

Rereading my jeremiad, I am conscious of what must seem an ungenerous response to 'The Quiet Revolution' and to the fifteen years spent putting its principles into practice. In fact, I endorse a 'call to order'. Furthermore, what has been done at Paddington, and more recently at the International Grammar School, has shown that his philosophy and methods are soundly based. Whether what he has done can be extended to language teaching state-wide or further is another matter, and it is to some of the problems involved in this that I have directed my comments.

But if more Reg. St Leons, more government endorsement and support, some approving nods from the *soi-disant* champions of the humanities, the Arts Faculties in our universities, and more particularly their language departments, are not forthcoming, it could well be that what is presented in 'The Quiet Revolution' as the cloud-cuckoo land of current language teaching will become the new Babel.

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their
language, that they may not understand one
another's speech.

Genesis, traditionally c. 2,200 B.C.

Comment: II

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Few people teaching languages in the universities of New South Wales would quarrel with what is said about the effects of the Wyndham scheme on language study. To take an example from my own field of interest, in 1936 candidates for Leaving Certificate Latin read about four-fifths of a speech of Cicero and the whole of a longish book of the Odes of Horace. Such a prescription has now become impossible, not because of a decline in the abilities of pupils or in the competence and dedication of teachers, but because of a decrease in the time allotted to language study, especially in the early years. It was a sad experience, over the last decades of my time at Sydney University, to attend syllabus committee meetings and to take part in the gradual reductions of course content made necessary by the changed conditions in the schools. What can be done about this?

With modern languages the solutions canvassed by Mr St Leon are, despite the difficulties they face, attractive. The difficulties are, of course, formidable. The first is the supply of teachers. I have not a great deal of confidence in the efficiency of the

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“largely untapped source of native speaking teachers of our major second languages. Still, as it is a long-term project something might be done. A second difficulty I see is the possible attitudes of parents and teachers to the use of children’s primary education as a vehicle for language teaching. To what extent, if any, will this retard primary education? Here I am completely in the dark and await enlightenment. I merely know that the problem has been raised. There is the possible evidence that might be had, say, from Greece, where the existence of the *katharevousa* and demotic forms of the language involved a kind of bilingualism, and from Natal Province where parallel teaching in Afrikaans and English involved a very real bilingualism. Comment on this would be interesting.

The second of Mr St Leon’s premises is that the decline in linguistic competence of students has been ‘aggravated by the effects of the earlier abandonment of the systematic teaching of English language in primary schools’. The facts of this abandonment are beyond dispute. I do not know the time-table of the change, but it is clear that pupils entering high schools in the nineteen-thirties knew the parts of speech, the relationships of noun and verb, and the types of clauses commonly found in the language. My own recollection of learning this material was not of a ‘parsing and analysis’ grind but of something interesting and fun to learn, with something of the excitement of getting a sum right in arithmetic. Nowadays such knowledge cannot be assumed, although there is anecdotal evidence of a revival of grammatical studies in primary schools.

It is beyond dispute that a knowledge of formal grammar is valuable, even essential, in foreign language study. Its place in the general development of literacy is open to debate. Discussion might well start from the statement which Mr St Leon quotes from the syllabus for Years 7-10 English. Here, I believe, there is a difficulty in the vagueness of the words ‘causal connection’. Has the research ‘generally shown’ that a course in grammar is not necessary to ensure ability to write? The truth of such a conclusion would be obvious. There are people who have not studied formal grammar and who do, in fact, speak and write well. Or has the research shown that in no case has a course in grammar assisted someone to write well? Such a conclusion would, I think, be erroneous. A knowledge of the structures of a language is clearly helpful in any discussion of mistakes made in the writing of it. Formal grammar is clearly useful as a point of reference in such discussion.

I believe, then, that formal grammar has a use in the teaching of English, especially in the language component of such teaching. To me, however, its usefulness is not the whole story. I believe that the grammatical structures of English are worthy of study in their own right and should have a place in a primary curriculum. Here I have entered the realm of ‘shoulds’, of policies rather than facts. In deciding curricula this is all one can do. Research here is irrelevant, it is a matter of choices and traditions and I believe that people with an interest in education

should try to defend traditional disciplines which promote clarity of thought and precision in language.

To turn to the ancient languages, what can be done for them? Mr St Leon's solutions seem to me to be inapplicable here. To use one of his distinctions, study of an ancient language must necessarily be very much a matter of 'knowledge about'. We can have no such immediate knowledge of an ancient language as we have of a modern one. Direct method teaching is out of the question, if one is honest about it. We have no accurate knowledge of pronunciation, of intonation and sentence rhythm, and no knowledge of everyday vocabulary and idiom sufficient to enable us to converse with any assurance that we are getting it right. The study of ancient languages is essentially the study of developed literary forms and it seems to me that high school is the appropriate place to begin. In the high schools a great deal might well be done. There exists in this State a body of teachers of high competence and great enthusiasm. The activities of such a body as the Classical Language Teachers Association makes this clear. There is also, one suspects, a population of interested students, many of whom have no access to the study of an ancient language because of the need to get together a class of a certain size before teaching can begin. The size of this population of students is unknown, but the existence of such a population is made certain from the numbers who enter the Elementary Latin course at Sydney University and say that they wanted to take the subject at school but found it unavailable. The problem is to bring teachers and pupils together. One suggestion that has been made, and it would be pleasant to see it tried, is that certain schools be designated as centres of language study and that pupils, if they so wish, should have access and travel facilities to those centres. If the hours allotted to language teaching were then increased even by one period a week state school children would have a choice already available to many private school children.