

# Journal

of



**Assembly for the Teaching  
of English Grammar**  
An Assembly of  
The National Council of Teachers of English

Volume 22

Number 1

Fall 2012

## ATEG Journal Editorial Policy

Founded in 1989, the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG) is an official Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English that provides a national forum for all those interested in teaching grammar. We welcome all views on the role of grammar in our schools.

Published twice a year, *ATEG Journal* seeks to foster discussion of teaching English grammar at all grade levels from kindergarten through graduate school. We solicit articles that describe, analyze, and/or critique any and all aspects of teaching grammar. For example, the following are some suggested topics:

- Classroom practices in the teaching of grammar
- Traditional vs. linguistic approaches to grammar
- Why and how grammar should or should not be taught
- How we handle language varieties in the classroom
- Teacher education and the teaching of grammar
- Integration of grammar with writing, speech, literature, and all forms of discourse

On these matters, we welcome articles, reports from the schools and from teacher education programs, as well as book reviews, textbook evaluations, and other critical responses. Submissions should conform to MLA style and should not exceed 3,500 words. All submissions will be reviewed by two anonymous referees. Please submit your submission as an MS Word .doc or .rtf file sent as an email attachment to:

Amy Benjamin, Co-President  
Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar  
Benjamin.amy@gmail.com

ISSN 2161-900X

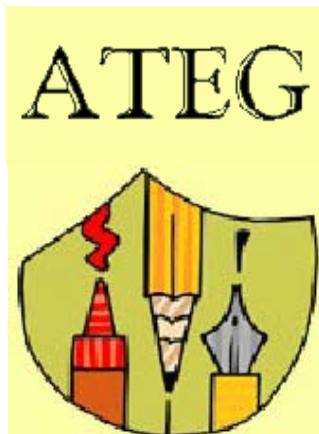
© 2012, ATEG, Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar



THE ATEG JOURNAL, FALL 2012, Vol 22, No. 1

# The ATEG Journal

Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar



An Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English

## **CO-PRESIDENTS**

**Amy Benjamin**

Benjamin.amy@gmail.com

**Sherry Saylor**

saylorb@pgcc.edu

## **EDITOR**

**Geoffrey W. Layton**

writergwl@hotmail.com

## **BOOK REVIEW EDITOR**

**Marshall Myers**

Marshall.Myers@eku.edu



## President's Message – Keynote Address 2011 ATEG Conference

Amy Benjamin, ATEG Co-President

Prince George's Community College ♦ Largo, Maryland ♦ 27 July 2012

Just over a year ago, a ragtag, incohesive band of American citizens began to rattle some cages. But while the “Occupiers” may have ignited new conversations and raised new questions, they did not always state their message explicitly. We ATEG members also want to be heard and challenge the status quo, but as a well-organized, highly principled, and strongly cohesive group with a very specific message:

***We proclaim that teaching grammar is absolutely necessary, indeed even interesting, and certainly not dreary, smug, or pedantic!***

So let's see what we can do to “occupy” the world of English education, issuing calls for “MIC CHECKS!” and insisting that grammar be taught in the classroom. As we know, grammar as a subject to be taught in school has had an uneasy relationship with our parent organization, NCTE. In many ways, we've always felt barely tolerated. They seem to be as nervous around us as the proverbial cat in a room full a' rockin' chairs, perhaps because we challenge precisely what they insist must be defended – the 1985 “Resolution on Grammar Exercises to Teach Speaking and Writing,” the text of which follows:

**Background:** This resolution was prompted by the continuing use of repetitive grammar drills and exercises in the teaching of English in many schools. Proposers pointed out that ample evidence from 50 years of research has shown the teaching of grammar in isolation does not lead to improvement in students' speaking and writing, and that in fact, it hinders development of students' oral and written language. Be it therefore

**Resolution** Resolved that the National Council of Teachers of English affirm the position that the use of isolated grammar and usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students' speaking and writing and that, in order to improve both of these, class time at all levels must be devoted to opportunities for meaningful



listening, speaking, reading, and writing; and that NCTE urge the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage the teaching of grammar rather than English language arts instruction.

This Resolution assumes that grammar instruction is only about learning rules and memorizing definitions. Thus, the term “grammar lessons” triggers an image of worksheets where students go on “grammar hunts” such as:

*Identify the nouns in the sentences below.*

*Identify the correct words in parentheses in the sentences below.*

*Identify the errors in the sentences below.*

The fact is, when this kind of grammar instruction was popular, we were playing something called records on that Victrola doo-hickey, and to most students and teachers, grammar instruction . . . well, grammar instruction reeked. Maybe it reeked of teachers’ resenting having to satisfy some sour-faced department chair to earn the right to get to the juicy stuff – poetry, drama, and novels; or maybe it reeked of some condescending sense of noblesse oblige, bringing civilized “good grammar” to the great unwashed; or worst of all, maybe it reeked of the haughtiness of some self-proclaimed “grammar goddess” using the classroom as her preening salon. And when grammar instruction reeks, we can see how the Resolution could have been regarded as relief and vindication.

But OK now, here’s the thing: “The Resolution” clearly does not view grammar instruction as a means of exploring language, understanding how the human mind learns it, comparing and contrasting English to other languages, or enlightening students about language change and variation through time, place, and circumstance.

In other words, just because the form of instruction might be bad maketh not the teaching of that subject *itself* altogether bad. For example, when I went to school, learning history meant memorizing dates, knowing who took which side in the French and Indian War, the place where the treaty was signed, and the names of New World explorers, but just because that form of history curriculum was “bad” didn’t result in not having *any* history curriculum. Instead of dropping history, methods of teaching it were improved so that today, history instruction focuses on concepts, trends and stories about power, leadership, and change. But



that evolution hasn't happened with grammar. The profession never reworked the way grammar is taught. It's been *don't teach it at all*, or *teach it like it's radioactive*, or *go back to the way it was taught when school desks were nailed to the floor and featured built-in inkwells*. And saying "*We teach grammar through the writing process*" tells us about when, not how, we teach grammar. And it certainly doesn't tell us anything about the "what" or the "why" of grammar instruction.

So what are we left with? Quite simply, we have legions of English and elementary school teachers who couldn't teach grammar if they wanted to because they didn't learn it, because their teachers didn't learn it, because the teachers of their teachers didn't learn it. When I work with K-12 teachers, whether they're elementary school generalists or special education teachers or certified English teachers, I find that they fall into three categories: 1) those who are eager to fill in their own gaps in knowledge of grammar so they can teach it; 2) those who go on the defensive and attack it; and 3) those who are just trying to make themselves invisible lest their lack of knowledge be exposed.

Later in my talk I'm going to address how good grammar instruction actually does have a positive effect on student writing, but now, for argument's sake, let's say we believe, along with the naysayers, that teaching grammar is "all bathwater and no baby," that grammar instruction does not improve writing. Well, I believe that grammar instruction is worthwhile even if it *doesn't* improve writing. Picture a Venn diagram with absolutely no overlap at all between teaching grammar and any improvement in students' writing or speaking. *I say, we should teach grammar anyway!* In fact, there are at least five reasons why explicit grammar instruction is important, aside from any connection to improved writing and speaking:

**1. The Ancients: Maybe they had something there.**

Grammar is one of the seven sisters of the Liberal Arts. For those of you who did not attend college in the Middle Ages, let's review: The Medieval university was centered on the three branches of language study known as the Trivium—rhetoric, logic (or, dialectics), and grammar; and the four branches of mathematical study, known as the Quadrivium—astronomy, music, arithmetic, and geometry. Proponents of a liberal arts education have



never claimed it to be practical, at least not immediately so. The purpose of a liberal arts education was, and is, to prepare the mind to receive and organize learning in other disciplines. In other words, equipped with a liberal arts education, you could learn anything.

Listen to this passage from “Grammar as Liberal Art in Antiquity,” brought to us by Anneli Luhtala from the University of Helsinki (that’s Finland—whose education system is always touted as a model for what we should be doing):

*The earliest references to Latin grammar in the first century BCE associated grammar with the study of virtue and the Liberal Arts. The view of the Liberal Arts as a complete form of education was cherished in Antiquity, by Platonists in particular, and was characterized by unity of study as well as the idea of ascent from a lower, earthly level to higher, divine realities.*

The study of grammar was once considered so sublime that it was associated with mystical learning, even witchcraft. Some etymologists find a connection between the English word *grammar* (which descends from the Greek: *grammatikos*—the learning of letters, or knowledge in general) with the Scottish word *glamour*, both words being associated with the occult. With a pedigree like that, there’s got to be a baby somewhere in that bathwater.

## **2. Reading your brain’s Owner’s Manual**

Studying grammar helps you understand what you already know. I always say: “When you get lost in the forest of grammar, you just have to remind yourself – ‘I already know this.’” Once, after I had taught grammar for several weeks, I asked my high school students to create any kind of project that demonstrated that they had learned grammar. One student created a lovely Power Point series and ended it with: “*Now you know what you already knew about grammar.*” What is the point of understanding what you know intuitively? The point is: Understanding grammar is understanding the importance of patterns, which is a lot like understanding mathematics. A sentence is like a formula, like an equation: a slot-and-filler system.



Let's talk about the value of knowing terminology. Having a name for something facilitates communication, of course, but having a name for something does something more primal: Names allows us to retrieve concepts in our brains. Without being a neuroscientist, I suspect that it's good when you know that a complex system can be reduced to its bare bones, and that's what we learn when we learn grammar. Again, not a neuroscientist, but I think it's a good idea to understand relationships.

### **3. Learning another language**

There is no question that being able to analyze and talk about the grammar of your own language makes it easier to learn another language. Most people say: "I learned English grammar when I had to learn Spanish (or French, or German)." If you are immersed in a second language, let's say Spanish, you will eventually notice on your own that, say, the adjective follows the noun. But when you're learning Spanish not by all-day immersion but by classroom instruction, it's a whole lot easier to just be told upfront that in Spanish the adjective follows the noun, and in English, we're used to having the adjectives precede the noun. And whereas in English, most nouns don't have gender endings, in Spanish, they do, and so do the adjectives that love them.

When we understand how Standard English is rule-governed, we can then understand how dialects are rule-governed. When we understand that, we can learn to respect dialects and stop the ignorant practice of condemning those who speak with a dialect, particularly African-American, Appalachian, Mississippi-Gulf, South Boston, and New Yawk.

Teaching students formal grammar of Standard English won't "improve" their speech if by "improve" we mean getting them to first disparage and then lose their home dialects. Language marks you as an insider or an outsider in a community of people who speak a certain way. We emulate the speech patterns of a group when we want to be accepted by that group. We rebel against the speech patterns of a group as a sign that we are saying "No, thank you!" to their invitation, or to brandish our speech markers as outsiders, as if to say: "I see your club, and I don't want to join it." None of



that deeply human behavior is amenable to circling the correct form of a helping verb on a homework sheet.

Yet, there's a battle to be fought on two fronts. On the one hand, we want no doors to be closed to our students on the basis of their dialects. We want enfranchisement for them. On the other hand, we work toward a society in which racism and other prejudices cannot mask itself behind the false belief that the prestige dialect is inherently "better" than any other dialect.

#### **4. Reading comprehension**

The most important factor in reading comprehension is vocabulary, but syntax also plays a part in difficult reading. When we're reading pre-twentieth century text or poetry, we often encounter inversions: *Away from light steals home my heavy son*. It becomes a lot easier to understand that sentence when we can untangle it: *My heavy son*, the subject, is doing the *stealing away*, the verb phrase, *away from light*, a prepositional phrase that, as prepositional phrases are wont to do, provides information about direction.

We can marshal what we know about grammar when we encounter very long sentences, sentences where the subject doesn't appear until way in: *When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the bands which have connected them to another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and the Laws of God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation*. Knowing that the subject is *a decent respect* helps the reader find the core meaning, backgrounding and foregrounding accordingly for the purpose of making meaning.

To read complex text, the reader must keep track of pronouns. If you can't connect pronouns to antecedents, then you can't understand what you're reading. In easy reading, the pronoun stays close to its mama. In more complex texts, there are lots of intervening words and phrases and even clauses between the pronoun and Mama Referent. In easy text, the nominal that the pronoun represents consists of a single word or a short phrase. In



more complex text, the pronoun can swallow up a lot more text. Asking the right pronoun questions is tremendously helpful in unlocking meaning.

### **5. Amy was good at grammar in the fifth grade.**

If you are reading this, you are either a teacher or else you have way too much time on your hands. If you are a teacher, you're probably not like me. Well, maybe you and I are similar now that we're adults, but you were probably the child who liked, or at least were not actually made physically sick by, school. Now it can be told: I was not in the top reading group. I was not in the honors classes. I was not on the honor roll. Ever. And it wasn't because I didn't sincerely want to be, or that I didn't, as they used to say, apply myself. Oh, I applied myself plenty. As best I could. But applying myself just wasn't getting me into those fields of elementary school glory.

But, somehow, there in the fifth grade, I was given, along with the rest of the class, that little white book known as Warriner's. I was informed that there were different kinds of words—you know, like nouns and verbs. They did certain jobs. They behaved in certain ways. I not only understood this, I found it fascinating. Suddenly, out of nowhere, *I was smart! I was smart!* If I hadn't been given a grammar book and asked to pick out parts of speech, I wouldn't have been good at anything at school. That would have taken my life in an altogether different direction. We should teach grammar because there are other Amy's out there who deserve to find their strengths.

So, those are my reasons for teaching grammar even if there is no intersect on our Venn diagram between teaching grammar and any improvement in students' writing or speaking. To summarize:

- 1) Because the Ancients counted grammar as a liberal art, there must be some essential value to it as a fundamental for learning other things;
- 2) Learning grammar helps you understand how your brain learns through patterns, names, and core principles of complex systems;
- 3) Learning the grammar of your native language helps you learn another language;
- 4) Grammatical knowledge is a tool for reading comprehension, especially of long and literary sentences; and,



5) We reach the brains of some children when we teach grammar; and if we don't teach grammar, we don't reach those children. And you never know who they are.

I don't like that the only way we can give grammar a seat at the table is to promise that we'll see immediate, measurable results in students' writing and speech. Grammar is a feature of the language arts. So is poetry. No one ever conducts studies designed to connect the utility of poetry to a student's speech and writing and then declare that poetry has a detrimental effect because it displaces instruction in the other language arts. Oh, but when it comes to grammar, we must be data-driven! Students might say: "Wow!" or "I never thought of it that way!" or "This is just like math!" or "Hmmm..." But those responses don't count because you can't assess them. Why are there no roses to stop and smell when it comes to learning how language itself is put together?

I'm not pretending that I don't know why grammar is the skunk at the language arts garden party – it's the associations between teaching grammar and reinforcing the prestige dialect of English. In my experience, very few teachers see the world outside that cave. We simply don't see that grammar instruction is fascinating and gives us insight into ourselves and the world – just like poetry!

But now let's come back to that Venn diagram so we can stop pretending that grammar has no application to good writing. We can infuse meaningful grammar lessons in the heart of the writing process. We can teach students about language register and offer explicit instruction about what it means to be formal and informal with our written and spoken language. We can unify grammar, vocabulary, and writing instruction by teaching morphology. And we can teach rhetorical grammar, using Martha Kolln's book of the same title, revealing to students the amazing idea that grammatical choices have rhetorical effects.

So what have the Occupiers accomplished? If nothing else, they have raised awareness. They have people talking. Let's see if we can do the same thing!

*MIC CHECK!*

*What do we want? Grammar! When do we want it? Now!*



## Contents

Keynote Address, 2011 ATEG Conference Amy Benjamin, ATEG Co-President	<i>pages ii-ix</i>
Table of Contents	<i>page x</i>
<i>“Too Easy Grammar”: The History of “Easy” Basic English Grammars</i> Mary M. Murray McDonald, Cleveland State University	<i>pages 1-12</i>
<i>Students Teaching Students: Getting College-Level Students to Pay Attention to Grammar</i> Ruth J. Heflin, Johnson County Community College	<i>pages 13-18</i>
<i>The Art of Grammar: Using Poetry to Restore Grammar’s Glamour</i> Natalie Gerber, SUNY Fredonia	<i>pages 19-36</i>
Book Review: <i>Structural Ambiguity in English</i> . Dallin D. Oaks. Reviewed by Gregg Heacock, Independent Author	<i>pages 37-40</i>
Book Review: <i>Grammar: A Pocket Guide</i> . Susan Behrens. Reviewed by Cornelia Paraskevas, Western Oregon University	<i>pages 41-42</i>
Membership Application	<i>page 43</i>



## “Too Easy Grammar”: The History of “Easy” Basic English Grammars

Mary M. Murray McDonald, Ph.D.

Director, Writing Center and WAC ♦ Cleveland State University

No matter what they are writing, most experienced writers ponder decisions about sentence structure, word choice, *and* grammar—and, they ponder these decisions extensively. From my various vantage points, though, (as Writing Center and WAC Director and grammar instructor at a large urban university), less experienced writers don’t engage in nearly enough pondering. While experienced writers see complexity, those who are less experienced can be lulled by a perception that their grammatical choices are simple, whereas experienced writers see them as difficult. Here are some examples:

Future English teachers remark that they dislike the analytic thinking required in grammar classes; after all, they are English majors because they love to read.

- ♦ In a class on teaching composition, some are astonished by their grammatical mistakes.
- ♦ The same perception occurs in Writing Center tutorials – basic writing students think grammatical mistakes mean a lack of elementary skills, and they wonder if they might have missed the third grade.

Juniors and seniors come in from Writing Across the Curriculum classes with professors’ notes on their papers indicating that they should have made “simple” grammatical corrections. The students look puzzled when these corrections take much more time than they thought. Some fight with tutors, telling them they like the way they phrased a particular sentence even if it contains a grammatical mistake like a missing referent or dangling modifier. Grammar, therefore, poses a contradiction to those teaching writing. On the one hand, individuals can have the perception that grammar is simple and easy. On the other, they confront major writing challenges when grammar becomes incredibly complex.

How did it come to pass, then, that so many students and professors think that the descriptive grammar of written English is easy, when experienced writers



know that ease and precision in writing are usually complex matters that include discerning an audience's needs while at the same time wrestling grammar, syntax, and vocabulary into a mutually advantageous working relationship?

Most of us who teach the descriptive grammar of written English know that a variety of analytical tasks are involved—tasks very different from the fluid thinking involved in writing a first draft or the integration of various resources into a research paper. Many of these analytical tasks are somewhat simple, but they vary depending on what part of grammar is being considered, and, in English, the sheer volume of what to know can be overwhelming. Nevertheless, we confront an entrenched idea of the simplicity of grammar at a time when teaching grammar is a high priority due to a variety of standardized tests across many states and the nation.

Historically speaking, texts that tout the terms “easy” or “simple” concentrate on parts of speech, and anything that can't be considered one of those parts of speech is gradually lost. That is not to say that simplifying the grammar of written English is a bad thing. Writers like Martha Kolln, Brock Haussamen, and Cindy Vitto have addressed this complexity in their respective books *Understanding English Grammar*, *Grammar Alive!*, and *Grammar by Diagram*. It is important, however, to look at the history of “easy” in basic grammar books to see the changes that have influenced us to this day.

In his book *The War Against Grammar*, David Mulroy writes that the first simplification of English grammar arose from a great need—the influence of Erasmus's ridiculing scholars who made grammar esoteric and thereby inaccessible, futile for teaching students the classical authors (53-55). What actually did help students learn was the simplified grammar written by William Lily modeled on Donatus's text that emphasized the parts of speech. Mulroy claims that the greatest English writers were fed on this text. However, they were also fed by practice in imitation, translating complicated sentences back and forth between English and Latin.

If grammar in Lily's day was too complex to be taught until simplified, today it is simplified in such a way that its nuances are lost. Using the work of scholars Ian Michael, Linda A. Mitchell, Gerald A. Padley, Ivan Poldauf, and



Emma Vorlat, I examined English grammar texts (from R.C. Alston's bibliography), isolated those with the concept of "easy" in the title, and visited rare book libraries. I found that while the "easy grammar" designation appears in the late 1700s and in our own time, it does not appear to the same degree in the 1800s. Its appearance is linked to the goals instructors have of helping students obtain employment, just as Lily focused his simple grammar on the learning of classical texts. This focusing of a text on the goal of employment (both in the 1700s and today)—instead of on preparing students to read literature (Latin in the 1700s)—created the perception that students now have today. The idea that grammar is easy comes from a parts of speech emphasis that occluded practice in syntax and the reading of complex writing. In the nineteenth century, accuracy, not simplicity, was valued and "easy" grammars disappeared and parsing books took their place. Our goal of teaching descriptive grammar can be accomplished with "easy" grammars if we augment them by emphasizing the need for practice, along with the understanding of form versus function and complex models as do Kolln, Haussamen and others.

### **Early Grammar Texts: Simplifying the Complex**

As early as 1605, Francis Bacon identified the genre of popular grammars, as opposed to theoretical ones. Popular grammars were for the "speedy attainment of language" (Padley, *Latin* 155). Tomasso Campanella (1638), another respected Latin grammarian, also separated grammars into *civilis*, resting on the authority of the best authors; and *philosophica*, based on reason (Padley, *Latin* 161). According to Murray Cohen, whether a student in the 1700s learned practical or philosophical grammar was a question of social standing. The poor often received the practical, the rich the philosophical (68).

Practical English grammars were fashioned after three sets of authorities: ultimately the Greek and Latin grammarians such as Donatus, Priscian, and Varro (Donatus especially had great influence); more locally the Latin text writers Lily, Linacre, and others; and finally the English grammarians Lowth, Ash, Priestly and a few others (Padley, *Trends* 3). Authors of easy basic grammar texts had their own knowledge of the standardized classics and sought to condense more



famous grammars of English. Their key ideas about language shaped how they presented grammar. “Easy” for them meant focusing on words, not on the interconnections among meaning in syntax, words, and audience. According to Ian Michael, that these grammars were only mildly different from each other can be understood as follows:

The hardening of categories, the increasing autonomy of logic and rhetoric, and the lack of any science of language, forced on grammar a preoccupation with classification and analysis of words alone. Once logic and rhetoric were conceived as disciplines distinct from grammar, fresh patterns of interaction were unlikely. Grammar was doomed to be trivial: a necessary descriptive procedure in the elementary study of a foreign tongue, but irrelevant, sterile and dull when applied to a vernacular. (490)

He says that grammars in the 1700s were marked by “crass stability with constant internal restlessness and change” (517).

Three other cultural phenomena shaped our current day exercise-filled grammars. First, authors of practical or reduced grammars were not grammarians (Vorlat 10), but teachers reacting to the painful learning process, first of Latin and later English. “Easy” basic grammar authors defended the vernacular as a speedy means of learning Latin (Poole 1646; Johnson 1765) and as presenting the “beauty of the English tongue” (Anonymous 1733; Sedger 1798). The cultural belief that Latin was grammar (Michael 492) halted any innovations beyond those within the Latin framework, of which there are many. This belief also coincides with the concept of a universal grammar: knowing one grammar prepared a person to learn them all. Hence, making a vernacular grammar easy (when there is only one grammar) means ignoring the differences between English (a word-order language) and Latin (a case-ending language). The pragmatic text writers assumed they could do no more than adapt or reorganize the above sources. As Stanisford (1797) claimed, “the subject of grammar affords little or no room for originality.” Other authors like Bingham (1785) and Fenning (1771) clearly admit that there is nothing new in their texts; they are simply



Lowth rearranged for specific readers. Ash (1774) wrote *Grammatical Institutes* solely as an introduction to Lowth.

Second, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English was believed to have no grammatical structure since it was the vernacular (Padley, *Trends* 170). Basic text grammarians opposed this belief; Dearborne (1795) claimed that “despite learned men’s beliefs, English can be reduced to rules” and that “incompetencies are due to a lack of simplicity.” Ash (1774) also stated this position. And third, the pressing need for “easy” texts encouraged the growth of this genre. Newbery, known as a publisher of children’s books, wrote *Grammar Made Easy* (1746), *Chronology Made Familiar and Easy* (1747), *Geography Made Easy* (1793), *Logic Made Familiar and Easy* (1777), and *Poetry Made Familiar and Easy* (1748). Stanisford (1797) also wrote *Arithmetic Made Easy* and *Bookkeeping Made Easy*. Students of that day were women and “the self-taught.” Much like our self-help books (some pocket-sized too), easy introductions to more learned subjects provided some transition for a changing populace. However, readers of these texts had a greater need to learn many languages rather than to write English (Poldauf 77). Ease and simplicity were also sanctioned by Lowth causing a trend that we see again today.

The students’ belief that grammar is a matter of word classes alone comes from these easy grammars: Padley writes that English grammarians’ “humanistic” Latin-derived notions of grammar as a word classification scheme caused them to create grammatical classifications for things that were really semantic, like the distinction between the words shall and will (*Trends* 150). These concerned teacher-text writers were not afraid to confront current pedagogy, but the Latin framework tied their linguistic hands. Two of the mainstays they used – Lily and Lowth – provide an even closer look at this genre.

### **Staples of the Easy English Grammar: Lily and Lowth**

The foundation of William Lily’s grammar, *A Short Introduction* (1509), rests on Linacre’s *De Structura*, which was “the most erudite Latin grammatical work of its date in England” (Padley, *Latin* 23). Three things established Lily’s grammar as a standard reference for over two hundred years: Lily’s being a pupil



of Linacre, his position as Headmaster of St. Paul's, and the royal sanction his text enjoyed (Barbour 488). John Colet, Dean of St. Paul's, collaborated with Lily in writing an introduction to the grammar which is seen in the first fifty pages of the text. Padley (*Latin*) says Lily's rule-based approach to Latin "contributed perhaps more than any other factor to the belief that Latin consisted of an inviolable set of rules with an existence independent of anything actually written in the language" (147). Lily, in Vorlat's terms, "lays the foundation for grammars of the vernacular in English" (8).

Lily held sway for two hundred years by official decree. Lowth's influence can still be seen in today's texts, over two hundred years later. Cohen refers to Lowth (1762) as "the most cited, most praised, and most imitated grammar of mid-century" (83). As Dennis Baron explains, Lowth framed himself as an authority who provided rules and examples against which to check correctness: "he sees the grammar book as the highest of linguistic authorities and he dispenses with judgments on the structure of English *ex cathedra*, without recourse to any justification based on reason, analogy, the historical development of the language, or even other grammarians" (142). Lowth cannot be seen outside of his historical context, however. As Linda A. Mitchell writes, "[Lowth] comes after a century of discussion about universal language, and reaps the benefits of his predecessors. His grammar book is a result of many decades of successes and failures, of experimentation and controversy, by those who came before him" (130).

Well aware of the language issues of his day, Lowth based his text, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, on tenets of universal grammar, patterns from "good authors," and specific philosophical grammars (Gleason 69-70). Lowth's discriminating use of universal grammar gives him further credibility. Instructors were referred to Harris' text *Hermes: or a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Universal Grammar* (1751) and to Wilkins for philosophical questions.

What made Lowth's theory-driven text eminently reducible was his dogmatic application of the principles he chose to follow. Initially, he cites the need for his text by listing errors of such notable authors as Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Addison, and Dryden – even the *King James Bible* and the *Book of Common Prayer* were not spared. Placing logic above usage, but still affirming common



patterns in classic authors, Lowth formed rules and “endowed them with all the authority he could muster” (Gleason 70). The combination of his language and literature scholarship earned for him the position of language authority. When he truncated theory in deference to easy and simplicity (Lowth xiv), he was respected for doing so and imitated. Mitchell argues that the use of universal grammar “gave impetus to the codification and standardization of the English language and a kind of prescriptivism that we see to this day” (131).

Basic easy grammars were displaced by parsing books and grammars that emphasized “correctness.” Parsing books first appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century and remained popular throughout the first half of the twentieth century (Gleason 73). As “correctness” became a higher standard, grammars became increasingly more detailed and were not called “simple” or “easy” anymore. Allen notes that school grammars took on a new goal of increasing social status (51) succeeding the earlier goal of language learning.

### **An Example of When “Easy” Causes Distortion**

As an example of how confusing the word-class-based easy basic grammar texts are to describe English, let us examine how the subjunctive mood is treated in the early easy texts through the 1700s and up to today. The subjunctive does not fit a word class because it is a semantic category.

<b>Text Title and Year</b>	<b>Definition – Subjunctive</b>	<b>Emphasis: Word Class, Syntax, Semantics</b>
<i>Bref Grammar for English</i> 1586 (earliest surviving printed grammar of English)	Always has a conjunction set before nominative case and depends on other verbs in sentences whether it comes before or after it	Word class emphasis on which words identify the use of the subjunctive
<i>The English Grammar . . . Being the Easiest, Quickest, and Most Authentic Method . . .</i> 1693	“Subjunctive and Optative – the same with the Indicative, only conjunctions and adverbs are adjoined to them”	Word class emphasis on which words identify the use of the subjunctive
<i>The English Accidence</i> 1733	“Optative,” “wish,” “sub-joined to a conjunction, adjective, or an interrogative becoming indefinite”	Word class emphasis on which words identify the use of the subjunctive



<i>English Grammar Reformed to a Small Compass and Easy Method</i> 1738	"Moods are expressed by auxiliary signs"	Word class emphasis on which words identify the use of the subjunctive
<i>A New Grammar: Being the Most Easy Guide . . .</i> 1750 (35 editions to 1800)	"The English tongue doesn't have any moods." "Use helping verbs to express other Times of Verbs."	Word class emphasis on which words identify the use of the subjunctive
<i>The First, Easy Rudiments of Grammar</i> 1765	"subjoined to some verb that went before or some conjunction"; models given; "in this we express Desire or Wish"	Word class and semantics
<i>A New Introduction to English Grammar: in the Simplest and Easiest Method Possible</i> 1766	No definition, just examples	
<i>A New Grammar of the English Language; or An Easy Introduction . . .</i> 1771	No moods because there are no endings to identify them, but auxiliary verbs make use of 5 moods. Subjunctive is a condition supposing ("if").	Word class emphasis
<i>The Practical Grammar: or, An Easy Way to Understand English</i> 1774	Explains use of verbs without labels; no mention of the subjunctive	
<i>The Young Lady's Accidence; or, A Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar</i> 1785	The word "if" denotes subjunctive	Word class emphasis
<i>A Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar</i> 1786	"expresses the action or being as possible or impossible, fit or unfit, doubtful or uncertain" "for the most part it depends on some other verb or has an auxiliary coming before it"	Both word class and semantics
<i>A Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar</i> 1797	"drops personal terminations in 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> persons of the (present and perfect tense) and the 2 <sup>nd</sup> person of other tenses; known by being Conditional, having <u>if</u> , <u>though</u> , or some other conjunction before it"	Both word class and semantics



<i>A Short but Comprehensive Grammar, Rendered Easy and Simple . . .</i> 1797	“expresses action in a doubtful manner; a conjunction is commonly placed before it; also expresses power, will, inclination, obligation of doing an action”	Semantics before word class
<i>English Grammar Made Easy to the Teacher and Pupil</i> 1822 (12 <sup>th</sup> ed)	“represents a thing under a condition, supposition, or contingency, expressed or understood, and by another verb; as ‘If he were good’”	Semantics emphasis along with a word class emphasis
<i>English Grammar Simplified</i> 1946	“an action or state supposed or imagined”	Semantics emphasis

In a study of grammar texts from 1784 to 1944, authors Henry L. Smith, Kathleen Dugdale, B.F. Steele, and R.S. McElhinney found that the percentage of pages given to the subjunctive over this period of time in English grammar texts ranged from 32 percent to 1 percent; after 1918, they found that mood was “scarcely mentioned” (67-68).

Time Period	1784-1824	1825-1865	1865-1905	1905-1935	All
Percent of pages on mood	32	42	15	1	15

### Conclusion

Grammar can be made “too easy” when its presentation concentrates solely on parts of speech. The history of “easy” basic grammars is linked to the goal of helping a wide array of students obtain employment, both in the 1700s and today. While a noble goal, this emphasis excluded complicated syntax and semantic overlays that could have been addressed through practice (such as sentence combining or imitation) or excellent models of writing. Teaching students the history of grammar can help them grow in accepting its complexities and making the myriad decisions required to meet the challenges of communicating effectively with their intended audiences.



Works Cited, Primary Sources

- Aicken, John. *The English Grammar . . . Being the Easiest, Quickest, and Most Authentic Method of Teaching It by Rules and Pictures*. 1693. Menston, England: Scholars Press, 1967.
- Ash, John. *Grammatical Institutes; or, an Easy Introduction to Dr. Lowth's English Grammar, Designed for the Use of Schools*. 1763. Leeds, England: Scholars Press, 1967.
- Bingham, Caleb. *The Young Lady's Accidence: or, A Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar*. 1785. Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1981.
- Bullokar, William. *Bref Grammar for English*. 1586. Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977.
- Carter, John. *A Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar*. Ipswich: G. Jermyn, 1797.
- Comley, John. *English Grammar Made Easy to the Teacher and Pupil*. Philadelphia: Kimber and Sharpless, 1822.
- Dearborn, Benjamin. *The Colombian Grammar or, an Essay for Reducing a Grammatical Knowledge . . .* Boston: Samuel Hall, 1795.
- The English Accidence, Being the Grounds of Our Mother Tongue: or, a Plaine and Easy Introduction to an English Grammar*. 1733. Leeds, England: Scholars Press, 1967.
- Fenning, Daniel. *A New Grammar of the English Language; or An Easy Introduction to the Art of Speaking and Writing English with Propriety and Correctness: The Whole Laid Down in the Most Plain and Familiar Manner*. 1771. Menston, England: Scholars Press.
- Fisher, Ann. *A New Grammar: Being the Most Easy Guide to Speaking and Writing the English Language Properly and Correctly*. 1750. Menston, England: Scholars Press, 1968.
- Houghton, John. *A New Introduction to English Grammar: In the Simplest and Easiest Method Possible*. London: J. Cotton and J. Eddowes, 1766.



- Irish, Frank. *Grammar and Analysis Made Easy and Attractive by Diagrams*. Antwerp: Eclectic Press, 1884.
- J., G. An Easy Introduction to the English Language. Bristol: The Author, 1796.
- Johnson, Samuel. *The First Easy Rudiments of Grammar, Applied to the English Tongue*. New York: J. Holt, 1765.
- Lowe, Solomon. *English Grammar Reformed into a Small Compass and Easy Method . . .* London: The Author, 1737.
- Lowth, Robert. *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*. London: J. Hughes, 1762.
- Newbery, John. *Grammar Made Familiar and Easy to Young Gentlemen, Ladies, and Foreigners . . .* London: The Author, 1746.
- Poole, Joshua. *The English Accidence: or, a Short, Plaine, and Easie Way, for the More Speedy Attainment of the Latine Tongue by the Help of English*. 1646. Leeds, England: Scholar Press, 1967.
- Sedger, John. *The Structure of the English Language: Exhibiting an Easy and Familiar Method of Acquiring a Grammatical Knowledge of its Constituent Parts*. 1798. Menston, England: Scholars Press, 1970.
- A Short and Easy Introduction to English Grammar*. London: J. Buckland, C. Dilly, and A. Cleugh, 1786.
- Smetham, Thomas. *The Practical Grammar: or, An Easy Way to Understand English*. London: J. Cooke, 1774.
- Stanisford, Daniel. *A Short but Comprehensive Grammar, Rendered Simple and Easy*. Boston: Manning and Loring, 1797.

#### Works Cited – Secondary Sources

- Alson, R.C. *A Bibliography of the English Language from the Invention of Printing to the Year 1800*. Ilkey: Janus Press, 1974.
- Baron, Dennis E. *Grammar and Good Taste*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.
- Barbour, F.A. “The History of English Grammar Teaching.” *Educational Review* 12 (1896): 487-507.



- Cohen, Murray. *Sensible Words: Linguistic Practice in England 1640-1785*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.
- Gleason, H.A., Jr. *Linguistics and English Grammar*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.
- Michael, Ian. *English Grammatical Categories and the Tradition to 1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Mulroy, David. *The War Against Grammar*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2003.
- Mitchell, Linda A. *Grammar Wars*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2001.
- Padley, G.A. *Grammatical Theory in Western Europe 1500-1700: The Latin Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- . *Grammatical Theory in Western Europe 1500-1700: Trends in the Vernacular Grammar I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Poldauf, I. "On the History of Some Problems of English Grammars before 1800." *Prague Studies in English* 45 (1948): 1-322.
- Salmon, Vivian. *The Study of Language in Seventeenth Century England*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins B. V., 1979.
- Smith, Henry L., Kathleen Dugdale, B.F. Steele, and R.S. McElhinney. *One Hundred Fifty Years of Grammar Textbooks*. Bloomington, IN: Bulletin of the School of Education, Indiana University. Vol. 22 (1946).
- Vitto, Cindy. *Grammar by Diagram*. 2nd ed. Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2006.
- Vorlat, Emma. *The Development of English Grammatical Theory 1586 1737 with Special Reference to the Theory of Parts of Speech*. Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1975.



## Students Teaching Students: Getting College-Level Students to Pay Attention to Grammar

Ruth J. Heflin, PhD ♦ Adjunct Associate Professor  
Johnson County Community College ♦ Overland Park, KS

I was probably like most high school students – I didn't pay much attention to grammar or to the language that describes how grammar works. To be honest, grammar mystified me until I began to teach it as a graduate teaching assistant while working on my master's degree. So I shouldn't have been surprised, then, when my college students also had difficulty learning grammar as I tried to teach it to them, years after finishing my doctorate.

However, I was given an opportunity unique to many college faculty: for two years in a row, I taught three sets of honors students in back-to-back semesters of Composition I and II, classes that became a kind of living laboratory for my experiments in grammar instruction. My most startling discovery was that my Composition II students continued to commit the five major errors (sentence fragments, enjambed sentences, missing or misplaced commas, possessives, and vague description) that I had so diligently taught them to avoid in Composition I. The conclusion was disturbing: if even honors students could not fully grasp grammar, what chance would other students have learning to avoid these common writing errors?

So I asked them why they had not retained the information I had taught them in Composition I, and the two most common answers that seemed to speak to the real issues at hand were that:

1. Students compartmentalize information, clearly believing that Comp II is a whole separate course from Comp I, so the students do not consciously carry over the knowledge from one class to another; and that
2. Grammar, in the grand scheme of things, seems unimportant, not worth retaining in their operating memories.



I discussed the issue with the students, with colleagues, and with administrators, but few people had any concrete suggestions for how to improve student appreciation of and retention of good grammatical skills.

My big insight came after a particularly productive peer workshop, where students read and wrote comments on each other's essays in response to special workshop questions I had developed over the years. I watched the students as they avidly read what their peers had said about their essays. Some smiled. Some asked their peers who had work-shopped the essay for more clarity about what they meant. And some asked me what I thought about what their peers had said about their essays.

Then it dawned on me. Why not have them teach each other how to identify and fix grammar issues?

The very next class period, I assigned each student to one of five groups for these specific grammatical weakness, trooped them over to the library, and had them research their assigned writing error. They had a week to prepare a presentation to the class on how to identify and fix each weakness.

During the presentations, the students sometimes fumbled around for explanations about why something was grammatically weak or for the specific grammar language that was used to label the weakness. These weaker groups tried to get me to teach the lesson for them, but I forced them to use their notes, emphasizing the importance of solid research before giving presentations. While some struggled, the positive results were noticeable with the very next set of essays.

What was different from having the students teach each other as opposed to a teacher lecturing and demonstrating the grammatical issues? I believe several factors are involved, but the three most important ones are:

1. Entertainment or "Schadenfreude"

When a teacher lectures, students' minds doze; when peers try to teach, fun ensues because students watch avidly, often hoping their peers will make mistakes;



## 2. Sympathy and/or Competitive Spirit

Students don't care how hard an instructor has worked to prepare a demonstration on proper grammar, but they do care how their peers come across because "Hey, I'm next!" so they often pay closer attention to someone whose anxieties and troubles mirror their own, with some students clearly hoping to do better than their peers did;

## 3. Language Use

College professors often use GrammarSpeak to discuss writing, whereas students use more common language, and often current idioms and slang. Since students have to be able to teach these foreign concepts to their peers, they often work hard to make the concept make sense to themselves before they present the ideas to their peers.

When I began teaching online, I resorted to providing detailed, color-coded feedback to point out as clearly as I could the grammatical errors students committed in their essays. I always felt a sense of dismay that my time was being wasted when some students would submit their "revised" essays for the Portfolio that still showed my color-coding and, occasionally, my written comments in the essay. Eventually, I was able to use Turnitin grading tools to put bubble marks to point out essay weaknesses, but I discovered that most students rarely paid attention to those, either.

In frustration, I borrowed a colleague's ideas. The instructor, who was not an English major although she taught composition online, had tried to make games out of studying grammar, and had developed online class discussion forums where students had to identify and provide examples of the grammar issue of the week in class discussion.

I did not think her concept went far enough, though, so in my first Grammar Games discussion forums, I had them find sentences with "Errors of the Week" and correct them. Unfortunately, I ended up having to correct misconceptions more often than I should have, until one thoughtful (maybe she was lazy?) student posted a grammar webpage link into the discussion as her participation for that week. As I examined the "BigDog" website (<http://aliscot.com/bigdog/>), I became enthralled. Here was a fun way to present proper grammar to my



students. Another student followed the other student's example, and posted a "ChompChomp" grammar game (<http://www.chompchomp.com/>), and finally, my online students began engaging in real discussions about what kind of instruction works best for them to learn grammatical concepts.

As I was still teaching occasional onground classes, I was able to conduct an experiment with one of my face-to-face, computer-assisted composition classes. I divided the class into three teams, with two teams competing at a time. The third team remained at their seats while the other two competed from the front of the room. I brought up the *ChompChomp* website on our large screen at the front of the room and presented them with the grammatical issue of the week. I offered candy to the winners, but I do not think the candy is what made them compete so fiercely. In fact, while the two teams competed in the front of the room, I was delighted to discover that the third team, instead of being on Facebook or MySpace, as was their usual wont when given down time in the class, were following along on their individual computers, guessing at the answers before the teams up front often did. The students found the *ChompChomp* cyber-prizes so much fun that they often deliberately missed the correct answer to see what the incorrect prize was.

Over the last six years of playing Grammar Games, my students have found hundreds of good grammar websites, from ones meant for children or people just learning English to much more challenging websites, with new grammar websites continuing to appear. One website many of my students like is GrammarGirl, < <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/>>, because she provides a spoken audio-clip of each lesson, as well as the written one, and some students find that the duel delivery helps them retain the information better.

One of the best websites available for college-level learning is Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL), <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/sitemap/>. Their Plagiarism webpage, <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/930/01/>, which shares links to activities to help students understand what plagiarism is, for instance, is now linked in my online classes.

About half of the students in a typical composition class seem to find both the online and onground methods useful for sharing grammar issues including



information on how to find and fix them. Yet there are still students who struggle with the concepts in their own writing.

The big disconnect that I have not yet been able help these students leap over is the difference between identifying an isolated problem in a quiz and being able to identify the same problem in an existing essay. Most of the time, they can find the errors more easily in someone else's writing than they can in their own.

Capital Community College Foundation, <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>, however, provides some of the most challenging grammatical quizzes along with a plethora of other writing tools for college-level students. Their webpage on Sentence Combining Skills, [http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/combining\\_skills.htm](http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/combining_skills.htm), which many of my students have struggled with, is one of their many paragraph-level grammar explanations and quiz sets. While there may be other websites out there that challenge students in such a practical, hands-on writing format, Capital Community College's paragraph-level quizzes are the kinds of exercises most of my students need to help them translate these concepts from quiz to essay drafting.

Sometimes, students demand to know why they need to work on what they perceive as such rudimentary skills in a college class. My initial response is that everyone can use a refresher exercise on what the grammar rules are, but I also ask them to read my Turnitin grading comments very carefully, urging them to print off or save the essay after it has been graded, so they can work to solve whatever editing or stylistic issues they exhibit in their writing. Most students, especially those straight out of high school, are not used to such in-depth grading comments on their essays—a major issue because, unless grammar skills are taught through actual writing practice, most people do not retain the reasoning behind the grammatical standard. One major step that might help at the high school level is having students listen to their writing read aloud, which often helps them hear the poor sentence structure and word choice. Reading someone else's essay aloud to the writer can also help make both the reader and the writer more conscious of how the words sound and are perceived.

The student comments that come later in a term or semester during the Grammar Games tend to voice a renewed appreciation for the chance to better



understand grammar concepts, and some appreciation for having the chance to bookmark or otherwise save valuable grammar tools from the internet. Several students reported that they began sharing some of the grammar finds with their co-workers, and at least three students in the last three years have relayed to me that their own improved writing skills earned them promotions on the job. One non-traditional student, who is, interestingly enough, an investment banker, told me that his improved written communication skills were the “best investment” he has ever made.

Should grammar be taught at the college level? Of course!

But the assignments cannot be stale or simply rote lessons taught by an instructor who already knows the rules. Students should teach other students. What better way to cement a lesson than to have to teach it to someone else?



## The Art of Grammar: Using Poetry to Restore Grammar's Glamour

Natalie Gerber, PhD

Associate Professor of English ♦ SUNY Fredonia, NY

Typically, grammar does not excite student minds. Part of the challenge may be the prescriptive nature of school grammars, part may be the difficulty in proving the efficacy of grammar instruction. Be that as it may, few students today can distinguish different parts of speech, let alone parse grammatical structures. It was ten years ago, students told me anecdotally, that grammar dropped out of their high-school curriculum; similar informal surveys today reveal that it has even largely dropped out of required college-level composition courses. However, now that grammar has cropped up on the dreaded SAT, grammar will undoubtedly find its way back into the curriculum, leaving a generation of teachers and students scrambling to make up for lost time.

And yet the disappearance of grammar from the curriculum is not a mystery. As one of my graduate students has clarified through a remarkable project, the current situation has deep historical roots, not only in NCTE debates dating to the 1960s, but in the original association of grammar with the teaching of Latin in the Renaissance. Debates over methodology led eventually to the erosion of comprehensive grammar instruction, in the face of both the lack of proven efficacy for grammar teaching and the increasing demands placed on instructors for classroom time (Szimuglia).<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Recent Master's-degree recipient and high-school English teacher Jill Szimuglia has shown how debates over teaching grammar today recapitulate centuries' long historical debates over grammar instruction in English. In brief, as histories of the English language attest, the teaching of grammar was originally associated with Latin, which was the language of prestige in pre-modern England. Thus, Latin grammar emphasized issues of style as well as correctness. When English began to be taught, however, grammar came to have quite prescriptive, even negative connotations: the first grammar books in English were designed to meet the requests of the lower classes for rule books to improve their English as a means of attaining upward social mobility. Hence, the demand was for simple, clear-cut rules that could be quickly memorized, mastered, and applied, not for complex or self-conscious reflections on why a language possesses the rules it does (Millward 226). Stylistic felicities and such nicer points were passed over, as they are today, in favor of immediate goals.



How to teach grammar effectively is, of course, the million-dollar question, and any teacher with innovative ideas on the subject will be in great demand. This paper does not propose a systematic method for teaching grammar, but it does demonstrate a novel approach to the subject matter as something more than an English professor's mania for correctness. This paper reaches back to the etymological connection of *grammar* and *glamour* (Crystal 136): it draws upon poets' and songwriters' masterful games with grammar to argue for the pleasure of playing with language in a way that transcends mere correctness and enters into expressiveness or expressivity. In essence it proposes how we can use—and teach—grammar not only as a prescriptive mechanism for conveying meaning but also as an expressive device for revealing feeling, perception, or, even surprise. Since we are so conditioned to expect certain grammatical habits, when they are either frustrated or used exceedingly well, as the examples herein demonstrate, they affect us deeply. Whether or not we can name these small, almost intangible shifts, we register them subconsciously, and they make us attend more closely to the content they convey. Tweaking such expectations is thus a great and playful way to focus attention on the art of grammar; it also encourages a productive play with inherent grammatical rules that raises the imagination of what language can do, and how grammar can help us do it. Instead of saying we don't have the words for that, we can find the grammar that gives the words the new enhanced meaning—and make explicit our intuitions about grammar in the process.

Such an approach is also, I think, a great way to motivate interest in matters routinely perceived as dull—the difference between nouns and pronouns or simple and compound nouns—by showing what a mastery of language can make of the implicit information encoded in these categories. It even shows how one can bend the rules, in a meaningful way, and so suggests to students their own adventures in grammar.

---

(*footnote 1 cont'd*) Today, we see the issues over the efficacy of rule-bound pedagogy vs. learning grammar in the context of literature (which includes stylistic awareness) at the heart of debates over how—and whether—to teach grammar at all.



A rather crass but handy example will help to demonstrate grammar's potential for lively provocation. It also sets the stage for our examination of grammar via the consummate practice of poets. It is a line from burlesque that the poet e. e. cummings loved to quote, which goes, "Would you hit a woman with a child? No, I'd hit her with a brick" (cummings *Six Nonlectures* 64).

Not to belabor the point, but the joke turns upon the way that the phrase "with a child" differs grammatically from the phrase, "with a brick." "A woman *with a child*" is a noun phrase and an object of the verb. "With a brick," however, is an adverbial element that expresses the instrument that one would hit the woman with. The comic energy thus foregrounds at least two subtle grammatical lessons for students: one, the fact that adjacent lexical elements do not necessarily modify each other; and, two, the way in which the same identical lexical material (here, a preposition followed by a noun phrase) can serve two completely different grammatical functions in a sentence, thus complicating our sense of grammar by showing that part of speech and grammatical function often diverge.

In such an attention-grabbing one-liner as this, it's the shock that registers and so the moral deviation. But one can also show how well respected writers use grammatical surprise more subtly to create a revelation in speech over the course of a longer composition. The examples below demonstrate these delightful habits for two major grammatical categories, nouns and verbs.

### **Nouns, Nouns, Nouns**

One of my favorite lines of poetry is from the Robert Hass poem "English: An Ode." It describes the girlfriend of an ornithologist who cannot quite muster his enthusiasm for telling one feathered creature from another. For every distinct species her boyfriend sees, she only sees – and mutters under her breath – "*bird, bird!*" ("English"). I suspect this is how many students feel about nouns, nouns, nouns. Failing to sense any qualitative or experiential difference between competing nominal forms or between a noun and its pronominal substitute, students lack interest in the fine distinctions that our grammar texts make between them. Yet the poems below open the door to these differences,



suggesting just how much expressive interest lies in a mere shift in grammatical subcategory.

*Compounding Perceptions, Part I: Compound Nouns vs. Noun Phrases*

Wallace Stevens' poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," could also be considered "thirteen ways of looking at a compound noun" (Hass "Conversations"). The poem somewhat obviously plays upon the difference in meaning and stress pattern between a compound noun and a noun phrase comprised of the same lexical material: that is, between a BLACKbird (a compound noun and a particular type of bird) vs. a black BIRD (a noun phrase and any bird that happens to be black in color). Stevens' play also points to deeper recognitions about the difference between these two grammatical categories. The first, the compound noun, signals entity: it presents the thing itself, as it is. In contrast, the noun phrase, expresses identity or description: it conveys the thing as it is seen and rendered by the viewer's point of view. The first does not change, whereas the second does. In the poem, this existential dilemma is dramatized as the poet's desire to capture the essence of a BLACKbird is helplessly deflected into serial attempts to describe the physical appearance of a black BIRD.

The poem never uses the adjective "black" or the noun phrase "black bird," yet the poem's repeated emphasis upon actual and implied colors (e.g., the "green light" of section 10 and the suggested blackness of evening and of bare cedar-limbs in contrast with the whiteness of "snowy" mountains and snow-covered limbs throughout the text) makes the implied contrast between "*the* blackbird" and a "black bird" integral to the life of the poem; of course, the seventh stanza comes closest to pointing out these distinctions with its explicit contrast between "golden birds" and "*the* blackbird" (emphasis added), where even the singularity of the blackbird signals its inimitability:

O thin men of Haddam,  
Why do you imagine golden birds?  
Do you not see how the blackbird



Walks around the feet  
Of the women about you?  
(Stevens 245)

This slippage between apprehending the singular entity of the mysterious figure of the blackbird and listing what we reasonably can know of this creature by relying upon our sense perceptions—its description via its contrasts in color, movement, shape, and action vis-à-vis its surroundings or other creatures—is what leads to the thirteen serial attempts to penetrate beyond its surface to the unknowable essence of the bird itself. It is also what provides the occasion for meditating upon the distinction between the experiential knowledge conveyed by a noun phrase, which provisionally presents the thing as it is seen, and by a compound noun, which is always the singular thing itself. What therefore may appear on the surface as an inert distinction made by grammarians based simply upon a contrast of stress patterns between noun categories (compound nouns receive primary stress upon their initial element, whereas noun phrases typically receive greatest stress upon their final element) becomes a livelier matter that suggests how these categories touch upon profound philosophical dilemmas.

*Compounding Perceptions, Part II: Simple vs. Compound Nouns*

William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheel Barrow" brings a different but equally keen awareness to the construction of compound nouns. In this brief poem (which corresponds to a single declarative sentence), each compound is broken into its constitutive elements across an enjambed line so that we get each simple noun in its separateness before we are asked to consider them together. In short, we see each separate component as well as the way in which each component's membership in a compound unit clarifies the use made of it or the relationships it holds to the world at large.<sup>2</sup> Since most of us know this poem by heart, I will give just the opening two stanzas:

---

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that the two compound nouns in Williams's poem, "wheelbarrow" and "rain water," are formed from two noun elements, and not, as was the case in Stevens' poem, of an adjective plus a noun. Of course, one might see the final stanza's enjambment of "white chickens" as a playful joke upon just this latter type of compound—one that seemingly asks us to re-consider



so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow ....

(Williams 224)

This implicit act of grammatically parsing “wheel” and “barrow”—and, later in the poem, “rain” and “water”—reminds us of the interdependence present even in our words and language, as it points to the interdependences that hold between common, everyday objects. The poem also clearly points out the distinctions between the compound nouns and the noun phrases in which they participate, again pointing to contrasts between the thing and how we see the thing.<sup>3</sup>

From these two poems, we can begin to communicate to our students a sense of how compound nouns truly differ from both simple nouns and noun phrases, and so express to them a sense of the significance each type of noun category holds in the language. By reminding students as well that compound nouns (and compounds in general) are one of the most productive ways to create new words in English, we can further demonstrate how grammar isn’t just prescriptive (a set of rules to follow lest you get a red mark in the margin), but also a creative resource that allows imaginative writers to craft ideas with art and surprise.

### *Making Noun Sense, Part I: What’s in a Noun?*

After privileging the compound noun above, it might seem that the simple noun is, well, rather *simple*. It is, after all, a single lexical entry naming a person, place, or thing. It has a fixed stress pattern, and it is the entity—the thing itself,

---

(*footnote 2 cont’d*) the “white chickens” as a potential compound in light of how its positioning mimics the earlier placement and parsing of compound nouns.

<sup>3</sup> This enjambment of compound nouns also creates an interesting tension regarding the stress assignment of each component. In a typical, continuous sentence, one would assign greater (i.e., primary) stress to the first element of each compound. In Williams’s poem, however, the reader would be well justified in parsing each lexical item separately (given the pausal factor typically accorded to a line break in verse), and thus in assigning almost equal stress to each compound element. This potential for equivalent prominence accords well with Williams’s philosophical impulses to privilege all everyday objects in like manner.



without description. And yet, as poet e. e. cummings demonstrates, simple nouns are actually far more complex. They group into subtypes organized around quite important distinctions—mass versus count nouns, abstract versus concrete nouns, animate versus inanimate nouns, etc.—and these subtypes can in themselves be made expressive (“noun”).

For example, in the title and opening line of the poem “my father moved through dooms of love,” cummings plays with the qualities of abstract versus concrete nouns. The line employs an abstract noun (“dooms”) where a concrete one (e.g., “expanses”) is expected. Doing so creates delightful and surprising complications that make the sentiment expressed feel remarkably fresh, even if its expression does not strike us as being altogether *grammatical*. It sounds awkward to say “my father moved through *dooms* of *love*” because, grammatically speaking, one cannot move through non-concrete things. (This explains, by the way, why we might say we moved through *stages* of grief, but not that we moved through *grief* itself.) Likewise, we conventionally express *quantities* of love, which involve a count or concrete value, but not *qualities* of love, which involve abstract or unquantifiable value. Thus, “*dooms* of *love*” also strikes us as odd.

Cummings extends his grammatical joke with concrete versus abstract nouns in these lines from the fifth stanza—“Lifting the valleys of the sea/ my father moved through *griefs* of *joy*...” (cummings 554; emphasis added)—where he yokes together two nouns (“griefs” and “joy”) that are not only abstract but also antonymic, so that our sense expectations are violated, right alongside our grammatical expectations. Of course, there are many more examples that require the torsion or complete suspension of grammatical belief in these stanzas, making this poem a trove for enlivening a grammar lesson.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> This poem is particularly handy for demonstrating artful violations of grammatical expectations that allow one part of speech to stand in for another. Note how in the second line of this poem cummings allows adjectives, verbs, and auxiliary verbs to serve as nouns: “through *sames* of *am*, through *haves* of *give*” (emphasis added). (Likewise, in her poem “Epitaph: Zion,” Anne Carson allows an adverb to stand in for a noun, in the partitive construction “drank a bowl of elsewhere,” which itself figures for the sudden placelessness and rupture brought about by dying.) Beyond pointing out such ungrammatical instances to students, we might use the expressive *qualities* of



Staying focused on the apparent ungrammatical nature of “dooms of a person of no a person of no love,” we see from cummings’ brilliant example that using the correct part of speech isn’t enough to ensure legibility: a statement can be ungrammatical (or expressive) if it mixes up the qualities of the noun that are semantically motivated by context. For example, certain verbs, including “move,” require that their objects or adverbial complements conform to a specific theme or profile; in the case of “move,” the implicit requirement is that its object be concrete.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, such recognitions lie beyond standard grammar texts, which tend not to explore more theoretical dimensions of grammar, such as thematic roles. Yet cummings’ poem sensitizes us to such subtle points and so makes the study of grammar far livelier. It sparks our interest in figuring out how the language actually works and what information grammar actually encodes (which exceeds a right or wrong answer on a test, or a right or wrong way of speaking). We also, I believe, begin to see grammar more as a living organism with a sense of subtle interdependencies—and a gradient scale encompassing the conventional phrasing to the outlandish—than as a hidebound rulebook imposed from without.

---

(*footnote 4 cont’d*) these substitutions to muse upon the differences in how these parts of speech work, what roles they conventionally play in a sentence, and thus how and in what context one part of speech might quite effectively stand in for another. Students can then bring in their own examples from the ample corpus found in popular music and culture. Or has no one heard of the Simon & Garfunkel song “A Simple Desultory Philippic (Or How I Was *Robert McNamara’d* Into Submission)” (emphasis added)?

<sup>5</sup> Consider, for example, the phrasal verb “put on,” which typically requires a concrete object, as in “put the shirt on,” “put on a play,” or “don’t put me on.” The idiom deriving from popular culture, “putting on the dog,” suggests that there may typically be a further requirement, which this idiom playfully violates: that the object of the verb be concrete but not animate. In contrast, consider the following theoretical statements, which are certainly ungrammatical but potentially interesting: “putting on a cow” (with its echoes of Bart Simpson’s “don’t have a cow, man”) or “put Sunday on.” These clearly sound wrong and taken as a class with shared properties (the noun serving as object is either animate or abstract) help mark the boundaries for what idiomatic expressions are more likely to be acceptable, as in “put on airs” or “put on a happy face.” On a related note, figurative expressions involving “move,” such as “to move heaven and earth” play on the implicit scale or impossibility of moving these two realms, but still conform to the expectation that the objects be physical entities.



*Making Noun Sense, Part II: What's in a Name?*

For demonstrating grammar's expressive dimension, my favorite e. e. cummings' poem is "anyone lived in a pretty how town." Where the prior poem focused our attention on unexpected contrasts between common nouns, this poem shows us how pronouns, which typically stand in for common and proper nouns, can also be used to generate surprise.

This poem derives much of its pathos from the way in which pronouns—which are classified as a minor category of grammatical words, and so tend to be discounted—are elevated to great significance, while the so-called content words (i.e., nouns and proper nouns) are held to be spiritually null. cummings' poem thus reverses an implicit bias embedded in our language and in our everyday speech, which bears some explanation.

To say that we tend to overlook the little, helper words in English may sound like a theoretically unmotivated, sentimental lament akin to the Oscar-winning, Hollywood star voicing her thanks for "all the little people" who helped make a film happen. In fact, however, there are quite real linguistic factors that tend to diminish grammatical words, such as pronouns, in contrast to their linguistically prominent cohorts, content words. Without going into too much technical depth, suffice it to say that linguists have shown how grammatical words lack inherent word stress, as well as other significant and audible factors that accord to content words (Inkelas and Zec 2006). The lack of lexical stress, in particular, reinforces the lack of status we perceive to obtain to pronouns (which tend to be swallowed in everyday speech) in contrast to proper nouns, which are marked as being both lexically and graphically prominent.

cummings, however, completely reverses this linguistic hierarchy. In his poem, the "heroes" are named "anyone" and "noone," which are hardly names at all. In fact, these two pronouns, which are, as indefinite pronouns, conventionally regarded either as lacking reference to a specific person or as referring to a person of no consequence,<sup>6</sup> take the place of proper nouns, that is, the proper

---

<sup>6</sup> Consider, too, Emily Dickinson's poem #260, which begins, "I'm Nobody! Who are you? / Are you - Nobody - too? (1-2). Like cummings' poem, Dickinson's also challenges the pejorative sense of being "Nobody," finding it far less dreary than being "Somebody." Dickinson's capitalization of



names of lovers. The entire poem turns upon this disequilibrium between the lack of public regard for these two “nobodies” and their complete and total significance to each other—ideas that are wordlessly expressed by the set of expectations we bring to pronouns vs. proper nouns, as we see in the seventh stanza and emotional climax of the poem:

one day anyone died i guess  
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)  
busy folk buried them side by side  
little by little and was by was (cumplings 553-554)

Much of the pathos of this stanza derives from cumplings’ pun upon *noone*’s being either (a) nobody, meaning that anyone’s death went unacknowledged, as we would expect from a normative grammatical realization of the indefinite pronoun; or being (b) a particular person as we might expect to be signaled by a common noun such as *lover* (i.e., and his girlfriend stooped to kiss his face) or by a proper noun such as *Juliet* (i.e., and Juliet stooped to kiss Romeo’s face). What we do not expect is an indefinite pronoun with a negative charge to stand in for such significant relations.

In short, the poem plays on ways we privilege proper nouns, experientially and graphically (i.e., they are capitalized whereas pronouns are not). We create histories, personalities, even personal connections to a well-known person or place. (Consider *Casablanca*’s “But we’ll always have *Paris*.”) Pronouns—particularly indefinite pronouns such as these—typically lack this semantic fullness. Yet cumplings, who knowingly plays upon this conventional lack, gives these two lovers exactly this semantic fullness, making all of us “somebodies” yearn to experience their love with all its truth, depth, and reckless freedom.

An intriguing exercise to try with a class is to reread the poem while substituting “John” and “Mary” or even “Romeo” and “Juliet” for “anyone” and “noone” and see if the poem still seems magical. This substitution—which, I’d venture, flattens out the text completely—teaches us about the qualitative

---

(*footnote 6 cont’d*) these two pronouns (indefinite pronouns are typically but not always set lower-cased in her other poems), and her linking of being “Somebody” with the repetitive croaking of “one’s name,” suggest that she, too, finds the anonymity of the indefinite pronoun preferable to the very public nature of being a known quantity.



differences between proper nouns, common nouns, and pronouns and how we “read” them. While grammar texts simply lay out the “rules” regarding different parts of speech and their sub-categorizations, cummings makes us acutely aware of the unconscious value judgments that inhere to such grammatical categories and deliciously turns these expectations upon their head.

### **Verbal Dexterity**

We so associate verbs with language that the very word “verb” derives from the Latin word for “word” (“verb”). Yet learning about verbs has always given students more trouble than nouns have. Where with nouns, one has only singular/plural and possessive/non-possessive distinctions to worry about, verbs present a bewildering array of information and distinctions: in addition to inflections that mark person and number (these are relatively simple in present-day English), there are also the little understood matters of aspect or tense, voice, and mood, any of which can call into play one or more auxiliary verbs that support the verb itself. Beyond this, there are phrasal verbs like *take off*, which are comprised of strange creatures called “particles” in addition to the more recognizable “verb” anchoring the unit. Thus, without much effort, one can whip up sentences like “I *was going to have picked up* dinner at the Chinese restaurant well before now” where simply describing the verb—let alone the complete verb phrase—can become a fairly daunting task.

Again, this section will be suggestive, rather than exhaustive, as to how we can reinforce instruction in some of the finer points of verbs in English by conveying these distinctions as expressive features rather than default points for rote memorization. We’ll segue from the discussion above of pronouns and, by implication, other minor category or non-lexical words in e. e. cummings’ poem to take a look here at how the non-lexical members within phrasal verbs afford their own opportunity for surprise.

#### *Pump “Up” the Volume: Particle Adverbs in Phrasal Verbs*

What cummings does for pronouns, singer/songwriter Billy Joel does for particles, those minor grammatical words that appear in a certain type of verb



construction, the phrasal verb.<sup>7</sup> Before we can show this to our students, though, we have to explain what a phrasal verb is.

Some verbs in English are simple; that is, they consist of a single word, as in *eat*, *talk*, or *sit*. Other verbs consist of two or more words. These are known as phrasal verbs, and they come in two types. The first type is called phrasal because it uses multiple words to express an idea, as in the examples “to take a picture” or “to give the evil eye.” The second type, which is what concerns us here, also is called phrasal since it too involves multiple words but it is further distinguished by a particular grammatical configuration with its own idiosyncratic behavior.<sup>8</sup> This kind of phrasal verb is comprised of a verb followed by a particle (typically, an adverb), which together form a unit that acts as a single verb. *Call up*, *pick up*, *move in* are all examples.

For whatever reason, phrasal verbs seem to lend themselves to verbal games. Popular expressions such as *get out and stay out*, *put up or shut up* capitalize upon a kind of semantic rhyme created by retaining the same particle while changing the verb. The fact that a single verb can also give rise to an array of phrasal verbs provides further potential for linguistic play. *Call up*, *call on*, and *call to*, or *throw out*, *throw in*, *throw up*, *throw away*—give a sense of the range of phrasal verbs “spun off” from the same core verbal element.

Now consider an excerpt from Billy Joel’s song “Movin’ Out” from the 1970s album *The Stranger* (given fair use guidelines, I am calling upon you as Joel fans to recreate this in your head). This song, turns upon a grammatical gem—the unexpected torquing of a single phrasal verb across the song but

---

<sup>7</sup> The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) provides a useful definition of particles: “A particle is an uninflected item that has a grammatical function but does not clearly belong to one of the major parts of speech...” (“particle”).

<sup>8</sup> As an interesting aside, one of the markers of true phrasal verbs is that they can undergo particle shift, meaning that the particle can either precede or follow the object; e.g., one could say either call your thugs *off* or call *off* your thugs. When the object is a pronoun, however, there seems to be preferred placement for the pronoun to precede the particle adverb, as in the title of the Kirsten Dunst film, *Bring It On* (but not “bring on it”). In contrast, other types of verbs that are sometimes called phrasal (linguists term these “prepositional verbs”) cannot have their second element shifted; an example of the latter would be *call for* (you can say “The recipe calls *for* flour” but not “The recipe calls flour *for*”).



particularly in the chorus. When Joel sings, “And it seems such a waste of time / If that’s what it’s all about/ Mama if that’s movin *up* then I’m movin *out*” (emphasis added), he neatly sidesteps an entire generation and its system of social aspiration merely by changing a single particle. In fact, so much of the song’s haunting effect comes from the way in which its defiance of social expectations coincides with its equally fleet evasion of conventional grammatical habits. The conditional statement in play here “if *x*, then *y*” establishes the expectation that *x* dictates *y*; that is, even if one chooses to rebel against *x*, *y* follows *x* in a predictable manner. Yet Joel’s savvy shift from “movin *up*” to “movin *out*” changes the rules of engagement entirely. Rather than letting the current system dictate even the form of his rebellion (say, moving down instead of moving up), he rejects its entire hierarchical system, tossing out its vertical axis in favor of a horizontal one; today, it’s what we would term a “lateral move.” In short, he finds an “out” where none seems to exist—not by barreling through the collective wisdom of the American middle class, but by unexpectedly shifting strategy and direction midcourse—a perfect example of moving sideways through language.

*Even Verbs Get the Blues: Unpacking Verbal Tense and Mood*

Now let’s look at a poem whose entire action seems to unfold from a subtle and unconscious yoking of the revelatory powers of grammar. The poem is Jane Kenyon’s “Let Evening Come” and the grammatical element is the verb: more specifically, it involves verb tense and mood (Mood is that aspect of verbs dealing with how the speaker conceives of an action). In grammar lessons, many of us probably tend to overlook tense and mood, but this area is, even in English with its relatively few tenses, remarkably rich. As Kenyon shows us, it also implies far more than we might guess:

*(from “Let Evening Come”)*

Let the light of late afternoon  
shine through chinks in the barn, moving  
up the bales as the sun moves down.



Let the cricket take up chafing  
as a woman takes up her needles  
and her yarn. Let evening come. (Kenyon 176)

As we see from just the opening two stanzas quoted above, this poem achieves an incantatory spell by reiterating syntactically parallel units. In the complete poem, which totals a mere eighteen lines, there are, remarkably, eleven syntactically parallel variations upon the statement of the title, “Let evening come.” Emotionally, it is clear that these restatements advance the poem, but technically speaking the change advanced by them is less obvious. By exploring the poem’s grammar, it’s possible to understand precisely what prepares for the poem’s climax and learn something about how expressive grammar really is.

The poem’s title and, as it were, “core” sentence “let evening come” is in the jussive mood, which expresses indirect command and generally occurs in the third-person. The visible grammatical structure is “let x do y,” yet a crucial aspect of the sentence’s grammar is absent: the agency that authorizes or accomplishes the specified action. As in a direct command (also called an imperative), the agent or person addressed is absent from the sentence. Yet in a direct command, which is usually in the second person, there is a strong sense of a specified audience. The jussive here lacks a sense of specific agency, and it is the further intensification of this absence vis-à-vis the natural processes enumerated in the poem (e.g., dew collecting, stars appearing, the wind dying down, etc.) that creates the poem’s emotional force.

It is important to note that all of the processes mentioned are ones that are natural to their performers. In fact, as the poem progresses, the litany of activities shifts from those that are reasonable to their actors (a woman may take up needles and knit) to ones that are characteristic of them (stars appear; the moon shines silver). Along the way, interesting details add pathos to these activities: dew by definition gathers on grass. Yet the additional focus upon not the grass but “the hoe abandoned/ in long grass” intensifies the poem’s affect by foregrounding the absent figure who did the abandoning. In fact, as the poem progresses, our attention shifts quickly from objects presumably abandoned by people to objects that are in themselves in their proper sphere. By the time the



syntactically repeated structure departs from its jussive framework to take up the parallel string of prepositional phrases, “To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop/ in the oats, to air in the lung” (13-14), the poem has left entirely the realm of human agency or enabling fictions. The strangest of these objectifications is, of course, “air in the lung” since it moves into the interior of a person as the previous stanza moved into the blackness inside a shed (i.e., “Let the shed/ go black inside”), and we are asked to think of our organs, our breathing, as both involuntary and independent of ourselves.

This question of voluntary participation in processes is at the heart of the poem. Evening comes whether or not we will or let it. In fact, the repetition of the statement “let evening come” may suggest to some readers over the course of the poem the poet’s dread of evening’s arrival and her inability to stop it (a suggestion that readers familiar with Jane Kenyon’s life and her battle with depression may find especially powerful). Evening may be symptomatic of a world that is full of objects but lacking in agency: the absence of intimate address either to the nominal presences or to the agent addressed in the first five stanzas also creates a vivid but uninhabited world. The seemingly insignificant grammatical changes that arrive in the sixth stanza thus prefigure the radical transformation of this world from a sparsely physical place into a spiritual environment, as follows:

Let it come as it will, and don’t  
be afraid. God does not leave us  
comfortless, so let evening come.

(Kenyon 176)

This shift is marked simply enough by the change of direct object from common noun to pronouns: Let *it* come, as *it* will” (16). While “it” is in the third-person and thus impersonal, as a pronoun it is bound in an anaphoric relationship to an absent noun, “evening,” and so *it* is the first example we have of a binding relationship, of the promise that anything holds of necessity to anything else. The glimpse of presence suggested by this relationship is answered immediately by the direct command “and don’t be afraid” (Notice the shift of mood here, from jussive—or expressing a wish—to imperative—issuing a command.) This



command provides the first opening in the poem for a “you,” or even indirectly for a human figure. Quick on the heels of this promise of audience, into the vacuum created by careful repetitions of a few spare objects, the agency withheld throughout the poem appears in a kind of apotheosis: The agent is none other than God, and God’s arrival generates a sudden sense of well-being. For the poem’s speaker, the belief that God lets these things happen not only binds God to the world but, as a corollary, also brings God to her and the reader: “God does not leave *us/* comfortless” (15-16; emphasis added). After the poem’s sustained absence of agency and absence of any first or second person address, an I-Thou relationship is suddenly established between God and the world and, subtly, between poet and reader. The pronoun “us” binds the “you” hinted at through the direct command into an intimate relationship to the poet. When the sentence that began the poem is repeated one final time, tonally it reads less as a jussive or indirect command and more as a direct address and appeal to the reader to “let evening come.” The slight addition of the word “so” furthers this intimacy and moves the statement closer to prayer; as the construction “so let” closely echoes the sense and sound of “so be it,” the final amen or acceptance of blessing at the end of prayer.

### Conclusion

It is my hope that the foregoing examples demonstrate the adventurous approach that could be brought to any and all grammatical distinctions (well beyond those mentioned here<sup>9</sup>), particularly if one seeks out the poets and poems,

---

<sup>9</sup> Additional examples, which I have cut here for the sake of space, involve grammatical words, such as determiners, deictics, and relative pronouns. To give just one suggestive example, Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Man on the Dump” allows a determiner, “the,” which typically modifies a noun, to stand in for the noun of all nouns--“truth”:

Is it a philosopher’s honeymoon, one finds  
On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,  
Bottles, pots, shoes, and grass and murmur *apest eve*:  
Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say  
*Invisible priest*; is it to eject, to pull  
The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone*?  
Where was it one first heard of the truth. **The the.**”  
(Stevens 254-5; emphasis in bold added).



songs and songwriters who do so. In fact, why not challenge students to discover artful uses and abuses of English grammar in popular music? By searching their iPods for examples and then explaining what the rule is and how each example relates to it, they will make explicit their innate knowledge of grammar and suddenly start thinking in grammatical terms as they listen to music and take in popular culture. Such examples will, I hope, inspire students' desire to learn grammar, since they show that much of the magic of literature, as well as song lyrics, can be traced in part to the magic of language. They may come to believe that grammar is available as a tool that they as writers can use to intensify the news they wish to communicate, as well as being an important practical skill that they must master for success in the classroom and professional world.

#### Works Cited

- Carson, Anne. "Epitaph: Zion." *Men in the Off Hours*. New York: Knopf, 2000. 9. Print.
- Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. 2d ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.
- cummings, e. e. "anyone lived in a pretty how town." *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Volume I*. Ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. New York: W. W. Norton, 2003. 553-54. Print.
- . "my father moved through dooms of love." *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Volume I*. Ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. New York: W. W. Norton, 2003. 554-56. Print.
- . *Six Nonlectures*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1953. Print.
- Dickinson, Emily. Poem 260 ("I'm nobody! Who are you?"). *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Volume I*. Ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. New York: W. W. Norton, 2003. 722. Print.
- Gerber, Natalie. "moving sideways through language." The Literary Festival at St. Mary's College. St. Mary's City, Maryland. 30 May 2000. Lecture.



- Hass, Robert. "Conversations with the Author." UC Berkeley and Point Reyes, Calif. December 1999-May 2000.
- . "English: An Ode." *Sun Under Wood*. New York: Ecco P, 1996. 67. Print.
- Inkelas, Sharon, and Draga Zec. "Auxiliary Reduction without Empty Categories: A Prosodic Account." *Working Papers of the Cornell Phonetics Laboratory* 8 (1993): 205-253. Print.
- Joel, Billy. "Movin' Out (Anthony's Song)." *The Stranger*. Columbia Records, 1977. CD.
- Kenyon, Jane. "Let Evening Come." *Otherwise: New & Selected Poems*. Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf P, 1996. 176. Print.
- Millward, C. M. *A Biography of the English Language*. 2d ed. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 1996. Print.
- "Noun." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*. Ed. P.H. Matthews. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.
- "Particle." *The American Heritage Dictionary of The English Language*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print.
- Stevens, Wallace. "The Man on the Dump." *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Volume I*. Ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. New York: W. W. Norton, 2003. 254-55. Print.
- . "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Volume I*. Ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. New York: W. W. Norton, 2003. 244-46. Print.
- Szimuglia, Jill. "The How and Why of Grammar." Unpublished essay, 2005. Ms.
- "Verb." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*. Ed. P.H. Matthews. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.
- Williams, William Carlos. "The Red Wheelbarrow." *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I: 1909-1939*. Ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan. New York: New Directions, 1986. Print.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a slightly revised version of an article that originally appeared in the 2007 special grammar edition of the Louisiana English Journal. Reprinted by permission.*



## Book Reviews

**Oaks, Dallin D. *Structural Ambiguity in English*. New York and London: Continuum, 2010, Two Volumes.**

**Reviewed by Gregg Heacock. Now retired from full-time teaching, he is working on *The Logical Connection: An English Teacher's Guide to Enlightenment*.**

In this time when even high school English teachers complain they were never taught grammar, the two-volume set *Structural Ambiguity in English: An Applied Grammatical Inventory* by Dallin Dixon Oaks is large enough to fill the gap. Oaks gives his readers something noticeable—jokes they get—to teach them something they weren't noticing—grammatical terminology they haven't gotten—so they might discover something they thought they'd never get—the power to write well.

The jokes “illuminate the role of various features of the English language: readers know “at an unconscious rather than a conscious level” those instances that allow structural ambiguities to be created by humorists, advertisers, poets, and other writers to catch their readers by surprise (Oaks *vii*). Catching the reader off-guard leaves an impression like the man on the mound Robert Francis describes in “A Pitcher”: “The others throw to be comprehended. He/Throws to be a moment misunderstood.” Confusion opens us up to learning; getting it right strengthens our sense of being connected. We show respect to those who catch us unawares.

Paul Ziegler, my physically challenged friend in high school, gained parity with his physically challenging classmates by saying, “The blind man picked up his hammer and saw.” Groucho Marx gained fame saying such things as, “Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana.” And advertisers gain clients with jingles like this one for GLAD garbage bags: “Don't get mad. Get GLAD” (Oaks 4). When people get the joke, they often get the product. As more people seek empowerment through personal development, Oaks' text is as pertinent as its humor is impertinent: “[M]y hope is that scholars from such related fields as communications, psychology, humor research, editing, advertising, and language pedagogy will also find the information in the book to be accessible and useful” (*vii*).



Oaks points out, “Much of the knowledge that native speakers have about their own language remains at an unconscious rather than a conscious level” (12). His goal is to increase readers’ “explicit awareness of different classes and subclasses in the language, along with their idiosyncratic behaviors” in order to increase their “resourcefulness in fashioning creative structural word-plays” (13). Besides helping his readers become more effective writers, he means to prepare them for “lucrative industries . . . where word-plays are often used, such as comedy writing, advertising, business jingles and slogans, greeting cards, bumper stickers, captions, headlines, etc.” (ix).

Oaks’ volumes cover all aspects of language: spoken and written; headlines, telegrams, advertising, and poetry; inflectional and derivational affixes; grammatical categories; the use of ellipsis and fixed expressions. He honors Leonard Cohen’s insight: “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” In this 500-page grammatical inventory, Oaks shows that light humor has seeped through every crack in our language and that these cracks reveal its structure.

Oaks’ approach reflects a change in pedagogy. Over forty years ago, Paolo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* described a classroom based on the banking model, where instructors were in charge of vaulted knowledge that would be doled out to students. Freire called for a different model, one that recognizes students already have prior knowledge and are in a position to conduct a meaningful dialogue with their instructors to advance those skills that might change them from outsiders to insiders, ready to partake of the advantages of their culture. Now, Oaks has opened the vault, sharing his inventory and strategies, empowering his readers to enrich their writing.

As he examines each element, Oaks usually begins with a joke. The lead-in to his inventory of transitive verbs is a routine from George Burns and Gracie Allen:

*George:* (looking at Gracie, who is arranging a large vase of beautiful flowers) Grace, those are beautiful flowers. Where did they come from?



*Gracie:* Don't you remember, George? You said that if I went to visit Clara Bagley in the hospital I should be sure to take her flowers. So, when she wasn't looking, I did. (163)

The explanations that follow such examples introduce or repeat terminology, giving readers an opportunity to see how structure frames different meanings. Because the mind can hold only one interpretation at a time, just as it does with optical illusions, connecting terminology to the formal aspects of language helps readers see meaning they may have missed. Just as a kung-fu master has students focus on a point beyond an obstacle to keep them from holding back as they thrust their hands through bricks and boards, Oaks has readers look at the shifts in meaning so that terminology strengthens their passage to understanding.

Though I taught English in high school and have read several books on grammar, much of the terminology Oaks used was new to me. I was pleased to discover the terms *epistemic* and *deontic* to explain the different meanings of auxiliaries" "The epistemic uses are those that indicate something about the actual state of affairs. Deontic uses, on the other hand, refer to notions of permissibility or obligation" (87).

*Professor:* "You can't sleep in my class."

*Student:* "If you didn't talk so loud, I could." (88)

Similarly, the terms, *conjunctive* and *disjunctive*, would help teachers explain a different use of "and" as shown by Samuel Johnson in this comment to a writer: "Your manuscript is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good" (321).

Though with prepositions such terms have not been developed to sort out various meanings, Oaks writes that, because they are functional words, "when they have more than one meaning in a particular context, we shall consider that ambiguity to be structural" (295). Oaks uses bold print to identify shifts in interpretation:

"This plane goes to Los Angeles in ten minutes,"

"That's moving!" (**Measurement into future vs. Duration**) (312)

Our experience with language frames our understanding of how words and parts of words function in different contexts. The prefix *-un* means "not" when



applied to words like *happy* and it signifies reversal when added to *tie*. The following dialogue shows how these different meanings can pose an ambiguity:

*Movie Director*: Unmarried?

*Applicant*: Twice. (100-1)

Because our understanding of these differences is acquired unconsciously, it is easy to miss the significance of certain grammatical shifts until we stumble over them. I could not see the importance given by grammarians to distinguishing between adjectives and nouns being used as modifiers until I read the examples presented by Oaks. Here is one from comedian Steve Wright: “I got food poisoning today. I don’t know when I’ll use it” (158). Once I realized the importance of this distinction, I was able to apply it to the time I told a man repairing blinds in my classroom that I had found a new meaning to a phrase used by my friend, Paul Ziegler: “The blind man picked up his hammer and saw.”

Oaks helps us who are blind to see how our minds work with language. He believes that “what some may be able to do intuitively, others can learn to do consciously.” With two volumes of humor, analysis, and strategies, Dallin Dixon Oaks offers readers a touch of genius to grace their most common work.



**Behrens, Susan. *Grammar: A Pocket Guide*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 221 pp.  
Reviewed by Cornelia Paraskevas, Professor of Linguistics and Writing, Western Oregon University**

Susan Behrens' new grammar book is a "quick and easy guide" to some common structure and punctuation questions aimed at academic writers (students)—we can think of it as a quick, inexpensive reference grammar to be kept on the desk for use when a language question arises (and when a detailed, in depth explanation is not necessary). Even though the size of the book makes it similar to a handbook, it differs from handbooks in significant ways: here, the focus is not on avoiding or correcting mistakes but on describing the structure and usage of Standard English. In other words, Behrens' book clearly shows that the study of language should not be a "joyless censoriousness" (Dick Veit's expression) but an inquiry into language questions we encounter daily in writing, ranging from syntactic issues to punctuation concerns.

The book is organized into 18 chapters, each beginning with a section titled "Something to Think About": for example, the following question/answer pair prefaces the chapter on verb transitivity: "What is the difference between *lie* and *lay*? *Lie* does not take a direct object; *lay* requires a direct object" (70). This preface has a twofold effect: it first provides a linguistic focus on which the chapter is developed, and then it removes grammar anxiety from the use of the book, especially since statements such as "You should avoid . . ." or "To correct this error . . ." do not appear in any of the chapters.

The chapters may be read "out of order," independent of each other, as questions arise; however, it is clear that Behrens begins from the core elements of a clause and moves to more peripheral elements such as discussion of relative clauses, apostrophes and commas. Specifically, the topics covered include subject-predicate (1), verbs (2), verb forms telling time (3), subject-verb agreement (4), nouns (5), objects and complements (6), verb transitivity (7), subjunctive (8) passive (9), pronoun case (10), adjectives and adverbs (11), prepositional phrases and particles (12), conjunctions (13), relative clauses (14), misaligned modifiers (15), commas (16), and apostrophes (17). The last



chapter—“Applying the Knowledge”—asks the reader to edit a paragraph by removing all non-standards forms so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard Edited English.

Behren’s linguistic training is evident throughout the book in multiple ways: while understanding the importance of descriptivism—topics are presented not as ‘errors’ but as non-standard varieties (16), she also understands the influence of the public perception on language and warns readers about being “mindful [of] their choices.” (41) Similarly, she acknowledges the reality of language change and treats it as simply change: she calls the distinction between *may* and *can*—a favorite of teachers—“rather stuffy” (34) and the uncertainty of the “singular status of *none*” as evidence of language “in flux” (49).

This little book—only 220 pages—has some wonderful, reader friendly features: cross referencing between chapters (“Ch. Xx has more on . . .”); practice opportunities—albeit with fairly uncomplicated sentences—at the end of each chapter, with the answers provided at the end of the book; and “cheat sheets”—tables summarizing important grammar elements such as verb conjugations, pronoun forms, “common situations that result in non-standard subject-verb agreement” appearing just before the glossary; and an excellent list on “books about grammar that are worth reading” (179).

Finally, the most important question: is the book truly useful in a writing class as a reference guide? Yes, but ONLY if the students have solid knowledge of the basic structure of English and simply want a quick answer to a question or to confirm knowledge.



## ATEG Membership Form

NAME/TITLE/ORGANIZATION

---

---

MAILING ADDRESS

---

---

---

---

E-MAIL \_\_\_\_\_

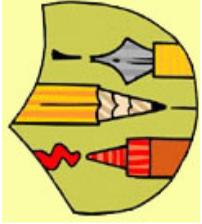
MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY

- \$12.00 US            one year
- \$7.50 US            one year student rate
- \$20.00 US           two years
- \$12.00 US           two year student rate

Checks drawn on foreign banks must be in US funds. Please make all checks payable to ATEG. We are not at this time able to accept credit cards or purchase orders.

Membership includes a subscription to *ATEG Journal*. Please mail checks to:

ATEG  
P.O. Box 92  
Fishkill, NY 12524



THE ATEG JOURNAL  
ASSEMBLY FOR THE TEACHING  
OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR  
P.O. BOX 92  
FISHKILL, NY 12524