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A NOTE ON THE LINGUISTIC THEORY OF  
M. TERENCE VARRO

The question with which we are concerned here is the following: what level on the classical Greek hierarchy of intellectual achievement could the study of language attain, according to the classical grammarians, especially the Latin grammarian M. Terentius Varro (116–27 B.C.). That hierarchy consisted of four levels: *peîra*, *empeiria*, *tékhnē* and *epistēmē*; which may be translated as “skill”, “practical knowledge”, “science”, and “understanding” respectively.

The most important linguistic controversy of the Hellenistic period, namely that between the Stoics of Pergamum and the Alexandrian grammarians, was actually a debate whether the study of language could attain the level of *tékhnē* (the Alexandrian position), or only of *empeiria* (the Stoic position). The Stoics characteristically attempted to justify their position on the grounds that the form of language is not governed by rule or principle, but consists simply of a mass of unrelated entities, or “anomalies”. If language is so chaotic, then there is no principle (*lógos*) for describing it scientifically, and hence our knowledge about language can only be considered to be *empeiria*.<sup>1</sup>

The Alexandrian grammarians, on the other hand, maintained that the form of language is indeed governed by principles, which they called “analogies”. The best known Greek grammar produced by the Alexandrian school, the *tékhnē grammatiké* of Dionysius Thrax, reveals by its name the level which this school believed could be achieved in the study of language.<sup>2</sup> In particular, it should be noted that no Greek grammarian made the claim that the study of language could reach the level of *epistēmē*. From this

<sup>1</sup> Actually, the criticisms leveled by the Stoic Crates of Mallos (fl. 160 B.C.) against the Alexandrian grammarian Aristarchus (c.220–145 B.C.) were as much against the particular methodology used by him to determine analogous inflectional paradigms, as it was against the overall research goals of the Alexandrians, i.e. the determination of the inflectional regularities of Greek. This aspect of Stoic criticism is not at all incompatible with the view that the level of *tékhnē* is attainable in grammatical study. Cf. Sir John Edwin Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship*, Vol. I, third ed., Cambridge 1921, p. 157.

<sup>2</sup> It is doubtful, however, that the work was originally known by this name. Furthermore, grammar is defined in this work as the “practical knowledge (*empeiria*) of the usage of writers of poetry and prose”. This passage, to which an Alexandrian scholiast took exception precisely because *empeiria* and not *tékhnē* was the term used, reveals the Stoic influence upon Dionysius Thrax. For details, see R. H. Robins, “Dionysius Thrax and the Western Grammatical Tradition”, *Transactions of the Philological Society* 1957, pp. 67–106.

negative evidence, we may conclude that the Hellenistic grammarians felt that there were no general principles of language from which the principles of particular languages, such as Greek, followed. The principles underlying Greek syntax, as discussed by Dionysius Thrax – the division of words into eight parts of speech, the defining properties of each part of speech, the division of sentences into a subject and a predicate, and the notion that a simple sentence is that structure which expresses a single complete thought – were thought to be properties of Greek only, and did not follow explicitly from any universal principles of language.

It is the Latin grammarian Varro who may be given credit for first raising questions about language at the level of *epistémē*. Varro noted that derivation (*declinatio*)<sup>3</sup> was an essential property of both Greek and Latin, where the notion “derivation” covered both inflection and complex word-formation. Examples of the latter given by Varro include *mammosae* “big-breasted women”, related to *mamma* “breast”; *argentifodinae* “silver-mines”, related to *argentum fodiatur* “silver is mined”.<sup>4</sup> Varro was not, however, content simply to describe the facts of inflection and complex word-formation for Latin; he was interested also in explaining why these processes were necessarily a part of Latin syntax as a consequence of the fact that Latin was a natural language.

“Derivation has been introduced not only into Latin speech, but into the speech of all men, because it is useful and necessary; for if this system had not developed, we could not learn such a great number of words as we should have – for the possible forms into which they are inflected is numerically unlimited (*infinitae*) – nor from those which we should have learned would it be clear what relationship existed between them so far as their meanings (*cognatio*) were concerned.”<sup>5</sup>

Two facts about this argument by Varro should be noted. First he viewed the phenomenon of syntactic derivation in Latin as following from a universal feature of human language: the ability to form an unlimited number of expressions (in fact, words) from a limited number of elements in a systematic fashion. Second, he justified this position on the grounds that if it were not true, then language acquisition would be impossible.

Actually, according to Varro, two kinds of derivation in language must

<sup>3</sup> The section of Varro’s extant work of relevance to syntactic theory comprises Books viii and ix of his *De Lingua Latina*. The English version used here is the Roland G. Kent translation in the Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass. 1938. I am indebted also to the perceptive critical study of Varro’s linguistic work by Jean Collart, *Varron: grammarien latin*, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres de l’Université de Strasbourg, Fasc. 121, 1954.

<sup>4</sup> *De Lingua Latina* viii, 15, 62.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, viii, 3.

be distinguished. First there is the spontaneous creation of a lexical item, with or without regard to the rest of the language, according to the whim of the innovator. This he called "spontaneous derivation" (*derivatio voluntarius*).<sup>6</sup> Forms created by spontaneous derivation may not conform to the regularities of the language, and hence may appear to be anomalous. Derived items which are governed in form by storable rules of the language are instances of "natural derivation" (*derivatio naturalis*), and the resultant forms are thus analogous. In this way Varro attempted to resolve the old anomalist-analogist controversy.

To describe natural derivation, Varro made use of the metaphor of a plant growing from a seed. Naturally derived forms are produced by inflexible linguistic laws, just as the form of a plant is governed by the inflexible laws of its growth, according to kind. "... those who say that there is no logical system of regularity [in language] fail to see the nature not only of speech, but also of the world."<sup>7</sup> But the nature of the world is generative, thus for example "lentils grow from planted lentils", etc.<sup>8</sup>

Varro in fact made an even stronger assertion than that syntactic derivation is an instance of a universal generative principle. He asserted that given an expression denoting any underlying object or idea (*subesse res*), it must be such that it can form the basis of further derivation.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, Varro failed to pursue this particular idea any further than this, but the statement itself indicates that he had some sort of awareness of the nature of the recursive property of syntactic derivation.

This concludes our discussion of the question posed in the opening paragraph. The concern of the Alexandrian and Latin grammarians to attain the level of *tékhnē*, or even of *epistēmē*, in the study of language was clearly inherited by the rationalist grammarians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while the Stoic belief that only the level of *empeiria* was attainable can be said to correspond to the empiricist position concerning language. It makes a certain amount of sense, in fact, to correlate the top three levels of knowledge and intellectual achievement of classical antiquity with the three "levels of adequacy" recently suggested by Chomsky for evaluating the significance of work in linguistics, although the correspondence should

<sup>6</sup> Kent translated this phrase literally as "voluntary derivation". The expression used here is perhaps more revealing than his literal translation.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, ix, 33. The suggestion by Louis Kukenheim, *Contributions à l'histoire de la grammaire grecque, latine, et hébraïque à l'époque de la Renaissance*, Leiden 1951, p. 79, that Varro would not have made this universal claim had he been aware of languages without inflection seems false, because of the broad sense in which Varro understood the term *derivatio*, at least in this context.

<sup>8</sup> *De Lingua Latina* ix, 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, ix, 37.

probably not be pushed too hard.<sup>10</sup> If we make the correlation, then we observe that the Stoics maintained that observational adequacy is the highest possible achievement in the study of language, while the Alexandrians maintained that descriptive adequacy could be achieved. And we may credit Varro with having first dealt significantly with the issue of explanatory adequacy in the study of language, at least within the Western grammatical tradition.

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<sup>10</sup> For a recent discussion of Chomsky's hierarchy, see Section II of his 'Current Issues in Linguistic Theory' reprinted in J. Fodor and J. J. Katz (eds.) *The Structure of Language: Readings in the Philosophy of Language*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1964, pp. 62-79.