GWYNNE'S GRAMMAR

THE *ULTIMATE* INTRODUCTION TO

GRAMMAR

AND THE

WRITING OF

GOOD ENGLISH

N. M. GWYNNE

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Anxious about apostrophes?

In a pickle over your pronouns and prepositions?

Fear not – Mr Gwynne is here with his wonderfully concise and highly enjoyable book of grammar.

Within these pages, adults and children alike will find all they need to rediscover this lost science and sharpen up their skills.

Mr Gwynne believes that happiness depends at least partly on good grammar – and Mr Gwynne is *never* wrong.

About the Author

Formerly a successful businessman, N. M. Gwynne has for many years been teaching just about every sort of subject to just about every sort of pupil in just about every sort of circumstance – English, Latin, Greek, French, German, mathematics, history, classical philosophy, natural medicine, the elements of music and ‘How to start up and run your own business’ – in lecture-halls, large classrooms, small classrooms and homes – to pupils aged from two years old to over seventy – of many different nationalities and in several different countries – and since 2007 ‘face to face’ over the Internet. English grammar has been the basis of many of the subjects he has taught.

His teaching methods are very much in accordance with the traditional, common-sense ones, refined over the centuries, that were used almost everywhere until they were abolished worldwide in the 1960s and subsequently. His teaching has been considered sufficiently remarkable – both in its unusualness in today’s world and in its genuinely speedy effectiveness – to have featured in newspaper and magazine articles and on radio programmes.

GWYNNE'S GRAMMAR

THE *ULTIMATE* INTRODUCTION
TO THE WRITING OF GOOD ENGLISH

Definitions, explanations and illustrations
of the parts of speech,
and of the other most important technical
terms of grammar.

INCORPORATING

STRUNK'S GUIDE TO STYLE

explaining how to write well
and the main pitfalls to avoid.

N. M. Gwynne, M.A. (Oxon)

EBURY
PRESS

To those pupils of mine
in various parts of the world, of ages ranging from
two years old right up to elderly adulthood, and in many
cases their parents and even grandparents as well,
who are primarily responsible for this book – or, rather,
book's – coming into existence.

PREFACE

MUCH MORE THAN is customary, this Preface is intrinsic to a proper understanding of the rest of this book, and to how to make the best possible use of it. The reader is urged not to skip past it, and indeed is urged to read it with some care.

I can say with complete safety that what you have in your hands is a thoroughly *practical* little book. It owes that feature to a number of remarkable circumstances.

The first is how it came into existence. For many years now, I have been teaching at one time or another most of the academic subjects, but principally Latin. Thanks to Internet technology, for the most part I have been doing this while sitting at home – remarkably, within seconds of a class starting, it is as though we are in the same classroom together.

My pupils' ages have ranged from two years old to over seventy. Of the younger ones, some have been home-schooled and some I have given classes to just before or after school, in parts of the world ranging from India in one direction, through Europe, to the west coast of the USA in the other. I have even been employed by Selfridges (one of the two most famous department stores in London, Harrods being the other), to give a series of once-a-week lectures on English grammar, most of them two hours long, to all comers in the store's Ultralounge.

In every case I have been having to tackle English grammar with my pupils, either because it has been largely forgotten by my older pupils or because it has been ignored, most often completely, in the schools that my pupils attend or have attended. I have had to do this simply in order to make it possible to teach the other subjects satisfactorily.

Enter now the publisher of the original edition of this book, Mr. Tom Hodgkinson, the father in one of ‘my’ families of pupils. From the time that I started teaching his children after school hours, he would often sit in on the classes, as I very much encourage parents, and even grandparents and other family members, to do when they can. Himself an experienced journalist, he was endlessly interested by the English grammar I was teaching his children – so much so that he eventually came up with the suggestion that I should put together what I had been teaching into a small book which he would publish, and which we could be confident would be useful and helpful. He even chose its two-word title.

In spite of very little advertising other than by word of mouth, the first edition ran through its print run with encouraging speed, as did two subsequent editions, each of them incorporating additional material arising from questions raised and comments made by my pupils, and by others of all ages who have read this book, including schoolteachers of the highest seniority.

The result is that, as it exists in this new edition, what you are now reading is tried and tested (even in several countries) as few books have the opportunity to be. It is, moreover, expressly designed to fill a need specific to the present day and, beyond any doubt, to the foreseeable future: a need which my experience has brought forcibly and repeatedly to my attention. This is the need to explain and show *exactly* how grammar in particular and writing in general should be learnt and taught; and not merely *what* should be learnt and taught. More on this later in the Preface and also elsewhere in this book.

Prior to this edition, much the biggest change between editions was between the first one, which consisted of only twenty-six pages, and the second one. When the time came for the second edition, there was a problem with the whole concept of a book such as this that it was well worth trying

to solve. This was simply that even diligent mastery of the book's contents would still leave many readers of it somewhat up in the air.

Acquiring an effortless command of grammar, indispensable though it is as the foundation of competent writing or better, is only part of the struggle in the process of learning to write well consistently. Once that technical side is learnt, what then needs careful study is how to apply it in order to produce whatever effect one is trying for at any time. That is to say: how to make one's writing crystal-clear, or attractive and enjoyable, or persuasive, or compelling, or any or all of those. That is further to say: how to develop a writing *style* capable of suiting any useful purpose.

As with grammar, style is a *science*, just as much a science as are any of the physical sciences to which the term is nowadays more commonly applied. And only when this science has been studied and mastered is the student in a position to develop the *individual* style that will set his or hers apart from everyone else's.

Modern 'child-centred' education theory denies this, of course. For the last several decades the public has been preposterously asked to believe that learning the basics of how to do something destroys a child's creativity. Common sense and thousands of years of tradition tell us, on the contrary, that the techniques of *any* activity, from composing poems to playing tennis, must be carefully learnt *as a science* – often very painstakingly in the case of the most satisfying and enjoyable occupations – before the budding practitioner can expect to flourish at it.[fn1]

Providentially, a solution to the problem of how to help users of this book acquire the *general* elements of good writing style, from which to develop the styles that their individual inherited abilities make possible, presented itself – a solution that seems to me as good as could reasonably be hoped for.

Back in 1918, a professor at Cornell University, William Strunk, privately published a little book, written for the use of his students and others at Cornell, which he called *The Elements of Style*. Occasionally revised, it was kept in print in a small way, until, in 1957 and after Strunk's death, one of his early students, Elwyn Brooks White, was commissioned by the Macmillan publishing house to revise it so as to make it suitable for general trade. Macmillan's judgement was vindicated indeed. To date more than ten million copies of this extraordinary book have been sold, and it has even been the subject of a published 'biography'.

Some observations by E. B. White, in the book's latest edition, still in print, will do much to show why *The Elements of Style* is exactly suited to our purpose. It is extraordinarily compact. It fits, White says, the vast number of rules and principles of English on the head of a pin. It concentrates especially on the rules of usage and principles of composition most commonly violated. It aims at cleanliness, accuracy and brevity in the use of English. It does so with vigour that has never been matched. Indeed, as White puts it, 'Boldness is perhaps its chief distinguishing mark … He scorned the vague, the tame, the colourless, the irresolute …' It is effortlessly readable.

To that I add that all of this comes without any trace of quirkiness. On the contrary, what Professor Strunk has given the world, in an astonishingly small space for so much, is clearly the product of painstaking study of the best authors of his time and deep and systematic thought.

At the risk of appearing extravagant, I even go so far as to estimate Strunk's little book as a minor work of genius. In the many features in which it shines, there has certainly never been anything else like it; and I can safely say that even very experienced writers can benefit from it, to increase their ability to convey their message exactly, clearly, elegantly, and in every respect in the most effective possible way. Discerning reader, whatever your present

level of competence at writing English, you have much to look forward to in Part II.

What is reproduced here, as Part II, is the 1918 original, which is of course well out of copyright. I have improved the way it is set out, made adjustments to reflect and make clear occasional differences between American English and British English, and removed a chapter which now serves no evident useful purpose.

I THINK IT worth drawing attention to something that I have taken considerable trouble over. A rather dismaying feature of many modern books on grammar, even ones so good that I include them enthusiastically in the Further Reading chapter, is the inclusion of occasional errors in the grammatical information they give that are not really acceptable.

This is especially so in relation to well-known points of dispute, such as the split infinitive and the modern use of the adverb ‘hopefully’. In such cases, of which there are relatively few, I have gone to the trouble to find out and to show what the undoubtedly correct usage is and why.

I believe this to be quite an important feature of this book. It reflects the fact that, contrary to what is often supposed, English grammar is not a haphazard collection of rules that (a) happen to have been put together over the centuries, and (b) happen to exist in their present form at this point of time in our history. The rules always have a *logic* underpinning them. Even the many exceptions – of which there are perhaps more than in any other language – have an identifiable logic.

Thus, whenever I do some prescribing – which means ‘laying down authoritatively’ – I by no means do this as an authority in my own right, which of course I am not. I do it under the authority of being a conscientious conveyor of what can be *shown* to be true. And even under that heading, I am not exercising authority as such. In any

disputed matter, I expect any conclusion I offer to be considered as decisive and compelling only to the extent that the arguments I support it with do support it.

In the light of all this, I hope it can be seen to be reasonable that, provided that I have exercised due care in arriving at the facts, I believe prescriptiveness to be more often justified than most modern grammarians do. I believe that I have sufficiently shown, too, that, when assessing what correct grammar is or is not, we should be influenced neither by prevailing fashion, nor by present-day majority vote, nor by the pronouncements of acknowledged experts – and not even if those experts are unanimous – but *only* by adequate evidence.

'Our language belongs to us all,' we hear it said. I deny that it is as simple as that. For a good enough reason, I maintain, the traditional rule should be stated all the more uncompromisingly the more it is fading away under the pressure of prevailing fashion – perhaps even stated as one to be defended for all time, and yes, even after the battle seems irretrievably lost.

My motive is not that of wishing to dictate for the sake of wishing to do so. It is one of principle, grounded on reasoned reverence for our language.

To explain.

Those who speak English today have the prodigious good fortune to have inherited from our ancestors a language which has two really spectacular features. One is that it is the most widely spoken language there has ever been. The other is that during the last four centuries, it has been, together with classical Greek and Latin, one of the three great vehicles of thought, communication, science and culture of all time.

For the ordinary person, the 'man in the street', which is what I myself claim to be, two clear, common-sense duties flow from this good fortune of ours.

One of these duties is to master such a valuable possession as thoroughly as we can, in order to take the fullest possible advantage of it – for both present-day use and for learning from and enjoying the best of the past.

Of the past? As opponents of the teaching of formal grammar delight to point out, English has not remained exactly the same during the last several hundred years. Only dead languages, such as Greek and Latin, can do that. Anything alive must grow and change. Language is no exception.

What the same opponents are slower to point out, however, is that the changes during the period have been remarkably small. For instance, Shakespeare can be followed nearly as easily as if the plays and sonnets were written today. Words such as ‘thou’ and ‘unto’ have slipped away, and the original meaning of ‘nice’ has been largely lost, and words such as ‘X-ray’ have been introduced, and ‘mouse’ has acquired an additional meaning; but such changes are far too few to make English a different language, as it undoubtedly is compared with the original Anglo-Saxon.

Moreover, by well before the turn of the nineteenth century, two hundred years ago, the English of the day was so close to being the same as ours as to be not far from identical, other than in additions needed to reflect later events and inventions. For instance, as I write this I am looking at the best possible specimen to use for comparison: William Cobbett’s *English Grammar*, first published in 1817, a best-selling book of its day and for long after, and indeed still in print today very nearly two hundred years later. In its style and in the grammar it teaches, it might have been written today.

What about before Cobbett? And indeed before Shakespeare?

The straightforward answer to those questions is likely to be startling to most readers to the extent that they may find

it difficult to believe. I shall therefore give it with the help of the single most thorough and learned treatise on all aspects of the English language in my bookshelves. Here is J. M. D. Meiklejohn, at the time Professor of the Theory, History and Practice of Education in the University of St Andrews, on page 336 of his *The English Language*: *Its Grammar, History, and Literature* (Alfred M. Holden, 1894):

> From the date of 1485 – that is, from the beginning of the reign of Henry VII – the changes in the grammar or constitution of our language are so extremely small, that they are hardly noticeable. Any Englishman of ordinary education can read a book belonging to the latter part of the fifteenth or sixteenth century without difficulty. Since that time the grammar of our language has hardly changed at all, though we have ordered and enlarged our vocabulary, and have adopted thousands of new words.

And the English vocabulary during that period? Professor Meiklejohn supplies a complete list of those words that have greatly changed their meaning, as for instance ‘animosity’ which meant ‘high spirits’, ‘cunning’ which innocently meant ‘skilled’, ‘hobby’ which meant an ‘ambling nag’ (still preserved in ‘hobby horse’), ‘sad’ which meant ‘earnest’, and ‘thought’ which meant ‘anxiety’. I have counted them and they total one hundred and twenty-seven. A few other words have been completely lost.

The total loss of any kind, in both grammar *and* vocabulary, is minuscule in the context of the English vocabulary as a whole. What has changed very significantly has been by way of *additions*, which of course would not affect our ability to understand our ancestors but only, hypothetically, their ability to understand us.

Moreover, up until around the early 1960s, almost all changes of any kind that did take place over the years were for the better, with new words enriching the language, and

small refinements of grammar and punctuation tending in the direction of greater precision and clarity.

That is to say, our language has been both improved *and guarded* by our ancestors. Changes were admitted when they were desirable *and fought off when they were not*. We should continue to do this, I maintain, as our second common-sense duty under this heading, so that we and our contemporaries can all of us continue to speak the same precious language to each other, and to understand our forefathers.

In addition to those two reasonably obvious duties, we have a third one, in my submission: this one not on a strictly practical heading, but more under the heading of the reverence I referred to above. This is to give our ancestors the respect we owe them. We of today are – as the saying goes – standing on the shoulders of giants who themselves revered what they had received and, generation after generation, took the trouble to pass it on, intact except where improved, to the next generation.

It would be an act of ingratitude and vandalism to throw that away, and also an act of ingratitude and vandalism to *let* it be thrown away without resistance. What our ancestors did for us, we owe it to them to do for ourselves and for future generations. ‘Our language belongs to us all?’ Not in the sense that we are free to dispose of it as we feel like. Our language is something that we have the use of, but we have a duty to be responsible, even to consider ourselves as trustees during our period of ‘occupation’.

That at least is how I see it.

The conclusion I am now able to arrive at is this. Having, as I say, done the study that is necessary to reach the straightforwardly correct answers on the few contentious points, I am now prepared:

on the one hand, to welcome any innovations – such as new words for new things – which are useful, and, on the other hand, to fight in order to resist any changes which

> are not in the direction of greater richness, clarity and precision, and are not consistent with the best features of our language, the features that have been tried and tested over a long period and not found wanting.

THAT LAST PARAGRAPH serves as an introduction to a difficulty that caused me to ponder at least as much as anything else in this book did. Throughout the history of the English language up till the last few decades, the pronoun ‘he’, when referring to an unnamed person, has been used to include both sexes. In other words, it has been used for two purposes: to refer to members of the male sex in particular and to a member of the human race of either sex. In Britain at least, the second use was never considered remotely inappropriate or uncomfortable – female speakers and authors used it in this general sense without hesitation or objection. (Interestingly, Strunk addressed that very point for his American readers in his Chapter 5, under the heading of ‘They’, as will be seen.)

This of course has changed, the use of ‘he’ to embrace either ‘he’ or ‘she’ now being held by some people to be offensive to women. The result of this has been unfortunate, to say the least. Because saying ‘he or she’, ‘him or her’ and ‘his or hers’, when speaking about people generally, is often disagreeably clumsy, a way of avoiding doing so has arisen which is offensive to logic and common sense and shockingly illiterate when in writing. In place of ‘he or she’, and the rest, the words ‘they’, ‘them’ and ‘their’ are now often used, even when referring to only one person, as in ‘Any*one* who considers this modern practice acceptable has lost their mind’.

Given the weight of tradition and authority supporting the all-embracing use of ‘he’, I could easily justify defending it prescriptively and forcefully. I should, moreover, be in good company if I did, even among recent authors. I give two