

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 no one will think that I am "poking fun" 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 take much too long to chase this really childish blunder out of all the grammatical nooks and corners in which it lurks. I shall content myself with giving you a few typical instances.

Did any of you, when very little boys and girls, ever learn some rhymes about the parts of speech, written with the view of aiding the budding intelligence of infant minds, and some of which ran somehow thus—(I am not sure about one line):

"First comes the little particle
Grammarians call an Article,
And then the mighty Noun.
A noun, it may be anything,
A tree, a castle, or a king,
A person or a town."

Here you see the absurdity above referred to in full force. The ghost of this innocent little effusion still haunts the examination room. I have a dreary presentiment that within the next six months I shall be told hundreds of times, as I have been told during the last, that a common noun is "some thing that belongs to a

*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.

class," and that "an abstract noun is some thing that you can't see or hear or feel." This last wonderful absurdity has been rather a favourite of late. When it has been given *vidæ vocæ*, a little colloquy of the following kind has sometimes ensued between myself and the examinees. "Is goodness an abstract noun?"—"Yes." "Did you hear the word?"—"Yes." "But you told me just now that an abstract noun was something that you couldn't hear." Puzzled silence for a moment or two. Then, from some child a little sharper than the rest, and not impossibly a little sharper than the teacher,— "An abstract noun is the name of something that you can't see or hear." "Very well, let us try. Is brightness an abstract noun?"—"Yes." "Can you see the brightness of the sun?"—"Yes." "Then how can brightness be the name of something that you can't see? But now, did you ever hear of a quality?"—"Yes." "Tell me a quality of sugar."—"Sweetness." "What quality makes me call a man good?"—"Goodness." "Very well, sweetness and goodness are abstract nouns. What are they names of?"—"Qualities." "Now name to me some action."—"Jumping, motion, flight." "Those too are abstract nouns. What are they names of?"—"Actions." "Now tell me a noun that denotes a state in which a person or a thing may be."—"Sleep, life, death." "Good, those also are abstract nouns. Now put all that together, and tell me what an abstract noun may be the name of." The answer will come promptly from a dozen at once—"An abstract noun is the name of a quality, or an action, or a state." Is not all this within the comprehension of the youngest child who should be learning grammar at all? If so, is there any excuse for cheating the intelligence of a beginner with the rubbish that I quoted before?

While on this point I cannot refrain from pointing out the worthlessness of a definition of abstract nouns which is more frequently given at examinations than any other; namely, that "an abstract noun is the name of anything which we only conceive of in our minds as having a real independent existence." Now, as *only* is not a negative, this definition involves the assumption that we do conceive of that for which the abstract noun is a name as having a real independent existence. But this is palpably absurd. You cannot conceive of motion, for example, as having a real independent existence apart from something that moves. You would contradict yourself in the attempt. That which has an independent existence of its own cannot be an attribute of something else. We may fix our attention upon the attribute without thinking about that in which it is inherent. But we cannot abstract an attribute in the complete manner in which a thief might abstract my watch. The definition is lame enough as it stands. But confusion gets worse confounded when examinees leave out the word *only*, or, reproducing that irrepressible blunder about words and things, tell us that an abstract noun is "something that we conceive of as having a real independent existence."

Of course this blunder is extended from nouns themselves to their accidents. I suppose most children might be made with a little pains to comprehend that sex (male and female) is a distinction between classes of animals, and that gender (masculine and feminine) is a distinction between classes of words. At present any question on the subject is sure to elicit in abundance such replies as the following, which I quote *verbatim*:—

"Sex is the difference between animals, gender is the difference between things."

"Gender is applied to one individual person, and sex to a collection of persons."

"Sex is applied to living beings, and in a singular sense; gender in a plural sense, and also to inanimate objects."