Structuralist and Generative Ideas in the "Gramatica" of Andres Bello

Luizete Guimarães Barros

Structuralist and Generative Ideas in the "Gramatica" of Andres Bello

Structuralist and generative ideas in the "Gramática" of Andrés Bello

Luizete Guimarães Barros

1. Introduction

The question that motivates this paper is, briefly put, how distinct tendencies in modern linguistics are to be found in earlier authors. That question involves here the grammatical studies of the Venezuelan philologist Andrés Bello (born in Caracas, 1781-died in Santiago, Chile, 1865), to whom we owe one of the earliest Spanish grammars written in America, namely, the *Gramática de la lengua castellana destinada al uso de los americanos* (GCA, henceforth), published in Chile in 1847. In addition, Bello also wrote a shorter article on the verb called Análisis ideológica de los tiempos de la conjugación castellana (AIT, henceforth), published a year after GCA, thought it was written much earlier, around 1810.[1]

One can recognize two trends in these two works, both explicitly stated in the prologues. Their antagonistic inspiration, nurtured in the last two centuries, can be summarized as follows:

(1) First, the universalist ideas of a "philosophical grammar", which presupposes a common substrate to all languages and originated with the grammars of El Brocense (1585) and Port-Royal (1660). It gained new impetus during the second half of this century with the generativism.

(2) Secondly, the empiricist trend which intends to describe languages formally, using methods applied by the comparative method in use during the late nineteenth century.

The opposition between a general and a particular grammar is clearly reflected in Bello's prologues. In GCA Bello is concerned with describing one particular language, the Spanish variety used in the American colonies. As Bello had said: *"Una cosa es la gramatica general, y otra la gramática de un idioma dado."* (It is one thing the general grammar and another the grammar of a particular language.). On the other hand, AIT has a more universal focus by describing the Spanish verbal system as a prototypical system for all languages. Thus AIT is more concerned tacitly with the general productive principle that controls all speakers.

1.1. Structural features

Barry L. Velleman, who wrote extensively about the methodology and sources used by Bello in GCA, saw in this work an affinity with later structuralism rather than traditional philology (Velleman 1974, 1978). Velleman recognizes two trends in Bello's grammatical studies: (1) universalist present in his early studies, e.g. AIT and (2) empiricist which began around 1830 and shows the influence of English empiricism. Some features of GCA that point toward a Bello as a forerunner of structural ideas are the following ones:

---

[1] Oscar Sambrano Urdaneta, who wrote a chronological sketch of Bello in Obra literaria de Andrés Bello (Caracas: Ayacucho), 1979, p. 618, puts forth 1809 as the date for AIT. Furthermore, Federico Álvarez, in his "Bello y el periodismo chileno" (in Andrés Bello, La Habana: Casa de las Américas), 1989, p. 159, states that Bello published his article on the theory of the verb around the time he was living in London, that is, between 1810 and 1829.

1.2. Language and Thought

In the GCA's prologue, Bello disclaims the current view of language as a mere reflection of thought:

> "No debemos, pues, trasladar las afecciones de las ideas a los accidentes de la palabra. Se ha errado no poco en filosofía suponiendo a la lengua trasunto fiel del pensamiento." (GCA: 29)[2]

This identification between the word and its referent opens the possibility of associating the biological and linguistic gender, a common practice among the contemporary grammars. Bello attempts to distinguish the noun gender through the adjective linked to the noun and limits the scope of the analysis to linguistic gender (GCA:45-6). Furthermore, he posits that for a word like "muerte" (feminine), its association with the female sex is due to the adjective form which is attached to the noun. Though this explanation seems to confuse the concept with the word, Bello avoids "animist" solutions and, instead, seeks a more formal account of gender of words.

His bipartite classification of adjectives needs special mention. One group serves a specifying function, by which the meaning of the noun is completed, e.g. *animales mansos* 'tamed animals'. The second group contains generic adjectives which explain what's common to all particular instances of the noun, e.g. *mansas ovejas* (idem.)

If GCA tends to view language through a formalist prism, the prologue of AIT, in contrast, manifests Bello's preoccupation with the present interest with how speakers process information during the act of speech[3] and how to describe the mental act that each verbal tense represents.

The GCA prologue denies any identity between language and thought, and it begins to delineate the gap that linguistics and philosphy will begin to form in this century. This goal differs from what he sets to do in AIT, namely, a "philosophical study of language" and its discovery of the mental procedures responsible for language (AIT:416). The logical nature of Bello's linguistic analysis stems from the rationalism prevailing at the time.

1.3. Signifier & signified

The form-meaning dichotomy of traditional grammar was replaced by the linguistic levels (phonological, syntactic & semantic) of structuralism. Bello distinguishes different functions for the dictionary and the grammar. While the former contains the meaning of the word root, the latter provides the inflections (morphology) and their combinations (syntax) (GCA:30). This classification stems from Bello's view that words can be categorized in terms of their degree of dependency and combinability to other words rather than semantic content.[4] Thus Bello defines the noun as the word having a subject role as well as others.

For Velleman this definition shows a desire to classify forms on the basis of their potential to occupy syntactic slots in a large structure, and is therefore superior to the previously ubiquitous references to 'name of substance'". Bello rejects the traditional

---

[2] We should not translate the subtleties of ideas to words' properties. Much wrong has been done in philosophy in presupposing language as the exact copy of thought.

[3] "...lo que pasa en el entendimiento cuando hablamos." (AIT: 417)

[4] "En realidad, las varias clases de palabras no difieren unas de otras por su signficado, sino por su conexión y dependencia en el lenguaje." (In reality, the various word classes do not differ from each other for their meaning but their connection and dependency in the language.) Quoted in Velleman (1978:57).

definition of the verb as "that part of the sentence which stands for the movement or action of beings, their impression upon our senses or, even, the abstract relationship it holds between two ideas."[5] In Bello's view, this definition of the verb is more akin to a listing of semantic features (GCA:58).

Based on a syntactic criterion, Bello also rejects the classical interpretation of the verb as copula plus attribute (to love = to be + loved) which "has no philosopical foundation nor a practical application in speech" (GCA:56).

1.4. Synchrony & diachrony

Velleman regards Bello as one of the first hispanists to approach language facts within a well-defined stage, identifying a synchronic and diachronic dimension in language. Indeed, Bello is explicit in this question, regarding the "history" of words not part of the domain of the grammar of a language.[6]

Vicente Salvá, a pioneer among grammatical studies for his attempt to describe the "actual Spanish language" influenced Bello for his insistence on forming a corpus. For Salvá the corpus consisted mainly of contemporary Spanish literature, which was extended to earlier periods with Bello. (Salvá 1988, vol. 1:121). For example, Bello considers erroneous the historical explanation for ellipsis of "ser" (to be) in the phrase "se jacta de valiente" (to brag oneself being brave) common in Cartesian-like grammars and synchronically unfounded.[7]

1.5. Arbitrariness & Naturalness

Structuralism postulated language as a system formed by arbitrary signs that carry out their functions according to the syntagmatic structure they are a part of. Bello makes use of similar ideas and favors the study of particular grammars: "El habla de un pueblo es un sistema artificial de signos, que bajo muchos aspectos se diferencia de los otros sistemas de la misma especie: de que se sigue que cada lengua tiene su teoría particular, su gramática (GCA:27).[8]

Alonso regards Bello's definition akin to Saussurean ideas since he sets down: (1) a speech community is an (2) artificial, (3) system of (4) signs.

One particular phrase of Bello has been quoted to demonstrate his originality with respect to Saussure: "En el lenguaje lo convencional y arbitrario abraza mucho más de lo que comúnmente se piensa." (GCA:29)[9] One must highlight the word arbitrary since it has kept some remnants of the universal grammar which opposes what's natural to what's arbitrary. Thus, in his word classification he identifies primitive and natural

---

[5] "...la parte de la oración que significa los movimientos o acciones de los seres, la impresión que éstos causan en nuestros sentidos, y algunas veces el estado de estos mismos seres, o relación abstracta entre dos ideas." (GCA:58)

[6] "Ver en las palabras lo que bien o mal se supone que fueron, y no lo que son, no es hacer la gramática de una lengua, sino su historia." (To identify what words were supposed to be in the past, and not what they are, does not belong to the realm of grammar but history.) (GCA:59)

[7] Amado Alonso (1989:548) sees in Bello's interpretation an antecedent to Sausurre's dichotomy between synchronic and diachronic linguistics.

[8] A speech community is an artificial system of signs, which differentiates itself from the other systems. Thus, one may conclude that each language has its own particular theory, its own grammar."

[9] 'In language, the conventional and arbitrary ranges beyond what it is commonly thought.'

functions:"Como el verbo es palabra esencial y primaria del atributo, el sustantivo es la palabra esencial y primaria del sujeto." (GCA:43)[10]

2. Generative characteristics

So far we have examined the characteristics pointed out by Barry L. Velleman regarding a Bello described as a structuralist, notwithstanding some comments about deviations to that norm. In the following pages we will examine Bello's relation to his pioneering ideas to generativism.

Chomsky has been criticized for his interpretation of Cartesian linguistics and that his ideas are not really Cartesian since Descartes never studied language (Joly 1977 & Aarsleff 1970). Aarsleff (1982:171) claims that Chomsky excludes from his list rationalists such as Locke and Condillac. These philosophers were translated by Bello during his youth and they influenced his development as a grammarian and philosopher.

The criticisms against Chomsky are based on his assertion that generative theory originates in the sixteenth century rationalism. *In Cartesian Linguistics* (1966) and *Language and Mind* (1968) Chomsky explains his formulation of the theory in *Syntactic structures* (1957) as the development of the logicist tradition which has its tenets in the Grammar of Port Royal (1660) and the *Minerva* of Sanctius (1585). Despite the opposition to this claim, we will sustain some of Chomsky's postulates such as Port Royal's predecessor of generative theory.[11]

2.1. Theory of the proposition

Chomsky sustains that an original facet of the Port Royal School was to establish the sentence as the minimal unit of linguistic analysis.

Bello only recognizes one universally valid grammatical unit. According to Bello, three units make up universal grammar: (1) thought is expressed by means of sentences, (2) all sentences consist of a subject and a predicate, and (3) all subjects consist of a noun which refers to an object and the predicate which consists of the verb and other words (GCA:28-9).

This type of proposition reminds one of the noun and verbal phrases that head tree structures. Both rationalists and generativists strongly advocate the creative power of language and its role in cognitive processes, as manifested, for example, in the recursive power of language.

The declarative sentences occupies the central role in this type of grammars such as Port Royal's and Bello's. Interrogative and exclamative sentences are not part of this model.

2.2. Logicist theory

The human being is defined in Cartesian terms as a logical animal and his language, though not being logical all the time, shows this nature. All languages have an identical deep base, but surface forms are different for each language. The Grammar of Port Royal has two types of constructions in language: simple and figurative. The simple construction might be compared to the deep structure of

---

[10] 'Since the verb is the essential and primary word of the attribute, the noun is the essential and primary word of the subject.'
[11] In this respect, see Robin (1969).

transformational grammar since all elements connected to what is logical to understand the sentence is present in its components. What's being produced via rules is a figurative one for the Port Royalists.

The recognition of a logical base subjacent allows to establish primary and natural senses which moves Bello to define the verb the as the primary and essential attribute (GAC:43).

Generative grammar, concerned with the common origins through the analysis of language origins, identifies certain features (primary and natural) common to human language. Thus, Bello contends that certain constructions participate of the verb (GCA:150). Passive voice can be derived from the active voice which is achieved when the verb has a complement.

The verbal classification in AIT is based on the meanings of tenses. Three primary tenses (present, past and futuro) are correlated with concepts such as concomitance, anteriority, posterity in order to exploit the Spanish conjugation. The present perfect indicative is given the name of "copreterito" indicating thus the concomitant action to another verb in the past. Bello explains the verbal system with four modes: indicative, common subjunctive, hypothetical subjunctive and the optative.

Bello, following a chronological order, sets up the the primary usage for the verbal forms and the usage that deviate in their temporal sense. One finds there expressions similar to those of generativism: " futuro pasa a presente" (AIT:443).

In AIT Bello defines some fixed senses, idioms and expressions used with constant laws that are uniform throughout languages. Bello strongly believes this and claims that while tense analysis is treated within Spanish conjugation, the procedures and methodology are essentialy the same.

2.3. Theory of uniformity

Searching an origin has as its intentions two principles that are recognized because of their identification in opposition to art. This aim would have no sense unless there were a theory common to many scholars such as the theory of uniformity. This theory is the corollary to universal thinking by Descartes and Locke and is based on the postulate of the French Revolution and its emergence of liberalism.

Bello seeks the ideal of uniformity, analtzing language through associations that reveal regular processes that go against linguistic diversity.

Bello reduces the irregularities in the Spanish verbal conjugation, giving thirteen classes of verbs and looks for regularity: "I doubt that some Romance languages are so regular...in the irregularity of their verbs such as Spanish" (GCA:191).

His definition of language is: "A language is like a living organism: its vitality does not consist in the identity of the elements but in the regular uniformity those functions play" (GCA:33). Furthermore, as an explanation to his methodology, Bello describes: " Meaning inflexions of the verb present a chaos, in which everything seems arbitrary, irregular and capricious. But, after analysis, such an order is apparent, and, instead, a system of general laws that function in absolute uniformity and susceptible of being expressed in formulas, they can combine and decompose just like algebra." (AIT:416).

2.4. Theory of inversion

Another crucial question for universal grammar is the topic of ellipse or inversion that in general terms involves a relation among deep and surface forms. The grammar of Port Royal postulated that some words such as the verb relate to other classes, which were just abbreviations or substitutes.

The common structure to all languages was defined deductively de agreement between Latin and then establish a logical and natural order. Even if Bello had classified the interjection as one of the seven classes, he saw problems in their categorization since Bello defined the interjection as an abbreviate sentence with an underlying first person subject and an attribute expressing emotion. The syntactic definition created an intriguing dilemma for Bello. Syntactically independent, the interjection must be considered a sentence equivalent. The sentence, for Bello, was an union of subject and predicate; these, however, can only underlie interjections. Thus, in order to define the interjection syntactically, Bello was obliged to postulate an ellipsis inherently contrary to a concept of grammatical description that was to be limited to observed events.

Some of the authors that view Bello as a forerunner of generativism: Rivero (1977 and Demonte (1977). Riveros recognizes, for example, that despite the different propositions, certain currents of generative grammar arrive to analogous conclusions as those elaborated by Bello. Indeed, she sees a similarity between her theory of elliptical verbs that govern the subjunctive and the imperative with abstract verbs.

Demonte warns that Bello seems to refer to other levels of analysis other than the surface level in his treatment of the ellipsis of verbs like "poder" (to be able) and "deber" (must) before infinitives as in "no tengo qué comer" (I don't have anything to eat) or "no sabía si retirarse" (He didn't know whether to retire or not). The explanation presupposes the ellipsis of the verb in order to elucidate the composition of the phrases. However, Demonte warns about the danger of attributing to Bello's theory some kind of mental analog to the deep structure of generativism.

3. Conclusion

For Chomsky, generative grammar is not new, but rather stems from the logicist tradition. The grammar of a language describes an idealized model of linguistic competence and, referring to what a language could possibly be, acceptable forms are transmitted.

A structuralist grammar starts from the empirical observation that through deductive reasoning, one can explain a linguistic system in particular. Spatial and time delimitation of observable facts, and the primacy of oral language gain recognition with Saussure, whose theory opposes itself to the prescriptive grammar.

Andrés Bello, a receiver of a long grammatical tradition, views ideas that were developed a century later with rigor a school that had lay down a model for the description of Spanish .

References

Aarsleff, Hans. 1970. The History of Linguistics and Professor Chomsky. *Language* 46: 570-586.

Aarsleff, Hans. 1982. *From Locke to Saussure*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Alonso, Amado. 1989. Introducción a los estudios gramaticales de Amdrés Bello. En *Andrés Bello*. La Habana: Casa de las Américas, p. 548.

Bello, Andrés. 1984 (1847). *Gramática de la lengua castellana destinada al uso de los americanos*. Madrid: EDAF.

Bello, Andrés. *Análisis ideológica de los tiempos de la conjugación castellana*.

Chomsky, Noam. 1968. Language and mind. NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Demonte, Violeta. 1977. *La subordinación sustantiva*. Madrid: Cátedra.

Joly, André. 1977. La linguistique cartesienne: une erreu memorable. En La grammaire
générale: des modistes aux idéólogues. Lille: Universoté de Lille III, pp. 165-200.

Rivero, María Luisa. 1977. *La concepción de los modos en la gramática de Bello*. Estudios
de ramática generativa de español. Madrid: Cátedra.

Salvá, Vicente. (1988) 1830. *Gramática de la lengua castellana según ahora se habla*.
Madrid: Arco/Libors.

Velleman, Barry L. 1974. *The Gramática of Andrés Bello: Sources and Methods*. Ph.D.
dissertation. University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Velleman, Barry L . 1978. Structuralist theory in Bello's Gramática. *Hispanic Review*
46:55-64.