Chomsky's Linguistic Theory

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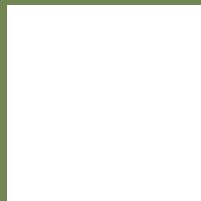
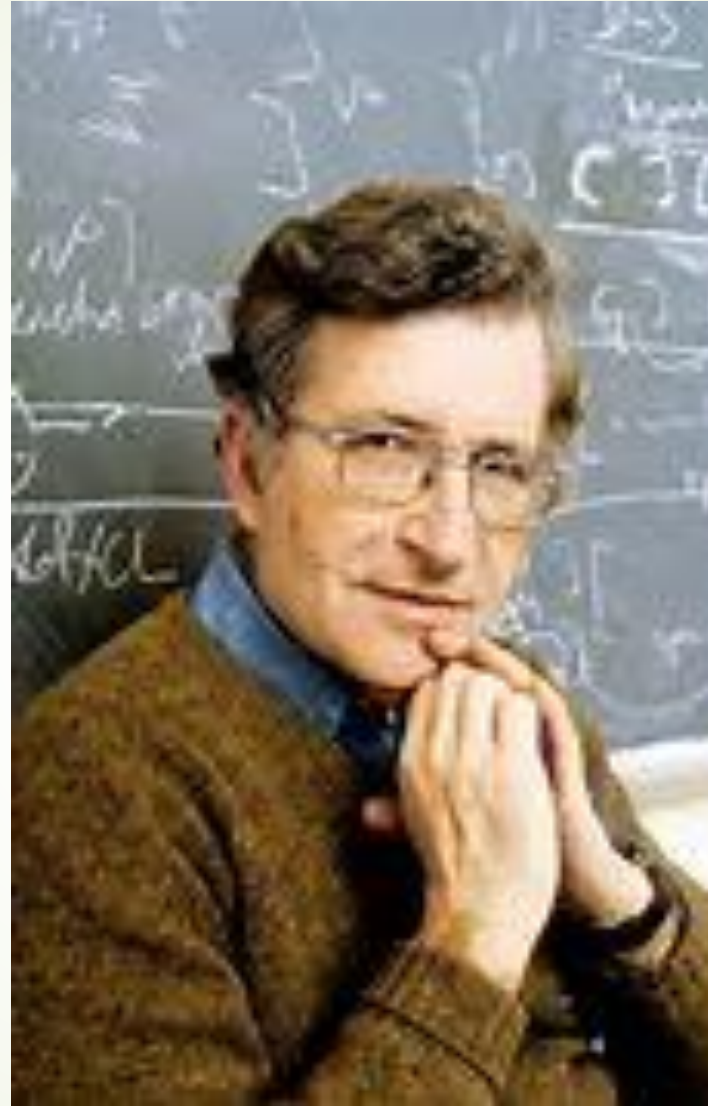**Objectives**

This lecture is designed to help you:

1. Have a general overview of Chomsky's approach to Linguistics (transformational-generative grammar).

2. Understand Chomsky's standing point towards de Saussure's conception of language and Linguistics.

- Avram Noam Chomsky (born December 7, 1928)

- He is an American linguist, philosopher, cognitive scientist, social critic, and political activist.

- *Syntactic structures 1957, Aspects of the theory of syntax 1965, Knowledge of language 1986*

Grammar: it is a set of rules or principle that we have in our minds which specifies how to form, pronounce and interpret phrases and sentences in a particular language.

The word grammar in this technical sense has a much broader sense than its familiar meaning from school textbooks. It covers not only syntax (i.e., how words are combined to from phrases and sentences) but also morphology (i.e., the internal structure of words), and semantics (i.e., meaning)

Chomsky's revolutionay idea

▶ The centrality of syntax

Traditional European grammar usually gives syntax a rather minor role. This depends on the language being described, with descriptions of more analytic languages devote more space to syntactic matters. But descriptions of highly inflecting European languages typically have a brief section on the phonology of the language concerned and a lot of information on the inflectional morphology of the language concerned.

For Chomsky,

1. A language is a set of sentences, and what allows a speaker to produce and a hearer to understand these sentences is the ability to manipulate syntactic structure.

2. In early work, morphology is dealt with as part of the syntax, in Later work it is dealt with as part of the lexicon, but in either case it is central to the working of the grammar.

Idealization of data

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker listener, in a complete homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.

▶ **Competence and performance, I-language and E-language**

Chomsky also distinguishes between the speakers' actual knowledge of the language, which is termed COMPETENCE and the use of that knowledge, which is termed PERFORMANCE. The errors listed above are presumably performance errors. Any piece of text (spoken or written) represents a performance of language, which will match the speaker's competence more or less inaccurately. Thus, performance is often taken as a poor guide to competence, but competence is the object of study for the linguist.

Deep structure and surface structure

Deep structure where semantic interpretation takes place

Surface structure where phonetic and syntactic interpretations take place

Language as a mental 'organ'

Chomsky and his followers talk about language as a mental organ.

the idea that we are presented with insufficient data from which to deduce the form of a linguistic system yet we can produce unlimited number of utterances.

Universal Grammar

Language universals refers to the properties that all languages share.

Human languages exhibit remarkable similarities or principles.

e.g., **Syntactic universals**: most of existing languages have verbs, nouns, adjectives and pronouns

e.g., **Semantic similarities**: one semantic universal regarding our notion of colour. There exist eleven basic colour terms: Black, white, red, green, blue, yellow, brown, purple, pink, orange and grey.

- The theory of universal grammar was proposed suggesting that all children are born with the ability to acquire, develop and understand grammar regardless of where they are raised (Language Acquisition Device- LAD).

- Universal grammar is **innate** and **generative**

- According to Chomsky, crucial parts of the human language ability are built into the brain part of our biology, programmed into our genes.

Generative grammar:

1. Separates grammatical from ungrammatical sentences

2. Makes explicit to the brain the finite mechanisms that can be used to generate infinite linguistic structures (**transformation rules**)

Chomsky argued that grammar is innate and generative.

Chomsky's reading of Saussure's structuralism

de Saussure	Chomsky
Language is a **system** not a collection of elements or items. This system is considered more important than its parts and defined by the relations between its component parts	"In Saussurean structuralism, a language (langue) was taken to be a system of sounds and an associated system of concepts" (p. 19)

"It should be noted that familiar characterizations of 'language' as a ...a game point correctly toward I-language, not the artificial construct E-language. .... A game is not a set of moves but rather the rule system that underlies them. The Saussurean concept of langue, although far too narrow in conception, might be interpreted as appropriate in this respect" (Chomsky, 1986,p. 31)

Langue Vs Parole	Competence vs performance
Langue refers to the abstract/internal set of rules or principles humans have about their language	**Competence**: speaker/hearer unconscious knowledge of language/ **Performance** : actual use of language in concrete situations
Parole refers to the actual speech of the individual	"Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) drew a fundamental distinction between what he called langue and parole. The first is the grammatical and semantic system represented in the brain of the speaker; the second is the actual acoustic output from his vocal organs and input to his ears. (Chomsky 1963:327)

Whereas the terms parole and performance might be used interchangeably, their counterparts competence and langue are quite different from each other

Langue is social (social fact, collective consciousness)	Competence is individual, innate, biological
• The CLG's description of langue as "the social part of language, exterior to the individual" ("la partie sociale du langage, extérieure à l'individu", CLG, p.31) • "language [langue…, is something that is acquired and conventional"	• "language is a mental organ: a 'biological endowment' that is species-specific and innate" • language is not socially inherited or socially adopted in any way; it is merely "triggered", as a genetic programme already present within the individual, by experience.

- According to Saussure, a langue exists as what is socially approved by members of a community. It is located in brains of members of a community just like a dictionary
- A langue is what is acquired but not an ability endowed by nature.

- language, as this "genetic programme", is completely independent from any cultural differences, which means that "each member of the human species is identical as regards **the faculty of language**, because language is inscribed in his or her brain"

The most striking aspect of linguistic competence is what we may call the 'creativity of language,' that is, the speaker's ability to produce new sentences, sentences that are immediately UNDERSTOOD by other speakers although they bear no physical resemblance to sentences which are 'familiar.

— Noam Chomsky —

AZ QUOTES

Creativity/generative grammar

- The notion of creativity has been used by many theorists to describe that aspect of language which enables a language user to use language in a novel way or to devise new forms of language.

- Chomsky differentiated between **rule-governed creativity** and **rule-changing/bending creativity**

- Rule-governed creativity is based on the notion that there is an infinite or unlimited number of sentences in any language= Syntactic creativity, which refers to the capacity of people to generate an infinite series of sentences that **conform** to the rules of syntax.

❑ Rule-changing/bending creativity/ semantic creativity: refers to the capacity of speakers to produce utterances which appear to be entirely novel in their semantic content and typically **break** a rule of language; metaphors are examples of this kind of creativity. Metaphor is clearly a meaning-based language device and has traditionally been described as a creative mechanism.

De Saussure:

Creativity is related to parole and not langue.

Syntax belongs to parole: 'La phrase est le type par excellence du syntagme. Mais elle appartient à la parole, non à la langue ...' (Saussure 1916/2005: 172)

People have a choice to form sentences in condition they conform to the rules presented in the mind.

Chomsky:

Creativity is a feature of linguistic competence/I-language

Because

What is universal across languages is syntax and syntax belongs to competence (head parameter, transformational rules).

Conclusion

We have considered Saussure's and Chomsky's views of languages. What underlies these differences is their fundamental idea of languages. Saussure insists that language is a social fact while Chomsky asserts that language is biological. Their different views of language come from these basic stand points. Although Saussure and Chomsky have had a great impact on Linguistics and other fields of sciences as well, their thoughts on language have never been unified into one theory so far. Will these two thoughts be reconciled some day? Or will one of the two give way to the other?

➡ Please read the following quotation carefully. Then, answer the questions underneath.

"*Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1966) drew a fundamental distinction between what he called langue and parole... It is the child's innate faculté that enables him to register and develop a linguistic system on the basis of scattered observations of actual linguistic behaviour. Other aspects of the study of language can be seriously undertaken only on the basis of an adequate account of the speaker's linguistic intuition, that is, on the basis of a description of his langue. ...Our discussion departs from a strict Saussurian conception in two ways. First, we say nothing about his semantic system of signs... Second, our conception of langue differs from Saussure's conception ... Once we reformulate the notion of langue in these terms, we can hope to incorporate into its description a full account of syntactic structure...*"(*Chomsky*1963: 327-328)

- 1. What language faculty Chomsky is talking about?

- 2. What semantic system Chomsky is talking about and what are his views towards this system "we say nothing about his semantic system of signs"? (explain)

- 3. In what way does Chomsky's conception of langue (Competence) differ from Saussure's?

- 4. Depending on the above quotation, complete the following statement:

According to Chomsky, the notion of structure belongs to…………………………, whereas for Saussure syntax belongs to………………………