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A.C. Partridge

A CHALLENGING HISTORY OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

English Grammatical Categories, and the Tradition to 1800 by Ian Michael, Cambridge University Press, 1970, is a painstaking account of research, which examines critically the fundamentals, as well as the confusions, of the tradition. Dr Michael shows how unstable the parts of speech have always been, one weakness being their reliance on definition. Inflexional Latin grammar was inappropriately used as a model for English, a basically uninflected language, as the author shows by examination of 272 grammars written before 1800. More than half of these had not previously been studied.

Part I is concerned with the Greek and Latin sources of the tradition found in Aristotle and the Stoic scholars by the 2nd century B.C. In the next century the principles of grammar initiated by Dionysius Thrax, the Thracian who worked in Alexandria, were dictated by the need for system and order, to enable Greek to be taught to foreigners. But no language that has made its mark in the world was the product of scientific thinking alone.

Adaptations of the Middle Ages followed the pioneering work of the African-born grammarian, Priscian, about 500 A.D. Dr. Michael suggests that Priscian, Thomas of Erfurt, and Lily's Latin grammar exercised considerable influence on English grammatical theory during the English Renaissance. The principal linguistic directions, as early as the time of Chaucer, were the literary, the logical and the speculative; but the discipline of early grammarians was never reduced to a straight-jacket; rather, grammarians sought to find the relationship between words and things. The expressed aims of a *grammaticus* were to teach correct speaking, the significance of words and the proper interpretation of literature. Thomas of Erfurt wrote in the fourteenth century: 'the syntactical function of a word is a part of its meaning'. Priscian had forestalled him by suggesting that 'the parts of speech cannot be distinguished from each other, unless we have regard to their individual capacities for expressing meaning'. The formal and semantic criteria of words, however, became neglected when the grammatical categories were defined, largely by their accidentals.

One merit of Dr. Michael's thesis is the grasp it reveals of the continuity of the tradition during two thousand years, from Dionysius of Thrace, through Apollonius Dyscolus, Priscian, Lily, Ramus, Sanctius, Gill, Wallis, Lane, Harris and Lowth, to Lindley Murray. These dozen names were the great ones behind the history of grammar, as it ultimately developed in England. During two millenia little attention was, however, given to sentence analysis, a novelty introduced in 1806 by the Abbe Gaultier, as an aid to precis-writing.

Grammar, logic, rhetoric and literary analysis are generally regarded as different aspects of language, but Dr. Michael contends that they should be complementary. Unfortunately, their reconciliation was far from attained within the tradition. What unites the various disciplines is *structure*; though each calls for special details of investigation, none should be considered in isolation.

Part II of the thesis deals with the progress of English grammar in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, seen against the educational background of Comenius and Locke. According to Michael, this crucial period had not the intellectual equipment to supply a new synthesis of the linguistic, rhetorical and logical disciplines found in Latin; it simply adapted Lily's categories of the parts of speech to English. Joshua Poole in 1646 was the first to urge that an Englishman should be versed in the grammar of his own language, before meddling with that of Latin. Mark Lewis wrote in 1670 that the study of grammar was altogether too subtle for the instruction of children.

A considerable stimulus to Alexander Gill's advocacy of universal grammar in the first quarter of the seventeenth century was given by the Port Royal document of 1660, whose purpose was to ascertain the basic ways in which languages could be used — an early hint of the science of linguistics. England's notable contribution to this philosophy came in the next age with James Harris's *Hermes* (1751), which argued that the principal function of words was to symbolize ideas. But a general theory of language was a luxury at this time; what English needed was a comprehensive grammar to restore confidence in the language as a medium of communication. Orthodox grammarians believed, with the blessing of Gill's *Logonomia Anglica* (1619), that a set of rules could be evolved suitable for educating the young in the proprieties of their home language. As a result, it became the grammarian's avocation to compile lists of solecisms, such as Dryden provides in the *Dramatic Poetry of the Last Age*. The leading grammarians of the seventeenth century, Gill, Wallis and Cooper, continued the

scholarly prejudice of producing treatises on English grammar in Latin.

The eight familiar parts of speech had all been recognised and named by Dionysius Thrax at least a hundred years before the Christian era. Disputes arose from the different criteria of classification, form, structure and function. Dr. Michael makes more of the instability of these categories than was then important; for the different criteria provided valid material for debate. Grammar will always be an abstraction, whose most useful purpose is to explain the techniques of communication. If grammarians differ in points of view, one should not conclude failure from expressions of dissatisfaction. Dr. Johnson was uncritical of the precarious system because he realized that reforms would have had no practical effect on the standards of speaking and writing. The parts of speech are no more than an analytical convenience. There comes a stage beyond which further refinements of classification are unworkable. Lily, for instance, distinguished more than twenty kinds of noun adjective, without satisfactorily differentiating substantives from qualifiers.

Grammarians with terminological quirks and perversities often prevent students from seeing to the heart of the matter. Before Bishop Lowth, articles were usually looked upon as prepositions, or substitutes for noun inflexions in the formation of cases. Priestley regarded 'paucity of inflexion' as the greatest defect of English; Jespersen a century later saw it as the principal liberating agent. Because English lacked definite inflexional forms, it was denied by over fifty grammarians of the eighteenth century to possess a passive voice. Tense distinctions were obscured, not because grammarians lacked perception, but because they were deferential to the Latin tense system. In the idiomatic use of tenses, most languages tend to be sensitive and individualistic.

As Dr. Michael observes, many grammarians were 'prisoners of their own definition[s]... There was only one line to take: if the idiom of the language did not fit the definition, the language must be changed' (pp. 448-9). *Syntax* was the single term that preserved a fairly uniform definition, one reason being that the significance of English word-order and the principles of subordination were not fully appreciated. Consequently sentence analysis in schools went no further than word parsing; the technical terms *subject*, *predicate* and *object* were tentatively borrowed from the discipline of logic.

In the final chapter, 'Protest and Acceptance', Dr. Michael assesses the weakness of the English tradition as a want of flexibility; categories became hardened before the science of language

was understood. Much of grammar remained educationally trivial and irrelevant. With the decline of rhetoric, the psychological, social and literary aspect of speech were lost sight of. A unified literary and linguistic discipline was needed to enliven grammatical education. The reform most advocated between 1711 and 1775 was the reduction of the categories to *four* primary parts of speech, noun, verb, adjective and adverb. Something similar had been earlier proposed by Gill (who added particles), by Wallis and Lane. Blinkered confusion of form and meaning, and a limited understanding of syntax, inhibited such changes. Teachers wanted rule-of-thumb grammars for instruction in the non-conformist English schools.

The reader will profit from the methodical evidence of *English Grammatical Categories*, without having to accept Dr. Michael's discomfiting conclusions. This book should be read by all who desire to dispel illusions about the origins of English grammar.

A.C. Partridge

Bruce L. Lilies: *An Introduction to Linguistics*. Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1975. xiii. 336pp. Paperback.

Albert J. La Valley (ed.): *The New Consciousness*. Winthrop. Massachusetts, 1972. xvii. 567pp. Paperback.

The scientific study of language should be the concern of everybody using it; indeed, our only safeguard against the debasement of language, either through indifferent and insensible utterance of the deliberate distortion of meaning, lies in the systematic establishment of the rules and principles of its usage. Formerly, these rules and principles were specified by the grammarians; since the beginning of this century, the task has been undertaken on a much more scientific basis by the linguists.

Linguistic studies can often become a labyrinth of abstractions and demographies out of which the general reader may despair of ever finding his way; distributional analysis, morphological alternations, phrase structure diagrams, phonometrics, and other constituents of the discipline are often bewildering to all but the specialist. There is good reason, then, to welcome a clear and concise exposition of the work being done by Ferdinand de Saussure's disciples — or his opponents. Bruce Lilies's book is just that sort of exposition. Lilies does not presuppose any previous knowledge of formal studies in grammar or of linguistics *per se*. The only requirement for reading and understanding what he has written is fluency in the English language.