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Grammar

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A Personal Grammar History

The first scent that comes to me as I type away in an arena of electronic grammars, is the scent of recently dried Elmer's glue. You see, my first memory of grammar comes from a little book of glue, black ink, and pastel colored cardboard: my phonics book. I probably was no more than four when my mother made this little book for me, and I can still remember the picture of a Cat-with a hard "C" drawn below it, and the way I would sit on our couch with my mother saying "Kat."

Thus, my first memories of grammar (actually phonics) are associated with things parental, familiar, and sweet-as sweet as the smell of my Mother's cooking.

Of course you can't always learn from graceful black-line drawings, drawn with a familiar hand. Eventually you have to make your way to school-to the place of spelling tests.

Now, from the build-up of the previous sentence you probably expect some sort of childhood horror story of large people commanding large leaps of abstract understanding-the ability to realize the difference between noun and verb, home and school. Oddly, enough that was not the case for me. I loved school, generally, and I was (as I still am) very eager to please. I remember writing stories throughout elementary school, and I remember the praise and encouragement I received for them. The only nagging memory-the only bit of black around the edges of my written sun were spelling tests.

I have a vague memory of my first spelling test in (I think) First Grade. I was holding one of those ridiculously large pencils (something odd about the way the smallest writers get the largest pencils), preparing to write. Other than that, I really can't remember much—a big pencil and tanish paper with a strange system of blue and red lines.

Later my memories become clearer, or I should really say memory. To be strictly honest, I have one collective memory of all the spelling tests I endured through grade school. The memory goes something like this:

> "A tattered sheet of paper ('Chris, you really should take better care of your supplies'); a A freshly sharpened pencil ('Form a line and sharpen your pencils'); mouthing 'receive' to myself ('R-E-C-E-E-V-E'); putting down the pencil gingerly ('Everyone must stop writing now'); and—finally—the exchanging of papers ('Hand your papers to your right please')."

In this exchange—a sort of economy of linguistic shame—I would mark down my classmate's incorrect words—always giving them the benefit of the doubt if handwriting became a purposeful cipher, and they would mark mine the same way. Two days later a percentage (75%,80%, 70%,90%, never 100%); a grade (mainly "Cs" and "Bs") and the report cards: "Chris is an average speller."

I didn't want to be an average speller, but I learned that people like me, people who could only hear the music of words, not see them dance before closed eyes, never could hope to be more than average spellers. We could write well, do pretty good in math, but we would never be good spellers—never win class spelling bees, never know how to spell "receive". . . "recieve". . ."receeve."

So, I matriculated into Junior High as an average speller and above average student. Ashland Junior High was an odd combination of Devil's Island (inmates bullied by administrators and upperclassmen) and a social science experiment—"Where do I fit, where do I fit?" It was in this florescent lit purgatory that I began to unlearn writing as an act of play. It was in 7th grade that I entered in to Mrs. Mahney's class. Mrs. Maheny spent a great deal of time teaching "GRAMMAR," and this was the sort of grammar that God might of handed down to Moses, and let me tell you that the God of Grammar was a harsh and jealous God. My papers, generally written about the stories in our reader, came back rewritten in red—my papers hemorrhaged run-ons (whatever they were); comma splices (something about sentences?) and "MISSPELLINGS!" Papers came back with comments like: "Good idea—poor grammar and syntax." And I started to see "C" and "B-" written across the top of my papers. Of course it could have been worse. I still had "Good ideas." Still, I began to think that good ideas weren't as important as the "right words" that were supposed to cradle them.

I can't blame everything on Mrs. Mahney. She was the teacher my sister (a brilliant writer and speller) remembered fondly from Junior High, and my parents thought she was a committed teacher. There has to have been some good that came to me from her class; maybe some of her dictums about grammar sank in. I really can't recall. All that I can now remember is that I stopped writing for fun. I stopped composing stories to entertain myself and others, and I only did what writing teachers asked me to do. Sometimes I wondered (or is this just a projection?) if I could learn to spell correctly through some sort of magic. Maybe a moment of clarity, or a feverent prayer to the God of GRAMMAR would give me spelling and grammar?

Ultimately, I found out that the God of GRAMMAR does not listen to prayers. My High School years (all spent at Ashland High School) are a testament to the God of Grammar's steely

nature. What I remember about High School English classes is that I continued to get the "Good ideas, poor grammar" remark, and that this remark came on a pale blue sheet (same shade as the unoxygenated blood that flees back towards your heart) called a "grading rubric." The rubric was essentially the same throughout my High School career, but I ultimately managed to not loathe this pastel sheet. My teachers in High School had a more generous bent than Mrs. Maheny, and they were, oddly enough, willing to teach me about how my syntax might serve me better.

The hero of this little story, "How Sentence Combining Saved Chris' Writing," is Butch McBain—a name that even gives off the faint scent of a movie western hero, a John Wayne in tweed. Mr. McBain was writing a book on sentence-combining, and we (his 10th grade class) were the beneficiaries of his effort. For the course of his class (half a year) we played with semi-colons, conjunctions, and odd kernel sentences about cowboys, 60s rock groups, and guy named Pete who wanted to play for Vanilla fudge. Slowly, without myself even noticing, I began to love the semi-colon, understand the mysteries of and, however, and nor. As I wrote my papers for Mr. McBain, I began to notice that my papers were returning less bloodied. The sentence was my friend in Mr. McBain's class, and I began to think that the God of GRAMMAR had heard at least a few of my prayers. I still wasn't a "good speller," but I was a fine maker of sentences—a craftsman who could take a simple metal (an alloy of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) and make fine chains of words.

As I sit here, typing away, I'm trying to remember how my craft of "word chaining" (from keys, to keystrokes, to symbols, to words, to sentences, to this paper) developed after Mr. McBain's class, and the honest to God truth is that I can't. My undergraduate years (both at Southern Oregon State College and the University of Oregon) were a blur in terms of learning

about grammar. It was as if my college teachers assumed that I knew all there was to know about grammar—both the prescriptive and descriptive aspects of it. Maybe this would have been different if I had been an undergraduate English major, but I was a history major. I had fine History teachers, and a couple of them even managed to be actively concerned about writing and grammar issues; however, not one of them ever thought to teach me (even with their marginal notations on my essays) grammar.

The only teacher I had for my undergraduate years was my Dad—one of my first teachers. Throughout high school, and even into college, we would occasionally sit together in our living room, and my Dad would read one of the papers I was working on. (This usually happened over the course of the odd weekend that I'd return home from the UofO—my 1970 Volvo station-wagon loaded to its gun-metal gray roof with dirty clothes and "Big Gulp" cups.)

Rather than proof-reading my papers, my Dad would read them through with me. He would be in his old rust colored easy-chair (what my mother referred to as "His awful chair"), and I would be in the family couch—immediately to my Dad's right. At the time, all I really wanted my father to do was copy edit my work ("home,"the college definition: "A place for free one day laundry service and copy-editing); however, I now see the value in my tutorial sessions with my Dad. Working on papers with my Dad allowed me, for the first time, to enter into his world: the world of reading, writing, and teaching. As my father unraveled the rules and mysteries of comma use, the semi-colon and the real importance of spelling, the distance between my Dad and myself started to close. For the whole of my adolescence I had convinced myself that my father and I were completely different, and I knew that my Dad didn't understand my needs, my ambitions, my dreams. I was, in short, a painfully self-aware and self-centered adolescent prior to conferencing about grammar with my Father.

So, sitting next to my Dad, my first teacher, I learned about the "whys" and "whats" of grammar, and more importantly I realized that it was possible for my Dad to understand my hopes and dreams. After all, he understood that I longed (in my own quiet way) to master grammar, and the proof of his understanding was that I now know not merely how to use a semi-colon, but how to explain its use to my students.

However, before I could learn to teach students about grammar, I had to convert myself into an English expert. Therefore I took a year's worth of classes at the college in my home town—Southern Oregon State University (SOSC). At SOSC I learned from people who I had known for the whole of my life, and one of these gentle people, Herman Schmeling, taught me about grammar and the delicate art of teaching it well. Herman's class was the grammar class that all undergraduate English majors had to take, and Herman's emphasis in this class was transformational grammar. It was here, in this class, that I learned about sentence combining, transformational sentence diagrams, and, most importantly, about how one might teach grammar to students.

Herman was a beautiful teacher. His kindness and compassion found expression in the way he had us do exercises in our books ("Do what you need to do"), and it even found expression in how he tested us—allowing us to retake tests until we mastered the subject. In the hands of Herman Schmeling, grammar of instruction ceased to be about the learning of ex cathedra rules and pronouncements, and it became the unraveling of the glorious machinery (like the intricate metal workings of the first chronometers) of language. In Herman's class, I saw that the study of grammar could be a humane and human art, and I realized that mastery learning (a place where tests and assignments aided, rather than tested, students' learning) was integral to the way that I was going to teach grammar to my students.

You see, I was at SOSC to prepare to become a secondary school teacher of English. At this point in my life, I wanted to teach the next generation of Oregon youth to read and write. Thus, in the fall of 1992, I started my year of teacher education and certification at SOSC, hoping that I could become, by dint of my soon to be awarded degree, an English teacher.

The first ten weeks of the year (we were on a quarter system at SOSC), were mind-numbingly dull. I had a reading and writing methods class, but this class was mainly lecture; soon I began to laugh grimly at the old, cynical joke that my colleagues and I shared, "Those who can't teach, teach others to teach." As I approached my half-day of student teaching, I began to approach desperation. If I didn't get some help from someone on how to teach, I was going to be eaten alive.

Enter Charlotte Hadella.

Charlotte was my "English Special Methods" teacher, and she taught me—at the most basic level—how to teach everything about English. Charlotte had taught for twelve years in Mississippi and Arkansas, and she was a disciple (in the best possible sense) of Nancy Atwell and Linda Rief. It was here, in Charlotte's class, that I learned for the first time about the idea of there being a writing process movement. Charlotte demonstrated, and had us demonstrate, teaching that incorporated group instruction (I now realize straight out of Kenneth Bruffee); process pedagogy (much like that described by Linda Rief in her work); and grammar instruction. Now, at this late point in the game, I began to see that grammar instruction was tied to issues of invention, writing, revision and editing. It seems obvious that grammar instruction should be tied to real student writing, but the thought had never occurred to me previously. It was Charlotte, Linda, and Nancy who convinced me of the importance of real writing tasks for my very real students.

A year later, I was teaching writing to some very real, and very different students, than anyone, even Linda Rief and Nancy Atwell, could have prepared me for. I was now an "At-Risk" GED instructor in a program for pregnant and parenting teen mothers. This was, for safe, middle class me, a very different world.

My students were compelled to study English, Math, Science, and Social Science with me (if they didn't attend, then they would lose their welfare checks, food stamps, and day care), and—needless to say—I encountered a little resistance to process writing teaching. My students were, quite naturally, more concerned with abusive boyfriends and parents (which roughly 70% of them had) than with writing and grammar. Thus, I had to get crafty. We played English Jeopardy, we wrote poems, we took practice GED tests, and I did an awful lot of pedagogical tap-dancing. The end result of this tap-dancing was that 25 out of 40 students (a record for our program) managed to pass the GED—including the required essay and English section (which consisted of reading comprehension, spelling, and grammar if I remember correctly) of the GED.

I was vindicated by my students' successes, but I was horribly underpaid (I got $ 13,000 for that year of work) and horrifically over-worked (I average about 50-60 hours a week at this emotionally grueling job). However, I decided to try something even more challenging for the next year: teaching at-risk 8th graders English, Math, and Social Studies at a suburban Portland school—J.B. Thomas Junior High.

This year, like the year prior to it, involved a lot of clever pedagogical tap-dancing; we played more English Jeopardy ("For 200 points write a sentence using a semi-colon"); I got more creative with inviting my students to write ("Hey Sean, why not write a rap for this next paper"); and I got very tired and surprisingly unemployed. You see at the end of my time at J.B. Thomas Junior High, I found out that my grant funded job would not exist next year, and, by that time, I

welcomed the prospect of not being an at-risk teacher. I was too tired to tap-dance anymore. Also, I had a moment of clarity as I was filling out a form.

It was 4 p.m., most of the teachers had gone home, and I was filling out an I.E.P. (Individualized Education Program) for one of my many learning disabled students—this young man had ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyper-active Disorder). As I sat there filling in the form, I struggled to write out a description of the "student's behavior in class." Words and the structure that surrounds them simply refused to move from my mind to the tip of my pen. I, a fluent writer at almost every other point in my life, could no longer write fluently. I remember putting down my pen and thinking, "I've got to get out of here." Next week, even before I learned that I wouldn't have a job the next year, I started the process of applying to the M.A. in English program at Portland State University. Like any good child of an academic, I decided that home was where the learning was—where chains of grammatically sound sentences could be woven together into a marvelous work of art.

I was going home.

For me, home was where the grammar was—at least its direct instruction. At Portland State University (PSU), I was brought back to what it means to teach grammar via a process-oriented pedagogy. Sherrie Gradin and Duncan Carter expanded my understanding of grammar's place in a writing process. I gradually learned that grammar just doesn't happen when students rewrite work (thanks Sherrie), it also can be generative (thanks Joseph Harris) and primary. Ultimately, the writer is the one who makes decisions about grammar—decisions that will affect his or her relationship with the reader.

Now, here I am trying to fashion a relationship with you—the reader of my text. Have you heard my story as I hear it in the private space of my inner ear? Do you notice my typos, my

fragments, my misuse of dashes, my grammar? Do you notice that this is a draft, one of about six really?

I wonder about you. I wonder what sort of grammar you bring to the reading of this piece. Are you a believer in prescriptive or descriptive grammars? Both? I don't know.

Ultimately, it is in this place of unknowing that I leave you—dear reader. I don't know you, but I have given you a gift of words—a torque made of ebon semi-colons, white gold implied subjects and obsidian sentence transformation (be careful—they can cut). In your eyes my grammar—and its history—is read. Maybe the space between words and ideas—our shared generative grammar—is small. I hope it is. I think it is. You'll tell me if it is. Won't you?