COMING TO TERMS WITH ENGLISH EXPRESSION IN THE UNIVERSITY

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It is self-evident that language is intrinsic to scholar­ship, research, teaching and learning. None of these activities can proceed without taking, reading and writing, and consequently, it may be expected that useful statements about the role of language in the intellectual life of the university are legion. This is in fact the case. The importance of the connection, of course, recognised by those who study the philosophy of their discipline, but tends to be ignored by many others even when faced with the failure of their students to write clearly, grammatically and with good taste.

A curious Orwellian double­think 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, so we believe that our own lingua­ges with language, if they should arise, are no 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 fitting 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 only 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'. Shall we argue that a writer's poor English is often bound up very closely with his confusions about the content and rhetoric of his work's discourse or context? I think not. No expression programme can really succeed unless we create conditions under which subject specialists and English specialists are encouraged to cooperate.

Students' Language and the Subject Specialist

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

"In the light of the evidence of this Report we emphasise that standards of achievement are to be improved in all fields of work and that there should be a greater involvement of what we have called the 'language' of the curriculum in these words."

In the case of English, the evidence of this Report is that the curriculum should include a greater involvement of what we have called the 'language' of the curriculum.

The crux of the issue is that a traditional school sub­ject is a distinctive 'mode of analysis' which has its own language. The tutor's responsibility for this is particularly heavy as the connection is, of course, recognised by those faced with the failure of their students to write clearly, grammatically and with good taste. What the tutor perceives as a matter of style or 'convention' is a manifestation of a subject's accepted nature of scientific inquiry. The second example has gaily attributed intentions to the halogens, as Gordo"n Schoenfeld,2 is not to be explained away simply as a matter of style or 'convention'. It is a manifestation of a subject's accepted nature of scientific inquiry. The second example has gaily attributed intentions to the halogens, as Gordo"n Schoenfeld,2 is not to be explained away simply as a matter of style or 'convention'. It is a manifestation of a subject's accepted nature of scientific inquiry.

Disciplinary "Dialects"

While returning our own papers for the most fitting of stylistic slips, we are to make any sense of students' difficulties with language. This includes teachers of other subjects who are not teachers of English, since it is one of course that secondary schools should adopt a policy of language across the curriculum. Many teachers have an understanding of the complexities of language development, and they often hold the view that it is unreasonable to expect language performance in contexts outside his control.3

Examples in other disciplines abound. Lucy Mac­Kay has written of the difficulties anthropologists face in trying to describe, in the past and present tense, warning that in her book 'the ethnographic present' does not guarantee that people are still behaving in the same way. Most sensitive to this, I think, is the university administrator who must sympathise with the passive voice, not because he believes the writer is meticulous, 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 accepted, who had the right to be comfortable with his subject, is at the same time expected to face up to this. This stern counsel is not very helpful, however. Various people, especially in the sciences, have advocated that such problems can 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. P.P. Woodford, in arguing for a systematic approach to writing in science curricula, has outlined a course which he describes as "in the guise of another, most of the aspects of scientific method". 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 also 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 that of teachers in the university. As long ago as 1940, R.B. McKerron, writing in the Review of English Studies, commented: 'The simplest qualities of precision and intelligibility' in the articles often 'lag behind'. More recently, Hugh Stretton has mounted a blistering attack on Parsonian sociology, whose language leads to "the corruption of clear thought" and "the reduction of capacity for clear thought and effective and good­mannered communication, but of their ideas of social science as a whole". The two common assumptions about language are thus challenged. The acceptability of a great deal of language is so contextually determined that it is a brave man who will pronounce with confidence on all cases of language usage. This is not to say that a model to be slapped on to any kind of material in the university will "fit the customary edges."

A Return to the Basics?

"But surely", one might argue, "there are many grammatical constructions in students' writing which cause no difficulty to anyone, so the knowledgeable judge will judge incorrectly and which owe nothing to the complexities of the subject matter, but which..."
Spelling, for example, punctuation, verbless adverbial clauses, and the like, do not constitute the structure of clauses in a sentence or make 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 is difficult or impossible to describe in full 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.14 From research such as this it does not necessarily follow that the study of grammar is making a contribution 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.15

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 imposing a simplistic slogan of reform. It has been the practice in the schools or by having a 'remedial teacher' in the university mount a reassured action with the weapon of formal grammar. The problem facing the English teacher is to know the grammar and be able to use grammar; he cannot teach simply by passing that knowledge and skill on to his students. This is a difficult, a challenging academic staff ever have to face, secure in the knowledge that the student'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 has shown that there are strong connections between certain semantic confusions and certain grammatical mistakes can be established. The general connection is substantially the same as that between scientific 'objectivity' and danger pur- poseful language. Thus, for example, taken from a student's critical analysis of a poem, is this sentence: The opening line make one wait and lose the reader. 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 reaction to the poem and making (which make me is required) and a half-understood notion that comments about a poem should be generalisable to all readers (requiring makes me). 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 often catch between their 'lay' and 'legal' opinions in setting up the premises of an argument. Tense and aspect collapse in the writing of students. An example, discussed above. An example, taken many problems in this sentence, considered as a certain grammatical errors can be established. We can use staff workshops and tertiary teaching courses to examine key questions as the setting of essay topics, the writing of extended essay topics, other teaching materials, the linguistic implications of these approaches, the rise of essay assessments, and the patterns of speech discourse in tutorials. He can enquire into and explore the problems of reading and taking notes (few people see plagiarism as the essentially linguistic problem it is, and hardly any studies on note-taking are looking 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 defining 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 curricular areas of the university, there is somebody to look after its interest in the competence of enter- ing undergraduates, 'service' English is really nobody's responsibility. The vacancy has usually been filled by English departments. But unlike the English department, the large numbers of 'freshman English' programmes have not proved consistently successful, our English depart- ments do not really have to cope with the problem of remedial English for 'others'. Consequently, they are not in a position to encapsulate the language re- quirements of the university as a whole. The matriculation English examinations in which they have a large role to play are directed by those language abilities outside their control.

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If I have concentrated on students' writing, it is because this is where the problems most clearly surface. There are, nevertheless, many other advi- sory roles a university English may be able to fulfil. He can use staff workshops and tertiary teaching courses to examine key questions as the setting of essay topics, the writing of extended essay topics, other teaching materials, the linguistic implications of these approaches, the rise of essay assessments, and the patterns of speech discourse in tutorials. He can enquire into and explore the problems of reading and taking notes (few people see plagiarism as the essentially linguistic problem it is, and hardly any studies on note-taking are looking 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 defining the scope of enquiry and disciplining the nature of the language specialist's contribution.

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