

Chomsky and Idealism

This short essay looks at Noam Chomsky's involvement with the philosophical principle of idealism and the scientific theory of idealization. The link between Chomsky and idealism is significant because of the uses to which idealism was put in the 20th century: the misinterpretation of the triad of Adam Smith's rationalist economics¹, Francis Galton's Eugenics² and Friedrich Nietzsche's Superman³ led to the rise of a state-first political philosophy which blighted most of the 20th century.

The state-first philosophy was an attempt to address the perceived problem that democracy posed for the evolutionary fitness of the species: if democracy treats the fit and the less fit equally, then how can humanity avoid the disaster of genetic and social degeneracy? Only the control of a strong state can ensure that the fit get their genes into the future, while the unfit are prevented, by various means, from breeding. Inevitably, those who are approved by the state become the good guys, and those without approval are the villains. The state-first solution was a beguiling idea that even the noted Democrat John F. Kennedy seems to have supported:

My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.⁴

It is, however, based on normative judgements about future evolutionary fitness which are not shared by nature. Natural selection is not concerned with destinations and outcomes, it is concerned with what works now. Nature remains an aggregation of individual gene packages, and the state remains an aggregation of individuals.

To an anarchist like Chomsky, the state-first philosophy, produced as a seemingly inevitable product of idealism, would have been anathema; he would have understood the problems brought by abstracting away from humans to a single concept of Humanity. As a Jew, even though he and his family did not directly experience the Holocaust, he must also have found the evidential outcome of strong states using state-first idealist principles to be appalling. So why, when he started formulating his principles of linguistics, did he adopt an approach based on idealism and idealization?

To understand Chomsky's view of the role of idealism in linguistics, we need to go back to the Theory of Forms developed by early Greek philosophers. This is a philosophy espoused most notably by Plato, although it does seem to have antecedents; and, as with all Platonic writing, it is not completely clear whether he is setting out his own philosophy or acting as the voice of Socrates, who did not write anything down because he opposed the idea of writing. Because of this, nearly all that we have of Socratic thinking comes from the second-hand writings of Plato.

The Theory of Forms holds that actual forms on Earth are reflections of perfect forms, or archetypes, which have their reality in a different mode of existence – a mode that we tend to equate with the realm of the Gods, or Heaven. It is therefore possible to name the earthly approximations of the perfect forms as if they were the archetypes themselves; for example, every earthly circle is an approximation of the one, perfect circle in Heaven. The Theory of Forms is part of the principle of

¹ **Adam Smith (1776)**. *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Strahan & Cadell: London, UK.

² **Francis Galton (1883)**. *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*. J.M. Dent & Co: London.

³ **Friedrich Nietzsche (1961 [1891])**. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, UK.

⁴ From John F. Kennedy's Presidential inaugural address, 1961, although there is evidence that it was an aphorism in prior use by his former headmaster, George St John.

idealism, which takes the view that the ideal archetypes are what is real, while what we think of as reality is an ethereal and distorted reflection or imaging of the transcendent reality of the Forms.

While not necessarily buying into the whole Platonic package, Chomsky does seem to have taken the view that linguistics, if it is to be a science, has to work with perfective ideals of language, which are instantiated in the universal language engine inside all our heads. Working with the error-prone real world of utterances can only deceive us into treating mistakes as realities. In 1965, on the first page of the book that gave us the concepts of competence versus performance, deep versus surface structures, formal transformation, and the first model of a generative grammar, Chomsky said:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.⁵

This is an often-quoted and unambiguous statement in favour of an idealist approach to linguistics, and it clearly positions his thinking on the side of Plato and his more modern adherents, which include medieval and renaissance scholars like Leonardo Da Vinci, Galileo Galilei and René Descartes. Chomsky has never repudiated this statement, so it is reasonable to assume that it is a view that he continues to hold.

However, a closer reading of his work indicates that this may not be the case. Chomsky continues to mention some aspects of his early theory in his current work (such as the idea that language should be viewed as innate and not learned), while other features (like deep structure) have been explicitly abandoned; but the principles of idealism seem to have been quietly forgotten without comment. If it is true that Chomsky is no longer an idealist and has dropped idealization, then the inevitable but speculative question arises: when did this happen? Is it possible to identify a particular text in which the change of heart is clear? The answer is, possibly.

We can see aspects of idealism in Chomsky's writing through the 1970s and 1980s. In 1971 he wrote:

The competence of the speaker-hearer can, ideally, be expressed as a system of rules that relate signals to semantic interpretations of these signals. The problem for the grammarian is to discover this system of rules; the problem for linguistic theory is to discover general properties of any system of rules that may serve as the basis for a human language ...⁶

I think it is fair to read this usage of "ideally" as meaning "when looked at through the lens of idealism" and not "in the best way".

In 1979 Chomsky dismissed criticisms of idealization:

Opposition to idealization is simply objection to rationality; it amounts to nothing more than an insistence that we should not have meaningful intellectual work. Phenomena that are complicated enough to be worth studying generally involve the interaction of several systems. Therefore you *must* abstract some object of study, you must eliminate those factors which are not pertinent.⁷

However, this linking of idealization with rationality may have indicated a change of direction; after 1979 Chomsky's work places more emphasis on rationality and less on idealization. Indeed, by 1980, the ideal speaker-listener had itself become somewhat scaled down: Chomsky now appeared to see

⁵ **Noam Chomsky (1965).** *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, p3.

⁶ **Noam Chomsky (1971).** Basic Principles. In J.P.B. Allen & Paul van Buren (eds.), *Chomsky: Selected Readings*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, p7.

⁷ **Noam Chomsky (1979).** *Language and Responsibility*. Flammarion: New York, NY, USA, p57.

it as a useful tool rather than the primary concern of linguistic theory. It was still an inescapable choice, but it should be used cautiously:

Continuing to think of the system of grammatical rules as a kind of “mental organ,” interacting with other mental organs with other functions and properties, we face a rather typical problem of natural science, namely, the problem of appropriate idealization and abstraction. In an effort to determine the nature of one of these interacting systems, we must abstract away from the contribution of others to the actual performance that can be observed. Steps taken in this direction are not without their hazards; they are also inescapable in rational enquiry. We therefore proceed to experiment with idealized systems, always bearing in mind the possibility that another approach might lead us closer to an understanding of the various systems that constitute the human mind.⁸

By 1986, Chomsky was attributing the idealizations in linguistics, in which the ideal speaker-listener had a role, to other authors; and he was distancing his own position from these older models:

The previous discussion has assumed the familiar Saussurean-Bloomfieldian idealization to a homogenous speech community, but a further sharpening of these ideas is in order. The systems called “languages” in common sense usage tolerate exceptions: irregular morphology, idioms, and so forth. These exceptions do not fall naturally under the principles-and-parameters conception of UG.⁹

By 1988, Chomsky was describing the idealization approach in a quite different way. Instead of insisting on the need for models of language abstracted away from reality, he seemed to be reducing the range of questions that should be asked by linguists. While it was permissible to question the constructions that came out of the generative enterprise, it was not the linguist’s job to study language as a psychologically real object – to question the enterprise itself:

We may ask whether the linguist’s constructions are correct or whether they should be modified or replaced. But there are few meaningful questions about the “reality” of these constructions – their “psychological reality,” to use the common but highly misleading term – just as there are few meaningful questions about the “physical reality” of the chemist’s constructions, though it is always possible to question their accuracy.¹⁰

The Minimalist Program, a theoretical bombshell in so many ways, also seems to have marked the abandonment of idealization by Chomsky. idealization is now a necessary target for researchers to aim at, but our very humanity makes it a target virtually impossible to hit. What stands in the way of a viable model of an ideal speaker-listener are all the real speaker-listeners out there in the real world:

This way of formulating the issues, within the P&P model, brings out clearly the crucial inadequacy in the characterization of language as a state of the language faculty. The latter can hardly be expected to be an instantiation of the initial state with parameter values fixed. Rather, a state of the language faculty is some accidental product of varied experience, of no particular interest in itself, no more so than other collections of phenomena in the natural world (which is why scientists do experiments instead of recording what happens in natural circumstances). My personal feeling is that much more substantial idealization is required if we hope to understand the properties of the language faculty, but misunderstandings and confusion engendered even by limited idealization are so pervasive that it may not be useful to pursue the matter today. *idealization*, it should be noted, is a misleading term for the only reasonable way to approach a grasp of reality.¹¹

⁸ Noam Chomsky (1980). *Rules and Representations*. Columbia University Press: New York, NY, USA, pp188-189.

⁹ Noam Chomsky (1986). *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin and Use*. Praeger Press: Westport, CT, USA, p147.

¹⁰ Noam Chomsky (1988). *Language and Problems of Knowledge: The Managua Lectures*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, pp7-8.

¹¹ Noam Chomsky (1995). *The Minimalist Program*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, pp6-7.

Writings after 1995 are notable for the absence from their appendices of the terms “perfect”, “rational”, “model”, and words beginning “ideal”¹². It is as if those terms have been expunged from Chomsky’s lexicon. Indeed, in the introduction to the third edition of *Cartesian Linguistics*, James McGilvray tells us:

In recent years Chomsky’s label for his approach to mind and language has changed from “rationalistic” to “biolinguistic.”¹³

I contend that this represents a more fundamental change in Chomsky’s thinking than just a change of label.

It seems, therefore, that any link between Chomsky’s idealist approach to linguistics and the worst excesses of idealism is probably spurious, because Chomsky himself seems to have abandoned the idealizations of his early models. Of course, the fact that there has been no mention of idealization in his recent work does not necessarily mean he has changed his view – absence of evidence is not evidence of absence; but it is an indicator that he no longer sees it as a significant feature of generativist theory which is worthy of comment.

Martin Edwardes, October 2016

A Short Glossary of Terms

Archetype: A cosmically perfect form.

Deep Structure: Chomsky’s previous view that language is divisible into surface features, which define individual language usage, and deep features, which are common to all languages and all language usage. He specifically abandoned this view in *The Minimalist Program*.

Eugenics: An application of idealism to Darwinian evolutionary biology: the idea that a species can be “improved” by conscious biological selection. Espoused in its modern version by Francis Galton, it is based on the non-Darwinian idea that there is a target of perfection to be aimed for.

Fascism: A political view based around ideas of unity, energy and purity, but not in a good way. Individuals unwilling or unable to meet the demands of the state may be eliminated. Nowadays, the term is largely used pejoratively.

Idealism: A philosophy which treats reality as an imperfect reflection of a cosmic perfection. Espoused by Plato and neo-Platonists like Da Vinci, Galileo and Descartes.

Idealization: A theory which states that reality cannot be studied in its actual imperfect state, so ideal models of the subject of enquiry should be extracted away from reality for study.

Nazism: The form of fascism used in Germany, 1933-45. An international psychological aberration so great that we are still coming to terms with it.

Rational self-interest: This is key to Adam Smith’s view of economics. He saw humans as rational beings who always make choices that maximise their own personal gain. This rational self-interest, combined with competition, creates the conditions for economic prosperity.

Superman: Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy of the Übermensch proposes that the achievement of a higher state of being is a target that each individual should set themselves, although few will actually achieve it.

Theory of Forms: Plato’s version of idealism. The cosmically perfect forms are real but transcendent (i.e. not available to mortals).

¹² The 2012 book, *The Science of Language*, does contain references to perfection and rationalism, but they are all in the text written by James McGilvray. Chomsky himself is silent on both subjects. [Noam Chomsky (2012). *The Science of Language: Interviews with James McGilvray*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK.]

¹³ Noam Chomsky (2009 [1966]). *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, p4.