

## A Grammar of Situation

by R. J. Harris

### Some suggestions for the treatment of the study of language intended to replace the traditional instruction in formal grammar in school<sup>1</sup>

The teacher's best approach to language in the English lesson is by the control/response situation. In what follows, I hope to outline the material which I feel should be covered in a language course before the O-level G. C. E. examination.

It is not enough to study English in isolation from the topic of language in general. I do not mean that children should be set to chase the will o' the wisp of a universal grammar by comparing the grammatical structures of English, French, Latin, and so, but that they should be asked to think about the nature of the instrument which is language:

The study of language is only too often regarded as being a matter of examining such things as pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure... but, as we all know from everyday experience, learning language is not simply a matter of learning words: it is a matter of correctly relating our words to the things and happenings for which they stand, and begins properly with a study of what language is about.

I have quoted here from S. J. Hayakawa's book *Language in Thought and Action* (Allen & Unwin, 1952) to which I am indebted for many of the ideas that follow.

#### A. Material for the study of language in general

A language is a system of agreed signals, the most complicated and adaptable of such systems that human beings use. Although other systems may have advantages on particular occasions, the limitations of gesture, flags, lights, smoke, notched sticks, knotted ropes, whistles, and drums, are very severe. All, compared with speech, are inflexible, limited in the range of meanings they can carry, and in the relationships they can represent. Language has to be a system; a few code sounds invented by a schoolboy are not language. It has to be intended to convey meaning to someone else, to be a signal: totally private symbols are hardly a language. And it has to be agreed, that is, to have at least two participants; for without this prior agreement, communication is not possible; the signals will not work.

Since everyone recognizes the value of international understanding, children might be asked to think why Esperanto and similar structures do not flourish – perhaps belonging everywhere the artificial language belongs nowhere. A really successful language must therefore have not only a good system of agreed signals, but must have also the deeply involved personal concern of its speakers.

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<sup>1</sup> *Appendix 4 to An Experimental Enquiry into the Functions and Value of Formal Grammar in the Teaching of English, with Special Reference to the Teaching of Correct Written English to Children aged Twelve to Fourteen (PhD thesis, University of London, 1962)* Click link below:

[http://www.harris-meltzer-trust.org.uk/pdfs/Harris\\_Grammar\\_Experiment.pdf](http://www.harris-meltzer-trust.org.uk/pdfs/Harris_Grammar_Experiment.pdf)

Real language (as distinct from mere exclamations) is the means and expression of human co-operativeness. Through language, by becoming less individual we become more ourselves; we give up some of our differences to gather what is valuable to each of us from the similarities between us. It is not difficult to demonstrate to children the limitations of their own, or of one's own knowledge, experience, and skill, and then to show how books and speech can enlarge for them the world to which they can respond. Our nerve endings finish where language falls silent.

Children like to speculate about the origin of speech, and their guesses may be very similar to the common theories – what Partridge calls the bow-wow, the pooh-pooh, the ding-dong, and the ho-ho-ho theories of origin. Whatever theory they arrive at, it is not hard to show that agreement about the denotation of the sounds, or that imitation which is natural agreement, is essential to the establishing of effective language. Influenced maybe by the order of chapters in courses of English, they may hazard a guess that the first words were names of things. However, in watching infants one may notice that a relatively complex situation is among the primary names on occasion. “Bye-bye”, the first recognizable word that my elder daughter spoke, meant roughly “I see that you are going and I am filled with desolation, anger, fear.” Children can learn much from trying to write down what other children say.

Speculation and observation of this sort should lead to an examination of some of the assumptions that we make about language, and of the process such as symbolization and abstraction that enable language to work smoothly or not at all. It may seem that such a discussion is above the heads of children.

But provided clear examples are chosen, and provided pupils are asked to think out like instances for themselves, no difficulty arises that is not well repaid by results, if only by the realization that “human fitness to survive means the ability to talk and write and listen and read in ways that increase the chances for each of us and fellow members of our species to survive together.” Two assumptions that need deliberate investigation are: that there is an identity between words and the things they denote; and that words and ideas can be set in order without the intervention of words or symbols. The former assumption is dangerous because it leads to a confusion of fantasy and reality; the latter because it relieves anyone making it of the necessity to set his words in order.

Human beings can by agreement make anything stand for anything. But children will often feel that there is an inherent connection between the object and the symbol. Piaget gives an example in his book *The Child's Conception of the World*: “Could the sun have been called moon and the moon sun? – No – Why not? – Because the sun shines brighter than the moon. – But if everyone had called the sun moon and the moon sun, would we have known it was wrong? – Yes, because the sun is always bigger. – Yes, but the sun isn't changed, only its name. Couldn't it have been called ... etc. – No, because the moon rises in the evening and the sun in the day. As they grow, children become enslaved to the power of the symbol, in advertisement, propaganda, education.

As there is a break between language and reality, so also there is a positive relationship, and we can tell truth only when our language conforms to that relationship. We don't see things exactly as they are, but abstract a few general resemblances between one and another. It is this which makes general thought and calculation practicable. Hayakawa uses an “abstraction ladder” to illustrate this process:

wealth  
 asset  
 farm asset  
 livestock  
 cow  
 “Bessie”  
 the cow we see

More and more of the perceived and individual characteristics are left out as the degree of abstraction increases.

Abstractions are useful as we recognize them for what they are – things remote from the extensional or real object. If we forget this, false judgements, prejudices, rumour, may spread from our omission.

We may use emotionally charged words, such as Russian, chorus-girl, teddy-boy, Jew, nigger, in a hostile generalization, forgetting that each of these abstractions is only one of a thousand that may be applied to a particular individual. Children in this way will often think in terms of good/bad, hero/villain, and so lapse from reality. Even expert grammarians may fall into the same error – as when Eric Partridge, following Jespersen, talks of English as “manly and vigorous, masculine, virile”, on the basis of such remarks as that “The Englishman does not like more words than are necessary ... or to comomit himself to being too enthusiastic”.

So much can and should be said before bringing the children to English as a particular example of language..

## B. Study of English language

### 1. *The spread of the language*

Some knowledge of the geographical spread of English and of its historical development check parochialism and intolerance in children. Evidently, it is unlikely that the 50 million population of Great Britain can expect to be the only arbiters of language for a tongue spoken by about 350 million people. This wide spread sharpens the need for standardization and simplification of forms: some regularisations are still mere vulgarisms, but others are continually becoming established. “The bird flew out the window” may now be commonly heard, on the analogy of “in”; and the blurring of distinctions as between “shall” and “will” is part of the cost of exporting and universalizing a language.

Just saying “no” is vain: Partridge writes that the form “don’t” is “no longer permissible”, for example.

### 2. *History.*

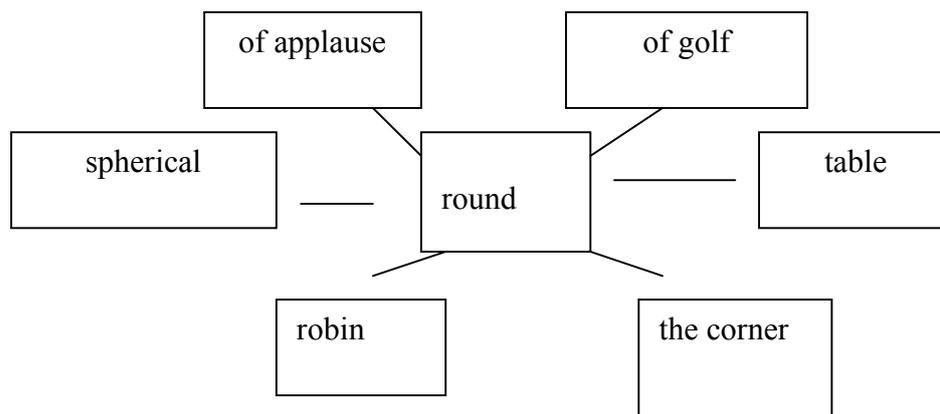
To tell children that many modern languages arose only recently means little, and the hypothetical forms of the Indo-European languages fall on deaf ears. But a brief resumé of the family and personal history of English can be important in children’s study of language. It reveals to them the perpetually changing process of language and their own indebtedness to history. Simple evidence, for example, can be assimilated, of links between the Romance languages and between the West Germanic, with particular reference to English relatives in these groups. But the

essential is not the mastery of much detail, but the realisation of the general trend, and of the ostrich-like digestion of English. The minimum detail should be regarded as the maximum, always provided that sufficient example are given to bring historical process to convincing life. The landmarks must be clear – the coming of Christianity, the Scandinavian invasions, the Norman conquest, the influence of American and colonial forms. Children should grasp the enormous enrichment of vocabulary, the simpler patterning of accidence, the move towards a standardized form of pronunciation and spelling, and the increasing subtlety of the general structure of sentences, especially the larger proportion of subordinated groups in modern English as compared with say that of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

The perception of change and growth realizes for children the organic tie between language and the changing circumstances of life around them. It persuades them that they are the present instruments of change, and must share the responsibility for it. They should therefore study its causes, and the means also of stability.

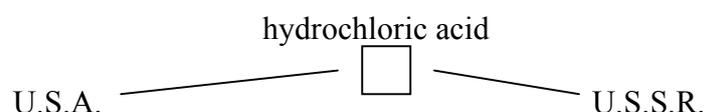
### 3. *Agreement and disagreement.*

Children need to know something of language's contribution to these topics. It is worth asking them to consider words not as parts of speech but as areas of meaning or intention: for example:



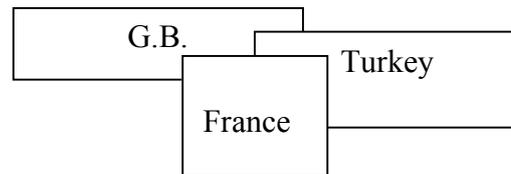
[central “round” links on the one hand to applause/ spherical/ robin; and on the other, to golf/ table/ the corner]

Children are curious to find, say, that the New English Dictionary gives over 200 main senses of the word “set”. In most such instances, the right division will be distinguishable by context. But when the context does not help, confusion results. This happens commonly with many abstract words, words covering a large area of meaning, as well as with words broken into numerous barely related meanings whose ambiguities may at times be resolved by grammatical form. If a word of small area is taken, a simple linguistic molecule, disagreement is unlikely:



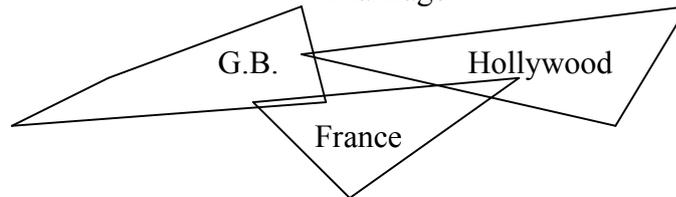
But a word of larger area is another matter:

## Love

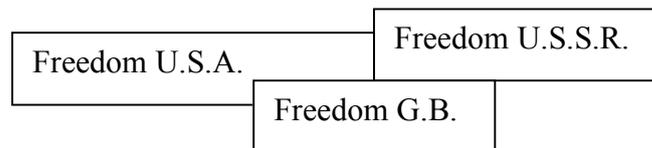


Here there is considerable overlap, but plenty of room for misunderstanding. Or take:

## Marriage

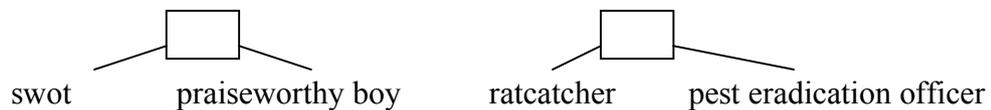


There are points of contact, but that is all. Freedom is another word in which the area outside agreement may be greater than that within:



- although of course each concept may have a local validity.

Disagreement arises too from our calling the same thing by different words, reflecting thus our various attitudes:



guide, philosopher and friend

teacher

schoolmaster

schoolteacher

schoolma'am

pedagogue

pedant

instructor

a regular Squeers



Then of course we are quarrelling about our attitudes, rather than about our inability to understand. It is still true, however hard for linguistic reformers to swallow, that human beings fight about things before they fight about language.

From this, it may seem to children that words of small area, such as “hydrochloric acid”, are the “best” because they cannot lead to disagreement. But of course situations not unambiguous can hardly be described in unambiguous language. There are varied styles of speech and writing. Vocabulary depends on wishes, technical needs, and social aspirations.

#### 4. *Vocabularies*

By the vocabularies we choose, we select our social groups – both those in which we would be included, and those we would exclude. Children growing up are in continually changing social situations, especially in their relationship to adults. Technical terms however complicated are not really so difficult for children to learn as the apparently simpler tonal language of everyday speech, and this is because they are of small area.

Everyday terms, on the other hand, need more experience of life for their adequate manipulation. It is not hard to help children to grasp that they do use words that relate only to their own feelings. They do so every time they make a judgement without having a clear idea of its grounds: “This is a smashing book”; “Maths is a lot of rot”. They benefit from a few examples of the temperature chart of certain words – how from a datum line these have risen or sunk in the estimate of history: words such as “silly”, “cunning”, “intellectual” – or King James on St Paul’s Cathedral: “amusing, awful and artificial”, that is, pleasing, awe-inspiring, and skilfully done.

Less important than the lexical meaning of words are the spelling and pronunciation. Within ordinary limits, pronunciation does not affect intelligibility, though localisms can serve, whether in Oxford or Bow, to define social groups to protect or exclude. Tape recordings of a passage of dialogue between people speaking a wide variety of dialects are valuable for bringing home to pupils the great tolerance of the language for variation in sound, and one would guess that educated speech is willing to accept a wider range of pronunciation than used to be the case when a certain crusading zeal attached to the words “standard English”.

The pronunciation that calls for any special study is of course that which is natural to the particular group one is teaching, and that largely in proportion to the limitations it imposed on the group. “Muvver, fing, sumfink, wa?er”, are crudities even in Cockney. Just when a dialect form loses the dignity and colour of dialect and becomes simply a class-conscious restriction is hard to say. Probably it is only when local sound is combined with other limitations – ignorance, thin experience or vocabulary, fear of competition, a kindly or a rude complacency. The change from local to general language is delicate for children, who in attempting it are open to the scorn of their fellows and the ridicule of the educated speaker, and certainly a patronizing attitude to the local dialect on the part of the teacher bars success. The dialect should be described rather than judge. When children feel safe, then ambitious, they will imitate to acquire and not to mock; they will judge for themselves.

Spelling is refreshingly simple to treat after this. The most chauvinistic local patriot will be the first to comment on any unconventionality of spelling as “bad” spelling. That which is taken for granted by professional people, and insisted on by commerce and bureaucracy, must be a crucial subject for children growing up into

these communities. Some resent it as tyranny, others welcome it as a further protective device. Children learn to spell by practising specific examples and extending these analogically, rather than by rules.

Here is one of the three chief rules of English spelling, as set down by G. H. Vallins in a popular work:

When a monosyllable ends in a single vowel plus single consonant, the consonant is doubled before a suffix beginning with a vowel; similarly when the final syllable of a disyllabic or polysyllabic word ends in a single vowel plus single consonant, the consonant is doubled only if the final syllable is stressed.

Naturally, there are exceptions to this rule. Some understanding of the link between spelling and etymology reconciles children to the rigidity of the conventions and the inconsistencies which elude rules, and they learn to see the word as an eye-symbol, a window on history.

### 5. *Structures*

In structures, as in spelling, there are unalterable arrangements which the children just have to learn. These “formulas” are effective in language because the situations in which they are used are continually recurring. They are situation controllers in the purest sense, and hardly units of communication at all. It is not usual to reply “Very poorly” to the apparent question “How are you?” The formulas of greeting, parting, of superficial acquaintance, are of great value to children, though mentioned in textbooks less often than the written differences between say “Yours sincerely” and “Yours truly”.

Between complete formulas and what seems complete freedom there are many degrees. The complete formula can have nothing added or interpolated, though intonation or stress may sometimes alter (“How d’you do?”, “How d’you *do*?”).

And in any society there are subjects as distinct from linguistic formulas – the weather, politics. Silence is to most human beings an intolerable threat. Nonsense is better – “Is it really you?” someone will say.

There are no completely free structures. They would be meaningless. The patterns of intonation, the stresses, word order (especially in written English), the few inflexions – have to be observed. All that is really free is the ability to choose which rules to obey, and which lexical units to put into relationship. To do this, children have to learn the fixed units which are used in relatively free structures. These are the more common regular and irregular endings which signal agreement, comparison, and so on; word order; and common prepositions and conjunctions and the words they accompany. Those need separate practice which are often used faultily, but the great majority of these units are fully absorbed only by using them in context. Oral work is more valuable than written in this, since twenty examples can be rehearsed in speech for one in writing, and this can be decisive in setting up the correct habit.

One can usefully start by showing children how much they do know. They are really quite advanced by twelve in their acquaintance with the signals and structure of English. Words such as “subject and predicate” are not of course tabu, but it isn’t helpful to say that the subject is what names the thing being discussed: “It is a tiger.”

It is as well, since many school grammar questions are simply disguised comprehension questions, to ask one's grammar questions in semantic terms: "They are throwing the ball." Who are? – They are. "The soldier who was going on leave left his pass behind." – Which soldier left his pass behind? – The one who was going on leave. "Give him the book." – What was given? – The book – Who to? – Him. The children are perfectly at home in all these constructions, though they may never have heard of an adjectival clause or an indirect object. What is wanted is a sharpening of their powers, not a breakdown.

It is possible by means of example and analogy to teach more complicated patterns, especially if these can be shown to be useful in improving the conciseness or balance of a particular piece of writing a child has done. An example of a pattern is built up on the board, and the class imitates by substituting new clauses for those given. Children will readily perceive, for example, how the situation gets out of control – how, say, the reader becomes bored – if the sentence patterns in a story are not varied. But even so, recognition of new sentence patterns precedes the power to use them, and there is no point in anticipating the need for complicated extensions of complex sentences.

### 6. *A grammar of situation*

Learning language through situation, making as it were a grammar of situation, is simply to adopt one well-known method of teaching as a basis, and to organize language material in its terms. It is the method whereby language is treated as an element in a total context. When teachers complain that the specimens of sentence structure used for analysis in G. C. E. papers are contextless, they usually mean that they are without linguistic context.

But children do not see language linguistically nor learn it for linguistic reasons: they learn it to manage life. The non-linguistic context, the situation, is thus the motivating factor in their study. Often, it is hard to provide a genuine situation in the rigid and bare framework of the classroom, and one has to search for the tie between a form of language and the outside world. In a cynical mood, one might say that Stephen Potter's *One-Upmanship* is the best English grammar book in print. But children are friendlier than Mr Potter's gamesman. They wish to respond as well as to dominate.

No work is wasted with a class when any language need is satisfied by example, but systematic teachers are wary of chasing hares, and will want to classify a syllabus of situations. Only the most general classification is practicable. There are two main groups of situations in which the pupil will repeatedly find his problem. First, that situation in which the speaker is always aware of his audience and of social effect; and second, that in which he is as a writer alone with his material, and in which his main consideration is for the nature of things – scientific reports, how to work a model train, and so on. In the latter, the difficulties are intellectual, and the aims are clarity and the proper subordination of ideas. In the former, the aims are psychological, and the aim is to control the audience's response: to persuade, request, calm, anger, cajole, encourage, to greet and say farewell.

Situations of the second group are, for example, all the "How to do something" titles. One exercises the language by examining the content. The question "Why so and so?" brings out an adverbial clause; "Couldn't you do so and so?" stimulates a conditional or concessive clause. Once a topic has been concluded, one may study some of the fragments of structure that need reshaping before they will fit

into the clear picture – unmix any mixed structures, for example, or show what happens when limiting words are divorced from the ideas they limit, or are moved about in a group. If an example occurs in a talk, that must be the seed example; if no mistakes are made, there is no need to develop the theme. Such a sentence as “He showed his friend a motorcycle in the shed that was for sale” may occur, and once a real example has been spotted, it is sensible to build others on it, and the children will see the connection. It is no use starting with “Wanted, a Pomeranian for an old lady with a good pedigree.” If structures are portmanteau’d in the actual work, one can pull them apart.

“The reason we caulk the seams is because the yacht won’t sail if it leaks” – this becomes either, “The reason we caulk the seams is that...” or “We caulk the seams because...”. If tenses are jumbled, try out some more, and let the children speculate about possible meanings. Which covers the longest spell of time – “It is 5 o’clock”; “It is Tuesday today”; “Twice two is four”; “He is playing patience”? What does “I forget...” mean in “I forget what he said”? What does “I catch the 8.15 on Saturday” mean as distinct from “I am catching it at 8.15”? Which is a true statement: “He read a book as he came into the room” or “He was reading a book...”? Which relates to farther back in time: “Did you read it?” or “Have you read it”? Different classes will work at different levels, and a rigid syllabus is out of place. The golden rule is, use the actual work in hand; if certain mistakes are not made, it is pointless to correct them – but only too often teachers draw the children’s attention to errors they would not otherwise commit.

The purely informative statement is quite common to children’s speech and usually without error in structure. But the series of consecutive and carefully proportioned statements conveying a complex piece of information is comparatively rare, as it is in adult language. It is the more dramatic language, which is immediately face to face with another person’s reaction, that is constantly to be heard.

There is a type of public examination which shows very well how to treat this need. In it, the candidate may be asked to imagine that he is, for example, in charge of an office, and that he has to reprimand the staff for their increasing tendency to lateness and to get them to be on time in the future. What does he say? Similarly, situations in which the children might find themselves can be postulated and dramatized in class, and the effect of various structures assessed. Two children from different schools meet in a train. What do they say to each other? (This is not easy for the teacher, if he is rash enough to suggest the dialogue. Teaching of this sort demands some literary imagination and a close contact with the particular social needs of the children, rather than with the textbook.) In the train, there is silence for a while. Each child reads his comic. What is the effect of continued silence? Discomfort. The one child says, “Want a sweet?” Why does he do this? (What might an adult say in similar circumstances? – “Any idea when we are due in?”) “Thanks” – willingness to be friends – or ‘Thanks, what are they?’ – a more prickly character. And later on, “D’you like lessons?” – exploring the possibility of decent civilized communion. “Not much” – i.e. “I am quite normal and on your side”, or, “They’re not too bad” – slightly apologetic, but he does like them and although willing to be friendly does not want to start off on the wrong foot; or, “I’ll say I do – they’re smashing!” – this could lead to the friendship of a lifetime, or to one of those little comic-strip galloons inscribed “Thanks – blimey!”, and picks up comic. Other situations are such, as a prefect dressing down a small boy, and aiming to make him feel small or alternatively to feel that he can do better; or a conversation on the dance floor at the sixth-form Christmas party; or that between members of opposing football

teams before the match – what, for example, is the effect of “Have you won any matches this year?” as compared with “Have you lost any matches this year?”

For the teacher, it is perhaps easier to deal with the situations in which the child is facing an adult. A form has been threatened with the loss of a privilege because of some misdemeanour. A child is selected to approach the Head to ask for the form’s reinstatement in favour. What does the child say? A rather touchy aunt has promised to take the child to the theatre. The child would rather have the money. How does he say so? The child has been taken out to tea with a friend of his father’s. He knows that the intention is to show what a good boy he is. The stranger asks, “And what is your favourite lesson, eh?” What is the comparative effect of:

Maths, it’s fine.

Oh, English, I suppose.

Chemistry – it’s smashing to turn on the gas when old Stinks isn’t looking

I hate the lot.

Such exercises as these bring out the differences between demand and request, command and invitation, decent reserve and cold rebuff. They can lead to the detailed consideration of particular structures – to the loading of sentences, for example:

Do you have grammar at your school? (a simple question)

Don’t you have grammar at your school? (surprise)

Do you still have grammar at your school?

Perhaps most important of all, they make the children realise that other people exist, must be considered.

In making a syllabus on this basis, the material cannot of course be divided horizontally – that is, Year 1 – spelling; Year 2 – history of language. The division has to be made vertically, for some of the material is applicable to all ages in the secondary school, and the division lies primarily in the detail of the examples and in the degree of difficulty of the applications, situations, and exercises.

The reparative gesture which these suggestions embody does not pretend to include everything which probably should be studied in the field of language at school, but may it is hoped show that the active co-operation of children may be assured if their needs to control and respond to a situation are satisfied. They become responsible for language as they perceive the link between language and their life.

In conclusion, a summary of the argument of this appendix is offered, together with a few of the types of question which may be usefully asked of children studying language in the way proposed.

## SUMMARY

Study of language in school

Aims: to link study of language with total situation.  
to enable pupil to be responsible for linguistic choices.

A. Study of language in general

1. what language is – a system of agreed signals
2. what it does for us – co-operation, extends boundaries of self.
3. its origin
4. assumptions about it that need examining –
  - a) that the word is the thing
  - b) that thought is independent of symbols
5. how language works –
  - a) symbolism
  - b) abstraction – uses and dangers.

B. Study of English language

1. *Geography* and its effects – simplification, tolerance.
2. *History* –
  - a) show by example general trends –
    - simplified accident
    - standardized spelling and pronunciation
    - growth of proportion of subordinating structures
    - enrichment of vocabulary
  - b) link with main events -
 

Christianity	Renaissance
Northmen	American and colonial
Normans	
  - c) change – organic tie between Language and Life –
    - causes – outside world; inner attitude;
    - mechanics
3. *Agreement and disagreement* –
  - the word
    - a) as an area of meaning and intention
    - b) as a mirror of attitude
4. *Social or class function* of vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation.
  - Protecting or excluding function of local forms – describe, not judge
  - Pronunciation
  - Spelling – value as history

### 5. *Structures*

- a) formulas
- b) fixed units in “free” structures – specific example and oral work to establish habit
- c) knowledge of simple structure – demonstrate semantically
- d) more complex structures – practise according to need

### 6. *Situations*

- a) the writer/speaker and his material – exercise language by examining content, e.g. mixed structures; order of modifiers; tenses.
- b) the writer/speaker and his audience – exercise by inventing situations
  1. child/ child
  2. child/ adult

## C. Summary of content and method

- Content:*
1. nature and function of language
  2. history and geography of English language
  3. forms of change and stability
  4. areas of agreement and disagreement
  5. pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary and structure developed in concrete situations

- Method:*
1. avoid tautology – hence little place for use of systematic grammatical terminology
  2. work to level of maturation, not generalizing or anticipating unnecessarily
  3. use motivating experience of control/ response situation. By specific examples related to actual work, satisfy the children’s present needs, rather than the teacher’s.