Revolutionary Grammar

The more we read Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, the more aware we become of the Jefferson effect: the beautiful phrasing, the consistently elegant tone, the quiet dignity of the words chosen, the air of philosophical reflection. We are reminded of the social dictum that gentlemen do not raise their voices. Other men in the Continental Congress might have assembled enough relevant ideas to create a serviceable declaration, but it would not have been like this. The screaming Patrick Henry certainly could not have written it. Jefferson's words are almost mesmerizing; courteous, logical, and rhythmical, they announce defiant revolution against the world's superpower with a serenity and confidence that is almost impudent.

As we have seen, this effect is in large part created by the extreme politeness of the words. The announcement of what is certain to be revolutionary war is expressed as dissolving political bands. The *Declaration* itself, an unprecedented assault on the existing machinery of power, is made with a "decent respect to the opinions of mankind." And the violent overthrow of Great Britain's rule in the colonies is permissible because when they are "impelled" to, the people can "alter or abolish" their government, and "institute" a new one that will "effect their safety and happiness." It is almost a shock to realize to what these pleasant words refer; after all, the new government would be "instituted" with guns. The very grace, the elevated tone, must have been a presumptuous slap in the face to the British monarchy, who were not accustomed to be addressed with such equality.

This confident air of self-sufficiency is seamless in the document, and extends not only throughout the vocabulary but also to the grammar. The grammar of the *Declaration* is not elementary, not crude, not choppy; it is refined and elegant, and harmonious with the choice of words. Here too Jefferson is presenting a statement of advanced thinking, effortlessly

assembling an array of ideas into deceptively easy-to-read complex sentences that seem, but are not, simple. From the opening words of the *Declaration*, Jefferson uses complex grammar to assert a tone not just of philosophical clarity, but of intellectual power. The first sentence has seventy-one words in it, and the second sentence has one hundred and ten. As an accomplished document, the *Declaration* would stand up against anything then being written in Great Britain, and Jefferson knew it.

The First Sentence

Jefferson's first sentence, even though it contains seventy-one words, is actually a simple *When A, then B* idea, as we might see in any D.I complex sentence. ***When*** *it becomes necessary to do X and Y,* ***then*** *respect for others requires Z.*

> When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

The two parts of the idea, if separated into the dependent part and the independent part, are:

> 1: *When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them...*

2: ...a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

It seems simple enough, but as architect Mies van der Rohe said, "God is in the details." Knowing that the first words would establish the persona of the *Declaration*, Jefferson elaborated within this simple *When A then B* structure to form a justification that would respectfully persuade "mankind"—French mankind, particularly—to understand and support the revolution. This separation is "necessary," and is one to which people are "entitled" by both the "laws of nature" and of "nature's God." We see that even the first sentence is steeped in the egalitarian ideas of the Enlightenment; Jefferson presents the dissolution of the political bands as a simple matter of voluntary arrangements between one people and another people.

For these words, in every country in Europe, Jefferson would have been executed. In England, France, Russia, or Prussia, the ruling autocracies would not look kindly upon the idea that a "separate and equal" station could be assumed. They would not permit such a station to be assumed. They would not permit it to become separate, and they would not permit it to be equal.

Prior to Jefferson's words, in spite of the fact that John Locke had developed earlier forms of these concepts, there were in the world no separate and equal stations for a people without a monarch. This was something, if taken literally, entirely new.

	We	hold	these	truths	to be	self-evident,
Parts of Speech:	pron.	v.	adj.	n.	adj.	adj.
Parts of Sentence:	subject	predicate		direct object		
Phrases:					-----infinitive phrase-----	
Clauses:	one independent clause, a simple declarative sentence					

We are now too familiar with Jefferson's words to feel the shock they delivered at their inception. In *We hold these truths*, the full boldness of the active voice transitive action verb *hold* communicates a certainty; there is nothing ambivalent here—these are *truths*, and we hold them. Likewise, the plural subject pronoun *we* steps forth boldly; the sentence was announcing political and philosophical revolution, and those who would sign the *Declaration* would be bold about it. It is a brave sentence: *We hold these truths*... Much of the shock value of the sentence comes from the fact that, up until the day Jefferson wrote the sentence, these were not truths. No government in Europe or America would have regarded the propositions as truths; rather, they would have been criminal ideas. Finally, these newly proclaimed truths were certainly not, traditionally, *self-evident*. What had been self-evident was that power belonged to kings by divine right, and ordinary people were incapable of self-government. The infinitive phrase *to be self-evident*, which modifies the noun *truths*, was the master phrase of revolution.

	that	all	men	are	created	equal
Parts of Speech:	pron.	adj.	n.	v.	v.	adj.
Parts of Sentence:			subject	predicate		
Phrases:	-----no prepositional, appositive, or verbal phrase-----					
Clauses:	This passage is a dependent clause, used as an noun.					

This clause, the core of *these truths* that Jefferson would enumerate, is the passage cited by Abraham Lincoln as the proposition to which the new nation was dedicated. Jefferson knew that the ideas he was putting together might change the world. He knew that his statements of self-evident equality were not universally self-evident, even to the ordinary human beings they would benefit, and he knew that the words would take hold slowly in the world. He wrote that this new concept of freedom and equality would come "to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all," and history has borne him out. "All men," Jefferson wrote, and he coupled that with a statement deploring slavery and blaming the slave trade on the king; the antislavery passage was deleted before the *Declaration* was published, but Jefferson succeeded in getting the words "All men" into the document, where they continued to inspire and raise consciousness, generation after generation. Today we have continued to focus on this clause as the central proposition of democracy, and "All men are created equal" has become perhaps the most powerful single sentence in world history.

	that	they	are	endowed	by	their
Parts of Speech	pron.	pron.	v.	v.	prep.	adj.
Parts of Sentence:		subject	----------predicate----------			
					----------preposition	
Phrases						
Clauses:	one dependent clause; used as a noun					

In the second truth, we see Jefferson's famous passive voice action verb, *are endowed*, showing that the rights of *all men* are no mere preference, but are endowed by the *Creator*—a greater authority, be it known, than a king.

These rights, furthermore, are *unalienable* (in Adams's version of the adjective, and *inalienable* in Jefferson's version); they can not be taken away, given away, or relinquished; they are inherent, God-given, and permanent. Nothing we can do can make the rights alien to us. They are ours forever. By using this unusual adjective, *inalienable*, which he had discovered in his reading of Locke, Jefferson again grounds the *Declaration* in Enlightenment philosophy, which Voltaire and Montesqieu had made popular in France, and he further lifts the document to an exceptional intellectual stature.

What would have been the effect if Jefferson had used the active voice form of this statement: "that the Creator endowed them with certain unalienable rights"?

Creator	with	certain	unalienable	rights
n.	prep.	adj.	adj.	n.
	----------prepositional phrase----------			

The clause continues with two prepositional phrases. The first, *by their Creator*, modifies the passive voice verb are *endowed*. In the historical context of the divine right of kings, these words are resonant because it is all men, not the king, to whom the Creator gives rights. The second phrase, with certain unalienable rights, is located immediately after a noun, Creator, and so is by rule eligible to modify Creator; on inspection however we find that the prhase also modifies the verb *are endowed*.

This double structure, with two successive prepositional phrases, each modifying a passive voice action verb, is a deep illustration of how much conceptual content can be packed into a predicate. As a rough measure of how much intellectual impact a passage has, examine the amount of explanation required to explain it.

Why did Jefferson not simply say, "with unalienable rights"? What is the role of the adjective *certain* in the idea?

	that	among	these	are	life,	liberty,
Parts of Speech	pron.	prep.	pron.	v.	n.	n.
Parts of Sentence:				predicate		
Phrases	----prepositional phrase----					
Clauses:	one dependent clause; used as a noun					

Jefferson's third truth is an unusual, creative grammar structure. In fact, we might gaze at the clause some time before realizing what we are looking at. If we begin by looking at the verb, *are*, and trying to make sense of *among these* as its subject, we are stymied because a prepositional phrase would never typically be a subject of a verb. Is there no subject? That is when we see the light: the verb *are* precedes the subject, and the subject is a triple compound with the nouns *life*, *liberty*, and *pursuit* equally serving as the subject of the verb *are*. The order of the idea is reversed from the norm; the idea is that *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are among these*, but Jefferson has reversed the flow.

Why? Certainly, Jefferson's version is better. To end the passage by focusing on the noun *happiness*, that rings in the silence of the semicolon, is stronger than bring the whole passage to a focus on the pronoun *these*. *Happiness*, Jefferson puts at the pause, *happiness*. Government exists to allow us to pursue happiness. Once again, Jefferson has controlled the definitions, making his case in a way that is intensely human.

and the pursuit of happiness

conj. adj. n. prep. n

subject

-----prepositional phrase-----

Jefferson's choice of words is even more interesting in light of the difference he establishes between his ideas and Locke's. John Locke had written that governments existed to protect the people's life, liberty, and *property*. By property, Locke meant not only one's possessions, but oneself, since we belong to ourselves, and not to anyone else.

Jefferson has extended Locke's philosophy into a view of life. Jefferson himself was a famous pursuer of happiness, acquiring books, violins, furniture, and fine European wines, and happily working away designing creative objects and instruments of all kinds. He occupied his days making scientific measurements and studying plants and stars, and he soaked himself in the Latin and Greek classics, which he read in their original languages. Very few intelligent individuals have ever been as active in pursuing happiness, or have made as good use of their personal time, as Thomas Jefferson. His life, including the design and construction of his home, Monticello, was his hobby. The idea that government should leave people free to pursue happiness in their own way was a liberated view, and Jefferson used these words in full understanding of what they meant.

	that	**to secure**	**these**	**rights,**
Parts of Speech	pron.	adv.	adj.	n.
Parts of Sentence:				
Phrases	----------infinitive phrase----------			
Clauses:	one dependent clause; used as a noun			

The fourth self-evident truth is that the purpose of government is to secure certain unalienable rights for all men. This clause continues with a participial phrase modifying the noun governments: *to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed*. There are so many ideas in this one clause: that governments arise from among men themselves, that the purpose of government is to secure the rights of all men, that the power of government is derived from the consent of the people—it is another example of the Jefferson touch, the ability to encapsulate large vistas of thought into a single elegant passage that reads so well it seems simple to understand, and yet when we look closely we find the concepts expanding out with each phrase, until a single sentence seems like an entire essay. This is part of the facility with language that Adams admired in Jefferson.

The infinitive phrase *to secure these rights* modifies the passive voice verb *are instituted*, and the noun *rights* is the object of the infinitive.

governments are instituted among men,

n. v. v. prep. n.

subject ----------predicate----------

---prepositional phrase---

We are again struck by Jefferson's arrangement of ideas. Why did he put the infinitive phrase first in this sentence? Why is it:

> that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed

instead of:

> that governments, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, are instituted among men to secure these rights

As Jefferson wrote it, the passage builds to a kind of crescendo where words rich in *o*'s and *u*'s (just, powers, from, consent, of, governed) sound out one of the most majestic facts about the new theory of democracy: the *consent of the governed*. That is what Jefferson wanted the clause to end with, for that is what the rights are about.

...that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

With this fifth self-evident truth, the *Declaration* arrives at the step that justifies Richard Henry Lee's resolution, that *the colonies are and of right ought to be, free and independent states*. Because all men are equal; and they have unalienable rights; and these include life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; and governments exist to secure these rights and derive their powers from the consent of the governed, it follows that people have the right to abolish a bad government and create a new government that will make them safe and happy.

But bad governments, as all of history shows, will resist being abolished, and creating a new government tends to mean one thing: war. There had been revolutionary violence in the colonies for a year; now there would be revolutionary war.

If you reflect back on all of Jefferson's ideas, on their depth and importance, on their complexity, on the deadly risks taken by Jefferson (and his colleagues) in saying such things publicly, it is a shock to realize that Jefferson has expressed all of these ideas in just *two sentences*. In two sentences—a total of one hundred and eighty-one words—Jefferson encapsulated the Enlightenment's theory of humanity, a theory of government, and a justification for revolution, and he did it all in language that is dignified, stately, educated, and profoundly revolutionary. *We are*, these two sentences say in a manner without precedent in history, *equal*.