

DEFINING GRAMMAR: A CRITICAL PRIMER

by

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This thesis is dedicated to God, without whose help this task would not have been accomplished.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. WHERE GRAMMAR AND CRITICAL THEORY MEET	1
Defining the Problem.....	2
The Problem.....	2
Rationale and Desired Outcomes.....	4
Significance, Contribution, and Place within the Larger Scholarly Context.....	5
Why Apply Critical Theory To Grammar?.....	6
Critical Theories Turn Old Subjects New.....	7
Critical Theories Lend Authority.....	9
Critical Theories Position Grammar in the Language Arts Classroom	10
Grammar: in the Margin	10
Grammar: Outside of Content.....	11
Grammar: Inside Language.....	14
2. DENOTATIONS: WHAT CAN WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY <u>GRAMMAR</u> ?.....	17
Difficulty Defining “Grammar”.....	18
Grammar Can Mean.....	22
The System of Grammar: Rules About How a Language Works.....	23
The Study of the System of Grammar	27
Phrase-Structure/Descriptive Grammar	28
Transformational-Generative Grammar.....	29
Usage (Linguistic Etiquette): Cultural or Societal Rules about Language Use.....	30
Textbook/Traditional Grammar	32
Rhetorical or Stylistic Grammar	34
Grammar Does Not Necessarily Mean	37
Grammar is Not Necessarily Spelling.....	38
Grammar is Not Necessarily Punctuation.....	39
A Quick Recap: Rules and Relationships	40
3. CONNOTATIONS: ABOVE AND BEYOND DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS	42
Grammar and Authority.....	45
Authority and Marxism.....	45
Authority and Post-Structuralism	48
Authority Undermined.....	49
Grammar and Morality	50
Grammar and Mortality	52
Death of Creativity.....	53
Death of Identity	55
Changing Connotations.....	56

TABLE OF CONTENTS – CONTINUED

4. IMPLICATIONS: TOOLS OF THE TRADE AND FOOD FOR THOUGHT	58
Ignorance Equals Bewilderment and Rebellion.....	58
Awareness Invites Elaboration and Interest.....	62
Definitions as Tools of the Trade and Food for Thought	64
REFERENCES CITED.....	67

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Grammar: Outside of Content yet Inside All Language Use	16
2. Saussure's Sign as Described by Allen.....	21
3. The Transformation of a First-Order Meaning Into a Second-Order Meaning, or Connotation.....	45

ABSTRACT

Many new or pre-service English teachers may not have learned much about grammar during their own school years or throughout their college preparation. This lack of preparedness may cause these instructors to remain apprehensive about teaching a subject they don't understand very well. Also, the full-fledged grammar classes which a pre-service English teacher might be required to take in college may further intimidate through an immediate, in-depth explication of the subject with complex diagrams and theories before the teaching candidate is even fully aware of the definition(s) of the word grammar. This text functions as an introductory primer to the subject, giving the numerous surface-level definitions for the word grammar, as well as illustrating several of the important second-level connotations which attach to the word, preparing the English teaching candidate for a full-length exploration of the grammar of the English language and its accompanying theories in a college classroom. Critical theories are applied to the subject of grammar in order to shed light on the denotations and connotations of the word, as well as the reasons why this subject is so important. The resulting aim of this text is that new or pre-service English teachers will gain a full understanding of the multiple meanings of the word grammar, the unspoken connotations which follow this word and subject, the ways in which critical theories can bring a new perspective to an old subject, and the necessity of sharing with students these underlying issues in order to revitalize the study of the subject. The conclusion reveals that rather than closing off discussions and hemming in subjects, definitions may be used to open up a subject to endless possibilities.

CHAPTER 1

WHERE GRAMMAR AND CRITICAL THEORY MEET

To anyone just starting out in this exciting field, welcome to the world of English teachers, a world filled to overflowing with multiple content areas and offering conflicting opinions on just about every one of them. Montana standards list, for example, expectations for student expertise in reading, literature, media literacy, speaking and listening, and, finally, writing; each content area enumerates five standards. Given the stress new English teachers face in attempting to formulate lesson plans and units for the multiplicity of content areas for which they are responsible, it is not surprising that the subject of grammar is the least likely to arouse excitement and the most likely to fall haphazardly by the proverbial wayside. A long line of studies, dating back to 1950, appears to prove little to no positive result from teaching grammar with regards to improvement in students' reading and/or writing skills (Weaver¹ 4, Kolln 27-8). Moreover, the function of grammar has now all but been relegated to a last resort of editing and proofreading (Elbow 167; Master v), and yet some suggest that "students, especially the non-native speakers of English who account for a steadily increasing percentage of school populations at all levels, have the right at all times to ask their teachers why certain elements of grammar operate the way they do" (Master v), and that English teachers ought to be able to give students sufficient answers, either off the cuff from knowledge they have already acquired or through a promise to "check on that" and tell them within a day or so (Master vi). Let's face it: grammar is just one more content

area that any new or pre-service English teacher must master. But in order to teach it, one must first be able to define it, and that is no easy task.

Defining the Project

The Problem

For a new or pre-service English teacher, the word grammar may set teeth on edge and raise fine hairs along the back of the neck. As a novice, one may be afraid of possessing inadequate knowledge of the subject; one may be horrified that this subject must somehow form part of the domain of a language arts instructor; and, yet, one must nonetheless be prepared to teach it. Granted, this subject is, in and of itself, complex, but even defining the term presents more complications than one would suppose, and no teacher can explicate a subject he or she cannot define.

Unfortunately, many grammar texts, even those supposedly geared toward pre-service English teachers, offer little by way of defining the subject they discuss, and the partial definitions they do include appear vague, to say the least. In the first chapter of their text, Understanding English Grammar, Martha Kolln and Robert Funk speak of “language competence” (1), the “systematic nature of English” (5), and “our innate, subconscious ability to generate language, an internal system of rules that constitutes our human language capacity” (6), but nowhere do they give a full definition of the term, and the glossary omits the word altogether. James D. Williams opens his text, The Teacher’s Grammar Book, with a first chapter on “Traditional Grammar,” neglecting an introduction which could have provided a reasonable definition. His first chapter relates,

instead, the history of the formal study of the subject and its object, prescriptivism (1-5). Finally, mid-way through the chapter, Williams suggests a brief definition with the statement that “Grammar deals with the structure and analysis of sentences” (8); however, this single statement contains two separate meanings for the word: “structure” and “analysis” form two distinct categories. In yet another text, Systems in English Grammar: An Introduction for Language Teachers, Peter Master employs the key word grammar as if everyone wholly understood its meaning, emphasizing that “The focus of this text is grammar at the sentence level” (v), without ever explaining what grammar is. Even more unfortunate, in attempting to define the term, authors commonly employ the word itself, which does not improve the reader’s understanding. Kolln, writing for the English Journal (1999), restates Patrick Hartwell’s five definitions of grammar and uses the word grammar in each one (26). To summarize the first part of the problem, instructional grammar text books for new English teachers do not adequately present denotations, or surface definitions, for grammar.

I not only find cause for concern in the lack of surface definitions for the term grammar; the connotations associated with the subject generally go unspoken but carry a powerful impact and may confuse new instructors. Critical theories can illumine many connotations we would not ordinarily notice, and I apply them to my discussion. We could describe each various denotative, i.e. surface, definition as “a first-order system: it involves a signifier, a signified, and their combination in a sign” (Allen 42). However, this word grammar clearly signifies something else, something more, in excess of its surface definitions. According to Roland Barthes, myth—Barthes’ word choice to explain

what “presents itself as natural and even timeless but is, in fact, an expression of a historically specific ideological vision of the world” (Allen 34)—alters first-order meanings, changing them into second-order meanings: “a second-order semiological system...is [one in which] a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system becomes a mere signifier in the second” (rpt. in Allen 43). Barthes relates connotation with second-order meanings (Allen 50). The connotations associated with the word grammar may speak even louder and more insistently than those of its denotation; most of the connotations carry a negative overtone, and yet many of the connotations are based on misunderstandings of the basic definitions of the word. Developing an awareness of the multiple connotations associated with the subject of grammar may help English teaching candidates to understand students’ potential aversion to studying grammar, as well as their own difficulties or confusions about the subject.

Rationale and Desired Outcomes

The main focus of this text, as is evidenced by the title, is an exploration of the need for a clearly delineated and extended definition of the word grammar, for I have slowly grown aware of the diffuse and numerous ways in which this word is employed in pedagogical circles and in society in general, potentially confusing new or pre-service English teachers. Toward this end, I address the following questions: 1) in what superficial ways is the word grammar defined and employed? (denotation); 2) beyond the surface uses of the word, what deeper meanings or assumptions are attached to it? (connotation); and 3) what implications result from these varying and indistinct definitions and the combinations of these corresponding denotations and connotations? I

hope to alleviate any anxieties new English teachers may have about this subject and give a firm foundation for future studies, as well as to, hopefully, alter perceptions of the subject from negative to positive or, at least, to a neutral position, if the latter option does not seem quite possible at this time.

This text does not attempt to suggest a correct method of teaching grammar, nor does it present a neat problem/solution discussion. In fact, it does not suggest a solution to any of the major controversies currently accruing around the subject of grammar. I hope to help those just beginning to study grammar to gain an awareness of the multiple and complex facets of the term so that their progression to the next grammar text, the one which will present an in-depth look at the various linguistic approaches to studying and/or teaching grammar, will be an easier one since a firm foundation of this seemingly (and deceptively) simple word already exists.

Significance, Contribution, and Place within the Larger Scholarly Context

I need hardly point out the glut of grammar texts at large in the current market. The Amazon.com website listed over 3,028 selections for English grammar alone; it goes without saying that the need for another full-fledged explication of grammar is non-existent. However, I recognized a niche for an introduction to the subject. As an undergraduate pre-service English teaching candidate myself, I noticed a number of responses to the study of grammar among my colleagues: 1) a general dislike of the subject of grammar, based, in part, I am sure, on a common inability to master the intricacies of diagramming sentences or to fully understand how to identify and label the

complicated anatomy of convoluted sentences; 2) a general panic about how to best teach a subject they didn't fully understand; and, 3) a general lack of understanding of what was meant by the word grammar in the first place. I also noticed that these pre-service teaching students encountered a severe shortage of time—time to learn more about grammar and time to become more comfortable with the subject—due to other coursework and curriculum constraints. Moreover, most of my colleagues went on to interview and successfully secure jobs directly after graduation, which meant that they would have little to no time at all after graduation and during immediate employment in which to try to hone their grammar skills. The texts I have seen on the subject of grammar, those usually employed in classes with titles such as “English for Teachers” at the college level, include a glut of information and details, linguistic theory and history, rendering them potentially oppressive and intimidating to a new or pre-service teacher who finds him or herself already extremely short on time. With these observations in mind, I imagine this text, this primer, as providing a stepping stone toward reading and understanding a full-fledged grammar text book.

Why Apply Critical Theory to Grammar?

I have no intention of distressing novice English teachers with my application of current critical theories to the subject of grammar; however, I do feel that in order to understand all the denotations, connotations, and implications of the term grammar, we must first de-familiarize the familiar, that is, look at the subject through a number of various lenses and in unprecedented ways; moreover, since there is nothing new beneath

the sun, the only new or interesting elements an author can bring to a nascent text are perspective and application, and critical theories play a crucial part in both processes. Robert Scholes suggests that the answers to our dilemmas in teaching English literature and composition must be arrived at through theory (13), and I would correlate this also with complications in understanding and teaching English grammar. As Scholes explains in Textual Power, “I know that many teachers feel the concerns of theory are beyond them, or irrelevant to their problems. They see theory as having kicked itself upstairs to a position where it can do neither good nor harm...[but] I would argue that practice is never natural or neutral: there is always a theory in place...” (x). I will attempt to present the theories I use in such a way as to be accessible to those without an extensive theoretical background. For those with more of a theoretical foundation, I request patience with my attempts to foreground applicable theories for the inexperienced.

Critical Theories Turn Old Subjects New

If we, as teachers, never step outside of our own subject matter, whatever it may be, we can never gain a new perspective. The very premise of my text, the assertion which I make—that we need to clarify and broaden our definition of the term grammar in a number of ways—and the way in which I support it, derive from my readings in critical theory. Only reading texts focusing on grammar and methods of teaching grammar, I never would have arrived at my current position, a position located at the confluence of two seemingly diverse disciplines. I arrived at this destination, in part, through reading a text entitled Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space, written by Elizabeth Grosz, a philosopher writing about an imagined and shared space in which

architecture and philosophy could have something profound to say to and about each other. In her introduction, she asserts, “a productive interchange between philosophy and architecture can work for the mutual enrichment, and opening out, of both historically distinct disciplines...” (vii); she then expands on the idea of a place in which this conversation could potentially occur: “two disciplines and enterprises that are fundamentally outside of each other...require a third space in which to interact without hierarchy, a space or position outside both, a space that doesn’t yet exist...it is only by submitting both to a third term, to a position or place outside of both...[that] they may be explored beside each other, as equivalent and interconnected...” (xvi). Her text becomes that third space. I imagine the same sort of process occurring as I place grammar and critical theory in a room together. Too, if I had not read about Roland Barthes and his works, I would not have realized that one of my previous writing assignments was really an attempt to categorize and analyze the connotations associated with the word grammar. Again, application of one seemingly unlike subject to another, along with a new perspective provided by critical theories, can revitalize old subjects.

What I’ve just said is that critical theories have lent me the tools, i.e. the vocabulary, I needed to discover and discuss an important pedagogical issue, similar to the way in which many teachers see that one of the values of teaching grammar lies in the vocabulary which, one hopes, allows the students to talk about what is or is not working in their writing. Brenda Petruzzella admits that her students “had good ideas and interesting things to say [about their writing]—but [she] found it very difficult to assist them in polishing their work without a common vocabulary of grammatical terms” (68).

Obviously, my discussion is not helpful at all if I do not also help my reader understand the vocabulary of critical theory which I use. Scholes also supports the idea that critical theories can help bring problem areas to light and help us search for resolution: “the first job of any teacher of criticism is to bring the assumptions that are in place out in the open for scrutiny. Post-structuralist theory offers us an extremely sophisticated and powerful set of procedures for accomplishing precisely this task. That is why it is important” (xi).

Critical Theories Lend Authority

Elements of critical theory actually authorize the position I occupy in this text. In fact, what I hope to do here resembles in some small way what Michel Foucault has done with many of his works in post-structuralism. Rather than providing pat answers to complicated situations, Foucault’s works have been instrumental in encouraging further thought about the subjects he investigated and discussed, such as “the distinction between madness and reason” (Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason) and tracing “the changes...in the way that societies punish those they consider to be criminals” (Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison) (Mills 1-2). Sara Mills introduces Foucault by saying, “his work is not simply concerned to analyse social conditions, but is, at the same time, an analysis of the bases on which we think about analyzing social conditions” (1); in other words, he analyses the positions we take in our processes of analyzing. At the same time, it seems to me that Foucault analyzes without evaluating, casting aspersions, or pointing fingers; it has also been said that his lack of interpretation, his reticence to “infer the subject’s meanings or implications” (Aaron 8), “is another element of Foucault’s work which many find disconcerting and unsettling”

(Mills 24-5), so I do not identify with Foucault because he is perfect or infallible, but because I see value in his accomplishments, and, thus, my authority is, in part, derived from his.

Critical Theories Position Grammar in the Language Arts Classroom

My application of critical theory to the subject of grammar also allows me to attempt to position grammar in the curriculum of the English or Media/Communication Arts classroom. Scholes clearly presents a hierarchy of importance in English education: interpretation of literature ranks as the most important activity; second in the lineup is the practice of creative writing, “pseudo-literature;” thirdly, we have acts of reading what he designates “non-literature;” and the lowly art of composition, of writing “pseudo-non-literature” comes in last (6-7). As we can see, writing assignments for students would rest at the bottom of the hierarchy. Even as I listed the Montana Content Standards above, writing was the very last category. We already know that content, what is said, ranks more highly than form/structure, i.e. how it is said, what structures underlie the content. The subject of grammar is lower than the lowest category of writing, relegated to the role of housekeeping, as I mentioned earlier; Peter Elbow entitles his grammar chapter in Writing with Power, “The Last Step: Getting Rid of Mistakes in Grammar” (167).

Grammar: in the Margin We might conclude that if a subject falls to the lowest position, it is, exactly as it appears to be, of absolutely no importance at all, that it really doesn't matter if we teach grammar or how we teach grammar. Strangely, though,

deconstruction, a critical and theoretical position associated with Jacques Derrida, looks at this situation differently. “Deconstruction is interested in this so-called marginal term. Given that this exclusion does not reflect lived reality but is an operation of power enacted on behalf of certain politically constituted groups, then the recuperation of the margins is a necessary step in demonstrating the injustices which are disguised by the work of logocentrism” (McQuillan 23), logocentrism being the hierarchical thinking of the Western world. The subject of grammar is pushed to the margins while content holds sway in the center of the curriculum, with the ever-enticing pleasures of media literacy coming in second. Yet it is because grammar is pushed to the margins that it takes on such importance. Deconstruction does not credit the seemingly central issue as being most important; the margin, the seemingly unimportant element, looms larger than the small, still center (McQuillan 23-30).

Grammar: Outside of Content Grammar appears to be an outsider in the English classroom, even though we would have no content without it, for it is the vehicle by which our content is transmitted to others. Yes, I shall be blunt here and say that grammar—all uses of the word and superadded connotations—stands outside of language as content, language as story, and unless one can adapt and acculturate to this location, unless one can see through or around content, one may not be able to grasp the idea of grammar. Again, I must draw on Elizabeth Grosz: “This is the rare and unexpected joy of outsideness: to see what cannot be seen from the inside, to be removed from the immediacy of immersion that affords no distance” (xiv).

Not only is grammar itself an outsider, students and teachers who “just don’t get it” become outsiders, too, in both the academic and “real” worlds. Peter Elbow points out that, some time ago, “If you knew grammar you were special. You had prestige, power, access to magic; you understood a mystery; you were like a nuclear physicist. But now, with respect to grammar, you are only special if you lack it. Writing without error doesn’t make you anything, but writing with errors—if you give it to other people—makes you a hick, a boob, a bumpkin” (167). Elizabeth Grosz notices something very like and very applicable to Elbow’s observation about grammar:

Communities, which make language, culture, and thus architecture their modes of existence and expression, come into being not through the recognition, generation, or establishment of common interests, values, and needs, and the establishment of universal, neutral laws and conventions that bind and enforce them (as social contractarians proclaim), but through the remainders they cast out, the figures they reject, the terms that they consider unassimilable residue: the other, the abject, the scapegoat, the marginalized, the destitute, the refugee, the dying, etc. I will call this residue “more” or “excess,” but this “more” is not simply superadded but also undermines and problematizes (152).

Grosz acknowledges that we focus on and are defined by those who are outsiders, those who just can’t get it, whatever the “it” is, which in our case is grammar. Heaven knows every English teacher will spend more time and energy trying to figure out what to do to help those misfits who, by virtue of this lack of “grammatical” ability, fall outside of the preordained parameters of success than they will spend on those bright students who do “get it.” In other words, grammar provides such food for thought in current pedagogical publications because it is a subject fraught with complications and problems.

What about English teachers who don't "get it" either? If English teachers function as guardians of our language and its various uses, what happens when these guardians can no longer understand, teach, or uphold the basic tenets of that language? Many college seniors who will be graduating as secondary English teachers in our country today will do so having taken only one full class of training in English grammar, since much curriculum concerns itself with the content of literature. Many of these students don't remember learning much, if any, grammar in their own grade school, middle school, or high school days. One angry student teacher confessed in his class journal: "All my education courses said grammar wasn't important, and now I find out that it is" (Petruzzella 69)! Even more embarrassing are the comments the cooperating teacher wrote on the student evaluation: "Needs to work on grammar basics—fragments, run ons, comma splices, etc. His spelling is weak and he misses many misspellings on student essays. He also needs to rid himself of the sub-standard English he uses in speaking" (Petruzzella 69). Yet another cooperating teacher admits, "Sadly, my seniors [now] have a better working knowledge of grammar, usage, and punctuation than my student teacher has" (Petruzzella 69).

Perhaps what stymies any Language Arts novice with regards to getting a grip on grammar is the difficulty distinguishing between inside and outside. The boundaries between the two are not easily perceived. As post-structural critical theories like deconstruction remind us, "[after] the act of reason that turns language into a representation of a world apart and the knowing subject into someone separate from the field of vision he masters with representation...what reason creates (representation,

meaning, knowledge as knowable order, equivalence of signifier and signified, etc.) will necessarily be surrounded by what it banishes” (Rivkin & Ryan² 336-7). The following excerpt reveals the initial difficulty grasping that difference in perspective:

Imagine yourself in a cave somewhat like Plato’s, only one of language, in which you grow up swimming in an entire sea of words, hearing them wash around you like waves upon the shore of your open ear. You have always seen language this way, from a lovely distance, the same way the Crazy Mountains look purple from your bedroom window. Language has been, from your perspective, a relationship between two people, or more, or between a text and yourself, but always a relationship, allowing for blissful revelation in the story play of language as a narrative, as a concrete expression of self.

Now imagine that you rise up out of the cave of your own volition into the initially harsh and blinding light of the academic world, a world you choose to explore because you think it will teach you more about the intrinsic poetry of the language you have loved all your life. You discover, much to your immediate chagrin and surprise, as the luminescence dispels the shadows of the underworld of your childhood, that you have traveled so close to Language, that you are now actually inside it, and your lovely illusions are deconstructed before your very eyes. Language is not more than cool, impersonal codes, and those communicators whom you revered as heroes and heroines are mere texts of transmission in some non-human plane of abstract existence. The mountains are not purple, up close (Wilcox 1).

So, we can see that, although grammar stands outside of the normally perceived parameters of language as content and story and communication, it resides well within language itself. As Grosz says, “to be outside something is always to be inside something else” (xv).

Grammar: inside Language Because grammar involves the rules and relationships through which we construct meaningful sounds, words, and sentences, we could not enjoy the language of content without it. Grammar lives within language, nearly invisible compared to content, similar to the way the binary codes of the movie The Matrix are

masked by the content they create; similar to the way an internal combustion engine drives a vehicle, but most people focus on and enjoy the exterior of the vehicle, not what's under the hood. (Figure 1 illustrates this relationship.) Grasping grammar requires us to look under the hood. It requires, in a sense, an analytical mindset, a scientific approach, rather than the imaginative one so necessary to the interpretation of literature. In looking at grammar, one looks at the sub-atomic particles which constitute our uses of language.

As a pedagogical aside, this difference between grammar and content translates into a division between the structure of our language, what I imagine as the vehicle of transmission, and what we choose to say, the cargo. Not surprisingly, Constance Weaver informs us that, with regards to literacy, children are drawn immediately to content, to what they want to say (deep structure) more than they are interested in the surface structure of what written conventions they employ to say it (Weaver¹ 14); she also reminds us that, as students get older, they are still more likely to be interested the communicative process of what is being said rather than how language works to say it (Weaver¹ 3). Because language is a symbol system, this process makes perfect sense; that is, as James Moffett relays the information, “English, French, and mathematics are symbol systems, into which the phenomenal data of empirical subjects are cast and by means of which we think about them” (6). So, then, if we are going to teach grammar, if we are to understand grammar ourselves, we need to look at it differently, through another lens, as separate, in a sense, from the content it carries. The overabundance of

grammar textbooks on the market take you inside grammar, so that you stand within the system, attempting to see how it works, what it looks like, but you cannot see the forest very well for the trees. In this discussion, we will actually stand outside of grammar, so that we can see better what it really is.

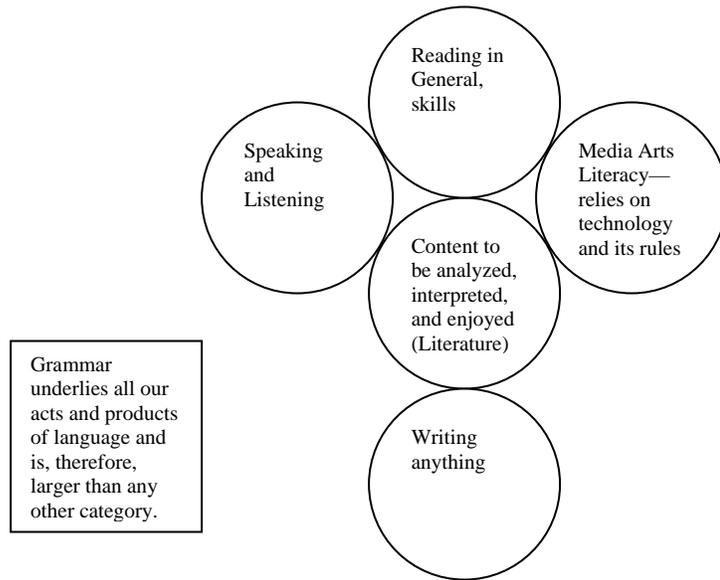


Figure 1. Grammar: Outside of Content yet Inside All Language Use.

CHAPTER 2

DENOTATIONS: WHAT WE CAN MEAN WHEN WE SAY GRAMMAR

I must admit that in my own early introduction to the subject of grammar I naively imagined a single definition for the word, even though I know from dictionaries that most words are followed by designations such as “1 a,” “1 b,” “2,” etc. In fact, however, according to Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (1977), our key word, grammar, includes four major and numerous minor delineations:

1 a : the study of the classes of words, their inflections, and their functions and relations in a sentence **b** : a study of what is to be preferred and what avoided in inflection and syntax **2** : the characteristic system of inflections and syntax of a language **3 a** : a grammar textbook **b** : speech or writing evaluated according to its conformity to grammatical rules **4** : the principles or rules of an art, science, or technique.

I can spot several immediate problems with a set of definitions like these. First of all, they do not offer the reader a comprehensive understanding of the meanings of the word, and, thus, they cannot help the reader to identify which particular meaning may be symbolized by any use of the word. What, exactly, does it mean to study the “classes of words” (what are the “classes of words”?), and what are “inflections”? What is to be preferred in inflection, and what in the world is “syntax”? Secondly, the order of the definitions does not adequately reflect initial and successive meanings or the frequency of use of any one meaning. Jean Aitchison relates a name for this dilemma—polysemy, multiple meanings for one word—and agrees that “[d]ictionaries often rely on history and combine items in a single entry if they are descended from the same original word...[b]ut this is not very helpful when considering how current-day speakers handle words in their

minds” (Aitchison¹ 234). More questions came to mind for me after reading the dictionary entry than I had before.

Difficulty Defining “Grammar”

We could say that the difficulty in defining the word grammar stems, in part, from the multiplicity of referents for the English word spelled g-r-a-m-m-a-r. However, in order to do this, we must first define referent. Martha Kolln, in her article “Rhetorical Grammar: A Modification Lesson,” explains a referent by telling her students “Every noun has a referent, a reality that the word, or name, symbolizes...the pencil in my hand is a warm body, the referent symbolized by the word pencil” (25). By this, Kolln seems to indicate an actual pencil, one specific pencil, the one in her hand. In other words, according to Kolln, the referent could be considered the actual or real item. She also mentions that the word pencil is a symbol for the real thing.

This definition of referent as “real thing” is problematic because, in presence, I could look at the pencil I’m holding and speak of “this pencil,” and my viewer/listener could recognize it as such. In absence, however, that is, in writing, I cannot show the actual pencil, and my reader may have a different mental “picture,” “idea,” or “concept” of a pencil. Switching from pencils to birds as objects, Jean Aitchison suggests that we all have an “amalgam of ideal bird characteristics” stowed away in our minds and that we identify a bird as such by “matching it against...a ‘prototypical’ bird” (Aitchison¹ 226). If this is so, then perhaps each of us carries an idea of a “prototypical” grammar in our minds, but it may not match with the image in another person’s mind or with the actual

use of the word. Also, with an abstract noun like grammar, one couldn't look at a physical representation of it. This explains why Kolln calls for clear modifiers to help transmit to the listener/reader an image as similar as possible to the one the speaker/writer holds (30).

This discrepancy between the “real” thing and how spoken and written words attempt to represent it occurs, in part, because language is a symbol system, based on a successive progression of interconnected symbols. An actual item (whether abstract or concrete) is symbolized by a sound, and the sound is further symbolized by a written pattern of letters. Too, every symbol (word) must be defined by employing still more symbols (words) (Scholes 91). James Moffett reminds us that English is a symbol system, and such “[s]ymbol systems are not primarily about themselves; they are about other subjects” (6). A word, then, appears to be a symbol, a stand-in, for a real thing, but are we correct in believing, as Kolln suggests, that the word referent denotes the real thing itself?

I believe we must look back to the theories of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the foremost seminal influences in Structural Linguistics (Culler 74), in order to understand what the word referent might mean to our project of defining grammar. Saussure imagined a tripartite linguistic illustration of what we might simply think of as a word, which he calls the sign. A sign is composed of a “sound-image...not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses” (78), which he calls the signifier, plus, our concept or idea (emphasis mine) of the item itself, which he designates as the signified, not the real thing itself. To restate the issue for clarity, a sound-image (word or mark),

referred to as a signifier, is arbitrarily and randomly associated with our concept or perception of something, in which the concept is called a signified. The signifier and the signified combine to form a complete linguistic sign, but nowhere present is the actual thing itself. Graham Allen explains it thus, “In English the combination of the sounds k + a + u (cow) is linked to the signified (the concept) cow (‘the female of the domestic or any bovine animal’)” (41). Steven Pinker, a noted, present-day linguist, assures us as well that “The meaning of a word is a link to an entry in the person’s mental encyclopedia, which captures the person’s concept of [,say,] a rose” (Pinker² 3). I would suggest, then, that Kolln’s referent, with regard to our present discussion, functions similarly to Saussure’s signified in that both represent a concept, a perception, an idea. In any case, Saussure’s work with the sign lays the foundations for much that is of interest to our project.

Now we are faced with the task of attempting to flesh out the sub-atomic particles of definitions for the word grammar, which the dictionary supplied. We may rest fairly secure in our correlation of Kolln’s referent with Saussure’s signified as a starting point, for we know we are searching out the various concepts and perceptions commonly attributed to this English word. However, before we begin to ferret out the multiple meanings of our key word, we need to turn to the word denotation, a word mentioned in this chapter title, which helps to further delimit our project. In Elements of Semiology, Roland Barthes, another “crucial figure in modern literary and cultural theory” (Allen 1), explores the difference between denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to “the literal (first-order) meaning” (Allen 50) of words and, for Barthes, statements. For the

purpose of this study, I envision denotations as surface definitions, such as ones we find in the dictionary. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1977) specifies denotation as being "a direct specific meaning."

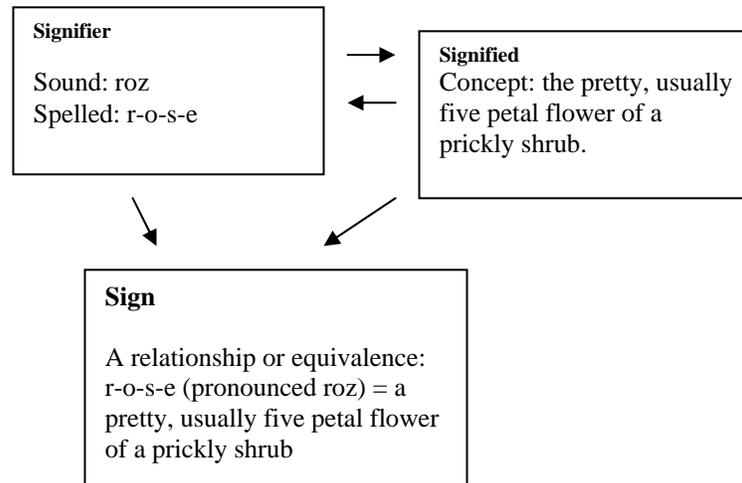


Figure 2. Saussure's Sign as Described by Allen (42).

Since grammar is understood in so many ways, with its many definitions, i.e. meanings, signifieds, referents, it should not be surprising to find the term misunderstood in a number of ways as well. Quite frankly, many people, having no good idea what grammar is, misuse the word on a regular basis. For the purposes of this chapter, a beneficial course of action will be to look at what the word grammar can mean and, second, to look at what it does not necessarily mean. As you will soon be aware, those who have attempted to define grammar in the past have done so using a hierarchical or numerical system, implying that one definition may be considered of primary importance, while others are of less consequence. In all probability, I will not be able to avoid making the same mistake, even though I can see it coming, for as Martin McQuillan says of the

theoretical position of deconstruction, we cannot escape from logocentric (hierarchical) thinking except through logocentric thinking, and yet “[a]s soon as we recognize the unconscious, our thinking about it is no longer unconscious as such but part of our conscious experience” (13).

Grammar Can Mean...

Patrick Hartwell already published a well-known article attempting to define the meanings of grammar in 1985. “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar” appeared in College English and has enjoyed a number of reprints. Anyone who has encountered this piece might imagine that, in my attempt to define grammar, I merely tread in Hartwell’s footsteps, covering the same ground, reporting his research verbatim. However, I feel Hartwell attempts to cover far too much territory in his article, as he moves quickly from definitions—omitting at least one important example, usage, since he assumes his readers are familiar with it already (188)—to a discussion of “the value of formal grammar instruction” and “What...our theory of language...predict[s] about the value of formal grammar instruction” (186). I conclude that authors who attempt to cover too much territory with regard to this term inevitably end up confusing their readers; thus, I intend only to share definitions (referents, signifieds, meanings) without analysis of any practical application. I must also admit that this process will represent a synchronic effort, that is, one anchored in a specific place and time, and so it will not try to explain historical changes in our key word (Aitchison² 10).

The System of Grammar: Rules
About How A Language Works

I would suggest that grammar can mean a system of rules which allows the users of the language in question to create meaning, by building both meaningful words and larger constructions of sentences. My methods of consulting encyclopedias and dictionaries in order to ascertain the meanings of this elusive and hard-to-pin down term may seem to some elementary or naïve; however, they provide a clearer resource than many of the texts we have so far encountered (see Chapter 1). The New Encyclopedia Britannica suggests that grammar, at its most basic level, comprises “rules of a language governing the sounds, words, sentences and other elements, as well as their combination and interpretation” (410). The system of the English language, according to The World Book Encyclopedia, “depends on three features: (1) word order, (2) inflection, and (3) function words” (303), which one could study in a grammar textbook. So far, so good.

However, complications arise in attempting to distinguish a primary allocation of meaning for grammar in that many sources omit acknowledgement of a pre-existing system and denote grammar first as the study of the system, similar to Webster’s definition at the beginning of this chapter. For example, the Encyclopedia Americana gives the following definition of the word: “in its simplest sense, [grammar] is the study of how a language works. More specifically, it is the study of those systems and patterns that operate in a language to give meaning to an utterance...” (151). Webster’s Third New International Dictionary (1971 & 1986) also lists “the branch of linguistic study that deals with the classes of words, their inflections or other means of indicating relation to

each other, and their functions and relations in the sentence...” as definition “1.a,” moving on to “1.b” as linguistics, and “1.c” as usage (which we will discuss shortly); definition “2,” oddly enough, gives the system itself as a meaning, “that which is studied in grammar...,” but how can a study of a subject exist prior to the system it professes to study? W. Nelson Francis succinctly places the “study of the system” as secondary, as I would, explaining, “Just as gravity was in full operation before Newton’s apple fell, so grammar in the first sense was in full operation before anyone formulated the first rule that began the history of grammar as a study” (rpt. in Hartwell 188). In any case, the study of the system must be relegated to that of the next referent.

This system of rules about how language works is the same system Martha Kolln refers to as “the grammar in our heads—our native competence” (26), and also “the internalized system of rules that speakers of a language share” (rpt. in Hartwell 189), and it is to this that Kolln points when she says, “If you’re a native speaker of English, you’re already an expert. You bring to the study of grammar a lifetime of “knowing” it—except for your first couple of years, a lifetime of producing grammatical sentences” (1). Hartwell sheds more light on the subject of this system by suggesting the “grammar in our heads” is a “tacit and unconscious knowledge,” that these rules are “abstract, counter-intuitive,” and, third, that one’s internal grammar “seems profoundly affected by the acquisition of literacy” (189).

The system of grammar includes subdivisions of phonemes, morphemes, and syntax, which must be identified and understood in order to fully grasp the definition of grammar. Briefly, phonemes are the smallest units of sound which make a difference in

meaning—and all with reference toward the production of words (Kolln & Funk 395). Phonemes are small enough to go unmentioned in many grammar texts. In order to recognize phonemes, one must understand “the parts of words and syllables as sounds rather than as letters of the alphabet and to hear these sounds separately” (Kolln & Funk 401). Not all languages contain the same phonemes (sounds), which can explain why someone from Norway may pronounce the English name Jack as Yak: Norwegian has no /j/, only a /y/ sound (Kolln & Funk 402).

Kolln and Funk define morphemes as “a sound or combination of sounds with meaning” (393), so one can see that morphemes consist of combinations of phonemes. Although a morpheme may take the form of a complete word (a free morpheme)—that is, words composed of a single morpheme, unable to be subdivided—such as head and act and kind and walk (Kolln & Funk 258), many other morphemes, called bound morphemes, must be added to free morphemes in order to create meaning, such as prefixes and suffixes: re-, co-, -s, -ing (Master 4). Too, the word morpheme must not be equated with syllable, for the English language, for one, contains a multitude of multi-syllabic words which are considered single morphemes: carrot, college, and jolly, just to mention a few (Kolln & Funk 259). Kolln & Funk give the criterion for identifying morphemes: “They have meaning; they appear with the same meaning in other words” (259). Of course, both free and bound morphemes may be further subdivided into even more distinct categories; yet, this rather simplistic explanation must be sufficient for now.

One last comment about morphemes is that they represent a crucial aspect of inflection, one of the key features of any system of grammar, in that they alter the forms

and, thus, the function of inflected words. It is worth noting House and Harman's lengthy explication of the word:

Inflection is the change, or modification, in the form of a word to indicate a change in its meaning. Verbs change their form (inflect) to show a change in tense (see, saw), person (do, does; am, is), number (was, were), voice (give, is given), and mode (is, be). Nouns and pronouns may change their form to show gender (actor, actress), or number (boy, boys; man, men), or case (boy, boy's; he, his, him). The inflection of a part of speech may be terminal (boy, boys; red, redder; learn, learned), or internal (ride, rode; goose, geese), or both terminal and internal (sell, sold; bring, brought). The inflection of a verb is usually called conjugation; that of the adjective and adverb, comparison; and that of nouns and pronouns, declension (15).

Function words, also mentioned earlier as important to systems of grammar, are categorized as morphemes as well, only they are often called “empty morphemes” because they no longer hold meaning themselves but show relationships between other words (House and Harman 15). Function words—for example, but, in, are, these, and she—are considered to be a subdivision of free morphemes (Master 3).

Syntax involves “[t]he structure of sentences; the relationships of the parts of the sentence” (Kolln & Funk 389). This is where word order comes into play, at least in the English language. The sentence, “The bear chased the girl” means something very different than the sentence “The girl chased the bear.” Word order in a noun phrase, for instance, would begin with a determiner to signal an upcoming noun, perhaps followed by an adjective, perhaps followed by a noun functioning as an adjective, followed by the headword, the noun itself. So our phrase might look like this, “the tall Texas grandma.” We would not, however, say “the Texas tall grandma.” Syntax governs the patterns our sentences may follow. Kolln and Funk draw on observations made by structural linguists in illustrating ten basic sentence patterns or formulas which provide the groundwork for

our English sentences (19). Since the central and primary “slot” in the sentence belongs to the verb—Kolln and Funk qualify this statement by explaining, “The ten categories [of sentence patterns] are determined by variations in the predicates, variations in the verb and in the slots following the verb” while the subjects may remain simple and similar (21)—the sentence patterns revolve around the be verbs (am, is, are, be, being, been), the linking verbs, intransitive verbs, and the transitive verbs. Again, this is a very brief survey of these elements of grammar.

The Study of the System of Grammar

The study of the system of grammar is also known as grammar, but with the usual distinction of a determiner, or article, placed in front of the term, as in “a grammar” or in the plural sense of, say, recent “grammars.” This definition of grammar often comes first in dictionaries and textbooks. In two separate editions of Merriam-Webster’s New International Dictionary (1971 and 1986), the definition of grammar reads exactly the same: “1.a” designates a “branch of linguistic study that deals with classes of words, their inflections or other means of indicating relation to each other, functions and relations in the sentence...” but then it adds the qualifier “as employed according to established usage” (which is a separate kettle of fish altogether and will be discussed later). W. Nelson Francis gives a corroborating account of this grammar, calling it “the branch of linguistic science which is concerned with the description, analysis, and formulization of formal language patterns” (rpt. in Hartwell 188), while Jean Aitchison calls this “systematic study of language,” “linguistics” (Aitchison² 3). This designation of grammar

is also multiform, for there is not just one “study of the system of grammar,” but many, which take the form of methods of studying the system of grammar, which may also become methods of teaching the subject. Personally, I amend the definition by suggesting that a grammar (a study of the system of language) attempts to explain or account for (or describe or model) the way in which a language works to create meaning. Homer House and Susan Harman respond similarly in saying, “Since grammar is a science, it must describe and analyze the basic facts of speech, and explain and interpret the laws governing the behavior of language” (11). I provide a brief view of two main approaches.

Phrase-Structure/Descriptive Grammar. Toward the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, the interest in grammar shifted from a focus on connecting English grammar with Latin (see “Textbook/Traditional Grammar”)—an approach which was highly prescriptive (Kolln & Funk 4)—to an attempt to observe, analyze, and describe how language works (Williams 51, Kolln & Funk 4-5). Anthropologists studying the disappearing languages of Native Americans sparked in linguists a desire to do the same to the English language. Franz Boas and Leonard Bloomfield created and compiled ground-breaking advances in linguistic studies during the first half of the 20th century; scholars in this field are often referred to as structuralists (Williams 52), even though all linguistics after Saussure may be considered structural (Aitchison² 25). James Williams simplifies the practices of phrase-structure/descriptive grammar by explaining that it analyzes language at the sentence level (syntax), employing “shorthand” notation for each component of a sentence, such as “NP” for noun phrase and “VP” for verb

phrase (55). Rather than using the complex Reed-Kellogg diagrams (see “Textbook/Traditional Grammar”), phrase-structure/descriptive grammar looks to tree diagrams to help illustrate relationships between components of a sentence (Williams 60).

Transformational-Generative Grammar. During the mid-1950’s, a linguistic revolution took place, headed by Noam Chomsky, turning drastically away from the perceived simplicities of phrase-structure applications and moving toward a more theoretical position (Williams 141). Many credit Chomsky with having opened up linguistics to psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers and others, changing it from an isolated subject for Ph.D. candidates into a “major social science” (Aitchison² 26). Whereas those involved with phrase-structure grammar examined spoken sentences in attempts to describe the systematic nature of those utterances, Chomsky’s transformational-generative linguists “wanted to unlock the secrets of language: to build a model of our internal rules, a model that would produce all of the grammatical—and no ungrammatical—sentences” (Kolln & Funk 6). One of the most helpful revelations of transformational-generative theory is that the proposition (meaning) which a sentence hopes to communicate, i.e. the “semantic and grammatical relationships which underlie the surface structure” (Kolln & Funk 415), may be considered the “deep structure” of a sentence and may be shaped into any number of “surface structures,” “the form the sentence takes when we speak it” (Kolln & Funk 415). This aspect of the theory takes into consideration the ambiguities inherent in sentences such as “Visiting relatives can be boring,” in which one could imagine that going to visit relatives can be boring and/or relatives who are visiting you can be boring (Kolln & Funk

415). Transformational-generative linguists also employ the tree diagram but with some modifications, reflecting additional understanding of how our language generates meaning.

Usage (Linguistic Etiquette): Cultural or Societal Rules about Language Use

My immediate impression of “usage,” or “linguistic etiquette,” is that it represents, not the natural language which we absorbed like sponges as children, but language which is tamed, domesticated, and trained into a certain acceptable shape. Although Kolln and Funk clearly explain that “no one variety of English can lay claim to the label ‘best’ or ‘correct, [and] that the dialects of all native speakers are equally **grammatical**,” qualifying a dialect as “the variety of a language spoken in a particular region or community” (7), even they cannot deny the authority invested in what is known as Standard American English (our current status dialect), nor the power available to those who wield it well (8-9).

Frequently, when people say, “Oh, that student has terrible grammar,” what they really mean is usage. William Murdick suggests that “Usage is a ‘social’ issue: certain grammatical constructions or word uses are appropriate in one context but not another” (42); so, in other words, usage appears to be a social grammar, rules about how to use grammar in a cultural or societal context in order to create acceptable utterances. Murdick indicates that students don’t need to learn grammar but “multiple sets of table manners” (43). Just as those who break the law pay a penalty, awkward or unacceptable usage of language can also exact retribution: the individual unable to speak or write Standard

American English (Standard Edited English, for the written word) must stand outside the privileged enclave of those who receive the high-paying jobs, of those who are respected.

Usage involves what I call “word choice,” which is choosing the word with the meaning you desire rather than one which sounds the same but is spelled differently and means something different (homophones), or an entirely different word altogether. Many words sound similar and, thus, may cause confusion in speaking and writing. For example, accept is a verb form, which means “to receive,” while except usually functions as a preposition or a conjunction meaning “but for” or “other than” (Aaron 469). Usage can involve distinguishing between transitive and intransitive verbs: set means “to put” or “to place,” and, as a transitive verb, it is followed by a direct object, as in the sentence, “She set the bag of groceries on the counter,” in which bag is the direct object, the receiver of the action of the verb; meanwhile, the word sit is an intransitive verb meaning “to be seated;” it does not take a direct object. This aspect of usage has much to do with definitions, for if the definitions are clearly understood, then the proper use of the words comes much more easily.

Another aspect of usage revolves around appropriate word use, that is, appropriate for one’s subject, purpose, and audience (Aaron 131). This is where Standard American English comes into play. Jane Aaron, author of The Little, Brown Compact Handbook, explains SAE as the “English normally expected and used in schools, businesses, government, and other places where people of diverse backgrounds must communicate with one another. Standard English is ‘standard’ not because it is better than other forms of English but because it is accepted as the common language, much as dimes and

quarters are accepted as the common currency” (131). However, a person’s use of SAE in school or at work (appropriate situations) in no way negates their home dialect (Black English Vernacular, for instance) in other arenas of life, such as at home or in the company of friends. Kolln and Funk introduce the word register to denote the different levels of language one person may employ throughout the average day: even children know “the ‘huh-uh’ of the playground becomes ‘no thank you’ when the school principal asks a question” (12).

Textbook/Traditional Grammar

Textbook grammar, or “common school grammar” (Hartwell 188), is connected with what is usually referred to as a “formal” or “traditional” approach. It has been accused of being “developed unscientifically, largely based on two inadequate principles—appeals to ‘logical principles,’ like ‘two negatives make a positive,’ and [on] analogy to Latin grammar...” (Hartwell 188-9). Murdick adds another accusation: “Traditional grammar...[gives but] a small set of assumptions about what kinds of word classes and larger structures exist in English” (38)—rough translation, “Traditional grammar is deceptive in its simplicity.” When you hear reports that studying grammar does not improve students’ speaking or writing (much less reading) abilities, “traditional,” “formal,” or “schoolbook” grammar is considered to be the culprit, with its isolated grammar drills and old-school Reed-Kellogg diagrams. Every English teacher must be aware of one negative report which still causes consternation in grammar circles today: Martha Kolln cites a well-known 1963 report by the National Council for Teachers

of English (NCTE), more specifically Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, which suggested the following:

In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing (27).

This report, among other considerations, encouraged many teachers to refrain from teaching grammar altogether, which may explain why so many pre-service English teachers feel inadequately prepared to teach grammar.

Many sources suggest that “textbook” grammar gets its bad reputation, in part, from its stance of prescriptivism, that approach which says “He ain’t here” is bad grammar. In reality, though, as Williams points out, the students are so entrenched in their home vernacular or dialect at home, that they need the practice and exposure to Standard American English which the school environment provides (6-7). However, teachers might want to be careful not to say home dialects are “bad” but remind students that a definite boundary exists between “private and public discourses” (Williams 7) and that position and power generally accompany “standard” language practices. As you can see, this idea of traditional grammar and prescriptivism turns back to usage and the socially accepted rules of language use. It seems impossible to separate these multiple definitions of grammar.

Aside from its negative reviews, traditional or textbook grammar attempts to familiarize the students with the various parts of a sentence and their relationships to each other, i.e. their forms (morphology) and functions (syntax). “Forms” refers to whether a

word is a noun or a verb, an adjective or a preposition. The students are usually asked to distinguish these forms from each other, which, at first, seems quite a simple exercise; unfortunately, it is soon compounded by the fact that an entire phrase can stand in for a single noun, in the subject slot. For instance, in the following sentence, “Whoever made the cake will need to clean up the mess,” the subject slot, which many students mistakenly assume is held only by a single noun, includes the entire clause “Whoever made the cake.” Traditional/textbook grammar tends to employ the aforementioned Reed-Kellogg sentence diagrams (which petrify so many English teachers) in order to analyze sentences, making grammatical study more manageable; however, these diagrams, unlike the tree diagrams, become “very complicated very quickly,” in part because they have no way of labeling sentence constituents (Williams 60). The Reed-Kellogg diagrams may work well for shorter, simpler sentences, but even sentences which appear simple may have a complex structure. Most English teachers will be faced with using the Reed-Kellogg diagramming system in the public schools. A key question to ask oneself when diagramming is “to what does this word, clause, phrase refer or what does it modify?” The prepositional phrase “with a flat tire” in the sentence “The car with a flat tire is blue,” modifies car, giving you more specific information.

Rhetorical or Stylistic Grammar

Rhetorical or stylistic grammar relates to the choices writers (or orators, if you look to classical education) may utilize in a given situation in order to effect a certain response in their reader/listener (Kolln & Funk 343). When Martha Kolln calls for the modifier rhetorical to be added to grammar, she does so with the idea of teaching

grammar in the context of writing, rather than in isolated worksheets, as traditional grammar often does. I suggest that this form of grammar works to unnaturally manipulate written language in ways not wholly possible or probable in the spoken version. Quite frankly, much, if not most, of what we write is formulated into patterns and constructions infrequent in oral conversation (not planned speeches). An example of the unnaturalness of rhetorical grammar can be seen in the construction of absolutes. Donald Daiker *et al.* speak of an absolute as a “phrase that is almost but not quite a complete sentence” (65) since one removes a form of the verb “be” altogether from one clause or changes the main verb of that clause into an –ing form: “Marie was sitting at her desk, her head slightly lowered over a pile of chemistry notes” (Daiker *et al.* 64). This type of construction works well in a written context but would sound awkward in an oral environment.

Walter Ong notes that “writing...imposes some kind of strain on the psyche in preventing expression from falling into its more natural patterns” (40). At least one aspect of “orality” also seems to apply to language spoken by literate individuals. It is additive, not subordinate (Ong 36). If we were to listen to ourselves speaking to one another, how many times would we notice the use of the word and? “**And** George said to Cynthia, ‘blah, blah, blah,’ **and** Cynthia said, ‘blah, blah, blah, yourself,’ **and** then we all went **and** had a cup of coffee.” Although those of us who are literate employ subordination in common speech, we utilize more than our fair share of additive style as well. Naomi Baron points out that, “particularly in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth

centuries, writing developed an autonomous identity from speech, though the rhetorical uses of writing were never far beneath the surface” (262).

In a sense, rhetorical or stylistic grammar involves word choice, much as usage does, but in this case, the choice involves strategies to maintain a reader’s interest in the piece of writing. For example, the “known-new contract” supposes that writers will place known information from the previous sentence in the subject of a sentence and new information in the predicate (Kolln & Funk 344). According to Kolln & Funk, the following items all represent rhetorical grammar: rhythm, end focus (the main part of the sentence in the predicate), passive voice (slotting the direct object as the subject), abstract subjects (there, it, what in the subject slot), shifting adverbials, sentence appositives (renaming an entire sentence super-succinctly), nominal appositives (succinctly renaming a noun or noun phrase), word order variation, the deliberate sentence fragment, the coordinate series, and, finally, repetition (344-80). Donald Daiker *et. al.* present a fifth edition of a sentence-combining text titled The Writer’s Options: Combining to Composing in which they teach many of the elements of syntax without ever using the word grammar at all: relative clauses, participles, appositives, absolutes, coordination and subordination, prepositional phrases and infinitive phrases, and noun substitutes. Applying an opposite method, Paul Trout, a Montana State University English Professor, gives students A Short Guide to Sentence Style, which teaches rhetorical grammar, liberally employing the word grammar, based on the concept that a vocabulary of constituents must precede the ability to manipulate those constituents; that is, one must learn the vocabulary for the elements of a sentence and their relationships to each other

before one can successfully manage those elements, which is what rhetorical grammar is all about.

Grammar Does Not Necessarily Mean...

Now that we have explored a number of meanings which may be attributed to the word grammar, let's take a look at meanings which don't necessarily belong to this word. Interestingly enough, the complications surrounding definitions for grammar have to do with the written form of language, not the spoken form. Would we be studying grammar at all, in this analytical fashion, if we didn't have a written representation of our language? I don't think so. Walter Ong says that in orality "words have no focus or trace...They are occurrences, events," that "there is nowhere to 'look' for them" (31). Ong reminds us that in orality, "[i]n the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify whether he or she has done so or not" (34). Orality renders analysis impotent and redundancy important; orality favors the old idea and shuns the new (Ong 41). In fact, Ong claims that "[w]ithout writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally, even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness" (77). So we shall see that the meanings mistakenly attributed to the word grammar are so attached because of confusions associated with the technology of writing.

Grammar is Not Necessarily Spelling

When we speak a word aloud, the meaning is conveyed to the listener within a context, and, thus, the listener can generally discern the meaning intended. Difficulties arise when we write, however. Many people tend to imagine that all spelling issues are those of grammar. If a word is merely spelled incorrectly, then the problem is not a grammatical one. The word c-o-m-m-i-t-m-e-n-t may be misspelled by a writer as c-o-m-m-i-t-t-m-e-n-t. This constitutes a spelling error, and we certainly see enough of those these days. Naomi Baron reports “For many centuries, English spelling was relatively laissez-faire” (104), and we may be coming back around to a similar period in which the youth of America don’t know how to spell much of anything. I have heard ghastly reports of students spelling phonetically and even omitting vowels altogether, especially in chat rooms and in e-mail messages. Yes, Houston, we have a problem, but not all of it is grammatical.

Yet some so-called spelling errors are, in fact, grammatical ones. Errors of this type would be those of inflection. Constance Weaver shares an example of a young writer who omits tense markers from the verbs as well as several function words from a writing sample. Rather than mark these omissions as errors of carelessness, Weaver suggests: “Since this child does not leave off grammatical endings in her spoken dialect...it may well be instead that such “errors” are the result of a developmental phenomenon: in her concern for expressing the basic elements of her underlying propositions, the child is not able to attend to all the grammatical signals as well” (Weaver¹⁵).

Grammar is Not Necessarily Punctuation

In 1817, William Cobbett, in his treatise on ‘Orthography, Prosody, Etymology and Syntax,’ listed only four elements of punctuation: the “full point” or period, the colon, the semi-colon, and the comma (x). Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (1977), denotes punctuation as “the act or practice of inserting standardized marks or signs in written matter to clarify the meaning and separate structural units” (935) and lists Cobbett’s four, plus the following: dash (three distinctive types), hyphen, double hyphen, question mark, exclamation point, apostrophe, parentheses, brackets, braces, quotation marks, ellipsis. The issue of what constitutes punctuation is still somewhat muddled, though, for Jane Aaron’s Little, Brown Compact Handbook includes end punctuation, the comma, the semi-colon, the colon, the apostrophe, quotation marks, dashes, parentheses, ellipsis, and quotation marks as punctuation marks, and yet the lowly hyphen, capitalization, underlining or italics, abbreviations, and number usage are all slotted as “Mechanics” (241-94). Many people also mistakenly suppose that the category of punctuation is subsumed beneath that of grammar. As a writing center tutor, I am never surprised when I meet students who say, “My paper is in really good organizational shape; I just need a quick grammar check,” which I translate into “Please proofread and edit my paper for spelling and punctuation errors.”

Naomi Baron claims that there are two traditions of punctuation (hence, all the confusion about how to punctuate): “The first tradition (‘rhetorical’) sees the role of punctuation to be assisting readers in re-creating oral renditions of texts, either by reading the text aloud or memorizing it. The second tradition (variously called ‘grammatical,’

‘syntactic,’ or ‘logical’) views punctuation as a set of conventions for marking grammatical relationships in stand-alone written documents” (170). Whereas rhetorical punctuation shows where a reader would take a breath, grammatical punctuation separates grammatical entities such as relative clauses, even if they don’t require a pause. R. Scott Baldwin and James Coady, authors of “Psycholinguistic Approaches to a Theory of Punctuation,” explain that punctuation is relatively worthless and that if only everyone would write in canonical word order, we would be just fine. They do suggest, however, that “punctuation is a late developing cue system in reading” (363). But with the various possibilities which rhetorical grammar provides writers, readers are not going to encounter many canonical subject-verb-object constructs. This just goes to show how controversial the punctuation situation is. If one does rearrange the syntactic elements of a sentence for rhetorical or stylistic purposes, is that punctuation, then, considered a problem of grammar? In addition, Baldwin and Coady used only simple, short sentences in their study, which seems to detract from the reliability of their argument.

A Quick Recap: Rules and Relationships

The word grammar can mean our underlying system of rules for making meaning with language through the formation of words and sentences; this process involves individual phonemes (sounds) which combine to form morphemes (the smallest linguistic units with meaning), which may stand alone as complete words or combine with other morphemes to form complete words. Words must be arranged in a specific order to create a sentence, and words may be categorized according to their form (noun, verb,

preposition, etc.) and function (subject, direct object, adjective phrase, etc.). Grammar might also mean the study of the system of language rules such as phrase-structure or transformational grammar. These “grammars” attempt to describe, model, explain, or account for the ways in which a language works. This word may also be construed as a standard of “correctness,” known as Standard American English. Too, traditional/textbook grammar prescribes the same social rules of appropriate language use, labels parts of speech and their corresponding relationships. Finally, grammar may be used in a rhetorical context to denote methods of manipulating the written word toward effective and interesting communication. The subject of grammar repeatedly involves rules, whether they are intrinsic to language itself or societal, and relationships. There we have grammar in a nutshell: rules and relationships.

By now, it also ought to be apparent that grammar does not necessarily include spelling, punctuation, or mechanics, even though these are often these subjects are often lumped together with grammar in school textbooks. Obviously, spelling involves rules—i before e except after c—and relationships, although these are relationships between individual letters (phonemes). Punctuation, too, requires rules, although you’ll find eight different teachers will punctuate a document in eight various ways; these rules seem to fluctuate, and one could certainly say that punctuation includes relationships since the punctuation reveals the connection between parts of a sentence. Here, again, we find the paramount importance of rules and relationships.

CHAPTER 3

CONNOTATIONS: ABOVE AND BEYOND DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS

The usual response which I have received from those to whom I explained the topic of my text—grammar—has been an entirely blank stare, glazed eyes, and an extreme desire to change the subject. Grammar is not a topic generally received with great joy or interest. In fact, you may imagine that all of the superadded second-level connotations applied, consciously or unconsciously to this term, reflect a negative overtone. I have been asking myself why grammar is looked upon with such disfavor. Imagine that we were able to say exactly as we pleased in a wild and natural manner. This may illustrate the language we are born to, but because we all live in a larger society, what is natural and wild and untutored must become tamed and domesticated in order to be productive. Studying grammar, a.k.a. Standard American English, the most commonly used denotation of grammar, attempts to make conscious and measured a previously unconscious, free, and unhindered use of language. Perhaps your mother corrected you verbally as you learned to speak; perhaps a teacher or parent pointed out to you the benefits of politeness, especially to your elders, but when one receives red marks on school papers, when one is forced to learn what appears to be an unnatural course of study such as grammar, the result is that suddenly that free and natural and uninhibited use of language seems wrong. Language certainly impacts identity. In any case, we shall soon discover that most of the negative connotations applied to the idea of grammar stem

from a resistance to the process and discipline of the domestication of language use and from the images and emotions such processes bring to the surface.

As I have mentioned before, connotations are second-level meanings added to a word, or even to an entire utterance, above and beyond the meanings associated with first-level, literal definitions, and, as such, they represent an excess, something extra, something beyond. To illustrate this excess and its relationship to grammar, I will need to share another example of strange correlation and application. In reading Natasha Korda's book Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England, I noticed how Korda speaks of Kate, the so-called "shrew," as posing a linguistic threat to the symbolic order of the Early Modern household, hence the need for her taming. Korda, in turn, quotes Joel Fineman as explaining, "the shrew's linguistic excess becomes a threat not of too many words, but rather of too much meaning. Kate's speech underscores the way in which language always 'carries with it a kind of surplus semiotic baggage, an excess of significance, whose looming, even if unspoken, presence cannot be kept quiet'" (57). This discussion led me to look at connotations as "semiotic baggage," as excess which may be implied but goes unspoken. Connotations always require the listener/reader to listen/read between the proverbial lines in order to grasp the full meaning. But how can a new or pre-service English teacher accomplish this fantastic feat if he or she remains unaware that connotations exist?

My discussion of connotations also ties in with and stems from Barthes' exploration of myth and second-level meanings, which he calls connotations. In the 1950's, Barthes, generally frustrated with "the sight of the 'naturalness' with which

newspaper, art and commonsense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history,” began to write a series of articles which were later published under the title Mythologies as one of Barthes’ most popular and influential books (rpt. in Allen 34). In these articles, Barthes explained how the simplest cultural artifacts and practices were, in fact, not what we imagined them to be. According to Barthes, it is this mythic ideology which produces superadded connotations altering the initial surface-level definitions of words and statements. This may account for the long faces which appear at the mention of the word grammar, when none of the surface-level definitions are necessarily negative.

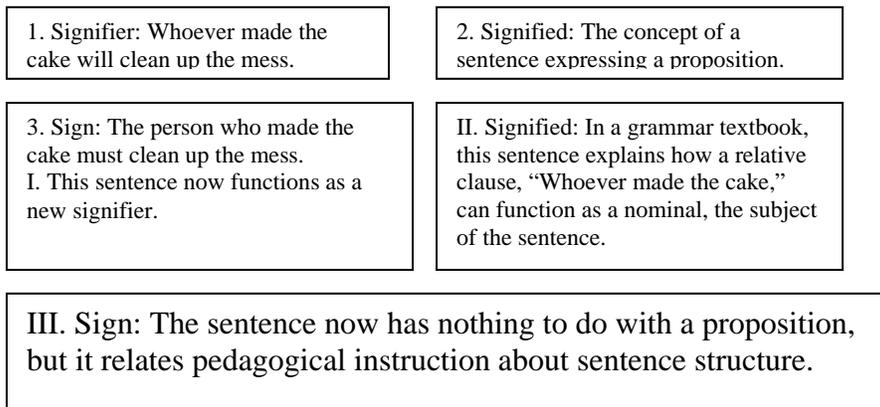


Figure 5. The Transformation of a First-Order Meaning into a Second-Order Meaning, or Connotation.

These connotations, which are subtly constructed out of first-level meanings, coincide with “the perpetuation and dissemination of bourgeois ideology...[and are] maddeningly difficult to criticize” (Allen 44), for it is as if the original definitions have been emptied of content and filled, instead, with the new, second-level concept. This new

concept may well address a political concern rather than the surface meaning of the original word.

Grammar and Authority

Any use of the word grammar carries with it the weighty connotation of authority. This is perhaps the first mythic, or second-level, meaning attached to the word, and it may be applied to any one of its first-level definitions, for rules represent authority, and, as we have already discovered, grammar is about rules, whether they are inherent to language or products of culture. Our good friend, Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1977), reminds us that authority means “power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior” (**2 a**), “freedom granted by one in authority: RIGHT” (**2 b**), or, among other choices, “persons in command; specifically: GOVERNMENT” (**3 a**) (76). So, strangely, it seems that institutions of authority, institutions of domestication and taming (schools are a primary example of this type of institution), ask for grammatical correctness in the form of Standard American English, and, at the same time, they grant freedom and privilege to those who have mastered this arcane knowledge. One can think of this in terms of allegiance and amnesty. Institutions of authority demand allegiance in the form of mastery of Standard American English, and, in return, they grant a sort of amnesty, privilege and possible power reserved for the members of the club.

Authority and Marxism

Marxism, as an older form of critical theory, explores class distinctions and structures and the ways in which these boundaries affect lives materially and economical-

ly. Those with wealth, according to Marxism, are those who represent authority; “those with wealth in society also control the means for making wealth, from factories and corporations to the private schools that separate those destined for wealth-accruing professions such as law and medicine, realms of mental labor, from those destined for low-pay manual jobs” (Rivkin & Ryan² 231). Culture, then, works as a tool of the ruling class (authority) to sedate those of a lower class, filling their minds with happy stories via novels, television programs, movies, music, etc.. This culture may even allow the subjugated individuals to feel they are lashing out and rebelling against the “system” through song lyrics, outrageous clothing and personal fads, just to name a few “rebellious” outlets, when, in reality, they remain just as enslaved as ever (Rivkin & Ryan¹ 232, Bourdieu 1029).

Standard American English is, in a sense, a “coin of the realm” in that it achieves a market value. Those who can master the system of grammatical or linguistic correctness, according to the current cultural prescriptions, may succeed in obtaining those “wealth-accruing” jobs and gain authority, which may be accompanied by a smug sense of superiority. However, as studies have shown, the students who truly grasp grammatical principles are few and far between. If I were, again, to visually depict this scene, it would resemble a relatively small inner circle of individuals in any given community, not just schools, who understand and are at least adequately able to master and manipulate the intricacies of so-called grammatical correctness; surrounding this small inner circle would be the outsiders, as numberless as the stars in the vastness of the universe, who still communicate in a more natural but less “acceptable” format. I have

coined the term “linguistic mechanic” to denote those who “get into” language and love tinkering around with words, investigating the myriad ways they work together to make meaning, but there probably won’t be very many of these in any given classroom. Unfortunately, according to the cultural misconceptions of which Marxism informs us, those on the linguistic sidelines are almost certainly bound to congratulate themselves for avoiding the position of “teacher’s grammar pet” or “holier-than-thou” linguistic convert, and, yet, we must remember that the reverse term for superior is inferior, and one can’t help wondering if those who “don’t get it” feel inferior.

Marxism, with its location of authority anchored in the ruling class and upheld by institutions such as schools and work places, presents a view of society in which those in authority must constantly work to contain and control the subjugated masses without seeming too obvious in these despotic efforts. However, any attempts to institutionalize individuals or shape language use seem very similar and very apparent to those being institutionalized. “In fact,” Kelley suggests, “some students even liken school to prison...Regulated schedules, designated break periods in the ‘yard,’ and strict rules governing every aspect of day-to-day life are the norm in both cases” (40-1). It’s no wonder students resist the authority of grammar—either as a study or a model. Reminiscent of George Orwell’s 1984, grammar lessons may strike many students as an effort to prune, shape, dissect, and police their language, seemingly at all hours of the night and day, until nothing authentic remains.

Authority and Post-Structuralism

Post-Structuralism, emerging in the 1960's from the conservative view of Structuralism, rebelled against perceived authority, against the content structures identified and explored by anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, literary critic Roland Barthes, and Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, employing "linguistics to argue that all such orders are founded on an essential endemic disorder in language and in the world that can never be mastered by any structure or semantic code that might assign it meaning" (Rivkin & Ryan² 334). Thus, while Structuralism sought to identify and illuminate rules, Post-Structuralism sought to render them powerless and impotent (Rivkin & Ryan² 334). Negative connotations of authority and structure re-emerged, resembling the Marxist notion of "oppressive class regimes:" "After [Foucault's] Words and Things [1966], French thinkers began to see signification not as a gateway to structure but as a way of constructing repressive orders of knowledge and meaning as well as an apparatus for repressing anti-structuring forces. Signification was not a path to knowledge but a servant of cultural regimes that imposed repressive categorical orders on the world" (Rivkin & Ryan² 337).

Thus, we can identify a growing awareness of authority and its changing status. Through Marxist study, authority became noticeable as an unfair and oppressive agenda associated with capitalistic wealth. Structuralism, characterized by rationalism and repression, helped to maintain those "repressive class regimes" (Rivkin and Ryan² 338). Finally, and most recently, Post-Structuralism radically rebelled against this so-called

authority, calling it into question, attempting to undo stability and the pseudo-secure sense of meaning which accompanied authority.

Authority Undermined

Unfortunately, today authority is being undermined in a number of ways. Ex-Vice President Dan Quayle received a lot of bad publicity for his lack of linguistic expertise. Currently, President George Bush finds himself the target of similar ridicule. Authority simply isn't what it used to be. W. Michael Kelley, speaking to the novice teacher in his text Rookie Teaching for Dummies, sadly delivers the bad news that "Teachers, as authority figures, are not automatically deemed worthy of respect..." (40-1). Gone are the days during which the students blindly followed their elders, unquestioningly gleaned wisdom and knowledge. Forays in democracy have extended individualistic freedoms to children now, to the extent that they demand certain educational services and situations which were not available to students of any other generation.

And, since authority and grammar find themselves tacitly tied together, it should come as no surprise to find that language use is not as highly regarded nor held as authoritatively powerful as it once was, either. Written language, especially, becomes even more informal, that is, less distinct from speech, as students spend increasing amounts of time with video games and movies as opposed to books and writing assignments. In the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, writing assumed an "autonomous identity from speech" (Baron 262); sentence constructions were convoluted and lengthily elegant, dotted with multiple semicolons, colons, and commas in ways unfathomable by today's school students or even teachers. However, Baron suggests that e-

mail, with its elements of “contact languages,” lessens the formality of written communication by employing predominately speech-like words, i.e. many first-and second-person pronouns, frequent use of adverbial subordinate clauses, disjunctions, present tense, contractions, and unchecked emotion (Baron 251). I would add to this list some of the atrocities I have witnessed in e-mail communications: total omission of vowels, capitalization, and punctuation, as well as many words spelled phonetically and lack of any full-fledged paragraph organization. Thus, we see that respect for authority, and for the language of the authority, wanes in our age of technology.

Grammar and Morality

Grammar and its corresponding sidekick, “correctness,” function as heavily-laden signifiers of values and morals, many of which came over on the Mayflower and took root. Constance Weaver identified a quote in a home school text, resounding with all the authority of God Himself: “Grammar is taught with the purpose of making clear to the student the orderly structure of their language, a picture of God’s orderly plan for the world and their lives” (Weaver² 15). Religious preferences aside, the quote seems to speak for a number of individuals who will swear to the proper use of grammar as an indication of virtue and right living as well as mastery of the status dialect. Will Manley, a librarian, recalls the missionary zeal one of his instructors applied to the teaching of grammar: “Dr. Fieldstone used to say that a weak grammatical foundation meant that the integrity of the message resting upon [it] would collapse. He felt in some strangely heroic way...he was teaching moral standards. He equated grammatical purity with personal

integrity” (1801). How can a subject so seemingly simple and merely structural as grammar find itself caught up in accusations of not only ineffectiveness with regards to improvement in writing but also of causing long-term mental and emotional trauma to students who could not avoid studying the subject and, moreover, may never recover from it? S. I. Hayakawa shows how deeply pedantic grammar instruction penetrates into the psyche of luckless students in a lengthy but well worth-while selection:

The most common result of the teaching of English and composition is not the creation of good writers and speakers, but the creation, in most of the public of a lifelong fear of grammatical errors....To be sure, we help some of our students to speak and write better. But the majority of the fair-to-middling students leave the English class feeling that ‘correct English,’ like moral perfection, is something they cannot hope to attain. Burdened, as the result of our castigations, by a sense of linguistic Original Sin, they depart from school feeling, like those Puritans who felt that whatever was fun must be sinful, that whatever sounds natural must be wrong. It is tragic that most Americans suffer, with respect to the use of their own language, especially in formal or semi-formal situations, a discomfort or malaise that can only be described as a mild form of anxiety neurosis (237).

Perfectly good, straight “A” students have flunked grammar units and imagine some gross moral deficiency in their otherwise stellar character, as if an inability to master this complex subject detracts from mastery in other areas.

Unfortunately, we cannot avoid the implications of this particular connotation with regards to the workplace, a world that English teachers must prepare students to join (Kolln & Funk 11). Grammatical competency, as revealed in one’s resume, can also connote a much-desired work ethic, a moral value judgment the reader may naturally assume is valid. In spite of those who say lack of grammatical competency does not adversely affect one’s potential to acquire a well-paying job in the business world, one person previously in charge of hiring for a large finance corporation would say it does.

Linda Adams, former Vice President of Marketing for Telco Communications Credit Union in Tacoma, Washington, confesses that for every advertised position she would compile several stacks of incoming resumes, based upon the grammatical correctness of the documents, with staggering implications. An average of eighty resumes end up in the pile kindly referred to as “no way, José’s;” another thirty are designated “maybes;” and a scant ten would find their way into the stack allocated for interviews. Of the ten people interviewed, only three would make it into the final round, and just one would finally be hired (Adams interview). Thus, even though the dictionary won’t list morality as a corresponding term for grammar, I would vouch for the veracity of this culturally held connotation.

Grammar and Mortality

Of course, the connotation of control, which accompanies many individual’s concept of grammar, can lead to certain death. Thomas Carlyle, a “difficult and cranky” but highly regarded Victorian author of historical works and social criticism (Damrosch *et al.* 1057), equated the controlling function of grammatical structures with death in Sartor Resartus (translation: The Tailor Retailored), as he wondered, “How shall he give kindling in whose inward man there is no live coal but all is burnt out to a dead grammatical cinder?” (118). In a similar vein, Erich Fromm correlates the state of general, current education with death: “While life is characterized by growth in a structural, functional manner, the necrophilous person loves all that does not grow, all that is mechanical. The necrophilous person can relate to an object—a flower or a person,

only if he possesses it; he loves control, and in the act of controlling, he kills life” (rpt. in Freire 77). This control approach to writing, language, and grammar can reduce the readers to mere “receiving objects” in much the same way Friere describes “the banking system” of education (77). In this scenario, grammar, or what is perceived as grammar, functions oppressively—squeezing the life out of language, denying to those who cannot master it access to the power the status dialect conveys to its fluid users. This connotation, as seen by those who don’t “get it,” also tends to relegate those who have mastered grammatical principles to the dull and spiritless categories of “kill-joy” and “fun sucker,” although I may be stretching the situation somewhat with these curious labels.

Death of Creativity

Many people mistakenly imagine that grammar and grammar instruction force them into a corner, limiting their creativity. This may well tie in with the perception of authority and rules in general as stifling expressive impulses. Peter Elbow seems to represent those who would rather express themselves than worry about sentence fragments. He reports: “Learning grammar is a formidable task that takes crucial energy away from working on your writing [doesn’t he sound like Braddock *et. al.* ?], and worse yet, the process of learning grammar interferes with writing...For most people, nothing helps their writing so much as learning to ignore grammar as they write” (rpt. in Kolln 26). However, as Martha Kolln points out regarding Elbow’s notion of the death-grip of grammar, “Elbow was referring also to mechanics, to punctuation and spelling, the details of proofreading” (26).

Elbow is not the only author who correlates strict grammatical correctness with the death of creativity. Wendy Atwell-Vasey claims that language is maternal and nurturing and life-affirming in the beginning: “Words float gently around us, at hand, to be plucked like plums...cooing with mother at the breast, crying at being left alone, whispering in bed with a sibling, laughing in the tub with Dad, haggling with playmates over a toy...” (1-2), but all the examples she uses to illustrate the maternal creativity of language stem from oral utterances, vocalizations of sounds flying from pharynx to ear to heart. Then she calls attention to the domestication, taming, and management of language which takes place in the classroom, where “words are regulated and specialized vocabularies prevail” (2), snuffing out all that lovely creativity. It is not merely the classroom environment, heavily-laden with dense authority, with which she finds fault, but the grammar lessons, now paternal and stern, overriding natural exuberance and passion in language use. Just as Samuel Johnson feared for the sanctity of language trampled and fouled by those who use it (Baron 102), Deborah Cameron, in her book titled Verbal Hygiene, explains how “traditional grammar and traditional pedagogy are related in content and form by beliefs, values, and goals selected to order and fix a language that seemed chaotic, vulgar, and liable to degeneration” (rpt. in Atwell-Vasey 3).

For Atwell-Vasey, this paternal squelching of language leads back to Plato and others who associated “nature” with women and “culture” with men. Of course, Freud’s theories of the super-ego come into play here. “It was hard for Freud to prove or count the presence and influence of the father as the authority figure in our families and our

institutions. But, of course,” Atwell-Vasey suggests, “we noticed that very father in our laws, customs, religions, and moral codes. For Freud, it is the paternal function that is law-bearing, and among the first laws to which a child submits are the laws of language” (5). This concept should be neither new nor startling, for Leonard Shlain, in The Alphabet and the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image connects literacy with widespread “demise of the Goddess, the plunge in women’s status, and the advent of harsh patriarchy and misogyny” (viii), exploring changes in the brain due to what Walter Ong refers to as “internalized literacy” (175). Some may claim Shlain’s expose as unstable, since he is, after all, the chief of laparoscopic surgery at California-Pacific Medical Center, but who better to explain that abrupt shift from right-brain, Goddess-venerating modes to linear, left-brain thought-processing?

Death of Identity

Creativity is not the only perceived victim of the domestication and taming of wild maternal language: identity, too, is sacrificed at the altars of institutional authority. The fear of loss of identity is so pervasive that some even argue that students ought to be able to speak and write in their home dialects in the school environment. Williams shows this concern in action: “The argument that students have a right to their own language has influenced discussions of dialect since the late 1960’s. It emerged out of the Civil Rights Movement and concern that school policies that stress Standard English and disallow the use of Black English for recitation and writing are discriminatory and place an unfair burden on African-American children” (252-3). Unfortunately, while this policy would supposedly keep intact the students’ sense of identity, it also effectively prevents those

students from learning the standards of language use which could promote them to success. Balance between dialects is, by far, the most holistic solution, producing students who would be bi-dialectical.

Many others argue that all Americans must learn to master Standard American English in order to be equally prepared for success in the school and business realms. The controversy over acceptable dialect usage in these realms returns to the main tenets of Marxism. “Socioeconomic factors play a more complex role. Every language has a prestige dialect associated with education and financial success” (Williams 242). A widely-read essay published in Newsweek (1982) explains that employing a subset of language, such as Ebonics, can actually work against those who wish to preserve their cultural and personal identity by keeping them on the outside of that privileged enclave of Standard American English users. Rachel Jones, the author of the aforementioned essay, confessed, “My skill with standard English propelled me from a life of poverty and dead ends to a future I could have scarcely imagined. It has opened doors for me that might never have budged an inch for a poor black girl from Cairo, Illinois. It has empowered me in ways I can’t begin to explain” (489). As we can see, the connotations are not necessarily true, but they can carry a more powerfully visceral charge than the actual definitions do.

Changing Connotations

Connotations may be considered gut instincts or unconscious/subconscious first impressions formed before one even really knows what grammar consists of, and, as

mentioned earlier, these connotations may be predominately negative, especially if one thinks of grammar only as usage or cultural/societal rules about language use. But grammar does not need to connote total authoritative control, nor a moral value judgment, nor death of creativity or identity. Authority can be viewed as access to power, not only denial of it. Certainly, one cannot look at any of the renowned authors of previous centuries and their vast oeuvres of inestimable value and imagine that they suffered loss of creativity in using even more exacting structural forms than we do today. Too, many people learn more than one language without feeling as if they have killed off their original identity or language in the process of gaining proficiency in others. Perhaps if we approach learning about and teaching grammar in light of these other possible connotations, students and novice teachers alike would be more willing to tinker around and, perhaps, become linguistic mechanics.

CHAPTER 4

IMPLICATIONS: TOOLS OF THE TRADE AND FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Now that we have investigated, to a certain extent, the surface definitions and at least three major connotations associated with the word grammar, the next step is to look at the results, or implications, of this exploration. Something implied is never stated directly; one must arrive at conclusions through inference or deduction. “To implicate” is to “fold or twist together, to entwine...” (Webster’s 1977). This means we must consider the various intersections between these two groups—denotations and connotations—and what these entirely new signs imply, rather than looking at individual denotations or connotations as stand-alone elements. We must also investigate the implications of ignorance and awareness of this issue; in other words, it is helpful to discover why and in what ways this discussion can prove beneficial and to see what results from an absence of this information for both teachers and students.

Ignorance Equals Bewilderment and Rebellion

In Chapter One, I described my undergraduate colleagues’ responses to the study of grammar; most of these responses can be summed up with one word: bewilderment. I am not the only person who has noticed this reaction. Virginia Monseau from Youngstown State University, current editor of English Journal, remembers an English Methods class she taught in which her students admitted to not knowing even what a subordinate clause was or what it did. Despite extensive work with grammar during that

class, and despite new observations the students made, Monseau sadly reported, “they didn’t feel they were qualified to teach those lessons. A scary thought” (11). If our new English teachers are bewildered, how effective will their language instruction be? I know of at least one undergrad who actually transferred into History Education because she couldn’t imagine ever mastering grammar.

The cost of remaining ignorant about the complex and convoluted permutations of denotations and connotations for the term and subject grammar is too high. One implication of our discussion is that we cannot take any term or subject for granted; even seasoned teachers need to continue to wonder and investigate, study and probe the layers of meaning surrounding our content areas. That bewilderment can only be dispelled through such endeavors. I think many of the gut reactions people feel about grammar stem from misperceptions about what it is or what it can mean (denotations), as well as from a nebulous notion of the negative connotations associated with the word; most likely, few of those negative reactions are based on fact. Dispelling those misconceptions is perhaps the first step in looking at the subject of grammar differently, with an openness to experiment and learn playfully rather than fearfully.

Another conclusion, and perhaps a quite obvious one at that, which can be drawn from our two categories of denotations and connotations—both having much to do with rules, authority, and constraint, all things human beings, and especially young ones, tend to rebel against—is that many students will resist learning it or practicing using it. Although our first surface definition of grammar—the system of rules and relationships

within language itself which allow for meaningful words and sentences—is inherent to all language use, and thus cannot be avoided even if it is not studied, many students may feel that if they don't pay attention to the rules of usage, the social grammar of our day, they retain a natural use of language. They may feel that they escape domination by authority. They may, in fact, see no value at all in learning what a noun clause is or how it works, not to mention the numerous other structures and connections. Even now I can hear students whine, “Why do we need to study grammar? It will be just like algebra, some dumb subject we'll never use. It's all just busywork.”

The tendency of youth to rebel against the authoritative structures of grammar and language lessons taught at school ties in with a more recent field of critical theory known as “Cultural Studies,” which surfaced in England during the 1960's and blended together elements from fields such as sociology, Marxism, and Structural semiotics [the study of signs] (Rivkin & Ryan³ 1025). In explaining the basic tenets of this school of theory, Rivkin and Ryan note that culture, commonly acknowledged as political in nature since the advent of Marxism, is seen now as “both a means of domination, of assuring the rule of one class or group over another, and a means of resistance to such domination, in a way of articulating oppositional points of view to those in dominance” (1025). So, with regards to our discussion of grammar, Cultural Studies would want to explore both the ways language and grammar lessons oppress students as well as the ways in which students resist this oppression and rebel through their own individualistic language use.

The quality of education a student receives, coupled with the home environment, according to Pierre Bourdieu, directly influences individual “tastes” for music, art, and

literature, among other subjects, seemingly predisposing students for a higher or lower level in the cultural class hierarchy: private schools are bound to include and enforce a more rigorous curriculum and direct students toward a privileged knowledge of and preference for elevated forms of classical music, art, and literature. However, many of the poorer, public schools can barely teach the educational basics and subsequently predispose working-class students toward blue-collar popular forms of entertainments, such as weekly sitcoms, movies, popular novels, and pop music (Bourdieu 1028). Private schools may place fewer than ten students in each classroom. Many private Christian schools teach a vigorous, exacting, and ancient curriculum centered around the classic Greek trivium (Strawbridge 3). On the other hand, public schools may be forced to cram as many as thirty-five students into a too-small room with one teacher and curriculums that are now much consumed with political correctness, often to a point of insipidity. This overcrowding in the public schools also diminishes the amount of possible individual learning projects students could accomplish under the direct supervision of an excited teacher.

These personal “tastes” and preferences of which Bourdieu speaks correlate with a student’s level of motivation to master Standard American English or to excel in other subjects in school. Many students may have made up their minds, subconsciously if not consciously, to subsist at a level of the class hierarchy which accepts mediocrity. James Williams says that “language change occurs when someone is highly motivated to modify his or her language. [But] [t]eachers may not be able to do much to address the issue of motivation” (152). Williams also mentions that today’s students appear more interested in

a pop culture literacy than they are in actual cultural literacy: they know the names and fictional histories of television characters, but they may not know the name of the current President. And he concludes by noting, “There appears to be inherent value to a society when its citizens have the intellectual tools necessary to move it forward materially. As yet, not one critic has been able to explain how a storehouse of trivia about The X-Files or any other pop culture icon can help anybody build a better computer or a more durable road” (152). Furthermore, these entertainments toward which not only youth gravitate are exactly those tools of “mass culture—the culture of television, radio, film, and cheap paperback...a way for capitalism to offer ephemeral gratification to people condemned to lives of work,” according to Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer (Rivkin & Ryan³ 1025). Thus, the students are caught in their own trap: in rebelling against the “system,” they only further their own domination. Culture may function as a form of resistance, but it is not a resistance which results in freedom.

Awareness Invites Elaboration and Interest

Just as ignorance of the multiple dimensions of grammar can lead to bewilderment on the part of English teachers and rebellion in the students, an awareness of the breadth and intrigue of this subject can invite teachers to elaborate more fully and communicate more clearly to the students, and, in turn, the students may find more interest in what they had previously perceived as a dry and boring lesson. In fact, realizing that the word grammar encompasses both denotations and connotations is no different than realizing that every utterance contains both surface structure and what

Noam Chomsky labeled deep structure. That is, as Constance Weaver reminds us, “On the one hand, a sentence obviously consists of a linear sequence of clauses, phrases, words, and sounds or letters. On the other hand a sentence clearly has one or more meanings” (Weaver¹ 7). Just as everyone who learns to read first forms a hypothesis regarding the possible intended meaning of the sentence as they move from the beginning to the end, checking and rechecking the contextual definitions of polysemous words as they go, English instructors, now, armed with the knowledge of the multiple denotations and connotations connected to our word/subject of choice, may do the same with regards to the word grammar, mentally scrolling through the denotations and connotations for all of the possible permutations pertinent to the text at hand. This skill may prove as helpful to the teaching of the subject as it ought to be to the learning of the subject, for, if shared with students, it may help them understand better what is being asked of them and why learning grammar is important.

This discussion and exploration of the first- and second-level definitions of grammar can be used as a foundation for a rationale for teaching grammar. A rationale for any lesson or unit plan explains why it is an important lesson or subject to learn and what life-long benefits it bestows upon the students, providing a firm foundation for lessons or, in this case, for a unit plan for grammar. Many teachers will create a rationale and form a theoretical basis for lessons which they never share with their students, since these underpinnings are not necessarily part of the lesson itself. However, I feel that if we let students in on the discussion of the subject and give them our reasons for teaching it, they may gain more respect for the lesson; they may see its importance rather than merely

reacting subconsciously or assuming they can do without it. Gerald Graff calls this the “cultural context.” Although Graff speaks of teaching literature, again, I connect his sentiments to that of grammar: “Students run into trouble when they have not inherited either the requisite ‘social agreements’ and ‘implicit pacts or contracts’ the text takes for granted, or those other codes taken for granted by the intellectual communities that are constantly recontextualizing and reappropriating texts for various purposes” (257). If students are not made aware of the insidious results of dismissing grammar and “correctness,” then they can too easily default into the mediocre status quo of dead-end manual labor without even recognizing that they have a choice, that they do not give up identity or give in to authority by learning the language of authority, that they can make the language of authority, the prestige dialect, their own, that they can be bi-dialectical as many others are.

Definitions as Tools of the Trade and Food for Thought

In conclusion, I must pause briefly and reexamine the purpose and scope of my text. I am aware that some may feel I have overstepped my boundaries and cheapened my subject by referring to so many dictionary definitions and, by doing so, seemingly attempting to place firm, secure boundaries around these words after so much explication of the wonders of critical theories and their potential to open and expand previously hemmed-in and crystallized subjects. X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, editors of a literature anthology, remind us, “The trouble with definitions is that they may stop thought” (738); that is, if we feel that we fully understand what a word means, we may

stop wondering and thinking about it altogether; we may begin to take the word for granted, assuming that it will mean today exactly what it meant yesterday or what we thought it meant yesterday. And yet this discussion has shown just the opposite, that definitions can be seen as a starting point, a place of departure for widening the use and relevance of a word.

Recent critical theories, especially deconstruction, push against the idea of an ultimate, firmly anchored meaning for any word or utterance, even though on the surface many of us, entrenched as we are in logocentric thought patterns, remain convinced that we want to know what a word or statement means, that we want to pin down this elusive element so that we can rest assured that we have “figured it out,” whatever the “it” may be. McQuillan, speaking for deconstruction, explains that “Western thought is governed by an idea of a stable or essential meaning, which is ultimately fixed by a transcendental signifier (a signifier which escapes the play of meaning and against which all meaning is measured)...” (13-4). What we seem to desire is a meaning which trumps all other meanings and ends the endless chain of signifiers of which Barthes speaks and which is partially illustrated in Figure 5 of Chapter Three. We must, however, imagine that the succession of signifiers never ends, that the so-called sign of one set (signifier + signified = sign) becomes the signifier of yet another set, ad infinitum. Jacques Derrida calls this endless process of signification “freeplay.” Allen contextualizes this by saying, “When we inquire into the meaning of a sign such as ‘culture’ we find that its signified [concept] turns into a signifier [word-image] for a series of further signifieds: non-natural, man-made, historical, tasteful, social privilege, superstructure (a Marxist term), language,

education are only some of the signifieds which confront us when we attempt to establish the meaning of 'culture.' Meaning, Derrida argues, cannot be pinned down: meaning is, as Saussure had only partially grasped, purely relational" (68). Thus, any word and its particular resonance may only be seen in relation to its connections with other words in an utterance; nothing is a static or dependable definition.

Just as we generally look to definitions to end our search for meaning and the transcendental signifier, we, as a culture, also tend to look to medicine to wholly end our ills, a myth which Dr. Thomas Armstrong refutes: "Medication is a tool, only one of many, that can be helpful to some when used with nonmedical approaches" (xvii); similarly, definitions only serve as tools of the trade of teaching, food for thought, a way of opening up discussion rather than providing an ending for it. It is my hope that this text encourages an openness and a willingness to further explore the grammar of our language, of any language, in all the myriad ways possible.

Moffett concludes, "The most natural assumption about teaching any symbol system should be that the student employ his time using that system in every realistic way that it can be used, not that he analyze it or study it as an object" (7); this comment supports the current trend which favors teaching grammar in the context of writing, in which the student's spontaneous communication (deep structure) takes precedent over the surface structure, at least initially (Master v). Let this text stand as a call to English teachers, especially those new to the field, to remain vigilant in our guard over the language which we teach by internalizing its rules and relationships, standing ever ready to explain these precepts to our students when the need arises.

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