THE NEW ENGLISH GRAMMAR:

A Descriptive Introduction

N. R. CATTELL
with a Foreword by Wayne O'Neil

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FOREWORD

I

In the pages that follow, I will not comment at all on the substance and presentation of linguistic theory in Mr. Cattell's book except to say straightaway that it is an admirably clear and concise presentation of a substantial theory of language and of the main features of English grammar. There is no need to recapitulate here what the book itself does so well. Rather, I will deal with a topic that Mr. Cattell alludes to but, since this was not his purpose, does not dwell on: the consequence of such a theory for and its role in general education.

For many long years, grammar study has lain at the heart of the school curriculum: in the schools of America there are certainly, at any one moment of the study day, more children toiling over grammar than over all else combined. Yet few ask whether grammar should continue to be central and, if so (perhaps even if "maybe"), then why. At a time when highly commercial publishers and publicly financed curriculum production centers (both mining the new-found curricular

talents of the university "experts") are cram-jamming modern linguistics into the school day, it is especially important to consider these questions thoughtfully, rationally, and carefully.† Too often in today's highly bureaucratized educational system, decisions of basic importance to education are made for reasons unrelated to the proper goals of education; they are made instead on the basis of whether, for example, the materials are multimedia, modern, teacher-proof, routinized, automated, or sequentialized. It would be pleasant if such important decisions about what to teach, what course to follow, what set of texts (if any) to adopt, and so on, could for once be based on knowledge, on a concern for achieving a good education, on noncommercial honesty. This can be the case only if people in education, educators and laymen alike, read books like Mr. Cattell's and then consider seriously their possible educational consequences. It is to reflections of this sort that I now turn.

II

Public compulsory education exists, on the one hand, in order that the myths of the dominant culture may be properly transmitted to and reinforced in all the members of the society. On the other hand, a proper and important goal of education is that children come to understand how to construct coherent explanations

†For an extensive discussion of some of the same issues raised here and for a critical examination of one of the new linguistics textbook series, see my "'Paul Roberts' Rules of Order: The Misuses of Linguistics in the Classroom," *Urban Review* 7.2:12–16 (June 1968). A few of the following paragraphs have in fact been adapted from that article.

(formal and informal) of data—that they learn to generalize significantly across facts. It is presumably in this way that new directions through the real world are seen and perhaps followed, and that career choices and intellectual decisions are not foreclosed. There are, of course, other educational goals, but I believe that these two predominate in educational theory and practice.

Now the second of these goals is very often perverted when the aim becomes rote learning of generalizations (perhaps even of outdated ones) rather than coming to them through discussion and hard work around facts. Worse though, the two goals become badly confused when the data are so limited and chosen that the rote-learned generalizations attempting to explain them are in fact the myths of the culture. Look no further than the standard textbook treatment of American history (the settling of the West, the Civil War, America in the Philippines, etc.) to see that the myth generalizations dished up there are simply not consonant with the full range of facts available.

Now it is only where myths are at stake that such confusion can arise, only there that the contradictory nature of these goals becomes so obvious that relentlessly pursuing the latter is destructive of ever achieving the former. (Counterfactual beliefs about physical forces carry no weight in a physics classroom, while claims about the importance of Shakespeare to everyman can find neither rational confirmation nor disconfirmation.) And this is certainly a proper ordering of affairs: cultural myths deserve to survive (if at all) only insofar as they stand up to the challenge of

the full range of data. The image of a jolly, good-willed, peace/democracy/have-not-loving Uncle Sam should survive only if in fact it is a true image: we must know what we are if we are ever to become what we would want to be.

All of this seems far off from language and grammar, I hear you cry. Not really, for there are significant and far-reaching myths about language and especially about language differences that prevail in America (and in most other countries). Consider, for example,

1. That there exists a standard language that is systematic and "logical" and beside it unsystematic and less logical substandard language(s).
2. That the unsystematic and illogical nature of substandard language is a function of the generally (morally) depraved ways of the lower classes.

These myths appeal immediately and in fact make a major contribution to an individual's paranoid belief in the imperfectability of humankind, and in this way their effect is quite the opposite of American historical myths that lead one on to complacency and self-satisfaction. For they attack some aspect of an individual's social identity, lead to social insecurity, and are, in fact, totally destructive of school talk, of intergroup talk, and so on.

Now if language were to be studied in the schools in the way, for example, that the physical universe is studied, that is, in an objective, scientific way, with no attention given to mindless myth, with due consideration of the facts of language, no support whatsoever for the language myths would ever emerge. For there is none. Arguments for the systematic and supposedly

more logical character of preferred ways of speaking/writing would melt away as the systematicity and logic (whatever this could mean) of less preferred ways of speaking/writing became clear—in fact, dialects would differ in trivial ways only. And socioeconomic class explanations as well as climatic and physiological (folk) explanations of language differences would have to be given up as geographical and historical factors were brought forth. In other words, the existing myths could hardly emerge from (even quite informal) consideration of the facts of language.

It is important that these myths be destroyed, for clearly they are part of racist and elitist beliefs that a proper education should work toward erasing rather than sustaining. That education was in origin elitist is a sad enough fact, but that it should continue to promulgate elitism while going public and compulsory is intolerable.

Erasing the myths that surround language or, better, providing no support for them would simply be a by-product of attempting to generalize across language data or perhaps of drawing certain conclusions from the generalizations. From this point of view, language study would play an important role in a very general goal: arriving at coherent, rational explanations of the human differences, class differences, their naturalness, and so on. It is, of course, another matter entirely to argue that language study can contribute importantly to the general goal of theory construction, that it is proper grist for the mills of coherent discussion. Is there something about language that makes it especially amenable to this sort of examination? Clearly there is: the availability of the data to be explained.

In some new science and math curriculums there are attempts to get children to discover the generalizations that account for an array of data. There are, however, great difficulties, for children can bring very little of themselves to bear on such problems. The problems must then be tightly packaged so that the possibility of error, of making a wrong discovery, is eliminated or at least minimized. By carefully constraining the data made available, the student is led toward the foregone conclusion. The claim is that this is inductive teaching and that learning is "doing" science.

This is hardly better than rote-learning generalizations and considerably more wasteful of time. Surely "doing" science is quite another thing: theories are not built up inductively out of data, nor do they emerge from a poor acquaintance with the data. Thus it is clearly a mistake to teach the ways of science in a poor context. For such learning must go on in a context that is rich and full, one to which the child has some immediate access.

Such an area is language. A speaker of a language has a knowledge of it in a way that he has knowledge of few other things. The knowledge is, to be sure, tacit, but it can be tapped in ways that his knowledge of American history, say, cannot be until he is filled full of the facts of American history. Moreover, in grammar there are no unchallenged or unchallengeable explanations: the teacher does not and cannot hold the secret in his back pocket.

I can thus imagine, and in fact have run classes of this sort myself, a legitimate and important classroom activity being grammar construction. To various levels

of precision and formality, a class can proceed to come up with significant generalizations, a consistent set of them accounting for the complex array of English sentences and for the intuitions that speakers of the language have about the structure of sentences and relationships among them. Thus grammar does not become a procrustean bed of *do*s and *don't*s into which sentences must be rudely forced; but rather the grammar must be made to fit the facts. Language study can then be, in part, the writing of a grammar of a class's own language with considered attention to any individual differences that are uncovered. What is finally learned will possibly be of far more general significance than any set of generalizations upon English sentences, which can only prove wrong on closer examination anyway. What is learned is theory construction itself, how to come to grips with the problem of offering consistent, coherent explanations of complex arrays of data. And this is an area where the learner has some knowledge and access to potentially limitless data: there he can gain insight into the nature of formal explanations and formal systems.

III

The goals of grammar and language study just sketched in bear interesting relationships to the traditional goals: "On a single point, at least, all English grammarians are united," wrote Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg in 1878. "They hold that, by the study of grammar, the pupil should acquire the art of using the English language with propriety. A study of the science that does not issue in this, all agree, fails of its proper

end."† Clearly, one of the goals of grammar study has always been to improve oral and written expression, to get children to speak and write better. Now much can depend on such a term as "better," and much does. To speak and write better in the world of rhetoric – in that corner of the English class – is simply to be in tune with what is deemed effective and polished and sweet speaking/writing in one's own time – at least in the time of one's teachers. To speak and write better in grammar in that corner is simply to try nervously to cover up one's social and/or regional origins, to sound and write middle-class, or rather the way the middle class imagines itself to speak and write. Now whether we consider these goals laudable or ludicrous, happy or hallucinatory – and it should be obvious that I consider them tragic – a straightforward question is whether the study of grammar can in any way help in realizing them.

It is certainly easy to understand why it was believed to be a help, for when such goals were formulated, the school population was significantly an immigrant population that literally did not speak English; moreover in the not-too-distant past, education had simply meant education through a language not one's own (through Latin, for example). The prevailing method of teaching a foreign language being the grammar-translation method, what was more logical than pummeling the children with parsing, diagrams, and rules?

And so the teachers did. Yet there was never any reason to believe that grammar should be effective. After all, foreign language teaching never took very

†*An Elementary English Grammar* (New York, 1878), p. 3.

well. And now, in fact, because a great deal of research energy has been spent on such questions (albeit much of it very badly designed research), it is clear that the extent of a young man's knowledge of formal grammar relates at least as well to his skill at pool as it does to his ability to express himself in speech and writing. There is nothing in research or in logic to lead us to believe it should be any different. For grammar comprehends such a small piece of language – and nothing of language use – that no designs for "improvement" could at all follow from it. Worse, of course, is that though we have some intuitive sense, for example, about what good writing is, we have no ways whatsoever of objectifying that goodness. Why then should objective knowledge of grammar lead to improving we know not exactly what?

Faced with this dilemma, Reed and Kellogg would probably have us give up the enterprise. Yet the nineteenth century had another (very vaguely defined) goal for grammar study: it provided mental discipline. That's what I think it's all about, too. And in the preceding section I have essentially tried to give a somewhat precise characterization of "mental discipline." Language study is not important for what it finally allows one to do with language; it is important for the questions it asks and the freedom it opens up to one in answering them.

Wayne O'Neil

Cambridge, Massachusetts
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