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Linguistics at school - recent events in England

Mittwoch/Wednesday: 11:15

My paper (in English) will survey the recent history of language education in England. (Other parts of the UK have had similar experiences but I only know about England.) This history is relevant to the theme "Linguistik in der Schule" as a partial success story: linguists now have the opportunity to influence what is taught in English schools. But we are starting from a very low base line, and there is no question of teaching linguistics, as such, in our schools.

Seen from the schools, this influence all falls under the heading of "grammar", but school grammar relates to many different areas of linguistics in addition to the obvious ones (descriptive syntax and morphology): lexical relations, word meaning, discourse structure, language variation and change.

Recent history is divided by three dates:

About 1960. Grammar disappeared from the curriculum of English in most schools because it was badly taught, boring and irrelevant. English = study of English literature plus creative writing. Subsequently:

- Public concern about the weak written English of school-leavers, and suggestions that it was 'because they know no grammar'.
- Most young English teachers now know little or nothing about grammar.

1988. We got our first ever **National Curriculum** for all subjects. The English curriculum included grammar in quite an enlightened form.

1999. The **National Literacy Strategy** was introduced for Years 1-6, focussing grammar clearly on the needs of **writing**. Every primary-school class now has a compulsory 'literacy hour' every day, which has to include some grammar. The general strategy, including the grammar focus, now also applies to Years 7-9, and grammar is applied not only in writing but also in reading and even (tentatively) in speaking and listening.

Linguists have influenced these developments in two ways:

- **sowing seeds** - since Halliday in the 1960s, small numbers of linguists have encouraged initiatives in individual schools, leading to the "language awareness" movement and also to a rather informal course on English Language at Years 12-13. Widely disseminated in a training project (LINC) which the government first funded, then rejected.
- **direct influence** - a group of us complained about a glossary of terminology that was issued with the National Literacy Strategy, and were allowed to revise it - the official government-sponsored glossary of grammatical terminology! We presented ourselves as 'critical friends', who were basically in sympathy with the strategy. Since then we have been accepted as experts and consulted on matters of grammar - mainly by commenting on draft documents.

I shall give concrete examples of the documents that we have influenced.

Is this "Linguistik in der Schule"?

- The main justification for teaching grammar is the practical aim of improving the use of language in writing, reading and speaking/listening.
- But the method of teaching encourages children to understand how grammar works, including their own everyday grammar.
- Children enjoy grammar, educational managers think it's important, but teachers don't know much about it (and secondary English teachers have been taught to despise it), so it's probably not always taught as we would like.