

Chapter 1

Grammatical Competence



Transformational Grammar

Engl 424

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What is Linguistics?

Linguistics is the study of language.

➤ **What aspects of language should be the focus of our study?**

Chomsky answers this question saying that there are 3 inter-related theories which any detailed study of any language should concern about:

- **Theory of Language Structure** → **What are the defining structural properties of natural languages.**
- **Theory of Language Acquisition** → **How children acquire their native language(s).**
- **Theory of Language Use** → **How linguistic and nonlinguistic knowledge interact in speech comprehension and production**

The Theory of Language Structure

➤ What are the characteristics that this theory seeks to characterize?

Any adequate Theory of Language Structure must provide answers for the following answers:

- **What is language?**
- **What is it that you know when you know a language?**
- **What are the essential defining characteristics of natural languages which differentiate them from, for example, artificial languages, or from animal communication system?**
- **Do languages differ from each other in unpredictable ways, or do they all share certain common, universal properties?**

The Theory of Language Structure

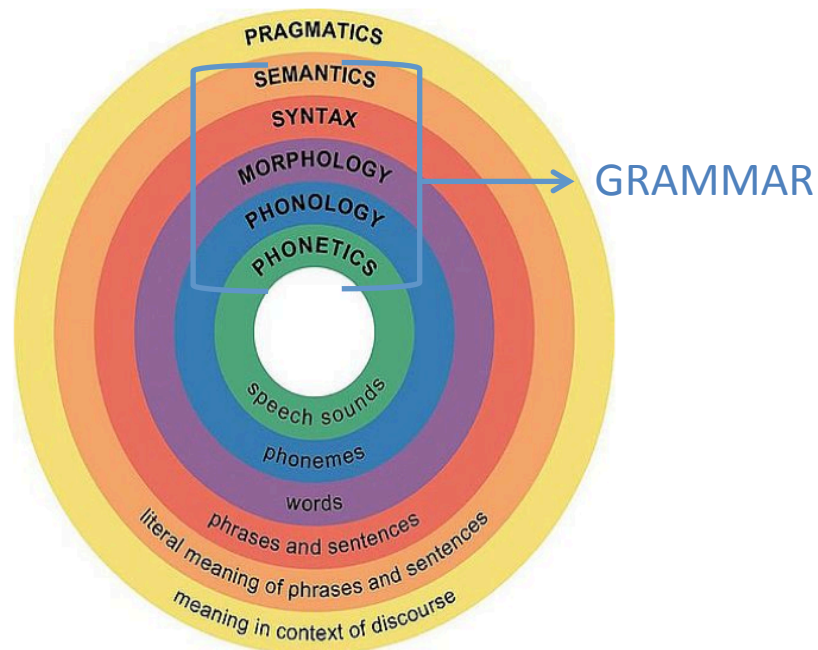
➔ How do we attempt to develop a Theory of Language Structure which will answer such questions?

1. The first step is formulate detailed descriptions of particular languages (known as grammars)
2. The second step is to abstract common, universal properties from particular grammars that they all share. (The study of Universal Grammar).

The Theory of Language Structure

➤ What do we mean by “Grammar”

It is a set of rules or principles which specify how to form, pronounce, and interpret phrases and sentences in the language concerned. It covers not only Morphology and Syntax, but also Phonology and some aspects of semantics as well.



The Theory of Language Structure

➤ What exactly is it that a grammar of a particular language sets out to describe?

Chomsky answers this question by stating that a grammar is a model of those linguistic abilities of native speakers of a language which enable them to speak and understand their language fluently. Chomsky names these abilities [the competence of the native speaker](#). This term is contrasted with another term introduced by Chomsky as well, which is [the performance](#), which means what people actually say or understand by what someone else says).

➤ So, what do we mean by competence and performance?

Competence: The fluent native speaker's knowledge of the language (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language).

Performance: The actual use of language in concrete situations.

(Chomsky, *Aspects* (1965), p.4).

The Theory of Language Structure

➤ According to Chomsky, what are the two types of competence?

1. Grammatical competence → **The Theory of Language Structure**
2. Pragmatic competence → **The Theory of Language Use**

Pragmatics is concerned with the role played by nonlinguistic information such as background knowledge and personal beliefs in our use of sentences.

E.g.

1. **Today was a disaster** → 'disaster' here may mean lots of things depending on the background knowledge (**Pragmatic competence**).
2. **He thinks that John is wrong** → 'he' does not refer to 'John' (**grammatical competence**)

(Chomsky, Essays (1977a), p.40).

Grammatical Competence

➤ How can the grammatical competence of the native speaker be shown?

It is reflected in two types of intuition which speakers have about their language:

1. Intuition about sentence well-formedness.
2. Intuition about sentence structure.

These intuitions about sentences can be seen in four different aspects of language; **phonology**, **morphology**, **syntax**, and **semantics**. Hence, it can be said that native speakers have phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic competence, and that this competence can be reflected in their intuitions about phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic well-formedness and structure of sentences in their native language(s).

Grammatical Competence

➤ A native speaker's phonological competence:

It is reflected in two types of phonological competence:

1- Stress pattern

E.g.

- THIS is a graMMAtical SENtence.
- this is A grammatiCAL senTENCE

Phonologically correct

Phonologically incorrect

2- Phonotactic intuitions.

E.g.

- Blick
- Bnick

Phonologically possible

Phonologically not possible

Grammatical Competence

➤ A native speaker's morphological competence:

E.g.

- Van and can → Vans and cans **BUT** man → men not mans
- Fold and scold → Folded and scolded **BUT** hold → held not holded
- Approve and refuse → approval and refusal **BUT** prove and amuse → proof and amusement not proval and amusal.
- Overload, overplay overwork → Over + load, play, work (prefix + stem) **BUT** overture → NOT over + ture.

Grammatical Competence

➤ A native speaker's semantic competence:

E.g.

- I thought that Mary was ill, but it turned out that she wasn't.

Semantically correct

- ! I realized that Mary was ill, but it turned out that she wasn't.

Semantically odd

Grammatical Competence

➤ A native speaker's syntactic competence:

E.g.

- I gave back the car to him
- I gave the car back to him
- I gave him back the car.
- I gave the car back.

Grammatical

- I gave the car to him back.
- I gave back him the car

Ungrammatical

This is all for today

SEE YOU NEXT WEEK 😊