

Grammar

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Wednesday, 05 December 2007

I) INTRODUCTION

Grammar, branch of linguistics dealing with the form and structure of words (morphology), and their interrelation in sentences (syntax). The study of grammar reveals how language works.

II) KINDS OF GRAMMAR

Most people first encounter grammar in connection with the study of their own or of a second language in school. This kind of grammar is called normative, or prescriptive, because it defines the role of the various parts of speech (see Parts of Speech) and purports to tell what is the norm, or rule, of "correct" usage. Prescriptive grammars state how words and sentences are to be put together in a language so that the speaker will be perceived as having good grammar. When people are said to have good or bad grammar, the inference is that they obey or ignore the rules of accepted usage associated with the language they speak.

Language-specific prescriptive grammar is only one way to look at word and sentence formation in language. Other grammarians are primarily interested in the changes in word and sentence construction in a language over the years—for example, how Old English, Middle English, and Modern English (see English Language) differ from one another; this approach is known as historical grammar. Some grammarians seek to establish the differences or similarities in words and word order in various languages. Thus, specialists in comparative grammar study sound and meaning correspondences among languages to determine their relationship to one another (see Language). By looking at similar forms in related languages, grammarians can discover how different languages may have influenced one another. Still other grammarians investigate how words and word order are used in social contexts to get messages across; this is called functional grammar (see Linguistics).

Some grammarians are more concerned, however, with determining how the meaningful arrangement of the basic word-building units (morphemes) and sentence-building units (constituents) can best be described. This approach is called descriptive grammar. Descriptive grammars contain actual speech forms recorded from native speakers of a particular language and represented by means of written symbols. Descriptive grammars indicate what languages—often those never before written down or otherwise recorded—are like structurally.

These approaches to grammar (prescriptive, historical, comparative, functional, and descriptive) focus on word building and word order; they are concerned only with those aspects of language that have structure. These types of grammar constitute a part of linguistics that is distinct from phonology (the linguistic study of sound) and semantics (the linguistic study of meaning or content). Grammar to the prescriptivist, historian, comparativist, functionalist, and descriptivist is then the organizational part of language—how speech is put together, how words and sentences are formed, and how messages are communicated.

Specialists called transformational-generative grammarians, such as the American linguistic scholar Noam Chomsky, approach grammar quite differently—as a theory of language. By language, these scholars mean the knowledge human beings have that allows them to acquire any language. Such a grammar is a kind of universal grammar, an analysis of the principles underlying all the various human grammars.

III) HISTORY OF GRAMMATICAL STUDY

The study of grammar began with the ancient Greeks, who engaged in philosophical speculation about languages and described language structure. This grammatical tradition was passed on to the Romans, who translated the Greek names for the parts of speech and grammatical endings into Latin; many of these terms (nominative, accusative, dative) are still found in modern grammars. But the Greeks and Romans were unable to determine how languages are related. This problem spurred the development of comparative grammar, which became the dominant approach to linguistic science in the 19th century.

Early grammatical study appears to have gone hand in hand with efforts to understand archaic writings. Thus, grammar was originally tied to societies with long-standing written traditions. The earliest extant grammar is that of the Sanskrit language of India, compiled by the Indian grammarian Panini (flourished about 400 bc). This sophisticated analysis showed how words are formed and what parts of words carry meaning. Ultimately, the grammars of Panini and other Hindu scholars helped in the interpretation of Hindu religious literature written in Sanskrit. The Arabs are believed to have begun the grammatical study of their language before medieval times. In the 10th century the Jews completed a Hebrew lexicon; they also produced a study of the language of the Old Testament.

The Greek grammarian Dionysius Thrax wrote the Art of Grammar, upon which many later Greek, Latin, and other European grammars were based. With the spread of Christianity and the translation of the Scriptures into the languages of the new Christians, written literatures began to develop among previously nonliterate peoples. By the Middle Ages, European scholars generally knew, in addition to their own languages and Latin, the languages of their nearest neighbors. This access to several languages set scholars to thinking about how languages might be compared. The revival of classical learning in the Renaissance laid the foundation, however, for a misguided attempt by grammarians to fit all languages into the structure of Greek and Latin. More positively, medieval Christianity and Renaissance learning led to 16th- and 17th-century surveys of all the then-known languages in an attempt to determine which language might be the oldest. On the basis of the Bible, Hebrew was frequently so designated. Other languages—Dutch, for example—were also chosen because of accidental circumstances rather than linguistic facts. In the 18th century less haphazard comparisons began to be made, culminating in the assumption by the German philosopher Gottfried

Wilhelm Leibniz that most languages of Europe, Asia, and Egypt came from the same original language—a language referred to as Indo-European (see Indo-European Languages).

In the 19th century scholars developed systematic analyses of parts of speech, mostly built on the earlier analyses of Sanskrit. The early Sanskrit grammar of Panini was a valuable guide in the compilation of grammars of the languages of Europe, Egypt, and Asia. This writing of grammars of related languages, using Panini's work as a guide, is known as Indo-European grammar, a method of comparing and relating the forms of speech in numerous languages.

The Renaissance approach to grammar, which based the description of all languages on the model of Greek and Latin, died slowly, however. Not until the early 20th century did grammarians begin to describe languages on their own terms. Noteworthy in this regard are the Handbook of American Indian Languages (1911), the work of the German American anthropologist Franz Boas and his colleagues; and the studies by the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, A Modern English Grammar (pub. in four parts, 1909-31), and The Philosophy of Grammar (1924). Boas's work formed the basis of various types of American descriptive grammar study. Jespersen's work was the precursor of such current approaches to linguistic theory as transformational generative grammar.

Boas challenged the application of conventional methods of language study to those non-Indo-European languages with no written records, such as the ones spoken by Native North Americans (see Native American Languages). He saw grammar as a description of how human speech in a language is organized. A descriptive grammar should describe the relationships of speech elements in words and sentences. Given impetus by the fresh perspective of Boas, the approach to grammar known as descriptive linguistics became dominant in the U.S. during the first half of the 20th century.

Jespersen, like Boas, thought grammar should be studied by examining living speech rather than by analyzing written documents, but he wanted to ascertain what principles are common to the grammars of all languages, both at the present time (the so-called synchronic approach) and throughout history (the diachronic approach). Descriptive linguists developed precise and rigorous methods to describe the formal structural units in the spoken aspect of any language. The approach to grammar that developed with this view is known as structural. A structural grammar should describe what the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure referred to by the French word *langue*—denoting the system underlying a particular language—that is, what members of a speech community speak and hear that will pass as acceptable grammar to other speakers and hearers of that language. Actual speech forms (referred to by the structuralists by the French word *parole*) represent instances of *langue* but, in themselves, are not what a grammar should describe. The structuralist approach to grammar conceives of a particular language such as French, Swahili, Chinese, or Arabic as a system of elements at various levels—sound, word, sentence, meaning—that interrelate. A structuralist grammar therefore describes what relationships underlie all instances of speech in a particular language; a descriptive grammar describes the elements of transcribed (recorded, spoken) speech.

By the mid-20th century, Chomsky, who had studied structural linguistics, was seeking a way to analyze the syntax of English in a structural grammar. This effort led him to see grammar as a theory of language structure rather than a description of actual sentences. His idea of grammar is that it is a device for producing the structure, not of *langue* (that is, not of a particular language), but of competence—the ability to produce and understand sentences in any and all languages. His universalist theories are related to the ideas of those 18th- and early 19th-century grammarians who urged that grammar be considered a part of logic—the key to analyzing thought. Universal grammarians such as the British philosopher John Stuart Mill, writing as late as 1867, believed rules of grammar to be language forms that correspond to universal thought forms.

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