

MODERN LINGUISTICS (An Overview)

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December, 2001*

1. Introduction

*Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of mankind is Man.
Plac'd in this isthmus of a middle state,
A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for skeptic side,
With too much weakness for the stoic's pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer,
Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little, or too much:
Chaos of thought and passion, all confus'd;
Still by himself abus'd, or disabus'd;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless Error hurl'd:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!*

(Epistle II, 1-18. c.f. Fowler, 1986)

Language is said to be the unique property of mankind and closely tied with philosophy, logic, rhetoric, teaching, literary criticism and religion. "We regard the ability to speak properly as the best sign of intelligence, and truthful, legal and trustworthy soul... rational faculty underlying and informing the spoken word in all its forms" (Harris and Tabor, 1989). It has been controversially approached recently. Different schools of thought have emerged and new dimensions in language and knowledge of language have been explored.

2. Language Definitions

Language, as an abstract phenomenon, has been given different definitions. Some have considered it as power of speech endowed to Adam by God to name the other creatures. Some have considered it as imitations from nature and environment. Some have defined it as a system for realization of meaning through form. And as a more recent definition, language has been defined as a system of vocal symbols used by all human beings to communicate thoughts and feelings.

Each of these definitions introduces the viewpoints and the school of thought which the definers adhere to. We can't find an idealized definition because the notion of language as it is used by different

people is purely different; and some of them contradict the others. These contradictory views of language have led to different schools and approaches to the study of language.

3. Development of Language Schools

3.1. Historical Linguistics

In traditional approaches to language a partial account of language has been given and it has been prescriptive. The problem of the origin of language has occupied the central place in the intellectual history of the period. In early nineteenth century, Romantic Movement enhanced the study of languages of past civilizations and exotic cultures. In historical linguistics two types of reconstruction was used; internal-external, and typological. "The aims of historical linguistics were to set up a hypothetical ancestor like Proto Indo-European, from which other languages descended" (Aitchison, 1992). A group of scholars called young grammarians claimed that language change was regular. Therefore, "they studied the similarities that exist between and among apparently different languages" (Hayes, 1370). Word histories, for instance, have been employed to trace the relationship among languages which may be now far apart in geographical distance. Thus far, as we have seen, language study, up to the end of nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, was more concerned with the history of languages rather than with how they were then spoken and written. "However, during this time the seeds of revolution were being strewn" (Hays, 1370). We may realize that many features of traditional theories and descriptions of language have proved to be unhelpful or positively misleading, and one of the main stimuli for development of linguistics was a reaction against this.

3.2. Structuralism

Evolutionary thinking in linguistics to establish the scientific 'sound laws' became dominant after the acceptance of Darwin's ideas, The Survival of the Fittest, in biology. "The first account of the scientificness of linguistics stems largely from the dominant behaviorist climate of the time which derives primarily from the stated attitudes of scientists from other disciplines and philosophers of science" (Crystal, 1971). All these events resulted in the shift of emphasis on language description rather than language change.

Many schools of linguistics that can be distinguished at the present time, have been influenced, whether directly or indirectly, by the great Swiss scholar, Ferdinand de Saussure, whose lectures were published under the name of "Cours de Linguistique Generale" by his students in 1916 after his death. Saussure exerted a major influence on the course of linguistics especially in Europe, by his explicit and reiterated statement, "that all language items are essentially interlinked" (Aitchison, 1992), and this carefully built structure initiated the era of structural linguistics. He held the idea that a language was not, for its speakers, in a continuous process of evolution, but was a stable structured system, in a way questioning the theoretical assumptions of the Darwin's ideas.

Suassure suggested the study of language as the primary task of linguistics, drawing a distinction between 'langue', the language system shared by a community of speakers, and 'parole', the act of speaking in actual situations by an individual. He treated the linguistic 'sign' as a unit purely defined by its form, which has two opposite sides; 'significant' and 'signifie'. He has further asserted that no linguistic sign can be defined without reference to both planes. He has stated, in order to make any serious study of the linguistic phenomenon, as one of his central tenets, we must give priority to the concept that langue is a structure and its essential properties are structural properties, and he calls upon the failure of the past as, not to draw border lines between langue and parole.

He further asserted; it was essential to distinguish between different points of view; that of synchronic and that of diachronic point of view. The former makes it possible to study any given language as a system of coexisting units and relations, while the latter makes it possible to study the

changes chronologically in time. He further emphasized priority of synchronic linguistics over diachronic linguistics. Moreover, he differentiated between substance as surviving through time and form as evolving.

He has further proposed that each linguistic unit can enter two kinds of relations; that of syntagmatic relations with other units of the same level with which it occurs and which constitute its context; and that of paradigmatic relations with all the units which can also occur in the same context. Paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships are also possible at the word level and they are interdependent. Linguists in America and Europe sticking to Saussurean points of view enriched his propositions through American structuralism, and functionalism.

3.2.1. American Structuralism

American linguist, Leonard Bloomfield, influenced by behaviorism psychology and an adherent of structural linguistics, tried to set up rigorous procedures for the description of any language. He proposed that linguistics should deal objectively and systematically with observable data. He furthermore considered meaning 'the weak point in language study'. 'Discovery procedures', a set of principles, would enable linguist to discover in a full proof way the linguistic units of an unwritten language. He applied his procedures to American Indian languages and collected sets of utterances from them. Later, he analyzed the collected corpuses into distinctive sounds, their variations, and the like, in order to study phonological and syntactic patterns without any resort to meaning. 'The Bloomfieldians', or as they are also called descriptivists, "submitted that language consisted of levels, each level hierarchically linked to the one above or below it" (Hayes, 1370). In order to examine the structure of words and sentences, they used immediate constituent analysis method.

3.2.2. Functionalism

Functionalism is best seen as a particular movement within structuralism. Major areas of activity of the Prague Linguistic Circle were: the study of functional significance of the sound patterns within the overall system of a language; the concept of functional sentence perspective which relates to style; the study of esthetic function of language and its role in literature and the verbal art; the study of the role of the standard language in modern society. They have tried to explain form in terms of function. Functional grammar is concerned with the identification, classification, and functioning of significant units. Functional relations are semantic, pragmatic, and syntactic. The concept of distinctive features was first introduced by Trubetzkoy who drew distinction lines between phonetic and phonology. Besides distinctive functions of phonetic features, he furthermore recognized demarcative function and expressive function of linguistically relevant functions. "In general, functionalism in linguistics has tended to emphasize the instrumental character of language" (Lyons, 1981).

3.3. Generativism

3.3.1. 1957 Model

Noam Chomsky is, arguably, the most influential and prominent linguist of the twentieth century. His book, *Syntactic Structures*, started a new era and a revolution in linguistics after it was published in 1957. He shifted attention away from detailed description of actual utterances to questions about the nature of the system which produces the output. He has considered structural linguistics both far too ambitious and limited in scope. He defined the language as a set of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements. His definition of language is structure dependent and differs largely from other definitions in style and content. Syntax, for Chomsky, is the core of a language and its organizing. He further stated that the grammar of a

language should be capable of generating all grammatical sentences and none of the ungrammatical ones. However, in his book, he concludes that, "Grammar is autonomous and independent of meaning, and that probabilistic models give no particular insight into some of the basic problems of syntactic structure" (Chomsky, 1957). He believed in three types of rules, phrase structure rules, morphophonemic rules, and transformational rules which acted upon the kernel of basic sentences, what is known as deep structure, to derive representing level, known as surface structure. Although, he has talked of independent syntax in 1957, he has also realized the correlations between syntactic structure and meaning and states, "These correlations could form part of the subject matter for a more general theory of language concerned with syntax and semantics and their point of connection" (Chomsky, 1957).

3.3.2. Standard Theory

Due to inadequacies of 1957 model-- no place for semantics, optional and obligatory transformations, lexical rules being within PS-rules, and two different components (phonemes, sound system and morphemes, syntax) being pushed together, his new modified model was proposed. Chomsky stated that, "A grammar of a language purports to be a description of the ideal speaker/hearer's intrinsic competence" (Chomsky, 1965). He drew a border line between competence, the speaker/hearer's knowledge of his language; and performance, the actual use of language in concrete situations. He considers performance limited because of bounds on memory. He has related acceptability to performance and grammaticality to competence. He has stressed that, "A generative grammar must be a system of rules that can iterate to generate an indefinitely large number of structures (Chomsky, 1965). He introduced three major components; syntactic, phonological, and semantic components, into generative grammar. However, it took fifty years, for the linguists to reintroduce the meaning into grammar. The syntactic component specifies an infinite set of abstract formal objects with all information relevant to a single interpretation of a particular sentence; the phonological component determines the phonetic forms of a sentence generated by the syntactic rules; and the semantic component determines the semantic interpretation of a sentence. Furthermore, syntactic component must specify a deep structure that determines the semantic interpretation, and a surface structure which determines the phonetic interpretation of each sentence. The syntactic component is composed of base, PS-rules, transformational sub-components, lexicon and lexical rules. Standard theory again underwent changes due to some observational, descriptive and explanatory adequacies which were not met. It was methodologically assumed that transformations are meaning preserving operations, where passive transformation sometimes changed the meaning. The response to this dilemma divided the transformational linguists into two factions favoring two different approaches

3.3.3. Extended Standard Theory

The linguists who supported extended standard theory claimed to respond to this dilemma through a) giving up the hypothesis that transformations are meaning preserving, and b) proposing an additional set of projection rules. The new set of projection rules operate on tree structures that exist post-translationally. Therefore, a part of meaning was incorporated in deep structure and a part of it was incorporated in surface structure.

3.3.4. Generative Semantics

The linguists who supported Generative Semantics position answered to the dilemma by extending the assumption regarding the meaning-preserving hypothesis to derivations, and furthermore, the two sequences must be derived from two different deep structures because they have

distinct meanings. The deep structures proposed by GS and EST tend to be quite different. The GS model proposed to do away entirely with projection rules and to identify deep structure by semantic representation. The semantic representation of any tree is the deep structure of that tree. The EST believed in separation of syntactic and semantic level in analysis, while the GS denied such a separation, maintaining that there is no difference in the set of formal objects that represent semantic and syntactic structures.

Part of meaning related to deep structure and part of meaning related to surface structure for extended standard theory; and at the same time, the main problem of specifying the underlying structures which became more and more unwieldy and the need for extraordinarily complicated rules by generative semanticists to show various combinations of underlying structures, led linguists to conclude that surface structure alone was responsible for meaning, and the resulting modified model became known as Revised Extended Standard Theory (REST). However, Charles Fillmore introduced his case grammar using the term case, "to identify syntactic-semantic relationships" (Hayes, 1370).

3.3.5. Revised Extended Standard Theory (REST)

The main preoccupation of REST linguists was working out ways of constraining the power of transformations, combining them and limiting their number. They off loaded some of the existing transformations to lexicon and semantic component. The deep structure was purely syntax acting as a bridge between logical form and phonetic form. Transformations operate on deep structure to yield surface structure. Semantic rules operate between surface structure and logical form to yield semantic representation. Phonological rules operate to derive phonetic form. Moreover, the idea of 'trace' was included for semantic interpretation at the level of surface structure. Transformations were reduced to one which was called 'movement transformation'. These alterations paved the way for a new transformational grammar, universal grammar and its model 'government and binding'.

3.3.6. Government and Binding

Government and binding pays particular attention to two aspects of grammar; government involves the idea of a constituent having power over the others in its wider notion, command; and binding dealing with the linking or binding of items to one another. In this type of grammar, we deal with a shift of perspective. In earlier years of generativism, "a grammar was essentially a device which specified what was, and what was not, a well-formed sentence" (Aitchison, 1992). However, in this recent version, emphasis has been moved to a specification of the general principles and relations which exist within language. For this reason, Chomsky prefers to call it a principles and parameters (p and p) model (Aitchison, 1992). Various models are incorporated in government and binding; X-bar theory which specifies tree structures in D. structure; p -theory deals with lexicon, D. structure, S. structure and logical form (who does what to whom); r -movement transformation, within certain bounds, as a part of bounding theory; Case theory through which a case is assigned to each NP; binding theory which shows how anaphors and their antecedents are recognized and interpreted; The Empty Category Principle (ECP) dealing with gaps in the structure and licensing of traces. Chomsky has already amended his theory, introducing a new model.

3.3.7. Minimalism

As a consequence of 'Chomsky's intellectual vigor' and as a manifestation of repeated revision of his own inventions and in order to promote observational, descriptive and explanatory power of his theoretical models the Minimalist Approach was introduced in 1995. Smith (1999) believes that, "Minimalism" is, "probably the most radical of the periodic upheavals in Chomsky's thinking, and one which he considers 'maybe the most interesting thing I've thought of'." According to Smith

(1999), "There are now just two levels of representation in the grammar, Phonetic Form (PF) and Logical Form (LF), and people are beginning to talk of 'the end of syntax.' It's actually the beginning, and we are just getting to a stage when 'we can at least formulate (interesting) questions.'" Chomsky has formulated a much more prominent role for meaning, stating that 'all constraints on grammatical processes are motivated by either perceptual or conceptual considerations.' He has further introduced the component of 'economy' as a principle of least effort which is characteristic of language faculty. Neil Smith, considering Chomsky's power to surprise, has stated that, "He has devoted his professional life to developing a paradigm which has concentrated on theoretical elegance and which has culminated in claims about the perfection of language, while emphasizing that what we should have expected is a rather more ramshackle contraption." And "...Minimalism is not the best system possible for global (or Martian) perspective, but that it is the best possible system given in the context in which language has developed in both the individual and the species. (1999:92)"

3.4. Concluding Remarks

"[Modern linguistics] still arouses controversy, particularly when it comes into conflict with traditionally held ideas. But much of the controversy is due to misunderstanding. One way of trying to avoid this is by putting the new in the context of old" (Crystal, 1971). A corpus-based approach restricts itself to the analysis of limited samples of language. The structuralists having considerable positive values in their detailed focus on points of uncertainty and dispute in language, had limitations in their conceptual basis in particular as a science. Generative grammar stimulated a sharp reaction against the empirical approach, which was so prejudiced against postulating any mental constructs. The main effect of generativism has been to bring linguistics face to face with issues which for the most part had not been tackled or even recognized in some cases previously. However it has undergone drastic changes since it was first introduced about forty years or so ago. I started this piece of writing with a poem from Alexander Pope and I shall conclude it with a paraphrase from a German philosopher, "We only know that we don't know", but we can still strive for better.

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