



The History of Linguistics: Greek – Twentieth Century

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1. Greeks

Before the 19th century, language in the western world was of interest mainly to philosophers. It is significant that the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle made major contributions to the study of language. The Greeks were more interested in the origin of language than in analysing it. They had little systematic knowledge of other languages. Plato was the first person to distinguish between nouns and verbs. In the Hellenistic era (3rd century BC), grammarians in Alexandria (the centre of academic activity at that time) dealt with grammatical matters as tense, mood, case and aspect, i.e., they had special interests in the grammatical categories of nouns and verbs. Also, texts of famous classical Greek authors were studied.

2. Romans

The Romans copied the Greeks exactly in all aspects of linguistics. Varro was called the most learned man of his time. He wrote a twenty-five volume work on the Latin Language under the heading Etymology, Morphology and Syntax. The most famous Latin grammars are those by Donatus (AD 400) and Priscian (AD 500) which were used as standard textbooks as late as the Middle Ages. They followed the Greek and introduced a similar speculative approach to language. In their description of Latin, they use Greek terminology and categories with little change.

3. The Middle Ages and After

In the Middle Ages, a number of scholars known as speculative grammarians made the most notable contribution to the study of language. Their prime concern was to find the relationship between words and the physical world of object. They believe that grammar is universal, i.e., all grammars are basically the same and only differ superficially. They were also interested in the origin of language, whether or not all languages came from a single source. They believed that Hebrew was Man's original language.

4. Sir William Jones (1786) and the 19th C.

1786 was one of the most important dates in the history of linguistics. An Englishman called Sir William Jones pointed out that Sanskrit (the old Indian Language), Greek, Germanic, Latin and Celtic all had structural similarities. He concluded that all these languages sprang from one common source. In the 19th C., linguists concentrated on writing detailed comparative grammars comparing the different grammatical forms of the various members of the Indo-European language family. They focused on written records. The interest was in historical analysis and interpretation. In the last quarter of the century, a group of scholars known as Junggrammatiker (or Young grammarians / Neo grammarians) centered near Leipzig. They investigated the sound change of many IndoEuropean languages. They thought that sound laws are regular, i.e., they admit no exceptions, i.e., within certain geographical limits and between certain dates, a change of one sound into another in any language would affect in the same way all words containing the sound in the same phonetic environment of other sounds. But these changes cannot be expected to affect all words at the same time. Some words may be subject to the change while others may escape it or are affected by a different change. Older

scholars objected this view and pointed out numerous exceptions to these so called laws.

5. The Twentieth Century and de Saussure (1857-1913)

De Saussure is the founder of modern structural linguistics and he was a lecturer in Geneva University. His early work was in philology. In the 19th C., linguists were more interested in historical linguistics (diachronic linguistics). In the 20th C., the emphasis shifted to synchronic/ descriptive studies. De Saussure's central ideas concerning the study of language were expressed in the form of pairs of concepts (dichotomies). These can be illustrated as bellow:

- a) Diachronic Vs. Synchronic:** In a diachronic study, de Saussure sees language as a continually changing medium. In a synchronic approach, he sees it as a living whole existing as a state at a particular moment of time. In this view, it is always necessary to carry out some degree of synchronic work before making a diachronic study, i.e., before we can say how a language has changed from state X to state Y, we need to know something about X and Y. In a synchronic analysis, there is no need to refer to history. Saussure illustrated this using an analogy with a game of chess: If we walk into a room and while a chess game is being played, it is possible to assess the state of the game by studying the position of the pieces on the board.
- b) Langage Vs. Langue Vs. Parole:** Language is the faculty of speech present in all normal human beings due to heredity-our ability to talk to each other. This faculty is composed of two aspects: langue (language system) and parole (language behaviour) the act of speaking: Langue refers to the abstract knowledge of language (the totality of language).

It represents the generalized system of rules and word images stored in the minds of individuals or native speakers. Parole refers to the actual physical utterance. It is the realization of langue in speech. It refers to the actual and concrete act of speaking on the part of a person (a dynamic social activity) in a particular time and place.

- c) Significant Vs. Signifie:** De Saussure recognized two sides to the study of meaning, but emphasized that the relationship between the two is arbitrary. His labels for the two sides are significant (= the thing that signifies / sound image) and signifie (= the thing signified / concept). De Saussure called the relationship between the two a "linguistic Sign".
- d) Syntagmatic Vs. Paradigmatic** A sentence is a sequence of signs, and each sign contributing something to the meaning of whole. When the signs are seen as a linear sequence, the relationship between them is called syntagmatic. It indicates the horizontal relationship between linguistic elements forming linear sequences in the sentence, as in Syntagmatic She + can + go Come + quickly When a sign is seen as contrasting with other signs in the language, the relationship is called paradigmatic or associative. It refers to the vertical relationship between linguistic signs that might occupy the same particular place in a given structure. These two dimensions of structure can be applied to phonology, vocabulary and any other aspect of language. Each word in a language is in a paradigmatic relationship with a whole set of alternatives. The result is a conception of language as a vast network of interrelated structures and mutually defining entities – a linguistic system. Syntagmatic She + can + go He + will + come I + may + sit You + might + see Paradigmatic 27 According to de Saussure, language is a system of relations. His aim was that he wanted to define language as an object that can be studied scientifically. He pointed out the structural nature of language, the fact that its elements are essentially

interlinked. He compared language to a game of chess; it is the relationship of each chessman to other chessmen which is the essence of the game, i.e., the role of each chessman is entirely dependent on the position of the other chessmen on the board.

6. Bloomfield and the Americans

In America, linguistics developed far faster than in Britain. This was due to the presence of numerous American-Indian languages which were fast becoming extinct and scholars rushed to record them before it was too late. The most famous anthropologists, sociologists and linguists were F. Boas and Edward Sapir (whose book *Language Written* in 1921 is still an excellent introduction to linguistics). Leonard Bloomfield, who also wrote a book entitled *Language*, initiated a new era in American Linguistics. He emphasized the scientific study of language based on objective systematic observation of data. He was not interested in the study of meaning, but in structure only. Thus, trivial problems of analysis became major issues and linguistics lost touch with other disciplines and became of little interest to anyone outside it.