Double agent

Some contradictions between linguistic and political philosophy

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Noam Chomsky has led an unusually public double life, as both a ground-breaking linguistic scholar and a trenchant political polemicist. Over the years he has taken pains to stress that these two métiers have occupied wholly distinct spheres, but Chris Knight begs to differ: *Decoding Chomsky: Science and revolutionary politics* avers that Chomsky's linguistics work was inextricably bound up in politics, often in ways that ran counter to his left-wing beliefs. If the suggestion that Chomsky was ethically compromised by his decades-long association with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology – with its deep connections to the US military-industrial complex – is hardly new, Knight's contention that his linguistic theories are implicitly reactionary in themselves is altogether more intriguing.

At the heart of Chomsky's theory is the proposition that our capacity for language and the basic structures that underpin it are innate. Knight, who is an anthropologist at University College London, traces the genealogy of this idea back to the revolutionary futurism of the Russian formalists. The poetic visionary Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922) believed in the existence of a universal language rooted in laws of nature – a kind of skeleton key whereby each speech sound, vowel or consonant, has its own intrinsic meaning, transcending national or local variations; this concept resurfaced in the work of Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), who conceived of a universal alphabet of "distinctive features". Knight dismisses this as scientifically unfounded "delightful nonsense"; what interests him is how these ideas, which originated in a vision of anti-militarist, internationalist

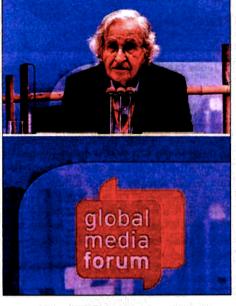utopianism, found themselves enlisted in the service of US geo-strategic policy in the latter half of the twentieth century.

By repudiating the then prevalent behaviourist ideas associated with B. F. Skinner – which prioritized environmental factors in the shaping of language and culture – Chomsky played his part in what would come to be known as the "cognitive revolution", which brought together psychology, anthropology and linguistics to spur the development of the emergent fields of artificial intelligence and computer science. This coincided with the stepping up of US Army interest in precisely these domains: at the dawn of the Cold War, it was increasingly clear that electromechanical military systems – in which the human soldier is merely a subordinate cog in the technological machinery – would be the future of warfare. Knight contends that the demise of behaviourism was the product of "Corporate America's urgent need for a mind-centred psychology".

Chomsky's assertion that language is essentially a scientific phenomenon, the product not of human interaction but of biology, was also expedient on the ideological battlefield. Never mind whether it relieved him of any pangs of conscience regarding his work at MIT (because, so the argument goes, if

Noam Chomsky, Bonn, 2013

linguistics is mere science, then it is politically neutral by definition); more importantly, this divorcing of mind from matter has profound philosophical implications, turning on its head Marx and Engels's dictum that "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life". The mutability of mankind has been a longstanding kernel of progressive thought, whereas dogmatic talk of human nature belongs to the pessimistic vernacular of conservatism. Knight even discerns, in Chomsky's emphasis on the separateness of human ontology from questions of materiality and society, a degree of overlap with religious mysticism. Invited to address a Vatican audience in Rome in 2014, Chomsky

gave a talk in which he suggested that the origin of language evolution was likely to remain a mystery. Here, then, was a most unusual thing: a scholar, a scientific thinker, seemingly deferring to the unknowability of truths.

Having begun his inquiry in a tone of friendly scepticism, Knight proceeds to quietly eviscerate Chomsky's entire system of thought, highlighting a number of lacunae. By the late 1970s, Chomsky himself had disowned his notion of a "deep structure" of semantics hidden within the "syntactic component" of the digital blueprint. Conversely, he has staunchly defended the idea that even such words as "carburettor" have been genetically programmed in humans for thousands of years before the objects they denoted had even come into being. Knight argues that once you strip away from the theory all the caveats, qualifications and vacillations that have accumulated over the years, there is very little left of it.

The suggestion that Chomsky's elimination of politics from linguistics was essentially instrumental and self-serving will be attractive to his detractors, who will doubtless enjoy the irony of seeing him subjected to precisely the kind of critique – apropos of his proximity to power – he is known for dishing out. The proposition that his entire oeuvre has been one long exercise in making a virtue of necessity is enticing, but ultimately speculative and futile. Chris Knight is nevertheless to be commended for this engaging and thought-provoking intellectual history of a thesis that remains hotly contested – and the reverberations of which, as he rightly observes, resonate far beyond academia.