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Language Lessons: Alternatives to Grammar Piecework

Robert L. Root, Jr.

Thirty years ago, the only required course in English education at my small state teachers' college was called Methods and Materials in the Teaching of English. For twelve weeks we developed ideas for teaching literature and then gave up two weeks to discussing grammar—I recall two full class sessions on the gerund. No one objected to this allotment of time since, after all, teaching literature demanded creativity and planning and teaching grammar required neither—either you defined grammatical terms and required students to locate them in model sentences or you explained usage errors and required students to correct them. Teaching grammar and usage, we believed, was merely a burden we assumed for the privilege of teaching literature.

A couple of years into my first teaching job, at a small rural high school, I was assigned to teach a course called Vocational English, intended to prepare non-college bound 11th and 12th graders in mechanical and secretarial trade courses for the workplace. It was simply a course in grammar and usage. I was provided with the first new textbook the English department had been allowed to purchase in years, a set of overhead transparencies for classroom drill, a new overhead projector, and a long pointer. A viewing screen was installed permanently in the corner of the room.

So each day I lectured students on principles of grammar and usage and then led them through the exercises on the overhead, asking each one in turn to spot the error in the sentence I indicated, if there was an error, and then correct it, if it needed correction. I became pretty deft with the pointer and pretty facile at checking the answers in the teacher's guide as we went along.

Then one day I had an out-of-body experience (or something like it) in class. I was drilling the students and brandishing my pointer, when I realized that I had actually been thinking not about my questions and their answers but about the model boat I would work on after school. Moreover, I had been thinking about it for some time and, while thinking about it, still hadn't missed anything happening in the drill. In fact, even as I was thinking **that**, I was still talking and gesturing.

It was almost as if I had left myself, risen to the ceiling, and looked back down at the class. From this perspective, I saw how bored the students were, how they only roused themselves as their turns at this grammatical crapshoot came up and how they lost even the faint glimmer of attention the moment their turn passed, how they didn't care whether they had been correct or not. I saw too how bored (and boring) I was, how disinterested and detached. I stayed outside myself for a few minutes more, watching this automaton go

through the motions of interaction with these somnambulists. It was both fascinating and horrifying.

I don't remember now how I got through the rest of the day or the rest of the semester, but I remember asking myself for the first time how grammar drill actually taught language and how it had any effect on writing at all. I had been the one to learn something from that language lesson, and it was probably one of the formative experiences to nudge me into the teaching and the study of composition. It also led me to promise never to put my students or myself through such an experience again.

For most of the years since then, as a college teacher of composition and composition pedagogy courses, I haven't taught grammar at all. I teach writing, for which grammar instruction can be counterproductive, and I work with students individually on their own works-in-progress; usage drill sometimes seems as remote and antiquated as a session in Gradgrind's school in Dickens' *Hard Times*. Yet occasionally the specter of grammar instruction rises to confront me: grammar fundamentalists among inservice teachers greeting whole language approaches to composition with hostility; an eighth grade teacher commenting that my April guest appearance to teach media would give her students a break from the grammar drill they've been doing since September; a student teacher being assigned sole responsibility for his cooperating teacher's grammar classes while his cooperating teacher focused on an honors literature section. There is something pernicious, almost malign, in the persistence of grammar/usage piecemeal to substitute for the teaching of writing and, worse, for the teaching of language itself. It has somehow successfully evaded the currents of reformation so prevalent in the rest of the field and infected all our conversations about language instruction.

Language study should be motivated by more than a desire to instill "correctness," whether grammatical, social, or political, and it shouldn't be separated from all the places that we find language in use. Rei Noguchi has argued that, in spite of overwhelming evidence that formal grammar instruction does not produce significant

writing improvement, "the most powerful force in [its] continuance" is the likelihood that teachers "know of nothing better to offer in [its] place" (120). I think we have a great deal to offer in place of formal grammar instruction. What follows is suggestive, not inclusive, of possibilities for language instruction which have been dormant all along not only in our teaching of writing but in our teaching of literature and media as well.

Language and Literature

In the study of literature, we tend to teach students how to follow the story and how to identify the themes, how to analyze their own response to the work and how to appreciate such elements as narration, description, and characterization. Yet surely these literary works are also a vital place to explore how language works. For example, take a book like *Charlotte's Web*, a book that in some ways is as much about language as it is about friendship or the cycle of life and death.

In *Charlotte's Web*, E. B. White includes several lyrical passages about the natural cycle of the seasons and the pastoral qualities of farm life. Once, listening to an audiotope my children had given me of White himself reading *Charlotte's Web*, I was struck by this passage, which is best appreciated read aloud:

Early summer days are a jubilee time for birds. In the fields, around the house, in the barn, in the woods, in the swamp—everywhere love and songs and nests and eggs. From the edge of the woods, the white-throated sparrow (which must come all the way from Boston) calls, "Oh, Peabody, Peabody!" On an apple bough, the Phoebe teeters and wags its tail and says, "Phoebe, phoe-bee!" The song sparrow, who knows how brief and lovely life is, says, "Sweet, sweet, sweet interlude; sweet, sweet, sweet interlude." If you enter the barn, the swallows swoop down from their nests and scold. "Cheeky, cheeky!" they say.

In early summer there are plenty of things for a child to eat and drink and suck and chew. Dandelion stems are full of milk, clover heads are loaded with nectar, the Frigidaire is full of ice-cold drinks. Everywhere you look is life; even the little ball of spit on the weed stalk, if

you poke it apart, has a green worm inside it. And on the under side of the leaf of the potato vine are the bright orange eggs of the potato bug. (50-51)

In this story, which most children read (or have read to them) before fifth grade, notice that White is not only rich in information and descriptive detail but also rich in sentence structures.

The first paragraph begins with a simple sentence, subject-verb-complement, which is also a thesis sentence—the entire paragraph will be about birds. This is the definite, specific, concrete style White famously advocates in his handbook, *The Elements of Style*. His second sentence begins with a series of prepositional phrases identifying places which function as adverbials; then he sets off the rest of the sentence with a dash before the word “everywhere” encompasses them all and introduces the list of things that are in those places. However, he leaves out whatever verb might complete that sentence, perhaps because it is just another “state of being” verb, perhaps because we don’t need it, perhaps because leaving it out makes the sentence read like something someone might say. The repetition of the word “and” deliberately extenuates the list and eschews the use of the serial comma. He has also placed the compound subject at the end of the sentence; here the adverbials precede the subject, and we have a couple of options about where a deleted verb might go if we inserted it. Then the paragraph ends with a series of sentences identifying, characterizing, and impersonating birds. That is, the paragraph moves from the general to the specific.

In imitating the birds’ calls, White is not only exemplifying onomatopoeia and to some extent anthropomorphizing the birds (the swallow “scolds,” “Cheeky, cheeky!”) but also ascribing meaning to the sounds they make. These are not entirely original interpretations of bird songs—Roger Tory Peterson too identifies the white-throated sparrow’s song as “Old Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody” and the song sparrow’s as “sweet, sweet, sweet, etc.”—but White plays with meaning as well as sound by adding “interlude” to the song sparrow’s repeated notes and ascribes attitude and intention (“who knows how brief and lovely life is”) to the song. The attitude and the

intention are not the bird’s, of course, but those of the narrator who hears and describes the bird’s song.

The language of the passage has already prepared us for this transparent pretense that the ideas are the birds’ with the parenthetical description of the very first song. Why does he say the bird “must come from Boston”? Because the white-throated sparrow does not sing “pee-BOD-ee, pee-BOD-ee” but “PEE-buh-dee, PEE-buh-dee,” pronounced with a Boston accent. The parenthetical remark is both a joke inspired by what the birdsong reminds the narrator of and a clue to the pronunciation he has in mind for the reader.

The second paragraph in the passage repeats the pattern of a general sentence followed by a specific sentence which humorously includes a mechanical drink dispenser along with the natural ones. Then it changes the subject from drinks to life and, with a semi-colon, attaches to its brief general sentence a specific sentence which interrupts itself to include a subordinate clause in the middle. The passage concludes with a second specific sentence, this one beginning with the conjunction “And.”

Where in the works you regularly teach could you explore with your students the ways the authors use language?

Sentences starting with conjunctions, fragments, periodic structure, inverted syntax, parenthetical or appositive elements, paragraph structure, description and exposition, periods, semi-colons, dashes, parentheses, quotation marks, exclamation points, commas, periods, parallel structures, prepositions, coordination, subordination, philosophy, humor—everywhere language and grammar and usage and style. I find this a lively passage for talking about the ways language works, but I don’t find it a unique passage in that regard. Passages in *Walden*, “A Rose for Emily,” “Hills Like White Elephants,” *A Room of One’s Own*, passages by Annie Dillard, Alice Walker,

Amy Tan, and Mark Twain—all might serve as well. I want to ask teachers: what passages spring to mind for you when you think of language in literature? Where in the works you regularly teach could you explore with your students the ways the authors use language? Don't those works abound in powerful and exciting expressions of language that model grammar and usage more effectively than the lifeless, contextless sentences of handbooks and exercises? Isn't it the language that makes it literature instead of merely prose? One of the alternatives to grammar piece work is teaching language in the literature it creates.

Language and Composition

Just as in literature study attention to language should extend beyond vocabulary lists and glossaries, so in composition study it should extend beyond mechanical transcription and usage uniformity. Composition handbooks address language in two ways: either they attempt to prevent and/or cure errors in text preparation resulting from failures of (or failures to use) copyediting and proofreading skills, or they intone about being clear, concise, and coherent, as if writing were simply the making of perfect sentences, one at a time, by merely combining a list of ingredients and following a recipe. Whatever the merits of the advice they give, these prescriptive approaches erroneously imply that the primary goals of composition should be error-free transcription and grammatically-faultless first-and-final-draft sentences—they don't really tell students about composing, about how to get language down on the page and what to do with it once it's there, about how language doesn't simply record our thoughts but also gives us a means of thinking things through.

One of the sacred texts of prescriptive usage is *The Elements of Style*, a book originally published in 1918 by William Strunk, Jr., and then revised in 1957 by his former student, E. B. White. The idea for the revision of the book came from a publisher who had read an essay about Will Strunk that White had published in *The New Yorker*; in fact, the essay itself was revised to serve as the introduction of the book (a perfectly appro-

priate recycling of materials that we would never allow students to get away with). White's essay was principally a portrait of Strunk, illustrating his quirky teaching habits—saying everything three times, leaning forward while grasping his lapels, condensing his instruction to easily memorized rules, referring to his own text as “the *little book*” —and endorsing the wisdom of his advice. The piece ended with a memorable image of White himself imitating Strunk's demeanor and urging modern students to “Get the *little book*! Get the *little book*! Get the *little book*!”

If we want students to have some sense of how language works in composition, instead of directing them to *The Elements of Style* we might rather demonstrate what White went through to produce the language that ended the original essay so memorably. It was not simply the recording of his thoughts in precise, concrete prose. We know this because notes and drafts of the Will Strunk piece preserved in the E. B. White collection at Cornell University illustrate the kind of metamorphoses that language goes through even in the hands of a long-experienced and superior wordsmith.

White decided to write an essay on Strunk when a friend from Cornell sent him a nearly forty-year-old copy of *The Elements of Style*. He began working in written language by jotting down notes and scribbling reactions during and after his rereading of the book. One of the passages that he turned out in his preliminary writing was this one, imagining what he would say to students. The whole of it was handwritten and, except for a couple of revisions as he composed, simply an impromptu passage attempting to get the idea down on paper:

*If I were ever faced with the (to me) impossible assignment of facing a class of students I would I think I would just say. “Now you boys & girls get your hooks in a copy of the ‘little book’ & you go home & come back in 2 weeks. **Learn** Memorize the rules, & see if you can understand some of the explanations. Come back in 2 weeks, & we will go on from there.”*

It was a passage that would appear in various forms as he proceeded through several drafts of the essay. White said of himself that he wrote

largely by ear rather than by rules (*Essays* 256), and in the excerpts from successive drafts which follow we can see him tuning the language not only of the admonition to students but also of an automotive metaphor he uses to indicate the “faddishness” of classroom methods that diverge from Strunk’s.

White used both the advice he generated in his notes and the metaphor when he wrote his first draft. Note that, still drafting rather than editing, he repeats part of the second sentence in the opening of the third sentence, no doubt because he no sooner completed the second sentence than he discovered another way of getting the idea across. (Typographical errors throughout these passages are from White’s manuscripts.)

*I gather from my friend’s letter that accompanied his gift, that the “little book” has long since passed into disuse. It has, I have no doubt, been supplanted by bigger, longer, lower **books** textbooks. In these days of longer and lower textbooks, it would probably be found too arbitrary, too short, too crotchety, too simple. I think though, that if I were ever in the, to me, unthinkable position of facing a class in English usage and style, I would lean far over the desk o the first*

clutch my lapels, blink my eyes, and intone:

*day, ~~and say~~: ^ Get the **little** book, get the **little** book, get the **little** book.” Then I would dismiss the class for two weeks, and tell them to come back when they had learned ~~its~~ the rules. of the game.*

In the next draft he continues to tinker with the metaphor, stops himself in mid-paragraph to take another tack, inserts, deletes, adds, strikes over, tries out alternatives.

I gather from my friend’s letter accompanying his gift that

of course

*the “little book” has ^ long since passed into disuse. In these days of longer and lower textbooks, it would considered too **arbitrary** crotchety.*

elementary

too short, too simple. I think though, that if I were ever

Will died in 1946; and he had been retired from teaching several years before that. Longer, lower textbooks are in style in English classrooms, I dare say; books with upswept tailfins. ~~The Strunk opus would be found too short, too simple, too cocksure~~, and automatic verbs.

I hope some of them manage to compress so much as much good sense

as does “The E of S.”,

*in so small a small space ^ but I would back “The Elements of Style” against any stock model on a modern **speedway** track manage to get to the point so quickly & **keep it so** illuminate it so **brigh** amusingly.*

Finally he arrives at the version that will be published in the magazine. He has settled on the extent to which he wants to develop the metaphor, the tone he wants to strike in his imitation of Strunk’s classroom stance, the balance and coherence among the sentences.

*“The little book” has long since passed into disuse. Will died in 1946, and he had retired from teaching several years before that. Longer, lower textbooks are in use in English classes nowadays, I daresay—books with upswept tailfins and automatic verbs. I hope some of them manage to compress as much wisdom into as small a space, manage to come to the point as quickly and illuminate it as amusingly. I think, though, that if I suddenly found myself in the, to me, unthinkable position of facing a class in English usage and style, I would simply lean far out over the desk, clutch my lapels, blink my eyes, and say, “Get the **little** book! Get the **little** book! Get the **little** book!” (*Essays* 261)*

The language here sounds better to the ear than the language in the earlier drafts, but it is not language that *The Elements of Style* (or any other handbook I know of) can teach anyone to achieve, because none of those books demonstrate the process of languaging that works its way through to this level. Like most handbooks on grammar and usage intended for composition students,

Strunk and White show us the final destination they intend us to arrive at—they don't show us how to get there.

In composing we cannot make a mold to someone's master pattern and then pour molten language into it to form flawless sentences every time; rather, we shape individual sentences like a potter working in malleable and messy clay shapes her pottery a piece at a time, the final piece not glazed and hardened to ceramic in the kiln until its ingredients have achieved a form and shape that merits preservation. To achieve the very sentences I just completed, I had to make a stab at what I hoped to say, then tinker with the rough form, inserting, deleting, replacing, before being satisfied that the shapes of the sentences held the metaphors in ways that made them clear first of all to me and then to potential readers. When I print out my drafts and then revise them by hand, which I usually need to do, I build up manuscript artifacts of my own composing, as my students do when they do multiple drafts. Often I share my own composing with my students before asking them to share theirs with me or with one another. Often I turn to the manuscript records for other authors as well, the composing evidence for *Walden*, for example, or for passages in works by Dickens, Eliot, Woolf, or the draft page facsimiles in the *Writers at Work* series—it turns out that our libraries contain plentiful evidence of how the authors we study struggled with language in exactly the ways that the students (and teachers) who study them do. The opportunity for language study and the issues of languaging that surface in composition extend far beyond the limits of proofreading skills, the chief concerns of the study of grammar and usage.

Language and Media

In recent years a number of English education organizations have called for the inclusion of media literacy in the preparation of classroom teachers. One aspect of media literacy that merits attention is the language of popular music. A rich resource for language study is available in the cassette and CD cases stacked next to the stereo systems of our students. Research tells us that very little activity book drill in grammar and

usage carries over into the students' own writing, just as memorizing the Periodic Table has no impact on their recognition of elements all around them, but if we build an awareness of the way language works in the media which saturates them, we may be able to change the way they hear language, the way they listen. When people become more aware of how language is used in the world around them, they are more likely to be aware of the ways they use it themselves. For this reason, we ought to make the language of media an extension of the language study in the classroom.

In composing we cannot make a mold to someone's master pattern and then pour molten language into it to form flawless sentences every time. . .

For example, record companies tend to print lyrics without punctuation or at least without consistent punctuation other than capital letters at the beginning of a line, apostrophes, and occasional commas. It has always struck me that lyric sheets in tape and CD packages were a fertile ground for exploring the relationship between meaning and punctuation in the language of popular song.

For example, I sometimes give students a passage like the one below, and ask them to imagine that a friend has faxed this to them with the explanation that she typed up a song lyric verbatim as she heard someone sing it, but her computer has a virus that eliminated all the carriage returns, capitalization, and punctuation when she printed it out. She asks them to read it through at least once to see what kind of sense the unformatted, unpunctuated form makes and then put in the correct punctuation, capitalization, and lyric margins on their own. (You might want to try this yourself.)

a friend of mine she cries at night and she calls me on the phone sees babies everywhere she goes and she wants one of her own shes waited long enough she says and still he cant decide pretty soon she'll have to choose

*and it tears her up inside shes scared scared
shell run out of time*

*i see my folks are getting on and i watch their
bodies change i know they see the same in me
and it makes us both feel strange no matter
how you tell yourself its what we all go
through those lines are pretty hard to take
when they're staring back at you scared to
run out of time*

*when did the choices get so hard with so
much more at stake life gets mighty precious
when there's less of it to waste scared to run
out of time*

*just when i thought i'd had enough and all my
tears were shed no promise left unbroken
there were no painful words unsaid you came
along and showed me how to leave it all
behind you opened up my heart again and
then much to my surprise i found love, baby,
love in the nick of time*

I doubt whether we have much trouble with the meaning or with the problem of establishing the lines in the verses by their rhymes, but we may have some difficulty with the placement of the punctuation. One difficulty may arise because song lyrics include elements of oral communication which violate our sense of formal written syntax—for example, we want to eliminate the first “she” in “A friend of mine she cries at night/ And she calls me on the phone” and possibly the second, or we want to add one “she” before “sees babies everywhere she goes.” Another problem may be choosing among available options that change emphasis but not necessarily meaning—for example, choosing between “She’s scared—scared she’ll run out of time” or “She’s scared, scared she’ll run out of time” or between “she calls me on the phone. Sees babies . . .” or “calls me on the phone; sees babies. . .” or “calls me on the phone—sees babies . . .” The examples that students work on in grammar drill may lack the possibility of multiple readings (if the handbook is rigorously prepared enough) but language in life seldom does, and these lyrics let them wrestle with that.

However, despite these problems, most people who try this exercise come out with a version that looks very much like this:

A friend of mine she cries at night,
and she calls me on the phone.
Sees babies everywhere she goes,
and she wants one of her own.
She’s waited long enough, she says,
and still he can’t decide.
Pretty soon she’ll have to choose,
and it tears her up inside.
She’s scared—scared she’ll run out of time.

I see my folks are getting on,
and I watch their bodies change.
I know they see the same in me,
and it makes us both feel strange.
No matter how you tell yourself
it’s what we all go through,
those lines are pretty hard to face
when they’re staring back at you.
Scared to run out of time.

When did the choices get so hard
with so much more at stake?
Life gets mighty precious when
there’s less of it to waste.
Scared to run out of time.

Just when I thought I’d had enough
and all my tears were shed—
no promise left unbroken;
there were no painful words unsaid—
you came along and showed me how
to leave it all behind.
You opened up my heart again,
and then, much to my surprise,
I found love, baby—love in the nick of time.
(Raitt)

When we examine the finished product we should find that the lines conform to the same basic rules as regular prose—in fact, the punctuation clarifies the meaning of the lines and the relationships among them.

Students often have difficulty reading Shakespeare or other poets because they read lines one at a time, and attempt to interpret and decipher the line in isolation from the rest of the speech or verse, or more frustratingly, in isolation from the syntax of the sentence or sentences to which the line belongs. Such lines as Horatio’s speech at the close of *Hamlet* I: i (ll. 168-171) make very little sense read independently, as separate sentences, with punctuation implied by a stop at the end of the line:

Break we our watch up and by my advice[.]
 Let us impart what we have seen tonight[.]
 Unto young Hamlet for upon my life[.]
 This spirit dumb to us will speak to him[.]

In such a reading we are really interpreting capitalization as the indication of sentence beginning and the end of the line as the end of the sentence. The four lines actually make up three linked sentences.

Break we our watch up;
 [and] by my advice, let us impart what we have
 seen tonight unto young Hamlet;
 [for,] upon my life, this spirit, dumb to us, will
 speak to him.

In Hardin Craig's edition of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, the lines are punctuated thus:

Break we our watch up; and by my advice,
 Let us impart what we have seen tonight
 Unto young Hamlet; for, upon my life,
 This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him.
 (905)

However, in Willard Farnham's edition of the play for *The Pelican Shakespeare* the punctuation runs more simply:

Break we our watch up, and by my advice
 Let us impart what we have seen tonight
 Unto young Hamlet, for upon my life
 This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him. (34)

In other words, Shakespeare's editors are trying to do to Shakespeare's language what record companies expect consumers to do to the lyric sheets of the recordings they buy—provide the punctuation to help make sense of the separate syntactical units on the printed page.

In the song lyrics we have been looking at, from "Nick of Time" by Bonnie Raitt, we quickly recognize that most lines are separate sentences in themselves ("I see my folks are getting on/[and] I watch their bodies change"). We may notice as well that, in the first two stanzas, the first and second lines and the third and fourth lines are joined by "and" and that the ideas in those pairings are connected. The ideas in those two

pairings are so linked that it makes equal sense in both stanzas to use either a semi-colon or a period at the end of the second line; in other words, the first four lines of each stanza are connected logically because they describe a circumstance or state of mind, as in the second stanza:

I see my folks are getting on,
 and I watch their bodies change. [or ;]
 I know they see the same in me,
 and it makes us both feel strange.

But examining the second four lines in the second stanza, we notice that the general statement about each line being a sentence doesn't apply here. These four lines together make up one sentence, a fact we can deduce by working through the logic of the lines and one we can indicate by the way in which we punctuate them.

No matter how you tell yourself
 it's what we all go through,
 those lines are pretty hard to face
 when they're staring back at you.

On a larger scale Shakespeare is doing the same thing in Hamlet's first long speech in Act I Scene ii. His first three sentences make up the opening line, his fourth sentence takes up the next six and a half lines, and his fifth sentence, summarizing the contents of the speech so far and essentially placing the "thesis" of the "paragraph" at the end, runs three and a half lines.

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'
 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
 Nor customary suits of solemn black,
 Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
 No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
 Nor the dejected havior of the visage
 Together with all forms, moods, shapes of
 grief,
 That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
 For they are actions that a man might play,
 But I have that within which passeth show—
 These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
 (I,ii, 76-86 [Farnham 37])

So too the bridge in "Nick of Time" takes up four lines but is composed of two sentences:

When did the choices get so hard with so much more at stake? Life gets mighty precious when there's less of it to waste.

Bonnie Raitt and William Shakespeare and countless poets and songwriters are all playing by the same rules and have to be read (and punctuated) the same way.

When I have tried this exercise on students and teachers alike, I sometimes hear the odd objection that you can't punctuate poetry or at least that you can't punctuate song lyrics. But poetry, including song lyrics, uses the same language we use in prose, the same language we use in conversation, the same language we write in diaries and letters and grocery lists. Moreover, every student and probably every new teacher coming out of college has experienced language more often through popular song and commercial jingles than through any other form, possibly including conversation or reading. Often these forms are ones that play with both style and sense in clever, engaging, and rhetorically deceptive ways—ways that make them a rich resource for language study. If students become more attuned to the language they hear all the time, they stand a better chance of becoming, like E. B. White, writers who compose by ear.

Language Lessons

I **have** altogether too frequently heard English teachers complain that students don't know a noun from a verb, and I marvel that in thirty years of teaching I have never once had a student use a noun where he or she should have used a verb—never had to write in the margin "Change this verb to a noun," never even had a student confuse me in conversation by mistaking a verb for a noun ("Did I umbrella my forget after class?"). I have known students (and teachers) who couldn't go through a written sentence and categorize each word as this or that "part of speech." Since, in the school district where my own children were educated, the parts of speech are taught every year from second grade through at least eleventh, I don't assume this inability stems from lack of drill or from some grammatical void in the curriculum but rather take it as likely evidence of how ineffec-

tive instruction in grammar and usage really is—how difficult it is for students not to assign it to the vast area of useless information in their memories, even after all that repetitious drill.

Suppose I gave you a model sentence and asked you to perform a copychange on it. I might show you something like this: "Having had the spotlight in my eyes—the opportunity to prove myself a showoff and not a wallflower—and having performed onstage for six months, I didn't need to go on with it." You might come up with a copychange reflective of your own experience (in fact, you could do it now rather than read on), perhaps something like this: "Having had the spices in my cuisine—the ingredients to make me a chef and not a cook—and having created variations in twelve recipes, I didn't want to put catsup on it." I might also ask you to write a follow-up sentence of your own design, and you might write: "Even this simple hot dog could be more rewarding eating if I used imagination to garnish it." It might be a tricky chore, possibly challenging, but very likely you could do it, once you understood the principle of the copychange, and certainly the followup sentence would be less challenging, even though you composed it without a model, with only a context.

. . . the teaching of grammar and usage to improve anything other than proofreading and text preparation skills and to foster clerical correctness rather than composition competencies is merely teaching children to ride bicycles by memorizing the Schwinn catalogue.

However, if I asked you to go back through those sentences and name the grammatical terms for every word, you might be more challenged. Not every reader could do it. While I think it would be good for **teachers** to be able to do it, I can't imagine why a **writer** would need any of that grammatical terminology. Haven't we just written those sentences? Isn't the existence of those

sentences proof that we can write them? In what ways does knowledge of grammatical metalanguage precede or determine grammatical ability? What "part of speech" were you ever taught before you could speak any phrase or any sentence you have ever spoken in your life? The ability to write is not dependent on the information in handbooks; the teaching of grammar and usage to improve anything other than proofreading and text preparation skills and to foster clerical correctness rather than composition competencies is merely teaching children to ride bicycles by memorizing the Schwinn catalogue.

From time to time we seem to be making some inroads in the teaching of dialects and social uses of language, although the study of language as linguists practice it seems more a branch of psychology or biology than of English, and we are in danger of giving over language study either to the specialized and often inaccessible interests of the linguists and simultaneously abandoning it to the flat-earth approaches of grammarians and neophyte Fidditches. We need to devise new ways to teach the study of language systems, but in my experience the current teaching of grammar and usage doesn't qualify either as a study of language or as a preparation for writing and reading. I urge English teachers to try teaching language within the existing subject matter of English, to help students to understand how much it determines the power and beauty of the literature we encourage them to read and the intensity and immediacy of the media they are exposed to everyday, and to teach them how to use it them-

selves with all the imagination and energy they can in their own writing.

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