The Sentence in the Linguistic Theory

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Abstract

The definition of the sentence is considered one of the most controversial issues in linguistic . Many definitions of the sentence , some of which go back to the ancient Greek tradition , have been proposed . The purpose of the present study is to show how each of the major linguistic theories ; namely the traditional , structural , and generative theories approached the sentence . It has been found out that these theories share common views with regard to the notions that the sentence should be considered the largest unit of grammatical description and that it consists of two basic elements . it has also been found out that the theories differ , on the basis of their theorization , with regard to the nature of the sentence ; whether to consider it a physical or a psychological phenomenon .

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I. Introduction

One of the controversial issues in linguistics has been the definition of the sentence . The controversy is old and it goes back to the early days of traditional linguistic theory which originated in the Greek tradition . Since then , so many definitions such as notional , logical , formal , structural , psychological , operational , verbal , and phonological definitions , have been proposed . Ries (1931) reported that (150) definitions of the sentence were proposed between the years of 1830 and 1930 . These attempts suggest how significant the sentence is in the linguistic theory.

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The purpose of the present study is not to propose a new definition of the sentence. Rather, it aims at briefly identifying how the different linguistic theories have approached the notion of the sentence. The study will examine the sentence in three major linguistic theories. It is hypothesized that each theory has its own approach, which stems from the theoretical grounds and principles of theories.

II. The Traditional Linguistic Theory

The traditional linguistic theory is primarily associated with the contributions made by the Greek and Roman scholars to the study of the human language and , of course , the Arab grammarians' contributions which are occasionally , but not every often , recognized by the western historians of linguistics . The traditional approach to the sentence drew heavily on logical and semantic criteria . (Robins , 1967) .

In the Greek tradition , Plato was probably the first to deal with the sentence which he called " logos " . According to Plato , a logos consists of two components ; namely , " onoma" that is name , noun , or nominal subject , and " rhema " , that is the phrase ,

saying verb , verbal or predicate (Dineen , 1967) . These two components actually constitute the components of a proposition which , in turn , falls in the heart of logic . Aristotle , who also adopted the term " logos " , proposed a general definition of the sentence . He stated that a sentence is " a significant speech of which this or that part may have meaning as something , that is uttered but not as expressing a judgement of positive or negative character . " (1973 : 121) . Finally , Thrax , the great philosopher and grammarian equated the sentence with a " complete thought " .

The Roman tradition , which inherited much of the Greek tradition , made no radical departure from the Greek teachings . Priscian , for example , introduced the term " oratio " which seems to stand for the sentence . For Priscian , the sentence is " a complete sequence of words manifesting a complete thought " (Covington , 1984 : 6) . The Modistae gave a well – stated definition of the sentence by saying that a sentence consists of a subject and a predicate . It is clear that this definition emphasizes the functional basis of the sentence. (Dineen, 1967) .In the Arabic tradition,

the sentence is sometimes treated as being equivalent to speech and, therefore, there is no difference between the two (Al – Zamakhshari, N. D; Ibn Jinni, 1952). However, Ibn Hisham (1966) rejected this notion and he believed that the sentence and the speech were not the same. It is noteworthy that the Arabic term " Kalaam " which is translated into English as term " speech " is ambiguous here . Sibawaih (1966) studied the sentence within the context of Al – Musnad Ilayh and Al Musnad which roughly stand for the subject and the predicate respectively .The traditional definitions of the sentence may be criticized on two grounds . On one hand , it is claimed that is difficult to determine exactly what is meant by a complete thought and what makes it a complete one (Palmer , 1971) . On the other hand , the logical definition which is based on the notions of subject and predicate may involve some problems related to the corresponding between what is called the logical subject , the grammatical subject and the thematic or psychological subject . The inadequacy of the traditional definitions is sometimes attributed to the

fact that they were derived from oral culture (Rosenberg , 1977) .

Despite the criticism which is often levelled at the traditional definitions of the sentence , these definitions seem to have laid the basis for further definitions which have employed the functional notions of subject and predicate : a dichotomy which is essential in grammatical analysis . Furthermore , it seems that the traditional expression of a " complete thought " has been misinterpreted and taken out of context . We imagine that this expression was used to refer to one thing only : that is the combination of a subject and a predicate . If one is missing, then the thought will certainly be incomplete . So , implied in the definitions are the two notions of subject and predicate which make up the sentence .

III . The Structural Linguistic Theory :

The structural linguistic theory is often associated with De Saussre as well as the views of the scholars who succeeded him who altogether established

what is known as structural linguistic which dominated the linguistic field until the middle of this century . The impact of the structural theory on the study of language has been enormous . Generally speaking , there has been no unanimous agreement on the definition of the sentence within this theory . De Saussure views the sentence as one type of a linguistic sign ; a concept which covers more than one thing in this theory . For De Saussure , the sentence is " the ideal type of syntagm " (1959 : 123) . A syntagm , for him " is alwayes composed of two or more consecutive units. " (ibid) . Though general or even vague in nature especially when we learn that the sentence belongs to " la parole " rather than to " language " , this definition of the sentence is useful because it , in some sense , generated further definitions . The term " ideal " found in the definition should be carefully interpreted to mean the " largest " unit or the upper limit of the a syntagm or a structure ; a notion which has been adopted by many linguists during the structural period . period . period . Sapir defines the sentence in a rather different way . For him , the sentence is simply a " linguistic

expression of a preposition " (1921 : 35) . His definition is very much traditional because it draws largely on logical rather than on pure structural principles . Bloomfield who is widely recognized to have established a tradition in the structural period , defines the sentence as " an independent linguistic form , not included by virtue of any grammatical constructions in any linguistic form " (Bloomfield , 1933 : 170) . In essence , this definition is not quite original because the central defining feature found in the definition was suggested earlier by booth Meillet (1903) and Jespersen (1924) . However , the definition , as will be argued later , is important and plausible . Finally , Hockett (1958 : 201) defines the sentence by proposing the two notions of " topic " and comment " as being the basic structural constituents of the sentence . " Apart from Sapir ' s definition of the sentence , the structural approaches to the sentence focus on two important characteristics of the sentence . The first characteristic is concerned with the sentence as a free grammatical construction unembeddable distributionally in a larger construction . This one does

distinguish the sentence from other grammatical construction such as the clause and the phrase . It does not , however , exclude the fact that a sentence may be embedded in another similar structure , i.e. a sentence within a sentence . The other characteristic of the sentence , being the " largest " grammatical unit of grammatical description or analysis , proposed implicitly by the early structuralists as alluded to earlier , and explicitly by later stiucturralists such as Robins (1964) and Lyons (1968) and the functionalists such as Halliday (1985) , does distinguish it from larger constructions such as the text . It is true that structuralists insist on basing their definitions , including parts of speech on purely structural and formal criteria , the fact of the matter is that such criteria , may have sometimes semantic roots manifested in semantic presuppositions involved in the grammatical description in general . In fact , the structuralists , are criticized for such matter (Brown and Miller , 1991) .

III. The Generative Linguistics Theory:

The generative linguistics theory which is considered the most adequate theory up to date has contributed very little to the definition of the sentence . In fact , the theory offers no definitions . This theory operates on a a number of assumptions regarding the language and the sentence as will be shown shortly . This section will address the views of generative syntacticinns and partially the views of generative semanticists. Generative syntax , as prposed by Noam Chomsy (1957 , 1965) during the early dayes of transformational – generative theory , views language as a set of sentences and the sentence as consisting of two major elemnts ; that is , a noun phrase (NP) and a verb phrase (VP) . the following formal constituent structure rule illustrate the essence of the sentence : S NP VP ; a rule which is sometimes criticized as being arbitrarily formed (Covington 1984) .

Therefore , the sentence is taken to be an object which is analyzable into smaller constituents . On this occasion it is noteworthy that the generativists follow the structuralists in adopting the view that the sentence is the maximum grammatical unit of grammatical description . Generative syntax has also introduced the notion of ill formed vs . well – formed sentences . It is taken for granted that a generative syntax , which is assumed to account for the intuitive knowledge of " an ideal speaker – listener " (1965 : 3) , is expected to generate the latter type of sentences .Implied in this claim is the fact that the sentence is not treated as a physical construct but rather as a psychological one which specifically belongs to the competence of the native speaker (Harrocks , 1987) .

Two comments are to be made with regard to the generative syntax approach to the sentence . First , the proponents of this type of syntax have very much adopted the traditional definitions of the sentence especially the subject – predict

formula but these functional terms have been replaced by their categorial counterparts ; that is NP and VP . therefore , it is no surprise to read , for example , a bout the definition of the subject of the sentence , in the light of the tree – diagramming illustration suggested by the generativists , as being NP which is immediately dominated by S . The other comment concerns the scope of the term sentence as used by the generativists . It seems that they use it in a fairly flexible and broader sense to cover the clause as well . So , the functional categories underlying the structural categories are extended to cover the clausal structure for the simple fact that a clause , structurally and functionally speaking consists of the same categories as the sentence i.e a subject (NP) and a predicate(VP) . In fact , taking into account both dimensions in sentence description bears necessary in order to produce good descriptions In this regard , Givon (1993 : 30) , who advocates using a double lable such as (subj) and (NP) in the description of the

sentence , correctly remarks that " There have been various attempts in contemporary grammatical description to deal with this dichotomy without using double labels , most of these . attempts have been rather unsuccessful because of their claimed reductionism and formal purity " .

In the context of generative semantics , Chafe (1970 : 98) who represent one trend in this type of semantics defines the sentence as " either a verb alone , a verb accompanied by one or more verbs , or a configuration of this kind to which one or more coordinate or subordinate verbs have been added " . It is obvious that Chafe , like the proponents of this theory , stresses the central role of the verb or the predicate in the structure of the sentence . His contention stems from the assumption that it is the verb that determines the type of noun which accompanies it and not the other way around . He goes too far to cast doubts on the " independent structural entity " of the sentence of a whole . Accordingly

, he believes that the starting point of the sentence generation represented as S should ~~be replaced~~ by V in which the verb is the starting point in the generation operation . Although Chafe present some important arguments in support of his definition , unfortunately , falls short of account for certain grammatical cases . For example , in the sentence " John is hungry " , the copular verb "is " plays no central role in determining the type of noun which precedes it except for , of course , its role in determining the number of nouns . Furthermore , such a definition fails to account for what is known as verbless sentences . A good example is the Arabic sentence " Zaidun Kareemun " which is translated into English as " Zaid is generous " in which an overt Arabic verb is lacking . At any rate , Chafe ' s definition of the sentence derives much from Martinet ' s definition which states that the sentences is " an utterance , all the elements of which are attached

to a single predicate or to several predicates . "
(Martinet , 1964 : 122) .

IV. Summary and Conclusion

The above discussion has made a number of things clear a bout t6he sentence . It has demonstrated how the linguistic theories approached and viewed the sentence . Each has its own theorization a bout the sentence which sometimes resembles the other theory and some other times differs markedly . Below is a summary of the points and views presented in the body of the study .

1) All theories agree that the sentence should be taken to be the maximum unit of grammatical description .
2) All the theories recognize the fact that the sentence consists of two obligatory components. But sometimes these components are recognized implicitly and

given different labels . the difference may be described as a terminological one in this case .

3) Each linguistic theory approaches the sentence on the basis of its linguistic theorization which is very much determined by the intellectual atmosphere dominating the given period . in the traditional period , logic and semantics did , to a large extent , shape the linguistic views which coincides with some views later on . during the structural period , the principle of distribution governed many of the structural theorization a bout the units of language including the sentence . The generative theory emerged as a result of the influence of the congnitive intellectual climate which has been dominating the realm of knowledge since beginning of the second half of this century . The sentence is accordingly viewed as a cognitive phenomenon or a psychological construct which belongs to the linguistic knowledge

(competence) rather than to linguistic behavior (performance) . But it should be emphasized here that the generative characterization of the other preceding linguistic theories . A close look into those characterization will certainly reveal this fact . It is known that the generative theory has adopted and succeeded in reintroducing many structural and traditional notions in a new and a creative way .

4) The structural theory seems to be the only theory which has drawn well – defined structural boundaries of the notion of the sentence . The structural definitions especially those given by Bloomfield and his followers distinguish the sentence from similar structures such as the clause and the phrase . In contrast , the generative theory looks flexible in this sense that it allows other non – sentenial structures such as the clause to enjoy the status of sentence .

5) Finally , there is no doubt that the level of theoretical sophistication and argumentation advocated by the type of the linguistic theory will determine , to a large extent , the type of approach to the sentence . The generative linguistic theory is a good example in this regard .

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