Noam Chomsky

Introduction

Noam Avram Chomsky was born in 1928 in Philadelphia. He is a theoretical linguist whose work from the 1950s revolutionised linguistics by treating language as a uniquely human and biologically based cognitive ability. Through his contributions to linguistics and related fields, including cognitive psychology and the philosophies of mind and language, Chomsky helped to initiate and sustain what became known as the "cognitive revolution." Chomsky has also gained a worldwide following as a political dissident for his analyses of the "pernicious influence of economic elites on U.S. domestic politics, foreign policy, and intellectual culture."[1]

So states James McGilvray, Emeritus Professor at McGill University, Montreal who wrote the Encyclopaedia Britannica biography of Noam Chomsky upon which much of this paper is based. He knows him well, perhaps too well. Reviewing *The Science of Language: Interviews with James McGilvray*, published in 2012, Geoffrey Pullum, professor of general linguistics, at the University of Edinburgh, is hardly effusive. He says the book is "like discussions between friends."[2] Chomsky has many critics and others who disagree in part or substantially with his ideas on cognitive linguistics. A section at the end of this paper is devoted to a few, including Geoffrey Pullum.

In order to obtain a balanced view of Chomsky two approaches are used. His work on biological language acquisition is discussed and critiqued in two weighty academic tomes on psychology. In contrast his observations on the world today, especially the politics of life, are explored using examples of actual events rather than theories for otherwise we may stray from the path. An example of differing standpoints is the discussion on R3 Nightwaves of reason, power and authority with Noel Chomsky and then Anthony Seldon, Master of Wellington College; same subject with contrasting perspectives formed by life experiences and their own frames of reference. Sound arguments are advanced by both, in the context of their respective worlds.

It is for the group to unravel Noam Chomsky's contribution as a great thinker and in so doing to attach some criteria for evidencing whether he is or is not worthy of inclusion in our hall of fame. There is much to go at, including not just his theories and ideas but presentational style, his intent to make subject content accessible to a wide audience and his care about human beings and their fate.

Life and basic ideas

Born into a middle-class Jewish family, Noam Chomsky attended an experimental elementary school in which he was encouraged to develop his own interests and talents through self-directed learning. When ten years old he wrote an editorial for his school newspaper that lamented the fall of Barcelona in the Spanish Civil War and rise of fascism in Europe. His research then and over the next few years was to

serve decades later as the basis of "*Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship*" (1969), Chomsky's critical review of a study of the period by the historian Gabriel Jackson.

At thirteen Chomsky began taking trips by himself to New York City, where he found books to sate his voracious reading appetite. He also made contact with a thriving working-class Jewish intellectual community. Discussion enriched and confirmed the beliefs that would underlie his political views throughout his life that:

- all people are capable of comprehending political and economic issues and of making their own decisions on that basis;
- all people need and derive satisfaction from acting freely and creatively and from associating with others;
- authority, whether political, economic, or religious, that cannot satisfy a strong test of rational justification is illegitimate.

In Chomsky's view of libertarian socialism, the best form of political organisation is one in which all people have a maximal opportunity to engage in cooperative activity with others - and to take part in all decisions of the community that affect them.

In 1945, aged sixteen, Chomsky entered the University of Pennsylvania but found little to interest him. After two years he considered leaving to pursue his political interests, perhaps by living in a kibbutz. He changed his mind after meeting Zellig Harris, a mathematical syntactician and one of the American founders of structural linguistics, whose political convictions were similar to his own. Chomsky, at Harris's recommendation, studied philosophy with Nelson Goodman and Nathan Salmon and mathematics with Nathan Fine, who was then teaching at Harvard University.

In his 1951 master's thesis, *The Morphophonemics of Modern Hebrew*, and especially in *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory* (*LSLT*) written while still a junior fellow at Harvard (1951–55), Chomsky adopted aspects of Harris's approach to the study of language and of Goodman's views on formal systems and the philosophy of science and transformed them into something novel. Goodman assumed the mind at birth is largely a tabula rasa (blank slate) and that language learning in children is essentially a conditioned response to linguistic stimuli. Chomsky held that the basic principles of all languages, as well as the basic range of concepts they are used to express, are innately represented in the human mind and that language learning consists of the unconscious construction of a grammar from these principles in accordance with cues drawn from the child's linguistic environment.

Whereas Harris thought of the study of language as the taxonomic classification of "data," Chomsky held it is the discovery, through the application of formal systems, of the innate principles that make possible swift acquisition of language by children and ordinary use of language by children and adults alike. Goodman believed that linguistic behaviour is regular and caused (in the sense of being a specific response to specific stimuli), but Chomsky argued it is activated and incited by social context and discourse context but essentially uncaused - enabled by a distinct set of innate

principles but innovative, or "creative." It is for this reason that Chomsky believed that it is unlikely that there will ever be a full-fledged science of linguistic behaviour. As in the view of the 17th-century French philosopher René Descartes, according to Chomsky the use of language is due to a "creative principle," not a causal one.

Harris not only ignored Chomsky's work when realising he did not accept his stance on behaviourism but denounced it. This reaction, with variations, was shared by a large majority of linguists, philosophers, and psychologists. Although some linguists and psychologists eventually came to accept Chomsky's basic assumptions regarding language and the mind, most philosophers continued to resist them.

Chomsky received a Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Pennsylvania in 1955 after submitting one chapter of *LSLT* as a doctoral dissertation (*Transformational Analysis*). In 1956 he was appointed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to a teaching position that required him to spend half his time on a machine translation project though he was openly skeptical of its prospects for success. He told the director of the translation laboratory the project was of "no intellectual interest and was also pointless." The University was impressed by his book *Syntactic Structures* (1957)and a revised series of lectures he gave to MIT undergraduates. Chomsky and his colleague Morris Halle were asked to establish a new graduate program in linguistics which soon attracted several outstanding scholars.

Chomsky's 1959 review of *Verbal Behavior*, by B.F. Skinner, the 'dean of American behaviourism', came to be regarded as the definitive refutation of behaviourist accounts of language learning. Starting in the mid-1960s, with the publication of *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) and *Cartesian Linguistics* (1966), Chomsky's approach to the study of language and mind gained far wider acceptance within linguistics, though there were many theoretical variations within the paradigm.

Chomsky was appointed full professor at MIT in 1961, Ferrari P. Ward Professor of Modern Languages and Linguistics in 1966, and Institute Professor in 1976 before becoming Professor Emeritus. He retired in 2002.[1]

"Plato's problem"

A fundamental insight of philosophical rationalism is that human creativity crucially depends on an innate system of concept generation and combination. According to Chomsky, children display "ordinary" creativity - appropriate and innovative use of complexes of concepts - from virtually their first words. With language, they bring to bear thousands of rich and articulate concepts when they play, invent, and speak to and understand each other. They seem to know much more than they have been taught -or even could be taught. Such knowledge contended Chomsky must be innate in some sense. To say it is innate, however, is not to say that the child is conscious of it or even that it exists, fully formed, at birth. It is only to say that it is produced by the child's system of concept generation and combination of these, in

accordance with the system's courses of biological and physical development, upon their exposure to certain kinds of environmental input. This was the stimulus.

It has frequently been observed that children acquire both concepts and language with amazing facility and speed, despite the paucity or even absence of meaningful evidence and instruction in their early years. The inference to the conclusion that much of what they acquire must be innate is known as the argument from the "poverty of the stimulus." Specifying precisely what children acquire, and how they acquire it, are aspects of *LSLT,* the "fundamental problem" of linguistics. In later works he referred to this as "Plato's problem." This refers to Plato's attempt (in his Socratic dialogue the *Meno*) to explain how it can be possible for an uneducated child to solve geometrical problems with appropriate prompting but without specific training or background in mathematics. Unlike Plato, however, Chomsky held that solving Plato's problem is a task for natural science, specifically cognitive science and linguistics.[1]

Linguistic principles and parameters

Chomsky's early attempts to solve the linguistic version of Plato's problem were presented in the "standard theory" of *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* and in the subsequent "extended standard theory," which was developed and revised in the late 1970s. These theories postulated that the mind of the human infant is endowed with a "format" of a possible grammar (a theory of linguistic data), a method of constructing grammars based on the linguistic data to which the child is exposed, and a device to evaluate the relative simplicity of constructed grammars. The child's mind constructs a number of possible grammars consistent with the linguistic data and selects the grammar with the fewest rules or primitives. Although ingenious, this approach was rather cumbersome in comparison with later theories, in part because it was not clear what procedures would have to be involved in the construction and evaluation of grammars.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s Chomsky and others developed a better solution using a theoretical framework known as "principles and parameters" (P&P), which Chomksy introduced in *Lectures on Government and Binding* (1981) and elaborated in *Knowledge of Language* (1986). Principles are linguistic universals, or structural features that are common to all natural languages; hence, they are part of the child's native endowment. Parameters, also native but not necessarily specific to language, are options allowing variation in linguistic structure. The P&P approach assumed that these are related to exposure to a minimal amount of linguistic data, a hypothesis supported by empirical evidence according to McGilvray.[1]

Acquiring a first language

Michael Passer et al in Psychology: the Science of Mind & Behaviour, states Chomsky and Pinker contend language acquisition represents the joint influences of biology (nature) and environmental nurture. Children, despite limited thinking skills start to

master language in life without any formal instruction. All adult languages appear to have common underlying structural characteristics formed by unfolding a biologically based process within a social environment, a view echoed by Aitchison too.[3]

Humans are born with a language acquisition device (LAD) asserts Chomsky. This is an innate biological mechanism incorporating general grammatical rules which he terms "universal grammar" common to all languages. These contain noun and verb phrases arranged in particular ways such as subjects, predicates and adjectives. He likened this to an electrical panel with banks of illuminated switches, calibrated to the native tongue. Given the acquired biological foundation, social learning plays a central role by conversing in child directed speech, pointing to objects and reading aloud and answering a never-ending stream of questions. Modern psychologists question whether Skinner's operant conditioning alone accounts for development. [3]

This view is shared by Chomsky as operant conditioning cannot explain creativity of language. "The normal use of language is innovative, in the sense that much of what we say in the course of normal language use is entirely new and not a repetition of anything that we have heard before." Whilst Chomsky asserts language cannot develop without some form of environmental input, Lenneberg and McNeil contend that such factors are not an adequate explanation. They believe there is more to it but so did Chomsky in commenting that language is much more complex and far less predictable than Skinner indicates.[3]

Of particular interest is Chomsky's theory of transformational grammar and use of phrase-structure rules but whilst they specify some important aspects of language they don't specify them all. According to Richard Gross a sentence surface structure refers to the actual words or phrases used in a syntactical structure whilst its deep structure corresponds mainly to meaning. Chomsky argued that when we hear a spoken sentence we don't process or retain its surface structure but we transform it into its deep structure. This observation links closely to the psychology of how we learn and that this is a spiral process. Gross then goes onto examine the views of other psychologists that takes us into a thicket of theories and later work that builds on and questions some of Chomsky's ideas.[4]

A world of politics

Chomsky's political views seem to be supported to some extent by his approach to the study of language and mind which implies that the capacity for creativity is an important element of human nature contends McGilvray. He says Chomsky often notes, however, that there is only an "abstract" connection between his theories of language and his own politics. A close connection would have to be based on a fully developed science of human nature through which fundamental human needs could be identified or deduced. But there is nothing like such a science. Even if there was, the connection would depend additionally on the assumption that the best form of political organisation is one that maximises the satisfaction of human needs. And then there would remain the question of what practical measures should be

implemented to satisfy those needs. Clearly, questions such as this cannot be settled by scientific means says McGilvray though one is tempted to add the word 'alone' to recognise that in some areas science may play an important part.

Although Chomsky was always interested in politics, he did not become immersed publicly until 1964, when he felt compelled to lend his voice to protests against the U.S. role in the Vietnam War, or, as he prefers to say, the U.S. invasion of Vietnam. This was at no small risk to his career and his personal safety. He has argued that the Vietnam War was only one in a series of cases in which the United States used its military power to gain or consolidate economic control over increasingly larger areas of the developing world. In the same vein, he regards the domestic political scene of the United States and other major capitalist countries as theatres in which major corporations and their elite managers strive to protect and enhance their economic privileges and political power.

In democracies similar to the United States, in which the compliance of ordinary citizens cannot be guaranteed by force, this effort requires a form of "propaganda": the powerful must make ordinary citizens believe that vesting economic control of society in the hands of a tiny minority of the population is to their benefit. Part of this project involves enlisting the help of "intellectuals" - the class of individuals (primarily journalists and academics) who collect, disseminate, and interpret political and economic information for the public. Regrettably, Chomsky argues, this task has proved remarkably easy.[1] This may be interpreted not only as compliance but a form of operant conditioning that reflects corporate unity, a desire not to let the side down and an orchestrated belief the actions are not only right but warranted.

Forty years after the end of the Vietnam War it is easy to see how in hindsight many people were misled by the causes and intentions of Ho Chi Minh who died in 1969. Yes, he did travel to the Soviet Union and join international communist organisations and travel to China too but as preparation to guide Vietnam's own revolution. We need to remember that Vietnam for centuries had been occupied by the Chinese and later the French. Whilst Ho Chi Minh aligned himself with some of the ideas of other communist parties his aim was an independent and integrated Vietnam. This is borne out in his many speeches and policy directives. One only has to read about the history and culture of Vietnam to see there were huge differences with firstly the French, although elements were retained, and USA. More than a glimpse is provided by Nguyen Khac Vien in his compelling Vietnam: A Long History. [5] Chomsky believed the American War to be criminal as it was "a case of conscious and pre-meditated aggression in "a war of annihilation" and "indescribable: atrocity."[6] As with Cassius Clay, later Muhammad Ali, it took bravery to speak out in America at this time with its fierce sense of patriotism and conviction politics.

As a responsible rather than mercenary member of the intellectual class, Chomsky believes that it is his obligation to provide ordinary citizens with the information they need to draw their own conclusions to make their own decisions about vital political

and economic issues. As he wrote in *Powers and Prospects* (1996): "*The responsibility of the writer as a* moral agent *is to try to bring the truth about* matters of human significance *to* an audience that can do something about them*."*

In an early political essay, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals* (1967), Noam Chomsky presented case after case in which intellectuals in positions of some power, including prominent journalists, failed to tell the truth or deliberately lied to the public so as to conceal the aims and consequences of United States involvement in the Vietnam War. In a two-volume work *The Political Economy of Human Rights* (1979) and later, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), Chomsky and economist Edward Herman analysed the reporting of journalists in mainstream, corporate owned, media on the basis of statistically careful studies of historical and contemporary examples. Their work provided striking evidence of selection, skewing of data, filtering of information, and outright invention in support of assumptions that helped to justify the controlling influence of corporations in U.S. foreign policy and domestic politics.[1]

These and other studies used paired examples to show how very similar events can be reported in very different ways, depending upon whether and how state and corporate interests may be affected. In *The Political Economy of Human Rights*, for example, Chomsky and Herman compared reporting on Indonesia's military invasion and occupation of East Timor with reporting on the behaviour of the communist Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. Both events took place in approximately the same part of the world and in the mid to late 1970s.[1]

McGilvray says that as a proportion of population, the number of East Timorese tortured and murdered by the Indonesian military was approximately the same as total Cambodians tortured and murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Yet corporate media in the United States devoted much more attention to the second case; more than 1,000 column inches in the *New York Times* than to the first, some 70 column inches. "Moreover, reporting on the actions of the Khmer Rouge contained many cases of exaggeration and fabrication," whereas reporting on actions of Indonesia portrayed them as essentially benign. In the case of the Khmer Rouge, however, exaggerated reports of atrocities aided efforts by the United States to maintain the Cold War and to protect and expand its access to the region's natural resources (including East Timor oil deposits) through client states. Indonesia was just such a state, heavily supported by the U.S. military and economic aid.[1] By focusing media attention on Cambodia the claim is the USA could exploit the resources of East Timor especially.

Although ordinary Americans were not in a position to do anything about the Khmer Rouge they were capable of doing something to support for Indonesia, in particular by voting their government out of office. But the media's benign treatment of the invasion made it extremely unlikely they would be motivated to do so. According to Chomsky, this and many other examples demonstrate that prominent journalists and other intellectuals function essentially as "commissars" on behalf of elite interests.

As Chomsky wrote in *Necessary Illusions* (1988): *"The media serve the interests of state and corporate power, which are closely interlinked, framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege and limiting debate and discussion accordingly."* That a topic or event may be fiercely denied does not mean an accusation is untrue.

The politics of organisational behaviour

Some of Chomsky's critics have claimed that his political and media studies portray journalists as actively engaged in a kind of conspiracy; extremely unlikely of course, given the degree of coordination and control it would require. McGilvray adds that Chomsky's response is simply the assumption of conspiracy is unnecessary. The behaviour of journalists in the media is exactly what one would expect, on average, given the power structure of the institutions in which they are employed. It is predictable in the same sense and for the same reasons that the behaviour of the president of General Motors is predictable. In order to succeed, and to be hired and promoted, media personnel must avoid questioning the interests of corporations they work for or the interests of the elite minority who run those corporations.[1]

Because journalists naturally do not wish to think of themselves as mercenaries (no one does), they engage in what amounts to a form of self-deception. They typically think of themselves as stalwart defenders of the truth (as suggested by the slogan of the *New York Times*, "All the news that's fit to print"), but when state or corporate interests are at stake they act otherwise, in crucially important ways. In short, very few of them are willing or even able to live up to their responsibility as intellectuals to bring the truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them.[1]

Corporate culture has been the subject of many studies, often in those that failed as well as the successful. Then there are exposures when events go radically wrong including hacking the phone of celebrities, politicians and others such as the missing schoolgirl Millie Dowler causing untold anxiety to the family. The Leveson Inquiry, reporting in 2012, referred also to recklessness in pursuing sensational stories, of freedom to invade the privacy of the famous, use of "covert surveillance, blagging and deception, relentless persistence to the point of harassment, disregard for accuracy, a culture of resisting or dismissing complaints and failure of management systems and compliance."[7] This catalogue is by no means the preserve of the press alone as cavalier actions are a trait of human nature. The imperative for companies and other organisations is not to get caught or, if found out, to suppress or remove evidence and continue to deny and deflect accusations unless irrefutable evidence emerges in which case they may plead mistaken intent and unintended harm.

A journalist challenging the system was Peter Oborne who in December of last year resigned from the Daily Telegraph. On joining in 2010, he followed in the traditions of Peter Utley whom he admired for the "quiet decency and pragmatism of British conservatism" but circulation was falling fast. Waves of sackings followed in this

booming digital age. In eighty one years to 2004 the paper had only six editors, the same total since the Barclay brothers took over in that year. The foreign desk was decimated and half of all sub-editors sacked. Print news now competed with online hits and subscriptions.

Axiomatic in journalism is for the advertising department and editorial function to be kept apart but Oborne had good reason to believe this no longer applied. A story on HSBC concerning closure of accounts of Muslims was not published as there was "a bit of an issue" with HSBC. Then, via a Hong Kong analyst, it emerged a black hole in HSBC accounts had appeared. This startling revelation was quickly removed from the Telegraph website. Says Oborne, neither did the Hong Kong protests feature, nor the Tesco false accounting story other than in the business section.

Only weeks after resigning, allegations emerged about an HSBC tax evasion scheme in its Swiss banking arm. Miniscule coverage was given in the Telegraph but space enough to include smears against the Labour Party. In mid-January Oborne went public. Of greatest concern to him was the Telegraph committing a form of fraud on its readers and undermining democracy as under the Telegraph, News International and possibly others the press was no longer free.[8]

Critical acclaim and critics

Paul Robinson, writing in the New York Times Book Review some years ago, referred to a "Chomsky problem" or paradox. Chomsky's profound, technical contribution to linguistics contrasts with his political pronouncements, "often maddeningly simple-minded." Was this his ability to cut to the chase, to offer simple explanations or a sharp insight into real causes and consequences? Maybe it is a fusion of all of these plus his wish to make forcible statements to clearly express his views.

Nailing his colours firmly to the mast in support of Chomsky is Robin Blackburn, a British historian and professor of sociology. In the magazine Prospect he "celebrates a courageous truth-teller," praising Chomsky's intellectual achievement and political courage. He states that very few transform an entire field of inquiry as Chomsky has done. Whilst Chomsky's scientific work is controversial, for Blackburn his immense achievements are undoubted, including his damning political insights.

Opposing is Oliver Kamm, a British writer and journalist who deplores Chomsky's "crude and dishonest arguments." Kamm concedes that Chomsky remains the most influential figure in theoretical linguistics with his ideas, his belief that language is a cognitive system and the realisation of an innate faculty. "Whilst they enjoy a wide currency, many linguists reject them."[9] Maybe so but that does not necessarily make their views 'right.' The jury is still out on the perceived truth of an incredibly complex area of human psychology. A majority verdict is unlikely soon - or any verdict.

Kamm's polemic is reserved for his final paragraph, accepting that Chomsky has a dedicated following for "judgements that have the veneer of scholarship and reason, yet verge on the pathological." A final barb was added when referring to a piece of

advice Chomsky gave regarding the role of the media. Their task "is to select the facts, or to invent them, in such a way as to render the required conclusions not too transparently absurd – at least for properly disciplined minds." This, believes Kamm, is a neat encapsulation of Noel Chomsky's own practice.[9] If guilty he would hardly be the first in fitting facts and evidence to an assertion or hypothesis, or in conveniently omitting factors that do not support an argument or contention.

What is that arouses such extremes of adulation and contempt, for Noel Chomsky has hordes of admirers and detractors. Are his linguistic ideas now outmoded in the modern era? The review by Geoffrey Pullum, professor of general linguistics, was scathing. He referred to the McGilvray interviews with Chomsky as "jargon jostling with loose conjecture and dogmatic assertions." What incensed Pullum most was university presses still "publishing stuff like this, devoid of carefully framed ideas, results or scientific data about language." Yet in a 'Foreign Policy' and 'Prospect' magazine selection in 2005 of the top 100 public intellectuals Noam Chomsky came first. His total votes were almost twice as many as the person in second place.

These contrasting views raise an interesting question when analysing who we deem to be great thinkers. Do we judge the actuality of their achievements, assuming we are able to evidence and understand these, or the perception of their achievements, using as our witnesses the views and impressions of a wide strata of society? How much are we swayed by the impressions and opinions of others rather than our own research and analysis? Then there is the task of how we weigh one against another, especially if setting a prescribed limit, let alone trying to place in a ranked order.

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