along with the cutesy ways to teach nouns and verbs to the little moppets. In their place were serious analyses of the problems of teaching usage and proposals for a more useful version of

English grammar, proposals that were referred to as part of a search for a "pedagogical grammar" by several participants.

Why grammar has returned

What is going on? Partially, it's just a a new assertiveness by a group of people who never lost interest in grammar as part of the English curriculum. The love of grammar has always been there, bubbling below the surface, kept alive in college English departments by the need to teach grammar courses for prospective secondary English teachers. (Much to his surprise, your esteemed editor finds himself teaching two such courses these days.) A second influence may be the dismal results of various assessment efforts, which bring to notice once again the nagging problem of what to do about "error" in student writing. We face a lot of pressure to "do something" about it, and teaching grammar has always seemed like the logical thing to do, despite the abundant evidence that it doesn't work.

A third influence may be a growing interest in several aspects of composition that seem to require students to have at least a modicum of knowledge about grammar. One is the "stylistic grammars" that promise users a clearer, more graceful style and elimination of bureaucratese, sociologese, and other ridiculed styles. Perhaps the most popular book espousing this approach is Joseph Williams' *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (HarperCollins). (This is a book that I have found quite helpful but that my students have not loved. Perhaps books like this are more appropriate for experienced writers than for college students.) A book with a similar approach but different emphasis is Martha Kolln's *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects* (Macmillan). Many of the principles covered in Kolln's book are presented in this month's professional article. As you'll see when you read her article, she not only has some ideas for a better style but also demonstrates that much of the conventional wisdom about effective style is far from accurate. Just as Williams demonstrated that the passive voice is not only quite useful in certain cases but also absolutely required in some situations, Kolln shows that the traditional advice always to avoid beginning a sentence with an expletive (e.g., "there" and "it") is also oversimplified.

The current approach to error

True, error has not been entirely ignored by the field of composition. However, most composition specialists have reduced its place in the writing curriculum. Current practice is to attack error only during the final editing stage of writing, to individualize the instruction as much as possible, and to limit each lesson to just one or two errors. However, this method does not seem to have caught on, perhaps because too many teachers lack sufficient knowledge of the technicalities of grammar and usage to conduct successful lessons and because individualizing instruction takes an enormous amount of time and organization. Also, if my observations are correct, many teachers still do not use the process approach to writing presumed by the admonition to teach correctness during the editing stage. Finally, I haven't seen any proof that teaching correctness during the editing stage actually works. I would acknowledge that it probably works if the teacher does it conscientiously and well, but I haven't seen the proof. It's hard to change things in English teaching even if you have the evidence; without evidence, change is highly unlikely.

So is there a potential for a new, successful way to deal with correctness and style instead of a return to the old, ineffective grammar-based instruction? Having been around the block a few times, I am not optimistic, but I can see at least three trends that could lead to a new approach if only the profession will pay attention. These address what I see as our three main needs if we are ever to successfully deal with the problem of error: more accurate statements of the rules of correctness, a more teachable grammar that kids can learn well enough to apply, and a better pedagogy than the ubiquitous workbook.

The potential for more accurate rules can be seen in advice given by stylists like Williams and Kolln. They show that English teachers have often been basing their advice on inaccurate views of how the English language actually works. Advice to avoid the passive and the expletive may apply in many situations but not all. Sometimes expletives and passives are the best constructions to use. Indeed, it may not be overstating matters to say that *most* of the so-called rules of correct English are oversimplified or downright wrong. It is not true, for instance, that fragments and comma splices are always wrong. And every college writing teacher can attest that the only "rule" that every freshman can cite is the completely false one about never beginning a sentence with a coordinating conjunction.

Finding the truth about the rules

We are getting more accurate versions of the old rules not only in the stylistic grammars but also in a smattering of articles on usage that have appeared in various journals. But perhaps the most comprehensive treatment can be found in a new book by Brock Haussamen aptly called *Revising the Rules: Traditional Grammar and Modern Linguistics*. Haussamen takes on a wide variety of rules and shows that in nearly all cases the traditional versions of the rules do not reflect how English actually works. (See p. 3 for a description of Haussamen's book.) It is not too far-fetched to believe that one of the main reasons that students cannot learn to follow the rules is that the rules are not accurate. A rule that cannot be followed consistently isn't worth much. For instance, if it's not true that a subject must always agree in number with its predicate, then how is the poor student to know when to follow the rule and when not to. *We* know, because we have learned the truth implicitly through thousands of hours of reading, but many students have not had the same opportunity.

A second promising change is a search for a grammar that works better for students than the other grammars currently available. Traditional grammar—the grammar taught in English textbooks—is inaccurate both in its description of real grammar and in the explanations given to students. This makes it difficult to learn for anyone who does not grasp it through intuition rather than through explicit learning. And the other grammars, scientific ones like descriptive, structural, generative, and the like, are too technical for use in teaching. What we may need, in other words, is a "pedagogical grammar" that is both accurate and simple. One that has already been published is Rei Noguchi's "writer's grammar" as described in his book *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities* (NCTE, 1991). And at the ATEG conference this summer, no fewer than three additional grammars were proposed. These were by Anthony Hunter, Ed Vavra, and Glenn Swetmann. (See p. 4 for further information on the Hunter and Vavra systems.)

It's too early to tell whether these pedagogical grammars will help, but at least someone is trying.

Finally, the third trend that may help in the attack on error is better teaching methods, something to replace the standard approach that we have come to call "drill and kill." An example is the model based on cognitive psychology and explained in an article that appeared in the Fall 1989 issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* (Muriel Harris and Katherine E. Rowan, "Explaining Grammatical Concepts"). In this model the teacher must construct fairly elaborate lessons that begin with a more accurate view of the concept to be taught than is provided by traditional explanations. The lessons then incorporate a number of techniques that have been proved successful by cognitive scientists. These include restatements of the grammatical concepts underlying the one to be taught, copious use of both correct and incorrect examples (despite the suspicion of incorrect examples prevalent among writing teachers) along with explanations of the difference, and practice with feedback. None of these techniques are new; what's new about the Harris and Rowan model is that each lesson incorporates many techniques, in contrast to our usual lesson of a handful of overly simple sentences with fill-in-the-blanks exercises.

My students and I have done much experimenting with this model and have found it far from fool-proof. Indeed, since we work with real sentences and not made-up ones as much as possible, we often get the wrong answers to our own test questions. But I take this as a promising sign that we're working with real problems rather than the usual oversimplified textbook problems. If we ever figure out how to devise lessons or materials that solve these problems, we will be onto something.

Furthermore, the efforts to use this model can only be helped by the other trends identified above. Since the Harris and Rowan model requires at least a modicum of grammatical explanation, a better grammar should improve the success of the lessons. And since it also requires precise descriptions of the rules to be taught, we will be helped by the efforts to describe English usage more accurately. At some point, perhaps, all this will come together to help us deal with our most infamous yet ubiquitous responsibility—to improve the correctness of the usage in student writing.

A List of Pedagogical Grammars

If Rei Noguchi's was the first modern pedagogical grammar, it was not the last. The following is a brief attempt to describe several proposed pedagogical grammars. Note that other proposals have yet to be published by a commercial or academic publisher; thus the proponents have had to dig into their pockets and publish their manuscripts themselves.

Rei Noguchi, *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities* (NCTE, 1991).

Noguchi has proposed what he calls a "writer's grammar," "a type of grammar study [that] focuses on only those aspects of grammar that have relevance to writing." He proposes a "minimal set of categories" for students to learn and a variety of techniques or tricks that help students identify such items as the subject and

verb. He refers to these techniques as "operational definitions." For instance, students learn to recognize personal pronounsa personal pronoun is a construction that can substitute noun or noun phrase in any construction that can have a pronoun put in its place.

Ed Vavra, *Teaching Grammar as a Liberating Art* (Rose Parisella Productions, 1994).

Vavra, the founder of ATEG and its newsletter/journal, *Syntax in the Schools*, says he kept this manuscript in a drawer for nearly ten years after failing to find a publisher for it. Discerning that interest in pedagogical grammar is growing, he dusted off the manuscript and decided to publish it himself. Not only does he offer a simplified grammar that he believes students will find it easy to learn but he also has come up with a theory about the order in which students become capable of writing the various kinds of grammatical constructions. Thus he combines a pedagogical with a develpmental grammar.

Vavra's book can be ordered from Rose Parisella Productions, 30 Marvin Circle, Williamsport, PA 17701.

Anthony Hunter, *Sentence Sense: The Hunter Writing System* (Hunter & Joyce Publishing, 1991).

Hunter developed his grammar in the process of writing his dissertation under the linguist Robert L. Allen. He has combined it with a complete educational program consisting of a textbook, a "skills practice book," and a teacher's guide. He says that his system will help students not only learn the grammar but also correct their errors in usage. Recently retired, Hunter now travels the country promoting his system at conferences and seminars. He has, in other words, invested heavily in his program.

You can obtain more information about the Hunter Writing System by contacting Hunter & Joyce Publishing, RR 2, Box 54, Delhi, NY 13753. The phone is 800-462-7483.

Glenn Swetman, "The Nine-Question Method of Teaching Grammar."

Swetman said that by answering his nine questions students can accurately identify nearly all of the basic elements of grammar. They can then use these identifications to figure out how to correct their errors. His system is based on traditional grammar but without the vague and unhelpful definitions used in traditional grammar. The system is not published, but anyone wanting to see it should be able to find Swetman's paper on the internet after the papers from this summer's ATEG meeting are collected and posted, probably through Penn College, where the conference was held.

Will we add pedagogical grammar to Hartwell's Grammars 1-5?

The most famous—or infamous, depending on your point of view—classification of grammars would seem to be the one that appeared in Patrick Hartwell's "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" (*College English* 47, Feb. 1985). One aspect of Hartwell's article was his atempt to untangle the various means of the term "grammar." His answer has become the standard way to classify basic approaches to grammar. It is also the classification that underlies the previous article. It goes as follows:

Grammar 1 - The grammar inside of our heads (i.e., "the internalized systems of rules that speakers of a language share" —Kolln).

Grammar 2 - Scientific grammars: descriptions of Grammar 1 constructed by linguists.

Grammar 3 - Usage, or the rules of linguistic etiquette.

Grammar 4 - Common school grammar, or the grammar that appears in most secondary school textbooks (an unscientific description of Grammar 1)

Grammar 5 - Stylistic grammars ("grammatical terms used in the interest of teaching prose style" —Kolln)

And shall we now add:
Grammar 6 - Pegagogical grammar: grammars intended to be used in teaching writing

Another new book on grammar

Given the company's orientation to whole language, Boynton/Cook-Heinemann may be an unlikely source of books on grammar, but it recently published one anyway. It's a useful book for anyone wanting an introduction to the issues related to teaching grammar. However, it's not a book for anyone wanting to know more about grammar itself or looking for a defense of traditional grammar.

The book is *The Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction: Past, Present, Future*, edited by Susan Hunter and Ray Wallace, Boynton/Cook, 1995, ISBN 0-86709-352-8.

The book comes in three sections: I. Past attitudes toward grammar instruction; II. Present concerns about grammar and writing; III. Future places of grammar in writing instruction. The introduction by Ray Wallace is titled "Reexamining the Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction, the Susan Hunter's afterword is "Repositioning Grammar in Writing Classes of the future."

The book contains 16 articles. Some of those I found most interesting were:

Gina Claywell, "Reasserting Grammar's Position in the Trivium in American College Composition."

Garry Ross, "The 1945 NCTE Commission on the English Curriculum and Teaching the Grammar/Writing Connection."

John R. Edlund, "The Rainbow and the Stream: Grammar as System Versus Language in Use.

David Blakesley, "Reconceptualizing Grammar as an Aspect of Rhetorical Invention."