

Chomsky and language

Dc Tue 10th December 2013 at *The Blue Mugge*

Noam Chomsky - b. December 1928. American linguist, philosopher and political commentator. Chomsky was voted the leading living public intellectual in the '2005 Global Intellectual Poll' conducted by the British magazine *Prospect*. He reacted saying "I don't pay a lot of attention to polls..".

1. **Theory of Universal Grammar (UG)** - proposing that the ability to learn grammar is hard-wired into the human brain; that linguistic ability manifests itself without being taught, and there are properties that all human languages share. Hence, the principles underlying the structure of language are biologically determined... and genetically transmitted. All humans share this potential... irrespective of socio-cultural differences... human language is unlike modes of communication used by other animal species. Does this make sense?

2. **Theories about linguistics** and UG are inevitably technical and complex. However, we can try to test out their relevance to everyone - aren't we all clever, learning language/s effortlessly when very young? The latest evidence from research on the human brain indicates that most of us can continue learning languages into old age.

3. Chomsky's ideas have had a strong influence on research into **language acquisition**, though some working in this sphere argue strongly against his theories - placing emphasis on the extensive and complex environment in which language is used and learned. Chomsky has been accused of being American/ Euro-centric in his researches. Given the radically different languages across the globe does the idea of a 'Universal grammar' hold? Can *language acquisition* affect physical and neurological human features?

4. Elizabeth Bates and Michael Tomasella, experts in these spheres, are critics of Chomsky. EB argues that linguistic knowledge is distributed throughout the brain rather than in one located centre for language development; MT proposed a functional, social-pragmatic, theory of language development in which children learn linguistic structure through pattern-finding.

5. Looking back, briefly, on the origins of language and forward to one dominant international language, maybe...

6. **Chomsky' political views:** in his own words '...nourishing the libertarian and creative character of the human being', he has described his beliefs as 'fairly traditional anarchist ones' and defines himself as an 'anarcho-syndicalist'. Chomsky has been and remains fiercely critical of US foreign policy.

7. Chomsky in a lecture published in in his small recent book, *Occupy*, talked about the history of the US economy: "For centuries, since the country began, it had been a developing society, and not always in very pretty ways... Major... crises - like the Great Depression, but a sense 'we're gonna get out of it'. The 1970s began a major turning point in American history (leading to...) a pervasive sense of hopelessness, sometimes despair. It has an objective basis... There had always been a gap between public policy and the public will...but it just grew astronomically from the 1970s..."

8. He heads his chapter *Remembering Howard Zinn* in *Occupy* with a quote from the historian "To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness." He then writes "Howard's remarkable life and work are summarized best in his own words. His primary concern, he explained, was "the countless small actions of unknown people" that lie at the roots of 'those great moments' that enter the historical record - a record that will be misleading and seriously disempowering, if it is torn from these roots as it passes through the filters of doctrine and dogma. Consideration of these political views to reflections on the remarkable diversity of US politics and culture - from the Ku Klux Klan & Tea Party to Chomsky.