Grammar: A Historical Survey

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The term grammar has been derived from the Greek word 'grammatica or grammatika techne' which means 'the art of writing'. The Greeks considered grammar to be a branch of philosophy concerned with the art of writing. In the middle ages grammar came to be regarded as a set of rules, usually in the form of text book, dictating correct usage. So in the widest and the traditional sense, grammar came to mean a set of normative and prescriptive rules in order to set up a standard of 'correct usage'.

The earliest reference of any grammar is to be found in 600 B.C.. Panini, in 600 B.C., was a Sanskrit grammarian from Pushkalvati, Gandhara, in modern day Charsadda District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Panini is known for his formulation of 3959 rules of Sanskrit morphology, syntax, semantics in the grammar known as Ashtadhyayi meaning eight chapters. After Panin observations on Language are found in the records we have of pre-Socratic philosophers, the fifth century rhetoricians, Plato and Aristotle.

The sources of knowledge of the pre-Socratic and the early theoraticians are fragmentary. It would be wise therefore to begin with Plato. The earliest extinct document in Greek on the subject of language is Cratylus, one of Plato's dialogues.

Plato was the first philosopher who took up the subject of grammar seriously. The History of the traditional classification of words into parts of speech begins with him. Plato's definition of nouns and verbs are different from the ones we are familiar with. Nouns for him are words that can function as terms in proposition and the verbs are words which can function as the predicate in a proposition. What interests us is the fact that Plato used illogical criteria to define his categories.

Aristotle maintained his teacher's distinction but added a third class which covered conjunctions, articles, pronouns and prepositions. The early stoic philosophers went still further and proposed a classification of words into four categories: Nouns, verbs, conjunctions and articles. The adjective was classified with the noun . The system of eight parts of speech first appeared in the work of the great Alexandrian grammarian, Dionysius Thrax(Late 2nd century B.C.), who is reputed to have written the first comprehensive and systematic description of a language to be published in the western world. In addition to the four parts of speech , Dionyssius recognized also adverbs, participles, pronouns and prepositions. All parts of speech classification of traditional grammar since then have been based more or less on the system derived by Dionysius.

It was Protagoras, a fifth century Greek philosopher, who first made the distinction of the three genders in Greek . An important contribution from Aristotle was the recognition of tense. The discovery of inflections is credited to the stoic philosophers . It was they who gave the term case the sense which it had in traditional grammatical descriptions ever since. Further the stoics distinguished between the transitive and intransitive.

The Romans had been in contact with the Greek civilization for a long time, and they accepted the Greeks as their superiors in intellectual and artistic achievements. The Latin grammarians depended upon the Greek model for the description of Latin. The first important Latin grammar was written by Varro (116-27 B.C.). The other grammarians of this period were Quintillian and Donatus. With the collapse of Rome, most of the Roman scholars took refuge in Constantinople. It was here that Priscian (512-60 A.D.) wrote his 'Grammatical Categories', which was used for teaching Latin throughout the middle ages and as late as the seventeenth century.

The thirteenth century was the period of the great Scholastics who under the influence of Aristotle's logic, tried to reduce all sciences to the principles of logical deduction. Grammarians of the period are known as speculative grammarians. (The word speculative comes from speculum which means mirror. The term refers to the view that language reflects the reality underlying the phenomena of the physical world). If all the languages reflect the underlying reality, then all languages must be structured the same way. The speculative grammarian s were preoccupied with formulating the essential universal features for all languages.

The ideals of the speculative Grammarians were revived in the 17th century by the Port Royal Grammarians in France. Thebook 'Grammaire Generale at Raisome' is commonly known as the Port Royal Grammar. They held that the structure of language is the product of reason and that different languages of men are but varieties of the same universal and rational system.

During the medieval and the early modern times i.e. until about the end of the 18th century , a great deal of information about language was collected in the west. The methods of analysis and interpretation, however , remained unchanged. It was only towards the nineteenth century that linguistic studies started exhibiting a more or less scientific approach towards the objective analysis of data. The precursors of this approach were Gotfried Wilhelm Von Leibniz and Sir William Lones

For the sake of reference the grammar before the beginning of the 20th century is called traditional grammar and the grammar after the 20th century is called modern grammar. Modern grammar as it evolved, developed into various other kinds of grammar. During the early 20th century , the grammar which evolved is known as structural grammar. Structuralism can be traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure.

In America Franz Boas encouraged his desciples to record and analyse the Red Indian languages. He had two followers Edward sapir and Leonard Bloomfield. The followers of Bloomfield developed his theories and techniques to formulate what is known as Structural Linguistics. The 40s and the 50s were the heyday for American structuralism. In 1957, a revolutionary linguist called Noam Chomsky published his 'Syntactic Structures', in which he attacked the basic tenets of structuralism and proposed a new theory which is known as transformational generative grammar.

The whole of structural linguistics was devoted to the search for a set of mechanical operations which would yield the correct descriptions of a language. However, even after years of research by the leading linguists of the period, nothing which faintly resembled the ideal could be formulated. On the other hand, as more and more languages were analysed , there arose the growing conviction that such a procedure was impossible to formulate.

A more serious trouble spot was the structuralist concept of language . the concept of language as the sum total of sentences produced by a community leads on to the theory that language learning is a matter of imitation and reproduction. The behaviorist theory of language acquisition which the structuralist subscribed to , fails to account for the creativity of language use.

The most important characteristic of human language is its creativity. Any native speaker can produce and understand sentences that he or she has never come before .the unconscious knowledge of a native speaker which enables him to produce and understand an infinite set of sentences is referred to as competence. The actual process of production and understanding on the other hand and the sentences produced are referred to as performance.

For the structuralist, the object of enquiry was the corpus (parole/performance). Once the corpus was analysed and the element identified and classified, the linguist's job was done. For Chomsky, the object of enquiry is the set of underlying principles (langue/competence) behind the corpus. The corpus is used as a means in order to discover those principles. The opposition is between the methodology of confining research to observable facts as clues to hidden and underlying laws.

What is revolutionary about this approach is that the native speaker's intuition about his language (his innate knowledge) becomes the data which the linguist has to account for . Structural grammar rejects intuition both as data and as a tool of description. Generative grammar accepts the native speaker's intuition (competence) as data, but uses explicit, objective devices as tools of description. Traditional grammar has the speaker's intuition as its data but it often makes the mistake of substituting intuition for explicit description.

The model of grammar that Chomsky has outlined is known as generative grammar . Chomsky's definition of grammar is: A grammar is as theory of a language . We also know that by language Chomsky means competence and not performance. Therefore we can also say that a grammar is a theory of the competence of the native speaker.

Linguists usually say that a grammar should be able to generate all the sentences of the language. Here to generate is not the same as to produce. To generate in grammar means explicitly characterize or explicitly enumerate. This can be further explained with the help of simple mathematics. We can enumerate the first six even numbers as 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12. But if we are asked to enumerate all the even numbers , we cannot list them because they are infinite. We can, however, explicitly characterize the set of all the even numbers by the following formula: $2n$. With this formula we can enumerate the even numbers: If $n=1$ $2n=2$, if $n=2$ $2n=4$ and so on. We can say that the formula $2n$ generates the set of all the even numbers.

Now had the number of sentences in a language been finite, we could have listed them in a grammar book. We can list all the phonemes, all the morphemes, and all the words, but not all the sentences. A sentence can be stretched to infinite length . For example : The philosopher loved the womanwho was married to the doctor who loved the nurse who loved the doctor's compounder ……. The property which allows sentences to be combined indefinitely in this manner is called recursiveness. There is no upper limit to the length of a sentence in a language. This is why a language can have an infinite number of sentences with a finite set of words. Since the number of sentences in a language is infinite, we have to characterize them by means of an explicit rules. It is in this sense of characterizing explicitly that a grammar is generative. A Generative grammar generates or explicitly characterizes all the grammatical sentences of the language.

The two main devices of grammatical analysis are: (a) Breaking up a string (b) labeling the constituents. There are three kinds of breaking up: (i) Sequential (ii) Hierarchical (iii) Transformational Similarly there are three kinds of labeling: (i) Morphhological (ii) Categorical (iii) Functional. A grammar is free to choose and combine any of the techniques of cutting and labeling. Depending upon what tools the grammar chooses, we have different types of grammar. If a generative grammar makes use of sequential cutting up only, it is called Finite State grammar. If a generative grammar makes use of hierarchical cutting up and no transformation, it is called Phrase Structure Grammar. A generative grammar that makes use of all the three (sequential, hierarchical and transformational) it is called Transformational Generative grammar.

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