Misconceptions about traditional grammar

A **traditional grammar** is a framework for the description of the structure of a language. The roots of traditional grammar are in the work of classical Greek and Latin philologists. The formal study of grammar based on these models became popular during the Renaissance.

Traditional grammars may be contrasted with more modern theories of grammar in theoretical linguistics, which grew out of traditional descriptions. While traditional grammars seek to describe how particular languages are used, or to teach people to speak or read them, grammar frameworks in contemporary linguistics often seek to explain the nature of language knowledge and ability.

Traditional grammar is often prescriptive, and may be regarded as unscientific by those working in linguistics.

Traditional Western grammars generally classify words into parts of speech. They describe the patterns for word inflection, and the rules of syntax by which those words are combined into sentences.

The formal study of grammar became popular in Europe during the Renaissance. Descriptive grammars were rarely used in Classical Greece or in Latin through the Medieval period. During the Renaissance, Latin and Classical Greek were broadly studied along with the literature and philosophy written in those languages. With the invention of the printing press and the use of Vulgate Latin as a lingua franca throughout Europe, the study of grammar became part of language teaching and learning.

Although complete grammars were rare, Ancient Greek philologists and Latin teachers of rhetoric produced some descriptions of the structure of language. The descriptions produced by classical grammarians (teachers of philology and rhetoric) provided a model for traditional grammars in Europe. According to linguist William Harris, "Just as the Renaissance confirmed Greco-Roman tastes in poetry, rhetoric and architecture, it established ancient Grammar, especially that which the Roman school-grammarians had developed by the 4th [century CE], as an inviolate system of logical expression." The earliest descriptions of other European languages were modeled on grammars of Latin. The primacy of Latin in traditional grammar persisted until the beginning of the 20th century.

Scope of linguistics

Linguistics is a growing and interesting area of study, having a direct hearing on fields as diverse as education, anthropology, sociology, language teaching, cognitive psychology and philosophy. What is linguistics? Fundamentally, it is concerned with the nature of language and communication.

Some of the definitions of linguistics are as under:

1. "Linguistics observes language in action as a means for determining how language has developed, how it functions today, and how it is currently evolving." (G. Duffy)

2. "Linguistics is concerned with the nature of human language, how it is learned and what part it plays in the life of the individual and the community." (S. Pit Corder)

3. "Linguistics tries to answer two basic questions:
   a. What is language?
   b. How does language work." (Jean Aitchison)

4. "The scientific study of human language is called linguistics". (Victoria A. Fromkin)

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. By this we mean language in general, not a particular language. If we were concerned with studying an individual language, we would say 'I'm studying French… or English,' or whichever language we happen to be studying. But linguistics does not study an individual language, it studies 'language' in general. That is, linguistics, according to Robins (1985):

is concerned with human language as a universal and recognizable part of the human behaviour and of the human faculties, perhaps one of the most essential to human life as we know it, and one of the most far-reaching of human capabilities in relation to the whole span of mankind's achievements.

Does this not sound a little abstract? It is, because there is no way of studying 'language' without referring to and taking examples from particular languages. However, even while doing so, the emphasis of linguistics is different. Linguistics does not emphasise practical knowledge or mastery of a particular language. Linguists may know only one language, or may know several, or may even study a language they do not know at all. What they are trying to study are the ways in which language is organised to fulfil human needs, as a system of communication. There is a difference between a person who knows many languages (called a **polyglot),** and a **linguist,** who studies general principles of language organisation and language behaviour, often with reference to some actual language or languages. Any language can be taken up to illustrate the principles of language organisation, because all languages reveal something of the nature of language in general. (Of course,

it may he of help to a linguist to know more languages so that differences and contrasts as well as similarities between the languages can also be studied in a better way.) We can say that linguistics is learning about language rather than learning a language. This distinction is often explained as the difference between learning how a car works and learning how to drive a car. When we learn how to drive a car, we learn a set of habits and do some practice—this is similar to learning how to speak a language. When we learn how the car works, we open up its mechanism, study it and investigate the relationship of its parts to one another. This is similar to what we do in a scientific study of language, or linguistics: we investigate the mechanism of language, its parts and how all these parts fit together to perform particular functions, and why they are arranged or organised in a certain manner. Just as while driving a car, we are using its various components, while speaking a language we are using the sounds, words, etc. of that language; behind these uses is the mechanism which enables us to do so. We study language because it is important for us to understand this mechanism.

Linguistics today is a subject of study, independent of other disciplines. Before the twentieth century, the study of language was not regarded as a separate area of study in its own right. It was considered to he a part of studying the history of language or the philosophy of language, and this was known not as linguistics but as philosophy. So 'Linguistics' is a modern name which defines a specific discipline, in which we study language not in relation to some other area such as history or philosophy, but language as itself, as a self enclosed and autonomous system, worthy of study in its own right. It was necessary at the beginning of the growth of modern linguistics to define this autonomy of the subject, otherwise it would not have been possible to study the language system with the depth and exhaustiveness which it requires. However, now we acknowledge that while linguistics is a distinct area of study, it is also linked to other disciplines and there are overlapping areas of concern.

The main concern of modern linguistics is to describe language, to study its nature and to establish a theory of language. That is, it aims at studying the components of the language system and to ultimately arrive at an explanatory statement on how the system works. In modern linguistics, the activity of describing the language system is the most important and so modern linguistics is generally known as descriptive. But linguistics has other concerns as well, which fall within its scope and these include historical and comparative study of language. These differ from the descriptive approach in their emphasis; otherwise, these approaches also involve description of language.