

THE ONLY DISTURBING FEATURE...

by

R. J. HARRIS

Deputy Headmaster, Woodberry Down School

Clause analysis was generally well done by those who attempted it. . . . The only disturbing feature was that students who obtained high marks for analysis sometimes displayed, in their essays or précis, inability to construct a correct sentence. . . . (from the Examiners' Report on the General Certificate of Education, 'O' level, Summer 1962).

IN *The Reader over your Shoulder*, a horrible but fascinating book with the same sort of attraction as the *News of the World* (it is strewn with the corpses of writers) the authors, Graves and Hodge, list twenty-five categories in which they tabulate the principles of clear statement. They then criticise, by applying these principles, passages from the work of such writers as T. S. Eliot, Dr. Leavis, Eric Partridge, Sir Arthur Eddington, C. Day Lewis, and Helen Waddell, and it is distressing to find that twenty lines from any of them will usually produce twenty errors. Yet these are not grammatical errors in the sense given to this term by our school texts. They are more serious. They are errors in the expression of thought, possibly in thought itself. I think we may assume that all the writers quoted by Graves and Hodge are well versed in English grammar. Do we in teaching English pay too much attention to our pupils' ignorance of grammar, and too little to their errors of thought which may be at least as numerous, and more gross, than those noted in *The Reader over your Shoulder*?

The English grammar that we teach in more or less adulterated form, the grammar of Nesfield and Sonnenschein, has for years been regarded with scepticism by some linguists and teachers. The objections to it are both pedagogic and academic. It has been said, for example, that the syllabus includes too much material, presented often in such a way that the important and unimportant points are undifferentiated. Only the brightest children manage to learn it, and then not safely—the 1962 Examiners' Report mentions that less than half the candidates recognised that 'sincere' was an adjective. Transfer between knowledge of formal grammar and other skills, or correlation between it and other branches of English, is very slight. The traditional terminology is not a grammar of modern English, for it is still

closely tied to Latin formulations, and ignores such important signals of structure as intonation and stress and the other apparatus of spoken idiomatic English. Its use of very detailed classifications distracts the student's attention from the larger contextual units; and the details are often illogical, imprecise, and arbitrary, with criteria not consistently applied, as when we see nouns and verbs defined semantically, but prepositions functionally. Formal grammar as we know it in class is thus isolated from life and from language behaviour, and from language skills also. Evidence on such points is readily available. Discussion of the linguistic objections to formal grammar, and of the possible forms of a more accurate English grammar, may be found in the writings of Fries, Quirk, Strang, Mittins, and Gurrey; and good summaries of the evidence for the pedagogic objections exist in the *Encyclopaedia of Educational Research*, in Lyman, and in other work mentioned below. In view of the weight and the long standing of these objections to traditional grammar, and of the accessibility of the evidence, it is surprising that conscientious teachers should continue to use its material in the classroom.

However, it is difficult to believe, and as difficult again to admit, that a course of action that one has followed for a long time has in reality been largely mistaken, and this difficulty may account for the continued presence of instruction in an extensive grammatical terminology in the English syllabus at most schools. Whether this terminology is taught parrot-fashion, purely formally, or as what is called 'functional' grammar makes, I believe, very little difference to the amount of time wasted. What is certain is that most text-books establish only the weakest links between their terms of grammar and the practical business of writing one's native language.

With these considerations in mind, practising teachers may value some recent evidence as to the value or otherwise of teaching English grammatical terms to children. This evidence was obtained in an enquiry into this matter as it affects the correctness of children's writing in the early years at the Secondary School.

A start was made by asking for the co-operation of a number of schools in a long-term experiment. Five were able to take part, but more were approached. In the discussion it was found that far from being a precise and clear subject, formal grammar seemed to mean different things to different people. What it means is usually the first question with which the would-be experimentalist is challenged, although it is the last he can get answered. Nevertheless, most teachers taught the names of the parts of speech, subject and predicate, and certain extensions of these, by one method or another, in the expectation of using this knowledge in correcting or improving written work.

Next, a number of essays written by children of ten and of fifteen years of

age were analysed to ascertain the structural differences that existed between the work of young and of older children. Many appeared, but only those which were clear, measurable and definite were assumed to be indications of maturation, and were to serve as measuring instruments in the experiment.

The five schools were asked to run an English course for two years and for two forms as nearly parallel as possible. One form, however, had each week one lesson in formal grammar, whose terms were used in discussing written work, whereas the other form had no English grammar lesson at all. Naturally, influences existed which can obscure the effect of this distinction, and results of such an experiment can have no very precise scientific exactitude. Nevertheless, the difference between the work done by forms was large and simple, and could be expected to show an end in favour of or against formal grammar as taught in two liberal and progressive grammar schools, one equally adventurous secondary modern school, and the technical streams of two comprehensive schools. In four of the five schools, the pair of forms was taught by one teacher. All the children wrote an essay. Then for nearly two academic years they worked at their courses. Finally, they wrote another essay on the same topic as their first. The two essays were then compared, using the measuring instruments obtained from the early work of the ten and fifteen-year-old children.

The instruments were eleven in number, and were based on a count of the following scores:

- (a) total correct sentences
- (b) average number of words to each common error
- (c) number of different sentence patterns
- (d) number of subordinate clauses
- (e) number of correct complex sentences
- (f) instances of the omission of the full stop
- (g) number of simple sentences with two or more modifying phrases
- (h) correct non-simple minus correct simple sentences
- (i) number of adjectival clauses and phrases
- (j) average length of correct simple sentences
- (k) total words written

Many other counts were made of the original essays, but those listed above gave the clearest evidence of change. The 'common errors' used were such as the omission of a period, or of a comma in items in a list; lack of agreement between verb and subject, or failure to give a finite verb to a clause; faulty sequence of tenses; unrelated participles; the use of adjective or preposition as adverb; failure to give a pronoun a clear antecedent—all of these were errors evident in the original essays. The order of reliability of the measuring

instruments is that in which they are listed above. The first five are statistically very reliable; the next four are fairly reliable; the last two are not in themselves reliable, but when taken with the other nine contribute something to the general picture.

Thus there were eleven measurements in each of five schools—fifty-five in all. In the most reliable twenty-five, significantly better scores, in which the critical ratio exceeded 3.0, were made by the forms not taking grammar than by the forms taking it. The latter scored no successes of this degree. Of the less reliable measures, non-grammar forms held a significant advantage in one, grammar forms in none. The ten important scores reaching significance in a reliable measure were:

1. In the number of words per common error. Three forms, from Grammar, Technical, and Secondary Modern schools gained here.
2. In the variety of sentence patterns used. There were two gains here, in a Grammar and a Modern school; but if a level of significance of 2+ is considered, the two non-grammar forms from the Technical schools could be included.
3. In the number of correct complex sentences used. Four gains were made by the non-grammar forms, from a Grammar, a Secondary Modern, and the two Technical schools.
4. In the total number of correct sentences written. Here, one Technical school scored, and if the 2+ level of significance is included, a Grammar and a Technical school in addition.

The other significant gain by a non-grammar form was in the total words written, the form being from a grammar school. Both non-grammar forms from grammar schools gained here if the 2+ level is included.

These gains by the non-grammar forms cover a wide field. Mechanical, conventional correctness—as in the number of words per common error; maturity of style—as in the variety of sentence patterns used; the control of complex relationships—as in the number of correct complex sentences; as well as general overall correctness, seen in the total number of correct sentences, were all improved significantly in groups practising direct writing-skills as compared with groups studying formal grammar. It should be noted also that the gains were made in all three types of school.

Further evidence for the inadequacy of grammatical instruction to produce advantageous changes was found in scores made by all pupils in the counts of individual errors of common occurrence. The five commonest errors—omission of the full stop; faulty use or omission of the comma in lists, apposition and non-defining clauses; lack of a clear antecedent for pronouns; misuse of prepositions or conjunctions; lack of a finite verb in a sentence—yielded twenty-five comparisons. Of these, twenty showed an advantage to

the non-grammar forms, of which five were significant, with a *t*. ratio exceeding 3.0. No significant gains were made by the grammar forms. And yet the non-grammar pupils might have been expected to make more mistakes than did the grammar pupils, for they wrote more clauses, wrote at greater total length, and used more sentences even than the top third of the grammar pupils.

It seems safe to infer that the study of English grammatical terminology had a negligible or even a relatively harmful effect upon the correctness of children's writing in the early part of the five secondary schools. That significant gains were made by forms not studying grammar need occasion very little surprise when one considers that an extra writing period in place of grammar must almost double the time given each week to actual written work in class, despite the theoretical—and highly dubitable—economy in correction afforded by the teacher's use of grammatical terms.

Previous experimental evidence has shown that traditional grammar is unteachable to the point of serious application, certainly to all but the cleverest children. It has been clearly established that there is no greater correlation between grammatical knowledge and English skills than between two totally unrelated subjects—indeed, correlations between say Arithmetic and Grammar are often higher than those between grammar and composition. Modern linguists have cast serious doubt upon the logical coherence and descriptive accuracy of the traditional terms. And finally, the work just described tends to show that grammar gives no direct aid to children's writing skills.

Have we in fact been wasting a quarter to a fifth of our English teaching time, and are we still doing so? If the value of grammar as an instrument in helping children to write correctly is abandoned, is the rest worth while? We have either to rebut the evidence, or to show that it has been misinterpreted, or to accept its verdict. Or, of course, we can ignore it, and plead examinations. We can escape into the comforting belief that we teach grammar much more effectively than the people in all the experiments. We can fall back on the study of grammar for its own sake—as a pure science. A pure science (and traditional grammar may well rank as one, with astrology), has a fascination of its own. A grammatical fact is no less worthy of dignity than any other. We grammarians are left free to chase our definitions and functions just for the sake of catching them, and not for food. We are surrounded by a universe of facts, and we choose to remember that 'the' and 'a' always accompany nouns (with a few exceptions, of course—the fewer the better). This, as between consenting adults, is no harm—but are we right to teach these things to children? Choose, as the examiners sternly say, and justify your choice!

I would add just one point for the consideration of those teachers who feel

that in the upper forms of a school, at least, formal analysis should have a clearer influence for good. This sentiment may be founded in the idea that until the stage is reached at which pupils can through clause-analysis be conscious of the grammatical structure of complex sentences, little apparent relationship can be expected between knowledge of grammar and written correctness. To test this possibility, the writer took about seven hundred G.C.E. 'O'-level scripts, in 285 of which the candidates had attempted the clause-analysis question. On the whole, the answers to this question were well done. Scores made were correlated with those made by the same candidates on a combination of the other three questions—essay, précis, and comprehension. The correlation ($r = +0.365 \pm 0.022$) suggested that there was only a weak tie between success or failure in analysis and in the rest of the paper.

The sixth form, after all, seems the most profitable place to study grammar—to argue about our present inheritance, or even better, about the new description of the actual structure of our language which surely we school teachers live in hope of receiving from the universities in the not-too-distant future. The only disturbing feature is that at sixth-form level we cease to study grammar.

Teachers interested or whose conscience is stirred to inquire more deeply into the other disturbing features of grammar may care to consult the following works of reference:

- (a) On the unteachability of grammar: *The Difficulty of English Grammar*, W. J. Macaulay; *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, XVII, 1947, pp. 153-162; and also F. Cawley's article on same theme in Vol. 28, June 1958, pp. 174-176.
- (b) For a general summary of doubts thrown by experimental work up to 1929, a most important source of information is *Summary of Investigations Relating to Grammar, Language and Composition*, R. L. Lyman; *Supplementary Educational Monographs*, No. 36, Univ. of Chicago, 1929; *Encyclopaedia of Educational Research*, Macmillan (New York), pp. 383-396, 1950 edition, article on English Language etc. by H. A. Greene.
- (c) For further detail on the work discussed in this article, see *An Experimental Inquiry into the Function and Value of Formal Grammar in the Teaching of English*, R. J. Harris, Ph.D. thesis, London, 1962.
- (d) On a new approach to grammar, see for example, *Modern English Structure*, B. Strang (E. Arnold).