

Tribute to Noam Chomsky for his Inaugural Ceremony at UCY (May 18, 2006)
by Dr. Kleanthes K. Grohmann, Assistant Professor of Theoretical Linguistics

It is my great honour and pleasure to introduce Prof. Noam Chomsky, Institute Professor at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The University of Cyprus is privileged to welcome Prof. Chomsky to the list of its honorary doctorates, and the unanimous vote to this effect which the Dean of the School of Humanities, Prof. Stephanides, is going to read aloud in a moment mirrors these sentiments.

Last night, Prof. Chomsky showed once more how to think differently about current events, from a perspective that diverges from mainstream documentation and propaganda. Tonight, however, we are awarding Prof. Chomsky with an honorary doctorate from the University of Cyprus. Typically, doctorates are awarded for academic excellence. Since I am a linguist teaching and researching in academia myself, I take it upon me to thus bring closer to you Prof. Noam Chomsky, the academic — that is, Noam Chomsky, the linguist.

Usually, I suppose, one honours another human being for achievements presented in chronological order — starting with the past, zooming in on the present, and speculating on the future. I say “I suppose” because I have never done this kind of thing before and I am way too nervous at this point to reflect on past honorary affairs I have been present at. And since even, or perhaps especially, academia is to do largely with change and improvement, I’ll try a new hypothesis and go backwards in time. It’s certainly a change, and who knows — it might be an improvement over past traditions.

What will the future of linguistics bring? This is a good question with a very simple answer which we all know. So let me rephrase the starting point of this brief introduction, the foresight. What will Noam Chomsky bring to linguistics in the future?

There are two brief answers I wish to give. On a personal level, I am happy to announce that Noam has recently agreed to serve on the Advisory Board of the new electronic journal *Biolinguistics*, which I am about to launch in co-editorship with my colleague Cedric Boeckx from Harvard University, and in our audience tonight we also have freshly installed members of the Editorial Board and our (unofficial) editorial assistant. The future, and especially success, of this journal remains to be seen, but we hope that Noam’s involvement will help us do a good job — and a vital job for the linguistic community in a narrow sense, or more generally, the interdisciplinary community of scientists that explore the biological foundations of human language.

Secondly, if an answer to the question can be judged for the immediate future on the basis of this morning’s keynote address to the *InterPhases* conference, of which many participants are also present tonight, the answer is: quite a lot. Chomsky is not only a relentless political and social activist, he’s also a relentless linguist and never tires of improving the framework he has laid out. Just this morning he set about to rid the theory of the c-command relation and made suggestions to drop other famous and long-standing assumptions.

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At the heart of this lies the latest instalment, if you like, of a research program in theoretical linguistics that has become widely known as the “Minimalist Program”. Over the past eight years or so, beginning with the final stages of my graduate work, Noam has developed Phase Theory, an attempt to construct syntactic derivations on the basis of phases, that is, smaller collections of lexical items that are assembled piece by piece. The result is an approach that aims to be both economical and easy on the complexity of mental processing.

Both these keywords also formed the core of the Minimalist Program, as Noam and others have developed it in the early to mid 90s, which happened to coincide with my undergraduate and early graduate years. This minimalist approach to linguistic theory aimed to not only construct a theory that works, such as its immediate predecessor, but also one that captures facts about human language and analytical tools in a minimalist Occam’s Razor-type fashion.

To quote from a recent textbook I have co-authored with Norbert Hornstein, who couldn’t make it to this event unfortunately, and Jairo Nunes, who sits somewhere in the audience, “all things being equal, two primitive relations are worse than one, three theoretical entities are better than four, four modules are better than five. In short, more is worse, fewer is better. Let’s call these types of considerations principles of ‘methodological economy’.” In addition, “[t]here’s a second set of minimalist measures. Let’s dub these principles of ‘substantive economy’. Here, a premium is placed on least effort notions as natural sources for grammatical principles. The idea is that locality conditions and wellformedness filters reflect the fact that grammars are organized frugally to maximize resources. [...] These substantive economy notions generalize themes that have consistently arisen in grammatical research.”

Examples from the generative history are rich. Many of these have been discovered and developed throughout the 80s, when the state-of-the-art theory was Government-and-Binding (which, incidentally, has no political connotations). Government-and-Binding Theory, or GB for short, was highly modular: apart from a modular composition of the brain — alongside the language faculty, the systems for vision, colour, numbers, and so on — linguistic organization itself was assumed to consist of modules (Theta Theory, Case Theory, Binding Theory, ECP, etc.). Minimalism tries to do without this full-blown modular articulation, but in GB times this perspective was well founded and indeed made a lot of sense. It also fit in nicely with the general enterprise ‘we’ — well, I entered secondary school when the famous Pisa Lectures were published — were articulating: the Principles-and-Parameters approach to human language, of which GB was the initial and Minimalism is the current instantiation.

Of course there is a reason for my going backwards. We now already reach a point where I, in my tender linguistic age, have had no first-hand experience. So, since we’re now entering a period during which I was not even physically present, since I’m starting to run out of time, and since you’ve been slumbering for too long with these technical digressions, let me wrap up this brief reverse chronological historical overview with two comments.

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Of the landmarks in the history of generative grammar, and a fruitful time of research in which many other of the substantive economy notions were discovered, I would like to mention three items.

- Noam Chomsky's famous article "Remarks on Nominalizations" from 1970 which, to mention just two consequences, transformed linguists' views on grammatical categories and also put an end, as one hears, to some twisted infighting;
- *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, published in 1965, which, among other things, put on the agenda of linguists the necessity to study the development of language, children's acquisition of language, to which Noam's wife Carol, also here with us tonight, contributed as well;
- and the 1957 monograph *Syntactic Structures*, which started the generative enterprise in the first place, at least measuring by time of publication.

Many important works and co-authors — like Morris Halle or Howard Lasnik, who I am happy to announce is also with us tonight, alongside other big figures in the field, such as Richard Kayne or Luigi Rizzi — have been left out here. I beg for forgiveness. The notions 'Universal Grammar' and 'Plato's Problem' — at the root of generative inquiry — have not been mentioned /i:/ther (or /ai/ther). I hope that Noam will rectify this situation shortly.

I would lastly like to point out how the circle closes: Chomsky's doctoral dissertation, *Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, which he expanded and completed in 1955, but which was not published until 20 years later, contains many notions that can be found again in current theorizing. It is thus nice to see that Noam's doctoral dissertation is still very relevant today, a day on which he will be given another doctorate on the one hand and has contributed to current research on the other.

So, after all this and without further ado, as one of the most overused sayings in the English language from over 600 years ago has it (so much for my contribution coming from an English department), let's witness the procession of tonight's honorary ceremony and then hear how Prof. Noam Chomsky envisions how the biolinguistic exploration is best sold to the mostly non-linguist public.