

I often begin my first-year composition classes with this question: If you were a part of speech, what part of speech would you be?

Students like this question, I've noticed. They've told me that they're a conjunction because they like to "bring people together." Some of them are verbs because "they're really active and like to do things." I've had a few very literal students tell me that they are a noun because...they are a person. Surprisingly, this question is generative, it lets us talk about hobbies, values, personalities. But inevitably, one of the students will ask "but are we actually going to talk about grammar today?"

And with that one question, all the energy leaves the room.

Fortunately, my answer is typically "no." We're not talking about grammar—not what they mean when they say "grammar," anyway. It's not what this course was designed to tackle, which is often a relief to my students.

It's these moments and conversations that point me back toward disciplinary conversations about the role of grammar—in our classes, in our writing, in our world. Within rhetoric and composition, a dominant approach to these issues is that of translingualism. In a landmark *College English* article, Horner et al define translingualism as such:

We call for a new paradigm: a translingual approach. This approach sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening. When faced with difference in language, this approach asks: What might this difference do? How might it function expressively, rhetorically, communicatively? For whom, under what conditions, and how? The possibility of writer error is reserved as an interpretation of last resort.

(303-304)

Translingualism continues the conversation laid out in the CCC's landmark resolution "Students' Right To Their Own Language," published in 1974. This resolution asserts that

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language -- the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.

Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. (1)

The connections between oppression and dominance and certain forms of language expression and instruction remain important considerations for people working in the fields of language instruction, but also for anyone interested in social justice. To truly address the systemic oppressive power structures at work in our nation, we must acknowledge the role that language plays in building and upholding those systems. In fact, it is just the sort of nearly invisible system of power that we should be critically evaluating.

For these reasons, a translingual approach to grammar and writing instruction is often—though certainly not universally—embraced by writing scholars and teachers. But that raises new sets of questions and concerns. While it may be easy enough to mentally assent to the principle of students' right to their own language and translingualism, it's another thing altogether to transform that theory into praxis. Recent literature on translingual writing demonstrates that while most people in our field accept it as a good thing, few of us feel like we know exactly what translingual writing instruction and assessment should look like or how to teach it.

I point specifically to Zhang-Wu's recent article on translingualism, which surveys the history of the term and difficulties with implementing it. She notes "Translingual writing is often

theorized as a *noun*—something somewhat motionless and passive. [...] Perhaps it is the very nature of such nominalized definitions that has limited the potentials for translanguaging to function as a *verb*—an active force with concrete actions to tear down the English-only wall, to decolonize knowledge, and to delink from linguistic imperialism” (123). Rethinking what part of speech translanguaging writing is opens up ways of applying the theory to the actual work that we do in teaching and reviewing writing.

Continuing that project, I propose that turning translanguaging writing from a noun to a verb is made easier if we consider the approaches and insights of the medieval grammarians.

This might be a surprising source of inspiration. After all, medieval grammarians are not the first people that come to mind when we think of a willingness to reconceive what writing might be and how it may act in service of social justice. In fact, medieval grammar often serves the opposite purpose; it is, partly, the order-obsessed legacy of the grammar of the middle ages that runs through our Standard American English now.

But it’s this element that lets us use this grammatical legacy to our advantage—so long as we—to borrow Zhang-Wu’s framing—move our understanding of medieval grammar from a noun to a verb.

For too long, we’ve thought of medieval grammar as a thing—a set of rules, static standards for correctness, right and wrong. We can trace these notions back to the medieval grammarians of Rome. For example, in *Ars Grammatica*, medieval grammarian and teacher Alcuin of York creates an instructional manual for proper grammar. The text depicts a conversation between a teacher and his two students. The “inciting incident” of the text is when the students “decide to pick out a few rules of the science of letters in order to memorize them in question and answer form” (7).

Those ideas represent well what we still imagine grammar to be: rules that need to be memoized. Even now, that's what grammar *is*. But what does it *do*?

Returning to Alcuin, we're told that grammar is the beginning of ethical behavior. The students beg for their teacher to show them SLIDE "the first steps to wisdom" (Alcuin 5).

Their teacher, in turn, urges them SLIDE to "arm yourself with these so that you may turn into absolutely invincible defenders of the true faith and upholders of truth" (Alcuin 6). In these quotes we see what editors Copeland and Sluiter indicate was the emerging force of grammar: it became "the carrier of all ethical import" (58). They continue, "The very terms of the art itself, the intellectual system that it comprised, was understood as a cultivation and preparation of the mind through language" (58-59). Grammar served an illustrious and orderly purpose: to train in ethical thought, to cultivate a "correct" worldview in students.

When we learn grammar, it is one of the earliest times (and in many cases the only time) we spend concentrated efforts naming and discussing the underlying structures of the systems that organize our culture. Many of our systems are made invisible. We take them for granted and assume they are natural. But in studying grammar, we actually investigate what's underneath. It stands to reason, then, that in learning the particular structures of grammar, we learn about the composition and use of structures more generally.

This is the ethical work that grammar and grammar instruction does—it trains in its learners a perspective on the structures and systems we live within; those in turn develop a worldview, and that shapes our conception of right and wrong and guides our actions.

Alcuin and similar figures used this power of grammar to reinforce form, structure, and order. They wanted to indicate that there is a "right place" for words, for people. They saw the potential in grammar instruction to develop this worldview. It's a moment not just to learn

language rules but to learn that systems like language should have rules. For Alcuin and his contemporaries, it mattered that those rules reinforce hierarchical thinking and taught a strong commitment to social standing and proper behavior. That was ethical.

But that's not the only way we can use grammar. Consider how those same processes might work if the student and teacher engaged instead with a "rhetorical grammar" approach. Rhetorical grammar is defined by Martha Kolln as "understanding the grammatical choices available to you when you write and the rhetorical effects those choices will have on your reader" (3). If we were to imagine Alcuin's schoolroom in this light, grammar becomes less about what is "right" and what's "wrong." It focuses more on options and making informed choices—doing things on purpose to achieve a certain effect.

If we take the medieval grammarians at their word, that change in perspective has real ramifications for the worldview and ethical compass that students develop. Rather than cultivating an awareness of and submission to hierarchical structures, students come to see that those structures are constructed in order to achieve certain effects. They are given more agency to contribute to the development, management, reshaping, or even abolishment of certain systems.

Beyond training students to think ethically, teaching translingual grammar may in and of itself be an ethical obligation for those of us who work in the field of writing studies. In a 2021 Statement on White Language Supremacy CCC reaffirmed "our dedication to work as coconspirators against white supremacist practices." And, of course, we cannot fight against those practices if we cannot see them. We certainly cannot go on teaching Standard American English as we always have, knowing what we do. And we cannot ignore the issue either and say nothing about grammar or its troubling past.

There are enough forces seeking to obfuscate our nation's history, including bills—often ill-defined and misinformed—that disallow the teaching of Critical Race Theory and the continuation of book bans, especially of titles that deal with race and/or gender. If we are to really be “coconspirators” against White Supremacy, those of us in rhetoric and writing disciplines must use every tool we have to tell the truth—including grammar instruction. Writing teachers may be able to instill students with these sorts of reflective, critical thinking skills while remaining “under the radar”—so to speak. And in doing so, we'd actually be honoring traditional, medieval grammar, and its association with ethical training.

Coupled with grammar's ability to train people in certain patterns of thinking, students are trained to see hierarchies and to negotiate and push back against them. Learning and using rhetorical grammar asks them to see and respond to those systems again and again in their grammatical choices—which trains them to see and respond to systems in other areas of their lives.

If that seems lofty, consider this. That's the only reason we've ended up with the grammar we have today in the first place. We reject the medieval notion that the hierarchies and order of grammar are “natural.” They came from somewhere. They only seem “natural” or inevitable due to the powerful, normalizing effects language plays. In redirecting those language efforts, we'd do much to restructure our society more generally.

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