

Structuralism to Generativism

- Generativism as succeeded by structuralism (de Saussure);
- Structuralism w/ emphasis on segmentation and classification; cataloguing elements, their relations and distributions;
- Structuralism's main contribution: methodological (according to Chomsky); the idea of language as a formal system;
- Structuralism makes it possible to address the problems posed by UG (SR p5).

Noam Chomsky (1928-)



- creator of the theory of **generative grammar**, one of the most significant contributions to the field of linguistics in the 20th century;
- genuine insights in linguistics imply an understanding of aspects of mental processing and human nature

Mentalistic Approach of Generativism

Generativism forms a return to Kant:

- **similarities**: emphasis on mental structures which experience (learning a language) can order ('setting the parameters'), but which cannot be derived from experience (they are genetically determined);

Mentalistic Approach of Generativism (cont)

- **difference**: for Chomsky, these structures are not just transcendental, found only through philosophical reflection, but can form the object of empirical (cognitive psychological) research.

A Universal Grammar (UG)

- the ability to learn grammar is hard-wired
- provides insight into the use and acquisition of language
- not just descriptive but also explanatory
- distinction between deep structure and surface structure

Chomsky advocates a return to the idea of a universal grammar; the kind of grammar that flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries;

"concerned with general features of language structure rather than with particular idiosyncracies"

The decline of universal grammar

Tradition of universal grammar came to an end in the 19th century:

- dismissed as **too metaphysical**;
- **too ambitious**: "the problems posed were beyond the scope of the technique and understanding then available"
- **the problem of rule-governed creativity**: how is it that from an early age onwards, children can create sentences they have never heard?
- ousted by IE comparative linguistics

Generative grammar

- **Object of research**: syntax only (autonomous component) (SR p21);

Generative grammar (cont)

- **Only this part of the grammar is susceptible to rules**: "The fundamental aim in the linguistic analysis of a language L is to separate the **grammatical** sequences which are sentences of L from the **ungrammatical** sequences which are not sentences of L and to study the grammatical sequences. The grammar of L will thus be a device that generates all of the grammatical sequences of L and none of the ungrammatical ones." (SR p18)

Grammaticalness

Grammaticalness cannot be determined by:

- a corpus of utterances (performance)
- meaning (semantics):
- frequency of use

the rules of grammar as formulated in the language of mathematics and logic;

economy: by specifying a finite number of rules the grammar can generate an infinite number of sentences (**recursivity**); accounts for creativity in language

S → NP + VP

VP → V + NP

NP → D + N

D → the

N → boy, dog

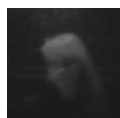
V → chased

The boy chased the dog

The dog chased the boy

Chomsky's Evaluation

- Linguistic theory must provide the means to evaluate possible grammars
- **Possible grammars**: devices that generate the grammatical sentences of a language
- Such a grammar must be **descriptively adequate** in the sense that it is able to disambiguate ambiguous sentences, i.e., sentences with an identical surface structure (signal, form), but with different semantic interpretations (deep structures)



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Competence vs Performance vs Saussure

Performance: what speakers do (= de Saussure's parole);

Competence: an individual native speaker's implicit knowledge of the language (= de Saussure's langue)

→ Both de Saussure and Chomsky regard language as a system and ignore individual speech acts;

→ Chomsky's competence is a psychological phenomenon, imprinted in the mind, not a shared generality but a genetic endowment in each individual; its basis is universal grammar;

→ de Saussure's langue is a socio-psychological phenomenon shared among a community of speakers and is language specific.

- "The only legitimate object of linguistic research is the competence of the ideal native speaker" (Chomsky)

Innateness vs UG

- "a universal grammar – a general theory of linguistic structure that determines the form of grammar – is primarily of interest for the information it provides concerning innate intellectual structure"

- language acquisition and use are made possible by a particular component in the human mind: the language faculty, consisting of a Universal Grammar;

- languages scarcely differ at the level of deep structure – which reflects the basic properties of thought and conception – but that they may vary widely at the much less interesting level of surface structure

→ the rapid language acquisition of children

→ the poverty of the stimulus;

→ creative language use of native speakers;

→ competent critical period (sensitive period)

→ gave rise to the nature vs nurture debate

Generativism: a new paradigm (Kuhn)

- **field:** syntax as an autonomous component

- **emphasis:** evaluation instead of discovery

- **tool:** grammaticality judgments (i.e., informal elicitation) of data

Principles & Parameters:

→ **Principles:** abstract rules of grammar, common to all languages

→ **Parameters:** markers or switches that are turned on or off for particular languages and determine variability

Government & Binding Theory:

→ **Government:** an abstract syntactic relation mainly concerned w/ the assignment of case > all languages have abstract case though they may not have morphological case

→ **Binding:** an abstract syntactic relation mainly concerned with the referents of pronouns, anaphors (reflexives) and referential expressions



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