The Traditional, Structural And Cognitive Approach To Linguistics

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Abstract:- This paper traces the historical development of linguistics, and the related disciplines that have emerged. An attempt is made to give a fair idea of some of the major concerns of linguists by acquainting with different dimensions of linguistics, and with serval interdisciplinary fields relating to linguistics. The traditional, structural and cognitive approach to linguistics are studied.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Language, as we know, is many things-a system of   communication, a medium for thought, a vehicle for literary expression, a social institution, a matter for political controversy, a factor in nation building, etc. And we find that every man is interested in language to some extent. The word linguistics originates from the Latin word Lingua which means"tongue". Linguistics must, therefore, certainly deal with language. One of the simplest difinitions of linguistics is that, it is a scientific study of language.

David Crystal (1987:412) in his encyclopedia defines linguistics as the "science of language". It has also been defined as :
The scientific inquiry into human language-- into its structures and uses and into the relationship between them (Finegan& Besnier 1989:8).

Dimensions of linguistics
Linguistics can be studied from different perspectives. Some of these dimensions of linguistics are represented below:
These dimensions can be distinguished, depending on the focus and interest of the linguist. We therefore have diachronic and synchroniclinguistics-developed as a result of the distinction introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure .Diachronic linguistics is the study of language change. It is concerned with the historical development of the language through time. A study of the history of the Hindi language will be a diachronic study. Synchronic linguistics is the study of language states, regardless of their history. That is, a study of language as it exists at a particular point of time. Hence if we make a study of French as it was spoken in the 1960s or of the English language of Chaucer's time, it would be a synchronic study. When linguists try to establish general principles for the study of all languages, they are said to be practisingtheoretical (or general) linguistics. When they concentrate on establishing the facts of particular language system, they practice descriptive linguistics. When the focus is on the similarities and differences between languages, the subject is often referred to as comparative (or typological) linguistics. And the application of the concepts and methods used in linguistics to other areas like language teaching, translation or testing is called applied linguistics.

Interdisciplinary fields of linguistics
When we talk of branches of linguistics what we also have in mind are the interdisciplinary fields that have developed since the inception of linguistics. David Crystal (1987) in his encyclopedia called The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language has categorized some of these under different interdisciplinary fields of linguistics. A brief introduction is also given along with each discipline. Some of these disciplines like sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, translation, applied linguistics, etc. will be discussed in detail. Anthropological linguistics

The study of language variation and use in relation to the cultural patterns and beliefs of the human race, as investigated using the theories and methods of anthropology. Applied linguistics The application of linguistic theories, methods, and finding to the elucidation of language problems that have arisen in other domains. The term is especially used with reference to the field of foreign language learning and teaching, but it applies equally to several other fields, such as stylistics, lexicography translations and language planning, as well as to the clinical and educational fields below.

Biological linguistics
The study of the biological conditions for language development and use in human beings, with reference to both to the history of language in the human race and to child development. Clinical linguistics The application of linguistic theories and methods to the analysis of disorders in spoken, written, or signed language. Computational linguistics The study of language using the techniques and concepts of computer science, especially with reference to the problems posed by the fields of machine translation, information retrieval and artificial intelligence.

Educational linguistics
The application of linguistic theories and methods to the study of the teaching and learning of a language (especially a first language) in schools and other educational settings.

Ethnolinguistics
The study of language in relation to ethnic types and behavior, especially with reference to the way social interaction proceeds.

Geographical linguistics
The study of the regional distribution of languages and dialects, seen in relation to geographical factors in the environment.

Mathematical linguistics
The study of the mathematical properties of language, using concepts from such fields as algebra, computer science and statistics.

Neurolinguistics
The study of the neurological basis of language development and use in human beings, especially of the brain's control over the processes of speech and understanding.

Philosophical linguistics
The study of the role of language in the elucidation of philosophical concepts, and of the philosophical status of linguistic theories, methods and observations.

Psycholinguistics
The study of the relationship between linguistic behavior and the psychological process (e.g. memory, attention) thought to underlie it.

Sociolinguistics
The study of the interaction between language and the structure and functioning of society. Statistical linguistics The study of the statistical or quantitative properties of language.

Theolinguistics
The study of the language used by biblical scholars, theologians, and others involved in the theory and practice of religious belief.

The Traditional Approach To Linguistics
Buddha once said that life is always in a state of flux. By analogy therefore everything in life is in a state of flux, be it the value of the rupee, or the trends in fashion, or the changes brought in in sciences by new discoveries and innovations. If you have given this phenomenon some thought, you would have noticed that generally these changes are brought in because of a reaction against the existing state of affairs or because of new discoveries and innovations. Linguistics, as a discipline, is no exception to this phenomenon.

Broadly speaking we can divide the development of linguistics into three phases : the traditional, the structural and the cognitive. In this section we shall trace the origins of linguistics—often referred to as the traditional approach to linguistics. Historical records tell us language has been an object of fascination and a subject of serious inquiry for ove 2000 years. In fact, Panini and his near contemporary Plato were the first to give us a reasonably complete Grammar: Panini gave us a grammar of Sanskrit, and Plato, of Greek. Later, it has been recorded, scholars like Aristotle, Dionysius Thrax and Protagoras investigated aspects of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation in a detailed and organized way. The Greeks were primarily interested in the written form of a language. And they thought that only the language of the great writers was "pure" and "correct" and any deviation from it was seen as a corrupt and decayed form of language. Later when the Latin grammarians came, they simply followed the Greek model for the description of Latin. In fact, they thought that the Greek model could be used for the description of any language. What we said above was more or less true of

the Indian grammatical tradition also. Panini and the later grammarians who followed in his footsteps (e.g. Katyayana and Patanjali) primarily focused on the written form of Sanskrit; and later, Sanskrit grammar was used as a model for describing any other languages of the Indian subcontinent.

Scholars during this period took meaning into account while describing grammatical categories; and they seemed to believe that syntax i.e. the way words are put together in sentences, followed "Iogically" from meaning. The traditionalists were also interested in language as a tool for analyzing reality. They believed that the structure of language was a product of reason. Linguistics was thus looked upon as subordinate to logic and philosophy. And the linguistic description of language was prescriptive in nature. That is, they told people what they ought to use, following the great writers of that time, instead of describing what people actually use. This type of understanding and investigation of language continued until about the end of the 19th century.

The discovery of Sanskrit by western scholars like Leibniz and Sir William Jones was a major factor in the development of linguistics during the 19th century. Sir William Jones was struck by the similarity that Sanskrit bore to Greek and Latin. Researchers during this period started systematically comparing different languages and tracing them to a common origin. This way of analyzing languages came to be known as Comparative Philology. The contribution of comparative philology to the development of linguistic science lay in the following: it established a methodology for setting up language families, it developed a general theory of linguistic change and linguistic relationship and it started focusing on the observation of "facts" of language instead of speculation. This was the first step towards turning linguistics into a scientific discipline.

The Structural Approach To Linguistics

The second phase in the development of linguistics started during the late 19th century, with the emergence of linguists like Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) in Europe and Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1947) in America. By this time, European nations had established colonies. One of the results of colonialism was a realization that there were many more languages in the world than just the languages of Europe; and that these languages were on the verge of extinction because either their speakers were wiped out by colonialists or they were forced to switch over to the colonial language.

This period, therefore, saw a great effort by American linguists (Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Leonard Bloomfield) and European linguists (Ferdinand de Saussure, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Louis Hjelmslev, Nikolas S Trubetzkoy, Roman Jokobson) to travel to places where these languages were spoken and to learn enough about the languages to describe them as fully as possible. As a reaction against the traditionalists and also because of the discovery of new languages, linguists of this period aimed at describing each language in its own terms. Each language was treated with respect, which meant not trying to force it into the grammatical framework of any other language. Similarly, ideas regarding the superiority of the classical languages, and of the written form, were rejected. The colonial notion that the languages of the native people were primitive was fought against, because although many languages did not have a writing system, they were still highly complex and structured. Thus the emphasis shifted from the description of the written form of the language to the spoken form of the language. This resulted in treating language variety, dialects and registers as part of language; and because the spoken form became important, the grammars proposed during this period became descriptive in nature as opposed to the prescriptive nature of traditional grammar. That is, the grammar of the language now described what actually happened; what native speakers actually used instead of prescribing what people ought to use.

The use of meaning in the description of grammatical categories was also rejected because meaning was not objectively verifiable. It was considered an object of introspection, and hence "subjective" and (somehow) unscientific. Thus, as you can see, there was an attempt at making linguistic descriptions more scientific and more objective. Slowly, the linguists started looking for ways in which languages could be described, identified and classified. The question of what languages had in common therefore became important during this time. Linguists around the beginning of the 20th century began to generalize about which sounds were common in the languages of the world and tried to propose rules and principles that could be applied to any language. Joseph Greenberg noticed regular connections between different parts of grammar in a wide range of languages, while Charles Hlocklett devised a set of criteria which distinguished human languages from the animal communication system.

It was around this time that Zellig Harris proposed a general method of analyzing language in his prominent book entitled Methods in Structural Linguistics; and Saussure proposed his famous pairs of concepts—diachrony vs synchrony; langue vs parole; significant vs signifie; and syntagmatic vs paradigmatic – in his book Cours deLinguistiqueGenerale. It was Saussure who introduced the notion that language is a system of systems. That is, every element in a system derives its significance from its relationship with the other elements of the system. As the languages of the colonies presented a different kind of structure than those encountered in Europe, a lot of attention was paid to giving a careful account of these languages. Hence field methods were borrowed from anthropological researches and used for recording and analyzing languages which

the linguists themselves could not speak and which had no written form. Pioneers in this field were linguists like Franz Boaz (1852-1942) and Edward Sapir (1884-1939).

Another major work that synthesized the theory and practice of linguistic analysis was Bloomfield's Language. This book dominated linguistic thinking for over twenty years and in due course the Bloomfieldian approach came to be known as the structuralist approach because of the various kinds of techniques it employed in order to identify and classify features of sentence-structures. It was during the structuralists period that linguistics achieved the status of an autonomous science, after long centuries of partial subordination to logic and philosophy. In the first international congress of linguistics in 1928, Millet spoke for an autonomous linguistics, while Hjelmslev and Bloomfield laid the foundation of a science of language delineating its domains and sharpening the instruments of its methodology. The structuralists proposed discovery procedures which were a set of techniques which when applied to unknown languages, helped in discovering their correct grammar. For the structuralists the goal of linguistics was only to describe the linguistic facts but not to give an explanation of lingustic facts. Thus, linguistic was still far away from becoming a science.   The structuralists were satisfied with just the identification and classification of linguistic facts. The structuralists did not give importance to the linguist's intuitive knowledge of the language. With the help of their discovery procedures a computer and a linguist would come up with the same analysis, that is, identical conclusions; beacause, according to the structuralists, the human brain/ mind did not have any linguistic faculty. There was no special part of the brain which helped human beings in learning languages. The mind was a blank slate – a tabula rasa—as far as language learning capabilities were concerned.

The cognitive approach to linguistics

The latest phase in the development of linguistics started during the late 1950s when Chomsky published his Syntactic Structures. Chomsky rejected the structuralist view that the function of linguistics was simply to provide a classification and a terminology to talk about language. He argued that a linguistic theory must be able to capture the psychological aspect of the knowledge of language. That is, the human mind is not a blank slate. The aim of linguistics is to understand and explain the following :

*   What is in the mind/brain of the speaker of English or any other language?
*   How did this knowledge arise in the mind/brain? How did we learn our native languages? Were we born with it? Or was it learned later?   or both?
*   How is this knowledge put to use in speech? Etc.

homsky, therefore, emphasizes that the role of the native speaker is very important. For him a linguist who tries to learn and describe a language different from his/her own may be able to produce a good description (as the structuralists did) but not the explanation that his "generative" grammar aspires for. For Chomsky the business of linguistics was to construct a theory which would explain and predict facts regarding languages. He treats linguistics as a science, and the point about science is that it seeks to explain why things are the way they are. It is this search for explanation which distinguishes science from other human activities. Chomsky has given a special name to this description Generative Grammar or Transformational Generative Linguistics. Generativedefines the aim – that is the grammar should be able to generate all and only the correct sentences, transformational defines one of the means of achievement. That is, grammar which is able to generate all and only the correct sentences of the language by means of applying transformational rules is a transformational generative grammar. Chomsky believes that "the person who has acquired knowledge of language has internalized a system of rules that relate sound and meaning ina particular way. The linguist constructing a grammar of a language is in effect proposing a hypothesis concerning this internalized system". (as quoted in Verma and Krishnaswamy 1989:148)

Chomsky has, therefore, once more shifted the pendulum in the opposite direction by making linguistics a branch of cognitive psychology. Linguistics today activity cooperates with a whole spectrum of disciplines including semiotics, logic, cybernetics, electronics, poetics, acoustics, neurophysiology, genetics, psychology, anthropology and sociology: areas regarded as extralingustics (by the structuralists) have now become part and parcel of linguistic study. Linguistics thus started as a branch of humanistic studies and was leterregared as a natural science and still later as a social science some saw it as an empirical science others as an axiomatic discipline.

If it took time depending from its original humanistic basis, determined by various philosophical system and philosophical needs it has in recent time – under the influence of Chomsky-shown an inclination to return to these traditional sources. But this time it is supported, as never before, by powerful theoretical, methodological and experimental means. The observation that one sometimes hears that linguistics is the most scientific of all the humanities and the most humanistic of all the sciences is thus not unfounded.

II. SUMMARY

We traced the historical background of linguistics from the traditionalist to the structuralists and then to the transformationlists and showed what linguistics has come to mean today. That is, the goal of linguistics shifted from giving a mere description, identification and classification of linguistic facts to the construction of a theory which would explain and predict facts regarding languages.

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