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NOAM CHOMSKY'S LANGUAGE STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE USE: A CRITIQUE

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Abstract

Noam Chomsky is an American linguist, philosopher, cognitive scientist, historical essayist, social critic and political activist. He is popularly known as for language structure. He has also got an eminent place in the use of language. Chomsky argues that individuals are born with a predisposition to learn language. It is significant to note that he has contributed *theories on language, language acquisition skills* and *universal grammar*. He concluded that children must have an inborn faculty for language acquisition. According to this theory, the process is biologically determined. The human species have evolved a brain whose neural circuits contain linguistic information at birth. The present paper aims to discuss four notions that can easily count as his contribution to the study of language in use. They are (i.) *acceptability of expressions*, (ii.) *selectional restrictions*, (iii.) pragmatics *of lexical items* and (iv.) *non-opacity of some utterances* with respect to meaning.

Keywords: Language Structure, Language Use, Competence and Performance

"A language is not just words. It's a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It's all embodied in a language."-Noam Chomsky

INTRODUCTION

Linguistic theory was formed by Noam Chomsky who described language as having a grammar that is largely independent of language use. Unlike Behavioural Theory, Linguistic Theory argues that language acquisition is governed by universal, underlying grammatical rules that are common to all typically developing humans. Chomsky argues that individuals are born with a predisposition to learn language. Chomsky is the innovator and explorer of theories on language, including the acquisition of language, universal grammar, innate language, and language acquisition during a child's critical developmental stages. Chomsky's theory of language is based on the idea that all languages contain similar structures and rules (a universal grammar), and the fact that children everywhere acquire language the same way, and without much effort, seems to indicate that we're born wired with the basics already present in our brains.

Noam Chomsky is the most influential linguist of the second half of the Twentieth Century. He has made a number of strong claims about language: in particular, he suggests that language is an innate faculty - that is to say we are born with a set of rules

about language in our minds, which he refers to as the 'Universal Grammar'. The universal grammar is the basis upon which all human languages build. Children do not simply copy the language that they hear around them. They deduce rules from it, which they can then use to produce sentences that they have never heard before. They do not learn a repertoire of phrases and sayings, as the behaviourists believe, but a grammar that generates an infinite number of new sentences.

Language rules are complicated and complex. If there is not a Universal Grammar, how do children make sense of it all? When the child begins to listen to his parents, he will unconsciously recognize which kind of a language he is dealing with - and he will set his grammar to the correct one - this is known as *'setting the parameters'*. It's as if the children were offered at birth, a certain number of hypotheses, which he or she then matches with what is happening around him. The child knows intuitively that there are some words that behave like verbs and others like nouns, and that there is a limited set of possibilities for ordering them within a phrase. This is not information that the child is taught directly by adults, but information that is given for the child to decipher. This set of language learning tools, provided at birth, is referred to by Chomsky as the *Language Acquisition Device (LAD).*

Universal Grammar (UG) is a theoretical concept proposed by Noam Chomsky (not without criticism or controversy from scholars in the scientific community) that the human brain contains an innate mental grammar that helps humans acquire language. Universal grammar (UG), in modern linguistics, is the theory of the genetic component of the language faculty, usually credited to Noam Chomsky. The basic postulate of UG is that there are innate constraints on what the grammar of a possible human language could be. When linguistic stimuli are received in the course of language acquisition, children then adopt specific syntactic rules that conform to UG. The advocates of this theory emphasize and partially rely on the poverty of the stimulus (POS) argument and the existence of some universal properties of natural human languages. However, the latter has not been firmly established, as some linguists have

argued languages are so diverse that such universality is rare. It is a matter of empirical investigation to determine precisely what properties are universal and what linguistic capacities are innate.

Features of Chomsky Language Theory

1. **Innate Ability –** Chomsky states that children develop the ability to learn language and grammar from childhood. This consensus is genetic and universal.

2. **Significance of Environment –** Chomsky believes that although the ability to learn a language is innate, the environment plays an important role in learning and developing its principles and elements. It depends on the environment in which direction our language develops.

3. **Inter-relationships in Languages –** Chomsky believes that all the languages of the world and their elements are interrelated to each other.

4. **Language Acquisition Device (LAD) –** To Chomsky, a part of the brain belongs to the LAD, which works to enhance the ability of language. This ability to learn a language is high in the first five years and after that its effectiveness starts to reduce.

5. **Universal Grammar** – a theory in linguistics usually credited to Noam Chomsky that suggests that the ability to learn grammar is built into the human brain from birth regardless of language.

6. **Competence and Performance:** *Competence*, according to Chomsky, is the native speaker's knowledge of his language, the system of rules he has mastered, his ability to produce and understand a vast number of new sentences. *Performance* is the study of actual sentences and the actual use of the language in real-life situation. So, the speaker's knowledge of the structure of a language is his linguistic competence and

the ways in which he uses it is his linguistic performance.

Competence is, then, an underlying mental system, it underlines actual behaviour, linguistic institution ability to analyse language, detecting ambiguities, ignoring mistakes, understanding new sentences, producing entirely new sentences. Whereas competence is a set of principles which a speaker masters, performance is what a speaker does. The former is a kind of code; the latter is an act of encoding or decoding. Competence concerns the kind of structures the person has succeeded in mastering and internalising, whether or not he utilises them, in practice, without interference from the many of the factors that play a role in actual behaviour. For anyone concerned with intellectual processes or any question that goes beyond mere date arranging, it is the question of competence that is fundamental. Obviously one can find out about competence only by studying performance but this study must be carried out in devious and clever ways, if any serious result is to be obtained. In this way, the abstract, internal grammar which enables a speaker to utter and understand an infinite number of potential utterances is a speaker's competence.

This competence is free from the interference of memory span, characteristic errors, lapses of attention, etc. "The speaker has represented in his brain a grammar that gives an ideal account of the structure of the sentences of his language, but, when actually faced with the task of speaking or understanding many other factors act upon his underlying linguistic competence to produce actual performance.

LANGUAGE USE

To put the matter in some perspective, it may be mentioned that language in the familiar sense of the term is not the object of study for Chomsky, but an idealization of it, called *"I-language"*, the **internalized language** in every individual, which can be thought of as the **"knowledge of language".** Putting it in a different terminology, the object of his research enterprise is the study of (linguistic) **"competence"** and not of (linguistic) **"performance".** Performance is about the native speaker's production and comprehension of

language in situations of linguistic interaction, whereas competence is the knowledge behind performance, making performance what it is. Questions of acceptance arise at the level of performance alone. Thus "*much have I travelled in the realms of gold*" or "*the realms of gold have I travelled in much*", etc. In the context of language use, one could understand "production" as both the process involved and the output. Performance or what we ordinarily call "language" may not be outside the domain of linguistic enquiry per se; it is just that in the present state of knowledge any meaningful study of it is unrealistic from Chomsky's point of view. Several faculties of the mind interact when one understands and produces language, and the faculty of language, which is the chosen object of the study in the Chomskyan enterprise, is only one of these. As for other faculties, including the ones related to the knowledge of the world, of reasoning including the so-called commonsense reasoning and ethical knowledge, the best that can be said is that only little is understood. Under the circumstances, one would tend to agree with Chomsky that it is unrealistic to study performance.

To say the obvious, language is mostly used in communicative contexts in real life. In a conversation, one doesn't just say anything, but says something that is appropriate in the relevant context. An irrelevant utterance to a question would be unacceptable as would be an impolite utterance in normal interaction. This is one aspect of the notion of "acceptability". Chomsky is unconcerned with it in his technical work where one finds a different characterization of the notion of acceptability. And this accept of acceptability has hardly in the literature on communication or conversation.

In his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* Chomsky distinguishes between **"acceptability"** and **"grammaticality"** and observes that not all grammatical sentences are acceptable. One is aware that not all ungrammatical sentences are unacceptable; for instance, an ungrammatical sentence in one dialect might be considered grammatical in another. But the more interesting case is the one of grammatical sentences not being acceptable. The sentence **(1)** "*The man who the boy*

who the students recognized pointed out is a friend of mine" is grammatical but not acceptable because it is clumsy, not natural, and one requires some effort to make sense of it. Similarly, although theoretically there is no limit to the length of a sentence, the following which are not really long (but can be easily augmented) would exemplify only what is theoretically possible, but most unlikely to be used in real life interaction, except probably as a joke: **(2)** *'John's father's brother's cousin's auntie's relatives were here yesterday*" and **(3)** "*This is the cat that caught the rat that stole the cheese that John had bought*." In real life interaction, identities of intended referents are not constructed in such details and in such a complex manner. The difficulty in understanding all the three expressions relates to the limitations to our memory. Consider yet another kind of sentence, the so-called "*garden path sentence*" that requires more complex processing and to that extent it is unacceptable: **(4)**; "*The horse raced past the barn fell*", It has the appearance of a simple sentence; so when one tries to make sense of it treating it as a simple sentence, one finds that the last word "*fell*" remains unrelated to the sentence. It becomes part of the sentence when the sentence is viewed as a complex sentence with a reduced relative clause embedded in it; that is, "*raced past*" is understood as "*which was raced past*".

It is in **generative grammar** that for the first time in the long and rich history of grammatical studies that structural ambiguity received the careful attention it deserved. Sentences such as **(5)** "*Flying planes can be dangerous*", **(6)**, "*Troops stopped drinking*", **(7)** "*Two languages are known to everyone in this room*" are ambiguous for **structural reasons**, not **lexical reasons**. None of these is ambiguous because it contains an ambiguous word. It may be noted that each of these has a meaning that is more readily accessible to the hearer than the other. Thus arguably "*flying planes*" in the meaning of planes in the air in opposition to those on the ground, "drinking" in the sense of the troops' (own) drinking rather than different from everyone, are in some sense the "normal" meaning of these expressions. One must readily comes up with these meanings when asked what these mean. Often, only when asked to give another meaning, one would

give the other meaning, after some thinking. That is, the non-spontaneous meaning is a result of some further mental computation. All this may have to do with one's experience of the world or understanding of how the world in most likelihood is organised and how it works, etc. One would like to note that ambiguous utterances, which are perfectly grammatical, are ordinarily unacceptable in day to day use of the language. In sum, the "*grammatical – acceptable distinction*" can contribute to our understanding of the nature of language used in real life communicative context and it also provides a framework for a description of the same.

In *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Chomsky deals with co-occurrence restrictions and distinguishes between **"strict sub-categorisation"** and **"selectional restrictions".** The former is **a syntactic categorical notion**, and the latter, informally speaking, a **semantic (-pragmatic) notion**. Thus the verb "elapse" is different from the verb "hit" in the following ways (there are other differences too, but we set them aside for the present) : the former is an intransitive verb, and the latter, a transitive one and the former takes a time expression as subject, whereas the latter, in its transitive use, takes animate entity as subject. Thus, **(8)** *'Time elapsed*' is well-formed, whereas, "*time elapsed memory*" is not, and **(9)** "*The girl hit the boy*" are not. For reasons that are irrelevant for the current purposes, later versions of the theory of syntax dispensed with the notion of selectional restrictions.

Now in real life interactions, expressions that are used are ordinarily well-formed in the above sense; that is, they satisfy the requirements of strict sub-categorisation and selectional restrictions. However, sometimes the people's utterances in their day-to-day interaction violate selectional restrictions, but such violations do not render an utterance unacceptable or unintelligible, except in extreme cases. They are understood metaphorically. Each of the following namely, **(10)** "*That man is a fox*" and **(11)** "*She demolished his argument*" violates the selectional constraint, but each is understood metaphorically: there is a semantic category mix in each of these humans are not animals and an argument is not a physical structure

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to be demolished. Thus "*selectional restrictions*" turns out to be an important notion to describe not merely literary language (for instance, expressions such as "*a grief ago*", "*life's a tale* told by an idiot*", "planting dreams and harvesting sorrows", etc.), but also day-to-day language, which is no less colourful - a fact that sometimes tend to be missed.

Although the notion of selectional restrictions was never intended to be part of an inventory of descriptive terms for conversational analysis, one might wonder whether it cannot really be used to describe conversation. One might think of the repertoire of one's "world knowledge" as containing the way humans communicate linguistically with one another for mutual benefit (that includes building and maintaining relationships), which is indeed what rational linguistic interaction is basically about. Now one important characteristic of human interaction is the following: humans answer a question or respond to an utterance in a relevant manner. Consider **the following responses to A's question to B** about what the latter thinks the Prime Minister does after returning from a cabinet meeting: **(12)** "*He cooks his dinner*", **(13)** "*One cannot trust newspapers these days* ". B's response (12) is clearly more natural than her response (13); in other words there is a much greater fit between the A's question and (12), than his question and (13). If one states it in the selectional restrictions framework, then (12) satisfies the semantic pragmatic requirements of the query, whereas (13) does not. As noted above, failure to satisfy the selectional restriction requirement does not render an expression unintelligible and unacceptable; it receives interpretation only in a different, often figurative, sense. Thus (13) may mean that B was telling A that his information about the Prime Minister's daily routine was from some newspapers, but since one could not trust the newspapers these days on account of the paper's agendas, of paid news problem, etc., he was not in a position to give A the correct answer. There could be similar other interpretations as well, which is precisely one of the typical consequences of selectional restriction violations.

Turning to the **pragmatics of lexical items**, in *Language and Thought* **(1993)** and elsewhere too, Chomsky has dealt with the complexities of meaning of words. He has always maintained that a dictionary, no matter how detailed its entries, will always be grossly inadequate to mention all the meanings of the words contained in it. Sometimes a word acquires a new meaning when it is used as a new context. *For instance*, till the mid nineties of the last century the expression "sex up" was not listed in the well known dictionaries. Here the word 'sex' does not have its familiar meaning. Chomsky has drawn attention to the pragmatics of words as he deals with their use. *For instance*, when a river, which is defined as a flowing object, becomes dry, say during the summer, it is still called "river", which ignores its defining feature. In Hindi and in many other languages including Odia, different words are used for the waters of a river in particular, if it is a sacred river, depending on the context of use. In Hindi, the relevant words are *paani* and *jal*; the latter is used when the water is used for ordinary purposes; the former, *jal*, when it is used for ritual purposes. There are other uses as well; thus for instance the language has the compound *jalpaan*, (tiffin) not *paanipaan*; it has *chaaipaani* but not *jalpaani*. To take another example, the liquid in the cup is tea or muddy water depending on whether one believes that the tea bag had been dipped in the water. What one would refer to as "table" another would "bed" if he sleeps on it.

Turning to the **non-opacity of certain expressions with respect to meaning**, we might begin with saying that such expressions are part of normal discourse in day-to-day life. In his **political writings,** Chomsky posits a concept which he calls **"Orwells Problem"** (see Chomsky (1986) for some detailed discussions). In essence, it is about how people fail to see the reality of their situation and hold on to unfounded views although there are bits of evidence all around them that could lead them to the truth, once they pay attention to, and carefully reflect on these pieces of evidence. The reasons for this state of affairs could be many, including the one that the evidence itself is corrupt, therefore unclear. *For instance*, the news that people receive through media is manipulated by those who control the

dissemination of the same. If this kind of the evidence that lies scattered all over for people to acquire knowledge of things from, then, it is entirely understandable why people hold on to their unfounded beliefs. In this situation, according to Chomsky, the role of the intellectual is to let the people know through truth; putting it somewhat rhetorically, **"speak truth to people"**. According to him, there is no need to speak **"truth to power"**, as **Edward Said** put it, because power knows the truth, so truth has to be told to those who do not know, namely, the people. Now people must be alert and not take as true the information and analysis disseminated to them by the controllers information flow. Chomsky's explication of the concept of **"Orwell's Problem"** does not involve language, not directly at least; his focus is on information.

This paper invites attention to the fact that "Orwell's Problem" has a linguistic dimension as well. Talking power, concealing facts and disseminating lies as facts, doubts talk and indirect speaking are among the instances of language use. Those who have the training and the means to study language must do so in order to inform the people who have neither about the way discourse is created to deceive them. Doublespeak is often the language of politics, and the language of marketing conceals more than it reveals, and through that means, misinforms. *For instance,* when in order to project the success of its economic policies, the government informs that many people have crossed the poverty line recently. It does not inform the people about the definition of the poverty line itself. A very familiar example, of misinformation in the marketing domain is the advertisement of a motor vehicle which is marketed to television in terms of the highly favourably ratio of its running speed and its petrol consumption but there is no mention of the condition of the road and the nature of the traffic. When the label on the food shows its impressive shelf life, it might inform but not educate - so that he can take an informed decision - the customer about the chemicals that have been used as preservatives.

CONCLUSION

Language use refers to the communicative meaning of language. It can be compared to usage which refers to the rules for making language and the structures we use to make it. Language and language use constitute a central ingredient of human psychology. Language is an essential tool that enables us to live the kind of life we do. Can you imagine a world in which machines are built, farms are cultivated, and goods and services are transported to our household without language? Is it possible for us to make laws and regulations, negotiate contracts, and enforce agreements and settle disputes without talking? Much of contemporary human civilization wouldn't have been possible without the human ability to develop and use language.

In sum, there are among the very fascinating ideas in Chomsky's work that enrich our understanding of language and its use in day-to-day life. These have not received the attention they richly deserve probably because scholars of language think of Chomsky's work as being unconcerned with language use in the familiar sense of both "language" and its "use".

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