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**WORKING PAPER**

**No. 2 1984**

**THE USELESSNESS OF 'FORMAL  
GRAMMAR'?**

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**baal/lagb** committee for **linguistics in education**

*ISSN 0964-8275*

## Summary

'Formal grammar' has traditionally been used to mean teaching the terms of a linguistic metalanguage, and is thus very much a part of Linguistics. Opponents of formal grammar teaching in schools have usually based their opposition to it on its ineffectiveness in improving linguistic skills. Since this is one of the main arguments which anyone wanting to teach linguistic terms must expect to face, this paper looks at some of the research which has been devoted to proving the claim. Despite weaknesses in the design of much of the research reported on, we find no essential reason to disagree with the findings. Rather, the direction of the research as a whole seems to be misconceived. If formal grammar is one way of approaching the study of language, there seems no more justification for excluding it from the curriculum than any other study. To demand that it should justify itself in terms of practical results represents an unacceptably materialistic approach to the curriculum. Even those who attack it most virulently say that some kind of metalinguistic terms are necessary for the sensible discussion of language - whether the pupils' own or anyone else's. We conclude that 1) there is no a priori reason why the linguistic study of language, especially the native language, should not be as legitimate as the study of any other subject; 2) if it is going to be taught fruitfully, then it can not be taught 'on the side' as it were, but must be taught on a proper basis by properly qualified teachers using proper methods; and 3) there is still plenty of room for improved definitions of linguistic skills and empirical research into the best ways of developing them.

## **The uselessness of 'formal grammar' ?**

John Walmsley

'Formal grammar', meaning the teaching of the terms of a linguistic metalanguage, is obviously one area which is of central concern to linguists. Until the last few years, the teaching of English grammar in schools had suffered a decline extending over more than fifty years. Although the teaching of some grammatical terms is doubtless done in the context of the foreign-language lesson, any English teacher who tries to introduce or re-introduce this aspect of linguistics into his or her work should not be surprised to meet with opposition - overt or covert. Though many reasons have been advanced for keeping formal grammar out of schools, the one we look at below is the most pervasive - it is the argument of which most has been made in the literature, and the one we think interested teachers are most likely to be confronted with.

## The argument

It is natural that in approaching what amounts nowadays to a new discipline, teachers should be interested in its usefulness. As Brookes says, '... the limits of the usefulness of such (i.e. linguistic - JW) insights in relation to other considerations in teaching need to be very carefully considered' (Brookes and Hudson 1982: 65). In fact, the strongest attacks mounted against the teaching of formal grammar in the past have been based on its failure to produce improvements in pupils' linguistic ability. The point has been put most succinctly in a book which was said at the time (by its editor) to represent 'the best current thought and practice in Britain' (Thompson 1969: 1). It reads, 'most children cannot learn grammar and ... even to those who can it is of little value' (Thompson 1969: 7). Coming when it did, this two-pronged criticism echoed scores of similar remarks which had gone before. For example:

'Intelligent pupils can repeat definitions of parts of speech, recognise them in sentences, and fill up gaps with the correct words, but the fact that so many pupils can do this and yet write ungrammatically shows that there is no real connexion at this stage between correct writing and that superficial knowledge of grammar which they have acquired' (Evans 1953: 8);

or this:

'And now a word about grammar. It will be a dogmatic one. The formal teaching of grammar makes negligible difference to the child's ability to write well. I admit ignorance of what the pundits have to say on this issue; forty years in the classroom convince me that fresh, spirited and correct expression is not achieved by lessons devoted to the minutiae of formal grammar' (Mason 1964:33) .

One might suppose that grammar could be admissible for those who have no difficulty with it. But this is not the case:

'I admit that some pupils take readily to instruction in grammar, but I have never found that proficiency therein necessarily ensures corresponding efficiency in other and more important aspects of their work in English' (Mason 1964: 34) – the implication being that unless it does, there can be no place for it in teaching; and, 'The study of English grammar remains an essentially **investigatory** activity; it is the proper province of linguists and it is not the province of schoolchildren, for the reason that they have on hand a task in which it can give them almost no assistance - the task of learning to write' (Walsh 1965: 181).

In other words, for these authors the overriding aim of English teaching is to teach children to write, to express themselves freshly, spiritedly and correctly, and, they say, knowledge **about** language can make no significant contribution towards achieving this aim. Under the circumstances, that anyone should show any interest at all in teaching grammar would appear perverse:

'... one can only conclude that a great number of both examiners and teachers are ignorant of, or indifferent to, the scholarship which has demonstrated its inherent deficiencies, and practical experience, which has shown it to have no, or only minimal, influence in developing the skills of writing and reading' (Wilson 1969: 155).

It is not only practical experience which has shown grammar teaching to have only minimal influence in developing linguistic skills - research into this area has, according to Wilkinson, been 'massive' (Wilkinson 1971: 35). From the wealth of studies available we shall deal with just three. These studies, however, have not been selected at random: they are interconnected, and they have been chosen because their results have been wielded with considerable effect by opponents of the systematic teaching of formal grammar. They are associated with the names Harris, Cawley and Macauley.

#### Aims of the research

Harris's aim was to test the effectiveness of English grammar-teaching in improving mastery and control in children's writing. He was working on the assumption that the teaching of grammatical terminology is directed to these ends:

'Many teachers would concede that they do use much of this terminology. Most would no doubt hope and feel that they succeed in linking the terms to the practical business of composition. This would seem to be a crucial justification for retaining formal grammar in English instruction' (Harris 1962: 21).

In his review of earlier work, Harris found that '... Cawley, as Macauley previously, suggests that for all except the bright children no level of attainment likely to be valuable can be reached in formal grammar' (Harris 1962: 56). His criticism of Macauley's work - and the starting-point for his own approach - was that Macauley 'does not show why it (i.e. grammar JW) should be taught ... at all: and he does not show that even if learnt it has no effect on correctness' (Harris 1962: 58).

#### Methods

Harris's method was to compare two sets of five forms each in a variety of schools over two academic years. The control group followed a basic course in English, with no grammar. The experimental group followed the same basic course, with a further lesson a week in English grammar. While the experimental group was being given its lesson in English grammar, the control group spent the same amount of time practising writing.

#### Results

After two years, Harris discovered that the control group produced better written work than the experimental group. 'Better' was defined to mean, among other things a higher number of words per common error; greater variety of sentence pattern; and a larger number of complex sentence patterns used correctly. Harris concluded that

'... the grammar lesson in these five schools was unreliable as a means of securing a greater mastery of control in children's writing than could be secured with the entire neglect of grammar in English lessons, and its replacement by some form of direct practice in writing' (Harris 1962: 202).

The earlier research by Cawley had arrived at similar conclusions, though by a different route. He had tried to replicate Macauley's Scottish experiment, for English schools. Both Cawley and Macauley were trying to assess the effectiveness of the teaching of formal grammar in its own terms, i.e. they were not trying to assess its effectiveness in a different area (the teaching of writing skills). Both asked their subjects to identify five parts of speech (N, V, Adj, Adv, Pron) in a set of sentences. Macauley found that even after six years of grammar teaching only four out of 397 pupils could manage 50%

correct answers on all five parts of speech. Having set his 'pass' criterion at 50%, Macaulay goes on,

'at the end of a three-year secondary course we have still not managed to get the median boy over this hurdle. This seems to indicate that even at the end of a three years' senior secondary course, recognition of the simplest parts of speech by their function is still too difficult' (Macaulay 1947: 159).

Cawley extended Macaulay's research to include such questions as:

- Is there an order of difficulty in recognizing the five parts of speech?
- Are there any noteworthy correlations between grammar scores and intelligence?
- Are there any significant correlations between grammar scores and marks in school exams?

Cawley's results did not conflict in any way with Macaulay's, and the main point of his research was confirmed, namely, that even judged on its own terms, the teaching of formal grammar failed to make the concepts intelligible to the pupils. Cawley concluded:

'Ability in grammar (as measured by this test) depends considerably on verbal intelligence. Factor analysis shows that it has little connection with essay writing ... It is doubtful whether grammar should be taught in all secondary modern classes since (a) comparatively few pupils have the necessary intelligence to benefit from the teaching; (b) the ability to write well is not dependent upon a good knowledge of grammar' (Cawley 1958: 176).

So far, it looks like an open-and-shut case. Before we leave this research, however, one or two points must be made about aims, methods and design.

In trying to test the effectiveness of grammar-teaching in transmitting grammatical concepts, both Macaulay and Cawley can at least be said to have approached their problem rationally. Harris, however, was trying to do something rather different - he wanted to see whether the transmission of grammatical concepts had any effect on the quality of pupils' writing. Under the name 'transfer-of-training', the assumption that the results of practice in one form of activity are transferred to other activities has been familiar in educational psychology since the last century.

'Belief in such transfer was at one time universal. ... Researches carried out in the early years of this century, however, have shown that the view is almost entirely mistaken. Transfer occurs in a sense, but not in the sense in which the old educationists had supposed... It can be quite safely laid down as a principle that the best way to become proficient in any activity... is to practise that activity, and not some other' (Knight and Knight 1966: 170-71).

The first point to note, then, is that far from being surprised to find no direct connexion between grammar-teaching and success in composition, the results were only to be expected. A large number of empirical studies had in fact appeared by 1929 (Wilkinson 1971: 32) which demonstrated just this point. Furthermore, by the time Harris was writing, there is evidence that this view had been widespread among teachers for some decades. In the Preface to the 1924 edition of his English Grammar, Ritchie wrote:

'The claim of English Grammar to a place in the school curriculum has sometimes been defended on the ground that it enables or assists the learner to speak and write correctly. This argument is easily refuted by facts: it is tolerably

obvious that the correct use of language is mainly a matter of environment, and is very little, if at all, dependent on a knowledge of grammar.'

Harris's assumption that most teachers hope that they succeed in linking grammatical terms to the practical business of composition would therefore appear to need putting in perspective.

The second point concerns methods. Although it might seem obvious that the best way to improve writing is to practise writing, there is nevertheless a real dilemma here for linguists. For although they might not wish to postulate a direct positive influence of grammar teaching on the quality of a pupil's writing, it would seem unintelligent to suggest that the less cognitive understanding of language a pupil has, the better his or her writing is going to be. The problem is, it depends exactly how much grammar we mean: a little, or none at all? And if some, how much, and exactly what? Harris's evaluation criteria for the research included, as we saw, the variety of sentence-patterns used, the number of complex sentence-patterns used correctly, and number of words per common error. How far was the grammar teaching over the two years of the experiment geared to the evaluation criteria? In his thesis, Harris lists a number of grammatical (i.e. metalinguistic) terms: 'If these forms or equivalent ones are used in teaching English, then for the purposes of this enquiry formal grammar is taught' (Harris 1962: 21). This being the case, one wonders whether the results would have been the same if, instead, the experimental group had been given specific tuition on such things as variety of sentence-patterns, complex sentences etc. The mere use of grammatical terms would scarcely seem to suffice in itself for a rational test of the effectiveness of grammar teaching. It is perhaps for this reason that some writers have shown themselves unimpressed by the results of Harris's kind of research:

'It has actually been 'proved' by means of experiment and statistics that lessons in grammar are largely a waste of time. This conclusion has been reached so often in the last four decades that one is inclined to wonder whether in the field of educational research the scientific path follows the laws of fashion rather than of logic' (Diack 1956: 7).

And Carroll wrote in the same vein:

'... I am reasonably sure that unless the student gets a feeling for sentence patterning ... his own sentence patterns will show many obvious defects. Research on the effectiveness of teaching English grammar in improving English composition has been mainly negative, but until this research has been repeated with improved methods of teaching English grammar, I will remain unconvinced that grammar is useless in this respect' (Carroll 1958: 324).

What exactly was taught, and the methods of teaching, appear to be areas which Harris signally failed to pay much attention to in the course of his research. In view of the above, his results could equally well be felt to argue for **more**, rather than less, grammar teaching. For if the effects of teaching some grammatical metalanguage more or less at random for one lesson a week are so negligible, an equally persuasive conclusion would seem to be that pupils' writing might be improved by teaching those aspects of grammar which are later to serve as evaluation measures for the research, more intensively, at greater length and on a sounder foundation.

## Discussion

In order to assess this research properly it will help if we ask ourselves what conclusions we would draw, were we to be faced with the results obtained. For – let us face it – the results make pretty dismal reading. They document the almost complete failure of four to six years' instruction in grammar at both primary and secondary level to teach even the most basic items (five parts of speech) with any degree of success.

The first thing one would surely do would be to cast around for possible candidates for more detailed enquiry:

- Were the methods used in teaching the grammatical terms adequate?
- Were the materials sound?
- Were the teachers competent and effective?
- Was the subject matter suited to the age and ability of the pupils?

Strangely, none of these seems to have detained Macauley, Cawley or Harris for long. They all agree that there is a kind of inherent difficulty in grammar which puts it beyond the reach of all but the ablest and most mature learners. Since they do not tell us which methods of teaching the teachers used, we cannot find fault with them. Nor may we fault the teachers' own knowledge. Those who mention the teachers at all assure us that - wherever else the fault may lie - it does not lie with them:

‘As far as could be judged, all the teachers were ... competent and practised in the present grammar of the language’ (Harris 1962: 115).

And Macauley:

‘From our investigation, we can say that there is no necessity to malign the primary teacher who has been struggling for the previous four years with the subject. The factor in the situation which has altered is not the personality or efficiency or method of the teacher but the age or maturity of the scholar’ (Macauley 1947: 159).

We have, of course, no means of checking the effectiveness of the teachers who participated in the experiment. Since this would be a crucial factor for research of this kind, however, it is odd that not more attention was paid to it. Odder still is the fact that remarks elsewhere in Harris's thesis actually lend support to the suspicion that the results of his research may indeed be due in some measure at least to the teachers involved.

Harris mentions a discussion with a group of

‘sixteen teachers of English, all of more than two years' experience. On December 1st the sentence 'Thinking it would be late, the man ran to the house' was analysed in a passing comment to the... teachers, and at the second meeting a week later they were asked to analyse into clauses the sentence, 'Thinking it would be late, the man ran to the house where his friend lived' ... only four of the sixteen teachers managed to provide a correct answer...’ (Harris 1962: 57).

In view of this, Harris's earlier assurance that as far as he could judge, all the teachers concerned were competent in the grammar of the language seems somewhat disingenuous. There is no reason, in making this point, to fear that we are unjustly maligning the teachers. They were doubtless working more or less in the way they themselves had been taught. The blame, if any, should be laid at the door of those responsible for educating them.

We may sum up this research, then, by saying that although the results show that the random teaching of the terms of some grammatical metalanguage is less effective in

improving pupils' written expression than practice in writing, in order to be properly effective it would have had to compare general practice in writing with specific teaching on the grammatical points in terms of which the writing was going to be evaluated.

We have conducted the debate so far within the framework of the assumption that improving linguistic skills is the overriding aim in the teaching of English, and that all other aims must be seen as subservient to this. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that this view is widely held, with its corollary that unless the study of linguistics (in the form of grammar) can be justified on these grounds it cannot be justified at all.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that many teachers still make use of a metalanguage of some kind. Further, pupils are almost certain to come up against the terms of a metalanguage in their foreign-language lessons, even if not in their English lessons. More surprising still is the fact that some of the most vehement opponents of grammar teaching list in detail the terms of a metalanguage which seems to be indispensable, even to them. It is most surprising of all, however, to find them writing school books of the grammar they so despise - e.g. O'Malley and Thompson, 1955. These programmes specify not only what should be taught, but - implicitly or explicitly - how. Holbrook, for example, insists that the parts of speech, sentential functions (subject, object), and secondary grammatical categories (number, tense) should be 'defined by example rather than by their function' (Holbrook 1961: 233). It is a question worthy of serious consideration how far the propagators of these totally inadequate methods, such as Mason, Holbrook, O'Halley, Thompson etc., do not themselves bear considerable responsibility for the ineffectiveness of grammar teaching which they so lament.

We shall now consider the question of whether the improvement of linguistic skills really is the only criterion against which grammar teaching can properly be measured. We saw that a number of writers claimed that improving pupils' linguistic ability is not what linguistics is trying to do - that linguistics is not that kind of science (Blamires, Ritchie, Walsh). If we can rid ourselves of the notion that linguistics can only be measured against a purely materialistic yardstick, then we can begin to see it in a somewhat different light. We can surely agree that we live, grow up and work in a particular environment, or a series of environments, and that one of the functions of education is to explain his or her environment to the individual learner. No-one would dispute either that a number of traditional disciplines are very much concerned with the nature of this environment from different points of view - Geography, History; parts of Biology, Chemistry, Maths. Now, in the same way as we inhabit a physical, social etc. environment, we grow up in and inhabit a linguistic environment. Why should our pupils not study their linguistic environment just as they study Biology, History, Geography etc.? Seen from this point of view, insisting on a direct connexion between school subject and practical skill looks a lot less convincing as a criterion for accepting or rejecting the teaching of any particular discipline. We do not measure the success of geography lessons primarily in terms of whether a pupil can find his or her way round the town or not - and if we did, what place would we find for History? Geography is concerned with a different scale of values. And would we accept Mason's criticism if it were applied to Biology - '... forty years in the classroom convince me that a good digestion is not achieved by lessons devoted to the minutiae of biology... '? We must divest ourselves of the view that some subjects should be required to provide detailed

justification for a place in the curriculum whereas others are there by a kind of divine right:

‘... literature needs no justification. Its significance for personal values, for the width and depth of an individual's mind, and for his growth as a thoughtful member of society is self-evident’ (The Examining of English Language 1964: 20).

If Linguistics, including the study of grammar, is, as Walsh says, ‘an essentially investigatory study’ (loc. cit.) providing a means of approach to what is after all one of the most impressive, pervasive and important aspects of any human being's environment, ought not the boot rather to be on the other foot? Instead of allowing Linguistics to be tied to written performance as the only admissible criterion, ought we not to demand that any child should have the right to study his or her own native **language** in all its aspects? Why should such a study need more special justification than any other subject? The argument that it can not be shown to improve their practical written performance smacks of a depressing philistinism totally irreconcilable with a humane or liberal approach to the curriculum.

Peculiarly odd in this materialistic approach to the curriculum is its propagation by some who profess to support the humane values of literature. Holbrook, for instance, speaks of a ‘failure of confidence’ in English: ‘It can be felt from the university to the primary school ... It lies behind the retreat to utilitarianism ...’ (Holbrook 1979: 9). If English teaching in this respect is indeed retreating to utilitarianism, why should it surprise us? Utilitarianism is the only criterion which has been held up to the teaching of grammar as a yardstick against which it should be measured.

### Conclusions

In our necessarily cursory look at the evidence on which the claim that grammar teaching is useless is based, we have found, I think, consensus of a kind in three areas:

1. The random teaching of grammatical terms seems to effect no direct improvement in pupils' expressive ability in writing. As Carroll pointed out, what was being taught under the label of 'grammar' in these experiments would have to be more carefully controlled, if the results were to be entirely convincing.
2. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that a grasp of the terms of a linguistic metalanguage is an essential tool for communicating about language even in schools. Even those who claim to be against the teaching of grammar accept this, and some go as far as making suggestions as to which terms ought to be taught, and how. The question here is: in view of the uncertainty about grammar, and the poor results which have been achieved, would it not be better to put this teaching on a sound footing rather than teach the bare minimum, and that skimpily ‘by example’?
3. The conclusions reached by Macauley and Cawley point to a rather different, and more interesting conclusion than the one we have been discussing – that grammar is inherently too difficult for any but the brightest and most mature pupils. This argument deserves more space than can be devoted to it here, and will be taken up again elsewhere.

In the latter part of our paper we argued that even if the opponents of grammar-teaching do believe that some kind of metalanguage is useful, a narrow, materialistic approach is not one which linguists ought to subscribe to. Language is a significant, important and interesting aspect of our environment in its own right, and there is just as much justification for studying it as there is for studying its physical, social or historical aspects. Anyone who argues that language is in itself not a legitimate study for children ought to be required to say why. These arguments should then also be applied with equal stringency to other subjects of the curriculum. And for anyone interested in discovering exactly what the best way is of improving oral and writing skills, the field is still very much virgin territory:

‘If a small part of the research effort that has been put into demonstrating the uselessness of grammar ... had been distributed over a wider field, more might be known about how skill in the use of English can best be developed’ (Thouless 1969: 211).

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