

# Origin and Development of Grammar in Greece and Rome

## Abstract

This Paper intends to study the origin and development of 'grammar' through the ages especially of Greece and Rome. It is proposed to list the contributions with regard to grammar studies made by major grammarians and linguists of the world through centuries and civilizations. Before the emergence of linguistics, the study of grammar at the philosophical level could be traced back to Greek notions such as logic and syllogism, Naturalist versus conventionalist, Anomaly versus Analogy. These concepts gave rise to controversies in the Roman Age which effected a change in our old assumption that grammar is a part of rhetoric rather than logic. But Greek's endeavour was not entirely undermined by the new concept of Romans. Analytical study began and enveloped whole Europe because Romans had started to analyze Latin language and its grammar with Greek. These analyses were at philosophical as well conceptual level that continued throughout.

**Keywords:** Greece, Greek, Rome, Latin, Philosophical, Analogy, Logic, Syllogism, Rhetoric, Grammar, Graphein, Grammata.

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## Introduction

The study of grammar begins with the origin and development of 'grammar' through the ages especially of Greece and Rome. It is proposed to list the contributions with regard to grammar studies made by major grammarians and linguists of the world through centuries and civilizations.

Dykema (1961) cited in Nancy, G. Patterson (1999: 1) "The Role of Grammar in the Language Arts Curriculum"

The origin of the word grammar can be traced to the Greek *gramma*, or letter, as in an alphabetic letter. This is a development of the word *graphein* which means to *draw* or *write*. The plural form of the word is *grammata* which evolved at one point to mean the rudiments of writing, and eventually to mean the rudiments of learning. Eventually the adjective form of the word, *grammatike*, was combined with *techne* and meant the "Art of knowing one's letters."<sup>1</sup>

## Aim of the Study

In this Paper an attempt has been made to highlight a historical overview on grammar from Greece to Rome.

The first attempt to study grammar began in about 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. with Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* and in 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C in India with Panini's grammar of Sanskrit. Later, the Romans approached the study of grammar for the study of their own language. At this stage grammar was mainly learnt and taught as a tool for the analysis of the languages used for producing and for analyzing literatures, or even for deciphering the rules of ancient languages of the holy books. Grammar was initially studied as a part of philosophy, logic and rhetoric. This can be evidenced in the following discussion on the Greek masters and their followers among Romans and the Medieval grammarians until the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries:

## The Greeks

The study of grammar was initiated by the Ancient Greeks. They started to study grammar as a tool by which they could understand their own language. In those days, even common people were keenly interested in knowing the internal structure of language. They wanted to make it more practical not only in spoken form, but also in their writing. Plato, Aristotle, Apollonius, and Dionysius Thrax

are such names who contributed remarkably in the development of the Greek grammar. Plato's ideas were based on logic, while Aristotle modified the study of grammar and gave a new idea of syllogism and Dionysius Thrax attempted a technical definition and structure of language. Mc Arthur, (1991:41) observes:

The Greeks thus developed their practical interest in grammar while learning to commit Homeric and other material to a paper. There were many individuals, highly interested in such things as grammar, philosophy, logic, rhetoric and literature, who ran into each other. It took time for distinct concepts to emerge, as these pioneers struggled to create theories and terminologies without much in the way as precedents to help them. Their efforts can not be measured by twentieth-century yardsticks which enticingly allow us to make judgments in our own favour. Plato, Aristotle and their successors often took their theories from the abyss, to build the intellectual foundation on which we still stand today.<sup>2</sup>

The Greeks in general, and the Alexandrians in particular, developed grammar to understand the meaning of languages through categorization and classification in order to preserve the purity of language. The Greek masters were so wholesome and remarkable that one is tempted to study some of their contributions in this chapter.

#### **Plato**

The study of grammar began with Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* (5<sup>th</sup> Century BC). But Platonic views on language have also been found in his creation the *Theatetus* and *Sophists*. These were the dialogues which were put together in the above compilation. Dinneen (1967: 76) makes the following observations about Plato's contribution:

In these dialogues he was more concerned about the relation of thought, language, and the things talked about than the etymology of individual expressions. He saw that just as some things in nature can go together and others can not, so too certain words can be correctly combined and other can not. He appeared to see the reason for this in the conventional restrictions of language, in the way we think about things, and in the nature of the things themselves. He was interested, therefore, in finding some way of describing correct combinations that would

lead to true statements or definitions. His attempt to establish a discipline that could deal with such rules was a first attempt to found a formal logic, that is, a system by which we can tell whether combinations are correct or not merely by inspecting the relations among the terms used. He did not distinguish sufficiently among the various sources of limitations on linguistic constructions (grammatical, stylistics, truth-functional), but he did not devise a technique that leads later to the formulation of syllogistic rules.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of logical rules were of course a new invention by Plato, though it was quite difficult for the common mass. It needs much information to understand, but it was the only factor by which Plato was appreciated in making language cohesive. These views on the language and logic based rules of grammar have been viewed in the dialogues like *Theatetus* and *Cratylus*. These dialogues were a valuable notions by which a language can be systematic and cohesive.

Plato believed that language thoughts must be combined and cohesive by the logical rules. He did not emphasise on the cohesion and connectivity of the thoughts, but relations of thoughts have been compared with nature. He thought, that if nature can be systematic why not words can be correctly combined. Later there were many dichotomies/ terms on which they (Plato and Aristotle) agreed. There were three such kinds of terms which have been necessary for the description of the language.

Plato and Aristotle both agreed on the three terms, like *onoma*, *rhema* and *logos* as quoted in Mc Arthur, (1991:48)

1. The *onoma* or 'name', translated into Latin as the *nomen*, and (as examples of present-day usage) into French as *le nom* and into English as *the noun*.
2. The *rhema*, translatable as 'what is spoken', 'word', 'saying', 'phrase', 'predicate', and a number of other concepts. It was differentiated from the '*onoma*' by its having a time reference (that is, 'times' or 'tenses'). In English it is *the verb*.
3. The *logos*, one of the most important terms in Greek thought generally translatable as a whole spectrum of modern concepts, including, 'word', 'speech', 'statement', 'reason', 'report', 'narrative' and, in plural form, 'prose'.

For the grammarian-logicians of the ancient world, however, it was a composite made up of *onomata*, *rhemata*, and *syndesmoi*, a general class of particles roughly corresponding to 'conjunctions'. What is today called *a sentence* in English.

The logos worked hard in ancient times. In its philosophical aspect it lies at the root of whole science of 'logic' as well as innumerable modern 'ologies' ('biology', 'geology', etc.). It is present in 'analogy', 'syllogism', 'logistics', 'dialogue' etc.<sup>4</sup>

Dinneen (1967:78) observes "Plato seems to have distinguished for the first time the *onoma* and *rhema* as the constituents of *logos*".<sup>5</sup> It was the effect of the predecessor (Sophists) who already had discussed the logical and lexical constituents of a sentence. Plato who distinguished '*onoma*' from '*rhema*' based it not on grammar, but who distinguished '*onoma*' from '*rhema*' was not a grammatical distinction, but a lexical. After all distinction, he could not distinguish grammar and logic. Plato presented some traditional concepts of grammar but were not technical. It was totally logic based. So after a very short time he failed to get popularity and acceptance he tried to give a standard and modified he tried to give a standard and modified shape to language and many philosophers of that time appreciated greatly his logic regarding grammar. Collinge (1990:787) states in this regard that "Plato was the earliest European thinker to ponder on the fundamental problems of language".<sup>6</sup> About the heat ignited by Plato's concepts, Jindal and Syall (1998:39) claim that:

Plato's *Cratylus* (427-347 BC) was concerned with the origin of words (Etymology) and gave rise to a controversy between analogists, who believed that language was regular and based on logic (Plato was an Analogist) and Anomalists, who believed that properties of things were not related to the words used to name them, and that there was a great deal of irregular change taking place in words (this viewpoint was held by the Stoic school of philosophers in Greece).<sup>7</sup>

This kind of thinking changed their mind from the traditional trends. They tried to give a systematic arrangement to language so that they could study the language systematically. These kinds of trends left a nice impact on philosophers and logicians of that age. They developed then thoughts with the help of previous knowledge and introduced new philosophy and logical explanations to the Greek language. Apart from these concepts, they paid a good deal of attention towards etymology and phonetics. These areas were adopted by his pupil, Aristotle, who further developed and reorganized his master's views regarding grammar.

#### **Aristotle**

Aristotle, the pupil of Plato, modified his master's thought. In the words of Dinneen (1967:79):

He saw several levels on which language can be studied and

distinguished the forms of words and of sentences, the meaning of words in isolation and in constructions, and differences between the written and spoken styles of language.<sup>8</sup>

The Greeks were mainly concerned with the nature of language. There were many views regarding language, some believed that language is based on convention while others think that it has been inherited from the nature. This kind of debate and controversies impelled the Greeks to think a language minutely. There were many parts of speech and rules of grammar, are used now in the schools but a modified and developed shape.

Aristotle and Plato both agreed on the terms like *onoma*, *rhema* and *logos*.

Aristotle maintained this distinction, but added a third class of syntactic component, the *syndesmoi*, a class covering what were later to be distinguished as conjunctions (and probably prepositions, though this is not apparent from the examples cited) the article, and pronouns. This tripartite analysis of the sentence was probably intended to distinguish the components of the declarative statement in which as a logician Aristotle was most interested and which he defined a basic. Aristotle additionally gave a formal definition of the word as a linguistics unit: a component of the sentence, having a meaning of its own but no further divisible into meaningful units. For examples he defined *onoma* name, noun, as 'a sound sequence having a meaning by convention without any temporal reference'.<sup>9</sup>

(Robins R.H. 1997:32-33)

While Plato divided these components *onoma* and *rhema* verbal components have made a grammatical distinction underlying syntactic analysis and word classification in all future European linguistic description.<sup>10</sup>

(Robin 1997:32)

Later, Aristotelian usage has covered main grammatical relevants which led to the descriptive approach. He defined 'word', 'sentence', 'cases of nouns', 'different forms of superlative and comparative degree', 'forms of adjectives', 'adverbs', etc. These were not analyzed on the basis of grammar mode, but on logic. All these terms, concepts and analyses by Aristotle were reanalyzed and modified by the Stoics – (a group of philosophers in Greece). These philosophers, made changes in the Aristotle's notions on different language perspectives. They made a nice distinction

between logical and grammatical study of language.

#### **Stoics**

In the words of Dineen (1967:88):

The Stoics was a group of philosophers and logicians who flourished from about the beginning of the forth century B.C. The last notable author in the Stoics tradition was the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who reigned from A.D. 160 to 180. In their logical work the Stoics were the chief opponents of Aristotle's successors, who were called Peripatetic logicians.<sup>11</sup>

Stoics were the first to concentrate exclusively on language and hence paid much attention to the development of descriptive analysis of Greek and its Grammar. They wanted to develop and were very eager to make a refinement of grammar and its theories. For this they had to depend on Aristotle. Their contribution is most precisely briefed by Robins (1997:34-35)

The Aristotelian system of word classification and grammatical categories was further articulated by the Stoics in two directions: the number of word classes was increased; and more precise definitions and additional grammatical categories were introduced to cover the morphology and part of the syntax of these classes. Later writers saw the developing word class system as the progressive subdivision of the previous one: It seems that the Stoics proceeded in three stages. First among Aristotle's *syndesmoi* the inflected members (later pronoun and article) were separated jointly as *arthra* literally 'joint' from the invariant uninflected members to which alone the term *syndesmoi* was applied (the later preposition and conjunction); second, Aristotle's *onoma* was divided into proper noun to which the term *onoma* was applied and common noun *porsegoria* and third, from within this the class of adverbs was split off and named *mesotes* literally 'those in the middle' perhaps because they belonged syntactically with verbs mostly associated morphologically with noun stems.<sup>12</sup>

The Stoics made a distinction between the logical and the grammatical. Later on, they presented an explicit view on logic and grammar. They worked hard in this area and their main motto was to give purity to language. They examined the sound system, parts of speech and forms and meaning among various aspects of language. The stoics were highly influenced by speech sounds. Earlier Aristotle also discussed about speech, but could not give a pattern. But the Stoics were highly interested in doing something in this area. They studied sounds and gave

the 'Twenty Four letters' of the Greek language. What we call parts of phonology, the umbrella under which we study sounds. Firstly they introduced four (4) parts of speech but after sometime they invented one more and so finally it came to be five (05). These changes misled the Greeks who were busy in translation. They faced lots of problems after this change. After all logical and grammatical expressions, they were not fully satisfied with present forms of language. So they looked for the original forms, the root and 'etyma' of the present expression of language. This analytical study is known as Etymology. The Stoics were totally based on Aristotelian views, but they modified and analyzed to make a more advanced study. Robins (1997:36) sums up the Stoics's philosophy in the following manner:

'Stoics' linguistic works went on throughout Antiquity among the members of this Stoics philosophical schools; but in the history of linguistics, the changes made by Alexandrian scholars in the Stoic positions brought the subject, more particularly in its grammatical aspects, to the state in which the later Latin grammarians, and through them the European tradition, took it over.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Dionysius Thrax**

In the study of language/grammar, the name of Dionysius Thrax occupies a very significant place. This is so because of his major contribution and also as a member of the Alexandrian school of thought in Egypt, popularly known as Alexandrians. The Alexandrians in the first century B.C. were the followers of Aristotle and hence advocated his idea of grammar. Alexandrians were highly concerned with grammar because they wanted to see the purity of language. Dionysius Thrax of Alexandria analyzed literary texts in terms of letters, syllables, and eight parts of speech in his treatise called '*The Art of Grammar*', He introduced the concept of analytical study based on which many literary texts were analyzed after him. Dinneen (1967:401) states that

The formal approach to the study of grammar (which) was found first in the works of Dionysius Thrax, whose pioneering approach shows the characteristics of all scientific work on language. This grammar was formal (only the conjunctions were defined on the basis of extra-linguistic criteria alone), and its stated aims included the search for the analogies (the intra linguistic regularities) of Greek.<sup>14</sup>

So, we cannot deny the fact that his work was on different aspects of language. Dionysius Thrax's analogies became more powerful and it was more popular among the scholars and students. His definitions, elements of language, parts of speech and his analytical works are of equal importance. He provided much strength to the Greek language and the discipline of grammar studies. Thrax thus became the pillar for Greeks in particular and grammarians in general.

**Apollonius**

Apollonius further strengthened the study in Greek grammar. Some of his major contributions are grammar classes, grammatical rules and parts of speech (addition from noun to preposition). His belief was that grammarians should divert from the traditional, formal distinctions towards semantic categories.

**The Romans**

The study of grammar began with the ancient Greek, but its various aspects were brought to the fore by the Roman grammarians. The Greek and Roman grammarians described two very similar language-classical Greek and Classical Latin. They also used technical terms for the description of other language. The Roman grammarians were great followers of the Greek grammar and launched speculative approaches to language. David Crystal (1997:409) states:

Roman writers largely followed Greek precedents and introduced a speculative approach to the language. On the whole, in their descriptive work on Latin, they used Greek categories and terminology with little change. However, the most influential work of the Roman period proved to be an exception to this trend: the codification of Latin grammar by Marcus Terentius Varro under the headings of etymology, morphology, and syntax.<sup>15</sup>

McHenry, Robert (1993:410) claim that:

The Romans adopted the grammatical system of the Greeks and applied it to Latin. Except for Varro, of the first century BC who believed that grammarians should discover structures, not dictate them, most Latin grammarians did not attempt to alter the Greek system and also sought to protect their language from decay. Whereas the model for the Greeks and Alexandrians was the language of Homer, the works of Cicero and Virgil set the Latin standard. The works of Donatus (4<sup>th</sup> century AD) and Priscian (6<sup>th</sup> century AD), the most important Latin grammarians, were widely used to teach Latin grammar during the European Middle Ages.<sup>16</sup>

(McHenry, Robert, 1993:410)

In this age there were many books on grammar that came into being. Most of these books were mainly based on the comparison and contrast of the Greek and Latin languages. Crystal (1997:409) rightly briefs the contribution:

Especially towards the end of the millennium, several authors wrote major works in the fields of grammar and rhetoric notably Cicero on style on Quintilian (1st Century AD) on usage and public speaking. Julius

Caesar wrote on grammatical regularity. Aelius Donatus (4<sup>th</sup> century AD) wrote a Latin grammar that was used right into the Middle Ages; its popularity evidenced by the fact that it was the first to be printed in wooden type, and had a shorter edition for children. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Priscian's *Institutiones Grammaticae* (Grammatical categories) was another influential work that continues to be used during the Middle Ages. It contains 18 books, and remains the most complete grammar of the age that we have. The main result of the Roman period was a model of grammatical description that was handed down through many writers in Europe, and that ultimately became the basis of language teaching in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In due course, this model became the traditional approach to grammar which continues to exercise its influence on the teaching of English and other modern languages.<sup>17</sup>

So, after the Greek period the Romans did a great job in different fields of language. They did not concentrate on any particular topic like Greeks. They highlighted different aspects of language like grammar, rhetoric, usage and spoken form. They modified the grammatical description which shifted from Rome to Europe. After that they roused it in language teaching. The Middle Ages were an important time for the development of the language. The term 'traditional' grammar came into existence after a long wait because grammatical description by the Romans was modified.

**Trentius Varro**

M. Trentius Varro was the contemporary of Greek scholar Dionysius Thrax. He did a tremendous job in the development of Latin language. Most of the grammarians of this age were followers of the Greek. But Varro was the man who not only followed the Greek, but also further extended the study.

Varro, the Alexandrians and the Stoics were well known and discussed grammar at length, but it was only Varro who deviated from the logic based opinions. He gave some technical definitions and compounds with Greek and was the first serious Latin writer who maintained a record. Mc Arthur (1991:01) states that:

Varro was the legend who converted the technical terms of Greek into Latin, and adopted Greek-based rules to serve their own tongue. A great advantage in describing Latin more or less in terms of Greek was the similarity of the two languages: both are highly inflected with complex verb and noun structure.<sup>18</sup>

Even Dinneen (1967:108) claims that: Varro thought he would solve the problem of whether some words are

like other words in Latin. He believed that he could show that Latin is regular and that apparent irregularities could be explained, especially apparent irregularities between words and the things they stand for. In order to give this explanation, Varro offered his views about many features of the Latin language – what a word is, what variety and regularity are discoverable among the various forms of the words, how these are to be accounted for, how differing styles and periods in a language are to be understood, whose task it is to study these various problems and what kind of equipment is required to deal with these questions.<sup>19</sup>

He gave a minimum basic form that is not further analyzable into simple, meaningful parts. It can be used in various forms but style will remain the same. His study was both speculative and experimental. His position was very close to the Stoics because there were some views which were familiar to the Stoics.

#### Quintillian

Varro's ideas on the different aspects of language were modified by Quintillian, who was very similar to Thrax in his approach towards grammar and other aspects of language. Even Quintillian discussed and studied analytically the Latin case system. These types of topics were always in the system and were always in the minds of Latin scholars as followers of the Greeks. Apart from them, Robins (1997:67) states:

Priscian in view of the absence of any morphological feature distinguished the instrumental use of the ablative case forms from their other uses, the reproof such an addition to the descriptive grammar of Latin as redundant.<sup>20</sup> (super-vacuum).

It was a great success of the Roman grammarians through whom they accepted grammatical description of the language and brought it to completion. Later on they handed it on to the middle ages that spanned the first five centuries of the Christian era.

The main focus in the Roman period was a model of grammatical description that was supplied through many writers in Europe, and became a base for language teaching in the Middle and Renaissance periods. They used traditional grammar in language teaching. This approach was also accepted by different grammarians. The application of this approach is used in exercises and left a nice impact on language teaching. Latin grammar is written by different grammarians in this age but Donatus (4<sup>th</sup> century AD) wrote a grammar which had great importance. It was adopted by the medieval period. This age is assumed to be an age of complete grammar. There were many books written in this era. The main attention of this age was to provide a model. (Robins 1997:60) further states:

Roman linguistics was largely the application of Greek thought, Greek controversies and Greek categories to the Latin language.<sup>21</sup>

#### Conclusion

The present research paper, thus, takes a bird's eye view of the origin and development of grammar through the ages. The paper basically lists the major contributions and developments with regard to grammar studies. In a nut-shell it reflects three phases of grammar studies: First the study of grammar as a part of logic and philosophy which was initiated by the Greek masters; secondly the comparative and historical approach to grammar, (the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century); finally the phase of descriptive linguistics which later developed into structural, functional and communicative grammars with the development of Modern Linguistics. It is important to mention here that this paper concentrates more on listing the major grammarians and linguists and their contributions.

#### Endnotes

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