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NATE PIONEERS

Affronted adverbials:

The debate on grammar

John Hodgson gives a personal account of NATE's part in language and grammar study over the last fifty years – from Chomsky to SPaG, via Language in Use*,* LINC*, and* Grammar for Writing*.*

It's sometimes claimed that the last fifty years have seen a retreat from the teaching of grammar, and that generations of students have been denied an essential part of education in English. David Didau (2015) suggests that grammar is the 'alchemy' of language, and asks why he did not gain the benefit of this alchemy in his own schooling. What, then, was the experience of learners and teachers of English in the years before and after the alleged retreat, which we can conventionally locate somewhere in the 1960s (Cox and Dyson's first *Black Paper* on Education was published in 1969)? I experienced a grammar school education in the 1950s and 60s, and subsequently taught English in a number of schools in the UK and abroad. The following account relates my experience of learning and teaching English (and 'grammar') over nearly 50 years to the cultural and educational climate of the times, including successive attempts by government to discipline teachers in their teaching of the English language. NATE was usually in the front line in these encounters. It concludes with reference to the current situation, where a developed view of the nature of language and communication has placed the profession at considerable distance from the prescriptions of government.

I noticed early in my career as a grammar school pupil that English teachers varied greatly in their approach to language, or 'grammar'. (I put the term in inverted commas because its popular use covers such a wide range of meaning.) Some gave little or no time to this, while others did little else: an elderly master close to retirement bored us for a whole term by dictating definitions of figures of speech (metaphor, oxymoron and so on, often included in a portmanteau definition of grammatical knowledge) that we copied into our exercise books. The only consistent feature was

that no connection was made between 'grammar' lessons and the reading and writing that we did in the other periods of the week. The O level class was given an English course book, but most of the lessons were devoted to preparation for the literature examination, which required exhaustive knowledge of three set texts including *Twelfth Night.* The main use of the course book was for instruction and practice in clause analysis (known in the US as 'lining sentences'). My classmates generally disliked this rather abstract analysis of sentence structure, but I was somewhat interested and became one of the quicker students at recognising an adjectival clause of manner, or an adverbial phrase of time. However, this grammatical analysis was rarely connected to reading or writing. During the O level year, our weekend homework was always to write a story or essay based upon a few short titles given by the teacher. There was, so far as I can remember, no discussion of how to approach these in terms of genre or other language characteristics; certainly our weekly sessions of clause analysis were not related in any way to our writing.

One section of the course book did seem to apply to the practice of writing: a list of solecisms with an explanation of what the correct form should be. The dictionary defines a solecism as either (a) a grammatical mistake in speech or writing or (b) a breach of good manners. This makes clear the link between 'grammar' and social propriety. I still recall many of the errors listed: the correct alternative to 'because of' was not 'due to' but 'owing to'; the phrase 'the reason why' should not be followed by 'because of'; 'only' should be placed close to the word to which it referred; countable nouns should be preceded by 'fewer' rather than by 'less'; when making comparisons, 'like' preceded a noun or noun phrase while 'as' preceded a verb or verb phrase; one should not split an infinitive; the verb complement should be in the same case as the preceding noun ('It is I'). Even at this stage, however, I recognised that social correctness depended on usage and context. Challenged during a rugby match for having accidentally kicked the ball into touch, I didn't reply: 'It was I'!

When I moved from O level to A level English studies, language analysis took the form of 'practical criticism' of passages of prose and poetry. My first A level lesson gave me an early insight into the importance of contextual and stylistic knowledge. The young teacher set us to write about the satiric description of Sporus (Lord Hervey) in Pope's *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*. Never having read Augustan satire, I had no idea how to approach this. Such experiences led me later to think that the precept of New Criticism, and indeed of Cambridge Practical Criticism, that what mattered was

close attention to 'the words on the page' was insufficient. Such insights fed the cultural turn in English studies of the 1970s, which insisted that the meaning of a text is related to the framing discourses brought to it by writer and reader. The current prescription of analysis of 'unseens' in A level English Literature courses may be a return to a problematic practice.

The post-war educational settlement brought the Newsom Report of 1963, *Half our Future*, which made proposals to reform the education of those young people (the majority) who did not attend grammar schools. Significantly, NATE was formed in the same year, with a distinct purpose to support progressive, research-led English teaching for all school pupils. Two years later, the government required all local authorities to submit proposals for comprehensive education. The sixties turn towards social democracy and equality inflected other spheres: Trudgill (1974) pointed out that nearly everyone learns the rules of their language through participation in everyday life, and Labov (1972), amongst others, made clear that all languages and dialects have grammatical structure. Smith (1970) argued in *English in Education* that students should learn about different dialects and registers to help them communicate with others in varied situations. I joined NATE in 1973 when teaching in a Leicestershire comprehensive school, and read Harold Rosen, Nancy Martin and James Britton's research into the teaching and assessment of language and writing. I had by then already absorbed the zeitgeist view that traditional grammar teaching (such as clause analysis) was not practically useful. Along with my colleagues, I thus focused on enriching my students' language through reading and discussion of high quality texts, alongside plenty of practice in writing essays, stories and poetry. New books and resources by NATE writers such as Clements, Dixon and Stratta's (1967) *Things Being Various* were stimulating and supportive in this work. However, I didn't want to neglect language study and invested in a copy of Doughty *et al's* (1971) *Language in Use*, which offered a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach to everyday language. At this stage, however, I felt more comfortable with a literature-based approach to English, and didn't fully recognise the value of Doughty's work until I began to teach A level Language in the mid 1980s.

In 1976 I took the opportunity of a year's exchange teaching in a California high school. I prepared myself by studying Chomsky's (1957) transformational grammar, which I assumed would have affected English teaching in the US. I was thus surprised when I began teaching in the US school to find that 'grammar and composition' (which I taught for an hour at 8.00 a.m. every morning to a

freshman class) consisted of instruction in traditional Latinate grammar linked to the production of short paragraphs and essays. Whereas UK students were encouraged from an early stage to write complete stories and poems, US students learned painstakingly to write an expository paragraph in grade 9 (UK year 10), progressing to a 'multi-paragraph essay' by grade 12 (UK year 13). They had to take care to start each paragraph with a topic sentence, and end it with a 'clincher'. When they came to write a multi-paragraph expository essay, they were required to write a thesis statement that appeared at the end of the first paragraph, and to return to this in their conclusion.

Here, for the first time, I encountered a practice where grammar and writing were explicitly linked, at least in the course title. However, the formulaic production of expository writing was taught not by reference to strictly grammatical terminology but rather by a focus on function, purpose, genre and style. It was evident in California, as it had been in the English Midlands, that 'lining sentences' and knowing the names of parts of speech did not help students construct their writing. Moreover, despite the course book's explicit focus on and modelling of the form and method of exposition, the students seemed to find writing difficult and lacked fluency, constantly upending their pencils to use the eraser. (Later, reading John Holt (1974) on US high school education, I understood why he recommended drastic means of increasing student fluency such as encouraging continuous writing without punctuation.) I decided to use some 'creative' approaches, and became a more popular teacher simply by introducing practices already common in schools in the UK. The students enjoyed modest innovations such as being asked to write imaginatively about photographs, and my lessons were regarded as ‘cool’. However, I learned from US practice, and my more recent research into and teaching of academic writing has its roots in those warm days in California.

Reading for an MA at Exeter in the early 80s helped me put into perspective what I had learned (largely by experience) about teaching English and 'grammar'. Chomsky (1957) pointed out that fundamental grammatical concepts such as the distinction of subject and object were called into question by utterances as ‘John is easy to please’, where the status of the word or person 'John' as subject of the sentence is contradicted by its/his status as object of the verb 'please'. Other linguists have questioned whether adjectives and adverbs are indeed distinct categories. As mentioned above, work such as Labov's (1972) research into dialect diversity demonstrated that all languages and dialects have grammatical structure and that judgment of the correctness or

otherwise of these depends on the social position and purposes of the observer. From this point of view, the teaching of grammar (in the sense of Standard English) may appear to disregard the language identity of the learner and the linguistic resources that students bring to the classroom, imposing instead a form of correctness that owes more to social propriety than to linguistic knowledge.

By 1980, then, the teaching of grammar in UK schools was out of favour for at least three reasons. Grammatical systems were themselves contested and unstable; they did not support children in their own verbal expression; and the attempt to impose one 'correct' form of language upon children of varying backgrounds (and, increasingly, varying ethnicities) appeared unjustified in view of new understandings of language variety, use and function. This did not mean that the profession had lost interest in the teaching of language. Harold Rosen (1982) suggested in *English in Education* that schools should devote part of the time once filled with traditional grammar teaching to a collaborative exploration of the language use of working class students and the diversity of views and myths that surrounds this area. This exploratory approach to language study infused A-level English Language, the popularity of which has grown steadily since its introduction in 1985; and Ron Carter's (1991) *Language in the National Curriculum* project, supported by a number of NATE branches, involved hundreds of teachers and academics across the country. These initiatives saw language as a phenomenon worthy of study for its intrinsic interest and for its social relevance, rather than as a fixed body of knowledge to be learned by rote. Government, on the other hand, usually regards the teaching of English as prescriptive rather than descriptive. The history of the world offers numerous instances of attempts by powerful groups to regulate the language of their subjects. The teaching of English over the last 30 years has been marked by contest between government attempts to standardise language use and a professional resistance to simplistic notions of grammatical correctness.

In 1987, Kenneth Baker, Minister of Education, commissioned a report on the teaching of English Language under the chairmanship of Sir John Kingman, Vice-Chancellor of Bristol University and a mathematician by training. Members of the Committee included distinguished academics such as Gillian Brown, Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Essex, school teachers, writers (A.S.Byatt, P.J.Kavanagh and Keith Waterhouse), the broadcaster Robert Robinson and Professor Brian Cox of the University of Manchester, who became Chair of the National Curriculum English

Working Group that produced the 1989 report *English for ages 5 to 16*. Baker asked the Kingman Committee to recommend a model of the English language as a basis for teacher training and professional discussion, and to consider how far and in what ways that view should be made explicit to pupils at various stages of education (Cox 1991: 3). In the first chapter of their report, the Kingman Committee addressed the popular view that failure in literacy could be avoided by a return to an assumed past of 'standards' achieved by teaching traditional grammar:

> Research evidence suggests that old-fashioned formal teaching of grammar had a negligible, or, because it replaced some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful, effect on the development of original writing. We do not recommend a return to that kind of grammar teaching. It was based on a model of language derived from Latin rather than English. (Kingman 1988: para 2.27)

The Report goes beyond this to take account of the insights of structuralism and post-structuralism:

> The recent structuralist and post-structuralist revolutions in literary theory have caused people to think very energetically and critically about the relationship between the structures of language and the structures of culture. […] For the central ideas of structuralism and post-structuralism do indeed spring from the study of language as the human way of ordering experience. (*ibid:* para 2.25)

'The human way of ordering experience' is a very different idea about language from the received knowledge about grammar and usage that Baker had hoped for. Brian Cox (1991: 4) recalls that the Kingman report was 'not well received by right-wing Conservatives', including Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister, who 'wanted a return to the traditional teaching of Latinate grammar'. It was published on the same day, 29 April 1988, that the government announced the membership of a new working group charged with deciding on programmes of study in English for all children from ages 5 to 16 – the new statutory National Curriculum in English. The popular press presumed that this new group would 'make firm recommendations on grammar, in contrast to the equivocations of Kingman' (*ibid:* 14). The Chair of the group, Brian Cox, had doubtless been chosen because of his work as the chief editor of the *Black Papers* on Education, and Baker, assisted by Angela Rumbold, Minister of State at the DES, insisted on choosing the members of the group himself (ibid: 4). Nonetheless, not only the Chair of the group but also the other members proved 'strongly opposed to Mrs Thatcher's views about grammar and rote learning' (*ibid:* 6).

The National Curriculum in English (Cox 1989) included Knowledge about Language as a basic strand of English teaching in schools. However, the investigatory rather than prescriptive approach of Cox did not satisfy the minister, who asked (in notes printed at the front of the Report) for the programmes of study for writing to be strengthened 'to give greater emphasis to the place of grammatical structure and terminology' (ibid: 7). This was sufficient for the predictable press response: the leader in the *Daily Mail* on 16 November 1989 read 'Baker in row over basic English', and began: 'Bad grammar is acceptable for schoolchildren, an official report recommended yesterday.' According to the *Mail on Sunday* (13 November): 'A report telling schools to ignore English teaching in favour of trendy methods has infuriated Mrs Thatcher.' When the final report was sent for ministerial approval, it was clearly disliked by both the Minister and the Prime Minister, but they did not dare refuse to publish it for fear of angering the teaching profession and providing the press with a sensational story (Cox 1991: 11). The agreed compromise was to print the last three sections of the Report – the attainment targets and programmes of study – first, and on yellow-tinted paper.

As two major reports had not delivered a curriculum of 'basic skills' and traditional grammar, the government tried again, appointing Professor Ronald Carter to head a committee to report on *Language in the National Curriculum*. Ironically, in view of political and press expectations, Carter developed the progressive tendency of Kingman and Cox not only in his theoretical approach but also in the very practice of writing his report. Rather than working with one small Committee, as Kingman and Cox had done, Carter involved hundreds of academics and teachers through an extended consultation involving NATE members from a number of regions. In my own region, Devon, the County Adviser led some very exciting and stimulating sessions. These produced theoretical papers and draft classroom activities based upon a concept of language far removed from the drill and skill fantasies of political and media commentators:

> Until about 15 years ago, most linguistic studies were characterised by attention to small units of language, up to but not beyond the level of the sentence, usually out of the context in which they were actually used. More recently, however, developments in text linguistics, discourse analysis and functional grammar have provided a basis for examining patterns of language across complete texts. The LINC programme recognises the importance of this work and its relevance to education. Accordingly a text-based view of language is adopted and complete texts are the usual focus of attention. (Carter 1991)

LINC so displeased John Major's government that they not only refused to publish, through HMSO, the Project report, but also refused to release Crown Copyright: so the work of hundreds of teachers and other academics over three years, at a total cost of some £21m, never officially saw the light of day. Despite its official suppression, digital distribution has ensured the continuing influence of the *LINC* project, which is still highly regarded by English teachers and researchers for the breadth of its ambition, the quality of its research and classroom texts and the democratic method by which it was conducted.

In 1996, the government decided that direct intervention was required in order to resolve the assumed failure of the profession to teach English (now renamed 'Literacy') properly. Ministers set up the National Literacy Project, which aimed to promote 'a range of practical teaching strategies based on whole-class and group teaching' and the more effective use of time through the introduction of the daily Literacy Hour (National Centre for Literacy and Numeracy 1996). In 1997, the newly elected Labour government established a Literacy Task Force. The brief of this group, unlike that of previous committees – who had considered a research base and made recommendations – was to 'design a strategy' that would ensure that 'by the end of a second term of a Labour government all children leaving primary schools … will have reached a reading age of at least eleven' (Literacy Task Force 1997). The fact that the Task Force was prepared to adopt this nonsensical aim - 'reading age' being a normative concept below which a substantial number of children of that chronological age must statistically fall – indicates the extent to which, after eighteen years of Conservative rule, educators were prepared to support the aims of the incoming Labour government.

Almost simultaneous with the introduction by government of the National Literacy Strategy was the ascent of another NLS: New Literacy Studies. In 1996, the New London Group, a number of literacy academics and educators meeting in New London, New Hampshire, USA, encapsulated the outcome of their discussions in a new term: *Multiliteracies* (Cope and Kalantzis 2000). The New London Group defined the mission of education as 'to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life' (Cazden *et al.* 1996). They suggested that literacy, as conventionally understood, 'remains centred on language only, and usually on a singular national form of language at that, which is conceived

as a stable system based on rules such as mastering sound-letter correspondence' (Cazden *et al*. 1996: 63). 'Multiliteracies', on the other hand, relates both to 'the increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural, and so on', and to:

> the realities of increasing local diversity and global connectedness. […] Effective citizenship and productive work now require that we interact effectively using multiple languages, multiple Englishes, and communication patterns that more frequently cross cultural, community, and national boundaries. (*ibid:* 64)

Following Kress's (2003) influential work on multimodality, volume 40 (2006) of *English in Education* demonstrated ways in which young people can be helped to move effectively between different modes of communication (spoken, visual, written, performative) and harness the affordances of multiple technologies (email, creative software, discussion forums, digital photography) to achieve various outcomes. It also help suggested the role of language study in helping young people explore and consolidate their linguistic-cultural identities, as in the case of the Asian and Welsh students observed in Pahl's (2006) study of bilingualism.

There could hardly be a greater contrast between this idealistic ambition to enfranchise students with multiple Englishes and modes of communication and the conceptual framework offered by Grammar, Spelling and Punctuation tests, which attempt to impose on teachers and students a notion of language and grammar as subject to fixed rules independent of context or mode. However, the work of NATE members and associates over the last twenty years has continued to disseminate ways of teaching language that are engaging and enabling rather than prescriptive. Debra Myhill's (2012) *Grammar for Writing* project has supported teachers in helping students articulate and apply their understanding of grammar to achieve more effective and accomplished writing. Similarly, the National Curriculum concept of Knowledge about Language has been much developed: Marcello Giovanelli and Dan Clayton's *Knowing about Language* (2017) demonstrates the value of language study and linguistics in secondary and post-16 curricula. Stylistics, the study of which would have helped my early textual explorations, integrates language and literature study and suggests ways of unifying subject English in schools and higher education (Integrating English 2017).

Despite these positive advances, contemporary teachers find themselves dealing with governmental impositions that require students to learn an abstract, shifting terminology that frequently fails to distinguish propriety from structural knowledge. A sensitivity to students' needs will of course recognise that Standard or academic English, in which this article is written, is an important register of empowerment in certain contexts. But to suggest that only such usage is worth interest or study and to impose tests of 'grammatical' knowledge that are conceptually flawed is both intellectually dishonest and may be a way of grading students so as to deselect from social mobility those who don't do well in the tests. Reading the sample Grammar, Spelling and Punctuation test (STA 2015) reminds us that the insights of educationists and linguists hold: everything that is important in these questions can be taught without recourse to a complex metalanguage, and can be assessed simply by reading children's writing. The field of 'grammar' in primary and secondary education remains contested between professionalism and governmentality.

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