University of Oum El Bouaghi

Department of English

Level: 2nd Year L.M.D

Module: Linguistics

Unit 4. Transformational Generative Grammar -TGG-

1. Noam Chomsky and TGG
2. Criticism of Structural Linguistics
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Introduction

From the late 1950s onwards, structural linguistics has sometimes been used with less popularity because supporters of generative linguistics initiated by Noam Chomsky have regarded the work of American structuralists as too limited in conception. They have argued that it is essential to go further than the position of items to produce a grammar which reflects a native speaker's knowledge of language.

I. Noam Chomsky and TGG

Transformational Generative Grammar (also TG grammar, TGG) is a theory of grammar which attempted to provide a model for the description of all languages. It was launched and dominated by Avram Noam Chomsky (b. 1928), and it may be said to have officially begun with the publication of his book Syntactic Structures in 1957 (the classical theory) though some of the theory had been prefigured a few years before in introductory papers by Chomsky as well as in articles by Zellig Harris.

Chomsky has considerably modified his ideas since 1957. Undeniably, the best-known theoretical position is that of Aspects of the theory of Syntax (written in 1965) or the Aspects Model, a position that Chomsky himself has called the Standard Theory. It is, in fact, the most recognized version of the theory since it added important considerations to the study of language. TGG was revolutionary

and it is, undoubtedly, the most forceful and prominent in the century. No linguist who wishes to keep track of contemporary developments in the field can afford to overlook Chomsky's theoretical contributions.

II. Criticism of Structuralism

For Chomsky, structural linguistics involved some weaknesses in conceptions and in methodology.

A. Corpus Analysis

For American structuralists, an empirical science studies only observable phenomenon. For descriptive purposes, a language was defined in terms of a corpus. A linguistic corpus has a level of phonological structure, a level of morphological structure and a level of syntactic structure. They believed that when all elements of the corpus were grouped and labelled at each level, the grammar of the language was complete.

Structural grammars offer an inventory of forms and constructions which appear in a limited corpus; they do not provide the rules needed to construct an endless range of possible grammatical sentences. For Chomsky, a corpus can never represent the whole language, but will only cover an incomplete and a selective sample of it because language is infinite and creative in nature. TGG supporters suggest that instead of describing a corpus, a linguist can arrive at an inclusive grammar of language by describing its underlying system of rules, which is not contained within the corpus, but lies beyond it, in the minds of the speakers. The study of this system is more important than the study of the actual sentences.

B. Surface Analysis (taxonomic analysis)

Structural grammars only describe the surface structure of sentences. They cannot effectively handle important grammatical facts (which are part of a native speaker's knowledge of language), like the relationship between active and passive sentences, positive, negative and interrogative sentences, and the deep dissimilarities that exist between superficially identical sentences. The following sentences are seen to be structurally similar if their analysis considers only their surface layer, but if another layer is considered, they would be revealed to be dissimilar.

Examples

- John is eager to please.

- John is easy to please.

- Pierre a conseillé à Jean de consulter un spécialiste.

- Pierre a promis à Jean de consulter un spécialiste.

Chomsky and others criticized structuralist and post-Bloomfieldian theories as a whole as being based on a representation of a sentence in terms of surface structure alone. Such approaches are unsuccessful in distinguishing the surface from the underlying structures of a sentence.

C. The Behaviourist Attitude

Bloomfieldians were influenced by behaviourism. Behaviourism is a psychological theory of learning which takes into account only visible facts, excluding concepts like "mind", "ideas" and so on. For behaviourists, learning a language is similar to learning any other behaviour (to walk, to eat, to write . . .). It is a mechanical process based on habit formation. Learning is controlled by an external factor (a stimulus) which produces a response. This response is learnt when it is repeated and positively reinforced. This process is called conditioning. Language is learnt just by imitation of previously heard language, and the learner is passive when doing this. Chomsky had been the opponent of behaviourism. He tried to show the unproductiveness of this view and the inappropriateness of its terminology to the acquisition and use of human language.

D. Languages' Diversity

Bloomfield and his followers emphasised the structural diversity of languages following Boas. They tended to overstate the divergences between languages and have placed excessive accent on the principle that every language is a unique law. To arrive at a complete understanding of each language's structure, a linguist adopts a descriptive approach to the data.