

CHAPTER 4 LINGUISTICS AND ITS HISTORY



Linguistics is the study of language (Crane, 1981:4). It is concerned both in spoken and written language. Crystal (1974: 27) considers that “Linguistics is the scientific way of studying language”. These definitions are completed by Finegan and Besnier, (1989:8). They say that linguistics is the scientific inquiry into human language--into its structures and uses and into relationship between them. In short, linguistics is used empirical and scientific approached. Linguistics is best regarded as an enterprise whose principal objective is to provide an increasingly adequate understanding of particular facets of languages, thereby gradually building our understanding of the nature of language itself.

The definitions of linguistics above raises two further questions: what is the meaning of ‘scientific’? and what is the meaning of ‘language’? Scientific means we attempt to study language in much the same way as a scientist studies physics or chemistry, that is **SYSTEMATICALLY**, and possible without prejudice. Then, a language is a set of signals by which we communicate--to represent thoughts and ideas by means of sounds (or letters).

Nasr (1975) states that linguistics is science. In saying that linguistics is a science, he says:

1. that deals with particular body of material; spoken and written language
2. that it proceeds by operations that can be made known and described; and
3. that the body of facts it discovers can be justified by referring them to principles and to a theory that can be stated. The purpose of linguistics is to examine the material and to make general statements about its various elements that relate to regular rules. In its operations and statements it is guided by three principles of science:
 - (i) that material should be complete
 - (ii) that the material should show agreement between its different parts; and
 - (iii) that the statements about the material should be brief; a shorter statement is to be preferred to a longer one

When we say that a linguist aims to be scientific, we mean that he attempts to study language in much the same way as a scientist studies physics or chemistry, that is systematically, and as far as possible without prejudice.

Linguistics includes both language structure (grammatical competence) and language use (underlying communicative competence). In studying a language, according to Traugott (1980:12-14), linguists study the ways in which the sound-meaning correlation of languages are structured and how they function. There are several ways to do this. For example, a linguist analyzes the sound meaning correlation. Some linguists undertake to construct grammars on the basis of what is found in specific utterances sample, for example, a body of elicited texts provided by informants. Many linguists are interested not only in describing languages but also in constructing theories, that is well-organized hypotheses about how language works.

Linguistics can be divided into two broad branches, (i) pure linguistics) and (ii) applied linguistics. Pure linguistics is component of the grammar of the language, namely:

- (a) phonetics: the study of speech sound; how they are articulated (articulatory phonetics); their physical properties (acoustic phonetics); and how they are perceived (auditory/perceptual phonetics)
- (b) phonology: the study of sound system of language; how the particular sound used in each language form an integrated system for encoding information and how such system differ from one language to another
- (c) morphology: the study of word formation; the study of the way in which words are construed out of smaller meaningful unit.
- (d) syntax: the study of phrase and sentence structure; the study of the way in which sentences are construed; how the sentences are related to each other.
- (e) semantics: the study of meaning; how words and sentences are related to the (real or imaginary) objects they refer to and the situation they describe
- (f) pragmatics: the study of language use; how the meaning conveyed by a word or sentence depends on aspects of the context in which it is used (such as time, place, social relationship between speaker and hearer, and speaker's assumption about the hearer's beliefs)
- (g) discourse analysis: the study of discourse, such as structure information, adjacency pairs, turn-taking, etc

Today, linguistics (the empirical and scientific study of language) has taken on additional importance in an age where communication is as important to social, intellectual, political, economics, and moral concerns as before. In other words, the result and application of linguistics can be applied to such other areas. This is called as applied linguistics, such as:

anthropological linguistics: the study of the interrelationship between language and culture (particularly in the context of non-Western cultures and societies)

historical linguistics: the study of how languages change through time, the relationships of languages to each other.

- (a) neurolinguistics: the study of the brain and how it functions in the production, perception and acquisition of language.
- (b) psycholinguistics: the study of the interrelationship of language and cognitive structure; the acquisition of language

- (c) sociolinguistics: the study of the interrelationship of language and social structure, linguistic variation and attitudes toward language

History of Linguistics

As Crane (1998) suggests that linguistics is the study of language, linguist is more concerned with spoken language and its anthropological, psychological and sociological ramification. This study of spoken language goes back thousands of years. During some periods, linguists have been most interested in the changes in language through history; during other periods, they have concentrated on the study of languages at just one time. Some linguists have concentrated on describing how language is used; others, on how it should be used. Language has been seen by some linguists as a mirror of the mind and a key to the understanding of thought; to other linguist, mind is irrelevant to the study of language. At one tome or another, both empirical studies and philosophical analysis have dominated linguistics; the earliest linguistic inquires were almost purely philosophical. Among the questions that early linguists asked were What is the origin of speech? What is the relationship between the human intellect and the structure of language? How are words related to ideas? But both the ancient Indians and the ancient Greeks also studied how words are produced, formed, and changed.

The Ancient Grammarians

The earliest grammar of any language, as far as we know, was Parnini's grammar of Sanskrit, the classical language of India. Written in about the fourth or fifth century B.C., Parnini's remarkable work represents a highly developed approach to linguistics.

The ancient Indian linguists identified the chief parts of the vocal tract involved in producing sounds, and they associated them with particular sound segments like *p* and *m*. They also studied vowel length, tone, syllables, and other aspects of phonetics; and they investigated the rules that govern the proper combinations of sound segments and words in sentences.

Long ago, the Indian linguists recognized the verb as central to a sentence. They saw that all other words in a sentence bear a particular relation to the verb. But they also recognized that not all sentences are grammatical. For example, a sentence like *The student reads writes*

buys a novel, which disobeys the rule that a sentence cannot contain three consecutive verbs, cannot be grammatical. Nor can a sentence like *The rain ate the sun*, which involves contradictions in meanings of the words, be considered grammatical.

In general, the linguistic accomplishments of the ancient Indian grammarians were superior to those of their contemporaries, the Greek. But like most of the western sciences and humanities, the study of language in the Western world began with the ancient Greeks. Among the very early studies of language, Plato's *Cratylus* is perhaps the best known—largely because of its naïve approach in seeking the origin of words. If Plato were living today, he might seek the source of the word like *catastrophe* by noting that it seems consist of three parts; which sound like the word *cat*, *astro*, and *fee*. He might point out the *cat* is characterized by its ability to strike quickly; that *astro* refers to something extraordinary, colossal, and out of this world; and that *fee* refers to something costly, or something that is paid. Putting these meaning together, Plato might then explain that the word *catastrophe* means something that is “quick, colossal, and costly.” The problem with this simple and superficially plausible method is that almost anything can be made to mean anything as just demonstrated. Despite Plato's misguided approach to the origin of words, he offered valuable insights into language, including a differentiation between vowels and consonants, an appreciation of word accent, and a division of the sentence into nominal and verbal parts.

The study of language was more fruitful under Plato's successors, Aristotle and Dionysius Thrax. Aristotle classified the parts of speech in the third century B.C., and he is often regarded as the founder of classical European grammar. But the oldest known grammar of Greek was written by Dionysius Thrax, who lived near the end of the second century B.C. Thrax's grammar, the *Techne grammatike*, made inroads into the study of how sounds are produced; but it was even more useful in its treatment of word classes and functions.

Thrax identified eight basic word classes: nouns, verbs, pronouns, articles, participles, prepositions, conjunctions and adverb. He further noted important properties of classes of words—such as the properties of gender, number, and case for nouns and those of conjugation, tense, voice, mood, and person for verbs. To Thrax, the principal units of grammatical description were the word and the sentence. He

considered the sentence to be a group of words that expresses a complete thought—a definition that remained popular until the twentieth century.

Another major force in ancient Greek linguistics was the Stoic school of grammar, which enjoyed its greatest success in the second century B.C. The Stoics' most valuable contribution was their treatment of case as a grammatical category of nouns expressed by word endings, and they distinguish between proper and common nouns.

The approach of the ancient Greeks to grammar was continued and modified by the Romans. Writing in the first century B.C., Varro noted that the word endings discussed by the Stoics and Thrax could be further subdivided according to type. Some endings are used to derive new words; others are inflectional, indicating a word's relationship to other words in a sentence. To use a modern example, a word like *sunny* contains the derivational ending *-y*, meaning roughly “of or pertaining to.” Thus, the word *sunny* is derived from the noun *sun*. The word *sun* can also take inflectional ending *-s*, which indicates possession. Varro realized that derivational endings like *-y* cannot be attached to all nouns (for example, they cannot be attached to *Varro*) but that inflectional endings like *-s* are more general and can be applied regularly to all nouns to indicate possession (*Varro's*). Latin grammar achieved its most precise formulation in the works of Priscian and Donatus, who wrote grammars of Latin at approximately the time of the Roman Empire's decline. For centuries these descriptive grammars served as the basis for learning Latin and for learning about language in general.

The Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Age of Enlightenment

After the Fall of Rome and through the Dark Ages, Latin continued to be a respected language, both in scholarly and religious circles. The grammars of Priscian and Donatus remained in vogue for teaching purposes, thus ensuring a continuation of linguistic awareness. The first major new development in linguistics, however, did not take place until the thirteenth century, when **speculative**, or **modistic grammar** rose to popularity.

Speculative grammar resulted from the collision of traditional Latin descriptive grammar and scholastic philosophy, represented by Catholic philosophers like St. Thomas Aquinas. It sought a theoretical basis for Latin grammar by attempting to specify the ways, or modes, by which we perceive and signify things. Thus, the speculative grammarians sought to explain the differences between parts of speech such as nouns and verbs by looking for differences in the ways the mind perceives the thing referred to by nouns and verbs. For example, a chair differs from the act of laughing in that it possesses existence or substance. This property of chairs and similar objects is perceived by the mind, which expresses objects of this class by means of the part of speech we call *noun*. The speculative grammarians described other modes for perceiving and signifying verbs, pronouns, particles and so on. Like the ancient Indians, they recognized that words may be combined in sentences only according to certain relationships between parts of speech and meaning.

Although the speculative grammarians concentrated on Latin, their work led to the assumption that language has a universal basis, that all languages are essentially the same in nature and differ only in their surface characteristics. This was the view held by Roger Bacon (1214–1294), one of the first speculative grammarians, who studied Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew, as well as Latin.

With the coming of the Renaissance and Columbus's discovery of new world, several linguistic developments occurred, and views of language became more diverse. A strong interest in literature and the discovery of printing combined to draw attention to the inconsistencies between spelling and pronunciation, thus leading to a fuller understanding of their relationship. Furthermore, as the chief descendant language of Latin—French, Italian, and Spanish—were elevated in status, linguists became more aware of changes that had taken place since the days when Latin was spoken regularly. Linguists thus were provided with written proof of what they had always suspected: languages change. Finally, explorers and missionaries in the Orient and the Americas discovered new languages for which grammars eventually were written. Thus, the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries were marked by an increased awareness of the differences among languages.

Then, in the seventeenth century, the idea that beneath these differences all languages are essentially the same in nature surfaced again. The Port Royal grammarians, under the influence of Descartes, stressed the universality of thought, which they said was reflected in language. They also recognized that creativity is inherent in human language, and they viewed the phrase as corresponding to a complex idea. In many ways, their ideas are similar to Noam Chomsky's modern theory of transformational-generative grammar.

While the French grammarians following Descartes were investigating universal grammar, the English grammarians were studying phonetics, or the physical sound system of language. Much of what the English discovered about the articulation of sounds had already been known by the ancient Indians, but one great triumph of the English was their elucidation of the relationship between pronunciation and spelling. The English interest in phonetics, along with the discovery of many new languages, led to the first attempts to create universal **phonetic alphabets**. These are sets of symbols used to represent the most common sounds in known languages. The work done by the English in universal phonetics foreshadowed some of the most important advances in linguistics.

The Nineteenth Century: Linguistics Becomes a Science

In the nineteenth century, new developments in linguistics were stimulated by close attention to concrete data and exciting philological studies. Thus, a new approach emerged—historical-comparative linguistics. The earliest significant work in comparing languages was done by William Jones (1747-1794), an Englishman who noted certain similarities among Greek, Latin, Gothic, and Sanskrit. Although Jones assumed that these languages had a common origin, he somehow missed the importance of his discovery—the seeds of the comparative method, which allows one to establish the relatedness of languages within a family and to reconstruct the probable forms of the original parent language. Through the work of Franz Bopp, Rasmus Rask, the Grimm brothers and other nineteenth century scholars, the comparative method was recognized as a scientific procedure. This procedure established the relatedness of the *Indo-European Languages*, a family that includes Greek, Latin, Gothic, Sanskrit, English, Russian, and others. Soon linguists grouped Oriental and other languages into similar families.

In conclusion, nineteenth-century linguists were challenged by the growth of the natural sciences, and they were wise enough to turn their attention to a scientific method of dealing with language data. Their efforts also included many first attempts to expand the horizons of linguistics, such as the beginnings of acoustic phonetics and the study of dialects and bilingualism.

Traditional and Structural Linguistics in the Twentieth Century

The study of linguistics has often been divided into synchronic and diachronic linguistics. **Synchronic linguistics** is concerned with the analysis of a language at a particular time; for example, English at the time of American Revolution. It is also known as *descriptive linguistics*. **Diachronic linguistics**, or historical linguistics, deals with different states of language through time, such as the changes that took place between Old English and Middle English. In the twentieth century, historical comparative studies, which preoccupied nineteenth-century linguists, have assumed a secondary role to synchronic linguistics.

From the mid-eighteenth century until twentieth century, synchronic linguistics was essential normative or **prescriptive**; that is, it attempted to prescribe the nor of “proper” language usage. Because it did little but expand on the classifications of ancient Greek and Latin grammarians, it is sometimes referred to as *traditional linguistics*.

The structuralist theory of language was the first major new approach to descriptive linguistic in the twentieth century. Introduced by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and pioneered in the United States by Leonard Bloomfield, structuralist flourished for about thirty years, until the early 1960s. In its emphasis on the investigation of concrete linguistic data, structuralism logically followed the late nineteenth-century neo-grammarians school. But, structuralism was geared toward descriptive linguistics.

One criticism of structural linguistics is that it made no attempt to deal with how humans understand and interpret the meanings of sentences; that is, Bloomfield’s theory of structuralism excluded the mind from linguistic consideration. For this reason, structuralism is often linked

with the psychological theory of behaviorism, which similarly restricts itself to that which is concrete and observable.

Transformational-Generative Grammar

Transformational-Generative grammar emphasizes that human language is creative—that human are able to produce and interpret an infinitely large number of sentences that they have never before heard. It attempts to describe what a person knows about his or her language, but it also claims that all languages are grounded in universal facts and principles. By postulating **deep structure**, which are representations that contain the essential meanings of sentences and that underlie actual utterances, transformational-generative grammar is in direct opposition to structuralism

Linguistic theory has undergone considerable revision and modification in the past fifteen years, particularly in its approach to meaning. Linguistics has also drawn on other sciences to form a large number of linguistic subfields, most notably psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics.