



Finding Lost Luggage

by Helen Woodrow

wayfaring

**JOURNEYS
IN LANGUAGE,
LEARNING AND CULTURE**

Helen Woodrow · Carmelita McGrath, Editors

Introduction

Other Stories From This Book

Finding Lost Luggage *by Helen Woodrow*

Words On Paper *by Marie Finlay*

A Language So Dear *by Jeanette Winsor*

O Public Road... You Express Me Better Than I Can Express Myself *by Francis E. Kazemek*

Just A Simple Little Ditty *by William T. Fagan*

Touching The Language Electric *by Carmelia McGrath*

FINDING LOST LUGGAGE

Helen Woodrow

Sailing from the Past

Past tense; that's where grammar takes me. Sailing through two thousand years of history. To ancient Greece, where grammar meant literacy and critical thinking about literature; to the Middle Ages, when clerics viewed grammar as food for the soul and the path to sacred and secular knowledge; to the creation of the public schools, where parsing sentences and memorizing the rules were thought to promote mental discipline and social refinement. By the late nineteenth century, the language art, the honoured and revered ancestor of the literate tradition, had become just another tool in the emerging industrial economy. The schools were handed a stripped down factory version, a grammar bare of its vast power.

I picture my grandmother getting her dose of school grammar in the 1880s. At that time, there were few schoolhouses in the Dominion of Newfoundland. Josephine and the other children sat in a damp room at the back of Captain Oliphant's house. There was hardly any furniture, books or paper. Every morning a chorus of fresh, galing voices chanted the grammar rules. The children sang in a rich vernacular, dripping of salt water and hard work, but at school their language was inferior, uneducated. Those grammar rules reflected social judgments about the status of language users like the Mahers and other fishing families in the Dominion; they also revealed judgments about the status of languages.

English grammar is complex and confusing, in part, because it is based on the grammar of Latin. Though the languages have little in common with one another, for centuries Latin was held in high esteem by the British. Latin was the purest and most admirable of tongues (Bryson, 1990, 16). It was the language of the aristocratic males who studied in the elite grammar schools; it was the lingua franca of Europe. The earliest English grammars were actually published in Latin. Seventeenth century poet laureate, John Dryden, translated his sentences into Latin to help him decide how best to express them in English. Even our spelling system pays homage to the language of logic and enlightenment. The spelling of many English words was changed to conform to their Latin lineage; that's how debt picked up its "b" and why "s" appears in island. Remember the grammar rule about splitting infinitives? In Latin, an infinitive cannot be split because it is only one word. Infinitives can be split in English, but the grammar rule that says they must not expresses deference to the purest language.

At school, grammar was taught through definition, drill, and exercise. It did not celebrate language; it was tedious and boring. A variety of responses evolved to counteract the lifeless, mind-numbing routines of the classroom. Students introduced verbal play on the teacher's mnemonics: "transitive verbs do not stop with the doer" was translated into "the verb that went out the door." Pupils vexed by teachers' claims that their language was flawed might have retorted by parsing the couplet: "Who is Grammar?" I say, "Damn her."

Grammar also created problems for teachers and teachers in training. Memorial University of Newfoundland offered courses to correct the "speech defects" of students in the faculty of Education. Those defects requiring "corrective" measures included mumbling and mouthing of words, sloppy articulation, and poor grammatical usage (Crocker, 1959, 9). Some classroom teachers questioned why so much time was wasted on the non-essentials of English instruction. If "It's me" was acceptable usage, why was "It's I" required on an English exam? Though the verb "sit" cannot take a direct object, was it really impossible to "sit a baby in a chair?" The baby couldn't sit there without help, and teacher W. Bursey wondered: what should the poor baby do (1959, 27)?

For most students and many teachers, school grammar was misery. Strict rules were taught, labels were attached and endless exercises were completed. Language was dismembered. What did we learn from our grammar study? How did school grammar contribute to our growth as writers?

The reports of the public examinations provide one historical perspective on the impact of grammar instruction in the schools. Under the direction of the Council of Higher Education and later the Department of Education, marking boards were established each year to judge scholarly performance. These are some of the comments prepared by the marking committees for the English grammar and English language examinations.

ENGLISH GRAMMAR AND COMPOSITION, PRELIMINARY GRADE²

In most papers the noun clause was given correctly (possibly through good luck in some instances); a smaller number also had the adjectival clause right, but only a limited few succeeded in filling in the adverbial clause of purpose (Council of Higher Education, 1926, 25).

ENGLISH LANGUAGE, GRADE VII

Many groups of papers were excellent in Composition and Penmanship, but were very weak in Grammar, and vice versa (Council of Higher Education, 1933, 15).

ENGLISH LANGUAGE, GRADE XI (ACADEMIC)

The proper length of sentences, paragraphs and the correct use of periods and commas still need incessant drill in Grade XI (Council of Higher Education, 1940, 14).

ENGLISH LANGUAGE, GRADE X

Many pupils had no idea of how to divide the given sentences into clauses. The detailed analysis was poor throughout. Many parsed every word in the sentence instead of analysing the clauses (Department of Education, 1950, 8).

ENGLISH LANGUAGE, GRADE IX

...it is regretful to note that while many pupils can correctly identify clauses in an exercise, these same students are unable to apply them in their essays. Many students who scored good marks in clausal analysis, got less than 50 percent in their essays (Department of Education, 1960, 15).

ENGLISH LANGUAGE, GRADE XI (ACADEMIC)

Most students had a hard time finding an auxiliary verb, though the markers had some difficulty as well (Department of Education, 1970, 225).

LANGUAGE 3101, LEVEL III

Students tended to confuse "compound" and "complex" structures. Most students could not identify prepositional phrases (Department of Education, 1986, 18).

Over the past century, linguists, educators, and sociologists have made substantial contributions to our knowledge about language and language teaching. The evidence is quite striking. Asking students to analyze language does not help them manipulate it. Time spent taking language apart is better spent putting language together. Research studies have repeatedly concluded that formal grammar instruction doesn't improve writing ability. Students learn to write by writing, not by analyzing sentences in textbooks, not by memorizing parts of speech.

Overland to the Present

How do we use this knowledge about language and language teaching in our classrooms? In Newfoundland and Labrador, the Department of Education is responsible for the program of instruction for students in the K-12 system, which includes men and women registered in Adult Basic Education (ABE). Though the Level III ABE program parallels the course of study in the senior high schools, there are some differences. For example, the ABE course, CS 3211 Basic Grammar, has no equivalent in the high school system because grammar is normally taught in junior high schools (Department of Education, 1995, 1).

In today's junior high classrooms, students don't study the abstractions of grammar or memorize the rules of linguistic etiquette. In fact one junior high language arts text, Bridges 2, includes a chapter on standard English and other varieties of English. The message is clear: oral language should be respected, not corrected. Students explore how audience and purpose affect the language choices of both speakers and writers. Bridges 2 also includes a brief resource chapter on grammar that encourages work on sentence combining. Research has concluded that approach to developing syntactic maturity is about the only grammar exercise that has produced some positive results for writers.

A recent departmental publication provides a coherent, integrated view of learning and teaching of the English language arts which reflects current research, theories and classroom practice (Department of Education, 1996, 1). Curriculum guidelines suggest that students learn language concepts in context, rather than in isolation. In this approach, teachers read and write with their students, sharing their thinking and their drafts, demonstrating the wonders and challenges of language.

Yet the course outline for CS 3211 Basic Grammar reveals a different perspective on the learning and teaching of language (Department of Education, 1995, Level III, 3-5). Adult Basic Education instructors are expected to teach the parts of speech, the structure and functions of syntactic constructions (phrases, clauses and sentences), and the mechanics in isolation. James Moffett called it the particles approach. The recommended course texts include pages and pages of linguistic etiquette and endless drills. There is no discussion of who sets the standard, no explanation of our deference to the Latin ideal, no challenge to a model of language as a system of fixed rules, no writing. Basic Grammar is decontextualized learning, disabling to both students and teachers. It is not a celebration of language.

To understand more about the purpose of the Basic Grammar course and the challenges of developing writing practices, I talked with ABE students and instructors. In-depth conversations took place with instructors who had taught Basic Grammar, Writing Skills and other communications courses. Most were employed full-time at public colleges, and some worked with private schools. One was responsible for English instruction in a community program, but also taught part-time ABE students. On average, the instructors had ten years teaching experience. Conversations also took place with ABE learners, graduates and dropouts. Most of that group were studying or had completed the Basic Grammar course.

In conversations, people comb out the tangles of their ideas. In many ways, conversations are everyday celebrations of language, a sensuous feast of the vernacular. They provide a refuge from the *misery*³ of grammar, the *fussiness of phrases*, and the *confusion of adverbs and adjectives*. Conversations take us beyond the rules of the grammar book, and beyond the regulations of the Department of Education. Why is Basic Grammar, which contradicts the Department's stated philosophy for language learning, in the ABE curriculum? What does Basic Grammar really teach students?

Travelling through Strange Lands

Andy spent about forty years in the labour force; he never knew what it was like to be without work. Then technological change collided with a labour dispute, and he lost his job. In his supervisory position in the workplace, Andy wrote reports every day teeming with the parts of speech; in the ABE classroom he was confused by the definitions of verbals and modifiers. *I still haven't gotten it clear yet. Unless you're back at it everyday, how can you remember it?*

Martha is a successful businesswoman and community leader. Her primary purpose for registering in the ABE program was to become a better writer. She wanted to get *comfortable putting things down on paper. I figured if I got that, I'd feel good about myself.* Martha thought writers must crack a linguistic code, or at least that's what she remembered from her secondary school instruction.

I wanted to know how to write a sentence, and what was important, like verbs and nouns and one thing and another.... The English side of it was a foggy issue for me, knowing if two verbs or two nouns don't go together in a sentence, and finding ways around that.

Martha remembers the particles approach. It failed to develop her confidence as a writer when she was in grade school; a rerun might fail her as an adult, acting more as a form of punishment than an approach to language instruction. For Martha, getting comfortable with writing means gaining access to the language of power — the prestigious dialect of standard written English.

Mark is a voracious reader of history. He talked about Cassie Brown's intricate weave of fact and fiction in *Death On the Ice*, and the stillness of Kevin Major's *No Man's Land*. He compared his experience of writing in and out of school. *When you write for yourself, you're pleasing yourself. At school, I think: What do they want me to put down?* He is flustered by grammar. Analytic grammar study might be appropriate for linguists and other professionals who must understand the structure of language, or those with a personal interest in the subject, but Mark doesn't understand why it is a mandatory course in the ABE program.

I guess it's okay if you're going into teaching, but say you get a job as a welder. Somebody writes down: I want this beam and that beam, and that beam and that beam welded today. You're not going to stop and study it first for grammar, are you?

Obtaining her high school completion certificate was important to Clo. She put everything else aside so school could become her top priority. But she still wishes she had more time in the ABE program. *I like to be perfect. I like to remember it all. Picking everything apart* in the Basic Grammar course was hard. *She still gets stuck on things like punctuation.*

A work injury sent Luke back to school for retraining. He entered the ABE program fairly confident of his writing abilities. Basic Grammar didn't help Luke manipulate language.

A lot of the people are intimidated by this [Basic Grammar] and a lot of people don't express their writing, they don't put their writing down, because of this. It's in the back of their mind: 'Now, maybe this is not right.' It's stifling them. I can say that from personal experience.

CS 3211 is a mandatory academic grammar course. Students must complete this course before they register for CS 3112, Writing Skills. Does Basic Grammar prepare students for writing? An analytical approach to language study intimidated Martha; she was afraid to write. It isolated the writing Andy and Mark do, at home and at work, from the writing they do at school. Basic Grammar threatened Clo's sense of perfection: she was expected to dissect language but her real interest was mastering the conventions of writing. Basic Grammar stifled Luke's writing, and silenced many other students in his ABE program.

Instructors also talked about Basic Grammar's role in language learning. Agnes thought of Rose, who had recently completed the course, when she said: *It didn't improve her writing; it scared the hell out of her.* Elizabeth believes the course left many of her students *feeling they would never be fluent in their own language.* Joe said most students, and instructors, were troubled by Basic Grammar. *This is not a pleasant course. Instructors struggle with it too. This is dry, boring stuff it's just drill, drill, drill, drill; filling in the blank, then more of the same; if you can do one page, you can do a book.* Frances commented: *Students just learn it to pass the test.*

Joe, Agnes, Elizabeth and Frances are experienced adult educators. They know adults appreciate knowledge they can savour, and are eager to learn skills they can apply in their daily worlds. How does circling parts of speech or underlining direct objects help men and women understand the power that is exercised through language every day in courtrooms, government offices and colleges? Does performance on tests of isolated knowledge help adults use language? *Will students become better writers because they can define and identify a gerund? Much of the [Basic Grammar] course is an exercise in futility.*

On the other hand, most instructors and students found two course topics useful. The course outline describes those as Sentence Difficulties (run-ons, fragments, and subject-verb agreement) and the Mechanics of Grammar (capitalization, punctuation and spelling). These two areas represent less than fifteen percent of the course objectives.

Heading Home

CS 3211 has little to offer ABE students who want to use standard written English. Seasoned instructors know that learning to write must not start with an analytic grammar course. If it does, writing may end there. Learning to write begins with seeing oneself as a writer, doing the things writers do, and thinking the way writers think (Smith, 1994, 180). The present ABE curriculum may expect Level III students to define prepositional phrases and subordinate clauses, identify four different kinds of sentences, and underline transitive verbs before they write, but that curriculum has few supporters. Many instructors follow the best advice in their field. They ask students to write for real purposes and audiences, and create environments where writers can practice and refine many specialized skills.

Frank has taught ABE students for many years. When we sat together, he wasn't interested in talking about theories of writing pedagogy: he wanted to tell me about his students. Most of them believed writing must always be flawless, so they thought they couldn't write. Frank would find the newspaper and show students how language tumbles in the real world; he'd share his writing so the students would know how messy it really gets. He didn't "teach" Basic Grammar, Writing Skills, or Newfoundland Literature; he helped students see themselves as readers and writers. He was working with Pius at the time of our conversation.

As he talked about their work together, I learned about Frank's approach to writing instruction.

"I'll never be able to write," Pius said to me. "There's no way for me to do that. It's just as well for me to give it up."

"Pius, it's as simple as one, two, three, four," I said. "Now we're going to write a descriptive essay. What was the most memorable thing you did this week?"

"Well, the food fishery was opened," Pius said. "We went out fishing."

"Why was it so important to you?" I asked him.

"Well it's been so long since we've been at it."

"What about the night before? How did you feel, Pius?"

"I didn't sleep."

"Okay. Next morning describe getting up."

"Well, it's been a long time since we have been able to do this legally."

Then we talked about the different ways people put up fish in the region.

"Now buddy," I said, "we got all the hooks; we got to bait the trawl."

Frank helps Pius find a meaningful topic and demonstrates one of the most effective pre-writing strategies instructors can offer students: to talk about their subject before writing. Interviews or conversations can help writers decide on their topic. The strategy also enhanced Pius's fluency.

When we finished he had a descriptive essay — a descriptive narrative, and an expository essay.

"Expos what?" asked Pius.

I said, "I asked you to give me a set of directions and what you did was tell me how to prepare fillets for salt, right to drying and watering them, how many you'd water and how long you'd leave them in water, and then put them in the fridge so when you wanted a meal all you had to do was go to the fridge and take them."

Now here he was all of a sudden, this was the most Pius had ever written in his life. In two hours he got four pages. And he hasn't stopped. He hasn't stopped. It's gotten to a point now where it doesn't matter if I grade him. He's writing for himself now, and all his work is good. So now we can go back to edit; he's quite receptive. He doesn't mind now.

What is Pius learning? To see himself as a writer. Frank concretizes the abstract language of the school and transports Pius beyond the five-paragraph model essay. Pius isn't locked in the draft-correct-redraft-correct loop that defines some writing instruction.

"Pius," I say, "Now you're a writer. Let's make you a good writer, a polished writer. You write so well, so fluently, so interesting the things you say. Now if you were telling me this you'd say, 'by the — big one.' Now the guy who's reading that, because there's no way for you to raise your voice or swear, or pound your fist on the table, this is where this comes in here right now. We don't curse in this old foolish English language, what we do here in terms of the old foolish parts of speech, and that's what I'll say, 'the foolish old parts of speech,' we call that an interjection. So here's a good place to put an interjection. This is where you're coming on strong. If you were telling a story this is where you'd get excited. You've pulled up the big one. That's how you communicate that excitement to your reader by the signs. That's all grammar is, the signs."

Then we went over to the bookshelf. "Let's pick any book off the shelf. Let's go back and see how many of these you have. Look at these signposts there. All the way through there, look at them .commas, quotation marks...."

"You know," Pius said, "I saw those marks there but didn't know what they were for."

Frank delivers mini-lessons about grammar in the context of Pius's writing. As his confidence as a writer grows, Frank introduces him to some of the things writers do, like polishing and editing the pieces they hope to share with others. He helps Pius see that books contain useful models for writers. In this apprenticeship, Pius is learning to think like a writer.

Finding Lost Luggage

Analytical grammar courses such as CS 3211, Basic Grammar contradict the Department of Education's philosophy of language learning. Departmental policy suggests students should explore language in meaningful contexts; students in ABE programs are expected to learn the bits in isolation. Children are invited to discover the richness of language; adults are given drill books full of dull sentences. Students learn to exploit their tacit knowledge of grammar; in the ABE program, learners' operational knowledge of syntax is ignored. In school, students are encouraged to celebrate their language; Basic Grammar shatters adults' linguistic confidence:

ABE instructors like Frank can modify CS 3211 in their classrooms. But course modifications raise a number of troublesome issues. In order to modify the course, instructors must feel free to challenge the assumptions that underlie course content; and challenges of any sort can be problematic in a field which offers limited job security and few opportunities for professional development. If course modifications fail to conform to departmental requirements, students may not earn credits for a course they have completed. And modifications require a lot of individual effort. Surely that effort is better spent on teaching than on curriculum reform in each ABE classroom.

Let's offer adults the very best in curriculum and writing instruction. Let's ask them to embrace grammar as the ancient Greeks did, not just as correctness, but as style. Let's make sure grammar instruction enhances, rather than displaces, instruction and practice in writing. More than modification may be needed to CS 3211 and other communication courses in the ABE program. Think about the possibilities. Couldn't we ask students to write and teach a grammar that serves them as writers? What would happen if students read literature to discover the power of grammar? Can you imagine a classroom where adults investigate the grammar rules of their dialect rather than being told they speak incorrectly? Perhaps it's time for the Department of Education to revise CS 3211 so it begins to reflect what we know about literacy practices and literacy learning, and conforms to departmental standards.

Notes

¹ I found this rhyme in "The St. John's Balladeers," an essay written by Newfoundland scholar, George Story. According to Story's sources, a village schoolmaster who voiced objections to a songwriter's syntax was quickly silenced by this impromptu couplet.

² preliminary grade consisted of two years of study, roughly equivalent to Grades 7 and 8.

³ Italicized text denotes transcribed material from conversations with instructors and students.

Bibliography

- Bryson, B. (1990). *Mother tongue English and how it got that way*. New York: Avon Books.
- Burse, W. (1959). On the teaching of English. *The N.T.A. Journal*, 50(8), 8-14.
- Council of Higher Education. (1926). *Report of the examinations conducted by the council of higher education, Newfoundland, 1925*. St. John's, NF: Author.
- Council of Higher Education. (1933). *Report of the examinations conducted by the council of higher education, Newfoundland, 1933*. St. John's, NF: Author.
- Council of Higher Education. (1940). *Report of the examinations conducted by the council of higher education, Newfoundland, 1940*. St. John's, NF: Author.
- Courage, J. (1965). Some aspects of the linguistic approach to English grammar in high school. *The N.T.A. Journal*, 57 (2), 22-25.
- Crocker, O. (1959). The problem of speech development in Newfoundland schools. *The N.T.A. Journal*, 50 (5), 9-15.
- Elbow, P. (1990). *What is English?* NY: Modern Language Association of America.
- Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. (1995). *Adult basic education program guide (Level I, II and III)*. St. John's, NF: Author.
- Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. (1996). *Foundation for the Atlantic Canada English language arts curriculum*. St. John's, NF: Author.
- Government of Newfoundland. (1950). *Public examinations conducted by the department of education, Newfoundland*. St. John's, NF: Author.
- Government of Newfoundland. (1960). *Public examinations conducted by the department of education, Newfoundland*. St. John's, NF: Author.
- Government of Newfoundland. (1970). *Public examinations annual report*. St. John's, NF: Author.
- Government of Newfoundland. (1976). *Public examinations annual report*. St. John's, NF: Author.
- Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. (1986). *High school certification annual report*. St. John's, NF: Author.
- Moffett, J., Wagner, B. (1983). *Student-centered language arts and reading, K-13* (3rd ed.). Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Noguchi, R. (1991). *Grammar and the teaching of writing*. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Pinker, S. (1994). *The language instinct*. NY: William Morrow and Company.
- Robinson, S.D., Bailey, S.D., Cruchley, H. D., & Wood, B.L. (1985). *Bridges 2*. Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall Canada, Inc.

Smith, F. (1994). *Writing and the writer* (2nd ed). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Story, G. (1976). The St. John's balladeers. In C. Rose (ed.), *The blasty bough*. St. John's, NF: Breakwater Books.

Wagner, D. (1983). *The seven liberal arts in the middle ages*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Weaver, C. (1996). *Teaching grammar in context*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook publishers,

Woods, W. (1986). The evolution of nineteenth-century grammar teaching. *Rhetoric Review*, 5(1), 4-20.