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## **Classical Thoughts on Language: A Review of the Greek and Roman Linguistics**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the early development of linguistic science in Europe, western philosophers paid much attention to the observation of differences between an individual's speech and the neighboring people, looking at dialectical or language differences. According to Robins (1997), the initiation of European linguistics thoughts can be tracked from the Greeks. In his famous book entitled 'A Short History of Linguistics', Robins (1997) began his discussion by presuming that humans are biologically endowed with language faculty which enable them to acquire their first language. They then learn foreign languages and stimulate linguistic self-consciousness by contacts with the community and foreign speakers. Since then, the study of how language system develops is overlooked, since it is considered as humans' natural linguistics ability. Robins used the term 'linguistics science' to approach the study of how language is diverse and changes with an influence of close interaction between language use and the speech community. He asserted that cultures influence the power of language. Folk linguistics is thus fostered and transmitted into linguistics science through the generation of communities along with cultural variations. Although Robins indicated that the study of linguistics is grounded

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by the significant exploration of the European frameworks, he insisted that the history of linguistics in Europe does not entail any European superiority in the linguistics field in comparison to the lack of knowledge we may have on the established Sanskrit work of the Indians. Hence, this paper aims to review the two main classical thoughts established in the development of language.

**Keywords:** Classical thoughts of language, linguistic science, history of language

### THE GREEK LINGUISTICS

The study of linguistics is marked by the Greek philosophers looking at their incessant contribution to refining the structure of Greek language, which Robins (1997) labeled as 'linguistic science', and how their efforts and contributions in the study of language served as the foundation of current western linguistics thoughts. Rome then overtook Greek linguistics both theoretically and practically and progressed its etymology through the Late Latin grammarians to the Middle Ages.

Robins explained further the efforts made by the Greeks in the development of alphabetic devices to represent the language in the form of writing. The basis of linguistic science embarked on the establishment of the alphabetic system of writing in the Greek language, which diffused and initiated the later means of writing in merged to the Roman alphabet. The Phoenician system was then implemented by the Greeks in that the distinctive segments (individual units of sounds) for both consonants and vowels were introduced. This was marked as the most significant achievement in the history of linguistics. With the advancement of writing from the proceeding generations to the era of Plato and Aristotle, particularly in the skills of reading and writing, grammar (*grammatiké*) was the extension in the study of linguistic science.

Among the prominent philosophers during this period, Plato marked a significant contribution in the field of linguistic science by distinguishing between verbs (*rhema*) and nouns (*onoma*). He supported the conventionalist view on linguistics studies of the relation between constituents (verbs and nouns) and logs (sentence). He presumed that the constituents and their

meaning are a product of convention. Aristotle then extended Plato's thoughts on nouns and verbs with an addition of the linking words – conjunctions. He listed all the words, which are neither nouns nor verbs as *syndesmoi* (conjunctions) and outlined the correspondence between the actions and the time (tenses). Aristotle claimed that word meaning is determined by the convention and that words are men-made symbols.

Later, in the Hellenistic era, there were two famous schools of linguistic thoughts, which marked the establishment of linguistic science focusing on philosophical inquiries (logic), situated in Pergamum and Alexandria. The Pergamum linguistic science was dominated under the Stoics influence, in which the focus of observation laid on naturalistic views of language characterization between irregularities and inconsistencies, whereby irregularities in language were acknowledged and accepted. The Stoics focused the study of language based on the natural connection of forms and meaning (etymology) and the interaction between meaning and cosmos (Robins, 1997). The Stoics had also imparted studies on grammar, adding into it, the concept of 'article' and inflection (the declensions and conjugations). They also examined the area of voices (active and passive) and the discrepancy between transitive and intransitive verbs.

Unlike the Stoics, Alexandrians focused their linguistic science exploration on literary styles, looking at the area of textual preservation, expurgation, and emendation, with a special interest in texts from Homer. The Alexandrians were concerned about grammatical correctness and that their observation relied very much on Aristotle's thoughts in divergence between the spoken (modern) Greek and the language of the (classical) writers. Focusing their interest on the study of linguistics of the written language, they intended to codify and systemize the grammatical form of Greek linguistics. Their major contributions can be found in the study of *Dionysius Thrax* (*Techné Grammatiké*), the technical language employed by poets and writers, consisting of several main areas of knowledge such as literary composition, etymology, and analogies, to name a few. They also added additional elements to the grammar proposed by the Stoics: adverb, participle, pronoun, and preposition that were studied using the case, the gender, the voice, the mood as well as the number, of which these later became the standard way of

examining and analyzing words. It is considered the first comprehensive grammar in the West.

The Hellenistic age according to Robins (1997), is also the period where bilingualism emerged through the close contact and divergence of Greek speakers and speakers of other languages. The emergence of bilingualism not only contributed to the controversial issues of the variance in Greek linguistics, particularly, the grammar and the written accent marks of punctuations but also in its pronunciation. Robins pointed out that this should not be perceived as a result of Greek linguistics thoughts, but rather as a movement that was successfully achieved through experiments, new materials, and adaptation of experiences.

### **THE ROMAN LINGUISTICS**

Roman linguistics, according to Robins (1997) continued in the interest of Greek linguistics, which at that period was considered as the lingua franca. As Robins (1997) inscribed that “*Roman linguistics was largely the application of Greek thought, Greek controversies, and Greek categories to the Latin language.*” (pp. 60) The Romans were displayed to be more of the transmitters, instead of originators of linguistics. And, like other historical traditions, Roman linguistics was also prompted to change. Varro (116-27BC) was among the most prominent Roman linguists who produced many Latin grammars. While focusing mainly on the area of morphology, parts of speech, and forms of nouns and verbs, the syntax was disregarded.

Through the Middle ages and late 17th century, grammar was the product of the integration of the grammatical description of Latin. This integration in the Latin grammatical description was formulated by Donatus (4th century A.D.) and Priscian (500 A.D.) into the scholastic philosophy system, a combination of Aristotelian philosophy scholasticism into Catholic theology. Latin maintained its status as a medium for learning due to its regular usage as patristical practice for the western (Roman) church. During this period, philosophers turned their interest to study vernacular languages and the tradition of writing these languages emerged (Campbell, 2002). Philosophers at this period, including Roger Bacon, laid their ground studies of linguistics

on the universal nature of grammar. Their main concern is on the spelling reformation and revisiting inadequacies of the Latin-based writing system.

### **THE RENAISSANCE AND AFTER**

Subsequently, linguistic Science in the era of the Renaissance concerned more than language comparison and classification (Campbell, 2002). The grammatical descriptions of European language were written, as well as the grammars for languages of the colonies. Sibawahi, as an instance, and the Arabic scholars who wrote classical Arabic grammar also transcribed a phonetic description of the Arabic writing system. Furthermore, grammars for American-Indian languages were also published, namely Tarascan (1558), Nahuatl (1571), and Guarani (1640). Another scholar, Dante, who wrote on '*De Vulgari eloquentia*', conjoined certain aspects of several Italian dialects into a new, highly regularised philosophical language (Campbell, 2002).

One of the well-known Renaissance grammarians, Pierre Ramée who was held as the pioneer of modern structuralism rejected Aristotelian's (formalism) thought on language (Robins, 1997), and proposed a claim that all languages should be appreciated in their own right. Another great Renaissance scholar, Rasmus Rask, the Danish linguist proposed a coherent ideological system in the relatedness of languages. Relying on thoughts developed by the Hungarian linguists, János Sajnovic and Sámuel Gyarmathi (1751-1830), his main concern was to examine the grammatical evidence as the principles underlying the grammar descriptions and paid his attention to the study of regular sound correspondences between related words (cognates).

### **CONCLUSION**

Although it is evident that there had been the inscription of independent thoughts found in Roman's work of language mainly by Varro, in general, the Greeks were recognised to be the ones who established the path in the study of linguistic science, and that the Romans were revealed to follow them (Hornblower & Spawforth, 2012)

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