

Course: Linguistics

Level: L2

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Unit: 2 Contemporary Approaches to Linguistics

Lesson 8

## Transformational-Generative Grammar

### Introduction

Two major schools of grammar emerged in the 20th century, namely American **Structural Grammar** represented by Bloomfield and **Transformational-Generative Grammar** (TGG) represented by Chomsky. Structural grammar and Transformational-Generative grammar represent the two main stages of the development of modern linguistics. The former focuses on the systematic analysis and description of language forms and advocates the behavioristic theory of language while the latter aims at revealing the universal grammar in the human brain. Chomsky's theory is based on the idea that all languages hold similar structures and rules, also known as a universal grammar with specific options and limits for variation in grammar and features between languages.

**1. Noam Chomsky** (born December 7, 1928) is an American linguist, philosopher, and political activist. His theories made the modern scientific study of linguistics possible. He is considered as the father of modern linguistics and a major figure of analytical philosophy. His work has influenced fields such as computer science, mathematics and psychology. He is also known as one of the founders of cognitive science. Besides, the mentalist learning theory was spearheaded by Noam Chomsky, and arose in response to B. F. Skinner's radical behaviourism.

### 2. The mentalist theory

The mentalist theory also known as the innatist theory of language learning came up as a reaction against the behaviouristic language learning theory. It was first developed in America by Noam Chomsky who proposes that people have an innate language acquisition device containing universal grammar rules that allow children to rapidly learn any language.

### 3. Chomsky's Theory: Transformational-Generative Grammar (TGG)

The pit falls of the so far introduced structural grammars triggered Chomsky to launch the TG Grammar. Chomsky argues that the structural grammars such as IC analysis and P.S Grammars were not generative. They never recognized the competence of the speaker to produce **an infinite number** of utterances from a **finite set of rules**.

The transformational generative theory of language was propounded by Noam Chomsky in his book, *Syntactic Structures* (1957), and later expanded in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965). Chomsky **Transformational grammar is a theory of grammar** that focuses **on the ways in which sentences can be transformed into other sentences** while retaining their underlying meaning. It emphasizes the cognitive processes involved in understanding and producing language.

The theory proposed by Noam Chomsky has significantly shaped our understanding of language acquisition and universal grammar. His known contribution to psychology is the concept of **universal grammar**, which states that language is **innate**, or inborn, instead of learned contrary to what is advocated by the behavioristic theory.

The **Language Acquisition Device (LAD)** is a claim from language acquisition research proposed by Noam Chomsky in the 1960s. The LAD concept is an instinctive mental capacity which enables an infant to acquire and produce language; in other words, it enables children to navigate the intricacies of language, process linguistic input, and generate grammatically accurate sentences. **It is a component of the nativist theory of language.**

### 3. Concepts introduced by Chomsky

#### A. The transformational analysis claims that there are two levels of syntactic structure

- **Deep structure:** Deep Structure refers to the underlying syntactic structure of a sentence, which contains the core semantic meaning. Simply, the deep structure determines meaning; example: The students are doing the task.

- **Surface Structure** is the actual spoken or written form of a sentence, which can vary greatly while conveying the same deep structure. Surface structure determines sounds. Example: the students did the task. The task is done by the students. Did the students do the task?

Noam Chomsky introduced the concepts of **competence** and **performance** to distinguish between two different aspects of language use:

**B. Competence and performance:** Competence refers to a speaker's **innate knowledge** of the rules and structure of their language. It is the *underlying mental representation* of language that allows a speaker to generate and understand sentences, even those they have never heard before. Competence is about the *idealized, internalized knowledge* of language structures (such as syntax, semantics, and phonology) that allows for creativity in communication.

It represents the theoretical "mental grammar" that a speaker has, and Chomsky argues that this competence is universal across all humans, as it's part of our biological endowment (the *universal grammar*).

Competence is concerned with what a person *can* say or understand, theoretically, if there were no external factors influencing their communication (like distractions or stress).

**Performance** refers to the actual **use** of language in real-life situations. It is the observable *output* of language—what people say and how they say it. Performance includes the actual production and comprehension of speech, which can be affected by various factors like memory, attention, social context, or environmental distractions.

Chomsky emphasized competence in his work, arguing that it is more significant in understanding the structure of language, while performance data might not always accurately reflect someone's linguistic competence.

