

Grammar

A: qawā'id al-luġa. – G: Grammatik. –

F: grammaire. – R: grammatiks. –

S: gramática. – C: yufa 语法

Before the 'linguistic turn' that marked many fields of study in the twentieth century, **Gramsci** understood that grammar as the underlying structure that makes languages possible is an important political issue, both as a regulative social institution and a key element in philosophical questions of thought and knowledge. Indeed, **Gramsci** dedicated his last prison notebook (Q 29) to grammar. There his discussion of the politics of grammar can also be seen as a grammar of politics, as a metaphorical examination of the dynamics of hegemony.

Of the many meanings and dimensions of 'grammar', the most important for Marxists is whether it is seen as the structure or set of rules defining a language that is 'objective', politically neutral and even transcends history and culture in such ideas as a 'universal grammar'. The other alternative is that the very description of a grammar is a political act that has social and cultural consequences. **Gramsci** develops 'grammar' in the latter sense, showing how it inherently involves operations of power and how it relates to ideology, authority, regulation and hegemony. The former understanding of 'grammar' as, at least initially, a technical and objective structure or set of rules that can be described in a value-neutral way has had much greater purchase in contemporary linguistics as well as in everyday language. Noam **Chomsky's** theory of 'generative grammar' and his corollary search for a 'universal grammar' that is 'hard-wired' in the human brain is the culmination of a long history of supposedly apolitical notions of grammar.

1. Grammar comes from the Greek, *grammatikê (téchnê)* – Latin: (*ars*) *grammatica* – the word *grámma* means 'letter, written, recorded'. In its earliest usage in Greco-Roman

education, it was connected with writing and covered a broad spectrum including the appreciation of literature. The *grammateis* of the *New Testament* were the 'scribes' (Mat 2, 4). In the Middle Ages, it became synonymous with knowledge or study of Latin, and often learning in general, especially the type of knowledge of the learned classes. With the rise of the nation-state and the vernacular languages, 'grammar' lost its particular connection to Latin and became associated with 'modern' languages.

One of the basic distinctions in grammar is between descriptive grammar and normative (or proscriptive) grammar. What is known as the *Port-Royal Grammar* (published in Paris in 1660) is an important historical foundation of normative grammar. It used the idea of a 'universal grammar' shared by all languages to further its aim of teaching people not necessarily how language is used, but how it should be used. The authors, Antoine **Arnauld** (1612–94) and Claude **Lancelot** (1628–95), were Jansenists of the Abbey of Port-Royal des Champs near Paris. As with an earlier work by **Lancelot** (1644) explaining in French how to speak Latin, the *Port-Royal Grammar* was primarily a paedagogical tool aimed at making it easier to learn a language by explaining its structure. Its philosophical position is closely tied to the *Port-Royal Logic* (**Arnaud/Nicole** 1662) in presenting language structure as the product of rational thought processes.

In the tradition of René **Descartes's** rationalism, the *Port-Royal Grammar* defines grammar as the method by which one turns thoughts into verbal signs, or the art of speaking. As Michel **Foucault** notes, it would be too narrow to see this simply as a prescription of a legislator on how to speak. Rather, the correct use of speech for **Arnauld** and **Lancelot** is a way to reduce the discrepancy between one's thoughts (and one's mother tongue) and the language being learned (**Foucault** III–XVIII). This set a precedent whereby grammar had some important role in turning our inner thoughts

into their outer expression in language, which is at the heart of the connection between thinking and language, logic and grammar. The Port-Royal 'normative grammar' was also important in viewing language as a synchronic system where the histories of the words constituting it are irrelevant. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Ferdinand **de Saussure** took from the *Port-Royal Grammar* this insistence that linguistics should not be concerned with 'reconstructing' previous linguistic states, as was the method of the historical or comparative grammarians of the nineteenth century. Instead of diachronic analysis, linguistics must focus on languages as synchronic systems in order to define its subject in a 'scientifically manageable' way.

In the eighteenth century, German romanticism offered a much more historical and cultural approach to language, inspired by a fascination with the origins of language, the primacy of poetry and expression not solely rational but emotional, and the diversity of languages throughout the world. Johann Gottfried **Herder**, Wilhelm von **Humboldt** and others, in the context of their Enlightenment critique, provided important contributions to the study of language. Both the concept of grammar and the emphasis on the structure of languages were eclipsed by romanticism's aesthetic and expressive considerations. Though **Humboldt's** object was the *Diversity of Human Language Construction* (1836), he subordinated it to the expressive and 'active' power of what he called '*enérgeia*'.

In the nineteenth century, the term 'grammar' re-emerged in connection not to normative or synchronic structures of language, but to the historical investigation of language change and the relations among Indo-European languages especially rooted in comparisons between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin. Jacob and Wilhelm **Grimm**, August **Schliermacher** and Franz **Bopp** developed this approach labelled 'comparative grammar', comparative philology or historical linguistics. Working from the assumption that languages evolved like living organisms and that all Indo-European languages sprang from one original language or *Ursprache*, comparative grammarians tried to explain

historical changes in languages through 'sound laws'. They focussed on how individual sounds and word forms changed historically within a language and across languages. The emphasis was phonetic and lexical rather than either semantic or syntactic.

The affinities between comparative grammar and German romanticism waned at the end of the nineteenth century. With the rise of the 'neogrammarians [*Junggrammiker*]', comparative grammar took a decidedly positivistic turn. Where **Humboldt** believed in a 'universal grammar' and the early comparativists had comparable ideas about an 'Ursprache', the neogrammarians rejected all such ideas as unscientific. They were also disparaging of the value judgements that normative conceptions of grammar contained. Even if such value-judgements were supposedly based on logic and incontestable reason, the neogrammarian method excluded any notion of grammar as normative of how people should speak. Rather, grammar, for them, was a descriptive pursuit of how people actually used language. They took the earlier comparative grammarians' idea of 'sound laws' to its extremes, arguing that all language change could be attributed to such laws, without exception. According to this view, linguistic change has nothing to do with cultural, political or social context. Rather, linguistic phenomena could be explained scientifically solely by laws internal to language.

2. In 1911, the neogrammarians still held sway when the young student, Antonio **Gramsci**, began studying linguistics at the University of Turin. In the same year, the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de **Saussure**, completed his last of four years of lectures in Geneva, lectures that would give birth to structuralism. **Gramsci's** linguistics professor, Matteo **Bartoli**, hoped that **Gramsci** would become the linguist to refute successfully the neogrammarians. But it was **Saussure** whose legacy was, if not to destroy the neogrammarians, at least to render them a closed chapter in the history of linguistics. In his posthumously published lectures (1916), which became the famous *Course in General Linguistics*, he rejected historical

approaches to the study of language: language functions as a 'system' wherein expression and meaning are constituted through reference to and differentiation from each other.

There is no evidence that **Gramsci** knew anything about **Saussure's** lectures. However, his studies with **Bartoli** led to a similar rejection of the neogrammarians. Like **Saussure**, **Gramsci** returned to Port-Royal's notion of normative grammar as a synchronic structure of language. Also like **Saussure**, **Gramsci** criticised the Port-Royal connection between 'normative grammar' and 'universal grammar', or a direct relation to some ahistorical notion of logic and reason. Unlike **Saussure**, **Gramsci's** critique was fundamentally based on the notion that grammar is 'history' or an 'historical document': 'it is the "photograph" of a given phase of a national (collective) language that has been formed historically and is continuously developing. . . . The practical question might be: what is the purpose of such a photograph? To represent the history of an aspect of civilisation, or to change an aspect of civilisation?' (**Gramsci** 1985, 179–80; Q 29, 1).

We must ask, what is the purpose of freezing the continually changing process of language? As Jacques **Derrida** argued years later, inaugurating 'poststructuralism', if the synchronic dimension is totally disconnected from its diachronic roots, meaning could not appear (**Derrida** 1974, 62). Where **Saussure** would answer that it is only in the name of 'science' and there are no political or non-scientific motives at stake, **Gramsci** argues otherwise. This is evident in how **Gramsci** refers the concept of 'normative grammar' back to social situations: 'The reciprocal monitoring, reciprocal teaching and reciprocal "censorship" expressed in such questions as "What did you mean to say?", "What do you mean?", "Make yourself clearer", etc., and in mimicry and teasing. This whole complex of actions and reactions come together to create a grammatical conformism, to establish "norms" or judgements of correctness and incorrectness' (Q 29, 2).

As **Gramsci** often does with terms that later became 'Gramscian' concepts, after

expanding the traditional meaning, he then subverts the original meaning by emphasising its unavoidably political nature: 'It is obvious that someone who writes a normative grammar cannot ignore the history of the language of which he wishes to propose an "exemplary phase" as the "only" one worthy to become, in an "organic" and "totalitarian" way, the "common" language of a nation in competition and conflict with other "phases" and types or schemes that already exist' (**Gramsci** 1985, 180; Q 29, 2).

One of **Gramsci's** important points is that normative grammar is always comparative, in that it is based on the exclusion of other grammars that he calls interchangeably 'immanent' or 'spontaneous grammar'. This is 'the grammar "immanent" in language itself, by which one speaks "according to grammar" without knowing it. . . . The number of "immanent or spontaneous grammars" is incalculable and, theoretically, one can say that each person has a grammar of his own' (Q 29, 2). While such grammars seem to operate spontaneously, the historical perspective illustrates how spontaneous grammars are always tied to some phase of a normative grammar. As he explains elsewhere, 'pure' spontaneity does not exist in history; rather, 'in the "most spontaneous" movement the elements of "conscious leadership" are simply uncontrollable, they have not left behind a verifiable document' (Q 3, 48).

Thus, for **Gramsci**, there is no simple or strict line between spontaneous and normative grammars. Normative grammars are created by codification (often written), standardisation and imposition through 'reciprocal' censorship of grammars that had previously been spontaneous. And spontaneous grammars are the result of the fragmentation, sedimentation, habituation and forgetting of previous normative grammars. In this way, **Gramsci** connected the debates in Italian linguistics around standardisation with his more general cultural theory of hegemony. As Franco **Lo Piparo** has shown persuasively, it was in the milieu of European linguistics, especially the alternatives to the neogrammarian approach, that **Gramsci** came into contact with the

concept of 'hegemony'. 'Hegemony' was deployed there synonymously with concepts including fascination [*fascino*] and prestige [*prestigio*] in order to explain the adoption and adaptation of linguistic forms throughout different social groups and communities of speakers.

Gramsci did not oppose the creation of 'normative grammars'. On the contrary, he argued that the fascists' success was in part due to their ability to exploit the non-existence of a normative Italian grammar, permitting **Mussolini** to pit the northern proletariat against the southern peasantry. As he experienced with fascist educational policies, it is precisely the renunciation of a normative grammar which can be eminently oppressive, because it deprives the oppressed of a possible competence. The type of normative grammar that **Gramsci** advocated for the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I) was not the imposition of one grammar as the only possible one. Rather, **Gramsci** advocated the creation of a normative grammar through the various spontaneous grammars provided by the dialects.

Gramsci argued for the formation of a normative grammar that is self-consciously comparative. Thus, normative grammar and its relationship to spontaneous grammars move beyond linguistics and become metaphors for political organisation. The politics of grammar becomes the grammar of politics. The process of forming a progressive normative grammar is the same as his description of the development of the philosophy of praxis through the organisation and co-ordination of the contradictory and inchoate elements of 'common sense'. The metaphor of grammar is also valuable in **Gramsci's** explorations of how freedom and consent can be shaped by bourgeois hegemony in such a way that the majority can support their own subordination (cf. **Ives** 1997, 1998).

The reference of grammar to the field of cultural hegemony is, however, always more than metaphoric. 'Every time that the question of language appears, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems impose themselves: the formation and expansion of the ruling [*dirigente*] class, the necessity of stabilising more intimate

and secure relations between the ruling groups and the national-popular mass, that is, of reorganising cultural hegemony' (Q 29, 3).

3. 'Grammar' played a significant role in the debate between **Stalin** and the linguist N.Y. **Marr**. **Marr's** approach dominated Soviet linguistics until **Stalin's** repudiation of it in 1950. **Marr** criticised the neogrammarians for isolating language as an object of study from society, and saw in it, instead, a phenomenon of the 'superstructure'. **Marr** and his followers were concerned to show how, since 1917, Russian and other Soviet languages, including their grammars, had changed considerably with the transformation in the relations of production. Well after **Marr's** death, **Stalin** published an article in *Pravda* rejecting **Marr's** approach, specifically criticising the idea that language was part of the superstructure. According to **Stalin**, language is like tools of production and machinery; it was developed under previous historical epochs and any particular language and grammar is equally as useful for capitalism as for communism. Much of his argument relied on the rejection of any class nature of language. Grammar was critical in distinguishing language proper from mere dialects and jargons of particular classes or social groups that, according to **Stalin**, do not have their own grammar but borrow them from the national language (**Stalin** 1951). While such a distinction between language and dialect is not unique to **Stalin**, it remains almost impossible to make based on linguistic evidence. **Gramsci's** critique of such static notions of grammar also undermines **Stalin's** position.

The Russian psychologist, Lev Semenovich **Vygotsky** (1896–1934), concurred with **Gramsci's** emphasis on the primacy of the 'historical' in the relation between language and thinking. He criticised other schools, specifically the psychology of **Piaget**, for not understanding that language and meaning develop together historically, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically (1934, 62ff.).

A new aspect in **Vygotsky's** work, in comparison to **Gramsci's**, is the question concerning the mental correlate of grammatical

structures. **Vygotsky** spoke of a ‘non-correspondence of grammatical and psychological subject and predicate’, because ‘the development of the semantic and of the phonetic side of the word in the mastery of complicated syntactical structures does not coincide’ (304). **Vygotsky** distinguished between the grammar of thought (‘grammar of the inner language’), which operates semantically, and the grammar of the form of language or syntax (‘grammar of the external language’). This has some similarities with **Gramsci’s** distinctions between ‘spontaneous’ grammar, which tends to be more individualistic, and ‘normative grammar’. However, whereas **Vygotsky** delved into the movement from ‘inner language’ to ‘external language’, **Gramsci**, as we saw above, insisted that ‘spontaneous grammar’ has a history in previous normative grammars.

The Russian linguist and member of the **Bakhtin Circle**, Valentin **Voloshinov** makes two important points with respect to Marxist uses of ‘grammar’. The first concerns the relationship between grammar and style. **Voloshinov** takes heed of Karl **Vossler’s** argument that grammar is the solidification or crystallisation of individual creative acts of style. While **Vossler** is an idealist who places too much emphasis on the individualistic and creative aspect of language to the detriment of language as a ready-made system inherited by every speaker, his notion that style and grammar cannot be strictly separated is essential to Marxist linguistics. He agrees with **Gramsci**, emphasising that declaring something to be grammatical (i.e. selecting certain features as the correct grammatical structures) is a social and political act grounded in the economic existence of the language community. To argue that this selection process is ‘objective’ or apolitical is a mystification.

4. Similar to **Gramsci** and **Saussure**, **Wittgenstein** argued that it is futile to search for the essence or meaning of words outside their use in a given sign system. ‘The meaning of a word is its use in language’ (*PI* 43). Like **Gramsci** (and against **Saussure**), he insisted that language is to be understood as a social tool that humans use. Perhaps

the most important commonality between **Gramsci** and **Wittgenstein’s** views of language is that both are critical of élitist or purely philosophical approaches to language, in favour of a focus on what in **Wittgenstein’s** case became known as the ‘ordinary language’ approach. Nevertheless, as Wolfgang Fritz **Haug** has noted, **Wittgenstein’s** approach, in comparison to **Gramsci’s**, has less purchase (**Haug** 1996, Chapter 4). It neither offers adequate explanations of why language can be bewildering nor accounts for the social and historical contexts in which language confusions arise, which **Wittgenstein** nevertheless wishes to eliminate, because this approach ultimately tends to the ‘ahistorical’: ‘If the problems of the ancient Greeks still engage us and there therefore appears to be no progress in philosophy, then the reason for that consists in the fact, **Wittgenstein** noted in 1931, “that our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions”’ (**Haug** 1996, 72). And the ‘notions of common sense’ (*W* 8, 512), which **Wittgenstein** wants to address in his critique of philosophy, are, for **Gramsci**, precisely the point of departure of critical philosophy which sublates the ‘nozioni del senso comune’ (cf. **Haug** 1996, 71).

Noam **Chomsky’s** ‘generative grammar’ has held a dominant position within linguistics since the 1960s. Even though Chomsky is one of the most important critics of US capitalism, his linguistic theory, which he strictly separates from his political activism, runs in direct contrast to Marxist concepts of grammar in a number of points. **Chomsky** uses the term ‘grammar’ ambiguously to mean either the mental representation of a speaker’s knowledge of a language or the linguist’s codification of the structure of a language (cf. **Wasow** 1989). His theory of ‘generative grammar’ defines grammar as a finite set of rules that can generate an infinite number of sentences each of which can be distinguished from nonsensical strings of words. **Chomsky** distinguishes base grammar, which generates ‘deep structures’ of language, from ‘transformational grammar’, which is the set of rules that turns these ‘deep structures’ into

the sentences of actual language that we use. Despite the vast differences in the syntactical structure of different languages, there must be a 'universal grammar' shared by all natural languages, that is 'hard wired' into human biology. According to **Chomsky**, 'we do not really learn language; rather, grammar grows in the mind' (1980, 134). While **Gramsci**, with **Marx** (in the sixth of the *Theses on Feuerbach*), sees the 'human essence' realised in the ensemble of historically determined social relations, **Chomsky** identifies it with the human brain. **Chomsky** explicitly criticizes **Gramsci's** Marxist conception of human nature. **Chomsky** falsely assumes that the question of "human nature" must be confined to the human brain which exhibits "a system of a sort familiar in the biological world . . . of 'mental organs' based on physical mechanisms . . . that provide a unique form of intelligence that manifests itself in human language . . ." (**Chomsky** 1987: 196–7, see also **Chomsky** 1976: 128–43). **Chomsky's** approach to grammar is an obstacle to any understanding of language as a social institution integral to the formation of ideology and social reproduction as found in **Gramsci** and the semiotic Marxist approaches of **Vološinov**, **Vygotsky**, **Schaff**, **Rossi-Landi**, **Ponzio**, **Kristeva**, **Williams** and others.

In a very different realm, Jacques **Derrida** takes the term 'grammar' back to its etymological roots. With *Of Grammatology* (1967), he conceived a science of letters and syllables, of reading and writing, which promised a liberation from 'logocentrism' and 'ethnocentrism'. According to **Derrida**, the 'metaphysics of presence' that has dominated Western philosophy subordinates written language to spoken language; thus would arise the fiction that thought contents are readily available instead of recognising that they sedimented in innumerable structures.

Gramsci shows some awareness of such differences between spoken and written language, but evaluates them differently. He notes that one of the major obstacles to literary Italian becoming a national language was that the literary language (together with its normative grammars), like the Latin it replaced, was inaccessible to the non-literate

masses (**Gramsci** 1985, 169; Q 29, 2). 'Language has not yet acquired an extensive "historicity", it has not yet become a national fact. . . . In reality, in Italy there are many "popular" languages, and it is the regional dialects which are usually spoken in intimate conversation, in which the most common and diffuse feelings and affects are expressed; literary language is still, in many respects, a cosmopolitan language, a type of "Esperanto", that is, limited to the expression of partial feelings and notions' (Q 23, 39). In these cases, it is writing that wields ethnocentrism over speech.

The role of writing versus speech raises some questions in interpreting **Gramsci** (cf. **Ives** 1998, 47–8 and **Lo Piparo** 1979, 252). It remains an open question whether **Derrida's** attempt to shift the pursuit of science away from the 'form of logic' towards that of 'grammatics' can be utilised for Marxist projects. This presumably depends on the more general debate over the relationship between Marxism and deconstruction.

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consciousness, discourse analysis, discourse theory, Enlightenment, expression, history, hegemony, historicism, ideology, language, language game, meaning, philosophy of language, philosophy of praxis, rationalism, semiotics, sign, Spirit, translation

Aufklärung, Ausdruck, Bedeutung, Bewusstsein, Diskursanalyse, Diskurstheorie, Geist, Geschichte, Hegemonie, Historismus, Ideologie, Philosophie der Praxis, Rationalismus, Semiotik, Sprache, Sprachphilosophie, Sprachspiel, Übersetzung, Zeichen