The Power of Grammar: A Working Weekend

Anne Greer

A few weeks before the Research Institute's Colloquium on English Grammar at High Mowing School (March 16–18, 2008), Virginia Buhr, the coordinator of this weekend, was given what many might consider an impossible task; she was asked to take exciting photographs of participants engaged in the study of grammar. For many, not only is English grammar "notoriously the most widely and deeply hated of all studies"[1] but also, some might add, the most boring.

Not so for the fourteen seasoned English teachers grappling with the questions of the why, how, when, and what of English grammar teaching. Virginia's assignment turned out to be an easy one. Excitement during the weekend was palpable.

Teachers from east, west, north, and south came ready—indeed, some came armed—with firm answers. Of all things open to question, surely grammar was not one of them. By the end of the weekend, there was widespread agreement that English grammar is probably the least consciously taught subject in Waldorf schools. We left replete with questions, all of us eager for further exploration.

Waldorf high school teachers share a deeply held belief that our task is to awaken students to life-long questions: How do I know what I know? How can I be a conscious participant in my own experience? We ask such questions and, with our students, struggle toward answers through language. How then do we come to understand language and its role in what we know and how we know what we know? What is the meta-language with which we can talk about language?

My own teaching experience and observations based on visits to other classrooms have convinced me that, in teaching English grammar, teachers generally resort to dead concepts and to unexplored, outmoded prescriptive "rules." Much grammar teaching, particularly in our high schools, relies heavily on dusty sets of handbooks and workbooks.

Language consists of living phenomena. Waldorf methodology is premised on the understanding that students and teachers are engaged in a process of genuine discovery. The teacher should present phenomena, ask students to observe carefully, and, increasingly during high school years, observe, as well, themselves as observers. Together, teachers and students work toward becoming increasingly articulate about their observations. This rarely happens in a grammar lesson. Simply put, the meta-language used to describe English between the 17th and mid-20th centuries is based on Latin, a language long dead. The resulting concepts, now hardened, if not atrophied, have limited ability to capture living, evolving English syntax.

Grammar Symposium meets with Anne Greer at High Mowing School

During the 20th century, the study of linguistics was revolutionized. By the 1960s, exciting advances were being made in teaching approaches incorporating linguistic discoveries; these began to be offered in many schools. Perhaps the

resulting complexity was one of the reasons for the end of English grammar in public education in North America, Great Britain, and Australia. Because end it did, although not in Waldorf schools, where teaching grammar has never stopped. But those of us who remember being taught grammar generally teach it as we were taught, and those who have never been taught grammar muddle through in a mix of bewilderment and apprehension about not getting things right. "Getting things right" is a prescriptive approach bordering on the moralistic; living language demands a descriptive openness.

Rudolf Steiner had a keen interest in language. He found it most alive in speech, particularly in dialect. He admired its transformative properties, including the genius of inventing words, of changing nouns into verbs, and of embracing words from other languages. He deplored "abstract instruction," asserting that there is "no better method of pushing children into materialism."[2] When he spoke about grammar teaching, he was frequently negative:

> …[Y]ou may be sinning against the healthy condition of the child if you occupy him for an hour with what is usually called grammar. If the children have to occupy themselves distinguishing between what one calls subject, object, attribute, indicative, subjunctive, etc.—all things in which they have only a half-hearted interest—then they are put into a state where their breakfasts are boiling in their organisms quite uninfluenced by their soul lives. … Enteric illnesses are often caused by grammar lessons. . . . If I may speak plainly, the grammar lessons are just horrible. All the stuff which you find printed in books ought to be burnt. Something living must enter. . . .[3]

Steiner recognized, as has modern linguistics, "that all grammar already exists in the human organism." Our task as teachers is to raise grammar to consciousness "in a living way" and, by so doing, we "work on an 'I'-consciousness in the child." [4]

What Is This "Living Way"?

Part of the answer can be found in linguistics. Linguistics professor Adam Makkai, in his "Afterword" to the 1995 edition of Steiner's *Genius of Language*, tells us that not only is linguistics "one of the most important disciplines that human beings have developed throughout the course of evolution" but that it is "the prototypical consciousness soul discipline for our time." [5]

As English teachers, we keep up-to-date on the newest poets and the latest works of fiction, but we know little or nothing about the revolution that has occurred in the study of the English language and the new grammars that offer increased subtlety in their descriptions. According to British linguist David Crystal, the English language is currently experiencing its third revolution since the 5th century. By "revolution," he means any combination of events that produces a radical shift in consciousness and behavior over a relatively short period of time. The first was the change from Old English to Middle English; the second, the change from Middle English to Modern English (from Chaucer to Shakespeare). This third, Crystal claims, is caused by the confluence of three major trends, each global in significance, which cumulatively have altered the world's linguistic ecology: the extension of English as a global language with new varieties around the world; the realization that huge numbers of languages and dialects are dying, generating a sense of crisis and fresh initiatives toward preservation and regeneration; and the increasing use of Internet technology, which has supplemented spoken and written language, adding a further dimension of variety to our linguistic experience.[6]

While part of the answer in finding a "living way" must be an increase in the teacher's linguistic understanding, the larger part can be discovered only by first-hand experience in the classroom. Back in the classroom on the Monday morning following our exciting weekend, Mary Ann Wells (Waldorf High School of Massachusetts Bay) experienced the interest of students who are free to engage in a broader exploration of grammar:

> I walked into my 12th grade homeroom and the students asked for a study time. I told them that would be wonderful as I had to get some work done because I had been away attending a grammar conference all weekend. Several of the students thought that was very exciting and I

thought they were making fun of it—but they were indeed serious and a discussion ensued not unlike those had in Wilton. Johnny thinks grammar matters and cares deeply about correct usage. His very best friend Jahan sees the importance of correct usage and the rules of grammar but feels he knows them so he can speak any way that is comfortable and gets his point across. Augie wonders who invented punctuation and it went on and on. The entire 12th grade was engaged in a discussion about the importance of grammar and correct usage and they were fascinated that Waldorf teachers are researching and discussing it as well.

When seasoned teachers congregate, invariably there is sharing. Meg Gorman (San Francisco Waldorf School) delighted us all with a lesson on verbs liberally illustrated with stick figure personalities, bringing traditional terminology to life.

Jason Gross (Kimberton Waldorf School) began his exercise from transformational grammar with questions. If we are attempting a phenomenological approach to grammar, should we allow the students to find their own descriptions of language? If we label something, are we teaching only concept? What value does a label have? At what point, and how, do we present labels? Can we suspend jargon or labels and describe what a word or phrase is actually doing?

Wendy Bruneau (High Mowing School) invited us to take part in a writing exercise from *Image Grammar* by Harry Noden, an approach she uses with her classes. Noden developed his highly successful approach with his wife Jan when she was a Waldorf elementary school teacher in Akron, Ohio. *Image Grammar* is consistent in many ways with Waldorf pedagogy.[7]

Patrice Pinette (High Mowing School) shared examples of how language awareness enhances her creative writing classes, particularly in poetry.

The weekend wasn't all fun. It was also games. As warm-up exercises and for physical deepening, David Sloan (Merriconeag Waldorf School) brought us "Drammar"—movement explorations used in his drama classes, extended to grammar. In ludic delight, we discovered the balance between outer and inner, form and freedom, self and other.

Jane Wulsin (Green Meadow Waldorf School) was our lower school touchstone; she brought a clear picture of willing, feeling, and thinking as they work in body and soul during the three phases of child development. We recognized this as an invitation to the next stage of our work: to develop an understanding of how to awaken consciousness in appropriate ways at appropriate times, phenomenologically.

Endnotes

1. Myers, L.M. *The Roots of Modern English*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1966, pp. 255–256.
2. Steiner, Rudolf. *The Genius of Language: Observations for Teachers* (Six Lectures given in Stuttgart, 1919–1920). Trans. Gertrude Teutsch and Ruth Pusch. Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1995, p. 94.
3. Stockmeyer, Karl. *Rudolf Steiner's Curriculum for Waldorf Schools*, Forest Row: Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, 2001, p. 21.
4. Steiner, Rudolf. *The Renewal of Education*, pp. 111–112.
5. Makkai, Adam. "Afterword: Rudolf Steiner on Language: A View from Modern Linguistics" in Rudolf Steiner, *The Genius of Language*, p. 102.
6. Crystal, David. *The Language Revolution*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.
7. Noden, Harry. *Image Grammar*, Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999.

Editor's note:

Anne Greer is preparing a source book on grammar teaching that will incorporate contributions from this colloquium with the results of her own years of research and experience as a Waldorf high school English teacher. Her book will be published by the Research Institute and will be available through AWSNA Publications.

Anne Greer shares her research with colleagues.