

Current Mistakes in Teaching English Grammar.

Paper read by Mr. C. P. MASON before the College of Prec. ptors.

The subject of the following remarks has, unfortunately, no pretensions to the charms of novelty. Most of you have probably been hammering away at English Grammar for years, and some perhaps will have to do so for several years to come. My humble endeavour will be to help such to make their strokes as telling as possible, by showing them where and how effort is commonly wasted. For several years past I have had a good deal to do with the examination of pupils in schools, and candidates who have not long left school, more particularly in the department of English Grammar, in which subject many thousands of sets of answers have, from first to last, come under my scrutiny; and, considering how important a part examinations play in our modern system, (whether they are to be looked upon as a great good, or as a necessary evil.) I thought that it would not be uninteresting to those who, to a greater or less extent, are engaged in preparing pupils for the ordeal, if I gave them some of the results of my experience, by setting before them the kind of mistakes which candidates most commonly make, and the way in which they come to make them. In doing this I shall not be able to avoid criticising a good deal that is very commonly taught, and showing that the unfortunate bunglers have not merely gone astray, but have been led astray by what they have been made to learn.

I need hardly say that the teaching of English Grammar is something widely different from the teaching of, say, Latin or French grammar,—at least, to English boys. In Latin, and even in French, (as far as the verbs are concerned), you have to get your pupils to commit to memory a great apparatus of inflections, rules for forming genders, rules for various concords, rules for the cases to be put after prepositions, &c. All this is material of a very concrete character, and, though troublesome to master, does not, in the first instance, call for much beyond observation, comparison, and memory. English Grammar is quite different. We have hardly any inflections; a mistake about the agreement of an adjective with a noun is impossible, as adjectives do not mark gender, number, or case; and, as regards such inflections and concords as we have, the learners know them already. You never really have to teach a boy or girl to form the plural of *brother* or *man*, or the past tense of *be* or *go*. In teaching English Grammar you introduce pupils at once to the most abstract conceptions, the functions of words, the nature of the parts of speech, the import of inflections, the relations of words to one another, and so on. You begin at once a logical training of the most refined character, the main object of which is, or should be, to discipline the faculties in habits of clear and close thinking, and the perception of the relations of ideas one to the other: and so, through the medium of English Grammar, you put, if I may so say, a grammatical soul into that bodily organism of forms and inflections to which you mainly direct

your attention in the grammars of other languages. English Grammar is from the first a system of logical analysis and definition.

Now I am sure I should be wasting time if I set myself to prove at length that, if work of this kind is not done well, it had better not be attempted at all. It is not merely useless if done ill, it is positively injurious. Nothing but harm can come of slovenly analysis and inexact definitions. The mind gets inured to habits of loose and inaccurate thought, which when once acquired, are most difficult to eradicate. No doubt it is difficult to be accurate, but it is not impossible. Even young children may be led to grasp the elementary ideas involved in grammar with perfect precision, provided those ideas are presented gradually, simply, and exactly; and I protest most earnestly against the notion that it is fussy and pedantic to strive after this scrupulous accuracy, and that rough-and-ready definitions do well enough to begin with, and will be gradually shaped into what is more accurate as the pupil gets on. You would not expect that to be the result of giving loose and inaccurate rules in arithmetic, or of allowing a beginner in geometry to prove his propositions by means of a pair of compasses. And I assert, as a matter of fact, that the result of letting pupils learn loose and inaccurate definitions betrays itself at every large examination by a plentiful crop of answers from candidates who have been at English Grammar for five, six, or even seven years, which exhibit not merely abject and contemptible ignorance but (so to speak) a sort of general *sloppiness* of mind and an utter incapacity for writing English in an intelligible, coherent, and grammatical form.* On the other hand, I have invariably found that clear and exact answers about grammatical definitions go along with clear and grammatical English composition.

My special purpose at present, however, is to point out some of the commonest errors which vitiate much of the grammar teaching that goes on in our schools, and appear in such ludicrous forms at every examination. I hope none of you will think that I am "poking fun" at you when I say that the greater part of these mistakes would have been obviated, if the writers of the grammars which are most widely used had been able to grasp the not very recondite truth, that *words* are not identical with *what they stand for*—that the noun 'book' (for instance) is not the article made up of printed leaves fastened together, which we buy at the bookseller's and that when we buy one of these articles, we do not purchase a part of speech. Is any one present disposed to dispute this? If so, I hope no feeling of bashfulness will hold him back from having a tussle about it, as soon as I have finished my paper. It would

* Here is a specimen of what I see a good deal of:—"Adjectives are words used with nouns to denote some quality or attribute about which the noun stands for, and clearly shows whether we wish to denote its superiority, or deteriorate it above or below the standard of which we are speaking about." I dare say that ingenious youth had been learning grammar for five or six years. Obviously no clear grammatical idea had ever filtered into his mind during the whole time.