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ABSTRACT

Harold Allen states that language study will become an integral component of the college English curriculum when English departments recognize that a professional knowledge of the nature and function of language, of current theoretical studies in it, and of the geographical, historical, and social variations in language is vital to understanding literature and written expression. He maintains that every college English curriculum should offer courses in (1) transformational generative grammar, which provides tools for the objective analyses of literary style, complex syntactic relationships, and language performance, (2) language usage, (3) the new rhetoric, (4) semantics, (5) lexicography and language history, and (6) American dialect patterns, relevant to both blacks and those from widely divergent geographical regions. Concurring with Allen's remarks, George Worth adds that language study should not be confined exclusively to the classroom nor encased in incomprehensible jargon in research laboratories, but should enrich every aspect of the students' verbal behavior. (JB)

HOW OPTIONAL IS THE LANGUAGE COMPONENT?

Harold B. Allen
NCTE
Washington, November, 1969

At a conference somewhere last year I found myself with the chairman of an English department in a liberal arts college. Making conversation, I asked whether his department had an English language man for the linguistics courses or whether he was having trouble in finding one. "Oh," he said, "we don't have any courses like that. After all, they re optional, you know."

I am quite aware that the two speakers who follow me on this program are not like that chairman, and that their departments are not like his department. But they <u>are</u> chairmen, with a perspective and with insights the rest of us do not have. I hope that from that perspective and with those insights they will give their own answer to the question raised by that conversation, "How optional <u>are</u> language courses in a department of English? How optional is the language component?"

In our departments of English we are concerned with literature written in the English language or, sometimes, translated into the English language. Is it important that the development of critical appreciation of literature rest upon a sophisticated professional knowledge of the language in which it is written? This is no time to become involved in the controversy between those whose approach is purely belletristic and those who insist that a literary work be judged as to its relevancy to social and intellectual issues. With a reminiscent look at the recent May issue of <u>College English</u> I should say that this question can be answered regardless of whether we agree with Professor J.M. Morse that it is "crude, foolish, and self-defeating" to want literature to be "relevant to our non-literary concerns" or whether, contrariwise, we agree with those who today are so vociferously expressing the opposite viewpoint.

Certainly style is not the only consideration in evaluating literature, but whether it is focal or peripheral we cannot deny that it has never been neglected in the significant documents in the history of English literary criticism. Yet in discussing style critics have, until quite recently, been hampered by their inability to describe it except in terms that are subjective and often ambiguous. In his Discoveries Ben Jonson said that a writer should strive for a style that is "laboured." Addison commended Boileau for writing with "beautiful simplicity." Coleridge wrote of the "figures and contexture" of a poem as "vicious." William Hazlitt referred to "the antithetical point and perpetual glitter of the artificial prose style," and observed approvingly that "the epithet elegant is very sparingly used in modern criticism." In his 1910 lecture "The New Criticism" [How new is new?] J.E. Spingarn expressed impatience with the inadequacy of such judgments when he declared, "The theory of styles has no longer a real place in modern thought." Although Rene Wellek and recent new critics have sought to emphasize the need for an objective linguistic approach to style, they have had little success in influencing other literary scholars.

One reason certainly was at the time Wellek and Warren asked for this approach linguistics was offering to them only the surface analysis provided by structuralism. Those literary critics who did look at structural analysis must have been repelled by its refusal to deal directly with what to them was of prime importance, the relation of meaning and form. They could not have been happy, either, with what must have seemed unnecessary innovations in terminology. But if they and their present-day younger colleagues were to look again at what linguistics can offer them, they would find the situation different. Within the past ten years a strikingly new theory of language, that of transformational generative linguistics, has made possible a new stylistics. Today the critic and the scholar need not be bound by inadequate subjective and impressionistic judgments of style. Transformational grammar provides tools for constructing objective stylistic

analysis so that the critic can be freed for his major job, dealing with other aspects of the literary work. Richard Ohmann has notably led the way in prose and Owen Thomas in poetry, but others are also finding new insights through applying transformational analysis to the deep structure of prose. One of my graduate students is currently working on a dissertation in which he will extend this application to the historical comparison of genres in order to determine the effect of context upon the grammar of performance. Should a department concerned with literature ignore the help that contemporary language theory can give for the critical evaluation of the language in which the poetry and prose of literature is written?

An English department is concerned with the communication of meaning in literature and with helping students to learn to communicate in their own writing. Is it important that the department offer the recent and most powerful approach to the study of meaning, that provided by the inclusion of the semantic level in the deep or conceptual structure of the grammatical model? This approach, supported by findings from the interdiscipline of psycholinguistics, not only leads to new and useful understandings of how unambiguous meaning is communicated from one person to another but also contributes to knowledge of the several processes of semantic change operating throughout the history of our language. If semantic features are intrinsically bound up with syntax in the deep structure, what significant rules develop as the referents and their associations change in time? Is not the answer to this question significant in the understanding and appreciation of the writings of those men with something of value to communicate?

The great reservoir of information about word-meaning, of course, is the unabridged dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary with its period supplements. Is it important that the department of English offer information about how the modern dictionary evolved, how the principles of lexicography underwent change through three distinctive periods, and how contemporary commercial dictionaries are made?

Lexicography, so editors tell us, is both an art and an applied science. How much would one need to know about the standards of the art and the procedures of the science to enable him to be a professional user of a good dictionary? Recently an initial negative reaction to certain editorial features of Webster's Third New International has led to the publication of the American Heritage Dictionary. Already I have heard rather extraordinary comments about this dictionary situation, comments that could not have been made with any understanding of what dictionary-making is all about. Is it important that our departments provide professional rather than amateur information about lexicography?

But language meaning is transmitted within a rule-governed system of extremely complex syntactic relationships. Rich as 19th century historical and comparative grammar was, it did not systematically deal with those relationships. The eviscerated 18th century prescriptive grammar still found in some textbooks scarcely recognized them. The past decade, however, has already provided a surprisingly rich insight into the intricate operation of our language, and the dynamic research now supported by foundations and federal agencies assures a constant increment of language knowledge. Is it important that a department of English, professionally concerned with the literature of our language, be professionally concerned as well as with the almost daily growth of that body of information about how the language actually works?

In the now accepted terms of transformational grammar, understanding how our language works involves attention to the underlying structure, to what is called the grammar of competence that we as native speakers all possess. At the same time a department is concerned with both the theory and practice of what the transformationalist is only marginally concerned with, the grammar of performance, but for which he provides the basic model for analysis. Here is the attention to the actual surface features of writing and of speech; here is the emphasis upon those problems of lexical and phrasal choice that we have been subsuming

under the heading of rhetoric. Today these problems are recognized as intimately associated with linguistic operations in the surface grammar. Already some evidence is accruing that in certain situations transformational applications in teaching composition have measurably improved the control of written prose. I suspect that the direction taken by my colleague Martin Steinmann in developing an applied grammar of performance will bear fruit in further improvement of the teaching of rhetoric and composition. Is it important to a department of English to offer work that enables students to keep abreast of these advances in linguistics and rhetoric?

Any consideration of the grammar of performance must take into account the wide variation in actual performance. Can a department decline to consider as worthy of its attention the whole extent of this performance in our language? Serious misconceptions and gross errors of judgment about language result from ignorance of the relationships among the variations. Is it important, then, that a department of English provide information about that particular dimension known as regional or geographical variation? Within the past few years a whole new body of facts have become available about the distribution of language differences in the United States. Dialect geography will continue to provide facts as current research projects result in publication. Had they known something about this dimension of variation two distinguished scholars of southern background could not have derided, as they did in a widely used college rhetoric textbook, the use of the term pail. Thousands of northern students must have doubted that judgment, as other students must have felt doubt of inferiority when a textbook enjoined them not to use dove for dived, or sick to one's stomach for sick at one's stomach, expressions which differ only as to regional frequency. If we are to arouse respect for varieties of English used in other parts of the country than our own -- and I submit that this is a very desirable objective -- we are not going to do it by withholding from our students the facts about American dialects.

Especially is accurate knowledge about regional variation pertinent to the study of regionalism in literature. The author who uses regional terms and constructions and pronunciations uses them intrinsically, not as window-dressing. A full appreciation of what he writes, and of its significance in American literature, would, it seems to me, call for an understanding of those dialect features. Of course, I may expect too much. I have known of a professor teaching American regional literature who not only was unfamiliar with the American dialect patterns but was even heard to boast of that ignorance. Yet I wonder whether a department can really afford to ignore this area of language study.

Another type of variation in the grammar of performance is relevant to Relevance itself. Most of us here, I am sure, have been subject in one way or another to the current demand for Relevance -- in our institutions and in organizations to which we belong. Central in that demand is concern with the position of blacks in our society, in our schools and colleges. A department of English cannot remove itself easily from this concern. This year at Minnesota we have an offering of work in the literature of black America, and for a year and a half we have had a course in the dialect sometimes called "black English." I grant that the development of any sound information about black English is very recent. That is one cogent reason for the lack of such courses. But that is not a reason for failure to offer such a course now. Today, with the ferment of social change and conflict all about us, is it important to a department of English to accord some attention to this variety of our language and its social and educational implications?

Now the study of variations in the use of English, in social and in regional dialects, in the grammar of performance, is also relevant to another area of longstanding concern in our departments of English, that of usage. This concern has, in the past, scarcely been what anyone could call enlightened. Its scope has usually been limited by the myopia produced by the doctrines of correctness

derived from the early 18th century grammars. But is it not the responsibility of a department interested in style and in the teaching of composition to offer a less uninformed and less naive basis for the understanding of usage? Usage is the relationship between a language form and the complex nonlinguistic milieu in which it typically occurs. Statements about usage are opinions and prejudices unless they are based upon some evidence as to the nature and frequency of occurence of a given form in that milieu. Can a department in all conscience accept the notions of absolute correctness and absolute incorrectness and all the curious accompanying myths? How can it accept them and at the same time believe that control of style is a matter of sensitivity and judgment rather than of arbitrary rule, that precision in writing calls for evaluation of the time and place and audience rather than the application of unyielding prescriptions?

A final responsibility I should like to turn to is that of understanding the past. A department of English, almost as much as a department of history, finds its content in the past. Besides our course categories in terms of genres and authors we have our period courses and period sequences. We ask that our students have an awareness of the chronological scope of our literature and of the evolving and shifting influences upon writers from age to age. Is it not important to a department of English that this awareness include concern with the language of those periods and of changes within the language from age to age as well? Is it enough to know that the English vocabulary experienced three important periods of growth through borrowing and that Old English had more inflections than Modern English does? Is it enough to read a few introductory paragraphs about Middle English before undertaking the study of Chaucer? Can we afford to ignore the study of the language of the Renaissance and of the 18th century just because we can make shift to read Shakespeare and Swift and Pope with the help of some vocabulary footnotes? Or rather is it not a responsibility to make available information about the internal history of our language, of its

structure, through the entire millenium from the 9th to the 19th centuries?

I would say that our responsibility includes attention to the background of English in the United States, too. Is it not important in our attempts to understand the literature of the colonial period and of the early 19th century that we draw upon knowledge of the changing vocabulary and the semantic inventory of American English as it underwent modification because of changing conditions in the New World?

Well, it is obvious that I consider the title of this talk to be only a rhetorical question. If one really grants the importance of a professional knowledge of our language, of current theoretical studies in it, of its variations in time and space and social class, then its place in the total curriculum of a college or university department of English is not optional at all. It is imperative.

I am not raising here questions of departmental and college policy relating to requirements. Certainly there must be differences in different institutions. What should be required in the undergraduate major? What in the minor? What in the graduate program? What for prospective secondary and college teachers? What non-major language courses should be given? I am simply insisting that it is important that a department of English make available adequate opportunities for the study of the English language.

Unhappily, this importance is not universally conceded and some departments have exercised what seems then to be a false option, that of ignoring all or most of what is included in the study of the language. We have here a serious time-lag. In the 19th century and through the first two decades or so of this century the literary scholar was not aloof to concerns with the language and the language scholar was also at home in the study of literature. George Lyman Kittredge was co-author of the still valuable Words and Their Ways in English Speech. The first president of the National Council of Teachers of English, Fred Newton

Scott of the University of Michigan, was both a distinguished critic and a scholar in the language. Thomas Lounsbury of Yale was both a professor of literature and the author of two eminently sound books dealing with English usage. But in the third and fourth decades of this century certain influences, not the least of which was the apparently barren and terminologically forbidding new phase of language study, structural grammar, helped to force a gap between those who study our literature and those who study our language.

Whatever excuse justified this gap twenty years ago no longer exists. The new developments in linguistics, notably those in the fields of transformation grammar and in tagmemic grammar, are among the changes that warrant every effort to bring about a rapprochement between the "literary characters" and "the linguistic boys." Every effort is needed. As long ago as 1928 a special NCTE committee urged that college departments include adequate attention to the English language. A national survey nine years later revealed that only a small minority did so. Another survey in 1960 revealed some improvement, but not a great deal. The recent Guidelines have urged a strong language content in English teacher preparation, and some states are moving to make such content a requirement for certification.

But resistance is strong--sometimes active, sometimes simply that of indifference. Last month, after I spoke on this general theme in a midwestern state, Robert Hogan, the NCTE executive secretary, received an extraordinary letter about me from the chairman of the department of English in a nearby college. This man was really disturbed. Here is part of what I stimulated this chairman to write: "Congratulations to the communists for getting the obviously ignorant support of the 'generation-gapped' linguists using a bombastic lingo in the hope of destroying order and understanding based upon carefully examined usage of 'communication'--oral and written. Why do they wish to do away with any culture's logically demonstrable communicability and therefore create utter confusion brinking on chaos?" Whether I deserved all that you can judge for yourselves if you read that

talk printed in a pamphlet being made available by NCTE at this convention.

In the same mail that brought that letter, forwarded to me by Bob Hogan, I received another from the chairman of a distinguished liberal arts college in New England. This man reported that next year his department wants to add some courses in English linguistics because it feels that the department is incomplete without them, and he wanted to know whether I had a doctoral candidate I could recommend for this new position. Well, I do have, and I have already recommended him.

Perhaps these two chairmen represent two extremes. I should like to think that the first is unique and that the second is only one of many hundreds. Yet I am persuaded by the facts to believe that many chairmen still hold the language component to be optional, and still are reluctant to lead a department to accept its full responsibility to make available such language knowledge as I have been talking about this past half hour.

Why do I focus upon chairmen? Because chairmen should be more than accountants and committee-appointers. Chairmen, whatever their personal biases, should be concerned with all the interests within a department and with the department as an entity in which both literary and language components must exist in just proportion. If that language component is not there, or is inadequate, then I would insist that a chairman has the duty to lead his colleagues in every feasible way to an understanding and an acceptance of the proposition that the language component is not truly optional. Far from being optional, it is an integral part of a sound department's offerings.

THE LANGUAGE COMPONENT AS THE CHAIRMAN SEES IT

NCTE
Washington
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George J. Worth
Chairman, Department of English
University of Kansas

I come to you with clean hands. Not only do I myself accept fully all the arguments in favor of the so-called language component which Professor Allen has laid before you, but I represent a department which for many years has acted on the convictions which he so eloquently expressed. Not only do we have on our staff a fully fledged "language man," the author of an excellent textbook on the English language, but several other department members are sufficiently knowledgeable and interested so as to take an active part in teaching our very popular language courses. Not only have the prospective high school teachers of English whom we help train been required for as long as anyone can remember to take appropriate work in English language, but first our M.A.'s and more recently our Ph.D.'s have substituted up-to-date, linguistically oriented courses for the old-fashioned philology courses in the required English-language portion of our graduate curriculum, and even such hoary offerings as Old English, Middle English, and History of the English Language have lately taken on a new look and a new appeal to students. In fact, I could go on at some length to tell you how good things are linguistically and otherwise at Kansas, but that is not why I am here.

I am here to utter two warnings, with netiher of which I think Professor Allen would take issue. Both have their origin in what I regard as the unfortunate term, "language component." The word "component" always suggests to me something you plug in, like a tape deck into a home stereo system: something that has a discrete existence all its own, and that isn't really necessary to the existence of that into which you plug it. A stereo system will function without a tape deck. It may not be as interesting a system as it would be with that additional component, but it does function, very nicely. Theoretically, an English curriculum can function without a "language component," though such an English curriculum

today is sadly behind the times. What won't function at all well is an English department, or an English teacher, or a student of English, whose notion of English language is that it is something to be treated seriously only in a special course or group of courses and then disregarded in one's other work, or play. That attitude is about as worthy of respect as the view of religion which relegates it to an hour or so a week of one's time on Sunday morning.

No, if religion is to mean anything it must suffuse our whole being, spread its radiance into every nook and cranny of our life, color our every thought and action and reaction with its special glow. And if our study of language is to mean anything, it must touch with new meaning every aspect of that large portion of our behavior which is verbal. I need not take time before this audience to dwell on the enormous importance which responsible, precise, and sensitive verbal behavior--reading and listening as well as speaking and writing--has for man as a social, political, and ethical creature. What concerns me particularly, as an English teacher and a department chairman, is an appreicative awareness of language as an essential ingredient in the teaching of composition and literature.

Forgive me if the proposition I put before you at this point strikes you as a simplistic one. I mean it from the bottom of my heart. It is this: the student whom we cannot seem to teach to write themes well or to read literature well falls short of our hopes very largely because he doesn't care about language. He cannot use the language skillfully himself because, over the years, no one has persuaded him that this was a skill worth acquiring, demanding much more of him in the presence of challenging, complex, subtle, and ever-shifting materials of high intrinsic fascination than driving a golf ball or a sports car, or indeed courting a young lady. He cannot make as much as we should like him to out of the literature we have him read because the language in which it is expressed is to him so much inert if not downright hostile verbiage.

It so happens that, as I write this talk, part of my mind is on a seminar in which I am preparing to discuss Bleak House. It is an excellent group of graduate students who are marvelously responsive by virtue of taste, training, and experience to the nuances of Dickens' language. What agony it would be to confront a linguistically apathetic group with, for example, the striking opening of the novel, which you will remember. I don't think that for our purposes in the seminar we are going to subject this passage to any of the kinds of linguistic analysis to which it would profitably lend itself. If we were to do so, it would certainly be useful to my students to have had an English language course treating, for instance, stylistics in some systematic way. But not a "component" course in the mildly disparaging sense in which I used the term earlier: rather one of a group of related and coordinated courses, in both literature and language, which had as their chief objective the arousing of informed, perceptive, and appreciative response to what the student reads and hears. Let us not, for heaven's sake, isolate English language study in some kind of intellectual ghetto, but let us bring it and keep it in the mainstream of our concerns, where it belongs.

My second warning is not unrelated to the first. And, lest I be thought a know-nothing churl (a dreadful position for a department chairman to be caught in), let me utter it as gently as I can. It is directed to those who are responsible for teaching the so-called "language component" in our English departments, and to those who teach these teachers. Do not, by your speech or by your writings, do anything avoidable to isolate yourselves in special linguistic enclaves in the departments in which you teach, or indeed in the English profession at large. Do not pride yourselves on developing the kind of jargon that makes your ideas incomprehensible to the rest of us. Do not get so caught up in mathematical calculations or cybernetic hardware that you look down your noses at those of us who work with

concepts that are not readily quantifiable. And do not, above all, lose your sense of joy in the presence of imaginative ideas, your delight in poems and stories and books.

One of my more melancholy duties as departmental chairman has been to study the dossiers of numerous "language men" (and women) whom we have considered for employment in our department. I am sorry to have to report that over the years a large percentage of these dossiers (a significantly large percentage, I would say, than of those of literary types) has been dull to the point of being downright chilling. If the individuals whom they describe are vibrant and humane men and women, this certainly doesn't come out in the credentials. What does come out is a singleminded dedication to language as a specialty, a narrow and fanatical dedication which does not bode well for the kind of language courses these people will teach. If such courses are to be more than discrete and detachable and deadly "components," if they are to be truly integrated into our work and shed their beneficient effulgence, as they should, over everything our students do and think and are, then they are going to demand gifted teachers whose interests and competence are far reaching.

Let us by all means train our students to consider their language perceptively. But let us not merely set up a "language component" and think that we have thereby done our duty. Let us, in addition, make all of our courses, in part, into courses in language, and let us build solidly on literary and humanistic bedrock those of our courses which concentrate on language. In this way we shall not merely pay lip service to a currently fasionable branch of learning, but we shall immeasurably strengthen the education, and enrich the lives, of all our students.