

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE COALFACE GRAMMAR DISPUTE

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: I refer to these two papers together as 'the Coalface Grammar'. Unfortunately, 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. A detailed numbered catalogue of these errors is included in my 2009 paper 'Errors in the Coalface Grammar' (see §§7–8); references to particular errors in the present document are given in the form 'Errors' + the catalogue number.

I have been, and still am, trying to have the Coalface Grammar revised and corrected to minimise the danger of school students being taught erroneous material from this teaching resource. This document provides a short history of the dispute that has arisen over this matter between Dr Ferguson and me.

1 Initial contact with Dr Ferguson.

I first saw the Coalface material in July 2007, when a teacher, dismayed by the errors she herself had noted, asked me for my views. I got in touch with Dr Ferguson (whom I knew from earlier contacts, and who was editor of the journal as well as author of the Coalface Grammar) and we arranged that I would write an article for *Words'Worth* to correct the errors.

2 Negotiations: October 2007 – February 2008

I sent in a first draft in late October 2007. Because the errors were so numerous and because I felt it would be more useful to provide an explanation rather than a summary listing, my article was much longer than the limit set for *Words'Worth* articles. It was agreed, therefore, that I should write a short article for the journal and a longer one that would be posted on the ETAQ website. It was also agreed that we should develop material for a webpage including a short overview of the grammar presented in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* and a brief overview of Systemic-Functional Grammar; I wrote the former, which was uploaded to the ETAQ website in April 2008, whereas the latter was never written, for reasons I will come to shortly.

I sent in a short piece dealing with a sample of the errors on 7 January 2008, and the next day I sent a sample of material for the website article explaining functional grammar's distinction between classes and functions. Dr Ferguson had suggested that we should meet together to discuss matters, and we did this on 9 January. She put forward the view that the exposition of the class/function distinction would be more appropriate for the journal than the outline account of a sample of errors; I agreed in principle, but proposed including two other topics too, complements and expressions headed by adjectives. I then sent in a second version of the journal article on 14 January, but it became apparent that there had been a serious difference in our understanding of what had been agreed at the 9 January meeting. What I did in the section dealing with functions and classes was to explain these concepts and then use this account to show how the Coalface Grammar could have avoided a number of errors if it had adopted functional grammar's distinction between them; it showed, for example, that it could have avoided the error of saying that *your* in *your folder* is both a possessive pronoun and a determiner, two mutually exclusive word classes – and likewise that of saying that *Sam's* in *Sam's folder* is also both a possessive pronoun and a determiner. Dr Ferguson's view, however, was that there should be no mention at all of specific errors in the journal article: these should be restricted to the website article. Although I felt that this was not the best way of doing things, I had no alternative but to accept the decision made by the editor in consultation with the ETAQ President, Mr Garry Collins, and I submitted a third version on 25 January.

Up to this point our discussions had been amicable, and had been almost wholly confined to general issues and the matter of the division of material between the journal and website papers. Dr Ferguson gave no indication that she regarded the bulk of my criticisms as invalid. This is evident from her document 'Specific response to Rodney Huddleston's [sic] *Remarks*' of 7 December 2007 (included as an appendix to the present document), and from the fact that she accepted that the Coalface Grammar had failed to present functional grammar's distinction between functions and classes: she wrote a partial editorial revision of the second version of my journal article, the one dealing with this topic, and called it 'OMISSIONS with the coal-face grammar' (highlighting added). With three small exceptions, she didn't challenge my treatment of Coalface Grammar statements or analyses as errors. She didn't say, for example, 'It's not an error to call *Sam's* a possessive pronoun, *a pair* an adjective,' and so on: we didn't discuss this kind of question. The three exceptions appear in the 'Specific response' document; I discussed them in the first version of my 2009 paper 'Errors in the Coalface Grammar', but had to drop them from the final version for reasons explained in §8. I give the relevant extracts from the first version of 'Errors' in a second appendix to the present document – and as a third appendix I give the second (i.e. 14 January) version of my journal article.

As I mentioned above, I did not agree with the decision to exclude all discussion of specific errors from the journal article. I therefore distanced myself from it by saying that, as editor, Dr Ferguson took the view that all specific criticisms should be confined to the website article. Although this was of course true, it caused her great offence. One consequence of this was that she withdrew the invitation for me to collaborate with her on the brief overview of functional grammar for the webpage; I expressed the hope that she would reconsider that decision, but the matter was never mentioned again and the overview was never written. I removed the offending statement, and submitted the final version of the paper. Dr Ferguson had said that she was preparing comments for the March 2008 *Words'Worth* on papers by me and other invited contributors on various aspects of the Coalface project; I asked her to let me see a pre-publication draft of what she wrote on my website and journal papers, but she ignored this request.

3 The March 2008 *Words'Worth*

When on its publication in April I saw what she had written I was shocked to find that she had a paragraph headed 'Errata' listing just four errors, and she said that my paper 'identified some errors/oversights in the classification of "structural elements" ... which appear' in that paragraph. The implication (later expressed as an assertion) was that there were only those four errors in her work. Thus readers were not directed to my web article in order to find corrections to the Coalface material, as I had expected. Instead, my web article was said to require readers 'to have extensive knowledge of traditional, structural and functional grammars' and was recommended to teachers 'who are interested in comparing similarities and differences in traditional, structural and functional grammars, and in identifying areas of possible confusion'. Such remarks are not likely to motivate many readers to consult the article. We thus had a situation where all specific criticisms had been removed from my *Words'Worth* article and relegated to a web article that had been presented as suitable for a highly restricted audience.

I regarded this as a completely unacceptable outcome. It represented a major change from the position she had adopted during the three months of discussion we had had. As I have said, she had given no indication that she recognised only four errors, and this was inconsistent with what she had written in the 'Specific response' document and with her admission that she had failed to present functional grammar's distinction between functions and classes, a failure that underlines a good number of errors. The above-mentioned proposal to write a brief overview of Systemic-Functional Grammar, moreover, had tacitly recognised that the Coalface Grammar had seriously misrepresented it. In addition, many unacknowledged errors were strikingly obvious – e.g. the classification of *Sam's* as a possessive pronoun ('Errors' [60]) or of *a pair* as an adjective ('Errors' [11]). Many involved glaring inconsistencies. How can it not be

inconsistent, and hence an error, to assert that prepositions appear as head word in preposition phrases and then that preposition phrases have no head word ('Errors' [28])? This was an error to which I drew attention when I first wrote to Dr Ferguson in July 2007 and have quoted frequently since then, but she has never mentioned it, to acknowledge it or to claim it is not an error. Or take the issue of inflection. She defines this as a matter of whether bound morphemes are used to express grammatical contrasts, bound morphemes being parts of words, not themselves whole words. But then she says that inflection for grade in adjectives can be marked by the separate words *more* and *most*, and then later implicitly reverts to the original definition in saying that adverbs don't inflect, so that *more careful* will be an inflected form of the adjective *careful* while *more carefully* is not an inflected form of the adverb *carefully* ('Errors' [10], [19]). Her position is quite clearly untenable.

It was evident, moreover, that it would be pointless to complain to the President of ETAQ about this, for he had already made clear in correspondence I had with him while Dr Ferguson was overseas that he thought there was very little wrong with her articles. I had told him in an email of 8 April 2008 that the Coalface Grammar was 'shockingly bad', giving a sample of half a dozen particularly serious errors, and he had replied dismissively:

- [1] I do not agree that a few errors in Lenore's articles constitute "a most unsatisfactory state of affairs" at all. It would of course have been preferable if the errors had not been there but if they serve to generate some discussion and debate in school staff rooms about grammar then I think that could potentially be a good thing.

4 Approach to *The Australian*

After mulling the matter over for some weeks, and noting that nothing had come of the proposal for a brief overview of Systemic-Functional Grammar, I decided to contact *The Australian* with the aim of drawing public attention to the fact that Queensland teachers in ETAQ had been given a teacher resource containing a great many errors. I was interviewed by telephone by their education correspondent, Justine Ferrari, and an article appeared on 13 June 2008. She had also contacted Dr Ferguson and Mr Collins (the President of ETAQ), and their comments were cited in the same article. She also had an article the following day, based on a written submission by Dr Ferguson and a telephone interview with her. Both Dr Ferguson and Mr Collins denied that there were errors beyond those acknowledged in the March 2008 *Words'Worth*. Dr Ferguson said that for the rest it was merely a matter of differences of opinion: I have dealt with that claim in 'Errors', §Ic. In the article of 14 June she said that some of the alleged errors 'appear so when taken out of context', but no example was given and this claim has not been repeated. Mr Collins is reported as saying:

- [2] the mistakes were relatively minor ... If coming upon these couple of minor inaccuracies caused teachers to be having conversations about grammar in classrooms then I would see that as not a bad thing

This view is refuted in 'Errors', §Ia. Shortly afterwards, in an email of 19 June replying to an overseas correspondent, David Vaux, he wrote:

- [3] The few real errors that appeared in the ETAQ journal **last year** were ones of proofreading in moving through several versions of a document. They were acknowledged and corrected in the next issue.

This endorses the position adopted by Dr Ferguson in the March 2008 *Words'Worth*. In the same email he wrote:

- [4] You can be assured that I will continue to stoutly defend Lenore Ferguson and

probably to attack Professor Huddleston as opportunities present themselves.

5 Approach to Professor LaPolla

In view of the failure of Dr Ferguson and Mr Collins to accept that there were numerous and serious errors in the Coalface Grammar beyond the four acknowledged, I wrote on 28 June to the President of the Australian Linguistics Society, Professor Randy LaPolla, asking for his opinion on the matter. I had had no previous contact with him, and he had for a number of years taught courses on functional grammar at university level, making him an ideal person to express a judgement on the case. He wrote a letter of great tact to Dr Ferguson, with a copy to Mr Collins, expressing agreement with my criticisms and endorsing my recommendation that the material be revised and corrected. He emphasised that my criticisms

[5] were largely from the viewpoint of FG [functional grammar], and so were essentially the same as mine [i.e. Professor LaPolla's], and not criticisms that could be said to be due to him having a different theoretical stance.

Mr Collins and Dr Ferguson summarily dismissed his letter without addressing its content. The letter with my comments on these responses is available in the document 'Professor LaPolla's Coalface Grammar letter' on the same webpage as the present document.

6 'Reflections on Grammar at the Coalface'

In the September 2008 *Words'Worth* statements on the articles in *The Australian* by the Management Committee and the author were published in a section called 'Reflections on Grammar at the Coalface'. The Management Committee said that the approach to media had been unnecessary, which implies that there was nothing significantly wrong with the Coalface Grammar beyond what had been corrected. They also said that they had 'no official position in relation to the details of any of the Coalface materials or related articles commenting on them'. Dr Ferguson acknowledged two further errors: the classification of *a pair* as an adjective ('Errors', item [11]) and the inconsistency in saying first that the largest unit on the rank scale is the clause complex and then a few lines later that it is the clause ('Errors', item [1]). The acknowledgement at this point of two such obvious errors calls into question the credibility of the original list of errata of March 2008, for I had earlier drawn her attention to the first of them in five documents and the second in four: how had they come to be omitted from the first set of errata? She reiterated her position that there were now no other unacknowledged errors, and spoke of differences in perspective between structural and traditional or functional grammar, in spite of the testimony of Professor LaPolla reported in [5] above.

7 Legal proceedings

Before I could submit a reply to these statements I received a letter from Dr Ferguson's lawyer informing me of her 'intention to commence legal proceedings' against me for defamation on the basis of material published in *The Australian*. In response to a request for clarification from my lawyer she was reported as

[6] [adhering] to the view that all errors in her articles ... were corrected in the September 2007 and March 2008 issues of *Words'Worth*.

This didn't even take account of the two errors acknowledged in the September 2008 issue, following the publication of the article in *The Australian*. It was also claimed that we were not in dispute, but had 'agreed to disagree'. This is quite untrue. As argued in 'Errors' §Ic, to agree to disagree implies accepting that the other person has reasonable grounds for their position even though one doesn't agree with it. But Dr Ferguson doesn't have reasonable grounds for saying that *Sam's* is a possessive pronoun, *set of* an adjective, and so on. I couldn't possibly have

agreed to differ with her on such matters.

My lawyer's letter requesting clarification had included a sample of 34 errors, and the reply stated that Dr Ferguson was

[7] not interested in engaging in a point by point analysis of the 34 alleged "errors" identified by [Professor Huddleston]. She has examined each "error", re-examined her articles and adheres to the position previously expressed [and cited as [6] above].

The letter also repeated the claim about different perspectives:

[8] A number of Emeritus Professor Huddleston's "errors" are expressed from a perspective associated with structural grammar (e.g. classification, grammatical unit, syntax). This "alternative" perspective contrasts with the functional grammar perspective that specifically underpins the articles, as your client notes in his three articles published by ETAQ. They are therefore not errors at all when viewed from the grammatical perspective from which they are written.

As noted in [5] above, Professor LaPolla's letter explicitly testifies against this claim. Dr Ferguson has never given an example of an error I have identified which would not be an error from a functional grammar perspective. In 'Errors', §1b I argue against claim [8], citing the major source for functional grammar to demonstrate many cases where Dr Ferguson's analysis conflicts with that of functional grammar.

In his reply, my lawyer emphasised, among other things, that if the case were proceeded with, Dr Ferguson would certainly be called upon to justify her claim that the great majority of the errors I had identified were not errors at all:

[9] What is needed is a careful examination of the numerous specific errors identified by my client, with evidence and argument to establish that only a small minority are genuine errors. Dr Ferguson has never shown any willingness to engage in this kind of exercise.

We never heard from her lawyer again, and the case simply lapsed in due course. It is reasonable to infer that the reason she did not proceed with the case was that she knew she would not be able to demonstrate that most of the errors I had identified were not genuine errors.

In February 2009 I wrote the first version of my 'Errors' paper as preparation for my defence if the case should go to court. In due course it was posted on the web.

8 My response to 'Reflections on *Grammar at the Coalface*'

After the case had lapsed I wrote a reply to the statements in 'Reflections on *Grammar at the Coalface*'. The Management Committee refused to publish it, giving no reason for their decision; I have now posted it on the web at the same site as the present document. Mr Collins did, however, offer to post on the ETAQ website for a limited period a revised version of my 'Errors' paper provided I removed repeated references to Dr Ferguson. I submitted the revision, which does not even mention her name, at the end of November 2009: it was this condition that made it necessary to drop reference to the points made in her 'Specific Response' document, as noted in §2 above. The revised version of 'Errors' was uploaded to the ETAQ website in January 2010; it is also available at the present website.

9 Dr Ferguson's response to 'Errors'

On 24 December 2009 I received from Mr Collins a draft version of Dr Ferguson's response to 'Errors'. I sent him detailed critical comments on her draft – and also an 'eleventh-hour appeal'

to the Management Committee to warn members against basing their teaching systematically and comprehensively on the Coalface Grammar; this letter is posted on the present website with the title 'Coalface Grammar letter to Mr Collins of 6 January 2010'

The final version of Dr Ferguson's response was uploaded to the ETAQ website in mid-January 2010. Some personal remarks have been removed from the draft, but for the rest very little has been changed. She maintains her position that there was very little wrong with the published version of her article. And she continues to refuse to defend her analyses with respect to the evidence and arguments I have adduced against them: 'It is unnecessary to post a detailed response to "Errors in the Coalface Grammar"'. She also repeats errors resulting from her misunderstanding of the fundamental distinction between functions and classes. My comments on her paper are given in 'Reply to Dr Ferguson's response to "Errors in the Coalface Grammar"', available on the present website.

The Management Committee ignored my eleventh-hour appeal. We are thus left with the situation where ETAQ has published a teaching resource containing an exceptionally large number of errors of which only a small proportion have been acknowledged. The author refuses to acknowledge and correct the remainder, while ETAQ refuses to do anything about this; the Management Committee regard the matter as closed and will not publish any further articles or correspondence on it. I therefore have no alternative but to pursue elsewhere my efforts to alert teachers to the errors in the Coalface Grammar.