

out if empirical research had been done to locate the human language gene or genes that reside in the 2% difference between us and our simian cousins. I found that geneticists are examining the notion that genes have their own “language”. No help there. This does not constitute a definitive review of the field, but it seems to me that if the fundamental semantic riddle were solved, we would have heard about it because of its significance for Artificial Intelligence. It seems to me that the search for this basis is hamstrung by the same kind of difficulty as looking in the mirror to find out what the image on the other side is thinking. But if meaning is undefinable by anything other than itself, it is thereby immune to logical or scientific examination. Also, it’s curious to me that Chomsky would direct everyone’s attention to the source of the mind in the human brain without being interested in the fundamental nature of consciousness of which the mind is a component. The mind materializes from the ground of consciousness like the ripples from a drop of water falling in a still pond. The Zen koan, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” could be recast as, “What is the nature of zero considered as an object?” All such questions disappear into the black hole of the mind trying to contemplate itself. How are we ever to know whether the mind is essence or epiphenomenon? Chomsky professes to be undisturbed by the notion that some questions we can ask are, by their nature, unanswerable. My opinion is that a complete theory of the human mind must address how the mind emerges from the undifferentiated aesthetic continuum of consciousness. Consider also the possibility that emotions may be inseparably bound to ideas in the mind. However, my intuition and experience accept Chomsky’s positing of a genetic language acquisition faculty in the human brain, and I tip my hat to him for that insight. I also find it amusing that the existence of a universal language faculty gives credence to Jung’s (“un-scientific”) concept of a trans-personal sub-conscious.

One unfortunate unintended side effect of Chomsky’s tearing down the logical and scientific credibility of the linguistic and psychological schools he found in place, was the example he set for others who sought mainly to build reputations through academic iconoclasm. It’s well known that the further you depart from pure mathematics and physics, and the closer you approach the human psyche, the softer your science becomes. The humanities, then, make an easy target. Chomsky is not to be held solely accountable for the emergence of post-modernist dead-ends, but his destruction of superficial empiricist disciplines (only to replace them with a construct with a gaping unknown—maybe un-knowable—at its center) certainly encouraged others to put forth systems of thought originating in more personal concerns such as feminism, sado-masochistic homosexuality, or simple nihilistic iconoclasm.

To close the subject of Chomsky, I also fault Chomsky for two aspects of his social thought. One, he heaps moral disapprobation (or obloquy, if you prefer) on hierarchical governments for their cruel disregard for their subject’s well-being when there has never been a government in recorded time that has transcended this tendency. This is another example of his treating the abstract as a surer touchstone to reality than the concrete. Two, I quibble with his tendency—fueled by photographic memory, no doubt—to quantify human misery in terms of numbers of deaths. This is merely an annoyance because it clothes genuine compassion in a cloak of un-feeling accountancy.

DECONSTRUCTING CHOMSKY-5/28/06

I'll now focus on seeing if I can sort out Noam Chomsky. Ahem. Here goes. His initial success, it seems to me, derived from his ability to formulate and advance arguments that effectively defenestrated the various pretensions to theoretical status then current in the world of semantics. He maintained that the empirical studies then on-going were mere superficial taxonomies of infinitely extendable and transformable existing languages, a claim which must have sent linguistic faculty on the tenure track at the time into rages of anxious denial. He argued that, for scientific credibility, linguists require a theory of universal "deep structures". He argued that language is a genetically determined biological attribute, that there must be a language genome. He further argued that children do not "learn" languages, but that they have an innate language acquisition faculty in their brains requiring only exposure in order to manifest as language competence. He held that syntax connects phonetic representation (sound) to semantic representation (meaning). He posited that all human languages are structure-dependent (linearly sequential) and characterized by "discrete infinity" (words: unitary, indivisible ; sentences : infinitely extendable). To link these concepts, he makes a distinction between E-language and I-language. I-language exists only in the language acquisition faculty and E-language is everything else—the languages people actually speak. I-language consists of a Universal Grammar that maps semantic, phonological, and syntactic roles. It links to actually spoken language through a succession of grammars: transformational, generative, prescriptive, reference, and pedagogical—the resultant grammars characteristic of E-language.

Well, all this is getting several rungs up the abstraction ladder, but Chomsky has several rungs to go. The distinction between competence and performance. The ideal speaker-hearer. The existence of the mind as an aspect of the functioning of the human brain. The rejection of empiricist constraints on theoretical concept formation. The insistence that all language is both creative and recursive. From all this Chomsky concludes that the proper study of linguistics is the basis of the human mind in the brain considered as a biological entity.

This is starting to remind me of the old definition of an expert—someone who knows more and more about less and less until he knows everything about nothing. Here's the thing: Chomsky starts with the observation—correct as far as I know—that the human brain is unique among animals in being able to spontaneously separate discrete ideas out of the undifferentiated aesthetic continuum of sensory experience. After an elaborate and extended peregrination through the various studies (which he destroys, or marginalizes as superficial) of the most fundamental expression of this capability—language—Chomsky comes full circle to the unsolved riddle of the ontological omphalos—the meaning of meaning. The semantic component of the deepest structure of his Universal Grammar remains the missing integument of a fully grounded scientific explanation of human speech.

Realizing that decades have passed since his initial arguments were made, and assuming that the torch has been passed to younger acolytes, I Googled "language genome" to find