

PAPER 6 (DESCRIPTIVE LINGUISTICS)

STRUCTURAL GRAMMAR

Broadly speaking any grammar in which there is an attempt to describe the structure of grammatical sentences is structural grammar. But the term has come to refer more narrowly to the type of grammar brought to its maximum development in the early 1950's by such men like C. C. Fries and Zellig Harris. Structural grammar in this sense is characterized by the procedure known as substitution, by which word class membership is established and by which smaller structures are expanded to larger ones. The procedures and results of this structural grammar have been absorbed into Transformational Grammar where they appear in base components especially the branching rules.

From many years, from at least the early 1930's until the late 1950, the most influential school of linguistics was one which is usually described as structural linguistics school associated mainly with American linguists, Bloomfield, C. C. Fries and Z. Harris.

"Language" the main thesis of Bloomfield which was published in the early thirties upheld that language had a structure. But this statement in itself does not mean much. In one sense all linguists are structuralists because they all look for regularity and patterns. But Bloomfield and post-Bloomfieldian linguists envisaged language structure in a very limited way. In particular it was associated with the phoneme as the unit of phonology (sound system) and morpheme as the unit of grammar. As 'cat' consists of /k/ / / and /t/. According to these linguists, both 'phoneme' and 'morpheme' are units of form and not of meaning although there was a considerable controversy whether morpheme should be regarded as meaningful or not. The essential sense in which the approach is structural is that language is to be actually composed of morphemes in sequence, that is, strings of morphemes, and similarly, though at different level, strings of phoneme.

In 1951, Zellig Harris's "Method in Structural Linguistics" and C. C. Fries's "The Structure of English" were published. Both the books revolutionized the structural approach in grammar already launched by Bloomfield and his contemporaries.

Since Fries regarded conventional grammar as belonging to a pre-scientific era, he was anxious to replace it by a grammar worked out by scientific means. It was his intuition to start right from the beginning almost, as if conventional grammar did not exist, and to try to build up a grammar by extracting the neutral structure of language.

He tried to put out of his mind the notions he had borrowed from conventional grammar, and to this end he decided not to use the conventional names of parts of speech. The word class that he discovered were to be labeled by numbers and letters. He tried to approach this task without pre-conceptions involving a description of the language solely from observing it. HE was committed to the view that spoken language was primary and so he decided to collect samples of it as it was heard in the community around him. His whole aim was to describe the language as it was not to prescribe it as it ought to be. He recorded about fifty hours of telephone conversation conducted by people who did not know that they were being recorded.

Fries planned to allot words of the same parts of speech if they could fill the same set of positions in English sentences. This was a completely different basis for classification from the conversational one, which comprised meaning and function.

In order to find out which words could occur in which positions, he took test sentences and tried to substitute other words in each of the positions. For example, he took the sentence "the concert was good" and found out which words could be substituted for 'concert' without changing the structure of the sentence. He submitted each substitution to the judgment of the native speakers of English with a special request that they tell him whether it was actually the same as or different from the original sentence. The words which could be substituted words in different positions and finally formed four "word classes" which were given the number as class I, class II, class III, and class IV. One may say that these classes were similar to the traditional categories Noun, Verb, Adjective and Adverb. But Fries warned his readers against equality with these classes with the conventional ones. They are somewhat different in context and very different in conception. But we may make a rough equation here for the sake of convenience. In addition, Fries found fifteen groups of other classes which he called "function words". These were words which operated mainly to convey signals of structure. There was an important difference between the concept of "form classes" and "function classes". Each of the four form classes contains thousands of items to which other new items can be added, and hence they are called 'open classes'. But the function classes have a limited number of words like the conventional conjunctions, prepositions and interjections. To them new items can hardly be added. Fries claimed that in these fifteen groups, there are only 154 words.

WORD CLASS BY SUBSTITUTION

The process of substitution, employed by Fries has been used by all modern investigators, and is still of considerable importance in any grammatical description. Many people like Fries have tried to show that a sentence consists of a sequence of words, each of which represents a whole class, the idea may be made clearer with a few illustrations. Let us consider a sentence such as "Those rather beautiful designs won". Each of the words in this sequence could be exchanged for a number of other words such as,

"These rather beautiful designs won.
The fairly old films faded.
These extremely popular books deteriorated.
My very fancy costume succeeded.
His quiet impressive portraits failed."

Here the group of words that can replace each other in one position will also be interchangeable in other positions in English sentences, and so a word class of this kind is a group of words that can fill the same set of oppositions as each other. Though a grammar of this type has become very popular, many grammarians following this structural type of grammar have abandoned Fries's scrupulous avoidance of the conventional names of parts of speech, and have taken the view that it is better to use names that are familiar, even though concepts are somewhat different. So the terms like Noun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb are frequently used.

This grammar also helped the development of the system Immediate Constituents or I. C. analysis.

LIMITATIONS OF STRUCTURAL GRAMMAR

1. Structuralism ignores explanatory adequacy, meaning, linguistic universals, native speaker's intuition and his competence of generating infinite number of sentences from a finite set of items.
2. It is not a whole but a part of a whole - an inventory of units such as phonemes, morphemes, words, lexical categories, phrases.