

# Linguistics 120

## Introduction to Syntax

Autumn 2003

# Two Conceptions of Grammar

## PRESCRIPTIVE

- Rules against certain usages. Few if any rules for what **is** allowed
- Proscribed forms generally in use
- Explicitly normative enterprise

## DESCRIPTIVE

- Rules characterizing what people do say
- Goal to characterize all and only what speakers find acceptable
- Tries to be scientific

# Uses of Grammar

## PRESCRIPTIVE

- Identify speaker's socioeconomic class & education level
- Identify level of formality of a particular usage

## DESCRIPTIVE

- Understand how people produce & understand language
- Identify similarities & differences across languages
- Development of language technologies

# Sample Prescriptive Rule

- Don't end a sentence with a preposition.



Dear Dr. Science,

Is there a reason for not ending a sentence with a preposition that you can think of?

-- John Mostrom from Seattle, WA

## Dr. Science's Reply

I must admit I don't know where you're coming from. Correct usage in English and Science is something I've devoted my whole life to. Of course, if I say anything you can't understand, it will just be a new hammer you can try to hit me or another expert over the head with. There are plenty of people like you I can't hope to change the mind of. But then, I've dealt with people like you before. People who don't really want to learn, but just hope to find someone they can publicly disagree with. There is little I can say that your type won't find something to object to. But getting back to your question; no, there's really no reason for not ending a sentence with a preposition, at least none I can think of.



## From Dear Abby, April 9, 2002

It has been nearly 10 years since these rules of basic grammar appeared in my column -- and we can all use this refresher course....

.... My pet peeve -- double negatives: “I don't know nothing” and “We don't go nowhere” are the worst offenders.

## Prescriptivist propaganda: using two negatives in a sentence to convey a negative is illogical

- So you're not supposed to say *I don't owe you nothing* to mean you are free of debts to me.
- But many languages employ just this syntax, using multiple negative words to convey negation.
- These include the literate forms of languages, for example...
- ***Marysia niczego nie dala Jankowi*** (Polish)  
Mary nothing not gave John  
'Mary did not give John anything'

Anyway, language isn't logical....

*parkway*

vs.

*driveway*

*maternity dress*

vs.

*paternity suit*

*bathing trunks* (pl)

vs.

*bikini* (sing)

*you are*

vs.

*\*you is*

*Aren't I clever?*

vs.

*\*I aren't clever.*



Fill in the blanks:

*he/his, they/their, or something else?*

Everyone insisted that \_\_\_\_ record was unblemished.

Everyone drives \_\_\_\_ own car to work.

Everyone was happy because \_\_\_\_ passed the test.

Everyone left the room, didn't \_\_\_\_?

Everyone left early. \_\_\_\_ seemed happy to get home.

# Descriptive Grammar: an example

F--- yourself!

Go f--- yourself!

F--- you!

\*Go f--- you!

- Who taught you this?
- How did you learn it?

# Kinds of Things We'll Worry About

- Where to use reflexives (e.g. *myself*) vs. ordinary pronouns (*I* or *me*)
- Agreement (e.g. *We sing* vs. \**We sings*)
- Word order (e.g. \**Sing we*)
- Case (e.g. \**Us sing*)
- Coordinate conjunction (e.g. *We sing and dance*)
- How to form questions, imperatives, negatives...
- ...and much more

# Some History

- Writings on grammar go back at least 3000 years
- Until 200 years ago, almost all of it was prescriptive
- Until 50 years ago, most linguistic work concerned sound systems (phonology), word structure (morphology), and the historical relationships among languages

# The Generative Revolution

- Noam Chomsky's work in the 1950s radically changed linguistics, making syntax central.
- Chomsky has been the dominant figure in linguistics ever since.
- The theory we will develop is in the tradition started by Chomsky, but diverges from his work in many ways.

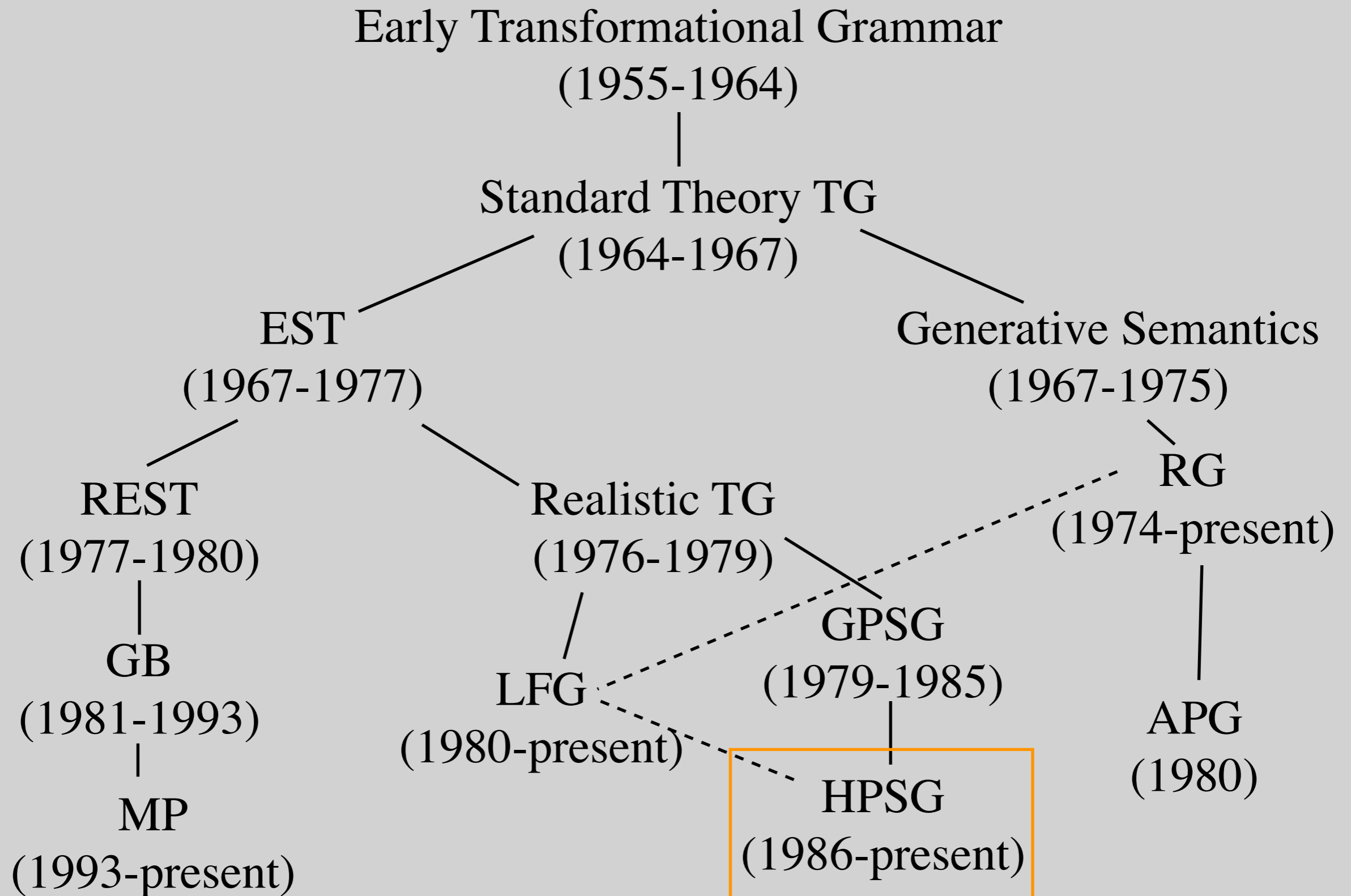
# Main Tenets of Generative Grammar

- Grammars should be formulated precisely and explicitly
- Languages are infinite, so grammars must be tested against invented data, not just attested examples.
- The theory of grammar is a theory of human linguistic abilities.

# Some of Chomsky's Controversial Claims

- The superficial diversity of human languages masks their underlying similarity.
- All languages are fundamentally alike because linguistic knowledge is largely innate.
- The central problem for linguistics is explaining how children can learn language so quickly and easily.

# Family Tree of Syntactic Theories





# Some Areas of Linguistics

- Phonetics: The study of speech sounds
- Phonology: The study of sound systems
- Morphology: The study of word structure
- Syntax: The study of sentence structure
- Semantics: The study of meaning
- Pragmatics: The study of language use