



To the Student

I should declare my bias now because I do not come to bury grammar; I come to praise it. This will be, to many, evidence of my naiveté because teaching traditional grammar has become controversial pedagogy or, at best, questionable judgment. Do I not realize that social realities obviate the teaching of traditional grammar and that I am wasting valuable classroom time clinging to a pedantic subject that my students will neither master, nor apply, nor retain?

I do not. From a utilitarian point of view, I think grammar is an intellectual pocketknife; it is small, easily purchased, and so useful that one would not dream of being without it. And not only do I not think that grammar is unteachable, I think that it is one of the most teachable subjects because its concepts are so few and well-defined.

Grammar is so lovely that even if it were useless, one would irresistibly explore it, as one explores chess, or architecture, or the spiral geometries of shells. It is a sort of magic aesthetic lens through which we can view the delicate structures of ideas. As scientists marvel at the silicate skeletal frames that support and form living organisms, through grammar we view the delicate relationships that give form to the phenomena of the mind. If this comparison strikes you as idealistic and metaphorical, please consider it further. These relationships do exist, and they are beautiful.

If only language were simple...

Imagine the simplest language. The universe is complicated, and life is complex, so a language must have enough words and structures to make ideas, but what would the simplest language be like?

It could not have many *kinds* of words; that would not be simple. What if we had only two main kinds of words and a few logic words to let us combine the main words, relate them, modify them, and shorten them? This is hard to imagine, but let us try.

As for shaping words into ideas, what if ideas had only two sides? You cannot get simpler than a binary (two-part) structure. An idea could be about one main word, and the other main word would be about the first. That would be the simplest structure: one main word about another. Minor logic and support words could finish the job.

Sometimes things act in systems, so we would need words to join together and act as a unified group, just like life. That would help us describe systems and the little sub-systems inside them.

We would also want the flexibility to use ideas for different reasons, such as to state, or ask, or command, or exclaim. We would want to combine ideas into double or triple ideas when one idea was connected or related to another; after all, we want our simple language to mimic the real phenomena it describes. When things are connected in the world, we want our ideas about them to be connected in the same way.

Finally, we would want to write the language, not just speak it, so we would need little marks for starts, and stops, and pauses, and marks for logic and emotion. These would have to be few, small, and easy to write.

If we could make a language that simple, we could express life and what we perceive in our universe. Imagine...two main kinds of words, two sides of ideas, some good ways to give them details and relationships...that would be perfect.

Let us imagine one more thing. What if this simple language were the one we already have, but no one noticed it? What if we were so involved in our language that we never really realized how simple and logical and beautiful it is? What if we then discovered a way to think about language, a way that would show us these things?

Grammar is that way of thinking about language.