

NOAM CHOMSKY'S MENTALISTIC APPROACH TO LANGUAGE INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

Noam Chomsky is undoubtedly the most contemporary linguist, and his works hint at an important contribution to our present understanding of the human mind and language. He is hailed by some in recent times as the 'Einstein of modern linguistics' and is equally well known to others as a leading campaigner of cognitive psychology. Chomsky's masterly works on language have given a new direction to the philosophy of language and linguistics. An innovative way of understanding the human mind was widely opened up by Noam Chomsky in an intellectual manner. His rational ideas in linguistics and related issues in philosophy influence linguistic thought and thereby turn linguistics towards a distinct movement. Chomsky, being a linguist, has highly developed a scientific analysis of language via an analysis of grammar. Chomsky's scientific analysis of language is dynamic in nature. In his scientific analysis of language, Chomsky advocates I-Language (I = intentional, internal, or individual). In the Chomskyan account, I-language is individual in the sense that each speaker has one. Equally, it is internal in the sense that it is a procedure represented in a speaker's mind for making well-formed expressions. He calls "I-language" a speaker's knowledge of the internal computational procedure that permits her to produce and interpret expressions of her language. Thus, an I-language contrasts with E-Language (E = external, public, or open) as intentional contrasts with extentional and internal contrasts with external. E-Languages for Chomsky are radical idealizations or mumbo-jumbo language. That is why he is an internalist or mentalist and his theory favours internalism or mentalism as opposed to externalism or behaviorism. The present paper attempts to show that one of Chomsky's major concerns has been to press for a mentalistic interpretation of language, on the one hand, and his mentalistic interpretation of language constitutes a revolution in linguistics and also a key factor of the cognitive revolution, on the other hand.

Key words

Behaviourism, language, mentalistic.

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Introduction

Chomsky's linguistic theories have had a profound impact on 20th century philosophy, psychology and anthropology. As a proponent of rationalism, he advocates for applying scientific rationality to language and mind studies. Chomsky's work emphasizes the role of innate ideas in language acquisition, drawing parallels between animal aptitudes and human linguistic abilities, both rooted in biological structures and genetic endowments. According to him, language is an outcome of the human mind's innate features. P.R. Bhat notes, "The ability to identify and differentiate begins at an early stage... This ability is innate; a natural ability in every normal child."¹ This suggests that rational animals have an inherent biological capacity for language acquisition. Chomsky asserts that language acquisition is genetically determined, stating, "a substantial part of our knowledge is genetically determined."² Language study offers insights into human cognition and the world. Chomsky believes that language reveals the mind's workings: "Language is a mirror of mind... created anew in each individual by operations that lie far beyond the reach of will or consciousness."³ Thus, by studying language we can uncover universal principles governing its structure rooted in human biology, not historical chance.

Objectives: The main objectives of this paper are:

- (i) *To examine Chomsky's mentalistic approach to language:* This study investigates Chomsky's emphasis on I-Language, exploring its implications for understanding language, recognizing it as an internal, individual and intentional construct.
- (ii) *To distinguish between internal and external language frameworks:* This paper explores Chomsky's distinction between I-Language and E-Language, highlighting the limitations of external language approaches and the significance of internal language perspectives in understanding human cognition.
- (iii) *To critique externalist and behaviourist language theories:* This study analyzes Chomsky's critique of externalist and behaviourist approaches, emphasizing the strengths of his internalist and mentalist viewpoint in explaining language acquisition and use.
- (iv) *To assess the impact of Chomsky's ideas on linguistics and cognitive science:* The paper evaluates the significance of Chomsky's mentalistic interpretation for linguistics and cognitive science, highlighting its contributions to understanding human language, cognition, and the intricate relationships between them.

- (v) To highlight Chomsky's contribution to the cognitive revolution: This paper demonstrates how Chomsky's mentalistic interpretation of language has played a pivotal role in shaping the cognitive revolution, influencing our understanding of the human mind, language, and their complex interrelationships.

Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative methodology, critically examining Noam Chomsky's linguistic theories through a multi-faceted approach utilizing both primary and secondary literature. It comprises a thorough review of his publications, a critical assessment of his stance on externalist and behaviourist perspectives, an exploration of core concepts and a comparative evaluation with other pertinent frameworks. Chomsky's works serve as primary data, supplemented by secondary literature from linguistics, cognitive science and philosophy of language. By employing thematic analysis and critical evaluation, this study aims to elucidate Chomsky's mentalistic viewpoint, shedding light on *I-Language*, *E-Language* and his profound impact on understanding language and cognition.

Discussion and findings

Chomsky's critique of empiricism stems from his belief that genetic information poses a significant challenge. He proposes that the mind comprises complex, genetically determined 'mental organs,' dismissing empiricist views of thinkers like Locke and Hume. Chomsky argues that mind development isn't driven by general intelligence, but rather by these mental organs. Cognitive structures emerge through maturation and environmental interaction, shaped by genetic factors. He asserts that language acquisition is innate, driven by internal constraints and genetic limitations on cognitive systems. Chomsky rejects induction as a viable path to knowledge, stating, "Knowledge of language cannot arise by application of step-by-step inductive operations... of any sort."⁴ This makes the sense to say that language knowledge isn't a product of generalization or abstraction from experience, but rather a biological capacity. Chomsky also rejects analogy-based arguments, like those proposed by Quine and Bloomfield, which rely on inductive generalization. He emphasizes creativity as a key aspect of language, enabled by internal mental representations of grammar. According to Chomsky, language ability stems from genetic endowment, with a universal human language underlying diverse languages. He aligns with rationalist thinkers like Descartes, introducing innate ideas, and rejects behaviourist and externalist interpretations of language. Chomsky argues that language can't be solely external, saying our language is a product of genetic inheritance. He says, "The internalized knowledge must be limited very narrowly by some biological property."⁵

Chomsky's groundbreaking work on language has revolutionized 20th century philosophy, marking a significant shift in the field. Prof. Kanti Lal Das notes, "if the linguistic turn of twentieth century philosophy is called 'the first linguistic turn' in philosophy, then surely Chomsky's internal explanation of language may be called the 'second linguistic turn' in philosophy."⁶ This transformation began with Chomsky's 1957 publication of *Syntactic Structures*, introducing generative grammar and challenging traditional notions. The study of language has long been intertwined with logic, epistemology, and philosophy. The term 'Logic' originates from the Greek '*Logike*,' derived from '*Logos*,' meaning reason or discourse. Historically, Western traditional grammar dominated, with no clear distinction between grammar and logic. Universal Grammar (UG) emerged in the 13th and 18th centuries, linking logic and grammar, but its universality was later questioned. Chomsky's work revived UG, assuming universality of logic and interdependence of language and thought. As he states, "the empirical study of language has more to contribute to the philosophy of mind than traditional logic and the philosophy of language have to contribute to linguistics."⁷ This perspective highlights the significance of language in understanding human thought and cognition.

Chomsky's revolutionary approach rejects traditional grammar for its limitations. He argues that traditional grammar fails to capture the essence of language, leaving learners unable to create new sentences. In contrast, Chomsky views language as productive, where knowing a language means mastering an infinite set of sentences. According to Chomsky, traditional grammar only provides a list of exceptions, paradigms, and examples, without explaining how learners acquire knowledge to form new expressions. He writes that a good traditional grammar "provides a full list of exceptions (irregular verbs, etc.), paradigms and examples of regular constructions [...]. But it does not examine the question of how the reader of the grammar uses such information to attain knowledge that is used to form and interpret new expressions."⁸ Chomsky's *Generative Grammar* (GG) aims to address this gap by making explicit the speaker's implicit knowledge. As he states, a GG "must render explicit the implicit knowledge of the speaker or the 'intelligence' of the reader."⁹ GG seeks to uncover the hidden features of a speaker's knowledge, providing an explicit characterization of the computational properties of human language faculty. By doing so, Chomsky's GG offers a new approach to studying human language acquisition, focusing on the underlying principles and procedures that enable learners to generate new expressions. This approach makes everything explicit, leaving nothing to interpretation and provides a comprehensive understanding of language.

Chomsky's *Universal Generative Grammar* (UGG) revolutionizes language acquisition, playing a pivotal role in cognitive science and human cognition. Unlike traditional approaches, UGG comprehensively explains sentence structure, moving beyond mere data collection. Chomsky criticizes linguistic analysis as *verbal botany*, where linguists merely catalog data without understanding underlying principles. In contrast, UGG uncovers the intricate mechanisms of language, comprising phonemes, morphemes, words, and sentences. Despite the finite number of phonemes and morphemes, language generates an infinite array of sentences, showcasing its creative potential. Chomsky's structural linguistics reveals that sentences share uniform surface structures, but may conceal diverse deep structures, which aren't always apparent at the surface level. This disparity between surface and deep structures highlights the complexity of language, where meaning isn't always explicitly stated. By exploring this dichotomy, Chomsky's UGG elucidates the intricate workings of human language, offering a profound understanding of linguistic creativity and cognition.

Chomsky's *Transformational Generative Grammar* (TGG) is a groundbreaking approach to language analysis, focusing on the creative aspect of language and the cognitive structure of the human mind. TGG is both Generative (G) and Transformational (T) as it discloses language's creative potential and transforms sentences while preserving meaning. This framework generates recursive rules and structures, mirroring deductive methods and produces a multitude of sentences from a limited set. Chomsky's TGG consists of three components: *syntactical*, *phonological*, and *semantic*. The syntactical component generates sentence structures, the phonological component explains sound patterns, and the semantic component interprets meaning. Language learning involves three steps: synthetic phonology (vocalization), grammatical (structure), and semantic (meaning). It is important to note here that TGG highlights two crucial aspects of syntactic structure: surface structure (*phonetic form*) and deep structure (*semantic interpretation*). Grammatical transformations link these structures, enabling the generation of meaningful sentences. Chomsky's earlier Phrase Structure Grammar (PSG) is deemed inadequate, being "complex, ad hoc, and unrevealing."¹⁰ In contrast, TGG reveals the deep structure of sentences, showcasing the creative, unconscious knowledge inherent in the human mind. This biologically determined capacity underlies Chomsky's concept of scientific language, which is structural, not superficial.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be said that Chomsky's work highlights the mind's role in language origin making syntax study a window to human cognition.

As Searle notes, “man is essentially a syntactical animal,”¹¹ implying that syntax structure reflects mind structure, offering insights into the human brain. Chomsky’s mentalism posits that language’s syntactical features stem from biological necessity, driven by an innate linguistic capacity. Thus, language acquisition is mentalistic, with humans born with a linguistic organ (left hemisphere) that’s biologically and genetically predetermined. This internal mental organ enables language acquisition, making language an abstract structure revealing mind aspects. Chomsky views language as a mental organ, created by an innate faculty and a mirror of the human mind. Thus, his mentalistic interpretation counters behaviourism, attributing language to genetic qualities. This perspective earns his internal explanation of language the label of 2nd *linguistic turn* in philosophy and positions him as a leading cognitive revolution campaigner. Chomsky’s unique stance in the intellectual world stems from his emphasis on language’s mental underpinnings.

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