What’s the point of grammar?

It was in French with Mme Maigre (she’s a living antonym, not “meager” at all with that huge muffin top around her middle). . . . She was making a point about the use of qualifying adjectives as epithets, on the pretext that our compositions were completely devoid of them, “really, you should have learned this in third grade.” She went on: “Am I to honestly believe there are students who are this incompetent in grammar,” and she looked right at Achille Grand-Fernet. I don’t like Achille but in this case I agreed with him when he asked his question. I feel it was long overdue. Moreover, when a lit teacher uses a split infinitive like that, I’m really shocked. It’s like someone sweeping the floor and forgetting the dust bunnies. “What’s it good for, grammar?” he asked. “You ought to know by now,” replied Mme-I-am-paid-after-all-to-teach-you. “Well I don’t,” replied Achille, sincerely for once, “no one ever bothered to explain it to us.” Mme Maigre let out a long sigh, the kind which says “do I really have to put up with such stupid questions?” and said, “It’s for speaking and writing well.”

I thought I would have a heart attack there and then. I have never heard anything so inept. And by that, I don’t mean it’s wrong, just that it’s truly inept. To tell a group of adolescents who already know how to speak and write that that is the purpose of grammar is like telling someone that they need to read a history of toilets through the ages in order to pee and poop. It is utterly devoid of meaning! If she had shown us some concrete examples of things we need to know about language in order to use it properly, well, okay, why not, that would be a start. For example, that knowing how to conjugate a verb in all its tenses helps you avoid making the kind of major mistakes that would embarrass you at a dinner party (“I would of came to the party earlier but I tooked the wrong road”). Or that to write a proper invitation to a little do at the chateau of Versailles, knowing the rules of spelling and punctuation could save you from: “Deer friend, may we have the pleasure of you’re company at Versaille’s this evening? The Marquise de Grand-Fernet.” But if Mme Maigre thinks that’s all grammar is for . . . . We already knew how to say and conjugate a verb long before we knew it was a verb. And even if knowing can help, I still don’t think it’s something decisive. . . .

I think that it was at age two, in listening to adults, that I suddenly understood, how language worked. Grammar lessons have always seemed to me a sort of synthesis after the fact and, perhaps, some terminological details thrown in. . . .

So I said to Mme Maigre: “Not at all! That’s totally reductive!” There was a great silence in the classroom both because as a rule I never open my mouth and because I had contradicted the teacher. She looked at me with surprise, then she put on one of those stern looks that all teachers get when they feel that the wind is veering to the north and their little class on the qualifying adjective as an epithet might turn into a tribunal on their pedagogical methods. “And what do you know about it, mademoiselle Josse?” she asked acldly. Everyone was holding their breath. When the star pupil is displeased, it’s bad for the teaching body, particularly when that body is so well-fed, so this morning it was like seeing both a thriller and the circus for the price of one admission: everyone was waiting to see what the outcome of the battle would be, and they were hoping it would be bloody.

“Well,” I said, “when you’ve read Jakobson, it becomes obvious that grammar is an end in itself and not simply a means: it provides access to the structure and beauty of language, it’s not just some gimmick to help people get by in society.”
“Some gimmick! Some gimmick!” she scoffed, her eyes popping out of her head. “For Mlle Josse grammar is a gimmick!”

If she had listened carefully to my sentence, she would have understood that for me, grammar is not a gimmick. But I think the reference to Jakobson caused her to lose it completely, never mind that everyone was snickering, including Cannelle Martin, even though they didn’t get what I had said at all, but they could tell a little cloud from Siberia was hovering over our fat French teacher. In reality, I’ve never read a thing by Jakobson, obviously not. Though I may be supersmart, I’d still rather read mangas or novels. But one of Maman’s friends (who’s a university professor) was talking about Jakobson yesterday (while they were enjoying a bottle of red wine and some camembert at five in the afternoon). Anyway, in class this morning I remembered what she had said.

O.K., so finally I backed off and didn’t say anything. I got two hours of detention and Mme Maigre saved her professorial skin. But when I left the classroom, I could feel her worried little eyes following me out the door.

And on the way home I thought: pity the poor in spirit who know neither the enchantment nor the beauty of language.


Some questions that this passage raises:

1. What is grammar good for?
2. Does Paloma, the narrator (whose teacher calls her by her last name, Mlle Josse), know more about grammar than Mme Maigre, her French teacher?
3. If language is all about enchantment and beauty, then why does Paloma react negatively to her teacher’s split infinitive?
4. The teacher uses grammar to make fun of her students. The student uses grammar to make fun of her teacher. Mme Maigre (the word means ‘thin’ in French, so her name is really an antonym) professes “correct grammar” while making grammatical errors. Paloma cites the structural linguist Roman Jakobson, though she has never read his work. How are we to know, then, what grammar is really good for?
5. If you had to teach students about language, how would you approach the task?