

## The Language Conundrum

*The Linguistic Wars: Chomsky, Lakoff, and the Battle over Deep Structure.* Second Edition 2021, Randy Allen Harris, Oxford University Press, pp. 368, \$25.99 used.

### Glynn Custred

University campuses in the 1960s were the scenes of widespread unrest when activist students, dissatisfied with the political leadership and its policies, demonstrated against nuclear weapons and the war in Vietnam. They also called for a transformation of American culture and experimented with new lifestyles, advocated tolerance for drug use, and joined the civil rights movement in what became known as the “counter-culture” and the New Left. Bands of protesting students took to the streets to advocate those causes, marching under the black flag

of anarchism (denoting their opposition to the “system”) and the red flag of revolution.

This revolutionary spirit coincided with changes then taking place in one of the established academic fields, linguistics, a discipline which examines the nature of language, its history, and its variation. At first glance this might seem a relatively minor and highly specialized subject in the broad spectrum of scholarly investigation. But a closer look reveals that language is essential to thought and action in every aspect of human life, and that there would be no humanities, no social sciences, no physical sciences without the ability to use language. Its study, therefore, goes far beyond just grammar, lexicon, language history, and dialect and stylistic variation, affecting in one way or another such disciplines as psychology, philosophy, computer science, biology, the social sciences, and the humanities.

Until the late 1950s the dominant linguistic theory in the United States was Structuralism,

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also known as Bloomfieldian linguistics named after Leonard Bloomfield, its chief proponent. Its goal was to describe the structural features which comprise the phonological and the grammatical components of languages. In the 1960s linguist Noam Chomsky appeared on the scene to challenge that approach, and to propagate his own view of grammar, a theory which pulled together earlier ways of looking at language but in an innovative way, an approach which broadened the scope of the study of language, and which had far-reaching implications for other disciplines. Chomsky, the son of a prominent Hebrew scholar, had studied under linguist Zellig Harris. His MA thesis dealt with modern spoken Hebrew. He had also studied mathematics and logic which he applied to his approach to grammar, the first version of which he published in 1957 under the title *Syntactic Structures*.

The title reveals Chomsky's approach to grammar which emphasizes syntax (sentence structure) over morphology (the word formation process), the component which had been emphasized in structural linguistics.

He describes sentences not in terms of static diagrams but as a process, using tree diagrams represented by the kind of symbols used in mathematics, to show the underlying processes of sentence production. This takes place on two levels, the deep structure, which is the base component, and the surface structure. Simple sentences in the deep structure are transformed through the application of rules into the complex sentences of the surface structure, forms which are then projected onto sound, thus the name Transformational Generative Grammar. For example, the deep structure sentences "I know a man" and "a man drives a Ferrari" are combined through the processes of embedding (reducing one sentence to a dependent clause), and substitution (replacing the phrase "a man" in the subordinate clause with the relative pronoun "who") to produce the complex sentence "I know a man who drives a Ferrari." This model reveals not only grammatical structure, but it also describes a speaker's linguistic competence, that is, what one must know in order to produce all the well-formed but none of the ill-formed sentences

of a language. Chomsky calls the act of speaking “performance,” which his model does not address. Instead, Chomsky focuses on “the underlying system of rules” that the speaker-hearer “puts in use in actual performance.”<sup>1</sup> (1965: 3-4). This approach, say its proponents, transcends structuralism, a model which merely describes, replacing it with one which *explains* how sentences are generated as a part of the cognitive process, thus lifting linguistics from the level of the humanities to the more elevated status of science.

This approach also has implications for language acquisition. The prevalent theory at the time was based on the stimulus response model of behaviorism as applied by psychologist B. F. Skinner to language acquisition in his book *Verbal Behavior* (1957). According to this theory children acquire their first language by constant re-enforcement, a process which takes place on the level of social interaction. Chomsky, however, argued that language is a feature of the mind, thus cognitive in nature, and that it is biologically based. Humans,

he argued, are genetically pre-programmed to acquire language, and despite the vast differences in the languages of the world they are all based on the same underlying principles in the form of an innate structure which he calls “universal grammar.” This approach cleared the way for a move beyond just structure to the study of the cognitive basis of language. It also stimulated the development of cognitive psychology and the biological basis of language as seen in neuropsychologist Eric Lenneberg’s study, published in 1967, *The Biological Foundation of Language*, a move towards biology and the evolution of language in what would come to be called biolinguistics. Like Copernicus and Galileo, Chomsky was soon regarded as an innovator largely responsible for a “paradigm shift” in scientific thinking.

Chomsky was a man of his time in another way as well, for he was, and still is, known and revered outside of academia as a public intellectual, one whom linguist John Lyons has called a “hero of the New Left.” As such he won added distinction for having

1 Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (MIT Press, 1965), 3-4.

been arrested for his participation in political demonstrations. Chomsky's ideology is expressed in his copious political writings and his activism, starting in the sixties with his opposition to the war in Vietnam. He wrote articles against the war for left oriented publications such as *Ramparts* and *Liberation* and for the *New York Review of Books* which he collected for his first political book titled *American Power and the New Mandarins* (1962), in which he claimed that the American elites, the "mandarins," were responsible for the atrocities which he says were perpetrated by the United States in Vietnam. Since then, Chomsky has produced a steady stream of political tracts addressing current issues from a predictably leftist perspective and with an anti-American bias.

He has described himself as an anarchist with Marxist leanings, and others have characterized his ideology as anarchism with voluntary socialism. But the principal feature of his politics and his activism is his visceral opposition to the United States and his defense of the totalitarian regimes which the United States opposes. For example, in an interview with Heinz Dietrich in

the 1980s (in *Latin America: From Colonization to Globalization* (1999) Chomsky said that the United States and not the Castro regime was responsible for the internal repression and brutality inside Cuba, for it is impossible, he said, for a country to live "in the shadow of a violent and sadistic superpower [the United States] that is committed to domination and control," a superpower which, he said, did everything it could "to drive them [the Castro government] into the hands of the Russians to ensure that there is a maximum amount of internal repression inside Cuba to reduce the possibility that it could be a model for anyone else." Paul Hollander in his book *From Benito Mussolini to Hugo Chavez: Intellectuals and a Century of Political Hero Worship* (2016) writes that Chomsky and Hugo Chavez, the dictator of Venezuela whose ruinous economic and social policies and political repression set off a mass migration of refugees, had a "warm mutual admiration, doubtless based in large measure on their shared fervent anti-Americanism." Chavez in his address to the United Nations in 2006 praised Chomsky. He showed the

audience one of Chomsky's books and advised them to read his other writings "and learn from them about the iniquities of the United States." The relationship however cooled when Chavez jailed, without trial, a judge accused of having released a critic of the regime.

Chomsky also defended another leftist revolutionary, Pol Pot in Cambodia. Hollander describes Chomsky and economist and social critic Edward Herman (with whom Chomsky had collaborated) as the intellectuals who launched the "most determined attempts to deny or minimize the mass murders of the Pol Pot regime, ridiculing and dismissing refugee accounts as untrustworthy tales designed to defame the regime." Chomsky and Herman, says Hollander, were "indignant about what they consider Western slandering of the Pol Pot regime that they judged to be decent and praiseworthy." More recently Chomsky has blamed NATO, which he says is controlled by the United States, for pushing Russia into the war in Ukraine making the situation worse by refusing to negotiate a settlement, unaware of (or choosing to ignore) what Putin himself

has said and written about his view of history and his vision of Russia's future. Chomsky also attributes the growing conflict between the West and Communist China to the West's aggressive anti-Chinese behavior, motivated by what he has described as the "imperialist notion" that Beijing poses a threat to the United States. Calling the American stance toward China "provocative," Chomsky ignores the ample proof that the Chinese Communist Party has its own sometimes aggressive hegemonic agenda which one might correctly label "imperialist." Mendacity, denial, distraction, name calling and, eventually, burying the story when it becomes convenient to do so are tactics Chomsky employs in the political arena. These, rather than reasoned debate, are also the tactics he and his followers use in their frequent clashes with those colleagues in linguistics who dare question his ascendancy.

Any new paradigm in science begins another "normal science" and with it the process of puzzle solving and theoretical exploration. So too with the Chomskyan Revolution, as some of his followers inspired by his ideas used his

model as the basis for their own approaches to language. Anyone involved in linguistics and related fields in those days recalls how mimeograph copies of papers were circulated and eagerly read on campuses across the country. Among those innovators were Charles Fillmore, James McCawley, Paul Postal, and John Robert Ross. But the one who rose to greatest prominence was George Lakoff, a graduate of the linguistics department at Indiana University and eventually a professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley.

Semantics had always been implied by transformational grammar, but in Chomsky's theory syntax was central. Once sentences are generated, he said, they are projected into meaning as they are onto sound. Lakoff's formulation started with Chomsky's Generative Transformational model, but turned it around by arguing that sentences are generated on the basis of meaning, thus the designation "generative semantics." With this hypothesis, deep structure, which is a way of capturing grammatical facts, is unnecessary, replaced by other levels of

language, the most abstract is like what logicians call the "logical form" of sentences. Chomsky, the man who defied authority in linguistics and in politics, followed a pattern so often seen in other domains of revolutionary change where those in charge, once revolutionaries themselves, tolerate no challenge to their own dominance. This is what happened when others began to diverge from Chomsky's line of thought, especially Lakoff.

Chomsky reacted with rancor and Lakoff and others reciprocated with their own disparagement in a verbal feud characterized by vitriol, sniping at one another and venomous personal attacks which Randy Allen Harris calls the "linguistic wars." This is the title of a book he published in 1993 in which he documents in detail the bickering and back-biting between the two camps, with Chomsky and his followers on one coast at MIT, and Lakoff, his wife Robin and others on the other side of the country at UC Berkeley. Generative semantics eventually lost the conflict, and Lakoff turned his attention to politics and to the study of metaphor while Chomsky quietly revised his theory, incorporating

some of the positions which he had contested at the time. But as Harris says, new bitterness and division continually occur which is one of the subjects of his revised and expanded edition of *Linguistic Wars* published in 2021.

Perhaps the most rancorous episode of the last decades, says Harris, involved attacks by Chomsky and the Chomskyites on a linguist named Daniel Everett. Everett was a member of the Methodist Church where he met his wife, Keren, whose parents were missionaries. He eventually became a “linguistic missionary,” a missionary who describes languages for the purposes of proselytization, which among Protestants also involves Bible translation. This enterprise actually follows an old tradition going back in the Americas of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when French and Spanish missionaries devised alphabets, wrote grammars, and compiled dictionaries of non-literate languages for the purpose of converting their speakers to Christianity. This activity made a valuable contribution to our understanding of the native languages of the Americas, an enterprise which linguistic

anthropologist Dell Hymes has called “the philology of languages which have no philology of their own.” The Summer Institute of Linguistics, founded in 1934, where Everett was trained, carries on his tradition by recording many small, sometimes dying languages, thus increasing our knowledge of the variety of the languages of the world. It has also contributed to linguistic theory as seen in Kenneth Pike’s *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (1954), and Eugene Nida’s *Language Structure and Translation* (1975) and *Towards a Science of Translation* (1964).

Once Everett had learned linguistics, he and his family went to live among the isolated Pirahã (peer-ah-haw) deep in the vast Amazon rain forest of Northwestern Brazil. It took him three years to learn the language. In all he spent thirty years among the Pirahã observing how they live and how they use language. He has described this experience in his book *Don’t Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle* (2009). The Pirahã, as described by Everett, had apparently remained virtually unchanged for

thousands of years representing what might have been the earliest stage of human cultural development. They have no social hierarchy, no government, no religion (just belief in evil spirits) and no musical tradition. Their vocabulary is extremely sparse. There are no color terms and no numerals (quantity is expressed by words like “many,” “few,” etc.) which is not uncommon in the small, pre-literate languages of the world. Pirahã grammar has a rich morphology (prefixes and suffixes) but the syntax consists of simple sentences with no subordination, a grammar sufficient for the needs of its speakers so that more complicated syntactic structures never emerged.

The process of recursion in language refers to the ability of speakers to place one syntactic component inside another by embedding meaningful phrases into a single sentence thus expressing ideas with fewer words and allowing for the indefinite expansion of sentences, what Chomsky claims is a part of Universal Grammar, and is thus at the core of every language. Everett’s finding, based on his years of observation, show that the Pirahã language does not use recursion,

implying that not all languages employ this device in their syntactic structures, and that recursion might not hold the central place in language and cognition that Chomsky theorized. The publication of those conclusions set off not only a scholarly debate, where it properly belongs, but also an intense campaign by Chomsky and his followers to discredit Everett. Harris says that three Chomskyites (Andrew Nevins, David Pesetsky, and Cilene Rodrigues) published a long paper in 2009 in the journal *Language* saying that Everett’s “claim was a lie.” Linguist Geoffrey Pullum, whom Harris quotes, commented on the conflict in a 2012 article in *The Chronicles of Higher Education* where he said that he had never before seen such “a vicious character assassination,” one delivered in a “billow of sarcasm” when Nevins et al. wrote in a “new genre” email, “you too can enjoy the spotlight of mass media and closet exoticism! Just find a remote tribe and exploit them for your own fame by making claims nobody will bother to check!” Another supporter, says Harris, “was instrumental in politically blocking Everett’s



further access with the Pirahã.” There were also accusations of data-faking, grandstanding and, of course, racism. Chomsky for his part called Everett an “*an utter charlatan*,” asserting that the implication of Everett’s work had “zero” impact on the Universal Grammar.

But the arguments of Chomsky and his supporters, says Harris, are “less than convincing,” amounting to mere epithets. And they made other arguments as well. For example, linguist Norbert Hornstein wrote that “the Pirahã may not deploy recursion when speaking Pirahã, but Pirahã children have no trouble learning Brazilian Portuguese (an indisputable recursive language) and so there is no evidence that their universal grammars are any different from anyone else’s.” Harris cites Pullum who said that Chomsky and his supporters eventually said that languages without recursive phrasal or clausal structures are compatible with Universal Grammar “so now nothing was at issue”; they believe it simply doesn’t matter.

The dispute attracted quite a bit of attention at the time as

heard in reports on National Public Radio and seen in articles in the *New Scientist*, the *Guardian*, the *New Yorker*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* and the British publication the *Independent*. It was also noticed by writer Tom Wolfe, who in 2016 gave his account of what happened in *The Kingdom of Speech*, told in Wolfe’s typical wry style.<sup>2</sup> There are two ways of relating current to historical events. One is the detached expository mode used by journalists, chroniclers, and historians. The other is that of the raconteur whose goal is to tell a good story. The two modes of reporting are combined in what Tom Wolfe called the new journalism, a kind of creative non-fiction which is the telling of a story about what actually happened but enhanced with the techniques of the novelist. In this kind of writing the objective reporter emerges from behind the scenes to become the subjective commentator, augmenting the narrative with speculations on how someone may have felt or thought, and employing the literary devices of fiction. In this case

2 In the summer of 2017, *Academic Questions* published a colloquium on Wolfe’s book, “Can We Talk? Tom Wolfe’s *The Kingdom of Speech*,” 182-198.

the style mocks the tone of the attacks on Everett, a way of telling the story which they invite by having departed from the more decorous manner of scholarly debates. Harris has nothing good to say about Wolfe's book, but he does admit that Wolfe got the basic story right.

Wolfe focuses on the differences between field linguists and those linguists who work in academia, often removed from the world of ordinary speech, a distinction to which Harris pays little attention. Wolfe begins with the analogy of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace who came up independently with the theory of evolution. Darwin had sailed the world visiting various places where he recorded the variety of life he observed in different zones. It was at home in England however where he worked out his theory of evolution. Wallace was a field biologist who had for years tramped through the Amazonian, the Malayan, and the Indonesian jungles in pursuit of knowledge about the varied plant and animal life of the world and sending home thousands of specimens in the process. Wolfe says that Darwin belonged to the inner

circle of "gentleman scientists," and the outsider Wallace was seen by the scientific elite as a mere "fly catcher." Wolfe then turns to the case of Chomsky and the inner circle of elite linguists versus the field worker Daniel Everett.

Everett the outsider struck Chomsky and his disciples as

a born again Alfred  
Russel Wallace . . . an  
old fashioned fly catch-  
er inexplicable here in  
the midst of modern  
air-conditioned arm-  
chair linguists with  
their radiation-bluish  
computer screen pall-  
ors and their faux-  
manly open shirts . . .  
the clueless outsider  
who crashes the party  
of big thinkers.

Clueless perhaps in terms of the insider norms of the establishment, but then maybe simply challenging the reigning linguistic authority, just as Chomsky had challenged the reigning authority in earlier days. Everett had been at MIT and had met Chomsky, had admired his work and had used his model in the initial

stages of his work. That is, until he decided the model did not fit the reality of the language he had observed in ordinary speech. His challenge therefore was not just from the outside, says Wolfe, “it was heresy.” Another mark against Everett was that he had been a “linguistic missionary” who sought to understand the language to facilitate religious conversion. As Wolfe says of the Chomsky establishment, “believers were regarded as hapless fools.”

The Chomskyites assembled what Wolfe calls a “truth squad” to refute the claims and to discredit their author. One heard over and over again words referring to Everett as “brutal,” “spiteful,” “ridiculous,” “childish,” “liar,” “charlatan,” along with the usual rhetoric of political correctness mocked by Wolfe. One must not show the “vaguest hint that you looked upon—*er*—indigenous peoples as stone age simple”; “linguists and anthropologists had to be careful not to characterize any—*er*—indigenous peoples as crude.” This is especially true when referring to the diffusion of the bow and arrow, an invention which passed to “the Inuit (the new ‘politically

correct’ name of the Eskimo) at the North pole, the Chinese in east Asia, to the Indians—*er*—Native-born in North America.”

For the structural linguists no language was too small or too obscure to escape their attention, thus the prominence of fieldwork which involves the systematic interviewing of native informants where they live, often in remote, isolated, and hard to get to places. Wolfe describes this kind of linguistics by pointing to Morris Swadesh who, in the 1930s, studied exotic languages in remote parts of Canada, the United States, and Mexico “living off coconuts, fava beans, and beef jerky and, in the chronic absence of plumbing, lowering his pants and squatting down in the tall grass” (a description which brings a smile of recognition to anyone who has engaged in field work in remote places). Chomsky, says Wolfe, “was bored brainless by all those tiny little languages” which old fashioned linguists were still bringing in from “the field.” And

only wearily could Chomsky endure traditional linguists who, like Swadesh, thought

fieldwork was essential and wound up in primitive places, emerging from the tall grass zipping their pants up. They were like the ordinary fly catchers of Darwin's day coming back from the middle of nowhere with their sacks full of little facts and buzzing about their beloved multilingual *fluency*, Swadesh-style."

Chomsky's sight was higher, says Wolfe, as he "had made it clear that he was elevating linguistics to its proper scientific level." Besides that, Chomsky "didn't enjoy the outdoors, where 'the field' was." Wolfe imagines him "sitting high, high on an armchair in an air conditioned-office at MIT, spic and span . . . he never looks down, only inward," and relocating the discipline of linguistics from the field "to Olympus. Not only that, but also giving linguists permission to stay air conditioned. They wouldn't have to leave the building at all, ever again . . . no more trekking off to interview boneheads in stench-humid huts.

And here on Olympus, you had plumbing."

One prominent Chomskyite, William Tecumseh Sherman Fitch III, did go to the Pirahã in an attempt to empirically disprove Everett's claims in the field. Wolfe obliquely characterizes the nature of the mission in a footnote which explains that Fitch was the great-great-great grandson of the Union Army general who laid waste to Savannah and Atlanta for the North.

But nothing came of Fitch's effort. Eventually Chomsky and Co. quieted down and in 2004 with three MIT colleagues he published a piece in the journal *Plos Biology* in which he says that "the evolution of the faculty of language largely remains an enigma." Nor did they "even extend Everett the courtesy of loathing him in print. They left non-him behind with all the rest of history's roadside trash." And so, like the battle with Lakoff, the assault on Everett was forgotten and Chomsky moved on. Chomsky's latest version is the minimalist theory which relates logical forms directly to the surface forms, a position which Paul Postal advocated in 1969 but

which was rejected by Chomsky at the time.

The study of language also moves on, as different lines of research from different disciplines converge giving us a better understanding of language, its structural variation, its use, its changes in response to communication needs, its relation to thought and action, its biological foundation, and its place in human evolution. Chomsky's role in this process was that of an innovator and an inspiration, an important part of the story. But the political bias and the petty squabbling of the linguistic wars will be remembered only as a footnote. However, for those scholars who study intellectual history, and the often contentious debates in the ongoing process of the scientific enterprise, Harris's thorough and well-documented study of the linguistic wars will be a valuable resource.