

TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR AND THE TEACHING OF LINGUISTICS

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Traditional grammar plays a curious role in the teaching of linguistics. It is acknowledged as the intellectual tradition of modern linguistic theory, and it is assumed as a prerequisite for doing linguistic analysis. However, crucial as it is to an understanding of modern linguistic theory, traditional grammar is rarely a part of the linguistics curriculum. Whatever knowledge students have of traditional grammar comes from instruction in grade school and high school English classes. This has two unfortunate consequences. First, there is a great range in the degree of understanding of the basic concepts of traditional grammar, such as the parts of speech and parts of the sentence. Second and more serious, traditional grammar is taught prescriptively, as part of a received cultural tradition, rather than as a theory of language. This means that most students consider traditional grammar differently from other theories about language to which they are subsequently exposed. They are rarely encouraged to view traditional grammar as a theory of language in its own right and subject it to evaluation in terms of internal consistency and empirical testing.

In this paper we sketch out a course on traditional grammar which is appropriate both for students in theoretical and applied linguistics.¹ Central to this course is the distinction between traditional grammar as a method for labelling utterances, that is, as a parsing tool, and traditional grammar as a theory of language.

As a parsing tool, traditional grammar provides a set of a priori grammatical categories which are used as labels for structural divisions of the sentence. Facility in this skill is developed through traditional diagramming exercises. In the past few years we have used Donald Emery's *Sentence Analysis*² which provides a complete set of diagramming exercises. In this part of the course questions about the appropriateness or legitimacy of grammatical categories are discouraged. It is emphasized that what is being learned is a classificatory skill which countless generations of students have learned to do satisfactorily.

The second theme of the course is an examination of traditional grammar as a theory of language. Here exercise of the analytical and critical skills of the students is actively encouraged. The particular version of traditional grammar we present, what we call the 'theory of

the sentence', is based on a synthesis developed by William Diver,³ and represents a coherent formulation of the work of nineteenth century grammarians, primarily of the classical languages.

The 'theory of the sentence' is designed primarily to explain the distribution of surface morphology, for example case endings. The theory holds that the structure of language is parallel to the structure of thought; that is, that the categories appropriate for the analysis of language are the same as those appropriate for the analysis of thought. The 'theory of the sentence' has three components: an organizational component, a conceptual component, and a component which relates the two.

The Theory of the Sentence

I. Orientation: Language is a manifestation of rational thought.

Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts. Sweet, *A New English Grammar*.

II. Basic Unit: Sentence

A statement of a complete thought is a sentence.

III. Organization of the Sentence

A. Simple Sentence.

- 1) A sentence is composed of a subject and a predication about that subject.
- 2) A predication consists of a predicator and whatever complements are necessary to complete the predication.
- 3) The subject, the predicator, and the complements may each be modified.
 - a. The modifier of a subject or a complement is an adjectival modifier.
 - b. The modifier of a predicator or of another modifier is an adverbial modifier.

- B. Sentences may be simple, compound or complex.
 - 1) A simple sentence is as stated above.
 - 2) A compound sentence consists of simple sentences standing in a relation of coordination, connected by a coordinator.
 - 3) A complex sentence consists of a principal sentence and one or more sentences standing in a relation of subordination, connected by subordinators.

IV. Content of the Sentence

What else is a part of speech but a word indicating a concept, that is a thought. Priscian 500 A.D.

- A. The conceptual units of the sentence are words.
- B. Classification of words according to concept.
 - 1) A word that names a person, place or thing is a noun.
 - 2) A word that indicates an action or a state of being is a verb.
 - 3) A word that names a characteristic is an adjective.
 - 4) A word that indicates manner, degree, time, place, etc. is an adverb.
 - 5) A word that indicates a connection is a conjunction.
 - 6) A word that indicates a relation is a preposition.
 - 7) A word that indicates a thing without reference to any of its qualities except individuality is a pronoun.
 - 8) A word that expresses emotion is an interjection.

V. Relation between organization of the sentence and content of the sentence.

- A. The Principal Relations.
 - 1) The noun functions as subject and as complement of the predicator.

- 2) The verb functions as predicator.
- 3) The adjective functions as the adjectival modifier.
- 4) The adverb functions as the adverbial modifier.
- 5) The conjunction functions as coordinator or subordinator.

B. Subcategorization of the relation of verb and noun to predicator and complement.

- 1) A verb is (conceptually) either transitive or intransitive.
 - a. A transitive verb is one whose action is carried over directly onto its object.
 - b. An intransitive verb is one whose action is carried over only indirectly onto its object.
- 2) The complement is correspondingly either a direct object or an indirect object.
 - a. The object of a transitive verb is a direct object.
 - b. The object of an intransitive verb is an indirect object.
 - c. A transitive verb may have both a direct and an indirect object.

The evaluation of the theory of the sentence is twofold: the categories of the grammar are evaluated in terms of their internal coherence and in terms of their fit with the data. In order to determine the extent to which the theory of the sentence is coherent, students are asked to examine the relationship between the categories and the orientation. Here they look to see if the categories of the grammar indeed correspond to the categories of thought. The relationship among the categories themselves is also examined. Here they look for overlap and imprecision. In this highly idealized version that we present, all the categories are indeed coherent with the orientation, involving either differences of concepts or different relations between concepts.

Some problems, however, arise with the precision and exclusivity of the categories, particularly with the parts of speech. For example, the

conceptual distinction between prepositions as stating 'relations' and conjunctions as stating 'connections' is difficult to delineate. Further, a category such as adverb is not substantively homogeneous, being defined by a list of concepts.

Evaluation in terms of fit with the data is accomplished by formulating these grammatical categories in such a way that they are subject to empirical testing. The theory leads us to expect a close correspondence between categories of linguistic expression and categories of the theory, i.e. between morphological categories of some particular language and grammatical categories. For example, we can test the organizational category 'subject' by examining the distribution of morphology which is regarded as being the direct or indirect manifestation of that category. The 'nominative case' is one such morphological unit whose distribution is said to be explained by the theoretical category 'subject'.⁴ Similarly, the traditional grammars of Latin (and English) hypothesize that the category 'subject' is relevant for an understanding of the distribution of the 'reflexive pronoun'.⁵ The grammars say that the 'reflexive pronoun' is reserved for instances in which a pronoun in the predicate has its antecedent in the subject of the sentence or clause in which it occurs. Thus the prediction based on this hypothesis is that we should find the reflexive pronoun only in the predicate, and never with an antecedent which is not the subject of the sentence or clause in which the pronoun occurs. The examples counter to this prediction are well known, e.g.

- (1) Latin: if hostages were given to him-sibi by them he would make peace with them. (B.G. i.14)

Socrates was put to death by his-sui fellow citizens. (A and G 301.b)

- (2) English: You yourself must decide.

I saw the chief himself.

After arguing with him for two hours, I've finally gotten Jones to give in. The job will be pulled by Smith and himself as planned.

Students are then led to see that IN THIS THEORY if the category 'subject' does not help us understand the use of some linguistic expression, then it has not received empirical support as a category of the language on which it is being tested.

Students test the conceptual component on the English lexicon. The theory of the sentence leads to two expectations: (1) that for a given

lexical item one can determine whether or not the conceptual definition of a particular part of speech applies, and (2) that the conceptual categories constitute an appropriate framework for summarizing and ordering the members of the lexicon, i.e. that the parts of speech will divide up the lexicon neatly and unambiguously. To test these expectations students are given a grid with lexical items listed on the vertical axis and parts of speech listed on the horizontal axis. They are asked to identify the part of speech of each lexical item by marking the appropriate box. The students are not required to justify their choices, and the decision as to whether one or more parts of speech may be chosen for a lexical item is left to the individual. The results of one such test are given below in FIGURE 1.

	noun	verb	adj.	adverb	conj.	prep.	pron.	interj.
1. love	17	15	4	0	0	0	1	3
2. rain	17	13	4	0	0	0	0	0
3. black	9	0	17	1	0	0	0	0
4. rich	2	1	17	1	0	0	0	0
5. home	17	0	4	12	0	0	0	0
6. out	3	0	1	13	0	10	0	1
7. like	0	16	1	1	3	7	0	1
8. therefore	1	0	0	0	16	0	0	0
9. then	1	0	1	14	7	0	0	0
10. than	0	0	1	0	10	8	0	0
11. my	0	0	15	0	0	0	6	1
12. horrors	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
13. there	4	0	0	14	0	0	4	1

FIGURE 1

Students discover that the English lexicon does not meet the expectations set up by the theory of the sentence: there is no intersubjective agreement on the classification of individual lexical items; the majority of English words fall into two or more categories; some words don't seem to fit at all. Furthermore, when they compare the results of their part of speech classification of the lexicon with the 'raw data' (FIGURE 2) they discover that a neat and easy-to-handle summary has not been achieved.

<u>Raw Data</u>	<u>Noun</u>	<u>Verb</u>	<u>Adj.</u>	<u>Adv.</u>	<u>Conj.</u>	<u>Prep.</u>	<u>Pron.</u>	<u>Interj.</u>
black	love	love	love	black	like	out	love	love
home	rain	rain	rain	rich	there-	like	my	out
horrors	black	rich	black	home	fore	than	there	like
like	rich	like	rich	out	then			my
love	home		home	like	than			horrors
my	out		out	then				there
out	there-		like	there				
rain	fore		then					
than	then		than					
there	horrors		my					
therefore	there							
then								

FIGURE 2

The principal relations between the organization of the sentence and content of the sentence predict that the conceptual categories of the parts of speech will mesh in a non-random way with the organizational categories of the sentence; i.e., that the members of each part of speech will fill only certain parts of the sentence. For example, the theory predicts that a verb will function as a predicator, but not as a subject, adjectival modifier, adverbial modifier, or conjunction. In testing this prediction against language data, students assume that a satisfactory classification of words into a single part of speech can be achieved, and they thus work with lexical items where there is substantial agreement as to part of speech. Students find that contrary to the prediction, every part of the sentence can be filled by some member of each part of speech; i.e., that there is a random relation between parts of speech and parts of the sentence. See for example FIGURE 3, (following page):

	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Predicator</u>	<u>Adjectival Modifier</u>
Noun:	The <u>boy</u> sat down.	He <u>penned</u> a note. The <u>dog</u> <u>treed</u> the cat. Father <u>footed</u> the bill.	The <u>clothes</u> washer arrived.
Pron.:	<u>He</u> left.	Don't <u>you-all</u> me!	A <u>she</u> wolf; a <u>he</u> man.
Verb:	The <u>take</u> was more than expected. The <u>run</u> on the bank was anticipated. The <u>has beens</u> weren't invited.	He <u>went</u> .	The <u>swim</u> meet was cancelled. It is a <u>must read</u> book. A <u>touch and go</u> situation.
Adj.:	The <u>good</u> die young. <u>Red</u> is my favorite color.	She <u>blued</u> her hair.	A <u>big</u> man came in.
Adv.:	<u>Once</u> is not enough.	He <u>backed</u> the car out.	He's an <u>only</u> child. <u>Yesterday</u> morning...
Prep.:	<u>After</u> is too late. The <u>ups</u> and <u>downs</u> were too much for her.	He <u>upped</u> the price.	The <u>up</u> escalator... The <u>after</u> effect...
Conj.:	<u>Ifs</u> and <u>buts</u> will not satisfy me.	He <u>whiled</u> away the hours.	The <u>then</u> director was John Ford. He was an <u>also</u> ran.
Interj.:		He <u>wows</u> the girls.	

FIGURE 3

The categories direct and indirect object also involve both the organizational and conceptual components of the theory of the sentence. These categories can be tested by examining the distribution of morphology identified as accusative and dative. In the theory of the sentence, the category 'verb' is subdivided into two categories

Students see that the theoretical categories direct and indirect object fail to receive support from the cooccurrence of verbs and cases in Latin. That is, the categories direct and indirect object do not account for the distribution of the morphological categories in Latin.

When students discover the failures of the three components of traditional grammar, they are ready with responses.

To the failure of the parts of speech: "There are two words 'love' in English; one a noun and one a verb." "An adjective is a word that modifies a noun." "A noun is a word that can be preceded by an article."

To the failure of categories motivated by the organizational component: "But that's an 'indirect reflexive'." "The 'subject' is the word that agrees with the verb." "There are exceptions."

To the failure of the relation between organization and content: "There, a verb FUNCTIONS as a noun." "Well, certain verbs GOVERN the dative."

Students are asked to turn their responses into new proposals and are asked to consider each new proposal in terms of the consequences for the theory of the sentence. In particular they are asked to consider whether a notion such as 'government' or the formal definition of a part of speech is consistent with the orientation of traditional grammar. They are also asked to consider how a proposal such as a list of exceptions or the idea that 'one thing functions as another' affects the possibility of empirical testing. They see that although their proposals create a closer fit with the data, it is at the expense of the internal coherence of the theory or its testability.

Students are also introduced to other proposals in response to the failure of traditional grammar, for example the notion of underlying structure. Here it is suggested that not all proposals can be incorporated into the traditional theory of the sentence, and that certain proposals in fact constitute new theories which may involve new orientations, new categories, and which may address a different range of phenomena.

As a result of this course, students see that the grammatical categories that they have long taken for granted are in fact parts of theories and that the legitimacy of these categories is dependent on the overall coherence and empirical success of the theory itself. Perhaps the greatest benefit, however, is a greater understanding of what it means to bring a scientific perspective to the study of language.

ENDNOTES

¹This course has been taught to graduate students in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University. The framework of this course was inspired by courses taught by William Diver at Columbia University. Alan Huffman of Columbia University also contributed to the development of the course.

²Donald Emery, *Sentence Analysis*, N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1963.

³Portions of this synthesis are presented in the following articles by Diver: A Concise Grammar of Modern English:1, *Columbia University Working Papers* 4.1-11. 1977; On Defining the Discipline, *CUWPL* 6.59-117, 1981.

⁴See Diver 1981.

⁵Allen and Greenough, *New Latin Grammar*, New Rochelle, N.Y.: Caratzas Bros., 1981, sec. 299.