

Reflections

Introduction

Noam Chomsky, now seventy years, is Institute Professor, Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), in the United States of America. He has been a dominant intellectual in the world in the present latter half of our century and may, perhaps, remain so, for many centuries to come. He came to prominence in the USA as the foremost dissenter out of the academia against the war in Vietnam in late sixties. He is well known for his writings, both books and articles, on problems in different parts of the world, the latest being the island of East Timor. Chomsky is known for his own typical style of presentation which is informal, with profuse documentation, incisive dissection, at times ruthless, leading to inescapable conclusions. Underlying all his writings is his notion of the fundamental nature of a human being – creativity and freedom – presupposing the existence of a human mind. His views, in turn, originate from his thinking about the nature of language which has been exercising his mind from the late forties.

Chomsky's prominence as a socio-political thinker has completely overshadowed his professional status as a linguist for the general reader. His little book '*Syntactic Structures*' published in 1957 by a then not so well-known publisher (Mouton and Co.) in Holland ushered in what is now known as the *Chomskyan Revolution*, not only in linguistics but also in allied fields, splitting social scientists into two groups, Chomskyan and others. His 1965 monograph '*Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*' published by the MIT Press presenting his views on language, now known as 'Standard Theory', generated a tremendous amount of interdisciplinary debate among professionals which refuses to subside even to this day.

The following essay was presented in the context of the above controversial intellectual and political fervour as a lecture at Loyola University at Chicago, January 8–9, 1970 as part of the University Freedom and Human Sciences Symposium. This is one of the rare articles in which Chomsky relates his linguistic thinking on the nature of language to freedom.

Chomsky subscribes to what he calls 'libertarian socialism' which is a social form next in stage to the industrial society. It will be founded on freedom, of choice and action, guaranteeing individual rights. Chomsky traces the origin of such thinking, which had its sway for almost a hundred years until the emergence of materialist-empiricist-behavioural thinking towards the end of the 19th century, to philosophers like Schelling, Rousseau, Kant, Descartes and his follower Cordemoy, Wilhelm von Humboldt and others. The common essence of their thought was that the nature of man/human being consisted in having intellect/reason/mind and freedom, one subsisting on the other, one unable to function without the other. Humboldt, in addition, proposed the attribute of creativity based on his linguistic thinking. For Humboldt, human language is a process of free creation, has a fixed form – a generative process rooted in the nature of the human mind. For the human mind, learning is a kind of reminiscence. Stimulated by experience, it draws from its own internal resources and follows a path that it itself determines. Necessity and freedom, rule and choice,

built-in form/constraints and creativity are the same aspects of human nature. Language provides a specimen of rule governed behaviour and free creation, a typical aspect of human mental organization.

Chomsky feels that for knowledge systems to be based on this essence of human nature, it is necessary to break away from much of the present/modern social and behavioural science. He further hopes for the development of a social science based on empirically well-founded propositions concerning human nature, i.e. forms of artistic expression, scientific knowledge, language, range of ethical systems and social structures etc., conceivable and attainable by human beings.

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Language and Freedom¹

When I was invited to speak on the topic “Language and freedom”, I was puzzled and intrigued. Most of my professional life has been devoted to the study of language. There would be no great difficulty in finding a topic to discuss in that domain. And there is much to say about the problems of freedom and liberation as they pose themselves to us and to others in the mid-twentieth century. What is troublesome in the title of this lecture is the conjunction. In what way are language and freedom to be interconnected?

As a preliminary, let me say just a word about the contemporary study of language, as I see it. There are many aspects of language and language use that raise intriguing questions, but – in my judgement – only a few have so far led to productive theoretical work. In particular, our deepest insights are in the area of formal grammatical structure. A person who knows a language has acquired a system of rules and principles – a “generative grammar,” in technical terms – that associates sound and meaning in some specific fashion. There are many reasonably well-founded and, I think, rather enlightening hypotheses as to the character of such grammars, for quite a number of languages. Furthermore, there has been a renewal of interest in “universal grammar”, interpreted now as the theory that tries to specify the general properties of those languages that can be learned in the normal way by humans. Here, too, significant progress has been achieved.

¹ This essay was presented as a lecture at the University Freedom and the Human Sciences Symposium, Loyola University, Chicago, January 8–9, 1970. It is reproduced with permission from *The Chomsky Reader*, ed. James Peck, 1987.

