2 Discovering Grammar

Perhaps the purpose of introducing students to grammar—whether in the third grade or at the college level—is to help them discover that all language *has* grammar. For it is not obvious that all languages share a few basic patterns (such as the division of sentences into subjects and predicates) any more than other underlying patterns in our world (such as the cells that compose all living things) are obvious. This chapter discusses new approaches for grammatical consciousness-raising, ways to open students' minds to both the variety and the unity of grammar. The discussion relates to Goal A, helping students communicate comfortably in Standard English and be aware of when to do so, and Goal C, the appreciation of language varieties.

Discovering Grammar through Language Variety

The varieties of English offer you a powerful entranceway through which you can encourage students to discover the structure of language. In particular, the language of ordinary conversation itself provides an essential grammar resource for the classroom.

But an introductory word is in order. You may find that the thought of using ordinary student conversation as a serious grammar resource makes you uncomfortable. After all, much of that conversation is not "correct" English, especially when it is written down on paper or up on a chalkboard and we can see how different it looks from Standard English. It is all well and good to believe that, as the linguists tell you, different language varieties are all "created equal" grammatically. But it is a different matter altogether to confront language use in your own backyard. Your own school and community have their own language issues: the recognizable accents, the regional phrases, the other languages besides English, together with the people's strong opinions about these topics. You as a local English teacher are right in the middle of your community's language issues. You may feel passionately that for the short time your students are in your classroom, you want to help them practice the language they will need to succeed in the adult world and in the world beyond their neighborhood, and you want to do all you can to discourage them from using language that might mark them for failure or discrimination. So part of your success as a teacher, you may feel, is helping your students recognize "bad" or "wrong" language when they see it or hear it.

But consider this: it is not language itself that is the crucial issue here; it is people, and the match between the language they use and the circumstances they find themselves in. Language is "correct" or "incorrect" depending on the circumstances. For adults as well as children, speaking in formal Edited Written English when you are joking around with your family is as out of place as writing a job application that includes instant messaging abbreviations. When you feel the urge to tell a student, or to mark on a paper, that his or her language is "wrong," think to yourself, "'Wrong' for what? 'Inappropriate' for what circumstances?" Remind yourself that the simplistic and absolute judgment that a piece of language is right or wrong can be, at its root, an attempt to judge people. If you can look at the diversity of language in terms of the diversity of people who speak languages as they know and need them, then you and your students can be more open to grammar as a foundation of all language varieties. This chapter will help you move from the "correct/incorrect" view of grammar to a "this is appropriate for this situation/that is appropriate for that situation" approach.

Methodology

Students from elementary through high school may bring to their school writing such home speech patterns as:

My dog name is Bark.
Mom walk me to school yesterday.
I have two brother and two sister.
I might could help you out.
I bought me a new truck.
The car needs washed.
I tried to call youse last night.
I seen the new monster movie already.
Mary be happy.

When a child produces a sentence such as "My dog name is Bark," it can be difficult to resist thinking that the child "lacks possession" or "has left off possession." Such a description, however, is actually a misdiagnosis. The students are not having problems with possession; they are not mistakenly omitting the *'s*. Instead, they have successfully followed the rules for producing possession in their home-speech language variety. That is, in this variety, African American English, possession is shown by adjacency: the possessor occurs next to the thing possessed (possessor:possessed). *My dog name* is not a mistake in Standard English; it follows the grammatical rules of the home speech.

Building on the students' intuitive knowledge of the home language patterns, you can then *add* another language variety to the students' linguistic toolbox. In class discussion, you and the students can contrast the patterns of home speech to the patterns of school speech. Through the contrastive approach, students build an explicit knowledge of the grammar of both language varieties. In the lower grades, teachers might make sentence strips for the classroom walls showing the contrastive patterns of home speech and school speech. During the editing phase of the writing process, the teacher might summarize: "In home speech, you show possession by saying who owns something and then saying the thing they own. In school speech, you also add the *'s* to the word for the owner." In doing so, you introduce the students to "code-switching," the technique of choosing between language varieties depending on the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose.

Conversational patterns offer constant opportunities for such grammatical discovery and increased grammatical mastery. The same kind of evenhanded analysis you can bring to contrasting the different rules for showing possession applies equally to other language differences. So, for example, when students write *Mary be happy,* the teacher may call on the students to translate the sentence into the Standard English *Mary is usually happy.* Students discover that in African American English, *Mary be happy* means that Mary is generally happy. (This use of the uninflected *be* is called the "habitual *be.*") As they pursue the contrast between habitual action and action in the moment, students may discover that in Standard English, *Mary is happy* can mean either that Mary is happy at the moment or that Mary is generally happy. In contrast, in AAE, *Mary happy,* without the *be,* means that Mary is happy at the moment. (Other differences in the verb systems of AAE and Standard English are described on page 94.)

Another point of contrast is the second-person pronoun *you.* Standard English shows no distinction between the singular and the plural in the second person. Standard English requires us to use *you* regardless of whether we are addressing a whole group or just an individual within that group, an inconvenience that we learn to adjust to. (Think of the ways in which you make your meaning clear when you use *you* in talking to a classroom full of students: "Sam, will you read the answer?" "All of you passed the test." Without *Sam* and *All of,* your students wouldn't know if your *you* referred to all of them, some of them, or one of them.) But students can help supply some of the various inventions of a second-person plural pronoun in home speech, such as *youse, y'all, you'uns,* and *yinz.* These forms show how language commu-

nities have been able to preserve a distinction between singular and plural that the standard variety has lost.

Other examples can be discussed in similar contrastive ways. For the sentence "Mom walk me to school yesterday," you might observe that this home speech signals past time through adverbials in the sentence *(yesterday)*, while school speech signals past tense on the verb itself (the *-ed* ending on *walked*). For "I have two brother and two sister," you can explain how African American English signals plurality through number words *(two)* and school speech signals it through the addition of *-s* to the plural noun *(brothers* and *sisters)*. In cases such as "I seen the new monster movie already," you can point out that the different varieties of English have developed different sets of irregular verb forms over time. Here the irregular verb is *seen*. In Standard English, the irregular verb would be *saw*. Neither language variety uses the regular *-ed* form, *seed*, although young children sometimes do so.

Some more examples: When a child brings multiple negation to school, you may be tempted to suggest that the child is speaking incorrectly and illogically. Contemporary Standard English requires single negation and excludes multiple negatives. But this convention is the result of the historical development of English and has nothing to do with logic ("the double negative is wrong because two negatives make a positive"). In Chaucer's time, multiple negation was quite common ("He never yet no villainy not said . . ."). Today, a number of languages include double negatives. In the French *Je ne sais pas*, "I don't know," the two negatives, *ne* and *pas*, are both required. Spanish also uses two negatives—*Yo no se nada*—and as a result the dialect of Hispanic English does too: *I don have no money; I no want nothin*.

Finally, even such simple matters as sentence fragments can become the subject of code-switching and discovery learning. As students describe the structure of conversation (e.g., Q: "Where ya going?" A: "To the store."), they notice that "incomplete sentences" occur as a natural and regular part of casual conversation. If you prompt students for the Standard English "translation," students discover that in contrast to conversation, writing requires the pattern of syntactically complete subject-predicate structures (with some exceptions such as interjections–"Wow!"—and stylistic fragments). After such a lesson, on seeing so-called fragments in the students' writing, you can ask the students to code-switch from the patterns of speech to the expected patterns of writing.

Through such contrasts, students discover that even though other language varieties may be organized differently than Standard English,

they are just as organized in their own ways and that Standard English is not the only variety that is grammatical. Of course, while all language varieties are regular and rule-governed systems, we know that certain varieties are privileged over others in the worlds of business and academia. Accordingly, it is the mission of our school system to teach mastery of both spoken and written Standard English in the appropriate contexts. The important news for teachers is that linguistic research is showing increasingly that the most effective way to achieve this mission lies through the techniques of contrastive analysis and code-switching.

In order to use the contrastive and code-switching approaches, you may have to educate yourself in the basic grammar of the language varieties in your classroom. The varieties may include a different language such as Spanish, a widely used and studied language variety such as African American English, or the particular speech patterns of the local community. If you know some of the basic grammatical features of the other languages and language varieties besides Standard English that your students speak, you will find it easier to discuss the language differences with students. (See the two very readable one-volume encyclopedias on language and on English by David Crystal listed in "Source and Resources" for information on various languages and on the varieties of English.) In turn, such discussions of contrasts will help students in three important ways: students will flex their understanding of grammatical structure in language generally; they will understand Standard English itself more clearly; and they will better understand why mastering Standard English is a challenge for those who have not grown up with it.

VIGNETTE: *FLOSSIE AND THE FOX*: CODE-SWITCHING BETWEEN THE LANGUAGES OF HOME AND SCHOOL

How does the contrastive approach actually work in the classroom? And can it work with elementary school children? In this vignette, a second-grade teacher uses role-playing to engage students in contrasting English codes. Notice the preparation that has provided the students with the background necessary to carry out the role-playing. What are some games or role-playing exercises that might call for older students to practice code-switching?

Twenty squirmy second graders wiggle on the red carpet as Mrs. Swords takes a seat in the comfy rocking chair before them. It's reading time and the children can choose whichever book they wish to hear that day. "*Flossie and the Fox*!" "*Flossie and the Fox*!" the children call. Ever since Mrs. Swords brought *Flossie* to class, the children haven't been able to get enough of it. Never before have they experienced a story in which characters speak like they and their mom and dad and friends do at home. By the third time the children heard the story, they broke into a choral response at one particular point: "Shucks! You aine no fox. You a rabbit, all the time trying to fool me."

But the fox walks a different verbal path. In reply, he tells Flossie, "'Me! A rabbit!' He shouted. 'I have you know that my reputation precedes me. I am the third generation of foxes who have outsmarted and outrun Mr. J. W. McCutchin's fine hunting dogs. . . . Rabbit indeed! I am a fox, and you will act accordingly.'"

Soon the children *knew* the book. They absorbed fox-speak and Flossie-speak.

Now Mrs. Swords invites the children to role-play. "Who would like to talk like a fox today?" Hands shoot up all over the passel of second graders. "OK, Devon, you be the fox. And who wants to talk like Flossie?" Mrs. Swords inquires.

In her blue belted pants, with neatly tucked white shirt, Heather jumps up and down, "Me, I do! I do."

"All right, Heather, you play Flossie."

Back and forth, back and forth, Devon and Heather play.

Children in the class keep tabs. They have already learned that language comes in different varieties or styles and that language comes in different degrees of formality, just like our clothing. The children have already made felt boards and cutouts showing informal and formal clothing and have talked about when we dress informally and when we dress formally. And the children have taken the next steps. They have already looked at and discovered patterns in language—the patterns of informal language and the patterns of formal-speak. They have been primed.

Heather, stretching her linguistic abilities, banters with Devon. "My two cats be lyin' in de sun."

Wait a minute.

The class quickly checks the language chart on the classroom wall. Their chart shows how we signal plurality in both informal and

formal English. Heather has stumbled. She has used the formal English pattern (*two cats*—in which plurality is shown by an *-s* on the noun) when she was supposed to be following the informal pattern (*two cat*—in which plurality is shown by the context or number words).

Mike hollers out, "Heather, wait a *minute*! That's not how Flossie would say it! You did fox-speak! Flossie would say 'My two *cat* be lyin' in de sun.'"

Heather stops. Hands on hips, she considers the wall chart. Mike is right! She regroups and recoups. "My two *cat* be lyin' in de sun!" Heather and Devon are back in their roles. Only one more minute till they swap sides.

In this way, the children practice choosing the forms of language appropriate to the time, place, setting, and communicative purpose. They code-switch between the language of the home and the language of the school.

Sometimes in writing a story, in order to develop a character, children choose the language of nurture, the language they learned on their grandma's knee. Other times, formal times, as when the children write up their research on the relative lengths of dinosaur teeth for their math storyboards, they know they'll choose the language of the professional world because they know that other teachers, the principal, and school visitors will see their work.

Throughout their classroom experiences, children learn to masterfully choose their language to fit the setting. And they do so with joy, verve, and command.

—Rebecca S. Wheeler

Discovering Grammar through Authentic Texts

To help students discover grammar, you need to show them that they can discover grammar wherever they find language. Grammar work sheets and grammar textbooks have their place and their purposes, but their limitations are serious. One of these limitations is that work sheets and textbooks reinforce the students' notion that the sole source and authority for grammar comes from a book of rules and definitions. Although we all turn to reference books when we want to check on the acceptability of a word or a type of phrase, the ultimate resources for judgments of the social acceptability of any language are its literature and the way the language is used by influential groups in society. One

of your strategies in teaching grammar can be to encourage students, when they ask "Is this word [or phrase] correct?" to think about whether they have seen it written in the literature and other professional writing they read.

Another limitation of grammar work sheets and textbooks is that they usually present sentences in unnatural isolation, when in the real world sentences are rarely found standing by themselves. In conversations, and in texts of all kinds, sentences live in groups.

The lesson for teachers is that we should teach grammar from authentic texts as much as possible. You can use the literature the students are reading, as well as newspapers and other texts, to demonstrate or teach almost any grammar lesson. You can also use the students' own writing to illustrate points of grammar—to illustrate not just errors but effective grammar as well. Here are some lesson ideas that help students become better observers of the grammatical features of texts, including the ones they write.

Creation of Style Guides

Students can study a given text, such as a newspaper, in order to discover its patterns of grammar and usage. They look for its rules regarding the following:

- capitalization
- paragraph length
- organization of information in text
- the writing of numbers in text
- sentence completeness
- sentence length
- sentence styles
- punctuation choices, such as the comma before the *and* in a series or the use of quotation marks or italics for titles
- voice (active versus passive)
- use of contractions and abbreviations
- beginning (or not beginning) a sentence with a coordinating conjunction
- use of sexist or nonsexist language

The "style guide" method is adaptable to all grade levels. Older students can find texts on their own and work individually or with others to write complete stylistic descriptions. They can formulate and explain such conclusions as their belief that a text is formal (e.g., lack of

contractions, long sentences) or that language is nonsexist (e.g., absence of *he* to refer to human beings). With young children, you can give them texts in class and ask them to work with partners; they can look, for example, for words with capital letters and then try to describe the groups these words belong to (e.g., words at the beginning of sentences, names). The conclusions and generalizations that students try to formulate in such exercises are valuable experiences in critical thinking.

Comparison/Contrast

There are many opportunities for comparison/contrast activities in grammar instruction. You can ask students to study the grammatical differences between two texts about the same subject. The students could, for example, compare an owner's manual of a car to an advertiser's brochure or an article from a car magazine: What differences do we find in the textual layout? What words do we find in one but not the other? Which has the longest and the shortest sentences, on average? Which has the most conversational types of sentences? The greatest number of stylistic sentence fragments?

When we ask students to write from one genre to another, we require them to compare and contrast grammatical choices. In going from a news article to a personal letter, for example, students need to adapt the language to the genre while keeping the content essentially the same. To make such an activity meaningful in terms of grammar instruction, students would not only write the information in another genre but also would then analyze *why* these changes were appropriate to a given genre. Such an assignment is a good opportunity to discuss the uses of the first-person pronouns *I* and *me* and the second-person pronoun *you* in writing. (See Chapter 6, "Grammar Superstitions.") When are those pronouns needed and appropriate in writing a letter? An essay? A report? The discussion familiarizes students with the terminology about pronouns and encourages them to think carefully about meaning and audience.

Poetry

Because poetry often uses grammatical structures that differ from ordinary speech, it offers opportunities to teach grammar. Students can look for words, phrases, and clauses that are not in the places they're usually found in sentences. They can discuss the poetic value of such placements, listening for how the placement affects emphasis, rhythm, and rhyme. "Whose woods these are I think I know," the opening line of Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," offers such

an opportunity. If you ask students to experiment with other ways the line might have been written or spoken, they will discover that it is reversed from the normal sentence order: *I think I know whose woods these are.* They should be able to explain the emphasis and surprise expressed in poetic arrangement.

You can ask students how we know that a piece of writing is a poem. What are the words and phrases that sound poetic? In answering, students discern the grammatical characteristics of not only poetic language but conversation as well.

Advertising

The language of advertising is designed to be fast, persuasive, and memorable. Students can search newspaper and magazine ads for examples of various constructions, including phrases ("Like a Rock," "Easy as Dell"), questions ("Do You Yahoo?" "Got Milk?"), imperatives ("Do It"), exclamations ("50% Off!"), and parallelism ("We've never had more. You'll never pay less."). They can also look for different sorts of wordplay, sharpening their sense of both word meaning and word arrangement: variations on familiar phrases ("This is Cloud Ten. Ford Expedition"), rhymes ("Power Hours"), graphic devices ("choLESSterol").

Everyday Genres

Ask students to observe the consistent grammatical features of a variety of ordinary genres: the imperative in recipes and instruction manuals *(Rinse chicken; pat dry with paper towels. Twist wing tips under back. If desired, brush with oil)*; participles in menus *(seared ahi served with baby carrots drenched in butter)* and greeting cards *(Wishing you well . . . Hoping you feel better soon . . .)*; and passive verbs in park brochures *(the rock paintings were discovered by settlers in the 1850s; . . . They were probably created by Native Americans for religious ceremonies).*

Postmortems of Student Writing

Select student-written sentences to share with the class. The sentences might be examples of smooth style, confusing writing, humor, beautiful description, ordinary error, effective punctuation—anything to raise student awareness of sentences, to engage them in a discussion of language, and to use grammatical terminology. You will be surprised by how, if you give students a chance to ponder just about any individual sentence, they can't resist coming up with ways it could or should be changed.

VIGNETTE: HELPING HIGH SCHOOL JUNIORS GET COMFORTABLE WITH SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLISH

Shakespeare's plays may seem to be unlikely material for the study of grammar. But, ideally, grammar instruction is a tool for raising students' awareness of the great diversity of language, including early modern English. Notice how carefully this high school teacher picks and chooses when to employ the technical vocabulary of grammar and when to simplify matters. Notice also how he connects the discussion of sentence structure with discussion of meaning and dramatic impact. Think about the works of literature you teach that might lend themselves to discussions of sentence structure and style.

Before tackling Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Mr. Doniger gives his students an opportunity to play with some of the language and become more comfortable with it. One of these lessons begins with the students and Mr. D. sitting in a circle. Mr. D. randomly distributes index cards to each student; each index card contains one quotation from the play and lists the act, scene, and character speaking the words. One at a time, students are asked to read their cards aloud; then the quotation is discussed, questioned, analyzed, and explained. The lesson continues as students are randomly asked to "act" their quotations to illustrate their meanings. It finishes with them being challenged to speak their lines with emotions or meanings that are not implied by the words (a theatrical technique known as playing against the text). One student, for example, is asked to read the line "To beguile the time, look like the time" as if it meant "I hate you" or "I love you." The objective is to make the students feel more comfortable with the language and familiar with some of the text before they read the play.

In the process of analyzing the quotations, students get some help by looking at the grammar.

> *King:* What bloody man is that? He can report,
> As seemeth by his plight, of the revolt
> The newest state. (1.2.1–3)

Students, after translating the verbal *seemeth*, have some difficulty understanding what exactly the bloody man can report. When Mr. D. shows that the subordinate clause *(As seemeth by his plight)* is a

modifier of the core sentence and not part of just the subject *(He)* or just the predicate, the sentence becomes clearer. Mr. D. keeps the technical terminology limited, referring to the subordinate clause as an idea that alters or deepens the meaning of the core sentence (students are usually able to understand the concept of a core sentence better than the notion of a main clause).

Some students try adding the pronoun *it* before *seemeth;* turning the verb phrase into a clause helps them understand it better. Now all they need to know is that Shakespeare, being a poet, sometimes reverses the normal order of phrases or sentence parts for effect. At this point, their only remaining question is the precise meaning of *state.*

> *Macbeth:* As easy mayst thou the intrenchant air
> With thy keen sword impress as make me bleed.
> (5.8.9–10)

The students find this quotation quite mysterious. Their first problem, once Mr. D. helps them get past the *thou* and the *mayst,* is vocabulary. With Shakespeare, usually nouns are the biggest vocabulary problem, but in this instance the adjective *intrenchant* and the verb *impress* (it's not what the students think it is) need explaining. That much is easy. What helps the students most with this sentence, however, is rearranging the grammatical units in a more modern, and less poetical, order. Mr. D. explains that in Shakespeare's day, adjectives were commonly used as adverbs. By changing the adjective *easy* into the modern adverb *easily,* putting the subject up front, and aligning the correlative subordinators *(as . . . as)* more closely, the students translate the sentence: "You can make me bleed as easily as you can put gashes in the air with your sword." Macbeth's sense of invulnerability becomes clearer.

> *Macbeth:* To be thus is nothing,
> But to be safely thus. (3.1.47–48)

Once the students understand the idea of *thus* (here Macbeth means, "To be the king is nothing"), the complications begin. First, reminding students about some grammar vocabulary as he goes along, Mr. D. shows the students that the infinitives are intended as subjects in the two clauses and that the clauses are parallel in structure. The main problem arises from the elliptical second clause, which omits the entire predicate. As Mr. D. puts it, the second clause is left

unfinished because the rest of it is understood. He then reminds the students that the word *but* suggests opposition. From there, they easily figure out what is missing in the predicate: "is everything." Once they get this idea, they can discuss the dramatic impact of the line more closely.

> *3rd Apparition:* Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
> Great Birnan wood to high Dunsinane Hill
> Shall come against him. (4.1.92–94)

Again, there are vocabulary issues to get out of the way first: *Birnan* (the spelling in *The Riverside Shakespeare*) *wood, Dunsinane, vanquish'd.* But here the students are confused also by the poetic word order. Mr. D. shows them that *shall vanquish'd be* is a change in the normal word order. He also explains that the phrase *Shall come against him* comes at the end of the sentence rather than directly after its subject, *Great Birnan wood.* The students move the phrase, and the meaning becomes clearer. There is time left for a short discussion: did Shakespeare save *Shall come against him* for the end of the sentence in order to create greater tension, to make this idea the strongest point of the warning?

—Paul E. Doniger