The new SAT and fundamental misunderstandings about grammar teaching

PHILIP A. BRALICH

Some recent difficulties with grammar in the USA

THE TEACHING of traditional grammar has been on the wane in education for the last 25 to 50 years, in the face of more interactive classrooms, more exotic developments in transformational grammar, and research suggesting that it may not play an effective role in improving student's writing. Recently, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in teaching at least some of its fundamental concepts. This new interest has taken on a more imperative bent as secondary schools and to some extent primary schools have been feeling pressure to teach basic grammatical concepts in order to prepare students for the 45 multiple-choice questions on grammar and usage in the new SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test). Teachers and schools that have not done well enough in this area will be held to account by parents and politicians, both of whom tend to believe that instruction in traditional formal grammar is the best means to this end. Teachers who send students off, without this training, to undergo the new SAT will have some serious questions to answer if those students scores are too low.

Introduction

This refocus on teaching grammar has raised many old arguments (and much of the same confusion) that caused grammar to be taken off the curriculum in many American schools in the first place. Such arguments even led to the remarkable decision by the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) to make a resolution in 1985 urging 'the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage the teaching of grammar.' While many educators, parents, students, and politicians have all along been in favor of teaching grammar (in spite of claims by the NCTE and others), their voices have largely been ignored or drowned out through the years of what David Mulroy (a classicist at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee) has named *The War Against Grammar* in his book of that title.

As a Professor at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, CA, charged with the responsibility to prepare students for Foreign Language study in a wide variety of languages, I can attest that a basic knowledge of grammar is the most important factor in reducing attrition and enhancing student success rates. I have a Ph.D. in theoretical linguistics with a focus on theoretical syntax. I have taught traditional grammar to native speakers, ESL grammar to non-native speakers, and composition to both. I have never found any of the anti-grammar articles or positions to be convincing. In fact, they have always

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struck me as more of a political movement than as a reasoned position taken in the face of convincing evidence – a political movement rooted in the profits to be made in the years of the ESL boom in the 80s and 90s, profits eyed by those who did not know grammar.

Since that time, the only tangible results of that policy have been a significant lessening in American foreign language skills and foreign language program enrollments, significantly increased need for remedial reading and writing programs at colleges and universities across the United States, and complaints from business and government about the lack of verbal skills in those who have been schooled since grammar teaching has fallen out of favor. Thus, rather than the leap forward for language arts that one might have expected from the NCTE position, there has been a lamentable and evident decline in language arts skills.

These last few decades of the 'war against grammar' have left serious gaps in the understanding of what constitutes a proper curriculum in English grammar. Thus, while there is a stronger interest in grammar and in preparing students for the new SAT, there are many educators who simply were not trained in grammar and do not know where to begin. In particular, some rather deeply rooted misunderstandings about grammar have grown up and stand in the way of the educator wishing to address this need and the politicians and parents wishing to evaluate the attempts to address this need.

Ways of misunderstanding

I wish to address four such misunderstandings here, in order to provide parents, politicians, students, and the otherwise concerned with a rubric by which they can evaluate both grammar teaching and teachers, and at the same time get a sense that the grammar movement is valuable and the new SAT is not insurmountable.

Misunderstanding #1

All grammar rules are equally as distrusted and untrustworthy as, 'Don't end a sentence with a preposition', 'Don't let modifiers dangle', and 'Don't split infinitives'. Nothing could be further from the truth. People routinely accept almost such rules and often even find a certain elegance in them. However, even though each of the three cited is an actual rule of grammar, they form a group of so-called 'unnecessary grammar rules' – and they are about the only rules of grammar anyone really complains about. I suspect that most people who don't know their grammar find it easier to memorize one of these handy and well-known rules for grousing about grammar than going to the trouble of actually learning it. This is like knowing to say 'Freud had a mother problem' as a means of escaping the responsibility to actually read Freud.

The SAT

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is a test in the United States for college admission, developed by the College Entrance Examination Board. It consists of questions testing verbal and mathematical skills, graded on a scale from 200 to 800 points and according to percentile ranking. Nearly every US college requires the SAT as part of its admissions process, and, for this reason, more than two million students take it every year. The SAT is a measure of critical skills needed for academic success, and is based on skills learned in high school. It includes tests in critical reading, mathematics, and writing. It is typically taken by high school juniors and seniors, but must be taken by students of any age who wish to be admitted to most U.S. educational institutions. Each section of the SAT is scored on a scale of 200–800.

Misunderstanding #2

Parts of speech, parts of sentence, and sentence types are three not two sets of terms. This misunderstanding is a little more complicated than the previous one and the next two, but it is the most important to know if we want to create or evaluate a grammar course or textbook. In beginning to approach grammar the first thing anyone needs to know is that words are made into phrases and phrases into sentences, and so we need an appropriate set of terms. The main thing that confuses people about these terms is that most books fail to point out that parts of speech and parts of the sentence form two distinct sets with the term *verb* common to both. Add punctuation and spelling and one is ready for the New SAT and for college.

Dividing the three steps in building a sentence (word, phrase, sentence) into three sets of terms and laying them side by side (as in the table below) demonstrates two things: First,

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Parts of Speech	Parts of Sentence	Sentence Types
Noun	Subject	Declarative
Verb	Predicate	Interrogative
Adjective	Verb	Imperative
Adverb	Object (indirect, direct, of prep.)	Exclamatory
Preposition	Complement (subjective, objective, nominal, adjectival)	Simple
Conjunction	Noun phrase	Compound
Comparatives	Verb phrase	Complex
Noun morphology (-s, -es, 's)	Adjective phrase	Compound/Complex
Verb Morphology (helping verbs, -ing, ed, etc.)	Adverb Phrase	Relative clauses/ Reduced clauses

that there is a lot less to learning grammar than there is to learning such other subjects as math, chemistry, geometry, home economics, or auto mechanics; second, that there really is a fixed and bounded body of knowledge underlying the grammar of a language, and that knowledge can be mastered.

Misunderstanding #3

There is a standardized vocabulary for referring to grammatical functions. There are several places in the set of traditional grammar terms where different books and different traditions use different terminology. This is unfortunate and should be addressed. The NCTE for example should be establishing a set of common terminology in these areas rather than trying to eliminate the teaching of grammar. There aren't that many more than we see here, but these are particularly confusing.

main clause	=	independent clause
subordinate clause	=	dependent clause
participial phrase	=	reduced adjective or reduced adverb clause
bare infintives	=	reduced infinitives
subject complement	=	predicate adjective or predicate nominative

It is particularly troubling that, if we know any one of the above sets, the other terms sound like they must be nuanced versions of something in grammar that we don't yet know. Grammar books need to settle on one set but they should also point out (perhaps in a foot note) that the other terms also exist. It is confusing if, after mastering the concepts of main and subordinate clause, we hear someone talking about independent and dependent clauses. Worse yet, are the terms *predicate nominative* and *predicate adjective* to refer to the two kinds of *subject complement*?

Misunderstanding #4

The term *gerund* is often dropped in grammatical circles the way some people drop the Kennedy name in political circles. If you know what a gerund is it shows you are a learned person. If you don't know what it is, you may be marked as illiterate or, at best, one of the semi-literate dharma-bum sort who can only do flow-of-consciousness writing and are incapable of the introspection that grammar requires. However, both the pride and the shame that come with 'gerund' are unjustified, as the term itself is somewhat ill-formed as a grammatical term. A gerund, as *ET* readers know, is a present participle used as a noun.

However, what most people fail to note is that an infinitive can also be used as a noun but no one has bothered to make a whole new term for it. For example, we can call a present participle when used as a noun 'a present participle used as a noun' or we can call it a *gerund*. However, an infinitive used as a noun can only be called *an infinitive used as a noun*: no special word was dreamed up for it. The word *gerund* is therefore unbalanced, and an utter waste of grammatical terminology. It makes a student of grammar feel that there must be something else going on. Since we do not give an infinitive

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a special new name when used as a noun, the term *gerund* should be dropped and *participle* used for all purposes. It is unnecessarily confusing and could lead to elitist pretensions that obscure a real knowledge of grammar.

In sum, with the New SAT here and unavoidable, American high school students are going to need to know more grammar and high school teachers are going to have to teach more grammar. For the parents, politicians, educators outside English departments, and students at large, awareness of the above four misunderstandings about grammar will take them a long way toward evaluating their own skills and the skills of those charged with teaching grammar. Hopefully, armed with this knowledge, the NCTE position will be changed, grammar teaching will begin in earnest again, students will pass their new SATs, foreign language skills will increase, and politicians and business men will once again respect the institutes of higher education from which they choose their rank and file. ■

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