



Characteristics of Traditional Grammar Analysis (Atomism)

Introduction

To truly appreciate modern language analysis (Linguistics), it is essential to understand the limitations of Traditional Grammar Analysis (TGA). Traditional grammar served as the foundation of linguistic thought for centuries, but its shortcomings (limitations) gave rise to modern linguistics, which approaches language in a more scientific and descriptive way.

Traditional Grammar, often associated with “atomism”, treats language as a set of separate, independent elements rather than a dynamic system of relationships. Below are the main characteristics (or weaknesses) of this approach.

1. Selective Attitude

Traditional Grammarians were **selective** about what aspects of language they analysed. Their focus depended on **who was learning** and **what was considered worth studying**. As a result, large parts of language use, especially **spoken and informal varieties**, were ignored. The two levels of selectivity are:

A. Focus on Written Language

Most traditional grammar rules were based on **written language**, not speech. Yet, language is primarily a **spoken phenomenon**. For instance:

- The rule “Add -s to make a plural in English” (e.g., *book* → *books*) works for many nouns but ignores irregular spoken forms such as:
 - child → children
 - man → men
 - *sheep* → *sheep*

→ These examples show that real language is far more complex than the rule suggests.

B. Focus on Formal Style

Traditional grammars usually described **formal, literary styles** and ignored **informal or colloquial usage**. For example:

- They might say that “*It is I*” is the correct form, but in real spoken English, people say “*It’s me*.” The latter reflects **actual usage**, while the former reflects **prescriptive correctness** based on formal writing.

2. Prescriptive Attitude

Traditional Grammar is prescriptive, not descriptive. That means it tells people how they should speak and write, instead of describing how they actually do.

- It distinguishes between “**good**” and “**bad**” language, often based on the speech of the educated elite.
- For example: a traditional grammarian might say: “Never end a sentence with a preposition.” But in natural English, we often hear: “That’s the book I was looking for.”

→ This attitude often leads to **judging speakers** rather than understanding language use.

3. Historical (Diachronic) Focus

- Traditional grammar often studied language **through its history** rather than **in its current form**.
- Grammarians believed that a word's **“true” meaning** was its **oldest or original** one.
- For example, the definite article *“the”* in English has evolved over centuries:
 1. Old English: *pe / se*
 2. Middle English: *pe / pa*
 3. Late Middle English: *pe*
 4. **Modern English:** *the* (after “p” changed to “th”)

While interesting, this focus on history distracted grammarians from understanding how language **functions today**.

- It can be compared to studying modern medicine solely through the lens of medieval remedies: informative and historically interesting, but clearly insufficient for a full understanding.

4. Item-Centred Analysis

Traditional Grammar focuses mainly on **individual words (morphology)** rather than how words **combine** to form sentences (**syntax**).

- It emphasises **parts of speech** (noun, verb, adjective, etc.) but says little about how these parts interact.
- For example: Grammar explains what a *noun* is, but not how nouns and verbs relate in a sentence like: *The boy kicked the ball*.

A modern (linguistic) approach would analyse how **word order**, **agreement**, and **function** work together to create meaning.

5. Borrowed Model of Study

Traditional Grammar borrowed heavily from **Latin grammar**, treating Latin as the **ideal language**. Other languages were analysed as if they worked like Latin.

However, this caused problems because:

- Latin is **inflected** (uses endings to show meaning), while English relies more on **word order**.
- For example: Latin: *puella librum legit* → “The girl reads the book.” Word endings indicate who is reading and what is being read. English: “The girl reads the book.”

Word order determines meaning; changing it to “The book reads the girl” completely alters the sense.

Thus, applying Latin rules to English often led to **incorrect or forced explanations**.

Why Latin Mattered

- **Prestige & tradition:** Classical heritage and rich literary traditions (e.g., Virgil).
- **Logical structure:** Clear, precise grammatical rules.
- **Educational model:** was seen as the language of intellectual and scholarly discourse; used in universities for philosophy, law, theology.

6. Dependence on Other Sciences

Traditional Grammarians often borrowed ideas and methods from **philosophy, religion, logic**, and **mathematics** rather than studying language on its own terms. For instance, they analysed language through **logic**, treating sentences as if they must always be rational or logical. But in reality, people say things like: “I could care less.” (which actually means the opposite)

→ This shows that language is not always logical; it follows **social and cultural rules**, not just logical ones.

Conclusion

→ Traditional Grammar Analysis played a crucial role in the early study of language, but it was **limited** by its:

- Selective focus (written and formal language),
- Prescriptive nature,
- Historical orientation,
- Word-centred approach,
- Latin-based model, and
- Dependence on other sciences.

→ These weaknesses opened the door to modern linguistics, which studies language as it is used, emphasising structure, function, and meaning in real communication.

Characteristic	What it means	Example / Explanation
Selective Attitude	Traditional grammar limits its object of analysis; only certain forms of language (often written or formal) are considered. Like choosing the best looking apples in a basket and pretending the rest do not exist.	Written language: the rule “add -s to form the plural (book → books)” ignores irregulars like child → children, man → men, sheep → sheep. Formal style: Grammar may treat “It is I” as correct, whereas everyday speech uses “It’s me.”
Prescriptive Attitude	TGA tells people how they should speak or write (rather than describing how they actually do).	A rule might assert “Never end a sentence with a preposition.” Yet we commonly say: “That’s the book I was looking for.”
Historical / Diachronic Study	Emphasis is placed on the history of language (how it evolved) rather than on how it works now (synchronic).	For example, tracing the development of the English article “the” from Old English <i>þe / se</i> , through Middle English <i>pe / pa</i> , to modern “the”.
Item-Centred Analysis	Focus is on individual items (words, morphemes, parts of speech) rather than on how those items combine into larger structures (syntax).	Traditional grammars define “noun”, “verb”, “adjective” but often do not explore subject-verb-object relations, word-order effects, clause linkage.
Borrowed Model of Study	The grammar of Latin is treated as the ideal model, and other languages are forced into its framework even when very different.	Latin is highly inflected and relies less on word-order; English relies heavily on word-order. Applying Latin-derived rules (e.g., “never split the infinitive”) to English can mislead.
Dependence on Other Sciences	Traditional grammarians borrow methods and categories from logic, philosophy, mathematics, religion instead of treating language as a self-contained system.	For instance, analysing sentences as if they must always follow pure logic, despite the fact that everyday language uses idioms, ellipsis, informal registers etc.