ENGLISH, SPEECH, AND THE LANGUAGE ARTS: DISORDER AND LATTER DAY SORROW

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I want to start with three assumptions which seem necessary to the burden of my argument.

The first of these is that knowledge about the nature and functioning of language is the central subject matter of the common school language arts curriculum. In saying this I don’t intend to minimize the importance of instruction in communication skill or in literature. Nor do I suggest separation of the study of language from the study of communication skill or literature. But I do want to point toward the subject of language as the intellectual center of our field—the structure of information and conceptualization which we should be seeking to transmit.

My second assumption is that knowledge about language is related to the skill with which people manage themselves in a symbol-using civilization, and related in ways which transcend the usual definition we give to communication skill. I think that those of us who teach speaking or writing often overestimate our capacity to affect materially certain kinds of behavior with which we often become preoccupied. I am impressed by Joos’s observation that homeostasis will keep the supply of “good” and “bad” English in our culture relatively constant, and I’m depressed by the hours I have devoted to an effort to modify some rather serviceable language behaviors. But I am also persuaded that, as Niels Bohr put it, we all live “suspended in language.” And I think that the more we know about that sea in which we are suspended, the more likely we are to keep sensibly afloat in it. In short, I assume that knowledge about language is efficient in the development of communication skill, but not necessarily, immediately, or automatically effective in relation to those skills we most often look for in classroom essays or speeches. In this sense, instruction about language is an aspect of the language arts curriculum separable from, though not irrelevant to, the aspect which gives direct instruction in writing, speaking, reading, or listening.

My final assumption is that you will grant a speech teacher the right to speak of the common school language arts curriculum as “our” curriculum, and even to appropriate this position of joint proprietorship when the curriculum travels under the name English. This is a courtesy I need in order not to speak as an angry outsider. In return for the courtesy I will promise not to develop an argument that every high school teacher of English should have at least a minor in the field of speech.

Renouncing the opportunity for this argument on this occasion gives me some pain. But I really came to talk on a matter of less parochial interest—the ques-

tion of the status of instruction about language in the secondary school language arts curriculum.

I.

In 1960 the College Entrance Examination Board issued a short description of the proper divisions of the secondary school English curriculum. The statement sets forth three general "names"—language, literature, and composition—for labeling the content of the high school curriculum. So far as I can determine, this three-legged paradigm produced little intellectual stir. It was greeted, I suppose, with no more sense of surprise than might proceed from an announcement by the American Academy that the three coordinate branches of the federal government were to be called the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches. After all, the names language, literature, and composition have been used by English teachers for some time. The CEEB training institutes had forecast this structure. And even if the statement did avoid mention of speaking as a possible communication skill, it was a brief statement unlikely to include everything. Only trouble makers or speech teachers would be sensitive about such an omission, and I should leave it to you to decide whether I have cited one or two categories.

Now I am certainly a speech teacher and occasionally a trouble maker, but I don't believe it was either of these two roles that aroused my anxieties when I first read the CEEB statement. Two matters did arouse me. One was the remarkable similarity between the formulation offered by the CEEB in the 1960's and the formulation central to the establishment of English as a high school subject which emerged in the great reorganization of the secondary schools between 1890 and 1920. In the early part of this century we were saying that the high school English field had three divisions: grammar, composition, and literature. Substitute the word grammar for the word language—and the substitution would not be inappropriate from the definition the CEEB gives to the study of language—and it would appear that we could be in the process of disproving the contention that history does not repeat itself. I find this prospect disquieting.

The second matter that aroused me was one to which I have already alluded, the definition given by the CEEB to the study of language. The study of language, said the Board, should..."include: (a) spelling, (b) the enrichment of vocabulary, (c) systematic study of word derivations and change in word meanings, (d) mastery of the forms of English usage characteristic in the spoken and written discourse of educated people, and (e) some competence in modern linguistic analysis through the study of modern English grammar." Now this seems to me a remarkable narrowing of the concept of the study of language. Three of the five points have to do with writing or speaking behaviors; they only imply study about language. The other two points suggest a study of grammar plus some historical linguistics. The definition makes no reference to the question of language development, or the problem of reference and meaning, or the problem of effect beyond the context of usage, and so forth. It is a narrowing not unlike that which occurred in the early part of the twentieth century. Its correlates then included part of the explanation for the departmental separation of the speech and English fields in American higher education, and a good measure
of the explanation for the lack of conceptual structure which has afflicted language arts instruction ever since. Or at least, this is the way I read the history of the English field, the speech field, and the secondary school language arts curriculum. If this is the history we are preparing to repeat, then I'm against the effort.

II.

To this point I have been producing assertions more rapidly than proof. However, before I proceed with my analysis I do want to make it clear that I have no real animus toward the statement of the College Entrance Examination Board. My concern is that the definition given to the study of language by the Board was one that might have emerged from a hundred sources, that it is altogether an unexceptional definition. My thesis this evening is not that the CREB is peculiarly wrong headed but that we have been laboring for many years in secondary school language arts instruction in a state of some confusion as to what is meant, or might be meant, or should be meant by the study of language. This confusion has had the most serious consequences for the high school language arts curriculum, and some resolution of the confusion seems to me a precondition of sensible curriculum reform, or sensible resolution of the problems of teacher education for the high schools. I want to proceed by giving an accounting of the nature of the disorder as I see it, the nature of its consequences, and then to conclude with a brief observation about the intellectual problem which I believe now confronts the field of English education.

III.

To understand what has happened to the study of language in the secondary schools, I think it useful to return to the circumstances under which high school English was born. The general outlines of this story, are I am certain, familiar to all of you, and I shall give them the briefest possible attention. High school English appeared as a major track or sequence in the high schools as part of the major reorganization of secondary school education occurring generally in the decades from 1870 to 1920, with particular emphasis on the decades after 1890. Prior to this time, English language instruction had taken place under a bewildering set of titles. A single school might offer courses in grammar, rhetoric, logic, word analysis, elements of criticism, discourse analysis, English literature, composition, and elocution. If one asks how so many courses could be devoted to the study of English and still permit students to engage in other studies, the answer of course is to be found in methods of curriculum planning and class scheduling somewhat unfamiliar to our own age. The courses were not taught each day of the week, nor week of the year, nor at every grade level. Nevertheless the very profusion of course titles in a period of expanding secondary school enrollments set the stage for reform, for curricular consolidation.

The reform discovered for English language instruction in the high schools paralleled the development of departments of English in American colleges and universities. Briefly stated the reform said that the name English would carry the legacy of English language instruction in the high schools, and that the name would include the study of grammar, of composition, both oral and written, and
of literature. One cannot turn to the discussion of such groups as the North Central Association, the Committee of Ten, or the Eastern Association of Schools and Colleges in the years around the turn of the twentieth century without sensing the magnitude of the revision undertaken through the consolidation of the high school English curriculum. Equally one senses the speed with which the new set of titles took root, and the optimism generated by sweeping reform. The titles under which instruction in language and language skills had taken place in previous generations went unmourned. Elocution was not dead, but it was dying; logic, an early loser in the secondary school curriculum, had become the possession of collegiate departments of philosophy; the title of composition was thought to keep all that was useful in the older name of rhetoric and to give a practical focus to that ancient discipline; and if the students needed knowledge, the study of literature and grammar would give them more than they asked for.

A sense of good work, well begun, pervades the discussions of both secondary school and college teachers in the decades from 1890 to 1920. Many of them had lived through the golden age of vintage McGuffey and were not charmed with its products. At Harvard, Professor Hurlbut could recall the ineffectiveness of his own high school instruction in English in the late 70’s—of four years spent in high school without writing a single theme. A. S. Hill could also refer to a dismal past in which “graduates of our best colleges could not write a letter home describing their own commencement without making blunders which would disgrace a boy twelve years old.” The colleges would do their part to teach grammar and composition, and through proper entrance examinations they would encourage the high schools to do their part. Everyone would look forward to the day when excellent high school education would relieve the colleges of worry about such mundane matters as usage, spelling, punctuation, grammar, and clear expository writing. Those who wrote well would also speak well, as that notoriously erratic informer “common sense” should tell us.

It is tempting to pause here to comment on the perennially broken hopes of those of us who get involved in any direct way with instruction in speaking or writing. If all else changes in our time, there is one secure island of changelessness—that island—the stubborn refusal of the vast majority of mankind to write or speak in a manner pleasing to those charged with their instruction.

IV.

But my concern this evening is not with change or changelessness, with hopes or disappointments, but rather with the question of what was happening to the study of language.

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4 Hurlbut’s and Hill’s comments are found in a series of papers published by Harvard University in 1896 in a pamphlet entitled: “Twenty Years of School and College English.”
What was happening is I believe properly described as follows: the study of language proposed in the consolidation of the high school English curriculum in the early part of this century was not a consolidation of the kind of knowledge about language which had emerged from the whole tradition of Western education; it was rather a sharp and somewhat accidental narrowing of the definition to be given to the study of language. This narrowing occurred primarily, I believe, because the newly created college departments of English, which furnished the intellectual base for the high school English curriculum, were themselves part of the picture of increasing collegiate specialization which has dominated the history of higher education for the last century. I find it interesting and important to note that collegiate departments of English emerged as part of a general movement toward specialization in higher education, whereas high school English emerged as part of a movement toward consolidation or integration in the secondary school. The identity of titles for two movements of such disparate tendency was fateful. These interpretations obviously need some explanation, and the explanation can be most quickly provided by a screening of the nature of the mission assumed by emerging departments of English against the background of the study of language which had been traditional in western European education.

In the early nineteenth century, following the precedent set by the entire history of western European education, the study of language proceeded within a framework provided by a small set of general names. These names were grammar, dialectic or logic, and rhetoric. The educational practices and bodies of theory comprehended by these names were by no means static through medieval, renaissance, and early modern education, but I must avoid such complexities in the interests of my present purpose. The names of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric had persisted for many centuries; taken together with their subdivisions they defined the scope of study about the nature of language; and they were held in somewhat common understanding by the educated people of any given generation. In an altogether preliminary and potential sense, the kind of knowledge represented by these names comprehended the two major ways of looking at language characteristic of our own age. That is, rhetoric and dialectic, in the Greek and Roman tradition, looked at language as a form of distinetively human communicative behavior. These subjects produced statements about the nature and purpose of discourse, the conditions under which discourse became effective in the conduct of interpersonal relations, or the conditions under which discourse was efficient in carrying out certain purposes. Grammar looked toward the system underlying the behavior and achieved an early if somewhat naive triumph in the direction of descriptive rigor.

You will sense a certain intention in the way in which I have defined the intellectual thrust of classical rhetoric, dialectic, and grammar. I have set my definitions within the framework provided by our contemporary sense of the ways in which language can be studied. To clarify this point let me abstract a view of language provided by a contemporary linguist, John Carroll. Carroll sees language as a structured system of arbitrary vocal sounds and sequences of sounds which is used in interpersonal communication and which rather exhaus-
tively catalogs the things, events, and processes of human experience. Explicit in Carroll's viewpoint is the picture of language as an abstract code—a structured system, as a form of human communicative behavior involving problems of reference and effect, and as an index of culture. Laying aside for the moment the anthropologist's view of the relationship of language and culture, I think it apparent that the classical tradition of language study anticipated the major lines of study about language characteristic of our own century. I do not mean to give more credit for insight to ancient grammarians and rhetoricians than they deserve, nor to suggest that the knowledge they accumulated and taught was not often as erratic as Aristotelian physics—although ancient rhetoric and dialectic stand up somewhat better than ancient grammar. But I do mean to say that the tradition studied language in a reasonably comprehensive way in terms of the knowledge about language available. And I want particularly to suggest that although the tradition associated the study of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric with the acquisition of skill in speaking and writing, it considered all of these subjects as substantive, as bodies of knowledge, and not merely as handmaidens to speaking or writing exercises.

V.

The last half of the nineteenth century, the period in which the subject known as English came into being, found the traditional framework for the study of language in a state of acute disorder, disrepair, and decline. The reasons for this were complex, but I do think it important to observe that English departments were not created primarily from the materials provided by the traditional study of language, nor were they born as an enterprise primarily devoted to the revitalization of this tradition. Logic, as I have already suggested, was on its way toward becoming a special child of departments of philosophy. Rhetoric was in the process of disintegration. One part of its traditional energy was to be carried into departments of English to support the expanding study of belles lettres. Another part, in vitiated form, was to be absorbed by the wasteland of elementary instruction in composition where, until recent years, the name itself was found increasingly dispensable.

A third part was carried into departments of speech through instruction in public address and disputation, and through a holding action on the study of rhetorical literature from the point of view of the canons of rhetoric rather than those of poetic. A fourth part, interestingly enough, was dispersed into the emerging social sciences. Studies of the conditions of effect in discourse were to become a growing passion in sociology and psychology, and rhetorical perspectives were commonplace in the works of historians and anthropologists.

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In short, of the trivium, only grammar 7 was to be treated by English departments as a coherent and essential body of knowledge about language. The energizing principle behind the growth of departments of English was the study of the vernacular literature. The growth of this study was and is remarkable, and should be viewed I believe as a triumph of man's unquenchably humanistic spirit seeking release from the bloodless hand of classical learning. But it was not a growth that promised much for the cultivation of the study of language. The field of English grew on a base which had attenuated interest in the study of language even as it expanded the scope of the study of literature.

From such a context it is not surprising that the formation of the high school English curriculum tended to equate the study of language with the study of grammar, to ignore logic except as represented in the pious wish of every teacher of composition that his students think clearly, and to forget rhetoric except for the admonitions one gives students before and after they have revealed their insufficiencies in writing. The story of an attenuated base for language study is not complete without some reference to the peculiar status of traditional grammar as a body of knowledge. In retrospect, seldom has a weaker intellectual tradition assumed such awesome responsibility. The grammar taught in 1900 and still widely taught was not about the system of language but about writing. Although it sometimes purported to be rigorously descriptive and deductively pure, it was in fact a prescriptive study mingling with graceless abandon statements about what was the case with statements about what should be the case.

It spawned rules with guppy-like abandon much in the manner of medieval rhetoricians cataloging figures of speech. And since the rules weren't rules, it was forced into a constant rescue operation. It sought to require English to behave as Latin was thought to have behaved, and it served as the not altogether unconscious agent of a social class. An intellectually rigorous and inquiring grammar might at least have given secondary school instruction one kind of systematic knowledge about language capable of growth. But the secondary school teachers of English by the early 1920's were in increasing numbers simply abandoning this substantive child, partly by increased attention to the canon of usage, and partly by increased devotion to the study of literature.

VI.

The consequences, or correlates, of the circumstances surrounding the study of language in the early part of this century have been reasonably implicit in much that I have said thus far. For one thing, those circumstances made all but inevitable the separation of speech departments from departments of English. The subjects of dialectic and rhetoric had always been indifferent to the line between speaking and writing, and I think it significant that both these subjects have been much honored, if not greatly reinforced by speech departments. That is, major speech departments were in part developed by teachers with a major

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7 A more complete account would give attention to the role of philology and historical linguistics in emerging departments of English. I am simplifying my statement here to focus on the general fate of the coherent structure of knowledge provided for classical education by the trivium.
interest in rhetoric and dialectic rather than in poetic. The grammar of 1900 was of little interest to persons interested in speech as a form of human behavior. It is tempting to wonder what might have been the fate of relationships between English and speech had either field pursued vigorously the line of linguistic study advocated by Bloomfield as early as 1914 and anticipated by the pioneer works of linguistic science of the nineteenth century.

But the separation occurred; speech teachers sought without total success to shake the ghost of elocution from their instruction; to make the study of vocal behavior somewhat more scientific; to submit some rhetorical generalizations to empirical study; and to keep within memory the materials of the rhetorical and dialectical tradition. Professor Harold Allen and I have sometimes discussed whether or not the separation needed to occur, and whether or not its occurrence has been on balance more productive than harmful. We haven’t resolved either point, but we do agree that the separation has produced some unmerciful complications in planning a sensible structure for a secondary school language arts curriculum, and a sensible education for those who are to teach in this curriculum.

I have been reminded annually of these complications by my efforts for some twenty years to teach a course in the teaching of speech. Some of the first and most baffling questions raised by prospective high school teachers are these: Where is speech taught in the secondary schools? Is it a part of the English class, or is it a separate course or sequence? What is the content of the speech curriculum, and how does this relate to the content of the English curriculum? The questions are baffling because in some schools it is assumed that the required English or language arts sequence includes systematic instruction in speech; this has been the historic position of the NCTE, and it is given more than lip service at times. In other schools the assumption is made that the study of English does not include the study of speech. In some schools speech units are taught as part of the English sequence; in others a semester or year course in speech appears as part of this sequence; in others elective courses in speech are taught alongside the English sequence. I have only begun to describe the various options now in practice, including the option selected by some schools of ignoring speech al-

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9 Professor Lee Hultzén of the University of Illinois has recently observed that when "... speech personnel broke off from departments of English they took language with them and left only the shadow behind. They never seemed to realize, however, that they had hold of the real thing." (Lee S. Hultzén, "'Linguistics,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, February, 1904, p. 79.)

The problem in the early twentieth century, of course, was that speech teachers were just as much ready as English teachers to accept the identity of writing and language. Woolbert’s definition of speech as a behavior embodying the codes of voice, action, and language set a structure for conceptualizing speech which has dominated that field for more than forty years. Woolbert, a psychologist studying speech, and Bloomfield, a linguist studying the same behavior, needed to discover one another. But both lived long before psychologists and linguists found any common language. Woolbert’s way of conceptualizing speech and Bloomfield’s way could have been reconciled, and together they might have spared us from such ear-cracking titles as paralinguistics and kinesiology, which now seem inescapable.
together. But I think you can judge the difficulty of telling a prospective speech teacher about the probable nature of the job he faces.

Equally confusing is the task of rationalizing our present patterns of teacher preparation for the high school. If speech instruction is indeed an integral part of the high school English curriculum, how do we explain a teacher preparation curriculum which ignores the question of college preparation in speech?

A second consequence of the narrow basis established for English language instruction has been that the secondary school English field has survived for the last half century without discovering any commonly accepted body of knowledge about language thought clearly to be teachable and worth teaching to high school students. The problem of sequence and structure for the content of instruction about the English language remains for the most part an unsolved problem. It is extraordinarily difficult to discover principles of order and sequence for a body of knowledge if you don’t know what goes into the body. And this, I think, is not an inappropriate description of our situation. One must be cautious of praise about the amount of knowledge shared by our population about the physical universe, about history, about politics and government, about personal health, or about literature and music. But I think it is fair to say that substantive illiteracy about the nature and functioning of language runs deeper in our culture than any other intellectual shortcoming.

The third consequence is that lacking an elementary frame of reference for defining the nature and scope of the study of language, the high school English field has been ill equipped to assimilate new knowledge about language as it appeared. New knowledge about language has been piling up in our century not only faster than we have been able to consider its uses to our instruction, but often in places that we haven’t even been examining. The knowledge has been the product of linguistic scientists, linguistically oriented anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, a new cross-bred genus called psycholinguists, and most recently even the mathematicians have been joining the hunt. The study of language has now become the traditional passion of philosophers, and its seems to be the emerging passion of nearly all parts of the sprawling establishment of the behavioral sciences. If I sense properly what is happening in the English field today, substantial progress is being made to absorb the materials and methods of linguistic science into the common school curriculum. The process of absorption will be slow, burdensome, and productive of many frustrations: old grammars never die, they just fade away. But the cause is well worth the effort since the name of the cause happens to be the pursuit of reliable knowledge.

But my real concern as you may gather is not that we shall fail to improve our instruction in the analysis of language as a code or system, and thereby improve the condition of human understanding of language. We are not failing on this task. My real concern is that we shall stop short of any sustained effort to come to grips with the knowledge now available about language as a form of human behavior. It seems to me our students need to know something about how language is learned, about its functions, about the way it mirrors and shapes culture, about the conditions under which it produces certain effects, about the
relationship of its larger forms to the forms of our various social institutions. I am prepared to accept the proposition that there is more known about language than any one of us is likely to know, and much more than we should ever try to teach in the common schools. But I am unprepared to accept the proposition that we can decide sensibly about what we should teach, and about the order and structure within which we should teach it, until we have looked at the shape and substance of the whole field of the study of language.

In short, I think the field of English education faces a formidable intellectual task. The task is so basic that it should take precedence over any of the immediate problems of instructional logistics that we all know so well, with the possible exception of the work of developing English language instruction for the large population we now refer to as culturally deprived. The task is this: the discovery of the content and sequence of knowledge about language which should be part of the secondary school language arts curriculum.

This work must be done, I believe, before we can get any very sensible answers about the form of the college major most suitable for the preparation of the high school language arts teacher. It must be done before we can get reasonable answers about the relationship of instruction in English to instruction in speech in the high school. It must be done before we can give any stable definition to the nature of the informational and conceptual content of the high school curriculum.

This work will be difficult. Knowledge about language is not now being systematically assembled, organized, and taught in any one of our existing college departments. The synthesis and systematization needed for the common school curriculum is not a work that those interested in English education can readily expect to be performed except as they themselves bring pressure and organization to the work. Since the work will be difficult, there is every reason we should be getting to it.