

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);
- **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);
- **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

Grammaticalness (cont)

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)

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



By **Soraya** (Soraya)
cheatography.com/soraya/
truantsblog.com

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