

Not for Everyone

At 22 years old, after a year of high school teaching, I had 6 months or so to wait for a Peace Corps assignment that never arrived. I figured I'd use the time to educate myself so I enrolled in a graduate Linguistics class at Brandeis, my alma mater.

Because I took pride in understanding grammar and had been writing creatively since high school, I figured that a Linguistics course would be interesting and informative but not terribly challenging. I did not bargain for the psycholinguistic element, the giving of evidence via languages besides English, and the casual and unstated disregard for the sanctity of the rules of the sixth grade English grammar I had so assiduously mastered. The professor was aware that many students, who were intelligent, grammar-literate, and similarly unprepared, might enter his classroom and thus did said professor sit me down for a discussion one afternoon. "Some people just don't get the type of linguistics we are doing. Most of us in the field are ultimately trying to discover a universal psychological construct for language. Not an ur-language so to speak, but some commonality about how humans have gone about creating the way they communicate. Maybe this type of thing is not for you. Some people are more comfortable working within rigid rules rather than experimenting on the outskirts."

I certainly recognized myself in this "rules" category (although the word "rigid" ruffled my feathers). I respected rules because they made functioning in the world a lot easier. But investigation often challenges rules such that at least once or twice in a lifetime (perhaps more frequently in the contemporary world) people have to give up their rules or reform them severely. Rules cut a path through the forest, but the path is narrow. Finding one's way through the foliage without rules can be daunting, but only with newly broken paths can more efficient rules be formed.

In learning any budo, one group of people flow with it naturally; others find it easier to do what they are taught without flowing at all, seeing the rigid rules, the precise forms, and the exacting practices as an essential part of the art they are aspiring to emulate. They are comfortable emulating without flowing. If they emulate well, they will probably be good martial artists.

Those who flow see the art as a set of suggestions that imitate reality, albeit inaccurately. They are comfortable flowing ever more freely by using emulation as a set of training wheels. If they step outside the narrow pathway of the art, they might struggle, but just might find what they needed for application, which is why they studied the "art" in the first place.

Another way of saying this is: not everyone travels the same path through the jungle, up the mountain, or into the safety of the village. Before choosing one's path, one should know a few things. If you are stuck in the comfort of sixth grade grammar, better not march into the wilds of psycholinguistics expecting to salute a Strunk & White "Elements of Style" at the other end of the semester. On the other hand, if you don't mind making a series of potentially painful psychological (if not paradigmatic) shifts in the process of learning, you

may find that the rules and forms actually help set you free—free to flow, rather than march, much like a well-written essay or perhaps a martial artist who can both represent his art and also defend himself.