On the history of generative grammar: Four perspectives

(1) Noam Chomsky (b. 1928)

_Cartesian linguistics_ 1966

Generative grammar revives classical ‘rationalist’ linguistic theory

17cen. Port-Royal grammarians; Herbert of Cherbury; Cordemoy; Harris; Beauzée; Humboldt

Rationalism opposes ‘empiricist’ linguistic theory

?Locke; ?Vaugelas; Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949) & American structuralists; modern connectionists

Parallels between 17cen & 20cen rationalism

Acknowledges the creativity entailed in everyday language use & language learning

Distinguishes ‘deep’ versus ‘surface’ levels of grammatical structure

Prioritizes explanation of grammatical structure over description

Asserts that language learning is not entirely input-driven, but entails contribution from learner

20cen advances in psychology, math, philosophy rejected empiricist/behaviorist analysis of language, gave birth to cognitive science, & revived rationalism in linguistic theory

Fundamental insights of generative grammar are continuous since 1950s

(2) Generative linguists

Generally accept Chomsky’s ‘Cartesian linguistics’ without engaging in it

Evidence: 50 years of textbooks / introductions to generativism that communicate the theme of _Cartesian linguistics_, unretouched

1960s Bolinger 1968; Langacker 1968
1980s van Riemsdijk & Williams 1986
1990s Haegeman 1991; Freidin 1992; Ouhalla 1994; Pinker 1994
2000s Hudson 2000; Jackendoff 2002; Larson 2010


Consider Chomsky’s linguistics ‘revolutionary’ in various senses of word

Newmeyer 1996b; _cf._ Joseph 2010

Divide Chomsky’s linguistics into stages; sometimes identify each as a ‘revolution’


(3) Historians of linguistics

Extensively criticize Chomsky’s ‘Cartesian linguistics’ & rationalist/empiricist dichotomy

Chomsky misconstrued 17cen scholarship


_Cf._ Fellman 1976; Sullivan 1980; Bracken 1984
17cen & 20cen scholarship are incommensurable
Aarsleff 1970, 1971; Foucault 1971; Cooper 1972; Searle 1972; Brekle 1975; Simone 1998
Cf. Biltman 2010

Chomsky mis-identified historical basis of ‘Cartesian linguistics’

Evince skepticism over Chomsky’s dissociation of generative grammar from 20cen American descriptivism / behaviorism
? Continuity between Chomsky and descriptivists: Nevin 2010
? Adequacy of Chomsky’s rejection of behaviorism: Radick 2016

(4) Disciplinary outsiders’ perspectives on history of generative grammar

Cold War socio-political context stimulated investment in language learning / teaching & machine translation, raising general profile of linguistics, including generative grammar
Martin-Nielsen 2010; 2011; 2012

Ideals of open-mindedness, rationality, and the scientific mindset were promoted in 1950s politics, education, and social sciences as antidotes to authoritarianism, boosting acceptance of Chomsky’s linguistics
Cohen-Cole 2005; 2014

U.S. military support for Chomsky’s research drove him to increasingly abstract theorizing, to ensure that his linguistics would be incompatible with military applications
Knight 2004; 2016; cf. Harris 2018; Newmeyer 2018

References


Martin-Nielsen, Janet. (2012). "It was all connected': Computers and linguistics in early Cold War America’. In Mark Solovey & Hamilton Cravens (Eds.), *Cold War social science: Knowledge production, liberal democracy, and human nature*, 63-78. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.


