

**The Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar**  
**Summary of the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual ATEG conference, July 2001**  
**Paul E. Doniger, Secretary**

The ATEG 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference at Park University, Parkville Missouri proved a lively success last week. There were ten instructional sessions during the first two days (the “Mini-Course”) and eleven papers or presentations during the last two (the conference proper). In addition, ATEG officers held their annual business meeting, which was well attended.

The sessions opened with the two-day mini-course on Wednesday, July 11<sup>th</sup>. Jeff Glauner, who hosted the conference, Amy Benjamin, Brock Haussamen, Martha Kolln, and Robert Yates all served as the faculty for the courses. Attendees included some ATEG regulars and many new faces representing teaching backgrounds from early elementary to post-graduate education. As in the past, the students who took the mini-course for college credit were required to complete and submit a lesson plan on a grammar topic; all attendees received a nicely bound copy of the completed plans. This year, everyone who signed up for the mini-course became a member of ATEG and received a one year subscription to *Syntax in the Schools*.

The courses were fairly evenly divided among the faculty, and most were profusely illustrated with handouts. After introductions given by Jeff Glauner, Brock Haussamen opened the sessions with an open forum on the questions, “What should we learn? What do we want to learn?” After a short break, Jeff Glauner, with visual aides (and an uncooperative video monitor), gave a lesson on the “Eight Essential Constituents in Grammar Instruction.” Then, after lunch, Amy Benjamin brought her high school teaching experience to bear in a session about “Thinking in Verbs.” During this look into a sample of an average student’s writing and methods of facilitating revisions, observations abounded; Brock observed that “Sentence flexibility is difficult for students to incorporate into their systems.” Amy Benjamin concluded with what could be one of ATEG’s most often reiterated points: “To talk about language, you need to have meta-language.” The first day of the mini-course ended with Martha Kolln’s “The Incredible, Expandable, Understandable Verb Phrase.” This proved an eye-opening lesson for many of the newest attendees, especially those who teach on the elementary level. Those familiar with this material enjoyed the clarity of Professor Kolln’s explanations.

The second day of the mini-course began with a look into “The Acquisition of Grammar for Writing,” by Robert Yates — a scary look into the ways that readability measuring undermines textbook writing; there seemed to be some consensus by the end of this session that authentic texts were far more valuable as instructional material than made-up texts, out of context. There was also serious concern about the quality of the texts being written for school consumption.

This lesson was followed by the second half of Martha Kolln’s lessons on the building blocks of sentences: “The Versatile, Valuable, Handy-Dandy Noun Phrase.” Two more lessons followed after lunch. First was Brock Haussamen’s “Nuts and Bolts Grammar,” which examined Robert de Beaugrande’s “Forward to the Basics” approach to grammar studies and sentence correction. Brock generously included, along with de Beaugarde’s article and a brief method of testing his techniques, copies of his own “Tips for Teaching Grammar” from the ATEG website. The final

lesson, before a brief wrap up led by Martha Kolln, was Amy Benjamin's "What Stephanie Needs to Know: Grammatical Strategies in Essay Writing." This last included a very usable teaching strategy that Amy calls "Sentence Post-Mortem." Although this technique, which requires selecting sentences from students' writing to include on a classroom hand-out, involves a lot of teacher preparation, it appeared to many of the participants to be a very dynamic teaching tool.

The following two days were devoted to the conference proper. There were a number of new participants who arrived the evening before and the morning of the first conference day, and there were a few who left, only attending the mini-course.

The conference opened with a pleasant welcome from Jeff Glauner and addresses from Dean Greg Plumb (Interim VP for Academic Affairs at Park Univ.) and ATEG President, Brock Haussamen. Dean Plumb suggested that "Every class in high school and college should be an English class," in part because of what he perceives as a lack of irony and subtlety in American discourse.

Brock introduced the attendees to the new officers — himself; Vice President, Pam Dykstra; secretary, Paul E. Doniger (myself); and Treasurer, Dave Sawyer, who, unfortunately, was unable to attend the conference. He then put out a call for readers to assist Rebecca Wheeler with making selections for *SIS* (interested parties may contact Brock, me, or Rebecca). He also reminded everyone of the new web address ([www.ateg.org](http://www.ateg.org)) and webmaster, Michael Southwell (also unable to attend). He concluded his talk with a listing of three priorities for the coming year:

1. The upgrading and improving of our website (also putting in a call for input from members).
2. More investigation, discussion, and research into the connection between grammar and reading.
3. Publication by NCTE of our recommendations for grammar curricula or standards. This last was the topic of much discussion during the annual business meeting that evening.

The conference proper then began with Amy Benjamin's discussion of "Grammar and Reading Comprehension." Amy suggested that "grammatical language is one of the ways we can engage students in literature," which seemed to many like a good follow up after priority #2, above. Her session included many literary quotations that were approached grammatically; this approach showed the impact of grammatical analysis on meaning, on readability, on style, and on readers' expectations. One teaching method that Amy spoke of was her "Let's ruin it" technique, in which she has her students revise a literary passage in order to show how different sentence structures may destroy the author's intent.

Next on the agenda was Maureen Fitzpatrick's "Variations on a Sentence." In her advanced composition classes at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, KS, she uses a passage from MLK's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" as a template for her students to create an extended sentence, filled with relative clauses ("When , when, , when , then ."). After taking us

through the speech and the structure of its various clauses, she suggested a number of strategies for teaching with this template and others like it.

We broke for lunch after a round-robin discussion, led by VP Pam Dykstra, called “What Works For Me.” A number of interesting teaching tools came out of these discussions, including Amy Benjamin’s “Semi-colon license,” Wanda van Goor’s “Rap” of all the helping verbs in English, and Pam’s own metaphor: “A sentence is like a bicycle.”

After lunch we moved into the realm of ESL instruction, starting with a joint presentation by Jeannine Donna and Susan Finlayson, called, “The Dangers of Input and the Teaching of Grammar for ESL Writers.” The presenters gave a very informative and lively discussion of various L1 interference issues one may encounter in the ESL classroom.

The next paper, “The Effects of Instruction on Eliminating Pronominal Copies,” was delivered by Aimen A. Maghrabi, who traveled to us all the way from Saudi Arabia (King Fahd Univ. of Petroleum and Mineral) — a fact that left many of us awestruck. Although primarily about an ESL instruction topic, the talk held great interest for all those in attendance. Among other issues, it raised the question of the value of mere error correction as an instructional strategy; most agreed with the speaker that consciousness-raising required a more dynamic approach, such as the ones presented in this paper.

After a short break, the first day ended with ATEG’s annual business meeting. Seventeen members attended this session, which ran for nearly two hours — in spite of Brock’s good intentions to limit the meeting to only one. Minutes from the meeting are in process, and will be available shortly. Interested parties should contact me or Brock for more detailed information.

The final day began the next morning with Prof. David Mulroy, a classics scholar and teacher at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He read his paper, “The First Liberal Art,” which is a step in the process of a book he is working on about the controversy over grammar instruction. Professor Mulroy returned some of the focus to the grammar/reading connection when he explained, “The reason I use grammar [as a classicist] is to interpret complex texts.” His paper included brief historical overviews of a number of related topics, in which we were all reminded that grammar was part of the Greek trivium of liberal arts education. He also reminded us that Henry VIII’s decree re-introducing Lily’s Latin grammar into English education may have influenced the dawning of the English Renaissance that gave us Marlowe and Shakespeare.

After this presentation, we turned once again toward second language education to Carl Zhonggang Gao’s paper, “Second Language Learning and the Teaching of English Grammar.” In this paper, Professor Gao reminded us that L2 students often use grammar as a sort of road map to help them navigate through the new language. He agreed that grammar was a means to an end (the end being competence in using the second language), not the end in itself. Grammar, he said, is a catalyst for accuracy and fluency.

After the break, Martha Kolln took us through a musical excursion called, “I’ve Got Rhythm (And so do you!).” After delivering her opening words in a deliberate, “H.A.L. 2000” monotone, she revealed what we should have inferred from her opening — that “There is a lot of

information in our intonation contours.” We then discussed various examples of intonation and rhythm in speech, such as the difference between yes/no and informative questions, and conjunctive adverbs inserted in sentences as stress markers.

The last session before the lunch break, “Using Children’s Literature to Teach Grammatical Concepts” was given by long-time member, Wanda van Goor. Professor van Goor opened with a reminder of founding member Ed Vavra’s challenge to ATEG to come up with a design for which grammar topics should be taught at which level. She then illustrated some concepts in her work-in-progress through two recent revisions of a book once banished from our culture due to its racist language, *Little Black Sambo* — the new versions cleaning up the racism by changing settings, character names, and language. In her very thorough study, she compared sentence types, sentence openers, and word choice (among other things). Her presentation, as lively as ever, raised numerous questions for discussion that extended the session into the lunch break that followed.

Unfortunately, due to my flight schedule, I could not attend the last two talks after lunch. They were Brock Haussamen’s “Private and Public Grammar” and a joint presentation by Robert Yates and Jim Kenkel, “On Observational and Explanatory Descriptions of English Grammar.” For those who wish more details regarding these two presentations, I suggest that you contact the presenters through e-mail or the listserv.

Finally, special thanks are in order to the hosts of the conference, Jeff Glauner and Park University. In addition, many of us owe a debt of gratitude to Robert and Karen Yates for their hospitality as chauffeurs, tour guides, and local culture experts. The graciousness of the Yates family and Professor Glauner was appreciated by all.