CHAPTER FIVE

Grammar and the Sentence

So far, we have moved from a general concept of discourse to the spectrum of discourse and thence to two particular kinds of discourse — drama and narrative. Now I would like to magnify that substructure of discourse called syntax, bring into close ken the domain staked out by linguists and described by grammar — the sentence. First, I want to examine the assumption that a knowledge of grammar will improve writing. In Chapter Three I proposed a dialogical approach to sentence development that exploited the processes of expatiation and emendation characteristic of discussion. Part of what follows here is a consideration of the conventional teaching approach that was rejected in that chapter. But there are other ways in which formal sentence analysis, especially that of linguistics, is influencing education. A look at grammar teaching will eventually lead us to those other matters.

Probably no other area of the language arts except beginning reading is so bedevilled with semantic confusion as grammar teaching. What *kind of knowledge* of grammar does one mean

— a working knowledge or a conceptual grasp of grammatical generalizations? What *kind of grammar* — prescriptive or descriptive, a body of rules for correct usage in the standard dialect, or a systematic schematization of syntactic relations? If descriptive, a classificatory, structural, or generative grammar? What *kind of instruction* — identifying parts of speech, filling in blanks with the correct linguistic form, parsing and diagramming sentence examples, making up sentences on a grammatical paradigm or pattern, memorizing concepts and codifications about the operations of syntax? And finally, *improvement in what aspect of writing* — the "mechanics" of punctuation and capitalization, the correction of *me and him went to town,* the expansion of the syntactic repertory in the direction of elaboration and diversification of sentence constructions, or the development of judgment in sentence construction as measured by communicative effectiveness and rhetorical advantage?

What have been the main claims for grammar teaching as regards composition? What improvement in writing have teachers hoped to achieve by such instruction? The claims are of essentially two very different sorts. One concerns correct usage — avoidance of error, or the use of what is generally known as "good grammar." As most linguists tend to conclude nowadays, correctness really means conformity to the particular grammar of standard dialect. In a very meaningful sense, people speak and write incorrectly only when they deviate from the regular practices of the speech community from which they learned their dialect. Inasmuch as *ain't* and *he go now* represent consistent usage in some dialects, they are incorrect only in relation to the norms of standard dialect. In other words, learning to write "correctly" involves a shift of dialect and hence the very sensitive moral and psychological matter of *joining a new speech community,* that is, the speech community in which standard dialect is preferred.

In this view, teaching a prescriptive body of rules designed to induce correctness appears blandly technical and humanly naive. The student is being asked, in effect, to prefer the dialect of a speech community to which he does not belong and to dis-

avow, in some measure, the way of talking that he learned from his parents and from other people upon whom his sense of personal and social identity depends. A lot more than variation in linguistic forms is entailed in this sort of correction. If school populations, for example, are racially and socio-economically segregated — whether on principle or de facto, by a tracking system — corrective grammar teaching assumes that a speaker of the non-standard dialect should write in standard English even though he is barred from association with speakers of standard English. Actually, to preserve his own sense of integrity, he has a powerful motive not to adopt this alien grammar. It is partly for these reasons that I advocated, in Chapter Three, the heterogeneous mixing of students in the English class and the naturalistic modification of grammar through vocal exchange among these mixed students.

In view of the stand on racial segregation taken in some regions, and of the socio-economic split between urban, suburban, and rural populations all over the country, this proposal no doubt appears very idealistic. But it is precisely at this point in considering corrective grammar teaching that one realizes how much the tradition in which it thrives is a factor of the material facts of life in America. In Washington, D.C., for example, where the school population is rapidly becoming 100% black, the Center for Applied Linguistics has arrived at the following pedagogical strategy. Linguists expert in dialectology are to describe precisely those differences in usage that distinguish the dialects of that population from standard dialect. Then educators are to "develop materials" that will enable students to bridge the gap. Instructional techniques would presumably consist of pattern practice of the sort employed in second-language learning whereby students drill specifically on those points of divergence that constitute errors. Although those dialectologists are more sensitive than anyone to the social and psychological implications of membership in speech communities, and most cognizant of the effective equality of dialects, they have nevertheless settled on a solution that ignores these implications and this equality. They have done so for humane

reasons of social engineering: "bad grammar" brands the speaker and bars him from jobs and status.

This strategy and this goal have ever been part and parcel of corrective grammar teaching. The ironic result of this short-sighted "practical" concession to the social facts of life in America is that it bolsters segregation and homogenization of classes and thus defeats its own humane purpose at the same time that it defers a more fundamental solution. So long as we admit — as we certainly should — that corrective grammar is a factor of social engineering, then other alternatives are possible — the re-gerrymandering of school districts throughout a metropolitan area, consolidation of rural schools, the abolition within a school of achievement and ability grouping, and the classroom exploitation of vocal interaction. In short, if standard English grammar, as a behavior, is considered desirable, then let "disadvantaged" students speak with those who use the standard dialect. They will learn it the same way they learned their local dialect, and for the same reason — that they are members of a speech community where it is native.

For most middle-class students reared where standard English is spoken, "errors" are a problem only to the extent that the adult community commits them also, in which case, as in the notorious matter of *as* and *like,* the educator must ask himself what indeed he means by "standard." The individual deviations such as small children make (*I bringed it*) inevitably disappear without correction because in time a child always comes to regularize his speech according to the norms he infers from speech experience.

But let's look more closely at the kinds of errors made by children in both lower and higher socio-economic groups. From everyday experience, anyone can establish the fact that even a first-grader, from whatever language environment, never commits certain syntactic mistakes unless he is aphasic or a foreigner just learning English. No such child ever puts a nominal direct object between subject and predicate (*I the car saw*) or a determiner after the adjective (*Red my hat*). From various research studies it is also clear that by at least fourth grade

children use *in their writing* all the kernel-sentence types, all the simple sentence transformations, and all the transformations that operate on embedded sentences. Orally, most children seem to be able to use all the transformations before they enter school. By utterly naturalistic means — conversation, mainly — they have generalized for themselves, in an operational and behavioral way, the regularities of syntax, and constructed some kind of internal model by means of which they can endlessly generate well formed sentences that they have never heard before.

In a longitudinal study of 338 children from whom oral speech samples were elicited at intervals between kindergarten and twelfth grade, Walter Loban found the following problems among the speakers of standard dialect (through ninth grade):[1]

> For those children not handicapped by social dialect, most difficulties fall into five categories, occurring in the following order of frequency:
>
> inconsistency in the use of tense
> careless omission of words (excluding omission of auxiliaries)
> lack of syntactic clarity
> ambiguous placement of words, phrases, and clauses
> awkward and incoherent arrangements of expression
> confusing use of pronouns
> trouble with agreement of subject and verb when using *there is, there are, there was,* and *there were*
>
> It is immediately apparent that all these problems transcend usage. They are matters of sensitivity to clarity and precision of communication. This is not at all what the researcher had expected. (p. 47)

For these "problems that transcend usage," I would add, the writing-workshop approach to composition provides precisely what is needed.

[1] *Problems in Oral Language* (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1966).

What does Loban conclude are the oral language problems of children speaking a "social class dialect"?

> Their difficulties fall into ten categories in the following order of frequency:
>
> lack of agreement of subject and verb, third person singular (other than the forms of the verb *to be*)
> omission of auxiliary verbs (especially those formed with the verb *to be*)
> inconsistency in the use of tense
> nonstandard use of verb forms
> lack of agreement of subject and verb while using forms of the verb *to be*
> careless omission of words (excluding omission of auxiliaries)
> nonstandard use of pronouns
> nonstandard use of noun forms
> double negatives
> omission of the verb *to be* (p. 49)

These errors are confined almost entirely to the forms and inflections of individual words, especially verbs, and more especially the verb *to be.* Though most are errors of usage, none concern sentence construction. Neither group of children showed difficulty connecting with prepositions and conjunctions or modifying with adjectives and adverbs. Both groups had problems with clarity and coherence, as described above.

The gist of all this is that many children do not deviate from standard grammar and that even those who deviate do so in far less significant ways than has been supposed, however conspicuous or nerve-shattering the faults may seem to the sensibilities of English teachers. Speaking generally of the language of elementary school children, Loban reports that there is no significant difference in the structural patterns of high and low proficiency groups (which roughly correspond to higher and lower social classes), but that the higher group shows greater dexterity in using elements within these structures. Where there are subject nominals, for example, the higher group uses clauses, infinitives, and gerundives — not just nouns and pronouns; they have a greater repertory of clauses; they shift movable

elements with greater ease. "Not pattern but what is done to achieve flexibility within the pattern proves to be a measure of effectiveness and control of language at this level of language development."[2] This statement is illustrated in the following passage and linked to the findings of a British researcher:

> The research of Basil Bernstein in England and my own research on language development are pertinent here. The Cockney and the upper-middle-class British speaker have the same basic language, the same grammar. The difference lies, according to Bernstein,[3] in the extent to which Cockney fails to use the potential of the language. This is exactly what I found in my research in the Oakland, California, schools. In kindergarten and in subsequent years, the same grammar operates in the language of all the youngsters. But subjects from the lower socio-economic groups do not use the language with as full a range of potential as those from more favored groups. They can use the full potential, but if they are in the lower socio-economic group they do not do so very often. By full potential, I mean using such syntactical devices as coordination or subordination to express a complex idea or using an appositive to reinforce or to extend the listener's understanding of what is being communicated. They do not use infinitives — not so much the infinitive alone as the infinitive phrase, the elaborated infinitive phrase, a much neater device than dependent, subordinate clauses for tightly coiling ideas. Gerund phrases, participial phrases, and infinitive phrases are usually indicative of a much tighter kind of thinking than is the long dependent clause.[4]

Loban's findings are partly corroborated but also possibly somewhat contradicted by the research of Harry Osser[5] and

[2] Walter Loban, *The Language of Elementary School Children* (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963), p. 84.

[3] Basil Bernstein, "Language and Social Class," *British Journal of Sociology,* XI (1960), 271–276.

[4] "A Sustained Program of Language Learning," *Language Programs for the Disadvantaged* (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963), pp. 222–223.

[5] "A Study of the Communicative Abilities of Disadvantaged Children," unpublished final report for Office of Economic Opportunity contract no. 2402, 1968.

Arthur McCaffrey.[6] In Osser's research, lower-class Negro pre-schoolers showed less control over thirteen common syntactic structures in standard English, on imitation and comprehension tasks, than middle-class whites, even when efforts were made to compensate for dialectical differences. In McCaffrey's on-going research with pre-schoolers, first-graders, and fifth-graders, the children of lower socioeconomic status likewise performed less well on imitation, comprehension, and production tasks involving thirteen similar syntactic structures. But McCaffrey raises several unsolved problems about what these children's lower scores mean. The Osser-McCaffrey studies are not easily compared with Loban's study, and Loban's somewhat imprecise use of "patterns," furthermore, would introduce ambiguity into any such comparison.

Loban, incidentally, believes grammar instruction to be ineffectual and recommends oral practice and grappling with language problems in real communication situations.[7]

The effort to pinpoint so-called grammatical problems in sentence production inevitably leads us back to the other hope held by proponents of grammar teaching — that a knowledge of grammar will increase the student's syntactic versatility, that is, will enable him to elaborate and diversify his sentence constructions. In writing itself, evidence demonstrates very clearly that children's sentences grow in precisely this direction as a matter of normal development. That elaboration and complexity are developmental seems to be a well established fact. But certain construction feats in particular have been identified by Kellogg Hunt as indices of syntactic growth.[8] They are: (1) the increasing modification of nouns by large clusters of adjectives, relative clauses, and reduced relative clauses; (2) the increasing use of nominalizations other than nouns and pronouns for

[6] "The Imitation, Comprehension, and Production of English Syntax —A Developmental Study of the Language Skills of Deprived and Non-Deprived Children," unpublished progress report for Office of Education contract no. 5-10-239, 1968.

[7] *Problems in Oral English,* p. 56.

[8] *Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels* (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1965).

subjects and objects (clauses and infinitival and gerundive construction, all increasingly unique); and (3) the embedding of sentences to an increasing depth (naturally entailed by (1) and (2)). This elaboration, we note, does not involve correctness. As stated in Chapter Three, elaboration is achieved by embedding or conjoining potentially independent sentences so as to assert several statements in a single, qualified predication within which the statements are logically and subordinately related to each other by syntax. The issue is not that schoolchildren do this incorrectly, although on some attempts they get lost in their own construction; the issue is that they do not do this as much and as often as mature speakers. In other words, they know the transformations requisite for elaboration, and they will elaborate more anyway as they grow up. In asking whether a knowledge of grammar improves writing in this respect, all we are asking is what Piaget calls "the American question": how can we speed it up? But, more fairly stated, we are asking how we can help students to go farther in syntactic growth than they would have otherwise.

The reasons why children do not elaborate as much as adults stem from causes other than ignorance of grammar. Children may forget how they start a sentence construction. They have trouble holding in their minds at once several syntactic relations or levels of embedding. They are not intellectually ready to relate ideas in logical ways other than temporal, or to range ideas in a hierarchy of subordination, or even to perceive the listener's need for such ranging and emphasis. They need to hear and read a lot of elaborated sentences so that they can internalize the forms and relations. And they have to discover, through speaking and writing, the deficiences of simple sentences. They must construct sentences that answer the felt needs of their maturing thought, their exchanges in conversation, and their efforts to fit what they write to what they have to say. There is good reason to believe that the final answer to linguistic elaboration lies beyond language, in general cognitive development, and that intellectual stimulation is far more likely to accelerate syntactic growth than grammar knowledge.

But let's look now at what research has to say about the influence of grammar instruction on composition. If one were to accept the following statement, the whole issue would seem closed.

> In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based upon many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing.[9]

But the research studies upon which this statement is based were almost entirely concerned with the goal of error-correction, even when, as in the case of a couple, the data included some counting of sentence constructions in student writing (most of the data in these studies being drawn from objective tests). Nor does the statement include research with transformational grammar, which is only now being put to the pragmatic test. What has been rather definitely proven so far — and this is the exact significance of the quotation above — is that parsing and diagramming of sentences, memorizing the nomenclature and definitions of parts of speech, and otherwise learning the concepts of traditional, classificatory grammar or of structural, slot-and-substitution grammar do not reduce errors. When correctness is the goal, these studies show, an incidental and individual approach to errors is more effective. In other words, the main preoccupation that inspired the bulk of this research — correctness — is precisely that aspect of composition to which grammar study has nothing to contribute.

Only two pieces of research have, as of this writing, attempted to find out (1) if grammar study increases syntactic versatility and (2) if a transformational grammar can succeed where its predecessors have failed. Comparing the writing per-

[9] Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, *Research in Written Composition* (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963), pp. 37–38.

formance of 21 students who were taught transformational rules and concepts over a two-year period with the performance of 20 students who were taught no grammar, Bateman and Zidonis[10] concluded that because a generative grammar seems to be a logical representation of the psychological process of sentence formation, a knowledge of such grammar enables students to increase the proportion of well formed sentences they write, to increase complexity without sacrificing grammaticality, and to reduce the occurrence of errors. Two of these conclusions, we note, still concern correctness, but one does make a claim for syntactic elaboration. The assertion about generative grammar being a representation of psychological processes is actually a speculation, not a fact derived from the data, and in fact amounts to a misunderstanding of transformational theory, where no such precise claim is made. No account is given in the report of how the grammar was taught or of the kinds of writing that students were asked to do. But the most serious problem with this research is the methodology, which has been considered very poor and indeed has been used as a bad example in a course on methodology given at Harvard University by an imminent researcher in psychology. Though not reliable in itself, the experiment was a badly needed piece of pioneering, and Bateman and Zidonis are pursuing their investigations.

In the other study, by John Mellon,[11] about 250 seventh-grade students of different schools, socio-economic classes, and academic tracks comprised the population. The experimental group was taught certain transformational concepts and rules of transformation in preparation for the main treatment, which consisted of novel sentence-building exercises that required students to embed one or more dummy kernel sentences into a

[10] Donald Bateman and Frank Zidonis, *The Effect of A Study of Transformational Grammar on the Writing of Ninth and Tenth Graders* (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1966).

[11] *Transformational Sentence-Combining, A Method of Enhancing the Development of Syntactic Fluency in English Composition,* Harvard University, Project 5-8418, Cooperative Research Bureau, U. S. Office of Education.

base sentence according to the previously learned rules. The point of these exercises was to afford students the actual experience of elaborating syntactic constructions they do not normally use, without their being distracted by efforts to make up content or to adapt constructions to rhetorical needs. This treatment was presented as part of a course in language study for its own sake and deliberately divorced from the composition program, so that the a-rhetorical situation considered desirable for the sentence-building exercises would not be misconstrued by students as an adjunct to or substitute for composition. The control group worked its way through one or the other of Warriner's traditional grammar texts, and the placebo group studied no grammar at all. All subjects wrote nine pre-test compositions in various modes of discourse and nine post-test compositions in the same modes. Extensive grammatical analysis — centering on the number and frequency of nominal and relative embeddings, and on clustered modification and depth of embedding — was made of this large corpus of writing. The resulting data made possible not only comparisons of syntactic growth among the three groups but also with the norms for such growth as established by Hunt.

Mellon's study is of great importance. It is the first to establish that some kind of formal language exercises can cause students to write with greater syntactic fluency than normal growth would occasion. The research was intelligently designed, expertly executed, and cautiously interpreted. The experimental group, which had done the transformational sentence-building exercises, was writing at post-test 32% more of the five critical transform types (nominal clauses and phrases, and relative clauses, phrases, and words) than the control group, which had studied traditional grammar. Their rate of growth was more than twice the rate indicated by Hunt's norms. The experimental group ended the year embedding 1.9 secondary statements per independent clause as compared with 1.4 for the control group (a very significant difference when operative over a large amount of writing). In frequency and depth of embedding,

and in frequency and size of clustered modification, the experimental group led both control and placebo groups. The fact that the latter two were not significantly distinguishable leads Mellon to conclude:

> First, the growth produced by the sentence-combining treatment represents a significant enhancement of normal growth, regardless of whether the latter is defined in a curriculum environment featuring conventional grammar, or in one with no grammar study of any kind. Second, conventional grammar is in fact a kind of placebo treatment itself, in that the effects which it produces do not differ significantly from those observed in a no-grammar environment. (p. 93)

It is essential to be precise about just what this valuable study proves: *embedding exercises* based on transformational rules will improve syntactic versatility in writing. It does not substantiate the hypothesis that instruction in transformational grammar will produce these results. Mellon states quite explicitly his conviction that what achieved the more-than-normal growth in linguistic elaboration was *the students' experience itself of embedding kernel sentences so as to create complex sentences,* not the learning of transformational nomenclature and rules, which were taught only to facilitate the exercise procedures. In fact, he goes further:

> But turn now to the question of curricular implications which obtain in the findings of this study. It should be remembered first of all that what each of the sentence-combining "problems" actually represents is one mature sentence entered upon the record of the student's total experience in language. Thus the significance of this research, assuming its findings are borne out in future studies covering a wider range of grade levels, pertains only secondarily to the particular format of the sentence-combining activities it investigates, and hardly at all to the model of grammar in the context of whose study they were presented. Rather, its significance resides in its having demonstrated that systematic programs entailing the a-rhetorical, intensive, and specially structured

> experiencing of mature sentences, can bring about an increase in the otherwise normal rate at which the sentence structure of the student's own productions becomes more highly differentiated and thus more mature. Subject once again to findings of subsequent studies, it appears further that this increase of growth rate is of sufficient magnitude to justify one's regarding the programs which produce it as valuable supplements to reading, writing, and discussing, which would of course remain the staple activity content of the several subjects in English. (p. 111)

Threading through Mellon's conclusions are two critical matters. The first concerns the rejection of the possibility that learning the concepts and rules of transformational grammar or of any other grammar could improve sentence production. His argument for this rejection is the same I would advance and that seems to enjoy a fair consensus among linguists. To hope, by means of grammatical formulations, to shortcut through the deep, cumulative learning that comes from speaking is to indulge in wishful dreaming. These formulations cannot seriously compete with the profound conditioning of speech habits acquired in the learner's native environment. For children who learned a non-standard grammar at home, description and analysis remain a little body of intellectual knowledge powerless to permeate the automatic process that generates their utterances. To expect such book learning to reverse years of unconscious experience, emmeshed as it is in family and social life, is a ridiculously academic notion. Only because language is symbolic and bound up with ideas would we ever have been so foolish as to entertain this notion. We certainly don't expect other behaviors to be acquired this way. The trouble is precisely that we teachers are prone to conceive language as an external object instead of an internal operation. As for expanding one's linguistic repertory, that certainly must be done by *receiving and producing* sentences oneself. Input indeed is needed: the learner must hear and read many sentence constructions that would not initially come to his mind. But he needs to try out the forms he takes in.

Transformational linguists themselves have never claimed that a knowledge of their grammar will improve a learner's speech or writing. Peter Rosenbaum may be fairly taken as representative:

> The abstract constructs offered in a transformational description are designed solely for purposes of description and explanation. Neither the transformational theory nor the transformational description of the syntax of English contains any implicit pedagogical recommendation. From neither does it follow that a transformational description of English should be taught in the classroom. From neither does it follow that instruction in transformational grammar will improve performance in the literate skills. With respect to the latter assertion, consider an analogy from physical education, in particular the pedagogy of the forward pass. Any instance of the physical event identified as a forward pass has certain mechanical properties which are characterized by the Newtonian theory of mechanics. The descriptive apparatus of this theory, consisting of such constructs as mass, acceleration, velocity, time, distance, and so forth, is a consequence of the theoretical constraints imposed upon a description seeking to account for the mechanics of physical event. To teach a potential quarterback the mechanics of the forward pass is to teach him how this type of event works. It is not to teach him how to make it work. The Newtonian theory itself gives us no reason to believe that instruction in the mechanics of the forward pass will affect the quarterback's becoming a good passer one way or the other. Similarly, to study and practice the constructs of a transformational grammar may result in an understanding of how the student's language works, but not necessarily in an understanding of how to make it work.[12]

The second matter raised in Mellon's research concerns the context in which students underwent the sentence-combining experience that actually accelerated the growth of their written sentences. Teachers must ask not only whether a certain practice achieves the intended effects but whether in doing so it also

[12] "On the Role of Linguistics in the Teaching of English," *Harvard Educational Review,* Vol. 35, no. three (1965), pp. 341–342.

produces undesirable side-effects. In a part of Mellon's research that tested for overall writing quality (outside readers judged an 8% sampling of the compositions) certain possible side effects of the exercises such as the creation of strained, garbled, or torturous sentences were ruled out. But what is not known is whether the a-rhetorical learning context divorced syntactic fluency from syntactic appropriateness, that is, whether the exercises made students value elaboration for its own sake and become facile without relating this facility to those communicative, stylistic, and rhetorical needs that alone make elaboration desirable in the first place. The experimental group did not, according to the readers, produce writing of a higher quality than that of the other two groups, a fact that may be attributable to many other factors besides the experimental treatment and that, indeed, rests on too small a sampling to warrant much concern. It is possible, however, that the learning context in which the sentence-combining tasks took place does enhance facility while neutralizing the compositional judgment that should accompany it.

One reason for thinking that this may be so arises directly out of the very effectiveness with which the sentence-building experience was transferred to writing even though everything was done to keep students from associating it with their work in composition. One purpose of dissociating the exercises from composition was actually to ensure that students did not, when writing, elaborate sentences for no good compositional reasons, as they did essentially of course during the exercises. But if the syntactic skill transferred, why not the "learning set" that surrounded it? The curricular separation of language study from composition cannot ensure that when a student elaborates sentences in his natural writing he does not do so in the same a-rhetorical way he did during the exercises, for the learning and the learning set are bound by a very powerful association. If he learns to coil and embed constructions as an extraneously motivated intellectual feat, he may write his own sentences without regard for the needs of the whole discourse in which they occur and which alone can provide the proper context for

them. Not only learning theory but the failure of some sentence exercises of the past give basis to my concern here. For example, students asked to subordinate one of the clauses in a dummy sentence, or to write a modifier-cluster sentence modeled on an example, often get the idea that such constructions are *absolutely* good. At any rate, they will concoct them for no other motive than to comply with what seems to be the teacher's preference, just as they originally subordinated that clause to comply with the exercise directions, instead of doing so because their ideas demanded such a conjunction. I doubt that calling an exercise "language study" rather than "composition" will avert this. It is very dangerous to separate a learning action from the motive that one expects will engender the action in authentic practice. This point in no way undermines the essential validity of the sentence-combining experience; it merely argues for situating the experience within another setting. Mellon himself suggests that the embedding "problems" might be stripped of grammatical appurtenances and made into language-building games for elementary school or incorporated into composition assignments for high school.

Francis Christensen has objected to the Hunt-Mellon measures of syntactic growth on the grounds that these measures may reinforce bad style.[13] One certainly must agree with him that complicated sentences and multiple embeddings can make for awful writing. And who would disagree that much insufferable officialese results from the over-use of long noun phrases? Syntactic complexity is no virtue in itself, surely. But the point is to be *able,* not *obliged,* to complicate one's sentences. Appropriateness — matching language structure to thought structure, and form to effect — must be the criterion. As I suggested, the a-rhetorical nature of Mellon's exercises risks disjoining complexity from appropriateness.

Whether Hunt and Mellon do or do not equate complexity with good style, another part of Christensen's objection seems valid to me, namely that in computing clause length, they have

[13] "The Problem of Defining a Mature Style," English Journal, Vol. 57, no. 4 (April 1968).

failed to discriminate among constructions that have very different effects for style and readability. Thus Hunt and Mellon do seem to imply that long clauses represent maturer writing, whereas, Christensen points out, some of these long clauses contain construction like appositives and absolutes that should not be included in the wordage count of the clause. Christensen argues that, because they make a rhetorical difference, all grammatically "loose or additive or unessential or nonrestrictive" constructions — all "free modifiers" — should be classified separately from the clauses they modify. Accordingly, Christensen claims that the sentences of the best writers will yield, by his analysis, a smaller wordage count per clause. The sort of distinction ignored by the analysis of Hunt and Mellon is illustrated, Christensen says, by the following two sentences:

> The very hallmark of jargon is the long noun phrase — the long noun phrase as subject and the long noun phrase as complement, the two coupled by a minimal verb.

and

> The very hallmark of jargon is the long noun phrase as subject coupled by a minimal verb to the long noun phrase as complement.

The conclusion of Christensen's argument is that the natural growth toward long clauses, especially noun clauses, should not be fostered, as Mellon tried to do, but rather that the twig should be bent. *"Maybe the kids are headed in the wrong direction."*[14] But I think Christensen fails here to allow for the dynamics of language growth. He is assuming that instruction can short-cut development, so that, for example, a student can be deflected from relative clauses to appositives, or from adverbial clauses to absolutes. But children's sentences must grow rank before they can be trimmed. Although I cannot cite evidence to prove this point, I feel certain from studying children's writing that they have to spin out long clauses before they can learn to reduce

[14] Ibid., p. 575.

them. Of the two sentences below I would say that the maturing student has to write the first before he can write the second.

> After he was elected, Goodsayer adopted the policies his opponent was advocating, which he had harshly criticized when he was running for office.
>
> Once elected, Goodsayer adopted the policies advocated by his opponent — the very policies he had harshly criticized during the campaign.

Three of the four changes are reductions of clauses. Much of the tightness and readability of mature style depends on clause reduction of this sort. And since clause reduction presupposes a prior expansion of clauses, short-cutting is not possible. In other words, I believe the term "clause reduction" refers not only to some sentence transformations but also to a psychological process of language maturation. The pedagogical issue, then, is not whether children's syntax should grow in the direction of more and longer clauses — it must — but, rather, when and by what means students can feel the need for clause reduction and thus learn to exploit it for rhetorical advantage.

Once we bring the notion of clause reduction to bear on problems of sentence complexity, we realize how difficult it is to relate stylistic maturity to any concept of complexity (of which many are being developed today). Intricacy of thought does not necessarily correspond to linguistic intricacy. *That* is merely a demonstrative pronoun whose inclusion in a sentence does not make for snytactic complexity, but if *that* refers to a whole preceding idea, then the sentence may be far more cognitively loaded than its structure would suggest. In this respect, consider some adverbs that act as inter-sentence connectors, such as *however, conversely,* and *in this respect.* And of course it is in the very nature of clause reductions, as we have seen, that length of clauses and sentences should be no true index of stylistic maturity. Indeed, sometimes a single well chosen word can replace an entire clause, producing a far simpler and far better sentence (though any evaluation must depend on a writer's intent). Compare:

I don't like what is left in the cup after you finish drinking.

to

I don't like the dregs.

Unless the speaker wished to convey ignorance of vocabulary itself, the second sentence is better. But the first is considerably more complex. Or should we look at the matter this way: in reducing to a noun a clause-within-a-clause, the word *dregs* is in effect replacing its own definition — *what is left in the cup after you finish drinking.* Therefore the true structure of the simpler sentence includes the nominal clause — the definition of *dregs* that appears explicitly in the more complex sentence but that merely underlies the vocabulary of the simpler one. If syntactic development stands in such close relation to vocabulary development, then one can only regard skeptically any efforts to measure sentence maturity by sentence complexity. Indeed, the argument above casts doubt on the whole effort to evolve a theory of complexity in isolation from semantics and word concepts. Or at any rate a theory so derived seems doomed to superficiality.

Francis Christensen's own work deserves our passing attention because it exemplifies how grammar teaching keeps cropping up under new rubrics, newly rationalized.[15] Christensen's way of analyzing sentences, which has been incorporated into the tenth-grade experimental materials of the Nebraska Curriculum Center, is rather misleadingly called "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence." It is generative only in the technical sense of a deductive system, being derived from transformational theory as popularized by Paul Roberts (whose rendition is unacceptable to most transformationalists themselves), not in a psychological sense relating to actual sentence creation. His analysis is indeed rhetorically oriented, since he emphasizes how syntactic differences make a stylistic difference, but students doing his exercises are not placed in a rhetorical situation.

[15] See *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

Unfortunately, the yoking of *generative* and *rhetoric* suggests a utility for composition that is not borne out.

Christensen analyzed sentences from well known professional writers and concluded that the good features of their style could be described by four principles — the *addition* to the main clause of clause modifiers, the *direction* of modification (placement of modifiers before or after the clause), the *level of generality* of modifiers in relation to the main clause, and the sentence *texture* that results. The following sample, drawn from his Nebraska unit, and originally written by Irwin Shaw, shows his mode of analysis: the additions are staggered below the main clause, labeled for construction, and numbered for level of generality.

(1) The assistant manager fussed over him,
  (2) wiping a cut on his leg with alcohol and iodine, (VC)
    (3) the little stings making him realize how fresh and whole and solid his body felt. (AB)

This differs from purely grammatical analysis in only one important respect: the numbering of abstraction levels, which brings in a semantic factor, does indicate that the writer states the broadest generality in the main clause, which he places first, and states the details in ensuing clause modifiers of descending abstraction level. Christensen claims that this kind and direction of modification characterizes the great majority of narrative and descriptive sentences in contemporary professional writing. Consequently he has devised two sorts of classroom exercises that embody this analysis. In one, the student brackets and numbers the various modifying constructions in sample sentences such as the one above, and in the other he combines two or three dummy sentences so as to "restore" a particular sentence as originally written. Clearly, the first is old-fashioned grammar parsing with a slightly new twist, whereas the second closely resembles Mellon's sentence-combining exercises, even to the stipulating of which structure is to result from the combining. Furthermore, Christensen's exercises presuppose a course in formal grammar. In other words, the Nebraska unit on "gen-

erative rhetoric" is vulnerable, on the one hand, to the same old criticism leveled at any other kind of grammatical analysis — that no evidence justifies it as a teaching procedure for composition. After all, grammar-composition approaches have always tried to relate syntactic differences to effective style; there is nothing new here in method. On the other hand, the unit prompts the same objection as to Mellon's exercises — that combining dummy sentences outside the real writing situation divorces syntax from judgment.

At first glance, Christensen may seem to have precluded such a separation since, in contrast with Mellon's a-rhetorical approach, Christensen has *told* the students that they are doing the exercises to provide them with good structures for narrative and descriptive writing. But pre-teaching rhetorical rules of good style, as I will argue at length in the following chapter, does not help students evolve an effective rhetoric, whether the rules derive from Aristotle or from a study of the best contemporary writing. By distilling a formula from the sentences of professionals Christensen has made the descending clause-modification structure a doctrinaire kind of absolute good, whereas it should always remain one option among others, its relative virtues to be ascertained by trial comparison with these other options. The very criterion of appropriateness that Christensen invokes against Hunt and Mellon becomes jeopardized in his own exercises. The assigning of abstraction levels to clause modifiers, which is his real contribution, serves better to describe what writers do than to prescribe what novice writers should do. If it is true that professionals characteristically construct their sentences deductively, opening with a main clause that sets the general scene or action first and afterwards adding details in clause modifiers, then it is reasonable to assume that such a widespread tendency answers a correspondingly widespread need in readers to see the whole tableau before proceeding to its parts. Such matters are historically and culturally relative, however. Much haiku poetry, for example, not to mention some passages in Faulkner, move inductively from the unsituated detail to the frame of reference. In these cases the

writer deliberately does not orient the reader until after the reader has tried to orient himself. It is precisely as a *psychological* matter of orientation that analysis by levels of abstraction becomes rhetorically significant.

The "direction of modification" does indeed make a difference in effect since it indicates a whole-to-part or part-to-whole orientation. But, first of all, the teacher should not himself prefer one or the other on the grounds that one characterizes the writing of his own epoch. In this respect, secondly, one feels that Christensen over-reacts to the outmoded canon of style that preferred the periodic sentence. He is right to point out that contemporary writers do not follow the old principle "Shift the modifier to the head of the sentence," but he is replacing one dogma with another. The fault is to *prescribe* anything. Third, whatever the orientation, a writer may wish to subordinate the most general statement into a modifier and raise the detail into the main clause: "As he was fussing over him, the manager wiped the cut on his leg with . . . ." (See the original Shaw sentence on page 175.) Thus a deductive sentence orientation plus a certain logic of subordination will *require* that the modifier precede the main clause. Only a comparison of sentence alternatives — in the context of what the writer is trying to accomplish — will teach judgment. Finally, a sequence of images may ascend or descend in generality not only throughout a single sentence but throughout a series of sentences, paragraphs, or stanzas as well. Which is to say that the opportunity to learn consists precisely of deciding *whether* to combine the sentences of the exercise or to leave them as they are, whether to parcel out the image sequence over a string of Christensen's "additions" or over a string of independent sentences or even larger units. Without options, and the reasons for options, it is futile to speak of teaching rhetoric. And the options must be made apparent during the composing process, not settled in advance by a dictum of good style.

In sum, the activity of combining sentences undoubtedly constitutes a powerful teacher of syntax — if related to will and choice, and if will and choice are exercised during authentic

discursive tasks. What Mellon and Christensen try to do by arraying sentence types in sequential exercises can be better done, I submit, by exploiting the sentence-combining activities ordinarily entailed in naturalistic tasks. Although embedding-transformations cannot in this way be precisely sequenced, the trading of systematization for organic learning may prove a wise bargain.

Any sort of revision can entail appropriate sentence-combining if the revision process is well directed. In Chapter Three I tried to demonstrate how the revision process of discussion becomes internalized and thus causes the individual to incorporate sentences into each other. The necessary condition here is that the dialogue be a collaborative development of a subject, and this usually requires some discussion training. Other sorts of revision are proposed in *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum.* One sort occurs in a pure game situation when one child makes up a short sentence, passes it to a partner to expand in any way that occurs to him, takes the sentence back to expand further, and so on, the object being to make together the longest sentence they can.[16] Another sort occurs when students rewrite sensory or memory notes into a composition.[17] For the sake of economy, one often notes ongoing sensations and memories in a clipped, staccato fashion, producing sentence fragments or kernel sentences that need to be combined when composing from these notes later. A class discussion of sample notes can indicate some of the sentence-combining possibilities before students cluster in small groups to read each other's notes and make similar suggestions. It is during the preparatory class discussion that the teacher's knowledge of sentence analysis can come into play.

More generally, any composition revision, whether based on notes or not, can include sentence-combining (or clause reduction). Let me illustrate. Suppose that students have written a piece of narrative, reportage, or fiction. The teacher projects or dittos one of the incoming papers and leads a discussion de-

[16] See page 155, *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum.*

[17] *Ibid.*, Chapters 9, 13, and 14.

signed to help students make suggestions to each other for revision when they break into small groups afterwards. Let's say that one student has written:

> The assistant manager fussed over him and wiped a cut on his leg with alcohol and iodine. The little stings made him realize suddenly how fresh and whole and solid his body felt.

By any number of means, the teacher can suggest that students consider other structures for this sentence sequence. The class may express some difficulty in understanding the passage or some concern about the style, in which case the teacher invites suggestions for revision. Or the teacher may simply change some sentences, in the spirit of tinkering, and ask for reactions to different versions:

> Fussing over him, the assistant manager . . . .
> The assistant manager, fussing over him, wiped . . . .
> As the assistant manager was fussing over him, wiping a cut . . . , the little stings made him . . . .

What difference do these changes in emphasis and effect make, in the opinion of the class? Would other rewritings be better? Should the sentences remain as they were? The teacher or a student might propose as a possibility the exact sentence that Irwin Shaw wrote, but maybe that would not be the best sentence for this piece of writing. What does the student author think? Which revision would he accept? Does the class agree, knowing now his intention? Then the teacher proposes that they suggest and discuss similar sentence revisions for their papers in small groups. By this means the concepts of Christensen and the transformationalists may influence student writing, not narrowly and systematically but constantly and organically. Sentence-embedding and clause reduction can occur in mid-composition as two of several options, another of which is to break one sentence down into smaller ones.

Some complete discourses are one sentence long — certain poems, including some haiku, and such things as maxims, proverbs, and epigrams. Only when the sentence unit defines

the form should the unit of study be the sentence. If students write these discourses, exchange them, and tinker with them, in a spirit of creative play, they can learn an enormous amount about significant syntactic possibilities.[18]

Following out now the earlier notion that cognitive stimulation may be the best developer of syntax — especially of *appropriate* syntax, let me give two examples from some trials of sensory writing. While watching some third-graders write down their observations of candle flames — deliberately this time, not merely in note form — I noticed that sentences beginning with *if-* and *when-* clauses were appearing frequently on their papers. Since such a construction is not common in third-grade writing, I became curious and then realized that these introductory subordinate clauses resulted directly from the children's *manipulation of what they were observing.* Thus: "If I place a glass over the candle, the flame goes out." And: "When you throw alum on the candle, the flame turns blue." Here we have a fine instance of a physical operation being reflected in a cognitive operation and hence in a linguistic structure. Consider also the following nominal clause, taken from a sixth-grade class where the pupils were dropping liquids of varying viscosity from varying heights onto papers of varying absorbency: "The drops it makes are almost indestructible." This embedding of one kernel sentence into another (*It makes drops. The drops are almost indestructible.*) resulted directly and organically, I feel, from the pupil's effort to render exactly what he saw, to specify *which* drops are indestructible, *it* referring obviously to one of the three liquids and his task being to discriminate among the three by testing for differences. Similarly, the cognitive task entailed in the candle tests *created a need* for subordinate clauses, because the pupils were not asked merely to describe a static object but to describe changes in the object brought about by changing conditions (*if* and *when*).

In summary, there are alternative methods to grammar teaching for developing syntactic maturity. Sentence-expansion

[18] For work with one-sentence discourse, see *pp.* 361 and 463, *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum.*

games, good discussion, rewriting of notes, collaborative revision of compositions, playing with one-sentence discourses, and verbalizing certain cognitive tasks are the alternatives I would recommend. The cognitive tasks build sentence structure along the referential dimension of discourse while revision from feedback builds sentences along the rhetorical dimension. Transformational theory has rendered a service by inspiring people such as Mellon and Christensen to devise sentence-combining tasks, but since transformational theory itself merely reflects syntactic options confronting people when they discourse, sentence-combining may operate powerfully throughout the curriculum without referring to the theory that describes it and without confining it to the small context required by research.

Unfortunately, transformational theory has also inspired a wholly different rationale for teaching grammar than the old one about improving speech and writing, which for many educators and linguists stands discredited on both empirical and logical grounds. The new case is that teaching some form of transformational concepts is an essential part of a humanistic education. In the same article quoted earlier, Peter Rosenbaum makes the case for this school of thought.

> In providing the most general account of linguistic structure, the transformational approach to linguistic inquiry yields new insights into human intellectual capacity, namely, those innate properties of the human mind which allow for the acquisition and use of language. In pursuing this capacity through the linguistic mechanisms which underlie competence in language, the student is involving himself in a study which has had intrinsic intellectual appeal for centuries, the study of those abilities which make human beings human.[19]

At first this may have a plausible ring, perhaps because it insists on the word "human," but it is a specious argument, I'm afraid — one that I'll have to take issue with. The mere fact

[19] "On the Role of Linguistics in the Teaching of English," pp. 343–344.

that it is of a human subject does not make a description a humanity, especially if that description derives from mathematical and symbolic logic. The mode and abstraction level of the description are critical. Transformational grammarians are committed to describing linguistic *competence* — that is, the ideal capacity that some generalized speaker of a language seems by inference to possess. To use their distinction, competence is quite different from *performance,* which includes all the actualities and accidents of real situations — speaker-temperament, audience influence, ongoing circumstances, etc., which accompany any authentic instance of speech. In short, all those palpable, particular, familiar, *human* qualities are missing (no fault for research perhaps, but a serious fault for school learning). What makes history, literature, conventional philosophy, and a lot of material in the behavioral sciences humanistic is that either they treat particular instances of things relatable to one's own behavior and observation (this relating being already a considerable feat of abstraction), or else they generalize directly from such instances. If someone were to describe lovemaking by charting relations of heartbeat, electrical potential, skin temperature, and brain waves (possibly a very useful description for some purposes) I would not therefore classify this description as humanistic, however dear the activity may be to human practitioners.

A severe limitation of both older and new linguistics is that they deal with no structure larger than the sentence. Such circumscribing of the field of inquiry is of course what defines a discipline, but to impose on the English curriculum, as a humanity, a discipline that does not rise above the level of syntax is hardly rational. The power and import of language become apparent only when we go well beyond the processing of phonemic and morphemic sequences into well formed sentences — not only to chains of sentences and paragraphs but to large verbal behaviors within and among people. What is humanistic is precisely what lies beyond the bounds of linguistics, which is a drastically small context for studying man's symbol-making capacity. More appropriate are those individual

and group arenas that psychology and sociology have staked out. It would be extremely difficult to maintain that linguistics should enjoy the status of a required subject, as part of English, when those other disciplines having a much clearer claim to the status of humanities — and which, in fact, are fast incorporating linguistics — are generally not taught at all before college.

That transformational theory applied as a research tool in psychology, sociology, and anthropology will in the future yield insights that should legitimately appear in the school curriculum — yes, that I can certainly accept as a possibility. Indeed the quick adoption of transformational theory for analytical purposes by important researchers in other disciplines, as by psycholinguists Roger Brown and David McNeil, testifies to its value. But educational benefits will be necessarily indirect for school study of how the mind works. It is understandable that university researchers working in the brilliantly advancing discipline of linguistics should hold hopes for a great yield of knowledge and want that knowledge to be taught in school. But to recommend that their research theories be in some way incarnated as a content in the English curriculum betrays both the misguided zeal of a junior science feeling its oats and the insensitivity of the university theoretician to the learning process of pre-college students. The following statement is tell-tale: "The educational implementation of a transformational description of the structure of English introduces the student to the live tradition of scholarship and language study. . . ."[20]

Now that we are barely beginning to exorcise the grammar ghost, I would hate very much to see it conjured from another quarter, certified by the prestige of some of our finest thinkers and licensing a notorious weakness of many schools, which can now feel free to play the old grammar game but with new texts and a clear conscience.

Other rationales have been advanced for grammar teaching, old and weak but persistent. One hears, for example, "Shouldn't

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 344. From the fact that Rosenbaum has recently put out school textbooks it is clear that by "implementation" he means direct substantive teaching of transformational grammar.

grammar be taught as an aid to learning foreign languages?" But a decision to teach grammar for this reason amounts to taking sides in an important controversy among foreign language teachers, many of whom abhor the grammar–translation method and espouse a more "direct" method based on conversation and oral pattern drills. At any rate, if foreign language teachers want students to know formal grammar, let them teach it. "But a knowledge of grammatical terms helps the teacher discuss composition with his students." If a teacher feels such a need for the vocabulary for parts of speech, kinds of clauses, and types of construction — *adverb, subordinate,* and *appositive,* for example — then let him set aside a class period to name and illustrate these things, supplying a couple of handout sheets for reference. Merely learning the nomenclature does not require a course, a textbook, etc. We hear still another voice, however: "Grammar disciplines the mind — it teaches students to think logically." The answer to this is that ordinary language is far too ambiguous for training in formal logic. Instead let's offer a course in symbolic logic itself and not fool around with an inferior system.

The latest rationale for a grammatical focus, however, deserves serious consideration because, though unwisely formulated so far (mostly because of a linguistics bias), it speaks in principle to an important educational goal. The term that seems to be emerging for this goal is "rational inquiry." The argument goes like this: Students should become involved in the basic process of examining data and ascertaining facts, in the creation of knowledge through generalization from instances. But, continues the argument, what corpus of data is so familiar to students that they can conduct an honest inquiry into it? Language itself constitutes such a corpus. Any student has produced and received enough speech to be an expert. So let us propose certain inquiries to students and let them find the answers. For example: "What do all sentences have in common?" The class examines lots of sentences and distills for an answer something like a subject and a predication about that subject. Then they may test this out by examining other sentences until they run

afoul of imperatives. Are these exceptions?[21] Or, more narrowly: "What kind of things do we say can be frightened (What class of nouns can be objects of *to frighten*)?[22] Such inquiry can be conducted without textbooks, though teachers may need help in asking good questions and in directing the inquiry.

While endorsing enthusiastically the main point of this proposal, I see several problems, all stemming from the unnecessary limitation of inquiry to the realm, once again, of the sentence. First, there are facts about language that students know and facts they don't know. Since they can manipulate syntax orthodoxly it seems reasonable to assume that they know, intuitively, the grammatical fact they are being asked to "discover." The question, then, is what value there is in formulating explicitly something they already know intuitively. The real purpose of inquiry, after all, is to find out something one doesn't know. Second, unless situated in a larger context, questions about the sentence will seem arbitrary and academic to most students. What is the motivation for *grammatical* inquiry? Third, inquiry restricted to syntax will, I'm afraid, blend only too easily into the phony "discovery" approach so widely advertised today, wherein some small facts are programmed for "induction." That is, the students are not "told the facts" in the old fashioned way; they are told the facts in a new fashioned way, the improvement being in the *subtlety* of the manipulation. This is certainly not the intent and spirit of those proposing rational inquiry into language, but my point is that by circumscribing inquiry to syntax they risk subverting unwittingly and unnecessarily their own noble goal. The difference between real and phony discovery depends on whether the teacher can predict what stu-

[21] Wayne O'Neil, "The Misuses of Linguistics in the Classroom: Paul Roberts' Rules of Order," *The Urban Review*, summer, 1968 (Center for Urban Education, 33 W. 42nd St., New York, 10036). This article is a devastating criticism, on both pedagogical and linguistic grounds, of the *Paul Roberts English Series* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966). Professor O'Neil is a transformational linguist.

[22] This example is taken from a forthcoming article by Samuel Jay Keyser of Brandeis University.

dents will discover and when. And the difference between trivial and significant inquiry depends on the initial size of the arena.

As with sentence-combining exercises, my recommendation is to leave the sentence within its broader discursive context. Students should raise questions about language to which they truly want to find answers. These will no doubt often lead down to the sentence. Suppose, for example, that they ask, "Why do people communicate through language instead of through other means?" At first, such a question seems hopelessly general, but it is precisely the job of inquirers to sharpen and subdivide questions until the questions become answerable, and answerable by some clear means. In determining what language can do that other media cannot, students may well ask eventually, as a subquestion of their main inquiry, "What do all statements, or sentences, have in common?" In this way, the examination of syntax can, because of its context, yield truly new insight that students honestly want (their original question being prompted, let's say, by the current concern that visual media may supplant language). Similarly, if students generate a question about the difference between the language of poetry and that of prose, they could quite logically end up examining the classes of nouns that can be the objects of certain verbs: normally only animate things can be frightened, but in poetry the thunder may frighten the house.

Rational inquiry into language must not be allowed at its very outset to fall prey, like composition, to the overblown influence of sentence analysis. It is quite clear, if one thinks about it, that grammar tyrannizes over language teaching not because the sentence unit is a sensible learning unit but because we think we know more about the sentence than about whole pieces of discourse, which cannot be analysed with nearly the same precision. But our inability to get a convenient intellectual handle on discourse above the sentence level does not mean that we should adjust education to fit the severe limitations of research instruments. If we teach only what we "know" in this limited technical sense, then we are committing a colossal cop-out.

Ignorance becomes an excuse for further ignorance. Actually, since we practice the various discourses every day, we certainly know them in whatever way we need to know them to help the next generation practice them. Furthermore, sentence definition is not so neat, nor discourse definition so obscure, as appears at first blush. Both are determined by a speaker's decisions about where to begin and end, decisions that depend ultimately on personal choice as conditioned by all the various performance factors.

Point of view is critical here. Seen as a *fait accompli,* as a specimen pinned to the board, a given sentence looks deceptively discrete and self-contained, but if teachers have anything to learn from transformational theory, it is this: any such given sentence *might have been* embedded as a clause or reduced clause in a more complex sentence, or *might have been* strung into a sequence of several sentences. It is only from the point of view of the finished utterance that one can even speak of a sentence. From the viewpoint of language *production,* there are only options about how to parcel out thought into syntax. No grammar can tell us how people play these options, for the reasons are psychological and social, not linguistic. And it is these reasons the teacher must help students to relate to the linguistic forms. He can do so only if the units of learning are units larger than the hindsight sentence. But no reasonable unit exists — surely no arbitrary sequence of sentences or paragraphs — until one reaches that unit which is determined by some speaker's decision to open his figurative mouth somewhere and to close it somewhere else. It's about time the sentence was put in its place.