



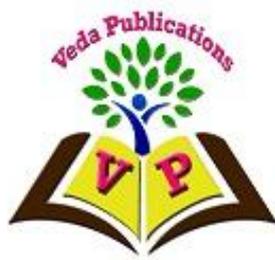
## MODERN VIEWS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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### ABSTRACT



Teachers of English try to teach the same things in the same way. But the area of reasonable tolerance seems quite insufficient to contain the many differences that tend to split the subject into fragments. The catalogue of unanswered basic questions is far too long for comfort. In what sense, if any, is it a subject at all? Is it one subject or two? Speech and writing, standard English and dialect? Is there such a thing as correct English? Grammar is partial in the sense that, though it concerns all language, it is essentially a study of it rather than an activity in it, and as a study is perhaps proper only to older and abler minorities. Literature is partial in that, though relevant to all pupils, it is but one of a range of language activities. It is only literature against the background of the language as a whole.

**Keywords:** *Language-Use, Speech and Writing, Standard English, Dialect, Language Activities, Creative Writing.*

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## INTRODUCTION

No one expects or wants all teachers of English to teach the same things in the same way. But the area of reasonable tolerance seems quite insufficient to contain the many differences that tend to split the subject into fragments. The catalogue of unanswered basic questions is far too long for comfort. In what sense, if any, is it a subject at all? Is it one subject or two? What are the relationships between language and literature, language-study and language-use, speech and writing, standard English and dialect? Is there such a thing as correct English? –and so on. We do need enough agreement to provide a frame work within which theory and practice can co-operate systematically and purposefully.

Some teachers, failing to find an internal unifying principle, seek an external one by orienting themselves towards examinations. At worst, such an orientation extends a baleful influence from testing to teaching and from limited candidate-groups to whole school-populations, at best, it is dubiously preferable to no orientation at all. Other teachers organize their work round the study of grammar or literature. Neither of these last two can be expected to unify the English programme as a whole. Each occupies only part of the territory. Grammar is partial in the sense that, though it concerns all language, it is essentially a study of it rather than an activity in it, and as a study is perhaps proper only to older and abler minorities. Literature is partial in that, though relevant to all pupils, it is but one of a range of language activities. It is only literature against the background of the language as a whole.

Any unifying conception must embrace not only grammar and literature, but also many other linguistic or partially linguistic operations, such as to name only a few of the more familiar ones.. creative writing, conversation, newspaper-reading, analysis of advertisements, drama. It must be based, in fact, on a definition of English as broad as any piece of human behavior that is clearly meaningful language, whether spoken or written, and which is not any language other than English. This definition comes from a writer on linguistics since all English is language activity, it is reasonable to ask whether linguistics, the study of language, can offer teachers

of English a view of language conducive to unity and direction in their total work.

Before venturing an affirmative answer, one needs – at the risk of seeming over-cautious –to make several reservations. The first is that, as a comprehensive rigorous science, linguistics is very young. Its youth, has blamed modern linguistics for developments by which in one generation grammar has been uprooted and pedantic fantasies about teaching the mother tongue have been made to seem liberal and advanced. There would be no point in countering this denunciation with an equally dogmatic affirmation. That there is a prima facie case for taking modern linguistics seriously involves concessions to youth, to differences reflected in rival schools and rival terminologies. One of the most intractable problems – the role of meaning –seems to be reaching resolution, with those who tried to insist on the complete exclusion of semantic factors yielding to those who allow meaning a respectable if restricted part in methods of analysis. But there remain other areas of variation, for instance, hardly have we got used to the new structural grammar when we are confronted with a newer transformational-generative grammar.

A second caveat is that linguistics exists, of course, in its own right. Any help that teachers of English may get from it is secondary to its main purpose. It is possible to arrange the various branches of linguistics in a sequence leading towards teaching from general linguistics through applied linguistics but remains the educationist's job to work out the actual teaching implications. It does not follow, however, that, because linguistics is more or less distant from actual lessons or because it has relevancies to other operations than the teaching of English, it cannot provide 'English' with a unifying principle. It may well do that received for his job as a teacher, in the preparation of the teaching materials of all kinds that he makes use of in class.

A third and last –cautionary point is that knowledge of linguistics no more guarantees success in language teaching than ignorance ensures failure. As in all teaching, theory does not always or necessarily correlate with practice. Nevertheless, at a time when better English teaching is both demanded and in some ways impeded by social and



technological developments, we ignore at our peril the possibility that language theory can help.

By providing a new description of language, linguistic studies have a direct and explicit bearing on the teaching of grammar. But since grammar of any kind is not taught to all and in any case is only one aspect of language, more important bearing of linguistics on general conceptions and attitudes. Traditionally teachers have tended to treat language as if it were a set of facts more or less separable from experience. The newer view regards it as form rather than substance, as 'patterned social behavior' operating meaningfully in social situations. The great variety of possible situations is matched by a great variety of kinds of language. There are many Englishes, and to disentangle them requires more and better sets of distinctions than the familiar old ones. Much linguistic thought is devoted to the working out of such distinctions. A simple example is the replacement of the rather division, recognizing that writing is a device for recording prose, not conversation'.

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Differentiation by dialect and accent focuses primarily on the speaker or user—his living-place, social and educational status, etc. Another scale can be devised in terms of use, or area of discourse; this scale identifies, for instance, the 'registers' of scientific English, legal English, advertising English, English for addressing babies and foreigners, and so on. To some extent the criteria here are occupational. By contrast, a third variable is largely social. At the intra-linguistic level, grammar is usefully separated from lexis, with related separation of 'closed' from 'open' word-classes, and of syntagmatic from paradigmatic word-classes, and of various strata have been identified—for instance, the academic study of language in general, the description of a single language, 'teaching grammar', 'linguistic etiquette', and even 'disguised grammar'.

Text-books still set exercises in elimination 'get' and in 'correcting' sentences so short that context and co-text are quite inadequate for judgment of appropriateness. These and similar practices, by implying that language is single and simple, neglect real English in favor of a dangerously unreal 'school-mastered' English.

Reluctance to accept that language is manifold is commonly accompanied by reluctance to accept that it is constantly changing, and that change is not deterioration. Over the ages contemporary usage has always been accused of falling short of some ideal. For example in universal reason, in logic, in the authority of grammarians or literary writers, or in etymology and linguistic history. The heterogeneous and conflicting nature of this criteria, and pronouncements of grammarians to win acceptance not only from the public but even from their colleagues and successors, ought to have put an end to vain notions of 'fixing' English once and for all.

Undesirable conservatism in matters of language is sometimes reinforced by an excessive emphasis on literature as the realization of linguistic excellence. Obviously, over and above its unquestionable humanistic value, literature is a most valuable exponent of the art of writing. But language activity is more than an art., and more than writing and reading. It includes the practical business of speaking and of understanding speech. To stress the primacy of the oral skills—as linguistics does—is not to claim for them a superior absolute value, but to recognize that they have their own special importance. Speech comes first in the processes of personal and cultural growth. Furthermore, whereas writing is awfully linguistic activity, speaking includes extra-linguistic elements that includes—voice, gesture, presence etc. which help to give it a more nearly total expressiveness. Ordinary speech is the basis of all language, including the prestige-bearing language of literature.

The prestige which literature properly enjoys, while intrinsically unobjectionable, can be harmful if it leads—as it sometimes does—to depreciation of other language uses. The descriptive emphasis in modern linguistics is not wholly suitable for teaching purposes, but it at least has the merit of discouraging the divisive tendency, peculiarly strong in England, to equate language variations with social-class ratings. On educational grounds we must welcome the insistence that no one language is intrinsically better than another, that literacy is not superior to articulation, that 'standard English' is not preferable as such to local dialect, nor 'RP' to regional accent,



and that modern sophisticated languages are more efficient than so-called primitive ones.

Linguistics doubtless have private tastes in these matters, but their refusal as professionals to evaluate languages deserves some degree of emulation by teachers, the example is not, however, one to be followed utterly, since the teacher has responsibilities to pupils as well as subject-matter. He may himself speak and write a socially-preferred English, just as he may read an academically-preferred literature: and he is entitled to personal opinions about the aesthetic and functional values of different dialects, registers and styles. Further he has right, perhaps a duty, to share these opinions with his pupils and to help them to appreciate the social and aesthetic valuations placed upon different modes of language. But—and this is where linguistics can help—he must beware of language.

The teacher on the one hand needs to reject the role of language-policeman, but on the other hand cannot reasonably adopt a totally descriptive 'anything-goes' position. To some extent he must prescribe to educate. His most appropriate position is that of Bloomfield's 'wise and moderate prescriptivism'. To be 'moderate' his injunctions should be few in number and liberal in tone, to be 'wise' they should recognize the facts—as distinct from the folklore—of language. R.A. Hall looks forward to a distinct future when claims to dispense 'correct' English will be indictable offences. We readily concede that the courts would have been kept busy in the past with all those offenders who condemned split infinitives and final prepositions, and insisted on 'not so... as' and 'his agreeing'. We too readily assume often without taking the elementary precaution of consulting the records, that our own prescriptions are more soundly based. Now we may be experiencing a kind of reversion. It may be that this particular usage is one on which we should at least fight a retreating action. If so, at least we should take a stand on firm ground rationally chosen.

Knowledge of linguistic history helps in choosing a position between the extremes of authoritarianism and permissiveness by providing the fact both about shifts of meaning and usage and about the efficacy or otherwise expressions about which puristic objections center are not so much

neologisms as they are old forms and usages of the language which are struggling to survive. It reveals the futility of demanding conform to etymology, to logic or to grammatical 'rules'. No amount of etymological history will make people 'averse from' rather than 'averse to', or with prevent 'contemporary' meaning 'modern'. No amount of logic will make two negatives mean a positive, or will outlaw 'from hence' or 'the reason it because' as for grammar, linguistic history is punctuated with fascinating attempts to regiment a recalcitrant English. Two or three generations ago, for example, dispute raged over the admissibility of certain passive constructions.

Modern grammar is more concerned with word groups and less with single words than traditional grammar. Even so, where the latter allocates words to a number of categories of more or less equal status, the modern grammarian presents a more complicated, hierarchical scheme. Between open classes of 'form-words' and closed classes of 'function-words'. The former can be catalogued in quite short, finite lists. Broadly, meaning is carried lexically by the open, grammatically by the closed, classes (as well as contextually by extra linguistic factors). The contributions of lexis and grammar are not precisely separable, but that of grammar seems the more fundamental. Tampering with lexis reduces meaning; tampering with grammar destroys it, as experiments with nonsense words show.

#### CONCLUSION

The modern view of language is, then, a distinctively scientific one. As such, it tries to provide an exhaustive, consistent, and economical account of language in general and languages in particular. In so far as its descriptions are relevant to the teaching of English, it does not exclude any of the recognized activities, but it does expose weaknesses of content and attitude. It provides the facts for replacing bogus Latin-oriented grammar by a realistic grammar of the vernacular as actually spoken and written, for eliminating much of the folklore and fallacy from usage theory, and for developing a more reasonable, encouraging attitude to language activities of all kinds than the legislative and often prohibitive methods all too common in the past. Above all, at the same time that it breaks down over-simple



'monolithic' views of language, it offers a much-needed theoretical framework for the integration of the varied skills, topics and experiences that make up the total of 'English'.

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