



# The Underground GRAMMARIAN



Volume Five, Number Five

May, 1981

## The Little Old Lady and the Linguist



ONCE in a while, just to see how the other half lives, you ought to read *Today's Education*, an uplift and self-help journal put out by the National Education Association, a trade union, for the aid and abettance of its members. The articles are often remarkable demonstrations of the encouraging fact that you don't need a sense of humor in order to write funny copy.

In the April-May issue of that journal, we discovered a mildly entertaining piece by one James C. Bostain, identified only as "Linguist and Lecturer on Language" in Alexandria, Virginia. He is displeased with some supposed "grammarians" who claim that their "rules" are statements of fact rather than judgments. If we could find those silly twits passing themselves off as grammarians, we'd defrock them quicker (*not* quicker) than you can punctuate a non-restrictive clause.\* However, unless they are all lurking in English departments in the schools of Alexandria, we just don't know where to look.

\*A fortunate example, although certainly not a fortuitous† one. The "rule" for the punctuation of non-restrictive clauses does indeed provide a *writer* with a way to indicate a certain kind of relationship that is regularly indicated by a *speaker* of English, regardless of place, learning, or status, by *one* certain pattern of intonation. And that's a fact.

†For *thinking*, it is necessary to be able *and* regularly inclined both to make countless such distinctions and to recognize them as made (or left unmade) by others. Of course we *could*, if we chose, use "fortunate" and "fortuitous" to mean the same thing, but only a fool would do that which must diminish his ability to make fine distinctions. And that's *another* fact.

Bostain starts off by solemnly announcing—keeping a straight face is especially important for a humorist—that "I didn't eat nothing" is simply an alternative form of "I didn't eat anything." From that only slightly muddled revelation (the second is not precisely a *form* of the first, except to those uninterested in fine distinctions), he goes on to "argue" thus:

Grammarians, trying to unify the three R's by making the principles of language as absolute as those of arithmetic, feel that a linguistic double negative *ought* to have a positive significance. Sometimes they feel so strongly on the question that, in the face of all the evidence, they assert that it *does* have a positive significance. This is a free country. We are entitled to our wishes and opinions, but it is important not to confuse them with facts.

Well, we figured that if there were *one* living grammarian on the face of the earth who might take such a feisty stand, it just *had* to be our faithful subscriber and friend, retired English (and Latin) teacher, and constant correspondent, forever fuming over the needlessly split infinitive, and announcing, from the evidence of certain subtle but indubitable violations of the principle of parallel structure in *The National Review*, the imminent collapse of Western Culture as we know it, that implacable Grendel's Mother of grouchy grammarians, the Little Old Lady in Dubuque.

Persnickety? That dear lady is *so* persnickety that she wouldn't even hesitate to waggle her finger right in the face of a Linguist and Lecturer on Language who was so disrespectful of language as to say (*Continued on p. 4*)



# Approaching, from our positive heteronymous perspective, an epistemological purview, we can expand our delivery system of the word and say:

Urban Studies is trash. Or, if you prefer, Urban Studies *are* trash. They are *all* trash, all those hokey and trendy “studies” designed to create, *ex* absolutely *nihilo*, jobs in Academe for those who either would not or could not master the intellectual scholarly disciplines within which *anything* can be studied. To understand what happens in cities calls for exactly those powers by which we can understand, if we *can* understand, what happens in dis-cothèques or on the Staten Island Ferry, and there is as much academic justification for Sunday School Picnic Studies as there is for Urban Studies or Women’s Studies or Intercultural Multiethnic Studies, and we’re sorry we said that, because within a year some wifty bible college will *have* a Department of Sunday School Picnic Studies, and our local teacher-trainers, compleat chameleons and cunning contrivers of cultish contraptions, will puff up their already bloated experiential continuum of distinction with a secular counterpart: the Nondenominational/Multicultural Class Christmas/Hanukkah/Soltice Party Studies Module, to be completed in a graduate workshop.

This evil-tempered outburst was provoked by the excerpt reprinted below. It is the work of the mind of one Raye G. Richardson, associate professor of Urban Studies at San Francisco State. He wrote that stuff in support of his application for a place on the university’s “literacy committee.” Let’s hope that he didn’t make it, lest the committee’s presuppositions of meanings *also* fail to obtain literacy, as the term literacy committee mandates.

However, while we would never say that “literacy has a deeper meaning than simply the ability to read and write,” since that has no clear meaning, we *do* say that literacy is not the same thing as the ability to read and write. Literacy is the ability, *in language*, to make sense

and to detect nonsense. It is the ability to devise understanding and reach judgment in a series of connected, coherent statements.

Consider the benighted blatherers whose writings we regularly display, the educationists and apparatchiks who bleat about transhumanistic learning experiences that *may* be identified as operational facets of noncognitive mode enhancement. They can *all* read and write. They can *spell*—even hard words like *epistemological* and *heteronymous*. Many of them can often punctuate. In fact, they embody perfectly that highest degree of excellence that our silly education mongers can imagine—basic minimum competence. But they are *not* literate.

And what about poor Richardson, would-be member of the literacy committee? Shall we hope that our children will grow up to be as literate as he, so that they too can become college professors and approach *their* words from a positive heteronymous perspective? Can we hope that their epistemological purviews will be so inclusive that no one will notice the ludicrous absurdity of those commas they occasionally drop between subject and verb?

Carpet-bagging educationists were among the first of the tribes to sneak across the border and dump their trash in Academe, where it soon turned septic and seeped into the ground water as toxic waste. The educationists, who had no native tongue but *were* able to imitate certain sounds and sometimes even whole words, quickly developed a language-like lingo of their own in which to write their own credentials and legitimate the archetype and progenitor of all the spurious “studies,” nothing less than “education” itself—Studies Studies, as it were.

Since then, drawn no doubt by the fetid emanations from the poisoned springs, and delighted to discover that Educanto is so *easy* to learn, and that they *pay* you to recite it, new tribes beyond counting have flocked to the easy pickings. You can see them from here, squatting in their encampments out on the fringe of the campus, practicing the pronunciation of *parameter*.

Sometimes, from the way they look at you, it’s almost as though they understood what you were saying. But, although the word is ever the same, the presuppositions of meanings from different backgrounds won’t obtain.

---

**In the context of the urban university, literacy has a much deeper meaning than simply the ability to read and write. Constantly expanding delivery systems of the word, require ever expanding skills of analysis and interpretation of the word. ... The word then as symbol must be approached from a positive heteronymous perspective. That is, although the WORD is the same, from different cultural, racial and economic backgrounds the presuppositions of meanings may not obtain literacy, then must be as inclusive in its epistemological purview as the term urban university demands.**

---



# New Highs, New Lows

## Big Bucks for Bantam Books in Booboisie

Slow readers could lead to fast sales, book publishers believe. Bantam Books Inc. launches a series of "high/low" paperbacks, designed to hold high interest for teen-agers with low reading skills. Scholastic Inc. expanded to more than 100 titles a series of paperbacks for teen-agers reading as low as the second-grade level.

The books usually offer simple plots, short sentences and many pictures. Most treat subjects that captivate teen-agers such as disco music and love. Bantam's titles include "Disco Kid" ("All set to boogie and no place to go") and "Rock Fever" ("The rest of his life was a mess, but Doug was alive when he sang.")

Rising attention to the low reading levels of many students helps prompt schools and libraries to buy these books, says Thetis Powers Reeves, publisher of *High/Low Report*, a newsletter.

[from the *Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 1981]

**S**URE, there's one born every minute, but what good is that? That's a lousy 525,600 new suckers a year.

Well, shoot, when you consider our infant mortality rates and the obvious fact that a hefty percentage of those kids might escape suckerdome entirely just purely out of dumb luck by being born into the wrong kind of family, the day may come when there won't be enough suckers in America to buy all those lottery tickets or support the manufacturers of pornographic T-shirts and keep *CHIPS* and *The Dukes of Hazzard* at the top of the charts.

So let's hear it for those swell folks at Bantam Books, and a big hand, please, for those schools and libraries, bravely bearing through the gloom of back-to-basicsism the glowing lamp of minimum competence and maximum bottom line.

And kudos and laurels, too, for Charles F. Reasoner, professor of elementary education at New York University. Reasoner (what a *splendid* name) is editor and the leading intellectual light at Laurel Leaf Library, Dell's arsenal of high/low books with lots of pictures. As long as America has educators like Reasoner meeting the needs of corporate enterprise, there will never be any shortage of housewives who need to be told that their kitchen cleaner will *also* clean the bathroom, and no one will ever even wonder *why* shiny flakes mean true coffee taste or if deodorants are really necessary, and *Gilligan's Island* will go on forever.

Here's an example of Reasoner's astute editorial judgment, always on guard against antisocial incitements to

critical thinking, the nasty skepticism that can actually be caused by so simple a thing as a sequence of complete sentences. It's a passage from *Brainstorm* ("Never give a sucker an even break"), by Walter Dean Myers, also the author of *It Ain't All for Nothing*:

They had not expected the summer storm. In 2076 the science of weather was very exact. The storm had not lasted very long. There was some thunder. A few flashes of lightning. And it was over. Then the strange reports started. People found lying in the streets. They weren't dead. But they had no idea who they were. In the worst cases they couldn't speak.

They were taken to hospitals. They were tested carefully. All proved to be healthy. Healthy but helpless. When they were hungry, they would cry. When they had been fed they would lie still. Sometimes they would make soft noises. Finally they were sent to Brain Study unit for more tests. Then came the discovery. Their minds were gone!

There. That should keep the little buggers healthy but helpless. Give'm a few pages of that every day, and in no time at all they'll be lying still, making soft noises.



## The Underground GRAMMARIAN

Published monthly, September to May  
R. Mitchell, Assistant Circulation Manager  
Post Office Box 203, Glassboro, New Jersey 08028  
Annual subscription: US & Canada, \$10; others, \$14

*Neither can his mind be thought to be in tune, whose words do jarre;  
nor his reason in frame, whose sentence is preposterous.*



Shirley Hufstедler, erstwhile Secretary of Education, has written to us, first to ask where we found the passage attributed to her, and then to assert innocence, which she promises to prove when she can unpack her papers. Frankly, we think she *is* innocent, and her proof may provide us an interesting story. We'll keep you informed.