Ancient & Mediæval

Grammatical Theory

in Europe

by R. H. ROBINS, M.A.

ANCIENT & MEDIAEVAL GRAMMATICAL THEORY IN EUROPE

WITH PARTICULAR REFERENC
MODERN LINGUISTIC DOCTRINE

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PREFACE

THIS short book has been developed from two lectures, open to the University of London, on the early history and growth of grammar and grammatical theory, which I gave in the spring of 1950 at the invitation of Professor Geoffrey Tillotson and the Department of English at Birkbeck College. In it I have tried to trace in broad outline the history of grammar in Europe from its beginnings in ancient Greece through to the close of the Middle Ages. In such a study the great work of the Indian scholar, Pāṇini, and his commentators, on the grammar of Sanskrit, can receive no mention, though of more merit than any single work on grammar in ancient or mediaeval Europe; besides being composed outside Europe, this work, unfortunately, became known to European scholars only after the close of the Middle Ages, and had, therefore, no influence on the grammatical thought of the periods covered by this book.

Throughout I have endeavoured to concentrate on those points that are relevant to linguistic and grammatical theory at the present time. A particular attempt has been made to focus attention on the treatment in antiquity and the Middle Ages of questions that are of concern to linguists to-day. I have been more interested in showing the relevance of much ancient and mediaeval speculation to current linguistic research, and in relating the study of grammar to its

wider context in the intellectual climate of the times in which it was undertaken, than in giving a full discussion of specific points of detail or historical controversy. For the Greek and Roman period the more important historical problems in linguistic theory are dealt with in the standard work of Steinthal, *Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft bei den Griechen und Römern*, and in the older book of Lersch, *Die Sprachphilosophie der Alten*. In the mediaeval period I have largely confined myself to work on Latin grammar, as this was the language predominantly studied, and it was on the basis of Latin that mediaeval grammatical theory was developed and elaborated.

In the preparation of this book I have been greatly helped at all stages by the encouragement and advice of Professor J. R. Firth; Dr. W. S. Allen generously placed at my disposal the material of his Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, *Linguistic Problems and their Treatment in Antiquity*. I must also express my thanks to the School of Oriental and African Studies for making a grant towards the cost of publication, and to Mr. F. R. Palmer for undertaking to read the proofs during my absence on a visit to the United States.

R. H. R.

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GRAMMATICAL THEORY
AMONG THE GREEKS

THIS study is devoted to a brief account and considera-
tion of the origin and development of grammatical
theory and grammatical studies in Western Europe.
The history of this subject can be traced from its
beginnings and early progress in ancient Greece, by a
more or less continuous line, through Rome and the
mediaeval world to the eve of what we may call, in
this as in wider contexts, modern times.

In dealing with the inception and history of any
doctrine it is not practicable or desirable to lay down in
advance definitions of key terms or of the main subject,
in this case grammar itself. Such definitions have their
place in the exposition of a theory or in criticizing the
theories of others, but can justifiably be made only
after the development of quite a body of work on the
subject has made possible its establishment as a science
or organized system of thought and permitted a scrutiny
of its methods and foundations. Any definition of the
word 'grammar' must, implicitly or explicitly, pre-
suppose a particular grammatical theory or approach
to grammatical studies; and in dealing with the history
of the subject, what matters is not how we define the
term, but how thinkers during the course of the develop-
ment of grammatical studies envisaged, and con-
sequently set about, the matter of their inquiries. It
is, of course, open to us to criticize the work of a gram-

marian, both in the details of his exposition, and in his whole method of treating his subject, which latter involves his implied or expressed definition of it. But if we were to start with a fixed definition at the outset, it would lead to misunderstanding and unfair judgments on the work of early scholars at a time when the subject was still far from any precision of terminology or method.

In considering and estimating the work of early thinkers in the field of grammar, one is bound to be passing judgments favourable or unfavourable, and to be doing so from the standpoint of the subject as understood and practised by scholars at the present time. For this reason an outline of the main principles of current grammatical theory among linguists to-day in Great Britain and elsewhere has been given in the concluding chapter, in which certain topics and questions, raised or suggested earlier in discussing the history of the subject, receive further treatment in the light of the modern theory underlying the criticism of earlier grammarians. But in all cases we are likely to be fairer in appraising and understanding the work of Greek and Latin grammarians if we leave the term 'grammar' not more precisely defined at this stage than it is in general, non-technical usage.

There is, however, one preliminary remark that it might be well to make. By all definitions and treatments grammar involves speaking or writing about the working of language or languages; grammar is 'language about language'.[1] The language of grammar is a 'second-order' language, subsequent both in

[1] cf. J. R. Firth, *The Semantics of Linguistic Science, Lingua*, Vol. 1, 4, esp. p. 394.

temporal and logical succession to the use of language itself. Men, even learned men, spoke and wrote before they formulated grammatical rules for their languages, just as John Locke rightly tells us that men thought rationally before Aristotle laid down the so-called 'Laws of thought'; 'God has not been so sparing to men, to make them barely two-legged creatures, and left it to Aristotle to make them rational'.[1] The same might be said of grammatical studies and with reference to any of the great grammarians. When this elementary fact has been realized we hear less of the deplorable assertions, based on little but *a priori* prejudice and ignorance, that the languages of unlettered and uncivilized peoples can 'have no grammar', simply because no one has so far been willing, or competent, to discover and set down the structure of their language and the manner of their employment of it.

In studying the history of grammar in the western world, as in so many other speculative subjects, one must start with the work of ancient Greece. Exactly what causes, geographical, political or racial, led to the miraculous flowering of the Greek genius for inquiry in so many fields is an absorbing question, but it cannot be pursued here. What must be said is that quite early in their history the attention of those Greeks who were later called philosophers was turned to considering the facts of their own language.

Before dealing with the work of the early Greek thinkers who concerned themselves with grammatical questions—whether we call them grammarians or philosophers matters little at this stage; grammar was

[1] *Essay on Human Understanding*, Book IV, 17, 4.

not yet thought of or treated as a separate intellectual discipline—two facts should be borne in mind:

(1) In the pioneering stage of any subject one cannot expect systematic developments or consistent tidiness of method; systematization comes later, at the hands of those who revise and set out, sometimes with scant acknowledgment, the daring original work of their predecessors. Therefore criticism of shortcomings from a modern point of view, and of mistakes in method, as, for example, the failure to distinguish between the descriptive and the normative approaches to grammar (a common feature of ancient grammatical work) can rightly be made against early grammarians, but must not be taken as censure or disparagement of them in the way that one would take it in the case of a modern writer on grammar who failed to make such a fundamental distinction (and there are still those who do), or who showed similar lack of organization or method in his grammatical and linguistic work. In passing' comments on ancient scholars we must remember our privileged position in having an already developed and formulated subject of study, which we owe not least to the profit derived from considering the mistakes of our academic fore-runners, in Greece and elsewhere.

(2) Linguistics has now achieved the status of an autonomous academic subject, and grammar is a recognized subdivision of linguistics; but in the early days of the subject there was no such organization of studies, and we must be prepared to find grammatical and general linguistic speculations produced along with, and buttressed by, theories that would now be considered the province not of grammar at all, but of

psychology, physics, logic or even metaphysics, theories in fact on any subject that interested the pioneers of Greek speculative thought. In particular, the fact that the beginning of grammatical studies in Greece (and Europe) lay in the work of philosophers left a permanent effect on ancient, mediaeval and much modern grammar, an effect which is constantly noticed in studying the history of the subject.

The mention of Greek philosophers makes one at once think of Socrates, and he paid attention, among his subjects of inquiry, to what we should now speak of as grammatical problems.   But before Socrates lectured and argued, a great deal of work, on which he built, had already been done, and usually goes under the omnibus title of 'Pre-Socratic Philosophy'.[1] Of the work and thinkers of this period, which belongs roughly to the sixth and early and middle fifth centuries B.C., we know all too little; most of their writings have been lost, and what we have surviving consists largely of quotations and references in later writers.   But the beginnings of our subject lie before Socrates, and an attempt must be made to trace their origin and growth.

We may confidently begin the historical study of grammar in western Europe with Greek thinkers, not necessarily because they were the earliest people to reflect on the structure and nature of speech, but because, looking back from present-day grammatical and other linguistic theories, we can follow a nearly continuous stream of thought back to its source in the work of the Pre-Socratics.

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[1] For the Pre-Socratic philosophers generally see Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, London, 1946, Book I, part 1.

It is interesting and important to notice that grammatical research started as part of the natural curiosity of the early Greek thinkers in everything that went on around them. One commonly hears it said [1] that grammatical interest arises as a result of contact with people speaking a language other than one's own, and for purely practical purposes. The production of teaching manuals and text-book grammars is largely stimulated in this way, and the progressive inclusion of the Greek-speaking world into the Roman Empire may be expected to have brought into being several grammars of Latin in Greek. But to a large extent such works were the codification of earlier spontaneous grammatical research. It is also true that grammatical studies develop in the wake of literary periods. The discrepancies between the language of Homer [2] and the language of the Greek world in the third and second centuries B.C. gave rise to a great body of Homeric criticism, including grammatical investigations, at Alexandria, a city fulfilling some of the functions of a university in the ancient world. But in this case also the foundations of grammar had been, however roughly or inadequately, laid down before, and we must credit the birth of the subject to the spontaneous interest and brilliance of the Greek mind.

The study of grammar started among the Pre-Socratics as part of the wider study of the nature of speech, and this in turn was conditioned by the sort of questions and speculations that were current in

[1] e.g. A. C. Burnell, *On the Aindra School of Sanskrit Grammarians*, Mangalore, 1875, p. 38, where this widespread opinion is stated as a general fact.
[2] The name 'Homer' will be used throughout for the author or authors of the Homeric poems.

philosophical circles at this time. One of the most prominent questions raised by these thinkers was to what extent human institutions of all kinds were 'natural' and to what extent 'conventional'.[1] The Greek words most generally used in this controversy were φύσις and νόμος or θέσις ('nature' and 'convention' respectively). The question of the natural or conventional origin and status of language was discussed from opposing points of view by various philosophers of this early period; in Plato's dialogue, *The Cratylus*, we have a summary of the arguments on either side. Heraclitus and Cratylus [2] maintained the naturalist standpoint and argued for the reflection of a thing's qualities or attributes, its nature, in the phonetic structure of the word by which it was denoted. The opposite view was taken up by Democritus and Hermogenes,[3] that the numerous discrepancies between the structure and development of words and the patterns exhibited by the qualities of things make such an attribution of language to 'nature' untenable; they maintained the conventional origin of words and speech.

The nature versus convention question was treated as a general philosophical topic and by no means confined to the study of language. But throughout antiquity and well into the Middle Ages, and even

[1] On this see further H. Steinthal, *Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft*, Berlin, 1863, pp. 42–109, W. S. Allen, *Ancient Ideas on the Origin and Development of Language*, *Trans. Philological Soc. of Great Britain*, 1948.

[2] For Heraclitus cf. Ammonius quoted in L. Lersch, *Sprachphilosophie der Alten*, Bonn, 1838–41, part I, pp. 11–12; for Cratylus cf. Plato, Cratylus 390 D–E.

[3] For Democritus cf. Proclus quoted in Lersch, op. cit., part I, p. 13; for Hermogenes cf. Plato, Cratylus 384 D.

beyond, arguments for and against the 'natural' origin of speech were ventilated and developed. In the Christian era an additional twist was given to the discussion by the introduction of the divine origin of language as a third possibility. Such an idea was hinted at by Plato and some other Greek thinkers, but always kept in the background.[1]

In itself the 'nature/convention' (φύσις/νόμος) discussion appears very jejune at the present time, based as it is on untenable premises and faulty method. The origin of speech is a subject beyond the reach of scientific investigation; it is almost certainly as old as Homo Sapiens himself.[2] Contrary to common opinion there are no examples extant of what might be called 'primitive language'; the languages of least-developed savages have to-day centuries of linguistic history behind them. Talk about 'the first name-giver' [3] as occurs frequently in this controversy in antiquity must be regarded as no less a mythological account of the facts than the assignment of the origin of mankind to the Garden of Eden; and the 'social contract' theory of words as deliberately chosen symbols for things and actions, which finds a prominent place later in Aristotle, though more sensible than the naïve naturalist theory, is in fact as impossible historically as is the 'social contract' explanation of the origin of society. Language cannot be treated as a kind of code produced self-consciously by agreement between men at a

[1] cf. Plato, Cratylus 397 C, 425 D.
[2] The banning of this subject as a topic for papers on the part of the Société Linguistique de Paris is well known; for a recent summary and criticism of various views put forward see G. Révész, *Ursprung und Vorgeschichte der Sprache*, Berne, 1946.
[3] cf. Lersch, op. cit., part 1, pp. 25–9.

given time.   Such a procedure would presuppose the prior existence of language in terms of which to frame the code.

The historical interest of the controversy is due to its place in the early development of linguistic theory and speculation, and to its having been a stimulus for grammatical studies.   In combating the theory that words reflected in their forms the nature of things, conventionalists were led to examine more closely the structure of words and sentences and to take notice of the formal classes and patterns of behaviour that words exhibited when used in various combinations.   It is in such investigations that the categories of verb, noun, case, gender, number and tense and the rest have their origin.   The development of these categories ('grammatical categories') will be considered later.

It is, perhaps, possible to breathe some life into the ancient 'nature/convention' arguments if we leave out the historical perspective and considerations of the origin of speech, and, concentrating on the structures, phonetic and grammatical, exhibited by languages as they are to-day or at any known period of history, inquire how far languages manifest any universal characteristics and whether any facts of language can be causally correlated with facts in the world outside language.   Plainly enough onomatopoeic words in some sense mirror what they stand for, and more refined observations have been made of the way in which in most languages some words seem to contain sounds peculiarly appropriate to their meanings, where onomatopoeic symbolism is out of the question.[1]

[1] cf. O. Jespersen, *Language*, London, 1923, chap. 20 ('Sound Symbolism').   It has been observed that the two nonsense-words

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But such examples cover only a minute part of language, and those whom it might be legitimate to class as the academic descendants of the 'naturalist' (φύσει) school still argue for the dependence of linguistic changes on cultural changes and for the reflection in grammatical distinctions of real distinctions, outside language and grammar, either in the world at large or in the processes of the human mind.[1] On the other side those who, with greater plausibility, urge that linguistic categories and classifications must be treated wholly in terms of criteria and distinctions within actual languages themselves, and who, like the French linguist de Saussure, deny any intrinsic connection, except in the onomatopoeic and 'sound-symbolism' cases mentioned above, between word and thing or between linguistic and extra-linguistic structures,[2] may be considered as sharing many of the views and using many of the arguments of the 'conventionalists'

'oomboolu' and 'kikeriki' seem to suggest, to almost all hearers, something round and bulging and something sharp-pointed respectively (cf. W. Köhler, *Psychologische Probleme*, Berlin, 1933, p. 153, and *Gestalt Psychology*, London, 1930, pp. 186 f.).

[1] cf. V. Brøndal, *Les Parties du Discours*, Copenhagen, 1948; L. Hjelmslev, *Principes de Grammaire Générale*, Copenhagen, 1928; H. Hoijer, *Linguistic and Cultural Change, Language*, Vol. 24, 4. For a 'naturalist' account of speech generally cf. the gestural theory of Sir Richard Paget (*Babel, or the Past, Present and Future of Human Speech*, London, 1930).

[2] F. de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, Paris, 1922, p. 100 (L'arbitraire du signe). It should be noted that the details of the ancient νόμος/φύσις arguments turned largely on the 'natural' appropriateness, or mere conventional relation, of the phonetic structure of the word to its meaning. Modern discussions on the relation between facts of language and facts outside language are, as is to be expected, carried on in a far wider field and with greater linguistic understanding; but the possible parallelism is perhaps worth noticing. Some of the issues raised will be mentioned again in the concluding chapter.

(νόμῳ), although any suggestion of an historical derivation of language from an actual convention is absurd.

The detailed examination of modern grammatical theories in the light of resemblances to these two opposed principles does not belong here, but it seems worthwhile to point out that the νόμος/φύσις discussion raised by the Greek pioneers of linguistics, besides setting the scene for the development of grammatical studies in the ancient world, suggested lines of thought that are still of interest to-day.

This early Greek linguistic speculation in linguistic problems took no account of languages other than Greek, and indeed the whole framework of linguistic science and grammatical description in antiquity was based on Greek and remodelled just to the extent necessary to fit the kindred and similarly structured language of the Romans.

By the middle of the fifth century B.C. in Greece, when philosophical and grammatical studies (they were not yet separated from one another), emerge for us into the full daylight of abundant evidence, another influence was contributing to the study of language structure, that of the Rhetoricians.[1] These teachers of public speaking and argumentation, who often ranged far outside their subject as narrowly conceived to-day, brought a pragmatical interest into the investigation of the nature and working of language, that of persuasive oratorical ability and plausible, if not always convincing, conduct in forensic debate.

[1] On the Rhetoricians see especially J. E. Sandys, *History of Classical Scholarship*, Cambridge, 1903, Vol. I, chap. 6, and the books there cited.

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