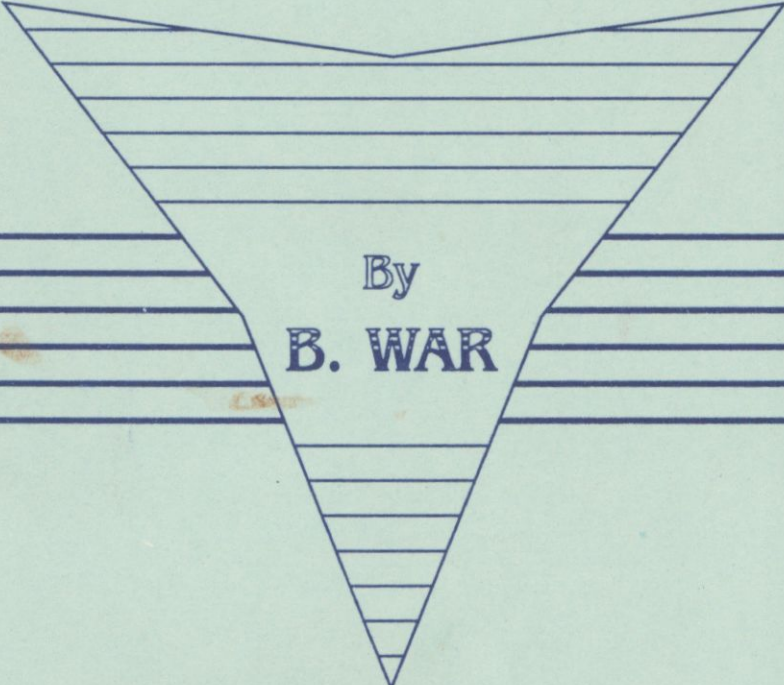


AN
INTRODUCTION
TO
LINGUISTICS



By
B. WAR

Preface

AN INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTICS

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Preface

Ever since I started teaching linguistics in Khasi Department of the North-Eastern Hill University, I have noted a deep-felt need for an introductory text book on the subject. My students since 1983 have urged me time and again to write an easy-to-read book on General Linguistics in order to help them prepare for more specialized courses in Linguistics. However, it is only in 1996 that I seriously started collecting materials and writing down important aspects of this study. I have purposely organised the chapters of the book in accordance with the topics designed for M.A. (Course I), Khasi Department, so that students will have a proper foundation in the subject. It is my earnest hope that this book will enable them to realize the varied fields of linguistics and will, therefore, encourage them to investigate the different aspects of the Khasi language. The scope is vast and wide open for scholars who, I hope, will find the subject as fascinating and fulfilling as it has been for me.

Dated Shillong

(B. War)

The 30th January 1997

1. David Crystal. 1969. *What is Linguistics* p. 1-9
2. David Crystal. 1969. *ibid.* p.28

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CHAPTER II

The Pre-Linguistic Era

The study of language has fascinated scholars from ancient days. However, we will discuss the pre-linguistic era only from the period of history when there were written records on the study of language. This starts with the investigation of what is generally known as Traditional Grammar.

A. Traditional Grammar

'Tradition' is generally associated with the way opinions, doctrines and practices are handed down from generation to generation. The word 'grammar' on the other hand, can best be understood only if one studies the etymology of the word. This study has revealed that the word has changed both in form and meaning from the original word. According to Dykema, the word 'grammar' evolved from the Greek word grammar 'letter' (of the alphabet) which in turn has evolved from **graphein** 'to draw' or 'to write'. The plural **grammata** has changed in meaning from 'letters' to 'alphabet' to the 'rudiments of writing' to the 'rudiments of learning'. The adjective form **grammatike** with **techne** means the 'art of knowing one's letters' or the 'art of writing'. Later on came the Latin word **grammaticus**. Dykema speculated that the 'r' in the modern word **grammar** must have been a vernacular form since it first appeared in Old Provincial as **gramaira** and developed in English with a variety of spelling beginning first with the ending **-er**.¹⁶

Crystal, a modern linguist, defines traditional Grammar as a "term used in linguistics ... to refer to the

16. Karl W. Dykema. 1971. "Where our grammar came from" in Harold B. Allen (ed) *Readings in Applied English Linguistics* p.3.

set of attitudes, procedures and prescriptions characteristic of the pre-linguistic era of language study The emphasis on such matter as correctness, linguistic purism, literary excellence, the use of Latin models and the priority of the written language characterises this approach”.

As the etymology of the word **grammar** shows, Western Grammar begins with the ancient Greeks. Bloomfield remarked that the “ancient Greeks had the gift of wondering at things that other people took for granted. They speculated boldly and persistently about the origin, history and structure of language”. In fact, Traditional Grammar began as a philosophical enquiry into language, particularly its origin and nature. Plato (427-347) was the first to make his mark in this enquiry. His **Cratylus**, a dialogue which he devoted totally to the question of the origin of words and their etymological study, is widely believed to be the earliest documented record of language study that has survived throughout the centuries.¹⁷ About the same period the Sophists stated that a word describing action is a verb (rhema), one which performs the action is a noun (onoma.).¹⁸ The renown philosopher Aristotle was the next to contribute to the field of language study. In **De Interpretations** he was concerned only with logically necessary parts of discourse where he defined only the noun and the verb whereas in **De Poetica** he added definitions of other elements.¹⁹ These were the conjunction (syndesmoi), the three genders, inflection and the fact that sentences have predicates.

The Stoics were the first to take the initiative in trying to separate the study of language from philosophy, thereby making many contributions to the field of language study. They define and discuss terms such as noun, verb, conjunction, article, number, gender, case, voice, mood and tense.²⁰

17. David Crystal. 1971. Op. cit p.50

18. Karl W. Dykema. 1971. Op. cit p.3-4

19. Charles V. Hartung. “The persistence of tradition in Grammar” in Harold B. Allen (ed) *Readings in Applied English Linguistics* p.16-17

20. R. H. Robins. 1951. *Ancient and Medieval Grammatical Theory in Europe* p.20-25

The most substantial contributions of Traditional Grammar are seen in the work of Dionysius Thrax titled **Techne Grammatike** (second century B. C.) which means the 'art of grammar'. Hartung remarked that "the major contribution of Dionysius Thrax to the methodology of grammar was in analytic procedure. He extended definitions of the parts of speech to eight, using formal criteria to define the pronoun, the participle, the prepositions and the adverb. His scheme of classification is a model of deductive procedure" which "even though it does apply different criteria to different parts of speech, is admirably designed for describing Greek, the language on which it was based. Because the scheme was so effective, it was later used, with some experimental revisions, to describe other languages."²¹

The Latin grammarians subsequently based their analysis of their language on that given by the Greeks. The most famous Latin grammar books are those of Donatus, later also known as Donat or Donet (400 A.D.) and Priscian (500 A.D.) which were used as standard text books until as late as the Middle Ages. Greek and Latin are similar in many aspects and both are rich in inflections. However, there are some differences between them. For example, Greek had a definite article while Latin had none. Some Latin grammarians did classify demonstratives **is** and **hic** as articles. Latin also differs from Greek in that it has more cases, a different tense system and no dual number. Nevertheless, Greek and Latin are not radically different as types of languages. As time went on, this framework of analysis based on Greek and Latin was used to analyse other European languages including English. Here again some points of differences arose where, for example, English has only two active tenses against six of Latin. With the spread of European power, especially the British Empire in the last few centuries, Traditional Grammar was taken along as the framework of language analysis for many more languages.

Apart from the immense contributions that Traditional Grammar had made towards the introduction of terms,

21. Charles V. Hartung, 1971. Op. cit p.20-21

defining them and classifying them as parts of speech of a language, it has also taken the first step in examining the relationship between words and their meanings. Plato was of the view that the meanings of words were determined "by nature" whereas most later philosophers from Aristotle onwards, in the Graeco-Roman tradition, were of the opposite view that meaning is determined "by convention".²²

Limitations of Traditional Grammar :

Even though we have outlined the immense contribution of Traditional Grammar towards language study, yet there are serious inadequacies in it. The following are some of the main limitations of Traditional Grammar :—

1. Traditional Grammar began as a philosophical enquiry into language based on Greek, yet over the centuries it has turned into a dogmatic set of rules for achieving correctness. The Latin grammarians fitted the norm imposed from Greek into Latin quite successfully because the two languages were not radically different. However, when it was applied as a universal framework to other languages which are typologically different, its flaws then became apparent.
2. It does not adequately distinguish the different linguistic levels, namely, phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics.
3. It is normative and prescriptive so that a grammarian takes the role of a legislator who adopts a prescriptive attitude and lays down rules for a language.
4. Its approach is diachronic rather than synchronic where it tries to study a living language like a dead one. It does not investigate into the fact that a language changes and absorbs new sounds and forms due to phonetic changes, analogy and borrowing.
5. This grammar was pre-occupied with only one particular form of the written language, namely, the literary language. It does not take into account the spoken form of the language. Therefore, it fails to

22. Robert A. Hall. 1969. *Introductory Linguistics* p.68

explain certain expressions of usage. We can see this in the classic example of English where usage shows the popular use of 'It's me' which according to the rules of the Traditional Grammar is ungrammatical and should be 'It's I'.

B. The Port Royal Grammar

Traditional Grammar did not progress unhindered and unchallenged though it did reign supreme until about the twelfth century. There had been cases of challenge only when this grammar did appear to be in conflict with sacred theological writing. But a comprehensive alternative framework to the Traditional Grammar was brought out by a group of scholars in the seventeenth century at Port Royal near Versailles in France. Their view of language analysis were made explicit by Arnauld and Lancelot in their book entitled **Grammaire générale et raisonnée de Port Royal** which was published in 1660. This grammar shows a resurgence of the Aristotelean concept of logical categories "based on a hierarchy of such mental operations as conception, judgement and reasoning. Conception is defined as simple apprehension of ideas such as **being** and **God** and of material images such as **circle, dogs, and horses**. Judgement is the making of an affirmation that something is or is not so, e.g., **the earth is round**. Reasoning is the use of two judgments to form a third. For example, if we assume that virtues are praiseworthy and patience is a virtue, we must also assume that patience is praiseworthy".²³ However, the Port Royal grammarians did not go as far as the third step in grammatical analysis. What is the most important principle in this grammar is its assumption that grammar is essentially logical. The formal study and syntactic arrangement of words are not considered to be important. A noun is defined as a word that signifies objects of thought while a verb is defined as a word that signifies affirmation. The logical relationships between words in the structure of thought are the focus of the Port Royal Grammar. Their view of language as being free from stimulus control and as being a cognitive

23. Charles V. Hartung, 1971. Op. cit p.21-22

behavior is brought into sharp focus by Noam Chomsky in the middle of the twentieth century in his discourse on the relationship between language and the mind.

The fact, however, remains that the Port Royal grammar was not as universally accepted by the majority of grammarians as was the classical Traditional grammar. The reasons for this are not hard to find. While the Port royal Grammar was more concerned with the philosophical functions of linguistic forms. Traditional Grammar provides workable tools for a systematic analysis of language.²⁴

24. Charles V. Hartung. 1971. Op. cit p.22-23

CONCLUSION

This book is an attempt to present an insightful account into what linguistics is and how it has emerged and developed throughout the centuries. As has been stated time and again, linguistics is concerned with the study of language. The fact being so, linguists have always paid attention to discussion on what is language. This has led to many attempts to ascertain the characteristics of natural human language. Charles Hockett, in particular, lists thirteen design features of language, namely, vocal-auditory channel, broadcast transmission and directional reception, rapid fading, interchangeability, total feedback, specialization, semanticity, arbitrariness, discreteness, displacement, productivity, traditional or cultural transmission, duality of patterning. The last four design features are considered to be unique to human language.

In presenting the development of linguistics from the eighteenth century, one can see how the focus of the discipline has shifted from one period to another. Nonetheless, the fact remains that each movement, be it by an individual or by a group, has contributed enormously to the study of linguistics.

Chapter IV of this book deals with the development of linguistics both in Europe and in the USA during the first half of the twentieth century. Even though the sections show the names of the different school of linguistics, yet these have been dealt in a very condensed manner. In particular, the European schools, namely, the Prague School, the Copenhagen School, and the Firthian School have been focussed on the pioneers of the schools, namely Roman Jakobson-Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Hjelmslev and J.R. Firth respectively. No attempt is made to present a discussion on the followers of the schools. For example, Firth's concept of polysystems has given rise to many important linguistic theories. The most well-known among them is the Scale-and-Category Grammar developed by M.A.K. Halliday and his colleagues.

Finally, the second half of the twentieth century has been deliberately left untouched in this volume as this period unfolds a new era in linguistics. The discipline has developed so rapidly in all its branches of study with new theories and new frameworks emerging thick and fast. This has also led to the problem of methodology in relation to the study of language, be it in the area of pure linguistics such as syntax, phonology etc. or in sociolinguistics, language teaching etc. It is, therefore felt necessary that a new and separate volume should be prepared that will deal exclusively with the development of core areas of linguistics in the latter half of the twentieth century.

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