REVIEW


Reviewed by MICHAEL H. LONG, University of Hawai‘i.

There can have been few scientific disciplines whose leading theoretician was an anarchist. Yet that is the case with modern linguistics, a field dominated for 30 years now by the ideas, controversial though they may be, of Noam Chomsky, Professor of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT and staunch advocate of anarcho-syndicalism. Chomsky’s political writings and participation in anti-imperialist struggles (Vietnam, Cambodia, the Middle East and Central America, among others) are well known. His views about language are less familiar (outside linguistics circles), however, and it is the political status of these ideas and of the often politically motivated critiques they have provoked from both left and right that is the main focus of Newmeyer’s book.

Newmeyer has become the unofficial historian of (and, some would say, apologist for) contemporary “autonomous” linguistics, an approach to language study currently represented most clearly in Chomsky’s work. Newmeyer’s earlier widely read Linguistic Theory in America (1980) and Grammatical Theory (1983), together with an article in Language (1986), attribute paradigmatic status to Chomsky’s ideas, of which he is a passionate and articulate advocate.

Chomsky claims that one of the main things which makes humans human, and thereby distinguishes us from other animals, is an innate, species-specific, language-specific, biological endowment: genetically transmitted knowledge (referred to as Universal Grammar, UG) of quite abstract grammatical principles governing possible human languages, their universal features and the ways they can vary. It is only because of this endowment, Chomsky reasons, that the infant can learn, by about age 5, most aspects of whichever language(s) he or she happens to be exposed to, given that the grammatical rules involved are often so complex as to present a severe
intellectual challenge even to trained adult linguists. Without the endowment, in fact, no one could learn any language at all in a single lifetime, since the mathematically possible grammatical permutations, combined with the lack of available negative evidence about the inadmissibility of many of them in the linguistic input to the child, would make the task too great to accomplish by inductive reasoning alone (the "stimulus poverty" argument for an innate endowment). By hard-wiring some grammatical principles and knowledge of parameters along which languages can vary, UG constrains the range of potential options, predisposing the child to look for variation in certain areas, and so makes the learning task manageable.

The primary goal of linguistics, Chomsky says, should be to describe and explicate this amazing capacity, i.e. to provide a detailed, formal statement of what the principles and parameters are, deduced from the study of language(s), language learning and language learnability. Understanding how the human language learning faculty works will mean understanding a large part of human cognition and uniqueness. Linguistics is best thought of, it follows, as a branch of cognitive psychology, and quite satisfactorily conducted autonomously, as the study of the inner workings of language and the human mind, separate from the communicative function language serves, from the beliefs of its speakers, and from its social context.

Autonomous linguistics in general, and Chomsky's views in particular, have been attacked from the political right and left. Objections from the right, Newmeyer shows, typically involve thinly disguised racism, e.g. opposition to the value-free scientific study of a variety of languages, treated as linguistically equal, without regard to the social or political status of their speakers, and with as much attention paid to languages of the oppressed, e.g. African and American Indian languages, second dialects, pidgins and creoles, as to those of the oppressors, e.g. English, French, Spanish or Russian. Newmeyer's own linguistic expertise and Marxist political views make it easy for him to treat such attacks expertly and with the contempt and humor they deserve.

More seriously, there have been two major charges against Chomsky from what Newmeyer regards as the left, i.e. from Marxists. It is alleged, first, that the study of language divorced from its social context is politically irresponsible, and second, that belief in innate properties of the human mind encourages and perpetuates discrimination based on racial and other criteria. Newmeyer finds these criticisms more understandable, but also flawed. He
regrets that they have, in his view, unfairly damaged both Chomsky's reputation and that of autonomous linguistics.

As indicated, the first charge is that to study language removed from its social context, as autonomous linguistics has done for 200 years, is to ignore the crucial role language can play in regulating behavior and in perpetuating the oppression of women, ethnic minorities and other groups. Hence, it is socially irresponsible, especially in one, like Chomsky, who holds progressive political views. The study of language in context, after all, reveals (sometimes bidirectional) relationships between language and gender, language and politics, language and ethnicity, language and class, linguistic genocide and colonialism, and language and education, among other things. Hymes, Haberland, Lakoff, Mey and other critics argue that linguists (and presumably all scientists) should put themselves at the service of oppressed groups by working on issues like these, which would usually involve doing sociolinguistics, not linguistics, and especially not autonomous linguistics.

In response, Newmeyer points out that to criticise Chomsky for studying language as a system in its own right on the grounds that language can also be usefully studied in "applied" contexts (of use) is as valid as to chide a crystallographer for studying the internal structure of coal without reference to its use as a source of heat in winter. Citing Chomsky's own statements on the topic, he shows that accusations that Chomsky thinks relationships between language and society uninteresting are unwarranted; extralinguistic factors simply happen to be irrelevant for Chomsky's (autonomous linguistic) work in generative grammar.

While welcoming and illustrating socially useful linguistics, and respecting much of the work done under its banner, Newmeyer rejects this "moral critique" by progressive sociolinguists because he does not think that definitions of socially useful work in a field should define the scope of all work in that field. One might add that it is easy to shout "ivory tower", but that to be logically consistent, those who do so must also say if they would wish for all basic research to come to a halt, not just basic research in linguistics. Quite apart from the loss of unsought scientific discoveries (e.g. X-rays, penicillin and plastic) this would have meant in the past, many would presumably oppose such a policy as a limitation on personal and academic freedom.

A second criticism from the left centers on Chomsky's belief that the human language faculty is innate. Previous claims in the social sciences based
on genetic inheritance have such a poor track record that new ones are likely to invoke justified suspicion among ethnic minorities and working people, who ultimately suffered as a result in the past. One remembers, for example, the racially motivated scientific deceits (skulduggery?) of the early craniologists, and the fraudulent claims of Sir Cyril Burt and other psychologists about hereditary IQ, both documented so well by Gould (1981) in *The Mismeasure of Man*.

In light of travesties such as these, many on the left fear that any innateness claims may be used to rationalize discrimination on the grounds that observed social inequalities are the natural product of genetic differences. In fact, Chomsky’s claim is that *all* humans are innately endowed with the same language capacity, not just those of one race, sex, class or country. In Newmeyer’s words, ‘universal grammar unites all people, it does not divide them’ (p.77). Further, at an admittedly rather abstract level, Newmeyer points out, the ideas about innateness sit well with anarchist belief in the primacy of the individual: if the creative language capacity is indeed innate, it is correspondingly free from outside manipulation, from environmental conditioning, from social control.

The weakest part of *The Politics of Linguistics* is Newmeyer’s treatment of Chomsky’s anarchism. Given that he is writing for non-specialists in linguistics or political philosophy, the two short paragraphs (pp.78–79) devoted to a summary of anarchist beliefs (as if there were just one set) are clearly inadequate. The footnote referencing *Radical Priorities* for Chomsky’s (1981) own exposition of anarchosyndicalist views is unlikely to help much, given the potential readership for Newmeyer’s book. The reader interested in this side of Chomsky’s work should see Chomsky (1981), but also Peck (1987) and Otero (in press).

In Newmeyer’s defense, Chomsky himself has always denied anything more than the most general connection between his political beliefs and his work in linguistics. Also, the current book is not just about Chomsky, but has sections on such topics as linguistics in Nazi Germany and Russia, military funding of linguistic research in the US, and the staunchly conservative political character of the Texas-based Summer Institute of Linguistics. Newmeyer reports that SIL had 3,700 staff members working on 675 languages in 29 countries in 1978. While SIL’s major goal is to translate the Bible into the
languages of numerous third world peoples as part of an effort to convert them to Christianity, the organization has frequently been accused of covert political involvement in some of those countries, and has produced publications in which communism is consistently identified with Satan.

Recent American autonomous linguistics and Chomsky’s work are the main focus, however. In The Politics of Linguistics, Newmeyer provides insightful linguistic and political analyses of right-wing and Marxist attacks on Chomsky and on approaches to language study in general; he defends generative grammar and autonomous linguistics very ably, as in his previous two books, on linguistic grounds alone.

References


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