A Little Introduction to Grammar

by

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For many people the word *grammar* leaves a clear taste in their mouths. For others, and unfortunately for many, the word gives a very different feeling, such as struggling to cut bread with a dull knife and ending up with five unsuccessful, half-destroyed pieces on the table. Then you find a sharp knife and cut the bread in whole pieces, each the right size.

When grammar is experienced individually and discovered by the child, there will always be some of the "knife-sharp" triumphant feeling attached to it. But when the study of grammar is a superficial, formalistic learning process, it is merely sand and remains sand. When sand arrives in the wrong place and in overabundance, it creates direct pain. And grammar is never so simple as merely appearing as "sand" or as a "sharp knife." For the knife at first is pretty dull for everyone and must be sharpened within. Sharpening grammar occurs inside the child—and there something must always be sharpened away!

If we were to leave discovering grammar up to growing children, there would be no grammar ground at all. And that problem would be removed from the face of the earth. Or, alternatively, almost no one would participate in grammar. Probably one in a million pioneers of grammar would not only learn the subject from others but also discover entirely new areas of grammar. And the remaining 999,999 would know nothing of grammar at all. We would be left with unconscious grammar, only the rules of our spoken language. For when we speak, that is what takes place.

But we would know nothing of the rules. And why should we know? For, indeed, in order to speak, it is not necessary to know grammar. Young children do not know grammar, yet they speak fluently. By copying someone who speaks correctly, we can learn to speak correctly without consciously knowing any grammar. And it is possible to learn to speak a foreign language fully without any grammar at all. Should grammar be just a "crutch" with which we quickly learn to speak correctly? Or could it help us learn a foreign language when we do not have the opportunity to learn it directly?

In other words: What value does grammar have on its own merit? Does it have something that every person should participate in? What takes place in grammar? It is reflection. It sharpens our self-consciousness, and consciousness of the Self is increased. This is grammar's true value for the human being, no matter how many meaningful but secondary practical goals it has: speaking correctly, learning a foreign language, and answering exam questions correctly.

Without "consciousness-searching" reflection, words stream into our speech without our noticing how different the words are. There is a world of difference between the word's inherent character and the tension that exists between words. An artistically trained ear knows words by their sound and rhythm and is able to grasp the special character of the words and speech with feeing and in pictures. In grammar the conscious reflection is sharpened so that the character and tension of each word is described directly. Yet how easily the enlivened word disappears and one is left with only a dead scheme, a fishing net with no living fish. That is when the dry taste of sand appears. This is where the grammar teacher's hidden challenge lies.

Is it possible to help the child experience even a little bit of the self-discovering, consciousness-sharpening of grammar? Or will grammar lessons irrefutably drown in the sand dunes? Today's school systems have set the bar for examinations such that the teacher must practice grammar drills with the students as a pure formality. Until the school systems are revised, there will certainly remain a lot of sand in the grammar lessons. But that does not prevent us teachers from continually bringing to the children as much of grammar's purely humanly educational activity as possible.

Let us illustrate this with a certain part of speech—verbs or "action words": *run, hop, sing, hammer, knit, bathe, crawl,* and *saw*. When these verbs follow each other and we try to experience inside ourselves what lives within them, there is a strong activity, a characteristic movement. A lot is happening. They are truly "action words."

But stop a moment. Are not the following words equally verbs: *sleep, rest, lie,* and *sit*? Here the movement is gone and there is not a lot happening. If we speak about "action words," we must ask: Is there something even more characteristic of verbs, something held in common with words such as *run, hop, sing* and words such as *sleep, rest* and *sit*?

And let us consider the so-called dependent words: *are* and *become*. What is going on there? The expression "action word" is a good description for many verbs, maybe for most of the verbs, but not for all verbs. What do all verbs share in common and what is most characteristic of them? It is the moment of will, "I will" or "I will not": I will *bathe*, I will *sleep*, I will *be* courageous, I will *lie* down, I will *hop* and I will *be* strong. A most exact description of all verbs is, therefore, "words of will" or "will-words." One might argue that this concerns only what conscious beings do, while we have many verbs that belong to non-conscious nature: the river *roars*, the sun *shines*, it *grows*, it *storms*. We may not say: I want to roar. I will shine. I will grow. Yet the moment of willpower is also there. The being that wills is much larger and more powerful.

Language arose in a time when human beings experienced natural phenomena as the actions of powerful spiritual beings. For example, they did not merely say, "It rains," but rather, "Zeus rains." And all verbs of nature were expressions for the intentions of these beings. The fact that people nowadays no longer relate to such beings does not prevent the verbs we use from having willpower.

With verbs of nature we can better identify with nature than with substantives or nouns. Nouns are very different from verbs: *table, head, foot, flower, sun, moon, animal, stone, beauty,* and *wisdom.* Here we find absolute steadiness compared with the verb's willful activities. Everything, every single being, every relationship has its name. "Name words" is an expression that covers all nouns. They are the part of speech that provides pictures of thoughts. While verbs carry us away to experience the actions as if we created them (*run, hop, roar, storm*), the nouns are more readily

pale, completed, finalized pictures that are viewed from the outside and at a distance, for example: *house, tree, forest, ship,* and *sky.*

Of course there may be movement in a noun: *river, lightning, storm, car race* or even the word *movement*. But in all of these words, the movement lies within the meaning and not in the words' function as nouns. Therefore the moment of movement is dulled, the movement is considered a completed picture. On the contrary, with verbs we go into intension of the movement and enter the inside of the action: "Lightning" is duller than "It is lightning." "Storm" is much duller than "It is storming." If we say, "There are flags in town and at sea," we have the picture of a celebration although a pretty stiff and complacent one. If we say with Bjornson,"They are flagging in towns and at sea," immediately the flags flap courageously in the wind and people celebrate in the streets.

With verbs we enter the stream of time. Verbs have many tenses. They live and weave in time while nouns are static. Nouns are either plural or single but there are no tenses. With nouns we define the tenses in the present, past and future. Once again these are finalized pictures of the tenses.

Verbs and nouns are polar opposites in language, much as willpower and thinking are in our life of soul, much like our body's movements and its static structure. If we imagine language with no nouns, it would roar off chaotically, driven by passionate impulses without clarified stability. If we imagine language without verbs, we would have a dead moon landscape clarified and stable, but without the living and moving element.

Between these polarities we find a third part of speech—adjectives: *courageous, smart, green, red, sour, sharp, pointed, heavy, slippery, sleepy, jumpy, defeated* and *lost*. With adjectives, name and action do not count. These words express the experience of how things and every being are and how those beings are that lives with the activities of the verbs. Adjectives commute between nouns and verbs and facilitate between them. "A man does his duty and sacrifices his life for the cause." With nouns and verbs we can express a relationship clearly and dramatically. Yet even if the issue appears clearly and no matter how intense the dynamic actions may be within the verbs, the language remains hardened, unresolved, and immature if some of the living atmosphere does not appear: "Oh, how brave he is!" and this appears in the adjectives. For all

of them it depends on saying: “Oh, how —”! Adjectives are expressions of feelings and impressions. And as far as feelings and impressions (all of our senses) are organs for experiencing how the world truly is, the true qualities appear in adjectives. Normally we call adjectives “feature words,” which is a dry noun expression for this relationship. Adjectives span a large area. They may express impressions that are provided by a specific sensory organ: *green, yellow, blue, sour, sweet, slippery, warm* and *cold.* They may be subjective so that we learn more about the person who is speaking and not so much about the matter at hand. Regardless, the objective quality usually dominates when adjectives are used.

The adjectives that are much more apt to have a subjective quality are those in which the impressions are not provided by a specific sensory organ but rather by the entire human being who acts as an organ for feelings: He is a *quirky* person, a *polite* man, and so forth. But with all adjectives an impression or a feeling is expressed. Within the mood that lives in adjectives, the verb’s intense activity is reduced, while at the same time the noun’s clarified steadiness is enlivened. Adjectives create a harmonizing element in the language, much like feelings express and harmonize thinking and willing in the life of soul and much the way in which rhythmical processes express and harmonize the structure of the body and its movements.

And if the teacher finds text in which verbs and adjectives are presented with artistic certainty, the students can learn more about the specific qualities of verbs and adjectives than in any thick grammar book with schemes of conceptual distinctions.

Just as important as separating the specific qualities of the words of speech is to find the transitions by which a word is transformed from one part of speech to the next:

It darkens. The night is dark. Dark night. The dark.
It lightens. The day is light. Light day. Daylight.
It greens. The fields are green. Green fields. The green.

The farther we remove ourselves from lively verbs to nouns, the more our consciousness becomes sharper and clearer. Nouns are the part of speech for reflective and intelligent self-consciousness. This is where all

knowledge of things is kept. Everything becomes objective, becomes the object for observation and thus limited in relation to other objects. Even grammar and all of its descriptions, explanations, examples and rules is stuffed with nouns.

To speak in pictures we can say that verbs are like wild, lively children. Nouns are like old, wise, but unmovable men. Adjectives have both qualities harmonized: They are mature people. Such pictures can be further developed and used in the first stage of grammar lessons, as I will soon demonstrate.

Grammar lessons are not relevant until the fourth grade or at roughly the age of nine or ten. Before the fourth grade the teacher can bring many word exercises and comparisons as a preparation for grammar, but before the age of nine or ten, it should not be addressed consciously. At that age most children arrive at a moment of self-development and self-consciousness they have not achieved previously. Often this occurs during small conflicts with adults. One can often see how they unconsciously search for opportunities to misbehave and not listen to others. Through these confrontations they awaken to a clearer experience of their own selves. This is when it is appropriate to begin grammar lessons. For the same desire for confrontation and awakening can be resolved in a sharpening of self-consciousness.

The goal is to let the children discover on their own as much of the grammar as possible. We teachers guide them to create their own sharpening and awakening, using grammar as the subject. Here is one way of doing it:

The teacher speaks with the children about how young children learn to speak. Almost no one remembers anything from that moment in their lives when they learned to speak. Yet everyone has seen others do it, be they siblings or the neighborhood children. Everyone has witnessed how young children struggle to get the words out. Now in the tenth year words are spoken without even noticing the separate words. Speech flows in a stream all by itself. Some children cannot help but speak. This is what we review in the initial fourth grade grammar lessons. We look at how the words are different, as different as a wild young child and a wise old man who knows everything but his legs are too weak so he sits in a wheel chair. As vividly and dramatically as possible the teacher tells the story of

everything the little, wild boy does and allows him to repeatedly say, ”I will” for every new action he undertakes. “I will climb! I will climb!” – “I will chop! I will chop!” This brings all kinds of verbs into play without mentioning the grammatical term. Then one event follows the other, where the little boy courageously carries out great, boy-like activities and when sometimes he also recklessly causes huge amounts of damage.

His mother, Solveig, observes everything and praises him every time his good sides appear saying: “Oh, how strong, how brave, how talented!” and so on. And she is on the verge of desperation when he loses control and destroys: “Oh how ugly, how wild, how terrible!” The adjectives appear without labeling them grammatically.

And then we lead the children to the old grandfather in the wheelchair who calms the boy down and explains to him: “That is a stool. That is an axe.” Now we present nouns without labeling them grammatically. The teacher asks the children, “Can you find the words that are similar to those spoken by the wild boy, his mother Solveig, and the old grandfather?”

Such a picturesque, riddle-like story allows the children to find their own examples of verbs, adjectives and nouns without labeling them grammatically and without using explanations to define them, but all the while clearly holding all three parts of speech separate from each other.

Of course this picturesque story can be told much better than I have indicated here briefly. Use your imagination in the first grammar lesson but keep it simple, powerful and make sure it works for all the children in the class, for the children who think quickly and for those who think more slowly. My experience when I used this example was successful, for not one bad example appeared!

When the children find examples from the story, we can begin to put the words in order, write them on the board and into their books. And then we need to find expressions for all three types of words. What should the boy be named? And what should we name the words that belong to him? “Wild,” said one child. “Call him Will,” said another. And so we called the words “will words.” And what can we call the grandfather? “Call him ‘Name,’ for he names all of the things.” We now had the “name words.” And the third type of words, the adjectives, we called the “Solveig words” after the mother. (The teacher can enable this realization if the children do not.) The “Solveig words” are then grouped in addition to a number

of adverbs the children naturally add. (But I recommend to delay a distinction between adjectives and adverbs until later.)

When the children discover so much grammar in one lesson, we have achieved the first level of learning. During the many lessons that follow, we repeat, expand and practice the same level. Once it is learned and digested by the children, they can draw examples from the story in their workbooks and add text to the drawings with columns of words. We find examples for all three parts of speech so that all three words fit meaningfully into sentences. Then we find the transitions from part of speech to part of speech as I indicated earlier in this article. Also when the class reads great writing, we can now point out the parts of speech.

Grammar workbooks in which everything is given in advance, and all you need to do is understand and remember without discovering it for yourself, can be very good at a later level in order to provide a systematic overview and practice. But at this early level it is important that grammar lessons follow three phases:

1. Experiencing the grammatical qualities in a story and allowing the children to find their own examples. We can call this the "willpower phase" of the lessons.
2. What has been experienced and carried out is repeated, practiced and thoroughly worked upon. The children learn to breathe in it. We can call this the "feeling phase" of the lessons.
3. What has been learned in the first two phases is crystallized in a clear and controlled relationship, preferably in an accurate drawing. This is the lesson's "thinking phase."

After the third phase is completed, it is worth introducing the actual Latin-based grammatical expressions, verbs, nouns, adjectives, and so forth. Of course such teaching demands well-planned and -timed lessons in the main lessons every morning for a certain period with the same subject a couple of weeks at a time. This allows the children to concentrate on the topic and allows the teacher to present a comprehensive development in less time.

If your children have completed the first and easiest awakening to a sharpened consciousness in grammar lessons, the path is clearer for other

areas of grammar. Therefore the first grammar lessons are especially important. For every new area the teacher plows up, a new, intense effort must be made. Nothing rolls along on its own, if it should support human development.

After all three main parts of speech are worked on at the same time (for they belong together), each one must be deepened separately. The teacher quickly discovers that the children find more good examples for nouns and verbs than for adjectives. Children near the age of ten use very few adjectives! Vocabulary increases as the children mature, and this is especially the case with adjectives. Except for the most common adjectives used with our senses (e.g., *red, green, sharp, dull, slippery*), most children at this age use only a few adjectives such as *good* and *bad* (to use some expressions from Bergen, Norway), actually words that express sympathy and antipathy.

Of course they understand many more words than they actually use. And their active adjective vocabulary grows quickly when we help them a little, in other words, whenever we awaken something that is asleep in them. Now we can move from sensory area to sensory area, from adjectives of sight (*red, green, light, dark*) to taste adjectives (*sour, sweet*) and on to adjectives of touch (*slippery, sticky*) and finally to areas that are not connected to certain senses, but which we experience and feel with our entire being (*brave, friendly, bad, cowardly*).

Now grammar touches many other subject areas and these relationships are always especially enlivening and productive. Eventually all types of polarities appear in the vast expanse of adjectives. They appear of themselves: *light-dark, little-big, slippery-sticky, strong-weak, nice-mean, brave-cowardly, dumb-smart, red-green* (here you can add a whole row of color exercises with complementary colors), *warm-cold, heavy-light.*

Adjectives are the area of language that can be most easily ignored and turned inside out, for this area demands harmonious, human maturity. Our life of feeling is our organ for reality. One author once said, “Look into which adjectives you use and you will discover what kind of person you are.”

If this area becomes impoverished and underdeveloped, our language becomes dry and empty. Then it must be refreshed with passionately

impregnated reinforcements: *very small, ghastly nice, terribly sweet, swine pretty,* not to mention: *devilishly good, acceptably smart, rottenly fun*. Or adjectives are strengthened by an additional word: *extremely fine, extremely good*, and *extremely ugly*. In short: inflation. In this way we can move from one part of speech to the next. All of them hide their human possibilities. And the same is true of grammar's other main area, the word's reciprocal relationships or syntax. For language sleeps until it is awakened. Grammar is one of the paths to an inner awakening.