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## Box 09, Folder 50 - "The Teaching of Grammar" (E.M.S.)

Edwin Mortimer Standing

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## THE TEACHING OF GRAMMAR

At a recent lecture - given at the International Training Course being held in Rome - Dr. Maria Montessori discussed the question of Teaching Grammar.

In pedagogical circles, said the Dottoressa, the point is often discussed as to what age one ought to begin teaching Grammar to the child. Indeed, nowadays it is sometimes questioned whether there is any practical use at all in teaching Grammar, since it is well-known that many great orators and speakers have been ignorant of the rules of Grammar. These points, however, continued Dr. Montessori, are really beyond dispute. We cannot settle them with our little rules of logic. Both the best age for teaching Grammar and the necessity of Grammar for the child are settled independently of our various views and theories, for they are settled by the observed facts of life - "Life which was not made by man nor follows the rules of his intelligence."

The best time for presenting Grammar to the child is the period from 6 - 8 years. Even if Grammar did not serve in the slightest degree towards better composition and better speaking we should still have to give Grammar to the child - not for its own sake - but as a means of fulfilling the psychic life of the child.

Some people think that it is wiser to postpone the teaching of Grammar to a much later age. The study of the various functions of the different parts of speech and the laws governing the construction of sentences, etc. - this, it is said, is too dry and arid a subject for the child at this tender age. On the contrary, says Dr. Montessori, it is just at this age (6 - 8) that the child has a particular interest - "a sensitive period" for these things.

Dr. Montessori regards this special interest in words and their relationship as allied to that peculiar and well-known susceptibility of children to acquire languages - their own and foreign - with a marvellous accuracy and permanence. Because the child has this peculiar sensibility



to language, he assimilates it - he does not know how. The words penetrate into him as if drawn in by a magnet. They come, they fix themselves, they remain for ever as a part of him, they put themselves in order; yet it all happens in such a simple way that the mind does not seem to work at all. There is a sort of reaction between the child and this language which surrounds him; each is made for the other, like the flower and the insect. All the niceties of grammatical construction, the minute nuances of inflexion, he learns all this with an ease which to an adult, trying to learn the same language, seems almost miraculous.

The susceptibility of children to learning new words is so great that it is as though the child had an immense void in him which required filling with words. There seems no limit to this desire for words. At this stage - when a child easily acquires a second language - street children who have no opportunity to do so will even invent a language of their own. They have a mania for finding strange words which others do not understand, because those words they hear are not enough. They search for all kinds of words, clear and obscure, known and unknown. This shows that children should not only be taught their own mother tongue but another language at this time.

Now if there is this epoch in the child's life when there is taking place this creative fact of the learning of languages, this interchange between the individual and the environment - if there is this period, then this individual might well feel an extraordinary and profound interest towards this thing which is taking place within him. Here as always, when confronted with a natural phenomenon, we must assist it at the opportune moment. At this epoch then, when this marvellous work is being spontaneously accomplished in him, the child displays an immense interest in the world of language into which he is entering. He takes a great delight in the study of words, in composing them, handling them, scanning them, grouping and regrouping them, classifying, understanding, loving them. It is for this reason we must give him Grammar; and we



must give it to him, not with theoretic and explanatory lessons, but seeking to bring into play the activity of the child. And by this we do not simply mean his muscular activity, moving and placing objects, etc., but also the inner activity of his reasoning powers. We must do this in such a way that by means of this activity of body and mind there will spring up spontaneously an intuition of the definitions, rules, functions of various parts of speech, and so on.

Dr. Montessori then went on to ~~say~~ explain that in practice we could assist the child in this study of words (1) By presenting it with material which helped it to discover the affinities of words. i.e., the grouping of words in families according to their derivations and their common roots; and (2) By analysing the functions of words - i.e., the parts of speech.

In discussing the second part, Dr. Montessori said that, when you come to think of it, there are only really two Parts of Speech - the Noun and the Verb. These correspond in the world of physics to Matter and Energy. And just as there are two kinds of Energy, Static and Dynamic, so one has two kinds of Verbs; Verbs of Being and Doing - representing a state or an action.

Apart from these two main divisions all the other Parts of Speech were but dependants and servitors. The Article, for instance, really is an attendant upon the Noun, and so, too, is the Adjective. And the Noun "which is so important" cannot be everywhere and do everything and answer all the demands made on it; so it makes use of the Pronoun. But the Pronoun is really no new "Personaggio".

Similarly Adverbs are merely things which chisel out the meaning of the Verb more clearly. So, too, Prepositions and Conjunctions are mere servitors to these two main Parts of Speech.

Interjections, continued Dr. Montessori, are strange, odd and unnecessary things. Certain peoples, as the English, are rather shocked at them! but the common people use them everywhere, and dialects are



full of them. The Interjection is the cry of the soul which wedges itself into the sentence as an intruder. Well-educated people keep them in check. But the Interjection exists all the same and we cannot put it on one side - not at least until we arrive at such a control of our emotions as to abolish this ancient and inferior form of expression. But until that day comes - which has not yet dawned - the Interjection will also be numbered amongst the Parts of Speech.

In discussing the meaning of the Tense of a Verb, Dr. Montessori went through various actions. Thus to show that the Present of the Present Tense is not an absolute Present but refers to the action, Dr. Montessori began laying a table in the lecture room, putting down cloth, plates, knives, etc., saying as she did so, "I am laying the table"; and then drank a glass of water, saying, "I am drinking your health". One Present lasted ten minutes, the other two seconds, yet both were Present - whilst the Present Tense of the stenographer who was writing down the lecture and who could say, "I am writing," continued for the whole hour.