

Course : Linguistics

Level : L2

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Unit: 1 European structuralism

Lesson 1

Introduction to Modern Linguistics

1. Traditional Grammar versus Modern Linguistics

On the one hand **traditional grammar** (also known as classical grammar) is a framework for the description of the structure of a language. It refers to the collection of **prescriptive rules** and concepts about the structure of language that is taught at school. On the other hand, **modern linguistics** refers to the **scientific study of language and its structure**. This includes **the study of features such as grammar, syntax, and phonetics**. The main difference between traditional grammar and modern linguistics is that the former is **prescriptive** while the latter is **descriptive**.

1.1. Difference between Traditional Grammar and Modern Linguistics

Most traditional grammarians considered the **written** form as the most important aspect of language; however, **modern linguists** considered **speech** as the most important aspect of language. Moreover, traditional grammar attempted to **force** language into a **Latin-based framework**, but modern linguists **do not judge one language by the standards of another**.

Traditional grammar is initially based on **European languages particularly on Greek and Latin**, therefore, it describes phrases and sentences based on established categories of Latin and Greek whereas modern linguistics is descriptive.

Prescriptive grammar specifies **how a language should be used** and **what grammar rules should be followed**. A prescriptivist view of language implies a distinction between "**good grammar**" and "**bad grammar**," and its primary focus is on **standard forms of grammar and syntactic constructions**, whereas **descriptive grammar** is a study of a language, its structure, and its **rules as they are used in daily life by its speakers from all walks of life, including standard and nonstandard varieties**. Descriptive grammar describes the language, its structure, and the syntactic rules that govern sentence and phrase constructions (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990). A descriptive study of grammar is **non-judgmental**, and it does not have the goal of determining what represents good or bad language, correct or incorrect structures, or grammatical or ungrammatical forms (Leech, Deuchar, & Hoogenraad, 2006).

To simplify the **descriptive** and **prescriptive grammar** dichotomy and their practical characteristics, most linguists or language hobbyists are likely to be descriptive grammarians who analyze and explain a language's uses while most practicing teachers probably work with prescriptive grammars (Andrews, 2006).

1.2. History of Modern Linguistics

The earliest linguistic traditions arose in antiquity, in societies with established traditions of writing whereas modern linguistics emerged in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the shift of focus from historical concerns of changes in language over time to the idea that language can be seen as a self-contained and structured system situated at a particular time. This forms the basis of structuralism that developed in the post-first World War period.

1.3. Structuralism

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure(1857-1913) is widely acknowledged as a key figure and the founding father of modern linguistics. He published little himself but his students reconstructed his ideas from his lecture notes and published them in 1916 as *Cours de Linguistique Général (course of general linguistics)*. He considered that **a language is a system in which all the elements fit together, and which the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others.** It is worth also mentioning that phonology and phonetics were dominant in early modern linguistics.

1.4. Modern Schools of Linguistics

DE Saussure's structuralism proved a rich field for subsequent investigators and extended to other neighbouring fields such as anthropology and semiotics and inspired other linguists. Many linguists used his ideas as the approach in linguistics, such as Leonard Bloomfield, Charles Francis Hocke, Andre Martinet, Edward Sapir. It is worth also mentioning that phonology and phonetics were dominant in early modern linguistics.

The modern schools of linguistics that emerged in the twentieth century include the structuralism school, the functional school and the mentalist school led by Ferdinand de Saussure and Leonard Bloomfield, M.A.K Halliday and John Searl and Noam Chomsky respectively.

Schools of linguistics

- **The structuralist school**
 - ❑ Ferdinand de Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield.
 - ❑ language is a structure that can be studied independently from other aspects of human behavior.
- **The functionalist school**
 - ❑ M.A.K Halliday, John Searl
 - ❑ Both structure and function must be taken into account to understand the nature of language.
- **The mentalist school**
 - ❑ Noam Chomsky
 “Primarily ,I am intrigued by the possibility of learning something From the study of language ,that will bring to light inherent properties of the human mind”.
 Noam Chomsky.

Here are four of the most well-known linguistic schools of thought:

- **Structuralism:** several schools of 20th-century [linguistics](#) committed to the structuralist principle that a [language](#) is a self-contained relational structure, the elements of which derive their existence and their value from their distribution and oppositions in texts or discourse.

Saussurean structuralism was further developed in somewhat different directions and other European movements.

the [United States](#) the term structuralism, or structural linguistics, has had much the same sense as it has had in [Europe](#) in relation to the work of [Franz Boas](#) (1858–1942) and [Edward Sapir](#) (1884–1939) and their followers. Nowadays, however, it is commonly used, in a narrower sense, to refer to the so-called post-Bloomfieldian school of language analysis that follows the methods of [Leonard Bloomfield](#), developed after 1930. [Phonology](#) (the study of sound systems) and [morphology](#) (the study of word structure) are their primary fields of interest. Little work on [semantics](#) has been done by structural linguists because of their belief that the field is too difficult or [elusive](#) to describe.

- **Functionalism.** This first school of thought focuses on how language is actually used in everyday life.
- **Generativism:** Generative grammars do not merely distinguish the grammatical sentence of a language from ungrammatical sequences of words of the same language; they also provide a structural description, or [syntactic](#) analysis, for each of the grammatical sentences

- **Cognitivism** : Cognitivism in linguistics refers to how language is learned, and how language plays a role in forming our thoughts and other mental processes.

Andrews, L. (2006). Language exploration and awareness: A resource book for teachers (3rd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

An outline of modern linguistics: https://home.csulb.edu/~cwallis/382/readings/482/text/history_outline.pdf

Greenbaum, S. (1996). The Oxford English grammar. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leech, G.N., Deuchar, M. & Hoogenraad, R. (2005). English grammar for today (2nd ed.). London: Macmillan.

Structuralism : <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ferdinand-de-Saussure>