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Rhetorical Grammar: A Modification Lesson

Martha Kolln

Modification refers to change. To modify a word or other structure in the sentence is to change its meaning. To help my students understand this important grammatical concept, I introduce them to the noun phrase. Interestingly, even though the noun phrase is by far the most common structure in our language, students in my college grammar classes frequently report that they have never before encountered the term *noun phrase*. The noun, of course, is familiar. And they know that nouns can be modified by adjectives. When pressed, they will also come up with a definition for *phrase*: two or more words that act as a unit. So, yes, *noun phrase* makes sense.

But does the noun really change when an adjective, a modifier, is added to it? *Delicious pizza* is still *pizza*, isn't it? *True happiness* is still *happiness*. And *rhetorical grammar*—that's *grammar*, right?

For this lesson on modification we need another definition, that of *referent*. Every noun has a referent, a reality that the word, or name, symbolizes. To explain this concept, I call a noun's referent a warm body—certainly easy to illustrate in a classroom full of warm student bodies. But my term *warm body* also applies to the referents of abstract nouns like *happiness* and of inanimate nouns like *pizza* and *pencil*. I explain that the pencil in my hand is a warm body, the referent symbolized by the word *pencil*. (And if I decide to expand the discussion of symbols, I write the word *pencil* on the blackboard, thus producing a written symbol of a spoken symbol. But that's another topic!)

The class has no problem understanding that a common noun like *pencil* may have a vast number of potential referents. Using another common noun, *student*, I illustrate how that referent gets changed. Everyone brings a meaning to the word *student*—a general sort of referent. That gen-

eral referent changes, however—it becomes more specific—as we add modifiers.

For example, we can eliminate all K–12 students as referents with a single word, in this case a noun:

the *college* student

or, to be more specific:

the *Penn State* student.

And because in this modification lesson I want to illustrate—and to emphasize—the formal, systematic nature of the noun phrase, I will fill the other preheadword slot, the adjective slot, thus changing the referent again:

the blonde Penn State student.

Det	adj	noun	NOUN
			HEADWORD

We can call this form for the noun phrase systematic because no other order is possible: when both an adjective and a noun modify the headword, the adjective always comes first. We don't say:

the Penn State blonde student.

It's not that we can't say it; we simply don't. (Note that this statement also illustrates the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammar.) Different classes of adjectives, when more than one appears in the noun phrase, are ordered systematically as well: *little old man*, not *old little man*; *thin blue line*, not *blue thin line*.

Now we'll change the referent again by filling the first slot following the headword with a prepositional phrase:

the blonde Penn State student *in our grammar class*.

The adjective *blonde* obviously eliminated many thousands from the possible pool of referents; the prepositional phrase has narrowed the meaning to a mere 30 candidates. When we fill the final two postheadword

The author, an expert on the subject, explores just what grammar means.

slots—the participial phrase slot and the relative clause slot:

the blonde Penn State student in
our grammar class wearing the
blue sweater who is sitting in the
back row

or, more logically, as we move from general to specific:

the blonde Penn State student in
our grammar class sitting in the
back row who is wearing the blue
sweater

we have changed the meaning again, having eliminated all but one possible referent from the 30 (assuming, of course, there is only one blue-sweater wearer in the back row). It's important to note as well that the arrangement of the three postheadword slots is also systematic:

prepositional phr + participial phr
+ relative cl

(By this time my students have come to realize that a more efficient way to identify that particular warm body in the back row is with her own personal noun, *Judy Smith*. The meaning of “proper noun” has become obvious.)

Now let's consider the headword of the noun phrase that heads this discussion: the *grammar* of “Rhetorical Grammar.” Strangely, its referent may be even more elusive than that of *student*, even though the number of possible referents is much smaller. In the case of *student*—even of *the blonde Penn State student*—we knew we weren't even close to an identification. In the case of *grammar*, however, we're likely to think there's no question as to its referent. We all know what *grammar* means.

Or do we?

DEFINING GRAMMAR

Does everyone understand the referent for *grammar* that Frank O'Hare had in mind back in 1973 when he explained the appeal of sentence combining?

The English teacher who simply
“doesn't like grammar” can use this
system. (30)

Does everyone understand the referent Peter Elbow had in mind in 1981 when he wrote *Writing with Power*?

Learning grammar is a formidable task that takes crucial energy away from working on your writing, and worse yet, the process of learning grammar interferes with writing. . . . For most people, nothing helps their writing so much as learning to ignore grammar as they write. (169)

It's fairly clear that when O'Hare and Elbow used *grammar*, they were referring to the traditional, Latin-based, eight-parts-of-speech variety, heavy on prescriptive rules and drills and error-correction exercises—what is often called “school grammar.” Elbow was referring also to mechanics, to punctuation and spelling, the details of proofreading. In fact, this quoted passage above is from a chapter entitled “The Last Step: Getting Rid of Mistakes in Grammar.”

There are, of course, definitions of *grammar* other than that of traditional school grammar. Patrick Hartwell, in his well-known article “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar” (1985), describes five ways in which the word is commonly used:

1. The grammar in our heads—our native competence;
2. Scientific descriptions of the grammar in our heads;
3. Usage—often called “linguistic etiquette”;
4. School grammar;
5. Stylistic grammar. (105–127)

When we hear the unmodified *grammar* in connection with the curriculum, chances are its referent combines two of Hartwell's five categories: usage and school grammar. When people complain that schools “don't teach grammar anymore,” they are probably thinking about linguistic etiquette as well as traditional grammar rules. (They are, undoubtedly, also thinking about spelling, the most noticeable deviation from standard usage when writing is involved.)

The negative attitude towards grammar, as expressed by O'Hare in 1973 and Elbow in 1981, came to be the prevailing, if not the official, policy of our profession back in 1963 with the publication of *Research in Written Composition* by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer. One sentence in that NCTE report succeeded in changing the direction of language study. I call it the “harmful effect” statement:

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 composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing. (37–38)

You'll notice that here *grammar* has a modifier—the adjective *formal*, which actually refers to a method of teaching grammar rather than to content. It refers to grammar taught in isolation from writing.

It's unfortunate that the loaded phrase *harmful effect* was a part of that famous, oft-quoted sentence in the Braddock report. (Without it, of course, the sentence would have sunk without a trace, as the rest of the report did long ago.) *Harmful* implies a threat of sorts—that students who understand grammar, the structure of their language, are somehow at risk, that having no conscious knowledge of grammar is somehow safer than having learned it in a formal way. I also blame that phrase for having cut off the discussion that was going on at the time, for starting grammar's free fall.

THE FREE FALL OF GRAMMAR

In the early 1960s the study of the language itself was an important component of the language arts at all levels, with a lively, open discussion of grammar and linguistics. At the 53rd annual meeting of NCTE, held in San Francisco in 1963, the year of the Braddock report, the “language” sequence included twenty different sessions, with fifty individual papers. (The three other general areas of the program were literature, composing, and curriculum.) Titles of the language sessions included Semantics, Structural Linguistics for the Junior High School, Generative Grammar, Some Creative Approaches to Grammar, and The Relationship of Grammar to Composition. Among the speakers whose names I recognize were S. I. Hayakawa, Neil Postman, Roderick Jacobs, John Mellon, Leonard Newmark, J. J. Lamberts, and James McCrimmon. Some of the other sequences also included language-related sessions. In the “composing” sequence, for example, Josephine Miles spoke on “Grammar in Prose Composition.”

Thirty years later, in 1993, out of some 340 sessions on the NCTE program and, I would estimate, well over 1,000 individual papers, not a single one was devoted to language structure or linguistics. In fact, the word *grammar* appeared only once in the program—and that was in a negative way: “Beyond Grammar in the Classroom”; the word *linguistics* also appeared only once. Anyone who traveled to NCTE conferences in Pittsburgh in 1993 (or to Orlando in 1994 or to San Diego in 1995) in order to glean a helpful hint or two about teaching the structure of language surely went home disappointed. (I am hopeful that this situation is changing. The 1996 program for CCCC included not only several sessions on grammar, but also a full-day workshop. This issue of *English Journal* is, of course, another welcome sign of change.)

Harris Study

In 1963 the phrase “harmful effect” was borrowed from a research study conducted in England by Roland J. Harris, the grammar study that Braddock *et al.* describe as the least flawed among the many they reviewed—apparently the best of a bad lot. The design of the study had two redeeming features: its length—a two-year period; and its measuring instrument—actual writing, both pre and post samples.

Although the subjects in Harris' study (twelve- to fourteen-year-old pupils in five London schools) did indeed write essays, the readers who scored them were not asked to evaluate them holistically, to assess in any way the overall writing effectiveness. The scores given to the essays were based solely on objective counts: errors (including mechanics and punctuation), sentence length, total words, and the occurrence of various structures, such as complex sentences and subordinate clauses.

Given the high standards that Braddock *et al.* set for the research in all other areas of composition—and given the non-definitive results of the scores—I find it shocking that they accepted without question what the researcher called a “safe” inference: “It seems safe to infer,” Harris concludes, “that the study of English grammatical terminology had a negligible or even a relatively harmful effect upon the correctness of children's writing in the early part of the five Secondary Schools.” What is more troubling,

Our profession has not been well served by the anti-grammar policies based on dubious research and on distorted conclusions.

the Braddock report goes even further by extending the possibility of harm from mere “correctness of children’s writing” to “a harmful effect on the *improvement* of writing” (emphasis added).

Overlooked in the rush to pass judgment on teaching grammar as a result of Harris’ findings is the fact that both of his groups actually learned grammar. The “direct method” students—although they were not taught terminology—learned about language structure in the context of writing, what might be called “functional grammar.” As for the “formal grammar” group, we could certainly argue that in 1960 there was better material available than a traditional Latin-based book published in 1939.

Elley Study

Harris is only one among many researchers who have set out to test the efficacy of teaching formal grammar. Another well-known study was carried out in New Zealand by Elley *et al.* who included transformational as well as traditional grammar in a three-year study in 1976 and who concluded that grammar “has virtually no influence on the language growth of typical secondary school students” (18). However, like Harris and many other researchers, Elley *et al.* apparently expected the knowledge of language gleaned from grammar lessons to transfer automatically to the students’ writing. As I interpret the report of their findings, grammar discussions were barred from the writing class, with details of usage, punctuation, and spelling brought up only when necessary.

INTRODUCING GRAMMAR POSITIVELY

Has anyone wondered what would happen if grammar knowledge were introduced in a positive way—in a “rhetorical” way, perhaps—into the writing process?

When George Hillocks, Jr., updated the state of composition research in 1986 in *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*, his every mention of the word *grammar* was part of a disparaging comment. He omits from his summaries the possibility for teaching any description of grammar other than the traditional variety—and any method other than “formal.” Here is his conclusion:

None of the studies reviewed for the present report provides any support for teaching grammar as a means of improving composition skills. If schools insist upon teaching the identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagramming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional school grammar (as many still do), they cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing. (138)

What Hillocks and Michael W. Smith, who co-authored the grammar section, leave out of this stark, negative assessment is the recognition that all grammar is not traditional school grammar taught in a formal way. In fact, four pages earlier they describe research studies from the 1960s and 1970s that compared “linguistic grammar” with traditional grammar:

The structural linguistics group [in a 1965 study by White] showed superior performance on STEP Writing Tests, STEP Essay Tests, and teacher-assigned themes. However, the differences were significant only on the STEP Writing Test, which does not involve a writing sample. Mulcahy (1974) found that one class of college freshmen who studied a linguistic grammar for one semester showed significantly greater gains in language knowledge and writing ability than another class who studied traditional grammar. (134)

Hillocks and Smith caution that neither of these experiments had adequate teacher controls. However, composition studies are never completely free of problems: there are simply too many uncontrolled—and uncontrollable—variables in every writing classroom to make definitive claims, especially when comparing groups with different teachers. (This caution also applies to the 1961 Harris study.) But surely the findings of White and Mulcahy suggest that linguistic approaches may have something to offer the composition teacher. Yet Hillocks, in his summaries and recommendations, never mentions such a possibility.

Hillocks follows the review of grammar research with reviews of research on sentence combining and sentence construction. “Sentence construction” refers to methods based on Christensen’s “generative rhetoric,” in which students generate their own sentences, then learn techniques for adding information to them, often in the form of free

*The time has
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modifiers. This technique obviously differs from sentence combining, where the sentences are already constructed.

Most of the researchers in these two areas conclude that sentence combining and sentence construction do help student writers understand syntax, providing knowledge that gives them control of their writing. It seems obvious that what they are learning can be called grammar. Here, for example, are the chapter titles in *The Writer's Options*, a popular work on sentence combining: Relative Clauses, Participles, Appositives, Absolutes, Subordination, Coordination, Prepositional Phrases and Infinitive Phrases, Noun Substitutes. Teachers who guide their students through these chapters are surely “teaching grammar as a means of improving composition skills” (to use Hillocks’ words)—and doing so in a “functional” rather than a “formal” way. (Clearly, sentence combining has changed since 1973, when O’Hare deliberately excluded traditional terminology and could thus promote his method for the teacher who “doesn’t like grammar.”)

In his final assessment of sentence combining, Hillocks is clearly discussing grammar, even though he manages to avoid the G-word:

Since the Hunt study [Kellogg Hunt 1965], researchers and teachers have emphasized sentence combining practice as a means of increasing “syntactic maturity,” meaning increasing T-unit and clause length. Perhaps a more useful emphasis would be on *facility*. Facility would appear to involve an expanded repertoire of syntactic structures, the ability to sort through the available structures to select and test those which are feasible, and finally the judgment to select effective structures for a given rhetorical context. (150)

USING RHETORICAL GRAMMAR

This language “facility,” this conscious ability “to select effective structures for a given rhetorical context” is what I call “rhetorical grammar.” I use the adjective *rhetorical* as a modifier to designate a method of teaching that is different from “formal grammar.” I use it also to designate a purpose that is different from the remedial, error-avoidance or error-correction purpose of so many grammar lessons. I use *rhetorical* as a modifier to identify grammar

in the service of rhetoric: grammar knowledge as a tool that enables the writer to make effective choices.

The content of rhetorical grammar is different, too. Although it includes much of the terminology of traditional school grammar, it also includes the framework of “linguistic” grammar—especially that of the structuralists, a description based not on Latin, as traditional grammar is, but on English. And it encompasses Hartwell’s fifth definition, mentioned earlier—stylistic grammar.

For both sentence combining and rhetorical grammar, the goal is facility. It is in method that they differ. For example, a typical sentence-combining lesson on modification would begin with a list of sentences:

The student is blonde.

The student is in our grammar class.

The student is wearing a blue sweater.

In combining them into a single sentence in various ways, the students come to understand the forms that the noun phrase can take. Clearly, they do learn the “grammar,” the systematic structure of their language. But sentence combining is not the only way—and certainly not the most efficient way—to learn the system of modification in the noun phrase. It’s important to recognize that there are times when direct instruction works best.

A friend who teaches the writing process to high school freshmen and sophomores teaches the noun phrase, as I described it earlier, as a series of slots, encouraging her students to look for places in their own noun phrases where words and phrases and clauses would make effective modifiers. (The appositive is another slot that can be taught in conjunction with the noun phrase.) The students also examine the sentences of their reading assignments and discuss the effect of modification in the noun phrases they find. My friend tells me that such lessons have had a positive effect on her students—both on their attitude towards writing and on their own writing effectiveness.

ANTI-GRAMMAR POLICIES

Our profession has not been well served by the anti-grammar policies based on du-

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bious research and on distorted conclusions and inferences. The real harm has ensued because the negative findings have been applied to all of grammar, not just to traditional school grammar taught, as it so often is, in repetitive, prescriptive ways. It's time for the policy makers of our profession to recognize that the word *grammar* has more than one referent, that there is a wide range of methods and content it can refer to—and, yes, that includes sentence combining.

I worry about curriculum planners and administrators who don't hear that message when they look to our leadership for advice. Instead they read this in Hillocks' final chapter, "Validity, Implications, and Recommendations":

School boards, administrators, and teachers who impose the systematic study of traditional school grammar on their students over lengthy periods of time in the name of teaching writing do them a gross disservice which should not be tolerated by anyone concerned with the effective teaching of good writing. We need to learn how to teach standard usage and mechanics after careful task analysis and with minimal grammar. (248–49)

And in his final "Ramifications for Policymakers," Hillocks again assails grammar in his recommendations for funding:

We need national institutes for college and university faculty who are responsible for teaching others the most effective methods of teaching writing. Without effective training at this level, new practitioners entering the field are likely to rely on such relatively ineffective foci of instruction as grammar and free writing—neither of which requires much understanding of the dynamics of composing. (251)

Until our anti-grammar policy changes, the quality of language study that Ben Nelms describes in his penultimate issue as editor of this journal will not change:

The study of the English language in most secondary schools is limited almost exclusively to "grammar" and "usage," which probably are fairly widely taught but rarely advocated or discussed openly in professional journals and books. On other language topics—such as dialects and social registers, the nature of language and linguistic change, semantics and pragmatics—we are mostly silent. If an

Allan Bloom or a Diane Ravitch were to inquire seriously about what every seventeen-year-old knows about language, he or she could write a chilling exposé of American schools. (105)

Altering the situation that Nelms describes will obviously require modification throughout the system, beginning with changes in our attitude towards language study. It also means enhancing the language component of our teacher-training programs, encouraging discussion at our conferences and in our journals. And with a new century close at hand, it means finally leaving the 19th-century descriptions of grammar and looking to linguists for insight into our language based not on Latin but on English.

SIGNS OF CHANGE

One positive sign of change occurred at the 1994 NCTE Convention in Orlando, when the Council approved a Resolution on Language Study, proposed by the Assembly on the Teaching of English Grammar:

RESOLVED, that the National Council of Teachers of English appoint a committee or task force to explore effective ways of integrating language awareness into classroom instruction and teacher preparation programs, review current practices and materials relating to language awareness, and prepare new materials for possible publication by NCTE. Language awareness includes examining how language varies in a range of social and cultural settings; examining how people's attitudes vary toward language across culture, class, gender, and generation; examining how oral and written languages affect listeners and readers; examining how "correctness" in language reflects social-political-economic values; examining how the structure of language works from a descriptive perspective; and examining how first and second languages are acquired.

Clearly, the time has come to modify *grammar* in ways that clarify its place in our profession. And, yes, it does have a place—in the writing process, in the whole language classroom. The time has come to modify our anti-grammar stance, to recognize that modifying *grammar* with adjectives such as *functional* and *rhetorical* can contribute to positive, meaningful changes in the language arts curriculum.

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Martha Kolln is retired from teaching at Penn State University. The author of *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects* (1996, New York: Allyn and Bacon), she is the president of ATEG, the NCTE Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar.

EJ SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

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Julian W. Abernethy. 1921. "The Annotated English Classic." *EJ* 10.9 (Nov.): 497-498.

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