Teaching

English Grammar

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To

E. A. CROSS

grammarian, teacher, friend

this book is gratefully dedicated

Preface

IN THE CURRENT SETTING of grammar teaching in the
United States it is perhaps more foolhardy than courageous to
offer a book on the subject. On the one hand the forces of tradition
and conservatism cling so firmly to grammar as a school subject
that anyone who ventures to suggest changes in content and
method is condemned in advance. In direct contrast, the experi-
mental endeavors of contemporary linguists have laid so bare the
inadequacies of traditional grammar as the means to the study of
English that anyone fairly familiar with their work hesitates to
refer to the older terminology of grammar, much less to advocate
its use. Yet somehow this chasm must be bridged. English grammar
has a useful part to play in the training of young people to use their
language effectively. Those who teach grammar need help in deter-
mining exactly what is meant by the term, what content it does
and does not include, for what purposes it is properly to be used,
and what outcomes may be expected from its use.

Many and serious confusions exist regarding the nature, use, and
outcomes of grammar instruction. To clarify some of these con-
fusions, to distinguish the particular contribution which grammar
may make to the education of young people, and to present a
workable, reasonable plan to accomplish these educational goals
is the purpose of this book. No one is more aware of its many
shortcomings than the author. Although many difficulties are in-
volved, he finds courage in the hope that despite almost irrecon-

cilable conflicts of idea and opinion among current practitioners
of English grammar, this book may offer a compromise position
and plan for those who wish to teach grammar, and may in time
assist the union of tradition and experimentation which seems to
be the manifest destiny of English grammar.

In the preparation of this book many scholars and teachers have
indirectly contributed by their lectures, conversations, and writ-
ings. Thanks to all such in general is expressed here, and in particu-
lar by footnote reference throughout the book. In the composition
of the manuscript the writer is deeply indebted to the research
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While the author accepts full responsibility for any errors of fact
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                                                    R. C. P.

TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR

Contents

I

What Is Grammar?

NEARLY EVERY TEACHER OF ENGLISH who owns to his profession publicly has learned to expect some such reaction as this: "So you're an English teacher!" An awkward pause usually follows, and then comes the almost inevitable remark, "I never did like grammar!" The average ex-student, recalling hours spent in memorizing rules in a vain attempt to bring his speech and writing into conformity with some inflexible pedagogical ideal of "pure" and "correct" English, is apt to regard many English teachers with distaste if not dislike.

Just what is this grammar, so often of unpleasant memory? What does the term mean now, and what has it meant in the past? An examination of the sources of the word itself may help us to answer these questions.

DERIVATION OF *GRAMMAR*

The ultimate root of the English word *grammar* is the Greek word *graphein*, to write. From the root of *graphein* comes the word *gramma*, letter, written mark, and from the plural of *gramma*, *grammata*, comes the adjective *grammatikos*, of or pertaining to letters or literature, the feminine of which, *grammatike*, becomes in Latin *grammatica*. The Old French *gramaire*, an irregular adoption from the Latin form, becomes the Middle English *gram(m)ere*, from which Modern English *grammar* is derived.

The *New English Dictionary* tells us that in classical Greek and Latin the word *grammar* denoted "the methodical study of

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literature . . . including textual and aesthetic criticism, investigation of literary history and antiquities, explanation of allusions, etc., besides the study of the Greek and Latin languages." As its sources themselves clearly indicate, the term was indeed equal to the term "*philology* in the widest modern sense."

In the Middle Ages grammar was the first subject of the *trivium*, which included also logic and rhetoric. Grammar, for medieval man, meant the study of the Latin language and Latin literature.

> The Latin language contained the sum of knowledge transmitted to the Middle Ages. And it had to be learned. . . . Centuries before the Roman youth had studied grammar that they might speak and write correctly. Now it was necessary to study Latin grammar, to wit, the true forms and literary usages of the Latin tongue, in order to acquire any branch of knowledge whatsoever, and express one's corresponding thoughts. [1]

Here, too, the *grammar* included in its meaning what we should consider literature. This fact is born out by John of Salisbury's description of the teaching method followed by Bernard of Chartres:

> By citations from the authors he showed what was simple and regular; he brought into relief the grammatical figures, the rhetorical colours, the artifices of sophistry, and pointed out how the text in hand bore upon other studies. . . . He inculcated correctness and propriety of diction, and a fitting use of congruous figures. Realizing that practice strengthens memory and sharpens faculty, he urged his pupils to imitate what they had heard, inciting some by admonitions, others by whipping and penalties. Each pupil recited the next day something from what he had heard on the preceding. The evening exercise, called the *declinatio*, was filled with such an abundance of grammar that anyone, of fair intelligence, by attending it for a year, would have at his finger's ends the art of writing and speaking and would know the meaning of all words in common use. [2]

Bernard, then, made much use of literature in his teaching of grammar, and this appears to have been the custom generally.

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[1] Henry Osborn Taylor, *The Mediaeval Mind* (London, Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1938), Vol. II, p. 361.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 157.

The term *grammar*, meaning knowledge of Latin language and literature, knowledge peculiar to the learned class, was sometimes used, says the *N.E.D.*, as synonymous with learning in general in the Middle Ages. It is interesting to note that we owe our word *glamour* to the idea that magic and astrology were part of the "learning in general" to which the O.F. *gramaire* was applied. Some students may be unwilling to admit even an etymological connection between *glamour* and *grammar!*

GRAMMAR TRANSFERRED TO ENGLISH

Until the seventeenth century the term *grammar* in English usage meant the study of Latin—hence a "grammar school" was originally one in which Latin was taught. Very little work was done in English grammar. Ben Jonson's *English Grammar*, written *c.* 1600 and published in 1640, was one of the first books, according to the *N.E.D.*, to deal with the subject under its own name. Jonson's grammar shows everywhere the influence of his study of Latin and Greek, despite the claim made in the title that it was "made by Ben Jonson, for the benefit of all strangers, out of his observation of the English language, now spoken and in use." [3]

The rise of the middle class in the eighteenth century brought about a great demand for grammars. People with new leisure for the pursuit of culture demanded rules for "correctness" in language, and rules were provided in great plenty. Most of the grammarians of the eighteenth century followed the precedent set by Ben Jonson and others in the seventeenth century—they modeled their grammars of English on the Latin grammars. Most of them divided the study of grammar into four or five parts: Orthography, Etymology, Syntax, Prosody, and sometimes Orthoëpy. [4] Teaching grammar meant to them teaching students to write and to speak according to the rules. The fact that the rules were often arbitrary or based on personal prejudice seemed not at

[3] For detailed evidence of Jonson's dependence on Latin in this work, see Roland G. Kent, *Language and Philology* (Boston, Marshall Jones Co., 1923), pp. 134–137.
[4] *N. E. D.*

all to disturb those who expounded them. They did not hesitate to point out "errors" in the works of England's greatest authors. This attitude Fries called "the doctrine of original sin" in grammar. [5]

THE PRESCRIPTIVE NOTION OF GRAMMAR

The eighteenth-century philosophy of prescriptive grammar was carried over into most of the grammars produced in the nineteenth century and even into our own times. In the nineteenth century, however, we find the beginnings of a new concept—descriptive grammar, based on scientific studies of the history of languages and of usage. The Romantic Movement, with its interest in the exotic and ancient, brought in its train the frame of mind necessary to appreciate the rediscovery of Sanskrit, and hence the beginnings of really scientific language studies. [6] The work of R. K. Rask, J. L. C. Grimm, A. F. Pott, A. Frick, and others made clear some of the relationships among languages and the nature of the changes which occur in them. F. Max Müller's *Lectures on the Science of Language*, published at Oxford in 1861 and 1864, helped to make the results of this work known in England. [7] For those who applied the results of these studies to English, grammar came to mean observation and description of the language as it is spoken and written, and an attempt to determine how it came to assume its present form. By 1910 we find A. H. Sayce writing an article on grammar for the 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in which he says flatly:

Grammatical propriety is nothing more than the established usage of a particular body of speakers at a particular time in their history. . . . The idea that the free use of speech is tied down by the rules of the grammarians . . . must be given up; all that the grammarian can do is

[5] Charles C. Fries, *The Teaching of the English Language* (New York, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1927), p. 17.

[6] Leonard Bloomfield, *Introduction to the Study of Language* (New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1914), p. 309.

[7] For a discussion of the development of language studies, see Louis H. Gray, *Foundations of Language* (New York, The Macmillan Co., 1939), pp. 419–460.

to formulate the current uses of his time, which are determined by habit and custom, and are accordingly in a perpetual state of flux. *We must get rid of the notion that English grammar should be modeled after that of ancient Rome;* until we do, we shall never understand even the elementary principles upon which it is based. [Italics mine.]

Expressions of very similar attitudes toward grammar can be found in the works of such distinguished students of language as Otto Jespersen, Leonard Bloomfield, and George P. Krapp.

The fact that many people still cling to the eighteenth-century notion of grammar is in large part due to resistance to change on the part of schools and school teachers. It is to be hoped that in the future increasing numbers of English teachers will be convinced of the truth of Jespersen's statement that "the essence of language is human activity," and that like human activity, it is subject to change; that words and forms are not "things or natural objects with an existence of their own," but tools which may be modified by those who use them. [8]

In this book the word *grammar* will refer to the structure of English, the way English works when it is used for the communication of ideas. Further definitions will be found in Chapter IX.

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[8] Otto Jespersen, *The Philosophy of Grammar* (New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1924), p. 2.

II

The Development of Grammar

FROM VERY EARLY PERIODS, man has been concerned
with solving the riddle of the origin of languages. The story
of the Tower of Babel in the book of Genesis represents one at-
tempt to account for the diversity of tongues; the explanation
given there, it will be remembered, is that when men in their pride
attempted to build a tower reaching to the heavens, God caused
confusion of tongues, thus forcing them to abandon their project.
The many attempts at etymology in the Old Testament also show
an early interest in the history and meanings of words. An example
of such popular or folk etymologies is the Biblical explanation that
the term *Babel* (Babylon) was given to the place where the ill-
fated tower was begun "because the Lord did there confound the
language of all the earth."[1]

Real language study begins, however, with what Gray calls "the
two great thinking peoples of antiquity," those of India and those
of Greece. [2] Of the Indian grammarians, whose interest in grammar
was primarily analytical, the greatest was Panini, who wrote an
authoritative grammar of Sanskrit at the end of the fourth century
B.C. This is the first formal grammar of which we have any knowl-
edge, and it "consists of some four thousand very brief statements
of linguistic phenomena, most of them designated by arbitrary
sounds or complexes of sounds used as code-words." [3] The Indian

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[1] Louis H. Gray, *Foundations of Language* (New York, The Macmillan
Co., 1939), p. 419.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 421.

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grammars were primarily designed to enable people to read tradi·
tional esthetic and religious works. [4]

PHILOSOPHIES OF GRAMMAR

In Greece, speculation about language assumed a more philo-
sophical character. The earliest example which we possess of the
Greek attempts to study language is the *Crotylus* of Plato, which
gives some rather inaccurate etymologies and sets forth the idea,
apparently held earlier by Pythagoras and Heraclitus, that lan-
guage has arisen "by nature"—that is, out of some inherent neces-
sity. In general, the Stoic philosophers agreed with Plato in this
notion about the origin of language. Here, however, as in so many
other areas of knowledge, Aristotle is the first really important
figure. He "may be regarded as the father of grammar in the Oc-
cidental World." He began the study of the parts of speech, cases,
and gender. As to the origin of language, he agreed, not with Plato
and his predecessors, but with Democritus, that language is the
result of "convention" or "agreement," an opinion in which the
Epicureans generally concurred. [5]

As the study of language in Greece developed, another contro-
versy arose to complicate further that already created by the dif-
ference of opinion between the Platonists and the Aristotelians
about the origin of language. This was the controversy between
the Analogists and the Anomalists. The point of view of the Anom-
alists, of whom the most important was Crates of Mallos, was
very close to that of modern students of language: they held that
grammatical rules are established by custom and are therefore sub-
ject to change. The Analogists, on the contrary, stated that there
is a strict law of analogy between the idea and the word, and in-
sisted upon absolute, unchanging grammatical rules. The Analo-

[3] *Ibid.*
[4] Leonard Bloomfield, *Introduction to the Study of Language* (New York,
Henry Holt and Co., 1914), p. 307.
[5] Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 423.

gists eventually triumphed, and Dionysius Thrax, pupil of the Analogist Aristarchus, wrote a Greek grammar in the first century B.C. which became a model for most Latin grammars in Rome. Donatus, in the fourth century A.D., and Priscian, about 500 A.D., wrote grammars after the pattern set by Dionysius; and these two grammars, in turn, set the pattern for most of the Latin and Greek grammars written in the Middle Ages and for the vernacular grammars which followed:

> The grammatical apparatus developed and available in the sixteenth century when the first practical grammars of the vernacular arose was this which had been used for centuries for the Latin language—it is the dead hand of the old Analogist group of the second century B.C. [6]

As Gray points out, Christianity influenced all things, including the study of language. The early Church Fathers, Saints Basil, Jerome, Augustine, and John Chrysostom, made very little linguistic progress; they followed Plato and the Stoics in saying that language was given to men by God, and they devoted most of their efforts to establishing the Christian faith. The Scholastics, however, living in the Middle Ages, when the Church no longer had to fight for survival, had time to revive speculation about language. The famous controversy between the "realists" and the "nominalists" was really a kind of revival of the old Anomalist-Analogist argument. In general, however, the Scholastics adopted Aristotle's views about language. They gave grammar its place in the *trivium* and studied the Latin language intensively. In the Scholastic period we find many treatises on grammar, such as those of St. Anselm and Duns Scotus. The "great school-grammar of the Middle Ages," however, was the *Doctrinale puerorum* of Alexander de Villa-Dei (1199), based on the work of Priscian. [7] This famous grammar and its background we must examine with some care.

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[6] Charles C. Fries, *The Teaching of the English Language* (New York, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1927), p. 20.

[7] Gray, *op. cit.*, pp. 426–428.