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Belated Thoughts on ENGLISH GRAMMAR

By Prof. J. Y. T. GREIG

A FRAGMENT of dialogue that occurred in a lecture-room on the other side of the world has stuck in my memory when countless more important incidents have dropped out and are lost for ever. I happened to say: "Now when we come to consider the verbs—" But I got no farther; for a student, somewhat bolder than the others, perhaps, interrupted with an apology, saying: "I'm sorry, Mr.— ... Mr.— ..."—a neighbour prompted him with my name—"but would you mind telling me what a *verb* is?"

I have no reason to believe that the student was just being difficult, or wished to create a diversion. He really didn't know what a verb was; he had never been taught any grammar at school under the heading of "English", and apparently he had escaped, I don't know how, having to learn any foreign language. I never saw him again after that morning, but I gathered that he earned plenty of money in a freezing-works.

Admittedly, the boys and girls who managed to pass through high schools in that country without *any* study of grammar, either under the heading of English or under that of French or Latin, were not very numerous. But they did exist here and there. And a fair number "got by", as the Americans say, with a minimum of information.

A much greater proportion of students, however, in England, America, South Africa and New Zealand with whom I have come in contact have had a fairly good grounding in grammar. You may safely say that they will recognise a verb when they see one; and that is something that a university teacher can be thankful for. But their tendency will be to expect English verbs to behave in much the same way as Latin ones; and though this expectation of theirs will not be seriously disappointed when they are studying *Old* English, the same students may be a little disconcerted when they try to fit the verbs of Modern English into the grammatical categories that serve for Latin.

I know that there has been a great deal of argument and disagreement in English-speaking countries about the teaching of formal grammar; I took a hand in this from time to time when the occasion served, and have no wish to repeat myself in *Symposium*. I will only say that though I don't believe the teaching of formal grammar to children below the age of 12 or 13 has much, if any, good effect on their manner of speaking and writing their own language, I do very firmly believe that teaching it to older pupils, especially after they have begun to ask *why*, does lead in most of them to a marked improvement in their spoken and written English. We all know that we cannot learn to speak a foreign language fluently merely by building up a large vocabulary of words and memorising grammatical rules; but any of us who by other means have learnt to speak one or more foreign languages fluently will agree that to go farther than this, to learn to *write* a foreign language accurately and with reasonable grace, it is essential to gain a pretty good knowledge of the grammar. I would say it is the same with the mother tongue. Each of us learnt his mother tongue by speaking and listening to it; but I will venture to affirm that in order to speak and write it with the accuracy, clarity, and economy that are very properly expected from educated men and women, some mastery of the grammar of the mother tongue is essential. Everyone can speak it after a fashion without knowing anything about its grammar, without even, like the no doubt worthy student I quoted, knowing what a verb is; everyone can write it simply and haltingly with the same limited knowledge; but with no more than this limited knowledge no one will speak it without falling into occasional blunders indicating illiteracy. Take fifty of the essays handed in to the English Departments of the various branches of the University of New Zealand—which, remember, is not bedevilled by bilingualism. Most of the writers have had a full high-school course in New Zealand, and have either been accredited while at school or been successful in the University Entrance Examination; a few more mature in age, have not had so much

J. Y. T. Greig will be remembered by many readers as Professor of English at the University of the Witwatersrand. Thereafter he took the Chair at a New Zealand University College, but returned recently to settle near Grahamstown, where he continues to keep touch with academic life. At one time a strong supporter of the Leavis school, he himself wrote a short book for First-year Students involving the analytical method and set in Socratic dialogue—a feat that did not, however, prove ominous. Apart from a fine study of Thackeray, Professor Greig was the author of "Breaking Priscian's Head".

formal education but have been allowed provisional entry in the hope, often justified in the sequel, that they will prove no worse students than the others. Of these fifty essays, picked at random from, say, three or four hundred, it is pretty certain that about half will be disfigured by errors in composition—stupid misspellings, misleading punctuation or virtually none at all, juvenile grammatical blunders (such as singular verbs with plural subjects), and more complicated grammatical failures through mismanagement of subordinate clauses. I will not say that each will contain all these errors. I will only say that each will contain some of them—more than can be reckoned as mere slips of the pen.

Now, as it happens, I have taught university students in England, America, South Africa and New Zealand, and although no man's memory is to be wholly trusted over forty-odd years, I can at least hazard comparisons. I would say that the standard of first-year or freshman writing in the University of New Zealand is very little, if any, lower than that of corresponding students in the provincial universities of England; that it is certainly rather higher than one finds in English-speaking universities in South Africa; and that it is a good deal higher than in any except, let us say, the top ten or a dozen universities in the United States.

Like other Scotsmen, I used to be puffed up about the ability of the Scottish undergraduate to write English. But recent information has shaken my complacency.

I would make no extravagant claims for the grammatical teaching I was given in my youth. Much of it was misleading, and a good deal of it was sheer waste of time. It may very likely have made our writing duller than it would have been if the red pencil had been permanently mislaid. Learning grammar by means of jingles has something to be said for it, but in the end we forget even the jingles. Learning grammar won't teach anyone how to write a significant poem, play, or novel, if he has the capacity to do so; and, after all, there are plenty of dull folk to put in the hyphens and semi-colons. It has always been a comforting thought to me that, however stupid I may prove to be, and however unenlightened the regulations of the college or university that pays me to vent my stupidity on the young, I cannot really do much harm to the best of them. They'll get by, as the Americans say, in spite of me and my colleagues.

One has only to read the detailed biographies of outstanding men of letters in English-speaking countries to realise how often the formal teaching they received at school and college contributed very little towards making them remarkable writers of verse or prose. Sometimes this is quoted against the school or college. It shouldn't be. A school or college should be judged, not by what it does or fails to do for the 2 or 3 per cent. of brilliant pupils at the top, or for the 15 or 20 per cent. of weak pupils at the bottom, but by what it does or fails to do for the run-of-the-mill pupils, the 75 or 80 per cent. in the middle grades. It is for these that I am convinced some teaching of sensible English grammar is essential.

Before I try to indicate what constitutes *sensible* English grammar, let me say a word about when this teaching may profitably start. I have discussed this a good many times at conferences of primary-school and secondary-school teachers in South Africa; and have come up against sharp disagreement on many occasions. There is always a tendency, among hard-pressed teachers, to insist that it's "the other fellow's job". Many high-school teachers would be glad to have the teaching of English grammar polished off in the primary school; many primary-school teachers think it should be postponed until the high school; and at one joint conference of primary-school, secondary-school, and university teachers of English that my Department in Johannesburg called, a batch of teachers maintained that if any grammar at all had to be taught it ought to be undertaken in the university. I took them at their word; and for the next three years incorporated an 8-weeks' course on Theory of English Grammar for 2nd-year students of English. Oddly enough, some of the students seemed to be interested.

You may remember that it was the custom at the end of the 17th century, and early in the 18th, for English men of letters to depreciate the language they wrote in. "We have no prosodia," said Dryden in 1693, "not so much as a tolerable dictionary, or a grammar, so that our language is in a manner barbarous." And he confessed that he often did not know how to express some thought of his until he first translated it into Latin and then translated it back into English. Jonathan Swift held that English was very defective in grammar. The grammar of Latin was almost universally held up as the model for English, not only in the 18th century, but also very often in the first half of the 19th.

The most notable dissident was William Hazlitt, that voluminous and sharp-tongued essayist contemporary with Coleridge, Lamb, and de Quincey. In 1809 Hazlitt published a small volume entitled *A New and Improved Grammar of the English Tongue*. The author meant it to be used in schools, but it did not catch the attention of the public. Publishers who have issued orthodox text-books for schools are often reluctant to take a chance on unorthodox text-books. A certain distinguished French linguist remarked of the grammatical text-books used in French schools: "Whoever has read one has read the lot, and all are worthless."

A few sentences from Hazlitt's preface to his *New and Improved Grammar* are relevant even today:

> The common method of teaching English grammar by transferring the artificial rules of other languages to our own, not only occasions much unnecessary trouble and perplexity; but by loading the memory with mere technical formalities, accustoms the mind to one of the worst habits that can be—that of mistaking words for things, and of admitting a distinction without a difference. ... In this respect the French seem to have much the advantage of us; as their grammars are, generally speaking, real descriptions of their language, not a fanciful and laboured account of what has nowhere any existence.

Nearly twenty years later, in Hazlitt's collection of essays entitled *The Spirit of the Age*, he delivered another attack on the firmly established English grammarians, and, in particular, Lindley Murray, whose work remained throughout most of the 19th century standard but pernicious. Listen to Hazlitt on Lindley Murray:

> He defines a noun to the the name of a thing. Is *quackery* a thing, i.e. a substance? He defines a verb to be a word signifying *to be, to do,* or *to suffer*. Are *being, action, suffering* verbs? He defines an adjective to be the name of a quality. Are not *wooden, golden, substantial* adjectives? He maintains that there are six cases in English nouns, that is, six various terminations without any change of termination at all (at least with only one change in the genitive case), and that English verbs have all the moods, tenses and persons that the Latin ones have. This is an extraordinary stretch of blindness and obstinacy.

Will those of you who have been called upon at one time or another to teach English grammar, and have made use of a text-book prepared for schools, cast your minds back and try to recall how many of these grammatical follies in Lindley Murray (who published his book in 1795, remember) survived in the 20th-century text-book that you were required to use when you were at school. All of you, I hope, know and value *Modern English Usage*, that delightful book by the late H. W. Fowler—so free from pedantry as to be *nearly* unique among books on language. But, just because it is so free from pedantry, Fowler's occasional lapses stick in the memory. One of these occurred when he spoke of "case visible and case invisible". It is "case invisible" in English nouns that Hazlitt very properly denied. Case invisible is case non-existent.

For our purposes as grammarians we have to assume that what is talked about is independent of the process of talking; or, to put it in another way, that patterns of meaning are outside or beyond patterns of language, and remain unaffected by them. There are philosophical and psychological difficulties about this assumption, I know; but for grammatical study I think it is harmless and necessary. If I see a motor-car travelling at high speed and remark to a companion at the road-side: "That fellow's doing 80 or more," the car, its driver, the road, the dotted white line, the lorry coming in the opposite direction, and so on and so on, make up what we may call a pattern of meaning, and this pattern is not in the least affected by my pattern of language when I comment on the incident.

Language, the sole function of which is to express, convey or communicate patterns of meaning, has its own patterns. They are infinitely less varied than the patterns that may be talked about. They are of two sorts: patterns of sound and patterns of structure. The grammarian's main (and perhaps only) concern is with patterns of structure.

Grammar is to language what the science of anatomy is to the human body—the study of its structure. The science of physiology, on the other hand, is chiefly interested in what these bits of structure do. Corresponding to these two biological sciences, we have, in linguistics, the branch of study known as grammar, which is the study of form in relation to function, and the branch known as semantics, which is the study of function in relation to form.

The difference between grammar and semantics really lies in the point of departure. Just as in anatomy the medical student dissects out a certain muscle, in order to discover what it looks like and where it goes, so, in grammar, we dissect out a certain pattern of words occurring in a context, label it, show the inter-relation of its parts, and classify it as one of the patterns for asking a question. Unless form is constantly related to function, the thing as it is, constantly related to what it does, the study of form is of little value. It is not enough to say that a certain grammatical pattern is right. We must know what it is right for.

You may say that this is so obvious that it does not need the emphasis I am putting on it. Well, I may have been unlucky. In my childhood I was forced to learn a great deal about English grammar without ever being invited to hear what it was all for; and, not very many years ago, I have had to listen to grammar lessons of the same dreary and useless character. I think the lowest point was reached only a few years ago—and I won't say whether it was in South Africa, America, or New Zealand—when I heard a teacher talking to children of ten years of age all about abstract nouns.