Understanding Grammar

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Introduction

The problems which face every potential author of a textbook on English grammar, no matter whether it is designed for the sixth grade or the college senior year, are numerous and perplexing. If an Introduction to such a book is to be of any service at all, whether to instructor, student, or general reader, it can probably be most helpful by calling attention to the highly complex background of tradition, of newly developing science, of educational practice, and of public attitude, against which a grammar must inevitably be written. And against such a background, the present work stands as a noteworthy achievement and a credit to its author.

For the past century and a quarter there has been a science of language—linguistics—soundly based and rigorously controlled in its operation, as any science ought to be. As is the case with many newly developed intellectual disciplines, there has come to be a considerable lag in the application of this body of scientific knowledge about language to the practical and everyday schoolroom situation. Even today, the definitions, the judgments concerning the status of specific expressions and language items, the concept of how language is to be learned, and indeed the attitudes toward the function of language in society which appear, either overtly or covertly, in most school textbooks reflect the neoclassical orientation of the eighteenth century, the pre-scientific age as far as the study of language is concerned.

Without a doubt, one of our basic educational problems is to get a scientific treatment of language into the school textbooks, but this is precisely where some of our complications begin. In order to appreciate them, we must first understand what is implied by "a scientific treatment of language." One aspect of this which is immediately comprehensible is the unbiased and objective reporting of the facts about the English language as it is used today. Like any other science, linguistics must proceed upon a body of accurately assembled data.

This sounds so simple that one is inclined to wonder why there should be any difficulty about it at all, yet problems do arise. Since all language does not carry equal prestige, there arises first the necessity of determining acceptable sources of such data. Shall it be newspaper language, that of our authors of fiction and the drama, that which is to be heard in the halls of our legislative bodies, on the lecture platform, on the street, or at a club meeting —or some mixture of one or more of these? And what is to be the attitude toward the spoken as compared with the written language? Is the former to be considered the real living article, or a somewhat careless and broken down form of the latter. Professor Roberts' attitude toward these very matters is an excellent illustration of careful and judicious, scientifically controlled procedure.

A second difficulty occurs in that many people, both in the schools and out, have been reluctant to accept the factual evidence of present usage and have preferred instead a nonrealistic concept of what they feel should constitute "correct" English. There are many reasons for this, most of which have their roots in certain facets of our cultural history, but that is a story which is beside the present purpose. From our point of view, what is significant is that only very recently have some of the really important facts about the English language come to replace earlier inaccuracies in our school textbooks, and although this ferment has been going

on for some fifty years, much still remains to be done. Here again our author demonstrates a scholarly regard for linguistic fact in his full and very competent handling of such moot points as *shall* and *will, like* and *as,* and the split infinitive.

But the impact of the new science upon traditional procedures and attitudes by no means stops with the accurate reporting of data and the correction of previously held misconceptions about current English usage. If that were the case, we could report the tide of battle turning in our favor even though the shooting is far from over.

No science can rest upon the mere collection of new facts. The data must be classified; inferences must be drawn from such classifications, and the whole must be seen as a series of significant and meaningful patterns. This is where the new science of linguistics and the traditional grammatical practices of the pre-scientific age are still poles apart. And this is where the present-day textbook author must proceed with extreme caution, particularly if he is honestly concerned with making some impact upon what goes on in the classroom.

In their attempts to classify the carefully collected language data, linguistic scientists have found it necessary to do a considerable amount of violence to the grammatical categories and concepts which for generations have formed a part of our traditional learning apparatus. This has come about largely because the older categories were suspect of circular reasoning in their establishment; they were often defined in multiple and nonexclusive terms. New categories, concepts, and terms have been created and employed, resulting in great gains in precision, but often demanding the renunciation of familiar terminology and ideas about language. Consequently, a great deal of the most recent linguistic theory and research, much of it extremely useful in arriving at a better understanding of the structure and operation of language, has had little impact on the schools and among the general public

simply because the teachers and educated laymen have not been able to understand what the researchers and scholars were talking about.

The present author has faced this problem deftly and realistically. As his footnotes and incidental comments indicate, he is clearly aware of the new developments in the field of linguistic science. In order to secure a maximum effect, he employs the familiar terms for parts of speech, verb tenses, sentence function, and other basic grammatical classifications whenever possible. At the same time he is devastatingly frank about the shortcomings of the traditional definitions and concepts, and he tries to make all possible corrections in their application and in the point of view behind their use. His general attitude on this matter merits not only quotation but widespread imitation: "It doesn't matter much what we name a thing provided we can agree on the application of the name."

In short, Professor Roberts takes the student behind the scenes with respect to the new developments in linguistics and their points of conflict with older and more traditional practices. He follows approved scientific practice by recognizing sentence order and the formal aspects of words as a primary basis of classification, but once having arrived at his basic categories objectively, he shows no hesitation in reapplying or revamping a well-known term, after a full discussion of the limitations of the traditional definition. This is particularly apparent in his treatment of the individual parts of speech and his discussion of case in nouns.

However, there is more here than a mere middle ground between scientific exploration and conventional practice, although this in itself is probably what is most needed in the whole area of language education. The author makes several noteworthy and happy contributions to linguistic analysis in his own right. The treatment of *it* as an expletive, a situational, and an impersonal pronoun follows closely his recent researches on the subject. His

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classification of strong verbs in terms of the identity of the various principal parts is a highly useful device. His terminology for the various levels of formality in speech and writing is not only accurate but carefully selected to avoid emotional interpretation.

At the same time, he is not so preoccupied with a scientifically objective attitude toward language that he is unable to give the student some very sound and practical advice on the everyday problems of self-expression. In certain instances, after presenting the pros and cons of certain syntactical constructions, he tells the student that the best thing for him to do in such a situation is to recast the sentence. Yet, such oft-repeated cliches as the caution against the use of the passive are freshly examined and their shortcomings and inaccuracies are fully brought to light.

A full but judiciously selected bibliography and a very helpful glossary of grammatical terms maintain to the very end of the volume the high standard of presentation which is to be found here. This book will not at once and of itself bring the schoolroom abreast of the newest developments in the science of language, but it will go far in closing the gap between them.

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Preface

The title of this book is indicative, if not of its accomplishment, at least of its intent. Grammar is not ordinarily approached as something to be understood, but this approach may have its uses. It may turn out that the student who hates grammar (and precious few students *don't* hate grammar) hates it not because it is hard (though it is) or because it is dry and impractical (it is neither) but because he is scarcely ever given an inkling of what it is all about. To the average product of American schools, grammar is a collection of more or less meaningless rules and definitions to be memorized and recited; these rules and definitions emanate from the Grammarian, a being with supernatural powers and sources of information but with no particular interest in any language spoken by man. Thus viewed, grammar has made a deep impression on our folkways, and it certainly has its quaint and charming side, but it is of small value in learning to speak or read or write.

I have tried in this book, first, to give some account of the grammatical forms used by educated Americans in the middle of the twentieth century; second, to explain the conventional grammatical terminology; third, to give some notion of the assumptions underlying the structure of the traditional grammar: how rules are arrived at, how definitions are made, how categories tend to overlap, how grammarians often disagree about terms and subdivisions, and so on. The student will find that the de-

scription of English grammar that results is much less neat, less clear cut and positive than that given in his high-school text. But if it be objected that it will be in that degree more difficult to learn and to teach, I can only answer that my own experience is otherwise. Having tried it both ways over a period of years, I find that students respond more readily to that which engages their understanding than to that which merely exercises their memory. This is especially true when the object of memory work is an artificial language which the grammarian invents because he finds the real language too complicated for the symmetrical patterns he has preconceived.

At this date, no one publishing a book on grammar should fail to state its relation to linguistic science. My feeling is that the premises and procedures of linguistic science are clearly right and true, and in so far as I could I have used those premises and procedures in explaining the traditional terms and categories. This is not to say that I have attempted a "marriage" of the modern science and the old tradition. In many respects the two are incompatible, and the English grammar that linguistic science writes will be much different from the one presented here. But that grammar is not written yet, despite the brilliant preliminary work done by Fries, Trager and Smith, Harris, and others, and meanwhile teachers must make do with the systems available. Also it is fair to say that traditional grammar, unwieldy and inefficient and misguided though it often is, has sometimes achieved glimpses of the truth. For example, there are such things as verbs in the English language. It is true that it doesn't get us very far to say that verbs are words which "express action, being, or state of being," but there are such things as verbs. There may even—though this is not quite so certain—be such things as sentences.

The reader is expected to bring to the book only such information or misinformation as he may have acquired in high school. It will help if he has some notion of the meaning of *noun, verb,*

subject, object, and a few other key terms, but if he does not, he may, as he feels the need, refer to the Glossary, where all terms used in the book are briefly defined and abundantly illustrated. I suspect, indeed, that most users of the book will find it worth while to acquaint themselves from the start with the Glossary and to use it as a means of orientation whenever they feel weighted down by the theory and qualifications necessarily present in the main text. Probably the student will progress most satisfactorily if he first reads a small portion of the text and then works through the corresponding exercises, referring to both text and Glossary as he does so.

Any textbook is the work of many. A specialist happening on this volume will note heavy indebtedness to the works mentioned in the Bibliography, especially to those of Curme, Fries, and Jespersen. I should like to acknowledge my debt to three teachers who worked patiently on my own understanding of grammar: Mr. Harold P. Miller of San Jose State College, and Mr. Phil S. Grant and the late John S. P. Tatlock of the University of California. The manuscript was read by Professors Josephine Miles and Arthur G. Brodeur, of the University of California, and Professors Donald H. Alden and Wesley Goddard, of San Jose State College, all of whom removed from it many blunders; where errors remain, it should be supposed that I ignored their advice. Professor Alden, however, cannot altogether be absolved from responsibility for the book, since his influence is everywhere in it.

P. R.

September, 1953

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1 General Principles

1. The Best Reason for Studying Grammar

The best reason for studying grammar is that grammar is interesting. Most readers will find this statement shocking and absurd. But that is because in their early school days they did not take grammar straight but had it mixed with a number of bitter ingredients. Writers of many elementary grammar books would also, presumably, consider the statement heretical; for in the prefaces to such books we find repeated the remark that grammar, though profitable (it enables us to write powerful and accurate English), is unfortunately not pleasurable. This might be called the medicine approach to grammar: we know it has a frightful taste, but you must take it to get well. Pedagogically, this has two faults: first, it sets the student against the subject; second, it is untrue.

Anyone teaching a subject as a means rather than as an end may expect trouble, especially if the students are immature. Most youngsters are rather less intent on improving themselves than on enjoying themselves. This is disheartening, but we may as well face it. Even college students are reluctant to submit to a stiff discipline in grammar in order to strengthen and brighten their prose styles. Many of them don't give a hang about their prose styles, and many others consider their prose styles regrettable but

hopeless. Consequently, grammar presented as a means, not an end, has no appeal to them.

Happily, it is not very difficult to present grammar as an interesting and desirable end in itself. We all of us wish to know about things; this is merely a consequence of being human. Sometimes we wish to know about impersonal things, like insects or airplanes or atoms. But more often we want to know about things connected with ourselves, and since nothing is more closely connected with ourselves than the language we speak, we want to know about grammar. It is true that in most people this particular curiosity has been throttled by the time high-school days are over, but we all begin with it. It is no harder to interest the student in the way he says things than in, say, Shakespeare, or the Crimean War, or the dank mysteries of zoölogy. Further, it is not especially hard to engage him in the patterns and complexities of a grammatical system. Many elementary teachers have noticed that children like—of all things—diagraming, useless though this activity may be. The only advantage that puzzles and cryptograms have over grammatical problems is that puzzles and cryptograms are not so likely to improve us. For it happens that grammar does have practical value, apart from its intrinsic interest.

2. The Second-Best Reason for Studying Grammar

We can best understand what grammar can do for us by understanding what grammar is. Grammar is a body of generalizations about how people say things. In order to make generalizations, we must first agree on the meaning of terms for the things we wish to talk about. That is grammatical definition.

The first task of the grammarian is to group the words that occur in sentences so that he can talk about them. When he discovers which words naturally go together in groups, he gives the groups names, for convenience of discussion. For example, if he examines the sentences "The apple was ripe," "The car was

old," "The moon was low," he notes that *apple*, *moon*, and *car* are similar words. In other English sentences he finds other words which in form and behavior are similar to *apple*, *moon*, and *car*, and presently it is clear that *apple*, *moon*, and *car* are part of a large group of words. The grammarian then tries to define the group—that is, to state in general terms what it is that the members of the group have in common. The next step is to give the group a name—in this case, the name *noun*. Then, instead of saying, "Words like *apple*, *moon*, and *car* behave such and so," he can say more simply, "Nouns behave such and so."

This paves the way for discussion of language problems. It makes possible the teaching of language. Suppose the problem is whether to use *is* or *are*, *was* or *were* after nouns like *apple*. *apples*, *car*, *cars*. Instead of explaining each detail, each individual sentence as it occurs, the teacher uses a generalization: "In English, plural subjects are commonly followed by plural verbs." If we know what the terms mean, and if we understand that a generalization is just a generalization and not a divine commandment, we have a useful guide to a problem of language.

It should not be supposed, however, that learning generalizations about the detail of a language is the same thing as learning a language. We are not competent in a language until we can use its materials automatically in response to situations, without stopping to ponder the pertinent generalization. The generalization serves merely as a guide during the learning period, checking and correcting us while the details are becoming fixed.

Generally speaking, the student's need of grammatical information is in inverse proportion to his competence in the language. For example, a foreign student beginning the study of English can make use of such a generalization as "In statements the normal word order is subject-verb-object: 'Ed milked the cow.' " The native speaker has less use for the generalization, since it would not occur to him to vary the pattern to "Ed the cow milked" or "Milked Ed the cow." Native speakers, however, can utilize

very simple generalizations when they are trying to change from one dialect to another. For example, the person who habitually says "Him and me milked the cows" learns the generalization, "In Standard English, pronouns used as subject are in the nominative case." Grammatical generalizations are useful also to those seeking skill in writing, for they give a clearer idea of the resources of the language.

Does it follow then that he who uses the language expertly needs no knowledge of grammar? Yes, it does. For ability to use a language does not presuppose ability to describe it. Millions of people who use English very competently cannot describe it at all. In America most children do not study grammar earlier than the seventh grade, when for the first time they encounter such terms as *subject*, *verb*, *singular*, *present*, *passive*. But long before this they have learned how to make subjects and verbs agree, how to form the past tense, how to make singular nouns plural, even how to use dependent clauses and to execute complicated maneuvers with participles and infinitives. The grammar class, when they reach it, does not teach them how to speak but rather how to describe their speech and name the parts thereof. Nor is the child's further progress in language entirely dependent on his learning a technique of description. Some people have skipped the grammar class entirely and gone on to become not only competent but even expert users of the language.

In practice, however, most people do not escape instruction in language. Even professional writers seek the advice and criticism of formal or informal teachers. And instruction in language presupposes knowledge of grammar, since grammar is the means by which teacher and student talk about language.

3. Correct English

This book is based on the conviction that grammar is essential to the teaching of English and that the study of grammar is quite

a lot of fun. But there must be something wrong somewhere—else why are the benefits so debatable and why does the word *grammar* conjure up in so many citizens painful memories of dull and unrewarded drudgery? The answer is partly that grammar is often taught irrationally and partly that it is too easily identified with certain quite different aspects of the English class. Before we can use grammar—indeed, before we can tolerate it—we must separate it from what it is not. To begin with, we must rid ourselves of the urge to equate English grammar with "correct English," and to define "correct English" as the language which all decent, right-thinking people speak.

In the first place, correct English does not exist in any absolute sense. Correct English is English that goes off well in the situation in which it is used. We are told by some handbooks that it is correct to say "Shall you attend the meeting this evening?" and incorrect to say "Will you attend the meeting this evening?" As a matter of fact, there are relatively few situations in which "Shall you attend?" is correct. It is correct if it sounds right to the person being asked, but there aren't very many such persons in twentieth-century America. Most people will feel the form a trifle strange, and if you are talking to them, the sentence is not quite correct. If you are talking about a meeting of, say, the Sailors' Union of the Pacific, "Shall you attend?" is a gross error. In that situation the correct form is "You gonna go?"

We must remember that grammar is a description of how things are said, not of how they should be said. Most English grammars, including this one, describe how things are said by the educated, but of course it would be possible to describe how things are said by the uneducated or by the semieducated. Grammar of the English of college graduates is only one kind of English grammar and not necessarily the most interesting and complicated and puzzling kind. Consequently, grammar books cannot properly tell us, for example, that it is right to say "He doesn't" and wrong to

say "He don't." They can only report that educated people in America commonly say "He doesn't" and avoid "He don't." The student may decide for himself which is correct. If he is trying to pass as an educated person, "He doesn't" is correct. If he wishes to be thought uneducated, "He don't" is correct. If it doesn't matter to him whether he appears educated or not, he may use both forms, thus varying his conversation.

It is of course true that most of the social forces push one toward "He doesn't" and away from "He don't." If you say "He don't," you may be suspected of bad table manners, moral weakness, and subversive activity. Saying "He don't" may cost you a job or a date with a graduate of Bryn Mawr. But it isn't the fault of the grammarian. As a grammarian he feels every bit as amiable toward "He don't" as toward "He doesn't." "He don't" is just as easily understood, just as pretty, and rather more economical of effort, since it consists of only two syllables. People who object to the forces that shove them toward "He doesn't" shouldn't blame the grammarian. He's not shoving.

But obviously they do blame the grammarian, and they blame the English teacher. Any English teacher knows that the quickest way to put the chill on a new acquaintance is to let it be known that he is an English teacher. The new friend will either announce defiantly that *he* was very poor in English or squirm miserably and try to escape before he gets caught saying "He don't" or "Will you attend?"

Because of this common neurosis, we are not likely to get very far with grammar unless we can untangle it from "correct English." We should not study it, *in the first place,* to learn how to speak and write. In the first place we should study it as a description of an interesting and many-sided and often amusing human activity. We should feel its interest as an exercise in logic, as a sharpener of wits. And when it seems to be not logical after all, but of all human activities the most illogical, we should not feel

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