

Lecture 6: The Romans & the Middle Ages

Today we will

1. Revise Non-Western & Ancient Greek thought on Language
2. Trace the Sophistic *Nomos/Phusis* Debate through the centuries
3. Learn a little about life in Rome in those days, and about some later developments in Greek and Roman thought; and finally,
4. Focus on, and find the reasons for, the general decline in intellectual activity in Europe during the Middle Ages.

1. A Re-Cap of Ancient Non-Western and Greek thought on Language

In the past 2 weeks we have strained to hear the echoes of human thoughts about language from millennia ago. We mentioned the achievements of Chinese scholars in terms of the development of a unique writing system (hieroglyphics) and discussed the brilliant writings of some Indian thinkers, including

- **Panini** (~ 5th century BC), whose grammar of Sanskrit had used (long before the so-called “Western” linguistics) concepts like the *phoneme*, and the general principles of *word formation* through the successive application of *morphological rules*, and
- **Bhartrhari** (~ 5th century AD), who believed (a truly logical observation!) that the sentence should be interpreted as a single unit which, like a picture, conveys its meaning 'in a flash'. In other words, he observed all those hundreds of years ago that the human mind does not process each sentence as a sequence of words put together, but that the full meaning of each word is only understood in the context of the other words around it.

We also ‘caught’ a few echoes from the Ancient Greeks:

- **The Sophists**, who taught language and rhetoric to Athenian citizens as part of the ‘survival skills’ (since Athenians citizens had to personally represent themselves in the court of law).
 - **Protagoras** believed that “**Man is the measure of all things**” (relativism). He is credited with distinguishing *sentence types* (i.e., narration, prayer, question, answer, command, report & invitation), as well as *gender & tense*
 - **Gorgias** taught the use of figures of speech (analogy, metaphor, etc.)
 - **Prodicus** examined synonyms, and **Hippias** – the sound system of Greek.

“One of the most famous doctrines associated with the Sophistic movement was the **opposition between nature and custom or convention** in morals” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2004 Edition). This debate extended also to language origins and etymology, and continued through the centuries by other philosophers, such as:

- **Socrates (469-399 BC) & Plato (428-354 BC)** analyzed the relationship between language and thought, focusing on issues ranging from the nature, origins and purpose of language to its sounds and structures. Words are the proper names of ideal and eternal Forms that are independent and separate from physical reality, but are ‘graspable’ by the human mind/ “intelligible.”
- **Aristotle (384-322 BC)** argued that the physical reality (including language) is ‘knowable’ through observation and analysis (inductive logic, on which the Scientific Method is based). He classified all human knowledge (‘The Categories’) and explained the causes (driving forces) behind all physical reality (Aristotlean *Four Causes*). Extending his analysis to language in *De Interpretatione*, Aristotle examined the relation between words, thoughts and things. He asserted that:
 - Words are symbols, i.e. conventional tokens, for thoughts, as well as 'signs' of things. Truth emerges from the correct or incorrect 'combination' of these basic words in an assertion
 - Both nouns (*onoma*) and verbs (*rhema*) signify meanings, but the verb has an ‘additional meaning’ which together with the meaning of the noun made an assertion or negation possible. The verb thus contains three elements: a basic signification, a binding function equivalent to the role of the copula 'is', and an indication of time, which forms a second type of 'additional signification'.
 - Aristotle defined longer utterances, distinguishing those, which possess **truth-value**, from those, such as prayers, which do not. He also stated that ‘**No single word is an assertion,**’ since an assertion must represent a predicate as truly holding of a subject; and

- Similarly, **no part of a word can have signification**. At best, the elements of a compound word can only 'tend to signify'.

Most of the developments in theoretical grammar grew out of philosophy, and often stemmed from the *Nomos/Phusis* debate, which distinguished between that which exists “*by nature*” (*phusis*) and that which exists “*by convention*” (*nomos*). According to Guthrie, *nomos* and *phusis* were the ‘catchwords’ of **Greek thought**:

“The two terms *nomos* (pl. *nomoi*) and *phusis* are key-words — in the fifth and fourth centuries one might rather say catchwords — of Greek thought. In earlier writers they do not necessarily appear incompatible or antithetical, but in the intellectual climate of the fifth century they came to be commonly regarded as opposed and mutually exclusive: what existed ‘*by nomos*’ was not ‘*by phusis*’ and *vice versa* ...

Phusis ... can safely be translated ‘nature’, though when it occurs in conjunction with *nomos* the word ‘reality’ will sometimes make the contrast more immediately clear. *Nomos* for the men of classical times is something that ... which is believed in, practised or held to be right . That is to say, it presupposes an acting subject — believer, practitioner or apportioner — a mind from which the *nomos* emanates.” (Guthrie, p. 55).

With regard to language, the adherents of the *phusis* approach accounted for words as ordained *by nature* (by *onomatopoeia*—*i.e.*, by imitation of natural sounds), whereas the adherents of the *nomos* approach believed they came about arbitrarily, *by a social convention*. We witnessed this dispute regarding the origin of language and meanings in Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus*, where Hermogenes, Cratylus and Socrates argue about the ‘truth’ or correctness of names.

Subsequently, the *nomos/phusis* debate gave rise to two divergent views:

- The “*analogists*,” who looked on language as possessing an essential regularity as a result of convention, and
- The “*anomalists*,” who explained the lack of linguistic regularity by the inherent irregularities of nature.

It will be useful at this point to remind ourselves about the various approaches to the study of language which you must have discussed in your Introduction to Linguistics course – you will see how the two divergent views have affected linguistic thought right up to the present (See Appendix I at the end of these notes). You will see that Structuralists (like analogists) typically emphasize regularity in the forms of language, whereas Transformationalists (like anomalists) focus more on the deeper meaning, created by different superficial forms.

Later Greek Thought & the Romans

The Alexandrians* of the 1st century BC (they were *analogists*) further developed Greek grammar in order to preserve the purity of the language. **Dionysius Thrax (2nd century BC)**, for example, wrote the first systematic grammar of Western tradition, *The Art of Grammar*, in which he analyzed literary texts in terms of letters, syllables, and eight parts of speech.

***Alexandria** – the ancient center of civilization and capital of Egypt for more than a thousand years, founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BC. Now with a population of over 5 million, it is the 2nd largest city in Egypt.

The Romans adopted the grammatical system of the Greeks and applied it to Latin. Except for **Varro**, of the **1st century BC**, who believed that grammarians should discover structures, not dictate them, most Latin grammarians did not attempt to alter the Greek system and also sought to protect their language from decay.

So the Romans are important not as originators but as *transmitters* of knowledge attained by the Greeks. **Aelius Donatus**, (4th century AD), and **Priscian**, an African of the 6th century AD, were slightly more systematic than their Greek models but were essentially retrospective rather than original. Up to this point, *ars grammatica* (or ‘the Art of Grammar’) was a mix of investigations in general philosophy, logic, and rhetoric.

The *anomalists* of that time concentrated on surface irregularity and looked then for regularities deeper down (i.e., Stoics sought them in logic) – they resemble contemporary scholars of the **transformationalist** school. The philological *analogists*, on the other hand, with their regularizing surface segmentation resemble the spirit with the modern school of **structural** grammatical theorists.

The works of **Donatus (4th century AD)** and **Priscian (6th century AD)**, the most important Latin grammarians, were widely used to teach Latin grammar during the European **Middle Ages**.

Middle Ages is a period of European history between the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century and the *Renaissance* in the 15th. Among the period’s distinctive features were the unity of Western Europe within the Roman Catholic Church, the feudal organization of political, social and economic relations, and the use of art for largely religious purposes.

It can be divided into three sub-periods:

The **early Middle Ages**, 5th-11th centuries, when Europe was settled by pagan Germanic tribes who adopted the vestiges of Roman institutions and traditions, were converted to Christianity by the church (which had preserved Latin culture after the fall of Rome), and who then founded the feudal kingdoms;

The **high Middle Ages**, 12th-13th centuries, which saw the consolidation of feudal states, the expansion of European influence during the Crusades, the flowering of scholasticism and monasteries, and the growth of population and trade;

The **later Middle Ages**, 14th-15th centuries, when Europe was devastated by Black Death and incessant warfare, feudalism was transformed under the influence of incipient nation-states and new modes of social and economic organization, and the first voyages of discovery were made (The Wordsworth Encyclopedia, 1995)

From the information box above, you can see that “unity of Western Europe within the Roman Catholic Church, the **feudal** organization of political, social and economic relations, and the use of art for largely religious purposes” characterized the Middle Ages.

Feudalism is a “term that emerged in the 17th century and has been used to describe European economic, legal, political and social relationships that existed in the Middle Ages. Derived from the Latin word feudum (fief) but unknown to people of the Middle Ages, the term feudalism has been used ... to refer to medieval society as a whole and ... to describe relations between **lords** and **vassals**. ... As described by Karl Marx, it is the stage in history that preceded capitalism and, as such, involved the entire social and economic structure of medieval Europe. ... feudalism in this sense is a mode of agricultural production based on the relation between **lords** and the **peasants** who worked their own land and that of the lord. The peasants owed labour service to the lords, who provided military protection and also had extensive police, judicial, and other rights over the peasants” (2).

The Middle Ages, sometimes referred to as the Dark Ages, were not a very nice time to live: constant wars between the rival feudal lords and backbreaking labour dominated common people’s lives. In medieval* Europe, education was inaccessible to ordinary people; it was mainly the monks in the monasteries that were taught how to read and write, for the purpose of re-writing the holy scripts. All education then was conducted in Latin. **Aelfric**, the abbot of Eynsham (**11th century**), who wrote **the first Latin grammar in Anglo-Saxon**, proposed that this work serve as an introduction to English grammar as well. Thus began the tradition of devising English grammar according to a Latin model.

*Note the spelling: **Medieval**, not *Medieval*, as it was once spelt on CNN! ☺

In the mid-13th to mid-14th century, in the so-called Proto-Renaissance period, a slow re-awakening of intellectual thought became evident in, for example, *speculative grammar** (a theory promulgated by the *modistae* grammarians, who viewed language as a reflection of reality and looked to philosophy for explanations of grammatical rules). The *modistae* sought one “**universal**” **grammar** that would serve as a means of understanding the nature of being.

***Speculative grammar**: a linguistic theory of the Middle Ages, especially the second half of the 13th century. It is “speculative” not in the modern sense but as the word is derived from the Latin **speculum** (“mirror”), indicating a belief that language reflects the reality of the physical world. In accordance with this belief, speculative grammarians searched for a universal grammar, valid for all languages despite the “accidents” of their differences. The categories of this grammar would correlate with the categories of logic, epistemology, and metaphysics; e.g., nouns and pronouns were thought to express the metaphysical category of “permanence,” whereas verbs and participles expressed “becoming.” Speculative grammarians took over **Priscian** grammar but relabeled the parts of speech to show their “modes of signifying.” So many of their works were titled *De modis significandi* (“The Modes of Signifying”) that they have come to be called the Modistae.

The search by speculative grammarians for a universal grammar has been criticized as the result of their shortsightedness: the privileged, predominant position of Latin in their culture made “universality” seem more likely. Nevertheless, speculative grammar was more coherent and theoretical than any previous grammar, and its proponents investigated ideas still of interest today, such as deep structure, the incorporation of meaning into grammatical systems, and universals (2).

From Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2004 De Luxe online edition:

Certainly the most obviously interesting theorizing to be found in this period is contained in the “**Speculative Grammar**” of the *modistae*, who were so called because the titles of their works were often phrased *De modis significandi tractatus* (“Treatise Concerning the Modes of Signifying”). **For the development of the Western grammatical tradition, work of this genre was the second great milestone after the crystallization of Greek thought with the Stoics and Alexandrians.** The scholastic philosophers were occupied with relating words and things—i.e., the structure of sentences with the nature of the real world—hence their preoccupation with signification. The aim of the grammarians was to explore how a word (an element of language) matched things apprehended by the mind and how it signified reality. Since a word cannot signify the nature of reality directly, it must stand for the thing signified in one of its modes or properties; it is this discrimination of modes that the study of categories and parts of speech is all about. Thus the study of sentences should lead one to the nature of reality by way of the modes of signifying.

The *modistae* did not innovate in discriminating categories and parts of speech; they accepted those that had come down from the Greeks through Donatus and Priscian. The great contribution of these grammarians, who flourished between the mid-13th and mid-14th century, was their insistence on a grammar to explicate the distinctions found by their forerunners in the languages known to them. Whether they made the best choice in selecting logic, metaphysics, and epistemology (as they knew them) as the fields to be included with grammar as a basis for the grand account of universal knowledge is less important than the breadth of their conception of the place of grammar. Before the modistae, grammar had not been viewed as a separate discipline but had been considered in conjunction with other studies or skills (such as criticism, preservation of valued texts, foreign-language learning). The Greek view of

grammar was rather narrow and fragmented; the Roman view was largely technical. The speculative medieval grammarians (who dealt with language as a *speculum*, “mirror” of reality) inquired into the fundamentals underlying language and grammar. They wondered whether grammarians or philosophers discovered grammar, whether grammar was the same for all languages, what the fundamental topic of grammar was, and what the basic and irreducible grammatical primes are. Signification was reached by imposition of words on things; i.e., the sign was arbitrary. Those questions sound remarkably like current issues of linguistics, which serves to illustrate how slow and repetitious progress in the field is. While the *modistae* accepted, by modern standards, a restrictive set of categories, the acumen and sweep they brought to their task resulted in numerous subtle and fresh syntactic observations. A thorough study of the medieval period would greatly enrich the discussion of current questions.

Reminder:

Linguistic thought in Mesopotamia (now part of Iraq), however, was thriving during the Middle Ages, driven by the religious inspiration to share the Koran with non-Arabic speaking peoples. The so-called Basra School produced eminent Arab scholars, such as:

- **Asma’il** (740-828): he was a scholar and anthologist, one of the three leading members of the Basra school of Arabic philology. A gifted student of Abu Amr ibn al-Alaa, the founder of the Basra school, Asma’il possessed an outstanding knowledge of the classical Arabic language. On the basis of the principles that he laid down, his disciples later prepared most of the existing collections of the pre-Islamic Arab poets. He also wrote an anthology of mostly religious poetry.
- **Sibawaihi** (760-793?) was a celebrated grammarian of the Arabic language. After studying in Basra, Iraq, with a prominent grammarian **Khalil**, Sībawayh received recognition as a grammarian himself. Sībawayh is said to have left Iraq and retired to Shīrāz after losing a debate with a rival on Bedouin Arabic usage. His monumental work is *al-Kitāb* (“The Book”) was frequently used by later scholars.
- **Khalil** (718 – betw. 776 & 791): an Arab philologist who compiled the first Arabic dictionary and is credited with the formulation of the rules of Arabic prosody. His dictionary is arranged according to a novel alphabetical order based on pronunciation, beginning with the letter *ayn*.

In the 9th -10th centuries A.D., Arabic thinkers also had recorded remarkable insights into the relationship between language, grammar and logic. Look, for example, at some real ‘gems’ from **Al-Farabi** (870–950 AD):

Text 1. This art [of logic] is similar to the art of grammar, in that the relation of the art of logic to the intellect and the intelligibles is like the relation of the art of grammar to language and expressions (*al-alfâz*). That is, to every rule for expressions which the science of grammar provides us, there is an analogous [rule] for intelligibles which the science of logic provides us.

Text 2. The subject matters (*mawdû‘ât*) of logic are the things for which [logic] provides the rules, namely, intelligibles in so far as they are signified by expressions, and expressions in so far as they signify intelligibles.

...

[Logic] shares something with grammar in that it provides rules for expressions, yet it differs in that grammar only provides rules specific to the expressions of a given community, whereas the science of logic provides common rules that are general for the expressions of every community.

[Alfarabi (1931) 17.5-7, 18.4-7]

While Indian and Chinese scholarship were relatively unknown in the West until almost the nineteenth century AD, there have been a lot of cultural contacts and intellectual interdependencies between Europe and North Africa/ the Near East. Ancient Greek thought greatly influenced the development of linguistic speculation in various cultures of the Middle East (Mesopotamia), such as Akkadian (present day Iraq), Old Egyptian, Syriac, and Hebrew. On the other hand, Islamic scholars, in particular, played a great role in preserving and translating the works of Classical Greek philosophers and later ‘transmitting’ them back to medieval Europe.

Conclusion

Donatus (4th century AD) and **Priscian (6th century AD)** were the most important Latin grammarians, whose books were commonly used to teach Latin grammar during the European Middle Ages.

There was a general decline in intellectual activity (and, consequently, in all linguistic thought) in Europe during the Middle Ages. This was due to the prevailing economic conditions and the resulting social relationships of the time: political fragmentation of Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire (the Western part of it, anyway) in the 5th century, left most people (subsistence farmers) vulnerable to the many marauding war lords, fighting for land and influence. Seeking protection, the common people were forced to submit to a new form of subjugation (compared to slavery): *serfdom*. In exchange for military protection, they worked the fields to feed their Lord and his army, and took up arms themselves to fight for the Lord, if called upon.

Trying to survive between constant wars and strife was not a conducive environment for philosophical reflection. There were no books, and no schools – education was mostly the function of the monasteries. The wisdom of the ancients was all but forgotten, kept alive only by the industrious monks, scribbling away in the scattered monasteries, copying the holy texts... Dominated by the Roman Catholic Church, education was mostly based on Latin texts. What vernacular grammars were written during that time, were all based on Latin standards (the traditional, or prescriptive grammars).

People, however, cannot stop thinking: a gradual accumulation of general and technical knowledge, the development of more sophisticated means of production/ technologies, increased trade, the formation of nation states and national languages brought about the highlight of medieval linguistics: the *modistae*, who attempted to prove that all human languages had common (universal) traits, because they all reflect reality (the physical world).

References

1. Guthrie, W.K.C. *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume III, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1969.
2. Encyclopedia Britannica 2004 De Luxe Online Edition: History of Linguistics