



THE BEHAVIOR OF WORDS



JOHN ERSKINE

I have long wondered why some one doesn't write a grammar from the point of view of the human race. The books we study must have been composed by men who never talked. They dissect language after it has been used, and upon the fragments they meditate in logical evolutions, but they neglect the vital thing, the behavior of words in flight from my mind to yours. Grammar as a subject of study is a structure imposed upon speech by pedants more interested in the structure than in the speech. The genuine grammar, the natural and inevitable relations between words when the words are intelligible, is, like some other profound things in nature, simple.

Many a bright pupil has asked how the grammar now taught could help him to read or write. Many a writer, whose formal training in grammar was defective, has written well. If like Shakspeare he reaches unassailable fame, the grammarians exercise much dialectic to prove he was following their rules after all. We suspect he was following rather the genuine laws of speech, which we wish we knew. If we are told his genius rose superior to the rules of grammar, we are skeptical; we suspect the rules were either useless or wrong.

We make our criticism, that is,

from the point of view of the people who are using the language, the speaker and the hearer. The only important grammar is that which brings them together. Even if the formal grammar were correct, Shakspeare and his audience would need only a few pages of it, and we need no more. But the children still learn, or try to, that nouns are abstract or collective, common or proper; that "certain proper nouns become common nouns when used in a special sense"; that nouns have gender—or if in spite of grammars they obviously haven't, then they have common gender. But did any human being ever find use for these definitions as he spoke or wrote? Would the knowledge of them solve a single difficulty of expression? Hundreds of thousands of children are at this moment learning that sentences ask questions, or make statements, or express commands. Well, what of it? If the children didn't notice this of themselves, what would they miss? Now they have the information, what are they to do with it?

These are some of the useless pages. But much of the formal grammar is from the writer's or speaker's point of view highly questionable or obviously incorrect. Most of the text-

books begin with the definition of the sentence, either because the grammarian thinks the sentence is the simplest unit of discourse, or because he wants the students as soon as possible to write the kind of sentence which is easiest for theme-readers to correct; he wants every sentence to have a subject and a predicate. All might yet be well, if the human mind were not full of other kinds of sentence. As it is, the student usually meets at the beginning of the book two definitions which contradict each other. The first tells him that a sentence is a group of words expressing a complete thought. The second tells him that a sentence must have a subject and a predicate. Yet the student knows, from the conversation of the teacher or of any one else, that complete thoughts are often, perhaps usually, expressed without subject or predicate. "How much?" we ask the shopkeeper. "Twenty-five cents." Nothing could be more explicit than this question and its answer; each is a complete sentence.

The grammarian has an argument against me, however. He says that the examples just cited are really abbreviations. "How much?" is colloquial brevity for "How much is this?" and "Twenty-five cents" is a loose way of saying "This is twenty-five cents." If you ask me, "Is it raining?" and I say, "No," what I am trying to say, according to the grammarian, is, "No, it is not raining." Elaborate speakers, trained in this school of complete grammatical construction, feel uneasy with such a sentence as "I can run faster than you"; they carry the pattern out to "than you can." A real pre-

cisian ought to say "than you can run." To such a mind an unfinished comparative is distressing; "Tom is the taller" becomes for them "the taller of the two."

To think of sentences in this way is to assume that human speech as we normally hear it is shrunk from some elaborate and complete form it wore in an ideal age, when man parsed as he talked. But primitive man, so far as we know, did not begin with subtleties and afterward simplify his utterance. Like us, he defined the completeness of his sentences in terms of intelligibility, not of subject and predicate. We, like him, are sometimes eloquent in a single grunt. You say, "Smith is a fine fellow, isn't he?" and I, not liking Smith, say "Umph!"

The old grammar misleads me badly, I think, when it defines the passive voice. The formula is that in the passive voice the subject is not active but is acted upon—"He was lifted from the car." This ingenious definition ignores the reason why we use passives, and it implies what is not true, that the hearer thinks of the pronoun in the above sentence as the subject. To the hearer the relation of subject, object, and indirect object remains the same, whether you say "He told me the truth" or "I was told the truth," "The explosion lifted him from the car" or "He was lifted from the car." The difference is that in the passive voice the real subject or active agent is not mentioned, either because the speaker doesn't know, or, more often, because he doesn't wish to tell. The passive voice occurs usually in such statements as "I was told that you said so-and-so about me!"

Similarly the old grammar teaches that pronouns stand for certain nouns, which are their antecedents. From that doctrine I get the impression that pronouns are substituted for something we already have in mind. Experience leads me to believe, however, that we have pronouns in mind before we are aware of the nouns, and nouns are at last substituted for pronouns. "I, Hamlet the Dane," and "This my son" follow the order of nature for pronouns and nouns. Children think of the broad, general name first, and say *he*, *she*, *it*, until we force precision on them by asking who is *he*, *she*, or *it*. If, as some of us believe, the ultimate success of expression is in finding the perfect name, the noun which can stand alone, independent of grammar, then it is not surprising that the beginning of talk should have the sort of looseness which pronouns facilitate. I know the books tell us to substitute the pronoun in order to avoid repetition of the name, and certainly awkward repetitions should be avoided, but it is just as awkward to repeat *he* or *she* as to repeat *Tom* or *Mary*. For the speaker or writer, the use of a pronoun is to be vague and general, and sometimes that is what we wish to be.

One last illustration. The grammar tries to make me believe there is an essential difference between a noun and a verb. The noun gives the name of a thing, "water," and the verb makes a statement about it, "Water flows." But when you have made a statement about a thing, you have named it; "water" connotes the flowing and the freezing and the everything else that water

does. And if you really name a thing, you have made a statement about it. When I propounded wisdom to my small neighbor, he said, "Apple-sauce!" A complete statement—but is "apple-sauce" a verb?



Our one purpose in speech is not to illustrate grammar but to make ourselves understood. If our thoughts are crude, then a crude expression satisfies us; if our ideas are subtle, then we must convey the subtlety to the audience; but in either case we follow a simple process. We produce sounds which we hope will call up our meaning, and if we suspect the meaning has not been called up, we add other sounds. I say that a garage is a building in which automobiles are kept, and a church is a building in which religious services are held, and a hotel is a building in which travelers find shelter. In all three cases I have called the thing a building, but to make myself clearer I have added something. This process, the most elementary kind of definition, contains all that is vital in grammar, from the speaker's or the writer's point of view—all that is important in word relations, sentence structure, paragraph structure, or total form. Of course if I could find a sound which would define the garage or the church or the hotel without aid from additional sounds, I'd use that fine word, and so escape the necessity of grammar altogether, as the child did when he said "apple-sauce." But in most cases, when I have called a thing by one name, I add another to be specific. It is as though I sharpened the pencil, not by cutting away, but

by building up the point on the end. First I call the thing by one name, or noun, and then I call it by an added something, an adjective.

For the purpose of clearness the added something, the adjective, is more important than the noun. The older grammar did not tell me so; it let me think that where both noun and adjective are needed, or verb and adverb, the nouns and verbs are the very backbone of speech, and adjectives and adverbs are mere decorations or frills. Yet in our natural talk the noun is the more general sound, having the same relation to the adjective that the pronoun has to the noun; it is the setting for an image which without the adjective would not be defined.

This principle of noun and adjective controls the structure of the sentence. My old grammar told me that the main clause was the one which contained the main idea: it was the independent clause; it could stand alone. The subordinate clause contained the subordinate statement, which could not stand alone because it depended on the main clause. Writers have to find out for themselves that the main clause is the noun, and the subordinate clause is the essential adjective; in other words, that the less important idea must go into the main clause. "We'll come to-morrow, if it doesn't rain." The promise to come is too general, and nothing is further from the intention of the speaker than to let it stand alone, as statements in main clauses are said to do. "If it doesn't rain" is the heart of the matter. In conversation such clauses are independent. "Will you come?" you

say, and all I need to answer is, "If it doesn't rain."

Inexperienced writers gather from the old grammar that the great use of subordinate clauses is to vary the sentence form; every now and then one should sprinkle in a "when," an "if," an "although," for contrast with simple statements. This happy-go-lucky method leads to indifference as to what goes into the subordinate clause; the cheerful scribe will not care whether he writes, "When the sun rose, I got up," or, "When I got up, the sun rose." Such a writer—and the grammarians—should refresh their memory of the orthodox definitions, and then should meditate on what went into the main and the subordinate clauses of Shakespeare's lines,

"If this be error, and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever
loved."

This is great writing and sound grammar—writer's grammar; the main clause, if taken independently, would be nonsense.



If grammar dealt with the problems of speaker and writer, it would tell us where to take hold of the first idea, and in what order to add the other ideas. In ordinary talk most of us have had the ghastly experience of beginning in the middle, and realizing that we must go back and fill in. We have probably read more than one novel which got us nicely started in the first pages, and then doubled on itself to give the life of the hero's grandfather. Something must be wrong with any method of discourse which involves this contortion. If we happened to join a

group of people, strangers to us, the conversation would be fairly intelligible from the moment we arrived, and it would become more so as we talked on. But it would occur to nobody to stop for a biographical sketch of all the characters present, nor for a summary of previous remarks. In a story well told, one suspects, there should be no slipping back; the incidents should march as they do in life.

The old grammar had something to say of the structure known as "apposition"; a noun is in apposition to another noun, we learned, when it is placed next to it to explain it. "John Smith, grocer," would be the illustration. But this is in no respect different from the noun-adjective structure we have just been describing; it is that building up to a point which characterizes all well defined thought. When we say, "John Smith, grocer," *grocer* is the added noun, the important name which distinguishes this John Smith from others of the same family.

The natural structure, then, is apposition. When we talk well we add new names to those already uttered, and if our discourse grows to a final point, without hesitation and without temporary retreat, it is because we are willing to let verbal by-gones be by-gones; if we have come so far, we can probably go on. No small amount of practice is needed for a fluent use of this organic style, but the method itself is simple. We have only to sort out the ideas into such an order that they can be stated in sequence, added to each other without a break.

This structure is the key to good paragraph writing, and to good essay

writing in the large. The first sentence in the paragraph is simply the preliminary noun to which other sentences are added, until that first noun is completely sharpened to a point. We are then ready for another paragraph. And the essay as a whole ought to begin with the title as its first noun, and each paragraph should serve as a more vital adjective sharpening the title to its conclusion. Other structural devices are suggested by the grammars, but this principle underlies any coherent discourse. In spite of much talk of relative clauses and grammatical agreements, the closest relation is between the ideas which fall nearest. Proximity and succession are the secret of structure. If we bring together harmonious ideas, the effect is clarity; if incongruous ideas, the effect is humor. When the unfortunate merchant put out his sign, "Don't go elsewhere to be cheated, come in here," his grammar in the old sense was perfect, but from the point of view of human discourse it was humorously incorrect, since he had got the idea of cheating too close to his own premises.

The only other serious problem of the writer, once he has solved the question of order, is to know when to stop—not simply at what point to stop his essay or story, but when to stop each sentence and phrase. I assume that he has some dramatic sense of his audience, that he is the sort of person who, when he sees in his listener's face that his point is made, feels some compunction about adding unnecessary words. In ordinary talk he would stop the moment he saw he was understood; let the rest of the sentence take care

of itself. On the page, if he had a crude sort of courage, he might be willing to end his sentences with this same abruptness, punctuating with a dash. But the written page tyrannizes over us with formal ghosts, grammatical obligations. The writer therefore experiments in rearranging his sentence so that the key to it, the illumination which will show in the reader's face, is postponed till the end; hence the periodic structure, much praised in old grammars, and very little practised by competent writers. The objection to this device is that though it keeps the reader guessing up to the last moment, it does so, not because the discourse is of interest, but because it is, up to that point, comparatively unintelligible. The desire to make a striking effect in the last phrase or word sadly interferes with the natural sequence, the method of apposition, one essential noun added to another. A finer kind of technique states in their order those ideas which seem most important, and stops modestly whenever the point of illumination is reached. How shall we recognize that point? A shrewd writer discovers it by trying his manuscript on others. For some reason, though he knows his own ideas in advance, he probably has thought more words necessary than his friends are willing to attend to. As he reads, something in their silence makes him wish he had left out this or that.

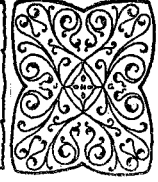
If some old writers, like Milton, or even recent ones like Walter Pater or Hawthorne, seem elaborate to us now, rather slow and over-weighted, the reason perhaps is that with the

modern quickening of our nervous system we become more alert to the general meaning of discourse, and less patient with what seem purely grammatical elaborations. In such a speeding-up process, something, of course, is lost. There are those who say our present alertness is, after all, crude—that we miss the subtleties of the old lengthy and involuted style. I do not hold with this opinion myself, but I do think we miss something else which has nothing to do with grammar. Speech has two uses: we can employ words to express definite meanings, or meanings as definite as we can make them; we can also enjoy words for their sound and texture, for the pleasure they give us aside from the intellectual meaning. Much of the older writing gave this pleasure and was intended to do so. I doubt if in our brisk and staccato modern style there is much opportunity for the musical overtones, the harmony and balance of phrase, the long rhythms, which distinguished the prose of such writers as I have here named. But I hasten to say also that this beauty of style was never acquired by a study of grammar, and in no essential does it contradict the principles of writers' grammar which I have here tried to suggest. Speech is still a maneuvering between speaker and hearer, an emotional and intellectual drama acted out in their imaginations, whether the purpose of the sounds be to tell us what time the train leaves, or whether the sentences we build have as their chief use to cast upon us a glamour and a spell.



The ROVING CRITIC

CARL VAN DOREN



WE'LL GO NO MORE A-ROVING:—Any book-reviewer toughened to his trade has to marvel at the bright faces and lifted foreheads with which apprentices take it up. I have talked with those among them who were almost desperate with willingness to try the job. They seemed to regard book-reviewing as the natural spring-board into literature. Perhaps it is, but it is a spring-board which comes in time to lose most of its elasticity under accustomed feet and to become water-logged and lifeless. Therefrom results that curse of the trade, the formal review, with stereotyped structure and language and opinions, and, worse than all, without the eager vitality which marks the few good reviews that are ever written. Everybody who knows a reviewer has heard him talk excitedly about some book or other, and then has found that the man's review sounded as if he had lost his voice and had to let a machine do his talking for him. This is the case with the best reviewers. And the honest ones know it. Sooner or later, they all stop reviewing; at least, stop reviewing books in general. The advantage is, of course, that new writers are thus admitted to the trade. The disadvantage is that some of the older reviewers do

not notice what has happened to them and go on pouring chloroform into print. Every one of them who has a chance should take a whiff of his own medicine and allow it to have its way with him. I have the chance. I therefore now adjust the mask to my willing face and announce that the Roving Critic is only history, and very little of that.

During my final gasps, however, so strong are my habits, I want to speak of three American books which have made my spring a cheerful season.



SO THIS IS AMERICA:—First, there is "The Rise of American Civilization" (Macmillan), by Charles A. and Mary R. Beard. Ever since I heard of this book, some months ago, and saw the proofs of the opening chapter, I have looked forward to its appearance with an enthusiasm tempered only by respect for the task which the authors had set themselves. That was, anybody who knew anything about the Beards could be sure, to hunt out and explain the motives among Americans which have driven them to take the various courses which have resulted in their special civilization; and also to exhibit American civilization, with