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## Grammar and Great Literature

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**ABSTRACT** This is an extract from 'Politics, Reading and Knowledge about Language', the author's address to the 1991 annual conference of the National Association for the Teaching of English. It describes the moment in 1988 when Kenneth Baker, then Secretary of State for Education and Science, received the report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English Language [the Kingman Report], which he had established. It failed to please him, because it did not recommend a return to old-fashioned grammar teaching based on a Latinate model of English, as he had hoped it would.

... But grammar was what Mr Baker wanted. It has totemistic power; it is one of the carriers of populist myth from the government's point of view. Precariously, he tried to link grammar with another totem, great literature, in the terms of reference he imposed on the work of the Cox Committee [described here as 'the Working Group'], which he had recently convened to propose the contents of the new National Curriculum for English:

The Working Group's recommendations on learning about language [for which, in the government dictionary, read grammar] and its use should draw upon the English literary heritage...

So you get your grammar from your heritage, as in:

In these times of ours, though concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise, a boat, of dirty and disreputable appearance, with two figures in it, floated on the Thames, between Southwark Bridge, which is of iron, and London Bridge, which is of stone, as an autumn evening was closing in.

The opening of *Our Mutual Friend*. A magnificent sentence, full of subordination and historical interest, such as the fact that London Bridge is no longer of stone.

Equally effective as the opening to a novel is the following sentence:

London. [full stop]

This is followed by another, even more effective sentence:

Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in  
Lincoln's Inn Hall. [full stop]

And thus *Bleak House* begins to cast its spell. We read through its wonderful first paragraph, once again about London in the autumn, with ne'er a main verb to guide us. Second paragraph looms up:

Fog everywhere. [full stop] Fog up the river, where it flows among  
green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled  
among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great  
(and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish  
heights.

Verbs here, yes, but only in the subordinate clauses. And so on for ten more lines (but only three more sentences); Dickens knew the use of the semi-colon. The third paragraph:

Gas looming through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as  
the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by  
husbandman and ploughboy. Most of the shops lighted two hours  
before their time – as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard  
and unwilling look.

More verbs of various forms, but none main. It's too much of a flight of fancy, of course, but I'll mention it anyway, to suggest that there's any significance in the fact that Dickens only feels the need of a main verb when he introduces us, in the fourth paragraph, to the English law:

The raw afternoon is [pshaw!] rawest, and the dense fog is [what a relief!] densest, and the muddy streets are [thank goodness!] muddiest, near the leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits [he does, at last!] the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

When it comes to doing things legal, we need to get our language straight. Mr Baker said as much a few months later, when, again through gritted teeth, he held another press conference to introduce the Cox Report:

Children need to know the various weight that words are, er, used  
in sentences.

– a charmingly appropriate occasion on which to use an ungrammatical sentence.

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