

Language and Responsibility

N.Chomsky

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This book is in the nature of an extended interview by a French linguist - Mitsou Ronat and Noam Chomsky, she speaking French, he answering in English. The original French publication involved a French translation of Chomsky, while this English edition involves a retranslation back into English, to which Chomsky has given his blessings as well as occasional modifications and amplifications. Many topics are brought up, but there is a clear discernible theme throughout.

Chomsky expounds on Science. Science is about looking at things with non-trivial content and interest, and supplying great explanatory insights¹. The model is of course physics along with its derivatives among the hard physical sciences. Natural science differs fundamentally from its predecessor - natural history. The latter is but descriptive, nothing wrong about that, but it is not science properly speaking, just arbitrary collections of facts, maybe interesting in themselves, but of course by far not at all as interesting as facts related to an explanatory theory and the principles on which it is articulated. It is the explanatory theory that is the center of intellectual interest, and one should not be so harsh as to say that theories are falsified by experiments. The history of science teaches us otherwise. In many cases proposed theories have not meshed with the facts, but this has not meant that the theories have been rejected. If faith is sufficiently strong in a theory, say due to its elegance and explanatory power, inconvenient facts can be ignored at the time, the future development probably will take care of them, and history has in fact often vindicated such faith.

One cannot of course set up rules when to reject and when to postpone, in fact scientific discovery is by its nature unpredictable and not reducible to some methodological algorithms². Thus in particular Chomsky takes exception to the empiricist point of view, in which science proceeds by a universal methodology involving finding facts, and inductively formulating hypothesis, to be tested by further fact findings³. You do investigate because

¹ procedures and tools are fine and in fact necessary, but they are not sufficient. Behaviorist psychologists can boast of excellent tools, but they have nothing to apply them to, and thus no results to display.

² Principles are not set beforehand but are discovered and suitably modified during the process. Thus in scientific fields people do change their mind, and then often go back to their original positions, with the proviso of having changed those positions in some fundamental way. Chomsky has abandoned his original Cartesian point of view, but may in some future go back to it, after having transformed it. Such behavior is often seen as unprincipled by people outside science, as in the humanities, in which you identify yourself with a point of view

³ Connected with empiricism, according to Chomsky, is the notion of the brain being a tabula rasa, also notions like racism is more liable to be developed in an empiricist setting, than say in a Cartesian or religious

of a powerful drive of curiosity and you do make up the methods as you go along, as you can never in advance predict what you will find.

Still in our ways of looking and pursuing science we are mentally restrained. Such restraints are no doubt biologically based, and one may of course speculate as to their evolutionary origins. But of course such highly abstract restraints are by their nature very hard, if not impossible, to formulate, would we be able to do so, we might also be able to transcend them. Thus in order to be successful, Chomsky points out, two things have to be fulfilled. First our ways of thinking have to be biologically congenial (that is accessible to us), and the biology of the brain may set up very strict limitations. Secondly those ways of thinking have to be congruent with truth. Truth is of course independent of ways of thinking. Thus even if the basis of the thinking may have an evolutionary explanation, its fruits certainly have none. There is no reproductive advantage of being able to probe the mysteries of the cosmos, nor to discover arcane mathematical truths, or to compose symphonies. What they are, are in fact manifestations of intellectual needs. All people have them, but the forms they take differ from culture to culture. The exceedingly complicated kinship relations developed by the Australian aborigines and enthusiastically reported by anthropologists may be what you develop if you do not have formal mathematics. Not to simply pass the time, but because of an innate urge. When you have this miraculous intersection, then you may attain real knowledge.

Chomsky speculates that the spectacular success of the physical sciences may be temporary. It might yield its harvest, and after that go dry after a few centuries. There is nothing that says that past success necessarily implies future success and hence that success would be unlimited, even if in practice when you are doing science, this is the criterion on which you tend to judge your methods and attempts, but on a global level, such assumption is nothing but metaphysical optimism. It could very well be that there will never be any true humanistic or social science, simply because the human mind is too restricted to conceive of a fruitful way of doing such science. This does not mean that you cannot obtain valuable knowledge in such fields, you may be even able to develop a kind of technology. But you will never understand the basic principles, and all such knowledge will be intellectually unsatisfying. In fact most of us do succeed beautifully in social interaction, but we cannot really understand why.

Linguistics may be the one exception⁴, Chomsky seems to suspect. What is remarkable about language acquisition is the rapidity with which it is achieved and with such a paucity of data to boot, and also within the same linguistic community, the remarkable similarity of the results (just as remarkable by the same paucity). Such similarities do not arise when it comes to other mental conquests, the opinions and actual fields of knowledge different individuals acquire throughout their lives differ greatly. Those similarities strongly indicate that language competence follow very narrow grooves, and hence are very rigidly formed and developed. The conclusion that our language abilities are biologically innate is very hard to avoid. But of course from such a basic premise it is very hard to postulate an actual mechanism and explanatory theory. Clear is that one needs to distinguish between surface manifestations and the deeper, hidden ones, that explain the former. A

⁴ a similar subject, according to Chomsky, is visual perception, where our uncanny ability to recognize faces cries out for some kind of explanation.

basic notion is that of a universal grammar. By this is not meant a grammar, but something much more basic, of which individual grammars are but manifestations, projections so to speak, to use a Platonic metaphor. A universal grammar is a way of generating grammars. Grammars are traditionally seen as collection of rules, often descriptive (and thus often confused as normative), to which there incidentally are various exceptions. To the analytically minded, such structuring of languages may be very congenial if intellectually frustrating, as those grammatical rules seem often to be so ad hoc, as well as superfluous to the fluent speaker, who seems to be able to intuit their applications even when ignorant of their formulations. A universal grammar on the other hand is a collection of rules for forming rules, and unless we do understand the universal grammar, the actual rules of the particular language will seem inexplicable.

The linguistic discussion is held at a rather abstract and philosophical level, and thus it gives very little tangible material for the lay-reader to make an independent assessment. In particular there is no concrete description of what a universal grammar may actually be in practice, apart from what it should be ideally and in the abstract. There are of course quite a few explicit examples of sentences and transformations, but those are so scattered and unrelated to any precisely formulated theories, that they do not give any illumination. It is hard from reading the exposition not to form the suspicion that such a linguistic theory is not yet in place, and what the linguistic community has been concerned with in the last few decades is a meta-discussion of how such a theory should come about (which incidentally is rather common in attempts at social and humanistic sciences, not to study the subject itself, but to explore how the subject could and should in fact be studied.) Chomsky points out that in order for the subject to be interesting it has to be reasonably restricted, if too many things will pertain to it, it simply becomes chaotic and intractable. This is his objection to involving semantics. In order to be able to get a theory one should try and restrict to the purely formal and grammatical aspects of language acquisition. Of course this would be a simplification and an idealization, but Chomsky points out that opposing idealization is to give up all hopes of rational inquiry. If such idealizations are not tenable in linguistics, than the whole subject is untenable as well.

Although I find Chomsky's philosophical reflections very fascinating, I find the linguistic subject itself, and its rather tedious examples, excessively dry. (Which is no doubt due to the fact that the substance of it is not conveyed, only its philosophical shadows.) It is hard for me to believe that he can have been obsessed by the subject since his teens. In fact his general interest seems to have been philosophy, with which general linguistics has much in common (one thinks in particular on the Oxford school of analytic philosophy, mainly concerned with matters of language and its inherent limitations). His attitude is also no non-sensical and unsentimental, and one suspects that indeed MIT would have provided a most congenial environment, unfettered by classical humanistic traditions. Still he has the commendable sense to make a distinction between formalization and mathematics, just by doing the former does not automatically mean that one is doing the latter, only when the formalism takes on an intrinsic interest. Related to linguistics is the notion of Artificial intelligence, and here Chomsky is dismissive of their irresponsible claims, bringing to mind those by Skinner and his behaviorists

Known as he is for his linguistic ideas, even more known, or at least more notorious

he is for his political stands, especially in the 60's and 70's. He has been much censored for this⁵ but has remarked that the more intellectually mature a subject is, the more liable people are to pay more attention to the contents of what you say than to your own credentials for saying them. The extreme examples being furnished by mathematics and mathematicians⁶. Political science is not a science, thus it is accessible to anyone with the right intellectual bent and willingness to search out sources and do some critical and independent thinking. You need no special technical qualifications to do so. But of course political scientists do jealously guard their sense of being licensed, and hence the public debate is being monopolized by an ideologically very narrow segment. Chomsky finds it remarkable that the grooves of political correctness⁷ in the States are so much more narrow than in Europe. Of course America is a democracy, he will not be physically assaulted by the government for his views, and there is not even any overt censorship. On the other hand there is no need for such draconic measures, through subtle social pressures a consensus of views can in fact be induced more effectively through voluntary subscription than through coercion⁸. During the student revolts of the late 60's, this American consensus was at least temporarily challenged, something Chomsky welcomed⁹. True there were excesses, but those he suspects were provoked by governmental infiltrators anyway. He recalls that once he wanted to have an economic debate, and thus looked around for a Marxist economist, but such a creature was not to be found in the American University system. Chomsky is not a Marxism, in fact he dismisses Leninism as a repressive and reactionary movement, but what he is concerned about is the conformity of views. As to the great virtues of the Watergate he is less than impressed. Who were the victims of Watergate he asks rhetorically. Who really came to grief? In fact what happened was that Nixon instead of attacking some powerless and disenfranchised, he attacked the powerful liberal elite (who incidentally share the basic premises with the conservative one, rejecting the Vietnam adventure not on moral grounds but because of it being ill-conceived and unsuccessful¹⁰ which fought back successfully¹¹. In the view of Chomsky Nixon and his Republican administration have perpetrated many serious crimes, war crimes especially, but Watergate has not belonged to them. What really makes Chomsky indignant is the governmental involvement in tracking down and murdering members of the Black Panthers¹² (and similar organizations). Here we are really

⁵ I recall my first girlfriend asking what credentials did he have as a linguist to speak out on political issues.

⁶ This is true. In disciplines like mathematics, the partitioning into kind of guilds, each jealously preserving their borders, is unheard of. Anyone is invited to contribute.

⁷ He does not use that particular terminology which came in vogue, I guess, in the 90's, but this is clearly what he means.

⁸ In the words of Chomsky, setting the limits of possible thought rather than formulating a doctrine one needs to parrot or suffer the consequences

⁹ But it could not be sustained and translated into an effective political movement, because there was no real social base for it, due to the political conformity to be discussed below.

¹⁰ parallels with the present Iraq debacle are obvious

¹¹ Furthermore he notes that even during the McCarthy hysteria, the liberals mostly objected to the methods of the Senator, especially when they themselves became targets.

¹² I recall a similar indignation on the part of my father, which surprised me, because he harbored no

seeing serious constitutional violations involving victims who are actually hurt, but no one seems to care, except scattered local media attentions, which do not cohere to a national outrage. Furthermore Chomsky finds that while people like Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov certainly should be commended for their great courage, to consider them moral giants is uncalled for.

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such political sympathies, but I guess it was the ethical aspects that rankled him