

# Grammar

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IN *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53), John Ruskin denounced the Renaissance passion for systems: “The sciences ceased at once to be anything more than different kinds of grammars,—grammar of language, grammar of logic, grammar of ethics, grammar of art; and the tongue, wit, and invention of the human race were supposed to have found their utmost and most divine mission in syntax and syllogism, perspective and five orders.”<sup>1</sup> In the nineteenth century as in our own time, grammar was often treated as a synonym for structure, certitude, and even constraint. *The Youth’s English Grammar* of 1871 commences by defining grammar as “the science which teaches how to speak and how to write *correctly*,” and it realizes this principle by relating a predictable taxonomy of consonants, vowels, syllables, and diphthongs.<sup>2</sup> In the preface to *A Brief English Grammar on a Logical Method* (1873), Alexander Bain proclaims: “Grammar is a science, or nothing. . . . There are Definitions to be framed, Principles to be stated, Rules to be prescribed; all which operations, if entered upon at all, should be carried out in a scientific spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

Such claims were reinforced by institutional developments. The term “grammar school” originated in the medieval *scholae grammaticales*, schools attached to monasteries and intended to provide instruction on Latin grammar. It gained currency in the nineteenth century after the Grammar Schools Act of 1840 facilitated the teaching of subjects other than classical languages, including English language and literature, in schools across Britain. As new sites of learning emerged over the next several decades, many adopted the designation “grammar school,” thus formalizing the link between the study of grammar and institutional structure.

Yet grammar was always far more than a fixed set of rules. In *How to Teach Grammar* (1880), T. J. Livesey proposes that the teaching of grammar not only encourages students to express themselves with accuracy

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but can also “strengthen the perceptive and reasoning faculties, and train the children to habits of close, exact, and methodical thinking.”<sup>4</sup> Livesey thus classifies grammar as a sort of *techne*: a concrete system of knowledge that forms productive habits of mind and culminates in the individual’s ability to make meaning. It is in this way that Livesey arrives at the even more surprising pronouncement: “Grammar is an Art.”<sup>5</sup> The claim is borne out by the etymology of grammar: the Greek term *grammatikḗ téchnē* translates literally as the “art of letters.”

Despite its association with clear and systematic learning, grammar was a hotly contested subject in the nineteenth century, helping illuminate divergent views on the function of language, the value of systems, and Victorian habits of mind. In the first place, there was widespread concern that grammar teaching had become too prescriptive in its aims. James Tilleard argued vociferously against the teaching of “scientific grammar,” proposing that language should instead serve as a “means of intellectual training.”<sup>6</sup> In *An Introduction to English Grammar* (1841), Hugh Doherty not only deviated from the form of the conventional grammar text but questioned the very validity of grammatical knowledge. “The philosophy of language,” he explains, “is yet to be discovered, and the common rules of grammar are as imperfect as they are unattractive.” Even a passing acquaintance with philology reveals “much confusion in scholastic rules” governing grammar.<sup>7</sup> In order to realize the stated objective of so many grammar texts—the clear and elegant communication of thought—a strictly scientific method would ultimately prove inadequate, “for, in the present imperfect state of the English language, there are few rules which are not beclouded with exceptions.”<sup>8</sup> The rules, it seems, were meant to be broken.

It has taken some time for literary studies to acknowledge the vitality of grammar as a subject, method, and cultural idea. In what continues to be one of the most comprehensive surveys of the English grammar, Ian Michael describes nineteenth-century grammar texts as “ordinary, routine productions” that conceal the real range of opinions on both instructional methods and language itself.<sup>9</sup> David Richter rightly notes, however, that educational reform efforts and the rise of print media resulted in widespread efforts to reimagine grammar, both in the interest of standardization and in response to a burgeoning interest in philology, history, and philosophy of mind. To this extent, the “command of correct speech thus constituted the first and most important form of cultural capital circulating in modern society.”<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, Janet Sorenson treats grammar as a “a syntax wherein all elements contribute to the

overall meaning through their relationships to each other,” an approach that raises the possibility that these parts may not always work toward the same ends.<sup>11</sup> Considering grammar as a tool of empire, Sorensen explores the ideological tensions introduced when grammar is both a method of cultural assimilation and a distinguishing quality of the learned classes.

More recently, the concept of grammar has been leveraged not to impose but rather to disrupt entrenched political and disciplinary structures. In *Grammars of Approach*, Cynthia Wall establishes compelling links between the shifting terms of architectural design and the study of grammar, suggesting that the nineteenth century saw a growing attention to the “spaces in between”—that is, punctuation and the “lesser parts of speech.”<sup>12</sup> Such a relational approach to grammar has gained traction in the wake of Caroline Levine’s reappraisal of literary form: “Literature,” Levine tells us, “is not made of the material world it describes or invokes but of language, which lays claims to its own forms—syntactical, narrative, rhythmic, rhetorical—and its own materiality—the spoken word, the printed page.”<sup>13</sup> Seen this way, grammar is more than the raw material of literary expression: on the contrary, grammar is a network of associations, comprised of minute parts that are equally subject to reinterpretation, evolution, or collision with other forms. It was perhaps in this spirit that Ruskin rejected the rigidity of grammatical systems while also fantasizing about founding his own “grammar school of Art,” an ambition to which he devoted much of his later life.<sup>14</sup> For the Victorians and, increasingly, for contemporary scholars, grammar reveals language to be modular and interactive. It calls attention to how language evolves in response to history and its political uses. Perhaps most importantly, grammar reveals how the mind itself negotiates the troubling line between liberty and constraint. So far from reflecting fixed and incontrovertible precepts, grammar might be a powerful tool for querying and renegotiating disciplinary structures.

#### NOTES

1. John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 11 of *The Works of John Ruskin*, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903), 3:78.
2. John Heywood, *The Youth’s English Grammar* (Manchester: John Heywood, 1871), 5 (emphasis original).

3. Alexander Bain, *A Brief English Grammar on a Logical Method* (New York: Henry Holt, 1873), 1.
4. T. J. Livesey, *How to Teach Grammar: Illustrated in a Series of Notes of Lessons* (London: Moffat and Paige, 1880), 2.
5. Livesey, *How to Teach Grammar*, 2.
6. James Tilleard, *Lecture on the Method of Teaching Grammar* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1855), 4, 5.
7. Hugh Doherty, *An Introduction to English Grammar, on Universal Principles* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1841), 2.
8. Doherty, *Introduction to English Grammar*, 3.
9. Ian Michael, *The Teaching of English: From the Sixteenth Century to 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 346.
10. David Richter, *A Companion to Literary Theory* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2018), 157–58.
11. Janet Sorensen, *The Grammar of Empire in Eighteenth-Century British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8.
12. Cynthia Wall, *Grammars of Approach: Landscape, Narrative, and the Linguistic Picturesque* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
13. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 1.
14. John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, vol. 27 of *The Works of John Ruskin*, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1907), 496n.

