A Comment on "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar"

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(thereby to command him), so it was not out of his foot to be trod upon, but in a (medium) out of his side to be his fellow-feeler, his equal and companion." As Nist puts it, the comment "sounds like some turn of the century suffragist, or . . . a Bible-belt feminist during the ERA campaign of the 1970s." But, she asks, "When and by whom was this written?" A good question.

Indeed, I first encountered this idea in a "Dear Abby" column of some twenty or thirty years ago, and Ms. Van Buren commented that she knew nothing of its source. The rationale for the creation of woman from man's rib dates from long before the time of "Mary Tattle—well and Ione Hit-him-home, Spinsters." It derives, in fact, from mainstream medieval and male-dominated tradition.

For instance, some two and a half centuries before Tattle-well, Geoffrey Chaucer put into the mouth of one of the Canterbury Pilgrims (the Parson) these words:

For he [God] ne made hire [Eve] nat of the heved of Adam, for she sholde nat clayme to greet lordship./ For ther as the womman hath the maistrie, she maketh to much desray . . . . / Also, certes, God ne made nat womman of the foot of Adam, for she ne sholde not been holden to lowe; for she kan nat pa
ciently suffre. But God made womman of the ryb of Adam, for womman sholde be felawe unto man." (ParsT, 925-27)

The Parson's Tale, significantly placed at the end of Chaucer's great work, treats penitence. The comment on Eve's creation appears with a misogynistic twist in the section devoted to remedying the sin of lust. "To knytte up al this feeste," Chaucer presumably assigned to the Parson a sermon he had previously translated from the French. The explanation of the significance of Adam's rib to woman's lot, however, is not to be found in the French prototype. It was actually a medieval commonplace.

At least a century before Chaucer, Saint Thomas Aquinas set the idea forth in the Summa Theologica, Part I, Chapter 92:

It was right for the woman to be made from a rib of man. First, to signify that social union of man and woman, for the woman should neither use authority over man, and so be subject to man's contempt as his slave, and so she was not made from his head; nor was it right for her to be subject to man's contempt as his slave, and so she was not made from his feet. . . . (tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, rev. Daniel J. Sullivan)

Perhaps some patristic scholar can trace the topos further back and answer Nist's question with magisterial finality.

In other words, the Adam's rib idea, like many other observations on the nature of women, can be used to support either a traditional view or, with a slight change in emphasis, a feminist one. If Mortimer Adler had seen fit to include a heading such as "Feminism" or "Women" in his Syntopicon, teachers of women's literature like Nist and I might have an easier time, but how was he to know the value of such ideas in the Neo-Victorian 1950s?

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A Comment on "Grammar, Grammars, and The Teaching of Grammar"

Patrick Hartwell tells us that the grammar issue was settled for him twenty
years ago ("Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" [CE, February 1985]). He dramatizes the point by quoting what I call the "harmful effect" statement from the NCTE's 1963 report Research in Written Composition, then tops it off with the catchy phrase "magical thinking," a quote from Janet Emig.

Hartwell quotes a lot of other people, too, including me, but he spends most of his space rehashing definitions of the word grammar, as if such information would somehow settle the "grammar issue" for everyone. Not only does that list not settle the issue, it does not even suggest what the issue is.

The source of the misunderstanding of the grammar issue is tied up with a problem of definition, it's true. But the term we need to define is not "grammar," but rather "formal grammar." We need to clear up the distinction between the two terms. The failure of Braddock et al. to do so in that 1963 report has been the source of a great deal of misunderstanding in our profession. What did they mean when they declared in "strong and unqualified terms" that the "teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on improvement in writing"?

What exactly is "formal grammar"? The term refers to a separate class in the curriculum in which students study grammar in a "formal" rather than an applied or functional way, grammar taught with no connection to writing. I remember such grammar classes myself, from the 1940s, when we learned definitions, when we parsed and diagrammed sentences; in those days we even memorized a long list of prepositions.

Every one of the research studies that Hartwell mentions, the research that helped settle the grammar issue for him, has to do with "formal grammar." That's the grammar that Hoyt worried about in the curriculum for young children back in 1906; that's the grammar that Ash and Frogner were experimenting with in the 1930s; and that's the method of teaching grammar that the widely touted study by Elley et al. in New Zealand was all about.

Professor Hartwell complains that "the two sides [of the grammar dispute] are unable to agree on how to interpret such research." He despairs of critics and nitpickers like me who refuse to put the "grammar issue" to rest. Just look at the high marks given to the New Zealand study, he reminds us; it was carefully designed and carried out, its validity unquestionable, etc., etc. But what do we critics say? "Martha Kolln, when her attention is drawn to the study, thinks the whole experiment 'suspect.'"

You're wrong about me, Professor Hartwell. I am quite willing to put to rest the issue of "formal grammar." I agree with you—and with Elley et al. and with Braddock et al. that formal method is certainly not the way to teach grammar.

There must be a better way.

As far back as 1935, the NCTE recommended a better way. In An Experience Curriculum in English, an NCTE Curriculum Commission called for an end to formal grammar and advocated instead "instrumental grammar"—what is now often called "functional grammar" and what I choose to call "rhetorical grammar." Their lesson plans, which begin with the study of
adverbials in the second grade, include some twenty-five structures that the students should be familiar with by twelfth grade. The purpose of this kind of grammar study is to help students understand their language as they learn to use it, and to do so developmentally, throughout their school years. This is not the kind of grammar that researchers, such as Elley et al., are testing.

When I characterized the New Zealand study as “suspicious,” I was not referring to its methodology. I was referring to the whole enterprise of grammar research that continues to flog the long-dead corpse of “formal grammar.” All of those studies that we have been hearing about all of these years, from Hartwell and from others—studies carried out over the past eight decades—have asked the same question. Does the study of formal grammar improve writing?

And how is the answer pursued? The New Zealand study is typical: The experimental groups studied grammar in a formal, nonrhetorical way; the grammar they studied was completely isolated from their composition classes. Take the passive voice, for example. The group using The Oregon Curriculum—that’s the group who “proved” that studying transformational grammar has little or no effect on the improvement of writing—learned about the passive voice as a transformational rule, a formula; in their text the passive is never mentioned in connection with rhetoric or style or sentence effectiveness.

Let me put my use of the word suspicious into its original context, (“Reply to Ron Shook,” CCC 32 [1981]):

Am I the only suspicious person around? Doesn’t anyone else suspect that grammar is being set up in studies like those of Elley et al.? What would be the result, I wonder, if someone who really believes in the usefulness of teaching grammar designed an experiment in which grammar was deliberately brought into the composition class as a teaching tool, if the teacher made every possible effort to help students write, using traditional or structural or transformational grammar, or all three—whatever works.

I don’t understand the objection to that kind of “rhetorical grammar.”

Back in 1963 when we saw the words grammar and harmful there in the same sentence, we panicked. And some among us translated that fear into pedagogy. The result? We’re not to waste our time on grammar anymore; and we’re not supposed to use such terminology as “subject” and “predicate” and “participle” and “gerund.” Our students should learn to write by writing—only by writing, by letting it all hang out. Let’s not inhibit their creativity by calling unnecessary attention to the structures they use; and we’re certainly to have no “lessons” on sentence structure or parts of speech, on “formal grammar.”

How foolish. How harmful. The result is a generation (or more) of students who have no language for discussing their language. We teach them terminology in every other field—in science and math and history and geography and computer science and physical education, in literature, and in French. But not in their own language. We have produced a generation of teachers whose philosophy is based on the notion that grammar is for teachers to know, but not for students (and, in fact, the only title on the NCTE booklist concerning grammar in
the curriculum has that philosophy as its title: Grammar for Teachers).

We at the college level will not solve the problem of the language arts curriculum by turning our composition classes into grammar classes. I have never advocated such measures, despite Professor Hartwell’s words to the contrary (‘‘She concludes with a stirring call to place grammar instruction at the center of the composition curriculum . . .’’ [106]; ‘‘Martha Kolln’s argument for teaching formal grammar . . .’’ [124].) But I do believe that rhetorical grammar has a place in our composition class, because of course grammar is there (Hartwell labels it ‘‘the grammar in our heads’’). Beyond that, at the college level we certainly do have some influence on teacher training.

Professor Hartwell says that the grammar issue is a complicated one. Indeed it is. Unfortunately, articles such as his, despite its definitions and flow charts and analogies, provide little, if any, clarification.

In conclusion, I offer an analogy of my own. Imagine a research study carried out by the History Department to find out if learning the dates of historical events enhances a student’s understanding of history. During one period a week the usual history lesson is replaced by an experimental class where students spend their time memorizing dates: they recite the dates, they diagram the dates, they drill. At the end of the experiment—a semester, perhaps, or a year—all the history students, those who studied the dates in their special class as well as those who did not, are given two tests: one is a test of dates; the other is a test of the students’ general knowledge, or understanding, of history.

Here are the results: (1) The students in the experimental class score better on the test of dates, just as we would have predicted. (2) There is no correlation between the two tests; that is, students who score high on general knowledge are not significantly better at dates than those with a low general history score. Or, to put it another way, given a student’s high score on dates, we cannot predict a comparable high score on general knowledge.

Now, what curriculum decisions should the history department make on the basis of these data? If they follow our lead, not only will they eliminate the class devoted to dates, they will remove all mention of dates from their other history classes as well. They will, in fact, declare far and wide that henceforth there shall be no time spent discussing dates in history classes—that time thus spent, because it displaces instruction in more important ideas, has a harmful effect on the understanding of history.

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Patrick Hartwell Responds

There’s little to be accomplished by talking across paradigms, so I’ll try to be brief about this. Professor Kolln reads carefully the sections of my paper that deal with her work; she ignores the rest of what I had to say. Her ‘‘instrumental grammar’’ or ‘‘functional grammar’’ or ‘‘rhetorical grammar’’ (par. 9) is my grammar 5, defined, referenced, and given an acknowledged role in the teaching of composition (see the response of Joe