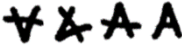


## Language Scholarship, History of

[3000 words. For the Baker *Encyclopedia of Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics*]

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Our earliest evidence for language scholarship is the creation of writing, more than 5000 years BP. Speech, which is ephemeral, is ontogenetically and phylogenetically prior to writing, invented to create records of inventories, business transactions, and retain the accuracy of religious texts. The earliest Egyptian, Chinese, and Meso-American scripts are pictographic or ideographic logographs – capturing a semantic representation of words; these quickly become more abstract and are extended to homophones (cf. 4 *SALE* using ‘4’ for ‘for’). This opens the way for phonetic representation and the development of syllabaries and alphabetic scripts. The process can be demonstrated by  in which the Semitic symbol for *ʔālep* “ox” (the leftmost symbol sketches an abstracted ox-head) comes to be used for the letter A (alpha, α, A) in Greek, which had no use for glottal stop, ʔ. A was borrowed into Latin and, later, English.

There are traditions of language scholarship in China, India, and the Middle-East (Allan 2013) but I shall focus only on the Western Classical Tradition that begins with ancient Greek philosophers and grammarians, whose ideas were adopted with little alteration for use with Latin, the language that dominated scholarship in the West until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and foreshadows Chomskyan, functional, and cognitive linguistics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Allan 2010). The Western Classical Tradition has spread from Europe to the other four inhabited continents. It is a story of successive stages of language study, each building upon, or reacting against, the preceding period. There is a theoretical track passing through the ancient Greek philosophers Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics to the scholastics of the later middle ages, and on to the vernacular grammarians of the renaissance, then the rationalists and universal grammarians of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Plato (428–348BCE), Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and the Stoics (c.300BCE–300CE) studied language as the medium through which people express knowledge of the world and the nature of things that they experience in it, as well as their conceptions of metaphysical matters. They were concerned about the relation between what is said and what actually holds true in the world. To precisely account for the

meaning of statements requires a prior account of their structure; and because statements are expressed through sentences, they looked into the construction of sentences to establish what constitutes a statement. Thus began a long association between philosophy and language analysis, which once again flowered in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to the development of semantics and pragmatics within the discipline of linguistics. Aristotle also left us a critical theory of poetry and of rhetoric: in his *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* he discusses language structures which are relevant to the success of poetic and rhetorical effect (Aristotle 1984). In addition to talking about the functions of various parts of speech, he described some phonological aspects of Greek, because in his day, and for centuries after, literature was rarely read silently, but declaimed by actors or poets from the stage, and by pupils in the schoolroom.

The Alexandrian grammarians, Dionysius Thrax (c.160–85BCE) and Apollonius Dyscolus (c.80–160CE), were pedagogical grammarians and not philosophers (Dionysius 1987, Apollonius Dyscolus 1981). Their principal motivation was a perceived need to teach the correct meaning, forms, and pronunciation of Homeric and Attic Greek so that classical literature could be properly read, performed, and understood. Perhaps their pedagogical approach to grammar was influenced by living in Egypt, where Greek was a second language. The work of Aelius Donatus (c.315–85CE), who lived in Rome shortly before it was sacked by the Goths in 408, is undoubtedly based upon the work attributed to Thrax. Donatus described the parts of speech to be found in classical Latin literature, although Vulgar (i.e. colloquial contemporary) Latin was in daily use about him (Donatus 1961a; b). Priscian (c.490–560CE) adopted the view that language reflects the way the world is, and explained a number of syntactic constructions on these grounds (Priscian 1961a; b; c). For example, he said that one cannot imagine an action without presupposing an actor: the actor is prior to the action. Consequently, because grammatical structure reflects patterns found in the world, the subject of a sentence always precedes the verb – i.e. all languages are either S(O)V – Subject, optional Object, Verb – or SV(O). Many such assumptions are justified by the grammars of Latin and other languages familiar to traditional grammarians, but turn out to be wrong when applied universally; for instance, Maasai is VS(O), Malagasy V(O)S, and Tohono O’odham arguably (O)VS. Priscian’s books on classical Latin syntax, *Institutiones Grammaticae*, were based directly upon the classical Greek grammar of Apollonius Dyscolus, whose grammarian son Aelius Herodianus travelled to Rome at the time of Marcus Aurelius (between 161 and 180 CE). *Institutiones Grammaticae* remained the principal pedagogical source for Latin grammars until modern times. Dionysius Thrax, Apollonius Dyscolus, Donatus, Priscian, and

their commentators were not philosophers but prescriptive pedagogical grammarians and precursors to applied linguists within the Western Classical Tradition.

Some 600 years after Priscian, from about 1150 to 1350, grammar became once more wedded to philosophy (Bursill-Hall 1971, Thomas of Erfurt 1972). But all along, from the early middle ages to the present day, running on a more or less parallel track to philosophical grammar, there continued to be a pedagogic strain manifest in prescriptive grammars for the classroom. For several hundred years, education in Europe was education in Latin. Access to Latin was through grammars of Latin. Hence *grammar* as a school subject meant the “grammar of Latin”. Except during the middle ages, when Church Latin, and in particular the 4<sup>th</sup> century Latin of the Vulgate Bible, displaced the pagan Latin of antiquity, the best authors were said to be the classical authors; it was their language, in particular classical Latin, but to a certain extent classical Greek, that came to be regarded as the ideal model. English and other so-called ‘modern languages’ were regarded as debased and corrupt compared with classical Latin and Greek; and teachers insisted that the best way to write a ‘modern language’ was to follow the rules of Latin grammar so far as possible. In other words, pedagogues believed that the grammar of classical Latin provides appropriate rules for the grammars of European vernaculars. Such a view was properly condemned by linguists, now calling themselves ‘linguists’, in the first sixty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, most of these critics rejected not only the excesses of traditional grammar, but its successes too.

For several centuries the works of Aristotle were lost to scholars in Europe. But in the 12<sup>th</sup> century they once more became available and there was renewed interest in Aristotelian philosophy. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in western Europe, scholars had Priscian’s rules for Latin syntax but, because of their focus on pedagogy, sought no explanation for why the rules operate as they do. Scholastic grammarians adopted the Aristotelian dictum that the world is the same for everyone, believing that language is like a *speculum* “mirror, image” that reflects the world; so their grammars are described as ‘speculative’. The speculative grammarians also followed Aristotle in believing that everyone has the same experience whatever their language; consequently, mental experiences are the same for everyone (*On Interpretation* 16<sup>a</sup>4). It led them to claim that what is signified is universal, but the means by which it is signified, the ‘*modi significandi*’, differ from language to language. Because of their interest in *modi significandi*, these medieval scholastics were also known as ‘modistae’. During the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the speculative grammarians began to establish the notion of a ‘general’ or ‘universal’ grammar common to all languages (God-given, of course – they were all churchmen).

In the late 17<sup>th</sup> and throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, language was the province of rationalist grammarians (Arnauld and Nicole 1996; Lancelot and Arnauld 1660), whom Noam Chomsky – undoubtedly the most prominent theoretician in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – claimed for his intellectual forebears (Chomsky 1966). Like the *modistae*, the rationalist grammarians were inspired by Aristotle; the essential difference between the two schools is that the *modistae* viewed human beings as all having similar experiences because of the nature of the world around them, whereas the rationalists believed that people have similar experiences because of the nature of the human mind. The rationalists were post-renaissance scholars living in an age of exploration which had given rise to grammars of several exotic languages. Scholars in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries knew that experience of the world differed greatly among different communities of human beings; but that all of us possess minds through which to perceive and categorize and assimilate information about the world. On the rationalist view, the nature of the mind is to think; and because (almost) everyone is capable of being rational, they adapted medieval notions that there must be an underlying ‘general’ or ‘universal grammar’ that exists (or comes to exist) in the human mind. It follows that languages differ from one another only because the common underlying structure of human thought is expressed through different forms.

The 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the development of comparative philology arising from the discovery and gradual identification of the Indo-European language family (Jones 1791, Rask 1811; 1818, Grimm 1822, Bopp 1833, Schleicher 1861-62, Saussure 1879). The early cross-language comparisons used terminology directly derived from ancient Greek statements on phonology. For the most part, however, 19<sup>th</sup> century comparative philology takes the Western Classical Tradition in a new direction by focusing on phonological systems.

There is a tradition relating language to thought handed on from Epicurus (341–270BCE) and Lucretius (c.95–55BCE) to John Locke (1632–1704), Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715–80), Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), Franz Boas (1858–1942), Edward Sapir (1884–1939), Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), and today’s cognitivists. The ‘linguistic relativity hypothesis’ can be traced to the Romantic movement that spread from Condillac and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) in France to Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) and Humboldt in Germany, to re-emerge with Boas in America and be instilled into Sapir and Whorf. Also known as the ‘Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’ or, simply, ‘Whorfian hypothesis’, it reverses the traditional view that the structure of the world informs the structure of language and instead postulates that the structure of language informs the structure of the world as conceived by speakers of a

particular language (Humboldt 1836-39, Boas 1911, Sapir 1949, Whorf 1956). For Sapir, Whorf, and gestalt psychologists, humans are pattern-processing beings. This is a trait taken up by the connectionists in the 1980s and then by cognitive linguistics. Cognitive linguistics holds that language is constrained and informed by the relations that (a) human beings perceive in nature – particularly in relation to themselves; (b) experience in the world they inhabit; and/or (c) conceive of in abstract and metaphysical domains (Fauconnier 1985, Lakoff 1987; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Langacker 1987; 1991, Jackendoff 1992, Wierzbicka 1992, Talmy 2000). This obviously links back to the tradition of linguistic relativity and the longer tradition hypothesizing the relations of language to thought.

20<sup>th</sup> century developments in phonetics and phonology (terms not properly distinguished from one another until about 1920) and the whole paradigm of Saussurean structuralist (Saussure 1916) and Bloomfieldian mechanistic linguistics (Bloomfield 1926; 1933) were a new direction in, and sometimes in revolt against, the Western Classical Tradition. Nonetheless, linguistics in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was a crucial foundation for the post-structuralist linguistics that is the consequence of the so-called Chomsky revolution. Chomsky's predecessors had rejected traditional grammar along with linguistic universals, rationalist theory, and semantics. All of these are back in vogue. If modern linguistics began with a hiccup in the Western Classical Tradition, it is now back within the comfortable framework of two and a half millennia of linguistic description.

We must assume that such people as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Thrax, Donatus, Priscian, and their successors had beliefs about the composition and structure of language, and that their studies of language were motivated and purposeful. Throughout history there has been a philosophical school of grammar which brought forth modern theoretical linguistics, and concomitantly a pedagogical school which has given rise to applied linguistics. Modern linguistics developed from the investigations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century neogrammarians into the origins and interrelations of Indo-European languages, which eventually merged with a mushrooming interest in the non-Indo-European languages of Native Americans and the peoples of former European colonies in Africa and Asia. This interest was partly motivated by a fascination with exotic cultures and languages, and partly by ideas for literacy and education in indigenous languages. The development of linguistics was spurred on by technological advances in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that have facilitated detailed study of the spoken medium and the process of language interaction. By the 1960s, Chomsky had brought linguistics back to the tradition with his embrace of rationalist grammar. There was re-ascendancy of hypothetico-deductive theory over the inductivist theories of the early 20<sup>th</sup>

century, such that both approaches are necessary for the proper modelling of language in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

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