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## Beyond Grammar

Linguistics in Language and Writing Courses

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Over the past half century, traditional rule-based prescriptive/proscriptive teaching methods have been largely discarded. Prescriptive pedagogy had seemed so simple—tell the students what to do and have them do it—but students found it boring, and researchers and teachers thought there could be a better way. Usage rules like “don’t split an infinitive” and “never say ‘ain’t’” ultimately lose their integrity anyway for two reasons: (1) language is always changing, and (2) commonly accepted usage often does not follow the rules. Certain prescriptive aids are still widely and justifiably used but are no longer the main emphasis in the classroom.

Noam Chomsky revolutionized the way we look at language with his book *Syntactic Structures* (1957). Researchers have since enhanced, challenged, and expanded upon Chomsky’s work in the area of syntax, and still others have advanced our knowledge in related fields such as sociolinguistics, semantics, psycholinguistics, and historical linguistics. The results of this extensive research have not been included in general curricula, nor have they become common knowledge within the larger population.

In 1964, M. A. K. Halliday, Angus McIntosh, and Peter Strevens argued that the locus for a more ample, holistic study of language should be the secondary school: “Is our language so poor and uninteresting a thing that we put it in the school curriculum only in order to fight for its lost causes, to pass pathetic judgments on some of its marginal features? We should be

ashamed to let anyone leave our secondary schools knowing so little of how their language works and of the part it plays in our lives” (230).

Discarding the rule-based methods left a void that has been filled by “process pedagogy.” Here is how Dartmouth College describes its writing program:

Were you asked to write about things that mattered to you? . . . When you were confronted with a controversial issue — capital punishment, for instance — were you required to work with a group of your peers, to converse and to collaborate until you could together draft a paper that represented the views of all present? Were you instructed in how to organize your ideas? Were you expected to revise your papers? Did you meet with the teacher or with your peers to talk about *how* you expressed yourself, as well as *what* you were saying?

If you can answer “yes” to many of these questions, chances are you were taught to write according to the principles of process pedagogy. (Gocsik 2005b)

Dartmouth also has a page titled “Attending to Grammar,” which states that “grammar is more than [rules]: it is an understanding of how language works, of how meaning is made, and of how it is broken” (Gocsik 2005a). The purpose of this article is to facilitate the inclusion in high school language courses of a deeper study “of how language works, of how meaning is made,” and, as Halliday, McIntosh, and Strevens put it, “the part [language] plays in our lives.”

Not all areas of linguistics are pertinent to the teaching of writing, but many are. Learning enough about syntax (otherwise called grammar) to sense the underlying structure of sentences is useful, as is expanding one’s skill at semantics through wordplay and attentive creation of context. Identifying one’s position in the social, cultural, historical, and personal geography of language is also useful. This knowledge is only part of the recipe that creates a good writer, but it is a useful part.

Part of the reason linguistic instruction has not become a common part of curricula is that it is complex. Using a tree diagram to parse a sentence, for example, may look easy, and it *is* easy with a simple sentence, but when modifiers, idiomatic expressions, digressions, and multiple parts are added, it becomes a complex undertaking, requiring not only specialized linguistic knowledge but graphic skill as well. The concepts and exercises introduced here are simple and do not require extensive training of teachers. A course in linguistics would look quite different.

Many relevant linguistic concepts can be introduced in fifteen- to

twenty-minute units, with a short explanation followed by an exercise. In order to cement these ideas in students' minds, the concepts can be reintroduced from time to time, with follow-up exercises.

The following areas have been chosen for their relevance to writing: morphology, semantics, syntax, and sociolinguistics.

### **Morphology**

A *morpheme* is the smallest linguistic unit that has a meaning or grammatical function. . . . *Morphology* is the study of how words are structured and how they are put together from smaller parts.

—*Language Files*

The word *morpheme* is related to the Greek word μορφή (shape). The letters of the alphabet and the words made from them are simply shapes that we have given certain powers to. We might have said that the shape ◻ would be used to indicate the past tense. “Looked” would be spelled look◻. We might have decided that it would be put in front of the root, ◻look (or, just for fun, in the middle of the word lo◻ok). We could have decided that ◻ would be pronounced “um” and the past tense of “look” would be pronounced “lookum,” or “umlook.” Morphemes are used to construct language in just such delightfully original ways.

Identifying these linguistic building blocks can help to organize language into groups, instead of single words. In English, for example, *s* is usually added to indicate the plural (*week[s]*), and *ed* to indicate the past (*look[ed]*). By isolating morphemes, students can more easily break out the root, thus unifying large numbers of words, making them easier to manage. *Look* (verb and noun), *looked*, *looking*, *lookout*, and *outlook* are five separate words, but they can also be organized into a group with the common root, *look*.

Morphemes are not always single syllables; the word *establish* is also a morpheme in that it cannot be broken into any smaller grammatical units. (This is a good opportunity to point out that some units are phonetic, such as syllables, and some are grammatical.) Morphemes that could be added to *establish* include *-ed*, *-ment*, and *dis-*, among others.

As a bonus, morphology suggests the flexibility and inventiveness of language, which will be useful when students acquire second languages, where morphemes have similar functions, but take different forms. In Italian, for example, the plural of a noun like *amico* (friend) is formed not by adding an *s* but by changing the terminal *o* (*amico*) to *i* (*amici*).

The textbook *Language Files* (1998: 153) provides a series of brain teaser puzzles in the morphology section. Turkish uses morphemes as the plural marker, which an English speaker would expect, but it also uses morphemes in place of English prepositions. There follows a truncated version of the exercise (153):

[deniz]	an ocean
[denize]	to an ocean
[denizen]	of an ocean
[elim]	my hand
[eller]	hands

With this limited information from the book (there is more to the original exercise), students can take a stab at figuring out how to say “oceans” (*denizler*). Solving such puzzles provides examples of Turkish and several other languages as well as teaches students something about the variety among languages, and gives them an example of how morphemes are used.

The function of morphemes does not take long to convey. Once students have the idea, they will begin to notice them. It would be best to introduce morphology at one point in the course and come back to a new exercise some time later, after they have had time to take note of the morphemes around them.

#### *Additional Exercises in Morphology*

1. Teachers can ascertain whether any students in their classes speak other languages. If so, these students can be invited to contribute examples of morphemes from that language. Simply introducing the method by which plurals are formed would suffice. If there are no multilingual students, the teacher can prepare examples provided by outside sources, such as fellow teachers of other languages. An exercise could also be devised in which the morphemes of Shakespearean English (*willst, cometh, a-comin*) are updated using today’s language practices.
2. Students can be given a paragraph of English and asked to underline all the functional morphemes. Almost any randomly chosen fragment of English will illustrate the use of morphemes, and might also illustrate, for instance, that the addition of morphemes is not the only way to create a past tense. *Fight/fought/fought*, for instance, uses another method to form the past. In the introduction to linguistics that this article proposes for students, it is not necessary to explain such exceptions, just to note them if they come up. Some students may want to investigate further on their own.

## Semantics

Semantics is “the study of meaning; how words and sentences are related to the (real or imaginary) objects they refer to and the situation they describe” (Crystal 1995: 216). Stated simply, this is language at the word level. A grasp of semantic principles can improve variety, clarity, precision, and flare. Studying semantics does not mean that students have to learn fancy words but, rather, that they learn to use the words they already know. The aim is not to cover the field of semantics in all of its richness but to improve their writing.

In his book *Spunk and Bite: A Writer’s Guide to Punchier, More Engaging Language and Style* (2005), Arthur Plotnik encourages writers to expand their field of choices: “Use familiar words in a new way; raid the coffers of poetry; recruit fresh words and images from specialized fields; tweak clichés. . . . Dare to use unfamiliar words with attention-getting qualities, such as . . . *barmy*” (11).

In my classes, we discuss how to make students’ essays more interesting and informative through use of synonyms. When asked for other words for *child*, the class gave me *kid*, *infant*, *toddler*, *baby*, *niño*, *teenager*, *youngster*, and *little monster*. Much extra information is conveyed when choosing *little monster* over *toddler*. *Stroll* or *gallivant* is more precise than the generic *walk*; *sob* or *melt down* instead of *cry*; *skyscraper* or *cottage* instead of *building*.

Each student is familiar with his or her own set of highly specialized words. It would be interesting to have them write down these sets and then write a paragraph or two using them. Alternatively, one student’s set of specialized words (let’s say, *kyrie*, *immaculate conception*, *Mother Superior*, *confession*) could be given to another student who would see if he or she could use these words in a paragraph. These specialized words could be religious, scientific, familial (words for grandma, nicknames), poetic, historic, from other languages, or in some other category.

Relationships of words to each other can also be explored as an exercise or a timed contest, in groups or as individuals: name the antonym, spell the homonyms, list the synonyms, find the hyponym. Since this is an exercise in a writing class, not a linguistics class, the goal is that the students sense a relationship between words, whether or not they retain the definition of the terms *homonym*, *antonym*, *synonym*, and *hyponym*.

A longer exercise in meronymy could go on for a while. This is a part-whole relationship, so meronyms for *body* might be *arm*, *liver*, *hair*, and so forth. The various relationships could be introduced one at a time; antonyms one day and meronyms another. The introduction and exercise could last five to ten minutes.

Semantics also deals with the other determiner of meaning, context. How would one define the uncontextualized words *blue* and *hey*? Can the students think of other words that cannot be understood without context? Students could read pieces such as an essay on the attempt by the New York City Council to ban the use of the words *bitch*, *nigger*, and *ho*. Without context, what do these words mean? They have historically had a negative meaning but today may be affectionate terms in certain contexts. Was the council attempting to ban a word or a context?

Students can be divided into groups to spend fifteen minutes devising, writing, and then reading aloud tiny stories in which a certain phrase must be included, with different contexts for each group. Say the phrase is “The bridge fell down.” The groups could be given two contexts: “rush hour in Minneapolis” and “play time in a nursery school.” The resulting stories would be very different from one another, though both are based on the identical phrase, thus demonstrating the importance of context in relation to meaning.

Words can be fun, as any street corner rapper can tell you. Classes can do timed verbal rhyming exercises, or timed exercises in which they have to think of an adjective or adjective phrase to describe something. *Book* could invite dozens of adjectives: *heavy*, *interesting*, *long*, *inflammatory*, *religious*, *dull*, *on the shelf*, *right here*, and on and on around the class, going as quickly as possible until they run out of adjectives. Or each student can have two minutes to write down all the adjectives he or she can think of to describe Queen Elizabeth, 9/11, or okra (for okra I would use the adjective *inedible* while someone else would write *delicious*).

Since the harvest of adjectives will indicate varying reactions to a given word, this exercise has the added value of proving that not all people think alike—an important concept in writing. Many students will write essays that claim that “everyone knows” or “everyone does” something. There are few things that “everyone” either knows or does, and burgeoning essay writers should think twice when making such assumptions. Creative writers have to keep that fact in mind when developing fictional characters.

With just a short introduction to semantics, reinforced at appropriate moments, students will come to appreciate the robust voluptuousness of words, their sneaky piquancy, their athletic ability to leap from meaning to meaning. Word play can continue throughout any language course, either observed in works that are read or applied in students’ own essays.

### *Additional Semantics Exercises*

Students can be asked to provide alternative word choices during peer review, or the class as a whole can review examples of essays for especially interesting or evocative word choice and can suggest replacements for generics such as *child* or *totally awesome*.

Students can be given a generic word, such as *whoops*, and asked to provide the word that they would use when speaking to a baby (*oopsy*), their grandmother (*oh, dear!*), a teenage peer (*expletive deleted*), and so forth.

Students can write the same message in different contexts. The message could be “I’m not coming home tonight” written to one’s spouse, mother, and college roommate, noting the differences in word choice in each message.

As the converse to the last exercise, students could be asked to provide possible contexts for a simple dialogue or description. Give the class a scrap of dialog:

“Give me the key, please.”

“I said you couldn’t have the car.”

“Just give me the key.”

Students could be asked to expand these simple sentences, adding information about who is speaking, under what circumstances, in what tone of voice. This exercise can be worked on in groups of three or four and then read aloud, predictably providing a rich variety of imaginative forays and story lines. One group will see a threat in the dialogue and create a mystery story; another will say the first person was not talking about the car at all, she wanted the key to the front door; someone else will see a romantic breakup; and yet another will come up with something you have never thought of.

Students can be asked to list words that have recently entered our vocabulary, such as *twitter*, *9/11*, *hip hop*, *bff*, and *bushism*. This demonstrates the flexibility and creativity of common language and gives them a sense of how language changes, and how quickly.

### **Syntax**

Syntax analyzes the function and placement of subjects, verbs, objects, modifiers, and other parts of a sentence, and charts and analyzes all other aspects at the sentence level.

The novelist Stephen King argues in his book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000: 129) “that the paragraph, not the sentence, is the basic unit of writing—the place where coherence begins and words stand a chance of



becoming more than mere words. . . . You must learn to use it well if you are to write well.” The moment of “quickenings,” as King calls it, comes in the paragraph. Creating compelling paragraphs is indispensable in good writing, but ideas begin at the sentence level, for example, “I think, therefore I am,” “e equals m c squared,” and “Be careful what you wish for.”

The ultimate goal of sturdy syntax rises above mere correctness. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, “the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of language” (qtd. in Lunsford, Glenn, and O’Brien 2005: 182). Not every student needs to be a linguist, but familiarity with the basic architecture, function, and purpose of each unit of language can give power to student writers’ ideas.

Grammar is traditionally thought of as a set of rules. It is more susceptible to rule- and error-based teaching methods than, say, semantics, where choice of the *mot juste* can often be a matter of personal style. A list of most common errors can provide efficiency and save time when grading papers.<sup>1</sup> A template can be created numbering the various common errors, and these numbers can be inserted where the errors occur. This is quicker than writing out a comment and also lends itself to analysis, since students can count up the occurrences of each number, thus identifying patterns of error.

In the 561 pages of her book *A Writer’s Reference* (2007), Diana Hacker acknowledges the arbitrary nature of grammatical rules and patterns, but nonetheless devotes 238 pages (roughly 40 percent) to gently prescriptive material. Among the more malleable of rules are those governing punctuation. Compared to the more complex relational rules of grammar, the comma seems quite ordinary and unthreatening, yet practices vary. British English, unlike American English, does not, for example, require a comma before the last item in a list (“The flag was red, white and blue”). As David Crystal (1995: 278) writes, “Early classical texts were unpunctuated, with no spaces between words.” English was written like this. Hebrew and Chinese do not use commas at all. English computer grammar checkers do not generally flag misuse of commas. Perhaps this is because a computer cannot follow Hacker’s advice, “Add commas in the logical places” (2007: 259).

If rules are malleable and arbitrary, how, then, should grammar be taught? In her textbook *Discovering Grammar: An Introduction to English Sentence Structure* (2000), Anne Lobeck dissects the pedagogical place of grammar:

Learning traditional grammar is something like learning the parts of an engine or memorizing the periodic table: it involves mastering terminology rather than

concepts, using memorization rather than problem solving. Studying grammar in this way does very little to help you actually understand language and its structure, and it is no wonder that the pedagogical benefits of grammar study have been questioned and continue to be at the heart of discussions of how to teach language arts most effectively, in particular writing. It is unfortunate, however, that research on the inefficacy of teaching traditional grammar has also led many to the conclusion that grammar instruction *per se* is of no use to students. (ix)

Though writing more than thirty years after Halliday, McIntosh, and Strevens (1964), Lobeck sounds a similar theme and urges a focus on “language and its structure.”

The following section suggests several concepts that can help students understand the way sentences are constructed and manipulated. This will not guarantee good writing, but there is no reason to withhold this information, and for the motivated student, a grasp of sentence structure will make revision easier.

Sentences may be long, complex, and highly original but still have an underlying structure consisting of a subject (S), verb (V), and often an object (O). Read James Joyce’s sentence in *Finnegan’s Wake*, “Arrah, sure, we all love little Anny Ruiny, or, we mean to say, lovelittle Anna Rayiny, when unda her brella, mid piddle med puddle, she ninny-nannygoes nancing by” (1982: 7). Even in this wandering sentence, there is an underlying skeleton that holds it together, *We (S) love (V) Anny Ruiny (O)*. If students see this skeleton clearly, methods of decorating it with modifiers are more easily grasped. When it comes to repairing sentences, perceiving the basic structure can lead to sounder results. That is the reason, not some unforgivable ignorance of a prescriptive instruction, for concern that students do not know how to identify the key parts of a sentence.

Teachers should use simple sentences to explain the subject-verb-object (SVO) nature of English. It would be unreasonable to expect a large enough cadre of teachers to have the mastery of linguistic theory to explain the rules for changing “John killed Henry” to “Did John kill Henry?” not to mention “Was it Henry that John killed?” It might be informative to tell classes that other languages have different formats. Swahili and Thai are also SVO, while Gaelic and biblical Hebrew are VSO, and Eskimo and Japanese are SOV.

Before finding the structure, students must know how to find a noun and a verb. The traditional way of introducing parts of speech has been to identify nouns as “people, places, or things,” and verbs as “actions or states.”

This can be very confusing. The nouns *inspiration* and *darkness* are certainly not people or places, and not exactly things, either. Is the noun *going*, as in “Going is fun, coming back is not,” a person, place, or thing? The better way to identify parts of speech is not by what they are but by what they do and how they behave. This method of identification is more accurate and less fraught with complication. The following rules of thumb will help students identify the verb(s) and noun(s) in a sentence:

Verbs can be inflected (in English, add an *-ed*, *-s*, *-ing*, etc., or by internal changes to the verb, such as sing/sang/sung).

Verbs have past participles (*looked*, *seen*, *sung*).

Verbs can combine with auxiliary verbs (*may*, *might*, *will*, *do*, *have*).

Verbs appear at the beginning of sentences in the case of orders or requests (“*Come here*” or “*Pass the sugar, please*”).

Nouns have a plural form (books, comings and goings, curricula, mice).

Nouns can combine with determiners (*the*, *a*, *these*, etc.).

Students should know that the verb is the main force in a sentence. After locating the verb, finding the subject and object (if there is one) can be assisted by remembering that English is an SVO language, as in *John* (S) *killed* (V) *Henry* (O). In a simple English sentence, therefore, the first place to look for the subject is before the verb, and for the object, after it. In Joyce’s sentence, *we* (or *we all*) is right there, directly in front of the verb *love*, and the object *Anny Ruiny* comes after. The semantically meandering sentence can be reduced to *We love Anny Ruiny*, replete with repetitions and modifiers.

Chomsky’s famous sentence, “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously,” cannot be parsed logically but can be parsed grammatically, with the subject (*ideas*) immediately preceding the verb (*sleep*). Chomsky’s sentence illustrates the point that form and meaning function independently. A grammatical sentence can be nonsense, and a valid idea can exist in an ungrammatical sentence.

A detailed explanation of the function of verb tenses would take too much time in a writing class, but a few points can be made. Students are intrigued at the novel (to them) idea that one purpose of verb tenses is the sequencing of events. A good example of this is the past perfect tense, which many of them rarely if ever use, although of course they understand it. The temporal sequence is easily understood—the writer stands in the present and refers to an event that happened before another event in the past (I *had* already *eaten* when he *arrived*). The logical explanation of this sequence

may be clear, but if a form is not used intuitively, it can be difficult to master. Even given an explanation of the purpose and form of this tense, most students who do not customarily use it have not mastered it by the end of a thirteen-week course. This lag in mastery does not suggest that they should be deprived of an explanation of its purpose and form; it suggests instead that patience is needed. Those students who are interested in improving their writing skills have a good chance of reformatting their usage to include the past perfect over time. Student examples of the correct use of the past perfect can be included in the classroom review of student work. Examples of student sentences where it *should* have been used can also be reviewed. Teachers can provide an apprenticeship in the use of grammatical tools in their classes. Mastery depends upon the industry and motivation of each student.

In rule- and error-based teaching, the objective is perfection. On the other hand, if the objective is to use language *in a new way*, as Plotnik suggests, a quest for perfection can decimate inspiration. Hacker (2007: 14) writes, “As you rough out an initial draft, focus your attention on ideas and organization. You can think about sentence structure and word choice later.” Andrea A. Lunsford, Cheryl Glenn, and Alyssa O’Brien (2005: 7) and Peter Elbow (1981: 48) agree that students of writing need the chance to create a first draft where they can wander through the argument and try various ways to express it without worrying about the rules, so teachers should time their remarks and exercises regarding syntax to allow for this. Students need to know when to concentrate on syntax and when to let it go. This, too, is an important lesson.

After thoughts are put down in a first draft, a teacher can help students work on sentence structure and word choice. It is at this point, between drafts, when sentences can be repaired or refined, and in the process, principles of syntax can be introduced. If a student does not know how sentences are constructed, it can be difficult to write good ones. It would be like a carpenter trying to make perfect corners without intimate skill with his tools. Since the class is working on similar subject matter, review of selected examples of their peers’ work can help all of them in their own essays.

When attempting to perceive the underlying skeleton of a sentence, another valuable linguistic concept is the distinction between *concrete* and *grammatical* language. Concrete language consists of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Concrete words represent real objects or concepts, things we can touch and define. The S, V, and O will be among the concrete words in the sentence. Grammatical language is definable by its function, not by its meaning; it links words, marks tense, and performs other supporting func-

tions. In the sentence “*The leaf has fallen off the green tree,*” the concrete words are *leaf, fallen, green,* and *tree*. The grammatical words are *the, has, off,* and *the*. *The* indicates that this is a specific leaf, and a specific tree, *off* indicates that the leaf has fallen from a higher place to a lower place, and *has* indicates that the act of falling is complete. These grammatical words perform the same function regardless of the concrete word they are paired with. *The* lacks the semantic nuances or multiple meanings that *tree* could have.

By stripping out the grammatical words, a skeletal form of the sentence is revealed (*leaf, fallen, green, tree*). (At this point, a brief excursion into modifiers, in this case an adjective *green* and a prepositional phrase *off the green tree*, might be warranted, but the focus should remain on the skeleton.)

After isolating the concrete language in a randomly chosen selection, it might be interesting to determine the ratio of concrete to grammatical words. In the above sentence, the ratio is four to four. Half of the words (*the, has, off, the*) are grammatical and thus ineligible candidates to be the S, V, or O, thus potentially making identification of the skeleton simpler.

#### *Additional Grammar Exercises*

1. Have the class create a sentence, beginning with a subject, verb, and object (perhaps “John took a photograph”). Request that they modify it with appositives, clauses, adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, and so on. My classes usually become engaged in turning the sentence into a story. There is often a tendency toward the grisly: *John, the policeman, quickly took a black-and-white photograph of the mutilated corpse, which was lying on the sidewalk.*
2. Sample sentences, possibly from students’ essays, could be reduced to their skeletons and then reexpanded with the use of modifiers to sentences with a different meaning.
3. Representative sentences from student work can be analyzed, changed, or improved by the class as a whole or in groups. Focus can move between exemplary sentences and poorly crafted ones. This exercise can be done over and over again as the class progresses, stabilizing grammatical points by repetition.

#### **Sociolinguistics**

Sociolinguistics is the study of language communities. Everyone belongs to several such groups (family, church, school, sports team) and uses a different style and vocabulary in each one. Claiming membership in their various linguistic communities helps students in turn to claim their roles in these communities, and in the larger community where, in the United States, Standard

English rules. Students who are members of communities where nonstandard English is spoken do not speak nonstandard English all the time, and all of us have elements of nonstandard English in our repertoire. Authors from Mark Twain to Alice Walker have effectively told stories using the language of a nonstandard group; in other words, nonstandard English is useful not only orally but also in fine writing. One just needs to know how and where to use it.

Steven Pinker (1994: 413–14) writes:

I am not saying that instruction in standard English grammar and composition is a tool to perpetuate an oppressive white patriarchal capitalist status quo and that The People should be liberated to write however they please. Some aspects of how people express themselves in some settings are worth trying to change. What I am calling for is innocuous: a more thoughtful discussion of language and how people use it, replacing . . . old wives' tales with the best scientific knowledge available.

. . . most standard English is just that, standard, in the same sense that certain units of currency or household voltages are said to be standard. It is just common sense that people should be given every encouragement and opportunity to learn the dialect that has become the standard one in their society and to employ it in many formal settings.

Standard English is possessed of no inherent superiority, yet Pinker reminds us of the advantage to the writer of employing the standard in certain situations. Many classes have a diverse population that might include immigrants or children of immigrants, students with a distinctive accent, students who speak African American vernacular English, and others. It is important, often critical, for both those students and the rest of the class, to understand that written and spoken language are different forms. Since today's students communicate regularly through texting and e-mail in "sounds like" language, the boundaries between written and spoken language have become obscured in a new way, so it is important to explain the distinctions.

A bluebird sings in Bluebird instinctively, and research is clarifying the extent to which human language is or is not also instinctual. People raised imprisoned in closets or in the care of wolves do not benefit from the social development periods when this instinct blossoms into a native language, but otherwise we learn to speak long before we enter school. Written language, however, must be taught, beginning with the alphabet.

Throughout the world, a more or less standard form of written English is used that provides a means of communication across a wide range of dialects and accents. Some of the fine contemporary writers from India may be

difficult for an American to understand when they speak, but their written stories are perfectly comprehensible. No matter what version of English the student speaks, he or she must, as Pinker suggests, master written Standard English. Standard written language is the common ground, no matter what accent or dialect the student speaks.

### *Sociolinguistics Exercises*

1. Discuss how a family's dinner table conversation changes when there is a guest. Does it depend on who the guest is? How are the conversations different? This will require some research out of class. Over a holiday weekend, students could report on the various linguistic communities they were part of during their holiday dinners and the practices in each. Over Thanksgiving, for example, they might watch a football game with one set of family members, and eat the holiday meal with another set. How does the linguistic behavior change between the two groups? Decibel level? Vocabulary used? Politeness customs? Do the forms of address change?
2. Have each student analyze the places and situations in which he or she speaks nonstandard English. Roughly speaking, what percentage of spoken interactions are conducted in nonstandard English? For those who regularly speak nonstandard English, identify places or situations where they speak Standard English. For those who regularly speak Standard English, identify nonstandard phrases or usages in his or her everyday speech.
3. When students take fifteen minutes or so to learn the basic outlines of the language(s) their forebears spoke, they often gain a fresh perspective on the purpose and meaning of language. A writing class is not a psychology class, but identity is a salient issue whenever a person writes, even academically. Part of one's cultural identity is one's linguistic heritage, even if it was centuries ago, because closely held family and cultural patterns change so slowly.

Students can be encouraged to take a few minutes to familiarize themselves with the language(s) their forebears spoke. The Omniglot Web site ([www.omniglot.com](http://www.omniglot.com)) provides a list of useful phrases, in a large number of languages, including some sound files. A Google search on the Navajo language produced several Web sites with illustrations and audio clips explaining the language. One can also click on the MLA's map ([www.mla.org/map\\_single](http://www.mla.org/map_single)) to discover where in the United States the heritage language is spoken.

## Conclusion

This article encourages the introduction of certain linguistic principles to writing classes. High school would be the better level for this introduction, but failing that, it could be done in freshman college classes. The necessary information can be presented by all teachers, regardless of their familiarity with the broader field of linguistics. Through short exercises, the basics of morphology, semantics, syntax, and sociolinguistics can be introduced, thus giving students knowledge of how language is constructed and used. For students with even a moderate level of interest and industry, this knowledge can lead to improvement in their writing skill.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

1. For example, the “List of Most Common Errors” from *The Everyday Writer* (Lunsford, Glenn, and O’Brien 2005: 4):
  1. Wrong word
  2. Missing comma after an introductory element
  3. Incomplete or missing documentation
  4. Vague pronoun reference
  5. Spelling (including homonyms)
  6. Mechanical error with a quotation
  7. Unnecessary comma
  8. Unnecessary or missing capitalization
  9. Missing word
  10. Faulty sentence structure
  11. Missing comma with a nonrestrictive element
  12. Unnecessary shift in verb tense
  13. Missing comma in a compound sentence
  14. Unnecessary or missing apostrophe (including its/it’s)
  15. Fused (run-on sentence)
  16. Comma splice
  17. Lack of pronoun-antecedent agreement
  18. Poorly integrated quotation
  19. Unnecessary or missing hyphen
  20. Sentence fragment
2. Discussion of linguistics in the classroom will be continued on Ann Evans’s blog [linguisticsintheclassroom.com](http://linguisticsintheclassroom.com), in progress.



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