tends to get the cream of the high school students. If this is hard evidence, we have good reason to be concerned. For if what I have narrated is true, it surely shows that we are not being fuddy-duddies or crotchety aging academics when we are appalled by what we see around us.

Let me conclude with my other bit of anecdotal evidence, which would be even easier to confirm. Within the last two years, according to a colleague at the University of Queensland, the Science Faculty proposed that students entering that faculty be required to include, as part of their entrance standard, a fairly high level of achievement in English. *Their colleagues in the Faculty of Arts defeated this proposal.* Is this the wave of the future?

Comment: IV

TERRY THREADGOLD*

I want to be clear at the outset that I have no particular expertise in the teaching of foreign languages at primary, secondary or tertiary levels. I write rather as someone who teaches English in the Faculty of Arts and who also teaches 'grammar', particularly to those going into the school system to teach in our secondary classrooms. I do these things, on a day to day basis, in interaction with students who are the products of Mr St Leon's asserted but unanalysed 'crisis in literacy'. These are students who, if we can believe him, have been taught that 'grammar doesn't matter', or subjected by those he calls 'communicators' to nebulous forms of 'educational experience' rather than 'discipline', or worse exposed to 'functional grammar' which is said to consist in demonstrating that 'mistakes' in grammar are actually not mistakes at all. They are also, it seems, students who are fundamentally lacking in a proper understanding of the finer points of the split infinitive, and of the need for the possessive after the gerund, and who, therefore, will be among those who will inevitably contribute to 'the rapid devaluation of what ought to be our most prized possession, the language which expresses the quality of our thinking and of our lives.'

Whatever the truth concealed in this rhetoric, I would like to declare that I am not prepared to accept at face value Mr St Leon's 'crisis in literacy' any more than he is prepared (and rightly) to accept glib statements like 'the research shows . . .' with respect to the connection between grammar and the ability to write. It is true that in the time that I have been teaching at Sydney University there has been a decline in the teaching of traditional grammar in the schools. In Mr St Leon's terms this means 'parsing and analysis', the correction of errors in expression, a knowledge of split infinitives and the gerundive, or the ability to decline the definite article. I must

*Terry Threadgold is Senior Lecturer in English in the University of Sydney.

confess to finding the lack of these particular skills no problem. I admit that it is helpful when students already have some knowledge of the formal analysis of language: but lack of this does not seem to me to constitute a crisis in literacy or 'a steep decline in the linguistic competence of all but a handful of students entering first year university.' All my students still speak and write English fluently and can use its varieties tolerably well in a number of varied contexts. Many of the students I teach have a very real interest in thinking about the language they use, and in discussing the communicative functions of language in the social world they inhabit. They have a critical understanding of the difference between the language of a T.V. commercial and a history essay and an ability to discuss the processes of language change that have turned 'education' into 'educational process' and 'lifts' into 'elevators'. I can only assume that it is Mr St Leon's 'communicators' who have instilled these interests. That is, while I do not deny the difficulties in the educational system – the incompatible and contradictory ideologies and strategies – that Mr St Leon's rhetoric is pointing to, I would argue rather that students now have *different* rather than necessarily *inferior* knowledges and learning strategies when they reach university.

And yet I said at the outset that I teach 'grammar' and that I see that as something fundamental, particularly for those who are heading for our secondary school classrooms as teachers. It would seem then that I should be on his side: and indeed, when he describes his own educational practice in the teaching of German as a second language to primary school children, I can find little to disagree with. That foreign languages are best taught early, in a 'natural' way, analogous to the way a child learns its mother tongue, in everyday situations relevant to the child's communicative needs and interests; that generalisation and abstraction about the formal analysis of language (grammar) and formal resources such as spelling are related to the secondary process of writing; that these have to be formally taught, and are best taught in situations where you can show 'what knowledge of a rule can do; that teaching grammatical rules or decontextualised vocabulary lists for their own sake is pointless – with none of these arguments can one reasonably find fault. They provide a kind of exemplary account of what a 'functional' approach to language learning might look like in practice. I use 'functional' here in the sense in which it is used in the work of Michael Halliday, a sense of which Mr St Leon, in his derogatory references to 'functional' grammar seems to have very little understanding.

It is here then that I want to take issue with him on a number of points. He bewails 'the decay in the passion for exactitude which was once taken . . . as a central objective of language teaching', associating this with the doctrine 'that grammar doesn't matter', and with the introduction, despite this doctrine, by those who still maintained that there was a need for children to know 'why you said what', of a 'nebulous entity' called 'functional grammar'. It is a pity that the passion for exactitude *in* language teaching is not pursued with equal rigour in discussions *about* language teaching, particularly when these involve discussions about grammar. For

it is here that the argument degenerates into rhetoric and contradiction and becomes decidedly unhelpful to the very course he is advocating. He is not alone in this. If we are going to argue that grammar should be taught, we have to specify what we mean by grammar. If we are going to argue that 'research' does or does not show a causal connection between the teaching of grammar and the ability to write, we have to be specific about what research, what kind of grammar and what we mean by writing ability. Mr St Leon's paper seems to me to fail in exactitude, or at least to take up contradictory positions, in relation to all these questions. Let me explain.

There is a difference between learning to use a language effectively to communicate and learning to talk analytically *about* a language. In learning the first one inevitably learns the 'grammar' of the language, its characteristic ways of realising (giving form to) the meanings its speakers recognise as pertinent and relevant to their social and cultural needs. Along with the 'grammar' of the language one learns a good deal about the typical situation types in which characteristic patterns of grammatical choice regularly co-occur and recur. This is the kind of 'grammar' St. Leon is describing when he speaks of the teaching of foreign languages in the primary school where 'you can follow the natural order in which children acquire their native languages . . .' 'The central teaching problem is manipulating situations so that children can use their limited knowledge of the new language most of the time.'

In learning the second one has to learn a *metalanguage,* a language for talking about language. In English we also call this a 'grammar', and this is at the root of many of the difficulties in our discussions about literacy and grammar and linguistic competence. A 'grammar' in this sense is a set of categories (e.g., clause, subject, pronoun, article) constructed by a grammarian in order to try to describe what the grammar of natural language does and how it works. The two are very definitely not the same thing, although, as Mr St Leon recognises, there is a point where the two can fruitfully come together. This is where the teaching of the *metalanguage* can expedite, make explicit, and assist in, the learning of the evolved patterns of the natural language.

For example, all children do learn to use some version of the spoken language correctly, from experience, in everyday situations, long before they come to school. It would not be true to argue that this happened without teaching. They have been practising for thousands of hours,in multitudes of contexts, with the aid of adult and peer and sibling co-operation, before they ever reach the classroom. The hours available in the classroom as is shown. are much more limited, and to leave the written resources of the linguistic system, its spellings, its typical written forms (the use of language in mathematics, history, English, geography classes and so on) to evolve in the way the spoken language does would be impractical and unrealistic. It is simply very unlikely that mere exposure, even if repeated, to typical texts will, in the end, enable the average child to spell or to write effectively in the many different

contexts the school and later the community require. If we need any proof of this, Mr St Leon's clearly deeply felt assertions about a 'crisis of literacy', assertions that are repeated at various levels in the community in different ways, provide some indication of the nature and scope of the problem. The educational system is seen as not, on the whole, equipping all children equally well to cope with the communicative demands they meet in their everyday working and student lives, post-school. The answer, because it is what people know, is often seen, as in Mr St Leon's case, as involving a return to 'traditional' skills, like parsing and analysis, error correction and so on. This is not the solution. However, educational policy, and curriculum development, in a number of crucial areas is also full of the contradictions and misunderstandings that surround the failure to distinguish between the two radically different senses of 'grammar' I described above. Recognising, and rightly, that a return to 'traditional' grammar would be pointless, these approaches fall into the other error of failing to see the distinction *between* and thus the need *for* the conjunction of metalanguage and the evolution of the grammar of natural language in the school classroom. With the best intentions in the world, such approaches, and I have the N.S.W. Department of Education's *Writing K-12* document in mind, which assume that all language is best learnt in a 'natural' way, like oral language, and that 'grammar' (metalanguage) and 'spelling' will 'happen' equally naturally in discussions about such writing, are entirely impractical and impracticable. They never define 'grammar' and therefore do teachers a great disservice by providing absolutely nothing in the way of practical teaching methodologies. To this extent one has to applaud what Mr St Leon is arguing: but the problem of the definition of 'grammar' remains, both in his paper, and for us.

'Grammars', in the metalanguage sense, can be constructed to do many different things. We need to be clear at least about the purposes of those we already have available and why we might find one kind of 'grammar' more useful than other kinds of the educational problems outlined above. In Western scholarship there has been a traditional link between writing and the study of language. Most metalanguage 'grammars' have been attempts to describe the written language, and the emphasis has been on the structure and representational function of written language. That is language has been conceptualised as something we use to 'represent' reality. The emphasis on form or structure has been, if you like, an attempt to show how the 'bits' of language (its structures) are related to 'bits' of reality. Thus nouns are the 'names of things', the 'subject' is 'the doer of the action', and so on. As Halliday has said, traditional metalanguage 'grammars' have been written as if natural language were a system of forms with meanings attached to make sense of them.

Halliday argues that languages are rather *systems of meanings* with forms available to realise those meanings. Moreover, the representational function of language, its reality construing function, is only a part of what we use language for. We also use language, its grammatical resources, to construct interpersonal relationships, to exchange meanings in social contexts, and to intrude, as speaker, into the speech

situation. In order to use language to 'represent' and in this interpersonal way, we also require a third set of grammatical resources, with which our natural language provides us. These are the resources for constructing coherent texts and making them relevant to their contexts.

Halliday's metalanguage grammar, his *Functional Grammar of English* (1985), is an attempt to describe the way the grammar of English (its natural grammar) has evolved to serve these three functions. It is a grammar which sees language as a resource for making meanings. It tries to be specific about how meanings are realised in forms, and how choices in meaning and resulting patterns in form are systematically related to the contexts in which choices are made. It is thus able to provide a reasonably coherent account of the way in which 'grammar' (the patterns of language use) is related to context (for example the science, geography, or history classroom) and function (the writing of a scientific report, or geography essay). In principle then it is a metalanguage grammar which has been designed to work in education, and to deal with the very specific kinds of issues that Mr St Leon's paper sees as being crucial to what he calls 'a brave new linguistic world.'

Such a grammar is a far cry from the traditional grammar Mr St Leon falls back on each time he makes any attempt to define what he means by 'grammar'. It is also a far cry from the way he defines functional grammar – 'a nebulous entity which consisted of writing 'I seen it' on the board and asking 'what's wrong with that?'. Oh for the traditional concern with exactitude!

Traditional grammar taught the parts of speech and sentence analysis. Its primary function, the purpose for which it was written, was prescriptive, to establish a right way of writing and to correct errors. It concentrated on formal correctness and was associated with a number of rules of correct usage which all had to do with *form*. Writers were taught not to use split infinitives, to use the possessive case with the gerund, why they should say 'I did it' and not 'I done it', and so on. These rules concentrated on a number of very superficial aspects of writing and provided no real understanding of the writing task itself or of the relationship of that task to context or writing purpose. They were never intended to do these things. Traditional rhetoric which in many ways offered insights into what Halliday now calls the interpersonal and textual functions of language, was designed for those purposes. 'Grammar' in the traditional sense did not have that function.

That is precisely why traditional grammar, and the formal grammars developed by more recent linguists (like Chomsky) within the same tradition, grammars (metalanguages) which describe language as an abstract formal system, cannot be successfully implemented in literacy programmes to teach children to use language more effectively. Standing on their own, as prescriptive tools for correcting errors, and without the back-up of traditional rhetorical teaching and skills, such a

metalanguage grammar is, as Mr St Leon himself demonstrates, 'the death of productive teaching to infants classes'.

What is needed and available is a functional grammar which provides new readings of those traditional skills and a semantically based method of analysis that teachers can use to explain why bad writing is bad writing, why some kinds of writing are different to others, and why writing abilities are not the same as speaking abilities, among other things. At the same time, a functional grammar would provide teachers with a more realistic way of dealing with social difference than Mr St Leon is able to offer.

He rightly points to the failure of educational ideologues who maintain that 'grammar doesn't matter' to provide any methodology or approach which will ensure any more than 'minimal literacy for those incapable of achieving anything higher' and argues that they have 'no responsibility towards those whose needs are more demanding and who may – sinister thought! – distinguish themselves in some sphere if given the chance.' He is right because he sees that the failure to provide careful and explicit teaching in the formal abilities of writing and self-expression is a way of ensuring that those who have greatest access to the most highly valued written and expressive resources of our society, the children of the middle-classes, will continue to get there somehow, while those who have least access to these resources, the children of migrants, the poor, aboriginals, will most assuredly continue not to get there. He is wrong because the only methodology he has to offer, the only luggage he can give his upwardly mobile 'low achievers', the only access he can provide to the world of middle-class success, is the old catch-cry of 'correcting mistakes' and the pursuit of the split infinitive or the use of the possessive case before gerunds. Would that revolution were so simple!

It is not the absence of such knowledge that constitutes a 'crisis in literacy' and this is not the grammar that will solve such a crisis if it exists. Grammar *does* matter. We should be teaching it *and* tht it matters in our Arts Faculties; but to understand either the nature of the crisis or how to offer the necessary remedies we need to be very clear about which 'grammar' and why. Neither traditional grammar nor all the unsplit infinitives ever left intact will ever offer any real solutin to the serious issues and problems raised in Mr St Leon's paper. Nor will they be of any real help to the individuals who will continue to be labelled 'incapable of achieving anything higher' while functional varieties of language continue to be so ill-understood. In a social world where difference must always be labelled inferiority, it is not only those to be educated but also the educators who need a socially based theory of language and a functional grammar.