**Chapter 2: The History of Linguistics**

***Section Two:*****Traditional Grammar (TG)**

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**Traditional Grammar (TG)**

1. **Greek Origins:**

By TG we mean that type of analysis which until recently characterised all school grammar books (of English and of foreign languages) and which remains that most commonly found in language-teaching. Indeed, many people are under the impression that it reveals the ‘real’ structure of language. TG goes back to Greece of the fifth century before Christ. The first Greek grammarians were philosophers, for philosophy embraced all scholarly investigation. In the fifth century B.C. the question arose whether certain institutions were grounded in the nature of things or were the result of some hypothetical tacit agreement among men: ‘nature’ was thus opposed to ‘convention’. Applied to language this meant: was there an inevitable connection between a word and that to which it referred? For the first time the primitive question was questioned.

1. **Nature and Convention:**

To say that a particular institution was ‘natural’ was to imply that it ha dits origin in eternal and immutable principles outside man itself (and was therefore inviolable); to say it was ‘conventional’ implied that it was merely the result of custom and tradition (that is, of some tacit agreement, or ‘social contract’, among the members of the community – a ‘contract’ which, since it was made by men, could be broken by men). In different words, ‘Naturalists’ advanced demonstrations of the naturalness of words. For example, a word might be imitative of a sound (e.g., crash); or an imitative name might be applied to the source of the sound (e.g., cuckoo); or the sound of an individual letter might be symbolic: it was suggested that the Greek Letter L (Lambda) denoted smoothness. Again the meaning of a word might be extended by metaphor, i.e., the meaning of a word might be extended by virtue of some ‘natural’ connexion between the original and the secondary application: the foot of a hill; the mouth of a river; the neck of a bottle, etc. However, Plato (429-347 B.C.) claims ‘there is no name given to anything by nature; all is convention and habit of the users’.

1. **Analogists and Anomalists:**

In the second century B.C. this debate gave way to another between analogists and anomalists. In different terms, the dispute between ‘naturalists’ and ‘conventionalists’ was to endure for centuries, dominating all speculation about the origin of language and the relationship between words and their meaning. Its importance for the development of grammatical theory is that it gave rise to ‘etymological’ investigations. Again, the controversy between the ‘naturalists’ and ‘conventionalists’ developed rather later into a dispute as to how far language was ‘regular’. The Greek words for regularity and irregularity are ‘analogy’ and ‘anomaly’; those who maintained that language was essentially systematic and regular are generally called ‘analogists’ ( in English would be the huge numbers of words of the pattern jump/jumped), and those who took the contrary view are referred to as ‘ ‘anomalists’ (an English example would be buy/ bought). But the anomalists did not deny that there were regularities in the formation of words in in language, but pointed to the many instances of irregular words. If language were really a product of human ‘convention’ one would not expect to find ‘irregularities’ of these various kinds; and if they existed, they should be corrected. The anomalists maintained that language was a product of nature (the distinction between descriptive and descriptive grammar, i.e., the distinction between describing how people actually speak and write and prescribing how they ought to speak and write).

1. **The Alexandrian Period:**

In Alexandria, about the first century B.C., the first comprehensive grammar in the Western World was compiled; this was the grammar of Dionysius Thrax, and it consisted of only twenty-five paragraphs. Dionysius Thrax defined grammar as ‘the technical knowledge of the language generally employed by poets and writers’. He isolated eight parts of speech: noun, verb, conjunction, article, adverb, participle, pronoun and preposition; and he recognised: case, gender, number, person, tense, voice and mood. For example, he defined the noun as ‘a part of a sentence having case inflections, signifying a person or a thing’; and the sentence as ‘a combination of words that have a complete meaning in themselves’. One lack in Dionysius Thrax was treatment of syntax: that is, how the various parts of speech combine and how sentences may be analysed. To a great extent this was supplied by the grammar of Apollonius Dyscolus, written in the first or second century A.D. the works of these two Alexandrians remained the model for almost every grammar-book of the next sixteen centuries.

1. **Greek Grammar:**

The main investigators of Greek grammar were the Stoic philosophers. For the Stoics right conduct was living in harmony with nature; correct knowledge therefore would be a congruence of ideas with nature; and language ought to be words that express such ideas. In part the problem of language was: how and how well does language express thoughts? Notice the contention that thoughts were prior to, and could exist without, words. The Stoics wrote much about language; although their works have been lost, we have accounts of them from later writers. Their philosophy forced them to make a clear distinction between the form of a word and its meaning. The analogist-anomalist controversy led them to pursue the examination of the patternings of Greek and in time they recognised five parts of speech (noun, proper noun, verb, conjunction and definite article), cases, transitive and intransitive verbs, active and passive voices, and perfect and non-perfect aspects. This analysis found its way into all subsequent grammar-books.

1. **The Romans and the Mediaeval Period:**

The Romans owed almost everything of any cultural value to the Greeks, and this debt included grammar. In the first century A.D. the grammar of Dionysius Thrax was translated by Remmius Palaemon; thereafter, Latin grammarians did their best to adapt the terminology and categories of Greek grammar to Latin. It is a coincidence from the viewpoint of cultural history that the structures of Greek and of Latin are remarkably similar. Yet this coincidence had an important and lasting effect: it strengthened the notion that there was a universal grammar that reflected thoughts. Greek technical terms were therefore given Latin equivalents. Latin grammars typically consisted of three parts dealing with: the definition of grammar and the alphabet; the parts of speech; and mistakes to be avoided, style and sometimes verse-forms. Astonoshingly, such a tripartite arrangement may be seen in modern grammars. The most influential of the Latin grammars were those of Aelius Donatus and of Priscianus, which served as textbooks for the entire mediaeval period, that is, for the next thousand years. The Grammar ( Ars grammatica) by Donatus, dating from the fourth century A.D. is a short school-book suitable for beginners ; but the Principles of Grammar ( Institutiones rerum grammaticarum) of about 500 A.D. by Priscianus is the most complete description of Latin that has come down to us. Until the Renaissance Latin was the language of all scholarship in the Western world. It was no-one’s native language therefore had to be taught; hence it was the grammarian’s task to teach how to speak and write ‘correctly’ – grammar was prescriptive.

1. **From the Renaissance to the Present Day:**

Until the late Middle Ages, a handful of grammars of languages other than Latin and Greek had been produced in the West, but from the Renaissance onwards an increasing number began to appear. The majority of them applied Latin grammar to the description of other languages; in addition, the attitudes of traditional grammar were widely accepted. Speculation by such philosophers as Bishop Wilkins who postulated a universal thought structure possessed by mankind and therefore independent of any language, reinforced the notion of the priority of thought. Practical considerations strengthened the belief that every language possessed one correct format that it was the duty of the grammarian to teach it. The invention of printing made for the establishment of fixed spelling conventions. The increased geographical and social mobility of populations (especially after the Industrial Revolution) led to textbooks that prescribed standards of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. Two of the most influential works were those done by self-appointed experts: Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary (1755) and Bishop Lowth’s “A Short Introduction to English Grammar” (1762). In the later 18th and 19th centuries an increasing stream of such prescriptive works appeared, two of the most notable being those of Lindley Murray (English Grammar, 1795) and William Cobbett (Grammar of the English Language, 1819). In the present century countless grammars of this type have been published, each intended to promote the learning of a foreign language or the study of the mother-tongue.

1. **Wider influence of the Greco-Roman tradition**:

The term ‘Traditional Grammar’ has been used to refer to that tradition of linguistic analysis and linguistic theory which originated in Greece, was further developed in Rome and medieval Europe, and was extended to the study of the vernacular languages at the Renaissance and afterwards. This, the Greco-Roman tradition of linguistic analysis, influenced the descriptions of certain non-European languages even before the Renaissance. The grammar of Dionysius Thrax was translated into Armenian in the fifth century A.D. and somewhat later into Syrian. Thus, the Arab grammarians drew upon the Syrians, and they also came more directly into contact with the Greco-Roman tradition in Spain. And the Hebrew grammarians were influenced by the Arabs.

1. **The Indian (Hindu) tradition:**

The Indian grammatical tradition in not only independent of the Greco-Roman but also earlier. However, both grammars have certain points of similarity. In India, as in Greece, there was a controversy about the ‘natural’ or ‘conventional’ nature of language; and just as the Alexandrian scholars, dealing with the classical texts of the past, produced glossaries and commentaries to explain words or constructions which were no longer in contemporary Greek, so did the Indian grammarians.

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