

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.

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



Grammar Symposium meets with Anne Greer at High Mowing School

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.

Teaching Sensible Science

Michael D'Aleo

*T*he second week of the most recent cycle of Teaching Sensible Science began under unusual conditions. At 7 PM in Sacramento, California, on Wednesday, February 20th, 2008, a lunar eclipse was taking place as we resumed the work begun in the October 2007 session. The phenomena of the lunar eclipse, its timing early in the evening, and our location at Rudolf Steiner College created conditions whereby it was possible to observe the image of the eclipse both by looking upwards directly into the sky and also by looking down at the surface of a still pond. While we spent a large portion of time observing the eclipse under these different conditions, on the following morning we began to discuss these observations and to penetrate not only the conditions under which an eclipse occurs, but also the similarities and subtle differences seen by comparing the image in the sky with the one in the pond. Each observation, no matter how coarse or subtle, helps to build a picture of not simply a single “answer” but a multiplicity of relationships that can be summed up, even if not fully communicated, in the simple concept of eclipse or reflection.

The theme of reflection constitutes a key element in the physics curriculum of the seventh grade. Reflected images were one of a number of the central phenomena we experienced and made more conscious through keen observation, discussion, and conceptual development. For example, we observed that often the images seen when looking into a reflecting surface are very similar to those seen in the tangible world we experience daily. However, upon closer investigation we find that not only the images of objects are seen in the reflecting space but images of shadows as well. Is the image of a shadow any different from an image of an object? Is a shadow visible without seeing “it” on an object? Do we really see a shadow, or is this a concept used to convey that one part of an image is dark and another part is brighter? While at first these questions may

appear to be semantic, over the course of the week, even the most solid object, matter itself, was discovered to be more than just simply the given “stuff” of the universe. Most interesting is the fact that when we really take the time and care to investigate phenomena fully, both observationally and conceptually, our experience of the world becomes more intense, more acute, and we ourselves become an integral part of the experience. We also find that the phenomena and new technologies of modern science and engineering also take on a new relevance when investigated more thoroughly. They begin to appear as partial expressions of a new understanding of the world that is slowly bringing consciousness to those who take the time to pay attention.

The flow of the day in the Teaching Sensible Science course is central to helping teachers experience, understand, and embody the experience and concepts that they will later present to the students. The morning sessions, led by Michael D'Aleo, investigate the nature of our experience through observational exercises, discussions, and presentations. These are aimed at helping each teacher consciously awaken to his/her own inner activities of perception and conceptualization. It isn't new thoughts that are being developed but the activity of thinking that is being encouraged.

The morning sessions are preceded and followed by eurythmy guided by Barbara Richardson. Eurythmy provides an excellent complement to the morning sessions by allowing us to move our physical bodies with much of the same lively consciousness and with similar intentions as those cultivated through the activity of thinking.

After a long break for lunch, the afternoon is devoted fully to developing the experiments, demonstrations, discussions, and activities that are appropriate for the grade students in a Waldorf school. These sessions, led by Lylli Anthon and Gary Banks, are designed to find the age-appropriate means so that the students lay

the foundation for their own experience of the rich phenomena of the world.

The third and final session for the Rudolf Steiner College cycle of Teaching Sensible Science was completed in June of 2008. The next cycle of Teaching Sensible Science is scheduled to begin in February 2009 (with subsequent sessions in June and October of the same year) in Saratoga Springs, NY. Teachers interested in signing up for

the course or seeking further information should contact Michael D'Aleo by email at

spalight@verizon.net

or by phone at

(518) 587-0457.

Report on the Online Waldorf Library

Marianne Alsop

The Online Waldorf Library continues to help facilitate research and answer questions on a wide variety of topics. In recent months these have included:

- Requests for data on Waldorf school graduates in Europe, including the U.K.;
- Requests for statistical information on the effectiveness of foreign language teaching in elementary schools;
- Middle school and high school sports programs;
- Computer use in the middle school;
- Middle school science adapted to charter school use;
- Teaching children with autism and ADD and including them in Waldorf classes;
- Mentoring in early childhood settings;
- School readiness;
- Forming care groups;
- School administration and finances; and
- Parent education.

Also, news that the Steiner Schools Fellowship will sponsor “academy” schools in the U.K., state-sponsored schools based on the Steiner Schools curriculum, has brought several inquiries for information.

Teachers and parents of children in Waldorf schools in New Zealand, Australia, the U.K., Hungary, Mexico, and North America have sought permission to use OWL articles in their respective

homeschools and classrooms. It is wonderful to know that our articles are useful and that, when necessary, they are translated into other languages. There are now more than 350 articles in the OWL database and more are added every week. Articles are easily found by going to the “Focus Search” page and clicking on “article” and the subject of interest.

The number of books in our search database is now well over 400 and we add new titles regularly. Books can be found through the “Focus Search” page by clicking on “book” and the subject of interest. The site visitor will also find information on purchasing these books.

Two more editions of *Pacific Journal* and the *Waldorf Journal Project* are now available for viewing, in addition to past issues of *Gateways* and the *Research Bulletin. Living Education*, published by Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship in the U.K., is available in an online edition through a link on the “Journals” page. The most recent issue of the *Waldorf Science Newsletter*, with all past issues, is also available.

Have a look at OWL! Let us know if there is something you are looking for or a question for which we can help you find an answer.

The Online Waldorf Library (OWL) may be accessed at

www.waldorflibrary.org.