

Why Good Grammar?

The Underground Grammarian

I HAVE been given this assignment: To write on the question, Why good grammar? I have not been explicitly asked to answer the question, however, and for that I am grateful. It is a strange question, after all, something like Why clean hands? And its best answer is really, Well, why not? If there is anything to be proved here, it ought to be left to those who support the cause of “bad grammar”.

The fact that a collection of English teachers can put that question forth as worthy of serious consideration is far more interesting than the question itself, for it suggests that we need desperately to defend the continuance of an enterprise in which we have regularly failed to bring about any noticeable public devotion to what we call “good grammar”. And it conjures up a disquieting image of a colloquium of mining engineers which devotes one of its afternoon sessions to considering the topic: Why would English teachers sit around asking themselves “Why Good Grammar?” Surely they would find more fascination in that question than in “Why Good Arithmetic?”

Behind the current murmuring about the teaching of grammar, and the supposedly related teaching of writing, there seems to be a strange, but not at all unaccountable, misunderstanding. When I hear the plans and pleas of the curriculum coordinators and the language arts facilitators, I get the impression, which I am sure they intend to convey, and which they may actually believe a correct one, that the grammar of the English language is inordinately difficult to learn. They have such elaborate (and expensive) plans for the teaching of it that one might think them engaged in training a whole nation of children as master architects or violin virtuosi. But the learning of grammar is not a difficult and improbable achievement. In fact, there is some sense in pointing out that no one really needs to learn it.

While I often do claim, out of exasperation, to have students who have no native tongue at all, the simple truth is that there is no person on the face of the earth who doesn't know the grammar of his language, for who doesn't would have no language at all. He would be unable to utter anything that we would recognize. Grammar is a strange and as yet unfathomable power to utter, and without any deliberate thought at all, any

sentence or any infinite number of possible sentences.

But that power, of course, is not what the projectors of comprehensive nation-wide intercurricular grammatical renovation have in mind. They must be thinking about things like misplaced modifiers and “between she and I”, and even of pronoun agreement and the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses. And I think they may be wasting their time, and lots of money, some part of which is mine.

Even the “grammar” of conventional rules and regulations is not, in our language, either a large body of information or a particularly difficult one to learn. While serious meditation on the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses will lead to important insights about the philosophy of meaning, the student who would simply like to recognize which is which needs neither the meditation nor the insights. And the same is true of the agreement of subject and verb and the sequence of the tenses, and true, as well, of all those things that so many students seem never to have heard of, after having heard of them over and over again for twenty long years. We ought to be asking ourselves not whether we should persist in the teaching of “good grammar”, and seeking, as it must often seem to the rest of the world, some excuse to abandon the whole futile enterprise, but why it is that we can’t seem to teach such a small body of principles so easy to grasp.

I have encountered (who hasn’t?) governors and college presidents and deans and even guidance counselors, not to mention a few English teachers, who cannot consistently make their pronouns agree with their antecedents or punctuate non-restrictive clauses. Their defense of such lapses is an interesting one; on the one hand, it has some merit, but only if we grant the implicit assumption that “language is communication”, which we ought to be careful not to do. On the other hand, it is an inadvertent self-condemnation, admitting to a lapse somewhat more serious than an ill-chosen pronoun. They say, “Well, you knew what I meant, didn’t you?” And I did. But I also know where they had been, or, to put it more accurately, where they hadn’t been.

In any mouth or pen, grammatical habits, especially those more important to writing than to speech, present a miniature character sketch or autobiography. Many of the attributes therein revealed are personal, and some collective, social, or even ethnic, and, strictly speaking, none of a teacher’s business, and that is so whether the unwitting

autobiographer is the student I am supposed to teach or the academic vice-president who is supposed to be more academic than I. Most of those little gaucheries and solecisms that make us think that we ought to teach more grammar are only the habits of a mind in a certain condition, a condition to whose cure all of us have supposedly chosen to devote our lives.

I know of no specific name for the condition I have in mind, and I find it hard to describe. Although it is a kind of thoughtlessness, or unknowing, it is not truly what we usually mean by ignorance—the simple lack of information. Nor is it dullness of mind, or stupidity, whatever we might mean by that. It is that condition in which the mind takes but little, or takes but rarely, the grasp of itself. Although it isn't necessarily caused or perpetuated by a lack of reading, or cured, either, by a glut of reading, it is nevertheless the condition to which we seem vaguely to point when we sit around and complain that our students seem never to have read anything.

While I would not want to make a habit of it, I will for now call that condition “inducation”, the state of being led into something, rather than out of it, as “education” suggests. But even that idea is not quite enough, for the condition I have in mind is not accurately described as one into which we are led, but one in which we are left, and out of which we might be led. In its purest form, it is the condition in which the mind operates like an organ of the senses, thinking what it must think in response to the suggestions of its environment, as the ear hears whatever it can hear and the open eye must see whatever lies before it.

As Holmes often remarked to Watson, it is not at all uncommon for the eye to see without noticing, and when the mind works like an organ of the senses, it is to be expected that it will do the same, which can perhaps be described as thinking without thinking about, without considering, reflecting, comparing, weighing, or judging. It is the condition in which the mind serves as a registry, a perpetual catalog of whatever presents itself. That condition is not only one in which we are born, but one into which we fall continually, and into which, it must be admitted, we had better fall in the ordinary course of daily life, lest we find ourselves walking into closed doors and driving our cars on the other side of the road.

Consider now the opposite condition, the one in which the mind, still the hapless

receiver of the world about it, can nevertheless withdraw far enough so that it can, and will, consider, reflect, compare, weigh, and judge—comment, as it were, on the items in its register. How are those acts performed? What evidence have we, and what evidence can we provide, either of their existence or their conclusions? The form in which they exist, and the only form in which they can exist, is language, nothing but language. They are acts of language, which are to the mind what motion is to the body.

One who considers is in fact talking in himself and with himself, and one who does not consider but receives only is reciting what is really a kind of list, a list of the names of the items that appear in the world. To that list he may well add the names of items associated with those presently visible, but the act of the mind that he does not commit is the act we call, in what is truly a grammatical distinction, “predication”. And thus for the reciter, any kind of language will do, for the outer reality that it names is what it is no matter what the reciter calls it, and that he calls it something in its presence is sufficient. For the considerer, the outer reality engenders a statement that is not the reality itself, but a statement about it, a predication. And that statement brings forth statements about the statement.

There is another way to understand the reciter’s condition: in his case, language really is communication. His inward words correspond to the world outside—whether accurately or not, it doesn’t matter. It is he alone who needs to be satisfied with the correspondence. And should he, someday, find himself not satisfied and impelled to be satisfied, he will have to move to another floor of the mind, as it were, and make statements about his statements. Then, grammar will become important to him, although he is very unlikely to say, “Aha! I now see that grammar is important.”

An example: as a child in school, I was not baffled by subordinating conjunctions, but that was only because I was totally indifferent to subordinating conjunctions. I knew what the book said about them, and I could answer the teacher’s questions about them in the terms of the book, and that was all I needed to do. It satisfied the teacher. But to be baffled, one must be interested, and to be interested in subordinating conjunctions, a condition that seems especially dismal but, fortunately, remarkably unlikely, requires first an interest in subordination itself.

But an interest in subordination is not unlikely, not, at least, in a mind that has

discovered certain of its powers. Subordination is the root of logic, which is itself a grammatical art, the consideration of the just relation of one statement to another, and logical fallacies are errors of grammar—a confusion, for example, as to whether two statements can be related as “if” implies or as “because” implies. Some minds, at some point, discover that they cannot make sense of their own predications without attention to grammar, although they do not ordinarily think of what they are doing as an exercise in grammar.

If they don’t, that is our fault. We teach grammar, depending on our factions, either as a ticket of admission to “culture”, or a marketable skill serving to provide industry with plenty of communicators. Some of us would rather not teach it at all, seeing in it just another penchant of the “dominant class”. And in almost all cases, we are vainly trying to teach it as what it is not, a catalogue of rules and regulations, to the wrong people at the wrong time, to unawakened children, of many ages, whose minds have not begun to want any grasp of themselves. For them, and their registers, communication is enough, and they are, for their own purposes, quite right in saying, just as all those unawakened deans and presidents and guidance counselors say, “Well, you knew what I meant, didn’t you?”

And, just like the deans, and presidents, and guidance counselors, the children in our classes are as they are because their minds have not yet wandered or lingered in the right place, in that place where the mind does its most important work through the consideration and manipulation of language. Thus it is that even the most elementary facts of English grammar seem to them arbitrary. It is for the sake of the work of the mind that a pronoun “agrees” with its antecedent, however far away; it echoes and reasserts one relationship of ideas rather than another. But for him for whom the naming of ideas is enough, that curious “agreement” seems finicky, a strange notion of schoolteachers, and an unnecessary complication of a very simple and straightforward process—communication.

We are at least partly right when we sense that students, just like the deans and presidents and guidance counselors, seem never to have read anything. That isn’t true, of course; they have read a lot, but they are in the habit of reading (in both cases) texts carefully chosen not to disrupt the mind as a sense organ. Ambiguity, irony, and wit, to say nothing of deliberate pondering and metaphoric analogy, are not common either in

the texts exchanged by managers or in those by which children are taught to “read”. For it is not truly reading that they are taught; it is the receiving of communication. We do this in the strange belief that they ought not to have to suffer perplexity, but it is only as the mind notices its perplexity, and suffers—for the noticing is not by itself enough—that it begins to move from recitation to consideration, to taking some grasp of itself.

We have formed the habit of teaching “good grammar” as though it were a prerequisite for other powers, especially for good writing and clear thinking. In fact, though, those powers are really one—the power of the mind to consider itself and its own works. Writers do not write grammar any more than readers read grammar. Both, unless they are mere reciters and receivers of communications, do the work of the mind in grammar, for that work can be done in no other medium. And the knowledge and understanding of the rules and conventions of grammar come most readily to one whose mind is already using them. Before we can bring our students to remember, and enforce upon themselves, those rules and conventions, we will have to bring them to need them, and to know that they need them.

“Good grammar”, in the fullest sense of the term, is neither an embellishment nor an accessory to anything else. It is the Law by which meaning is found and made. It may be, of course, that a good “education” ought to provide something more, but it is preposterous, perhaps even wicked, to suggest that it can be had with anything less.