WHAT LANGUAGE CONCEPTS SHOULD WE TEACH TO FUTURE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH?

James M. McCrimmon, University of Illinois

In preparing these remarks I have made two preliminary assumptions. Since I am not a linguist nor a grammarians—traditional, structural, generative, or any other—I assume that my function here this afternoon is to consider the subject from the point of view of an English teacher—that is, a general practitioner in the teaching of English. I also assume that nobody really expects me, in twenty-five minutes or so, to discuss all the language concepts that a teacher of English must know and use, but that what is required is some exposition of those concepts that seem to me fundamental. I will not therefore try to be encyclopedic but will limit myself to three major sets of concepts: those that concern the teacher's overview of his subject, those that express the relation of language to experience, and those that have to do with grammar.

I think that the most important thing we can do for any young teacher is to give him a concept of his subject as a whole, by means of which he may integrate the various topics he will deal with in the classroom. Many English teachers lack a sense of coherence in their work; they teach units of subject matter rather than a subject, and they are often so preoccupied with these units that they do not make clear to their students or, even worse, to themselves the fundamental unity which presumably underlies these studies. Even those who pretend to some sophistication in the subject still find themselves at institutes, conferences, and conventions speaking, not about English, but about language, literature, and composition. Like Caesar, we divide the area into three parts and then find the divisions so convenient that we assume that God must have made them. Our lack of a sense of the unity of English leaves us with no clearly defined criterion for adding or discarding subject matter. Little wonder that Issue Number 1 in the Report on Basic Issues in the Teaching of English was the question, "What is English?"

What is English? What is its essence? Wherein lies its discipline? In the absence of any official answer to such questions, each of us must answer for himself. For me the answer lies in the relationship between form and meaning. The study of English, as I see it, is the study of the relation between symbolic structures and response to these structures. Stated more simply, it is the study of the relation between form and meaning in English statements, whether the statements are expressed in a sentence or a volume, and whether we approach the study from the concerns of a writer or a reader. As writers we are trying to shape our thoughts into a structure that will be meaningful to others; as readers we are trying to interpret the structures we encounter. These structures may be as simple as inflections for number or case, or they may be as complex as a tragedy or an epic. They may be written or spoken, read or heard; but always they have this in common: they are purposeful organizations of symbols from which we infer meaning.
Whether this answer is accepted or some other, I think that young teachers should be given an answer or be encouraged to find one; for some answer is necessary to bind together the disparate elements of an English course, and to keep the teacher from becoming, like Carlyle's Teufelsdrockh, a professor of things in general. There will be many things that the young English teacher can afford not to know, but surely he must know what his subject is; and it cannot be a collection of things; it cannot be a miscellany; it cannot be the science of things in general. If we are wondering what to teach our young teacher, I suggest we could begin with a concept of language as a means of sharing experience through the proper arrangement of symbols. Such a concept, when fully explored, would relate for him grammar, composition, and literature as they are not now related for him.

The second concept I would urge is the relation between language and experience, and here I do not mean simply the assertion that words are not things but symbols of things. Rather I mean the whole symbolic process by which we abstract and classify experience into concepts to which we give names. Whether, as Whorf has told us, our perceptions of reality are shaped by our language, certainly we interpret reality through language and we are constantly susceptible to confusing the two. Because we grow up in a language, it seems so natural to us that we forget how wonderfully artificial it is. The young teacher should at least know—though in moments of stress or sleepiness he will often forget—that language superimposes on reality a unity and permanence that are linguistic illusions.

An understanding of what is involved in classification and of the abstract and limited nature of class names will be important to him and his students in all kinds of intellectual activity. When I was a child I learned that all nouns were divided into three classes called "common," "abstract," and "proper" nouns. It would be hard to invent a system of classification that so confused the situation. Some nouns, it is true, are more abstract than others, at least in certain contexts, but all nouns are necessarily abstract, as are all other parts of speech. We may make the nouns more concrete by modification, but the words "abstract" and "concrete" denote relative degrees of abstraction. The young teacher we are concerned with must understand the abstract nature of language and pass on this understanding to his students, because only by this understanding can they escape the superstitions and the fallacies that ignorance of the word-thing relation invites.

There are other concepts in semantics which our teacher must know, though none so fundamental as the one I have mentioned. He should distinguish between denotations and connotations and between informative and affective statements in order to achieve a measure of control over the responses he himself makes and those he provokes in others. Most of all, his study of semantics should make him sensitive to the part that context plays in interpretation. What is required here is not just the crude observation that the meanings of words vary with their contexts, but the disciplined habit of close examination of a statement for clues which will reveal its implications. This habit is necessary to him and to his students in any interpretation of literature. A discovery of the
interrelation of context and connotation is often an act of creative interpretation in reading and writing. It would be folly for an English teacher to ignore that relation or to slight it while in pursuit of the less significant. The predisposition to make such discoveries ought to be built into the lesson plan so that it may be built into the student; and we should so instruct our young teacher.

In contrast to the overattention to grammar in our schools, the slighting of any serious work in semantics seems to me a sad thing. The interpretation of literature and effective speaking and writing, even clear thinking, are more often weakened by faulty semantics than by faulty grammar, and the consequences of semantic errors are vastly more serious than the consequences of grammatical errors. It seems therefore a very shortsighted policy to act as though the need for a study of language is satisfied by a study of grammar. I wonder if the reason for this disproportionate emphasis in the schools is that parents are more concerned that their children should speak correctly than that they should think correctly.

The third set of concepts with which I am concerned may be called "grammar." Generally these concepts have to do with morphological, syntactic, and intonational patterns in a sentence; but because my time is short, I am going to restrict what I have to say about grammar chiefly to syntax.

The first thing that our young teacher should know is that there is a significant difference between grammar and usage. Grammar is a system for analyzing the components of a sentence. It is descriptive. It tells us nothing about how the language should be used; it tries to tell us all it can about how language is used. Usage, by contrast, is concerned with how language should be used. It is prescriptive. It is concerned with establishing norms, and many of these norms have nothing to do with grammatical constructions but are concerned with such things as spelling, punctuation, pronunciation, and the mechanics of capitalization and hyphenation. In a society which is committed to a preference for a particular social dialect, standard English, the schools are necessarily concerned with usage; but the distinction between usage and grammar is not clearly understood by the public, which consequently spends large sums of money for the study of grammar on the assumption that it will help their children to speak and write "correctly."

Grammarians are sometimes scornful about attention to usage, chiefly because very often the norms that are advocated do not reflect the speech practices of educated people. Many constructions which have been standard usage for generations are condemned by teachers and parents who habitually use these constructions themselves; and this practice is sometimes supported by dictionaries, which—because of the time lag between the recognition of an established usage and its report in a dictionary—are necessarily behind the pace of an ever changing language. This situation, supplemented by public attitudes which are often less tolerant of linguistic immorality than of other kinds, sometimes makes it difficult for a conscientious lexicographer to tell the truth about usage, as witness the attacks on Webster’s Third International.

Returning now to the topic of grammar, we encounter a problem of which grammar to choose. Basically our choice lies between the old (traditional)
grammar and two new grammars—structural and generative or transformational grammar. Traditional grammar is the kind we grew up with, and which our ancestors have studied for upwards of 200 years. It is the grammar still being taught by more than 90 percent of English teachers. For most people the names "traditional grammar" and "English grammar" are synonyms.

Structural grammar is chiefly a development of the last thirty years, and its most commonly recognized sources are the writings of Leonard Bloomfield, C. C. Fries, Bernard Bloch, George Trager, and Henry Lee Smith. Its method of analysis is to recognize structures of sound, form, and order, and to generalize these structures into patterns. This grammar has considerable prestige in such organizations as the National Council of Teachers of English and has recently found increasing acceptance in the schools, where it is often called the linguistic approach to grammar.

Generative or transformational grammar, as it is revealed in the writings of Chomsky, Harris, Lees, Stockwell, and others, attempts to describe, with a precision often resembling mathematical formulae, the ways in which new sentences are generated from basic or "kernel" sentences. Since this grammar is less than ten years old, it has not yet had time to make an impact in the schools; but it has been received with considerable enthusiasm at conventions of the National Council of Teachers of English, and some distinguished teachers see great promise for its applications, especially in composition.

The question as to which of these grammars the future teacher will use is one that can be better answered in the future than it can be now. No one of these grammars is entirely satisfactory, though all of them are useful. The definitions of traditional grammar are notoriously bad, but if the definitions are revised, the traditional approach—whatever its theoretical shortcomings—is still operationally profitable. It is certainly not nearly so confused as the structural grammarians have tried to make it seem. The structural approach is especially useful whenever the structures are clear but much less useful when the structures are not clear, as they are not for modification, and its logic is sometimes not so rigorous as its propaganda promised. Generative grammar is still too new and incomplete to be taken as the single tool for grammatical analysis.

The situation with respect to grammar is what the war communiqués used to describe as "fluid." Increasingly there is a feeling within the profession that we are on the way to a better grammar but have not yet got there. Professor Sledd has suggested that the best solution for the present is a transitional grammar that will move in the direction of the new grammar without renouncing all of the traditional grammar, and I have found this procedure an effective and time-saving one in junior high schools. I think the best advice that we can give to our young teacher at this time is the advice that Professor Hook gave in an article in the Illinois English Bulletin of last December—to become acquainted with all systems and to select for particular purposes the most useful features of each system. This relativism may not always be comfortable, but I suspect that it will be less disturbing to young teachers than to older ones. At any rate, the future teachers might as well learn that, as Sapir once said, All
grammars leak. One way to keep dry is to change boats whenever the leaks become excessive.

One of the questions that the young teacher should consider is how much emphasis he is going to give the study of grammar, and in what grades. The answer depends, at least in part, on why he is teaching grammar at all. But whatever the reason, there seems to be no justification for the amount of time now devoted to grammar in the elementary and secondary schools. If we exclude problems of usage, which will be with us in all grades though not in all students, the practice of teaching grammar part of each year for upwards of eight years seems to me excessive, especially when we recognize that students have had six years of intensive experience with the language before entering the first grade. English grammar just isn’t that difficult. Most of what is now being done in the elementary and senior high school curricula could be completed in the junior high school without loss of performance, if we eliminated the repetitions, the made work, the excessive terminology, and the overattention to unprofitable details, and if we planned the work in more efficient sequence.

If our young teacher raises the question of why he should teach grammar at all, he may be given two answers. One is that a knowledge of grammar helps to lay a foundation for better communication and that the study of grammar will result in improvement of a student’s written and spoken composition. This is the majority position. The minority view is that since there is no satisfactory evidence that the study of grammar improves the student’s ability to communicate, we can justify the teaching of grammar only for its value as general education. There are difficulties with both answers. I shall consider the second one first.

If the study of grammar is valuable chiefly as general education, by what criteria do we decide that grammar should have precedence over other general education subjects, say astronomy or civics? And how do we justify the selection of one general education subject for repeated attention in almost every year of the junior and senior high school curricula? It seems to me that the logic of the general education argument would lead to making grammar an elective course in the schools, like art or music, or to confining it to a single year, like American history. In the light of increasing costs of education and the popularity of accelerated programs, it is reasonable to doubt that either the school authorities or the public would continue the present support of grammar solely as a general education subject.

On the other hand, it is true that there is no satisfactory evidence that the teaching of grammar does improve communication. There are two reasons why the absence of such evidence does not impress me as being decisive. First, we do not at present have any reliable, objective means of measuring improvement in writing; so how could we tell in any way that would be statistically respectable whether student writing had improved or not, with or without the study of grammar! Second, as it is generally taught, the work in grammar usually stops short of any transfer to writing. It is chiefly concerned with learning the metalanguage, with identifying and naming the parts of speech and the components of a sentence and thus acquiring a vocabulary for talking about language.
One would not expect that kind of accomplishment to have an obvious effect on writing proficiency. But if the work were carried beyond the naming of the parts to the effects achieved by manipulating the structures within a sentence and to the generation of new sentences from recognized patterns—whether done by traditional or generative methods—then one would expect to find some transfer to writing. Indeed, at that stage, the study of grammar becomes indistinguishable from composition.

The purpose of the study of grammar, in my opinion, is to improve communication by considering the ways in which ideas may be structured within a sentence, and I think grammar ought to be taught with that intent. If it is so taught, and if the evaluation instrument is designed to test the ability to structure ideas into a sentence, then I am confident that the relationship between grammar and writing can be established. If it cannot, we ought to reconsider the whole attention to grammar in the schools.

It will be obvious from what I have said that the grammatical concepts that I would stress are those which would be most likely to improve communication. For this interest, the chief concepts are those which permit us to explore the relation between logical and grammatical emphasis, or between the structure of thought and the structure of statement. I would emphasize especially coordination, subordination, order, and modification. But to teach these concepts efficiently the teacher would need some simple machinery—the basic sentence elements: subject, verb, object, modifier, connective, phrase, subordinate clause, and main clause. With these tools he could carry out useful analyses of sentences. But I think he would be well-advised to keep the analysis simple. The most useful structures are the phrase and the clause. The procedure of analyzing every word in a sentence—whether we call it parsing, sentence diagraming, or identifying the immediate constituents—is, in my opinion, unnecessary, unprofitable, and time wasting. The purpose of analysis is to discover the relation of form and thought, not to anatomize the sentence.

At the risk of boring you with my theme I am going to repeat my conviction that it is this relation of form and thought, of structure and meaning, that is the main business of the English teacher, regardless of the kind of communication he is working with at the moment. I am tempted to say that English has no true subject apart from this relationship, that in grammar, in an essay, in a short story, in a poem—especially in a poem—a fuller understanding of this relationship is basic to our concern with the material. It may be, as in this meeting, convenient to discuss the subject of English from the points of view of language, literature, and composition, but we must be careful to see that the subject does not get defined and thus limited by the point of view. It is in constant danger of being so defined and so limited, because it is easier to take things apart than to put them together again. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the study of grammar, which may in the classroom become all analysis and no synthesis and may nullify its purpose through a preoccupation with the particles of speech. Perhaps one thing we should do for our future teacher is to so inoculate him that he will be allergic to fragmentation.

These, then, are the concepts that I would advocate as the minimum essentials
for the future teacher in the area of language. I would have him, first of all, get above his subject and see it as a unified whole, a Gestalt, so that the particular and impromptu judgments that he will have to make in the classroom may proceed out of a philosophy of language and not be simply a collection of ad hoc decisions. I would have him understand that the purpose of language is to interpret and communicate experience and that therefore he should be aware of what is involved when we verbalize experience; and I would want him sensitive to the connotations of words in particular contexts. I would have him see the grammar of his language as a system for communicating information, ideas, and attitudes. And I would hope that he had enough sense of proportion not to allow the study of the system to become an end in itself.

To these I would add one final concept which is not restricted to language. The young teacher needs an image of his profession and of himself as a professional. Let me explain that briefly.

Great changes have taken place in the teaching of English in the last generation, and it is inevitable that still greater changes will occur in the next. When I first started to teach, the linguists, with a few conspicuous exceptions, such as Professor Fries, showed no interest in the teaching of English at any level below the graduate level. Today they are competing with each other to write textbooks, or to inspire textbooks, which will bring the results of their work into the schools at all grade levels. Similar contributions are being made by specialists in semantics, literature, psychology, and other areas, and all this makes for an impressive professional growth in the teaching of English. The young teacher must envisage himself as sharing that growth. If he is going to find a maximum sense of fulfillment in teaching, he must project himself into the future development of his profession and grow with it. If he wants to be a part of a cooperative effort that is moving in the direction of weaving the discrete elements of English into an integrated discipline, the opportunity will be open to him. Perhaps, in the long run, that image of an English teacher is the best concept we can teach him.