ENGLISH TEACHING - SOME PREJUDICES

by Paul Roberts

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Thank you very much, Harold, for the generous introduction. I don't know about generous introductions because the performance may disappoint expectation. I sometimes think it's better to say, "We've got this fellow and we'll see what he can do." But, at any rate, I'm pleased to have the opportunity to talk to you about some ideas that I've had which I call "prejudices" about the teaching of English, in all of its aspects. I don't shrink from the word prejudice, but I would like to venture the rather fine distinction between ideas that are prejudicious and those that are pre-judicial. By that I mean on the one hand that I'm not under the delusion that I'm talking about some kind of incontrovertible truth, some kind of actual fact. But that on the other, these are studied, not present thoughts by duty ruminated. They're based on nearly thirty years of teaching English, of teaching students who aspire to be teachers of English, of working with schools, and of much contemplation of the various serious problems of the English portion of the curriculum. I'm sometimes asked whether I ever taught in the lower school and I can just barely say "Yes." One year in Cairo I taught thirty-two eight-year-old Egyptian boys English, and I had the dubious distinction of introducing P.T.A. to that unhappy country.

The first suggestion that I would put to you is that English, whether in the elementary school, high school or the university, is not and should not be thought to be a service department. The English hour or the English class is of course importantly concerned with teaching the pupil how to spell, to read, how to write sentences and paragraphs. But this is not its essential function, in my view. And it is not, or should not be, the only part of the day or the school in which the goal is pursued. Teachers in the elementary school, I think, will perhaps be more easily persuaded of this than those who teach in high schools and universities, because the teacher in the elementary school is commonly with the pupils all day long, and involved in the variety of subjects in which English is used for the most part, spoken or written. The teacher does not say, "Well, now we're out of

English and into geography so it doesn't matter how you spell Mississippi." He keeps him to the spelling of Mississippi all day long. And even in arithmetic the teacher is concerned whether the child says "two plus two is four" or "two plus two are four." The teaching of English in the elementary school goes on all day. It's only in the upper grades, where one teacher teaches social studies, another math, another science, another foreign language, another English and so on, that proper spelling and the manufacture of correct and graceful sentences are thought to be the responsibility of the English teacher and nobody else. Thus we have the science teacher who complains that the reason the pupils cannot write proper scientific reports is that the English teacher, neglecting duty, has failed to teach them how to write scientific reports. But why should the English teacher, and not the science teacher, teach the writing of scientific reports? One might bear it if the science teacher were to say, "Well, you see, I have the misfortune to be illiterate. I can't spell or make sentences or organize material so would you please do this for me." But this is not the argument. The argument is the science teacher is occupied with big and lofty matters and cannot be bothered with "kitchen stuff" like spelling and manufacture of sentences. This is the task of the scullery girl, English. Or what is English for? Similarly, the social science teacher complains that English has not taught pupils how to write research papers, and the language teacher loudly asserts that the only reason that pupils cannot learn French and German is that the English teacher has not taught them English grammar.

Well, it's my prejudice that these attitudes are quite mistaken and should be extirpated from the school. In an American or British school it's everybody's business, I think, to teach English--to teach writing and speaking, to correct spelling, to eliminate errors, and ambiguity in sentence construction, to give advice on organization. I could be persuaded to the contrary only if it could be shown that all teachers except English teachers are illiterate.

Well, then, what is English for? Of course it plays a large part in the "kitchen" matters just described. It does systematically what other parts of the curriculum do only haphazardly and at random: describing the fundamental laws that underlie our words and sentences and the conventions that shape our paragraphs and articles and books. But this is not in my opinion the essential function of English. The essential function of English is to convey to the children in the largest measure possible, an understanding of

what civilization is all about. It should aim, through a careful exploration of English language and English and American literature to bring the children to some notion of what it is like to be a human being. Its purpose is not to make them happy. There are drugs which produce happiness, of a sort at least. It's rather to tell them what they are and where they are and where they've been and where they are going. All parts of the curriculum do this in some measure, but my prejudice is that English does it most because it is immediately concerned with the language and literature, and that herein lies its reason for being.

Well, if you accept this point of view as the point of departure, then there is quite a lot of consequence. We must re-examine such notions, I think, as beginning where the child is. Probably no one would object to this as pedagogical theory, but one must object strongly to the pedagogical practice that derives from it. And that is to begin where the child is and stay there. In the last few decades, the subject matter of English has become more and more the child himself. He is encouraged in the English hour to explore and contemplate and write about his family, his pets, his classmates, his summer holidays, and most of all, himself. We earnestly pursue George Robinson, third-grader, begging him to share with us his views on war and peace, the value of poetry, the relative worth of cats and dogs, the desirability of being the eldest child, the youngest child, or the only child in the family. This may have some use in getting him started in writing, but it has no other use. The views of George Robinson, third-grader, are of very little interest on any subject whatsoever, except perhaps whether he has to go to the bathroom. And furthermore, never will be unless early on we start putting information into George instead of forever trying to pull it out of him. The business of English is not to ascertain what he thinks, but to make available to him some of the things that other people have thought and written, not in the spirit of indoctrination, but in that of education. We don't require that he think that Aristotle is a genius or that Aristotle is a fool, but we don't want him to get to adulthood without ever having heard of Aristotle.

So far I think I will perhaps have carried most people with me. From now on as I become more specific about my prejudices, I shall no doubt drop off supporters and wind up possibly as a minority of one. For instance, I don't think that children should be taught to appreciate literature. More than that, I don't think they <u>can</u> be taught to appreciate it. They can

be taught to make the proper noises, but we shouldn't confuse these noises with literature appreciation. Once I visited a third-grade class where I heard a teacher read a poem on Halloween and ask, "Now Sally, can you tell us how this made you feel?" And Sally, rising to the occasion, "Oh, Miss Driscoll, it just made me feel all shivery." What I said to myself was "Well, Sally, you've become a very satisfactory small phony and if you will just persist maybe some day you can become a big phony and make a significant contribution to the decline of Western Civilization." We don want to require of Sally that she tell us how the poe makes her feel. In the first place, she can't. Appr ciation is one of the incommunicable things. Asking what a poem makes you feel is like asking what it is like to be in love. One can make noises to fill the silence, but one can never really quite tell. And th more one tries to tell, the more the experience shriv els. For support of that I will refer you to Heming- way's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." Furthermore, the poetic experience, like most deep ex- periences, is essentially a private one. What Sally feels about the poem is really between Sally and God. About all the teacher and Sally can do is nod and smile to each other across the valley that divides each human being from every other one and say, "Yes, it's so, isn't it, though I'm afraid I can't tell you just what It is." The teacher can, however, require something else of Sally--that she understand the poem. Whether it gives her ecstasy or boredom, she should be able to demonstrate her understanding. She may probe this understanding at different levels, depend- ing upon the age, the ability, the experience of the child. At the beginning, naturally, we probe for simple things. "Who is jumping over the candlestick?" Answer: "Jack." Later on we may get into metaphor, symbolism, the like, complicated matters of structure and syntactic delicacies. But the emphasis in my view should always be on whether Sally understands, not on how she vibrates. A considerable responsibility in this matter rests upon the teacher of the very young child, second or third grade teachers. A third-grade child is a very tempting animal because you can con the third-grade kid into almost anything: that the object of mankind is to breed winged pigs or that anything that rhymes makes you shivery. In the third grade, the typical child is still deeply in love with the teacher and quick to learn the responses that seem to please the object of adoration. But only on Grecian urns can one be forever panting and forever young. In the fourth grade and beyond, the child hears other voices and explores other rooms. If the third-grade teacher has fed him a lot of nonsense, he will become

disillusioned and cynical about the whole enterprise, be able to--be ready to--condemn it out of hand, and this is particularly, I think, a danger in English. Two plus two is roughly four in the third grade as in the eighth, but shivering varies. Few eighth-graders roll up to the English class with hungry enthusiasm, and I believe that the reason why they don't is that they've been taught early that English is chiefly an emotional rather than an intellectual matter. And when they don't feel the emotion, they come to look on English as a rather boring game that English teachers for some reason want to play. I shouldn't like to be misunderstood on this point. I think it's a wonderful thing for children, for anyone, to get enjoyment from literature. In some deep sense this is what the thing is all about. I just don't think that it's likely to be caught by direct pursuit. It comes, if it comes at all, with attention to understanding and not too much palaver.

Another prejudice I have is that I don't think teachers should be required to be creative, in the sense in which they have in recent years frequently been urged to be. In another sense, classroom creativity is highly desirable and a large mark of the good teacher. You must certainly commend the teacher who can hang a little loose, who can maintain some flexibility in relation to the lesson, see when it's going badly and have the wit to make it go well. You must value the teacher who is in a sensitive relationship with the pupils, and realizes that the problem of teaching Ricky is quite different from that of teaching Annabelle. If this is what creative teaching means, I'm all for it. But it has been interpreted to mean much more than this. To mean, in fact, to devise a new course of study, scope and sequence for every classroom situation. I don't think the teachers actually do this much, but they're made to feel that they ought to do it, and they often pretend to do it. If you ask a teacher whether he follows the book in whatever subject he's teaching, he will ordinarily deny it, truthfully or not. Following the book has come to mean bad or, at least, uncreative teaching. How can any book correctly anticipate the needs of the children of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, or San Jose, California? Well, no book can, of course. Ideally, Sioux Falls and San Jose would each have its separate book. More than that, each child in Sioux Falls and San Jose would have his own separate book, tailored for his own needs and capabilities. Obviously this is impossible, but it seems to me that this is just what, under some interpretations of creativity, teachers have been asked to do. Certainly a great many teachers are capable of producing a course of study,

responsible and useful and shaped to fit the needs o particular class. But no teacher is capable of doi this in the heat and sweat of day-to-day teaching. takes a great deal of time and a great deal of help produce a sequential program in any serious subject. It's absurd to think that anyone can improvise one d by-day between Huntley-Brinkley and dinner.

This problem is a little more serious in English than in other subjects. One skips around in math, science, social studies no doubt, but not so much as in English. The reason is that English in the last few decades has become somewhat formless. There hav been valiant attempts on the part of school committe to indicate some sort of sequence, but they've not c to much because they've dealt almost entirely with surface matters that do not really lend themselves t sequential treatment. Thus, I once saw a course of study for the schools of a large Western city which indicated that the children should learn to capitali the pronoun "I" in the third grade, the proper nouns in the fourth, the beginning of sentences in the fift and the name of the Deity in the sixth. I don't know how this worked out in practice, perhaps they wrote all proper nouns in the lower case until they got int the fourth grade, and perhaps avoided talking about t Deity until the sixth.

Our ancestors teaching traditional grammar did much better than this. One could guess that they would be on subjects and predicates in the third and maybe gerunds in the eighth. They were going somewhe Maybe not to any important place, but at least somewhere. It was, I believe, the tendency beginning in the Twenties to abandon the sequential study of gramm that took the spine out of English and left it floppy and amorphous. This quite apart from the question of whether it's useful to teach traditional grammar. Th point is rather that a subject with no identifiable subject matter is formless. It must either find a su ject matter or disintegrate. The tendency of English in the past few decades has been to disintegrate. The orthodox view for a long time was that the only gramm that should be taught was what was called "functional grammar." This means teaching no grammar that cannot be put to direct and instant use in the correction of some specific error in speaking and writing. That is, you don't teach the participle unless you catch the youngster saying, "He had wrote a letter." Then you teach the participle, with no concern for what gramma may have been taught before or may be taught later. Obviously, such a procedure cannot possibly lead to any real understanding of the grammatical system as

whole. The participle cannot be understood except in the large complex of which it is a part. And of course the whole notion of sequence has been abandoned.

Something of the same thing happened on the literature side of the English class. There was a time when English teachers were more or less agreed that certain poems and stories were valuable in themselves and ought to be taught to any child going to school. No doubt some of the choices were doubtful; I didn't care much for Silas Marner in the tenth grade, and I don't care much for it now. Nevertheless, I accepted then, as I accept now, the notion that literature is an absolute of some sort, that one studies the good things in school and reads the trivial ones privately as one's inclination suggests and leisure permits. This attitude changed also. The tendency grew to abandon the classics in favor of the trivial, on the ground that the latter were more interesting to the children, closer to their experience, more acceptable to them. So in many schools Silas Marner was replaced by Lou Gehrig, Grey's "Elegy" by poems on Halloween. My present purpose is not to defend Silas Marner against Lou Gehrig, but simply to point out that the replacement of the former by the latter contributes largely to the formlessness of English. For once Lou Gehrig is admitted, anything may be. Why not Bart Starr, Willy Mays, Wilt Chamberlain? With Lou Gehrig in the curriculum, anyone is safe on first. The children are no longer directed to a course of study comprising what people think any educated person should know. There are no longer particular things that the English course of study should contain, and there is, therefore, no longer an English course of study. This situation brought about English books that could be studied in any direction, forwards, backwards, sideways, diagonally. . . nothing was related to anything else. There was not much difference between the fourth grade book and the eighth except that in the eighth the sentences were a little longer, and the pictures portrayed larger children.

But this was not yet the worst that was to happen to English. Since English didn't seem to have anything in particular to teach, curriculum makers with new demands from society for things to be taught began to dump them into English. Telephone manners, for example. You speak in English on the telephone don't you, so why shouldn't the English class teach you how to speak on the telephone? Or how to behave to your grandparents, or how to be nice to the new child in class, or how to plan a picnic, or how to frame the soft answer that turneth away wrath. English came to be concerned less and less with language and literature and more and

more with manners and morals, and with other things as well. I remember an English teacher in a curriculum meeting where it was proposed to add still another thing, English say that she didn't see why science couldn't do syphillis because English was already doing gonorrhea. Maybe all of these things should be taught, I don't know, but I can't agree that they should be labeled English or be allowed to clutter up English books. Let's have a new subject called Miscellaneous. Children can study math at nine, Miscellaneous at ten, English at eleven, and so on. And let the English be restricted to the serious and sequential study of the language and of the literature.

The key word here is sequential. The hardest single thing for a text-book writer to maintain is sequence and progression, to keep building and not to be forever reviewing. There are two main developments in recent years that have exacerbated the problem. One is the formlessness of English that's just been mentioned. Since English doesn't deal with any particular thing, one cannot be sure that a pupil at any grade level, from first to thirteenth, knows any particular thing about English, anything that can be used as a foundation to climb to something else. I don't think I ever had a student in college who had never heard of Shakespeare, but I have had college students who were under the impression that Shakespeare wrote his works in Latin and that they were just badly translated. And the other development is the extraordinary mobility of modern society. There was nothing like this when I was in school. I would guess that over eighty per cent of my first grade class was still together in the eighth grade. I don't know whether we were taught well or not, but atleast we were taught more or less the same things and the teacher knew more or less what we had been taught and what to build on. Nowadays, particularly in the higher income groups, there is nothing like this. A youngster may pop in and out of two or three school districts a year. And the teacher can't possibly know what training all have in common and what to build on.

Well, what could curriculum planners do in such a situation? At the risk of sounding frivolous, I will say the only thing they can do is pretend it doesn't happen. This is what is done in the school of my own community, The American Overseas School of Rome. This school has a turnover that could be matched I think by very few in the States. The children are constantly coming and going as diplomatic and business reassignments require. A large number following in the wake of Fullbright or Sabbatical parents come for just a year

or part of a year. Yet the school curriculum is built on the assumption that every child that enters Overseas in the first grade will graduate from it in the twelfth. The assumption is patently false, of course. Few or none do. But there is the fundamental view that catching up is required, that there is a ladder from one through twelve with easy steps for the child who is always on the ladder and leaps demanded of those who come newly to it. The system works. Not only does Overseas rank spectacularly in college admissions, but those who leave it for State-side schools generally report that they're well ahead of their classmates. My advice to a curriculum committee in the American system, then, would be something along these lines: plan a sequential program. Plan it as if your population were entirely stable. Help your new people to meet the standard as well as you can, but not at the expense of the total program designed for the youngster who stays with it from one through twelve.

Well, I have many other prejudices and one of them involves what are called slow learners. Absurd as it may seem, my feeling is that the important thing about slow learners is simply that they learn slowly. This means that they must be given time to learn and also that more is demanded of the teacher than with fast learners. More wit and ingenuity, more patience. If this were a logical world, teachers would be graded for excellence and all the really good ones would be put teaching the slow learners, and the rather poor ones would be assigned to the fast learners. For the fast learners hardly need a teacher at all, and anyway can't be much harmed by a poor one. But that's not the way the world goes and my observation is that the clever teacher usually finds his way to the clever pupils. He is, therefore, not pushed to the full exercise of his professional ability. When I say that the characteristic of slow learners is that they learn slowly, I mean to imply that they can often learn the same things as fast learners, only that it takes them a longer time. I would make the further, stronger claim that they ought to learn the same things, at least in the elementary grades, and in much of high school. And I think that in English they ought to learn the same things, as much of them as they can, from one through twelve. I'll try to make this more specific with a rather exaggerated example. Suppose we have in the school district a streaming device in the twelfth grade. I have no strong opinion on streaming one way or the other. But I would see no objection to a fast stream studying "Hamlet," "As You Like It," "Macbeth," the middle stream studying "Hamlet" and "As You Like It," and the slow stream studying just "Hamlet."

What I would object to, I think, would be a situation in which the fast stream studied "Hamlet," the middle stream J.P. Marquand, and the slow stream Lou Gehrig. Streaming of this sort, particularly in the lower grades, produces a system just as pernicious as the British Eleven Plus, or other plan to sort out pupils of tender years, deciding that some will lead and dominate and others will haul and carry. They won't all achieve leadership, obviously, but they ought all to have a good shot at it and to be permitted to go just as far as their brains and industry and the skill of the teachers will take them. They ought none be barred *a priori* from the place where the power is. And I'll tell you where the power is. It's not with Lou Gehrig it's with "Hamlet." A rather interesting situation has developed in that respect with the English series that I wrote. It's rather conservative and rather hard, quite demanding, and intellectual. One would think it would be used, if at all, with superior students. Actually in a number of places it has been adopted for what I think are now called "disadvantaged children. I don't know why this is, but I imagine it has something to do with Federal funds. But whatever the explanation, I confess that I take some pleasure in the thought that these disadvantaged children are studying good things like Stevenson and Larkin and Dickens and Mark Twain, while Caroline Kennedy is learning how to talk on the telephone.

I'll now come to what is my most unpopular prejudice of all and I think quite an idiosyncratic one. I'm one of those people who cannot change a light bulb without risking blowing out the power of the whole city. And so I have a particular view of audio-visual aids. I'm a firm believer in them, but I think there are only two that are really first rate. One is the teacher's voice and the other is the chalkboard. I can see that the overhead projector may be in some circumstances more convenient than the chalkboard, but beyond that I feel that machinery is to be classed as an educational nuisance, except in very particular circumstances. I'll take an example somewhat apart from our present concern. Much of my work has been connected with teaching of foreign languages, which since the middle 1950's has been involved much with the use of language laboratories. Like most other people in this field, I was pretty bullish about language labs at one time, and have come to considerable disillusionment. I think they have some small contribution to make to foreign language learning but nothing commensurate with the cost of institution and maintenance and supervision. Our experience in Rome has been that after the first flush of enthusiasm has

rn off, it's difficult to keep students active in e lab for more than about ten or fifteen minutes at ime. And we have the feeling further that, even if could, the practice would not get us much closer to r goal, the spontaneous generation of actual and re or less accurate language. The reason that this a problem is that the educator is ethically bound, seems to me, to put up a certain amount of resis- nce to the layman's passion for machinery. The lay- n is willing to believe in almost anything that is chanical. Once in Rome I was called on the telephone a colonel attached to the United States Embassy. don't suppose that one gets to be a colonel in the ited States Army without a certain amount of intel- gence and common sense, but this colonel remarked at he had heard that he had to learn Italian, and he d heard that I was in control of an Italian learning chine, and he wanted me to plug him into this machine. ll, he advised me that he was a busy man and would t be able to devote more than two weeks to learning alian. He hoped that my machine was efficient enough meet this requirement.

On the home front, we have a situation perhaps not extreme, but nevertheless, in my idiosyncratic view, arming. We're all for teaching machines, film strips, ovies, records, tapes and much other machinery, much which seems to me of very little value. I include re the records that accompany the series that I wrote. would advise teachers to play them with very moderate pectation, and then only when quite a lot of time is ailable; for if you're like me you can be sure the rd will be too short, or that the mechanism won't produce satisfactorily, or that you won't be able to nd the band you want, or they will play at the wrong eed and Donald Duck on you. One of the arguments r machinery of this sort is that because of the large lasses that teachers must manage, mechanical help is ecessary. Obviously the classes are alarmingly large. don't know how things are in Minnesota, but in Cali- rnia where I've been the last few months, I've been ch bemused by the luxury to be observed everywhere the schools except in the size of classes. These chools are truly impressive, beautifully designed, ry and light, extensively carpeted, equipped with l sorts of machines that pop out of the wall at the ouch of a button, but the classes run thirty-five to rty on the average. American schools overseas gen- ally do better than this. There isn't much equip- ent but the classes run around twenty. And my feel- g is that the education is much better.

I still have something to say about grammar and

usage and I'll try to be brief. On usage, the Engli teacher is confronted with the problem not to be fou in other subjects, or at least not so acutely. This the constant change and development that is going on the language. English changes only very slowly in it deep structures, the underlying laws that govern its expression. But it changes fast in the surface struc ture. And this of course is what the argument about Webster's Third was all about. The dictionary report that the surface structures of the language had change enormously between 1934, the date of the Second Inter national and 1961, the date of the Third. This much distressed the editors and writers and many of our national magazines and newspapers who attacked the di tionary editors as if these editors were responsible for the change. But the change is just a fact of our highly developed, highly inventive, highly communica- tive civilization. Nobody is responsible for it, bu we all have to adapt to it one way or another. Havin been out of this country for more than six years, I have been quite struck by the changes in the language that have taken place in the interval. I don't mean so much the obvious things like new terms for space development or expressions like "keep your cool" or jokes like "sorry about that." I mean a large number of more subtle differences. For example, take a sen- tence like "This has got to be Barnwell's finest per- formance." Six years ago this would have meant that if Barnwell doesn't perform today better than he ever did before he will be in trouble. Now it means Barn- well has never performed so well as he is performing today. Such developments are everywhere in the langu- age. It seems it's universal now to address all ath- letes as "Baby" and other people as well; I wondered whether I should have said "Thank you, Professor Allen baby."

The question is: How does the English teacher, the teacher of the language, some would say the custodian of the language, float on this current? I suppose the answer depends somewhat on the temperament of the teacher. My own inclination is to stick pretty close to my own dialect, that is San Luis Obispo, California 1920 vintage. I don't require that the youth I teach adopt this, but I equally resist having to adopt the dialect of the youth I teach. I probably couldn't if I wanted to. The older person always sounds a bit silly, it seems to me, when he tries to talk like a young person. He is better off being himself, perhaps a little self-consciously himself, perhaps a little deliberately archaic. So far as the school is con- cerned, I think that the essential language of the English class should be a fairly conservative one, an

unslangy one--a language that dips generously into old classics and modern excellence. Structural linguistics has taught us that correctness is relative, that good English is whatever best suits the requirements of the time, the place and the circumstance, and I'm sure that we should carefully avoid making the child nervous about his use of language or ashamed of the dialect that he has learned from his parents or his playmates. On the other hand I don't think we should expend any energy in teaching the child how to talk on the play- ground, in teaching teen-agers how to talk like teen- agers. This they already know how to do. We should not bedevil them with trivial distinctions like that between shall and will, but we do have an obligation, I think, to acquaint them with how the great writers and speakers like Edward Gibbon, Edmund Burke, Winston Churchill, Robert Ingersoll, P.G. Wodehouse, have used the English language to make it do the things that they wanted done.

I come then at the last to grammar, the subject that has agitated English teachers for the last forty years perhaps most of all subjects. Should one teach grammar and if so what kind? Up to the 1920's, tradi- tional grammar was firmly in the curriculum, and taught in a more or less sequential way. It wasn't particu- larly scholarly, its connections with the scholarly grammarians were pretty tenuous, and it depended mostly from the work of textbook writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, particularly, on both sides of the Atlantic, of the American, Lindley Murray. This grammar was often illogical and it could not be shown that it provided any practical benefit. But it had its own inner consistency and it was taught serious- ly and sequentially for over a hundred years. Our an- cestors, whether they understood it or not, were to some degree shaped by it. To some extent they thought differently, wrote differently, lived differently, because of the traditional grammar they learned. Short- ly after the first World War the whole matter of teach- ing grammar was called into question. It was argued rather successfully that there was little correlation between the study of grammar and improvement of writing. The orthodox position came to be that grammar should not be taught in the schools or, if taught at all, only functionally. That is, directed ad hoc to the cure of specific writing ills. Many teachers, I suspect most teachers, continued to teach grammar as best they could, but with the onus of being considered old-fashioned, unprogressive, with no official support and with an increasing difficulty in maintaining the sequence. They came often to the point of having always to re- view the grammar instead of teaching it.

There came then the impact of what is generally called structural grammar. This developed through the researches of linguists of the 30's and 40's, and came to general notice in the publication of Charles Carpenter Fries' Structure of English in 1952. This brushed away a number of illogicalities and inconsistencies of traditional grammar, promoted a more rational view of the very large problem of correctness, and satisfied the needs of some teachers who wanted grammar but who were quite dissatisfied with the traditional grammar which had, until then, been their only alternative. Had I the time, I would like here to dwell on the merits of structural grammar. The contributions of the structuralists to our understanding of language have been very large and, unfortunately, have often been minimized by their successors. But time being what it is, I will pass over them and point simply to their essential weakness. They tended to teach grammar as a closed system, and to base their recommendations for language learning and language study accordingly. Their work suggested that learning a language was essentially a matter of learning a number of sounds, of words and sentences, and sentence patterns and then using these as the need arises. Most systems for foreign language teaching evolved within the last few years have been based on this assumption and have therefore failed.

Then the transformationalists, and particularly, of course, Noam Chomsky of M.I.T., came along in the mid 50's pointing out that language is not like that at all, that it's not a closed system but a very open one. The language is not the set of sentences one learns and uses at need. It is instead a system for generating these sentences according to unpredictable situations. Most of the sentences generated will be new ones never used before and yet accepted by the reader or hearer as correct and proper sentences of the language. The number of possible sentences available to the speaker of English is, if not infinite, at least on the order of magnitude of the particles of the universe. And the number of sentence types is not importantly smaller. Thus it can be shown that apart from the simplest formulas and greetings like "Hello" and "Thank you" and trite expressions like "A good time was had by all," the chances that any particular person will have occasion to use any particular sentence are quite small. This is so even in cases where the needs of the person are pretty well known in advance. For example, tourists. Countless British tourists preparing for Continental travel have memorized the French, German and Spanish equivalents of "I have two pounds of tea and three bars of chocolate for my own personal use," but it's doubtful that any

considerable number ever stammered out the sentence. What happens is that the Customs man boards the train at Calais or Modane, usually anxious to get back to his card games, says hopefully, "Rien a declarer?" and you say, "Rien a declarer," and go back to the study of your phrase book. The views of the people who write phrase books on what phrases might come in handy are sometimes peculiar. There's a Dutch book on useful English words and phrases which contains the sentence "Our postilion has been struck by lightning." One is not likely to find use for this, which is a pity because it's a sentence with a certain euphony and a kind of dignity. But in fact, the chances that a Hollander visiting New York will have occasion to say, for example, "Where are my suitcases?" are not much greater than they are for "Our postilion has been struck by lightning." They're a little greater, but not much. He'd have to lose his suitcases first of all, a thing not really easy to do, and then be in a situation in which "Where are my suitcases?" is the proper thing to say. Maybe "A thief just made off with my suitcases" or "Has anyone seen any unclaimed suitcases in the lobby?" would be better. The order of probability of "Where are my suitcases" and "Our postilion has been struck by lightning" are quite similar. Both are near zero.

Well, what does all this mean to the teaching of English? I'm not so bold to claim that I know. What it suggests to me is that we ought to be more occupied with describing the underlying systems of the language--the systems that permit us to make new sentences, new words, pronounce them correctly--than with devoting our energies to the haphazard pursuit of surface matters. Like whether it is better to say "Two plus two is four" or "Two plus two are four." The child who learns what it is that enables him to come up to each new situation with the language that the situation requires learns to a considerable extent what it is that makes him a human being. I cannot think that this knowledge is less valuable than that of history or mathematics or biology. It's also entirely possible that conscious understanding of the mechanism of the language will improve his control of the language. If it does, so much the better.

This is then roughly my position, my set of prejudices, on the teaching of English. Perhaps you will think them too conservative or reactionary. It's certainly conservative. I think we've been a little too quick in the last few decades to jettison cargo. Yet I wouldn't want to return to the Twenties even if we could. I would just like to recapture for English

some of the old things of value, and to teach the
the help of the many important advances that have
made, not only in pedagogy, but also in the under
ing of language and literature, because I think t
is the most important of all subject matters in t
school, the best and loveliest, and most powerful
that the teacher can set before the child.