
Reviewed by Gregory Radick (University of Leeds)

Did Noam Chomsky (b.1928) bring about a revolution in linguistics? Or is ‘revolution’ talk misleading in the Chomskyan case? E. F. Konrad Koerner urged the anti-revolutionary, ‘evolutionary’ view in a long paper which itself evolved over the 1980s, under the title “The Chomskyan ‘Revolution’ and its Historiography”.

Taking his criteria from Thomas S. Kuhn’s (1922–1996) account of scientific revolutions, Koerner argued that although Chomsky had perhaps introduced a new paradigm, there was no sense in which his linguistics was incommensurable with what had come before it, and no warrant for seeing his success as other than partial. Far from finding his work unattractively alien, a number of established linguists had welcomed it as developing their own views. And even after Chomsky and his acolytes had begun picking fights with the older generation, linguistics remained host to a range of approaches, some persisting from the past, others emerging or reviving in response to perceived gaps in the Chomskyan program. Institutionally too, there were continuities, notably in the military funding which flowed to American universities in the postwar period and which paid for Chomsky’s position at MIT from the mid-1950s. For Koerner, the real, and regrettable, discontinuity was historiographical; for, as he saw it, Chomsky and his allies had tried to rewrite the history of modern linguistics as if all was darkness before him. So dismal a scene did Koerner contemplate that he wondered whether the intellectual world that formed and then fêted Chomsky would ever attract the non-partisan historians it so badly needed.

On the evidence of *Chomskyan (R)evolutions*, we can now say that it has. Fittingly, the volume is a festschrift for Koerner in honour of his seventieth birthday and his monumental labours on behalf of linguistic historiography (including, of course, his editing of this journal). John Joseph opens with reflections on Chomsky’s seeking to represent his work not just as breaking with the status quo but as returning to the earlier, neglected legacies of René Descartes (1596–1650). Considered as scholarship, the claim for continuity has always looked tenuous. But,

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1. See Koerner (1989); for the earlier history of the paper, see the long note on p. 101. For his seemingly ‘definitive’ account of the ‘Chomskyan Revolution’, see Koerner (2002).
as Joseph nicely brings out, it becomes much more impressive when considered as rhetoric. Where linguists had tended to treat distance from the present as an intellectual misfortune, which increased the further back one travelled in the past, Chomsky reversed the situation, finding forerunners not in the decades before his arrival but in previous centuries. Joseph’s is one of three chapters making up a kind of prologue to the volume. The other two chapters, rather disappointingly, do not so much study the partisanship of old as join in. Christopher Beedham calls for an end to the building of generative models in favour of more richly descriptive work. Joanna Radwanska-Williams, ostensibly concerned with the interesting question of what is and is not included in the Chomskyan paradigm, turns out really to want to defend what she calls the “social and semiotic nature of language in the structuralist tradition” (p. 48) and to complain of how little of that nature one glimpses from a Chomskyan perspective.

With Part I, “The Young Revolutionary (1950–1960)”, we are back with serious history. Stephen O. Murray revisits the question of how Kuhnian a revolution Chomsky’s was, noting that there was no pre-Chomskyan consensus on syntax which Syntactic Structures (1957) overturned. Rather, morphology and phonology, not syntax, were the major interests of the 1950s, though the Bloomfieldians shared a sense that syntax was going to be the next big thing. So pleased were they with Chomsky’s filling that role that they gladly overlooked his critical stance on their behaviourism (hence, under its Bloomfieldian editor Bernard Bloch (1907–1965), the journal Language published both a fawning review of Syntactic Structures and Chomsky’s annihilating review of B. F. Skinner’s (1904–1990) Verbal Behavior).

There follow two chapters on Chomskyan linguistics before Syntactic Structures. Bruce Nevin examines Chomsky’s relations with his mentor in Philadelphia, Zellig Harris (1909–1992), looking in particular at how far their temperaments — with Harris eager to learn from people he disagreed with, and Chomsky eager to crush them (“He would follow you from room to room arguing, arguing, arguing you down to dust!” was what a member of Harris’ family recalled of young Chomsky, p. 105) — explain their different careers and also the differences between them. Chomsky’s revisions of the 1951 Master’s thesis which Harris supervised on the morphophonemics of Hebrew are the topic of Peter T. Daniels’ technically demanding chapter. Pierre Swiggers concludes with a discussion of how key concepts in Syntactic Structures tie the book to an American structuralist tradition it would soon eclipse.

Part II turns to “The Cognitive Revolution” and Chomsky’s role within it. We should find that role surprising several times over, Randy Harris suggests. There was, after all, nothing especially mentalistic about Syntactic Structures. Nor, before the attack on Skinner started to circulate, had Chomsky done much to encourage
a view of himself as a champion of cognitive psychologists and cognitively engaged computer scientists. In 1956, his contribution to a now famous symposium on information theory was a proof to the effect that information theory as a means for modelling the grammar of natural languages was a non-starter. Yes, at that time he was on the payroll at MIT as a researcher in a Machine Translation project; but he always regarded the project with contempt, and seems never to have worked on it or taken much of an interest in the computers around him. All the same, he became a hero of the Cognitive Revolution, even before the Skinner review. Randy Harris teases out the affinities and attractions, not least “Chomsky’s relentless talk of grammars and words and rules in dynamic, process-oriented, even anthropomorphic terms” (p. 246). The other chapter in the second part, by the late Malcolm Hyman (1971–2009), tracks Chomsky’s development of the biological side of his critique of behaviorism. In the Skinner review, Chomsky for the first time linked his theory of grammar to an innatist view of language acquisition. Hyman was not a fan of Chomsky’s innatism; but one can learn a lot from the survey of criticisms here.

As with the three chapters at the start of the volume, the six making up Part III, “Evolutions”, cohere only fitfully. Margaret Thomas conducts a high-altitude tour of ideas of universal grammar from the medieval period to the present. Sticking to near the present, Marcus Tomalin turns not to Kuhnian paradigm shifts but to more recent ideas about research programs and traditions in order to analyse the co-existence of generative grammar and relational grammar, including the incorporation of propositions from the latter into the former. Universalism returns in the next couple of chapters. Christopher Hutton draws out problems arising from Chomsky’s belief that the human language faculty is uniform throughout the species, while T. Craig Christy discusses the prospects for integrating that belief with the ‘language use in language change’ approach, which stresses the role of language use in language acquisition. Among other topics, Christy considers, and finds wanting, the image of pidgin-to-creole transitions as exclusively down to children doing what comes naturally, when the Chomskyan ‘language acquisition device’ switches on, without adult help and without even trying. Camiel Hamans & Pieter Seuren argue that the 17th-century thinkers whom Chomsky proclaimed to be his intellectual ancestors have a stronger connection to the ‘generative semantics’ heretics whom he loathes. The fight between those heretics and the traditionalists is the subject of Giorgio Graffi’s chapter. Mainly concerned with the Italian front in the 1970s, he nevertheless draws a lesson for the wider ‘linguistic wars’: that generative semantics failed due to internal, conceptual problems, not external, sociological ones.

Who cares? Historians, of course. But that is their existential predicament. They cannot help themselves. To be a historian is to care about how things went...
in the past and how best to explain why they went that way. But should linguists, as linguists, care? Is linguistics itself any better off for having its old arguments argued over? In the final part, “The Past and Future Directions”, the volume faces up to the question squarely. The overwhelming “yes” answer on the part of the two contributors, Jacqueline Léon (Paris) and Julie Tetel Andresen (Durham, N.C.), is, in this context, hardly surprising. But their ideas on the next steps for historically informed linguists do contain surprises. At the end of her account of Chomsky’s debates with British empiricists, Léon chastises empiricist colleagues who invoke those debates only because they seek a “mere strategic device of legitimation a contrario” (p. 441) — that is, they want to find Chomsky saying something negative about what they want to do, in order to suggest thereby that what they want to do is legitimate, and only ceased to seem so because Chomsky was so unreasonable. Instead, Léon advises, those debates should be as a sounding board, against which to check progress. For her part, Andresen has found in history inspiration for a rethinking of the linguistics curriculum, which she hopes to take away from Descartes (who here stands for disembodied abstraction) and closer to Charles Darwin (1809–1882) (who stands for embodied, variable reality). She has a slogan: “from language to languaging” (p. 452). (R)evolutionary.

REFERENCES


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