

The Debate on Grammar: A Historical Overview

Abstract

This paper commences with the evolution of grammar and its expansion through the different ages. The different opinions and views formulated by numerous grammarians, academicians and linguists resulted in the establishment of formal rules about language usage. Moreover, with the advent of written representations, formal rules about grammar rules were reinforced. Thus, the main focus of the paper is the debate that arises out of the establishment and development of grammar.

The emergence of English as a universal link language and the power of the language to broaden an individual's job opportunities have resulted in the mushrooming of a large number of establishments that promise to teach fluent English. A lot of people ultimately end up getting admitted in such establishments and institutes. At the same time the situation in the education system in India is in need of an overhaul, because even today majority of learners, despite years of learning English, are still not capable of forming grammatically correct sentences. Grammar has always been a matter of debate at the level of pedagogy and philosophy. This paper is an attempt to highlight this debate.

Keywords: ELT - English Language Teaching
 ESL - English as a Second Language
 EFL - English as a Foreign Language
 LSRW - Listening Speaking Reading Writing
 CLT - Communicative Language Teaching
 GTM - Grammar Translation Method
 TG - Transformational Grammar
 GTM - Grammar Translation Met

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Introduction

The term "grammar" is derived from the Greek root, 'Grammatike techne' which may be translated as the "Art of writing".

The meaning and the scope of grammar was later developed by the detailed studies, through centuries, by such grammarians as Plato, (5th Century BC), Panini (5th Century BC), Aristotle (3rd Century BC), Dionysus Thrax (1st Century BC), Alexandarians (1st Century BC), Varro (1st Century BC), work of Cicero and Virgil in Latin, Donatus (4th Century AD, Latin), Priscian (6th Century AD, Latin), Aelfric (11th Century AD, Latin) and many others. These grammarians established grammar as a discipline/an area of studies for further investigations and research. In fact as a result of their work the teaching of grammar largely became a substitute for the teaching of a language.

However, it was the emergence of linguistics in the 20th century, which questioned the very scope and function of grammar and gave birth to what we call today modern grammar as opposed to the traditional grammar. Linguistics questioned not only the definition, description and function of the traditional grammar, but also its role in the overall language teaching programme. In a nut-shell, the emergence of linguistics created a debate regarding the very use of grammar traditional or modern. For instance, while Frank Cawley (1957) went to the extent of arguing that "the teaching of grammar is a waste of time", Michael West (1952) claimed that "grammar is a preventive and corrective medicine". The contribution of linguistics, notwithstanding, in the Indian context, grammar still dominates the language learning and teaching programmes. It is only in over the last three to four decades (mostly in the Central Universities and Boards) that gradually it is either replaced by actual language exercises or is being taught inductively. This change is an output of the realization of the fact that the grammar teaching has largely failed to improve command over English, mainly because the grammar teaching remains confined to (often inaccurate and misleading) the description and analysis of formal language

patterns. But despite this change there are still strong advocates for traditional grammar and hence grammar still dominates the school curricula. Such a dominance is evident of the fact that the grammar debate is still continued.

English came to India almost three centuries ago along with the British traders. Even after more than fifty years of independence, English continues to serve as a major link language, library language and window to the world. Neither Hindi, the Official National Language, nor any of the other regional languages has risen in status, and is yet to substitute the all-encompassing influence of the English language in the socioeconomic and educational arenas.

Krishnaswamy and Sriraman (1995:50) rightly points out that

Macaulay might have thought that the knowledge of English was essential for civilizing Indians, earlier generations might have thought English was necessary for the shaping of character or the development of aesthetic sense, but the present generation is convinced that English is needed for mobility and social and economic advancement. English is the language of opportunities because it takes one outside one's own community to places (within or outside India) where more opportunities are available for professional and economic growth. That is why there is a greater demand for English; it has a lot of 'surrender value' and teachers might want to cash on it.¹

Krishnaswamy and Sriraman (1995:50-51) further state that

English not only gives us information in every conceivable branch of knowledge, it also has the power to change the world that changes us. However, it is important to note that English is the language, not of Westernization but modernization.²

Thus, the importance of the English language since the colonial phase till date has remained consistent. Due to this status of English, the teaching and learning of English has always been of prime importance for a long time. English, like other second languages, was taught through the Grammar Translation Method. Everyone seemed fairly clear about what should be taught and in what order. The result was that language learners understood a good deal about how the target language was constructed. When new methods and approaches emerged with the coming of linguistics and its applied disciplines, they belittled the utility of so much of grammar in ELT and attacked the effectiveness of grammar in GT Method in the name of new expectations, such as 'fluency', 'language use' and other new concepts.

With these drawbacks the Grammar-Translation Method came under immense criticism. Hence new language teaching methods emerged with new shape and size of grammar. What is important is that such replacements with regard to the extent, role and scope of grammar in English language programmes were not final, rather they generated consistent debate on these issues relating grammar. Latter we shall see that grammar, to the ancients, basically meant an area of study relating language,

rhetoric and philosophy, which was used for interpreting literary texts rather than as a tool for language teaching

It was not until the Middle Age that grammarians became interested in languages other than their own. The scientific grammatical analysis of language began in the 19th century with the realization that languages have a history. This resulted in the genealogical classification of languages through Comparative Linguistics. Moreover, grammatical analysis was further developed in the 20th century and was greatly advanced by the theories of Structural Linguistics and Transformational-Generative Grammar. The advancement in the theories of language resulted in numerous complications with regard to the teaching and role of grammar in the language curriculum. Thus, the definition of grammar and the reality of its existence in our language are neither simple nor easily definable. Grammar, by now, is used more as a tool for language learning and teaching.

The establishment of the school of linguistics led to the questioning of the traditional method used in the teaching of language. Initially, languages were taught using the traditional method of teaching grammar. The teaching of grammar was the main focus and everyone (both teachers and students) seemed fairly clear about what should be taught and in what order. The result was that language learners understood a good deal about how the target language was constructed, but had little idea of how it was pronounced or used in ordinary conversation. The other drawback to this approach was that it took a very long time to master the new language system, so it was not suitable for learners with a short period of time at their disposal. All these reasons led to the questioning of whether the teaching of grammar was actually helping in improving the language proficiency of the learner. Likewise different styles of teaching equate the varying opinions on how it should be taught, if indeed it should or can be taught.

Rothschild (2006) presents views as in the paper "The Great Grammar debate."

Linguists have, for years, been arguing over whether the "rules" of language are fixed or dynamic, and educational theorists have toiled in a parallel circle, over how it should be taught.³

Cameron (1995) observes in this regard:

Linguists can generally be divided into two groups: "prescriptivists", or those who hold that language is set in by fixed rules, and "descriptivists", or those who believe that language is a dynamic entity that evolves from the cracks and patterns of actual usage.⁴

In Nunberg's (1983) opinion

There was a time, not so long ago, when the prescriptivists were the ostensible monarchy of the grammar kingdom in the United States; a time when everyone seemed fairly clear about what should be taught and in what order"⁵

(Finegan 1980) puts on record the mixed response about grammar teaching

Verbs in all their complexity dominated the scene, and conjugations and inflections were learned by repeating everything until you threw up. The result was that while many grammarians-to-be understood a good deal about how English was constructed, many also found writing to be a tiresome and confusing process that did little more than tease the boundaries of sanity.⁶

Milroy (1991) states that

Grammatical supremacy, consequently, gave way to a "stimulus-response system" in which learners memorized a catalog of responses to certain prompts that mirrored situations outside the classroom".⁷

Finegan (1980) clarifies

Grammar from this direction is not analyzed in the classroom, but, in theory, enters the consciousness by some mysterious osmosis. Unfortunately it also fails to equip students to produce original utterances of their own. Clearly this method is not adequate for an in-depth acquisition of the language, and, consequently, not adequate for teaching anyone the explicit rules of grammar. The failure of this method led to the development of a third method, frequently referred to as the "cognitive approach".⁸

Under this method students are introduced to patterns of "correct" language, which, after enough time, promises to eventually enable them to deduce the rules for themselves. Cameron (1995) refers Our new linguistic kings assured the world that the element of discovery within this process somehow "made language learning exciting" and the grammar easier to assimilate than anything simply learned by repetition.⁹

However, this approach too is not without its share of flaws. The problem with this method is that it, too, has allowed noticeable gaps in acquisition. Many students who learn through pattern association can create original, well-formed sentences based on the rules, yet, many still produce language that is idiomatically incorrect. For instance, an example (quoted from Anderson 1990) that critics of the cognitive approach frequently refer to is often heard "excuse me, have you got fire?" in place of "have you got a light?"

Yet it is due to the preponderance of idiomatic incongruity like the one aforementioned that prescriptive battle-cries have grown in force and frequency, over the last several years, forcing the heavy artillery of the descriptivist to roll in on the defensive: "Correctness is less important than the effectiveness of the message"¹⁰ (Andersson 1990).

In other words, it doesn't matter even if a student speaks wrong grammar, but enables to get the message across.

Being objective about grammar is difficult because of the personal experiences we all carry with us. Those individuals who suffered through formulaic grammar memorization classes, for example, may in fact support the process because they now have the specifics of the rules embedded in their psyche.

Similarly, the second set of individuals who have learned through osmosis may also support their

method of instruction, because while they cannot point to a sentence and diagram down to its molecular structure they tend to have "a feeling" when something is wrong and when something is right. Moreover, they do not waste time hovering over minor technical inconsistencies, but instead just write and read and enjoy the language for what it is. Thus, the grammar debate continues. The fight for selecting the better method for the teaching of a language goes on with grammarians settled into different schools of thought.

Aim of the Study

The study discusses the controversy that emerges out of the gulf created by the teaching of grammar in the learning of language. The fight among grammarians, linguists and academicians is that prescriptive grammars do not have any justification beyond their authors' aesthetic tastes while descriptive grammarians focus on the way a language is actually used by people.

Conclusion

The conclusion has been obtained from the observations of the grammar debate. Thus, this paper focuses on the great grammar debate and the controversy surrounding the study of grammar. The issue about whether the solution lies with the method promoted and practiced by philosophical grammarians or pedagogical grammarians.

Through this discussion we can say to the certain extent that no method is satisfactory in itself. Each method has some positive as well as negative aspects. So the best of every method should be inculcated in learning and teaching grammar depending on the situation of the learner.

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