Universalism and Levels of Analysis

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Abstract

Any system as complex as human language is bound to lend itself to a variety of independent approaches. At different times different aspects of language have struck peoples and thinkers' mind. One of the most controversial topics which has become the most widely used linguistic theory is Chomsky's Universal Grammar.

This paper is an attempt to present a brief account of the historical background of the idea of the universal grammar and its implications. It manifests some universal features common to all human languages. Finally it focuses on the concept of hierarchy in language by which the levels of linguistic analysis are specified.

Keywords: Universal, Hierarchy, Genetic, Biological Reasons, Levels of Analysis.

Introduction

Universalism is a philosophical concept that some aspects or ideas have universal application or applicability. Historically the ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle believed in Universalism. Some early observation -based ideas about universality in language were proposed by Plato, who felt that word meaning mapping in some form was innate.

Although Universal grammar is fully credited to Noam Chomsky, but historical evidences reveal that the idea goes back to more than seven centuries before Chomsky.

Since the middle of 13th century Philosophers and Linguists dealt extensively with this concept. They have been divided on the question of whether there are universal properties which hold for all human languages. At present majority of linguists are on the side of universalism.

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The idea of the universal grammar is traced back to the English philosopher Roger Bacon (1219 – 1292) in his (Overview of Grammar 1245) and (Greek Grammar 1268) declared that all languages are built upon a common grammar.

In the 13th century the grammarians, following Bacon, postulated universal rules underlying all grammars.

Archbishop of Canterbury in England Robert Kilwardby (1215 – 1279) held that linguists should be concerned with discovering the nature of the language in general. Kilwardby was so concerned with the Universal Grammar that he excluded considerations of the characteristics of particular languages.

The concept of a universal grammar or language was at the core of the 17th century projects for philosophical languages.

In 1613 A.D the German Philosopher Alsted first used the term General Grammar as distinguished from Special Grammar. He stated that the function of General Grammar was to reveal those feature which are common to all languages. He pointed out that the general Grammar is the (Pattern Norma) of every particular grammar.

In 1750 the French Philosopher DU Marsias (1676 – 1756) stated: (In a Grammar there are parts which pertain to all Languages. These components form what is called the (general Grammar) in addition to these general Universal parts there are those which belong only to particular language; and these constitute the particular grammars of each language).

The article on grammar in the first edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (1771) contains an extensive section titled (Of Universal Grammar).

There is a Scottish school of universal grammarians from the 18th century, as distinguished from the philosophical language project.

Hundreds of other names and constitutions can be added who contributed to the idea of universalism in language.

The idea rose to prominence and influence, in modern linguistics with theories from Chomsky since the 1950s, known as Universal Grammar Theory.

Universal grammar is not to be confused with (Universal language), or even with grammar itself. Chomsky has stated that (Universal grammar is not a grammar, but rather a theory of grammars, a kind of metatheory or schematism for grammar).

According to Chomsky, Universal grammar is a theoretical or hypothetical system of categories, operations, and principles shared by all human languages. It is the theory of the genetic component of the language faculty. The theory proposes that there is an innate, genetically determined language faculty that specifies the rules of language, making for children to acquire the language they are exposed to easily.

Chomsky argued that the human brain contains a limited set of constraints for organizing language. This implies in turn that all languages have a common structural basis which is the set of rules known as "universal grammar".

This approach is in contrast with behaviorists' perspective, suggesting that language acquisition, like any other kind of learning, could be explained by a succession of trials. According to this approach children learn their mother tongue by simple imitation, through listening and repeating what adults said. It accounts for language development by means of environmental influence.

The basic postulate of UG is that a certain set of structural rules are innate to humans, independent of sensory experience. It treats language as a uniquely human, biologically based cognitive capacity.

The central idea of principles and parameters is that a person's syntactic knowledge can be modelled with two formal mechanisms:

1. A finite set of fundamental principles that are common to all languages. e.g., that a sentence must always have a subject, even if it is not overtly pronounced.
2. A finite set of parameters that determine syntactic variability among languages; e.g., a binary parameter that determines whether or not the subject of a sentence must be overtly pronounced (this example is sometimes referred to as the pro-drop parameter).

Within this framework, the goal of linguistics is to identify all of the principles and parameters that are universal to human language.

The following is a list of only few of Linguistic Universals presented by Chomsky and his followers:

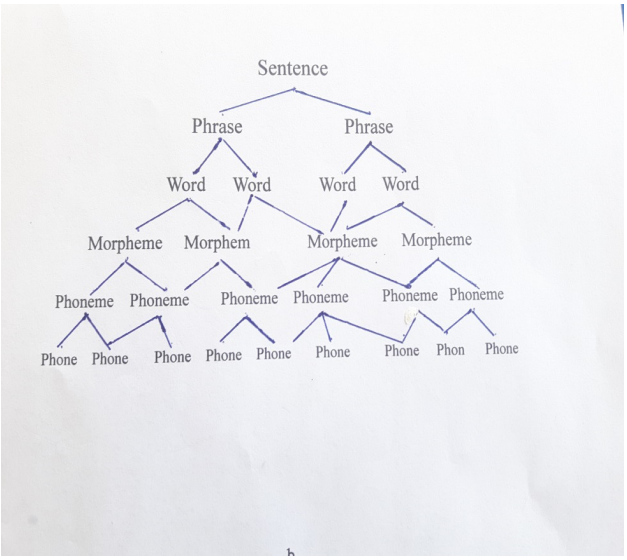
1. Man and Language are inseparably correlated. That means wherever man exists language exists.
2. Any normal child born of any racial, geographical, social or economic heritage will learn the language to which she or he is exposed. This proves that the differences among languages are not due to biological reasons.
3. There are no primitive languages.

4. All languages are equally developed.
5. All languages are perfect systems and are equally complex.
6. All Languages are capable of expressing any idea in the universe. The vocabulary of any language can be expanded to include new words for new concepts.
7. All Languages change through time.
8. Similar grammatical categories (like verbs ,Nouns , pronouns , adjectives , adverbs ..etc.) are found in all Languages.
9. The grammar of all languages contain of similar Phonological , morphological, and syntactic rules.
10. Speakers of all languages are capable of producing and comprehending an infinite number of sentences.
11. There are semantic concepts found in every language. Every language has ways of referring to different tenses, to negate , to form question.
12. Suprasegmental elements such as stress and intonation found in every language.
13. All languages have finite set of discrete sounds which are combined by similar rules within the frame of phonetic syllable structure to form phonological syllables.
14. In all languages the relationship between sounds and meanings are arbitrary.
15. All languages use the sounds produced by organs of speech. These sounds constitute the phonemic system (its phonemes) of the language in similar way.
16. All languages use the discrete sounds produced by organs of speech. These sounds constitute the phonemic system (its phonemes) of the language through the procedure of minimal pairs and minimal sets.
17. Hierarchical construction is an essential property of all human languages. The phonological system of all languages consist of a limited number of phonemes which are combined to form syllables and morphemes. Morphemes are the smallest meaningful element. The morphemes are combined by similar ways to form words and words are combined to form sentences by which full thoughts are expressed.

Hundreds of other entries can be added.

hierarchy refers to any ordering of units or levels on a scale of size. This indicates that the combinations of the individual elements of language are not only linear but also hierarchical in nature.

The hierarchical relationship between the smallest unit (the individual sounds) and the most complicated unit (the sentence) shown in the diagram:



This means that language consists not only of coordination relations, but also of subordination dominance relations. These relations can be demonstrated at every level of linguistic analysis: phonological, morphological, and syntactic. Each layer of the hierarchy constitute of further sub levels Level.

Syllable Hierarchy

A syllable is a phonological unit composed of one or more phonemes. Every syllable has a nucleus which is a vowel. The nucleus may be preceded by one or more consonants called Onset and followed by one or more consonant called Coda. The hierarchical structure of the monosyllabic word (streets) can be represented by the following diagram:

Syllable

Onset	Nucleus	Coda
s t r	i:	t s

Word hierarchy

The word is not simple sequence of morphemes. It has an internal structure. Foe example the word (unproblematic) is composed of three morphemes. (un – problem – atic).The root of the word is (problem). It is a noun to which the affix (-atic) is added

resulting in an adjective (problematic). To this adjective prefix (un -) is added forming a new adjective (unproblematic).

Adjective

un Adjective

Noun atic

problem

Sentence Hierarchy

Within the sentence itself, there is a **hierarchical** structure. For example in the sentence:

The children are selling red flowers.

This can be divided into two parts, Subject and Predicate, in each of which there is a main part and a subordinate part. The Subject consists of a Noun Phrase (The children), in which a noun (children) is the head, and a determiner (The) is a modifier. The Predicate has as its head a Verb Phrase (are selling) which governs a Noun Phrase (red flowers) as its Object. The Verb Phrase has a main verb (selling) as its head and an auxiliary (are) as a subordinate part, while the Noun Phrase has as its head a noun (flowers), and an adjective(red) as a modifier.

The levels themselves overlap and interrelate. Phonology interrelates with morphology to make morphophonemic level. Morphology interrelates with Syntax to make Morphosyntactic Level. Phonology, Morphology and Syntax interrelate to make Morphpophonosyntactic level.

Conclusion

Language is immensely complicated system. This extremely complexity makes it impossible and unworkable for a linguist to describe it at once. Because of that and in order to make a scientific statement about language, the linguist concentrates at any one time on different aspects of language. These different and partial aspects are called levels of analysis. Each layer of the hierarchy constitute one level. Each level constitute of further sub levels. The levels interrelate to make higher levels, as shown in the table.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="4">Structural Levels of analysis</th></tr>
<tr><td>Sentence</td><td rowspan="2">Syntax</td><td rowspan="2">Morphosyntax</td><td rowspan="5">Morphophonosyntax</td></tr>
<tr><td>Phrase</td></tr>
<tr><td>word</td><td rowspan="2">Morphology</td><td rowspan="2">Morphophonemics</td></tr>
<tr><td>Morpheme</td></tr>
<tr><td>Syllable</td><td rowspan="2">Phonology</td></tr>
<tr><td>Phoneme</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Sounds</td><td colspan="3">Phonetics</td></tr>
</table>

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