

COMING TO TERMS WITH ENGLISH EXPRESSION IN THE UNIVERSITY

It is self-evident that language is intrinsic to scholarship, research, teaching and learning. None of these activities can proceed without talking, reading and writing. Consequently, it may be expected that useful statements about the role of English in the intellectual life of the university will assist all who are thus engaged. The importance of the connection is, of course, recognised by those who study the philosophy of their discipline; it tends to be ignored by many others even when faced with the failure of their students to write clearly, grammatically and with good sense.

A curious Orwellian double-think comes into play when we look at students' writing. Just as most of us believe implicitly in our skill and sense of responsibility at the wheel of a car, we think that our own tussles with language, if they should arise, are serious epistemological confrontations. Those of others, by contrast, are simply the result of bad habits and bad training. We malign the editor of a journal who publishes another's unlovely prose while returning our own papers for the most trifling of stylistic slips.

If we are to make any sense of students' difficulties with language we must question two commonly held assumptions. The first is that we can distinguish very clearly between literate and illiterate (or correct and incorrect) English. The second is that grammar is a closed, purely formal system independent in all respects of any differences in the ideas or arguments it may be 'used' to express. In this paper I shall argue that a writer's poor English is often bound up very closely with his confusions about the content and rhetoric of his various disciplines. And, as a consequence, no English expression programme can really succeed unless we create conditions under which subject specialist and English specialist are encouraged to cooperate.

Students' Language and the Subject Specialist

The central importance of this last proposition has already been recognised at the school level. The Bullock enquiry into the teaching of English in the United Kingdom has endorsed a policy of what has become known as 'language across the curriculum' in these words:

... in the course of this Report we emphasise that if standards of achievement are to be improved all teachers will have to be helped to acquire a deeper understanding of language in education. This includes teachers of other subjects than English, since it is one of our contentions that secondary schools should adopt a policy of language across the curriculum. Many teachers lack an understanding of the complexities of language development, and they often hold the English teacher responsible for language performance in contexts outside his control.¹

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The crux of the issue is that a traditional school subject is a distinctive 'mode of analysis' which has its origins in language. What the teacher often lacks is an appreciation of his function in developing the language abilities of his charges; and where he does admit this role, he lacks confidence in his ability to fill it.

This is no less true of the university teacher. An induction into a discipline's mode of thinking and analysis can only be performed in language. The tutor's responsibility for this is particularly heavy where his subject is not taught in the secondary school curriculum, where no prerequisite such as a matriculation exam pass is insisted upon, or where students' abilities have been developed and tested largely by multiple-choice and short-answer questions. One of the most serious barriers some undergraduates face when they come to write an essay is that the only model they have to go on is the writing they did for their English teachers. They have never had the opportunity to develop the flexibility needed to attack differing kinds of academic discourse. So one of the first jobs of a university adviser in the use of English is to assist staff in making their expectations more explicit, and to help them clear a path through the thicket of spelling mistakes and verbless sentences to the underlying problems of expression in a student's writing.

This can be done in a number of ways. First it needs to be demonstrated, as I think it can, that many problems are common to both tutor and student. These are problems which directly reflect epistemological, methodological and rhetorical perplexities in the discipline itself.

Disciplinary "Dialects"

A fair example is the complex of syntactic choices faced by the chemist when he 'writes up' his experiments. These include restrictions on the use of / and we, and the almost hopeless task of trying to get a dangling purpose clause to come out 'grammatically', whether or not one has to use the passive voice. Two examples will suffice to illustrate the point: 'In order to determine whether the hydroxyl group was tertiary, the compound was heated with acetic anhydride'; 'The halogens are very ready to accept an electron in order to acquire the electronic configuration of an inert gas'. The first of these examples, quoted from one of a series of articles on 'The Chemist's English' by R. Schoenfeld,² is not to be explained away simply as a matter of style or 'convention'. It is a manifestation in language of a belief about the objective nature of scientific enquiry.³ The second example has gaily attributed intentions to the halogens, something which most literary critics condemn as

the 'intentionalist fallacy' when applied to an indubitably human poet. One must sympathise with the poor student who has elected a combined degree in chemistry and English literature.

Examples in other disciplines abound. Lucy Mair has written of the difficulties anthropologists face in trying to decide between the present and past tenses, warning that in her book "the 'ethnographic present' does not guarantee that people are still behaving in the way described".⁴ Historians need to be careful with the passive voice, not only because it is death to good narrative history⁵ but because the passive allows the agent or 'real' subject of the verb to be omitted, thus neglecting a crucial element of historical enquiry: 'Who said, thought, did or, indeed, intended this?'

One might, of course, argue that these quandaries have always confronted students, and that the poor fellow whose physiology essays were always accused of being too biochemical and vice versa must face up to it. This stern counsel is not very helpful, however. Various people, especially in the sciences, have advocated that such problems can best be solved by the subject specialists themselves, the men who know the language of their discipline well. H.V. Wyatt believes that they should not be left to service teachers and has attempted to construct a course for microbiologists into which language and other 'service' skills like statistical analysis have been integrated.⁶ F.P. Woodford, in arguing for a systematic approach to writing in science curricula, has outlined a course which, he concludes, will cover "in one guise or another, most of the aspects of scientific method".⁷ There are, however, problems with a solution which leaves everything to the subject specialist.

Role of the Language Specialist

In the first place, the fact that a man may be able to operate his language well is no guarantee that he can either talk about it or teach it. Otherwise it would necessarily follow that all fluent speakers and writers of English are *ipso facto* good English teachers. Even if this were so, we have to concede that the number of subject specialists who handle their language well is smaller than the number who teach in the university. As long ago as 1940, R.B. McKerrow, writing in the *Review of English Studies*, complained of the lack of "the simplest qualities of precision and intelligibility" in the articles offered him for publication.⁸ More recently, Hugh Stretton has mounted a blistering attack on Parsonian sociology, whose language leads to "the corruption (my italics) not only of students' capacities for clear thought and effective and good-mannered communication, but of their ideas of science as well".⁹ If bad models are offered to students, our moments of despair with their writing should be tempered by some sober reflection.

Clearly, it is not the job of an English specialist to tell others how to set their linguistic house in order. Such a policy would be to repudiate a generally held belief in the English speaking world that collections of 'experts' in the language should not attempt to prescribe usage in the manner, say, of the *Academie francaise*. In any case it is hardly necessary. The contributions of Schoenfeld and of McKerrow cited above, a recent series of articles in the *British Medical Journal*,⁹ and parodies of and 'plain men's guides' to journal articles are indicative of a professional concern to improve academic writing. The language specialist can, nevertheless, offer two services. He can provide an account of the language in question which seeks to clarify the nature and the source of the difficulty. He can also assist tutors in 'interpreting' the idiosyncratic language of many texts and monographs to students.

The second problem arising from a decision to leave language to the subject specialist is that he is often too close to his own particular discipline, its method, its rhetoric and its grammar to gain any perspective on the difficulties a general degree student faces on his three year tour of academia. For instance, the tutor might simply not be aware of the 'dialectal' idiosyncrasies of his subject which need to be highlighted in a writing course. He is like the man who, having but rarely left his neighbourhood or social milieu, believes his dialect to be quite representative of the language as a whole. Moreover, the experienced subject specialist is so familiar with his own language that in reading an essay he is not, in fact, always assessing what the student writes. Typically he 'translates' the student's language into his own and readily supplies an interpolation to fill gaps in the coherence of a statement. Consequently, at least part of what he is marking is his own linguistic facility rather than the student's ability to communicate. The English teacher can usefully perform the role of backstop; he can catch what gets through, and from his vantage point advise the member of staff on how to modify his technique for dealing with the curly ones.

The two common assumptions about language are thus challenged. The acceptability of a great deal of language is so contextually determined that he is a brave man who will pronounce with confidence on all cases. English grammar is not just a convenient template to be slapped on to any kind of material in the expectation that it will tidy up the communicative edges.

A Return to the Basics?

"But surely", one might argue, "there are many grammatical constructions in students' writing which every member of 'the community of the knowledgeable' will judge incorrect and which owe nothing to the complexities of the subject matter.

Spelling, for example, punctuation, verbless sentences, failing to co-ordinate the structure of clauses in a sentence or making the number of a verb or pronoun agree with their subject. These things should only be taught by someone versed in the teaching of English grammar, and should have been mastered at school."

The accumulated evidence points to the conclusion that the teaching of grammar does not of itself produce 'literate' writers. In a good, recent study of this question W.B. Elley and his colleagues devised three different English curricula for parallel classes in a secondary school and followed the performance of the three groups through five years. One class had no formal grammar, one was taught traditional grammar and the third transformational grammar. No significant differences in writing ability were observed.¹¹ From researches such as this it does not necessarily follow that the study of grammar can make no contribution at all to better writing or a more literate academic society. It may be, for example, that our didactic grammars are simply inadequate, or that the right connections between grammar, language production and teaching are not being made.¹²

This paper is not the place to debate such issues. But what studies like Elley's do show us quite clearly is that the standard of students' English is not going to be raised by intoning a simplistic slogan of "return to the basics" in the schools or by having a 'remedial teacher' in the university mount a rearguard action with the weapon of formal grammar. The 'service' English specialist needs to know and be able to use grammar; he cannot teach simply by passing that knowledge and skill on to his students. This is a difficulty which few academic staff ever have to face, secure in the knowledge that today's research becomes tomorrow's course content.

Epistemological Sources of Error

How, then, is one to tackle the common grammatical mistakes of students? My own recent research points to the conclusion that precise connections between certain semantic confusions and certain grammatical errors can be established. The general connection is substantially the same as that between scientific 'objectivity' and dangling purpose clauses, discussed above. An example, taken from a student's critical analysis of a poem, is this sentence: 'The opening line make one wait and listen for the explanation of its meaning'. There are many problems in this sentence, considered as a piece of literary criticism. The grammatical mistake with *make* can be attributed to one of them. The student has got caught between reporting his own reading of the poem (in which case *made me* is required) and a half-understood notion that comments about a poem should be generalisable to all readers (requiring *makes one*). The grammatical error is merely a manifestation of the deeper

ambiguity.

Law students find it difficult to co-ordinate the clauses of their sentences grammatically because they get caught between their 'lay' and 'legal' opinions in setting up the premises of an argument. Tense and aspect collapse in the writing of engineering students, unused to handling temporal sequence, when they are asked to survey a problem in the history of structural design. Not all errors in grammar or vocabulary can be thus accounted for. They are, however, sufficient to suggest that it may be possible to improve markedly the mechanical quality of students' writing by changing slightly the focus of some tutorials and lectures in a course so that the underlying issues are accentuated.

Rhetorical Sources of Error

Less clear, but nevertheless a hypothesis sufficiently encouraging to be worth pursuing, is the idea that many grammatical mistakes arise out of a general uncertainty about 'what to write next'. It may not be too difficult to show how faults of informal logic (begging the question, non sequiturs, tautologies) are the outcome of poor planning and rhetorical bankruptcy. The grammatical problem is less easy because the mistakes are apparently random. A general explanation is that the mistakes are made because the student is so overburdened with matters of content and rhetoric that he simply does not notice them. While an explicit knowledge of grammar may help a student pick up and correct these mistakes in the process of monitoring and proof-reading his writing, a closer familiarity with the rhetorical strategies of his various disciplines would forestall the mistakes in the first place. The problem is partly a psycholinguistic one requiring the kind of research begun by Garret on slips in speech.¹³

If we are to make sense of syntactic and morphological errors, we must make the initial assumption that there is some pattern in them which can be described and accounted for. This is to say no more than that the language deviations of undergraduates (and anyone else for that matter) are as fit a subject for disciplined study as any other apparently significant upset in nature or human behaviour. Indeed, the 'pure researcher' would not want them 'artificially' suppressed as they constitute an invaluable and irreplaceable source of data on how students learn and how they cope with the difficulties of understanding their work. More practically, no effective remedial or preventive action on a large scale can be expected without the understanding such study would hope to provide. There is reason to think that modern linguistic research is helping to break one of those old dichotomies bedevilling the study of language, that between content and form. It would be foolish not to make use of the opportunity to apply these insights to the writing difficulties of students.

A job description

If I have concentrated on students' writing, it is because this is where the problems most clearly surface. There are, nevertheless, many other advisory roles the English specialist may be able to fill. He can use staff workshops and tertiary teaching courses to examine such questions as the setting of essay topics, the writing in and of text-books and other teaching materials, the linguistic implications of alternative modes of assessment, the reliability of essay assessments, and the patterns of speech discourse in tutorials. He can enquire into and assist students in the very real problems of reading and taking notes (few people see plagiarism as the essentially linguistic problem it is, and hardly any studies on note-taking have looked at the quality and linguistic coherence of the notes themselves). The difficulty consists not in finding problems to work on with staff and students, but in delimiting the scope of enquiry and disciplining the nature of the language specialist's contribution.

Finally, in most universities the member of staff concerned with the use of English occupies an important position at the gate between secondary and tertiary education. Whereas in all other curriculum areas of the university, there is somebody to look after its interest in the competence of entering undergraduates, 'service' English is really nobody's responsibility. The vacuum has usually been filled by English departments. But unlike the English faculty of North American colleges (whose 'freshman English' programmes have not proved conspicuously successful), our English departments do not regard their duties as encompassing 'English for others'. Consequently, they are not in a position to establish precisely the language requirements of the university as a whole. The matriculation English examinations in which they have had a hand have not been, and could not be, by themselves a sufficient guarantee and test of those language abilities outside their control.

As the older, more rigid forms of assessment for university entrance are changed it is imperative that the universities have somebody who can study and develop suitable alternatives. Pioneering work of this nature has recently been carried out for the A.C.T. by the Australian National University and the A.C.T. Schools Accrediting Agency.¹⁵ Such work is necessary now. Otherwise Australian universities will in a few years be facing the problems at present being experienced in North America, where the reflex reaction has been to advocate that ineffective 'return to the basics' and the cumbersome, expensive paraphernalia of 'writing clinics'.

The question remains how best to institutionalise within the university the kind of work I have discussed. Each of the Australian universities who have appointed a member of staff to work on students' English has adopted a different solution. And, indeed, no generalised approach would suit

the differing structures of the various universities. What is essential is that the university contemplating such an appointment create the environment (and 'job description') in which the tasks I have described have some chance of being accomplished. This would rule out attachment to a particular department (say English), or to a student services centre whose contact with academic staff is fitful. A faculty or school attachment may be suitable where the focus is on a narrower range of disciplines. Language centres, depending on how they are constituted, may be a happy home. For those universities who have a 'higher education' or 'teaching and learning' unit with functions beyond the mere provision of educational technologies and techniques, this may be the most effective placement. The language dimension can thus be integrated into the other advisory and research concerns of such units, and an infrastructure such as the English specialist needs will already exist. In any setting he requires three fundamental things: contact with staff, students to teach and learn from, and time to think.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. R.S. Schoenfeld (1974), *The Chemist's English*, Proceedings of the Royal Australian Chemical Institute, 41 (1), 6-7.
3. It has even been suggested that the 'swing away from science' may have something to do with the language in which the subject is taught at school, a language which reflects what Nagel terms a 'realist' rather than 'instrumentalist' view of science. A. Hugh Munby (1976), *Some Implications of Language in Science Education*, *Science Education*, 60 (1), 115-124.
4. Lucy Mair (1962) *Primitive Government*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, pp. 31-32.
5. Manning Clark (1976), *A Discovery of Australia*, Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, p. 50.
6. H.V. Wyatt (1975a), *An Introductory Microbiology Course Based on the Clothier Report*, *Journal of Biological Education*, 9 (1), 21-25. (1975b), *Writing and Speaking: Communication for Biologists*, *Journal of Biological Education*, 9 (6), 256-258.
7. F.P. Woodford (1967), *Sounder Thinking Through Clearer Writing*, *Science*, 156, 743-745.
8. R.B. McKerrow (1940), *Form and Matter in the Publication of Research*, *Review of English Studies*, 16 (61), 1-6. Like present day estimations of the decline in students' English, McKerrow's impressions are not easily verifiable. He was, however, sufficiently forbearing to admit the possibility that "advancing age has made me thicker in the head", or that he had just become "impatient".
9. Hugh Stretton (1969), *The Political Sciences*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 299. See also pp. 421-422.
10. *British Medical Journal* (1976), 2 (6044), 6th November.
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12. Research in psycholinguistics indicates very little agreement on the relationships between grammar(s), language production and language learning. A recent review of the position from a semantic-Plagietian point of view is M.H. Edmonds (1976), *New Directions in Theories of Language Acquisition*, *Harvard Educational Review*, 46 (2), 175-198.
13. M.F. Garrett (1975), *The Analysis of Sentence Production*, *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, 9, 133-177.
14. *English Language Skills Expected in Year 12 Students: A Proposal For A.C.T.* (n.d.), A.C.T. Schools Accrediting Agency White Paper. See also the *Supplementary Document*.