

**Acts of Imagination**  
**George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and**  
**Lindley Murray and his *English Grammar***  
**A *Divertissement* on Literature and Language**  
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**I. George Eliot and the ‘Potential Mood’**

[Fred Vincy:] “When a man is not loved, it is no use for him to say that he could be a better fellow—could do anything—I mean, if he were sure of being loved in return.”

[Mary Garth, 22 yrs old:] “Not of the least use in the world for him to say he *could* be better. Might, could, would—they are contemptible auxiliaries.”<sup>1</sup>

IN MY EARLIER NOTE (Reibel 1987) on George Eliot and Lindley Murray (1745-1826), which should be read as the complement to this article, I reported that Gordon S. Haight kindly supplied the information that there are no further mentions of Lindley Murray or his *English Grammar* (York, 1795) in any of George Eliot’s works or other papers than those in Chapters XXIII and XXIV of *Middlemarch*. Nor do William Baker’s two annotated catalogues (1977 & 1981) of the surviving contents of the George Eliot George Henry Lewes libraries contain any entry for Murray’s *English Grammar*. Haight hazarded a surmise that her two quotations from Murray’s IVth Rule of Syntax in Chapter XXIV (Carroll 1986:240), which are exceptional for their accuracy, except for the missing commas, were due to the imprint that Murray’s *English Grammar* must have left on her memory of her school-days, when ‘learning your lesson’ meant memorising the textbook in successive bits. (See the beginning of Note 4.) Like her close-contemporary Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855), whose copy of the Thirtieth Edition (1818) of Murray’s *English Grammar* is preserved in the Brontë Parsonage Museum Library, Haworth, Keighley, W Yorks, George Eliot would also have learnt her English grammar from Murray’s, as did her creations, Mary Garth and Mrs Garth. (On George Eliot’s early education, and its effects on her language, see Haight 1968:9-12, especially the middle paragraph on p 11, quoted in Reibel 1987; Deakin 1913, Chapters II-IV; Vipont 1970, Chapters 3-6.) As the Yorkshire schoolmaster Wackford Squeers remarks to his hapless newly-arrived assistant: ‘“That’s the way we do it, *Nickleby*,” ...’ (Charles Dickens, *Nickolas Nickleby*, Chapter VIII, Of the Internal Economy of Dotheboys Hall)

Lindley Murray used much of Robert Lowth’s (1710-1787) *A Short Introduction to English Grammar: with Critical Notes* (Lowth 1762) as the framework for his *English Grammar*. But Murray also made use of so many other sources and interwove the material that he took from them so skilfully and thoroughly into the matrix initially provided by Lowth, in the process altering and replacing many of Lowth’s original formulations and examples for his own purposes, that it would be fair to say that Murray’s *English Grammar*, though a compilation, was in fact a wholly new and original type of work, the first *variorum* English grammar. The view that Murray’s *English Grammar* is a plagiarism is bizarre. (See West 1953/1996 below for full details.)

George Eliot's early training could not however protect her, in the masterful piece of verbal *genre* painting interpolated into the first proofs of Chapter XXIV (Carroll 1986:239-243), from constructing a garbled version of the third statement at the very beginning of the *English Grammar*, Part I, Orthography, Section I, that: 'A letter is the first principle, or least part, of a word.' — taken over *verbatim* from Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762:2). When Mrs Garth's children Ben (10 yrs old) and Letty (8 yrs old) are disputing her question, '“Should you like to speak as old Job<sup>2</sup> does?”' — revolving around Job's pronunciation of *you go* and *sheep* — George Eliot has Mrs Garth, who would have known better, say: '“Those things belong only to pronunciation, which is the least part of grammar,” ...' (Carroll 1986:340) By a quibble on 'least', which in the Lowth-Murray original means 'smallest' ('*adj.* the superlative of *little*. ... smallest.' — Johnson), interpreting it instead as 'of least significance', 'most insignificant' ('*adv.* In the lowest degree; in a degree below others; less than any other way.' — Johnson), George Eliot has provided Mrs Garth with a fine gloss on the relative value, importance, and merits of the different parts of Grammar. By a change of sign, as it were, 'least part' ('letter') suggests the greater or greatest part: 'Grammar' itself. No doubt Mrs Garth is meant to be making just that point, and might even have assented to the proposition, but she would have been aghast at the misquotation.

Some light is thrown on this by George Eliot's husband, John Cross, in his three-volume *Life*, where he says:

Her memory held securely her great stores of reading. Even of light books her recollections were always crisp, definite, and vivid. On our way home from Venice, after my illness, we were reading French novels of Cherbuliez, Alphonse Daudet, Gustave Droz, George Sand. Most of these books she had read years before, and I was astonished to find what clear-cut, accurate impressions had been retained, not only of all the principal characters, but also of all the subsidiary personages—even their names were generally remembered. But, on the other hand, her verbal memory was not always to be depended on. She never could trust herself to write a quotation without verifying it.<sup>3</sup>

The garbled version of the Lowth-Murray definition of a 'letter' attributed to Mrs Garth is the result of the combination of George Eliot's secure memory of *content* ('her crisp, definite, and vivid recollections'; 'clear-cut, accurate *impressions*') with her 'undependable' '*verbal* memory'. In this case at least she does not seem to have verified or checked the quotation for accuracy. 'Verbal memory' is a very well-chosen term for the process by which the mind's vast commonplace book ('her great stores of reading') is turned into a jumbled ('not always to be depended on') plethora of misremembered quotations ('She never could trust herself to write a quotation') with the references lost ('without verifying it.'). Why should she in this instance? The same process had almost certainly corrupted the memories of her vast audience, to whom such references had only the intended affectionate humorous import.<sup>4</sup>

Now first, as to Mary Garth's 'contemptible auxiliaries', we may note that 17thC and 18thC English grammarians from *eg* John Wallis on had realised that the alternations in the forms of the modal auxiliary verbs constitute pairs of present-tense and past-tense forms: *may-might*, *can-could*, *will-would*, *shall-should*.<sup>5</sup> The distinction of tense is clearly marked.

English also makes use of the past tense of all verbs including those of the modal auxiliary verbs to form conditional clauses in *irrealis* grammatical and semantic contexts (eg conditions contrary to fact), as for example, *I wouldn't do that if I were you.* — which has the conditional or *irrealis* reading for both verbs, although only the 'were' is the last remnant of a distinct form. This, however, has not been overtly appreciated until much later in the history of English grammar writing. (An analysis published in a tract of the Society for Pure English — reference now mislaid — which was intended to show that English has its own tense system not like that of Latin or other languages, says that, since the 'reference time' of any act named by the past-tense *irrealis* verb must lie in the future, that is, *after* 'speech time', this is an instance of a *past-tense verb form* with a *future* meaning or interpretation. But because any potential event has not yet been realised, there is no 'event time'.

(For the *locus primus* of the concepts of *event time*, *speech time*, and *reference time*, see Reichenbach 1947, §51, The tenses of verbs (pp 287-298), where he proposes solutions to the analyses of the tenses of the English verb, especially interesting for his treatment of the perfect, that have formed the basis for all significant subsequent work. Here he introduces the terms *speech time*, *event time*, and *reference time*, as used above.

(*Irrealis*, as the Latin etymology states, is the 'un-real' ie the 'not-real', 'the imaginary', 'the counterfactual', in contrast to the *indicative*, which makes statements: '[The indicative] "simply indicates or declares a thing." ...' — Murray, *English Grammar*, Part II, Etymology, Chapter VI, Of Verbs, Section 4, Remarks on the Potential Mood. See Palmer 2001 for an up-to-date treatment.

(So, grammatically and semantically, the *irrealis* is that mode or mood of the verb or proposition that is not indicative, factual, performative, or constative, but refers instead at the moment of speaking, 'speech time', to a hypothetical, as yet non-existent, potentially *future*, circumstance.)

This *irrealis* interpretation, without a distinct inflection in English, is a feature that English has inherited along with present-day German from their common Germanic ancestor. In earlier present-day German, in the so-called 'weak' or regular verbs, the past-tense (preterite) subjunctive verb forms are virtually identical to those of the indicative, exactly as in English. However, in German, unlike in English, the past-tense (preterite) subjunctive is overtly marked in the so-called 'strong' or irregular verbs and always in the modal auxiliary verbs by umlauting the stem vowel wherever possible: *konnte* (indicative) vs *könnte* (subjunctive), both translated 'could' in English, but having contrasting interpretations: factual vs counterfactual.<sup>6</sup>

(These simple, synthetic forms, which were in extensive use in German in George Eliot's day, are now considered old-fashioned, and alternative, periphrastic, analytical forms with the subjunctive forms of the auxiliaries *werden* 'future', *haben* 'perfect', and in some dialects *tun* 'do', have replaced the simpler synthetic forms. Even the modal auxiliary verbs may make use of these periphrastic analytic forms to construct the forms of both the indicative and subjunctive moods.)

But English does not have any distinct inflection for this verb-form. Instead, the interpretation is deduced from the context of use. For this reason many linguists deny that English even has such a distinct verb form at all. Otto Jespersen calls it the 'preterite of imagination.' He acknowledges the semantic distinction, but refuses to use the traditional terminology 'subjunctive' or 'conditional', because that refers to the distinct sets of inflections found in other eg the Romance languages or Latin, but not in English.

How far George Eliot, who knew German well and was widely read in German literature, philosophy, and so forth, consciously troubled herself about such grammatical niceties, we can only guess, but she must have known and used these distinctions in her translating and reading of German texts, and of course instinctively as part of her linguistic intuitions about English.<sup>7</sup>

She may also have thought the concerns of Murray's *English Grammar* a part of that benighted past when superstition and idle speculation characterised the science or philosophy of language and grammar that preceded, as she thought, the enlightened, progressive thinking of the new historical, comparative philology, so highly cultivated by the Germans, which concentrated exclusively on phonology and morphology, and which was represented in England by George Eliot's acquaintance Professor Friedrich/Frederick Max(-)Müller (1823-1900) at Oxford. The syntactic concerns of the many English traditional grammarians who wrote before 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition, had been overtaken by history. All the publishers wanted to bring out new titles, including textbooks. After that time, the grammars of Lowth and Murray *et al* fell into desuetude, along with their treatments of syntax. They were replaced by the new philological, historical approach for phonology and morphology, and by systematic, diagrammatic representations for syntax. The first and most important of these, from which all the later ones derive or to which they are indebted, is John Daniel Morell's *The Analysis of Sentences Explained and Systematised* (1852). Morell's system replaced the so-called 'traditional' syntactic descriptions, with their natural-language, purely verbal syntactic rules and analyses, and their concern for correcting or weeding out improprieties of usage. (For background on this point, see Leonard 1929; also Aarsleff 1983; Shuttleworth 1989.)

Now, where did George Eliot get the order of the modal auxiliary verbs *might*, *could*, *would* from in the passage quoted? Was it by chance or did it come from her memory of earlier school-days?

Assuming that the four modal auxiliary verbs in question *may-might*, *can-could*, *will-would*, *shall-should* (omitting *must*,<sup>8</sup> *dare-durst*, and *ought*, and sometimes *need*, which do not participate in the formation of the potential mood; see below) have been sorted into the two groups, present tense and past tense, the chance that three of the four would be chosen at random in the order *might*, *could*, *would*, is 1 in 24 ( $4 \times 3 \times 2 [ \times 1 ] = 24$ ). We also have to answer the question why the past-tense forms have been selected, thereby increasing the odds to 1 in 48 ( $2 \times (4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1) = 48$ ).<sup>9</sup>

In Lindley Murray's *English Grammar*, *might*, *could*, *would*, *should*, is the invariable order of these, and only these, auxiliaries used in all the illustrative conjugations of all verbs in the 'imperfect tense' of the 'potential mood' in Part II of the *English Grammar*, Etymology, Chapter VI, Of Verbs (see below). In Section 3, Of Moods and Participles, Murray first defines 'Mood or Mode' as 'a particular form of the verb, showing how the manner in which the being, action, or passion, is represented.' (Earlier, 'A Verb' has been defined as 'a word which signifies to be, to do, or to suffer.' — taken from Lowth 1762:44). Hence the tripartite division of 'manner' into 'being, action, or passion', also taken from Lowth, who has, however, only 'Action or Passion.' (1762:46.)<sup>10</sup>

In the short paragraph in Section 3 devoted to the potential mood, Murray says: 'The Potential Mood implies possibility or liberty, power, will, or obligation: as, "It may rain; he may go or stay; I can ride; he would walk; they should learn."'

Notice the sequence ‘may’, ‘can’, ‘would’, ‘should’: except for the mixture of tenses, it is exactly parallel to the sequence ‘might, could, would’, ‘should’.

Further on, in Section 4, Remarks on the Potential Mood, Murray says: ‘... it is formed ... by means of the auxiliary verbs *may, can, might, could, would, &c.* ...’ Here, the four modal auxiliary verbs appear in their now canonical order, including the order of the three modal auxiliary verbs used by Mary Garth, *might, could, would*, and the verbs, very roughly, sorted into present-tense and past-tense forms. The long discussion of the ‘Potential Mood’ in Section 4, *ca* 2 pp of smaller print, would have been sufficient to suggest to Mary Garth the equivocations and evasions that can be expressed by their use, as in Murray’s examples of how the ‘potential mood’ ‘may be expressed without any condition, supposition, &c. as will appear from the following instances: “They *might* have done better;” [four further example sentences with *may, would, should, and could & cannot, omitted*].’ (Of the subjunctive, he says: ‘That the Potential Mood should be separated from the Subjunctive, is evident.’) Note the first example given, with its modal auxiliary verb ‘might’ and the complement verb-phrase, ‘have done better’. ‘Could’, suggested by Fred’s repetition of it, then replaces the ‘might have’ of the example, and ‘done better’ suggests ‘be better’, giving the phraseology used by Mary Garth (see below).

Further on, we find, in Section 6, The conjugation of the auxiliary verbs To Have and To Be, in the conjugation of the Potential Mood of To Have, in the 1st Person Singular of the Imperfect Tense: ‘I might, could, would, *or* should have.’ — and so forth, throughout the conjugation. This order is adhered to in the conjugation of To Be in that Section. We also find the same order in Section 8, The Conjugation of regular Verbs. To Love.<sup>11</sup> The ‘Imperfect Tense’ is that tense of the ‘Potential Mood’ that may have the *irrealis* interpretation.

As stated above, it is a commonplace that the framework of Murray’s *English Grammar* was provided by Robert Lowth’s *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, but this grammar could not have furnished the model for the order of the modal auxiliary verbs in Mary Garth’s acerbic remark. On p 55 (Lowth 1762), in the conjugation of the ‘past time’ of the ‘subjunctive mode’, Lowth has a complete paradigm with *might*, adding below a further paradigm with the modal auxiliary verbs listed in the order: *could, should, would*.<sup>12</sup>

However Murray came to the order *might, could, would, should*, it is as certain as probability allows that George Eliot got her sequence from Murray’s *English Grammar*.

We may now try to reconstruct the chains of associations that converge on the alternating ‘turns’ in the extract quoted from the ‘conversation’ between Fred and Mary above.

The conversation has been revolving around the question of ‘love’. Fred has just remarked, perhaps rather hopelessly, that he and Mary have known each other for a long time:

“I suppose a woman is never in love with any one she has always known—ever since she can remember; as a man often is. It is always some new fellow who strikes a girl.”

Mary then teases Fred about love (the word ‘love’ has been used eight times since Fred has come in to find Mary) with a string of literary girls/women from Juliet and Ophelia

down to the early 19thC novel who have, or, as the case may be, have not ‘always’ known their loves, rather in the manner of Rosalind teasing Orlando in *As You Like It*, Act 4, Scene 1:

... The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died in his own person, videlicet, in a love-cause. [She enumerates two famous classical cases of men dying, but not, she says, for love.] Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love.

Who can say that George Eliot did not have this in mind? The pressure, the tension is too great not to suggest it. The pressure is also more than Fred can bear, and he blurts out his badly articulated, clumsy confession.

Compare Fred’s stumbling effusion with this carefully crafted parallel from Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), Volume II, Chapter LVIII, Absence:

If she had ever loved me, then, I should hold her the more sacred; remembering the confidences I had reposed in her, her knowledge of my errant heart, the sacrifice she must have made to be my friend and sister, and the victory she had won. If she had never loved me, could I believe that she would love me now?

The grammatical form of this passage could very well have been suggested by the conjugations of the subjunctive and potential moods of the illustrative ‘regular Verb’ ‘To Love’ in Lindley Murray’s *English Grammar*, which is referred to by name (‘Murray’s grammar’) in Chapter VII of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839). (See the other illustrative passages from *David Copperfield et al* by Dickens in part II below.) It is hard to imagine that Dickens’ readers would not have recognized — and appreciated — the parallels, or that he did not intend them to see them. Such an artistic experience is much like recognizing a composer’s witty allusion to or outright use made of a passage from the work of another composer. In both cases, the function of the use made of the passage by the borrower and the effect intended by the donor are very different.<sup>13</sup>

Now, in the imagination of the author George Eliot, the situation in question also suggests or even calls for a reference to the ‘Potential Mood or Mode’, apt for the expression of contingent ideas without any stated condition or qualifying circumstance. The sequence, ‘he could be a better fellow—could do anything’, with its repetition of ‘could’, all dependent on requited love (‘“...—I mean, if he were sure of being loved in return.”’), has been, we may suppose, suggested by the example sentence, ‘They *might* have done better’, in the passage on the Potential Mood in Murray’s *English Grammar*, retrieved from the depths of George Eliot’s capacious memory, as both Cross states and Haight deduces. Adopting the outlines of this sentence as a matrix, George Eliot adapts and improves it, as hypothesised above, to sculpt a riposte to stem the flow of emotive meaning coming from Fred. Mary finishes Fred off with her devastating put-down, stating what is in her view the use made of the ‘Imperfect Tense’ of the English ‘auxiliaries’ in discourse: to equivocate, prevaricate, deceive, and evade.<sup>14</sup>

## Addendum

Two further instances of the use of the Potential Mood can be found in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* as follows:

... Rosamond, in fact, was entirely occupied not exactly with Tertius Lydgate as he was in himself, but with his relation to her; and it was excusable in a girl who was accustomed to hear that all young men might, could, would be, or actually were in love with her, to believe at once that Lydgate could be no exception. His looks and words meant more to her than other men's, because she cared more for them: she thought of them diligently, and diligently attended to that perfection of appearance, behaviour, sentiments, and all other elegancies, which would find in Lydgate a more adequate admirer than she had yet been conscious of. MM  
Chapter XVI

As if to confirm the potential mood's universal function, the following brief episode in Chapter XLIV of *Daniel Deronda* serves very well.

Sir Hugo Mallinger, Mr Gascoine and Mrs Davidow are on their way back to England with Gwendolen Harleth after the accidental death of Gwendolen's husband Grandcourt. Sir Hugo, aka a 'the Baronet', Mr Gascoine, and Mrs Davidow are engaged in a discussion of how to rescue Gwendolen's fortunes after the meagre provision for her in her late husband's will. The excerpt below is on what to do with the house which was left to her: live in it or let it. Gwendolen herself does not seem to be party to this discussion.

... Gwendolen sat by in pale silence while Sir Hugo, with his face turned toward Mrs. Davilow or Mr. Gascoigne, conjectured that Mrs. Grandcourt might perhaps prefer letting Gadsmere to residing there during any part of the year, in which case he thought that it might be leased on capital terms to one of the fellows engaged with the coal: Sir Hugo had seen enough of the place to know that it was as comfortable and picturesque a box as any man need desire, providing his desires were circumscribed within a coal area.

"I shouldn't mind about the soot myself," said the baronet, with that dispassionateness which belongs to the potential mood. "Nothing is more healthy. And if one's business lay there, Gadsmere would be a paradise. ..."

The three present-day editions of *Daniel Deronda* — Hardy 1967, Handley 1988, Cave 1995, — have no annotation for this reference to the 'potential mood'.

## II. Charles Dickens and the ‘Potential Mood’

The passages from Dickens’ works reproduced below have been found by a simple search of the various internet websites devoted to e-texts of Dickens’ works. There may be further references, allusions, or quotations from Lindley Murray’s *English Grammar*, or allusions to or uses of the name ‘(Lindley) Murray’ there, but I have not tried to compile a complete list.

At first glance, it might seem as if George Eliot could have got her sequence ‘might, could, would’ from her reading of Dickens, as the quotations from the works below testify. Dickens is amply represented in the George Eliot George Henry Lewes library, as Baker 1981 shows. Dickens refers to Lindley Murray several times in various works, and the conditionals and straightforward sequences of modal auxiliary verbs certainly stem from the passages on the subjunctive and potential moods in Murray’s *English Grammar*, specifically from the conjugations of the potential mood, including that of the ‘regular verb to love’, in the *English Grammar*. But the use that George Eliot makes of the example sentence, ‘“They *might* have done better; ...”’ — converting it into ‘Not of the least use in the world for him to say he *could* be better.’ — shows, at the least, that she must have had Lindley Murray sections on the ‘Potential Mood’ in mind. Instead of quoting it, she found a new use for it.

Like George Eliot, Dickens had abundant imagination, in the sense of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (see note 14), but also, like her, made use of the faculty of Fancy in portions of the text where, not re-creation, but allusion of one kind or another was required, as in the illustrative passages from Dickens below. Of ‘The Fancy’, Coleridge says (from the same passage in *Biographia Litteraria*):

The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.

The key notion here is in the statement that ‘the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association’.<sup>15</sup>

In the passages below, it is as clear as it can be that Dickens is quoting from Lindley Murray’s *English Grammar*.

### Relevant Passages from the Works of Charles Dickens

*David Copperfield*. (1849-1850). Chapter XXXIII. Blissful.

When Dora hung her head and cried, and trembled, my eloquence increased so much the more. If she would like me to die for her, she had but to say the word, and I was ready. Life without Dora’s love was not a thing to have on any terms. I couldn’t bear it, and I wouldn’t. I had loved her every minute, day and night, since I first saw her. I loved her at that minute to distraction. I should always love her, every minute, to distraction. Lovers had loved before, and lovers would love again; but no lover had loved, **might, could, would**, or



**should** ever **love**, as I loved Dora. The more I raved, the more Jip barked. Each of us, in his own way, got more mad every moment.

The Poor Relation's Story. In: Some Christmas Stories. *All the Year Round*. Extra Christmas Edition. (1852) First paragraph.

He was very reluctant to take precedence of so many respected members of the family, by beginning the round of stories they were to relate as they sat in a goodly circle by the Christmas fire; and he modestly suggested that it would be more correct if "John our esteemed host" (whose health he begged to drink) would have the kindness to begin. For as to himself, he said, he was so little used to lead the way that really — But as they all cried out here, that he must begin, and agreed with one voice that he **might, could, would, and should** begin, he left off rubbing his hands, and took his legs out from under his armchair, and did begin.

*A Child's History of England*. (1854) Chapter XXXIII. England Under Charles the First. Second Part.

In some of their proceedings, this famous [Long] Parliament passed the bounds of previous law and custom, yielded to and favoured riotous assemblages of the people, and acted tyrannically in imprisoning some who differed from the popular leaders. But again, you are always to remember that the twelve years during which the King had had his own wilful way, had gone before; and that nothing could make the times what they **might, could, would, or should** have been, if those twelve years had never rolled away.

Prince Bull. A Fairy Tale. *Household Words*. February 17, 1855.

And now comes the most extraordinary part of the history of this Prince. When he had turned out those servants, of course he wanted others. What was his astonishment to find that in all his dominions, which contained no less than twenty-seven millions of people, there were not above five-and-twenty servants altogether! They were so lofty about it, too, that instead of discussing whether they should hire themselves as servants to Prince Bull, they turned things topsy-turvy, and considered whether as a favour they should hire Prince Bull to be their master! While they were arguing this point among themselves quite at their leisure, the wicked old red Fairy was incessantly going up and down, knocking at the doors of twelve of the oldest of the five-and-twenty, who were the oldest inhabitants in all that country, and whose united ages amounted to one thousand, saying, 'Will YOU hire Prince Bull for our master?—Will YOU hire Prince Bull for your master?' To which one answered, 'I will if next door will;' and another, 'I won't if over the way does;' and another, 'I can't if **he, she, or they, might, could, would, or should.**' And all this time Prince Bull's affairs were going to rack and ruin.

*Little Dorrit*. (1855-1857) Chapter XVII. Nobody's Rival.

It was (at least it might have been, always excepting for that wise resolution) like his dexterous impudence to call it a Paradise. He only called it a Paradise because he first saw her coming, and so made her out within her hearing to be an angel, Confusion to him! And ah! how beaming she looked, and how glad! How she caressed the dog, and how the dog knew her! How expressive that heightened colour in her face, that fluttered manner, her downcast eyes, her irresolute happiness! When had Clennam seen her look like this? Not that there was any reason why he **might, could, would, or should** have ever seen her look like this, or that he had ever hoped for himself to see her look like this; but still—when had he ever known her do it!

*Great Expectations.* (1860-1861) Chapter XLV.

Whatever night-fancies and night-noises crowded on me, they never warded off this DON'T GO HOME. It plaited itself into whatever I thought of, as a bodily pain would have done. Not long before, I had read in the newspapers, how a gentleman unknown had come to the Hummums in the night, and had gone to bed, and had destroyed himself, and had been found in the morning weltering in blood. It came into my head that he must have occupied this very vault of mine, and I got out of bed to assure myself that there were no red marks about; then opened the door to look out into the passages, and cheer myself with the companionship of a distant light, near which I knew the chamberlain to be dozing. But all this time, why I was not to go home, and what had happened at home, and when I should go home, and whether Provis was safe at home, were questions occupying my mind so busily, that one might have supposed there could be no more room in it for any other theme. Even when I thought of Estella, and how we had parted that day for ever, and when I recalled all the circumstances of our parting, and all her looks and tones, and the action of her fingers while she knitted—even then I was pursuing, here and there and everywhere, the caution Don't go home. When at last I dozed, in sheer exhaustion of mind and body, it became a vast shadowy verb which I had to conjugate. Imperative mood, present tense: Do not thou go home, let him not go home, let us not go home, do not ye or you go home, let not them go home. Then, **potentially**: I **may** not and I **cannot** go home; and I **might** not, **could** not, **would** not, and **should** not go home; until I felt that I was going distracted, and rolled over on the pillow, and looked at the staring rounds upon the wall again.

*Our Mutual Friend.* (1864-1865) [Beginning of] Chapter 16. Persons And Things In General.

Mr and Mrs John Harmon's first delightful occupation was, to set all matters right that had strayed in any way wrong, or that **might, could, would, or should**, have strayed in any way wrong, while their name was in abeyance. ...

Speech. The Newsvendors' Convention. London. April 5, 1870.

It is an appropriate instance of the universality of the newsman's calling that no toast we have drunk to-night and no toast we shall drink to-night and no

toast we **might**, **could**, **should**, or **would** drink to-night, is separable for a moment from that great inclusion of all possible subjects of human interest which he delivers at our doors every day. Further, it may be worthy the consideration of everybody here who has talked cheerfully to his or her neighbour since we have sat down at the table, what in the name of Heaven **should** we have talked about, and how on earth **could** we have possibly got on, if our newsman had only for one single day forgotten us. ...

The following show what can be termed *association instances*: a piece of text where the modal auxiliary verbs *might*, *could*, *would*, *should* etc appear more or less in that order, but not necessarily in direct contiguous sequence, but across the text, often in different clauses or sentences. *Close association* means that the items are more or less in the correct sequence and appear with relatively little intervening text. *Long association* means that although the items might appear more or less in the right order, the sequence is scattered over a succession of more or less contiguous clauses or sentences.

Finally, it should be noted that the critical literature on Dickens, as the internet search that turned up these examples shows, also has numerous instances of associated uses of just the modal auxiliaries *might*, *could*, *would*, *should*, often led by *must* or *must have*.

The example passages above from the works of Charles Dickens show *close association*, but because of the large number of passages where the four modal auxiliary verbs all occur together in proper sequence, it is not necessary to count the following as a direct instance.

*The Old Curiosity Shop*. (1840-1841) Chapter LXXII.

They bethought them of a removal from the scene of this last sorrow; of trying whether change of place would rouse or cheer him. His brother sought the advice of those who were accounted skilful in such matters, and they came and saw him. Some of the number staid upon the spot, conversed with him when he would converse, and watched him as he wandered up and down, alone and silent. Move him where they **might**, they said, he **would** ever seek to get back there. His mind **would** run upon that spot. If they confined him closely, and kept a strict guard upon him, they **might** hold him prisoner, but if he **could** by any means escape, he **would** surely wander back to that place, or die upon the road.

*Tale of Two Cities*. (1859) Book III. The Track of a Storm. Chapter 5. The Wood-Sawyer:

In all weathers, in the snow and frost of winter, in the bitter winds of spring, in the hot sunshine of summer, in the rains of autumn, and again in the snow and frost of winter, Lucie passed two hours of every day at this place; and every day on leaving it, she kissed the prison wall. Her husband saw her (so she learned from her father) it **might** be once in five or six times: it **might** be twice or thrice running: it **might** be, not for a week or a fortnight together. It was enough that he **could** and did see her when the chances served, and on that possibility she **would** have waited out the day, seven days a week.

*Great Expectations*. (1860-1861) Chapter 52:

It had seemed to me, in the many anxious considerations I had given the point, almost indifferent what port we made for — Hamburg, Rotterdam, Antwerp — the place signified little, so that he was got out of England. Any foreign steamer that fell in our way and would take us up, would do. I had always proposed to myself to get him well down the river in the boat; certainly well beyond Gravesend, which was a critical place for search or inquiry if suspicion were afoot. As foreign steamers would leave London at about the time of high-water, our plan would be to get down the river by a previous ebb-tide, and lie by in some quiet spot until we could pull off to one. The time when one would be due where we lay, wherever that **might be, could be** calculated pretty nearly, if we made inquiries beforehand.

What will serve as the last example is an instance from an internet website of a critical text with a long association instance of the sequence *might, could, would*.

After reading the book (*A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859) just after publication and being much moved by it, you are set the following Task:

### **Task**

You have been selected to serve on a review board created to examine the novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens set this tale in Revolutionary France, but was there a reason for this choice? You are to determine if Dickens was merely writing historical fiction in this work, or if in fact he was perhaps prophesizing [*sic*] what he foresaw in England's future. In order to reasonably take your stance, you need to think critically about your England. What sort of world are you living in? *A Tale of Two Cities*, portrays England as a solid and safe land when compared to the unrest in France. Did England remain so? Could Dickens have been issuing a warning? What **might** he have seen in England's future and how **could** writing about France make any difference? **Would** it be in Dickens' nature to write a novel about injustice? What **would** he be trying to do? You must decide and present your findings in essay form to the city magistrates in five days time. You must also portray the highlights of your essay in a Power Point presentation.

It may be that in the sequence, '(must), might, could would, should', there is a loose kind of logic in the semantics that promotes a sequence of propositions containing these equivocators, but that exploration is not the subject of this article.

## Notes and Annotations

**General Note:** It is a truth universally acknowledged, that you cannot teach Quantum Mechanics without the Mathematics. Nor is it possible to discuss English Grammar without the Grammar. This truism must serve as a justification for some of the technical detail in this article, without which an appreciation of the full meaning of George Eliot's use of her allusions to Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* would be impossible. Grammar formed a self-evident part, not only of George Eliot's education, but also of virtually every one of her contemporaries, who would have recognised immediately the allusions and their significance. I hope that I have brought out some of that in the body of this and the previous article, and in the Notes. On this point, *cf* the following:

... I don't mean to say that the only thing in the world is physics, but you were talking about physics and if that's what you're talking about, then to not know mathematics is a severe limitation in understanding the world.

(Richard Phillips Feynman (1918-1988), 'The Rules of the Game'. End of edited transcript of an interview with Feynman made for the BBC television programme *Horizon* in 1981, shown in the United States as an episode of *Nova*. Published in: *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out. The Best Short Works of Richard P. Feynman*. Edited by Jeffrey Robbins. Foreword by Professor Freeman John Dyson. London: Penguin Books. Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 2000. First published Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1999. Chapter 1. A VHS video of this interview is available.)

The majority of the following Notes can be read as independent mini-essays on topics related to the main discussion, but going off in other directions, which while relevant to the whole picture, do not add greatly to the local argument. An exception is the long discussion on the definition and meaning of the grammatical term *irrealis*, which has been placed in the main body of the text to ensure that it receives the attention that it warrants.

1. *Middlemarch*. Book II. Old and Young. Chapter XIV. This reference is due to Brigitte Weitzl and Martina Schmid.

There is no annotation of this exchange in the major editions of *Middlemarch* by Carroll, Haight, or Hornback listed below with page-references.

2. The lower orders, of which farm labourers such as Job are the lowest of the low, have comic pronunciations and comic Old Testament names, much as the school-master, the comic pedant and Latinist in Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost*, has the improbable OT name of *Holofernes*, from the Apocryphal Book of Judith. The Apocryphal Holofernes comes to a stickier end than the Biblical Job.

Notice also Mrs Garth's use of the more pedantic form of question which takes the grammatical point of view of the addressee, who is intended to understand that the answer begins with 'I should (not) like ...' — where the 'should' is the sign of the 'potential mood', and has the true *irrealis* sense. In terms of the more modern linguistic account further on, it is here the preterite subjunctive of *shall*. Elsewhere, when it appears in the passages from Dickens, the 'should' has the weaker sense of 'ought'.

3. John Walter Cross (1840-1924), *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*. In Three Volumes. Arranged and edited by her husband J. W. Cross. 1884. Volume III, p 420.

Charles-Victor Cherbuliez (1819-1899). Swiss-French novelist and miscellaneous writer; Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897), French writer; Antoine-Gustave Droz (1832-1895), French sculptor and man of letters; Georges Sand (1804-1876): Armandine-Aurore-Lucile *née* Dupin, baronne Dudevant, 'femme de lettres française'. (NB alphabetical order! And that they are all French writers.)

As for 'relying on verbal memory without comprehension', see the examples from Dickens in Note 4 below.

4. While George Eliot's garbled version of the definition of a 'letter' from Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* is unintentional, it is a product of her imagination, and in fact has, within the textual context, a clear and relevant meaning. Garbling of grammatical rules can also be a source of humour, which arises from the discrepancy between A and B. B is the text; A is the model, metamorphosed, sometimes into nonsense, for the sake of the contrast.

Dickens' ventures into grammar for dramatic, novelistic purposes and effects include deliberate garbling as the examples below show. Not only are his characters' quotations and distortions very witty and appropriate, they are also often intentionally funny, and, sometimes, poignant. Three are from Brook 1970.

The first is a straightforward exercise in the application of construing or parsing. See the 'Directions for Parsing' (variously titled in different editions) of the section on Syntax in Lindley Murray's *English Grammar*, appended to the Rules.

... The influence of the teacher as prescriptive grammarian finding fault with perfectly idiomatic expressions is to be seen in Miss Peecher's admonition to her favourite pupil, Mary Anne, who had allowed herself to say of Lizzie Hexam, 'They say she's very handsome':

'Oh, Mary Anne, Mary Anne!' returned Miss Peecher, slightly colouring and shaking her head, a little out of humour; 'how often have I told you not to use that vague expression, not to speak in that general way? When you say THEY say, what do you mean? Part of speech They?'

Mary Anne hooked her right arm behind her in her left hand, as being under examination, and replied:

'Personal pronoun.'

'Person, They?'

'Third person.'

'Number, They?'

'Plural number.'

'Then how many do you mean, Mary Anne? Two? Or more?'

'I beg your pardon, ma'am,' said Mary Anne, disconcerted now she came to think of it; 'but I don't know that I mean more than her brother himself.' As she said it, she unhooked her arm.

'I felt convinced of it,' returned Miss Peecher, smiling again. 'Now pray, Mary Anne, be careful another time. He says is very

different from they say, remember. Difference between he says and they say? Give it me.'

Mary Anne immediately hooked her right arm behind her in her left hand—an attitude absolutely necessary to the situation—and replied: 'One is indicative mood, present tense, third person singular, verb active to say. Other is indicative mood, present tense, third person plural, verb active to say.'

'Why verb active, Mary Anne?'

'Because it takes a pronoun after it in the objective case, Miss Peecher.'

'Very good indeed,' remarked Miss Peecher, with encouragement. 'In fact, could not be better. Don't forget to apply it, another time, Mary Anne.' (*Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865), Book II, Chapter I, Of an Educational Character. Brook 1970:84)

The expression, 'They say ..', is one of those 'low expressions' stigmatized in the Appendix to Lindley Murray's English Grammar:

Appendix: Containing Rules and Observations for Assisting Young Persons to Write with Perspicuity and Accuracy, to be Studied after they have Acquired a Competent Knowledge of English Grammar. Part I, Of Perspicuity and Accuracy of Expression, with respect to single Words and Phrases. Chapter I, Of Purity. ... Chapter II, Of Propriety. ... 1. Avoid *low expressions*: such as, "Topsy turvy, hurly burly, pellmell; having a month's mind for a thing; currying favour with a person; dancing attendance on the great," &c.

"Meantime the Britons, left to shift for themselves, were forced to call in the Saxons for their defence." The phrase "*left to shift for themselves*;" is rather a low phrase, and too much in the familiar style to be proper in a grave treatise. Notice the possible allusion to or adaptation of Murray's illustrative sentence of the use of the 'Potential Mood', ' "They *might* have done better;" ...'

This is all clearly the product of 'the Fancy', 'a mode of Memory', as Coleridge says, recreating a verbal parallel to what is in Lindley Murray's exercises in parsing, or 'grammatical resolution [analysis]', appended to the section on Syntax in the *English Grammar*. It is clearly meant to appeal to a knowledgeable audience who would have had to have undergone the same training in grammatical analysis, otherwise the allusion has no target.

As a contrast, illustrating the creative power of the 'Imagination', compare the following schoolroom scene from Charlotte Brontë's (1816-1855) schoolmate Mary Taylor's (1817-1893) novel, *Miss Miles or A Tale of Yorkshire Life 60 Years Ago*. London: Remington & Co., Publishers. 1890. Reissued in paperback: New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press. With an Introduction by Janet H[orowitz] Murray (b 1946). Chapter VII. Daylight To Fight By.

Sarah Miles, the principal protagonist, has been sent to a local school; the whole narrative seems to be based on composite impressions of Roe Head School and its famous scholars, the material used with creative imagination, humour, and artistic irony.

Miss Bell [the proprietress] appeared, called her, and showed her a lesson to be learned by heart. Sarah sat down with it, and a parsing class was summoned. Sarah listened with intense curiosity to all that

went on. She had formed the idea that the mystery she wished to penetrate might, perhaps, be learned at school, but not in the lessons. These were given to make the girls appear what they were not—to get like her sister Jane. But parsing was something new to her. (1990:89)

... rousing her neighbour's attention, she [Sarah Miles] asked—

“What's a preposition?”

“A preposition!” said Miss Dunn [a very proper fellow pupil], with a pause of astonishment. “It's a part of speech.”

Sarah considered the answer, and then asked—

“What's a part of speech?”

“It's a word.”

“Any word?”

Miss Dunn nodded.

“Then poker is a part of speech?”

“Yes, it's a substantive.”

“What's a substantive?” ...

“You must learn grammar, and then you'll know.”

“What's grammar?”

“You have one in your hand.”

For the first time Sarah looked at her book with the intention of learning her lesson. She “went at it” as she had done at the difficult business of entering the warehouse. It did not occur to her to indulge in the peevish exclamations that were rather in fashion among the pupils, such as, “Oh! what a long piece! I'm sure I can never learn it. Miss Bell, may I learn half? It's too much, I declare,” and so forth. In due time she astonished Miss Bell by calling out from her seat—

“Please 'm, I know my lesson.”

She said it perfectly. Miss Bell was puzzled, and thought it was as well that the girl had chosen to learn, as there seemed to be no way of making her if she had chosen otherwise. (1990:91-92)

*Genre* painting like this provides the circumstantial evidence that confirms the other evidence of the historical record about how grammar and the other subjects must have been taught.

Tom Gradgrind, having told Harthouse that his sister ‘never cared for old Bounderby’, is provoked by his companion’s reminder ‘We are in the present tense now’ into a parade of the jargon of a school grammar:

‘Verb neuter, not to care. Indicative mood, present tense. First person singular. I do not care; second person singular, thou dost not care; third person singular, she does not care,’ returned Tom. (*Hard Times* (1854), Book II, Chapter III. Brook 1970:85)

The amount of actual tuition going on at Dotheboys Hall is so slight that it hardly seems necessary for Squeers to have any knowledge of the subjects that he is supposed to teach, but English grammar is one subject of which he has at least a sketchy knowledge, although, by relying on verbal memory without comprehension, he gets the



rules all wrong. When he calls on the deaf Peg Sliderskew, the following exchange takes place:

..., Mr Squeers applied his hand to the latch of the door, and thrusting his head into a garret far more deplorable than that he had just left, and seeing that there was nobody there but an old woman, who was bending over a wretched fire (for although the weather was still warm, the evening was chilly), walked in, and tapped her on the shoulder.

‘Well, my Slider,’ said Mr Squeers, jocularly.

‘Is that you?’ inquired Peg.

‘Ah! it’s me, and me’s the first person singular, nominative case, agreeing with the verb “it’s”, and governed by Squeers understood, as a acorn, a hour; but when the h is sounded, the a only is to be used, as a and, a art, a ighway,’ replied Mr Squeers, quoting at random from the grammar. ‘At least, if it isn’t, you don’t know any better, and if it is, I’ve done it accidentally.’  
(*Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-1839), Chapter XXVII.)<sup>16</sup>

The ‘school grammar’ mentioned and ‘English grammar’ taught at Dotheboys Hall are both, of course, Lindley Murray’s *English Grammar*; see the reference in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Chapter VII to ‘Murray’s grammar’ lying with other books on the table.

In addition to sporadic quotation, parody, humorous use or misuse, as well as outright garbling, there is a complete parody of Lindley Murray’s *English Grammar*, published when it had entered the realm of venerable documents by having been so long in use. It appeared in 1840, by which time the *English Grammar* had virtually reached the end of its useful life, although perhaps very few users present or past were aware of this at the time.

Percival Leigh (1813-1889).] 1840. *The Comic English Grammar; A New and Facetious Introduction to the English Tongue*. By the Author of the *Comic Latin Grammar* [(1840), a parody of *The Eton Latin Grammar* (1758)]. Embellished with upwards of fifty characteristic illustrations by John Leech (1817-1864). London: Richard Bentley, New Burlington Street.

This is the most complete and comprehensive of the four known parodies of Lindley Murray’s *English Grammar*, and covers the full spectrum of topics, though not all equally fully. See the sympathetic and affectionate appreciation by Zandvoort 1970.

The passage on the ‘Potential Mood’ is rather thin. See pp 85-86, where he quotes Murray’s statement that: ‘The Potential Mood implies possibility or liberty, power, will, or obligation: as, ...’ Here follow five illustrative sentences (p 86) using ‘may’, ‘can’, ‘would’, ‘should’, in that sequence, preserving the original order, but mixing the tenses, as does Murray in his examples. Of the sample conjugations, the conjugation of ‘To Have’ has only the ‘Present Tense’ of the ‘Potential Mood’, as: ‘I med [*sic*] or can ha’’, etc, preserving the order. (‘Med’ = popular English *might*.) The conjugations of ‘Imperfect Tense’, ‘Perfect Tense’, and ‘Pluperfect Tense’ are omitted.

The humour consists mainly of those outrageous puns so beloved of the early and late Victorians alike. After quoting his own version of Murray’s definition of the ‘Indicate Mood’, that it ‘... simply points out or declares a thing’, Leigh uses the opportunity for illustrative sentences, of which the following is typical: ‘Q. Why is old age the best teacher A. Because he gives you the best *wrinkles*.’ (p 85)

Of this and innumerable others the remark by Dr Charles Burney (1725-1814) while on one of his musical tours of Europe, when a piece by a local composer was performed in his honour, is appropriate: ‘The piece was not of such great excellence as to make us regret the loss of similar such examples, but the disposition of those who were pleased by it must have been a great blessing to them.’ Of this, Sir Donald Francis Tovey (1873-1940), who quotes it for its value as a fundamental principle, says that when an artistic object is too remote from our artistic experience for us to fully appreciate it, then ‘the disposition of those who were pleased by it’ is our only guide. (Burney’s observation and Tovey’s deduction quoted from memory.)

In other words, you don’t have to be a Victorian to appreciate Leigh’s humour, or that of George Eliot or Charles Dickens, for that matter, but it helps.

5. In Wallis-Kemp (1765/1972:105 = 336/337), the order in Wallis’s list of the auxiliary verbs is (Kemp p 337) ‘*do, will, shall, may, can* together with their imperfect past tenses *did, would, should, might, could*’.

6. Speakers of Romance languages, which have a parallel semantic differentiation but distinct sets of overt conditional and subjunctive inflections, have some difficulty with the *irrealis* interpretations of the past-tense forms of English verbs. Concerning the past-tense forms of English irregular, *aka* ‘strong’, verbs in general, such as *write, wrote, written*, one very perceptive native speaker of Italian, a former student to whom I am very much indebted for this succinct formulation, suggested that, say, *wrote*, is simply the form of *write* that you use in a past-tense context; the vowel change *-i- > -o-* is arbitrary. This is virtually identical to a serious proposal of the American structural-descriptive linguists of the 1940’s and ’50’s. See Bernard Bloch (1907-1965), ‘English Verb Inflection’, *Language*, Journal of the Linguistic Society of America, Volume 23 (1947), pp 399-418.

The same analysis can *mutatis mutandis* be applied to the interpretation of the past-tense form of the English verb as an *irrealis* in a suitable semantic context, such as a counterfactual conditional.

In their study, an essay on George Eliot’s use of the English modal auxiliary verbs in *Middlemarch*, for a seminar on ‘The Language of Literature’ some time in the 1980’s, Brigitte Weitzl and Martina Schmid found that the proportion of *irrealis* interpretations of the English modal auxiliary verbs decreases over the course of the novel, compared to factual (*realis*) interpretations. This they attributed to what they perceived as the growing and progressively more optimistic outlook.

George Eliot’s appreciation of the usefulness of knowing German is reflected in the passage in Chapter XXI, where Will Ladislaw brings Dorothea up to date on the importance of being able to read German, which Mr Casaubon cannot. As Will says: ‘... If Mr. Casaubon read German he would save himself a great deal of trouble.’

In other words, just as one cannot do the English literature of the 18thC without knowing Latin (this observation is due to Jim Binns), so one cannot do the 19thC without knowing German (Will Ladislaw). On the latter point see Shuttleworth 1989.

The following delicious passage of outrageous satire puts the whole matter into perspective:

MISS PRISM

[*Calling.*] Cecily! Cecily! ... intellectual pleasures await you. Your German grammar is on the table. Pray open it at page fifteen. We will repeat yesterday's lesson.

CECILY

[*Coming over very slowly.*] But I don't like German. It isn't at all a becoming language. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson. [Third exchange later:]

CECILY

I wish Uncle Jack would allow that unfortunate young man, his brother, to come down here sometimes. We might have a good influence over him, Miss Prism. I am sure you certainly would. You know German, and geology, and things of that kind influence a man very much.

(Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), *The Importance of Being Ernest*. 1895. Act II. Part 1.)

7. As for learning German, the earlier generations of English scholars probably shared the well-known view of Richard Porson (1759-1808), Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge (1792-1808), that: 'Life is too short to learn German.' See the following passage from Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866), *Gryll Grange* (1860/1861), Chapter III, The Duke's Folly. (This reference is due to Roland Hall.) German classicists of Porson's generation wrote in any case in Latin.

The passage also shows how German compared to the other major European languages at the time at which *Middlemarch* is set:

"You have a great collection of books," said the Doctor. "I believe," said the young gentleman, "I have all the best books in the languages I cultivate. [John] Horne Tooke [(1736-1812)] says [*The Diversions of Purley*, Advertisement to Chapter VII (reference not located. DAR)]: 'Greek, Latin, Italian, and French, are unfortunately the usual bounds of an English scholar's acquisition.' I think any scholar fortunate whose acquisition extends so far. These languages and our own comprise, I believe, with a few rare exceptions, all the best books in the world. I may add Spanish, for the sake of Cervantes, Lope de Vega, and Calderon. It was a dictum of Porson, that 'Life is too short to learn German;' meaning, I apprehend, not that it is too difficult to be acquired within the ordinary space of life, but that there is nothing in it to compensate for the portion of life bestowed on its acquirement, however little that may be." [Long circumstantial note about a Frenchman long resident in Germany who knew no German omitted.]

The Doctor was somewhat puzzled what to say. He had some French and more Italian, being fond of romances of chivalry; and in Greek and Latin he thought himself a match for any man; ... .. But he thought it necessary to say something to the point, and rejoined:

... "Porson was a great man, and his *dictum* would have weighed with me if I had had a velleity towards German; but I never had any. ..." [*Velleity*: '... the lowest degree of desire. *Locke*.' — Johnson. Wanting to without necessarily undertaking the action required. —DAR]

By putting these remarks on the comparative usefulness of languages into the mouth of ‘the young gentleman’, the observation below seems apt.

... ‘Gryll Grange,’ his last novel. The exuberant humour of his former works is indeed wanting, but the book is delightful from its stores of anecdote and erudition, and unintentionally most amusing through the author’s inveterate prejudices and pugnacious hostility to every modern innovation’ (Article on Peacock by Richard Garnett (1835-1906) in *DNB*)

8. *Must* is anomalous in that, being already, historically, at least, a past-tense form, it can be construed as either a present-tense or a past-tense form. Because of the structure of much of the narration used by George Eliot in *Middlemarch*, a kind of authorial paraphrase of interior monologue, there are many instances of past-tense instances of *must*. George Eliot, along with other writers to the present day, continues also to use the form *must*, not only very frequently as the past tense of *must*, but also as the (past-tense) *irrealis* of *must*, despite the claims of distinguished English grammarians that *must* has no past-tense *irrealis* form. Cf this instance from *Middlemarch*, Chapter X:

She [Dorothea] did not want to deck herself with knowledge—to wear it loose from the nerves and blood that fed her action; and if she had written a book she must have done it as Saint Theresa did, under the command of an authority that constrained her conscience.

(“St Teresa is the classical example of one who combined the life of religious contemplation [mysticism] with an intense activity and common sense efficiency in ‘practical’ affairs [founding strict Carmelite convents], ...” Donald Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, 1965:319)

In the passage quoted, ‘must’ has to have the interpretation, ‘would have had to’, a clear past-tense *irrealis*, if the text is to make any sense. A list of further instances of *irrealis must* from other texts is available on request.

9. If the modal auxiliary verbs in question were randomly assorted with respect to each other *and* to present-tense and past-tense forms, then the possibility that they could have appeared in Mary Garth’s order by chance would be 1 in 40,320 (8 x 7 x 6 x 5 x 4 x 3 x 2 x 1) These simple statistics are due to Tony Sudbery, who very generously and patiently pointed out the obvious.

10. The following garbled version of the definition ‘a Verb’ as ‘a word which signifies to be, to do, or to suffer’ is due to Brook (1970:84), of which he says:

The most unexpected characters are liable to quote, more or less inappropriately, from grammars which had obviously been learned by rote. Mark Tapley comments on the warmth of Tom Pinch’s welcome by saying:

‘Mark!’ said Tom Pinch energetically: ‘if you don’t sit down this minute, I’ll swear at you!’

‘Well, sir,’ returned Mr. Tapley, ‘sooner than you should do that, I’ll comply. It’s a considerable invasion of a man’s jollity to be made so partickler welcome, but a Werb is a word as signifies to be, to do, or

to suffer (which is all the grammar, and enough too, as ever I was taught); and if there's a Verb alive, I'm it. For I'm always a-bein', sometimes a-doin', and continually a-sufferin'.' (*Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-1844), Book II, Chapter XLVIII)

As in many of the garbled passages, equivocations and quibbles replace the original intended meaning of a basic term with another, more natural, natural language interpretation, as in Mrs Garth/George Eliot's reinterpretation of 'least' in the definition of a 'letter' (see above).

Here, the unusual sense of 'suffer' intended in the definition of 'Verb' ([verb active:] '4. To pass through; to be affected; to be acted upon.' — Johnson) is replaced by one of the more common uses: [verb neuter *ie* intransitive:] '1. To undergo pain or inconvenience.' (Johnson)

11. 'Love' as the choice for illustrative verb has been taken over from Latin, as has the term, *imperfect tense*, for what has elsewhere been termed *past tense*, or *preterite*.

12. We discount the possibility that Murray's order *might*, followed by *could*, *would*, is some permutation of the order in Lowth. The term and concept 'potential mood' itself, not to mention quite probably the order of the modal auxiliary verbs that Murray uses, has been taken over by Murray from Charles Coote (1761-1835), *Elements of the Grammar of the English Language* (1788, pp 84-85.) This reference is due to West (1953/1996), *Lindley Murray — Grammarian*. Coote's grammar was not reprinted in R. C. Alston's reprint series of English grammars, *English Linguistics 1500-1800*.

Lowth of course does not use the term 'potential mood'; he adopts the usual (Latin) designation 'subjunctive' throughout, giving a quite different treatment of the whole topic altogether. Murray divides it into two distinct moods or 'modes', 'subjunctive' and 'potential'.

13. George Eliot and Charles Dickens, whose differing uses of the stock theme of 'grammar', represent different generations of artistic activity as well as differing artistic practice, are not the only writers to allude to Lindley Murray and his *English Grammar*. He and/or it are mentioned one way or another by the English and American writers listed below in chronological order by date of birth. Note the time span: from Cobbett (1763) to Joyce (1882). Not included in this list are the numerous British and American grammarians, historians of the English language, and other educational writers who treat or mention Lindley Murray's *English Grammar*, or copy it, improve it, or supplement it.

William Cobbett (1763-1835); William Wordsworth (1770-1850); Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834); William Hazlitt (1778-1830) (elsewhere than in his *A New and Improved Grammar of the English Tongue*, 1810); Washington Irving (1783-1859); Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859); Elizabeth Shelley (*b* 1794), sister of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), who also no doubt used or at least knew of this work; Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881); Thomas Hood (1799-1845); Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873); Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849); Mrs (Elizabeth Cleghorn) Gaskell (*née* Stevenson) (1810-1865); Harriet (Elizabeth) Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) (first page of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852); William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863); Charles Dickens (1812-1870); Mary Taylor (1817-1893), schoolmate of Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855); George Augustus

Henry Sala (1818-1895), journalist and novelist; Herman Melville (1819-1891 (*Moby Dick*, 1851); George Eliot (1819-1880); Charles Stuart Calverley (1831-1884) (in a punning allusion); Mark Twain *né* Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835-1910); George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950); James Joyce (1882-1941) (in the ‘Eumaeus’ episode in *Ulysses*, 1922); and others. And in Roget’s *Thesaurus* under § ‘567. Grammar. N. ... Lindley Murray (*school book*).’

14. ‘The imagination’ is here used in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s sense. It ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate.’ — much in the manner of a chrysalis metamorphosing into a butterfly. *Biographia Litteraria*, 1817, end of Chapter XIII, ‘On the imagination, or esemplastic power’. This reference is due to Gerhard Müller-Schwefe.)

It is idle to try to reconstruct this process by examining and deconstructing its products. Finding George Eliot’s sources for this little exchange may be interesting and even a little bit of fun, but it can never explain her art.

15. The distinction between ‘Imagination’ and ‘Fancy’ applies equally well in the case of the literary critical fallacy of looking for ‘prototypes’, ‘models’, or ‘originals’ of fictional characters. If they are products of the Imagination, then they cannot be mere straightforward copies or borrowings from real life. Anything may suggest something else, but the product is not the original.

16. Reinart Willem Zandvoort, in his article, A Comic English Grammar of 1851 [*sic*] (Zandvoort 1970), has a special appreciation of Leech’s work, which he characterizes as alternately good-natured or malicious, ironic, or sardonic (p 78). Leigh, as Zandvoort points out, is as much concerned with the spoken as with the written language:

We usually think of 19th-century grammar as based almost wholly on the *written* language; but here is a keen and humorous observer of the *spoken* English of his day. (p 69).

Zandvoort’s appreciation of Leigh’s exploitation of the social element, the snobbishness and racial and class prejudice, is also very perceptive:

The amusement is primarily extracted at the expense of the lower classes, of Jews, of Frenchmen [also the Irish], and of Americans, though “young ladies”, “dandies”, Quakers and other non-conformists also come in for their share of ridicule. (p 70)

Servants and their solecisms [also their barbarisms, or malapropisms] are also fair game. (p 71)

From anyone, in other words, who is not a well-born, well-bred, properly-educated, properly-spoken, properly-mannered Victorian English gentleman or lady. Later targets of linguistic chauvinism and racism would be (East) Indians and other colonials. The same analysis and critique applies *mutatis mutandis* to Leigh’s *Comic Latin Grammar* and Leech’s illustrations to it.

With a great deal of wry humour the anonymous [*sic*] author throws light on the social and linguistic practices and prejudices of the nineteenth century. The fact that he appears to share these prejudices himself does not diminish the value of his comments for students of the Victorian period. [It probably adds to it. DAR] (p 67)

What seems remarkable is the ability of this carefully-wrought parody to give pleasure and entertainment still today, despite the evident social, educational and cultural divide that separates today's reader from the original intended audience of well-educated, well brought-up, early Victorian youth.

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