

Early Lessons in English Grammar

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“So then I took up the next book. It was about grammar. It said extraordinary things about nouns and verbs and particles and pronouns, and past participles and objective cases and subjunctive moods.’ ‘What are all these things?’ asked the King. ‘I don't know, your Majesty, and the Queen did not know, but she said it would be very suitable for children to learn. It would keep them quiet,’” etc.—*Palace Tales*, by H. Fielding.

How common it is to meet with quite intelligent children and people who have learned grammar for years, and who will yet make “howlers” [mistakes]—will call “clearly” a verb, “with” an adjective, and “is” a preposition! Is there, then, no need for grammar? It cannot be denied that the subject has been looked upon as a bugbear by the pupil, as a subject to which valuable time may be given with no visible results by the teacher. We venture to think, however, that the fault lies rather with the method of teaching than with the subject. From my own experience in teaching [children] from eight to twelve, I contend that there need be no drudgery in this subject. Effort there must be, but effort is pleasurable and of the utmost value for cultivating the reasoning powers. In a first lesson we try to make words and their arrangement things of living interest to the children. We point out the difference between human beings and other creatures, and go back to the beginning of words.

“God gave man language just as He gave him reason, for what is man’s word but his reason, coming forth that it may behold itself?” Animals communicate with each other by signs and sounds; human beings all over the world speak with words. We would show the difference in the number of the words used by savage and civilized nations, “there being no such witness to the degradation of the savage as the brutal poverty of his language.” He needs few words because many things that we have he knows nothing about, *e.g.*, clocks, pictures, glass, pianos, history, geography. Some words they use in common with us, as names of animals and natural objects, *e.g.*, rivers, mountains, trees. We give the idea of the large number of words we use by showing a dictionary, and letting the children count the words on a page. We can talk about anything we choose—if a new thing is invented, we make a new word by which to express it. We bring out the idea that it is as impossible to use words without thought as to communicate our thoughts to others without words. If we cease to connect any ideas, whether complete or incomplete, with the words we utter, we can no longer be said to speak but to make noises. It may appear in this introductory lesson that we have not given any of certain definite rules, but our aim is to impart in each lesson a vivifying idea. In introducing it in this way we lead the children to see that the teaching or the study of grammar, though sometimes bewildering in its later stages, is originally a much less formidable undertaking than is commonly supposed.

Classification of Words

If all the words in the dictionary were written on bits of paper, we could separate all those strips of paper into eight heaps. The words in these heaps differ in sound and meaning as a tulip, daisy and rose differ, though all are flowers. When we wish to say anything we are guided by the thought which we wish each particular word to express. The particular words we arrange to make sense, and words put together to make sense, we call a sentence. We illustrate a sentence by first putting together words which do not form sense, as “quickly flower tore in hole and reach.” This cannot be a sentence. Then put together words which do form sense, as “Charlie eats his dinner.” This is a sentence.

We now deal with sentences and the positions that words occupy in them rather than with words, and what they are in their own right; it is better children should begin with the sentence and not with the parts of speech; should learn a little of what is called analysis of sentences before they begin to parse, should learn to divide simple sentences into the thing we speak of, and what we say about it. “The cat sits on the hearth” —before they are lost in the fog of person, mood, and part of speech. Here we make a great point of various and interesting exercises, which show whether the children have perfectly grasped the “idea” of the lesson. We work out the various grammatical rules and definitions, not in what is the order usually followed in books on English grammar, but in the order of their simplicity and their appeal to the minds of children.

Our method differs from the old-fashioned one in that we *lead up* to our definitions, and we generally succeed in getting the children themselves to give a more or less complete definition. The old-fashioned little textbook began with a cut-and-dried definition to be learnt by heart *before* the rule or thing defined had been used in exercises by the pupils.

LESSON I. —Give the name of this person or thing we speak of. It is called the *subject*. Subject just means the thing spoken about. At the end of the lesson there are three statements to be learnt and put on the board: —

- (1) Words put together to form sense make a sentence.
- (2) Every sentence has two parts, that which we speak of and what we say about it.
- (3) That which we speak of is the subject.

Exercises: —

- (1) Put sentences on the board to be completed, *e.g.*, “loves fruit.”
- (2) Give the subject and let the sentence be completed, *e.g.*, “father’s hat” and so on.

It is a mistake to try to teach too little by examples and too much by rules, instead of multiplying examples and from them deducing rules—and as few rules as may be.

LESSON II. —A sentence may be made with only two words, *e.g.*, “snow melts,” “grass grows.”

The words which tell us something about the subject, as “melts,” “grows,” would all come out of the same heap.

These words either tell us what the subject *does* or what the subject *is*, and it is impossible to make sense without at least one of them. Therefore we call these words *verbs*. Verb means word, and verbs are so-called because they are chief words in a sentence.

Statements to be written on blackboard: —

- (1) We cannot make a sentence without a verb.
- (2) Verbs mean words.
- (3) Verbs are chief words.

Exercises: —

- (1) Sentences in which the verb is supplied. Two verbs or one may be required. This is shown by the number of dashes, *e. g.*, “I ___ ___ home,” “the sky ___ blue,” “the sportsman ___ ___ birds.”
- (2) Make sentences with each of the following verbs: —is, are, should be, was, am, were, shall be, will be.
- (3) Make three sentences with verbs of being in each, *e.g.*, “These curtains are new,” “the trees will be green soon,” etc.

LESSON III. —Write on the board several sentences— “John writes,” “Mary sews,” “flowers grow.” The children already know how to find the subject of the sentence—the thing talked about. Ask them what they know about “John,” “Mary,” “birds.” They are all name words. Since everything has a name, we must have a very great number of these name words. They may be names of persons, places, things we can see, things we can hear and not see, things we know of but cannot see. (Children to supply examples of each).

The group of name words will be larger than the other seven groups. These name words are called *nouns* from a Latin word *nomen* which means a name.

Write on blackboard: *Name words are called Nouns.* Then follow numerous and searching exercises.

LESSON IV. —Words belonging to Nouns. These new words describe nouns. To describe is to say something about. They are called adjectives because they are added to nouns.

Position: they may come before or after the noun, as— “A good girl,” “the girl is good.” Some adjectives just point the noun as— “*a* book,” “*the* cow”; others describe or tell us something about the noun— “large pictures.” Others show the number of things, *e.g.*, “six men,” “the second class”;

others have no particular meaning— “*Any* time” “*some* work.” We can tell that these are adjectives because they belong to nouns.

LESSON V.—We know that every sentence has two parts—

(1) The thing we speak of, or the subject.

(2) The second part is what we say about or tell about the subject. This is often called the *predicate*. Predicate means to tell about. Try how many things you can tell or predicate about George.

Show the connection between the verb and the predicate. The verb is always that part of the sentence which is called the predicate. Sentences may often have a predicate made up of only one verb— “The clock ticks,” “Snap barks,” “the pot boils.”

Statement. —What we say about the subject is called the predicate. To predicate is to tell about a thing. Lesson to be followed by *Exercises*.

LESSON VI. —An interesting thing about verbs is that they are always in families: that is to say, every verb may have about six words belonging to it.

The verb “*do*” has the words—do, does, did, done, doing.

The verb “*be*” is a very useful busy verb, and has many words belonging to it, *e.g.*, be, am, is, are, was, were, been, being.

The verb “to be” can only help to make a predicate. If I say “Tom is,” it makes no sense, and I must use another word to show what I mean— “Tom is sad.” “Is” and a noun can make a predicate. “Is” and an adjective can make a predicate.

LESSON VII. —Begin with three sentences, as— “The table is round,” “the wall is high,” “the window is open.”

Notice when we speak of the subject “table,” we predicate that it is round. But “round” is an adjective, and so must belong to a noun. We can find to what noun by asking what is round—the table. Therefore the adjective belongs to the noun, though it is away from it in the predicate.

“This book is red.” “This book is old.” “This book is neat.” “This book is heavy.”—Show that all these sentences can be joined into one by joining the last two adjectives by “and,” and putting a comma between each adjective except those joined by “and,” “This book is open, large, red, old, neat and heavy.”

LESSON VIII.—In this lesson we shall speak of the same things as in the last, and we can have the same subjects for our sentences; but today we want as subject not one thing but several,—tables instead of table, walls instead of wall, curtains instead of curtain; so that we see our subjects are not really different in nature, but only in number. If we have only one table we say table, if more than one we say tables. When a name-word means only one thing it is single or *singular*, that is one by

itself; when the name-word means more than one thing, we give it a name which means more than one—*plural*. So we say a noun which means more than one thing is in the plural number.

LESSON IX. —Take once more the old sentences, but give them this time plural subjects. “The tables is round.” “The walls is thick.” “The curtains is red.” Your ear tells you that this is wrong, and that you must change “is” into “are.” “Is” and “are” are both words from the verb “be,” and have just the same meaning, but we always use “are” when speaking of more than one thing, that is to say with plural nouns. The verb and the subject are friends, and they agree so well that when the subject changes into the plural number the verb does the same. The adjective which goes with the noun need not be changed. We say, “the old table is round,” “the old tables are round.” Only the verb and subject agree. *Exercises.*

LESSON X. —Most verbs change in rather an odd way to match the subject. The word does not change altogether as “is” and “are,” but the last letter is changed. We noticed that most nouns are made plural by adding “s.” Now it seems as if the subject and the verb could have only one “s” between them, for when the noun is singular and does not want the “s,” we find that it is added to the verb, *e.g.*, “the canary sings,” “Tom shouts.”

But when we use the “s” to make our subject plural, then the verb can no longer keep its “s,” *e.g.*, “canaries sing,” “boys shout.”

Statement: —Many verbs are made plural by taking the “s” off the singular. *Exercises.*

LESSON XI. —Put a sentence on the board, such as “Tom is good.” We speak of Tom—therefore Tom is the subject. The words in the subject are always naming words, therefore they are in the naming case. Case means condition. If a child is hungry, he is in a hungry case; if sleepy, in a sleepy case; if miserable, in a sad case; and so because the words of the subject are naming words they are in the naming case. Do you remember the Roman word for name? Turn the “a” of our word into “o,” and add an “n,” and you get the Roman word for name— *nomen*. Just as we called our name words *nouns* from their word *nomen*, so we call our naming case the nominative case, that is the nomin-ative case, also from the word *nomen*.

I have given the sequence and method of Part I. of our grammar lessons.

We attach much importance to getting our [children] thoroughly to understand the simple notions of subject, object and complement, and of qualifying words and phrases. Furnished with these ideas of analysis which they have grasped with comparative ease from English, they apply them to the study of Latin. As a rule, [children] begin to turn English sentences into Latin as soon as they know a declension or two and a few tenses of a verb; and such attempts are of course useful in giving facility in the use of inflections and “in helping them to see what English grammar would be at when it speaks of a change in case or mood, yet shows no change in the form of the word.” The difficulties of syntax prove a serious stumbling-block to the learner who has not grasped the elementary principles which underlie the construction of an English as well as of a Latin sentence. It has been said by a successful schoolmaster that this ignorance of principles makes itself evident,

even in [children] who have been learning Latin for years, as soon as they are cast adrift from the Latin exercise book, with its hints and cautions. On the other hand, a previous training in English analysis, by familiarizing the learner with the structure of a sentence and the use of its component parts, clears the ground from the first and forms the best possible introduction to the study of any language which has to be acquired through grammar.

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