



THE STUDY OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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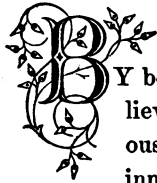
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BY both pupils and teachers the study of grammar is, I believe, quite extensively accounted as exceptionally tedious and unprofitable, mainly a bore and a failure. The innumerable text-books for it have few admirers; teachers are apt to go from one to another of them in weariness and despair. I do not think there is any good and sufficient reason why this should be so.

If I am not mistaken, a main cause of the failure is that many or most teachers and grammar-makers hold up before themselves the wrong end as that which has to be striven after.

The object, normally, of English grammar is usually defined to be, "to teach how to speak and write English correctly."

This is an error, imported into English grammar out of the study of foreign tongues, especially the classical. We cannot learn to speak or write Latin, for example, except by the grammar; the inflections and their use, the modes of construction, the words and their meanings and their connections, all have to be acquired laboriously out of a book. But it is not so with our native speech; that we acquire by a wholly different process, in learning to speak at all. The words, and inflections, and constructions of our mother-tongue we bring to school with us; they are already the well-established habit of our minds, a sort of second nature. Our habits of expression, it is true, may be in some respects wrong, by others' fault or our own; we may need correction in one or another point. But getting such correction is not learning grammar; nor can it be effectively gotten out of a book; it is, like improvement of faulty manners, a subject for constant reproof, and instruction, and imitation of good models. In both, book instruction may undoubtedly be made a valuable aid; the study of grammar will bear its part finally, in the formation of accurate habits of speech; but it must be in a secondary way, by a kind of reflex action.

That is to say, the position and aim of grammatical study is changed by the circumstance that in their own language the pupils have the whole body of facts already at their command, at their very tongue's end. The word is not "you must do this and that;" it is,

rather, "observe that we do this and that." The learner's attention is to be directed to these facts which he knows, and he is to be taught to understand something about them—to distinguish and classify them; to note their relations and connections; to see, to a certain extent, their origin and reasons. And the main and direct object of the study is simply this better comprehension of familiar facts. Only, the knowledge is also valuable because of other objects to which it leads. It trains the powers of reflection, and gives a start toward the study of mind in and through its means of expression. It prepares the way for the intelligent and rapid acquisition of other languages. And it tends toward the better command and more accurate use of the English itself; and to an extent that would alone make the study worth pursuing; although, as I have said, this result is not the primary aim, and is best attained by being kept in the back ground.

For getting this kind of training, for mastering the principles and relations of language,

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is not only a sufficient means, it is even the best to be found. On the one hand, as the pupil here has full possession of the facts with which he has to deal, his mind can be more readily turned to that which he is to be made to understand about them, and his attention kept more steadily upon it. Any one grasps and arranges but awkwardly the relations of things when it is only by an effort that he holds the things themselves; a good part of his mental power is used up in the mere exertion of memory; take the phrases which are familiar, in the use of which he can detect a fault instinctively and without reflection, and you leave him his whole mind to work at the point you want to make. On the other hand, you can here best avoid merely mechanical knowledge. A boy may declare *bonus* an "adjective" for no other reason than that he has found it called so in the dictionary, and he has learned in a similar manner that *bono* is its "dative," and that when he uses what the grammar calls the "dative" of *puer*, which his dictionary defines to be a "noun," he must put *bono* instead of *bonorum* with it, by rule so and so. This and other things like it he may do deftly, with as little real comprehension of what it all means as the child has who can give all the capes of Africa in their order, and does not quite know that a cape

is not an article of dress, and Africa its wearer. So with a verb; he may give it the right name because it makes its forms in such and such a way. Such mock knowledge can be more surely and thoroughly controlled and prevented in English.

This is no small matter. All teachers in higher institutions know how lamentably destitute of real comprehension of even the parts of speech many pupils prove themselves in their entrance examinations. And without it, all pretended grammatical knowledge is a sham. Some minds, undoubtedly, are almost blind to even the broadest grammatical distinctions; but a great many more are dulled and baffled by having the distinctions presented only as involved in and obscured by difficult and half-held phraseology. Give me a man who can with full intelligence take to pieces an English sentence, brief and not too complicated, even, and I will welcome him as better prepared for further study in other languages than if he had read both Cæsar and Virgil, and could parse them, in the routine style in which they are often read and parsed.

I would, then, roughly

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the things to be learned in English Grammar somewhat thus:

1. The ready and intelligent distinction of the parts of speech, by their use, their office in the sentence.
2. The systematic knowledge of English inflectional forms and their uses; including the simple syntax of words and phrases, on no elaborate or exhaustive plan.
3. The construction of the sentence, with its phrases and clauses used in the office of different parts of speech and equivalent to them.

The study of the English language, if properly presented, affords in itself, without the importation into it of anything that belongs to the grammar of other languages, ancient or modern, a sufficient foundation for the study of other tongues, and for that of language itself.—*Connecticut School Journal*.

DIGNITY of position adds to dignity of character, pretty much as it does to dignity of carriage. Give us a proud position, and we are compelled to act up to it.

AN indiscreet person is like an unsealed letter which every one may read, but which is seldom worth reading.