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A Socially Dynamic Approach to Teaching Grammar

Grammar class has long been
a site for displaying power

----Jon Olson *The Place of Grammar*

Few practices are more enshrined in tradition and romantic luster than the teaching of grammar. Each time a news report laments a low test score or marks the use of a double negative, there are renewed calls for more grammar, more basics, more discipline, more prayer. It is for this reason—its legacy as symbol for a lost era long ago—where society functioned better and kids were more polite—that grammar will forever be an interest to pundits and arm chair educational experts. We need grammar—or at least its metaphorical presence—like we need patriotic songs, Fourth of July celebrations, and cowboys riding high on their horses. At the very least, it symbolizes an age where things were simpler, more orderly, happier.

But as educators we should not fall victim to such silly nostalgia. Grammar, as it has been taught from the equally romanticized *Warriner's English Grammar*, does not and never has improved writing. While it often consumes days and even weeks of class time, and offers teachers a chance to inculcate arcane rules as if they were an objective set of facts, it has no more effect on the students' ability to write than teaching the rules of basketball would improve Kobe Bryant's jump shot.

Research has reinforced this in a multitude of studies of traditional grammar instruction dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Later, there were additional studies that isolated the effect that transformational grammar or sentence combining had on writing instruction. There was the Bateman and Zidonis Study (1966), which looked at transformational grammar and its effect on writing and the Mellon Study (1969) that combined transformational grammar instruction with sentence combining and finally the O'Hare study that examined sentence combining and its impact on syntactic maturity. In each case, dating back to the first grammar lessons, the efficacy of such lessons was best described by George Hillocks (1986), who argued:

None of the studies for the present report provides any support for teaching grammar as a means of improving composition skills. If schools insist upon teaching the identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagramming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional grammar (as many still do), they cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing. (p. 248)

So is there any hope for the teaching of grammar or the parts of the language we want our students to learn? The answer, I believe is yes, but it involves a radical paradigm shift in our

perception of why and how we teach it. Let me explain what I mean.

Traditionally, grammar has been taught as a way to improve, to fix, to remediate students who fail to use the English of the White upper class. The purpose was to sanitize the unwashed masses, to improve their lot by teaching them to speak like the gentry, allowing them a chance to elevate their position in life and be better citizens.

When teachers speak of "getting back to basics" and studying grammar and the parts of speech, they typically refer to the need to refine the usage of those students who come from the poorer and darker neighborhoods—minorities

who use a discourse that is offensive to the powerful elite in our country and who have the potential to corrupt our nation. According to Gary Howard (2006), "dominant groups tend to claim truth as their private domain" (p. 54), which leads those in power to want to expunge difference and create an official knowledge that is closely aligned with those in power. This has led to what Geneva Smitherman (2002) calls "linguistic imperialism of the few" (p. 168), where only one grammar is taught as correct and others are treated as sloppy or restricted.

Ostensibly, the goal of these lessons is to teach the language of power so others—even those who have been historically alienated and disaffected—can become part of the great American success story. But in the process, students see their language being treated like a disease that must be cured. Indeed, the medical metaphors that have typically accompanied language instruction are revealing. Students have historically gone to the writing "lab" as if they were part of an experiment or a procedure, where something malignant was to be removed and they would emerge linguistically clean, pithy, white. During this school procedure, they would be "prescribed" linguistic medicine and passively receive lessons in the language of the dominant group. This is the official knowledge that Michael Apple discusses and the "assumption of rightness" (Howard, 2006, p. 54) that has dominated American education since its inception.

The goal of grammar instruction, then, was not self actualization and personal empowerment but a kind of linguistic makeover that mirrored the change of Dicken's Pip when he is swept away from his poverty stricken brother and taught to talk and act like a gentleman. Grammar, put simply, was meant to be part of a lesson on etiquette and manners, on playing a new role

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in life so one could possibly enhance one's economic place. Education meant abandoning family, culture, and linguistic heritage. The cost for many children who had little else, was prodigious.

And it was a bitter failure—not because students didn't want success and upward mobility but because the cultural genocide that was embedded in these lessons took much more than they gave. Students wanted the success universal

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education promised but they recoiled at the notion that their family's ways with words were not only substandard but sloppy, lazy, or simply stupid. In writing about his ascent to Yale University, African American

historian Henry Louise Gates (1996) has suggested that "narratives of ascent, whether or not we like to admit it, are also narratives of alienation and loss" (p. 95). What he suggests, of course, is that in becoming educated—and in unwrapping all of the gifts stored in the venerable, ivy covered buildings—many students lose a bit of themselves. This is certainly true of grammar instruction and their loss of their family language or dialect. Yes, African Americans want to experience the American dream, but why does abandoning their language become a prerequisite?

In addressing the legacy of grammar and linguistic apartheid that exists in American English instruction, Otto Santa Ana (2004) suggests:

The linguistic ideology that oppresses our children is five hundred years old, as old as the contact between Europe and the Americas. It was essential part of the process that falsely raised the so-called superior European colonist over the so-called inferior native, the civilized over the savage, the sophisticated over the primitive. In short, it was part of the racist project of colonialism. (p. 3)

This loss has been both poignantly and cogently documented in Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* where she suggests that grammar and the pursuit of Standard White English has been a profound failure because it fails to consider the incalculable alienation and loss that are always part of this educational package. In *Ways with Words*, (1988) we see the black students of Trackton and the white students of Roadville failing to ever achieve their dream of a good education because the school system demands that they embrace a new language, a new notion of literacy, while trying to mimic the more affluent kids in the town. Heath chronicles the language habits of the Trackton and Roadville communities—their rich and ebullient language, their opulent ways of communicating, their colorful practices in communicating needs and emotions, and their eventual estrangement from the community school that seems unwilling to respect their ways with language or approaches to learning.

Indeed, when these children enter school they quickly fall behind, realizing that their language is neither respected nor understood by the teachers and the school system. As with Henry Louise Gates (1996), the children of Trackton and Roadville quickly are faced with the dilemma of confronting the alienation and loss that accompanies the "narrative of ascent" (p. 95). Heath (1988) examines the transition of Trackton and Roadville kids to the community school and the disaffection they experience. "They see no reason to use the word whose definition was learned in English class last week in either a conversation at home or in an essay for this week's American history class. . . By the time they reach high school, they have written off school as not making any difference for what they want" (p. 47).

The famous writer and historian W.E.B. Dubois (1995) referred the African American's experience as being a "double consciousness" (p. 45), contending that African Americans enter school and other aspects of society seeing themselves not only through their own eyes but the eyes of the white power structure that controls the schools and act as arbiters of right and wrong. It is this double consciousness, this alienation from their own language, that makes traditional grammar instruction both ineffective and unethical. It is the reason we must embrace the paradigm shift that I mentioned earlier in this work.

Descriptive vs Prescriptive Grammar

Instead of teaching grammar, usage, and language as a prescriptive way to reach a uniformity of correctness, we should approach it descriptively, exploring and celebrating the many discourses that students bring to class. In this approach, students are no longer passive recipients of what Freire (1989) called the banking

system of education but actually become collaborators in the learning and sharing of a language that is both social and forever changing. Descriptive grammar does not approach language in terms of right and wrong, because a

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social discourse is never that monolithic. As Robin MacNeil (2005) notes, "it fascinates me how differently we all speak in different circumstances. We have levels of formality as in our clothing" (p. 540). Descriptive grammar instruction, then, examines language in its many manifestations and practical social uses. Like clothing—that is changed to fit a particular context—language changes to fit the dynamic of the moment. In her essay "Grammar Instruction in the Land of Curiosity and Delight," Nancy Laurel Pettersen (2006) touches upon this more dynamic, more organic approach, suggesting that the goal of grammar instruction is to "shift the grounds from good-versus-bad to curiosity" (p. 388). Indeed, what Pettersen contends is that grammar instruction can be both interesting and helpful when it is given a real life context—when it

is taken out of the prescriptive world of right and wrong and discussed for its social appropriateness.

Is it wrong to address the lady at the store in an informal, non-standard English form or should we be more formal? The answer cannot be found in an obscure universal rule, but comes from our knowledge of the lady, our history together, and the image she has of our relationship. Is she herself educated? Does she see us as equals? Would she be offended if we flaunted a very formal English that revealed an advanced education—one that she lacked?

Code-switching and Code-meshing

The idea that students—and all people—use different discourses for different situations is hardly new, but most of our students are not aware of the ideology that permeates language use. To explore the code-meshing we all do and the language variety that is endemic in successful communication allows students to become participants in their exploration of grammar and the more interesting discourse variety that defines all of our existence. As an approach,

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Code-meshing suggests that there is no monolithic way to use language—that there is no correct way to speak or write and that all language is governed by social situations. Language is social. It is political. It is driven by the dynamics of people and setting. We do not speak or write the same language when addressing a group of conservative ministers as when communicating with professional athletes. African American rappers use a different language than classical musicians and we speak differently to our spouse or partner than to our professional associates. “Code-meshing,” writes Vershon Ashanti Young (2011), “begins with the belief that it is possible for people to live their lives free of compulsion to choose between language varieties. It is not necessary to demand total assimilation into one privileged dialect” (p. xii).

This, of course, creates a very different setting for the teaching of language. Instead of trudging through nouns, verbs, and apostrophes—with the teacher telling students implicitly that their home language is wrong, substandard, or sloppy—students are asked to explore the efficacy of grammar and usage in different scenarios. What is the best approach for a review in a pop culture magazine that is targeting Latino Americans? What about the language for a speech that Hilary Clinton is giving to African Americans on Martin Luther King’s birthday? In the process of grappling with such questions, grammar attains a real world authenticity that was long missing when it was reduced to monolithic fiat on the correct way to speak and write. Indeed, as we all know, nothing is going to get done if we can’t communicate effectively with our chosen audience. The author must create a context that gener-

ates trust and credibility. All of this is accomplished through grammatical code-meshing—through the use of grammar for real audiences.

In the Classroom

I like to begin my grammar lessons by introducing the terms that are typically used when discussing dialect difference and then invite students to reflect on the various kinds of English they have heard and used in a typical day. A descriptive approach to grammar starts with the awareness that grammar changes its form to fit the situation. Students must begin to see language descriptively and appreciate its use in a less reductive, deficit—driven way.

For instance, how important is a specific kind of code, dialect, or register to their identity or the situation they confront? To teach grammar through code-meshing, one must teach students the rudiments of language diversity, beginning with terms like *code-meshing*, *crossing-over*, *register*, and *dialect*. With each term, it is rather easy to explain the dynamic situations that lead to code-meshing and the social character of language. I typically define *register* as a form of English used in a particular situation. I ask students to consider the English employed at the gym or night club and then ask

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them to compare it to the language used while talking to their grandparents or a respected older adult. These, I remind students, are registers and are bound by situations. They are dictated by the social context and all of us become adept at employing various registers at a very young age.

Next, we consider *dialect* and I use the clothing metaphor to distinguish register from dialect. A register is like a suit of clothes. One uses it for particular situations but a dialect is like the color of one’s skin—it is with us forever and reflects important aspects of our culture and heritage. While we might try to hide our dialect, it is part of our identity and can never—and should never—be expunged from our lives. This generates a discussion of regional dialects and the perspectives we all hold about the person who speaks with the clipped /r/ sound (Havad yad) (Harvard Yard) and the Southern gentleman who uses words like “yall” and “gitter done.”

Quickly, students begin to see the ideological aspects of language, the preconceived notions we have of certain ways with words and the presumptions we have of the people who use them. I often show a clip of the writer Eastern William Buckley and contrast it with an interview with Southern historian Shelby Foote. In virtually every case, Buckley is seen as more educated, smarter, while Foote is given high marks for honesty.

These, of course, are all perceptions based on long embedded prejudices we have learned from living in American culture, and students quickly realize that language is neither objective nor free of ideology. The assessments we make of

language is dictated by the vision we have of the people who use them. While Shelby Foote was a celebrated author of Civil War books, he is never accorded the same erudition of someone speaking with the clipped /r/ of a Franklin Roosevelt or Buckley.

Next, I ask students to consider the times in their lives they have *crossed over*, a term used to describe a person's switch from one dialect or language to another. When African Americans seek a job in a professional setting, they might cross-over, using words and syntactic constructions that are consistent with academic White English. In the same way, White students are often seen using elements of African American English in an attempt to be included in specific contemporary contexts. In the end, we want students to appreciate the social aspects of language—the notion that language is dynamic, evolving, driven by the pulse of specific situations. To reduce this colorful array of discourses to a black and white, right and wrong, is to misrepresent the entire communication system.

African American English

One should be aware that many African American students are wary about a white teacher discussing their dialect. Indeed, many of my African American students are initially suspicious when I suggest that they speak a distinct dialect and argue that it is slang or bad English and not indicative of their speech. Older African American students are especially reticent and often blame the new generation for the use of

offensive language.

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This, we must remember is the legacy of shame that has been inculcated into African American students—both young and old. The fact that I am exposing this use of double negatives and clipped morphemes—both attributes of African American English—seems like yet another way to

humiliate them in front of their peers. For educators, dialect must be handled with sensitivity, empathy, and the constant reminder that this is a study of difference not inferiority. As I told one student after she claimed that she never learned to speak or write language correctly, all language is not about right and wrong but effective and ineffective.

This, of course, is an ideal teaching moment, as the class can begin to discuss language differences and the fact that all dialects and languages are rule-governed and should not be derided as substandard. Truly effective grammar lessons begin when students come to appreciate the subtle differences in language use, such as the fact that a standard rule in African American English is to change the possessive *their* and make it *they* or that vowels are made long after a consonant as in DEetroit or POLice.

Thus, students begin to learn about the elements of language but through a realistic look at the dialects they use on a daily basis. Megan a white student, talks about her use of African American English when she goes to the bar and wants to “let loose” and be “slutty.” Megan notes her syntactic use of double negatives and the lexical use of words like “bling,” “my bad,” and “sick.” On the other hand, she notes that she would never use the word “nigger” or “nigga” and never adopt phonetic changes such as making vowels long after a consonant, such as in DEetroit.

DeShawn, a single black woman in her early thirties, writes a paper about the language she uses with black and white friends and the politics that operate during their discourses. “For one,” she begins, “my white friends know that they have to be given permission to use certain words, such as ‘nigga,’ which is a sign of endearment. At the same time, almost all of her white friends delete the ‘be verb’ in their speech, constructing sentences like ‘She crazy’ and ‘He after you girl.’” Each relationship is unique and Deshawn ended her paper with a thoughtful discussion of how personal each use of language is.

I have white friends who use almost no Black English and others who speak like my sister. It just depends on how tight we are and what we feel comfortable with. It's interesting because I never examined the specifics of the language I use with different people. “Tight” is an African American word and so is “sick.” Now they become mainstream.

In writing her paper, DeShawn learned a great about grammar but it was rooted in real experiences. She noted the lexical differences of words like *hood*, *ho*, and *smack* and the African American trait of using double negatives and refusing to make subjects and verbs agree.

I see this is a part of who I am, not a set of errors that I need to correct. I see the differences and can respect them as different rather than right and wrong. That's helpful. And when I look at my communication with friends, I realize language is much deeper and more complicated than I ever realized.

A second paper was done by Chester who chose to write a fictional speech for president Obama as he launches his reelection campaign. For the speech, Chester had Obama speaking before a group of African Americans and told the class that he wanted Obama to use some African American English so that he reminded the audience that he was one of them. At the same time, he couldn't use too much or he would alienate the white people who have qualms about voting for a man who is “too black.”

In navigating through this political minefield, Chester peppered a very formal speech with references to W.E.B. Dubois and had Obama briefly code-mesh to African American English, but never allowed him to lose the formal language of the President of the United States. At the end, Obama referred to “the bling and pride that comes with hard work and living right, something that nobody understands better than Black

folk." In doing so, Chester ventured quickly into the realm of another dialect, making his audience that was one of them, while retaining his connection with the white people from whom he also sought votes. This is the challenge of teaching grammar through dialects and difference. It opens doors to our real discourses and opens the eyes of students who have long seen grammar as a subject that has no heartbeat.

Conclusion

In her essay "Op'nin the Door for Appalachia in the Writing Classroom" (2011), Amanda Hayes chronicles the prejudice and derision students typically receive because of the general ignorance about the Appalachian dialect and its ties to the student's culture. Hayes looks at the resolution on Students' Right to Their Own Language put forward by the Conference on College Composition and Communication and the need to respect the languages and dialects of our students. Much like other dialects, Appalachia is treated as incorrect, sloppy, and students enter school trying to expunge their home language and acquire the "superior" language of the school. This, argues Hayes, has resulted in a linguistic prejudice that mirrors how African American English has been treated over the years.

My fellow students were made to use Standard English or be incorrect, leading to a sense that these were their only options. My own students largely shared this experience. Very few of my students had ever heard their dialect described positively by educators, if it was discussed at all. (p. 168)

Clearly, there is much to be done in terms of teaching difference in the language class. What seems evident to me,

If we can liberate this tradition from its hegemonic legacy, we can empower students to both learn about the complexities of their language and to do so while coming to learn about their own ways with words and the way language works socially in our forever changing linguistic and political world.

is that this lesson is best practiced through the time honored tradition of grammar instruction. If we can liberate this tradition from its hegemonic legacy, we can empower students to both learn about the complexities of their language and to do so while coming to learn about their own ways with words and the way language works socially in our forever changing linguistic and political world. "The brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in America never had any interest in educating Black people except as this could serve white purposes," writes James Baldwin (1998, p.70). Teaching grammar descriptively and with the purpose of celebrating the differences in various dialects and registers allows students to see that they are being served as intelligent and unique language users.

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