

Dear Principal,

ETAQ'S TEACHING RESOURCE ON ENGLISH GRAMMAR

In 2007 the English Teachers Association of Queensland published in their journal *Words'Worth* a series of eight articles with the general title 'Grammar at the coal-face', presented as a 'teaching resource'. Two of the articles, 'The structural basics' and 'Functional elements in a clause', by Dr Lenore Ferguson, give an account of aspects of English grammar concerning the parts of speech, group and phrase classes, and clause structure, primarily from the perspective of what is known as functional grammar. I refer to these two articles together as the 'Coalface Grammar'. My purpose in writing to you is to warn you that the Coalface Grammar contains an exceptionally large number of errors – over sixty in fifteen and a half pages of relevant text, many of them very serious and basic, and including major misrepresentations of functional grammar.

I begin with a sample of a dozen errors to give a quick indication of the seriousness of the problem. Next I give a brief account of my credentials for commenting on the work. I then outline the author's and ETAQ's response to my criticisms. The following section draws attention to a letter from the President of the Australian Linguistic Society endorsing those criticisms. Finally, I report on my approach to Education Queensland.

Sample errors

- [1] *Set of* in *a set of bowls* is classified as an adjective: it is not a grammatical unit at all, but a noun followed by a preposition. That *set* is a noun is evident from the fact that it contrasts with plural *sets* in *two sets of bowls*. ['Errors': 46]
- [2] *Sam's* in *Sam's folder* is classified as a possessive pronoun: it is the possessive form of a proper noun. ['Errors': 60]
- [3] *His* in *his coach* is classified as simultaneously a pronoun and a determiner: this is theoretically impossible, for pronoun and determiner have been presented as distinct word classes. The error arises through a failure to distinguish between a function (a relational concept, like subject or modifier) and a class (a set of items that are grammatically alike, such as noun group or adjective): *his* belongs to the pronoun class, but its function is what functional grammar calls 'deictic'. ['Errors': 45]
- [4] Determiners are said to appear as determining adjectives in noun groups: again, this is impossible because determiner and adjective have been presented as distinct word classes: instead of the class term 'adjective' we need the function term 'deictic'. ['Errors': 25]
- [5] The demonstratives *this*, *that*, etc. (as used with a following noun, as in *this book*, *that car*) are inconsistently treated now as adjectives, now as determiners ['Errors': 22].
- [6] No classification is provided for expressions such as *very hungry* or *quite good* which have an adjective as their head element. ['Errors': 32]
- [7] *What* in *They saw what lay before them* is classified as a conjunction: it is a pronoun (functioning as subject of the subordinate clause). ['Errors': 29]
- [8] Prepositions are said to appear as head in preposition phrases – but on the next page we are told that preposition phrases have no head. ['Errors': 28]
- [9] The function of complement is first introduced in the traditional sense where it contrasts with object, but this is inconsistent with the glossary, where it is used in functional grammar's sense, in which it covers both traditional objects and complements. ['Errors': 7]
- [10] While the underlined expression in *the books we want fell from the shelves* is correctly

classified as definite, that in *the books fell from the shelves* is said to be indefinite: it too is definite, marked as such by the definite article *the*. [*`Errors'*: 27]

- [11] Imperative clauses are DEFINED as lacking a subject, but although imperatives USUALLY have no subject, imperatives containing an overt subject, such as *You have a nice day* or *Don't you worry about it*, are commonplace. [*`Errors'*: 51]
- [12] It is said that pronouns do not inflect, but in fact personal and relative or interrogative pronouns inflect for case, with nominative *I* contrasting with accusative *me*, etc. [*`Errors'*: 23]

The reference at the end of each of the above items is to my recent paper '*Errors in the Coalface Grammar*', the main part of which presents a catalogue of errors numbered from [1] to [65]: each entry consists of a citation from the Coalface Grammar followed by discussion. This paper is accessible by internet at:

< <http://ling.ed.ac.uk/grammar/otherstuff.html> > .

Credentials

I am an Honorary Research Consultant at The University of Queensland, with the title of Emeritus Professor, having retired a few years ago after almost thirty years in a full-time position in linguistics. My main work has been in the field of English grammar. I collaborated in an international research project based at UQ which led to the publication of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, by Rodney Huddleston & Geoffrey K. Pullum et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2002, 1842 pp.). The book won the Linguistic Society of America's Leonard Bloomfield Book Award for 2004, and following its publication I was elected an honorary life member of that society and a Fellow of the British Academy, and was awarded an Hon D.Lit by University College London.

Author's and ETAQ's response to my criticisms

I have felt it necessary to write to school principals on this matter because the great majority of the errors have remained unacknowledged. Dr Ferguson acknowledged just four in the March 2008 *Words'Worth*, and then two more in the September 2008 issue following the publication of a report on the matter in *The Australian* of 13 June 2008 (I have not included these six in the above sample). She denies that the others I have identified are errors but is unwilling to enter into academic discussion about them. Thus she has not defended the classification of *set of* as an adjective: she simply refuses to talk about it. And similarly for virtually all the other unacknowledged errors in my catalogue.

The Management Committee of ETAQ takes the view that it is not appropriate for it to adopt any official position on the matter, given that the inside front cover of the journal states that: '*The views expressed in signed articles are not necessarily those of The English Teachers Association of Queensland*'. I find their decision quite misguided. There is a major difference between the Coalface articles and articles submitted by ordinary members at their own initiative. Most importantly, the former are presented as a **teaching resource**: members are invited to use this material in the preparation of their classes. It is therefore of paramount importance that it should not contain errors – and hence that any errors in the originally published version should be properly acknowledged and corrected. It would be an educational disaster if teachers were to base their classes systematically and comprehensively on the Coalface Grammar, telling their students that *Sam's* is a possessive pronoun, *set of* an adjective, and so on. If students gave Coalface answers in tests and examinations they would be marked wrong and generally regarded as lacking basic knowledge of grammar. Given the

author's unwillingness to make the necessary revision and correction, the Management Committee should at the very least withdraw the two articles. They have posted my 'Errors' paper on their website for a limited period, but they emphasise that it doesn't necessarily represent an official view of ETAQ and it is accompanied by a response from Dr Ferguson in which she continues to deny that the Coalface Grammar contains more than a few errors. It is incontestable that it contains a great many errors, and I can see no justification for ETAQ's refusal to warn members of the dangers of using it as a teaching resource.

Letter from the President of the Australian Linguistic Society

In June 2008 I wrote to Professor Randy LaPolla, President of the Australian Linguistic Society, asking if he would examine the Coalface Grammar and give an opinion, in the light of the disagreement that had arisen between the author and me concerning the errors. I had had no prior contact with him and he was an ideal person to evaluate the work as he had long experience of teaching functional grammar. He replied directly to Dr Ferguson, endorsing my position and urging her to write a revised and corrected version; he also made a point of saying that my criticisms were 'largely from the viewpoint of functional grammar, and so were essentially the same as [his], and not criticisms that could be said to be due to [my] having a different theoretical stand.'

Regrettably, his letter was summarily dismissed by Dr Ferguson and by the ETAQ President. A copy of the letter, with some notes on their responses, is available at the website given above.

Approach to Education Queensland

In May 2009 I contacted Education Queensland to see if they would be willing to intercede. I was told that they are 'not in a position to publicly critique independent productions or programs', but they subsequently confirmed that it was open to me to write to schools myself, and facilitated this by providing a link to their directory of schools.

This, then, is what I feel I must do, given that I have been unable to persuade ETAQ to give their members proper guidance on the Coalface Grammar. Errors in a teaching resource for schoolteachers should not be allowed to remain uncorrected. I would request you, therefore, to forward this letter to English teachers in your school and to encourage them to follow up the web references I have given if they are considering using the Coalface Grammar in the preparation of classroom material. It goes without saying that I would be pleased to discuss the matter further – with you or any of your English teachers.

Yours sincerely,

Rodney Huddleston.