



## **WHITE PAPER**

# **History of the study of grammar and its teaching**

**And how knowledge of the controversies informs how and  
why to teach about language in the K-12 classroom**

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DRAFT – August 2014, revised February 2015

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## 1. Context

This white paper should be of use to pre- and in-service teachers of English Language Arts, especially at the upper elementary, middle, and high school levels. Questions about how and why to teach grammar and to what end have long occupied teachers and scholars; an understanding of some of the reasons that grammar teaching has been controversial over the years is critical in order for teachers to make informed decisions about how to teach about language in their classrooms. Despite the controversies, there has long been an expectation that teachers should know and, increasingly, should teach grammar, though the reasons why are often ill understood or left unexplained.

Additionally, the Common Core State Standards have an entire strand devoted to language with sections on Conventions of Standard English, Knowledge of Language, and Vocabulary Acquisition; therefore, attention to language has again increased, and teachers, administrators, and the educational publishing industry have focused on what to teach with respect to language and grammar.

Gaining an understanding of why students should be able to analyze language, which aspects of grammar to focus on and why, and how language has been used to evaluate and discriminate are all critical for future teachers.

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## 2. Introduction

“We shall be in a better position to evaluate the present views if we understand the origin and nature of these ideas and rules of language which have been so deeply rooted in popular prejudice”

– Charles Carpenter Fries, *The teaching of the English language*, 1927, 7

Nearly 90 years later, Fries’ words still ring quite true. The study of language, grammar in particular, in K-12 education is somewhat fraught. The teaching of grammar today is very much influenced and complicated by historical events and ideas, and it is important that future teachers understand the controversies about grammar teaching and the history underlying them in order to know how to best approach language study with future students. This white paper provides an overview of the key reasons that linguistically informed approaches to the teaching of grammar have been slow to replace models based on prescribed and sometimes arbitrary, socially-determined rules and ways of teaching. The reasons for this are many, but the studies on the influence of grammar on writing, the confusion over how to incorporate the advances of linguistics, teacher preparation, including changing entrenched attitudes, and the lack of available materials have all been contributing factors.

Focus shifted from direct teaching about language and usage to whether “grammar study” helped improve writing; as the field of composition developed, questions about whether grammar, usage, and conventions, which had been a part of teaching writing, should remain central arose and some (questionable) studies suggested that they shouldn’t. Also, the claim, supported by linguists, that children acquire language simply by being immersed in it led to an unfounded extension of that notion that overt language study, including study of grammar, as well as reading and writing, was unnecessary. Despite the initial excitement in the 1960s in English Studies about linguistics, there was a lack of clarity from linguists about what to teach and why, and only limited collaboration among linguists, teachers, and teacher educators. Additionally, the challenges of adding yet more content into an English class, already replete with the study of literature and improving writing, proved too much for most. Also, the emergence of the field of composition and rhetoric and the many studies that investigated the effects of grammar instruction on writing diverted attention from other benefits of teaching about language in an English classroom. Perhaps most importantly, a general intolerance of non-standard dialects and resistance to the message that all dialects are equal prevails. Given the interesting and complicated history of teaching about language, teachers sometimes approach grammar study hesitantly. However, there is no reason to approach the study of language apologetically or hesitantly; rather, there are many reasons to embrace it.

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### 3. Early Grammar Instruction: Medieval origins

The original purpose of so-called grammar schools in the Middle Ages in England was the teaching of Latin, necessary to train boys for the priesthood. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the curriculum of these grammatical training schools broadened to include science, math, and other European languages, and their purpose had changed as well as they became training grounds for future leaders of not only church, but also state. The schools now prepared students for higher education. With respect to language study, three subjects, grammar, logic, and rhetoric, made up the *trivium* in European medieval universities. These foci remained central well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (In an interesting etymological twist, the word *trivium* itself meant a place where three roads meet (from *tri-* 'three' and *via* 'road'), which is in turn derived from the word *trivialis*, which meant "that which is in or belongs to the crossroads or public streets; hence, that which might be found anywhere, common." From this comes our modern word *trivial*.)

The North American colonies followed the model established in England; the first grammar school in North America was the Boston Latin School, which began in 1635. Such schools' curricula included a great deal of memorization and recitation, and focused on Latin and the classics. Dorn (2004) notes that in 1647, a Massachusetts court passed the Old Deluder Satan Act, which required towns of one hundred families or more to establish grammar schools; during the second half of the seventeenth century, the number of colonial grammar schools increased in response to similar laws throughout New England. As they did so, however, the character of these schools also changed in response to the growing middle class, offering more varied classes, including vocational ones. Throughout the 1800s, though the focus at these schools was no longer Latin grammar, the term "grammar school" had become synonymous with elite, college preparatory education. And by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term was adopted by schools for young children, and though not currently used frequently, it is maintained, at least colloquially, in some Catholic schools in particular.<sup>1</sup>

**Satanic Grammar?** Why was the 1647 law to have grammar schools established called the Old Deluder Act? Well, it read like this: "It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times by keeping them in an unknown tongue, so in these latter times by persuading from the use of tongues, that so at least the true sense and meaning of the original might be clouded and corrupted with false glosses of saint-seeming deceivers; and to the end that learning may not be buried in the grave of our forefathers, in church and commonwealth, the Lord assisting our endeavors." The courts wanted people to study the structure of the language in order to understand the biblical scriptures, and thus protect themselves from the devil!

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<sup>1</sup> The study of grammar has long been linked to good morals and ethics, and often intertwined with religious training. Cameron (1995) discusses Lang's (1991) *Writing and the Moral Self* in which he equates good writing with ethical conduct, setting up structural similarities between prescriptions in Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* such as "omit needless words" and moral precepts such as "thou shalt not kill." "These prescriptions discourage the question 'why,'" (67) notes Cameron.

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#### 4. 18<sup>th</sup> Century: Prescription begins its long reign

Prescriptive rules and discriminatory attitudes about language really took hold in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, spurred by the school grammars of Lowth (*A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, 1762), Ward (*An Essay on English grammar*, 1765), Coote (*Elements of the grammar of the English language*, 1788), and then Murray's compilation (*English Grammar*, 1795), which had some 200 editions during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also, emerging during this time was Johnson's (1755) dictionary, as well as those of Sheridan (1780) and Ward (1765), which all led to the establishment not only of certain kinds of prescribed rules about language, but also to entrenched attitudes toward language.

The grammars published up to this time were either books for non-native speakers of English (and were often, therefore, written in French or in Latin) or they were Latin instruction books that used English to establish examples, and therefore, resulted in some overt instruction in English grammar (in much the same way that today's high school and college students report first learning English grammar through the study of a foreign language). Fries (1927) writes that "the authors of this group of grammars are in somewhat surprising agreement in their expression of either or both of the following purposes: (1) to reduce the language to rule ... and (b) to correct the usage of English people by making it conform to a standard or 'reason'" (10). Richard Johnson (1706) writes:

[I]t has been the Practice of several wise Nations, such of them, I mean, as have a thorough Education, to learn even their own Language by Stated Rules, to avoid that Confusion, that must needs follow from leaving it wholly to vulgar Use. Sure no Body need think long upon this subject to be convinced, that if there go so much Art to right reasoning, there must go some also to right speaking, I mean to a clear and certain Expression of that Reason, which is the Business of Grammar. (qtd in Fries, 11)

These 18<sup>th</sup> century grammarians attempted to present the definitive rules of the language and to eliminate "impurities" and "errors." However, they encountered variation in usage, of course, even among respected authors and the very educated. Fries writes, "For these eighteenth century grammarians...no usage ... , not even that of the 'learned,' was accepted as a basis for grammatical correctness" (14). Lowth (1762) laments that the English language, "as it is spoken in the politest part of the nation, and as it stands in the writings of our most approved authors, often offends against every part of grammar" (qtd in Fries, 14-15). Ward (1765) also notes that "a very blamable Neglect of grammatic Propriety has prevailed amongst the English Writers, and at length we seem to be growing generally sensible of it" (qtd in Fries, 15), and he continues that one must work towards "assisting Children to comprehend the general Import and Advantage of Rules concerning Language" (qtd in Fries 15). Sheridan joins in the criticism: "...yet so little regard has been paid to [the language]...that of our numerous array of authors, very few can be selected who write with accuracy ... some of our most celebrated writers, and such as have hitherto passed for our English classics, have been guilty of great solecisms, inaccuracies, and even grammatical improprieties, in many places of their most finished works" (qtd in Fries, 15-16).

These grammarians were in general agreement that there was a set of rules to be followed, a

so-called “rational grammar,” in keeping with the ideas of the times, the budding Enlightenment or Age of Reason. But, if even the elite, the educated, and the esteemed were violating these rules, where did they come from? The rules were either brought over, often arbitrarily, from Latin, or they were established by these grammarians themselves by appealing to their own reason or logic. Consider, for instance, the oft-cited example of the prohibition against double negation appealing to the rules of logic. No one, then or now, would understand *I don't have none* to mean *I have some*. The grammarians, it seems, even realized that Latin wasn't the best model, but it was what they had available; from *A New English Accidence*, anonymously authored in 1736: “It must be acknowledged that the *Plan of the Latin Grammar*, is not the best which might be contrived, especially for our English youth, but as Custom and Authority have made it the Standard Rule for teaching them that Language, there seems therefore a necessity of making the Rules of an Introduction to an English Grammar, as subservient thereunto as possible,...that whilst we are teaching the one, we may at the same time be laying a good Foundation for the other” (Preface).

**Accidental Grammar for Young Lads.** The complete title of the 1765 book is impressive: *A New English Accidence, by Way of Short Question and Answer, Built Upon the Plan of the Latin Grammar, so far as it agrees with and is consistent with the Nature and Genius of the Latin Tongue. Designed for the Use and Benefit, and adapted for the Capacity of Young Lads at the English School. In order to teach them the grounds for their Mother Tongue, and fit them for the more easy and expeditious attaining of the Grammar of the Latin, or any other language.* This use of “accidence” is a little known meaning of the term, from the Latin *accidentia* meaning ‘to happen’, thus referring to the inflectional endings of words. Also notable, though not surprising given its era, is that this book is intended for “young lads.” Females were not excluded, however: The anonymous author writes,

I shall therefore, Gentlemen, only beg leave to take Notice of one thing more, which is, that as you are equally concern'd in the Education of that beautiful Part of the Creation, the Fair Sex, you will hereby have an Opportunity of inculcating into their Minds, (without much expence of Time or Trouble) some suitable Ideas of the Grounds of that Language they are obliged to use, though often very improperly; not for want of Capacity, but proper Encouragement; and consequently will do them a Favour, by removing that invidious Reflection which some have endeavoured with more freedom than good Nature or Justice, to act upon them. (9)

Notably, Priestly (1761), Campbell (1776), and Webster (1789) were outliers who asserted that the measure of correctness should be usage by the people. Priestly writes that “it is not the business of grammar, as some writers seem preposterously to imagine, to give law to the fashions that regulate our speech. On the contrary, from its conformity to these, and from that alone, it derives its authority and value” (Book 2, Chapter 1). They were in a minority, however, and the arbitrary rule prevailed, offering certainty and security to a populace invested in and seeking “reason.”

Many of the rules they established are still with us, and where the individual rules or preferences have fallen out of favor, the attitude that there is a good, correct, and learned way to speak and write has certainly prevailed. Although neither England nor America had

succeeded in creating a language academy, like those of Italy or France, these prescribed rules in the 18<sup>th</sup> century grammar books served much the same purpose.

### Some 18<sup>th</sup> Century Rules

Although Lowth is often held up as an icon of prescriptivism, this reputation comes from others' interpretation of his work rather than what he himself writes, says Tiekens-Boon van Ostade (2011). Nevertheless, he is credited with these rules, among others:

*“Two negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an affirmative.”*

*“The preposition is often separated from the Relative which it governs, and joined to the Verb at the end of the Sentence, or of some member of it: as, ‘Horace is an author, whom I am much delighted with’...This is an idiom, which our language is strongly inclined to: it prevails in common conversation, and suits very well with the familiar style in writing: but the placing of the Preposition before the Relative is more graceful, as well as more perspicuous, and agrees much better with the solemn and elevated style.”*

Even celebrated authors got it wrong, notes Lowth. Not only should the preposition not come at the end, but in the following examples, *who* should be *whom*:

*Who servest thou under?* – Shakespeare, Henry V

*We are still much at a loss, who civil power belongs to.* – Locke



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## 5. 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Diagramming, parsing, and more prescription

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, students learned Latin, and they learned a set of rules about the English language as well; where there was variation, one form was established as the correct one. There was, incidentally, a great deal of linguistic scholarship going on at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; historical and comparative linguistics was flourishing and much was being discovered about how languages were related to each other and what motivated language change, and more accurate descriptions of individual languages were being written. However, this work had little to no effect on what was being taught about language in schools. For example, an understanding of the ways that English had changed did not affect the resistance to similar changes in the current language. Fries (1927) gives an example of the condemnation of *He had wrote* while quite acceptable are phrases like *The sun had shone* or *He has stood there*. He points out in his book intended for classroom use that *write* and *shine*, belong to the same class of verbs, historically, and to insist on *he had written* instead of *he had wrote* could mean that one might also insist on *the sun has shinnen* or *he has standen*. His point was that one is appealing to current usage, not logic or historical patterns, when these sorts of rules are established. Fries writes, “When then one brings together into a single view the facts of the circumstances under which the conventional rules of grammar were framed and accepted, together with the facts of the historical development of the English language, he is driven to conclude that these rules are not a safe and complete guide to correctness in English grammar” (30). Despite Fries’ attempts to demonstrate that many prescribed rules are not based on logic, and that attitudes towards variations are based, rather, on custom had little effect. Certain rules came to be the ones in the usage guides and grammar handbooks and have remained markers of status and education for centuries.

However, alongside such study, a method of instruction focused on visual representation of sentences prevailed in schools in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and continued throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Students spent countless hours analyzing and diagramming sentences, thereby learning about parts of speech, phrases, and clauses, and they ways in which they relate to each other. The activity known as “parsing” involved breaking down texts into its component parts, the traditional parts of speech, and labeling the functions (subject, predicate, etc.), also sometimes accompanied by explanation of other functions of the words and their relationships to each other. According to Hudson, (School Grammar), parsing was based on a method dating back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe.

FIGURE 1: 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY PARSING TABLE

I. Subject.	II. Attributive Adjuncts (to Subject).	III. PREDICATE.			IV. Adverbial Adjuncts (to Verb of Predicate).
		Finite Verb.	Object with qualifying words.	Complement with qualifying words.	
1. A merchant	(a) travelling through Tartary (b) having arrived at the town of Balkh	entered	the king's palace	...	(a) by mistake (b) thinking it to be a public inn.
2. Father	my	taught	(a) all his sons (b) Euclid	...	with much success.
3. Alexander	the King of Macedon	was sur- named	...	the Great	after the conquest of the Persian Empire.
4. The man	employed for the purpose	caught	the thief	stealing a watch.	...
5. The merchant	having much property to sell	caused	all his goods	to be conveyed on camels	there being no railway in that particular part of the country.
6. A gentleman	(a) of wealth and position (b) living in London (c) some sixty years ago	had	a country seat	...	(a) in Kent (b) some forty miles from the metro- polis.

A standard analysis table, illustrating a parsing of several sentences, from Nesfield, 1898.

The most common type of graphic representation of a sentence came to be known as the Reed-Kellogg diagram, from the names of its two promoters, Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg. Their book *Higher Lessons in English*, first published in 1877, became a model for diagramming throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is still used today in some schools. Reed and Kellogg were likely informed by Clark, whose 1847 book, *A Practical Grammar: In Which Words, Phrases & Sentences are Classified According to Their Offices and Their Various Relationships to Each Another*, used "balloon" diagrams like the following:

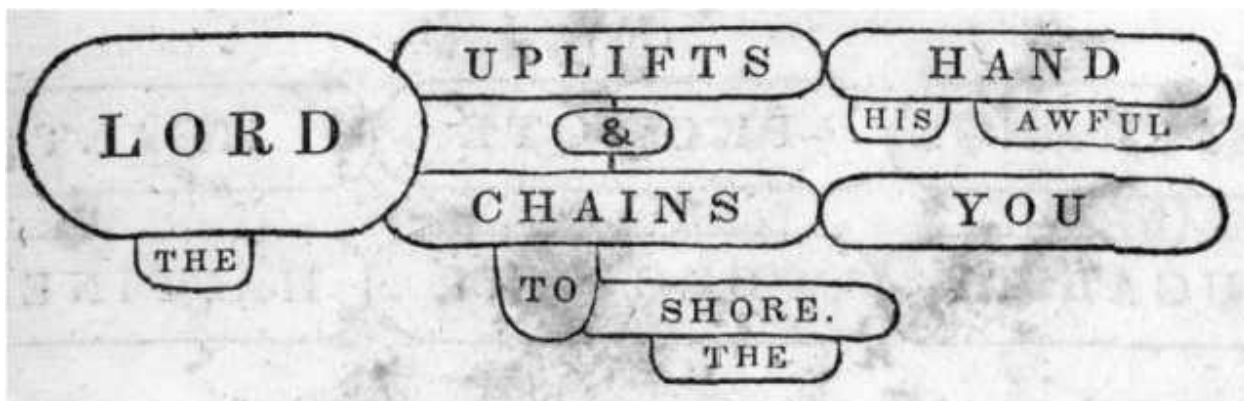
FIGURE 2: 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BALLOON DIAGRAM

Photo retrieved from <http://www.polysyllabic.com/?q=olddiagrams/clark/compound>

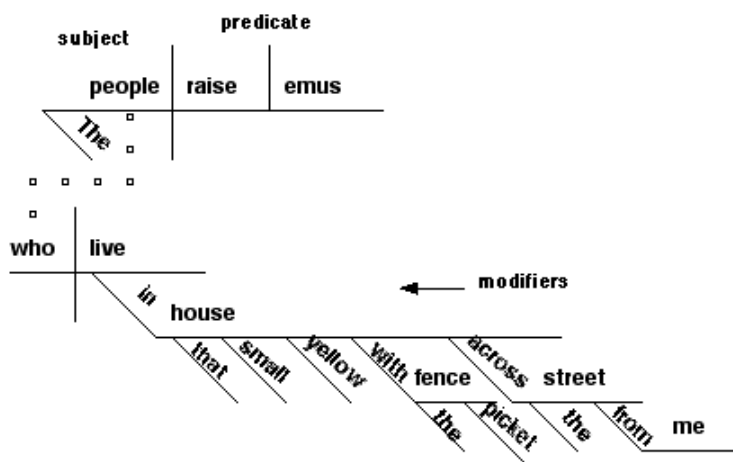
FIGURE 3: 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY REED-KELLOGG-STYLE DIAGRAM

Photo retrieved from  
[http://www.utexas.edu/courses/langling/e360k/handouts/diagrams/diagram\\_basics/basics.html](http://www.utexas.edu/courses/langling/e360k/handouts/diagrams/diagram_basics/basics.html)

The diagrams involved a great deal of knowledge not only of parts of speech, but also of grammatical relations.<sup>2</sup> The kinds of diagrams used by linguists today – and used in a few K-12 classrooms – indicate similar kinds of information and involve similar analysis on the part of the student.

There was not yet any research on the efficacy of various kinds of grammatical instruction. That would soon change, however.

<sup>2</sup> In the Reed-Kellogg system, each sentence has a horizontal line called the base. The subject is written on the left, the predicate on the right, separated by a vertical line extending through the base. The predicate must contain at least a verb, and when it also contains an object, the object is separated from the verb by a line that stops at the base. If the object is a direct object, the line is vertical (like *emus* in the diagram above); if it's a subjective complement, a backslash is used.

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## 6. The Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Research and reflection

Hoyt's (1906) thesis, "The Place of Grammar in the Elementary School Curriculum," considers the teaching of grammar as a separate subject in schools, and with it we see the first research considering the role and effectiveness of teaching about language. The reasons for teaching grammar had been, he proposed, that learning about grammar (a) disciplines the mind, (b) prepares the way for the study of other languages, (c) gives command of an indispensable terminology, (d) enables one to use better English, (e) aids in the interpretation of literature. He considered whether these were valid reasons and how effective they were, as did other later studies by Rapeer ("The problem of formal grammar in elementary education," 1913), Charters and Miller ("A course of study of grammar," 1915), and Stormzand and O'Shea (*How much English grammar?* 1924). Such investigation of what to teach and to what end continued, in much the same way, for the next 100 years. Some studies in the 1930s, including work by Barnett (1935), Barghahn (1940), Butterfield (1945), and Frogner (1939), investigated whether diagramming in particular had an effect on reading and writing. In the 1920s and 1930s, the idea that "traditional grammar," which was still not well-defined, but included at least parts of speech memorization and sentence diagramming, was probably not useful began to take hold. Others looked at other ways in which grammar study was connected to the study of literature and writing, including Catherwood (1922), Cutright (1934), Ash (1935), and Benfer (1935). Others began to bring in to the English classroom ideas from the field of linguistics. Fries, as early as 1927, was notable for attempting to bridge the gap between English teachers and linguists; in the Preface to Fries (1927), he writes that the book was "an effort to interpret the modern scientific view of language in a practical way for teachers" (Preface). Emerging from this, we see works such as Krapp's *The English Language in America* (1925) and Leonard and Cox's *General language: A series of lessons in grammar, word study, and history of the English language for junior high schools* (1925) which offered descriptive accounts of the English language and insisted that the insights of linguists such as Leonard Bloomfield, Otto Jespersen, and Edward Sapir should not be ignored and should be introduced in schools, according to Leonard and Cox, "to provide in the junior high school a better foundation for the study of foreign language, classic and modern, and for the work in English in the later years of high school" (xv). However, it was not an easy sell to get more progressive ideas about language into classrooms. In 1952, Fries writes that "Even after more than a hundred years of linguistic study based on the historical method, the fundamental principles upon which the modern scientific view of language rests and the results of scholarly investigation in the English language have not reached the schools. On the whole, the schools still perpetuate, with very little change, the eighteenth century point of view" (Preface).

Despite the emerging research on and interest in language by these early 20<sup>th</sup> century linguists and grammarians, there were challenges that slowed the integration of such study in schools.

## 7. The Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century: A flurry of activity

Beginning in the 1940s and continuing through the 1950s, as part of a more general educational reform that attempted to consider why students were being taught certain subjects, and why they were being taught them in the way that was traditional, as well as a federal effort to maintain supremacy and attempt to keep up with the global leaders, the teaching of many subjects, including language and grammar, came under scrutiny. O'Rourke's (1934), *Rebuilding the English-Usage Curriculum to Insure Greater Mastery of Essentials* is an example, as is Smith (1956), *Linguistic Science and the Teaching of English*, who writes, "The particular matter which concerns us here is to explore specific ways in which linguistics can help educators in the extremely important job they have in developing persons to function effectively in the world of today" (5).

More linguistic descriptions of the English language had begun to emerge in the late 1930s and early 1940s, probably most notably Fries' (1940) *American English Grammar*, as well as separate usage guides, such as Marckwardt and Walcott (1938), Leonard (1939) and Kennedy (1942), indicating a better understanding of the distinction between these two areas of study, namely grammar and usage, due primarily to the emerging field of linguistics. deBoer summarizes the current state of the field, as he saw it in 1959:

The descriptive approach encourages teachers to accept the English language as it is, rather than fight a losing battle on behalf of forms and constructions which may have had academic sanction but are not characteristic of contemporary speech or writing. Thus it recognizes the fact that word inflection has sharply declined in English, while variations in meaning are increasingly expressed by means of word order and function words. Arbitrary rules such as those against splitting an infinitive or ending a sentence with a preposition are giving way to more accurate descriptions of current language standards. The descriptive approach to grammar and usage does not imply a deterioration of standards of 'good' English. It implies rather the substitution of fact for fiction in the determination of what 'good' English really is. Learning the facts about the real language is fully as rigorous a process as diagraming sentences. It calls for wide reading, perceptive listening, and fine discrimination with respect to the social situation in which language is used. (418-19)

It was this open-minded attitude towards language change and usage that was difficult for many to accept – and still is. Teachers had seen their roles for many years as that of offering students more opportunities by changing not only students' writing but also their speech. This change in the teacher's role was acknowledged in much of the curricula. Fries (1952), in his book intended for classroom use, *The Structure of English*, writes the following:

The reader should know, first of all, that he will *not* find in this book the usual analysis of sentences that pupils have struggled with and the schools have taught for more than a hundred and fifty years. Modern scientific study has forced us to abandon many of the older commonly held views of language and has provided us with new principles and new assumptions which underlie new methods of analysis and verification. But the cultural lag in assimilating the results of this modern scientific study of language has been so great that the view and practices of a prescientific era still dominate the schools. That this is so in matters of language is

not surprising, for, in many fields of human endeavor, belief and practice have clung to traditional and conventional procedures long after the scientific evidence was available upon which they should have been repudiated. (1)

The attitude that usage by the people was what actually defines usage began to gain ground – a bit more than it had when Priestly and other proposed such ideas in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – but many people were still not ready to fully accept such notions. The learned rules about language, put in place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, were entrenched, as was the idea that there was a correct way to speak and write. Teaching about language in English classrooms over the previous century was based largely on Latinate traditions and elitist attitudes about “proper” English; it was not an easy sell to show that language could and should be studied scientifically and objectively. Changing attitudes is difficult, and an in-depth understanding of how language works and an awareness of the origins of attitudes about language is what it takes to truly address these biases.<sup>3</sup>

The learning of prescriptive rules from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, along with some sentence diagramming, was essentially what grammar study consisted of up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Education for all in the United States opened up opportunities for students to “move out of their station,” and language was thought to be very much a part of that. Offering up a “correct” version of variations, based on social status, ostensibly put everyone on equal footing. These attitudes, coupled with excitement about linguistics in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, raised many questions about how the “new grammar” might best fit in to the English curriculum, especially one that had historically been charged with “improving” the language.

### 7.1 Grammar and Writing in the 1960s

Alongside these struggles about changing linguistic attitudes, there was also the big question of how language study affects writing and the teaching of writing. There had long been an assumption that the direct study of language, of grammatical structure in particular, would lead to improved writing. Earlier studies, from the 1920s, '30s, and '40s had begun to investigate the role of language study on writing, but now new studies began to emerge again, out of the burgeoning field of composition, about the role of language study, grammar in particular, on the teaching of writing. A report commissioned by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) reviewed “what is known and what is not known about the teaching and learning of composition and the conditions under which it is taught” (1). This report, by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963), reviewed five studies on composition, only one of which was about the effects of grammar, an experiment by Harris (1962). Harris’s study compared two classes of students in five London schools; one class in each school had instruction in “formal grammar,” the other in “direct method.” Those studying formal grammar “followed a logically organized program of traditional grammar instruction ‘through the parts of speech, with stress on the function of words’ and employed the traditional grammatical terminology in classroom teaching and in correcting compositions” (70-71). Those studying Direct Method “used no

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<sup>3</sup> Fries (1965) writes that “linguists have abandoned these conventional views not because of any deliberate purpose on their part to oppose the conventional views but because their use of the newer methods of language study forced them to conclusions that made the traditional views of language untenable” (36-37), a point worth emphasizing.

textbook or grammatical terminology but considered the elements of ‘sentence building and structure’ which came to the teachers’ attention as they read the children’s writing, treating common errors in the classroom and in composition ‘by means of example and imitation, instead of by the abstraction and generalization of the approach through formal grammar’ which did not itself, of course, exclude the use of examples” (71). Harris concluded that there was a “lack of effective tie between a relatively high grammatical score and improvement in the measured items of the essay” (82-83). And from that, we get a sentence from Harris, cited in Braddock et al, that gets repeated over and over again over the last 50 years. Harris writes, “It seems safe to infer that the study of English grammatical terminology had a negligible or even a relatively harmful effect upon the correctness of children’s writing in the early part of the five Secondary Schools” (qtd in Braddock, 83). The impact of this has been significant; the Braddock report, Eaton (2003) suggests, “arguably began the decline of grammar instruction in the US” (79).

The Dartmouth Conference, held in 1966 and funded by the Carnegie Endowment, and organized by the Modern Language Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the British National Association of Teachers of English, with participants from the UK, New Zealand, Canada, and the US, was a large-scale attempt to collaborate about the role of English studies, including grammar. Muller (1967) notes the consensus on (traditional) grammar teaching was that it was “a waste of time”(68). Myhill and Watson (2014) connect the ensuing “widespread abandoning of grammar” during this time directly to the Dartmouth Conference. Thus, composition studies in general and the Braddock report and Dartmouth Conference in particular contributed greatly to the failure of more direct integration of language study into schools. Despite the critiques of the methodology and significance of the Harris study, promoted by Braddock et al (for example Kolln and Hancock 2005, Brown 2009b, Myhill and Watson 2014), and later in Hillocks (1986), the study is still cited with great frequency as an anti-grammar touchstone. However, linguistics and its role in English studies was still a hot topic, so language study’s role in the classroom remained a subject of much interest.

## **7.2 The “new” linguistics in the English classroom**

This new linguistically informed and scientific approach showed great promise for use in schools, going beyond rote memorization, sentence diagramming, and learned usage rules, to allow students to explore their language and make their own discoveries, and perhaps also to aid in reducing, or at least recognizing, linguistic discrimination. However, it has not had a seamless integration.

Throughout the 1960s, English meetings and conferences were filled with presentations on linguistics and its potential effects on the field of English Studies. The NCTE sponsored a program of Spring Institutes in 1963 (the same year that Braddock et al was published) and 1964 on Language, Linguistics, and the School Programs, which were for teachers “to hear distinguished scholars from a variety of fields of language study and to discuss with them the relevance of recent scholarship for English language programs in elementary and secondary schools and for the preparation of teachers” (Hogan 1964, iv). The Institutes were quite successful as were the various ways in which linguistics was beginning to be integrated into

middle and high school English classrooms. Reactions were generally favorable, as these comments suggest:

“In every school, reaction [to linguistic study in Portland, Oregon high schools] was favorable; in most, very enthusiastic” (Matthews et al in Wetmore 1963, 39).

“The results indicate that carefully planned and efficiently executed linguistically-oriented language arts programs for the middle grades might accelerate the unimpressive progress (reported by research studies in the last half century) that has been made by traditionally-oriented grammatical approaches toward improving children’s control of syntax” (Gale 1967, 224).

Study centers were established around the country, with linguists, teachers, and teacher educators working together to develop materials on language and rhetoric. These collaborative teams created an impressive array of curricula: Kitzhaber (1968-70), a multi-volume textbook set for grades 7-12 coming out of the Oregon group’s work; Dolive (1967) from a Texas-based workshop; and the multi-authored *The English Language: The Linguistic Approach*, from an Ohio Project English group. These projects then led to reviews of the resulting materials, their effectiveness, and their reception. Slack’s (1964) report on Project English was quite hopeful: “Project English could lead us into the Promised Land” (47). Textbook companies not associated with the workshops also began to produce textbooks for grades 7-12 such as Postman and Morine (1963), *Discovering Your Language*, and Roberts (1967) *The Roberts English Series: A Linguistics Program*.

However, for many teachers, especially those not involved in the workshops or institutes, there was a lack of understanding about why linguistics was important, especially given the apparently conflicting information coming out of composition and rhetoric about grammar study in the English classroom. There was also unease about exactly what teachers should be learning about; linguistics was all atwitter about transformational grammar in the mid 1960s, but there was not consensus on which aspects of the new approaches to language should be introduced to K-12 teachers and students. Some had the impression that linguists themselves knew little about language, and linguists did little to dispel this notion. In Hogan (1964), a volume coming out of the Institutes, Chomsky reflects on the teaching of grammar in schools: “I think it is important for students to realize how little we know about the rules that determine the relation of sound and meaning in English, about the general properties of human language, about the matter of how the incredibly complex system of rules that constitutes a grammar is acquired or put to use” (84). Chomsky’s point was simply to emphasize that there is still much to be done to discover the knowledge that underlies language. Such a statement, however, offered little guidance for teachers striving to determine which aspects of the new insights about language they should convey to their students and why.

There was, then, much to be learned; linguistics was not even just a new approach (to teaching reading or writing), but an entirely separate discipline, for which there was much still to be discovered. Adding yet one more topic to what English teachers were supposed to teach



complicated the situation as well; Marsh (1966) writes, that “the new philosophy narrows the extent of grammar study and broadens the scope of a school language program by suggesting content such as language history, dialect study, and semantics be added to the customary reading, writing, and speaking concerns. Such curriculum modifications are suggested to stimulate increased intellectual curiosity and interest among students in English as a topic for study” (32).

Despite the initial successes of linguistically informed approaches to language and grammar, replacing the outmoded approaches and attitudes was challenging, as was preparing teachers to teach the new material.

### 7.3 1970s-1990s: More Mixed Messages

The position on grammar study of the leading professional organization for English teachers, the NCTE, really has been all over the map over the years. As an enormous professional organization, with some 35,000 members, they wield a great deal of power. In the mid-1970s, an NCTE SLATE Starter Sheet<sup>4</sup> stated “The most accurate descriptions of grammatical structure – if, indeed, abstract knowledge of grammar is to be emphasized – are found in generative grammar and generative semantics,” demonstrating the effects that linguistics was having, though not going so far as to recommend it outright.

Also, during this time, NCTE, following the College Composition and Communication (CCCC)’s example, developed a position statement on “Students’ Right to Their Own Language:”

Resolved that the National Council of Teachers of English affirm the students’ right to their own language – the dialect that expresses their family and community identity, the idiolect that expresses their unique personal identity;

- that NCTE affirm the responsibility of all teachers of English to assist all students the development of their ability to speak and write better, whatever their dialects;
- that NCTE affirm the responsibility of all teachers to provide opportunities for clear and cogent expression of ideas in writing, and to provide the opportunity for students to learn the conventions of what has been called written edited American English;
- that NCTE affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to understand and respect diversity of dialects.

Be it further Resolved, that, to this end,

- that NCTE make available to other professional organizations this resolution as well as suggestions for ways of dealing with linguistic

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<sup>4</sup> Starter Sheets are “action-oriented information sources for English and language arts professionals” (<http://www.ncte.org/action/slate/startersheet>).

variety, as expressed in the CCCC background statement on students' right to their own language<sup>5</sup>; and

- that NCTE promote classroom practices to expose students to the variety of dialects that comprise our multiregional, multiethnic, and multicultural society so that they too will come to understand the nature of American English and come to respect all its dialects.

Many teachers, uncertain of how to teach about language and grammar fairly and effectively without discriminating against speakers of non-standard dialects, simply avoided teaching about it. Therefore, attention to the legitimacy of all dialects turned out to be another reason that the teaching of grammar diminished. Just a few years later, as Kolln and Hancock (2005) point out, grammar had all but disappeared from English studies. They note that the calls for proposals for the NCTE conference and Conference on College Communication and Composition (4Cs) in the 1980s had no presentations on grammar, nor even on language or linguistics. Then in 1985, the NCTE passed this resolution:

Resolved, that the NCTE affirm the position that the use of isolated grammar and usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students' speaking and writing and that, in order to improve both of these, class time at all levels must be devoted to opportunities for meaningful listening, speaking, reading and writing; and that NCTE urge the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage the teaching of grammar rather than English language arts instruction.

Although the studies, namely the Braddock report, that led up to this resolution are focused on "traditional grammar" instruction, the message to teachers was clear – don't teach grammar. A second, well-known report by Hillocks (1986), a follow-up to the Braddock report from 1963, provided an overview of a wide-range of studies within the field of composition. With respect to grammar, Hillocks summarized studies by White (1965) on the effects of structural linguistics on improving composition, by Whitehead (1966) on the effects of sentence diagramming on writing, by Bowden (1979) on the effects of "formal, traditional" grammar on writing, and by Elley et al (1975) on the role of grammar in secondary classrooms. The results were quite mixed, in fact, and Elley et al was the only study to look at the effects of more recent transformational grammar instruction. Elley et al's study compared three groups of students: those who studied traditional grammar, those who studied transformational grammar, and a group who studied rhetoric and literature. They found little difference among the three groups, though there was also no evidence that there was any progress at all, even within the groups. Brown (2009b) writes that Elley et al's "finding suggests not that grammar instruction is

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<sup>5</sup> A special issue of *CCC* (1974) provided background information explaining what led to the resolution. This excerpt posed the questions many were wrestling with: "Many of us have taught as though the function of schools and colleges were to erase differences. Should we, on the one hand, urge creativity and individuality in the arts and the sciences, take pride in the diversity of our historical development, and, on the other hand, try to obliterate all the differences in the way Americans speak and write? Our major emphasis has been on uniformity, in both speech and writing; would we accomplish more, both educationally and ethically, if we shifted that emphasis to precise, effective, and appropriate communication in diverse ways, whatever the dialect?" (2)

ineffective, but that NONE of the instructional approaches that were studied encouraged the development of students' facility with academic language. This overall lack of success would seem to warrant a call to find new approaches to teaching academic language rather than one to eliminate grammar as a subject of study" (222). A single sentence from Hillocks (1986) comes up over and over, however: "School boards, administrators, and teachers who impose the systematic study of traditional school grammar on their students over lengthy periods of time in the name of teaching and writing do them a gross disservice which should not be tolerated by anyone concerned with the effective teaching of good writing" (248). Hillocks was, in fact, quite knowledgeable about linguistics and was a strong supporter of such general language study in the classroom, as much of his previous work indicates.<sup>6</sup> However, quotes such as these were pulled out of context, or the "traditional" was removed, leaving only "grammar," so the message teachers received was simply that grammar should not to be taught. (Kolln and Hancock (2005) and Brown (2009a) provide comprehensive overviews of the controversy over grammar teaching; both include summaries of the effects of the Braddock and Hillocks reports. See also Locke (2009, 2010) and Denham 2015a.) Another leading figure in the field of composition and rhetoric, Peter Elbow, also dealt a blow to the study of grammar. In Elbow's influential book, *Writing with Power* (1981), he writes that

Learning grammar is a formidable task that takes crucial energy away from working on your writing, and worse yet, the process of learning grammar interferes with writing: it heightens your preoccupation with mistakes as you write out each word and phrase, and makes it almost impossible to achieve that undistracted attention to your *thoughts* and *experiences* as you write that is so crucial for strong writing (and sanity). For most people, nothing helps their writing so much as learning to ignore grammar. (169)

Elbow provides no evidence to support this claim. He also uses "grammar" as a catch-all term here; he seems to mean conventions rather than linguistic grammar - lexical and phrasal categories and their functions. Learning about language in an introspective, investigative way does not interfere with writing, though perhaps worrying about commas might. Though Elbow's point, as a leader in the process approach to composition, was to allow students to focus on ideas in writing, rather than mechanics, he does not make it clear what he means by grammar, so the resulting message to English teachers yet again was simply "don't teach grammar."

However, the message that knowledge of language is important for *teachers* seems to have been much less controversial. Work in the early 1990s by Kolln (1991) and Noguchi (1991) reinforced the message that study of grammar is extremely important for teachers,<sup>7</sup> and that such knowledge should also be imparted to students and likely does interact with writing in productive ways. NCTE and the textbooks in its wake now seem to primarily advocate for the

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Hillocks (no date – *The English Language: A linguistic approach*) where he suggests that we should "Let the student be his own linguist. Let him collect samples of language and make his own generalizations about language. Let him set up hypotheses about how his language works, and ask him to test and revise the hypotheses. Perhaps such an exploratory approach is the most valuable aspect of language study. The student will learn 'the scientific method' in approaching problems....He will...feel free to explore and experiment with his language--to use it as effectively and efficiently as he can because he realizes that he is the master of it, and not it of him" (23).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Adger, Snow, and Christian (2002) and Denham and Lobeck (2005, 2010).

study of grammar “in context,” often citing Constance Weaver, known primarily for teaching grammar in the context of writing (and for her book by that name, *Teaching Grammar in Context*, 1996). Though Weaver seems to promote a minimum time spent on grammar in middle and high school classrooms, as in Weaver (2010)<sup>8</sup>, for example, she actually advocates for fairly in-depth knowledge of linguistically informed grammar not only for teachers, but also for the students. For example, she suggests the following:

1. Teaching concepts on subject, verb, sentence, clause, phrase, and related concepts for editing.
2. Teaching style through sentence combining and sentence generating.
3. Teaching sentence sense through manipulation of syntactic elements.
4. Teaching both the power of dialects and the dialects of power.
5. Teaching punctuation and mechanics for convention, clarity, and style (Weaver 1998)

That is, in fact, quite a lot of grammar. Vavra (1996) also offers some examples of the ways in which even those who espouse not teaching grammar except as needed (as suggested by errors in student writing, for example) depend on knowledge of grammar for such instruction to be useful. Subject-verb agreement, for instance, is one of the more common errors of writing, so is typically listed as one that teachers need to deal with in their students’ writing. However, many studies, Vavra writes, show that students can’t identify verbs very well with no prior discussion of them: “Telling these students that ‘A subject must agree with its verb in number’ is as effective as telling them that ‘a podlezhashchee must agree with its glagol in chislo’” (34).

And, incidentally, Weaver herself is quite versed in linguistics, its history, and its applications in the classroom. She writes in that same book for teachers, *The Grammar Plan Book*, that work by linguists including Chomsky (1957), Fries (1952), Roberts (1956), Halliday (1985), Kolln and Funk (2006) has “influenced the grammatical description many of us use in writing for teachers and students today” (35). So even Weaver, who is characterized as taking an “anti-grammar” stance, actually recommends a good deal of knowledge of grammar for both teachers and students. Also, in response to backlash against grammar within the composition community, a group within NCTE formed in 1989, the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, which “is a national forum for discussing the teaching of grammar, and welcomes all views on the role of grammar in our schools” (website). *English Journal*, the signature journal of NCTE, had an issue devoted to grammar and its teaching in 1996, “The Great Debate (Again): Teaching Grammar and Usage,” which included some fourteen articles on grammar and usage by Vavra, Weaver, Kolln, and others.

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<sup>8</sup> Weaver (2010) writes in “Scaffolding Grammar Instruction for Writers and Writing”: “Frankly, I suspect that a conscious knowledge of grammar, even just a bit of grammar, has little value beyond school except perhaps in speaking according to mainstream conventions of ‘correctness’ when desired and, of course, in editing effectively, though certainly some professions may require a littler more knowledge of grammar than others ... Still, with the limited time an English teacher has to make a difference in her students’ lives beyond school, I vote for teaching selected aspects of grammar to enrich writing through detail, voice and style, and related tor other aspects of grammar to enhance writing through the skillful use of language conventions – whether mainstream conventions or those, say, of a dialect like African American English, when used for particular effect. I do not support the teaching of grammatical analysis as a school subject” (203).

Another factor that affected teaching about language in this time period – the 1970s to 1990s – was the Whole Language movement. Whole Language, broadly defined, is a philosophy of teaching and learning, but more narrowly, and more relevant for our purposes here, it is an approach to teaching literacy. A full discussion of Whole Language and the controversies surrounding it takes us too far afield, so I focus here on one aspect of this history. The evidence that emerged in the 1960s about humans’ innate capacity for language transformed not only the field of linguistics, but also had profound effects on other fields, including psychology and education. The message from linguists that language was a hard-wired aspect of being human and that everyone had an unconscious knowledge of their own grammatical system led many to reason that many aspects of language, therefore, need not be taught. A book by Marlene Barron summarizes well the message in its title: *I Learn To Read and Write the Way I Learn To Talk* (1990). Other statements in the 1980s and 1990s reflect the impact of the Whole Language approach, which focused on whole word recognition and “immersion” in literacy, rather than on learning to read by sound-letter correspondence (phonics).

“There is evidence which indicates literacy can develop in the same ‘natural’ way as spoken language when the conditions for learning are comparable” (Judith Newman, *Whole Language: Theory in Use*, 1985)

“Learning to read and learning to write area a lot like learning to talk” (Edelsy, Altwerge, and Flores, *Whole Language: What’s the Difference?* 1990)

“Written language shares all the characteristics of oral language except that it’s visual rather than aural” (K. Goodman, *On Reading*, 1996)

The processes of learning to read and to write, however, are in fact, quite different from the acquisition of one’s language, and the evidence does not support teaching reading and writing simply by immersing students in those environments (whatever that might mean). This movement, however, provided another reason to not teach about language, either grammar or sound-letter correspondences, in a direct way.

Vavra (1996) puts it bluntly: “The teaching of grammar came to be scorned by many in our profession as a result of some research in the 1970s and as a result of a claim that students can learn grammar simply by writing. Both the research and claim are faulty...Many teachers are not aware that the anti-grammar research is simply not valid...The claims that are still being made suffer from innumerable problems, ranging from the definition of ‘teaching grammar’ to the definition of ‘improved writing’” (32). The response of many teachers to the so-called grammar debate was either to avoid explicit instruction in the structure of English or to continue to teach grammar in a traditional, prescriptive manner. Thus, in 1995, the NCTE said that these extremes emphasized the need to articulate strategies for developing the language awareness of teachers and students. They proposed another resolution:

The National Council of Teachers of English...[will] explore effective ways of integrating language awareness into classroom instruction and teacher preparation programs,

review current practices and materials relating to language awareness, and prepare new materials for possible publication by NCTE. Language awareness includes examining how language varies in a range of social and cultural settings; examining how people's attitudes vary towards language across culture, class, gender, and generation; examining how oral and written language affects listeners and readers; examining how 'correctness' in language reflects social-political-economic values; examining how the structure of language works from a descriptive perspective; and examining how first and second languages are acquired.

This resolution, as with the 1964 one acknowledging students' right to their own language, while admirable, offered no clear means for how to achieve these goals. We have, however, seen the effects of this, as well as the research and resulting materials creation, begin to trickle down in very productive ways.

Grammar Rock, a segment of the ABC Saturday morning show Schoolhouse Rock, which aired from 1973 to 1985, has arguably been the primary source of knowledge of language for several generations of American children. Many of my students tell me that they do know about grammatical categories often comes solely from this. Even if they were in school after this aired, many teachers still seem to use it in their classrooms. See <http://web.archive.org/web/20080628074454/http://www.school-house-rock.com/history.htm>

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## 8. The 21st Century: Varied language study

*English Journal* has had two more themed issues on grammar teaching since the 1996 one, in 2006<sup>9</sup> and 2011<sup>10</sup>, demonstrating just a few of the many ways in which language study is being incorporated in innovative and promising ways. Nancy Patterson, a long-time leader in middle grade Language Arts research and curriculum development, writes,

The conversation should never be whether or not grammar is taught. Rather, it should be about *how* grammar is taught...English teachers must move beyond viewing grammar as a set of rules and a code of correctness, and they need to rethink the idea that a comprehensive knowledge of grammar terminology and rules somehow translates into a knowledge of linguistic structure or into an ability to write well. Instead, teachers need to move toward...a classroom that includes grammar within the context of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Grammar should be a means through which students learn more about themselves, their texts, and the world around them. (2001: 55)

In the middle and high school English classroom, grammar has long been discussed in the context of writing and it has been set up as a binary – Should I teach grammar: yes or no? Does it help with writing: yes or no? However, these are false dichotomies, as most have now recognized. There is plenty of evidence that language study should be a part of the English classroom. Teachers will find that some of that study is directly connected to their students' writing, in ways suggested by Noguchi (1991), Kolln (1991), Jones et al (2012), and Jones and Myhill (2013). (The recent work by Jones, Myhill, and Bailey (2012) suggests offers compelling new evidence on the effects of grammar instruction, informed by linguistics, on writing.<sup>11</sup>) There are also examples and much evidence, as indicated by the *English Journal* contributions, for example, that language study has other important applications, some of them critical since they engage with issues of discrimination, empowerment, and free expression. Haas (2011), in her article on the ways she has connected varied aspects of language study to multiple parts of her writing and literature components in her 27 years of teaching, writes that "these studies ... promoted critical and creative thinking that are applicable to the everyday lives in which we live. I still consider these components of language to be our responsibility to teach" (13).

We have now, as well, a great many linguistically-informed books for use in middle and high school classrooms that meet teachers and students on familiar ground, discussing writing,

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<sup>9</sup> This issue, *Contexts for Teaching Grammar*, includes a number of useful articles such as Anderson, "Zooming In and Zooming Out: Putting Grammar in Context into Context," Berger "Transforming Writers through Grammar Study," Schuster "A Fresh Look at Sentence Fragments," and Dunn and Lindblom, "Analyzing Grammar Rants: An alternative to traditional grammar instruction," among others.

<sup>10</sup> The 2011 issue features articles such as Flynn's "The Language of Power: Beyond the grammar workbook," Massey's "On the richness of grammar as an analytical lens in the integrated Language Arts," Schuster's "Beyond grammar: The richness of English language, or the zero-tolerance approach to rigid rules," Dean's "Shifting perspectives about grammar," and Keely's "Dangerous words: Recognizing the power of language by researching derogatory terms." These illustrate the ways in which language study has moved beyond error correction into a much more analytical endeavor.

<sup>11</sup> Also see Myhill speaking about some of this work here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXr09X86K20>.

usage, and conventions, but also delve into broader topics, demonstrating ways in which language study is of central importance.

In Anderson's (2005) book, *Mechanically Inclined*, he discusses the importance of teachers having a clear understanding of students' mistakes or "pseudo-concepts."

We will save ourselves a lot of frustration if we shift our notion of teaching punctuation and grammar to one of teaching principles instead of rules. Handbooks and English teachers often take a right-wrong stance. I'd rather my students take a thinking stance. Pseudo-concepts are stepping stones along the way to concept development. (4)

An example of a pseudo-concept is this student's overgeneralization: " 'Well, I am writing *its collar got stuck on the fence*. If I wrote *dog's collar*, I'd use an apostrophe. So I write *it's collar*.' That pseudo-concept is based on knowledge about a language rule. A mistake like this from a student, and the thinking behind it, shows me where I need to go next in my instruction" (4). That's an important point – there are good reasons that we all make "errors;" they are rarely just random. A teacher needs to think about the reasons behind the errors, which should be considered variations rather than errors, and use those to empower and teach.<sup>12</sup> Anderson makes the point that it is very important for a teacher to know about grammar (as Weaver and others have said), but it's also important to convey to students so that they can engage in the same kind of learning. To do any less does them a disservice.

Schuster (2003), in *Breaking the Rules: Liberating writers through innovative grammar instruction*, discusses the myths behind many of the old prescriptive rules. He focuses on using morphological and syntactic clues and frames to identify syntactic categories, and discusses the inadequacy of meaning-based definitions (such as a noun is a person, place, or thing). "The thesis of this book is that traditional school grammar has left a heritage of definitions that do not define and rules that do not rule (in usage, writing, and punctuation). These inadequate definitions and mythrules hamper students rather than help them in their development as speakers and writers" (191). As his book title suggests, the focus is on writing, and he carefully connects the discussions of grammar with writing.

Benjamin and Oliva (2007), in *Engaging Grammar: Practical advice for real classrooms*, discuss grammar as a resource and offer clear, linguistically-informed explanations of what aspects of grammar to teach and why, with explicit application of those concepts to writing and analysis of literature. Benjamin adapts the 18<sup>th</sup> Reed-Kellogg diagrams for her purposes here as well.

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<sup>12</sup> Like Anderson (2005), Crovitz (2011) encourages teachers to understand that the "mistakes" in students' writing are not just careless and stupid; rather, they show students "grappling with meaning" (32). He suggests playful ways to learn from students' ambiguity in writing, and offers ten alternatives to a typical daily oral language exercise. "DOL-type exercises ask students to apply knowledge of standard grammar rules in an arbitrary, context-free situation using safe, cherry-picked samples containing rule-specific mistakes. Rarely does discussion dwell on *why* writers make errors, just that they do and that they need to be fixed" (33). Crovitz also brings up language and class – how when one's language is criticized, it can result in feeling "uncultured or ignorant" (38), allowing students to grapple directly with the notion of linguistic discrimination.



Ehrenworth and Vinton (2005), in *The Power of Grammar: Unconventional approaches to the conventions of language*, offer practical ways of introducing grammatical concepts, while acknowledging language change, language elitism, and the role of power, which simply cannot be separated from discussions of language. Also, the authors embrace the empowerment that can come with this approach to teaching about language: "...[G]iven that our language and culture are in flux and changing rapidly, we serve students best when we empower them to make purposeful choices and decisions based on a complex, nuanced understanding of the effects those grammatical choices will have on both our minds and our hearts and the way they can affect and reinforce meaning" (4).

Wilde (2012), in *Funner Grammar: Fresh Ways to teach usage, language, and writing conventions*, talks directly and convincingly about language privilege. "Language variation is a social justice issue just as much as racial identity is" (96), while also engaging upper elementary and middle school students in analysis of grammar, including mechanics and usage. The chapter titles provide a useful overview: 2. Mechanics: Conventions Found Only in Written Language; 3. Nitty-Gritty Grammar: Words, Tenses, Sentences, and Complexity; 4. Usage; 5. Language Diversity and Social Justice; 6. Linguistics for Kids. Wilde also provides annotated lists of other resources, appendices of suggestions of what to do in each grade (3-8), commentary on the Common Core (saying straight up, for example, that to teach about the subjunctive, as indicated in this 8th grade standard, is misguided), and a careful consideration and explanation of why each subject she addresses should be taught. (See also Denham 2015b for discussion of the language strand of the Common Core.)

Even though many of these resources position grammar study primarily as a means of learning rules of writing, they do so in a way that takes advantage of students' unconscious knowledge and at least attempts to address language in a way that doesn't discriminate against language varieties. Importantly, they all meet teachers and students on familiar ground, discussing usage and conventions, and applications to writing and literature, while also touching on language acquisition and the history of prescriptive attitudes (Schuster), language change (Wilde), and inflectional and derivational affixes (Benjamin), for example. Other recent work focuses on the linguistically diverse classroom, included Adger, Wolfram & Christian (2007), Reaser & Wolfram (2007), Wheeler & Swords (2010), and Charity Hudley & Mallinson (2010, 2013).

## 9. Discussion and Conclusions

Today's teachers typically lack experience with analysis of language, as well as lack confidence, especially about their ability to lead discussions about language. Burgess, Turvey, and Quarshie (2000) discuss this insecurity about teaching about language, especially given that many teachers had no direct instruction in grammar in their own schooling. In a survey they conducted, two-thirds of pre-service teachers did not think they had sufficient "working knowledge of a descriptive grammar" of English. They noted, however, that some of their students' (pre-service teachers) uncertainties about their own grammatical knowledge was "precisely why they covet it for their children" (14). They were eager to learn alongside their students. Cameron (1997) also acknowledges some teachers lack of background and preparation for embarking on an approach to teaching about language that does not have set answers. "Teachers need to be confident that they can use a small set of principles to find out a larger set of facts, and show their pupils, at whatever level may be appropriate, how to do the same thing ... If they are to teach [a grammar] activity they will have to learn it actively, be given opportunities to ask question and to argue. It's a classroom project not a homework project" (237).

There is no need for a precise set of information about language that every teacher should have, nor is there a need to develop a fixed curriculum or a definitive set of lesson plans or textbooks on language.<sup>13</sup> Burgess, Turvey, and Quarshie (2000) write,

Neither a glossary view of grammar nor a reduction of it to a set of teaching items, nor identification of grammar with teaching basic skills can be appropriate. The aims must start with a view of children's learning at the centre, and balance this with an equivalent concern for theoretical knowledge amongst teachers. In this, an integrated and detailed view of grammar's working could function alongside wider knowledge about language to support pedagogy based on fundamental understandings. (17)

And Cameron (1997) also emphasizes that it's the approach that is important, rather than a particular set of skills or grammatical concepts. "Thinking is what grammar is really all about. The skills it develops are not specifically language skills (though they do have a verbal component); they are reasoning, argument, problem-solving and critical reflection. This is where the educational potential of grammar teaching lies" (232).

When teachers engage with certain critical concepts underlying a linguistic approach to language, they can really effect change in the way students think about language. Because of the history of grammar teaching as quite separate from other subject matter, and then the studies (purportedly) examining the effects of this traditional grammar instruction on writing, the whole notion of "grammar in context" has taken on a life of its own. I hear teachers say they only teach grammar in context, ensuring it is connected to discussions of writing or literature. And while it is of course laudable to consider how a particular intellectual task connects to others, grammar study has had to defend itself far more than other subjects.

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<sup>13</sup> The focus should not be on what exactly to teach anyway, and there is, unfortunately, a more general problem within education of the loss of teacher autonomy and the inability for individuals to be able to determine what to teach and how to their particular group of students.

Linguists have long advocated for the study of language for its own sake. Cameron (1997) compares grammar study to physics: “Physics is not taught to improve [students’] ability to keep their feet on the ground; indeed, since they can already do this with 100% reliability, you might say it is pointless to teach them about gravity ‘explicitly’ and ‘out of context.’ I would prefer to defend the general principles that all knowledge is worth having, and that a major goal of education is to teach people how to think” (232).

One of the most important ways that teachers and their students can best approach language study and “teaching people how to think” is to understand that data is something to wrestle with. It’s perfectly acceptable not to have an immediate answer to a question about language, and to engage together in using the data to analyze together. Linguists have been advocating for this kind of approach in schools for decades, as evidenced by this passage from Dawkins (1965) in “Linguistics in the Elementary Grades”:

Linguistics is by no means a body of ascertained truth and theory; it is far more a variety of ways of going about the search for truth and theory, ways that yield testable results by virtue of their systematic application to the data. The essence of it, and of science in general, might even be said to boil down to good work habits, good thinking, good intuitions. Now, to get back to our students, what do we really want them to do? Is it ‘linguistics’ if they can throw back at us the definitions of the parts of speech? Or discriminated between ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ forms? Or tell us some regional variants for *griddle cakes*? It would seem to be much more like ‘linguistics’ if they knew how to arrive at these conclusions by knowing how to handle data and how to generalize. (762-763)

It is through “handling data” that teachers engage students in analysis and thereby also address linguistic attitudes and discrimination. Cameron (1997) puts this well, when she writes that students must grapple with more than a checklist of constituent structure and word class categories “if you want [them] to have not merely some factual knowledge about language but a critical awareness on such issues as the value of standard and nonstandard dialects, the status of minority languages, etc.” (235). She continues:

It is my experience that if people don’t understand the grammar, they cannot make critical positions their own, because they cannot understand the supporting arguments. For instance, the sociolinguist’s axiom that ‘all varieties of a language are equal’ is not just a political statement to the effect that one should not be prejudiced against, say, Black or working-class speech, it is a statement about the comparability of varieties on structural linguistics criteria such as systematicity, formal complexity and rule-governedness. For someone who does not understand what is meant by these terms, who cannot look at grammar as a system and formulate the rules, the axiom remains mere dogma, something you believe, or not, according to ideological conviction. To be truly ‘critical,’ language awareness must be informed by ‘technical’ knowledge about language. (235)

Given the new Common Core State Standards, with its long list of standards related to language, there is an expectation that students will acquire a great deal of knowledge about language, including grammar, conventions, usage, and vocabulary. In order to address these (somewhat eclectic; see Denham 2015b) standards, however, teachers need to understand how to conduct grammatical analysis and be confident in their ability to engage in such study

alongside their students. When we teach about language and its structure, and encourage students to study language objectively and analytically, we provide them with methods that result in applications to reading, writing, spelling, and so on, but that also that trigger students' curiosity about the workings of language. This approach also opens a door to empowerment, both personal and professional, since it draws on each person's own unconscious knowledge, and everyone, regardless of language or dialect, has equal access to the data.

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## 10. Other Resources

Language and Grammar websites, with lesson plans:

- TeachLing – lesson plans on language and linguistics in K-12 education  
<http://www.teachling.wvu.edu/>
- Exploring Language – Daily Language Investigations for English Language Arts  
<http://www.explorelanguage.org/>
- Middle School Linguistics – a blog about language and linguistics in your upper elementary, middle, and high school classrooms <http://middleschoolling.blogspot.com/>

Word study websites, with lesson plans:

- Word Nerds – 7<sup>th</sup> grade forays into morphology and etymology by Anne Whiting  
<http://wordsavviness.wordpress.com/>
- Mr. Allen’s blog – 5<sup>th</sup> grade language study  
<http://blogs.zis.ch/dallen/category/languagespellingword-study/>
- Word Building and Spelling Experiments in English Morphology  
<http://www.neilramden.co.uk/spelling/index.html>
- Visual Thesaurus <http://www.visualthesaurus.com/cm/wordshop/>

Language awareness and dialect study for K-12:

- Voices of North Carolina Dialect Awareness Curriculum (for use in any state)  
[http://www.ncsu.edu/linguistics/research\\_dialecteducation.php](http://www.ncsu.edu/linguistics/research_dialecteducation.php)
- Talking Story about Pidgin: Exploring the creole language of Hawaii (for use in any state)  
<http://sls.hawaii.edu/Pidgin/>