



Traditional Grammar

Vs.

Modern Structural Linguistics

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First of all, we should say that by traditional grammar we mean the Aristotelian orientation towards the nature of language as exemplified in the work of ancient Greeks and Romans, the speculative work of the Medieval and the prescriptive approach of the 18th century grammarians. On the other hand, by linguistics we mean the empirical structural approach to language as represented principally by American linguistics during the period of the early 1940s and mid-1950s. Modern structural linguistics can be said to begin with the publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's lectures under the title of *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916. Behind de Saussure, stretching back over 2000 years lies the era of traditional grammar. De Saussure was the first person to point out clearly that language was a highly organized structure in which all the elements are interdependent. From him, we date the era of 'structural linguistics'. The term structural linguistics (in its general sense) refers to any linguistic study of a language, which considers it as an independent system of sound features, grammar and vocabulary in its own right. It is sometimes misunderstood. In fact, it does not refer to a separate school or branch of linguistics. Linguistics since de Saussure is structural, as structural in this sense means the recognition that language is a patterned system composed of interdependent elements rather than a collection of unconnected individual items. Misunderstanding is arisen as certain American linguists of the 1950s, who are sometimes called structuralists, gave all their attention to the way items were arranged to form a total structure excluding all other aspects of linguistics.

The Misconceptions of Traditional Grammarians

- 1. The Priority of the Written Language:** Traditional grammarians tended to assume the spoken language is inferior to and, in some sense, dependent upon the standard written language. In opposition to this view, contemporary linguists maintain that the spoken language is primary and that writing is essentially a means of representing speech in another medium. The principle of the priority of the spoken language over the written implies:
 - a)** that speech is older and more widespread than writing. Speech goes back to the origins of human society. Children often learn to speak before they learn to write.
 - b)** More important to linguistic analysis is the fact that all systems of writing can be shown to be based upon units of the spoken language rather than the reverse.
 - c)** Linguistics does also study writing, but it is important to realize that the written language is completely independent of the spoken language from which it is originally derived. And any written activity is a later and more sophisticated process than speech.
 - d)** Speech is the primary medium of linguistic expression. We begin to speak before we write. Most of us speak much more than we write in everyday life. All natural languages were spoken before they were written. There are many languages in the world today which have never been written down. To base one's statement about language on writing rather than speech leads to all kinds of confused thinking.

In traditional grammar, the material presented mostly does not even cover the whole range of the language's written form, but is restricted to specific kinds of writing – the most formal style in particular. They avoided anything relevant to informality and considered it 'slang' or 'bad grammar' though the informality is in regular and widespread use by educated people. A language can be used in many levels of formality and it should be one of the jobs of a grammar to take account of these differences and not to select some levels as 'right' and exclude others as 'wrong'. For example, we are all familiar with the 'rule' of English which tells us that we should use 'whom' and not 'who' as a relative pronoun in a sentence like The man I saw was tall and dark. In fact, it is not a question of 'whom' being correct usage, and 'who' being incorrect: each is correct in certain circumstances and incorrect in others. The difference is essentially one of formality: 'whom' in this context tends to be a more formal way of making the point than 'who', which is more colloquial.

- 2. The Influence of Latin:** Traditional grammarians tried to describe English in terms of another language usually Latin, for Latin was regarded as superior and as a model of description in Europe for centuries. One of the most common examples in this respect is to say It is I instead of saying It is me or to say that the 'noun' in English has five or six cases normally: 1. Nominative 'fish' 2. Vocative 'O fish' 3. Accusative 'fish' 4. Genitive 'of a fish' 5. Dative 'to/for a fish' 6. Ablative 'by/with/from a fish' 33 In fact, they treat English as if it were Latin. But it is not since the patterns of English grammar work differently from the patterns of Latin grammar. There is no need to force six cases of the noun into English just because it was so in Latin. English in fact has only two noun cases: 1. The genitive case (where we add an (-s) as in 'cat's' or 'cats'). 2. And the general case which is used everywhere 'cat' or 'cats'. The general point to be made, therefore, is that in

the description of a language or some part of a language, we must not impose findings from the description of some other language even if we have a strong preference for this other language. English must be described in its own terms and not through Latin terminology. It is a complex enough language without trying to force the complexities of Latin into it.

3. Logic and Language: Traditional grammarians treat Latin as a kind of authority which one can turn to when wondering what to do about English grammar. There are other authorities of this kind such as the criterion of 'Logic'. For instance, concerning the way a language is constructed, one may say 'English is a more logical language than French' or it is more logical to say 'spoonfuls' than the other thing 'spoonsful', without basing their descriptions of language structure on scientific facts and evidences. In fact, human language is not a logical construct, though some people think so. It is not even regular. It can change its form sometimes over the years and it is full of irregularities. One can not apply reasoning to language. We say for instance, 'big' – 'bigger', 'small' – 'smaller', but if we adopt a logical criterion then we should say 'good - gooder' is a 34 correct form. Traditional grammarians say this is a matter of logic without saying irregularities or exceptions or giving any language description. In short, it is best in language to avoid the word 'logic' and to use instead the terms 'regular' and 'irregular' to show that there is always a tendency for the irregular forms in a language to be made to conform to the patterns of the regular ones a process referred to as 'analogy' (treating irregular forms as if they were regular ones). This is apparent especially in the speech of children saying 'mouses*' and 'seed*' for 'mice' and 'saw'.

4. The Complexity of Language: There is no 'most complex' language where complexity means 'difficult to learn'. Standards of difficulty are relative: a thing is more difficult to do depending on how much practice we have had at doing it, and how used we are to doing similar things. We should not, therefore, say that one language is more complex or difficult to learn than another. To say, for instance, that Chinese is an awfully difficult language to learn, it may be true for a certain person, but we must be careful not to draw the conclusion that it is so. If one speaks a language which is at all similar to Chinese in its sounds, grammar and vocabulary, it will be a lot easier for him to learn than for one who does not. We conclude, the greater the grammatical and other differences one's own language and any other, the more complex that language turns out to be. Similarly, we must not talk about some languages as if they were 'simple', 'crude' or 'primitive' languages. This often when we talk about languages of tribes in Africa or South America which are said to be at a very low level of cultural development. It does not mean that because a tribe happens to be anthropologically 'primitive', its language is linguistically 'primitive' too. The word 'primitive' implies 'being near the bottom of a scale or standard of development of some kind'. Such a standard may exist in comparative anthropology, but not in language. The only realistic standard we ought to apply to a language is the language itself. We can not measure one language against the yard-stick provided by another. Languages always keep pace with the social development of its users. Just because some tribes do not have as many words as English, does not mean that it is 'more primitive' than English. It has no need of so many words, because it has enough words for its own purposes. Its people do not require the vast range of technical terms which English has. If such a tribe, through some process of economic development, did begin to come into contact with technical

things, then new words would be coined or borrowed, so that people could cope. So languages are not better or worse only different.

5. Aesthetics and language: From the aesthetic view point, a language, word, structure, etc. is said to be more 'beautiful', 'ugly', 'affected' and so on than another which was a very common attitude in older times (when beauty was associated with eloquence and the Classic). For example, in the Middle Ages grammar (in a form of a textbook) was "the art of speaking and writing well". In these days, aesthetic judgements about language concern people's accent or ways of pronunciation although these are unrealistic standards. In fact, no one sound is better or more beautiful than another is: We respond to other people's language in terms of our own social background and familiarity with their speech. If we are from London, for instance, then we will react to their speech in a very different way than if we are not. If we insist on criticizing someone else's accent as 'affected' or 'ugly', then we are simply trying to impose our own standards of beauty on others (i.e. judging other people in terms of our own particular linguistic preferences) forgetting that we probably sound just as odd to the people we are criticizing.