

# Noam Chomsky and the History of Ideas<sup>1</sup>

## An Elucidatory Exposition

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**Abstract:** Noam Chomsky incarnates rationalism in the study of language like no other man has or does in man's history, it seems to me. I will attempt to elucidate this position, however inchoately and incompletely, by enumerating his revolutionarily perceptive contributions to the study of language as a phenomenon. There is so much conventional perceptual deadwood about language that its position in epistemological space needs to be clarified, and perspectivised, deadwood that has come down and continues to float down the canons in the social sciences and the humanities. Once clarified, people could agree or disagree. People now seem to disagree with some of these positions without understanding them! The paper will position Chomsky in his niche in the history of ideas about language, a niche which is noticeably distinctly different from that of a Panini, the great Indian grammarian or a Sibavahi, the great Arabic grammarian, the three of whom together form the great grammarian trio the world has seen<sup>2</sup>. The intervention is clearly more an elucidatory, albeit argumentative, exercise than an originally researched paper although of course it has to do with placing language in epistemological space.

The first thing that comes to mind is the genesis of human language. Various reasons, which merit mention and elucidation, prompt the conclusion that language is not, and can't be, social in origin.

### **Nature Gives the Structural Template and Nurture the Slot-fillers.**

Language is NOT a social idea.

It is part of our original equipment, a genetic given, part of our instinctual make-up. It couldn't be that one day or over a period of time humans decided to have language and resolved to have this or that rule,

or they developed it not in a meeting called for the purpose but evolved it in what can be called in their 'social unconscious'. It is difficult to imagine language evolving socially without a predefined preexisting schema, a schema apparently driven nonsocially.

Our ability to speak, in other words, is not socially motivated/constituted.

The overriding evidence is first language acquisition. Children pick up any language that they are exposed to without any fuss, without any struggle and without any formal instruction. Uninstructed but unerring language acquisition at the young age of one and two years means that there is something innate in them that makes such a phenomenon possible. My granddaughter mastered the yes-no interrogation rule in Kannada, a South Dravidian language spoken in southern India when she was barely two and a half years old. The rule is for consonant-ending and enunciative vowel-ending words, add -a, the enunciative vowel being deleted in the latter case, and add -a elsewhere, with an inflectional increment  $n$  coming in. It is a pretty involute rule and to think that a two year old could master it is a tribute to the germ of language embedded deep in her consciousness. The complexity of the rule and the immaturity of her age rule out inductive inferencing.

Part of the evidence for saying it is not inductive inferencing is the fact that when quizzed, she can't make the rules explicit but she implements the rules that define the language she has come to acquire with amazing finesse.

I gave her the following passage

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<sup>1</sup> The piece is a journal version of a talk I gave in a seminar on Chomsky and the Contemporary World in the department of philosophy at the University of Pondicherry, India in 2009. I thank all those who fed me back there. I have drawn on (my internalization of) the whole body of Chomskian thought on language so that there are no specific references in the article. <sup>2</sup> The beauty is that all these three are/were monolingual!

There lived a king in xanabou. He had three wives and four children. Two of the children were boys.

I followed it up with the question of

How many daughters did the king have?

Much less answer the question, she didn't follow the question, which sheds light on the stage of evolution of her logical inferencing abilities.

There is a distinction made between what is called 'declarative knowledge' and 'procedural knowledge'. Declarative knowledge has to do with the 'what' of knowledge whereas procedural knowledge has to do with the 'how'. I know 'how' to swim without necessarily knowing its what, without knowing what swimming entails. Language is something like this. We know how to speak a particular language without knowing the 'what' of it. Native speakers have procedural knowledge of language, and not its declarative knowledge. Nobody teaches the kid how to move on its sides, how to crane its neck and how to sit, stand and walk. But she does it as expertly as any adult, as expertly and facilely as any Olympic athlete. If this fact viz that we speak language like we walk, i.e instinctively, without consciously thinking about it, is true as it undoubtedly seems to be, the conclusion is that language is embedded in our biology, in our genes. Much as our ability to move on our sides, crane our necks, sit, stand and lift our legs as we walk is part of our genetic blueprint, so is language. When a kid is born, the foundational structure, often called grammar, of all human languages is in her genes. Not just that of the language she would finally turn out to be speaking. As Chomsky says, there is a switch board of parameters which the kid has to choose from to build on the shared universal grammar. (This choice is a function of the linguistic ambience that the child is exposed to, the linguistic environs functioning as a trigger to our original equipment.) What this means is that this foundational structure of human language, which is in our genes, and which admittedly subsequently comes to exist in lived experience, is less easily subject to lived experience than lexica are. The part of language that is a growing and dynamic flux is not so much the structure part of it as its lexicon and its ethnography of speaking etc. This is not to rule out grammar being subject to lived experience.

There is an existent core and a nonexistent core which grammars of all human languages share and these are typically not subject to lived experience. The fact that all human languages must have phonemes and morphemes and words, phrases and sentences, that they should have nouns and verbs exemplify the former and the rule of not being able to extract an NP that is part of a coordinate NP, and question it, mentioned below, for example exemplifies the latter. Lived experience could

possibly change parts of this foundational structure of language over long spans of time, over hundreds and thousands of years. The foundational structure of language, often called grammar, is more like a biological object, say, the human hand which although it exists in lived experience is subject to it only in a non immediate sense. This analogy may not be terribly apt though. It is the lexicon among other things that sort of constitute the 'floating population', the easily mutable parts of the language, which is obviously and readily subject to lived experience. A nearly irrefutable evidence is facts like a newly born kid today anywhere in the world would have the procedural knowledge of the fact that she can't extract an NP out of a coordinate NP and question it (eg. 2 below). She could extract an NP that is part of a prepositional phrase and question it (eg. 1 below).

- 1 a. Giridhar went to the party with his friend  
b. Who did Giridhar go to the party with?
- 2 a. Giridhar and his friend went to the party.  
\* b. Who did Giridhar go to the party and?

The coldly empirical fact of the impossibility of a question-sentence like

3. What did you die?

Or the impossibility of

4. Kevin<sub>i</sub> killed Kevin<sub>i</sub>

as opposed to

- 4a. Kevin killed herself

is clearly not because of any sociocultural reasons, not because of any reasons of communication, but because of reasons of biology, genes and the consequent culture-free cognition. You can't ask a question addressing the nonexistent object NP of an intransitive verb. Nor can you not use the reflexive pronoun (or some such strategy in languages other than English) when two full NP's are coreferential in a clause.

Structural properties of language are typically biologically rather than logically necessary properties. Thus statements like

People is more important than anything, even grammar.

(Dan Harmon in Reader's Digest Oct 2014 p:160) or a similar statement attributed to Shankaracharya

When it is a question of life, grammar doesn't matter or people don't worry about grammar.

don't make sense in that they have no relevance, or the question doesn't arise. People, life and grammars occupy different cosmoses. On one's death bed, or faced with terrorists, nobody will say

People is more important than grammar.

or, when I am faced with a life-threatening situation, I won't think now it makes no difference whether I say

People is important...

or

People are more important...

and so let me say

People is more important...

Nobody would do that. As I said, the question doesn't arise.

It is like saying when it comes to people and life, you don't have to worry about how to move your limbs! How to move your limbs doesn't relate at all to life or people in the sense hinted at in the above two statements. It is instinctive. The question of how to move your limbs is orthogonal to the global question of life.

The suspicion is that some fifty thousand years after man's appearance on earth a mutation caused by some external factor such as cosmic rays engendered language in man.

**The thesis that language is genetic and not social in origin has a number of consequences:**

1. TThat like there are genetic constraints on how we move our limbs and how we see or hear (for example, motion pictures are a function of the inability of the human eye to separate out still pictures that are flashed in rapid succession, and the human ear can't hear sounds below a lower and an upper limit of decibels, humans can't fold their hands/arms backward, their legs forward ...), there are constraints on what could happen and couldn't happen in language or to it, constraints leading to rigorous regularities. Irregularities, irregular forms for example, belong to the finite periphery of language while

rules, regularities, constraints and conditionalities belong to the heart of language, to the infinite expanse that language as output is.

2. 2That languages couldn't differ in unlimited and unpredictable ways. This has become obvious now. As Chomsky says, that in some languages adjectives follow and in some, adjectives precede the head word, or adpositions follow in some languages and in some precede the noun could be instances of externalizations of what internally is the same thing.

3. 3Even under conditions of insanity and psychoticity we use our limbs and senses as normally as we always used. So seems to be the case with language. Grammar is NOT lost with insanity or psychoticity. I had a neighbour who had lost her memory to such an extent she even forgot that she had to wear something before going out etc. But she hadn't lost her language, she would speak perfectly grammatical Kannada sentences. I am sure she would have lost skills acquired in life which had no specifically genetic underpinning like swimming or driving a car or knitting and crocheting, cooking etc. This is more significant than some of us realize. That, in contrast, she hadn't lost language, much like she hadn't forgotten how to walk, how to use her hands, her fingers etc. points clearly to the fact that language has genetic moorings. Even in language, one expects her to lose lexical items before losing linguistic structure, which is evidence that linguistic structure is more quintessential than lexicon.

4. 4That language is not organically or intrinsically related to communication.

- a. Suppose I think of writing a piece on carcinogenesis tonight. The next morning I externalize it, viz the mental world I have created, making marks on pieces of paper, or record it in a CD and keep it for a few days. Let's call it the first stage. After a few days I decide to give a talk to the local cancer society and do give a talk on my ruminations. Stage no 2. After a few days I send my write-up to an international journal on cancer to be published to be presumably available for a wider reading public. Stage no 3. The argument is that the language act is complete with stage no 1. Stage nos 2 and 3 only exemplify one of the (social) uses of language. Grammar, the heart of language,

is not worried about, in fact has nothing to do with, stage nos two and three.

b. I write a love letter to the girl I am smitten with and stash it away for a decade. The fact that it has reached no one doesn't make my language behaviour that much less valid than if it has reached her or anyone else. The question of the use of such language behavior as does not communicate is NOT relevant to natural language.

c. I stand before a corpse and tearfully say,

"I am inconsolably sorry for what I have done. It is because of me that you have died."

I stand before an idol of God and ululate,

"God! What have you done? You took away my father! As if that was not enough now you took away my wife! You are ruthless and have no mercy. I will no longer come to you!"

Both soliloquies are complete language acts although there is no chance of 'communication'. That the validity of the language act is not a function of whether it traverses interpersonal space is what is meant by saying that there is no structure-function relation between language and communication. This is what is meant when we say that linguistic structure is NOT a function of communication because communication is not part of the definition of language, because communication is not a function, but only a use of language.

d. We have seen psychotics saying things loudly to no one in particular on streets. The fact that it may not reach anyone doesn't invalidate the psychotic's linguistic behavior.

e. We see/hear people saying as they enter houses Is there anyone in the house?

Or

See I have brought you so many things! Where have you gone? Come!

and so on. Even if there is no one listening, language has been performed.

f. Arguably, the speaking animal's linguistic behavior could be tailor-made in response to the requirements of her interlocutor.

To say that this is to admit that communication dictates linguistic behavior is to be delightfully myopic.

I could say something and my interlocutor might not understand it and might ask me to say what I mean in other ways. I may then reword, rephrase and restructure what I said to begin with.

What is happening here is the following:

My restructuring of my initial content is dictated at some level by the needs of communication, yes, but the point is the structure per se, the being per se of my subsequent language behaviour is not a function of communication. It is a function of gene-driven cognition. My *choice* of alternative possibilities that I juggle with is a function of the interlocutor's wants. An analogy would be: I have a bowl of pomegranates, apples, bananas, oranges, mangoes, grapes and so on. The eater is asking me for one of them. I gave him by mistake some other fruit. Now I give him his requirement, which may be a function of his tastes, his abilities (eg he may be toothless) and so on. Now, one can't say the structure of the fruit he requires and which the supplier gave him is a function of the requirement. The structure of oranges and guavas is NOT dictated by the eater's needs and requirements. Nature decides its structure and nature. This is the case with natural language as well.

**Expressive behaviour is not necessarily communicative behaviour. Somebody nods her head as she listens to the speaker in a meeting. This is pure expression of the self: It is NOT communication. It could be construed to be agreement by the on-lookers, in which case it becomes communication. When this happens with language behaviour, it takes on an 'interactive function', and it is then that society enters the scene. Then you have the sociology etc of language. This is a use, an external happening.**

A piece of painting for example is expressive behaviour, to begin with and to end with, without necessarily being communicative behaviour. It is not clear in the case of painting how the expressive behaviour that it is also becomes communicative behaviour, if it does at all. I don't know if we can hazard the statement that human linguistic behaviour is at the same time expressive and communicative behaviour. That the facilitator of thinking and creating mental worlds that natural language is constitutes at the same time communicational or communicable material.

**Whether the venting is ipso facto communication is debatable.**

It is more precise to say it is expressive to begin with and it is subsequently put to the use of communication, which then leads to nonlinguistic action, although in the case of language, the two seem to happen simultaneously. The latter is what Chomsky thinks. One needs to understand the subtlety of the situation.

This biologism ending up in mentalism and cognitivism in Linguistics is largely due to Chomsky and his aficionados. At least none has articulated it as relentlessly and with as much rationally driven vehemence as he has. If the biologism, mentalism, cognitivism and the consequent deductivism and the 'central reciprocal relationship' (Walter Benjamin's expression) of human languages are the bottomline about language, one is not sure whether Chomsky and Panini are comparable at all. They are clearly on different footings. Panini has apparently not talked about UG, deductivism, biologism, mentalism and cognitivism, or Has he?

These stand opposed to the social origin of language, to behaviorism and empiricism, to inductivism. Compare the stand of someone like Skinner who said except things like seeing and hearing everything else is learnt behaviour, the classic s-r behaviorism. An offshoot of biologism, mentalism and cognitivism in linguistics is deductivism as opposed to inductivism. We can now argue - not now, but for quite some time now - that certain things are not possible in human languages not by looking at each and every human language but deductively, without looking at any language in particular. Anoop Mahajan of UCLA presented a paper at the CIIL, Mysuru, India long back, arguing deductively why certain word orders are not possible in human language. What he said must be true of natural languages long dead like Chibcha, the central Columbian language and of languages yet to be born.

**These things have nothing at all to do with cultures, societies and belief systems, a mistaken assumption some people continue to make despite formidable evidence to the contrary.**

It has become irrefutably clear for some time now that language is not a social arrangement in a significant sense. It is a genetic idea, a genetic given, which is computationally configured to serve as an inner mental tool, a tool for thinking and for creating

mental worlds. If this is true as it seems to be, then there is no evidence to say that language was designed for communication although one of its uses is for communication. As Chomsky says, that language is used for communication is trivially true. What is nontrivially true is that language is there for thinking and for creating mental worlds. I have over the years understood this, and have come to agree. Computational efficiency is promoted in language design, says Chomsky, even at the cost of communicational efficiency.

There is no reason to believe that the genetic-cognitive and mathematical-computational foundations of language are less important than what may be called its cultural determinants, much as there is no reason to believe that human oneness is less interesting or less important than human diversity. Some years back I gave Chomsky a fill-in-the-blanks exercise which ran as follows:

Language is genetically or biologically founded, computationally or mathematically configured and socially ---

He refused to fall to the bait, saying it can't be sensibly filled!

This is of course not to say that there is no society involved at any level in language. In parts of its use language is or becomes a social phenomenon. As we said, vocabulary has of course to do with culture, which is precisely why it, unlike structure, is negotiable. And society comes into the picture once language is put to the use of communication. Till that point, natural language is deeply individual.

The only hitch to the idea of language being individual might be the existence of things like politeness expressions, second person pronouns and so on. The thing to say is that man has a social face and he needs these in his language rather than say that these are there because language is social. Much like the thesis that it is not language that has a poetic face, evil vocabulary and so on but man has these facets which language is there to externalise. This is also my counter to people's assertion that natural language has a poetic or literary face or use or function. It is not language that has a literary face or function, but it is man who has a poetic face to his personality which the resources of language are only used to express.

**Natural language is there quintessentially to think and to build mental worlds.**

Language occupies a unique place in the human scheme of things in as much as it is at the same time a rigorously rule-governed scientific system per se, an object in, or a wonder of, the natural world and at the same time a social object, unlike, let's say, a falling stone. It in fact is many-phased: it has a biological genetic phase, a cognitive phase, a representational structure phase, a physical phase, a philosophical phase, a mathematical computational phase, a social phase, a political phase, a communicative civilisational phase... We need to be careful when saying language is a social phenomenon. Especially cultural anthropologists and literary cognoscenti have been saying that language is a social phenomenon par excellence. This is part of their unthinking traditional canon. We need to rein in the extremely seductive relation obtaining between language and culture. See Giridhar 1981 for some discussion of the interface between language and culture. We need to say when and where language is social. Language is essentialist at significant levels. It is a procrustean bed in a significant sense.

**Nonprocrustean beds don't facilitate thinking and creating mental worlds that natural language can.**

People have also been saying that language creates reality.

The sense in which language creates reality is not clear, or could be misleading. The build of language per se could apparently give rise to conceptual constructs that have no empirical correlates. The mental worlds language creates may be fictive. A genuinely creative entity however is a causative entity. Language is not the causative factor in cognising and making sense of the world, something (both the linguistic relativity and linguistic-determinism parts of) the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis came close to saying. It could be our language in turn that shapes, at least partly shapes, the way we cognize the world. It is our cognition, to begin with, that is causative, it is our cognition that makes sense of the world and language reflects that cognition. Language expresses that cognition by codifying it, by becoming a tool for thinking, becoming a partial shaper of the way we think about the world, partly shaping the way we look at things, in terms of that cognition. It is clear at the same time that what I can express through my language or any language is only part of what I can think and cognize. . What is expressed through language would always be a subset of varying sizes of what I can think.

Cognition is the primeval thing, the 'original' thing if you will, and language mediates the relation between that cognition and the world.

**In other words language is NOT everything in human life, pace what some people think.**

Human language is a subset of human thinking, which is a subset of human consciousness. All terrains of consciousness are not available for thinking just as all arenas of thinking are not available for language.

Thinking, creating mental worlds and expressing or externalising that thinking is seminal to civilization. Language is central to that thinking and expressing. Grammar, the set of rules that normatively defines a language is central to language. It is Chomsky who has overwhelmingly argued that grammar is basic and language derivative, *another timeless insight from the master*. Everything about language is built on the understructure of grammar.

**Homo loquens is homo grammaticus in her core.**

If as we said thinking, creating mental worlds and externalizing it are central to civilization, if language is central to that thinking and externalizing that thinking and conveying it to nonself (=communication(?)), and if grammar is central to language, then it follows that grammar is central to civilization. Many of us need to mull such primacy of grammar in the human scheme of things. There is a recently published MIT book on the primacy of grammar.

It is perfectly legitimate for us to posit ideal states of man's being. To posit an ideal husband, an ideal wife, an ideal son, ideal father, an ideal mother, an ideal friend, an ideal king and so on, And an ideal speaker-hearer. This is an epistemological imperative. It is nobody's brief that such entities exist empirically. Chomsky has been unjustly criticised for doing precisely this. Epistemological imperatives that they are, such positings have the function of understanding things in perspective.

This is tied to the opposition between the manifest and the nonmanifest, appearance and reality, the superficial and the underlying, the surface and the deep. This is a dichotomy familiar to us in many facets of human existence. This is also true of language, both in its nitty-gritty and its global being. What we utter is a sign of what is there in our heads. What we perform is a reflection of our ability, our 'competence'.

One suspects that since our capacity for what is called 'culture' is also genetically founded, there

could be arguments for a UC (Universal Culture) and parametric variations of that UC. What makes this issue, of the human genetic capacity for culture giving rise to such an amorphous, seemingly unsystematisable scene is something to mull.

This is the scene of the internal build of language. I don't think anyone else has drawn the bottomline about the structural dynamics of this internal build more perceptively holistically than Chomsky. This again is not to deny whatever has since been said about the external function of language, viz about the dynamics of the interface between this internal build of language and whatever language does as an object in social space, as an identity marker, as a symbol of social solidarity, its sociohistory and so on and so forth.

Both these pictures, to perorate, are delightfully complementary and valid, I think and are NOT mutually contradictory, pace what many people seem to think.

#### **Reference**

Giridhar P.P 1981 Language and Culture: some Misgivings in *Indian Linguistics*