

# Port Royal Grammar

Marc van Oostendorp

Leiden University

October 4, 2011

# Port Royal

- The *Port Royal Grammar* (*Grammaire générale et raisonnée*, 1660) was written by Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694) and Claude Lancelot (1615-1695). These men were monks at the Port Royal Abbey in France; an abbey which also produced a *logic* and grammar manuals for teaching Latin and vernacular European languages.

# Aim of the Port-Royal Grammar

- Like the previous works we saw before, the Port Royal Grammar seems to have had a pedagogical goal as its primary one.
- However, this goal was not learning a specific language, but rather learning *any* language
- It aims to provide an overview of the grammatical features shared by *all* languages.
- As such, it was part of Port Royal's overall programme of changing language teaching methodology

# Function of language

- According to the Grammar, we have to understand language as the expression of thought.
- “This is why the different sorts of signification which are embodied in words cannot be clearly understood if what has gone on in our minds previously has not been clearly understood, since words were invented only in order to make these thoughts known.”
- A thought (-proposition) consists in two ideas which are joined by the mental operation of affirmation and judged to be similar or dissimilar. The first is the subject (noun), the second the predicate (verb)
- The Port Royal Grammar has therefore been put by many (most famously, Chomsky) in the rationalist tradition of Pascal and Descartes

# Port Royal and universals

- The Grammar holds that human reason is universal (and independent of language); and since every human language is an expression of this reason, there is also something universal to language.
- This rationalist view of language was already present in some medieval, modistic grammar, but the enterprise got new impetus with the new science-friendly atmosphere of the 17th Century.

# Grammar and thought expression

- Grammar studies the art of speaking in such a way that thought is fully and clearly expressed (one difference with Pāṇini and Sībawayh is that it is obviously *one's own* thought that deserves expression)
- This art is the same, independent of the language
- Notice that the idea is slightly different from modern conceptions of communication; the emphasis is on the *expression* rather than on *understanding*

# Nouns and verbs

*And thus the greatest distinction to be made about what occurs in our minds, is to say that one can consider the object of our thought on the one hand, and the form or manner of our thought, the main form being judgment, on the other hand. [. . .] It follows from this that men, having had need of signs in order to mark everything that occurs in their minds, also found it necessary to draw a most general distinction among words into those that signify the objects of thoughts and those that signify the form and the manner or mode of our thoughts [. . .].*

The subject noun and the predicate noun stand for the objects of thought, the copula for the mental operation of judgement.

# What 'idea' is expressed by an adverb?

*The desire which men have to abbreviate discourse is what has given rise to adverbs, for the majority of these particles are used only for signifying in a single word what could only be otherwise indicated by a preposition and a noun: as for example sapienter ('wisely') in Latin for cum sapientia ('with wisdom'), or as another example hodie ('today') in Latin for in hoc die ('on this day').*

# The only true verb is *est*

*[...] one can say that the verb in itself ought to have no other use save to mark the connection that we make in our minds between the two terms of a proposition, but it is only the verb to be [...] which remained in this simple state [...]. For, as men naturally proceed to shorten their expressions, they have almost always joined to the affirmation some other signification in the same word.*

# Incorporation of subjects

*when one says in Latin sum homo ('I am a man'), [...] sum not only signifies the affirmation, but also includes the signification of the pronoun ego ('I'), which is the subject of this proposition [...]. The diversity of these significations joined in the same word is that which prevented many otherwise very astute people from properly understanding the nature of the verb, because they did not consider it according to what is essential to it, namely affirmation, but rather according to [...] relationships which are accidental to it qua verb.*

# The difference between adjectives and nouns

*The objects of our thoughts are either things, like the earth, the sun, water, wood, what is ordinarily called substance, or else are the manner or modification of things, like being round, being red, being hard, being learned, what is called accident.*

*There is this difference between things or substances and the manner of things or accidents: substances exist by themselves, whereas accidents depend for their existence on substances.*

*It is this which has engendered the principal difference among the words which signify the objects of thought. For those words which signify substances have been called substantive nouns, and those which signify accidents, in marking the subjects in which these accidents inhere, have been called adjectival nouns.*

# Reason and custom

- One advance (?) which Port Royal makes over medieval grammars is that it acknowledges that individual languages also have particularities which cannot be understood in a rationalist way
- This may have been due to the understanding that vernacular languages are not inferior to Latin
- They distinguish for every language between *reason* and *custom/usage* (Note: very similar to *langue/parole* or *competence/performance*)

# Learning a language = learning customs

*It is a maxim that those who work on a living language must always keep sight of the fact that those modes of speech which are authorized by a general and uncontested usage ought to pass as legitimate, even if they are contrary to the rules and internal analogy of the language. On the other hand, one ought not to adduce them in order to cast doubt upon the rules and disturb the analogy of languages, nor should they be used to authorize as consequences of themselves other modes of speech which usage has not authorized. Otherwise, he who will linger only on these aberrations of usage, without observing the foregoing maxim, will cause a language to remain forever uncertain, and lacking any principles, it will never be able to be determined.*

# Explaining why languages are not perfect

*because men often follow the meaning of their thoughts rather than the words which are used to express them, and because often, in order to abbreviate, they omit something from discourse, or even because, considering elegance of style, they allow some word which seems superfluous, or they reverse the natural order of words — for all these reasons it has come about that four modes of speaking called figurative were introduced, which are like so many irregularities in grammar, although they are sometimes perfections and beautifications of a language.*

# Chomsky on Port Royal

- An important role in the current perception of the Port Royal grammar is played by Chomsky's book *Cartesian grammar* (1966).
- This book has been heavily criticized by specialists in 17th Century linguistics, for not representing Port Royal in the right frame
- We discuss it here because it still plays an important role at least in our perception (reception) of the Port Royal Grammar

# Problems with Chomsky's approach

- Chomsky is not so much interested in the historical truth about the people involved (how did these people see themselves), but mostly in finding intellectual forefathers (which he also explicitly mentions), hence in their ideas
- For instance, the fact that PR had a pedagogical goal is ignored, and so is the fact that there might have been conceptual gaps between Cartesian philosophy and PR Grammar
- He therefore *appropriates* the book, as is quite commonly the case (as we have seen) with historical work.

# René Descartes

- For Chomsky, the linguistics expressed in (among others) the PR Grammar is *Cartesian*, because it is based on a rationalist spirit which is expressed most clearly in Descartes
- An important difference between man and animal for Descartes is that animal behaviour can be explained purely mechanistically, but man has unique abilities (although most of his bodily behaviour can be explained in such a way)
- The difference is clearest in human language

# Discourse on Method (1)

*[We can] conceive of a machine so constructed so that it utters words, and even words which correspond to bodily actions causing a change in its organs (for instance, if you touch it in one place it asks what you want of it; if you touch it in another place it cries out that you are hurting it, and so on). But it is not conceivable that such a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in its presence, as the dullest of men can do. (CSM I, 39)*

## Discourse on Method (2)

*It is quite remarkable that there are no men so dull-witted or stupid — and this includes even madmen — that they are incapable of arranging various words together and forming an utterance from them in order to make their thoughts understood; whereas there is no other animal, however perfect and well endowed it may be, that can do the same. (CSM I, 39-140)*

# Humboldt

- The most important and last heir to Descartes according to Chomsky was Wilhelm von Humboldt
- For Humboldt, the only true definition of language is “a productive activity” [eine genetische]: “It is the ever repeated mental labour [Arbeit des Geistes] of making articulated sound capable of expressing thought”

# Deep Structure vs. Surface Structure

- “In these terms, we can formulate a second fundamental conclusion of Cartesian linguistics, namely, that deep and surface structures need not be identical. The underlying organization of a sentence relevant to semantic interpretation is not necessarily revealed by the actual arrangement and phrasing of its given components.”

# Deep Structure vs. Surface Structure

- Complex sentences “contain, at least in our mind, several judgments, from which one can make as many propositions. Thus, for example, when I say ‘Invisible God created the visible world’ three judgments that pass through my mind are included in this proposition. For I judge:

- 1 that God is invisible;
- 2 that He created the world;
- 3 that the world is visible;

and of these three propositions, the second is the principal and essential one of the original proposition. But the first and the third are only subordinate, and comprise only part of the principal proposition — the first composing its subject, the third its predicate. (p. 68; PRG 99-100)”

# Relative clauses

- A further example of an analysis in PR Grammar is the distinction between *explicative* (nonrestrictive or appositive) and *determinative* (restrictive) clauses
- “A complex expression is a mere explication if either (1) the idea expressed by the complex expression is already contained in the comprehension of expressed by the principal word of the complex expression, or (2) the idea expressed by the complex expression is the idea of some accidental characteristic of all the inferiors of an idea expressed by the principal word (pp. 59-60; PRL 45). A complex expression is a determination if the extension of the idea expressed by the complex term is less than the extension of the idea expressed by the principal word (p. 60; PRL 45).”