



Chapter One: The Pre-Structural Period/ Atomism

(The Traditional Approach to the Study of Language)

Introduction

We shall undertake a journey not through space but through time. Our objective is to trace the origins of human reflection on language and to explore how people first sought to understand its structure and function. Long before the formal establishment of modern linguistics, before Ferdinand de Saussure and before Noam Chomsky, scholars and thinkers were already posing fundamental questions about language: *Where did language come from? Why do we call things by these names? Is there a right or wrong way to speak?*

These early thinkers, including philosophers, priests, and poets, did not call themselves linguists, but they were the first to study language systematically. By examining their inquiries, we gain insight not only into the history of linguistic thought but also into the enduring human fascination with language as a uniquely powerful tool for communication, cognition, and culture.

This handout will guide you through key developments and examples, and introduces the early stage of linguistic thought, referred to as the *Pre-Structural Period*, or *Atomism*, or simply the *Traditional Approach*.

Part 1: What is Traditional Grammar?

* The term *Traditional Grammar* refers to the earliest way of studying language, mainly based on the grammars of **Greek and Latin**. There are two senses of this term:

a. In a narrow sense;

Traditional grammar refers to the **early** grammar theories from **Ancient Greece and Rome** that later became models for all European languages.

b. In a broader sense;

It also includes the grammars of the **19th century**, when scholars began comparing languages historically, the beginning of **comparative philology** (*the branch of knowledge that deals with the structure, historical development, and relationships of a language or languages*).

* Longman Dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics has given a similar definition: Traditional Grammar is "*a grammar which is usually based on earlier grammars of Latin and Greek and applied to some other language, often inappropriately.*"

* The main idea behind traditional grammar is that it is prescriptive ==> it tells people how they should speak or write, based on certain "perfect" models like *Latin* and *Greek*.

Example: Let us take a very famous rule from traditional grammar: "Never end a sentence with a preposition."

Why do we hear that? Because in Latin, prepositions must always come before the noun → that is what "pre-position" literally means. But English is not Latin!

We naturally say, "Who are you talking to?" Traditional grammar says: Wrong. Modern linguistics says: Perfectly natural English.

→ Traditional grammar has primarily emphasised *correctness* rather than actual linguistic *usage*. Its orientation has been normative, concerned with how individuals *ought* to speak rather than how they *in fact* speak. For this reason, it is characterised as *prescriptive* grammar, an approach that prescribes linguistic rules much like a set of directives. In contrast, modern linguistics adopts a *descriptive* stance, which does not evaluate linguistic forms as right or wrong but instead observes, documents, and explains how language is used in real contexts.

Part 2: Why “Atomism”?

- Atomism comes from the word *atom*, which means the smallest indivisible unit of matter.
- In theory, atomism is an approach that explains something by breaking it into distinct, separable, and independent parts. It is the opposite of a holistic approach, which focuses on the whole system and the relations within it.
- Early language study followed this atomistic approach. Scholars examined the smallest units of language (words, sounds, and letters) as separate items.
- They did not yet study how these units relate to one another or how they form larger patterns. This is similar to taking apart a car and looking at each piece separately without asking how the pieces work together to make the car run.
- For this reason, this early stage of linguistic study is called *atomistic*: it focused on language elements in isolation.

Part 3: The Three Stages of the Atomist Period

The Pre-Structural or Atomist Period developed through **three main stages**:

1. Rhetoric – The Indian Stage (Spoken Focus)

The first stage comes from **India**. It was the period of the **Indians**, and it was related to the **spoken** aspect of language.

2. Grammar – The Greek Stage (Written Focus)

It was the period of the Greeks, and it was related to the study of the literary texts and the establishment of Grammar. This is why it was concerned with the written aspects of language. In Greece, the focus shifted to **writing and literature**.

3. Comparative Philology – The European Stage (Language Families)

It studied the differences and similarities that exist between languages and from this, the idea of language families emerged.

Centuries later, scholars began comparing languages. They realised that certain languages had **remarkable similarities**.

Example:

English	French	Latin	Sanskrit
mother	mère	mater	mātar
three	trois	tres	trayas
brother	frère	frater	bhrātar

These are not coincidences; they all come from the same ancient root language, which we now call **Proto-Indo-European**. This discovery gave rise to the idea of **language families**, just like biological families. Languages can be “siblings” or “cousins” if they share a *common ancestor*.

Part 4: Schools of Atomism

I. The Greek School – The Philosophical Foundation

- The Greek School marks the point at which linguistic thinking in the Western tradition truly begins.

- The Greeks held their language in exceptionally high regard, viewing it as *pure*, *logical*, and even *divine*.
- They referred to other languages as *barbarian*, not because their speakers were violent, but because these languages sounded to Greek ears like “bar-bar-bar”; essentially unintelligible noise.
- Greek scholars therefore studied language primarily through written texts such as poetry, philosophy, and drama in order to preserve what they saw as the purity of Greek.
- Their work did not involve describing everyday speech in Athens; rather, they focused on defining how Greek *ought* to be written and spoken.
- As a result, the Greek approach was prescriptive, emphasising rules, structure, and order.
- The Greeks also posed a question that remains compelling today: *did language arise naturally, or was it created by humans?* This debate divided Greek thinkers into two groups: the Naturalists and the Conventionalists.

a. The Naturalists led by Plato	b. The Conventionalists led by Aristotle
Plato argued that language is <i>natural</i> rather than invented by humans.	Aristotle, Plato's student, maintained that language is a <i>human creation</i> based on agreement.
He believed that there is an inherent connection between a word and the object it names. Words are not arbitrary; they reflect the <i>Idea</i> associated with the object.	He argued that words are <i>conventional symbols</i> chosen by communities. Different languages use different sounds (e.g. <i>dog</i> , <i>chien</i> , <i>kalb</i>) to refer to the same entity, which shows that meaning arises from social agreement.
Plato's theory centres on his doctrine of <i>Ideas</i> (Forms). Objects in the physical world are imperfect copies of these ideal Forms. Naming something therefore means naming its underlying Idea.	Aristotle claimed that every linguistic sign consists of two components: Form (the sound or shape of the word) and Matter (the meaning or concept). Form helps to structure and organise the matter.
For example, although no one can draw a perfect circle, we all possess an ideal concept of “circle”, and the word refers to that perfect Idea.	Aristotle had both a philosophical and a practical approach to language. His practical work included classifying words into categories such as nouns, verbs, and conjunctions, forming an early grammatical framework.
Plato was deeply interested in etymology. He believed that analysing the roots of words reveals their true meaning (e.g. <i>philosophy</i> = “love of wisdom”; <i>democracy</i> = “power of the people”).	He also studied <i>onomatopoeia</i> , suggesting that early words may have originated from imitations of natural sounds (e.g. <i>buzz</i> , <i>hiss</i> , <i>crash</i> , <i>bang</i> , <i>splash</i>). Humans probably began naming things this way, by imitating sounds in nature.
For Plato, language expresses thought and reason. Vocabulary reflects the logic of Ideas.	For Aristotle, language is a symbolic system designed by humans for communication.
Plato viewed language primarily as a philosophical issue.	Aristotle viewed language in structural and functional terms.

2. The Indian School

- Moving east to ancient India, we encounter what is widely regarded as the earliest truly scientific linguistic tradition, represented most notably by **Pāṇini**.
- While Greek philosophers focused on abstract debates about meaning and the origins of language, Indian scholars concentrated on the *spoken* dimension of language, paying close attention to sound, rhythm, and articulatory precision.
- This focus arose primarily from religious concerns. The **Vedas**, considered to be the literal words of the gods, had to be pronounced with absolute accuracy; any deviation was viewed as a form of disrespect to the divine.
- Consequently, Indian grammarians analysed the phonetic system of Sanskrit with remarkable detail. They described how each sound was articulated: the point of contact of the tongue, the direction of airflow, and the nature of vocal vibration.

- Pāṇini composed the **Aṣṭādhyāyī**, a grammar consisting of more than 4,000 concise rules formulated almost like mathematical expressions. Its level of precision and systematic organisation has led modern computer scientists to describe it as an early form of an *algorithm*.
- His work also explained how new words could be formed through the addition of prefixes and suffixes, effectively providing generative formulas for word formation.
- In contrast to the Greek tradition, which tended to pronounce how language *ought* to be used, the Indian tradition concentrated on how language *is actually used*.
- For this reason, their approach is described as **descriptive rather than prescriptive**.
- Ultimately, Indian scholars studied language to ensure the accurate recitation of sacred hymns; this emphasis on spoken accuracy resulted in grammatical rules that resembled “chemical formulas”. Written Sanskrit closely reflected phonetic reality, reinforcing the descriptive and analytical nature of their linguistic work.

3. The Roman School (linguistics in Rome)

- The Romans admired the Greeks and largely followed their path, but their approach was more *practical*.
- They treated language as a **social tool**, something people used to communicate and to reason together.

Key Figures:

Marcus Terentius Varro

He considered several differences between languages. He viewed language primarily as a social phenomenon with a communicative purpose. Secondly, he saw it as a tool for logical and philosophical enquiry. In short, Varro regarded language as a reflection of society.

Priscian, a Latin grammarian, wrote the most complete and accurate work on Latin grammar. He introduced semantic and formal criteria, covering both phonology and grammar. He classified words systematically and described their forms and meanings in detail.

4. The Middle Ages (Medieval Linguistics)

- During the Middle Ages, the study of language continued, but the focus shifted back towards **philosophical inquiry**.
- Medieval linguistics is primarily known for its **speculative grammars**, in which grammatical concepts were interpreted philosophically rather than analysed in a systematic linguistic way.
- According to this view, all languages share a **hidden universal grammar**, differing only in superficial features.

Developments in the West

- Lexicography began to develop significantly, with several dictionaries being compiled and printed.

Developments in the East

- Arabic scholars produced highly advanced works on **grammar and pronunciation**, analysing the articulation of sounds in the mouth and throat centuries before modern phonetics.
- These works remained largely unknown in Europe until the **Crusades**, which facilitated contact between Arabic, Christian, and Hebrew linguistic traditions.

***West**: growth of dictionaries and lexicographical study.

***East**: descriptive and phonetic analysis of language, later introduced to Europe through cross-cultural contact.

Universal Grammar (UG) is the idea that humans are born with a built-in knowledge of language rules. This biological ability helps children easily learn their native tongue. The theory suggests a common mental blueprint underlies all the world's languages.

5. Comparative Philology

Scholars began to examine the **similarities and differences between languages**, often explaining them in terms of **geographical proximity** and **borrowing**. For instance, neighbouring languages such as French and Italian share vocabulary due to contact and influence, while English has borrowed extensively from Norman French.

Latin was commonly used as a **reference model** against which other languages were compared. However, this approach gradually declined for several reasons:

1. It placed **too much emphasis on dead languages and written texts**, focusing on Latin and Classical Greek rather than the living, spoken language.
2. **Sound and speech were largely ignored**, meaning pronunciation, phonetics, and oral usage were not considered.
3. It assumed that **languages with a common origin could not influence each other**, overlooking the way related languages often continue to borrow and interact, such as Spanish and Portuguese sharing words despite both deriving from Latin.

Summary

School	Focus	Key Figures	Type of Grammar	Goal
Greek	Written / Logical	Plato, Aristotle	Prescriptive	Purity & rules
Indian	Spoken / Religious	Pāṇini	Descriptive	Correct pronunciation, Precision
Roman	Social / Logical	Varro, Priscian	Analytical	Grammar for education
Middle Ages	Philosophical	Scholastics	Speculative	Universal Grammar
Comparative Philology	Historical	Bopp, Franz	Comparative	Language families

Reflection and Closing

Before linguistics became a formal science, it was an art of thinking, reflecting culture, logic, and belief. The scholars of the Pre-Structural Period, from India, Greece, Rome, and the Middle Ages, laid the foundations of linguistic thought and were the first to ask fundamental questions such as *what language is, how it functions, and how it should be spoken or written*. Their work established the principles upon which modern linguistics is built, and contemporary theories, ranging from Saussure's structuralism to Chomsky's generative grammar, draw directly on the insights and inquiries of these early thinkers. In essence, they remind us that the study of language is not merely the study of rules and structure, but a profoundly human endeavour, intimately connected to society, cognition, culture, and the quest to understand communication.