Mustansiriyah University

College of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

3rd Year Linguistics

Textbook: Linguistics (Aichison, 2010)

Lecture Title: Historical Development of Language Study and Linguistics

- The aim of this lecture is to traces the main directions linguistics has taken in the past two centuries.
- There are four main eras the lecture is going to tackle; these are:
  1. 19th century: Historical Linguistics
  2. Early to Mid 20th century: Descriptive/Structural linguistics
  3. Mid to late 20th century: Generative linguistics and Universal Grammar
  4. 21st century: Future Trends in Linguistics

1. 19th century: Historical Linguistics

- It is important to keep in mind that although linguistics is a relatively new discipline, but the study of language has been of interest to scholars from different background for more than two millennia.
- Nineteenth-century linguists were particularly interested in studying how different languages are related to each other. Their aim was to write comparative grammars for the various members of Indo-European language family in order to reconstruct the hypothetical ancestor of Indo-European languages.
- This interest started when Sir William Jones delivered a lecture in 1786 about the striking structural similarities between Sanskrit and many European languages.
- This emphasis on language change eventually led to major theoretical advances in diachronic linguistics. For instance, a group of scholars centered around Leipzig, and nicknamed the 'Young Grammarians', claimed that language change is 'regular'. They argued that if, in any word of a given dialect, one sound changes into another the change will also affect all other occurrences of the same sound in similar phonetic surroundings.

2. Early to Mid 20th century: Descriptive/Structural linguistics

- Around the turn of the Twentieth century the emphasis shifted from language change to language description, when the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out that all items in a language are interlinked. He was the first one to propose that language should be conceptualized as a system.
- De Saussure suggested that language is like a game of chess- a system in which each item is defined by its relationship to all the others. His insistence that language is a carefully built structure of interwoven elements initiated the era of structural linguistics.
- In the USA, linguistics began as a branch of anthropology. Anthropologists were interested in recording the culture of the fast-dying American-Indian tribes, and the languages of these tribes were one aspect of this culture.
- The prominent figure at that time was the American linguist Leonard Bloomfield who developed methods to describe the structures of unwritten languages, pioneering an approach that is called descriptive linguistics.

- Bloomfield considered that linguistics should deal objectively and systematically with observable data. So he was more interested in the way linguistic items were arranged together to form bigger units rather than in meaning.
- Bloomfield and his followers paid great deal of attention to refine analytical techniques that would enable them to uncover accurately the linguistic units of undocumented languages based on a corpus of utterances collected from native speakers. These techniques are called **discovery procedures**.
- Over the years, these procedures had become so complicated that linguistics were of little interest and use to scholars from other fields. The time was ripe for a revolution.

3. Mid to late 20th century: Generative linguistics and Universal Grammar

- The revolution was sparked by the American linguist Noam Chomsky who initiated the era of generative linguistics.
- Chomsky agrees with Bloomfield idea that linguistic theory needs to be able to lay down a grammar (set of rules) that is able to distinguish possible from impossible sentences in a language. Yet unlike Bloomfield, Chomsky believed that such a theory should be more than a description of old sentences but also sentences that have not been produced yet.
- Chomsky pointed out that anyone who knows a language must have internalized a set of rules which specify the sequences permitted in their language. Thus, Chomsky shifted attention away from detailed descriptions of actual utterances, and started asking questions about how the system of that language generates these utterances.
- In Chomsky's opinion, a linguist's task was to discover these rules, which constitute the grammar of the language in question. Chomsky therefore used the word 'grammar' interchangeably to mean, on the one hand, a person' s internalized rules, and on the other hand, a linguist's description of these rules, which he labeled a generative grammar.
- Such a grammar should be perfectly explicit, in that nothing is left to the imagination. The rules must be precisely formulated in such a way that anyone would be able to separate the well-formed sentences from the ill-formed ones.
- Chomsky pointed out that as all humans are rather similar; their internalized language mechanisms are likely to have common properties. Therefore, he argued that linguists should concentrate on finding language universals.
- Chomsky's later work, which is called Minimalist Program, became more and more abstract, as he tried to specify broad general principles underlying all languages.

4. 21st century: Future Trends in Linguistics

- Chomsky's generative grammar and his interest in studying language universals have directed attention towards the language potential of human beings; huge numbers of psychologists, neurologists, anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers have begun to take a greater interest in language and linguistics.
- Linguists have started to look at language as a collection of different cognitive and linguistic abilities.
- Linguists have started a quest for a less rigid framework to describe and analyze language. Optimality Theory is an example of such a framework. **Optimality Theory** suggests that the grammatical forms of a language arise from the optimal satisfaction of conflicting constraints.
- Linguistic evidence can now be provided by methods developed in **corpus linguistics**, which refers to the study and use of computerized databases for linguistic research.