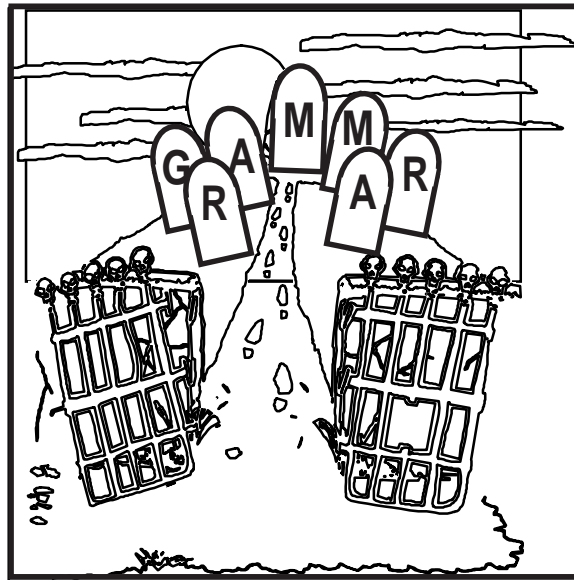


THE WAR AGAINST GRAMMAR

DAVID MULROY

I practice a dying profession. I have been teaching “Classics” (ancient Greek and Latin) at UWM since 1973. That year, I joined a department with five other tenure-track faculty members. Since then, no new appointments have been made. Classics has been merged into a Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics with other struggling programs (German, Hebrew Studies, Slavic Languages and Linguistics). Four of the original six classicists remain, but one will retire this year. Of the other three, two of us are in our mid-fifties; the third, a youthful sixty-something. When we go, there is little chance that any of us will be replaced. And the situation at UWM is typical of Classics programs nationwide. Enrollments started to slide in the mid-sixties and continue to do so. The number of Classics majors dropped by 30 percent between 1971 and 91; in 1995, over a million B.A. degrees were awarded; six hundred in Classics.¹ The handwriting is on the wall. How come?

At the heart of Classics are courses in the Greek and Latin languages. These days hardly any students take Latin; even fewer take Greek, which is harder. This is not for lack of



initial interest. Every September at UWM twenty to thirty eager students sign up for beginning Latin; ten or so for Greek. If a third of them continued to study these subjects for four or more semesters — as most them plan to do — we would have a flourishing program. Instead we lose virtually all of our prospective language students by the end of the first year.

You may think that we are just bad teachers. Our experience, however, is typical of Classics programs everywhere. The fatal problem is this. In order to learn Latin or Greek, students need to understand English grammar. These days very few American college students do.

The problem is not limited to Classics. Many foreign language programs are struggling. And enrollment statistics do not tell the whole story. In order to survive, foreign language teachers increasingly rely on “communicative” rather than grammatical syllabi. They try to immerse their students in the life styles

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of the people who speak the target language in the hope that their students will pick up the language effortlessly, the way they learned English. You can't miss this trend in colleges and high schools. A flyer advertising beginning Japanese at UWM emphasizes the fact that students will learn origami, the art of paper folding. Shortly before I switched my son to home schooling, a major assignment in his "French" class consisted of frying sliced mangoes, allegedly a popular treat in Francophone Africa. It even happens in Latin classes. An upbeat *New York Times* article on the alleged recovery of Latin in some secondary schools features a class that "uses dry ice to recreate Virgil's underworld." You get the picture.

I learned about grammar in a parochial school from no-nonsense (and no-dry ice) nuns who had me diagramming complicated sentences in the fourth grade. This gave me an understanding of the structure of language that is by far my most valuable intellectual possession: every word, one of eight parts of speech; every clause analyzable into one of four basic structures.

It took me a long time to realize that my students did not share this knowledge, which I had assumed to be the common possession of all elementary or "grammar" school graduates. I was not surprised when students needed to review the difference between participles and gerunds, but the discovery that they often could not distinguish between a noun and a verb or identify the grammatical subject of a sentence left me incredulous. In the late seventies, an outspoken student who became a close friend pulled the wool from eyes. In response to some patronizing remark of mine, he said: "You teachers are always putting us students down for not understanding grammar, but you have never taught us grammar. Maybe if you taught it, we would understand it."

From then on I always asked my students about their training in grammar and the truth of these comments was constantly confirmed. My students never had to master the fundamentals of grammar. The basic concepts were

presented briefly, if at all, and with evident distaste on the part of their teachers. As a result, I added two weeks of English grammar "review" to my elementary language classes, and met with some success. As time has passed, however, student ignorance of grammar has deepened. I once expected to salvage a half a dozen Latin students from a group of twenty-five beginners. Now I am happy with two.

In 1996 the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction was drafting a new set of standards for K-12 education. A draft was published with a request for comments. The standards included no reference to training in grammar. I attended public hearings and wrote an opinion piece for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* urging the inclusion in the standards of the ability to identify parts of speech and diagram sentences. I expected such an obviously sound suggestion to be embraced enthusiastically by the state's educational establishment. How could any sane person object to the proposition that high school graduates should know the parts of speech and understand the structure of sentences? When I was asked to serve on a subcommittee working on the language arts standards, I agreed to do so with high hopes.

According to E. D. Hirsch of *Cultural Literacy* fame, the nation's educational establishment occupies its own "Thoughtworld," in which they are secure from all criticism. This was my first encounter with the Thoughtworld. I found that one of its features is the arbitrary redefinition of words. The case in point is the word "standard." Unless you live in the Thoughtworld, you think that an intellectual standard involves a specific level of ability or knowledge that a person must display to obtain a given distinction like a high school diploma. In another context, employers might require prospective secretaries to type eighty words a minute. That would be a standard, right?

In the Thoughtworld, the situation is far more complicated. Here, it turns out, there are three kinds of standard. There is the "content

standard,” which specifies the area in which one’s ability is assessed; the “performance standard,” which describes how ability is assessed, and finally the “proficiency standard,” which sets the specific level of competence that one must display. A “content standard” for hiring a secretary might state that a candidate should be tested in word reproduction, while a “performance standard” might add that this test would involve using a keyboard. The business about eighty words a minute would be a “proficiency standard.”

One of the DPI’s ground rules was that it would formulate only “content” and “performance” standards. “Proficiency standards” were to be left to local school boards.

Outside the Thoughtworld, of course, “content standards” and “performance standards” are not standards at all. A “content standard” is what regular people call an academic subject; a “performance standard” is a kind of assignment or activity. An actual example of a “content standard” from the final version of the fourth grade language arts “standards” is “reading a wide range of materials;” a related performance standard is “reading aloud.” Only if you got down to defining what or how quickly or accurately students must read would have a “proficiency” (or real) standard, but only local school boards deal with those.

It takes a while to internalize the boldness of this sham, especially in the face of all those golden signs announcing that “Higher Standards Start Here.” If the DPI had responded to the call for higher academic standards in normal English, they would have said, “We refuse to set any statewide academic standards. We will, however, compile lists of subjects and activities in which local school boards may — or may not — impose some stan-

dards.” But “Longer Lists of Subjects Start Here” doesn’t make a very good motto.

Obviously, my goal of including the ability to identify parts of speech and diagram sentences was doomed from the start. That would involve “proficiency standards.” The closest the committee would come were grammar-related “performance standards,” which — generously interpreted — would be passed by anyone who could (say) order a hamburger in English, e.g., “(fourth grade students shall) understand and use parts of speech effectively, including nouns, pronouns, and adjectives.” Nor was this result unusual. Many states are adopting new sets of academic standards. Wisconsin’s are typical.²

Frustrating as this was, there was worse to come. Aware of my interest in grammar, a DPI consultant thoughtfully gave me a printout from the Internet on the subject of teaching grammar. The web site from which it was taken is produced by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the professional association of English teachers with a membership of eighty thousand.

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The handout read as follows:

FACTS ON THE TEACHING OF GRAMMAR

“Research over a period of nearly 90 years has consistently shown that the teaching of school grammar has little or no effect on students.” George Hillocks and Michael Smith, 1991

Background

The most common reason for teaching grammar as a system for analyzing and labeling sentences has been to accomplish some practical aim or aims, typically the improvement of writing. For decades,

however, research has demonstrated that the teaching of grammar rarely accomplishes such practical goals....

And so on.³

The printout contained bibliographical references so that the reader could consult the research on which these surprising opinions are based. To say that it is not compelling is a bit of an understatement. For example, the linchpin of the 1991 study by Hillocks and Smith — the one quoted on the web page's marquee — is a deliberately confusing test on identifying parts of speech, which was given to Scottish high school students in 1947.⁴ Their poor performance is said to prove that typical students are unable to learn how to identify the eight parts of speech.

The demise of college programs that (like Classics) make serious demands on students' verbal abilities is not the only sign of problems in K-12 language arts curriculum. Mean verbal scores on the SATs declined by 42 points between 1967 and 1993 (when scores were "recentered") — three times the decline in quantitative scores. At UWM, which is not unusual in this respect, a quarter of incoming freshmen are required to enroll in non-credit remedial writing courses in which they study the construction of sentences and paragraphs. Within living memory, public school sixth graders were required to explicate selections in McGuffey's readers, which included unaltered scenes from Shakespearean plays and poems like William Cullen Bryant's *Thanatopsis* ("So live, that when thy summons comes to join/The innumerable caravan, which moves/To that mysterious realm, where each shall take/His chamber in the silent halls of death,/Thou go not, like the quarry slave at night,/ Scourged to his dungeon")⁵ Flashing forward to 1998, Wisconsin's DPI proposes a high school graduation test. In the English Language Arts portion, it plans to ask graduating seniors questions like: "What can be assumed about caring for the garment that has this care label attached? '100% cotton/Made in USA/Machine Wash Cold/Tumble Dry Low/One Size Fits All.'" The correct answer? *D. This garment should not be*

*washed in hot water.*⁶ But now it looks like the test won't be given after all. Too hard.

And the nation's largest official organization of English teachers *opposes instruction in English grammar*. Thanks to their efforts, grammar has been banished from "grammar school." Is it possible that there is some subtle connection among these facts?

To be fair, the arguments against instruction in grammar are not utterly preposterous at first glance. Studies do show that the addition of instruction in grammar for a year or two does not dramatically benefit students working on English composition or foreign language.⁷ From this it is inferred, however, that knowledge of grammar is of no benefit in the mastery of those subjects, which is quite a leap. In fact, advocates of instruction in grammar view it as a foundational discipline best taught early in grade school. A good foundation in grammar enables students to excel *subsequently* in composition, foreign language study, and other verbal subjects. "Subsequently" is the critical term. Obviously, students who are struggling to write well or to learn a foreign language will not respond favorably to being saddled with the whole new subject of English grammar. By analogy, the history of western art clearly establishes that an understanding of anatomy is beneficial to painters and sculptors. Still, students in a class on figure drawing would not necessarily benefit from the addition of an anatomy textbook to their syllabus. The class would be less enjoyable, the students would become self-conscious and probably perform less well than a rival class that did not bother with anatomy. The lesson, however, is not to eliminate anatomy from the artist's training, but to provide its own appropriate place in the general curriculum. And that is also the real lesson of studies purporting to show that grammar just confuses students.

This is exactly the approach taken in the Brookfield Academy, one of the few schools in the nation to fight back in the war against grammar. There traditional grammar with a

heavy emphasis on sentence diagramming lies at the heart of the language arts curriculum in the second through the fifth grade. Despite the NCTE's "years of research," it is pretty clear that this approach does not damage the Brookfield students. Their verbal SAT scores were 86 points above the national average in 1999. Their teachers also report that the students are generally enthusiastic about studying grammar. I have visited their classes and find this to be obviously true. One fifth grade class enjoys a game in which they are allowed to realize abstract diagrams with "gross" sentences. When I challenged them to produce a gross linking sentence whose subject was a gerund with a direct object, every hand in the class shot up. A typical response: "Spewing chunks is unpleasant."

In his third great philosophical treatise, *Critique of Judgment*, Kant makes an interesting distinction between "determinant" and "reflective" judgments. A determinant judgment is one in which a set of rules or concepts is stipulated and applied to a particular situation. For example, a meteorologist classifying clouds as cirrus or cumulonimbus, etc. is making determinant judgments. Reflective judgments may reach some of the same conclusions, but they move in the opposite direction. You are given a particular situation and asked, in effect, what you think about it. You can apply whatever concepts come to mind. Contemplating clouds, you could say that they are pretty or threatening, look like cotton, are rapidly approaching from the west, promise rain — or even that they are cirrus clouds. The difference is that in reflective judgments the choice of concepts is open.

Reflective judgments are relaxed because they let the mind act freely. They are rarely wrong because the person who makes them

uses whatever rules or concepts come to mind and judges only those details of a situation that he notices. Determinant judgments are much harder. You lose your freedom. You have to play by given rules, understand them, and remember them correctly. If you don't notice all the relevant details, you will be wrong.

Classifying words by part of speech, parsing verbs, and diagramming sentences are all examples of the use of determinant judgments and the criticisms against them as pedagogical assignments can be made against all intellectual activities that rely primarily on determinant judgments. And all the criticisms boil down to one: they are hard.

*One consults doctors,
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impressions.*

For years progressive educators have done what they could to minimize the use of determinant judgment in education. The war against grammar is just one of their more successful efforts in this area. The effort to enhance student freedom by minimizing determinant judgments is profoundly misguided. Education serves no more important purpose than developing the capacity to make accurate determinate judgments, which

are essential to every practical endeavor. One consults doctors, lawyers, mechanics for determinant diagnoses, not reflective impressions. Not only that, the exercise of purely reflective judgments, even as an academic assignment, quickly becomes boring, precisely because it is not challenging and because the evaluation of reflective judgment is subjective. Nothing is either right or wrong.

The standard public school curriculum now provides little opportunity for the exercise of determinant judgment in the language arts beyond the basic skill of reading. Everything else depends on the students' reflective judgments: how they choose to

express themselves, what books they like and why, and so forth. Such a curriculum is a good formula for producing ennui. To retain interest, academic areas need nuclei of systematic knowledge whose use requires determinant judgments. In language arts, this is provided by the approach formerly taken in parochial schools and now used in places like the Brookfield Academy: first reading, then English grammar, and then the study of foreign language — with a grammatical syllabus.

Of course, it would be wrong to go to the other extreme and emphasize nothing but determinant judgments. What good teachers always do is to look for activities that synthesize reflective and determinant judgments, fostering freedom within constraints. Nothing prevents the inclusion of the systematic study of grammar in such a mix.

To put it another way, making up any old gross sentences is boring, but making up gross linking sentences whose subjects are gerunds with direct objects can be a lot of fun.

Notes

1. Victor Hanson and John Heath, *Who Killed Homer? The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (New York: The Free Press, 1998) p. 3.
2. English language standards proposed or adopted by twenty-eight states are reviewed by Sandra Stotsky, "State English Standards," *Fordham Report I.1* (Thomas B. Fordham Foundation) July 1997. The report is available on the Internet: <<http://edexcellence.net/stotsky/stottxt.html>>.
3. The full document is still available at <<http://homepage.tinet.ie/~seaghan/articles/6.html>>.
4. Hillocks and Smith, "Grammar and Usage," *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts* (New York: MacMillan, 1991). The Scottish test given by one W. J. Macauley gave preference to words that could be used as different parts of speech, e.g., *dance* as a verb in one sentence and a noun in another; *daily* as an adverb and then as an adjective. Hillocks and Smith also rely heavily on a book published in 1952 by one Charles Fries, *The Structure of English* (New York: Harcourt, Brace). This book is a shrill attack on "traditional school grammar," whose basic ideas are presented in an oversimplified way, ridiculed, and dismissed. It is true that the concepts of traditional

grammar were derived from Latin and must be stretched somewhat to fit English and other languages. Still, if Hillocks had consulted more scholarly works, e.g., Huddleston's *Introduction to the Grammar of English*, published by the Cambridge University Press in 1984, he would have learned that the search for universal principles of grammars in recent decades has made scholars more -- not less -- sympathetic with traditional grammar because traditional grammar still provides linguists with the only starting point for understanding the deep-seated similarities among all languages.

5. The first McGuffey's readers appeared in 1836. The series remained in widespread use for nearly a century. It is estimated the 122 million copies were sold between 1836 and 1920. The 1879 edition of the sixth grade reader was the last one to contain major revisions. It has been reprinted as a *Signet Classic* with an introduction by Henry Steele Commager: *McGuffey's Sixth Eclectic Reader, 1879 Edition* (New York: New American Library, 1963).
6. The sample test is no longer available on the DPI web site. For a hard copy, contact the author or the Office of Educational Accountability, State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, PO Box 7841, Madison, WI 53707-7841.
7. The Hillocks and Smith article cited on the NCTE web page (see above note 4) attempts to camouflage this limitation. Of all the studies they have reviewed, they say, "by far the most impressive is by Elley, et al. (1976)." In this study, students were divided into three groups, one studying generative or transformational grammar, one studying no grammar, and one described by Hillocks and Smith as "studying TSG (traditional school grammar)." Whereas other studies are acknowledged to have been done on too short-term a basis to be persuasive, "Elley and associates consider the achievement of New Zealand high school students as they moved through the third, fourth, and fifth forms and in a follow-up one year after the completion of the instruction." After three years, there were no significant differences among the groups. The conclusion: "teaching grammar does not have a beneficial effect on students' writing." If you consult the study, however, you find that its main purpose was specifically "to determine the direct effects of a study of transformational grammar on the language growth of secondary school pupils." An incidental observation is that students whose curriculum contained "elements of traditional grammar" showed no measurable benefits. There is no indication of how much traditional grammar was taught. The authors mention that the transformational grammar group was given additional tests on the central concepts of that approach. Nothing similar is mentioned for the "TSG" group. In any event, this "most impressive of studies" has nothing to say of the benefits of learning grammar systematically in grade school, which is the point at issue.