CHAPTER 7.

RE-VISIONING THE ROLE OF "GRAMMAR" IN WRITING STUDIES

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When I teach writing courses, I sometimes use an introductory assignment called "What Grammar Means to Me" so that I can learn about the grammatical baggage students may be bringing with them. One of my colleagues started using the assignment too, and over a decade ago he shared with me a memorable and telling response from a student:

> The student reported that the word "grammar" immediately caused flashbacks to their sixth grade English teacher. The teacher could see her students were struggling to understand prepositions. Her solution: She brought in a Mickey Mouse doll and a Barbie playhouse. She then moved Mickey around the house, saying things like "Mickey is *in* the house," "Mickey is *by* the house." The student remembered vividly the teacher then warning the class that if they ever put a preposition at the end of a sentence, Mickey would die. The student ended the story by saying that grammar has terrified them ever since.

This passage describes a potentially engaging lesson in descriptive grammar that took a deadly prescriptive turn: deadly for Mickey and, arguably, deadly for this young student's interest in the workings of language.

My previous sentence works from the premise that young people bring to classrooms an interest in language—because they are human. Humans like to play with language: we pun and experiment with rhyme and alliteration; we make up new slang; we create beautiful linguistic metaphors; we construct derivative languages like pig Latin; and we play games like Scrabble, Wordle, Bananagrams, hangman, Spelling Bee, and the list goes on. What breaks my heart about the way that "grammar" is often taught in school—from K-12 through college—is that it can drill our pleasure in language out of educational and academic spaces. And I've put scare quotes around the word *grammar* because "grammar" in school often refers solely to prescriptive usage rules (such as the rule not to end

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a sentence with a preposition), as opposed to the descriptive grammar and other linguistic knowledge that help explain how a language—and all the dialects that make up a language—actually work (e.g., Aull, Chapter 6, this collection; Orzulak).

In this piece, I am offering a straightforward argument: Grammar or usage, in the descriptive sense of the terms, can be (a) a site to engage students' curiosity and creativity as speakers and writers, and (b) a powerful, approachable vehicle for opening up and grappling with fundamental questions about diversity, inclusion, justice, and access.

This piece honors the career of my long-time colleague and friend Anne Ruggles Gere in a couple of ways. First, Anne's generous intellectual partnership over the past 20-plus years has helped me hone my linguistic scholarship, both my academic publications and my public intellectual work. Anne has spent her career pursuing academic work that matters for students and teachers in real time, and she supported my interest in public intellectual work and advancing linguistic justice even before I had tenure, when I wasn't hearing that message from other senior faculty. Second, the title of this piece picks up a theme from Anne's presidential address at the 2019 MLA Annual Meeting, focused on re-visioning, and specifically the "killer dichotomy" between reading and writing (452). Theories of language are woven throughout her address, from Fred Newton Scott's presidential address in 1907 to Louise Rosenblatt's "Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing" (454, 455–56). This chapter re-visions definitions of "grammar" and "the teaching of grammar" within writing studies to address the implicit dichotomy between the teaching of grammar and critical or creative engagement.

DEFINITIONS OF GRAMMAR

I've been playing a little fast and loose with the word *grammar* up to this point, and sometimes referring more generally to *language* (e.g., my comment in the first paragraph of this chapter about a student's "interest in the workings of language"), so let me pause on terminology. In the writing classroom, the term *grammar* is sometimes used to cover everything from punctuation to word choice to syntax to style. This whole range of sentence- and paragraph-level language issues is relevant in a writing classroom, and as a linguist, I would suggest that when we're referring generally to these issues, we employ the term *usage* instead. In linguistics, the word *grammar* typically is used more narrowly to cover morphology (the structure and form of words, including inflectional endings) and syntax (how words combine into sentences). *Usage* broadly encompasses how words and phrases are used in speech and writing; as such, usage can include pronunciation, word meaning and word choice, morphology, syntax, and punctuation. All the

choices we make about usage can and do have rhetorical effects (Kolln and Gray). Both terms *grammar* and *usage* can be used descriptively to refer to what speakers and writers actually do with the language and more prescriptively to refer to what they should do to demonstrate "good usage" or "correct grammar."

Debates about the role of grammar in writing classrooms go back decades (e.g., Hartwell), with many studies concluding that the teaching of grammar—sometimes specified as "formal grammar" and sometimes not—does not serve any "practical purpose" for most students (e.g., Weaver 15). The practical purpose referred to is often understood to be the consistent adoption of prescriptive rules in students' own writing. But the teaching of usage in its broadest sense—including descriptive approaches and awareness of the imposition of the prescriptive rules—can serve the practical purpose of engaging students in understanding the most fundamental of human characteristics and our expressive capabilities. It can also engage students in raising the most fundamental questions about power and justice.

LANGUAGE, CURIOSITY, AND WRITING

Language is a fundamental part of who we are and the families and communities that have shaped us. As Geneva Smitherman has been reminding us for years, in terms of why un- or misinformed language "correction" can be so devastating, "the student's mother tongue is the language of his/her mother. Dissin a student's mother tongue can thus be perceived as talkin bout they momma" (8). Language is a key resource for performing our identities and interpreting the identities of others as we navigate the social landscape. Language is one of our most powerful tools to hurt and heal, inform and misinform, reveal and hide, include and exclude.

For all these reasons and more, we should study language with as much seriousness and descriptive rigor as we use when we study other components of the human experience and natural world. Over 20 years ago, Kirk Hazen noted, "No biology teacher would ever say to a class, 'Okay, kids, today we learn how to breathe,' but all too often in English classes, students believe they are 'learning' language" (271–72). This belief manifests itself in a student comment such as "I don't know grammar"—which, of course, every speaker of a human language knows in order to be able to communicate with a language. What that student likely means is "I don't feel like I control the terminology to describe grammar" and maybe "I don't feel like I effectively control the standardized variety of English, especially in writing." We should teach students about language and grammar such that they can articulate what they want to know and what they are worried they don't know—and then help them gain that knowledge.

The combination "what [students] want to know and what they are worried they don't know" captures the juxtaposition of curiosity and judgment about language that, I would argue, lives in each of us. I have most recently framed this as the inner wordie and the inner grammando that dialogue inside our heads (Curzan, *Says Who?*).[1] The inner wordie enjoys language; the inner grammando has absorbed notions of "right" and "wrong" and judges language along those lines. Both the inner wordie and the inner grammando notice things in language—be that a new development in the language (e.g., "based off" rather than "based on") or a usage that differs from what we learned (e.g., "she walks" if we grew up saying "she walk"). The question is what we learn to do with that noticing. Have we been taught to be curious about linguistic diversity and language change as a natural part of language? Or have we been taught that there is only one correct way to use the language, and that is the formal, standardized variety? The latter is linguistically misinformed, and it forecloses the kind of engaged, rigorous exploration that should characterize teaching and learning.

Students' inner wordies should be educationally engaged in the writing classroom because effective writing comes from, among other things, a deep caring about—and ideally pleasure in—language and how it is used to convey ideas and images and arguments in written genres. A dictionary can become a treasure trove of cultural information and human decisions rather than a generic resource with "the answers" about what words mean (Curzan, "Lexicography")—and once that happens, students often engage in different ways with defining words they are using for their arguments.

I recognize that teaching usage issues doesn't have a great reputation, but it can be engaging. For example, with punctuation, we can start by asking students to record the rules of texting punctuation (e.g., the period suggests seriousness if not anger; the semicolon is only for winky faces). Once we have established the nuance and systematicity of texting punctuation and affirmed students' deep knowledge of this usage, we can compare this system with academic punctuation—another punctuation "game" to master to write in different settings, as opposed to the only "correct" way to use punctuation. As a second example, students can discuss how many educated speakers need to use the phrase *between you and I* before it can be recategorized as "educated usage" rather than a mistake propagated by all these educated speakers. Or students can debate the pros and cons of using *literally* to mean "figuratively" in formal writing or of employing singular *they* even though not all style guides yet endorse it.

1 *Wordie* is a relatively new word: it was added to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary in 2018 and defined as "a lover of words." *Grammando* appeared in Lizzie Skurnick's "That Should Be a Word" feature in 2012, in *The New York Times Magazine*, and is defined as "One who constantly corrects other people's linguistic mistakes."

As these last two examples suggest, it's important to acknowledge the grammandos that lurk, both in our heads and in our audiences as writers and speakers. Deborah Cameron has made the powerful argument that "verbal hygiene," or the desire to clean up or improve other people's language, is a natural part of speech communities (1–3). We as humans notice differences in other humans, including the way they use language, and we can be both curious and judgmental. We police each other's language as part of creating and preserving communities and their boundaries. We hear new bits of language and may at first resist language change or linguistic diversity.

I'll share a personal example: my initial reaction to the jargon *double-click* as a verb to mean "dive deep into." One of my colleagues consistently uses this to transition between slides in a slide deck, and the first dozen times I heard it, I rolled my eyes. "Business school jargon!" my inner grammando complained. And then over dinner one evening, my partner countered that it actually is a clever metaphorical extension of the computer-based terminology, and suddenly my inner wordie could enjoy it.

I'm about as descriptively minded as they come, and yet I am still managing reactions to changes in the language I grew up with. The point is that I am managing those reactions with a lot of linguistic information (which empowers my very vocal inner wordie). Too often teachers, with their list of peeves that students may not use in their writing, are unwilling to rethink these peeves or quiet their pen as they read student essays.

The policing of language happens at the institutional level and at the individual level, and the power of standardized English permeates classrooms at all levels. Notions of correctness are so powerful that we regularly talk about our responses to grammar in physical terms such as "makes my skin crawl" (Curzan et al., "Language Standardization"). And notions of correctness can be deeply biased, discriminatory, ill-informed, and silencing. This gets us to the power of talking about grammar or usage to address issues of diversity, inclusion, access, and justice.

GRAMMAR, AUTHORITY, AND JUSTICE

When students are empowered to ask probing, critical questions about the prescriptive usage rules that have been imposed on them as writers and speakers throughout much of their schooling, they will find themselves examining issues at the intersection of language, power, and identity—issues at the heart of the diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and justice work that we have been pursuing across higher education. Who said there's something wrong with the word *ain't*? Where did the rule about ending a sentence with a preposition come from? Why

is African American English often described as broken or unacceptable? Why can't people use their home languages or dialects at school?

This is not a new argument, but it is clearly one that we need to keep repeating. For example, linguist James Sledd has pointed for decades, back into the 1960s, to the necessity of recognizing, for students, the racial politics of grammar instruction; here is a version of his argument from 1996: "If [students] are ready for abstractions like subjects and predicates, they are ready for the abstractions of race and class" (62). But as April Baker-Bell points out in *Linguistic Justice*, too often approaches such as code-switching to teaching grammar and usage have allowed the educational system to maintain the status quo, centering "White Mainstream English as the be-all and end-all for Black speakers" (7), without interrogation. In the Foreword to Baker-Bell's book, Smitherman summarizes the need as follows: "We need a language pedagogy which teaches us to explore why things are the way they are. A language pedagogy which forces us to confront the questions: How did the present social order come into being? What do we need to do to take it out of being?" (xv).

As imagined by scholars such as H. Samy Alim, these questions live at the heart of Critical Language Awareness (CLA): "How can language be used to maintain, reinforce, and perpetuate existing power relations?" And, as its counterpoint: "How can language be used to resist, redefine and possibly reverse these relations?" (28).

The answers to these questions allow us to talk about standard language ideologies (Lippi-Green) and how they shape our view of which varieties of English are "correct" or "acceptable" and which are not. They provide the critical distance to see dictionaries and usage guides as the products of human hands—attached to human brains with beliefs and preferences and biases, situated within specific cultural moments—that can be critiqued and revised. Suddenly dictionaries and usage guides are not dusty relics or ultimate authorities. The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, a central resource for writing program administrators, can be revised to account for linguistic diversity and language change—and encourage teachers to foster in students the meta-awareness to explore and question prescriptivism and its social power (Gere et al., "Communal Justicing").

It has been exciting to see CLA, as a coherent approach, gaining prominence in the United States, both in writing studies scholarship and in classroom practice (Shapiro). This work has been out there for decades, in linguistics and in composition, without always enough scholarly dialogue between the two. It foregrounds how language—from descriptive approaches to linguistic diversity and grammar to interrogation of prescriptive usage rules—can foster the kind of inclusive, transformative pedagogy that is core to the diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and justice work that universities have been pursuing more generally.

CLA invites all students in, with all the language varieties they bring with them, and it empowers them to challenge discourses that may have devalued their linguistic identities and potentially created barriers to access.

We can think about this pedagogical shift within the frame of Jamila Lyiscott's redefinition of the word *articulate* in her brilliant TED talk, "3 Ways to Speak English." For decades, *articulate* has been a loaded term (to say the least) for people of color, often implying a kind of exceptionalism (i.e., that speakers from some literacy communities are not expected to be skilled speakers and writers and it is noteworthy that they are) as well as often referring specifically to control of standardized English (Alim and Smitherman). Lyiscott describes being articulate as treating all three of her languages as equal, as being able to switch among her languages with rhetorical intent and for rhetorical effectiveness, and, crucially, to be able to ask the probing, powerful questions she poses to her professors, to her family members, and to her audience in the talk itself.

CONCLUSION

Far from being cut-and-dried or drill-and-kill (or terrifying, to return to the words of the student who opened this essay), "grammar"—and all that can and often is encompassed by that term in the writing classroom—is one of our most powerful tools and resources to engage students in fundamental questions about identity, power, and justice. As Anne Gere reminds us in her scholarship and through her own career trajectory, we should eschew constricting dichotomies and disciplinary boundaries in the interest of more inclusive, evidence-informed pedagogies and writing classrooms. With the study of grammar and language more broadly, if we can start by tapping into students' genuine curiosity about linguistic diversity and language change, we can foster the kind of care with and knowledge about language that characterizes effective writers (e.g., Aull, *First-Year*; Lancaster). It is then imperative that students also have the opportunity to surface the power dynamics at play and ask equally genuine questions about who makes the rules and how they can be changed to create more equity and access for linguistically diverse speakers and writers.

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