

## 2. A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS

*By Charles Varano*

When thinking about a sociological perspective on grammar and mechanics I asked myself, 'what could a sociological perspective on writing mean?' I do not think there is any ONE sociological perspective on grammar and mechanics, but rather several. Certainly there are some agreed upon practices such as general grammatical correctness, coherent organization of topics, clarity of prose, appropriate citations and references, etc. (Smith-Lovin and Moskovitz 2016, Galvin and Galvin 2017). But on another level, sociology has always sought to present the "big picture;" one is reminded of C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959, 2000). As Mills argued, sociology is not only a discipline of scientific research that collects data, measures it, and presents it, what he called and criticized as "abstracted empiricism." Sociology is also about interpreting data and making an argument regarding its significance to the discipline and to society at large. Answering the "so what" question; Why is this important? Why should I read this? How does this matter to anything? Beyond the mechanics of writing, writing in sociology also involves linking the individual with society, constructing a self in relationship with various constituencies and milieus within a specific historical period. Consequently, I take a sociological perspective on writing to mean how writers try to persuade

readers of the accuracy and value of our interpretation of the world from a sociological perspective. Therefore, grammar and mechanics must work, in large part, toward that goal.

Put another way, writing in sociology is not as much about the data or information that is presented, but *how* it is presented. I often tell students in my classes that after reading Marx, I am a Marxist; after reading feminist authors, I am a feminist; after reading critical race theorists, I am a critical race theorist. This is because of how persuasive authors can be in presenting evidence and arguing their case. The key is how compelling a writer is, how convincing they are. Thus, one must also be cautious of how seductive writers can be by the ways they use grammar and mechanics to convey their point of view. I would like to discuss two main features of writing that I think will best illustrate this general point: the difference between using the first person pronoun or the third person passive voice in writing, and the critical importance of revision in writing. I will then offer a few observations on writing that I hope may be helpful for students. Throughout this essay I will speak of writing from a sociological perspective, but many, if not most, of my points apply across scientific disciplines as well as in many fiction genres.

## BUT THAT'S BIASED!

One of the most notable differences in how many sociologists (student or scholar) write is in using the conventional third person passive voice rather than the first person pronoun. Typically this is an effort to appear “objective” by presenting data or information in what many consider a “neutral” fashion while avoiding the first person pronoun “I” which connotes an author’s point of view about the data or information. Some commonly used phrases include: “The data shows” or “according to the data;” “research finds that” or “it was found that;” “it is thought that” or “the literature shows.” Personally, this phraseology troubles me and I ask my students to use the first person pronoun “I” when writing. Though there are certainly times when the third person passive voice is useful or unavoidable, in my view its standardized usage misrepresents the author and reinforces an ideology that science is apolitical, impersonal, and immune from bias.

First off, “data” does not *show* anything; rather authors present data in ways that show something they want to show. “Research” does not *find* anything; rather authors find research that is relevant to (and often supports) their argument. Lurking behind the third person passive voice is a real human being that is making an argument, conveying their point of view regarding evidence, and this person should be present in the writing as actively assembling the words being read. I see nothing biased in an author clearly stating how they arrive at the decisions they make regarding reviewing literature, designing a research project, gathering data or information, and presenting it to readers. At least the reader is more aware that choices were made and they can judge how biased or *flawed* these choices might or might not be. But when we write in the third person passive voice, I believe we hide behind the rhetoric of scientific objectivity in

ways that conceal the choices that may or may not actually produce bias or flaws. Further, this form of writing conveys an authorial voice that is privileged because of the impression that it is not biased but objective, thus casting all other voices (including the reader’s) as invalid or “merely” an opinion. In sum, let your reader know *you* are behind the pen, or rather the keyboard. Let your point of view be judged by the evidence *you* choose to present, rather than a grammatical form obscuring you from your reader.

## REVISION CLARIFIES THOUGHT

I have found that the process of revising one’s writing is extremely important for achieving clarity of prose but also for arriving at clarity of thought. We have all sat before a blank page trying to figure out what to write and how to begin; sometimes for hours or days, sometimes for longer. And frequently I will hear students say (as I have said to myself), “I have so many ideas I don’t know where to start.” My advice to them, as I have learned, is to start by putting those ideas down in print, just start writing! The point is that by writing or typing ideas you stop them from “swimming” in your head and hold them down so you can see them. After reading what you wrote, you can adjust the words to better convey what you think you think. In other words, revising one’s writing helps one to think through the many ideas we have and to better understand what those ideas are, and how they relate to other ideas and our purpose for writing. In this sense writing and thinking are a dialectical process, they rely on and enhance one another. And not unlike the person whose diary or journal writing helps them understand their emotional and mental world, the process of revising also enhances the clarity and coherence of one’s voice.

For example, I have always found it helpful when someone reads what I have written and

offers constructive criticism. Though I might have spent months re-reading and revising my work, that very fact may mean I am too close to it, too invested in what I have written to clearly see mistakes in grammar, sentence clarity, or organization of thought. Indeed, though most writing is a solitary endeavor, most of what is finally written and read by others is a collective achievement involving the revisions and comments from colleagues, reviewers, and editors, if not also family, friends, and students. And if you cannot find someone to read your paper then, as I suggest to my students, go into a bathroom, run the shower, and read your paper aloud. It is often easier to *hear* your mistakes or confused prose than see them on the page.

Finally, keep in mind that nothing's perfect; no book, article, or essay. Thinking about writing the "best of anything" will stop even the best of writers from touching a pen or keyboard. That is another reason why revision is so helpful. You know you will take many swipes at getting your thoughts clear, both on paper and in your head. Granted, the opportunity to revise varies by context. Given that undergraduate students frequently have three or four or five classes in a semester that may require multiple or extensive writing assignments all due at once, they will likely not have as much time to revise their writing (unless it is part of a class assignment). Hence, many if not most undergraduates are pretty good at writing a pretty good paper a few days or late nights before it is due. They have had practice juggling course requirements and meeting deadlines, often while also working full or part time or meeting family obligations. Graduate students may have more time for revisions, especially when they are writing their thesis or dissertation which requires multiple revisions pending advisor(s) comments. For university faculty who publish their work, revision is standard practice even prior to the "revise and resubmit" notification following

manuscript submissions. Still, whether a diary entry, term paper, or book manuscript, revision leads to better writing.

## SOME THOUGHTS ON WRITING IN GENERAL

When I was young I loved to write stories about this or that, probably based on something I saw on television or in a movie. I even came in second place in a city-wide contest in seventh grade when I wrote an essay about the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund or UNICEF (I modeled the essay on the popular television show *Mission Impossible*). I recall vividly how upset I was as my English teacher kept telling me to revise my essay; "It's too long, make it shorter!" Apparently there was a required word limit, but to me it seemed she was just being unreasonable. I continued to enjoy writing papers through high school and as an undergraduate, always basking in the praise (however brief) scribbled on the final page. Then I lost it all in graduate school. I literally forgot how to write. I could not even put two sentences together much less write a coherent paragraph. Of course part of it was trying to please demanding professors while in the company of fellow graduate students I assumed were better writers than me. Part of it was because I was trying to write in the complex lexicon of the theorists I was reading. And part of it was simply that I knew much less than I thought I knew and I feared never knowing enough to say anything meaningful about anything.

Thanks to a dear friend and fellow graduate student who spent weeks patiently showing me how to appropriately connect subject and object clauses, I gradually worked my way to a point where I was able to continue my studies and begin writing my dissertation. Thanks to faculty advisors who stuck with me through years of "writer's block" I completed my

dissertation. And thanks to another dear friend and fellow graduate student who edited my dissertation, I achieved my first book publication (though he shook his head for months, "How did you ever get this morass approved?") From this experience I want to offer some thoughts that reflect *this sociologist's* perspective on grammar and mechanics.

1. It is often helpful to read authors whose writing you like. There is nothing wrong with emulating an author's style as long as you are careful to not write in an overly complex or "intellectualized" manner. Some styles are more appropriate for some topics or methodologies. For example, more disciplined prose may be useful for presenting quantitative research, while a more literary style may work better with some forms of qualitative research, say ethnographic research versus interview based research versus historical-comparative research. Likewise, some authors write aggressively with booming crescendos of prose that demand a reader's attention (Marx comes to mind, as does some of C. Wright Mills' work), while other authors write lightly as they lead readers carefully through the complexity of evidence and nuance of their argument (in my view most good ethnographies reflect this style).
2. It is easy to get carried away and write long sentences that try to fit in every thought you have. When sentences become too lengthy, meaning gets lost within multiple clauses. Many writers try to use punctuation to regain coherence, but I suggest that one simply write a series of shorter sentences. You can always work on improving how to convey complex ideas through the revision process.
3. Be judicious when using punctuation such as colons, semi-colons, dashes, and parenthesis to set off ideas or elaborate a point. As noted above this is very common to long sentences, and incorrect or over usage can lead to awkward sentences and muddled prose. Punctuation can be very important in establishing a syntactical "rhythm" and if used wisely can convey ideas and arguments that readers want to read because they are easier to read. Similarly, punctuation can help writers address multiple audiences in the same sentence. A professor of mine once explained how he used parenthetical asides to address various social science disciplines but also as a way of silencing "imaginary" critics of an argument he was developing.
4. Lastly, in my view one of the best examples of a sociological perspective on grammar, mechanics, and writing in general is still C. Wright Mills' "On Intellectual Craftsmanship;" an appendix from *The Sociological Imagination*. In this essay Mills emphasized that writing should be integrated within, not separate from, one's life. Mills advocated that clear and simple prose is critical to engaging the world and one's inner self; that playing with words, phrases, and concepts is central to creatively and critically imagining self and society. I recall in graduate school taking a writing seminar (twice) where students would submit sections of their dissertation research for collective review. We would often spend an hour or more discussing one paragraph or even a sentence or two. It was excruciating when it was someone else's writing, but it could be decimating when one's own work was on the chopping block. Clearly our egos were on the line as anxiety, anger, embarrassment, and frequently tears welled up as the professor spoke: "What do you mean here?" "Why did

you use this word?" "This doesn't make sense," "You need to think this through more carefully," "Do you even know what you're saying?" The point is that we express who we are when we write but, unlike when we speak, "writing oneself" seems more permanent, less amenable to the wiggling and squirming self of verballity. From a sociological perspective, then, I would suggest that writing is as open to fluctuation as one is to acknowledging a complex world and one's changing place in it. This is the lesson of revision and the consequence of using the first-person pronoun "I."

## WORKS CITED

- Galvin, Jose L. and Melisa C. Galvin. *Writing Literature Reviews: A Guide for Students of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. New York: Routledge Press, 2017.
- Mills, C. Wright. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, (1959) 2000.
- Smith-Lovin, Lynn and Cary Moskovitz. *Writing in Sociology: a Brief Guide*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

## Vocabulary

**Grammar:** A way of thinking about language

**Four elements of grammar:** parts of speech, parts of sentence, phrases, and clauses.

**Parts of Speech:** the eight kinds of words in English; noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, and interjection

1. **Noun:** The name of a person, place or thing
2. **Pronoun:** a word that takes the place of a noun
  - ❖ **Subject Pronouns:** pronouns used for subjects of verbs and subject complements
    - Examples of subject pronouns: I, you, he, she, it, we, they
  - ❖ **Object Pronouns:** used as direct or indirect objects and objects of prepositions
    - Examples of object pronouns: me, you, him, her, it us, them
3. **Adjective:** a word that modifies a noun or pronoun
  - ❖ **Article:** the three adjectives: a, an, the
4. **Verb:** a word that shows action, being, or links a subject to its subject complement
5. **Adverb:** modifies a verb, adjective, or another adverb
6. **Conjunction:** a word that joins two words or two groups of words
  - ❖ **Coordinating Conjunctions:** and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet
  - ❖ **Subordinating Conjunctions:** connect two unequal clauses
    - Examples of subordinating conjunctions: if, as, since, when, because . . .
  - ❖ **Correlative Conjunctions:** either. . . or, neither. . . nor, not only. . . but also
7. **Preposition:** shows the relationship between its object and another word in the sentence
8. **Interjection:** shows emotion but has no grammatical function

Adapted from: "Grammar Cheat Sheet" from Folsom Codova Unified School District. Available online at: <https://www.fcusd.org/cms/lib/CA01001934/Centricity/Domain/1341/Grammar%20Help%20Sheet.doc>