

CORRESPONDENCE ON 'CATAGORIES OF ENGLISH'

1. An objection to the term
2. A defence

FROM: MR K.J. SAYCELL, CLUBVIEW EAST

As I was reading the articles by Mr J.D.U. Geldenhuys, 'Categories of English' and 'Further Categories of English' (*English Usage in Southern Africa*, 9 (2) September 1978, pp. 1-14, and 10 (1 & 2), pp. 1-13, respectively), I found myself wondering what exactly he was aiming to do. To begin with, the central term of his argument, 'category', is not defined. Reference to Wittgenstein proves not 'the futility of attempting exact definitions in this language context' ('Categories', p. 2), but rather the unwillingness of the writer to supply such a definition. It would perhaps be uncharitable to suggest that he is unable to do so, although the wide range that the term is forced to cover suggests that it is used so vaguely as to preclude its meaning anything of value. Initially, the 'category' of colloquial speech is contrasted to the 'rather formal category of exact legal writing' ('Categories', p. 1). Having no sooner adjusted to the assumption that 'category' refers to *register* we find on the next page that it refers to *number* ('the singular category' and 'the plural category'). Once again we adjust to this shift of meaning, only to find that the 'categories' that these articles in fact intend to discuss are those of the all-too-familiar *parts of speech* (the writer refers on p. 9 of 'Categories' to the 'category of adjectives').

The aims of the articles are clearly, if somewhat portentously, stated:

... the aim of this article is not to teach a myriad of language facts, but to instill (*sic*) an awareness of language propriety through the recognition of certain demarcated categories in any utterance or communication The method accepted here does, however, have one signal advantage in that it enables a writer to think for himself when confronted by a new or strange language situation and to figure out a correct construction *even if he is not cognisant of a specific rule or preference* covering the case.

('Categories', p. 3)

If this method promises to present a way of developing a 'feeling' for what is appropriate or correct in a particular context, we are, perhaps not unreasonably, disappointed to find that the body of the article consists, *inter alia*, in attempting to revitalize the hackneyed subjects of concord (under NOUNS); misrelated participles, and defining and non-defining relative clauses (under ADJECTIVES; they are referred to as 'defining adverbial clauses' on p. 12 of 'Categories'); mood, tense and voice (under VERBS); split infinitives (under ADVERBS); and the correct choice of prepositions.

It is not my intention to take issue with Mr Geldenhuys on minor points (e.g. his insistence that, in the sentence 'Looking west one sees fields of midnight blue ...', 'no comma is necessary after "west" , and a comma is in fact inadvisable in the case of a related participial sentence ...'. Firstly, the inclusion of a comma is more a matter of opinion than Mr Geldenhuys allows; and secondly, I am not sure what is meant by a 'related participial *sentence*'). On the other hand, his discussion of mood under VERBS in 'Further Categories' is confusing to say the least. Taking the subjunctive in modern English*, and while aiming to clarify the point for his readers, Mr Geldenhuys in fact finds himself unable to make up his mind. The sentence he discusses is the following:

In Great Britain and the dominions ... the subjunctive was on the wane and would possibly have become almost extinct had our American cousins not started to revive the manner.

('Further Categories', p. 1)

* The subjunctive is a dying phenomenon: why is it necessary to pay it so much attention?

We are then told that this sentence is in the subjunctive; reference is made to *would* and *had ... started*. The separation of 'would' from 'have become' is surprising. Clearly, Mr Geldenhuys is not sure of his case, and the identity of the indicative and subjunctive forms has added to his uncertainty, for further on he changes his mind:

The sentence referred to above as being in the subjunctive can be regarded as cast in the indicative mood if the sequence of tenses after 'was' is borne in mind: 'In Great Britain and the dominions ... the subjunctive *WAS* on the wane and *WOULD* possibly *HAVE BECOME* almost extinct *HAD* our American cousins not started to revive the manner.'

(pp. 1-2)

This is inexplicable: suddenly by combining the three parts of the verb *would have become*, we no longer have a subjunctive; conversely, by separating *had* and *started* (i.e. the opposite procedure), we find that mysteriously 'had' is transformed into the indicative. This is whimsical to say the least.

Furthermore, what is the point of all this if words can belong to whatever 'category' we choose to allocate them to? And is there any justification for confusing one's readers by taking contradictory positions, if at the end one merely claims, somewhat lamely:

... it suffices to say that perhaps so-called English subjunctives were better described as not being subjunctives at all but specialised uses of the indicative such as in *men were deceivers ever*, where *were* is not a subjunctive but an example of a tense called the gnomic praeterite.

('Further Categories', p. 3)

So the whole exercise, it seems, is rather meaningless. Why were we treated to a lengthy discussion of items that, at one and the same time, were and were not subjunctives, if only to be fobbed off with this disclaimer? In addition, we are left with a phrase, 'gnomic praeterite', whose introduction here seems gratuitous, as it is neither defined nor justified.

Other issues might have been raised (e.g. the distinction between 'will' and 'shall' on p. 2 of 'Further Categories'), but a more generalized comment must needs

be made. I suggest that two problems have vitiated the quality of Mr Geldenhuys's article: first, the lack of adequate and rigorous definition and substantiation; and, second, his lack of clarity about the audience he is addressing.

The examples given suggest that Mr Geldenhuys is addressing an audience of professional people, yet the actual subject of the essay is one covered by high school syllabi. A further lack of sensitivity to the audience is reflected in the tone of condescension in the parenthesis in this sentence:

In Great Britain and the dominions (which formerly included South Africa) ...

('Further Categories', p. 1)

The aim of these articles was to teach 'someone how to fish rather than merely giving him thousands of rations of daily bread' ('Categories', p. 3). Unfortunately this 'someone' remains unidentified, while the fish remain elusive and the daily bread leaves us with nothing but indigestion.

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MR J.D.U. GELDENHUYS REPLIES:

I must take issue with the suggested problems of 'the lack of adequate and rigorous definition and substantiation' as well as 'the lack of clarity about the audience [I am] addressing'.

So far as the audience is concerned I can only point out that the original audience consisted of people in business who had to write or correct business documents. All of them did pass through high school, and most of them retained more than a smattering of high-school grammar, but few of them remember much of this when compiling or correcting business documents, at least in my experience, which is, I suspect from the academic tone of the foregoing letter, perhaps more practical in some ways than that of the writer of the letter concerned.

Therefore it was attempted to give the audience a simple guide to grammatical matters by instilling (*touché*) in them the idea or thought of language categories as coherent units with which they should con-

struct their documents. Obviously, as an attempt was made to find the greatest common denominator, 'category' was made to carry a very great burden. However, it should be borne in mind that the articles do not purport to be academically sound in the manner of for example a master's dissertation.

I therefore contend that, had the writer of the foregoing letter been more aware of the intended audience's failure (or inability) to apply high-school grammar to business-writing, he would not have wondered about whom the audience consisted of. I am further of the opinion that to define a concept often proves little more than the definer's ability to complicate or lengthen a language utterance whose meaning should be clear from its function in each of the unlimited variety of contexts in which it may appear. (But this is precisely the philosophic shift from G.E. Moore to L. Wittgenstein, and perhaps the writer of the foregoing letter is more Moore (or I.A. Richards?)-orientated than I am - I should certainly hope so, for in this modern world of shifting absolutes I find that any definition may be made to stand on its head whenever I bend down to take a closer look at it.)

As to the previous writer's query about my being unsure of, or unable to make up my mind about, the subjunctive when I mention 'the sequence of tenses' the following should (*oops*) speak for itself:

He said: The subjunctive is on the wane and will possibly have become almost extinct if our American cousins did not start to revive it.

He said: that the subjunctive was on the wane and would possibly have become almost extinct if our American cousins had not started to revive it.

Extinct or no?

Certainly not in legal documents, which is exactly what a great many business documents are.

And as to the 'gnomic praeterite', isn't that pucky?

Finally concerning the indigestion caused by the daily bread, I should like to point out that no daily bread was given, as that clearly falls outside the province. Perhaps the indigestion-sufferer (excuse the lumped formation) should seek the fault not within his stars but within his own inner man.