**Course:** Linguistics (2nd year LMD) **Unit Three:** American Structuralism

**Lesson 4: Transformational Generative Grammar**

**Introduction**

From the late 1950 onwards, structural linguistics has sometimes less popular because advocators of generative linguistics initiated by Noam Chomsky have considered the work of American structuralists too limited in conception. They have argued that that it is essential to go further than the position of items to produce a grammar which reflects a native speakers’ knowledge of the language

1. **Noam Chomsky and TGG**

Transformational generative grammar (alsoTG grammar, TGG) is a theory of grammar which attempted to provide a model for the description of all languages. It was suggested by Avram Noam Chomsky, after the publication of his book *Syntactic Structure* in 1957. Chomsky’s early work falls into two related points:

1. Criticism of structuralism
2. New formulation of linguistic theory

Chomsky has considerably modified his ideas since 1957. The most famous theoretical postion is that of *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (*written in 1965) or the **Aspect Model**, a postion that Chomsky has called the **Standard Theory**. It added important considerations to the study of language. TGG was revolutionary and it is the most forceful and prominent in the century.

1. **Criticism of structuralism**

For Chomsky, structural linguistics involved some weaknesses in conception and methodology.

1. **Corpus Analysis**

For Americans structuralists, an empirical science studies only observable phenomenon. For descriptive purposes, a language was defined in terms of **a corpus.** A linguistic corpus has a level of phonological structure, a level of morphological structure and a level of syntactic structure. They believed that when all elements of the corpus were grouped and labeled at each level, the grammar of the language was complete. Structural grammars offer an inventory of forms and constructions which appear in a limited corpus; they do not provide the rules needed to construct an endless range of possible grammatical sentences. For Chomsky, a corpus can never represent the whole language, but will only cover an incomplete and selective sample of it because language is infinite and creative.TGG supporters suggest that instead of describing a corpus, a linguist can arrive at an inclusive grammar of the language by describing its underlying system of rules, which is not contained in the corpus, but lies beyond it, in the minds of the speakers. Thus, the study of this system is more important than the study of the actual sentences.

1. **Surface analysis (taxonomies analysis)**

Structural grammars only describe the surface structure of sentences. They cannot control efficiently important grammatical facts (which are parts of native speakers’ knowledge about their language), for example, the relationship between active and passive sentences, positive, negative and interrogative sentences, and the deep similarities that lie between superficially identical sentences. The following sentences are considered to be structurally similar if their analysis is about their surface layer, but if another layer is analyzed, they would be unveiled to be dissimilar.

**Examples:**

* John is eager to please.
* John is easy to please.

Chomsky criticized structuralists and Bloomfieldian theories as being based on a representation of a sentence on surface structure alone. These approaches fail to distinguish the surface form from the underlying structures of a sentence.

1. **The Behaviorist Attitude**

Bloomfieldians were influenced by behaviorism. Such approach excludes concepts like the “mind”, “ideas” because it trusts only visible facts. For behaviorists, learning a language is a matter of conditioning and habit formation; it is a mechanical process. Chomsky had been the opponent of this. He tried to illustrate the unproductiveness of this view and the inappropriateness of its principles to the acquisition and the use of human language.

1. **Language Diversity**

Bloomfield and his followers stressed the structural diversity of languages following Boas. They emphasized the divergences between languages and overstated that every language is a unique law. To succeed to understand each language‘s structure, a linguist adopts a descriptive approach to the data.