

## Comment: III

LLOYD REINHARDT\*

I am in almost total sympathy with the writer of 'The Quiet Revolution'. My sole reservation concerns his lament about the fate of the word 'disinterested'. I would remind him that the word 'unconcerned' has already suffered a similar fate. It was once the word used in the description of the responsibilities of judges, as in 'the unconcerned administration of justice'. Nowadays, to speak that way would be to represent a judge as callous. All this stems from the abiding ambiguity of the phrase 'has no interest in'. We must simply live with that. It may be that the problem is due to the rarity of, and controversy surrounding, the thing itself. It generates a sort of semantic class struggle. But change in usage is part of language. Conservatives on this issue – and I am one – may resist up to a point. But eventually it becomes pedantic, even fetishistic, so to resist; it becomes too much like insisting on 'It is I' instead of the better 'It's me'. Why give hostages to our enemy?

A major weapon in the arsenal of that enemy is the cessation of the teaching of English grammar in most of our schools. Apart from much other havoc wrought, this fashionable abstention makes learning foreign languages inanely difficult. Not having heard of such things as declension, conjugation, the subjunctive, etc., in one's own language, one cannot exploit these resources in learning foreign languages. The introduction of a significant component of drill in learning to reproduce stretches of conversation is not, however, something I oppose. I once learned Arabic (now rusted out) over a period of 46 weeks at six hours daily. The first month was devoted to mastery of such stretches. It was enormously helpful to acquire some feel for the rhythms and alien sounds of the language. After a month, since I had in school learned English grammar, I had already correctly guessed a lot about the grammar of Arabic, including the fact that it was an agglutinative language, though I had never heard of that mysterious word. It was all fascinating, and appreciation of the formal properties of the language was a major provocation toward my later involvement with the philosophy of language and my enjoyment in learning modern logic. The very idea of formal analysis is central to intellectual development in any individual mind; it may matter rather little what the content being analysed is. What is plausible and sometimes even exciting in the movements of thought called 'structuralism' and 'post-structuralism' depends precisely on this point about formal analysis. This remains so even if proponents of these approaches have exceeded all bounds of humility and fancy themselves to have acquired a new master discipline, applicable to humanities, social sciences and even culinary practices.

I have suspected for a very long time that the undeniable success of natural science – as the form of enquiry *par excellence* – in our culture, has (not necessarily

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culpably) caused the mess in the humanities. The sense of inferiority provoked by the buzz-word 'unscientific' among teachers and scholars in the humanities is appalling. One way to handle that sense of inferiority is to take refuge in the idea that natural science is itself just a 'discourse' of 'power structure' of some sort, imposing a distinctive vision of things on the world (and the rest of society). Within this approach, the concepts, theories and (dare one say) truths emerging from natural science may be seen as just so much steam puffing out of the engines of power. A different refuge is to claim to have found a 'scientific' style of 'literary theory', something scientifically systematic that can be done in the humanities. These two refuges can be sought out by the same people.

The first aficionado of structuralism I ever met said it was no longer the task – or even a task – of literary enquiry to renew and explore our favourable responses to Shakespeare in contrast to Edgar Guest or a dirty limerick. Such exploration tries to develop articulate and authentic understanding of why it can seem so obvious that *King Lear* is a superior work of art to the latest *Superman* film. This proponent of structuralist literary theory maintained that I was expecting scholars to make value judgments when what they ought to do is be scientific and objective. On these lines, the best of T.S. Eliot is as legitimate a thing to give careful attention to as an advertising jingle. From this to the insidious general category of 'the media' as the proper topic of both humanities and social sciences is not all that big a step.

Two pieces of anecdotal evidence are fitting here regarding what disturbs many of us and to what we see as a grave decline in the literacy of our students. I resisted that thought for years, assuming it was just a matter of academic middle-age. But, in 1982, a reliable friend who teaches at the University of California told me a veritable horror story. It concerns the fate, over a period of 20-25 years, of that university's Subject A examination in English. That examination is for all entering students at all campuses of the university (nine of them). The examination's results determine whether a student enters the normal (and required) first year English course or whether he or she must take Subject A English, colloquially known as 'bonehead' English. That examination consisted in the 1950's – when I took it – of (1) a page of unpunctuated prose to be punctuated; (2) several short poems of the sort it is appropriate to ask students to paraphrase as a test of some degree of understanding; (3) words set beside two lists, one of putative synonyms and one of putative antonyms, and asking the student to pick the word most like and most unlike in meaning to the original word; (4) a passage of several paragraphs in prose followed by a selection of sentences from which the student is asked to pick those which best summarize the successive paragraphs; and (5) a list of topics on which the student is to pick one and write about 700 words on it.

According to my source, during the period between the late 50's and the early 80's, a remarkable reversal occurred. In the 50's, roughly 70-75% of students passed the examination; by the 80's, 70-75% failed the examination. This was at Berkeley, which

tends to get the cream of the high school students. If this is hard evidence, we have good reason to be concerned. For if what I have narrated is true, it surely shows that we are not being fuddy-duddies or crotchety aging academics when we are appalled by what we see around us.

Let me conclude with my other bit of anecdotal evidence, which would be even easier to confirm. Within the last two years, according to a colleague at the University of Queensland, the Science Faculty proposed that students entering that faculty be required to include, as part of their entrance standard, a fairly high level of achievement in English. *Their colleagues in the Faculty of Arts defeated this proposal*. Is this the wave of the future?

## Comment: IV

### TERRY THREADGOLD\*

I want to be clear at the outset that I have no particular expertise in the teaching of foreign languages at primary, secondary or tertiary levels. I write rather as someone who teaches English in the Faculty of Arts and who also teaches 'grammar', particularly to those going into the school system to teach in our secondary classrooms. I do these things, on a day to day basis, in interaction with students who are the products of Mr St Leon's asserted but unanalysed 'crisis in literacy'. These are students who, if we can believe him, have been taught that 'grammar doesn't matter', or subjected by those he calls 'communicators' to nebulous forms of 'educational experience' rather than 'discipline', or worse exposed to 'functional grammar' which is said to consist in demonstrating that 'mistakes' in grammar are actually not mistakes at all. They are also, it seems, students who are fundamentally lacking in a proper understanding of the finer points of the split infinitive, and of the need for the possessive after the gerund, and who, therefore, will be among those who will inevitably contribute to 'the rapid devaluation of what ought to be our most prized possession, the language which expresses the quality of our thinking and of our lives.'

Whatever the truth concealed in this rhetoric, I would like to declare that I am not prepared to accept at face value Mr St Leon's 'crisis in literacy' any more than he is prepared (and rightly) to accept glib statements like 'the research shows . . .' with respect to the connection between grammar and the ability to write. It is true that in the time that I have been teaching at Sydney University there has been a decline in the teaching of traditional grammar in the schools. In Mr St Leon's terms this means 'parsing and analysis', the correction of errors in expression, a knowledge of split infinitives and the gerundive, or the ability to decline the definite article. I must

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