University of M'sila/Faculty of letters and foreign languages
English Department
Module: Linguistics/ Level: Second Year/ 1st Semester
Teacher: Mrs. Harizi
Course one, part Two

History of Linguistics

1. Traditional Grammar: Principles and limitations

Traditional grammar refers to the entire body of grammatical work done in Europe and America before the rise of modern linguistics in the twentieth century. Traditional grammar includes grammars from the classical period of Greece, India, and Rome; the Middle Ages; the Renaissance; the eighteenth and nineteenth century; and more modern times. The European grammatical tradition began with the Greeks and was continued by the Romans, both of whom were chiefly interested in describing their own languages. Though linguists today view traditional grammar as an unscientific way to study language, many of the basic Latin-based notions, descriptions, and terminology of grammar eventually came to be applied to modern languages like French and English taught in schools. They studied the structure and formation of words and sentences without much reference to sound and meaning. The grammars created in this tradition reflect the prescriptive view that one dialect or variety of a language is to be valued more highly than others and should be the norm for all speakers of the language. Traditional grammars include prescriptive rules that are to be followed and proscriptive rules of usage to be avoided. 'When describing an emotion, use of an English word descended from Latin is preferred over an Anglo-Saxon word' is an example of a prescriptive rule.

Thus, the prescriptions of traditional grammar are attempts to impose the speech patterns of one region, class, ethnicity, or generation on speakers belonging to other groups. They may be of interest to sociologists, historians, and political scientists, but they tell us very little about the nature of language. However, Modern linguistics has little use for this prescriptive conception of grammar, and linguists are more interested in the knowledge of language that allows native speakers to judge what is correct or incorrect in his mother togue. Linguists also believe that the rules of traditional grammar are inadequate because they were based on the writings of the best writers, poets, politicians, or religious men in the classical Greece and Rome. The prescriptive rules were derived largely from Latin and Greek and the linguistic categories were appropriate to these languages. Most of them were not suitable to even all Indo-European languages, and certainly not to most non-Indo- European Languages. In addition, linguists tend to criticize traditional grammar for being

normative, prescriptive and for not being backed by an overall theory or model of grammar. To sum up, traditional grammar was limited in data and scope, normative in principle, and unscientific in method.

2. Comparative Linguistics

The most outstanding achievement of linguistic scholarship in the 19th century was the development of the comparative method, which comprised a set of principles whereby languages could be systematically compared with respect to their sound systems, grammatical structure, and vocabulary and shown to be "genealogically" related. Through voyages, conquests, trading, and colonialization from the sixteenth century onward, Europe became acquainted with a wide variety of languages. Information on languages became available in the form of word lists, grammars, dictionaries, and religious texts, and attempts at classifying these languages followed. Large-scale word collections for language comparisons were the notable feature of that time and Etymology played an important role in the development of comparative linguistics or **comparative philology**. It was first observed that many Romance languages like French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian had evolved from Latin. Moreover, It European scholars realized that there were systematic similarities between Sanskrit and other well-known languages, such as classical Greek and Latin. These similarities indicated that a genetic relationship must exist; i.e. these three languages must stem from the same ancestor language. So Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit as well as the Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic languages and many other languages of Europe and Asia had evolved from some earlier language, to which the name Indo-European or Proto-Indo-European is now applied. Comparative linguistics then came to have Indo-European languages as its main concern.

The English philologist **Sir William Jones** (1746–1794) had brought the similarities between the Sanskrit, Greek and Latin into light in 1786. He wrote:

> The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful   structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either; yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists. There is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and Celtick, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanscrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family. (cited in Lehmann, 1967, p. 15).

3. The Neogrammarians

The Neogrammarians, beginning in about 1876 in Germany, became extremely influential. They were a group of young scholars who antagonized the leaders of the field by attacking older thinking and loudly proclaiming their own views. They included Karl Brugmann, Berthold Delbrück, August Leskien and others. They think that sound change is regular and exceptionless and that every sound change, that occurs mechanically, takes place according to laws that admit no exceptions. In short, they believe that all changes in the sound system of a language as it developed through time were subject to the operation of regular sound laws. By "sound laws" they meant merely "sound changes," but referred to them as "laws" because they linked linguistics with the rigorous sciences. Neogrammarian laws of regular sound change were used by the comparative method in their philological analysis of the Sanskrit, Greek and Latin.

4. Modern Linguistics

The first decade of the twentieth century saw a shift away from historical explanations of linguistic phenomena and from German domination of linguistic science (led by the Neogrammarians) towards descriptions of the structure of language at a particular point in time with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) of the University of Geneva. the replacement of the historical orientation in linguistics by emphasis on the study of living languages and their structure came from a number of quarters at roughly the same time. However, De Saussure's view of language as a system of arbitrary signs in opposition to one another, his distinction between language and speech, and his separation of descriptive linguistics and historical linguistics into two defined spheres of interest, earned him the reputation of one of the founders of structural linguistics. From this time on, the field of **descriptive linguistics** developed rapidly while historical linguistics and comparative studies lost their pre-eminence. Today, among the disciplines that make up the broad field of linguistics (descriptive, historical, sociological, psychological, etc.) historical linguistics, from once being the embodiment of the discipline, has become another branch of the multivaried area of investigation. Twentieth-century advancements in historical-comparative language studies have been on the practical side, with the collection of data and reformulation of previous work. On the theoretical side, much has come from advancements in descriptive linguistics and other branches of the discipline. The rise of structuralism was fostered by the works of Saussure from Switzerland, Baudouin de Courtenay from Russia, and Franz Boas from America.