COMMENT

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Why grammar?

A "heyday" of English grammar invites the question: Why? What was it that led to so many grammars during the 18th century and into the 19th—as well as dictionaries and manuals of pronunciation and style? As always, with issues of usage, the answer lies in social history.

A persistent theme, in the middle decades of the 18th century, was that the language was seriously unwell, suffering from a raging disease of uncontrolled usage, and needing professional help if it was to get better. In November 1754, Philip Stanhope, Lord Chesterfield, wrote a letter to the *World* periodical, in which he sums up the linguistic mood of the time:

> It must be owned that our language is at present in a state of anarchy.

What was wanted was "polite language"—the adjective was much broader in meaning than we find today. Dr. Johnson's definition of *politeness* was "elegance of manners; gentility; good breeding." "Polite language" was thought to be a use of English which was widely intelligible and acceptable—polished, elegant, correct. How was it to be acquired?

People looked to the language writers to tell them what to do, especially the lexicographers and grammarians. Chesterfield makes a remarkable statement illustrating the mindset of his age. We must choose a "dictator," he says, to provide order in the language, and:

> I give my vote for Mr Johnson to fill that great and arduous post. And I hereby declare that I make a total surrender of all my rights and privileges in the English language, as a freeborn British subject, to the said Mr Johnson, during the term of his dictatorship. Nay more; I will not only obey him, like an old Roman, as my dictator, but, like a modern

> Roman, I will implicitly believe in him as my pope, and hold him to be infallible while in the chair; but no longer.

In *Letters to his Son*, he takes up the cudgels himself, giving the lad a good telling off for his poor spelling:

> You spell induce, *enduce*; and grandeur, you spell grand*ure*; two faults, of which few of my house-maids would have been guilty. I must tell you, that orthography, in the true sense of the word, is so absolutely necessary for a man of letters, or a gentleman, that one false spelling may fix a ridicule upon him for the rest of his life; and I know a man of quality, who never recovered the ridicule of having spelled *wholesome* without the *w*.

He might have added: "or one false grammatical construction."

Who were these "men of quality"? They were the new businessmen, merchants, and industrialists—an increasingly powerful sector of society as the Industrial Revolution progressed. They were an increasingly literate section of society: by 1700 nearly half the male population and a quarter of the female population of England were able to read and write. And they were an increasingly genteel section of society. The growth of the gentry, a class below the peerage, became a major feature of 17th- and 18th-century life. But many of them came from a working-class background, and they were unsure how to behave in aristocratic society. They needed help.

Books of etiquette, conduct guides, and courtesy manuals came to be written, defining gentility. An early example was written by George Savile, Lord Halifax, who wrote *Lady's New Year's Gift; or, Advice to a Daughter* (1688). All aspects of behavior had to be dealt with—how to bow, shake hands, wear a hat, hold gloves, eat with a fork, pour tea, use a napkin, and blow your nose in public. Also, what not to do: no spitting, chewing with your mouth open, eating with your hands. And how to speak and write so as not to appear vulgar, not to offend, were critical considerations. A good grammar would be a desirable bedside book.

We can see the same mindset operating in a related area of usage, and one that several grammars from the period included as part of their remit: pronunciation. Thomas Sheridan, the father of the playwright, was famous for his countrywide lectures on elocution, speaking to packed halls. John Watkins, the editor of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's memoirs, reflects on the

"incredible" success of his courses—"upwards of sixteen hundred subscribers, at a guinea each, besides occasional visitors." Copies of his book, *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1763), sold at half-a-guinea each. Translated into modern values, that is equivalent to a course fee per person of about $100. In today's money, one of Sheridan's well-attended courses must have brought in around $200,000. Elocution was big business, and people were prepared to pay for it. It would have cost an up-and-coming clerk a quarter of his weekly salary to attend one of Sheridan's courses. But that is what the members of the new middle class did. A course of elocution was a good career move, as well as purchasing a good dictionary and grammar.

Grammar was especially important because, like pronunciation, it is "always there." One cannot say or write anything without it. Individual words are not enough. Most everyday words are polysemic, and viewed in isolation they don't make sense. What does *charge* mean? Or *table*? They need to be put into a sentence in order for us to see which meaning is required. That is where grammar comes in.

Grammar is an account of how sentences work, and the problem, for the average person, is that there seems to be so much of it! How much? Around 3,500 points of structure or usage are listed in the index to *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985), and although earlier grammars were very different in coverage because of their Latinate approach, the number of points dealt with—cases of nouns, tenses of verbs, forms of pronouns, etc.—would have been large. In the mindset of the day, each one was a potential trap for the unwary. No wonder grammars were so popular.