

TEACHING WRITING:

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As one who teaches linguistics to teachers (and prospective teachers) of high school English, I frequently hear two serious complaints concerning linguistics and the teaching of composition. The first is that high school students by and large cannot readily assimilate the sophisticated concepts associated with a linguistic analysis of English grammar. The second, and more serious, is that the teachers themselves, since their exposure to linguistics is frequently limited to at most a few courses, lack the mastery of linguistics necessary to employ linguistic theory as a useful tool in the classroom. The relationship between these complaints is clear, as is the basic implication: the English teacher cannot expect to teach a body of material, or even to use it profitably as a pedagogical aid, if he does not command that material.

But such complaints and their implications are only symptoms of an underlying problem, one which is concerned with attitudes toward the use of linguistic theory in teaching composition. Specifically, studies dealing with linguistics and composition have been primarily concerned with how a knowledge of linguistic concepts affects the syntactic fluency of students.¹ Such studies assume a methodology which exposes the student to linguistic concepts which the student then applies. Whether this methodology is valid is not the concern of this paper. However, these studies make one other assumption which does have a bearing on what will be said. It is assumed in such studies that teachers who would employ the methodology assumed therein will have a certain (unspecified) degree of sophistication in linguistics.² This assumption has two drawbacks. First, it ignores the fact that our school systems are presently manned by teachers who are often without linguistic training. Secondly, it incorrectly assumes that those currently being groomed to teach English are receiving thorough and uniform training in linguistics. These are formidable obstacles for any linguistically-oriented composition program.

It is not my intention to criticize studies in linguistics and composition, however. It may well be that the studies which have been done include a framework for instructing teachers of English in a manner and to a degree appropriate to the implementation of their proposed methodologies. My intention is rather to suggest a general course of action in approaching some kinds of composition problems. What I shall propose differs from the approach sketched above for previous studies in three important ways. First, it focuses on linguistic theory as a diagnostic tool for the teacher in teaching composition, rather than as a plan of action for the classroom. Secondly, what I shall propose assumes a mastery of only selected portions of linguistic theory, in this case generative-transformational theory. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, my proposal does not impose a new framework on the teacher within which he must function if he is to communicate his material. That is, if we are to deal with the immediate problems involved in teaching composition by utilizing linguistic theory, I suggest that there is a considerable amount of accessible, useful linguistic theory of which the teacher of composition may avail himself immediately. I further suggest that linguistic theory is more useful immediately as a diagnostic, rather than a teaching tool, and that in treating it as such we do not overburden the teacher, nor restrict his creativity.³

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A few pertinent examples should serve to clarify the generalizations I have made. Taking as a linguistic model the current generative-transformational theory, I shall demonstrate how a mastery of two fairly simple concepts within this theory can aid in diagnosing composition errors, using sentences which occurred in college freshman compositions. Let us first consider the sentence

1. While both characters are described as being mad, they do not have the same characteristics attributing to their madness.

The main item of concern here is the lexical item attribute, which is used incorrectly. It is fairly obvious that the student in question meant to use the word contribute. But, barring the correction of occasional "slips of the pen," to merely point this fact out to the student is, I think, unproductive. For the issue in this case is more than the near homonymy of two lexical items which can be cleared up by carefully distinguishing between the prefixes at- and con- and explaining the difference in meaning between the two lexical items. That is, the pair attribute/contribute exhibits contrasting sets of syntactic/semantic characteristics which enable the teacher to clearly distinguish the two more precisely in his own mind, and thus in the minds of his students.

The theory behind this syntactic/semantic distinction is simple. Noam Chomsky, in his work Aspects of the Theory of Syntax, points out that all verbs in English occur in well-defined syntactic frames. For instance, some verbs occur with direct objects (i.e., are transitive), while others do not allow direct objects (i.e., are intransitive). In other cases, verbs occur with prepositional phrases indicating relationships such as indirect object or location, as we see in 2 and 3, respectively.

2. Alex gave the book to Mary.
3. Sam resides in Florida.

While none of the preceding statements is innovative, a combination of such traditional syntactic notions into a maximal syntactic frame for specific verbs (called the "strict subcategorization" of the verbs) does offer a new approach in handling composition errors like that in sentence 1. First, if the teacher is conditioned to look for errors in terms of strict subcategorization, he may well find that what appear to be errors resulting from a student using the "wrong word" in compositions actually have a deeper root. Secondly, since the notion of strict subcategorization is not conceptually complex, it is easily introduced in the class room without burdensome theoretical terminology.

Chomsky further points out that there are semantic restrictions on the syntactic configuration in which a given verb occurs. He calls these restrictions "selectional restrictions." For instance, the verb elapse is intransitive, and so occurs only with a noun phrase as subject. However, only a very limited set of noun phrases, namely those which designate units of time, may function as the subject of elapse. Thus sentence 4 is grammatical, while 5 is unacceptable (with unacceptability marked by an asterisk).

4. Five minutes elapsed.
5. *Sue elapsed.

Thus the notion of strict subcategorization is limited by the notion of

selectional restrictions, to insure that verbs occur in a syntactically and semantically appropriate environment. Again, these concepts and their relationship are simple in structure and are therefore easily dealt with in the classroom.

Let us now employ these two notions in an analysis of sentence 1 to see whether they shed any light on this composition error. If we examine the strict subcategorization of the verbs involved, attribute and contribute, we find that they occur in identical syntactic frames: "X contributes Y to Z" and "X attributes Y to Z," where X, Y and Z are all noun phrases. Already we see that in addition to near homonymy of the lexical items we have identity of syntactic patterns. In fact, we see that in some syntactic environments (but, of course, not semantic one) either verb can be used, as in 6 and 7.

6. Sam contributed his knowledge to the Harvard Business School.
7. Sam attributed his knowledge to the Harvard Business School.

Thus it seems that this problem is not a purely syntactic one, for an examination of the syntax does not add to our understanding of why sentence 1 is unacceptable. However, the notion of selectional restrictions, coupled with strict subcategorization, does offer a new insight. For we find that while the syntactic frames for attribute and contribute are identical, the semantic restrictions on each are different. For it is the case that the subject noun phrase of attribute must be human, while this restriction does not hold for contribute. This fact accounts for the acceptability of 8 and the unacceptability of 9 (and of sentence 1, as well).

8. A good education contributes much to a well-rounded character.
9. *A good education attributes much to a well-rounded character.

So we see that a knowledge of linguistic theory can aid in the diagnosis of composition errors. For if the basic concepts like strict subcategorization and selectional restrictions can be instilled in the teacher without needless theoretical trappings, the teacher has a valuable tool at his disposal. The teacher may then adapt these concepts to his own teaching style to add a new dimension to his explanations of "word choice" or syntax in composition.

A second area in which we may employ the notion of strict subcategorization is illustrated in sentences like

10. My mother recovered over the flu.
11. The campus resident is prohibited to have a car on campus.

In these cases the syntax of one idiom is overlapped with that of another, synonymous idiom. Thus in 10, recover over is a hybrid of recover from and get over. Similarly, in 11, prohibit to is derived from a combination of prohibit from and not allowed to. One solution for such "mixed idioms" is to simply tell the student to use one or the other of these expressions. Once again, however, such a solution may be a treatment of symptoms only, while the underlying problem is overlooked. For just as was the case with attribute and contribute, the real problem for students who produce sentences like 10 and 11 may not be a simple confusion of idioms, but rather the lack of any way to avoid such confusion. In such instances an awareness of syntactic configuration may help to overcome this lack.

In cases like 10 and 11, the notion of strict subcategorization is easily related to the treatment of synonymy in language, since the problem to be dealt with is the differing syntax of synonymous expressions. Such a treatment must point out that synonymy occurs when one concept may have more than one possible realization in the grammar (i.e., the syntax) of a language. Thus, synonymy encompasses the syntactically more complex phrases we have discussed above, as well as simple lexical items. It should be pointed out that the syntactic treatment of some kinds of synonymy is one easily translated into a more traditional framework. That is, once a problem concerning the syntax of synonyms is diagnosed, the notion of strict subcategorization can readily be introduced by comparing synonyms or synonymous expressions which have, for example, different prepositions. Again, the concepts discussed here are hardly innovative, but the approach to teaching composition may be. For again I do not suggest the teaching of a linguistic approach as such, but rather that the teacher, through a mastery of certain linguistic concepts, might diagnose composition problems which otherwise could go undetected. The teacher can, once he understands the problem, attack it in a manner consistent with his own teaching methods, grade level and so on.

Finally, let us consider some of the ramifications of an approach such as that suggested. First of all, it clearly does not avoid the problem mentioned above, that the teacher of English has too little exposure to linguistics to adequately master its concepts. It does suggest, however, that a more beneficial use of what exposure there is might be a concentration in certain areas of phonology, morphology and syntax. That is, linguistics courses for the English teacher might well be conducted as intensive specific studies in well-defined aspects of grammar, rather than as general approaches to the field.

The approach I have suggested does avoid the other problems mentioned at the outset. For with only minor changes (or in some cases no change) in linguistic instruction, or with a mere shift in emphasis, the teacher of English can be made linguistically aware without having to grapple with concepts which are, for his purposes, burdensome. Further, the teacher is not restricted in his own creativity by linguistic terminology or frameworks. What I have suggested is that once the teacher has diagnosed a composition error linguistically, he then treat the error according to his own method of teaching. For certainly there is no need to label a linguistic concept as such, or to introduce intricate terminology, if the concept in question can be communicated at a more general, simplified and appropriate level. Thus, I do not propose that composition errors traditionally marked as "awkward" or "wrong word" be labelled differently, but merely that it is possible for the English teacher to have a more thorough (i.e., a linguistic) understanding of these terms in some cases, and thus to communicate this understanding in the classroom.

The fact that in my proposal the teacher is not overwhelmed by linguistics, and in turn does not overwhelm the student, has two important corollaries. First, what I suggest does not require the development of an elaborate framework for its implementation. Nor does it require developing new methodologies and teaching techniques which must be tested and revised. It treats linguistics as a common sense way of diagnosing writing problems. It thus makes linguistic theory an immediate tool for the teacher of English. Secondly, what I have proposed does not restrict the teacher. Rather, it adds to the number of useful concepts which teachers use in recognizing and treating language problems. It suggests that linguistic concepts, like any other concepts, should be

communicated through the teacher's personal methodology and his creativity, rather than through an artificial framework. Thus, while much of what I have tried to point out is not new, I believe that it is practical.

¹For a thorough and enlightening discussion of such studies, see Louis A. Arena, Linguistics and Composition: A Method to Improve Expository Writing Skills, (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1975).

²In this regard, see especially Marianna W. Davis, Transformational Grammar and Written Sentences, (The Hague: Mouton, 1973).

³cf. Arena, pp. 10-35.