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English Department
Module: Linguistics/ Level: Second Year/ 1st Semester
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Course one, part one

How was language studied long before de Saussure?

Introduction

It is important to have an overview of the major developments in the history of linguistics, but it is worth to note that scholars have often interpreted the past based on modern linguistic thought, distorting how matters were seen in their own time. However, it is difficult to understand developments in linguistics without taking into account their historical and cultural contexts. Early developments in linguistics were considered part of philosophy, rhetoric, logic, psychology, biology, pedagogy, poetics, and religion, making it difficult to separate the history of linguistics from intellectual history in general, and, as a consequence, work in the history of linguistics has contributed also to the general history of ideas. Yet, Linguistic investigation has gone on in a small number of societies like Mesopotamian, Chinese, and Arabs who studied the grammar of their languages. Their work was not known for Europeans and for that reason it was not of much influence on European traditions. A number of linguistic traditions arose in antiquity, most as responses to linguistic change and religious concerns. For example, in the case of the Old-Babylonian tradition, when the first linguistic texts were composed, Sumerian, which was the language of religious and legal texts, was being replaced by Akkadian. This grammatical tradition emerged, by about 1900 BC, so that Sumerian could be learned and these texts could continue to be read. Most of the texts were administrative lists: inventories, receipts, and rosters. Some early texts for use in the scribal school were inventories of Sumerian nouns and their Akkadian equivalents. From this, grammatical analysis evolved in the sixth and fifth centuries BC where different forms of the same word were listed in a way that represented grammatical paradigms, Language change also stimulated the Hindu tradition as will be explained in the next section.

1. Indian Grammatical Tradition (Pāṇini)

Undoubtedly, the most interesting non-Western grammatical tradition—and the most original and influential—is that of India, which dates back to the 5th century BC: the **grammar of Pāṇini**. The aim of Pāṇini was not to describe language for the sake of developing a linguistic theory. It was to find a way to preserve the sacred language of memorized religious Vedic texts. **Sanskrit**, the sacred language, was changing, but ritual

required exact verbal performance. Rules of grammar were set out for learning and understanding the archaic language. **Sutras** or the set of grammar rules Pāṇini developed to learn the Sanskrit was based on comparisons between different versions of the same Vedic texts. The grammatical rules were devised for this comparison and for checking textual accuracy, and technical methods of grammatical description were developed in connection with the formulation of these rules.

Though the study of Sanskrit grammar originally has had the practical aim of keeping the sacred Vedic texts and their commentaries pure and intact, the study of grammar in India in the 1st millennium bc. had already become an intellectual end in itself. the Sanskrit tradition has had great impact on modern European linguistic scholarship in different ways. The native tradition of phonetics in ancient India was superior to Western knowledge; and this had important consequences for the growth of the science of phonetics in the West. In addition, the rules (Sutras) of Pāṇini that provide subtle and penetrating account of Sanskrit grammar like the construction of sentences and compound nouns through ordered rules operating on underlying structures are similar in part to modes of contemporary theory. Therefore, Sanskrit grammar of Pāṇini contributed to the appearance of comparative Indo-European grammar, comparative philology and historical linguistics where Sanskrit was investigated as part of the data.

2. Greek Grammatical Tradition

The term *hē grammatikē technē* (“the art of letters”) had two senses. It meant the study of the values of the letters and of accentuation and prosody and, in this sense, was an abstract intellectual discipline; and it also meant the skill of literacy and thus embraced applied pedagogy. Greek grammatical tradition that owes its origin to language change, was developed originally by schoolmasters, though it is known only from later writings of philosophers. Most of the developments associated with theoretical grammar grew out of philosophy and criticism. However, Observations taken from earlier school grammar are found in works of **Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics**. Themes important in the ancient Greek tradition have persisted throughout the history of linguistics, such as the origin of language, parts of speech (grammatical categories), and the relation between language and thought,

A persistent controversy in Greek philosophy was whether “nature” or “convention” accounted for the relationship between words and their meaning. That is, the question was whether language originated in “**nature**” (by onomatopoeia—i.e. by imitation of natural

sounds) or as arrived at arbitrarily by a “**social convention**”. This had implications for the history of language and for the origin of words. The dispute regarding the origin of language and meanings resulted in divergences between the views of **the “analogists,”** who looked on language as possessing an essential regularity as a result of the symmetries that convention can provide (favoring convention over nature, e.g. **Aristotle**), and the views of **the “anomalists,”** who pointed to language’s lack of regularity as one facet of the inescapable irregularities of nature (thinking that language originated in nature, e.g. **the Stoics**). The anomalist tradition in the hands of the Stoics brought grammar the benefit of their work in logic and rhetoric. This led to the distinction that, in modern theory, is made with the terms signifiant (“what signifies”) and signifié (“what is signified”).

Morphology (word structure) for the Greeks was approached as part of “etymology” focusing on the creation of the structure of words, while only some aspects of syntax were treated in rhetoric and logic. With respect to parts of speech or grammar categories, we can mention Plato's division of the sentence into ónoma (“name”) and rḥēma (“utterance”) what is labelled “subject” and “predicate,” or simply known as “noun” and “verb” respectively.

3. Roman Grammatical Tradition

Roman linguistics continued Greek themes and inspired from the classical Greek grammatical tradition. Roman grammarians did not treat syntax (only parts of speech); rather, morphology dominated in an approach focused on noun declensions and verb conjugations. Language was studied as part of their interests in literacy, scribeship, logic, epistemology, rhetoric, textual philosophy, poetics, and literary criticism.

4. The Arabic Grammatical Tradition

For Arabic grammarians, the Arabic language was sacred and immutable as enshrined in the Qur’ān, and they were concerned with explaining why Arabic was perfect. For example, the system of inflectional endings was believed to be proof of the symmetry and logicalness of the language. The major impetus for grammatical study came from linguistic change and the desire to preserve the integrity of the holy language of the **Qur’ān**. While no change was acknowledged in formal Arabic after the eighth century, the realization that the spoken Arabic of the eighth and ninth centuries was changing stimulated the development of Arabic grammatical study. **Abū'l-Aswad ad-Du'ali** (died ca. 688) is known to be the inventor of the grammatical tradition of Harakat, which commenced seriously in the writings of **al-Khalil** (died 791) and **Sibawayhi** (died 804).

Conclusion

A study of Indian logic in relation to Pāṇinian grammar alongside Aristotelian and Western logic in relation to Greek grammar and its successors have held great fascination for 20th-century theoretical linguists.