

done to it. If, as I fondly hope, I have carried your judgments with me when I insist that when I say, "Tom kicked Harry," I do not mean that the noun or name, Tom, administered the kick, *a priori* you will agree that a mere *form* of a noun, a *case*, cannot do that which the "mighty noun" itself is incapable of achieving. Only fancy the *form* of a noun, a possessive *case*, being the owner of a house or a dog. No doubt the inventor of this wonderful specimen of definition plumed himself upon having turned out something remarkably neat and telling. He deserved to be turned into an objective case himself, that he might experience, not in word only, what it was to have "something done to him."

One of the most egregious and exasperating instances of this never-ending confusion between words and what words stand for, is still to be found in one of the most largely used English grammars (I don't wish to mention names, but see p. 31 of the last edition), and in scores of grammars based upon it, especially those little twopenny "dreadfuls" which simplify grammar for small children. It comes up in hundreds and hundred of answers at examinations. We are told that "adjectives express the qualities of nouns," i.e. of names. So that "a tall man" means that the noun or name, "man" is tall; "red rose" means that the word "rose" is red. There is no possibility of wriggling out of this conclusion, absurd as it is, if you accept that precious definition. I can fancy the writer saying, "Oh, you make such a fuss about trifles; of course, I meant that the man was tall, not the noun." I could only reply, "Then, if you meant what is right, why on earth did you say what is wrong? And what but harm can come of setting children to learn what is palpably and ridiculously wrong? It is but a variation of the same confusion when we are told that "an adjective is a word added to a noun in order to mark or distinguish it more accurately." Distinguish the noun? From what? You can only distinguished a word from a word; from what other word is the noun *rose* distinguished by the adjective *red*? Mark the noun? Pray how? Does it give a peculiar shade of meaning to the noun? What logicians know as the *connotation* of the word *rose* is not affected in the slightest degree; the adjective does not mark the noun, it denotes the *quality* that marks the *thing*. In trying to refine upon a definition which is radically bad, Dr. Abbott, in his, "How to tell the Parts of Speech," and "How to parse," makes matters still worse. \* He tells us that an adjective is a word that can be put before a noun either to distinguish it or to enumerate it, that is, to point out its number or amount." What? the number or amount of the noun—the name? In *three men* how does *three* enumerate the noun *men*, when there is only *one* noun? "Why, it tells you how many *men* there are, doesn't it?"—"Certainly, but I was told that it enumerated

the noun." "Well it's the same thing."—"Ah, that's where you make the mistake."

Naturally, this confusion between *word* and *thing* appears in force when definitions of the comparative and superlative degrees of adjectives are attempted. Here are some samples of a good deal that I have seen of late:—

"Comparative is one of two things, and superlative is one of three things."

"Superlative degree is the highest an adjective can go."

"Comparative degree is when the adjective is more so, and superlative most."

"The superlative degree expresses the greatest superiority an adjective can have."

"Superlative degree is the adjective extending the noun to the highest degree of comparison above every degree."

Questions about transitive and intransitive verbs always bring out a plentiful crop of mistakes, based upon this all-pervading confusion between words and that which they denote. The unfortunate examinees have been led astray by their grammars. I fancy no one present will dispute the accuracy of what I am going to say. In the sentence, "John struck the horse," we have *word*, a transitive verb, which denotes an action; we have a *word* "John," which denotes the doer of the action, and forms the grammatical subject of the verb; and a *word* "horse," which denotes the object of the action, and forms the grammatical object of the verb; the verb is a word, its subject is a word, and its object is a word. Well then, it must be sheer nonsense to say that the subject of the verb—the word John, mark you—is the doer of the action. It must be nonsense to talk of "the action of the verb." Verbs, words, have no *action*; they do not walk, or strike, or kick. They *denote* action, but that is quite another thing—the action is the action of the agent, not of the verb. The blow proceeded from the person John, not from the word "struck." Lastly, the action is directed not to the word *horse*, which is only the grammatical of the verb, but to the animal denoted by the word *horse*. It is the animal which is the object of the action, not the noun. It is unfortunate that the word *object* is used in this twofold sense—for the *thing* which is the object of the action, and the *word* which is the grammatical object of the verb, —but we cannot now help ourselves. Is it possible to dispute the truth of these statements? But how do our common grammars put the matter? One already quoted says,—“When the subject of the verb is the doer of the action; but when the subject of the verb is the object acted upon, the verb is passive.” So that a word, a part of sentence, can be either the giver of a blow, or the receiver of a blow. Now for the same blunder put the other way. “Verbs which take two objects in the active voice, one of the person and the other of the thing, can be put into the passive voice, with the person as the subject, and the thing as the object.” Only think of a *person*—a man or a boy—being part of a sentence, and forming the subject of a verb! Is it not irrational

\* In this paper I have striven, as much as possible, to avoid mentioning names. If I depart from this rule in the present instance, it is only because this author's great reputation might lead many, who do not care to think for themselves, to attach undue importance to what is doubtless simply the result of inadvertence.