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Metalanguage as a Tool for Constructing Linguistic Reality: A Discursive Analysis of Contemporary Grammatical Definitions

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Abstract: *This article examines the role of metalanguage in constructing grammatical reality, focusing on the discursive mechanisms through which contemporary grammars define key categories such as the verb, the subject, the clause, and the determiner. Through a comparative analysis of representative French and Anglo-Saxon grammatical works, the study highlights how definitions are shaped by epistemic orientations, theoretical priorities, and discursive strategies that stabilize and legitimize linguistic concepts. The findings reveal that definitions are not neutral descriptions of linguistic facts but interpretative acts that involve abstraction, reduction, and conceptual articulation. These processes contribute to the creation of coherent explanatory models and to the consolidation of disciplinary authority. By integrating recent theoretical insights into categorization, grammaticalization, and language ideology, the study demonstrates that metalanguage functions as a central instrument in establishing the conceptual architecture of grammar. The results suggest that understanding definitional discourse is essential for comprehending how linguistic theories evolve and how categories become institutionalized within scientific communities. The article opens new perspectives for interdisciplinary research on the epistemology of grammar and the discursive construction of linguistic knowledge.*

Keywords: *metalanguage; grammatical definitions; linguistic categorization; discourse analysis; epistemology; grammaticalization.*

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Introduction

In any discipline devoted to the study of language, metalanguage occupies a central position, functioning both as a technical instrument and as a constitutive element of theoretical reflection. The fact that linguistics constructs its own object through language is not a mere terminological detail, but a defining aspect of how knowledge about language is articulated, legitimized, and transmitted. From this perspective, metalanguage cannot be reduced to a specialized vocabulary serving solely terminological precision. It represents a fundamental dimension of the way in which the scientific community organizes its observations, delimits its concepts, and establishes what may be called "linguistic reality."

Although grammatical definitions have traditionally been regarded as neutral tools aimed at describing phenomena as accurately as possible, recent research in metalinguistics, discourse analysis, and linguistic ideology has shown that the matter is far more complex. Definition, as a discursive act, entails selection, generalization, conceptual hierarchization, and the establishment of relations between terms. Through these operations, it not only explains a linguistic phenomenon but confers upon it a particular form, an epistemic status, and a degree of visibility within grammatical theory. Seemingly technical formulations such as "it is a category," "it is defined by," "it represents," or "it is characterized by" activate processes of naturalization and legitimize a specific way of viewing linguistic phenomena.

The paradigm shifts that have marked linguistics in recent decades – from structuralist approaches to functional and cognitive models, from traditional grammar to formal and descriptive frameworks – have turned metalanguage into a privileged site of theoretical reflection. On the one hand, the definition of this categories seeks to provide a coherent framework for description; on the other hand, it implicitly expresses methodological choices, criteria of relevance, and epistemic orientations. In this sense, metalanguage is not an external layer superimposed on an already constituted reality, but an instrument through which linguistic reality becomes intelligible, classifiable, and ultimately transmissible in an academic setting.

Analyses devoted to language ideologies (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Silverstein, 2014; Woolard, 1998) have emphasized that every linguistic community develops representations about language and about the value of certain structures or discursive practices. Although such studies have primarily examined everyday language, their insights can be extended to scientific discourse as well. When modern grammar defines, for instance, the verb as the central element of predication, the noun as the locus of

reference, or the subject as an "obligatory syntactic function," these formulations are not entirely neutral: they reflect intellectual traditions, theoretical perspectives, and specific modes of conceptualization.

In this context, a discursive analysis of grammatical definitions becomes necessary. It makes it possible to identify the mechanisms through which concepts are constructed, the rhetorical strategies that present them as self-evident, and the ways in which certain interpretations are privileged over others. Definitions may mirror an effort toward conceptual clarification, but they may also indicate the manner in which theory imposes its own categories and forms of legitimacy.

The present study examines how grammatical metalanguage functions as an instrument for constructing linguistic reality in several contemporary works that belong to different linguistic traditions yet share a concern for conceptual precision: *Grammaire méthodique du français* (Riegel et al., 2008), *La grammaire d'aujourd'hui* (Arrivé et al., 1986), *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002), along with several linguistic dictionaries and recent specialized articles.

The analysis focuses both on the ways in which definitions are constructed and on the discursive strategies through which they acquire authority: nominalization, naturalization, use of generalizing formulations, oppositional structures, distribution of epistemic values, and the integration of exceptions.

This approach does not aim to identify the "correctness" of definitions, but rather to highlight the ways in which metalinguistic discourse contributes to the constitution of a coherent vision of language. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to examine how grammatical definition operates as a discursive practice, what linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms it activates, and what implications it has for the representation of linguistic phenomena. Such a perspective allows us to approach grammar not merely as a descriptive system but also as a space of epistemic negotiation, where concepts are shaped and delimited through discourse.

Theoretical framework

The analysis of grammatical metalanguage requires the articulation of a theoretical framework that brings together perspectives from several areas of contemporary linguistics. Although approaches vary, there is broad consensus that grammatical definitions cannot be understood outside the discursive framework that produces them, and that the conceptualization of linguistic phenomena involves specific metalinguistic operations. This section outlines the principles and orientations that inform the present interpretation.

A first relevant perspective is provided by studies of language ideologies, which examine the ways in which representations of language are shaped socially, culturally, and intellectually (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Silverstein, 2014; Woolard, 1998). Although these concepts were initially developed to describe linguistic varieties and discursive practices in speaker communities, they can be successfully extended to scientific metalanguage. Within a grammatical tradition, the choice of a defining criterion – semantic, formal, or functional – reflects not only a technical preference but also a representation of the nature of language and of how it ought to be described. Thus, language ideologies offer a useful analytical grid for understanding how certain definitions come to be perceived as "self-evident" or "canonical," while others remain marginal.

A second relevant line of inquiry is discourse analysis applied to specialized languages. Linguistics, by virtue of its reflexive status, generates a type of discourse in which conceptualization is inseparable from the linguistic formulations that express it. In this respect, Fairclough's (2003) work on the relationship between language, power, and knowledge, as well as Maingueneau's (2021) analyses of institutionalized discourses, provide a productive interpretive framework. The grammatical definition can be viewed as a discursive sequence with legitimizing functions, in which the coexistence of technical terms, generalizing formulas, and evaluative structures allows the establishment of a particular perspective on the phenomenon being described.

Metalinguistics in the strict sense offers another fundamental component of this theoretical framework. Culioli's (1999) conception of enunciative operations, which includes the process through which the speaker (or analyst) reflects on their own linguistic activity, highlights the constructive nature of metalinguistic discourse. Rastier (2011), through interpretive semantics, emphasizes that meaning cannot be separated from operations of description and classification. Thus, when defining a grammatical category, authors do not merely select relevant features; they establish a system of relations between concepts that shapes how these concepts will subsequently be interpreted.

Finally, contemporary perspectives on grammar – from functional grammar to formal approaches – are essential for understanding the diversity of defining criteria employed in the works under analysis. In *Grammaire méthodique du français*, categories are defined through a combination of morphological, syntactic, and semantic criteria, reflecting an effort toward internal coherence and conceptual clarity. *La grammaire d'aujourd'hui* places emphasis on the operational nature of concepts, and its definitions tend to

privilege functional criteria. In *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, the authors assign major importance to distributional criteria and syntactic tests, giving the definitions a distinctly procedural character. This diversity is not a methodological issue but rather an indication that the grammatical definition is, ultimately, the result of an interpretive process.

Thus, the theoretical framework of this study brings together three complementary perspectives: research on language ideologies, discursive analysis of specialized languages, and contemporary theories of grammar. Taken together, these perspectives allow grammatical definitions to be approached not merely as technical statements but as elements of a broader discursive ensemble that shapes how linguistic structures are understood. From this standpoint, grammatical metalanguage becomes an instrument of epistemic construction, and its analysis provides valuable insights into the ways in which the linguistic community articulates its own concepts.

Another fundamental aspect for understanding the epistemic function of grammatical metalanguage concerns the relationship between linguistic description and processes of categorization. Studies on categorization (Lakoff, 1987; Taylor, 2003) have shown that any classificatory system reflects not only the properties of the objects described but also the conceptual structures of the community that produces it. In linguistics, this becomes even more evident given that grammatical categories are not natural entities but the result of progressive abstraction. Concepts such as "verb," "noun," "determiner," or "clause" are inevitably theoretical constructs that depend on the relevance criteria selected. Consequently, the metalanguage through which these categories are defined expresses not only a set of features but also the principles by which the descriptive domain is organized.

A major contribution in this regard comes from cognitive linguistics, which emphasizes that conceptual structures are partially motivated but not directly determined by empirical reality.

For instance, the distinction between "mood" and "tense" in verbal description or between "definite" and "indefinite" in nominal description varies considerably across grammars – not because languages function fundamentally differently, but because certain explanatory models are preferred within a given tradition. This variability confirms that, in defining categories, metalanguage operates with an inevitable degree of interpretation that shapes the conceptual framework within which linguistic phenomena are integrated.

To this must be added the contributions from the analysis of scientific discourse, which offer important tools for examining the rhetorical strategies through which grammatical definitions are formulated. Studies of academic writing (Hyland, 2005; Swales, 2011) have highlighted the

importance of stance markers, generalization strategies, and modal formulas in constructing the authority of scientific discourse. Although such analyses have generally focused on research articles, their observations are equally applicable to grammatical discourse, particularly in definitional sections where authors often adopt a didactic, persuasive, or ostensibly neutral tone to reinforce the impression of conceptual stability. Thus, expressions such as "it is generally considered that," "traditionally," "in general," or "usually" function as rhetorical anchors that signal continuity with an earlier tradition or with a broader epistemic community.

Methodology

The analysis proposed in this study is grounded in a qualitative approach, focusing on the discursive examination of grammatical definitions formulated in contemporary linguistic works. The methodological aim is not to quantify phenomena, but to identify the mechanisms through which metalanguage contributes to the construction of a particular representation of linguistic reality. Accordingly, the methodology centers on corpus selection, the delineation of analytical units, and the establishment of criteria used for interpreting discursive segments.

Corpus selection

The corpus consists of definitions extracted from three types of sources, selected to offer a diverse and comparable perspective on how different linguistic traditions formulate grammatical concepts:

1. **Contemporary theoretical and descriptive grammars**, selected for their conceptual rigor and the explicit formulation of definitional criteria. This category includes works such as *Grammaire méthodique du français* and *La grammaire d'aujourd'hui*, representative of the French tradition, as well as *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, which exemplifies the Anglo-Saxon tradition.
2. **Linguistic dictionaries**, which provide concise definitions aimed at terminological clarification. These sources are valuable because they directly reveal how the specialist community fixes the meaning of fundamental terms.
3. **Recent scientific articles**, published in the last two decades, in which operational definitions of concepts such as "subject," "clausal realizations," "determiner," or "morpheme" appear in the context of theoretical debates. These sources make it possible to observe how metalinguistic discourse adapts to ongoing developments in research.

The selection avoided overlap with didactic materials, historical grammars, or corpora associated with previous studies, ensuring that the analysis focuses exclusively on contemporary scientific discourse.

Unit of analysis

The basic unit of analysis is the grammatical definition, understood as an explicit discursive segment in which the authors formulate a defining criterion or a set of features for a linguistic category. In some cases, the definition appears as a stand-alone sentence; in others, it occurs as a complex clause integrated into a broader explanation. Regardless of form, segments were selected in accordance with two conditions:

- they explicitly present a linguistic term (e.g., "verb," "clause," "determiner," "syntactic function");
- they establish a relationship between this term and a set of attributed properties.

Thus, the definition is treated as a discursive act rather than a simple description.

Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

(a) Identification of discursive strategies

For each definition, the linguistic structures through which classification and conceptual legitimization are achieved were identified. This stage focused on phenomena such as:

- nominalization (which confers abstraction);
- naturalization (through generalizing formulas);
- the use of epistemic markers;
- the construction of conceptual oppositions;
- recurrent metaphorical patterns.

(b) Analysis of definitional criteria

The analysis examined whether definitions privilege morphological, syntactic, semantic, distributional, or combined criteria. The objective was not to assess the adequacy of these criteria but to observe how they are mobilized discursively.

(c) Integrated interpretation of results

Definitions were not analyzed in isolation, but in relation to the broader conceptual architecture of the respective works. This stage

examined the extent to which various discursive strategies contribute to consolidating a coherent representation of language.

Limitations

This study is exploratory in nature and relies on a limited selection of sources, which entails certain inherent limitations. First, the analysis focuses on a relatively restricted corpus composed of works representative of well-established linguistic traditions. While this selection enables the identification of recurrent discursive strategies, it does not cover the full variety of grammatical definitions found in contemporary literature. Second, the adopted methodology privileges a qualitative reading of definitions, centered on discursive mechanisms and conceptual operations; therefore, quantitative aspects or the statistical distribution of phenomena are not addressed. Furthermore, the study focuses exclusively on scientific discourse, without integrating sources from pedagogical lexicography or instructional grammars, which could offer complementary insights into how certain metalinguistic concepts circulate and become stabilized.

These limitations do not invalidate the conclusions but rather suggest directions for further research, particularly through the inclusion of additional types of works or through diachronic analyses of grammatical definitions.

Discourse analysis of contemporary grammatical definitions

The following analysis examines how various linguistic works formulate the definitions of several fundamental grammatical concepts and how these formulations contribute—explicitly or implicitly – to the construction of linguistic reality. The study focuses on a number of central categories – verb, subject, clausal realizations, and determiner—given that these definitions involve the intersection of morphological, syntactic, and functional criteria and constitute sites where discursive strategies become particularly visible.

Defining the verb: between predication and distribution

In *Grammaire méthodique du français*, the verb is defined through the articulation of several criteria: its capacity to express predication, to participate in the organization of the utterance, and to integrate into a complex morphological system. Although the formulations within this work are not strictly uniform, they tend to position the verb axially, granting the definition a clear interpretative orientation. Predication is presented as a

"central function," while verbal inflection appears as a mechanism anchoring the verb in tense, mood, and person.

Even if not stated explicitly, the definitional discourse suggests that the verb functions as a conceptual node around which syntactic structures are organized.

The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language adopts a different strategy. The authors focus on distributional criteria and syntactic tests that allow the identification of verbs within the clause. The verb is described as an element capable of occupying specific positions in clause structure, and the tests (for instance, auxiliary insertion, inflectional possibilities, or infinitive/gerund alternations) are presented as operational procedures. This orientation gives the definition a procedural character: it specifies not only what a verb *is*, but also *how* it can be recognized. Through such a strategy, linguistic reality is shaped in terms of testing criteria, introducing a form of "interpretive practice" into the definition.

In both cases, the definition goes beyond listing features to construct a conceptual framework. In the first work, the verb attains a central status through the emphasis placed on predication; in the second, its status results from a set of procedures that confirm the verb's place in syntactic architecture. Metalanguage thus contributes to constructing divergent yet equally coherent images of the same linguistic phenomenon.

Complementing these observations, it is evident that the definition of the verb in the works analyzed frequently relies on a tension between tradition and innovation. The authors appear to negotiate continually between established criteria – such as predicative value – and the need to integrate more recent analytic procedures focusing on distributional behavior. This negotiation becomes visible in formulations such as "it is traditionally considered that," thus marking continuity, and those such as "it may be tested by," which introduce an operational perspective. We also note that the verb is presented as a nodal point in clause organization, suggesting that the definitions, even when cautious, confer upon this category an implicit conceptual authority. Overall, the definitional discourse frames the verb more as a principle of organization than as a mere lexical class.

Moreover, an examination of the definitional formulations shows that the verb is often introduced through a subtle interplay between technical precision and generality, indicating the authors' attempt to balance analytical fine-tuning with conceptual accessibility. In the French works, for example, the definition frequently hinges on the idea of a "predicative relation," a term that appears transparent but encompasses a wide spectrum of functions. This controlled polysemy suggests that grammatical

metalanguage functions not only as a tool of conceptual stabilization but also as a means of maintaining interpretative elasticity. By contrast, in Anglo-Saxon works, the definition relies less on tradition and more on criteria with a high degree of replicability, transforming the definition into an almost experimental procedure. This contrast between stability and procedure reveals two distinct ways of conceptualizing the relationship between concept, description, and testing.

Another salient element in defining the verb is the way in which authors manage the relationship between the flexibility of form and the stability of function. In some works, this relationship is articulated through conceptual oppositions – such as "lexical vs. functional" or "finite vs. non-finite" – that structures the perception of the verb subtly. These oppositions create a conceptual axis on which the verb is positioned depending on the dominant criterion of the theory. Furthermore, some definitions introduce a pragmatic dimension, suggesting that the verb not only organizes syntactic structure but also directs how information is distributed within the utterance. This pragmatic dimension often remains implicit, yet its presence shows that the verb continually functions as a point of convergence between description, interpretation, and discursive function.

Defining the subject: between logical criteria and formal criteria

The definition of the subject is a domain in which discursive strategies become particularly visible, since grammatical traditions have oscillated between logical perspectives and structural approaches.

In contemporary French works, the subject is often defined as an obligatory or near-obligatory "syntactic function." The emphasis falls on syntactic position, its relationship with the verb, and agreement. The formulations are frequently generalizing – "in most cases," "as a rule," "generally" – which gives the definition an appearance of neutrality while simultaneously introducing flexibility. Such discursive markers enable authors to avoid rigid formulations and to acknowledge atypical cases without elaborating on them extensively.

In *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, the subject is defined almost exclusively through distributional criteria: its position within clause structure, its relationship with modal or auxiliary operators, and its participation in inversion patterns in specific contexts. These criteria are presented as tests that can be applied systematically, which gives the definition a procedural and objectifying nature. The dominant discursive strategy here is "naturalization through procedure": what can be tested becomes, implicitly, theoretically validated.

In both traditions, metalanguage constructs the subject not as a pre-existing entity but as the outcome of a set of conceptual operations. The differences between formulations illustrate the extent to which definitions are inevitably theory-dependent.

Closer examination reveals that the introduction of the subject in these definitions often involves a layering of criteria, in which authors combine explanatory levels without explicitly stating their hierarchy. In some works, logical accents are invoked only to be immediately tempered by structural criteria, demonstrating the fragility of the boundaries between the two orientations. Strikingly, the discursive markers employed – such as "in general," "in this analysis," or "in a narrow sense" – function as devices of epistemic distancing, suggesting that the definition is not intended to be absolute. At the same time, the "testable" character of the subject in Anglo-Saxon works confers an impression of objectivity, even though the tests themselves arise from a particular structural tradition. Ultimately, the subject emerges as both a conceptual and an operational category, and the discourse that defines it reflects this dual nature.

It is also noteworthy that many definitions present the subject as a "structurally necessary element," formulations that suggest a form of implicit normativity. Even when authors acknowledge the existence of clauses without an overt subject, the discussion is framed so as to preserve the theoretical status of the subject as the axial element of the clause. This discursive mechanism constitutes a subtle strategy for maintaining the framework of traditional concepts, even in the face of phenomena that may challenge it.

In Anglo-Saxon works, by contrast, defining the subject as "the least marked element in clause structure" indicates that authors are not seeking to reinforce a logical role but to identify a structural regularity. This type of formulation is revealing of how metalanguage may privilege formal regularity over conceptual tradition.

Definitions of the subject also reveal a concern for maintaining coherence across levels of analysis, visible in formulations that attempt to harmonize semantic and syntactic criteria. Some works explicitly signal this tension, acknowledging that the grammatical subject does not always correspond to the semantic agent. This acknowledgement leads to the introduction of auxiliary concepts such as "syntactic role" or "structural function," which alleviate the pressure placed on the traditional definition. In other works, this differentiation is managed by distinguishing between the logical subject and the grammatical subject, allowing for a clearer demarcation of their respective domains. Overall, these strategies show that defining the subject is an exercise in balancing tradition with descriptive accuracy.

Defining the clause: syntactic unit or communicative unit?

The clause (or sentence) is one of the categories most sensitive to the theoretical orientation of its authors, and the way it is defined reflects the differences between linguistic traditions.

In contemporary French works, the clause is treated predominantly as a structural unit composed of a predicate and, where applicable, its associated complements. The definitional discourse is relatively stable, although the organization of the sentence may be nuanced depending on the authors' functional orientation. Occasional references are made to the communicative value of the sentence, but these seldom occupy the center of the definition.

In *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, the clause is defined with greater flexibility: it is considered the fundamental unit of syntax, characterized by the presence of a verb – finite or non-finite – and by its potential to occur independently or as a dependent structure. The discursive strategy is oriented toward syntactic tests and the identification of structural positions. In this approach, what counts as a clause depends primarily on how it can appear in clause structure, rather than on its logical or communicative value.

In both traditions, the definitional process involves conceptual selection: either predication occupies the central position, or the identification procedures of syntactic positions take precedence. Discursively, the definition acquires authority through the way authors justify these criteria – either by appealing to tradition or by invoking diagnostic tests.

The discourse analysis further reveals that clause definitions are more sensitive than others to the theoretical context in which they are formulated. Different authors attribute different degrees of importance to communicative value, and this variation is visible in their choice of terms and in the extent to which enunciative function is made explicit. In structurally oriented works, the clause appears as a "module" of the sentence, and technical metaphors give the definition an appearance of technological neutrality. By contrast, works concerned with communicative function employ terms such as "unit of meaning" or "segment with pragmatic autonomy," thereby transforming the definition into a broader interpretive construction. It becomes clear, therefore, that defining the clause represents a point of intersection between structuralism, functionalism, and discourse theory.

In some works, the clause is presented not only as a syntactic unit but also as a space in which grammatical relations are articulated. This

perspective, found particularly in French works, introduces an architectural dimension into the definition: the clause is the "place" where fundamental grammatical structures are realized. The formulation creates a powerful conceptual metaphor – "syntactic space" – which grants the clause a stable identity independent of the variety of phenomena it may encompass. In Anglo-Saxon works, on the other hand, the role of the clause is often defined through its ability to host operators and interact with various subordinating structures. This mode of definition emphasizes functionality, suggesting that linguistic reality may be conceptualized more through operations than through hierarchical structures.

A more detailed analysis shows that defining the clause also presupposes choosing specific tools for segmenting the utterance, a choice that directly influences how the concept operates. Some grammars adopt formal criteria, using the presence of a verb to delimit clauses; others prioritize informational function, treating the clause as a communicative unit.

These differences in approach produce distinct images of syntactic architecture, more rigid or more flexible depending on the theoretical perspective. In certain works, the clause is even described as a "prototypical unit," which allows variable structures to be included without compromising definitional coherence. This controlled flexibility suggests that defining the clause is a dynamic process, sensitive to the theoretical orientations of its authors.

Defining the determiner: a recent and discursively unstable concept

The determiner is one of the most recently integrated categories in modern grammars, and precisely for this reason, its definitions tend to be more variable. In French works, the determiner is defined as an element that "accompanies" the noun and specifies its reference. The definitions, however, are formulated with obvious attention to nuance: expressions such as "generally," "in recent literature," or "most often" signal a form of epistemic caution. This suggests that authors are aware of the relatively recent status of the category and of the fact that the grammatical tradition has not yet achieved stability in defining it.

In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, determiners are described through clear distributional criteria: they occur before the noun, occupy a unique position within the nominal structure, and form a closed set. The definitions are robust, yet there too we find discursive markers that acknowledge variation: "in most analyses," "typically," "commonly understood as."

These differences highlight how metalanguage seeks to confer stability on an emerging category. Through discourse, the category becomes "confirmed" and "established" within the grammar.

An essential aspect of defining the determiner is its status as an emergent category, which leads authors to explicitly mark the limits of their own formulations. Terms such as "in the current understanding" or "in recent typologies" reveal the perception that the definition is still being consolidated. Some works explicitly emphasize the taxonomic difficulties associated with this category, introducing into the definition a reflexive dimension rarely encountered in the description of other parts of speech. Interestingly, despite its instability, the determiner becomes an example of a category whose existence is supported through discourse: the more cautious the definitions, the more clearly the category takes shape within the grammar. This situation paradigmatically demonstrates the role of metalanguage in establishing linguistic reality.

The definition of the determiner represents an exemplary case of terminological emergence. Across the works consulted, one can observe both an effort to stabilize the category and an acknowledgement that it remains a conceptual area still in development. Authors frequently employ expressions of epistemic caution – "it tends to be considered," "in recent analyses," "in most modern typologies" – which function as indicators of the category's instability. Discursively, these formulas create a coherent image: they suggest that although it is a relatively new category, the determiner occupies a well-defined place within the nominal system. More broadly, the definition of the determiner illustrates that grammar is a field in constant reformulation, and that terminological instability may paradoxically signal theoretical vitality.

A close examination of the determiner category shows that its definition is far from stable across grammatical traditions. Unlike other parts of speech that have benefited of terminological sedimentation over the centuries, the determiner emerged as an independent category mostly in structuralist and post-structuralist frameworks relatively late. Earlier grammars subsumed these forms under labels such as adjectifs déterminatifs, articles, or adjectifs non qualificatifs, which reveals the conceptual uncertainty surrounding their status. Contemporary grammars attempt to unify these elements under a single functional criterion – nominal determination – yet they disagree on whether this function is semantic, syntactic, or discursive in nature. As a result, the determiner remains a discursively unstable concept namely its boundaries shift according to theoretical orientation, and its internal subdivisions (articles, demonstratives,

possessives, quantifiers) are variably grouped or separated. This instability conveys that the category is still undergoing conceptual consolidation, and that its definition continues to reflect competing models of syntactic and semantic organization.

Epistemic strategies in the definition of grammatical categories

The comparative analysis of grammatical definitions highlights the existence of recurrent epistemic strategies used to confer stability on concepts and to uphold the internal coherence of theoretical systems. These strategies are not merely linguistic procedures; they are ways through which authors assert their position within a scientific tradition and legitimize the proposed mode of conceptualization. Interestingly, they function both as means of clarifying notions and as subtle mechanisms for instituting disciplinary norms.

One of the most important epistemic strategies is the establishment of a "conceptual center" for the category being described. In the case of the verb, this centering is achieved in some works by placing predication at the core of the definition, suggesting that the verb is not merely a lexical element but an organizing axis of the sentence. In other works, centering occurs through distributional tests, which recast the verb as a unit recognized by its syntactic behavior rather than by its logical function. These modes of centering have significant epistemic implications: they determine the perspective from which the entire structure of the sentence is understood and reorganize the relationships among syntactic functions.

A second relevant epistemic strategy is the configuration of conceptual boundaries – that is, the delimitation of the zone in which the concept is applicable and the identification of marginal elements. This strategy is particularly visible in the definition of the determiner, where authors must draw boundaries within a still-unstable conceptual space. Formulations such as "are usually not included," "in some analyses they are treated separately," or "other linguistic traditions do not retain this distinction" indicate that the definition does more than describing the concept; it negotiates its position within the theoretical architecture. This negotiation shows that grammar is not a closed system but a field in which categories are gradually formed and stabilized through tacit agreement among authors and the linguistic community.

Another decisive strategy is the activation of epistemic normativity – the way definitions establish, directly or indirectly, a form of conceptual authority. This normativity may be explicit – through the use of terms such as "obligatory," "essential," or "necessary" – or implicit, through the

presentation of a single criterion as decisive for identifying the category. In the analyzed works, this authority is often subtle: for instance, when the subject is defined as an "obligatory syntactic function" or the clause as the "fundamental unit of the sentence," such formulations do not merely describe a reality but prescribe how it should be understood. This type of normativity plays a crucial role in consolidating theoretical paradigms.

Another essential aspect concerns the management of exceptions, which always signals the epistemic strategy of the authors. In some works, exceptions are smoothly integrated into the definition through formulas that alleviate conceptual tension ("there are, however, cases in which…," "in certain structures…"). In others, exceptions are treated as peripheral phenomena or are explicitly excluded from the definition to preserve systematic coherence. This shows that exceptions are not merely descriptive details but tests of the flexibility of the theoretical framework: the way they are handled reveals much about how authors conceive the relationship between rule and variation.

A further important strategy is the creation of legitimacy through alignment with tradition, especially in French works, where definitions frequently invoke the "traditional" or "established" perspective. In Anglo-Saxon works, legitimacy is achieved through methodological appeal: tests, highly repeatable criteria, and explicit procedural steps are used to confer objectivity upon the definition. Thus, tradition and methodology constitute two complementary modes of generating authority within the definitional discourse. Both operate as forms of epistemic anchoring that shield the definition from contestation and situate it within a shared framework of recognition.

Taken together, these epistemic strategies demonstrate that the definition of grammatical categories is a complex process in which description, interpretation, and conceptual regulation are inseparably intertwined. Metalanguage does not merely reflect linguistic reality; it configures, stabilizes, and projects that reality within the theoretical paradigm from which it emerges. For this reason, the analysis of epistemic strategies becomes essential for understanding how grammar is constituted as a scientific domain.

The epistemic strategies identified here can also be observed in the way authors construct "chains of justification," using examples, tests, or appeals to tradition to support their definitions. These chains function as rhetorical devices that transform theoretical decisions into apparent descriptive evidences. Authors also frequently employ cyclical argumentative structures – the definition of a concept is followed by an example and then

by a reaffirmation of the definition – which strengthens the impression of conceptual stability. Moreover, the epistemic strategies are closely linked to the discursive style characteristic of each work, a factor that contributes to the differences among traditions. This variety shows that grammatical definition is not a uniform process but an ensemble of intellectual practices shaped by cultural and institutional contexts.

The internal dynamics of definitions: between abstraction, reduction, and conceptual articulation

An aspect insufficiently discussed in the scholarly literature – but clearly visible in the works analyzed – is the internal dynamics of definitions: the way they emerge through simultaneous processes of abstraction, reduction, and conceptual articulation. Definitions are not fixed discursive sequences but evolving structures constructed through a series of successive metalinguistic operations. Analyzing this internal mechanism provides insight into how authors manage to transform a complex linguistic fact into a coherent conceptual entity.

A first observable process in defining categories is *abstraction*. At this stage, authors extract from the totality of linguistic phenomena a number of features deemed relevant for consolidating the notion. For example, defining the verb as the "predicative element" or "core of the clause" entails a drastic selection in which features such as lexical aspect, valency alternations, or voice variations are treated as secondary. Abstraction makes it possible to formulate a general definition, but it also entails distancing from the contextual diversity of language. In this sense, definition constitutes both a conceptual gain and a reduction of descriptive complexity.

A second process, complementary to abstraction, is *reduction*. In many definitions, peripheral or difficult-to-integrate phenomena are omitted or mentioned only marginally. This strategy is especially visible in the definition of the subject, where phenomena such as impersonal clauses, anticipatory constructions, or clauses without an overt subject are deliberately minimized. Reduction is not the result of oversight but an epistemic choice: it allows the formulation of a "conceptual prototype" around which atypical phenomena can later be organized. Through this mechanism, the definition acquires coherence and stability, even if part of linguistic diversity is relegated to the background.

A third process – perhaps the least visible without careful discourse analysis – is *conceptual articulation*. Here, authors do not merely identify features of a category; they construct internal relationships among those features. For example, the definition of the determiner does not stop at

presenting it as an element that "accompanies the noun"; it establishes connections among definiteness, reference, syntactic position, and morphosyntactic status. This articulation produces not just a list of properties but a conceptual network in which each feature gains value through its relation to the others. In this way, the definition becomes more than an enumeration: it becomes a condensed explanatory model.

An interesting point is that these processes do not occur separately but simultaneously. In defining the clause, for instance, authors combine abstraction (selecting verbal valency as the central element), reduction (temporarily ignoring intonational or semantic variation), and conceptual articulation (establishing relations between the clause and complementizer structures). This simultaneity generates an epistemic density through which a relatively short sequence becomes a conceptual core of the theory.

Another important aspect of definitional dynamics is the tension between generality and specificity. On the one hand, the definition must be general enough to encompass all instances of the category; on the other hand, it must be sufficiently precise to distinguish the category from related structures. This tension leads to the emergence of hybrid formulas such as "generally," "most often," "in the current typology," "in certain constructions." These expressions are not merely discursive markers; they are indicators of conceptual negotiation and of the ways in which authors manage zones of epistemic uncertainty. They protect the definition from rigidity while allowing it to remain coherent.

Finally, the internal dynamics of definitions reveal a more subtle aspect: the rhetorical role of apparent simplicity. Definitions are crafted to appear concise and unambiguous, even though the processes behind them are highly complex. This "constructed simplicity" contributes to the authority of the definition by creating the impression that the concept is clear and stable, despite the sophisticated processes that shaped its final form. From an epistemological perspective, simplicity becomes, paradoxically, an instrument for consolidating a concept rather than a sign of linguistic transparency.

Overall, the internal dynamics of definitions show that grammatical discourse is a profoundly reflexive process in which authors operate with selections, hierarchies, and conceptual connections designed to produce a coherent image of linguistic phenomena. Analyzing these processes reveals that definition is one of the most significant forms of modeling reality in linguistics and that metalanguage plays a constitutive role in the architecture of grammatical concepts.

The internal dynamics of definitions is also visible in how authors manipulate the degree of abstraction depending on the theoretical purpose pursued. In some contexts, definitions tend to be more inclusive, attempting to encompass as many features of the phenomenon as possible; in others, emphasis is placed on conciseness, extracting only two or three essential criteria. This variation shows that definition is an adaptive process shaped by the conceptual architecture of the grammar. Furthermore, definitions often include a "predictive" substrate: authors anticipate potential questions from the reader and adjust their formulations to prevent ambiguity.

Ultimately, definitional dynamics is an indicator of the theoretical maturity of the works analyzed, as it reveals how concepts are refined and calibrated according to the needs of the analysis.

Discussion

The results of the analysis demonstrate that grammatical definitions function as genuine discursive practices in which metalanguage plays a constitutive role. Grammatical categories are not presented as pre-existing entities but as conceptual structures constructed through the selection of relevant criteria, the establishment of hierarchical relations, and the activation of specific linguistic mechanisms. The differences identified among the analyzed works are therefore not mere variations in wording but expressions of distinct ways of organizing linguistic knowledge. The fact that some grammars emphasize predication, others distribution, and still others mixed criteria shows that grammatical definition is an interpretive activity, and that metalinguistic discourse becomes the instrument through which this interpretation acquires a stable and transferable form.

In relation to the scholarly literature, the findings confirm the observations formulated in studies on language ideologies (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Silverstein, 2014; Woolard, 1998). Definitional formulations are not neutral, even when they adopt a technical tone: they entail choosing a perspective, privileging a criterion, and establishing a relationship between the concept and its exemplifications. This observation aligns with discourse-analytic theories, which emphasize the institutional nature of specialized discourses (Fairclough, 2003; Maingueneau, 2021). The discursive strategies identified in grammatical discourse nominalization, naturalization, procedural marking, the use of tests – can be understood as means of consolidating the authority of the grammatical episteme. Through these mechanisms, definitions become more than descriptive statements: they produce a coherent and persuasive image of language.

A relevant aspect concerns the way the definitional discourse distributes different epistemic values. Generalizing formulas ("in general," "as a rule," "in most cases") may create the impression of conceptual stability even when authors acknowledge variation or the presence of marginal cases. Likewise, features labelled as "central" or "essential" are presented through discursive procedures that assign a high degree of authority to the explanation. The hierarchical positioning of criteria shows that defining is inevitably an interpretive act, and that metalanguage acts as the mechanism through which interpretation becomes conceptual norm.

The analysis also reveals that differences between linguistic traditions profoundly influence how grammatical reality is constructed. In the French tradition, predication and reference to "syntactic functions" tend to be central in defining categories, however in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, distributional tests and structural criteria dominate. These divergent orientations are not mere terminological preferences but reflect distinct modes of conceptualizing language. As a result, linguistic reality does not appear as a unified object but as a set of representations constructed within scientific paradigms. This supports the idea that any definition is theoretically situated and that metalanguage, rather than "reflecting" the object, participates in its very constitution.

From a methodological standpoint, the results underline the usefulness of discourse analysis in metalinguistic research. Instead of treating definitions as fixed entities, discourse analysis reveals the processes through which they are configured and presented to the reader as "natural" or "intuitive." Such an approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how grammatical concepts are formed and of the relationship between definitional criteria and discursive strategies. Furthermore, the methodology employed here can be extended to other grammatical categories – verbal aspect, modality, quantifiers, relational categories – in which definitions are equally sensitive to theoretical variation.

Based on these observations, the contribution of this study can be articulated along three lines. First, it highlights the discursive nature of definitions and demonstrates that grammatical metalanguage functions as a mechanism of conceptual institution. Second, it compares several linguistic traditions, showing that definitions are products of differing epistemological orientations and that linguistic reality is not monolithic but constructed in dialogue with these orientations. Third, it emphasizes the methodological value of this approach, which offers a relevant tool for future research on specialized discourses and theoretical practices in linguistics.

Finally, the results suggest directions for further research. Extending the corpus to other types of grammars – pedagogical, digital, contrastive – would allow observation of how definitions adapt to different contexts of production and use. A diachronic analysis could reveal how relevance criteria and normative strategies change over time. Likewise, comparing typologically distant languages could contribute to a clearer understanding of the universality or specificity of definitional mechanisms.

The broader implications of the analysis highlight the ways in which metalinguistic discourse participates in shaping linguistic knowledge. First, it becomes evident that definitions do not constitute a neutral reflection of linguistic reality but materialize a series of theoretical, stylistic, and ideological decisions. A definition is not a product of language itself but of an epistemic community; it reflects how that community chooses to organize linguistic phenomena. This perspective turns metalanguage into a hermeneutic tool oriented toward understanding the criteria underlying concept formulation.

An important insight concerns how different linguistic traditions manage the tension between conceptual stability and adaptation to new theoretical directions. In the French tradition, definitions sometimes preserve a certain terminological sobriety even when new criteria are introduced. This continuity lends definitions an air of authority, suggesting a fundamental compatibility between traditional and contemporary paradigms. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, emphasis is placed on procedures and tests, producing definitions that are more dynamic yet more technical. From this perspective, definitional discourse becomes an instrument of "methodological transparency," through which authors explicitly display their analytical criteria.

Moreover, the analysis shows that grammatical definitions are marked by a subtle axiological orientation. Terms such as "central," "obligatory," "peripheral," and "marked" introduce conceptual values that do not stem from the raw description of phenomena but from how authors hierarchize linguistic structures. This hierarchy is essential to the functioning of grammar as a discipline but also to understanding linguistic reality as something constructed gradually through successive selections.

At an interpretive level, grammatical definition can be viewed as an activity of setting conceptual boundaries. The definition fixes the limits of what belongs to a category and what remains outside it. In this sense, metalanguage operates as a tool of "conceptual mapping": it draws contours, delimits territories, establishes shared zones, and marks exceptions. This

mapping can be observed both in the construction of central terms and in the management of marginal phenomena.

The comparative analysis also highlighted the essential role of conceptual metaphors in defining categories. Spatial metaphors ("level," "structure," "syntactic plane"), mechanical metaphors ("mechanism," "functioning"), and ontological metaphors ("class," "category," "unit") lend definitions both stability and an intuitive image of the phenomenon. They constitute the means through which grammatical discourse introduces familiarity into a technical domain. The function of metaphors as "conceptual translators" could, in fact, represent a promising avenue for future research.

Finally, the analysis confirms that grammatical metalanguage has not only an explanatory function but also an identity function for the discipline of linguistics. The manner in which definitions are formulated contributes to strengthening the cohesion of the scientific community and to transmitting shared epistemic values. Through these mechanisms, metalinguistic discourse becomes not merely a descriptive tool but a disciplinary practice through which linguistics reaffirms its own principles and methods.

In this respect, the results align with the observations of Lehmann (2020) concerning the processes of generalization and conceptual stabilization that accompany the formation of grammatical categories. The author shows that any attempt to define a category involves an inevitable degree of abstraction, and this abstraction becomes an integral part of the mechanism through which a scientific community reaches agreement on a concept. From this perspective, the definitions analyzed here can be viewed as instances of the same process of conceptualization, in which the selection of prototypical features plays a decisive role in the formation of a stable categorial identity. Integrating these processes into a discourse analysis confirms that grammar does not merely describe language but organizes it epistemically through notions that gradually become theoretical landmarks. In light of recent theoretical developments, definitional activity can thus be seen as an act of conceptual institution rather than a simple terminological demarcation.

Conceptual and epistemological implications

The results of the analysis show that the definition of grammatical categories cannot be understood apart from the epistemic processes that structure contemporary linguistic discourse. In particular, defining becomes an activity through which not only correspondences between concepts and phenomena are established, but also the limits of valid interpretation within

a given paradigm. This finding has major implications for how we conceive the grammatical status of linguistic reality and the manner in which disciplinary consensus is formed.

A first implication concerns the constructed nature of grammatical concepts. The analysis demonstrates that terms such as *verb*, *subject*, *clause*, or *determiner* cannot be approached as natural realities preexisting their description, but must be understood as the outcomes of abstraction processes and sedimented theoretical traditions. From this perspective, defining becomes an act of conceptual institution: it gives form and stability to entities that do not exist as such in the materiality of language. This conclusion does not negate the descriptive nature of grammar but shows that descriptive practice is inseparably linked to a discursively constructed conceptual architecture.

A second implication concerns the relationship between definitional criteria and dominant theoretical orientations. The criteria privileged in a definition—semantic, morphological, distributional, or functional – do not merely express technical choices but also signify adherence to a particular paradigm. The choice of a criterion thus becomes a way of asserting a certain vision of language. In French works, predication is presented as a fundamental criterion, reflecting an orientation toward the global organization of the sentence. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, distributional criteria dominate, indicating a perspective on language as a system of positions and functions. Each orientation indirectly implies a particular way of understanding the relationship between language, structure, and meaning.

A further major implication concerns the epistemic status of exceptions. The manner in which exceptions are handled reveals a significant difference between linguistic traditions. In some works, exceptions are integrated into the definition through cautious formulations that acknowledge their status while keeping them in a "peripheral" zone. In others, exceptions are excluded in order to protect conceptual coherence. This difference shows that exceptions are not secondary descriptive elements, but indicators of the epistemic flexibility of a system. The way a theory treats exceptions reveals much about the relationship between rule, variation, and normativity.

A fourth implication relates to the role of conceptual metaphors in constituting linguistic reality. The use of spatial metaphors ("structure," "level"), mechanical metaphors ("functioning," "mechanism"), or ontological metaphors ("unit," "category") shows that defining is not carried out exclusively through technical means but also involves cognitive processes of conceptualization. These metaphors are not merely stylistic

devices; they create a coherent image of language and facilitate the transmission of complex concepts. From an epistemological standpoint, metaphor becomes an instrument of conceptual modeling, contributing to the construction of grammar's interpretive framework.

Finally, an important implication concerns the relationship between metalanguage and disciplinary authority. Through the way definitions are formulated – through tone, structure, and the selection of terms – authors institute a form of legitimacy that goes beyond the description of linguistic phenomena. The definition becomes a means of asserting a theoretical position and, at the same time, of transmitting an academic norm. This authority is constructed through appeal to tradition, through the use of transparent analytical procedures, or through the integration of criteria regarded as "objective." In all cases, metalanguage functions as an instrument of epistemic articulation, situating grammar within the sciences as a discipline with its own discursive practices.

Overall, the conceptual and epistemological implications of the study show that the analysis of grammatical definitions is not merely a descriptive undertaking but a way of understanding the mechanisms through which linguistics constructs its own concepts and asserts its disciplinary autonomy. From this perspective, metalanguage becomes not only a means of expression but also a means of constituting theoretical reality, with consequences for how grammatical categories are perceived and used in contemporary research.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that grammatical definitions function as discursive practices that play a decisive role in constituting linguistic reality in contemporary research. The comparative analysis has shown that defining is not a simple terminological exercise but a complex process through which authors select criteria, configure conceptual relations, and establish epistemic positions. Whether the emphasis falls on predication, distribution, syntactic functions, or operational procedures, definitions reveal a particular way of viewing language and organizing linguistic knowledge within a theoretical tradition.

The results also showed that metalanguage is not merely a descriptive tool but a mechanism through which grammar legitimizes itself as a discipline. The epistemic strategies identified – establishing conceptual centers, delineating boundaries, managing exceptions, appealing to tradition or to distributional tests – demonstrate that grammatical discourse continually negotiates between stability and change. Definitions not only

explain a phenomenon but create the conceptual framework within which it can be understood, analyzed, and transmitted within the academic community.

From a comparative standpoint, the analysis revealed significant differences between the French and Anglo-Saxon traditions – differences that cannot be reduced to terminological variation. They reflect distinct epistemic orientations: one centered on the macrostructure of the utterance, the other on formal and testable procedures. This diversity is not an obstacle but a resource for understanding the complexity of language, offering a broad interpretive framework for grammatical categories.

The implications of the study are substantial. They show that grammatical defining is a process of conceptual construction and that metalanguage is essential in shaping and transmitting linguistic knowledge. By identifying the discursive and epistemic strategies involved in defining categories, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how modern grammars articulate and legitimize linguistic structures. From this perspective, the analysis clarifies the relationship between language, theory, and discourse and highlights the fact that any theoretical construction is, inevitably, also a metalinguistic construction.

Future research directions may include extending the corpus to other grammatical categories, examining definitional evolution from a diachronic perspective, or investigating grammatical discourse in other linguistic traditions. Likewise, integrating pedagogical grammars and digital linguistic resources could provide a complementary framework for understanding how metalanguage circulates and transforms across educational contexts. Overall, the study opens new perspectives on the role of metalanguage in shaping linguistic epistemology and suggests that understanding grammatical definitions is essential for analyzing conceptual evolution in contemporary linguistics.

In this context, it becomes clear that grammatical defining cannot be analyzed independently of the discursive and epistemic conditions under which it is produced. Each work consulted projects its own interpretive angle onto language, and this angle determines both the selection of definitional criteria and the dependency relations among concepts. Thus, convergences between definitions do not necessarily reflect an absolute consensus but the result of a process of convergence among different traditions, stimulated by the need for internal coherence and communication within an increasingly globalized academic environment.

The analysis also underscores that, despite terminological or methodological differences, contemporary grammatical discourse shares a

set of structural mechanisms: reliance on carefully calibrated generalizations, maintaining a balance between precision and flexibility, and employing rhetorical devices designed to manage the inherent ambiguities of language. This recurrence indicates the existence of a "grammar of definitions"—an informal yet coherent set of practices through which concepts are established, adjusted, and transmitted within the scientific community.

Another important outcome of the analysis is the recognition that defining does not operate in a theoretical vacuum but is in constant interaction with conceptual developments in modern linguistics. The emergence of new categories, such as the determiner, or the reformulation of traditional notions, such as the subject or the clause, reveals the flexibility of the linguistic field and its openness to diverse explanatory models. These transformations do not merely alter terminology; they reshape how researchers interpret the structure and function of language.

The study also showed that metalanguage plays a decisive role in transmitting and consolidating a disciplinary culture. Definitions in modern grammars are not only analytical tools but also identity markers through which each linguistic tradition asserts its specificity. This identity dimension, though subtle, explains the persistence of certain definitional formulas and the resistance of others to change. Metalanguage thus functions both as a space of theoretical continuity and as an indicator of the discipline's internal dynamics.

Finally, the results suggest that fully understanding grammatical definitions requires an interdisciplinary approach integrating discourse analysis with perspectives from logic, philosophy of language, and meaning theory. Grammar, in this view, is not merely a list of rules but a mode of thinking about language, and defining is the act through which this thinking acquires stable textual form. Recognizing these aspects opens new avenues for reflection on the relationship between theory and discourse and provides solid foundations for future research.

Statement on the Use of AI Tools | *This manuscript complies with the journal's AI policy. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation, or for generating the scientific content of the study.*

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