

The History of English Grammar

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Abstract— *The first stage of development of the English grammar started during the early 16th century. William Bullokar wrote and published a book entitled "Pamphlet for Grammar" in 1586. Bullokar wrote the book to purposely address the development of the English language in Latin America. The book contained Bullokar's traditional grammar which was vigilantly remodeled by the "Latin Grammar" approach of William Lily in his book entitled "Rudimenta Grammatices" published in 1534. King Henry VIII prescribed the use of Lily's grammar in teaching the English language in 1542. Bullokar's grammar in many of his writings were said to be adapted from the traditional "Reformed Spelling System" of 16th century England. In 1685, Christopher Cooper wrote the first English grammar book in Latin entitled "Grammatica Linguae Angelicance".¹*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a reawakening of interest in the role of grammar in English language teaching. Grammar is usually a necessary or desirable part of classroom language learning, especially in elementary level. In Bangladesh, teachers teach grammar based on the rules and typical examples where it is expected that students will memorize all these. On the other hand, developed countries do not follow this technique. They follow different creative techniques by entertaining and relaxing the learners while they are learning or practicing a linguistic structure, which eliminates students' negative attitude towards learning. However, recent methods and theories of language teaching reveal that the traditional techniques of teaching grammar are ineffective. According to these methods and theories grammar should be taught inductively that demands grammar items to be presented creatively. There are many ways of teaching grammar creatively at elementary level like introducing the grammar through anecdote, describing pictures, playing songs etc. As part of my undergraduate degree in English, I had to do an internship where I worked as an elementary level language teacher in an English medium school. This gave me the opportunity to implement the language teaching theories and methods that I learned in class. When I applied different theories and teaching techniques in the classroom to teach grammar, I used authentic materials and taught grammar through real context that made the grammar points more understandable and easier. Then I realized the importance of presenting grammatical items creatively in front of students. Moreover, as I was a student of Bengali medium school and went through the typical ways of learning grammar where creative presentation of grammar did not take place, I can compare the style of teaching grammar between Bengali medium and English medium school. Furthermore, when I found an adult student of Bengali medium struggling with grammar while producing a single grammatically correct sentence, I once more realized the importance of grammar in language learning. All these motivated me to write this report on this topic.

2. MAIN PART

During the late 19th century, a renowned grammar writer named Lindley Murray cited the role of "Grammatical Authorities" in developing the use of the English language in many European and other Western countries. According to Murray's study, the use of Latin in interpreting the English grammar was distinguished from the Ancient Greek approach of the English language.² During the start of the 17th century, the development of the grammar primarily focused on tradition. The significance of the use of English grammar played a huge role in the commercialization of western societies. It was also during the early 17th century where the use of the "Grammar Writing" was introduced. A series of techniques in improving grammatical skills through speaking and writing were introduced in many European countries during the mid-17th century. In 1711, two books about the role of the grammar in Latin countries were published. The two books are the following:

- "A Grammar of the English Tongue" by John Brightland. Released during the early 18th century, the book contains Brightland's writings on the techniques of developing the English language through improvement of grammatical skills in the mid-17th century.

- "Essay towards a Practical Grammar Usage" by James Greenwood. The book contains the use of grammar in targeting people with no Hispanic or Latin cultural background.

A total of 16 new grammars based from Pamphlet for Grammar were introduced during the late 17th century. It took more than 115 years before 270 grammar titles were added during the last years of the 17th century. During the first half of the 19th century, a total of 900 books about the significance of grammar in the English language were published. Many of the 900 books

¹ <https://www.coursehero.com/file/p57k2mvk/Grammar-is-important-however-there-is-wide-spread-evidence-that-traditional/>

² <https://www.coursehero.com/file/p57k2mvk/Grammar-is-important-however-there-is-wide-spread-evidence-that-traditional/>

made use of the "Egalitarian" and "Utilitarian" method. In 1848, Edward Shelley wrote a book entitled "The People's Grammar: English Grammar Difficulties for the Million" in 1848. The book was written for the 18th century young readers who are acquiring in-depth knowledge in developing grammatical skills from the English language. William Cobbett's "A Grammar of the English Language: In a Series of Letters" was also published in 1848. Cobbett's writings were said to intend the significance of developing grammatical skills in writing and speaking English among students, sailors, soldiers and young apprentices.

There is no doubt that the history of English grammar is firmly connected with the history of English language. As well as the language itself, English grammar has been influenced by all the events and changes in British history over the time periods, from the days when it arrived in Britain to its contemporary status as a world language, sometimes called as lingua franca.

There is evidence that Latin, Old Norse, French and Old English (resembling to Old German) have influenced the English language through its history. However, Latin played one of the most important roles from the earliest moments of contact. From the linguistic point of view, considering grammar as a serious subject to study, the Latin language ruled the grammar teaching world for centuries.

In this perspective it is important to mention that traditional English grammars (first attempts appeared in the eighteenth century) describing grammatical patterns derived from the Latin grammars. Analysing English grammar, first grammarians of the eighteenth century (e.g. Robert Lowth) looked at the language using the terms and grammar distinction which had proved useful through studying Latin grammar patterns.³

For centuries, people had to know Latin to be accepted in educated society of course, at first in church environment.

English is a member of the Indo-European family of languages. The Indo-European languages include several major branches: Latin and the modern Romance languages (French, Spanish), the Germanic languages (German, English), the Indo-Iranian languages (Hindi, Sanskrit), the Slavic languages (Polish, Czech), the Baltic languages (Latvian), the Celtic languages (Irish, Welsh) and Greek.

Considering these branches of the Indo-European languages, there are two of them which are worth focusing on the development of English: The Germanic and the Romance. English is a member of the Germanic group and it is further classified as a Low West Germanic language of the Indo – European family. There is evidence that this group began as a common language in the Elbe River about 3,000 years ago. This Common Germanic language split into three sub-groups:

1. East Germanic spoken in south-eastern Europe.
2. North Germanic spoken in northern Europe (Scandinavian languages).
3. West Germanic considered as the ancestor of modern German, Dutch, Frisian, Flemish and English.

As we can see the early history of English language is fatally tied up with the early history of the Germanic languages which further developed into other languages as German, English, Scandinavian languages, Dutch, also Yiddish and Afrikaans. As a consequence, English belongs to the subgroup of Germanic languages containing many common features inside of this language group, and many differences which set them apart from other Indo-European languages.

Old English (449-1066 AD). The emergence of English language dates back to 449 AD which is the period of Old English (sometimes called Anglo-Saxon). The Celts families had been living in England and in 43 AD the Romans came. They left England in 410 AD and the Germanic tribes, Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians, came.⁴

By the arriving Anglo-Saxon, the language spoken in England was influenced by Celtic, but more evidently by Latin language. It is believed that the Germanic tribes had used Latin words on the continent of Europe before they invaded Britain.

According to Hladký, in Old English there was one characteristic feature - inflection. Like other Germanic languages, Old English was inflected, i.e. the words had endings indicating functions of those words in the sentence in order to understand the meaning of the utterances. Thus, word order was not very important comparing to Modern English, in which word order is crucial.⁵

The syntax of Old English was more flexible than Modern English. Although general word order was subject – verb – object, it varied more, mostly in the placing of the end of the sentence, typically a subordinate clause.

Nouns were of three genders: masculine, feminine or neuter. Numbers of nouns were either singular or plural and there were four cases.

There were seven groups of declensions for nouns.

Adjectives were either strong or weak, and they agreed in gender, case and number with nouns they described. Comparatives were formed by adding -ra to the adjective and superlatives had many endings: -ost, -ist, -est, -m.

Adverbs were derived from adjectives by adding -e or -lic.

Verbs in its infinitive ended in -an. In the present tense they had markers for number and person. In the past tense the verbs had endings -de in its weak form and a vowel change in its strong form. Old English had many more strong verbs than

³ THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR A.T. Касымбекова, старший преподаватель кафедры развития языков и культурологии РИПК СО

⁴ Thornbury, S. (2007). How to Teach Grammar. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

⁵ Hladký, J. (1998). An Old English, Middle English and early-New English Reader. Brno: Vydavatelství Masarykovy University

Modern English. Hladký points out, “that the OE verbs had only two tense inflections, present and preterite, which were often used to express complicated relationships”. He further comments that the present tense expressed the present time (both continuous and simple form), and the future time. The distinction between the present and the future time was done by the only verb - “bēōn” - the old form of to be. The preterite tense expressed a single or a continuing act in the past and the pre-preterite sometimes with a strengthening “aer” meaning “before”

Middle English (1066-1500 Ad). David Crystal states that “a fundamental change in the structure of English took place during the 11th and 12th centuries – one without precedent in the history of the language, and without parallel thereafter”.⁶

He further points out that grammatical relationship in Old English was expressed chiefly by the use of inflections. In Middle English, they were expressed (as they are today) mainly by word order.

The year 1066 was the beginning of a new social and linguistic period in Britain. William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy, invaded and conquered England. The language introduced to Britain by the invader was French, or to be more specific, Norman French. It was a dialect of Old French known as Anglo-Norman.

The Normans were of Germanic origin (“Norman” came from “Norseman” – a man coming from the North) and Anglo-Norman was a French dialect with Germanic influence and Latin roots.

In his highly acclaimed book, *Encyclopedia of the English Language*, David Crystal (2004:30) points to the French influence on Middle English.

Following William of Normandy’s accession, French was rapidly established in the corridors of power. French – speaking barons were appointed, who brought over their own retinues. Soon after, French – speaking abbots and bishops were in place. Within 20 years of the invasion, almost all the religious houses were under French – speaking superiors.

Large numbers of French merchants and craftsmen crossed the Channel to take advantage of the commercial opportunities provided by the new regime. And aristocratic lines remained strong with Normandy, where the nobles kept their estates.

As a result, the upper class in England began to speak French while the lower class spoke English (Anglo-Saxon). This situation continued for over a century.

But in 1204 AD an interesting thing happened – King John lost Normandy, and after him, King Edward I spoke only English.

Thus, French began to lose its prestige and English became more widely used among the upper classes, and consequently more use of the English language emerged.

Trying to find out the reasons for survival of the English language, we can see that in the 11th century English was evidently very well established in order not to be defended by another language. The position of English becomes stronger in the 13th and 14th century when first, prayers, romances, documents and other literary works in Middle English appeared.

As it has been mentioned, the era of Middle English was one of the most important moments in the history of the language. Turning to Hladký (1998), we can see that at the end of the Old English period there were clear signs for decay of the inflectional system of verbs. There was the change from synthesis to analysis.

“The analytical forms and new categories developed and the result is the present complicated system of tenses and aspects”

The most obvious reason was because of the stress shift to the beginning of the word during the evolution of the Germanic languages.

The syntax of Middle English was stricter and there were prepositions used in sentences.

Nouns lost the case suffixes at their ends, and the generalized plural marker became -s, although still competing with Old Anglo-Saxon -n.

Adjectives lost agreement with the nouns, although the weak ending – e remained. At this period the comparative form -er and superlative -est were finally established.

Adverbs became to be formed by the endings -ly, although there were some adverbs which were not formed in this way, such as fast, late, hard.

Verbs infinitives lost – an ending, and began to use to, originally a preposition, before the verbs to indicate infinitival form. The third person singular, as well as plural, was marked with - (e)th. Also the singular with - (e)s from Northern dialect emerged. More strong (irregular) verbs changed to weak (regular) verbs.

During this period auxiliary verbs be, have and do emerged and began to be used frequently.

Early Modern English (1500-1800 Ad). After introducing the printing press in English in 1476 by William Caxton and becoming the East Midland dialect as the literature standard of English, there can be stated that a new period of the history of English language began. The period of the Early Modern English was affected by the printing revolution. According to Crystal, “the new invention (printing press) gave an unprecedented impetus to the formation of a standard language and the study of its properties” (Crystal 2004:56).⁷

⁶ Alexander, L.G. (1991). *Longman English Grammar*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

⁷ Asher, J. (1997). *Learning Another Language through Actions: The complete. Teacher’s Guide Book*. Los Gatos, Calif.: Skz Oaks Oroductions.

The thousands words were added to English as writers created new words by using Greek and Latin prefixes and affixes. Scholars dealt with such areas of language as grammar, vocabulary, writing system and style. First English dictionary was published by Henry Cockrum in 1623.

The influence of Shakespeare and printed King James Bible had a very important impact on English language during the Renaissance.

The syntax was influenced by Latin syntactic style imitating Latin authors (e.g. Cicero).

However, word order pattern subject – verb – object remained unchanged. Also there were some developments in sentence structure, such as coordination and subordination. New conjunctions emerged (e.g. because), and participial construction became very frequent.

Adjectives lost their endings except for in comparatives and superlatives. Focusing on pronouns, relative pronoun WHO and neuter IT were first used.

Some strong verbs become weak and verbs in the third singular form become -(e)s instead of -(e)th.

There was a more limited use of the progressive and auxiliary verbs than there is now, however. Negatives followed the verb and multiple negatives were still used.

The era of Early Modern English was also called the Great Vowel Shift, when all the vowels changed their pronunciation.

The main difference between the Early Modern and Modern English was vocabulary. Since 1900, a very large amount of new words has been added to English in a relatively short time.

The majority of these words were the result of science and technology, use of Latin and Greek roots, and the fact of the British Empire which adopted many foreign words and made them as its own.

3. CONCLUSION

The 18th century was also the beginning of a new period of interest in English grammar. Several grammarians wrote dictionaries and grammar books in a prescriptive way – telling people, namely foreigners, what to do or not to do with the language. The most influential was Bishop Robert Lowth and his book Short Introduction to English Grammar (1762).

These early grammarians felt that English language should be clear and logical in order to be understandable. In conclusion, the English language at the end of 18th century and in the beginning and during the 19th century was by no means identical to English of present days.

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