

The Rainbow and the Stream: Grammar as System Versus Language in Use

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The question of whether or not to teach grammar appears on the surface to be a simple one. If a writer produces a paper which contains numerous grammatical errors, and if these errors appear to be one of the main difficulties for a reader in reading and understanding the paper, the logical course of action would seem to be to address these problems by teaching grammar. This is the view of most faculty in disciplines other than composition, of most university administrators, of most students, and of most parents. For people in all walks of life this is common sense. If you are a writing center director, as I am, you could make a long and happy career out of providing clear, well-organized, coherent grammatical instruction, with little fear of criticism from your clientele, colleagues, or supervisors.

In reality, however, the question is not simple at all. Common sense can be wrong, even dangerous. A substantial body of empirical research has accumulated that shows that teaching grammar does not improve writing, and *no* studies exist which show that teaching grammar *does* improve writing. George Hillocks Jr., in his book-length survey of recent empirical studies in composition, concludes:

The study of traditional school grammar (i.e., the definition of parts of speech, the parsing of sentences, etc.) has no effect on raising the quality of student writing. Every other focus of instruction examined in this review is stronger. Taught in certain ways, grammar and mechanics instruction has a deleterious effect on student writing. In some studies a heavy emphasis on mechanics and usage (e.g., marking every error) resulted in significant losses in overall quality. (248)

Rei Noguchi, in his recent book *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities*, responds to the above passage by asking, "Assuming that such studies are valid and reliable, *why* does formal instruction in grammar fail to produce any significant improvement in writing quality?" And he asserts, "Just because formal instruction in grammar proves generally unproductive in improving writing does not necessarily mean that we should discard all aspects of grammar instruction" (3). In other words, what aspects of grammar instruction, if any, should we keep?

Noguchi's questions are important and must be answered clearly and definitively if composition, as a discipline, is ever to escape from the trap of being at odds with both colleagues and students concerning teaching practices and theories. Empirical studies have shown that grammar instruction does not correlate with writing improvement. We must know why, and we must know what we should be doing instead.

However, the core of the problems which are called grammatical is at the intersection of a number of different theoretical perspectives, and although each perspective reveals different problems and implies different solutions, they also overlap and confuse one another. Our attempt to answer Noguchi's questions will unavoidably raise even more fundamental linguistic and philosophical questions, such as What is language?, Where and how does it exist?, and How do we acquire it?

The study of language involves an inherent and as yet unresolvable contradiction that is perhaps analogous to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle in physics, which states that the position and velocity of a subatomic particle cannot be measured at the same time. In linguistics the opposition is between language as abstract system and language in individual use. Thus the Belgian linguist Fernand de Saussure divided the study of language into *langue*, the system and relationships of the language considered in a timeless moment, and *parole*, the realm of individual utterances. Noam Chomsky made a similar distinction between "competence" and "performance," and M. A. K. Halliday means much the same thing when he talks of "intraorganism" versus "inter-organism" linguistics (*Language as a Social Semiotic* 57). Saussure argued that *langue* was the proper object of study for a science of linguistics, because utterances were too various, unpredictable, and changeable.

Bakhtin, recognizing this split, divides linguists into two camps: "individualistic subjectivists," best represented for him by Vossler, and "abstract objectivists," represented primarily by Saussure. He represents the relationship between these two views with an image: "If, for the first trend, language is an ever-flowing stream of speech acts in which nothing remains fixed and identical to itself, then, for the second trend, language is the stationary rainbow arched over that stream" (*Marxism* 52). This image is especially apt if we imagine the stream of language to contain not only currents and eddies of ongoing linguistic change, but also mud and wreckage, unseen obstacles, and

the other debris of life. The rainbow, on the other hand, is ideal, pure, logical, and timeless. The co-existence without connection expressed in this image is at the heart of our grammarian/anti-grammarian debate. In theory, system and use can be, perhaps must be, divided. In practice, language is a complex interaction of system, intention, history, and context.

In this chapter, I will apply this split perspective to a number of different linguistic contexts in which the contradiction of language as system and language in use play out: the descriptivist/prescriptivist debate, historical linguistics and the problem of ongoing linguistic change, Stephen Krashen's language acquisition theory, M. A. K. Halliday's vision of a grammarconstructed reality, and finally, the writing teacher's perspective.

The Descriptivist/Prescriptivist Debate

The common sense view is that knowing grammar will enable you to speak "correctly." The prescriptive type of grammar found in standard college handbooks, commonly called a "school" grammar, is designed to define the standard of what is "correct" and what is not, and to teach those principles. Edward Finegan, in his useful and interesting book, *Attitudes Toward English Usage: The History of a War of Words*, notes that in the view of many linguists this school grammar "has given the impression that nonstandard *spoken* varieties of English (and sometimes merely informal standard ones) are 'bad' or 'ungrammatical' English," and has provided "too-narrow and too-rigid definitions of 'standard English' itself, definitions that reject the usages of many educated and cultured speakers and writers" (9).

In fact, Finegan observes, many Americans consider bad grammar to be a crime or a sin against the national language, and evidence of questionable moral character. It is no surprise then that self-appointed "language guardians" emerge in every generation. When, for example, a cigarette company began using the slogan Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should," *New York Times* writer John Kieran responded "Such things . . . persuade me that the death penalty should be retained." And poet John Ciardi confessed that he'd rather hear his first grade son swearing "As, damn it!" than using *like* as a conjunction. (6). It would seem that making a grammatical mistake is considerably worse than swearing and just about equivalent to first degree murder.

The core of Finegan's book is a chronicle of the battle, in 1962, between the linguists and the language guardians over *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, the first dictionary created according to the principles of descriptive linguistics. The editors of the dictionary were accused of basing their definitions "simply on current usage" and of "refusing to distinguish good from bad," assertions which were, of course, quite true by design (122). Most commentators believed certain words, meanings, and usages to be right and others wrong, and they wanted the "wrong" ones eliminated or

clearly marked. The controversy was so heated that the American Heritage Publishing Company attempted to buy out G. & C. Merriam, intending to suppress the dictionary. That being unsuccessful, they published their own dictionary, including "extensive notes on how to use the language" (136).

We might ask, what does it matter if *like* becomes a conjunction? What can possibly be at stake? There are many contradictions here. On the one hand, there is the idea of progress. If the linguists simply describe the status quo, without judgment, how can we improve our language and our society? On the other is the conservative fear that a valuable legacy of the past is being corrupted or debased through careless, inattentive use. Sheridan Baker, in the guardian camp, finds a political motivation and puts the conflict in terms of class struggle:

Good English has to do with the upper classes—and there's the rub—with the cultural and intellectual leaders, with the life of the mind in its struggle to express itself at its intellectual best. Linguistic relativism has a fervently democratic base. Science' is only an antiseptic label for a deep social belief that we ought not to have classes at all, even among our words. (quoted in Finegan 124)

It is as if the structure of society is threatened by linguistic variation. And, indeed, perhaps it is.

Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, in their strange book *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*, point out that the first grammar of any modern European language, the *Grammatica Castellana*, was published by a Spaniard named Elio Antonio de Nebrija on August 18, 1492, just fifteen days after Columbus had set sail on what he thought was a new route to India (65). Nebrija argued to Queen Isabella that "the unbound and ungoverned speech in which people actually live and manage their lives has become a challenge to the Crown," (66-7) and that a standardized Spanish grammar would increase the power and reach of the throne, because it would allow conquered barbarians to learn Spanish and make them easier to govern.

But Nebrija had another reason for replacing the people's vernacular with the grammarian's language. He says:

Your majesty, it has been my constant desire to see our nation become great, and to provide men of my tongue with books worthy of their leisure. Presently, they waste their time on novels and fancy stories full of lies. (67)

On the surface, Nebrija's reasoning seems incomprehensible. How would a standardized language improve taste in reading material? However, Nebrija was born thirteen years before the first moveable type was put into use. When he published his Spanish grammar, he was 35 and Europe was awash in books. Illich and Sanders observe:

An argument for standardized language is also made today, but the end is now different. Our contemporaries believe that standardized language is a

necessary condition to teach people to read... Nebrija argues just the opposite: He was upset because people who spoke in dozens of distinct vernacular tongues in 1492 had become victims of a reading epidemic. They wasted their leisure on books that circulated outside of any possible bureaucratic control. (67)

Nebrija saw the standard language as a way to exert governmental control over publication and reading. Before the printing press, books were expensive and readers few. Most important documents were in Latin, a language which required years of study to master. Reading belonged to the elite. Nebrija wanted to put this genie back into its bottle.

By and large, Nebrija's vision has come to pass. Is it not true that in our own age those who speak and write only so-called "non-standard" dialects are shut out from publication and reading, as Nebrija desired, even in the midst of a surge in interest in ethnic literature? Enforcing a standard language has the effect of ensuring that only those who were born to a particular experience and world view, or who have worked hard to assimilate that world view, have a public voice. On the other hand, while a prescriptive grammar can be used to intimidate and shut out, we cannot ignore the fact that it might also be seen as a tool of social mobility, a way to transcend the social class into which one was born. Speakers of non-standard dialects often welcome prescriptivist approaches, just as they are baffled by attempts to validate or valorize their own dialects. Linguistic forms have social meaning and social consequences, and whether your language is good enough depends on who you want to talk to and what you want to do.

Nebrija was a man ahead of his times. He was fully aware of the fact that his grammar was an *artificio*, an abstract construct, a linguistic system. Illich and Sanders argue that Isabella initially rejected his project for this very reason, because she thought such a book could only be useful to a teacher, and she believed that the vernacular was something that could not be taught but could only be acquired naturally. Today, for the language guardians, and for nearly everyone else in our society, there is a unitary ideal national language, and usage is either correct or incorrect. However, we should keep in mind that this idea, as ubiquitous and powerful as it has become, is relatively new. It may turn out that Queen Isabella of Spain was correct in her linguistic views, in 1492.

The Historical Perspective

As noted above, another source of the vehemence demonstrated by language guardians is the fear that the language is decaying or deteriorating through the influence of unsophisticated users. Prescriptive school grammars are conservative, oriented toward preserving past usages and staving off new ones. However, ongoing linguistic change is an essential feature of any natural language. As Bakhtin says, language is not like a ball tossed from genera

tion to generation, but "endures as a continuous process of becoming" (*Marxism* 81).

Like Bakhtin, American linguist Edward Sapir saw language as a river flowing through time, with a current of its own making, a "drift." Sapir argues that "If there were no breaking up of a language into dialects, if each language continued as a firm, self-contained unity, it would still be constantly moving away from any assignable norm, developing new features unceasingly and gradually transforming itself into a language so different from its starting point as to be in effect a new language." (Sapir, *Language* 150) This process of change has continued in spite of printing, standardized spelling, grammar books, and language guardians.

While most individual variations die out without a trace, others are cumulative in some special direction. Sapir argues that this direction may be inferred from the past history of the language, but it is by no means easy to predict the future state of the language from the present, because the forces that direct this change are so complex and manifold.

In the long run any new feature of the drift becomes part and parcel of the common, accepted speech, but for a long time it may exist as a mere tendency in the speech of a few, perhaps a despised few. As we look about us and observe current usage, it is not likely to occur to us that our language has a "slope," that the changes of the next few centuries are in a sense prefigured in certain obscure tendencies of the present and that these changes, when consummated, will be seen to be but continuations of changes that have been already effected. We feel rather that our language is practically a fixed system and that what slight changes are destined to take place in it are as likely to move in one direction as another. The feeling is fallacious. (Sapir, *Language* 155)

Sapir argues that it is "the uncontrolled speech of the folk to which we must look for advance information as to the general linguistic movement." And he prophesies (in 1921) that within a couple of hundred years "not even the most learned jurist will be saying 'Whom did you see?' By that time the 'whom' will be as delightfully archaic as the Elizabethan 'his' for 'its'" (156). From our perspective more than seventy years later it appears to be safe to cut about one hundred years off of Sapir's prophecy.

As writing teachers, we are in an excellent position to chart the general direction of certain elements of the drift. These are the very features of student writing that we mark over and over again, things like *alot* for *a lot*, *l* or *their* used with a singular subject. When students write "Every student should bring their book," and get a red mark for it, they are being squeezed between massive linguistic change and the conservative resistance.

The resisters are afraid that the language is losing its ability to make subtle distinctions, and, of course, it is. The language guardians lament loudly every time someone confuses *compose* with *comprise*, or *lie* with *lay*,

or forgets to use the subjunctive. However, those resources that are lost or diminished are reinvented and renewed elsewhere. In a lecture about *Attitudes Toward English Usage*, Finegan argued that any existing language is constantly being pulled toward two contradictory extremes of ideal language, a desire for the complexity that would offer a unique expression for every single nuance of thought, and a competing desire for simplicity and economy—a single expression for every (all) thought. On the one hand, we have a poet attempting to express the ineffable; on the other, we have a group of teenagers who know each other and their own world so well that they can communicate using a single expression over and over again.

From the historical perspective a grammatical error might be an anachronism, evidence of the advance of the drift, or a minor eddy in the current, soon to be canceled out. It is harmless variation, a part of the vast process of linguistic change. For this reason it is clear that we should not waste massive amounts of ink and class time fighting against the drift, which is like taking up arms against the sea. If our purpose in teaching grammar is to halt linguistic change, we have chosen an impossible and useless task, and should not teach it. To return to Bakhtin's image, it is to impose the view of the rainbow on the view of the historical stream.

Language Acquisition Theory

Many composition teachers who have rejected grammar teaching as a method for improving writing ability still believe that grammar is a necessary part of the curriculum for foreign students who are learning English as a Second Language (ESL). However, grammar teaching is almost as controversial in the ESL community as it is in composition.

I began my teaching career as a writing teacher in an intensive English as a Second Language program. Grammar was taught, but in a different room, by a different teacher, in a different part of the day. On occasion, students would ask grammatical questions in my class, but by and large our issues were not grammatical, although, of course, their papers were filled with grammatical errors. One of the questions they asked was why is it that you can say:

He likes looking at paintings.

and

He likes to look at paintings.

and

He enjoys looking at paintings.

but not

She enjoys to look at paintings.

This is a very common type of problem in ESL writing, but one rarely encountered in the writing of native speakers. According to *The Grammar*

Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, the usual way of addressing this particular problem is to have students memorize lists of verbs that take infinitives, verbs that take gerunds, and verbs that take both. These are long lists, as you might imagine. Another approach is to teach "the Bolinger Principle," which states that there is an underlying semantic principle governing the choice: the infinitive very often expresses something "hypothetical, future, unfulfilled," whereas the gerund typically expresses something "real, vivid, fulfilled" (434). But the Bolinger principle doesn't seem to apply to the situation above, and there are, of course, other exceptions.

As an ESL composition teacher I often encountered situations like this one. Grammatical explanations were either too specific to cover the case at hand, or too vague or complex to be useful. It was this situation that made Stephen Krashen's language acquisition theory attractive to me, and it became the basis of my own teaching for many years.

Krashen distinguishes between conscious learning, such as memorizing the list of verbs that take the infinitive, and language acquisition, an innate human ability that takes place at an unconscious level. He also argues that second language acquisition is very similar to first language acquisition (*Principles* 10-11). Babies, after all, do not study grammars and dictionaries, but acquire language naturally from their linguistic environment. Acquisition is a very powerful process, both in children and adults. On the other hand, conscious learning has a very weak influence on language use.

The core idea of the theory is what he calls the "input hypothesis." This states that language acquisition takes place when "comprehensible" input is available. Krashen argues that we acquire language when we are exposed to input that contains structures and vocabulary a bit beyond our current level of competence ($i+1$). Context or extra-linguistic information can help make input comprehensible. When communication is successful, when the input is understood and there is enough of it, ($i+1$) will be provided automatically. We acquire by "going for meaning" first, and as a result, we acquire structure. Simple codes—caretaker speech, foreigner talk, teacher talk—facilitate acquisition by making input more comprehensible (*Principles* 20-23).

For example, on one occasion teachers from the ESL program took all of the students to see a baseball game. On the bus a conversation was going on across from me in Spanish. I could not understand everything the students were saying, but I had some Spanish, and I knew that they were talking about Mexican popular music, specifically songs about drinking. That conversation provided a degree of comprehensible input for me, and I could acquire further ability from listening to it. On the other hand, in back of me a conversation was going on in Indonesian. I have no Indonesian, and the context provided no clue as to what they were talking about. No acquisition is possible under these circumstances. However, if I had lunch with the Indonesians, and it was clear

that we were communicating about the food, the utensils, and things in the immediate environment, acquisition could begin. Context can make input comprehensible.

Krashen argues that conscious learning does not affect acquisition in any way and can only be used to "monitor" output to a small degree. This position, which Rod Ellis calls the "non-interface" position, holds that conscious and unconscious knowledge are entirely separate and unrelated (229-230). If we imagine a continuum of language teaching methods that has at one pole the direct teaching of grammar rules, vocabulary and syntax, Krashen's model, which relies on pure acquisition untainted by conscious learning or teaching would occupy the other extreme.

William E. Rutherford stakes out a position he calls "Consciousness Raising" (C-R) that is solidly in the middle of these two extremes. Rutherford argues that language learners build, test, and discard hypotheses about how the target language functions, based on linguistic universals, the grammar of the first language, and input. Furthermore, grammar teaching, in his view, can aid in the formation of such hypotheses by increasing awareness of certain linguistic features. For Rutherford, target-language grammar enters the learner's experience not as a body of knowledge to be mastered or as an obstacle to be overcome but "rather as a network of systems in which the learner is already enmeshed, the full grammatical implications of which he alone has to work out on the basis of what he comes in contact with in interaction with what he himself contributes as an already accomplished language acquirer." In this sense grammar is not "in command of teaching," but "in the service of teaching" (153).

The nature of the "interface" between learning and acquisition is crucial to the question of whether grammar should be taught. In Rutherford's model, unconscious acquisition is the primary factor, though learning can provide a context or a framework that focuses attention and facilitates acquisition. Today's grammar defenders tend to take a similar "interface" position, albeit reluctantly. Noguchi notes that

Startling as it may sound at first, all students who have acquired English as a native language (as well as many who have acquired it non-natively) already possess an immense knowledge of the operations (i.e., the descriptive rules) of English, including its syntax.... This knowledge, however, is largely unconscious. (43)

Noguchi recommends teaching grammar in a manner that takes advantage of the student's naturally acquired knowledge of the grammatical structures of the language through a procedure that emphasizes the sentence and its major components—subject, verb and modifier. Although Noguchi does not refer to Krashen's language acquisition theory, he argues that we should use naturally acquired knowledge as a foundation for *teaching* a grammatical system.

Martha Kolln makes a similar argument in the preface to the third edition of her book, *Understanding English Grammar*. She says that the book is designed "to help students understand the system of rules underlying the grammar of English, to help them understand in a conscious way the system they already know subconsciously.... The more that speakers and writers and readers know consciously about their language, the more power they have over it and the better they can make it serve their needs" (v-vii). Noguchi and Kolln are moving in the opposite direction from Rutherford, in that for them it is acquisition that makes the learning of grammatical concepts possible, rather than grammar facilitating acquisition.

The conscious/unconscious or interface/non-interface opposition is, in fact, the most problematic aspect of language acquisition theory. Behind the controversy is another version of the *langue/parole* distinction, language as system versus language in use. Krashen's theory is a theory of *parole*. The argument that Noguchi and Kolln have with Krashen is a version of the argument Nebrija had with Isabella.

A Grammar Constructed Reality

M. A. K. Halliday's concept of grammar is quite different from traditional views, and perhaps more than any other linguist he is able to avoid splitting *langue* and *parole*. The price for this is considerable obscurity, as we will see. Halliday argues that while it is possible to separate lexicon and grammar for certain purposes, it is better to think in terms of a "lexicogrammatical" system. He says "The lexical system is not something that is fitted in afterwards to a set of slots defined by the grammar," but is "simply the most delicate grammar" (*Language as a Social Semiotic* 43). There is one grammatical system, and lexical choices are the most specific level of realization.

For example, in the discussion above of *look* and *enjoy*, we found that certain verbs "take" the infinitive, and others the gerund. Some verbs "take" certain prepositions, and not others. Clearly part of the grammatical system is built into the lexical choices.

In "Language and the Order of Nature," a later article, Halliday characterizes the grammatical system as constructing both our social and natural realities. In other words, grammar does far more than structure our language—it creates our world. For Halliday natural language is a "dynamic open system" which is "metastable, multi-level ('metaredundant') and 'metafunctional' in that "it is committed to meaning more than one thing at once, so that every instance is at once both a reflection and action—both interpreting the world and also changing it" (145). This complexity is part of the reason grammatical rules are insufficient to the task of teaching language. The problems of ESL writers are both symptom and confirmation of this complexity, in that redundant systems are often in conflict, such as when the lexical choices indicate that the action is in the past, but the tense system indicates it is in the present.

Halliday notes that it is impossible to recover a fixed and stable meaning from discourse, but that one *can* recover a meaning that is complex and indeterminate. It is hard to make this meaning-making process explicit because

We can do so only by talking about grammar; and to do this we have to construct a theory of grammar: a 'grammatics', let us call it. But this 'grammatics' is itself a designed system, another scientific metalanguage, with terms like 'subject' and 'agent' and 'conditional'—terms which become reified in their turn, so that we then come to think of the grammar itself (the real grammar) as feeble and crude because it doesn't match up to the categories we've invented for describing it. But of course it's the grammatics—the metalanguage—that is feeble and crude, not the grammar. (145)

Halliday borrows the term "cryptogrammar" from Benjamin Whorf to describe grammatical features of a language that function below the usual level of consciousness, features "which create their own order of reality independently of whatever it is they may be used to describe" (142). One feature of the cryptogrammar described by Halliday is patterns of transitivity. For example, a recent memo I saw argued that one of the duties of a new committee should be to "cohere" various writing programs. *Cohere* is normally described as an intransitive verb, and we could argue that it is ungrammatical to say that one should "cohere" something. However, for a moment, imagine what *cohere* would mean as a transitive verb, what it would mean to be able, as an action, to *cohere* something. To me it implies a magical power of the fiat variety, a radical restructuring of human powers. This is not to say that we cannot translate this error into something that fits our world view better like *coordinate* or *supervise*, but it is enough to see that normally unconscious grammatical processes do structure our sense of what is possible and potential, what is connected and what is not.

Halliday argues that when we begin to reflect on the processes of the cryptogrammar, bringing them to conscious attention, we destroy them.

The act of reflecting on language transforms it into something alien, something different from itself—something determinate and closed. There are uses for closed, determinate metalanguages; but they can represent only one point of view about a system.... I don't mean that it is impossible to *understand* the cryptogrammar of a natural language, but that its reality-generating power may be incompatible with explicit logical reasoning. (1987 143)

Halliday is arguing that in a sense it is impossible to write a complete grammar of a natural language, not because the language is constantly changing, not because there are too many different varieties, but because a determinate representation of the grammatical system can never function as a real grammar.

Halliday's terms for the difference in function between grammar as determinate meta- language and the cryptogrammar are "automatised" and "deautomatised." I do not find these terms particularly helpful, but he explains that in semiotic terms, in the "automatised" function, the signified constructs the signifier—reality is described by the sign system. This is the common- sense view of how language works, that we choose our words and sentences to describe what we see. In the "deautomatised" function, the reverse is true, the signifier constructs the signified—the sign system constructs reality. In this mode, which Halliday argues is the normal mode of language use, our words and sentences structure what we see. In other words, "turning the cryptogrammar of a natural language into a metalanguage for reasoning" doesn't work because "it has to become automatised—that is, the grammar has to be made to describe, instead of constructing reality by not describing, which is what it does best" (144).

Halliday argues that as the structure of society changes, people want to change the grammar. For example, the fact that English does not have a gender neutral third person singular pronoun was not a problem before feminism. We are uncomfortable with locutions like "Every student should bring his book" for reasons which have nothing to do with grammar, but which exist in our social consciousness. The plural form, *their*, is clearly being pressed into service, and will eventually be acknowledged as grammatical. An analogous situation occurred in the late seventeenth century when the second person singular pronoun, *thou*, dropped out of English because it was too often used to imply contempt or superiority, and the plural form you was used in its place. (Burnley, *History of the English Language* 200). Halliday argues

When people want to change the conditions of the dialogue, and the structures it is setting up, they do so by changing the grammar—thus illustrating how well the grammar is doing its job. The complaint is not that the language is not functioning properly, but that it is functioning all too well—it is the social order construed by it that is being objected to. But mostly the design for change is drawn up only at the surface of the language, rather than at the much less accessible, cryptotypic level of patterning by which the structures are really installed. (137)

Halliday's viewpoint reintegrates elements of language and discourse others have divided, including, to an extent, *langue* and *parole*. Lexicon, syntax, grammatical structures, social structures, and our view of the natural world are all integrated in one dynamic open system. When we write a grammatical metalanguage, it is but a two-dimensional sketch of a small corner of a three dimensional universe.

In the light of these difficulties, can a case be made for teaching such a metalanguage? Even Halliday admits that "there are uses for such a closed, determinate metalanguage," and we can assume that one of the uses he has in mind is pedagogical. And Bakhtin characterizes such a metalanguage as

Language as a ready-made product, as a stable system (lexicon, grammar, phonetics), is, so to speak, the inert crust, the hardened lava of language creativity, of which linguistics makes an abstract construct in the interests of the practical teaching of language as a ready-made instrument. (*Marxism 48*)

Should we teach grammar because these linguists believe that teaching is one of the only uses for such a construct? It seems to me the answer depends on whether there are alternatives to teaching this "inert crust."

In my view, Krashen's language acquisition theory provides just such an alternative, just as Halliday's perspective provides insight into why the theory works and why direct teaching of a grammatical metalanguage is not sufficient for language improvement. Concepts like the "Bolinger Principle," mentioned above, represent attempts to describe the complex patterns of the cryptogrammar and thus fill in the inadequacies of the structural description, but such attempts are by their nature incomplete and insufficient. Without real linguistic input, without a language acquisition base, any grammar is but a pale shadow of the real language.

Halliday's analysis also addresses why some people see grammatical error as a crime or sin. From Halliday's viewpoint, a grammatical error is a new or different way of structuring or seeing the world.

The Writing Teacher's Perspective

It is not my intention to argue that the perspective of *parole* is superior or more valid than the perspective of *langue*. The difficulty of language as an object of study has made this division of perspective necessary for most investigative purposes. However, each view is inadequate without the other. Any representation of the system of language is necessarily deficient for the reasons I have described. It is a description of a frozen moment in the life of a language in constant flux, as Sapir makes clear. It is a decontextualized analysis, and Halliday, and others, have shown that the disassembled parts don't add up to a language. Noguchi's question was "why does formal instruction in grammar fail to produce any significant improvement in writing quality?" I think this is the answer. Any attempt to use formal grammar as a way to get back to first principles and build the language up again step by step is misguided.

However, Noguchi also asks if we should discard all aspects of grammar instruction. I think we can now resituate that question in terms of *langue* and *parole*. The split between *langue* and *parole* that exists in linguistic theory is paralleled in popular linguistic thinking as a split between *grammar* and "*the way I talk*," or *correct speech* and *ordinary speech*. Dictionaries and grammar books function as a physical representation of *langue*, and as a potential link between the rainbow and the stream. Unlike linguists, writers and writing teachers cannot remain comfortable keeping these two perspectives divided. We must negotiate a connection.

Thus, we cannot ignore usage. To deny that the linguistic precepts of the school grammar have social effects is indeed dangerous nonsense, whatever the logic, scientific validity, or intent of those precepts. Handbooks and dictionaries are useful, because they represent authority, define the unity, and take a position. A student can define herself and her language in relation to that unity; she does not have to let it define her. And each handbook is simply an opinion, a view of the linguistic unity. When handbooks contradict one another, as is often the case, they open up space for questions, redefinition, and a new unity.

One of the most unusual handbooks on our shelf is Douglas Cazort's amusing book, *Under the Grammar Hammer: The 25 Most Important Grammar Mistakes and Slow to Avoid Them*. Like Noguchi, Cazort has paid close attention to the Connors-Lunsford study of error frequency and the Hairston study of attitudes toward particular error (see Noguchi 19-31 for a summary). Both writers attempt to maximize the return on the effort spent contemplating grammatical problems. Cazort's small book, however, is the only grammar book I have ever perused which *reduced* grammar anxiety rather than increased it, and it makes no attempt to create a sense of monolithic authority. Cazort says:

I hope to free you from the idea that the English language is the sole property of English teachers and other authorities on correct usage. It belongs to all of us who use it, and part of my purpose in writing this book is to help you feel more secure in your ownership, even in the presence of English teachers. (4)

Rather than simply representing the idealized rainbow of *langue*, Cazort negotiates a compromise for those who exist in the multi-variant currents and eddies of the linguistic stream. We cannot deny *langue*; neither can we simply follow our own linguistic current. As practitioners, not theorists, this compromise is the best we can do.

Notes

1. I gave up on marking ***alot*" when I discovered that about 50% of the writing tutors I hired, many of whom were English majors and quite literate, spelled it that way.