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Mastery of Language: A Grammar Study of “Mere Christianity”

C.S. Lewis’s “Mere Christianity” is an enduring and renowned philosophical and theological masterpiece that has garnered substantial critical acclaim and enjoyed a broad readership. While touted for its profound exploration of Christian faith and morality and celebrated for its spiritual insight, it is equally worth consideration from a grammatical standpoint. Scholarship on grammar and “Mere Christianity” is robust, with researchers demonstrating extensive focus on its linguistic arguments and impressions. Therefore, this study aims to analyze Lewis’s work critically through a grammatical lens, highlighting text examples to prove the author’s strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, it investigates prevalent grammar issues in everyday spoken and written English, incorporating relevant research on language conventions to address persistent challenges modern writers face.

Lewis’s “Mere Christianity” employs an effective grammatical structure, focusing on clarity and coherence. Throughout the book, Lewis demonstrates remarkable precision regarding sentence structure – a model George Marsden of Notre Dame University confirms is worthy of emulation (210). Lewis employs concise, well-structured sentences that convey complex ideas with simple expressions. For instance, Lewis writes, “When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him” (44). Here, the author uses a simple subject-verb-object structure to convey the idea. The straightforward syntax enhances openness to his arguments and facilitates reader comprehension.

Ironically connected to clarity and coherence in “Mere Christianity” are Lewis’s talents for conveying complex ideas. For instance, in Chapter One, Lewis states, “I hope no reader will suppose that ‘mere’ Christianity is here put forward as an alternative to the creeds of the existing communions” (Lewis xii). The author uses a clear and concise sentence structure to convey the main idea effectively. “Reader,” as the subject, follows the verb “will suppose,” and the object “that ‘mere’ Christianity” is put forward as an alternative to the creeds of the existing communions. This straightforward structure aids in understanding the intended meaning without unnecessary confusion. In support of Lewis’s simplicity and coherence, scholar Joseph Pearce asserts in his book “C.S. Lewis and The Catholic Church” that the author’s style is markedly accessible and straightforward, allowing a wide readership to engage with his ideas (45). This argument supports the thought that Lewis achieves this through his grammatical choices, using simple and engaging sentence structure to communicate complicated theological concepts.

While Lewis conveys his ideas clearly, scant weaknesses in complex sentence structure can be teaching tools for the everyday writer. In Chapter Three, Lewis writes, “If you are a Christian, you do not have to believe that all the other religions are wrong all through” (34). This sentence exhibits a complicated grammatical structure with multiple clauses - some may claim a hindrance to comprehension. The inclusion of phrases such as “you do not have to believe” and “that all the other religions are simply wrong all through” makes the sentence lengthy and cumbersome. However, even amid attempted critique, Tandy posits that readers find themselves “convinced . . . against their will” despite attempts to give a detailed negative analysis of Lewis’s grammar (x-xi). Further, attempts by a myriad of scholars and students to dismantle the author’s unique grammar and writing style fall flat, even coining it “The Lewis

Canon,” – [a style] that rests on [his own] distinct medium of words and sentences” (Schakel and Huttar 203).

In addition, Lewis skillfully employs various rhetorical and figurative devices to enhance an argument’s impact. In Chapter Four, Lewis utilizes a simile to explain the concept of faith: “The act of faith is the opposite of a bargain” (78). This vivid comparison helps readers grasp the essence of conviction by contrasting it with a familiar construct. Additionally, Lewis uses metaphors throughout the book, such as when he likens a moral choice to “turning the central music of our souls to a discord” (93). These imaginative and evocative expressions add literary flair and aid in conveying abstract concepts more relatable and engagingly.

Paying particular attention to the word choice that accurately conveys his intended meaning, Lewis is keen to debate the nature of God’s existence - he states, “He is not the sort of thing that can be adequately described in a dictionary” (52). Here, the author uses the term “adequately” to emphasize language’s limitations in capturing God’s essence. This careful choice of words highlights Lewis’s nuanced understanding of the subject matter and enhances the depth of his arguments. In Tandy’s book, “The Rhetoric of Certitude,” he states that Lewis’s language style intimately resembles his faith, resulting in a unique brand of syntax, diction, and rhetorical figures to convey his point (ix).

Although a minor weakness, mention of excessive wordiness can occasionally be observed within Lewis’s grammatical design in “Mere Christianity.” An illustration, in Chapter Two, Lewis enters, “We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer” (22). This passage demonstrates a word and phrase repetition, such

as “progress,” “getting nearer,” and “any nearer,” resulting in redundancy and verboseness. A more concise expression could have effectively conveyed the intended meaning.

David Jasper, in his book “The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture,” highlights Lewis’s tendency towards wordiness in “Mere Christianity,” suggesting the author could have benefitted from more remarkable editorial restraint to avoid unnecessary and redundant words (66). As stated, however, positive scholarship on the author prevails, as we can again attribute this issue inherent to what Tandy and others term “The Lewis Canon” (xii). Thus, in “Mere Christianity,” C.S. Lewis demonstrates mastery of grammar and language, employing clarity, precision, and rhetorical devices to communicate his philosophical and theological ideas effectively. Through the careful structuring of sentences, the skillful use of figurative language, and the precise selection of words, Lewis enhances the persuasiveness and impact of his arguments. By analyzing the text from a grammatical standpoint, we gain a deeper appreciation for Lewis’s writing style and ability to engage readers through intellectual and stylistic prowess. “Mere Christianity” is a testament to Lewis’s literary craftsmanship and enduring influence on Christian apologetics.

Further evidence of the author’s command of grammar in the book is perfected and compelling sentence structure, precise punctuation, and consistent verb agreement, which Revington confirms are defining features of his prose (80). Also, Trask states that the backbone of effective sentence structure, promoting Lewis’s easy readability, can be attributed to parallelism, observed in “Mere Christianity,” Chapter Four (128). Lewis writes, “Good people know about both good and evil: bad people do not know about either” (53). This sentence uses parallel clauses, enhancing coherence, rhythm, and readability – resulting in a clear understanding of the author’s arguments.

Moreover, Lewis demonstrates a mastery of punctuation, which, as noted by Biber (10), is crucial for enhancing clarity and precision in written communication. As in Chapter One, Lewis states, “When you have reached your own room, be kind to those Who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall” (6). Using a comma in this sentence helps prevent ambiguity, thus enhancing the reader’s comprehension of Lewis’s profound message. Joe Bray and others (226) also reason that punctuation can be a form of “silent speech” guiding a reader through the text. In the author’s case, his deliberate punctuation can then be a subtle tool that steers a reader’s pace, facilitating their understanding and following his expressive contentions.

Lewis’s aptitude for punctuation is further observed in his application of semicolons, colons, and question marks to introduce, explain, or interrogate key concepts within his writing. For instance, the semicolon in the following sentence is profound, “We are not bodies; we are souls” (Lewis 36). The placement creates a balanced contrast between the two independent clauses, adding depth to his assertion while keeping it within a single thought. This technique adheres to Strunk and White’s recommendation for semicolon usage as it helps “join two related independent clauses” (5).

For guided imagery, the author’s use of the colon is also evident throughout “Mere Christianity.” In a pivotal sentence, he asserts: “What lies behind the moral law: a lawgiver” (Lewis 41). The colon helps the reader pause, anticipate, and absorb the ensuing critical thought. Per Kolln’s argument in “Rhetorical Grammar,” using the grammatic colon is vital in guiding readers through complex ideas by introducing explanations or elaborations (49).

In addition, Lewis commonly employs question marks to effect contemplation. For example, he writes, “Can we not see the absurdity of the universe without a grand purpose?”

(Lewis 52). By posing this rhetorical question, Lewis invites the reader to reflect on the deep philosophical issue. As Shibles highlights, “Rhetorical questions are an effective tool for engaging readers and promoting thought” (33). Lewis’s masterful use of punctuation in “Mere Christianity” helps clarify his complex ideas, underline essential concepts, and encourage reader reflection. Therefore, punctuation is an integral aspect of grammar, serving a critical function beyond mere aesthetics or convention. In the hands of skilled writers like C.S. Lewis, punctuation marks become tools of precision, offering clarity and guiding readers through complex philosophical terrains.

Consistency and accuracy in verb agreement further emphasize the author’s linguistic proficiency. An example lies in Chapter Two, where Lewis writes, “When a man who accepts the Christian doctrine lives unworthily of it, it is much clearer to say that he is a bad Christian than to say that he is not a Christian” (xiii). The grammatical accuracy between the subject, “a man,” and the singular verb “lives” reinforces the overall clarity of Lewis’s argument, a concept well-articulated in the Huddleston and Pullum analysis (5).

In contrast, today’s English deviates from traditional prescriptive grammar, defined by Rodby and Winterowd (3) as established language rules and guidelines. The rule against splitting infinitives, such as “to boldly go,” is often challenged and is deemed acceptable by many native English speakers. On the other hand, Trask illustrates that descriptive grammar focuses on the practical use of language (49). This approach acknowledges the fluid nature of language, apparent in the various verb conjugations and regional dialects of modern English. Rodby and Winterowd confirm that Chomsky’s theory of transformational grammar explains how basic structures and rules form sentences (10). Even though this theory is essential for understanding language, it does not affect how we use language and communicate daily.

Everyday language use is more about practical communication, not theoretical language models.

Of broad consideration, modern American English continuously evolves, with common grammar issues in written and spoken forms susceptible to frequent linguistic adaptations. Language mutates, adjusts, and sometimes degrades as the world interconnects. Various linguistic studies exploring contemporary English usage have observed this phenomenon. Accordingly, despite the natural evolution of language, this analysis will continue proof and discussion on the importance of adherence to standardized grammatical rules for everyday English to ensure mutual understanding and clarity.

In the wake of increasing informality and global cross-cultural communication, common grammar issues in spoken and written English continue to surface. Muftah confirms that the most prevalent of these involve verb tense inconsistencies, misuse of prepositions, and improper article usage, compounded by the influence of online language practices (5). The initial common issue involving contemporary spoken and written English involves inconsistent use of verb tenses. English speakers, particularly non-native ones, often struggle with keeping verb tenses consistent throughout sentences (Crystal 181). This consistency leads to more precise communication, both written and verbal.

An illustration lies in the sentence “Yesterday, I go to the market,” which demonstrates this inconsistency, where “went” should have been used instead of “go.” Muftah claims that as of 2010, subject-verb agreement errors are one of the most frequently encountered issues in spoken and written English today (4). In the active voice, the sentence would be: “Such errors occur when a mismatch in singularity or plurality happens between the subject of a clause and its verb. For instance, we should correctly say, “The team of managers is

deciding...” not “The decision was made by the team of managers...” since “team” is the true singular subject of the clause.”

Of second address is preposition misuse within contemporary English grammar.

Prepositions link nouns, pronouns, or phrases to other words within a sentence, providing it with context (Mukherjee and Rohde 557). English learners frequently make mistakes with prepositions, such as saying “I am on the school” instead of “I am at the school.” In addition, pronouns are often incorrectly matched with their antecedents, creating uncertainty.

According to Biber (5), learners often interchange “them” and “it” when referring to singular non-human antecedents. For example, instead of saying, “The company has updated its policy,” one might incorrectly say, “The company has updated their policy.

Using definite (the) and indefinite (a, an) articles are consistently challenging within prescriptive grammar. Many languages use articles differently, which, per Ionin and others, can cause transition issues to English (4). One suggestion to improve the effectiveness of article use would be to provide concrete examples. For instance, Dr. David Crystal recommends using visual graphic aids and breaking up the text for visual appeal and greater comprehension (46). The following sentence illustrates article usage: “I saw the cat in a park - where “the” should be used before “park” – assuming both speakers know the specific park under discussion.

Similarly, online platforms have given rise to an informal style of English, confounding modern grammar. “Shorthand writing and often a disregard for grammar conventions characterize technology-based interaction.” Dr. Crystal states that critics have widely criticized digital communication practice for its negative influence on grammar usage in conventional English (50).” For example, the use of abbreviations like “u” instead of “you”

or “2” for “to” or “too” in digital communication can carry over into formal writing, causing a grammatical issue. Equally, the advent of the internet and its language has significantly influenced English – categorized primarily as Chomsky’s transformational grammar (Muftah 3). Finally, Bray posits that text messaging and social media language often involves simplifying grammar and spelling, which can bleed into academic and formal contexts (268).

Thus, through thoughtful examination, this study demonstrates that C.S. Lewis’s “Mere Christianity” and “The Lewis Canon” are unique to mastery of grammar and language, using clarity, precision, and rhetorical devices to communicate his philosophical and theological ideas effectively. Through the careful structuring of sentences, the skillful use of figurative language, and the precise selection of words, the author enhances the persuasiveness and impact of his arguments. Analyzing the text from a grammatical standpoint achieved a deeper appreciation for Lewis’s writing style and his ability to engage readers through intellectual and stylistic prowess. “Mere Christianity” is a testament to Lewis’s literary craftsmanship and enduring influence on Christian apologetics through modern grammar.

Likewise, while language is undoubtedly an enduring influence - a living, evolving entity - it is crucial to recognize and address common grammar issues within prescriptive, descriptive, and transformational grammar to maintain clarity and professionalism in written and verbal communication. English language usage in the modern era presents several grammatical challenges. The inconsistencies with verb tenses, misuse of prepositions, and improper use of articles represent common problems that can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication. Moreover, the emergence of digital communication poses a plethora of new challenges to maintaining grammatical accuracy. Therefore, while the evolution of

language is inevitable, it is crucial to uphold grammatical rules to maintain the integrity of English as a global communicative tool.

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