

## LINGUISTICS, OBEAH, ACUPUNCTURE, AND THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION BY THAT BASTARD SLEDD

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Teaching is helping somebody to learn. When the help is help with writing, it must be given by one person to another—by one who luckily can offer what at the moment the other happens to need. Research in composition will never teach us much about that uniquely personal give-and-take. In fact, research in composition serves mainly the researchers. The Research Machine, when literary studies went to hell, simply moved to an underdeveloped country and established itself there, with cheaper labor and better chances for petty empire-building.

THE University (for which Texans will need no further identification) as always provides a modern instance. The story will take a few minutes in the telling, but it's worth the time.

Six years ago, in a report which I sent to everybody from the chairman of my department to the Speaker of the best little House in Texas, I made things easy for the bureaucrats by beginning with a summary. Like this:

Every year at UT Austin, some 10,000 students have to take the freshman courses in English composition.

In a survey made last spring, 206 students called their freshman English courses "very helpful," 447 "moderately helpful," 483 "slightly helpful," 394 "not at all helpful."

Of nearly 1,400 faculty respondents, over 60% judged that their undergraduates write "rather poorly" or even "quite poorly," while less than 4% judged that they write "well" or "very well."

Yet who teaches freshman composition? Most of the regular faculty in English won't unless they're made to, and the administration makes no effective efforts to get the money that would be needed to do the job up right.

So teaching assistants teach almost all of those ten thousand freshmen—teaching assistants who are overworked, underpaid, and

often new to teaching. Even such money as the administration does provide may be allocated so tardily that the English Department must keep hiring new assistants during registration, or afterwards.

That situation was already old in 1975. It had existed during the years 1969-1971, when I directed freshman English in the quickly disappointed hope that professoriat and administrators might be persuaded to support the program seriously. By 1975 I was less naive. Accordingly, I was not surprised when the UT community either ignored my study or denounced it; and in following years I watched developments with alternate amusement and disgust. I was disgusted as a “wage section” or “resource pool” of miscellaneous slaveys (some of them highly competent) supplemented the declining number of graduate students in the teaching of our lower-division courses, but I was amused as a hard-handed dean compelled as many professors as he could to join that undertaking—always, I need hardly add, against the vociferous opposition of the humanistic keepers of the wisdom of the race.

Even I have been a bit surprised, however, by the events of the present spring. I knew that our freshman classes had kept growing and that neither professoriate nor administrators wanted a ranked faculty big enough to teach them, so that I was prepared to read, in our student paper for January 21, that on the Friday before the spring semester began on Monday, the English Department “faced the prospect of having as many as 40 classes without teachers . . . Money was not available,” the *Daily Texan* said, “to hire enough teachers on such notice.” That was all old hat; but my delight in depravity was astoundingly gratified shortly thereafter. Part of my 1975 proposal was that we should give students a choice between the second semester of freshman composition and an upper-division course, well planned, well supported, and well staffed, in which they would do the kinds of writing appropriate to their particular majors. The proposal was ignored when it was made and was twice rejected when I repeated it between 1975 and 1980, but what do I read in 1981? In February, 1981, immediately after our latest debacle in staffing our freshman course, I am informed by the “Documents and Proceedings” of our University Council how dean and department propose to solve the problem, of the unwanted freshman. The heart of the proposal (whose grammar I have tacitly corrected) “is to transfer the second required composition course from the second semester of the freshman year to the junior or senior year and to require that the subjects of the themes be relevant to the particular discipline of the student”; and “the most

compelling reason for the suggestion” is found—guess where? In 1981 it has become convenient, for logistic reasons, to revive the proposal which I made in the name of better education; and “a mandate” is discovered in my condemned and rejected report of 1975.

So much for the uses of research in composition and for the reasons why I barfed when our Texas Writing Research Group announced this week’s big conference under the sponsorship of such humanistic agencies as Exxon. Much research in composition is of no importance for real students with real teachers in real classrooms; and no research in composition will be allowed to interfere with the ambitions of faculties and administrations to advance themselves by turning universities into research mills for the likes of Exxon. Instead of having luncheons at \$4.50 and dinners at \$10.00 a head, the Texas Writing Research Group would do better to take up a collection for half-starved graduate students or to plan a strike for decent wages and work-loads for the “resource pool.” It is equally likely that hell will freeze solid overnight.

I have now explained the title of my paper and have said the principal thing that I came to say. I have also implied my chief judgment on the assigned subject of linguistics and composition—namely, that the cult of the expert is foolish idolatry. Just as research won’t save us, so we won’t find any cure-alls by snooping about among the linguists. Some teachers can and do help students to write better, but in that enterprise they move as God does when He performs His wonders—in mysterious ways. They would not agree among themselves, and neither would we, even in defining *better*, and that is just as well, so long as we share enough assumptions to work together without chaos, tolerantly. Grand schemes for certifying assessors of student writing and for measuring composition programs with a single metre-stick are devices of the grantsmen and empire-builders, who forget that on this side of paradise, universal agreement will always be agreement in at least partial error. If a living Methodist may criticize a deceased Jesuit, we should quit looking for heaven haven in the dictates of some grantsmen and instead should glorify God for all things counter, original, spare, and strange.

To avoid an accusation of flippant anti-intellectualism, I will, however, fill my remaining minutes with one man’s map of some border-areas where linguists and composition teachers have recently met. One such meeting has been in the attempts to impose an organization on our subject by the analysis of “the constitutive factors . . . in any act of verbal

communication.” Roman Jakobson made the most famous of such attempts in his essay “Linguistics and Poetics,” from which I have just quoted, but in his discussion of “the aims of discourse,” James Kinneavy does much the same thing when he relates expressive discourse to the speaker or writer, informative discourse to the encompassing reality, persuasive discourse to the audience, and literary discourse to the signal (apparently Jakobson’s “message,” not Jakobson’s “code”). The difficulty with all such schematics is that they are essentially arbitrary. The relation itself between aims of discourse and elements in the communication situation is shifting and undefined; and the schematist might just as rationally—or irrationally—make different pairings or dismiss the elements of the communication situation altogether as means to distinguish aims of discourse. The chief function of such arbitrary mappings is to justify imperial ambitions. As Kinneavy remarks in a sentence which combines a dangler with a weak passive and a muddled figure (*Theory of Discourse*, 2),

by synthesizing some of the neglected areas of the past and much going on in the present within a framework suggested by modern philosophy and linguistics, it is believed that composition can very legitimately carve out a respectable domain in the field of English.

At the other extreme from the high philosophical are the detailed practical proposals, of which two of the most notable have been sentence-combining and Mina Shaughnessy’s analysis of error. Sentence-combining, I must confess, strikes me as technology for its own sake. I see no point in simply making long sentences out of short ones or short ones out of long ones. Sentences must be judged with respect to our ever-changing purposes; and wide reading is more effective than sentence-combining as a means to learning the resources of the language and their fitness for different ends.

For the author of *Errors and Expectations*, I share the general respect. Repeated readings of her book, however, have given me no reason to believe either that her proposals were in any sense revolutionary or even novel or that her three-semester program, with its initial emphasis on “error,” would cure the ills of basic writers. On the contrary, by her own statistics a semester’s work on error leaves the basic writer still above the level of the average academic’s tolerance for boo-boos (122, 158 f.); and certainly there is nothing new either in beginning with the traditional grammarian’s head-on assault on sin or in following that assault with a

semester on the short essay and another on the library paper. Perhaps the success of *Errors and Expectations* was due more to the character of the author than to the quality of her book. A completely unselfish and devoted teacher promised success where only failure had been known, and promised that success without disturbing the established social and linguistic values either of the culture at large or of the sub-culture of middle-class academics.

Between the areas of philosophizing and of detailed practicality lies a various middle ground, where linguists and composition teachers have met in such undertakings as the attempt to say what is meant by terms like *error*. For Shaughnessy, I take it, tolerable error was error which she herself would tolerate (122, with no. 4). For relativistic linguists, error is deviation from the established custom of the speech community—custom which itself cannot be criticized, since all dialects and all languages are equal, none better and none worse, just different. For E. D. Hirsch, Jr., with his remarkable belief in a classless and unchanging grapholect and his equally remarkable indifference to accurate representation of his sources, our standards for “intrinsic evaluation” are an assumed but undefined “correctness,” apparently the dogmas of traditional handbooks, and “relative readability,” which may be defined by the not-very-useful maxim, “Don’t make it any harder than you have to.”

In the face of these three failed attempts to establish defensible standards, I would be foolish to claim that the cooperation of linguists and composition teachers has given us satisfactory definitions of goodness and badness in the use of English. In fact, as I made plain in my earlier criticism of the grantsmen, there are and always will be multiple definitions; yet I can bring my generally pessimistic remarks to a mildly optimistic conclusion by pointing to one area of linguistics with which anyone concerned about standards should be acquainted. That area is the study of the nature, history, and social functions of standard languages in general and of standard English in particular, and workers in the area include such different Eminences as Joshua Fishman, Einar Haugen, Roman Jakobson, William Labov, Angus McIntosh, M. L. Samuels, and Peter Trudgill. The list could be easily extended without lowering the quality of a distinguished company.

For me personally, the most important lesson which one can learn from these linguists and others like them is that Hirsch’s grapholect is anything but classless. Listen, for example, to Einar Haugen, emeritus

professor at Harvard, speaking in the Forum series of the Voice of America a good deal more than ten years ago:

(National and international languages) are everywhere the result of a concentration of political power, which establishes dominion over an area in which it is convenient for that power to have a single language for communicating with its subjects.

The standard languages have usually come into being in a small community, often an elite recruited from various parts of the country or the empire. The standard languages have therefore nearly always been clique languages, either grown up in or regulated by the ruling network of a country. (A. A. Hill, ed., *Linguistics Today*, 106, 108)

Or, if you prefer, listen to Charles Fries, a professor at the University of Michigan and a great name in the NCTE, writing as long ago as 1940:

The “standard” English of the United States . . . is “standard” solely because it is the particular type of English which is used in the conduct of the important affairs of our people. It is also the type of English used by the *socially acceptable* of most of our communities and insofar as that is true it has become a social or class dialect in the United States. (*American English Grammar*, 13)

My time is up now, but if you have understood what Haugen and Fries were saying, you will grant that at least some areas of linguistics are permanently relevant to our work in composition. I can make my point in a single sentence:

The basics to which we are exhorted to go back are often no more than the linguistic prejudices, unreasoned and unreasonable, of WASPS like me.<sup>1</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper was read at the 1981 CCCC Meeting in Dallas; no attempt was made by author or editor to remove the signs of oral delivery.