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ABSTRACT

Schools stopped teaching any grammatical system some time ago, as they probably should have. But the schools also, at the same time, stopped teaching grammatical terminology, a mistake which has had lasting consequences. Students need to be told what "infinitive," "preposition," "case," and "predicate complement" mean. They need the tools to think about and analyze their sentences. This paper argues that students should have a vocabulary for discussing language. The paper contends that if students know the meanings of grammatical terms and phrases and have practiced identifying the concepts, they will then be able to recognize the structures in their writing, and educators will enable them to improve their work. The paper outlines the problem, considers why the problem arose, discusses traditional grammar (1675-1950s) and descriptive linguistics (1950s and 1960s), and suggests what is to be done now. (Author/NKA)

GRAMMATICAL VOCABULARY

A PLEA FOR THE RE-INTRODUCTION OF GRAMMATICAL CONCEPTS INTO OUR SCHOOLS

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SUMMARY

Schools stopped teaching any grammatical system some time ago, as they probably should have. The systems weren't valid. They didn't work.

But the schools also, at the same time, stopped teaching grammatical terminology. And that was a mistake which has had lasting consequences.

Even if we can't formulate rules about how to use infinitives, where a preposition goes, or what case to use for a predicate complement, we still can tell students what "infinitive," "preposition," "case," and "predicate complement" mean. By doing so we are giving them the tools to think about and analyze their sentences.

Abandoning the philosophical system, in short, does not require us to abandon the vocabulary too. The terms still have value, still refer to things we ought to be able to explain to our students.

My purpose here, then, is to argue that students should have a vocabulary for discussing language. If students know the meanings of grammatical terms and phrases, and have practiced identifying the concepts, then they will be able to recognize the structures in their writing, and we will be able to make clear suggestions to them that will enable them to improve their work.

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Introduction

This booklet is not, in any way, a denunciation of today's students for their inability to write. I have, in fact, a high regard for students. I've worked with them now for nearly 40 years, and I consider the experience to have been one of the greatest privileges of my life.

Nor is it a denunciation of schools. Today's teachers seem to me considerably better than the ones who taught me in the 1940s and 1950s, and I wish that many of the experiences my children have had in school had been available to me.

Instead my subject is the curriculum. Developments I have noted during these four decades have led me to believe -- in a 180-degree change from what I used to believe -- that linguistic principles do have an essential place in the education of our children. It's not just that people today have at least as much trouble as previous generations did in expressing their ideas. It's that they themselves know they do, yet,

lacking any system, any principles, for determining where they've gone wrong, they don't know what to do about it.

The result is, thus, not just poor communication but frustrated communicators.

Putting this argument in writing is difficult for several reasons, among which the question of audience looms largest. Older people, like me, will remember the traditional grammar rules I often refer to, while young people won't even know what I mean. Linguistic scholars will wonder why so elementary a discussion has to be brought up again, while people not familiar with the past 50 years of thinking on the subject will find the whole discussion strange. Schools that do still teach English grammar will wonder why I'm bothering to argue; schools that have abandoned grammar teaching will wonder how I can be so hung up over a long-dead subject. Conservatives will jump on a bandwagon they don't fully understand; liberals will be aghast to find this old ghost being raised again.

Rather than trying to satisfy any of these entirely reasonable segments of the public, I will merely state, as briefly and simply as I can, why I think we have a problem, how the problem arose, and what we might try to do about it.

Chapter One: The Problem

The problem being addressed here is not that students don't write as clearly and effectively as they might -- although that's true -- but that we no longer have any way of explaining to them how they can improve. We can "correct" their writing on an error-by-error basis, but we have no system we can refer them to in order to guide them in the future, or even any terms we can use to describe the problems.

The easiest way to explain this dilemma is to illustrate it. The following paragraph comes from a young man in his third year of college:

By having Mr. Anders actually go to these 1
departments will familiarize him with the
workers and managers of the plant. This
would help Mr. Anders in that he would also
now have first hand experience on how 5
inventory is taken in each respective sector. This
would allow him to make educated decisions that
would benefit all four sectors and be most efficient.
By having hands on experience with the inventory
and workers, Mr. Anders will be able to answer to 10
the needs of the general consensus of workers and
their problems, by doing this it will surely raise
employee morale. As well as give the managers
a face to place the name with.

First, I would like to tell the student that “By having Mr. Anders actually go to these departments” (lines 1 and 2) is not a noun phrase and therefore can’t be the subject of “will familiarize.”

Second, I would like to point out that the three “By _____-ing” phrases (lines 1, 9, and 12) are used in three different ways -- the one in line 1 (incorrectly) as a noun, the one in line 8 (correctly) as an adverbial phrase, and the one in line 11 (awkwardly) as an ablative absolute -- and that therefore they cause confusion to the reader.

Third, I would object to the three unclear uses of “this” (lines 3, 6, and 12), referring in each instance to a different antecedent, all three of which, moreover, are vague and undefined.

Fourth, I would tell the student that “it” in line 12 has no antecedent.

Fifth, I would point out the ambiguity in lines 10 through 12 (“be able to answer to the needs of the general consensus of workers and their problems”). The reader can’t tell whether “their problems” is the object of the verb “answer to,” the object of the first preposition “of,” or (although less likely) the object of the second preposition “of.”

Sixth, I would object to the imprecise use of figurative language in lines 9 and 10, which seem to say that Mr. Anders is going to put his hands on the workers!

Seventh, I would call to his attention that the words in lines 13 and 14 do not constitute a sentence.

But I can't. The student, even if he knows what a noun is, will not know what a "noun phrase" is, and he will not understand why one group of words can be a subject and another can't. He will also not understand "adverbial phrase," will have no idea what an "ablative absolute" is, and will not perceive why parallelism, or at least consistency, is important. He will not understand what an "antecedent" is, or why some things can be antecedents and others can't. He will not be able to see the difference between an object of a verb and the object of a preposition, or why it matters. Nor will he be able to comprehend why those last two lines don't form a complete sentence. Only the sixth objection -- to the use of figurative language -- will be clear to him, and that one only as a specific instance involving no general rule.

Chapter One: The Problem

On the next page is a second example, this one by a young woman also in her third year of college:

After analyzing the situation on hand, important 1
issues about the small family-owned company were
not handled appropriately in terms of the decisions
made by the financial conglomerate that acquired it. . . .
Employees, who are experienced, are important to 5
a company, because they are the ones who know
the structure of the company. They are needed to
build a good reputation for the company. Reputation
is very important to a retail business and if the
quality of the furniture decreases, then profit will 10
decrease in the long run, even though, the profit
seems to be increasing at the moment. Overall, the
manager should keep the experienced employees
and terminate the workers, who are not experienced.

To this young woman, I would like to say, first, that the opening phrase, in line 1, is a dangling modifier; if treated literally, it seems to say that the important issues have analyzed the situation on (at?) hand.

Second, even if the dangling modifier problem is ignored, the sentence seems to say that the important issues were handled inappropriately only after the situation was analyzed, not before.

Third, I would point out that the relative clauses in lines 5 and 14 are restrictive rather than non-restrictive and therefore must not be preceded by commas.

Fourth, I would tell the writer that a comma is needed in line 9 because she has two independent clauses separated by “and.”

Fifth, I would tell her that the comma after “even though” in line 11 is wrong because “even though” is a conjunction rather than an interrupting adverb.

But again, I can't. This student has no idea what a dangling modifier is or why it matters. She has, almost certainly, never even heard the terms “restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses,” and of course she has no idea what they mean or why they should affect punctuation. She does not know what an “independent clause” is and why it should affect punctuation, or what conjunctions are and how they differ from adverbs. Consequently, all she can possibly learn from my corrections on her paper is a non-rule like “Don't put a comma after ‘even though,’”

-- even though, in fact, I can think of many instances where a comma does belong there.

One final example, from another third-year student, a young man with really serious troubles:

Problems with this company began since its 1
founding. Problems consist of all the following
through each quarter of its operations during this
past year. You will find extensive problems when
broken up in this way. . . . 5

During the second quarter, forcing the early
retirement of some of the experienced, and highly
salaried personal helped to further decrease the
costs, however, it reduced total sales while income
was still being generated. Failure to listen to 10
managers of said fields, failed to use proper
judgment and was just plain unacceptable. Your,
decisions in this matter can not be understood
and will be left out. Finally, all this led to the
“increase” in profits. 15

I'd like to explain to this young man that the time in the first sentence is unclear: does he mean (as I suspect) that problems have always existed from the day the company was founded, or does he mean (as he seems to say) that the problems began later? By using the past tense rather than the present perfect, he has created an ambiguity.

Second, I'd like to explain to him that, in lines 4 and 5, he uses a misplaced modifier which seems to say that "if I am broken up in this way, I will find extensive problems"!

Third, in line 7 he has split up a pair of parallel adjectives with a distracting and totally uncalled-for comma.

Fourth, in line 8 he has demonstrated his unfamiliarity with English morphology by failing to recognize an adjective form. The -al ending of "personal" should have tipped him off that the word is, in all probability, an adjective -- like "logical," "maniacal," "magical," "lateral," and so on -- rather than the noun "personnel" that he was looking for.

Fifth, in line 9 he has violated one of the most basic rules of punctuation by using only a comma to separate two independent clauses. If he had written "but" he would have been okay, but by writing "however" he has committed a serious error.

Sixth, that extraordinary sentence in lines 6 through 10 -- "forcing the early retirement of some of the experienced, and highly salaried personal helped to further

decrease the costs, however, it reduced total sales while income was still being generated" -- makes such a botch of its emphasis that no reader will grasp its point on first reading, and some readers won't ever quite figure it out. By subordinating the less important ideas the student could have pointed up the important ones -- something like "Maybe you have indeed decreased costs by retiring your senior personnel, but it was a foolish thing to do because it has had the effect of reducing your total sales."

Seventh, insensitivity to usage levels in line 11 has led to that inappropriate and jarring use of "said," which sounds like archaic legal language.

Eighth, in lines 10 through 12 the student shows inability to judge what is and what isn't a suitable subject for his predicate: what he ends up saying is "Failure failed to use proper judgment."

Ninth, in line 12 he shows unawareness of what a comma does. He apparently tries to use it for emphasis, as if pointing a finger at the owner who is the intended reader: "It was YOUR decisions that caused all this trouble!" But the comma does not, of course, have the intended effect; any reader is sure to be puzzled by it.

Tenth, the intended subject of "will be left out" in line 14 is utterly unclear. The student may have meant something like "Your foolish ideas should have been left out of the decision-making process," or more likely what he means is "I won't

even bother to discuss your foolish ideas here, since they can't begin to be understood."

But, needless to say, any such explanations would be futile. Among the terms this student has probably never even heard are "present perfect," "misplaced modifier," "parallelism," "morphology," "independent clause," "subordination," and possibly even "subject" and "predicate." Maybe he could be taught how to write these sentences correctly, on a sentence-by-sentence basis, but he wouldn't learn anything that could help him the next time he has to write something. He would simply make the same mistakes again, every time he writes.

And thus we have a problem. To say it again: Because we don't teach the concepts, the vocabulary, of language in our elementary and middle-school curriculum, we leave the students without any way of understanding why their writing is bad, or any method of improving it in future attempts.

The least we could do is to provide them with the concepts, the ideas, the vocabulary, so that they can receive instruction in this very important area. And that -- providing them with the vocabulary to discuss language usage -- is what I am advocating here.

CHAPTER TWO: WHY THE PROBLEM AROSE

As Chapter One just said, most of our schools today don't teach grammar -- and haven't for 35 or 40 years. The reason is simple: we don't know what our grammar is.

No, that statement doesn't mean that we don't have any grammar, or that "right" and "wrong" don't exist. Of course English has grammar; of course some things are right and some are wrong. The New York Times, Seventeen, The Wall Street Journal, Tennis World, Fortune, Time, and all the other publications around us use the same language. If any one of them were to deviate from the accepted standard, its readers would bombard it with protests.

For instance, here's a paragraph from The Wall Street Journal, surely as well written a periodical as one can find anywhere in the English-speaking world:

AT&T's profit jumped 58% in the fourth quarter, but the telecommunications giant said its efforts to link up with cable firms, which are vital to its local phone strategy, are lagging behind. AT&T earned \$1.99 billion in the quarter, or \$1.12 a diluted share, and its revenue rose 4.5% to \$13.53 billion. But some analysts were disappointed that it didn't top estimates, as it had in recent quarters.

If the paragraph had instead been written in the following way, every single reader of this booklet would recognize that it was wrong:

AT&TS profit jumped fifty-eight %, in the fourth quarter but the telecommunications giant said it's effort's to link up with cable firms which are vital to it's local phone strategy, are lagging behind, AT&T earned 1.99 billion \$ in the quarter or 1 dollar and 12 cents a diluted share, and its' revenue rose four point eight per cent to \$13.53 billion dollars, but some analyst were dissapointed that it didnt top estimate's; as it had in recen't quarters.

We know it's wrong (I count 22 errors); what we don't know is why. Of course we can correct each individual error, and we can even explain why each one is considered wrong. But what nobody has yet devised is a comprehensive philosophy that explains why some things should be considered right and others wrong.

It's not like mathematics, where we can prove right and wrong. If, for example, somebody claims that $3 \times 8 = 25$, all we have to do is make three piles of eight toothpicks each and count them, and the person is disproved.

Nor is it like history, where we can do research and show how things used to be. George Washington was born in Virginia in 1732, and no amount of argument to the contrary can alter that fact.

Nor is it like fields that depend on authority. Since Jesus Christ said “Love your neighbor as yourself,” that’s the dictum all Christians must adhere to.

But in language it doesn’t matter who said what: neither Jesus nor George Washington nor anybody else dictates to the rest of us what’s right and what’s wrong about our speech.

We have, then, a strange situation in which we know what is right and what is wrong but not why. And because we can’t come up with a total explanation, we have abandoned the subject altogether.

Certainly the lack is not because nobody has tried. The next two chapters will describe three elaborate attempts at providing the long-sought comprehensive philosophical explanation and will show why each has, alas, failed to satisfy the requirements.

3. TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR (1675 – 1950s)

The kind of grammar that I studied in school in the 1940s was the same kind that my parents and grandparents, and their parents and grandparents, and theirs, had studied in earlier decades and earlier centuries. A few changes did come in from time to time over the years, but not very many. In general, it was an unchanging system that most people thought was natural, right, written in stone, and going to last forever.

It really had, and still has among some people, a strong place in our belief system. In fact many folks seem to have thought that God had decreed it, and that deviations from it were therefore sins. I once heard someone say that a certain Presbyterian minister should be removed from the pulpit until he could improve his disgracefully bad grammar -- as if he were not serving God well unless he spoke more according to the holy, divinely ordained rules.

Besides whatever religious implications it may have had, grammar was felt to have profound civic and social significance far beyond mere speaking and writing. The tendency of people to use bad grammar, the Detroit Free Press once

editorialized, is one more example of “the unfortunate trend of the times toward lawlessness in every direction” -- as if failure to follow grammar rules were the equivalent of a crime wave!

Even more common was, and still often is, the belief that bad grammar reflects bad social upbringing. For years, a famous advertisement for a home-study course in grammar featured the headline, “DO YOU MAKE THESE MISTAKES IN ENGLISH?,” and went on to describe dreadful social embarrassments that bad grammar had caused. Even today, a radio advertisement for some kind of English course blares out a warning that you should be careful about your grammar because “People judge you by the way you speak.”

Whether bad grammar was a sin, a crime, or a social disgrace, every school child clearly understood that it was at least naughty and probably evil, and that the learning of “correct” grammar was one of the most important parts of schooling. The very name “grammar school” shows how important it was considered.

Early traces of the traditional grammar system can be found back in the 1500s, as the Renaissance spread across England. But it got its real start during the last quarter of the 17th century and the first half of the 18th -- a manifestation of the orderly thinking of the Age of Reason. Philosophers wanted to demonstrate that our noble English language followed laws of nature and was rational and logical, so they devised rules that demonstrated its neatness and symmetry.

Two problems, however, marred their efforts: (1) the language isn't neat, logical, rational, and symmetrical, and (2) the rules they devised didn't fit.

Let's take those two points in order.

(1) The Sloppiness, Illogicality, Irrationality, and Asymmetricality of English.

Ye gods what a mess English can be at times!

Since we say "MYself" and "YOURself," we should, if we were logical and consistent, say "HISself" -- or since we say "HIMself" then to be consistent we should say "MEself" and "YOUself." Don't try it.

Since "everybody" clearly means more than one person -- when you say "Everybody was at the party" you certainly don't mean that only one person was there -- we should, if we were logical, say "everybody are." Not recommended, however.

Our inconsistencies are legendary. Look at the three parts of the verbs "ride," "slide," "hide," and "glide."

<u>present</u>	<u>past</u>	<u>past participle</u>
ride	rode	ridden
slide	slid	slid
hide	hid	hidden
glide	glided	glided

Every person who learns English as a foreign language -- as well as every child who learns it natively -- has to learn not to say "I rid in the truck yesterday," "The car slode on the ice," "We hided the presents," and "The sled has glidden to a stop" -- any one of which could be justified if the language were consistent.

Look at the inconsistent endings we stick on our adjectives. When we mean merely "having something to do with history" we say "historicall"; if we mean "illustrating history" we say "historic." But with economics it's the other way around: "economicall" means "illustrating economics," while "economici" means merely "having something to do with economics."

Why do we "pride ourselves ON" something but "take pride IN" something?

Why is it okay to say "I heard it last night on the BBC" but not "I heard it last night on the NBC"?

Why does "to jail" mean to confine to a jail, but "to house" not mean confine to a house?

Even without referring to the language's notoriously inconsistent spelling and pronunciation -- why, for instance, don't we say "pronunciation"? -- the list could go on and on. But let's stop now, since the point is made: the English language is not neat, logical, rational, and symmetrical, or anywhere near being so. Any system of rules that tries to make it appear so is not going to fit.

(2) The Inappropriateness of the Rules That Were Devised

The second problem was with the rules rather than with the language. The early grammarians, instead of simply acknowledging the inconsistencies of English and trying to come up with the best rules they could devise, chose to look elsewhere for rules that they could apply to -- impose on -- the language.

The three places they chose to look, inevitably but unfortunately, were the Latin language, earlier periods of English, and logic. None of them worked.

Let's deal with Latin first. Since the Ancient Roman Empire was considered to be the model of a perfect civilization, and since every great idea was thought to derive from the ancient world, and since writers like Vergil, Horace, and Ovid were thought to be the perfect models for students to emulate, then why shouldn't the Latin language also be held up as an ideal language, and English be forced to follow the Latin model? After all, every truly educated person could read and write Latin; in

fact the whole educational system, from the early grades through the universities, was built primarily around the teaching of Latin.

These pioneer philosophers of language thought they were doing the right thing -- since Latin was the ideal language then its rules must be ideal rules -- but again, it didn't work out. Latin differs from English in almost every important way, and the rules of Latin just simply don't fit English and never have.

Latin is, first of all, an "inflected" language, whereas English is a "word-order" language. Here's a good Latin sentence:

Equus interfecit hominem.
(horse) (killed) (man)

Clearly, even to people who have never studied Latin, the sentence says "The horse killed the man."

But now let's turn it around.

Hominem interfecit equus.
(man) (killed) (horse)

Despite what it looks like in English, this sentence in Latin still says "The horse killed the man." So long as "horse" is spelled e-q-u-u-s, it is going to be the subject of the sentence. And so long as "man" is spelled h-o-m-i-n-e-m, it is going to be the object. No matter how these three words are shuffled around -- "equus

hominem interfecit,” “interfecit hominem equus,” “hominem equus interfecit,” etc. – they will always mean “The horse killed the man.”

If you want to say “The man killed the horse,” you have to write it this way:

Homo interfecit equum.
(man) (killed) (horse)

No matter what order these words are placed in -- “Equum interfecit homo,” “Interfecit homo equum,” and so on -- they will always mean “The man killed the horse,” because h-o-m-o will always be the subject and e-q-u-u-m always the object. The different spellings of the words are called “inflections,” and they are what determine each word’s function in a sentence.

Anyone can see right away that the situation in English is entirely different from what it is in Latin. In English, the only difference between “The horse killed the man” and “The man killed the horse” is the order of the words; the words themselves are identical. In Latin, by contrast, the words are spelled differently in the two versions according to their meaning, and the order they’re in makes no difference.

This fact alone should make it clear that rules that apply to one of the languages don’t apply to the other: the whole structure, the whole method by which an idea is expressed, is radically different in each. But other differences exist too, if more evidence is needed.

For instance, in Latin a preposition has to go with something. “Ad,” meaning “toward” or “into,” has to be followed by the thing or place it refers to. The soldiers advance “ad urbem” (toward the city), or the students walk “ad scholam” (into the school). “Ad” by itself wouldn’t mean anything -- “ad what?,” any Roman would have said. The same is true of “ab” (away from), or “cum” (with), or “sine” (without). “Ab what?” “Cum what?” “Sine what?”

From this Latin rule -- that a preposition has to be followed by its object -- some early grammarians made the leap to declaring that the same must be true in English, and that therefore a preposition can’t come at the end of a sentence, where it would have nothing after it. They were wrong. In English, prepositions can go just about anywhere, and they always have, from the earliest years of the language all the way to the present. But because of the Latin analogy, this one erroneous rule won a place in the traditional grammar books, and today, alas, it’s just about the only “rule” -- even though a totally wrong one -- that many people know.

Another example: remember the rule against the “split infinitive”? Grammarians, observing that an infinitive in Latin is always one word -- “probare” = “to approve,” “dicere” = “to say,” “munire” = “to build” -- decreed that an infinitive in English must likewise be treated as one word, and therefore that it is wrong to put anything between the “to” and the verb. You couldn’t, according to them, say “to really be a success”; you had to say something awkward like “to be

really a success” or “really to be a success.” The result is often some very clumsy English.

Here, for instance, is a sentence from a modern translator’s preface to the work he is translating:

In making a translation the first essential is thoroughly to understand what one is translating.

Obviously this poor fellow was struggling to find some way to say what he really meant. The key word is “thoroughly.” It’s not enough, he wants to say, to understand the material in a superficial sort of way; instead, one must understand it thoroughly. He wants, therefore, to throw the emphasis on that word -- but the grammar rule against splitting an infinitive interferes. He can’t, according to the rule, say “The first essential is to THOROUGHLY understand what one is translating” (which is what he means), so he has to put the “thoroughly” somewhere else. He can’t say “to understand what one is translating thoroughly,” because that makes it sound like the “thoroughly” goes with the “translating” -- “thoroughly translating” rather than “thoroughly understand.” Another possibility would be to say “to understand thoroughly what one is translating,” but this one puts the “thoroughly” in a lesser position -- the reader will read “understand” and not realize until later that the writer really means not just “understand” but “thoroughly understand.” (Anyway,

“thoroughly what one is translating” sounds pretty clumsy too.) Thus he ends up saying “is thoroughly to understand” -- surely a not very satisfactory and not very English way of phrasing.

As a final example, look at the old bugaboo “It is I.” For years, decades, centuries, grammar teachers told little children that they had to say “It is I” rather than “It is me.” The reason is that in Latin, where word order isn’t important to the denotative meaning, it makes no difference whether the “I” comes before or after the “is”: the phrase is either “Sum ego” or “Ego sum,” both meaning simply “It is I.” But, as we have seen, in English the word order does make a difference -- in fact it makes all the difference -- so if “It is me” is more natural and less pretentious then why shouldn’t such a phrase be allowed? A rule from an inflected language like Latin doesn’t fit a word-order language like English, and attempts to impose such a foreign rule just result in clumsy and unnatural usage.

Let me not overstate the case against these pioneer grammarians. Not only did they sincerely believe in what they were doing and earnestly try to do it well, but they were real scholars in every sense. They knew many languages, they had read widely, and they had reasoned deeply about their subject. Moreover, much of the grammatical system they came up with is actually valid. English does have concepts like nouns, verbs, subjects, objects, and modifiers, just as Latin does, and these classifications work almost equally well in both languages.

But it's the defects of these early grammarians' work that stand out and attract attention, and it was these defects that eventually, after more than two centuries, led to the fall of the whole system.

During these centuries, a lot of people had made fun of the half-Latin kind of English that resulted from strictly following the rules. Even Shakespeare did so (in Love's Labours Lost), a whole century before the grammar movement really got started. Others who followed included Addison and Steele, Sterne, Goldsmith, Dickens, Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain, Gilbert and Sullivan, Ambrose Bierce, H. L. Mencken, James Thurber, Sinclair Lewis, and a few million weary students.

Some other people, however, took a more serious look at the problems and commented on the difficulties that this kind of grammar was causing ordinary speakers and writers of English. By the mid-twentieth century it was common for grammar books to relax their standards a bit and say that prepositions could come at the end of a sentence, or that it's okay to say "It's me" and "Everybody was at the party but then they left." Even the august and honorable Oxford English Dictionary, the famed OED, acknowledged, in a comment written around 1890, that "The pronoun referring to everyone is often plural," and that "this violation of grammatical concord [is] sometimes necessary."

Thus it really wasn't true that the Latin-based grammar system ever dominated and controlled to quite the extent that the people like me were led to believe when we

were in school. Nonetheless, it was indeed a strong force, and it had many ardent supporters.

One argument often advanced in its favor was that it represented the way the language "used to be," back in the golden days before modern people corrupted it -- and in fact, as previously noted, "the way it used to be" was one of the criteria some early grammarians cited as a way of deciding what should be called "right" or "wrong." Even today, one can sometimes hear purists cry "Let's keep our language pure," implying that we should earnestly work to restore grammar to its former state -- "like it was way back when."

But that argument is just plain wrong: there never was such a time, way back when. The rules that these grammarians imposed do not, in any way, reflect the way the language was used, ever, at any point in the past. Examples of English usage that didn't conform to the rules -- or, more accurately, since the rules came afterwards, of usage that the rules didn't conform to -- are plentiful.

For instance, in using past participles John Milton wrote "have spoke," "had stole," and "have chose," and the elegant and eloquent Joseph Addison wrote "had began," "has wrote," and "have arose." As for "who" and "whom," John Dryden, himself one of the pioneer grammarians, said "Tell who loves who," and the archly purist Jonathan Swift wrote "He knows who it is proper to expose" -- both of which, if the authors had followed the rules, would have been "whom."

Both the who/whom rule and the forbidden preposition at the end of a sentence were casually violated by John Locke, when he said "We are still much at a loss who civil power belongs to." Others who put prepositions at the end included both Alexander Pope ("a truth which booksellers are the first to inform them of") and Shakespeare, in lines like "What it should be I cannot dream of" and the famous "We are such stuff as dreams are made on." Even one early grammarian good-humoredly acknowledged that the preposition "rule" wasn't a very good one; he mischievously noted that "This is an idiom which our language is strongly inclined to"!

And finally -- "I" or "me"? Well, it's just as hard to say that these words "used to be" used correctly. Swift wrote, in a letter to Pope, "You are a greater loser than me by his death," and poet Matthew Prior wrote "He was a poet sublimer than me" -- both of which should have been "I" by the purists' standard.

The other line of argument, besides the notion that traditional grammar rules were justified by Latin or by history, is that the language they produce is somehow more logical, or simply "better." If people would only say things according to the rules, the argument goes, then communication would be better, people would understand one another more fully, and the world would be a better place to live in (or in which to live). This point of view is, frankly, preposterous. Not one piece of evidence exists to support it.

First of all, can anybody really cite even one example in which a person has failed to understand another person because of bad grammar? Such a happening is just about inconceivable.

Second, does anyone really maintain that "That's them" is less clear than "That's they," or that "Who are you in love with" is less clear than "With whom are you in love"? Surely, anybody will admit that the two versions are equally clear.

And third, in some instances the traditional grammar rules actually produce a less satisfactory kind of writing or speech. "We are glad you've chosen this community to live in" is clear and straightforward, while "We are glad you've chosen this community in which to live," although still clear, is less straightforward because it introduces a "which" -- "to live in which" instead of "to live in community."

It's hard to think of any instance where insistence on "correct" grammar produces a more satisfactory result than ordinary natural speech would produce. That's a sweeping statement, and people of the older generations today can easily remember when it would have been considered heretical. But, sad to say, it's true -- an observation that doesn't reflect well on two and a half centuries of education.

And the fact that it's true has been known for a long time: at least as far back as 1906, people conducted studies that demonstrated an astounding lack of correlation between high scores on grammar tests and an ability to write well.

So the Latin argument, the historical argument, and even the "better communication" argument all fall flat on analysis. No wonder a rebellion against the traditional grammar system finally set in.

The real wonder is that it took so long to happen.

4. The "Descriptive Linguistics" Movement

(1950s and 1960s)

After decades in which lots of people grumbled about the irrational demands that traditional grammar was making on English writers and speakers, somebody finally tried to do something about the problem.

Why, the grumblers had asked, do we have to have a grammar system that's modeled on another language or on another century? If the purpose is to get kids to write well, then why don't we invent a system of rules that describe the way English is today?

The key word there is "describe." Traditional grammar had prescribed, had told us what we ought to say. By the time it was fully developed, it made no claim to describing the way English was actually spoken and written. It proclaimed a high standard to which, it said, we should all aspire.

The reformers, quite sensibly, took the opposite approach. Instead of considering themselves legislators of right and wrong, they compared themselves to mapmakers who, they said, tell us not where a country ought to be but where it actually is. Their aim wasn't to pass judgment on writers and speakers, or to declare one form of expression better than another, or to legislate what is and isn't good English. Their job was, they said, to describe the English language as it really is.

Such an aim is wholly, entirely, completely, 100% commendable. Of course, obviously, inevitably, that's what grammar should do! In fact that -- amazingly -- is even what the early grammarians, of the previous chapter, thought they were doing. Although they used Latin as a model for many of their rules, they specifically and deliberately eliminated Latin things like gender (which English doesn't have in its nouns and adjectives) and the ablative and dative cases (which English doesn't have at all). One of them wrote, in 1762, that he wanted above all to avoid "forcing the English under the rules of a foreign language with which it has little concern." He was trying to create a grammatical system for English, and English alone.

Obviously he messed up. But it's revealing to see that that's what his aim was. He thought he was making rules for English as it was written and spoken at the time, but his prejudices in favor of the classics kept him from seeing his subject very clearly. Then, as we have seen, his successors over the next century and a half utterly forgot about his original intention and turned his system into a set of rigid prescriptive rules.

Although the reformers in the first half of this century started off with exactly the same aim -- to formulate rules that describe English, their technique was quite different. Instead of relying on their own observations through reading, and then backing up their observations by reference to Latin, they chose to conduct a scientific survey. They read and analyzed a group of 3,000 letters that distressed people had

written to the War Department, and they listened to and analyzed more than 300 recorded conversations.

Their criterion was simple: if something was used, then it was English; if it wasn't used, then it wasn't English. Usage determined what was accepted.

Actually, what they did was a little bit more complicated than I have made it sound. They stated five principles that guided their work:

- (1) Language changes constantly -- which means that grammar rules must change too. There's no such thing as a permanent rule.
- (2) Change is normal -- which means that rules must never be thought of as ways of preventing the language from changing.
- (3) The spoken language is the language -- or, in other words, what people say in conversation takes precedence in the forming of the language and in the forming of rules about it. Writing is merely a record that comes later.
- (4) Correctness is determined by usage -- as discussed earlier. This is probably the single most important

point: not Latin, not history, not logic, but usage, and usage alone, determines what correct English is.

(5) All usage is relative -- or, in other words, judgmental

concepts like "correct" and "incorrect," "right" and "wrong," have to be replaced by level-of-usage concepts like "standard," "non-standard," "informal," "colloquial," and "dialect," because what's "wrong" in one setting is probably "right" in another.

The first two of these five principles sound entirely reasonable. The others might need a little modification.

The third one -- about spoken language being the real language and written language being a mere record of it -- seems controversial and anyway not especially necessary. Written English has got to be just as important, in many ways, as spoken. For instance, Shakespeare and the King James Bible have profoundly influenced the English language for almost four centuries, but surely it's the writing, not the speaking, that has been influential. And it's true even among modern authors: Hemingway's writing has had an enormous influence, but who cares how he spoke?

The fourth principle -- that usage determines correctness -- is, as Chapter Two showed, absolutely correct. But to avoid misunderstanding, it probably should be

modified slightly, so that it says "Usage by native speakers and over a sustained period of time determines correctness." Otherwise, the principle seems to be saying that anything is okay, which is not what it meant at all.

The fifth principle -- about all usage being relative -- is merely overstated a bit. Maybe most usage is relative, but, after all, some things are just plain wrong, and no amount of usage will ever change that fact. If somebody says "Before two year I am speak good the English," it's not colloquial, or informal, or dialect -- it's out-and-out wrong. And so are other less extreme examples, like "Myself am typing a paper."

Anyhow, principles 1, 2, and (with modification) 4 -- that language changes, that change is normal, and that usage determines what's acceptable -- are absolutely and unchallengeably true. In fact they were much overdue. If they had been stated a long time ago -- for instance, back when I was in school -- they would have made my life and the lives of my generation much easier.

This descriptive linguistics movement, by the way, was what led to the famous publication of the Merriam-Webster Third New International Dictionary of the English Language in 1961, the dictionary that scandalized the purists by including the word "ain't." In response to repeated angry attacks, the dictionary-makers patiently explained, over and over, that including such a word didn't mean that they were "approving" of it. The inclusion meant only that, as everybody knows, the word does exist and anybody who wants to understand English has to be familiar with it. On

this point they were absolutely right: if a word is used, as Principle #4 says, then it's English of some kind, and a truly descriptive dictionary must include it.

But unfortunately, as things turned out, the effort to translate this whole philosophy, with its excellent principles, into a new system of grammar didn't get very far. It would, in truth, be hard to claim that these twentieth-century grammarians -- despite the fact that some of them were really impressive scholars -- succeeded even as well as the earlier grammarians they were rebelling against.

One reason was merely complexity. The system they came up with was, in many ways, much more complicated than the one they were trying to replace. Instead of the conventional eight parts of speech, for example, they came up with nineteen. Moreover, nobody ever actually gave a really convincing demonstration that the new system worked significantly better than the old one had worked.

It did have many fiercely devoted advocates, however, and for a few years it was the rage. Thousands of schoolteachers went to special summer institutes to learn all about it, and it entered the school curricula in the early 1950s and dominated for decade or so. Scholarly journals were filled with little articles saying "I heard somebody say this" or "I read where somebody had written that." Usage was king; classical grammar was dead.

And then, almost suddenly, the whole movement fell apart.

Many people had been unhappy with it from the start, feeling intuitively (and correctly) that relying on usage as determined by a survey was somehow superficial and unsatisfactory. After all, if it's true, as Principles 1 and 2 say, that language changes all the time, then why can't any usage be considered okay? If something deviates from the norm, just call it change and then it becomes normal. Or maybe the deviation was simply something that hadn't turned up in the surveys but was normal elsewhere. Somebody could claim that something wasn't standard English because "We don't say it that way" -- and all somebody else had to do to refute that statement was to say "But I do say it that way," and then it was standard. As a philosophy of language, it all seemed pretty shakily constructed.

But the real blow to the movement came in the late 1950s, with a couple of short books by MIT's eminent Prof. Noam Chomsky. Building on the work of some of the unhappy people referred to in the previous paragraph, he quietly demolished, with relentless logic, the whole idea of describing a language with a series of rules based on what somebody has seen or heard. He pointed out that things nobody has ever said or ever will say -- like "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" -- are perfectly good English, while things somebody might say -- like "The child seems sleeping" -- aren't.

Furthermore, he pointed out, language is infinitely expandable, and thus no set of models derived from a survey can ever cover all the possibilities. We can say "The

man is here," "The old man is here," "The old, bald man is here," "The old, bald, stooped man is here," "The old, bald, stooped, palsied man is here," "The old, bald, stooped, palsied, absent-minded man is here," "The old, bald, stooped, palsied, absent-minded, obnoxious man is here," and so on forever -- and it will never become "wrong."

He made other points too, but these will suffice here. His over-all conclusion was that usage alone doesn't determine what is and what isn't acceptable in a language. After all, somebody might use a word you've never heard before -- like "Nebraskaese" -- and yet you would accept it right away and know exactly what it means. There must be, therefore, something deeper than just surface patterns that determines the way a language forms its expressions.

The method that Prof. Chomsky and others did propose as a way of explaining a language's nature need not occupy us here. Called "Transformational Generative Syntax," it is illustrated through an elaborate system of diagrams showing how basic ideas ("I throw you the ball") can be transformed into many different surface structures ("I throw the ball to you," "The ball is thrown by me to you," "You are being thrown the ball by me," and so on). Although elegantly conceived, and although unquestionably correct in what it says, the transformational grammar system has no practical uses at all, so far as teaching and learning are concerned. It is a philosophical concept that describes how a language is constructed, not a practical

method which people can use to learn a language or to improve their writing and speaking.

And that's why we are where we are -- with no grammar being taught in the schools. The old classical grammar was overthrown, and the structural linguistics system that replaced it was itself overthrown, and the transformational system that replaced is not the sort of thing that gets taught in schools.

The result is the problem described back in Chapter One. Lacking any method of analyzing their own writing, any tools for understanding language structures, today's students are being severely handicapped in their efforts to learn how to write well.

The next chapter names the tools I think they should have.

5. What To Do Now?

The schools stopped teaching any grammatical system back in the 1960s, as they probably should have. The systems weren't valid. They didn't work.

But the schools also, at the same time, stopped teaching grammatical terminology. And that, I argue here, was a mistake which has had lasting consequences.

Even if we can't formulate rules about how to use infinitives, where a preposition goes, or what case to use for a predicate nominative, we still can tell students what "infinitive," "preposition," "case," and "predicate nominative" mean. By doing so we are giving them the tools to think about and analyze their sentences.

Abandoning the philosophical system, in short, does not require us to abandon the vocabulary too. The terms still have value, still refer to things we ought to be able to explain to our students. The comments I write on students' papers today are pretty much the same ones I wrote in 1960. About the only difference is that I used to be able to mention concepts like the ones in the list that you are about to read, and now I can't mention them anymore because nobody knows what they mean.

This list -- of things that I recommend every school child be taught -- derives not from any scientific study but from almost 40 years of paper-grading. My purpose here -- to say it one more time -- is to provide the students with a

vocabulary for discussing language. If students know the meanings of these terms and phrases, and have practiced identifying the concepts, then they will be able to recognize the structures in their writing, and we will be able to make clear suggestions to them that will enable them to improve their work.

Here goes.

CONCEPTS EVERY STUDENT SHOULD BE FAMILIAR WITH AND ABLE TO IDENTIFY

KINDS OF WORDS

noun

verb

linking verb

auxiliary verb

adjective

comparative adjective

superlative adjective

demonstrative adjective

pronominal adjective

adverb

pronoun

preposition

conjunction

co-ordinating conjunction

subordinating conjunction

VERBALS

infinitive

participle

present participle

past participle

gerund

FUNCTIONAL PARTS OF A SENTENCE

subject

predicate

object

direct object

indirect object

object of a preposition

predicate nominative

clause

independent clause

dependent clause

relative clause

restrictive relative clause

non-restrictive relative clause

phrase

noun phrase

adjective phrase

adverb phrase

infinitive phrase

prepositional phrase

appositive

antecedent

TENSES, CASES, VOICES, AND MOODS

present tense

past tense

future tense

present perfect tense

past perfect tense

future perfect tense

subjective

objective

possessive

active

passive

declarative

interrogative

direct question

indirect question

imperative

subjunctive

conditional

POSTSCRIPT

Not so very many years ago violent arguments -- even fist fights -- broke out among advocates of competing grammatical theories. Classicists were outraged by the upstart structural linguists, and the structuralists, in turn, were soon outraged to find themselves being battered by the transformationalists.

What I am doing here involves no such partisanship. In fact, I admire all three groups. My review of the classicists -- especially Robert Lowth's work in the middle of the 18th century -- has filled me with respect I never thought possible. My foray into the work of structuralist Charles C. Fries has left me wide-eyed at his accomplishments. And my admiration for Prof. Chomsky and the transformationalists is unbounded.

I do not advocate starting to teach again any disproven system of grammar. What I propose is that we resurrect the teaching of the terminology, so that perhaps in the future one of our students, through an enhanced understanding of the subject, will come up with a new and valid system that really does work. And at least, while we are waiting for that development, we will be better able to explain to our students how they can improve their writing.

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Comments are always welcome.

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