



Plain English Foundation

Much Ado About Grammar

The traditional grammar-based teaching of English was downgraded years ago, but teaching grammar, punctuation and spelling is back on the agenda. Submissions have recently closed on Kevin Rudd's new national English curriculum, which aims to restore grammar and language along with literacy and literary studies to the Australian classroom. But many might argue that the ability to correctly form sentences and the lack of understanding of nouns, verbs and adjectives is not the disadvantage it once was, and that the old-fashioned method at the level of the sentence compromises critical literacy, which is even more important. Neil James, Mark Tredinnick, Michael Meehan and Dominic Knight debate the issue.

- Sydney Writers' Festival 2009 program, event 337.

Learning from the mistakes of the grammar wars.

By Neil James

Imagine inflicting the following stunt on a class of eight-year-olds. As part of their English education, you want them to expand their vocabulary, so you prohibit the word 'got', because at that age, 'got' is a catch-all verb that kids overuse.

But you have a powerful way of reinforcing your point. You ask the whole class to write the word 'got' on pieces of paper, you march them out into the school yard, you dig a hole, and one by one you ask them to drop their papers in it. Then you take a spade and you bury them.

The psychological message is pretty clear to an eight year old. Get your grammar wrong, and you'll be buried alive.

No, I didn't make that up. That was a real practice in our schools during the regime of old-school grammar. This was a rigid, dull, moralistic approach to language learning that fortunately fell out of favour three decades ago. The problem was, we threw the rest of grammar out with it, and ever since we've been turning out graduates with little understanding of the mechanics of English.

But now, it seems, grammar is back in fashion. The writers of Kevin Rudd's draft national English curriculum have recently probed community sentiment and the verdict is in: everyone wants grammar back in our schools.

Not surprisingly, that's about as far as the grammar consensus goes. While we now largely seem to agree that grammar is a good thing, we can't all agree on what kind of grammar we should use. For around 30 years, our education system has been a linguistic no-mans-land in the middle of a great grammar war.

In the one camp are the traditional grammarians, advocates of the conventional classification of words into the eight parts of speech—such as nouns and verbs, adjectives and adverbs. The traditional arsenal is a bit imprecise—it doesn't differ much from what the Greeks taught 2,000 years ago—but it has the most enduring support.

In the next camp are the linguists, in modern disciplines with rather ominous titles like systemic functional grammar or deep structure and transformational grammar. These are much more complex grammars that bring sophisticated insights to our language. Their only problem is that so few of us can actually understand them.

Then there are the grammar sceptics, opponents of the bombastic blunderbuss of the old-school. They argue that for 'most people, nothing helps writing so much as learning to ignore grammar', and that imposing traditional grammar on students does them a 'gross disservice'. They cite studies showing that students learn to write well enough through what they call 'receptive competence' of grammar without needing a formal grammatical framework.

And in the middle of this battleground are the English teachers themselves, some still attracted to the old-school, some schooled in traditional grammar, some who learned little of anything, and others recruited to the belief that grammar is actively harmful. It's no wonder the system is turning out students confused about what grammar is, let alone how to use it.

So, who is winning the war? Well, it's official. The National Curriculum Board has declared traditional grammar will now be the main form taught in our schools. The board has opted for traditional practice because it offers an acceptable middle position around which we can build an accord.

Most educators will support this return, but anyone who remembers the bad old days will welcome it with mixed feeling. The biggest mistake we could make would be to return to the old-school methods, which tended to conflate grammar and usage and taught overly simplistic rules.

A good example is the noun-verb shift, which is one of the dynamic forces for change in our language. When we invent new things, we give them names as nouns. But as they become familiar in different contexts, we start using them as verbs as well. We take a noun like 'table', for example, and apply it to the action of 'tabling a report'. We take a noun like 'text' and find a useful verb in 'texting the details'. We take the noun 'medal' and talk about our athletes 'medalling' at the swimming.

Sports commentators are the doyens of the noun-verb shift. I'll never forget the following sentence from the mouth of 'Rabbits' Ray Warren during a swimming broadcast: 'Her form has been so good of late, I'm sure that she'll 'podium' tonight. Remember that she 'silvered' at the Sydney games.'

Are these grammatically wrong? No, they are all perfectly feasible, and are part of a grammatical process that has been changing our language for centuries. When 'tabling' of reports in parliament first came into usage, there were letters to the paper complaining about this latest barbarism of the language. Yet to our modern ear, this presents no problem. So too, 'texting' seems to have established itself fairly rapidly, although I'm not so sure about 'medalling', 'podiuming' and 'silvering' athletes.

The grand democratic glory of English is that it's the broader community of speakers who decides whether a usage becomes part of the language or ends up interred in a linguistic grave. And that's why our language is so rich and adaptable.

The problem with old-school grammar was that, instead of teaching kids how our grammar works, how the language evolves, and how to discriminate between what is grammatically feasible and what is a question of usage, it too often censored change of any kind. It was a prescriptive grammar, and it made it clear that any deviation from accepted usage was to be seen as a sign of moral failing, punishable by being buried with those rapidly composting pieces of paper with the word 'got' written on them.

It also taught overly simplistic rules that took on the status of catechism: thou shalt not start a sentence with a conjunction; thou shalt not split an infinitive; thou shalt not place a comma before a conjunction; and—under no circumstances—shalt thou end a sentence with a preposition.

There is a very rough justification to some of these rules when you are writing at a primary school level, but none of them is sustainable by the time you are a high school writer, and no major writer would take them remotely seriously.

Chapter one of Genesis continually breaks the conjunction at the start of sentences rule; writers have split infinitives quite freely since the 14th century; commas should indeed come before conjunctions separating some independent clauses; and Winston Churchill famously ridiculed the preposition rule by commenting 'this is the sort of language up with which I shall not put'.

Yet the catechism was so heavily drummed into young students of the old school that it takes sustained psychological therapy to undo. I remember one writing workshop I ran in a government agency, where a late 50s manager was confronting the evil and twisted possibilities of placing a comma before a conjunction. He was able to accept the logic of why he could do so, but the emotional commitment was another thing.

As he poised his hands over the keyboard to enter the unthinkable, the memory of burying his word 'got' in the playground suddenly became overwhelming, and he

did what all 59-year-old-director-level-senior-managers would do: his lip started twitching, his voice cracked and his eyes started to water.

This is not the sort of grammar we should reintroduce in our schools.

But the biggest crime of old-school grammar was simply that it was drop-dead boring. It was rote learning without understanding. We had to parse and parrot word classifications, parse and parrot sentence structures without any real understanding of how we might apply that knowledge in the real world. And knowledge without purpose is knowledge rapidly forgotten.

Unfortunately, there are some hints that the new English curriculum may be falling into some of the very same traps. The current draft divides English teaching into three separate strands: language, literature and literacy. It seems that ‘language’ is where our kids will learn the theory of traditional grammar, but ‘literacy’ is where they will do the actual writing.

I’d have to ask: why do we need such an artificial separation? The curriculum document is at pains to point out that the three streams will be as ‘fully integrated’ as possible, but why not integrate them completely by merging language and literacy into one?

My own experience is that unless these two are closely intertwined, students rapidly switch off. The Plain English Foundation finds in our writing workshops that participants learn best when a small chunk of grammar is immediately applied to a practical purpose.

So by all means, teach our kids about subjects and objects, but show them how to use these to turn passive sentences into the active voice and improve clarity. Teach them the difference between dependent and independent clauses, but then show them how to vary sentence length and structures for rhetorical impact. Do these things at the same time, and not in separate ‘streams’.

This approach has proven successful with the 7,500 professionals we’ve trained, to the extent that, when we survey them about what they enjoyed most, the number one topic is surprising: grammar.

There is a hunger out there to understand the mechanics of English, the impact of word choice, syntax and sentence structure. And this learning makes an enormous difference to writing. We wouldn't send people out to be practicing chemists without teaching them the difference between an element and a compound, so why do we send graduates into the workforce needing to write without teaching them about nouns and verbs, clauses and complements.

So by all means, let's re-elevate the status of grammar in our schools, but in doing so we must learn the lessons of the past and not return to the old school. We must end the grammar wars by teaching traditional grammar, but doing so in more engaging and practical ways.