Lecture 7: The Renaissance

Hundreds of years had passed from the days of Greek philosophers, who extensively researched the general nature of *logos* ('word, language, discussion, the power of *reason*') and the relationship between the language, thought, and physical reality. Their observations about the origins and forms, structures, meanings and functions of words formed the basis of ***Priscian*** grammar that was used for linguistic instruction throughout the **Middle Ages*** [the Romans, remember, were important not as originators, but as *transmitters* of knowledge attained by the Greeks].

*The term **Middle Ages** was coined by scholars in the 17th century to designate the interval between the downfall of the classical world of Greece and Rome and its rediscovery at the beginning of their own century, a revival in which they felt they were participating.

As we noted in Lecture 6, the 'Dark Ages' were characterized by a general decline in the arts and the sciences – not surprising, given the
- Feudal economic relations that determined the social hierarchy (lords, vassals and the serfs) and the whole way of life
- Supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church
- Fragmentation of Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire
- Incessant wars between the feudal lords fighting for dominance and wealth.

Against the rather depressing background, the major highlight of the high Middle Ages represented by the thinking of the ***modistae*** grammarians (13th -14th centuries AD) is even more remarkable. Through our first-hand experience of reading De Modis Significandi by Thomas von Erfurt, we now know that they explored the relationship between our intelligence, the physical world and language as the mirror reflecting physical reality. The ***modistae*** looked to the logic of human thinking for explanations of grammatical rules, and therefore sought one **"universal" grammar"** based on universal principles of Human Understanding.

Events at the end of the Middle Ages, particularly beginning in the 12th century, set in motion a series of social, political, and intellectual transformations that culminated in the Renaissance. These included:

- the increasing failure of the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire to provide a stable and unifying framework for the organization of spiritual and material life,
- the rise in importance of city-states and national monarchies,
- the development of national languages, and
- the breakup of the old feudal structures.

The Rennaissance (literally "rebirth") is the period in European civilization immediately following the Middle Ages. It is conventionally held to have started in the south of Europe (Italy and south of France) in the **15th century** and lasted, gradually spreading to the North, right up to the end of the **18th century**. *Renaissance* was the *rebirth* of interest in classical learning and values. The Renaissance also witnessed the invention of new technologies [i.e., printing press (which made education more accessible) and gunpowder (which facilitated the formation of larger nation-states), etc.], discovery and exploration of new continents. To the scholars and thinkers of the day, however, it was primarily a time of the revival of classical learning and wisdom after a long period of cultural decline and stagnation.

While the spirit of the Renaissance ultimately took many forms, its earliest expression was the intellectual movement called ***Humanism***. Humanism was initiated during the so-called "proto-renaissance" period in the late 13th and early 14th centuries by secular men of letters rather than by the scholar-clerics who had

dominated medieval intellectual life and had developed the *Scholastic* philosophy. Humanism began first in Italy. Its predecessors were men like **Dante** (*The Divine Comedy**, *De vulgari eloquentia*, etc.). The fall of Constantinople in 1453 provided Humanism with a major boost, for many eastern scholars fled to Italy, bringing with them important books and manuscripts and a tradition of Greek scholarship.

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* Italian **La Divina Commedia**, original name Commedia, long narrative poem written c. **1310–14** by Dante. It is usually held to be one of the world's great works of literature. Divided into three major sections—**Inferno, Purgatorio,** and **Paradiso**—the narrative traces the journey of Dante from darkness and error to the revelation of the divine light, culminating in the Beatific Vision of God. Dante is guided by the Roman poet **Virgil**, who represents the epitome of human knowledge, from the dark wood through the descending circles of the pit of Hell (Inferno). Passing **Lucifer** at the pit's bottom, at the dead centre of the world, Dante and Virgil emerge on the beach of the island mountain of Purgatory. At the summit of Purgatory, where repentant sinners are purged of their sins, Virgil departs, having led Dante as far as human knowledge is able, to the threshold of Paradise. There Dante is met by Beatrice, embodying the knowledge of divine mysteries bestowed by Grace, who leads him through the successive ascending levels of heaven to the Empyrean, where he is allowed to glimpse, for a moment, the glory of God.

Humanism had several significant features:

1. First, it took human nature in all of its various manifestations and achievements as its subject.
2. Second, it stressed the unity and compatibility of the truth found in all philosophical and theological schools and systems, a doctrine known as syncretism.
3. Third, it emphasized the dignity of man. In place of the medieval ideal of a life of penance as the highest and noblest form of human activity, the Humanists looked to the struggle of creation and the attempt to exert mastery over nature.
4. Finally, Humanism looked forward to a rebirth of a lost human spirit and wisdom. In the course of striving to recover it, however, the Humanists assisted in the consolidation of a new spiritual and intellectual outlook and in the development of a new body of knowledge.

The effect of Humanism was to help men break free from the mental strictures imposed by religious orthodoxy, to inspire free inquiry and criticism, and to inspire a new confidence in the possibilities of human thought and creations.

From Italy the new Humanist spirit and the Renaissance it engendered spread north to all parts of Europe, aided by the invention of printing, which allowed literacy and the availability of classical texts to grow explosively. Foremost among northern Humanists was Desiderius **Erasmu**s, whose **Praise of Folly (1509)** epitomized the moral essence of Humanism in its insistence on heartfelt goodness as opposed to formalistic piety.

Classicism: Early humanists returned to the classics with a sense of having been brought newly into contact with 'live' thoughts of the Ancients. *Petrarch*, the acknowledged founder of the humanistic movement, dramatized his feeling of intimacy with the classics by writing "letters" to Cicero and Livy. *Salutati* (a Florentine chancellor) believed that possession of a copy of Cicero's letters would make it possible for him to *talk* with Cicero. *Machiavelli* later described this experience in a letter of his own:

> Evenings I return home and enter my study; and at its entrance I take off my everyday clothes, full of mud and dust, and don royal and courtly garments; decorously reattired, I enter into the

ancient sessions of ancient men. Received amicably by them, I partake of such food as is mine only and for which I was born. There, without shame, I speak with them and ask them about the reason for their actions; and they in their humanity respond to me.

Machiavelli's term umanità ("humanity") means more than kindness; it is a direct translation of the Latin *humanitas*. Machiavelli implies that he shared with the ancients a sovereign wisdom of human affairs. He also describes that theory of reading as an active and even aggressive pursuit that was common among humanists. Possessing a text and understanding its words were not enough; analytic ability and a questioning attitude were necessary before a reader could truly enter the councils of the great. These councils, they believed, were not merely ennobling; they held secrets the knowledge of which could transform life from chaos into understanding. Classical thought offered insight into the heart of things. Once known, human reality could be transformed from an accident of history into a product of will. Almost paradoxically, humanists associated Antiquity with the future.

To 'commune' with the Ancients, people used the classical languages of Latin and Greek. So on the whole, no principally new advances were made in the scientific study of language right up to the 18th century, when, with the spread of literacy in English, for example, the so-called *prescriptive* grammars of vernacular languages were first written. Right up until then, the knowledge of Latin and Greek was the hallmark of an educated mind. Because Latin was (still is) the official language the Catholic Church, and because the Church, through its monasteries, was the keeper and the disseminator of education generally in those early days, the fixed norms of the dead language were considered to be the 'perfect forms' of language.

So: in the field of grammar, the Renaissance did not produce much innovation. Generally speaking, there was a strong rejection of speculative grammar and a relatively uncritical resumption of late Roman views (as stated by *Priscian*). This was somewhat understandable in the case of Latin or Greek grammars, since here the task was less evidently that of intellectual inquiry and more that of the schools, with the practical aim of gaining access to the newly discovered ancients. But, aside from the fact that, beginning in the 15th century, serious grammars of European vernaculars were actually written, it is only in particular cases and for specific details (e.g., a mild alteration in the number of parts of speech or cases of nouns) that real departures from Roman grammar can be noted. Likewise, until the end of the 19th century, grammars of the exotic languages, written largely by missionaries and traders, were cast almost entirely in the Roman model, to which the Renaissance had added a limited medieval syntactic ingredient.

Roughly from the 15th century, then, to World War II, the version of grammar available to the Western public (together with its colonial expansion) remained basically that of *Priscian* with only occasional modifications, and the knowledge of new languages brought only minor adjustments to the serious study of grammar.

As education became more broadly disseminated throughout society by the schools, attention has shifted from theoretical or technical grammar as an intellectual preoccupation to *prescriptive* grammar suited to pedagogical purposes, which started with Renaissance vernacular nationalism.

This **prescriptive approach** dominated the schools, where the study of grammar came to be associated with "parsing" and sentence diagramming. That is why educated people of the time were concerned about the 'degradation' of vernacular languages like English, and tried to set norms and unchanging standards, based on Latin grammar:

Samuel Johnson wrote his famous Dictionary of the English Language (**1755**)

Robert Lowth, the Bishop of London, laboriously stated prescriptive rules in his Grammar of the English Language (1762)

Jonathan Swift, the famous author of 'Gulliver's Travels,' was also opposed to language change, and attempted to preserve older linguistic forms and patterns (remember, he strongly objected to 'swallowing' the [i] sound in the past tense endings of verbs? He passionately believed that the English language had to be rescued from imminent collapse caused by people who pronounced *rebuked* [ri bju:kt] instead of [ri bju:kid] ! :)

By **1700**, **grammars of 61 vernacular languages** had been printed. These were written primarily for purposes of reforming, purifying, or standardizing language. Rules of grammar usually accounted for formal, written, literary language only and did not apply to commonly spoken language.

There were, however, a few highlights:

Ramus, a 16th-century logician, worked within a taxonomic framework of the surface shapes of words and inflections, such work entailing some of the attendant trivialities that modern linguistics has experienced (e.g., by dividing up Latin nouns on the basis of equivalence of syllable count among their case forms).

In the 17th century, the *Solitaires* of *Port-Royal* (an abbey in France) produced a grammar that has exerted continuing influence, even in contemporary theoretical discussion. Like the modistae, *Port-Royal grammarians* were also interested in the idea of **universal grammar**. They claimed that common elements of thought could be discerned in grammatical categories of all languages. Unlike the Greek and Latin grammarians, they did not study literary language but claimed instead that usage should be dictated by the actual speech of living languages. **Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694)**

Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694) and Claude Lancelot (1615-1695), two of the group of Solitaires, together wrote the *General and Rational Grammar* **of Port-Royal (1660).** In it, they postulated that

- Universal (innate) thought provides for "universal grammar"; and that
- Language is a "surface structure" expressing those ideas, and following the "natural order" of thought.

Reminiscent of David Hume's ideas? Indeed! ☺ David Hume, their contemporary, focused more on the nature of human understanding, while they sought to explain the structures of language on the basis of universal thought. The 20th-century linguist Noam Chomsky has called the Port-Royal group the first transformational grammarians.

Leibniz (**1646 –1716**) – another highlight! – was a German philosopher, whose linguistic 'input' was mainly in the context of logic. Like *Descartes* who had suggested the idea of a universal language for mathematics (as a "universal mathematics"), Leibniz wanted to devise a "universally characteristic language" (lingua characteristica universalis*) that would,
1. first, notationally represent concepts by displaying the more basic concepts of which they were composed, and
2. second, represent concepts graphically (in pictures, "*iconically*") in a way that could be easily grasped by anyone, no matter what their native tongue. Leibniz studied and was impressed by the method of the Egyptians and Chinese in using picture-like expressions for concepts.

*The search for a universal language to replace Latin was taken up again in the late 19th century, first with work on Interlingua, an uninflected form of Latin, which was directly inspired by Leibniz' conception, and then with Esperanto. The goal of a logical language also prompted the development of the logical language LOGLAN and the computer language PROLOG in the 20th century.

Descartes's mathematical bias was expressed in his determination to ground natural science not in sensation and probability (as did Bacon) but in a principle of absolute certainty. Thus his metaphysics in essence consisted of three principles:

1. To employ the procedure of complete and systematic doubt to eliminate every belief that does not pass the test of indubitability **(skepticism);**

2. To accept no idea as certain that is not clear, distinct, and free of contradiction (**mathematicism**);

3. To found all knowledge upon the bedrock certainty of self-consciousness, so that "I think, therefore I am - Cogito, ergo Sum" becomes the only innate idea unshakable by doubt (**subjectivism**).

Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744 – 1803) was a German critic, theologian, and philosopher, who was the leading figure of the *Sturm und Drang* literary movement and an innovator in the philosophy of history and culture.
In 1772, he wrote his ***"Essay on the Origin of Language"***, which finds the origin of language in human nature. For Herder, knowledge is possible only through the medium of language. Although the individual and the world are united in feeling, they separate themselves in consciousness in order to link themselves anew in the "intentional," or object-directed, act in which the objective meaning of a word is rooted. Thus, what earlier had been apprehended dimly but not specifically recognized in feeling is expressly designated. Feeling and thought thus interpenetrate each other; and the word, being at once sound and significance, is the cause of this union. Every signification of something therefore includes an emotional attitude toward it that reflects the particularity and the outlook of its users. Thus, the structure of language is a true image of human nature.

Whereas the psychologists of the time were carefully distinguishing various human faculties (conation, feeling, knowledge), Herder stressed the unity and indivisible wholeness of human nature. Consciousness and ***Besonnenheit*** ("reflective discernment") are not simply "higher" faculties added to an animal foundation; instead, they designate the structure of the individual as a whole with qualitatively unique human desires and human sensitivities. Since human instincts and sensitivities are subject to reflection (thought), or "broken off" (gebrochen), however, the human individual is "the first liberated member of creation."

Sir William Jones (Sept. 28, **1746**, London - April 27, **1794**, Calcutta): a British Orientalist and jurist who did much to encourage interest in Oriental studies in the West.
Of Welsh parentage, he studied at Harrow and University College, Oxford (1764–68), and learned Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and Persian. By the end of his life, he had learned 28 languages, including Chinese, often by teaching himself.
After several years in translating and scholarship, he turned, for financial reasons, to the study of law and was called to the bar in 1774. Meanwhile, he did not give up Orientalism. His Grammar of the Persian Language (1771) was authoritative in the field for a long time. His Moallakât (1782), a translation of seven famous pre-Islamic Arabic odes, introduced these poems to the British public.

In 1783 he was knighted and sailed for Calcutta as judge of the supreme court. In 1784 he founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal to encourage Oriental studies. He himself took up Sanskrit, to equip himself for the preparation of a vast digest of Hindu and Muslim law. Of this uncompleted venture, his Institutes of Hindu Law was published in 1794 and his Muhammedan Law of Inheritance in 1792. In his 1786 presidential discourse to the Asiatic Society, he postulated the common ancestry of Sanskrit and Greek, his findings providing one of the earliest examples of the science of comparative linguistics*.

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*Comparative Lx: formerly Comparative Grammar, or Comparative Philology, study of the relationships or correspondences between two or more languages and the techniques used to discover whether the languages have a common ancestor. Comparative grammar was the most important branch of linguistics in the 19th century in Europe. Also called comparative philology, the study was originally stimulated by the discovery by Sir William Jones in 1786 that Sanskrit was related to Latin, Greek, and German.

An assumption important to the comparative method is the Neogrammarian principle that the laws governing sound change are regular and have no exceptions that cannot be accounted for by some other regular phenomenon of language. As an example of the method, English is seen to be related to Italian if a number of words that have the same meaning and that have not been borrowed are compared: piede and "foot," padre and "father," pesce and "fish." The initial sounds, although different, correspond regularly according to the pattern discovered by Jacob Grimm and named Grimm's law (q.v.) after him; the other differences can be explained by other regular sound changes. Because regular correspondences between English and Italian are far too numerous to be coincidental, it becomes apparent that English and Italian stem from the same parent language. The comparative method was developed and used successfully in the 19th century to reconstruct this parent language, Proto-Indo-European, and has since been applied to the study of other language families.

Conclusion

Renaissance was a rebirth of Latin and Greek culture and language. Although vernacular grammars were written, based on Priscian principles, in the field of linguistics, the Renaissance did not produce notable innovation or advance.
Prescriptive grammar dominated; highlights:
1. **Port Royal grammarians**
2. **Leibniz**
3. **Herder**
4. **Sir William Jones**.
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