

Key Pedagogic Thinkers

R. J. Harris

Meg Harris Williams

R. J. (Roland) Harris (1919-1969), English teacher and poet, was deputy head of the flagship London comprehensive school Woodberry Down in the 1960s. He was perhaps best known in the educational field for the findings of his PhD thesis (1962) which was an experimental enquiry into the teaching of grammar in the early secondary school years. He also worked for the Schools Council, where he was instrumental in the raising of the school leaving age to 16; and for the last two years of his life he taught psycholinguistics at Brunel University. Many of his child-centred ideas on education were honed in association with his wife, Martha Harris, who was head of the Child Psychotherapy training at the Tavistock Clinic; his group work and administrative experience lay behind her restructuring of the training in the 60s. In 1968, after a pilot project conducted at Woodberry Down, they started a pioneering Schools Counsellors' Course at the Tavistock.¹

In the course of his research and publications (including *Your English* with Denys Thompson, and many articles in *The Use of English*), Harris tackled in various ways what were, for different reasons, the two consistently most unpopular aspects of the English curriculum, poetry and grammar – that is, emotion and structure. One is awkward and disturbing, the other is 'difficult'. With regard to grammar, the problem that frustrated many teachers, and that modern linguists recognized, was not just that it was difficult – it was that it did not describe accurately the living structure of the English language, nor was there a consensus even amongst grammarians. He described the situation at the time as 'authoritarian chaos'. His *Experimental Enquiry* (1962) was highly influential on the changing course of language teaching in subsequent years. Within the participating London schools, the experiment spanned a complete mix of social class and intelligence range. The oft-cited conclusion was that the written work of children who are taught no grammar improves faster than that of children taught grammar; and that at that age, grammar is in effect unteachable to all but a few, and those to a very limited degree. It was a conclusion that came as no surprise to many teachers; what differentiated this study from many previous ones (in America as well as Britain) was its scope and thoroughness, and the development and testing of realistic measuring implements, which were then deployed over a timescale sufficient to meaningfully assess children's stylistic maturation as well as their mechanical knowledge. Unmeasurable variables were also discussed, such as the experience and attitude of the teachers taking part, and the problems of defining correctness in an ever-changing, dialectal, world language.

In an article summarizing the conclusions of his grammar experiment (1965), Harris cites a G.C.E. examiner's report noting the 'disturbing feature' that students who

did well in the grammar test sometimes displayed in their essays 'an inability to construct a correct sentence'. He asks, 'Do we in teaching English pay too much attention to our pupils' ignorance of grammar, and too little to their errors of thought?' (1965, p. 197). English teachers may enjoy grammar; but it should not be a self-indulgent game to be played perhaps with some of the brighter pupils, at the expense of developing an effective system of language instruction that would enable pupils to become (as Milton put it) 'competently wise in their mother dialect' (*Of Education*, 1644). Language should serve life and its needs; and Harris's vision was that the world would be a better place if people were capable of 'putting their words in order' – not for purposes of persuasion or indoctrination or gameplaying but for 'co-operativeness': 'Human fitness to survive', he wrote, 'means the ability to talk and write and listen and read in ways that increase the chances for each of us and fellow members of our species to survive together' (1962, p. 249). 'Our nerve endings finish where language falls silent' (p. 249). How can the study of language help the child become a citizen of the world?

The various assumptions about the usefulness of teaching formal grammar (as a 'pure science', an intellectual discipline, a transferable skill, etc) reflected certain illusions about the nature of how languages develop and how children learn language, which no longer corresponded with twentieth-century philosophical and psychological awareness. Along with those in the I. A. Richards, Wittgenstein and Chomskyan traditions, Harris saw 'the inseparability of form and meaning [as] one of the most important considerations for the shaping of a language course' (1962, p. 92), for when form and meaning are separated, there is a danger of the 'parrot-like imitation' that actually disguises a deep ignorance of what the literature is actually about, and is moreover 'out of keeping with an organic understanding of language' (p. 88). Instead of regarding language as a tool, he suggests we use the analogy of 'muscles': 'As these are trained by exercising, so is language learnt. It is learnt by the manipulation of whole meanings – not lexical meaning simply, but structural meaning; not the parts of speech, but speeches' (p. 217). But renouncing the 'narrower values of prescriptive usage or of grammar' confronts teachers with the harder task of deciding other 'criteria by which to judge standards of acceptable speech and writing', and requires 'a clearer understanding of the nature of communication itself' (1966, p. 119).

What is distinctive about Harris's approach, in the *Experimental Enquiry*, is the application of scientific method to a strictly delimited problem, but in a way that creates repercussions with the total context in which the child has existence and needs to become 'educated', that is, to find identity. This is intimately linked to the

relationship with the teacher, highlighting the need for 'integrative' or 'interpersonal' modes of communication (terminology from D. W. Harding and from psychoanalysis respectively — in Harris, 1955, 1966). The English teacher, Harris wrote in 1966, was now expected to fulfil an increasingly 'diffuse' role in facilitating the child's overall development, in a way that takes social factors as well as the total curriculum into account. At the heart of this lies the responsibility of enabling the child to learn to use language to 'manage life'. A 'truly educative form' of teaching is not simply prescriptive, but 'demands from the pupil active co-operation and choice, a sharing of responsibility for the organic growth of language itself' (1962, p. 214). He calls this alternative mode of language teaching a 'grammar of situation' (p. 246), and presents it with examples in all his writings and textbooks. The classroom is 'a laboratory for the manufacture of linguistic situations' (p. 216), an opportunity to demonstrate the workings of 'language in action':

The active co-operation of children may be assured if their needs to control and respond to a situation are satisfied. They become responsible for language as they perceive the link between language and their life. (p. 266)

A 'grammar of situation' grows out of the context of the English lesson and takes the nature of the identification with the teacher into account. 'Everybody learns' — including the teacher. But the teacher's diffuse or semi-parental role — enabling emotional containment as well as academic achievement — can only be fulfilled if language teaching is effective; for 'without primary skill the secondary and more important value experiences are not finally possible through the medium of English.'

Society of course has changed since the 1960s, and language with it, as Harris's pedagogical principles with their 'process' outlook take into account. But if there are currently held views that on the one hand, 'correct' English is no longer necessary, and on the other hand, that formal grammar teaching should be reintroduced, it may be worthwhile scrutinizing yet again these principles and the evidence from which they are derived — the way in which the interaction of children, teachers and scientific measurement is handled. Harris thought, in fact, that grammar was best studied in the sixth form — the most profitable place:

to argue about our present inheritance, or even better, about the new description of the actual structure of our language which surely we school teachers live in hope of receiving from the universities in the not-too-distant future. The only disturbing feature is that at sixth-form level we cease to study grammar. (1965, p. 202)

To first establish correct usage, and then scientifically to describe or even modify and expand our definition of correctness, seemed to him the proper developmental order for studying the native language.

Ultimately his own conclusion to the problem of 'new criteria' was that, to be an authentic role-model, the teacher should be 'continually returning to the sources of his inspiration' (1966, p. 120), so that teaching is always a vehicle for his own learning and development, not just that of the students. However well qualified a teacher may be his identity is not fixed, but is always in the process of 'becoming', in the same way that Wilfred Bion (Harris's own analyst) defined the psychoanalyst's activity as one of perpetually 'becoming' a psychoanalyst. He does this by demonstrating his own interest, concern and craftsmanship. 'Will a child read or write or think these things matter, if his teacher does not?' (1966, p. 120). As Donald Meltzer wrote of the restructured Tavistock Child Psychotherapy course:

The central conviction, later hallowed in Bion's concept of 'learning from experience', was that the kind of learning which transformed a person into a professional worker had to be rooted in the intimate relations with inspired teachers, living and dead, present and in books. Roland himself, as poet and scholar, was an inspired teacher and the many textbooks he wrote concentrated on the development in the student of the capacity to read in both a comprehensive and a penetrating way. (Meltzer 2011, p. 345).

After Harris's early death in 1969, Martha Harris and Donald Meltzer founded the Roland Harris Educational Trust, a registered charity aiming to promote psychoanalytic understanding, in particular of children and young people; it published for 30 years as the Clunie Press and continues as the Harris Meltzer Trust, with the same aims (www.harris-meltzer-trust.org.uk).

R. J. Harris was my father, so influenced my own work in many ways; but none more than in this advice to keep returning to one's sources of inspiration, and never to divorce the grammar of language from that of life.

References

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¹ For the first lecture of the Course go to: <http://www.harris-meltzer-trust.org.uk/RolandHarris.html>. Origins of the course are recounted by Jack Whitehead (a teacher at the school) on <http://www.locallocalhistory.co.uk/schools/woodberry/index.htm>.