"LEARNING" ONE'S LANGUAGE

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*What will guide me, as something learned, is not what I have
lived, but the tone in which I tell of it.*

Jean Genet[1]

Genet has set down an answer to a question implicit in my
title. What is the point of "learning" one's own language? It is
to achieve a tone, in the telling of a life that may otherwise be far
from satisfactory, and to be guided by that tone. The simplicity
of this statement may be deceptive; it has, I suggest, the force of
the kind of truth that the humane studies have always been in-
tended to bring into play in people's lives. Recognised as the legit-
imate aim of language teaching in English, it could make of the
study something worthy of the respect it at present deservedly
lacks.

One cannot help feeling that the teaching of language in Eng-
lish to English-speaking people has never been seriously considered
by those who put it on the curriculum. The assumptions involved
in the design of the typical curriculum are muddled and often
childish. Its achievements, over years of school and college life,
are almost invariably nil. As an academic subject it commands
no respect outside the ranks of its own practitioners. It appears
to remain on the curriculum in a privileged place only because of
its alliance with English literature — which by contrast enjoys a
remarkable esteem.

The absence of any sophistication in the design of the language
curriculum, for a subject in which true mastery calls in fact for
a sophistication of the highest order, seems to result from at
least two rather astonishing assumptions. Evidently students who
are to "learn" their own language are thought to have the same
tutelary standing as students about to learn a second language;
only recently has any use been made in pedagogical tactics of the
idea that the students already know the language pretty well.
And as in teaching second languages, the further precarious as-
sumption has been made that to "learn" it there are certain
theoretical ideas about the language that must be grasped first,
and that it is helpful to proceed by analytically devised "steps."

It seems very difficult for even clever people to realise that
analysis is a one-way street; people do not learn by going up it
against the traffic. Or perhaps I should correct myself and say
merely that what one learns by this process is not the thing that
has been analysed, but rather a synthesized version of it. It is
often useful to one's understanding of a familiar thing to make
an analysis of it. It can also be useful to learn a synthetic model
of an actual thing and, by comparing the two, discover what remains
to be understood of the actual. Thus the building of a computer

116

can clear up one's understanding of the human mind by identifying those areas of its activity which the computer cannot resemble. But it is hazardous to believe that skill in using a synthetic model will reliably improve one's skill with the actual, for unexplored and significant elements of the actual will remain unaffected by the process. Indeed when a balance between the various elements of a skill is important, the consequence of such a one-sided synthetic process seems bound to be harmful. Yet whole curricula have been built mistakenly on this idea, that a student who already uses his language as a matter of course will improve it by learning a synthetic model.

The fluent child who enters school has already grasped somehow most of the ideas that our present theories of grammar, usage, semantics, and rhetoric are at considerable pains to present, together with a number that have not yet been defined by anybody. It is true that he cannot define them himself, but he does use them constantly. Good teachers relish (and poets may envy) the frequent simplicity, delicacy, and blinding accuracy of language that flows from uninhibited children of the primary years. The tone in which they tell of what they live is full of promise. What does our English language curriculum do for that promise? What could it do?

Prospects in Transformational Grammar

Typically, an English curriculum offers as an aid to the advancement of a student's use of language what people continue to think of as "grammar" although this term generally comprises what scholars now recognise as several distinct disciplines like semantics and rhetoric. Strict grammar, defined as a systematic exploration of the operations of the language, has a half-hearted role in schools now. This is less because of the inadequate explanations in the grammars that schools use than because of a drastic loss of teacher confidence in the possibility that any explanatory system at all could influence in a lasting way the intricate and highly entrenched system of a student's language habits. Nevertheless, trained as we are in academic ways, we are apt to feel that there must be a relationship between the intellectual adequacy of the explanations and the effectiveness of the instruction. Many English teachers are consequently now hopeful that the newer transformational-generative grammar[2] will achieve for language learning what other grammars of the language have so far apparently failed to achieve — some noticeable increment of value for students in the actual use of their own language. The question of what *is* of value in language use is generally assumed to present no great difficulty, though one rarely hears anyone talking of it in terms comparable to Genet's "tone."

Transformational grammar gives explanations of the way our language works with a greater sophistication and accuracy than have been available before. Associated in its origins with the development of computer languages, it formulates programmes

whereby good English sentences of considerable subtlety and complexity may be generated from simple symbolic elements by persons or machines. It is a synthetic process of great intrinsic appeal to anyone who has tried analysing the language, for it follows in its operations courses which one can accept as provisionally representative of the actual operations of a mind when it is forming statements. In other words, it offers a logical model of a psychological process. As things go in North American education — the hopes of English language instructors being what they are — a great deal of money and effort are about to be placed on this quite splendid horse.

Several texts and studies arising from this development and likely to have a considerable influence on a wide audience of English teachers have recently appeared. Unlike documents in the recent furore over structural linguistics and its onslaught on "traditional" grammar, these works are more concerned with the application of transformational grammar to teaching than with the defence or advance of some particular point of grammar in the scholarly arena. Questions that have been asked in this article emerge framed in a more particular context: Can the developments of transformational generative grammar be useful to "learning" one's own language? The larger question, of why one is learning it at all, may or may not exercise the minds of writers preoccupied with this narrower issue.

Owen Thomas, in his book *Transformational Grammar and the Teacher of English,* does try in the end to answer both questions with this summary assertion: "We should teach language, first, because it is important in itself, and second, because the proper study of language can increase our self-confidence in speaking, reading, writing, and listening."[3] As a concluding statement it is interesting for what it does not say. Even the "proper" study of language merely "can" do something, and not necessarily *does* do it; and that *something* is to increase confidence rather than, in fact, to improve performance in the various uses of language. What seems then to be a forthright statement of a general truth becomes a mere declaration of nervous hope for the future. These observations confirm suspicions engendered by the earlier part of the statement. In our day, to justify a study by its importance rather than by its usefulness is to concede the battle. The rationale, that the study of things that are important is therefore of itself important, would argue for placing alongside language study, in competition for the attention of school students, the studies of God, of war and peace, of money, of human reproduction, and of death — to name the first few important things that come to mind. Clearly, our present curricula award priorities to subjects on some other basis than "importance." Thomas is really saying that the main claim to a right to pursue language learning in school time lies in its intrinsic interest. Others, notably Paul Roberts, have said much the same: "The best reason for studying grammar is that grammar is interesting."[4]

If these men are right in their view, that grammar study[5] should be an end in itself rather than a means to some other end, we must recognise the implication that it should cease at once to be a subject required of all students throughout their educational careers. It should become instead an elective in the higher reaches of an educational career, like other subjects offering intrinsic interest without apparent application. A great deal therefore turns on the acceptance of their position.

Behind this position of relative despair about grammar's usefulness, which contrasts with the rather weak-minded optimism of the average curriculum's faith that it is the means to grace in speech and writing, lies the long record of failure by researchers to show that teaching grammar makes any noticeable difference to student speech or writing. These failures have had a cumulatively weakening effect on grammar in the curriculum, without actually killing it off, and it is difficult to find people in teaching nowadays who can declare a firm confidence in it without sounding rather angrily defiant. Grammar is challenging material, and one wants it to work, if only as an exercise to discipline the mind. But one need not be too easily daunted by the word "research" as a generalization. There has not really been so much research on this topic, considering the complexity of language, and the kinds of measurement used in many studies have been trivial or crude. Moreover, when a study has reported finding no differences made by teaching, that is only to say that it has found none in the one rather tiny area that it had perforce chosen to scrutinize. If the hair on one child's head be shown to grow no faster than another's, it does not follow that there is no difference in lustre.

Clearly much depends on the subtlety of the measurements. Yet having said all this about the deficiencies of research, one must not blink the fact that when a subject is being required of all students, an onus of proof that it will have some use rests on those who have made it a requirement. There is little sign that administrators who impose language instruction on thousands of teachers and millions of students each year are at all aware of this obligation.

Owen Thomas declares himself a pedagogue and not a linguist, and his book a pedagogical rather than a scientific grammar. But he ends by refusing to say that the study of this grammar will have any noticeable effect. Roberts, more of a linguist than a pedagogue perhaps, made his remark about the best reason for studying grammar in 1954, when he was an advocate of the cause of structural or immediate-constituent grammar. In 1962, after describing transformational grammar, he wrote with a linguist's enthusiasm about this more recent development:

> Often, in working with immediate-constituent grammar, one felt that beyond certain points progress became steeply difficult. The description was right as far as it went, but one couldn't take it farther. In transformational analysis one doesn't have this sense of a blocking-off. One feels that the way is open from a

rough and general sketch to a complete and satisfying description
of English. If this also is illusory, the illusion is at least not
easily dispelled . . .[6]

This vision of "a complete and satisfying description of Eng-
lish," that has for long been a sort of Holy Grail for English
teachers concerned about language, is quite clearly acquiring a
tantalizing nearness for observers of transformational grammar.
Thomas shares it, and H. A. Gleason[7] builds a proposed course of
study upon it. For linguists, such a myth is an end in itself —
satisfying just because the explanation is *not* yet complete, but
remaining to be pursued. Noam Chomsky has seen another such
vision, the glimmerings of a universal grammar, and it carries
him and his colleagues far beyond the concerns of the English
classroom.[8] But for teachers, who must always know what they
can do next period or next year, even the realization of Roberts'
vision will not be enough. They must have a programme[9] and
evidence of what a complete and satisfying description of the lan-
guage will do for their students' language, if they are not to be
forced to fall back on Thomas' position and declare the subject
an elective.

Some Effects of Transformational Grammar

A recently published bulletin of the National Council of Teach-
ers of English appears to show that the study of transformational
grammar can have real and measurable results — though on a less
ambitious scale. In a condensed version of their original first
report, Bateman and Zidonis declare that the teaching of trans-
formational rules from a generative grammar over a two-year
period did in fact increase the proportion and the complexity of
well-formed sentences that their ninth and tenth graders wrote in
fortnightly compositions.[10]

Briefly, setting aside certain tiresome features of a rather
polemical presentation, the authors measured several samples of
writing from the first three months and from the last three
months of a two-year project involving fifty students. The students
had been randomly assigned to a control group and an experimental
group at the beginning of Grade Nine. It is not made clear whether
the control group studied any grammar or not; "no formal gram-
mar was studied in the control class," although they followed the
regular curriculum at the school, and we are told these grades
were chosen because they "typically place the heaviest emphasis
on grammatical study in the secondary schools." The experimental
group studied "materials specially adapted by the investigators
from the area of generative grammar," and this was the only
difference in content studied by the two groups over the two-year
period.

We are not told how the specially adapted materials were
studied. We are given the forty-six transformational rules which
the authors selected both as the core material for the grammar
study and as the basis of scores for their evaluation instrument.

Applying the evaluation instrument to the twelve compositions of each student (six 'before' and six 'after'), the authors found that there were significant changes in language use in both groups on each of the three kinds of scores used, and that on one kind of score there were significant differences between the advances of the control and the experimental groups in favor of the latter.

What were these changes in language use over two years? Regardless of whether they had been offered explanations of language or not, the writing of both groups of students showed marked changes in the direction of a greater structural complexity of sentences, a greater proportion of well-formed sentences out of the total written, and fewer common errors. While there were in all these areas generally stronger advances by the experimental group as a whole, only in the proportion of well-formed sentences was there unambiguously a difference in degree of advance that could be put down to the differences in the work the two groups had done in class.

The authors are to be congratulated on developing scoring instruments of great sensitivity and high reliability for what might be called the 'density' of language, though the validity of this as a measurement of improvement in the light of the purposes of English language study, remains open to question. Their forty-six rules of transformation enable fine discriminations in the complexity of apparently similar sentences. Their criteria of well-formedness in sentences are rigorous, and a sentence will be judged to be malformed on a point of punctuation alone; hence the authors are able to make the rather fearsome observation that almost half of the sentences written by ninth grades are malformed, but this is a consequence of their definition and they are themselves misleading us when they claim on this evidence that it is misleading to contend that children have acquired virtual command of the grammar of English at an early age. It is the development of these instruments of evaluation that is probably the most notable contribution of the study. With such a means of measurement earlier studies might well have succeeded in showing differences of effect in grammar teaching where their own cruder means of discrimination failed.

The study shows that students who have had their attention drawn to the workings of the language by a formal programme of enquiry — in this case characterised by transformational rules from generative grammar — write more sentences that are considered by rigorous criteria well-formed, and tend to write sentences exemplifying those transformational rules more frequently, and with greater accuracy, than students who have had no such particular treatment. It also shows that the latter untrained students nevertheless advance significantly in these few skills, to such a degree that it is often difficult to distinguish them from the others. It is not necessarily out of ill humour, or resentment at the propaganda element in the NCTE's presentation of this study, that one asks whether the gains of the experimental group are

really worth it; whether significant changes in language use
would not be detectable, likewise, after two years of close attention
to the writing of some modern author like Hemingway; and wheth-
er the kinds of change observed in this study, which seem to
occur anyway among students of this age, deserve this considerable
amount of teaching effort. These are the kinds of change that
Owen Thomas has described under the title of linguistic "com-
petence."

> By the time a child is five or six, he has been exposed to a wide
> variety of linguistic experiences . . . On the basis of these . . . he
> has — in some fashion almost completely unknown to linguists
> and psychologists — constructed a grammar of his language that
> permits him to produce thousands of sentences that he has never,
> in fact, heard. In other words, every child somehow learns to
> make generalizations about language on the basis of his exposure
> to linguistic experiences of various kinds. More precisely, on the
> basis of being exposed to almost random and arbitrary linguistic
> data, every child develops a certain degree of linguistic "com-
> petence."[11]

This statement, in its admissions of ignorance and its recog-
nition of the competence of the child, reflects the considerable
advances in openness of mind and manifold awareness that have
recently been made in discussion of the unyielding problem of
English language teaching. But there remains in it by implication
the old fallacy that linguistic "competence" is an isolable element
that can be learned *per se*. Here is an actual process of learning,
it says, that can be replaced or reinforced by a synthetic one, in
which the child's generalizations about language from random
and arbitrary data will be exchanged for more verifiable general-
izations arising from scientific linguistic analyses. If this were
the whole picture, if higher linguistic "competence" were to be
the main object of our teaching, then the way would be clear for
the use of a teaching program if generative grammar could provide
it. But to act on this assumption is to leave unexplored, and mys-
terious still, the whole point of learning language, the motivations
that drive children to advance so early and so far their mastery
over it. Simply to generate competent sentences, without regard
for the reasons why one makes statements at all, seems hardly
sane. It raises a nightmare prospect, not purely visionary in our
day, of millions of machine-like people uttering continually and
ritualistically in English and getting nothing said.

The Prime Consideration

The dynamic behind the young child's feat of learning lan-
guage is all important. It can eventually emerge, unchanged, as
the same dynamic that drives a man like Genet to regard writing
as his life's commitment. For such people "language is where we
— I —the questing self alone lives. Language alone extends,
invents, discovers."[12] We use language to discover meanings in
things. Why does that motivation ever falter during youth? Does
the English language curriculum have anything to do with it?

The central issue of teaching language in English is to reach, maintain, and develop this already existing motivation towards mastery through language. Although we may not understand its ways, it is entirely on our success in channelling the strong current of actual language use into our curriculum that the effectiveness of any formal instruction depends. All synthetic constructs are secondary to this first concern of the teacher: to engender among his students a hunger for meaning that demands good language.

References and Notes

1. Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal* (trans. Bernard Frechtman), New York: Bantam Books and the Grove Press, 1965, p. 185.
2. As in current practice, the terms *transformational* and *generative* are used in this article either separately or in combination to refer to the one linguistic approach. Chomsky now appears to put *generative*, a term descriptive of the general dynamic involved, before *transformational*, a term characterising important particular operations in the generating process.
3. Owen Thomas, *Transformational Grammar and the Teacher of English*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965, p. 208.
4. Paul Roberts, *Understanding Grammar*, New York: Harper and Row, 1964, p. 1.
5. There is little evidence in the context of Thomas' quotation to show that he meant anything else by *language* than (transformational) grammar.
6. Paul Roberts, *Teacher's Manual, English Sentences*, New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962.
7. H. A. Gleason, Jr., *Linguistics and English Grammar*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.
8. This observation is founded on remarks made by Noam Chomsky at the N.C.T.E. conference in Boston, November 1965.
9. Gleason's book, an important contribution, offers a programme after exploring the possible uses of a grammar broadened in concept under the rubric of "language" to become a means of approach to both literature and composition. Although he has many interesting points to make illustrating "the grammatical bases of style," and is eminently sensible about the point at which instruction may usefully intervene in the natural writing process, his outline of a new curriculum having grammar in a central place is not likely to work because it relies on speculative advances in our understanding and a framework that is analytical rather than pedagogical.
10. Donald Bateman and Frank Zidonis, *The Effect of a Study of Transformational Grammar on the Writing of Ninth and Tenth Graders*, (N.C.T.E. Research Report No. 6), Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1966.
11. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
12. Alfred Kazin, "Imagination and the Age," *The Reporter*, Vol. 34 No. 9 (May 5th, 1966), pp. 32-35.

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