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Make grammar great again?

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of grammar has been strongly debated for decades, often with reference to an alleged decline in the 1960s. This article takes a historical perspective on grammar, or knowledge about language, within English Education. In the eighteenth century, Adam Smith's *Lectures in Rhetoric and Belles-lettres* offered a discernibly modern combination of English language and literature. In the nineteenth century, however, university English courses were divided between belles-lettres and philology, while the conditions of elementary schooling favoured "factual" instruction in grammatical "correctness" based on an ideology rooted in the emergence of Standard English. In the twentieth century, the Newbolt Report and Blue Books questioned grammar teaching, but grammatical analysis remained part of public examinations until the 1960s. The last fifty years have seen major advances in linguistic education, but curriculum and assessment procedures continue to conceptualise grammar as the prescriptive teaching of "correct" forms of language.

KEYWORDS

Grammar; Standard English; history; language

Introduction: discourses of nostalgia

"Grammar" can be a trigger word in social and educational discourse. Dropped into conversation, historically and contemporaneously, it is likely to elicit the view that young people today aren't taught grammar as they used to be. More recently the alleged decline is said to have started in the 1960s, when "creativity" took over from "formal English". Such widely held views have effects: Michael Gove, the former UK Secretary of State for Education, justified a profound reform of assessment in English on the supposed need to return to the "rigour" of the 1950s (Yandell 2013). As a result, some parents of primary school children now share concerns about the teaching and assessment of what Michael Rosen (2021) calls "so-called grammar … a package of outdated, rigid, misleading, prescriptive, disputed terms".

Discourses of nostalgia – that things were better in the recent or distant past – are a familiar feature of human consciousness. Williams (1993, 9–12) showed in *The Country and the City* that, for centuries, writers about country life have believed that a decline occurred about forty years before they wrote. Williams was referring particularly to views of the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation on country life, but any aspect of social life, including education, can embrace this structure of feeling. Is this nostalgia, this wistful

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view of a past when grammar was taught "properly", little more than using the past, the "good old days", as a stick to denigrate the present (Williams 1993, 12)? This may be the case, but the long history of complaints about the teaching of grammar (which go back to the Newbolt Report of 1921 and before) suggests that we need a more precise understanding of what happened. This short article, an airing of early findings from a three-year research project on the epistemology of English education, draws on our attempts to establish a more extended historical view. Our approach is genealogical in the Foucauldian sense, as it uses history as a "means of critical engagement with the present" (Garland 2014, 367).

Defining grammar

We must be clear about the compass of the term "grammar". There may be some general agreement, we think, that it concerns what might be construed as the rules or even laws of linguistic expression. In other semiotic domains, some rules (such as those for traffic) are invented and imposed; others (such as the laws of physics) are discovered and understood. The concept of "laws" in this second sense arguably comes from the Enlightenment. As Alexander Pope put it:

> Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night;
> God said, "Let Newton be!" and all was light!

Grammar can be prescriptive, as in the first sense, or descriptive, as in the second; but, as language is embedded in social life, the distinction is not always clear. Saussure regarded "langue" structurally as a signifying system whose rules and conventions are independent of and pre-exist the individual user. Online discussion forums such as *Quora* are full of questions, often from learners of English as a second language, about "correct" grammar: "Do I say 'meet at London' or 'meet in London'?" An analysis of preposition use in English may reveal patterns of language which allow such questions to be answered descriptively rather than prescriptively, emphasising usage rather than correctness. Since the publication of the first UK National Curriculum for English in 1989, this approach to "grammar" has been called "Knowledge about Language" because it eschews a priori notions of correctness in favour of an analysis of language in use. Our enquiry will adopt this larger definition of grammar.

Rhetoric and belles-lettres

If we were to envisage a golden age of grammar, it would be a time when the study of language ran alongside the study of literature, assisting students to understand the language of social life and the language of literature in a complementary way. However, we have had to go back nearly three centuries to discover an, albeit limited, organised course of study that meets our criteria. Our citation of Pope and the Enlightenment above was not fortuitous. We shall begin at this point and move forward (with regrettable brevity) to the alleged decline in the mid twentieth century.

Adam Smith is best known today as the author of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), an influential treatise on economics that argued that the "invisible hand" of the market could turn individual need into societal benefit. He foresaw, however, the need for a well-

educated commercial ruling class sensitive to the responsibilities of leadership (Court 1992, 21): his *Lectures in Rhetoric and Belles-lettres* (Smith 1985), first given at Glasgow University in 1751, drew on his studies in conduct and morality published in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Of his thirty lectures, the first six were primarily linguistic, while the next five dealt with language in relation to character and ethics and formed a bridge to the following nineteen lectures on genres of writing.

As an Enlightenment thinker, Smith desired explanation and evidence. Since the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium* early in the first century BC, the orator's art had been divided into invention, arrangement, expression, memory, and delivery. Smith's early lectures on rhetoric discarded this taxonomical approach to oratorical language in favour of explanatory principles – immanent laws – of language. This reordering of knowledge characterises the shift from the classical to the modern episteme (Foucault 1966): Smith's work anticipates the socially situated linguistics of the twentieth century. He focused on language in use, examining "the several ways of communicating our thoughts by speech" and "the principles of those literary compositions which contribute to persuasion or entertainment" (Stewart 1811, 16).

Smith chose perspicuity as a fundamental principle of rhetoric, and thus marked a break from rhetoric as persuasive elegance to rhetoric as precise expression. He began his first recorded lecture (Lecture 2): "Perspicuity of style requires not only that the expressions we use should be free from all ambiguity proceeding from synchronous words, but the words should be natives if I may say so of the language we speak in." The expression of ideas should be clear and transparent, and the vocabulary should be that of a community of English speakers. Smith declared that the French usurper "Develop" has "not half the strength or significance" of "the good old English word Unfold". Such arguments for the greater vigour of "English" words were not new. Sir John Cheke (1560) opined in the sixteenth century that "our own tung should be written cleane and pure, unmixt and unmangeled with borowing of other tunges", and such claims have been frequently repeated: Fowler (1908) recommended (with caveats) the Saxon word rather than the Romance; Orwell (1946) decried Latinate vocabulary in *Politics and the English Language*; and Ian Robinson joined battle on several linguistic fronts in *The Survival of English* (1973). This argument reverberates today (although we shall not develop it here) in the rhetoric of Anglo-Saxon and white supremacy.

However, perspicuity to Smith was a larger and more informing principle than linguistic nationalism. He did not claim the existence of a pure form of English detached from social use. "It is the custom of the people," he declared, "that forms what we call propriety, and the custom of the better sort from which the rules of purity of style are to be drawn." In Lecture 2, he attempted to prescribe rules for perspicuity, such as the imperative to put words in the best order to make meaning plain without reliance on accurate punctuation. The term "plain" recurs in Smith's attempts to define and illustrate good writing. He explicitly contradicts the view (which he attributes to Quintilian and Cicero) that in "figures of speech" are to be found "all the beauties of language, all that is noble, grand and sublime, all that is passionate, tender and moving". The case, declares Smith, "is far otherwise":

> When your language expresses perspicuously and neatly your meaning and what you would express, together with the sentiment or affection this matter inspires you with . . . then your language has all the beauty it can have. (Smith 1985, i.v.56)

Nearly three centuries later, as Myra Barrs (2019) has shown, policy and assessment schemes related to the UK national curriculum promote a view that good writing should always include ambitious, unusual vocabulary, sometimes called "wow words". Smith's case for straightforward communication was echoed in Ernest Gowers' *The Complete Plain Words* (1954), a guide to good writing by officials which has never been out of print. Its most recent revision by Gowers (2014) states on the cover: "writing should be as clear and comprehensible as possible, avoiding superfluous words and clichés – from the jargon of 'commercialese' to the murky euphemisms of politicians." This association of grammar with clear communication has a long history in English education. The terms "clear" and "comprehensible" refer, of course, to the listening and reading preferences of hearers and readers. As used by Smith and Gowers, however, "perspicuity" and "clarity" refer also to the speaker/writer's responsibility to communicate with respect to the complexity of reality and a notion of the listener. Hayakawa's *Language in Thought and Action* (1949), now in its fifth edition, remains a valuable guide to this endeavour.

Smith's approach to "belles-lettres" was as radical as his approach to "rhetoric". Just as he discarded the traditional teaching of rhetoric as an exemplification of oratorical categories, he transcended the belles-lettres view of literature as a collection of masterworks whose beauties should be studied as a mark of educated taste. Smith's formal approach to the study of literary texts had a very specific focus on individual human character. He lectured his students on established writers and characters in literary texts as examples of ethical behaviour, always connecting the style of the writer to the quality of their work. In Lecture 11, for example, Smith develops an account of Jonathan Swift's character and writings, praising Swift's knowledge of his subject and the clarity of his exposition. Swift's intellectual mastery, Smith explains, had its natural expression in a plain but expressive style, unlike that of Shaftesbury, who had "no great depth of reasoning" and correspondingly made choice of a "pompous, grand and ornate style" (Smith 1985, i.145). From this rhetorical study of literature, Smith argued, the reader would grow and mature their better self, becoming an "impartial spectator" (Smith 1759, 131) and cultivating their ethical judgements.

Smith's lectures remain a remarkable example of integrated language and literature study. Both components – language/grammar and literature – were important for their communicative function and their representative content. He addressed his audience throughout as writers and moral actors. The future author of *The Wealth of Nations* saw rhetoric and belles-lettres as an education in life that could be applied by the legal and mercantile elite in shaping the world to come. In this he was of his class and time: the coherence and social engagement of his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-lettres* derive from his specific audience and purpose.

Philology and literature

During the following century, however, English education bifurcated. Hugh Blair, Smith's contemporary at Edinburgh University, published in 1783 his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres* (Blair 1965), which reinforced belles-lettres assumptions about taste, standards and intrinsic literary merit (Belsey 1980, 2–5). These went through numerous editions and, as an early index of "literate culture", became the core text for the teaching of English in universities throughout the nineteenth century (Hirsch 1988, 84–88).

Meanwhile, language study adopted the title of Philology to describe a rigorously comparative and historical linguistics applied primarily to analysing texts in dead languages. The titles of papers in Volumes I, III and IV of *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* give examples: Albert A. Howard (1890), "On the Use of the Perfect Infinitive in Latin with the Force of the Present"; Thomas D. Seymour (1892), "On the Homeric Caesura and the Close of the Verse as related to the Expression of Thought"; Richard C. Manning (1893), "On the Omission of the Subject-Accusative of the Infinitive in Ovid". In a profound break from both the belles-lettres and philological traditions, the first "English" Tripos at Cambridge University in 1917 focused on English literature, with a subtitle "Life and Thought"– a significant addition which gave the study a new and vigorous emphasis (Williams 1983, 182). This practical separation between literary and linguistic studies has been frequently described as a liberation, but it was also an intrinsic limitation. "There are serious questions to ask," wrote Williams (1983, 179) "about the distance of literary from linguistic studies in higher education." In 2021, this remains an intractable problem recently discussed by Ahmed et al. (2021).

A similar split between a classical linguistic tradition and the new subject of English Literature occurred in school education. The introductory chapter to Newbolt et al. (1921), *The Teaching of English in England*, calls for the study of both English language and literature, the common discipline and enjoyment of which "would form a new element of national unity, linking together the mental life of all classes by experiences which have hitherto been a privilege of a limited section" (Newbolt et al. 1921, 15). However, the emphasis of the report is on the need for an affective engagement with literature, which, Newbolt asserts, "must be handled from the first as the most direct and lasting communication of experience by man to men" (p.9). Citing Wordsworth's (1800) dislike of "those who will talk with us as gravely about a *taste* for poetry", Newbolt expresses his committee's opposition to the belles-lettres tradition of literary study as "a superficial and superfluous kind of decoration, or a graceful set of traditional gestures". A literary education, according to Newbolt et al. (1921, 8), "proceeds, not by the presentation of lifeless facts, but by teaching the student to follow the different lines on which life may be explored, and proficiency in living may be obtained". Newbolt admits: "No doubt the connection between language and thought is a very intimate one", but continues:

> We are strongly of opinion that in dealing with literature the voyage of the mind should be broken as little as possible by examination of obstacles and the analysis of the element on which the explorer is floating. (Newbolt et al. 1921, 11)

Newbolt is referring here to the approach to classical Greek and Roman literature that pertained in public and grammar schools: "conventional appreciations, historical details and the minute examination of words and phrases" (p.16). For this reason, "formal grammar and philology should be recognised as scientific studies, and kept apart … from the lessons in which English is treated as an art, a means of creative expression, a record of human experience" (p.11). For "a clear view of what we must avoid", Newbolt cites Wordsworth's scathing criticism of the teaching of the classics prevalent in his own time: "those formalities to which/With overweening trust alone we give/The name of education" (The Prelude 1850, XIII.169-171). As we have discussed elsewhere (Hodgson and Harris 2022), the Newbolt Committee's construction of Wordsworth fundamentally influenced their Report.

The Newbolt Report thus generally disparages the teaching of grammar, although Chapter IX, written by John Dover Wilson, challenges this position by distinguishing between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to language and arguing that "children should obtain some kind of general introduction to linguistic study" (290). Dover Wilson (1969, 99) complained in his memoir that this chapter, upon which he spent "much time and pains", was almost entirely ignored by the committee. It appears that the turn against philology, buoyed by Wordsworth's views on the study of the Classics, influenced the Newbolt report as it had done the foundation of the Cambridge English Tripos (Williams 1993, 177–191).

Given the opposition to linguistic study expressed by Cambridge University, which had oversight of one of the public examination boards, and by the first government report on the teaching of English, what happened to "grammar" during the first half of the twentieth century? To answer this question, we have to consider how the teaching of grammar became institutionalised alongside the development of Standard English.

Standard English

The teaching of grammar in schools has always been associated with Standard English, which can be linguistically defined as "a set of forms which are used with only minimal variation in written English and in a range of formal spoken contexts around the world" (Carter 1999, 163). Standard English is, however, a socially constructed variant of English strongly associated, particularly in the UK, with the white professional middle class, whose grammar, lexis and even accent can be concomitant with notions of "correctness" (Milroy 2001, 536). The English language has undergone a cultural process towards linguistic uniformity since it superseded Anglo-Norman as the written and spoken vernacular of England towards the end of the fourteenth century (Wright 2020). Initially, wide regional variations remained, but over the following centuries new trading networks and communities of practice (Keene 2000), as well as technology such as the printing press, incrementally regularised the language. Latin and French had long been conventionalised on the page, and the literate professional classes ported Anglo-Norman writing conventions into English. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the language of law and the bourgeoisie had become established as Standard English, with significant implications for speakers whose language practices were deemed to fall outside this so-called standard.

As Milroy 2001, 532) argues, the term *standard* has connotations beyond regularity and uniformity. These include achievement and propriety, as in *examination standards* and *keeping up standards*. Such meanings are value-laden and ideological. The appropriately named grammar schools founded from the sixteenth century onwards followed the established so-called "public" schools in teaching the classical languages Greek and Latin, the grammatical structure of which was applied to the vernacular language of English. It became established that an education in English, as in Greek and Latin, would mean instruction in the structure of the language and a capacity to write and read its literature. This education was available only to the sons of the nobility and gentry who attended the established so-called public schools and to the aspiring middle classes who attended grammar schools. Shakespeare learned grammar and rhetoric at Stratford-on-Avon Grammar School, a multilingual education that evidently included historical and dramatic texts in three languages and set him up for his writing career. Adam Smith's

Lectures in Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres were an early instantiation of a university education in English. Inevitably, the language of those so educated became a standard of achievement and propriety. From "the custom of the better sort", asserted Adam Smith, "the rules of purity of style are to be drawn." It is important to note, however, that, in the history of standardisation, uniformity of usage has been institutionally imposed on pre-existent convergent states of language (Milroy 2001, 534). "Correctness" was established through publications such as Robert Lowth's (1763) *Short Introduction to English Grammar*, which went through over 40 editions before 1800 (Hodson 2016). Lowth, who was a Fellow of the Royal Society, a Bishop of the Church of England, and Oxford Professor of Poetry, wrote in his preface: "The principal design of a grammar of any language is to teach us to express ourselves with propriety in that language."[1] This teaching of propriety was taken on by the schooling and assessment system.

The nineteenth-century classroom

The nineteenth century saw a movement towards extending schooling to a wider proportion of the UK population. From 1844, the Ragged Schools Charitable Foundation was dedicated to providing free education to the most destitute children in working class districts, but it was not until 1870 that the Elementary Education Act established a framework for local authorities to provide schooling for children between the ages of 5–12. This provision, however, was neither free nor compulsory, and it took the 1880 Elementary School Act for the schooling of children between the ages of 5–10 to be made mandatory. With unconscious irony, the Bradford Observer (1880) of the time recorded: "The education system of the country is now as nearly as possible perfect." The extension of free education to all children of primary school age was indeed a notable advance. But the common conditions of schooling – a schoolroom containing two or more classes of fifty or more, the children marshalled and instructed by pupil-teachers supervised by the "master" – are well documented. In D.H. Lawrence's 1914 novel *The Rainbow* (Chapter 13), the young teacher Ursula faces a class of 55 "Standard V" (10 years old) children whom she must instruct in botany. She feels exposed both to the children and to the head teacher down the room, who manages his class by a "rapid firing of questions". Such an environment must have fostered a highly transmissive and prescriptive mode of teaching, whether of the parts of a plant or the parts of speech. In the school ethos satirically described by Dickens, prescriptive instruction in basic grammar would doubtless have made up some of the "Facts" with which Mr Gradgrind formed the minds of his "reasoning animals", and with which Mr M'Choakumchild terrorised Sissy Jupe.

Moreover, the ideology of mass education at this time expressly provided that pupils were to be educated in the ways and to the extent deemed appropriate to their social rank. Hannah More, an influential figure in the establishment of Sunday schools for working class children, declared: "I allow of no writing for the poor. My object is not to make them fanatics, but to train up the lower classes in habits of industry and piety" (quoted Simon 1960, 133). Under the Revised Code of 1862, Parliament provided an annual grant "to promote the education of children belonging to the classes who support themselves by manual labour". A portion of the grant would be forfeited if Her Majesty's Inspectors found that pupil attendance fell below a certain level and if any scholar failed to satisfy the inspector of proficiency in reading, writing and arithmetic as

required by their Standard (year in the school). Reading was tested by reading aloud, or "oral reading", while writing was conceived as "writing from dictation" (Arnold 1908). It was not until the twentieth century that "composition" was considered appropriate in the secondary school curriculum, and then at first only for older pupils (Hannon 2000, 17). In such a restricted concept of English education, the teaching of prescriptive grammar fitted an ideology in which correct expression in English was an index of both propriety and achievement.

The ideology of "correct" English always finds deficiency in the present. Even pupils from elite schools were rarely up to the required standard. The *Journal of English Studies* reported in 1914 "Some results of English teaching in Public Schools":

> A boy leaves school at the age of eighteen or nineteen, having had some 1000 or 2000 pounds spent on his education, able to hardly write a coherent sentence, with no knowledge of punctuation, no vocabulary, no power of expression, having read practically nothing and consequently possesses of few qualities . . . all because he has not received thorough training in his own language (Mais 1914, 188)

This despite, no doubt, being subjected to a regime that might have included Nesfield's 1898 Manual of English Grammar and Composition, which determinedly starts with parsing and analysis, jumping straight in with the helpful definition of a sentence as: "A combination of words in which something is said about something else" (Nesfield 1898, 1) and then moving seamlessly, before the end of page 1, into assertive, imperative, interrogative, optative and exclamatory sentences as well as (by page 2) finite verbs and nominatives.

Newbolt and the Blue Books

It is against a background of such "factual" instruction in English grammar that we have to understand the Newbolt Report (1921). This highlighted literature and oral communication as two areas that should be included within English syllabuses – the emphasis on oral communication being notable at a time when silence in class was generally considered laudable and deemed to signify diligence. Newbolt sought to promote a more interactive and dynamic learning environment and to emphasise that oral communication would be beneficial to improved proficiency in writing. The Report's view of enhancement in English and improvement in writing competence entailed a focus on communication rather than discrete skills or systemic instruction in grammar.[2] Its final recommendation on examinations reflected this:

> That the examination system should be applied as widely as possible to the power of 'communication' in English;
>
> That examinations in English for scholarships to secondary schools should be tests of this power rather than tests in grammar, analysis and spelling. (Newbolt et al. 1921)

Unfortunately, this perspective did not unduly influence the purveyors of the scholarship examinations at 11, nor indeed the School Certificate at 16 – as will be seen later. However, the Newbolt committee's view of teaching English was shared by some within the Board of Education (BoE). From 1905 until 1959, the BoE produced a series of guides, the "Blue Books". The prefatory memorandum in the 1905 edition, *Handbook of*

suggestions for the consideration of teachers and others concerned in the work of Public Elementary schools, outlined the ethos of the series:

> The teacher must know his children and must sympathise with them . . . He will seek at each stage to adjust his mind to theirs, to draw upon their experience as a supplement to his own, and to take them as it were into partnership for the acquisition of knowledge. (BoE, 1905)

One of the Blue Books, published in 1924, embraced the zeitgeist engendered by Newbolt and focused exclusively on *Some suggestions for the teaching of English in secondary schools in England*. In this edition, speaking and listening were emphasised alongside reading and writing since "every oral lesson is a lesson in composition" (BoE 1924, 26). This focus on the child had been equally apparent in the previous year, when the author declared that a child should have the "power to describe in his own words his own experiences, the sights and sounds, the thoughts and feelings of everyday life" (BoE, 1923, 39) and be able to write "independently and freely" (BoE 1923, 31). However, despite Newbolt's questioning perspective on grammar, the 1924 *Suggestions* were more conciliatory, seeing some value in formal exercises and stating:

> The teacher of English should not be afraid to take his examples from French and Latin . . . the demand for a reconstruction of our grammatical notions cannot be ignored' (BoE, 1924, para 26)

Overall, however, the Blue Books espoused a more integrated view of grammar teaching. As Smith (2019, 57) states: "[In the Blue Books] grammar is presented as subservient to the writing, grammar teaching arising naturally from writing being undertaken (BoE 1937)". As she goes on to emphasise, the conclusion of the 1937 Blue Book edition reinforced that a teacher's role was to focus on the children rather than to inculcate them with a manual of English grammar, since English

> requires an interest in children, an interest in words, and an interest in the larger world. Specialised knowledge is of less importance than such interests than these for they can easily flower into relevant knowledge, whereas knowledge without these interests can only succeed in imprisoning the child's vital and curious mind within a mesh of facts. (BoE 1937, 400)

Here an ideology of English education as "growth", in which a pupil's "vital and curious mind" generates interests that "flower into relevant knowledge", attempts to leaven a dominant ideology that will imprison the child's mind within "a mesh of facts".

Grammar and assessment

It may be asked: where were the progressive linguists who might have offered alternatives to grammatical prescription? A striking aspect of English education during the first half of the twentieth century is that it was largely uninformed by university studies in linguistics. According to Hudson and Walmsley (2005, 596), before the Second World War little serious work was done on grammar in Britain, still less on the grammar of English. Not only the teaching but also the assessment of grammar in schools operated in a professional void without the oxygen of new concepts and approaches. Grammar nonetheless maintained its priority and place within the assessment process, in particular by public formal examination. In the earlier part of the twentieth century, this was apparent in the scholarship examinations for entry into grammar schools for the few for

whom that was a possibility, and, after 1918, in the School Certificate examinations which from 1944 became GCE O-level for those young people able to stay in school and attempt to matriculate. Despite the strictures of the Newbolt Report, examination of English language at age 16 from the 1920s to the early 1960s always included at least one grammar question. The examination boards apparently chose to reflect a societal and ideological perspective that associated grammar with order; as a result, they posed grammar questions which required little beyond prescription, memorisation and some familiarity with clause analysis. During this period, therefore, despite the Blue Books' student-centred approach, there was little impetus, at least in public examination, to elicit meaning and understanding, and no imperative to discuss optionality or dialectal variation; but there was a definitive notion of correctness and accuracy. The aim was to get it right, and, in doing so, to ascribe the appropriate grammatical labels. The following examples come from the period 1940–1961.

Question 3 of the July 1940 Oxford Local Examinations School Certificate required candidates to "Analyse into clauses the last eleven lines" of a passage from George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. Although this was a contextualised passage (not always the case in current tests), there was no opportunity to describe the effect or significance of each clause; it was simply necessary to label each clause clearly and correctly. The Oxford Local Examinations School Certificate approached the task only slightly differently in July 1944, when question 3 required candidates to write down a principal clause forming part of a complex sentence, a noun clause, an adjectival clause and an adverbial clause. Although the candidate was then asked to show how each of the subordinate clauses was related to the sentence from which it was taken, it was clear that a systemic rather than a stylistic response was what was required. Things had not changed much in the Cambridge O-level English Language paper in July 1955, where candidates were asked to state "to what part of speech each of the phrases or clauses underlined in the following sentences is equivalent" and "to give the grammatical function of each".

In some boards, the passage of time simply increased the grammatical specificity apparently expected by their papers, as Carter (1991) notes when describing the grammatical detail that was required in a GCE O-level paper in 1961:

Read the following passage and answer the questions below it:

> *Leaving childhood behind, I soon lost this desire to possess a goldfish. It is difficult to persuade oneself that a goldfish is happy, and, as soon as we have begun to doubt that some poor creature enjoys living with us, we can take no pleasure in its company.*

Using a new line to each, select one example from the above passage of each of the following:

An infinitive used as the direct object of a verb
An infinitive used in apposition to a pronoun
A gerund
A present participle
A past participle
An adjective used predicatively (i.e. as a complement)
A possessive adjective
A demonstrative adjective
A reflexive pronoun
An adverb of time

An adverb of degree
A preposition
A subordinate conjunction

(Carter 1991, 104)

Pity the goldfish.

Conclusion

There was no golden age of grammar in the decades before 1960. Teachers and pupils in public, grammar and elementary schools were in thrall to a system of knowledge about language that had become disconnected from the study of language in use. It had institutional status as a grammar of the English language and was held in place by formal examinations taken by a minority of pupils at age 16. But its utility and relevance for school pupils had been questioned for many years, notably by the first government report on the teaching of English (Newbolt et al. 1921); and, in the main, the *Blue Books* of the Board of Education offered teachers an alternative model of English education in which grammatical knowledge was subservient to pupils' engagement with literature and ideas through reading, speaking and writing.

The period following the Second World War saw a revival of linguistic research and a critical re-evaluation of the English school curriculum led by the London Association for the Teaching of English. Harold Rosen, John Dixon, Nancy Martin, James Britton, Douglas Barnes and their colleagues at LATE regarded the language that children brought into the classroom as the starting point of their work. Rosen challenged Bernstein's earlier categorisation of working-class language as a "restricted code" inferior to the "elaborated code" of the middle classes – a deficit view that is sustained today in discourses of "word gaps" that, as Johnson, Avineri, and Johnson (2017) point out, deter educators from regarding community-based language skills as valuable in their own right and potential tools for supporting academic progress. Doughty et al.'s *Language in Use* (1971), which offers a non-deficit view of language patterns in everyday life, was used in classrooms in the 1970s and 1980s. This direction was supported by Halliday's (1978) approach to language as essentially social; Halliday's work influenced Ron Carter's (1991) wide-ranging study of *Language in the National Curriculum*, a report that was never officially published because the government refused to grant Crown copyright. Katharine Pereira's work in sociolinguistics informed a new A-level in English Language that became popular in the late 80s, while Carter was also involved (with Peter Stockwell) in developing a stylistics approach to literary reading which informed an integrated English Language and Literature A-level from the early 90s. Adam Smith would have approved of this, and of the integrated Literature and Language undergraduate courses that have developed in a small number of universities (Ahmed et al. 2021).

It would be pleasing to finish with a claim that the present age of grammar and language study outshines anything achieved in the past. However, for some years UK government policy has emphasised the importance of grammar in the school curriculum, and primary age children have been subject since 2013 to formal statutory assessment of their grammatical knowledge. In some schools, children are required to use Standard English at all times, an ideology of grammatical "correctness" prevailing over reciprocity in the conversation of the classroom (Cushing 2021). Teachers are recommended to teach

children directly the linguistic features characteristic of what are deemed A-grade scripts, and to give them a quota of particular word-classes to use in their "creative" writing (Barrs 2019, 19). Pupils and teachers are again in thrall: a visiting children's author reports that teachers sometimes ask children to spot the "connectives and metaphors" he uses. Some parents are concerned that their children are "spending precious learning time deciphering abstruse terminology that is clearly age-inappropriate, joyless and fundamentally pointless" (Glaser 2021). They may be surprised to discover that, under the ideology of Standards, this joyless learning has been visited upon generation after generation.

Notes

1. van Ostade (2011) argues that "Lowth's status today as a prescriptivist needs to be reinterpreted: prescriptive pronouncements primarily occur in the footnotes, which are not part of the grammar as such. Closer inspection of the rules in the grammar proper demonstrates unequivocally a descriptive approach to language. Such rules are often presented very carefully, allowing for different usage depending on medium (speech or writing) or the formality of the utterance" (135).
2. For a recent reappraisal of the Newbolt Report, see Green (2022).

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