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Prescriptive Grammar and Others: Which Is the Most Appropriate Paradigm for the Contemporary Learner and User of the English Language?

Chibuzo Nathaniel Nwoko

Department of Languages (English Unit) Yusuf Maitama Sule University, Kano, Nigeria Tel: 08038962136

ABSTRACT:- The objective of this study which is situated in comparative grammar is to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the three selected theories and types of English grammar: prescriptive, descriptive and Transformational Generative Grammars (TGG), for they have provoked controversies today with regard to the particular type that serves as an appropriate model for teaching and learning of the English Language. Certain sentence constructions which represent different paradigms by renowned linguists and grammarians constitute the source data of this work. These data enable the author to draw some conclusions. Adopting a framework-free approach to grammatical analysis, often associated with Haspelmath (2008) and Dryer (2006), each type of grammar is looked at closely without bias to deduce its strengths and weaknesses . On this basis, a synthesis of all the three grammars is provided to show their meeting points or otherwise. In order to obviate the dilemma of the choice of the suitable model to teach and learn, it is recommended that all the models play complementary roles, hence should be used and considered relevant. Therefore, none should be sarcastically branded old –fashioned or too complex. That is, both the teacher and the learner should be exposed to all.

KEYWORDS:- Grammar, Comparative Grammar, TGG, prescriptive grammar, descriptive grammar, minimalism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Our position in this paper is borne out of too much reliance and preference for a particular type of grammar at the expense of others, particularly prescriptive grammar over others and vice versa. This work does not lose sight of the disdain some English Language instructors display over traditional grammar and promotion of another. Sometimes, it gets to an extent where some English scholars are derogatively and caustically referred to as traditional or prescriptive grammarians. To a broadminded linguist or a language teacher, such elicits worries and concerns and provokes the question: "Is prescriptive grammar in a cross fire with others? Put in another mode, should the study and teaching of English grammars be done in isolation or is there any type or theory of grammar that has become obsolete or irrelevant today? It is believed that an unprejudiced examination of these three selected approaches to grammar could, to an extent, bridge the knowledge gap of our contemporary users of English.   After all, scholarly and linguistic evidence, including that of (Andrews 2006), reveal that a majority of teachers tend to be prescriptive (P. 26).It is very obvious that the expectation of the society where English is used, whether as a ENL or ESL or EFL is to see those English scholars and users whose constructions align with those of the educated English scholars globally. On this basis, we make an attempt to x-ray the strengths and shortcomings of the popular English grammars today, such as prescriptive or traditional, descriptive and transformational generative grammar. Therefore, this discourse, in its argumentative stance, is preoccupied with the above questions in its reassessment of the extant English grammars by examining their strengths and weaknesses.

II. THE EXPECTED ROLES OF ENGLISH GRAMMARS

In a multilingual society . including Nigeria, where the English Language has doubled as an official and a Second Language (L2), a knowledge and mastery of its grammar by its user is sine qua non. A mastery of its grammar, no doubt , qualifies its user as an educated and as a scholar. The grammar of any language , be it English or any other, is aimed at acquisition of the rules that govern the use of that language, the appropriate formation processes of words and larger units of that language. Cayne et al in Akeusola (2014), by way of

definition, say that "grammar is the science dealing with the systematic rules of language, its forms, inflections and syntax, and the art of using them correctly" (P.2). This same source adds other dimensions to the roles expected of grammar by acknowledging that grammar has to do with the study of the system underlying the formal features of a language, as sounds, morphemes, words or sentence (is) a theory specifying the manner in which all sentences of a language are construed" (P. 12).

O'Graddy, et al (2011) align with the above view points on what grammar does. They uphold the view that grammars show the acceptable and unacceptable utterances in a language which depict the linguistic competence of the native speakers of the language. Crystal (1988) does not take much exception to these others' point of view in respect of the roles of grammar, for he believes that what is called grammar should be a device, capable of identifying and analyzing units in a stream of speech as well as their patterns and how they are able to convey meaning. In summing up what grammar roles are, he says that the grammar of a language takes care of the "possible sentence structures organized according to certain general principles" (P.88). He goes further in enlightening the audience on what grammar stands for by making reference to Chomsky (1957) definition: "A grammar is a device of some sort for producing the sentences of the language under analysis".

Some of the areas in respect of the meaning or the roles of grammar the above cited scholars share in common include that grammars have the inherent function of specifying both the well-formedness and the ill-formedness in a construction; it provides an explanation or explanations to such structures. This is the same as asserting that it is the role of grammars to prove that a sentence does not conform to the linguistic competence of the native speakers. Still to be deduced from these scholarly positions in grammar functions is that grammar is not just about rules or prescriptions, rather it also shows how the smallest strings such as morphs attach themselves in a string to form words, how these words combine themselves to a larger unit such as phrase, and from there graduate to a more meaningful and coherent structure known as sentence. These standpoints in grammar need to inculcate to the language user that grammar ensures that formation of words that convey our thoughts and feelings do not take place in a haphazard manner, but in a systematic and accountable form that makes sense to the user, reader and hearer.

SAMPLES OF ENGLISH SENTENCE CONSTRUCTIONS BY DIFFERENT SCHOLARS

The following sentences which constitute the source of data of this work were constructed by different English Language scholars. They function as the yardstick for determining the strengths and weaknesses of each grammar. The underlined words show that some of them conform to the tenets of prescriptive grammar, while others agree with either descriptive or generative. At the end of each sentence, the source is provided.

1.   Everybody thinks he has the answer (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973,p.182)
2.   Everybody thinks they have the answer. (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973,p.182))
3.   Language shift can be extremely beneficial depending on which language you are shifting to (Adeyanju,2017,p.20)
4.   Why has Harare received very little attention almost two decades after? (Adeyanju, 2017,p.21)
5.   … to provide the necessary human, material and technological resources to achieve them (Adeyanju, 2017,p.21).
6.   What was he going to say to her? (Nwapa,1981, p.100)
7.   John taught himself (Huddleston,1976,p.6)
8.   John taught him (Huddleston,1976,p.6)
9.   The house which you told me about is not for sale(English essay)
10.   The house you told me about is not for sale(English essay)

PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR

Prescriptive grammar which bears the following synonyms: traditional grammar, normative and classical grammar, is known to be the beginning of study and teaching of English grammar. Its origin goes to the Ancient Greek and Roman scholars; notably among them are Dionysius Thrax, Protagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Varo and Priscian. Thrax identified two fundamental units for grammatical analysis. They are the sentence, also known as logos and word. He describes the sentence as the upper limit in grammatical description while the word is the lowest unit.

Remarkable characteristics of prescriptive school of thought in grammar include that grammar is all about the rules meant for correct usage of a language; it is not interested in the description of the natural language. This follows that prescriptive grammar believes itself as an authority that tells a language user what to say and what not to say, what is right to say and what is wrong to say, despite what the native speakers of a language agree is acceptable. To put the position of the prescriptivists in a proper perspective, they assume the position of a judge or magistrate. This position could not be unconnected with their classical view of language since what we study today as grammar originated from them. Also, this type of grammar was the only one (Latin grammar) taught in schools, until the 16th century when the first grammar of English emerged. The view

of the prescriptivist about language is that it is God – given, therefore cannot be tinkered with and by so doing must remain as it has been in its original form, hence the first grammars of English in use were prescriptive, modeled after Latin. This is acknowledged by Lowth (1775) in his *Short Introduction to English Grammar*, one of the pioneers of English grammar after 16th century thus: "The aim of this grammar was "to teach us to express ourselves with propriety… and to enable us judge of every phrase and form of construction, whether it be right or not" (P. 10). This is an attestation that whatever English grammar in use, even long after the century, was still prescriptive and Latin- oriented.

The following include the characteristics of prescriptive grammar usages:

1.   It rejects stranding. That is, it condemns a sentence that ends in a preposition. This implies that constructions like "What do you think **about**?" and 3 and 4 above which so many educated English scholars across the globe accept, are ungrammatical in the traditional grammar paradigm. On this note, Pullum and Huddleston (2002) remark: "The result is that older people with traditional educations and outlooks still tend to believe that stranding… is always some kind of mistake" (P.10).

2.   A sentence must end with a subjective case of pronoun. Therefore, "**It is I**" is the correct and acceptable usage according to prescriptivism while **"It is me"** is adjudged wrong, regardless of the position of the pronoun in the sentence, whether it ends the sentence or not, the rule remains static and unchallenged. To them anything other than that is a violation of their own concord rule.Therefore, sentences 7 and 8 by Huddleston(1976) are, to the Prescriptivists, ungrammatical.

3.   The personal pronoun **who** should appear in the subject position while **whom** should be used in the object position.

4.   Countable nouns should collocate with the determiners **few** or **fewer,** while non-count nouns go with **little** or **less,** as in **"No fewer than** 500 students attended the class yesterday" , while **"Less than** 500 students attended the class yesterday" is prescriptively ungrammatical or ill-formed. Other ill-formed constructions in this paradigm include: "Joe was a **little** boy at the time", "There is a **little** house just in front of the museum".

5.   In respect of concord, a noun or pronoun used as a singular subject should go with a singular pronoun reference, just as it goes with Government and Binding(GB) rule of generative syntax. Therefore, modern day constructions like "**Everybody** should come to class with **their** opinions" is prescriptively ungrammatical. By this rule, sentence 2 by Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) is rendered ungrammatical.

6.   Omission of relative pronouns is frowned upon. For example, "**This is the house he built'**is wrong, while the correct form is **This is the house which he built**.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

In all fairness, it could be an academic injustice to totally dismiss or condemn traditional grammar. One of the reasons is that this type of grammar which could as well be labeled legalistic for its strict adherence to the rules has become today the basis for identifying marked and unmarked sentences. This, we believe, could be indisputable because rules cannot be disregarded in the teaching and learning of a language. For example, we do not believe that there is an English scholar that will say or write ***I goes to work everyday** or***He teach Syntax** and the society considers it as an acceptable construction unless in a context of humour, jocularity or something in that ilk. In other words, the rule that provides or prescribes concord or grammatical concord is still welcome by all schools of thought in grammar. In word classifications, that is parts of speech, we acknowledge that the earliest and original division of English words by Thrax into nouns or onoma and adjective (one class), verb or rhema, particles, articles, pronouns, prepositions, adverb and conjunctions, still hold sway today in grammatical analysis by teachers and scholars alike. What has been done to it are mere slight modifications – resulting in eight parts of speech. Some of these modifications and additions which are a build up on classical grammar come from such contemporary grammarians like Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) who included articles and demonstratives to make it ten classes. While Morley (2000) excludes demonstratives and substitutes it for determiners in concurrence with Bloomfield (1933). The minimalist, Radford (1997), only adds complementizers, also to arrive at ten parts of speech. Some of the modifications we see are a matter of nomenclature or change of name. It goes to attest that language teachers today still adopt these word classes introduced by the traditional grammarians. For this, Andrews(2006) argues that "most linguists or language hobbyists are likely to be descriptive grammarians who analyze and explain a language's uses while most practicing teachers probably work with prescriptive grammars (p. 2).

On the other hand (weaknesses), it appears that prescriptivists lose sight of the truth that language is a sociolinguistic phenomenon, for this reason,a social event. In that case, it is something meant to adapt to the social needs of the users in a context of situation and the prevailing changes in a society . Jowitt (1991) shares this idea which traditional grammarians do not accept: "Language and society develop side by side, social changes bring linguistic changes" (p. 26). This line of reasoning accentuates the point that people and societal changes are inevitable factors that determine the use of language. An instance is the words **mankind** and

humankind. Of yore, **mankind** was the only acceptable word used to denote human beings in general, despite that it is sexist, favouring only men, but contemporary English today welcomes the need in society to welcome gender equality, balance and inclusiveness, hence **humankind** today is increasingly becoming acceptable. The same applies to the personal pronoun **their** which has been introduced to avoid the clumsiness of **his or her** expressions in sentences, as we find in sentence 2 above by Quirk and Greenbaum (1973,p.182). These go to say that language, unlike the prescriptive school of thought, should not be taught or construed as a static event that must remain in its original pure form prescribed by the traditional grammarians. Rather language should be treated as a sociolinguistic event, just as the use of slangs, colloquialisms, argots, conversational principles, speech acts, and even regional varieties are sociolinguistically apt. This points to the fact that one of the shortcomings of this type of grammar is its failure to admit creative use of language which is one area that makes language use interesting and worth using as it happens in literary pieces, figurative and imaginative pieces of writing. While pointing out the shortcomings of prescriptivism, an opposing school of thought, represented by Chomsky (1965) ,comments:

But the fundamental reason for (the) inadequacy of traditional grammars is a more technical one. Although it was well understood that linguistic processes are in some sense "creative", the technical devices for expressing a system or recursive processes were simply not available until much more recently. In fact, a real understanding of how a language can (in Humboldt's words)" make infinite use of finite means "has developed only within the last thirty years in the course of studies in the foundations of mathematics. (P.10)

The ground on this argument is that prescriptivism cannot be said to possess adequate paraphernalia to account for language system, probably due to its conservative stance towards language analysis and description which only adopts Latin, Greek and written languages as the only correct and prestigious model for language description and analysis. Its shortcomings and criticisms have opened more frontiers for others, including descriptive grammar.

DESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR

Descriptive grammar appears to have emerged to cater for the inadequacies of traditional grammar. Its core objective is to treat grammar as a systematic description of the structure of a language. This means that descriptive grammar holds the belief that an adequate study and description of grammars must account for the arrangement of words and their structures in a particular language. Believed and seen as the modern and scientific approach to the study of English grammar towards the end of the 19th century, it provides the description of grammar by identifying its main components as morphology and syntax. As a result of the identification of these constituents of grammars of languages, and in their submission that the study of grammar must be predicated on explaining and interpreting the actually occurring structures in a language, not the well–formedness of constructions, descriptivists, including Otto Jespersen, became preoccupied with the criteria for classifying words. They came up with meaning, form and structure as the principles. For example, based on the structure of a sentence, **It is me** and **It is I** could be equally correct and acceptable. This is, according to them, because **It is me** is acceptable if nothing follows the object **me** but **It is I** is acceptable if the sentence continues as in this structure:**It was I who moved the motion. I,**here, functions as the subject of the dependent clause which we agree educated users of English are comfortable with. Sentences 7 and 8 in the data source bear out position which is acceptable to Huddleston (1976) and other grammarians

Descriptive grammar, according to Greenbaum and Quirk (1990), studies the syntactic rules that apply to sentence and phrase rules which unarguably were expanded by the generative grammarians. It does not recognize Latin or Greek as the basis for the study and description of language. In terms of the roles inherent in the descriptive grammar, it could be described as functional grammar because it is concerned with how language is used in real life. That is, how language is used by youth groups, market women, working class, the elite and other social groups in society to generate meaning. This validates one of the hallmarks of descriptivism which is acceptance of language change. Contrary to the tenets of prescriptivism, descriptivists strongly believe that change in language form is not language corruption, but an inevitable trend in human society.

Descriptive grammar allows flexibility in the use of language since it is not judgmental. This is why it is interested in the use of language in different contexts of situation and cultural backgrounds. It is this type of grammar that deals with what language looks like, not what it ought to be, hence it analyses the structure.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

One of the fundamental flaws in the adoption of descriptivism is that it does not teach a student to draw a line between what is grammatical and otherwise. In other words, its view point is that every sentence stands to be acceptable, provided it communicates meaning between the speaker and the hearer. This is why its opponents derogatively label it "anything goes" paradigm. On the other sides, it accords prestige to all languages and dialects, with its maxim that no language is bad, in sharp contrast with traditional grammar that

holds that only Latin and Greek are prestigious and as such are supreme over all other languages. However, the flexibility which descriptivism allows in language use makes it to appear as if there are no guiding rules on how a particular language should be used. This could result in a chaotic linguistic situation, approximating to "Humpty Dumpty" situation in *Alice in wonderland*, a state of linguistic ambiguity. Therefore, it may not be suitable for a beginner to start learning the English language with a descriptive model. It acknowledges that every language possesses an inherent structure that helps its target user to describe and understand it. If this is realizable, descriptive model is capable of equipping the learner with the ability to use a language the same way native speakers of it do.

TRANSFORMATIONAL GRAMMAR

Transformational grammar is a build-up of Leonard Bloomfield's structuralism and advancement of descriptivism. It enunciates that grammar is a device for generating grammatical sentences, and that in every sentence is imbued a structural meaning devoid of ambiguity. The first transformational grammar was done by Harris in 1951 with his student, Chomsky. This first one stipulates that a language has many Kernel sentences as well as their transforms. The Kernel sentence is derived through a re-write rule as in the following Kernel sentence: **The player scored the goal**.

1.   Kernel sentence $\longrightarrow$ NP + VP
2.   NP $\longrightarrow$ det + N
3.   Det $\longrightarrow$ the
4.   N $\longrightarrow$ Player
5.   VP $\longrightarrow$ V + NP
6.   V $\longrightarrow$ Scored
7.   NP $\longrightarrow$ det + N
8.   det $\longrightarrow$ the
9.   N $\longrightarrow$ goal

This first part of transformational grammar constitutes 3 levels of grammatical analysis. They are phrase structure, lexicon and transformational rules. The second type of transformational grammar, pioneered by Chomsky alone, is what is known as Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG). It states that with finite rules, there is a possibility to produce or generate infinite sentence structures in a language, and this is facilitated by the Phrase Structure (PS) rule. The PS rules metamorphose to transformations which enable the language user to be able to exhaustively account for the syntax of the English Language.

Latter Chomsky (1962) broke away from the earliest of 1950s by positing that a sentence has two levels of grammatical analysis which are deep structure and surface structure, thereby condemning the idea about Kernel sentence. The deep and surface structure idea is aimed at expunging ambiguities in sentence construction. TGG assumes that sentences operate at two levels in the brain: DS and S-Structures. The deep structure is the level in the brain where abstract ideas which one cannot see or hear are formed while the surface structure is the stage where the sentence is realized, can be heard (Phonetically) and be seen. It is the deep structure that accounts for the similarities and otherwise of sentences in terms of meaning, as in:

1.   John likes Sam   2.   Sam is liked by John

D-structure employs re-writing operations which result in surface structure. That is to say that the interpretation of a sentence is predicated on its deep structure. It determines the meanings in active and passive structures and what related sentences share in common. The surface structure refers to the sentence the way it is articulated and written, with its phonetic symbols and transcriptions as in:

Surface Structure   **Deep Structure**
1.   Visiting doctors can be nuisance   1. We visit doctors. It can benuisance
2. Doctors visit us. They can be nuisance

Therefore, it is D-structure that enables the native speakers to interpret and understand the meaning of a sentence.

TGG, however, being a radical approach in terms of change, had to drop D and S- structure concept, the same way it changed from Standard Theory (Chomsky 1965) to Government and Binding (GB) Chomsky (1981, 1984 and 1986) and at present, to minimalist approach or program,as in Radford (1997 and 2004) and Chomsky (1995), to cite just few examples. As the latter version of Chomsky's TGG, minimalist program of Chomsky (1995) is concerned with how to use few grammatical symbols or apparatuses to describe the grammar of a language, making it possible for anyone without even a prior knowledge of English syntax to study it. This objective is summed up by Chomsky (1995) thus: "in pursuing a minimalist program, we want to make sure that we are not inadvertently sneaking in improper concepts, entities, relations, and conventions" (p.225) . In sum, minimalism is a theory that allows flexibility in universal grammar analysis; that human brain

works in tandem with computational rules and that language analysis should only contain necessary features; that a fixed set of principles are required in describing human language (Principles of Parameters).

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The obvious is to say that TGG has helped in advancing and modifying the earlier approaches to the study of grammar in terms of elaboration of functions and description of grammatical and sentence structures. For instance, it goes beyond the traditional categorization of a simple or kernel sentence into Noun Phrase (NP) and Verb Phrase (VP). That is S   NP + VP. But it analyses further the constituents of these larger structures via parsing and tree diagram to make the description much clearer. TGG gives room for flexibility and creativity in language use, more especially with the introduction of the minimalist program. This minimalist approach of TGG provides for different ways of sentence construction, including rule inversion, as in:

I can study Syntax which can be transformed by inversion rule to derive **Can you study Syntax?** by fronting the modal auxiliary **can.** Another interesting breakthrough by TGG is the use of gapping or deletion rule which is aimed at avoiding clumsiness in sentence connection, as in: ⟶

John attended the class but John left before it was rounded off. By gapping rule, the sentence is now derived as **John attended the class but left before it was rounded off**.

On the other side, one of the criticisms of this grammar is the use of too many complex mathematical signs and rules, despite that minimalists claim and appear to have come to economize such as a programme, no longer as a theory. Even Chomsky (1966) himself cautions that "the application be used with serious caution and skepticism" (P. 43). This is probably due to the admixture of Philosophy, Linguistics, Mathematics and Psychology inherent in TGG while teaching languages. This note of caution by him could not be unconnected with the difficult experience language teachers and learners encounter while adopting this type of grammar in teaching how to speak and write correct and acceptable sentences, especially with the use of such abstract and complex concepts like merger operation, movement, CP, DP, IP, etc. To heighten the dilemma in this grammar paradigm, its rules keep changing drastically: dropping Harris – Chomsky TG of early 50s and the earlier Chomsky of 60s, rejection of standard theory of 60's and GB of 80's to the adoption of minimalist approach of 90s to date. In defence of TGG, however, Carnie (2001) eloquently clarifies:

It is worth considering whether it is necessary to concern ourselves with the mathematics of tree diagrams. There are actually two very good reasons to do this. First by considering the geometry of trees, we can assign names to the various parts and describe how the parts relate to one another. Second, it turns out that there are many syntactic phenomena that make explicit reference to the geometry of trees. One of the most obvious of these refers to anaphors. Anaphors can only appear in certain positions in the geometry of the tree (p.66).

SYNTHESIS OF THE MODELS

Drawing on the analysis and observation so far made on these grammar types, it could be deduced that the three models of grammar have certain tenets they share in common. One of the reasons is that there is none that condemns outright the rules of sentence construction, despite that descriptivism plays down rules, but it is to an extent. None to date has disproved the theory of parts of speech of prescriptivism. Rather what others have succeeded in doing is the extension of the grammatical categories from the traditional eight to nine, ten and more as well as merger and separation of some classes. Chomsky (1965) even admits that the study of generative grammar itself should not be done in isolation by asserting that the investigation of generative grammar can (only) be profitably begun with a careful analysis of the kind of information presented in traditional grammar. This submission is a proof of the relevance of prescriptive grammar in our classrooms today. This follows that the teaching and learning of grammar should begin with prescriptivism if the user of English wants to be recognized as an educated user of the code. This equally follows that the study of other models presupposes the knowledge of rules of traditional grammar. Carnie (2001), once again, corroborates the symbiotic association of these grammars, with the prescriptive model as the basis of them by aptly observing that "C-Command of TGG is a notion stolen from traditional grammar, but implemented on our own kind of trees" (P. 77).

It has already been pointed out in this piece that what we have today as descriptivism, structuralism and TGG are mere build-up and consolidation of the classical grammar paradigm so as to provide more in-depth description of Universal Grammar. That is, what all human languages have in common. The anaphors in the GB theory are functions of prescriptivism which accentuate that there be an agreement or concord between a pronoun and its antecedent.

III.　　CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

A holistic study and interpretation of the grammar of the English Language requires the utilization of the extant models, not one in isolation of others. Our observation, based on the assessment of the three major selected types may validate a claim that there is no one perspective enough to study the English grammar; that a knowledge of one complements a knowledge of the other and serves as a step to understanding the other. Therefore, it could be a fundamental flaw and misconception for an English teacher or scholar to claim he does not believe in a particular model or label it "conservative" or "orthodox." It still remains to be seen if the English grammar can be profitably be studied without the prescribed rules, despite that one who strongly believes in rules could be nicknamed language legalist or conservative. Nevertheless, when these rules, however, fail to address language changes in society or changes which are bound to occur, we suggest that there should be a shift to another paradigm that accounts for that, hence the analysis, review and adoption of more than one model of grammar.

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Chibuzo Nathaniel Nwoko
Department of Languages (English Unit) Yusuf Maitama Sule University, Kano, Nigeria