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Case J. Boot

*Dordt College*

John Struyk

*Dordt College*

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# THE GRAMMAR CONFUSION AND SOME GUIDELINES

by Kornelis Boot, Assistant Professor of Foreign Language  
John Struyk, Associate Professor of German



*Kornelis Boot graduated from Dordt College in 1966. He taught at Lynden Chr. High in Lynden, Wash. from 1966-1969. Mr. Boot obtained his M.A. degree in German from the University of Washington and served on the Dordt faculty since 1969, where he teaches German, Dutch and Linguistics. Mr. Boot has also studied at the Summer Institute for Linguistics at the University of North Dakota.*



*Before coming to Dordt College in 1969 to teach modern foreign languages, Mr. Struyk went to graduate school in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. Mr. Struyk is presently working on a Ph.D. dissertation on *The Role of the Narrator in the Novels of Jean Paul Friedrich Richter*.*

## INTRODUCTION

Those involved in teaching language are aware of the chaotic state of affairs in the language arts. Many school principals complain about language teachers who insist on using the latest published series—which promises to be the final word on the language question. But after one or two years the text is dropped because it does not meet the teacher's objectives. Needless to say, the pupil suffers from this continual shifting. And no wonder that many pupils have learned to hate grammar.

The intent of this article is to discuss some of the trends in linguistics; to evaluate some current textbooks; and to suggest a tentative alternative.

## TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR

There still seemed to be hope for our pupils when they confessed in Latin class that they had never understood the English grammar until they studied Latin. Of course, the Latin teacher happily accepted such a compliment. What these students and teachers unconsciously admitted was that

the English grammar studied in the lower grades was much closer to the description of the Latin language than to English. The following example indicates why the Latin paradigm may be useful to the student, but is useless for a description of the English language:

amo	"I love"
amas	"you love"
amat	"he loves"
amamus	"we love"
amatis	"you love"
amant	"they love"

Some early traditional English grammar texts insist on the memorization of the English paradigm, instead of giving a simple statement to the effect that the verb in the third person singular takes an "s" and in all other instances the verb has no ending.

Traditional grammarians also impose the Latin noun case system on the English language, although generally restricting it to four cases:

nominative	stella	"a star"
genitive	stellae	"of a star, a star's"
dative	stellae	"to or for a star"
accusative	stellam	"a star"
ablative	stellā	"with, from, by, etc., a star"
vocative	stella	"O star!"

Obviously, the Latin noun shows various endings, depending on the function of the noun in the sentence; but in English there are no obligatory case markers, because even in the possessive, the Latin genitive, there is a choice between "of a star" and "a star's."

Why are English grammarians tied so closely to the Latin? The answer is probably to be found in the history and development of the Indo-European languages. Prior to the Old English period, there was only a dialectical difference between the speakers of Latin and English. Even Chaucer's English shows clear similarities with Latin, for instance:

I bīnde	"I bind"
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thou bīndest	"you bind"
he bint, bīndeth	"he binds"

Because of the loss of the various markers in the English language, grammarians resort to describing the English language more and more from the point of view of meaning, that is, a semantic point of view. Most of us remember the definition: "a noun is the name of a person, a place, or a thing." A more detailed and accurate definition is: "a noun denotes or 'names' a person, place or thing, a quality, idea or action."<sup>1</sup> We would like to indicate two things: first, the traditionalists mainly define grammatical entities in terms of lexical meaning; they neglect the context and the function of words within the sentence. Secondly, the definitions are restricted to semantic categories. Of course it is obvious that language has a semantic dimension, but the description of language may not be reduced to semantics. The traditionalists attempt to prescribe rather than to describe the actual working of language. Grammar then becomes a restrictive element to language. The proper or improper usage of expressions such as "he ain't" or "he is not" is determined by a simple black and white argument, based on a rather arbitrary grammar model. The violent reaction to the publication of Webster's Third International Dictionary came primarily from the so-called traditional grammarians. Bloomfield was one of the first ones to rock the traditionalists' boat.

## STRUCTURAL GRAMMAR

In the twenties Leonard Bloomfield wrote the following:

Our schools are conducted by persons who, from professors of education down to teachers in the classroom, know nothing of the results of linguistic science, not even the relation of writing to speech, or of standard language

to dialect. In short, they do not know what language is, and yet must teach it, and in consequence waste years of every child's life and reach a poor result.<sup>2</sup>

The structuralist is interested in the manner in which words are patterned in the sentence, e.g., the words "a," "an," or "the" signal nouns; the ending "-ed" signals past tense or past participle. It is primarily Charles C. Fries who stresses the structural meaning over against the lexical meaning. Fries assigns words to four classes according to their position in structural frames, for example:

Class I. The husband remembered the food.

ss The clerk remembered tax.

Class III. The food was good.

Class IV. The clerk remembered the tax clearly.

Fries claims that our utterances are mainly made up of arrangements of these four structural classes. Note that Fries purposely does not use the labels of the old traditionalist school, but the reader will recognize these structural classes as subject, verb, adjective, and adverb. In addition to the structural classes, English sentences contain a number of other words which Fries calls function words. These serve to signal structural meanings. He divides these into fifteen groups, of which we list the first four.

Group A: All words for the position in which the word the occurs.

The concert was good.

Group B All words for the position in which the word may occurs.

The concert may be good.

Group C The position where not may occur.

The concert was not good.

Group D: All words for the position in which very may occur.

The concert was very good.

Although Fries admits that the lexical meaning of the traditionalists together with the structural meaning make up the total linguistic meaning, he claims that the structural meanings are fundamental and necessary in every utterance and are signalled by specific and definite devices. Fries says: "The grammar of a language consists of the devices that signal structural meanings."<sup>3</sup>

"We would like to indicate two things: first, the traditionalists mainly define grammatical entities in terms of lexical meaning; they neglect the context and the function of words within the sentence. Secondly, the definitions are restricted to semantic categories."

Of course, the structuralists are on to something: structure or form is definitely an aspect of human language, but a description of language may not be reduced to this. Fries does not take into account how these sentences are formed, nor how the structures are related to each other in these sentences. Fries and other structuralists ought to be commended for their criticism of the prescriptive traditionalists' point of view, when they say:

All considerations of an absolute "correctness" in accord with the conventional rules of grammar or the dicta of handbooks must be set aside, because these rules or these dicta very frequently do not represent the actual practice of "standard" English but prescribe forms which have little currency outside the English classroom.<sup>4</sup>

From these remarks, however, it may not be concluded that the emphasis on descriptive linguistics is tantamount to a license of Vulgar English over against Standard English. The descriptive linguist is not only aware of these differences, but also records these phenomena and analyzes them.

## GENERATIVE-TRANSFORMATIONAL GRAMMAR

As a reaction to Bloomfield's and Fries' view of language, a new method of

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language analysis arose. In 1957 Noam Chomsky's Syntactic Structures came out. Chomsky distinguishes between a speaker's competence or ability to produce and understand infinitely many sentences and the speaker's actual performance of language in concrete situations. Chomsky claims that "language is an infinite set of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements." A grammar should generate all the grammatical sentences and none of the ungrammatical ones, Chomsky argues. In this context he explains that "grammatical" cannot be identified with "meaningful" or "significant" in any semantic sense. The following sentence is grammatically correct, although non-sensical: "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously." When this sentence is changed to "Furiously sleep ideas green colorless," the sentence becomes ungram-

matical. Chomsky concludes in Syntactic Structures that "we are forced to conclude that grammar is autonomous and independent of meaning...."<sup>5</sup>

Although his analysis of the sentence is somewhat analogous to Bloomfield's, Chomsky introduces a series of rigid phrase-structure rules. In addition, Chomsky shows how simple sentences are transformed into complex sentences by the use of transformation rules, for example:

The salesman sold the car.

The car had a new engine.

These sentences transform into

The salesman sold the car which had a new engine.

Transformation rules in themselves are nothing new, but the rules themselves justify whether the resulting surface structure utterance is grammatical or ungrammatical. These transformation rules are systematic, coherent, and rationally ordered.

Verburg, a Dutch linguist at the University of Groningen, criticizes Chomsky's mechanistic approach as follows:

The syntactic component is thus the point of departure for transformation grammarians. We receive the impression that they see this component as a kind of production line factory where the production lines are arranged mechanically....<sup>6</sup> [translation ours]

We ask ourselves whether the structures for language are really in the brain, as Chomsky seems to suggest, or whether they are ordered in God's creation and then symbolized in language.

## THE LANGUAGE TEXTBOOK SITUATION

It is interesting to note what our language textbooks have done with linguistic theories. As examples, let us take some of the most popular sixth-grade texts.

Fries' structuralist grammar is very obvious from Our Language Today:

*ich* In Our Language Today, four main word classes are developed: the noun, the verb, the adjective, and the adverb.... In the new approach, definitions are avoided. Instead, the pupil is led to observe where nouns appear in the sentence, what endings they may have;...and how they are spoken.... The word classes are identified by means of form and function.<sup>7</sup>

The Roberts English Series is unmistakably indebted to Chomsky's school:

Obviously, what we learn when we learn English is not a set of sentences but a sentence-making machine. We learn a mechanism for generating sentences according to the requirements of the circumstances through which we move, and for understanding such sentences. This mechanism is what grammar is.<sup>8</sup>

The Heath English Series adheres to similar principles:

The learning theory that underlies Communicating is that popularized by Jerome Bruner, which itself derives from the studies of Jean Piaget and Lev S. Vygotsky. The theory also finds independent support in the psycholinguistic studies derived from the theoretical linguistics of Noam Chomsky. Strongly opposed to behavioristic notions, which describe every learning bit as a step that has been shaped by a stimulus-response reinforcement paradigm, the newer notions are concerned with stages of concept development (from the concrete to the abstract) and with struc-

tures of knowledge.... In Communicating the child experiments with sentence elements.... In this way he builds a meaningful concept of the structural elements of language.<sup>9</sup>

Other books are more cautious in identifying themselves. The Ginn Elementary English series suggests an eclectic approach:

The text is not designed to produce grammarians—traditional, structural, or transformational; it is designed to help students observe how their language functions and how these functions can be analyzed through grammars. The book retains traditional terminology (noun, verb), but uses structural insights to help students classify words by examining their formal characteristics and their positions and functions in typical English sentence patterns. Students experiment with simple transformations in a variety of activities which reveal how such processes as modification, substitution, and subordination can be used to expand and rearrange sentences. Thus the book draws upon those elements of the three principal grammars which can best help students to recognize and understand the way the way the English language functions.<sup>10</sup>

The Laidlaw Series is also eclectic:

The authors of the Laidlaw English Program are convinced that no single system of grammar is adequate to fulfill their basic aim: to improve the communication capabilities of the pupils. Although the authors of this program believe that knowledge of traditional grammar helps the pupils achieve this aim, they also

feel that knowledge of some of the more recently proposed grammars is essential. For this reason, their approach to teaching English is both many-sided and eclectic, that is, they have selected and used that which seems best from many sources.<sup>11</sup>

Evidently, the situation for our present-day language teachers is very confusing.

man as image-bearer of God are reflected in his speaking. Although man has fallen in sin, God, in his infinite mercy preserves and upholds man in all his functions. This allows man still to respond to his Maker also as a speaker. The Scriptures explain to us that in Christ all things cohere and that all things were created by Him and that by His redemptive work all things will be reconciled unto God the Father (Col. 1:16-20).

"In conclusion, we acknowledge that language does not 'work' because of man, for then everything would be arbitrary and chaotic. Language is what it is because of the Creator Who in a most beautiful way gave man the ability to speak. Of course the language teacher still has to analyze the language by pointing out nouns, verbs, adjectives, subjects, objects, etc., but he may not stop there, because he should realize that he only deals with grammatical entities of language."

The teacher must be well-trained in the various linguistic theories. The selection of textbooks becomes more and more difficult.

#### TENTATIVE GUIDELINES FOR A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF LANGUAGE

Just indicating which textbooks would be the least harmful to students is like choosing the least of many evils. Our task as Christian linguists is, first of all, to define who man is as a speaker and secondly, to arrive at a linguistic description which is representative of man's speaking.

We must consider man as the image-bearer of his Maker. We should look at man as a speaker, but always in the fullness of his being, because man is not only a speaker, but also a thinker, a shaper, a ruler, a believer, an economist, an artist, a social being, etc. Man has to fulfill all of these functions. All the functional aspects of

We must consider more carefully how man responds to his Maker as a speaker in his fallen state. We notice that the speaker obscures and clarifies, that he ambiguates and disambiguates, depending on how sin corrupts man's utterance. The main function of language is clarification, and in language man clarifies himself by means of symbols; and the more man becomes aware of his responsibility to the full scope of the Creator's demands, the more clearly he will express himself. Therefore, it is imperative for language students to study how the functional aspects of man as a thinker, as a shaper, as a ruler, etc. are related to man's task of symbolic clarification.

The utterance is the basic unit of symbolic clarification. This utterance includes non-verbal and verbal speech-deeds; therefore, any act of man which intends to clarify comes under the scrutiny of language

study.

If one wants to express approval to someone, he may utter this in many different ways. The expression will always have some semantic content, which shows that man's functional aspects as a thinker are interrelated with man's functional aspects as a speaker.

The speaker may also give various shapes and forms to the utterance because of the interrelationship of man's functional aspects as a former or shaper and his functional aspects as a speaker. The form or shape may vary from a simple nod of the head to a sentence like "That is good" or even a whole book on a specific topic.

The utterance is also subjected to certain lingual rules and regulations, because man as a speaker is also a ruler. Nodding one's head for disapproval is not accepted in an Anglo-Saxon speech community, and "That are good" also transgresses a lingual rule.

But there are more aspects of language to be considered. The study of lingual economy, lingual aesthetics, communications, lingual concern, phonology, pitch, stress, acoustics, length of utterance are all part of language study. Every clarifying utterance will reflect a distribution of the lingual aspects which are interrelated with all the functional aspects of man. The distribution will vary from one speech community to another. In China there will be a different interrelationship between pitch and semantics than in Anglo-Saxon speech communities, because pitch changes the meaning of a word in the Chinese-Mandarin language.

In conclusion, we acknowledge that language does not "work" because of man, for then everything would be arbitrary and chaotic. Language is what it is because of the Creator Who in a most beautiful way gave man the ability to speak. Of course the language teacher still has to analyze the language by pointing out nouns, verbs,

adjectives, subjects, objects, etc., but he may not stop there, because he should realize that he only deals with grammatical entities of language. If the Christian teacher wants to do justice to the teaching of language, he has to consider and deal with all the functional aspects of language.

## FOOTNOTES

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