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# Chomsky's Atavistic Revolution (with a little help from his enemies)

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The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines Modernism as a “movement characterised by a deliberate break with classical and traditional forms or methods”. This is borne out by examination of how ‘modern’ linguists have routinely established an ironic distance between their own work and what went before. The exception is Chomsky, whose ‘atavistic’ revolution, harking back to putative early modern roots, broke all the rules in terms of the stance one could take toward intellectual predecessors in the wake of modernism. It showed how “a deliberate break with classical and traditional forms or methods” could be brought about by, not ignoring traditional methods, or taking an ironic distance from them, but reinterpreting them with a greater time depth. The ultimate irony lies in how Chomsky’s opponents forced an ironic distance on him, turning him into a mere garden-variety modernist — and by so doing, helped to guarantee the success of his generativist programme.

ATAVISM. Resemblance to grandparents or more remote ancestors rather than to parents.

MODERNISM. Movement characterised by a deliberate break with classical and traditional forms or methods.

REVOLUTION. 1. A single act of rotation round a centre. 2. An instance of great change or alteration in affairs or in some particular thing.

— *Oxford English Dictionary* (abridged)

## 1. Modernism and ancestry

For over a quarter of a century E.F.K. Koerner (1983, 1989, 2002) has not merely led the charge in denying that what is commonly referred to as the Chomskyan Revolution in linguistics was a revolution at all. He has *been* the charge, a one-man brigade, with others gradually lining up safely in the rear. Lagging still further behind to clear up after the horses, I argued in Joseph (1991, 1995) that no revolution, whether political or

academic, would ever qualify as such by the strict criteria Koerner was demanding. Revolutions are above all rhetorical, a matter of belief and linguistic performance, always with partial continuity of methods, agenda, institutions, even personnel. In any event, what is the point of carrying on an argument that boils down to how one defines the word 'revolution' in one of its metaphorical senses?

My inclination in such a case is to follow common usage and continue to speak of a Chomskyan Revolution. But casting about for an alternative that might satisfy Koerner, one word that suggests itself is 'modernism'. As defined above, it implies a deliberate break with traditional methods — with the emphasis on deliberate, since, again, the break will never be more than partial. If to call something revolutionary implies not just great change but scientific progress, labelling it modernist does not. It designates a limited period, a few decades either side of the two World Wars. The style and thought of the period embodied an ideology of progress, but today the term is a historical designation and implies no judgement as to whether any enduring progress was actually achieved.

Certainly Chomsky has been neither a traditionalist in the usual sense, nor a post-modernist, whatever that means. So Chomskyan Modernism would seem an apt term — except that modernist is a label we associate with the generation before his, that of Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949), those contemporaries of Le Corbusier and Stravinsky. This is despite the fact that Sapir never broke from the methods of his teacher Franz Boas (1858–1942) to the same extent as Chomsky did from the Bloomfieldians and Sapirians. As for Bloomfield, he effectuated a very modernist break through his behaviourist-framed distributionalism, yet insisted privately that the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was on every page of his 1933 book *Language* (Cowan 1987: 29; see Joseph 2002: 135).

Further on I shall consider in more detail how these figures and others relate to the previous linguistic tradition. But it first has to be pointed out that, even if the deliberateness of Chomsky's break was greater than that of the generation before him, he did not cast it as a rejection of classical and traditional forms or methods, but as a return to them. It was the Bloomfieldians, in his view, who were the modernists, and who had set linguistics on the wrong track. Chomsky was bringing about a 'revolution' in the first, most literal sense of the word, the completion of a circle. An atavistic revolution: a return to an understanding and methods more akin to those of his intellectual grandparents and remote ancestors, as he understood them, than of his parents.

That might still qualify Chomsky as a 'late modernist', since atavism and modernism are by no means diametrically opposed. One thinks of the pre-Raphaelites, those supreme early modernists who broke with contemporary practice by a deliberate return to the style of pre-modern masters. They trumped the authority of their teacher's generation by an appeal to a still higher authority, long-ago artists whose genius their teachers vaunted even while sneering at their primitive techniques. In Stravinsky's case,

he managed a second modernist revolution in mid-career by abandoning his earlier expressionism for a neo-classicism that harked back to the 18th century; these works remain firmly in the canon, unlike those of his third, non-atavistic atonal phase. This ambivalence toward historical authorities is what makes intellectual atavism a powerful means for a modernist break — again a revolution in the literal sense, regardless of whether we choose to call it one metaphorically.

Looking across the wide range of journals and books in a range of academic fields, both humanistic and scientific, the normal state appears to be one in which individuals situate their enquiries within some framework that is already in wide use, sometimes in direct competition with an alternative framework though more often simply ignoring rival approaches. This is in line with the positivist ideal of a steady accumulation of rigorously controlled observations gradually adding either to the scope of the model, by showing how it accounts for new data and cases, or to its precision, by excluding data and cases previously assumed to be covered by it.<sup>1</sup>

In these conditions, it is typical for the attitude toward the field's past to be one of simple progress. Figures from the past will be regarded as further from the truth the further back they are in time — with the proviso that, as argued by Cram (2007), an 'ebb tide' effect can make figures from the *immediate* past temporarily less authoritative than those a bit more distant. The most revered figures will be those who rethought the framework itself or made discoveries of such magnitude that they validated or reshaped the framework. Their importance relative to one another is a balance between the impact they had and their point on the timescale, so that, of two figures who had a roughly equal impact, the more recent one will be treated as more authoritative, except among antiquarians, or unless nationalistic or other identity

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1. There was a time not long ago when it would have been necessary to ascribe this view to Thomas S. Kuhn (1922–1996). That time is past, not because Kuhn's work has ceased to be authoritative, but because its impact on the history of science has been so profound. It is now hard to imagine that anyone could have been startled by Kuhn's contention that sciences do not simply progress from darkness to light, but are shaped by social, political and rhetorical forces. This is not to say that Kuhn (1962) has become some sort of bible, its every statement exactly what one would repeat today as truth. It is, for example, oddly uniformitarian — ahistorical, in other words — in its assumption that we could or would want to apply a single model of development to all of science, across vastly different cultural contexts. Kuhn was not a trained historian, but a physicist who became a philosopher. His aim was to break the stranglehold which a single, simple idea of positive science had in the modernist period, and to do so he harked back to Copernicus as his perfect model. It worked because of the way in which the Copernican revolution had been singled out and idealised in modern science, as one of a handful of paradigm cases along with Newton, Darwin and maybe Einstein, though there was still some residual nervousness about Einstein in that time of nuclear paranoia.

motives are in play, or if the figure has achieved fame well beyond the field that claims him or her as its identity marker.

For the practitioner working in the present, the appeal to the past is central to the argument from authority, which is the main valve controlling what I like to call the ‘economy of dreams,’ the limited degree to which any new work is allowed to innovate rather than reproduce existing knowledge and still find acceptance from the ‘gatekeepers’ of the field, the journal reviewers and editors, grant reviewers and boards, hiring and promotion committees. We face the paradox that our work is considered particularly valuable insofar as it is original and novel — yet is evaluated within a system that exists in order to keep novelty to a critical minimum, so as to limit the imagination and fantasy of any individual and constrain it to the shared dream of the group.

So how do practitioners in an academic field manage this economy of dreams? In part, rhetorically, through how they position their findings and conclusions relative to the field as a whole. It is here that the ancestral giants play a crucial double role. First, as authorities to whom one can appeal, and in so doing perform one’s mastery of the field’s past. Secondly, as figures who, by virtue of being remote in time, both allow and demand that much more interpretation to make their work meaningful in the present context. The remoteness is, as noted above, generally viewed as signifying distance from the truth as built up by later methods. But this creates a sort of rhetorical release valve in the plumbing system of dreams. An innovation that might otherwise be rejected as excessive within a conservative field can be made acceptable by claiming that it is actually part of the field’s heritage — what it has always believed, even if it has temporarily forgotten that it believes it — by tying it to an authoritative figure from the past. Texts written by that figure can usually be interpreted and contextualised in a way that appears to support whatever present-day view one is upholding. That is the advantage of intellectual atavism, but also its disadvantage, since one’s opponents can equally well reinterpret and contextualise the same texts in their own favour. To continue with my dubious plumbing metaphor, this sort of atavism is a lead-pipe cinch; but the softness that makes lead so pliable is also what makes it so poisonous.

## 2. Ironic distance

In the modernist period, atavistic rhetoric faced a further obstacle in the imperative to detach practice from tradition. In academic terms, the rejection of tradition can take a number of forms, all of which amount to a sharp and deliberate revaluation of the currency of scholarly work. The old does not become worthless, but its value is adjusted downward relative to the new. At the same time, what was marginalised in the past is sometimes brought to the centre, and vice-versa, which is another way of revaluing the currency.

The need for detachment complexified the paradox. It did not eliminate the motives for appealing to the past, but required practitioners to perform rhetorically their simultaneous understanding of how the past was both right and wrong. The principal rhetorical means for this performance was what is sometimes called 'ironic distance' or 'ironic detachment', where the irony lies in the ambivalent relationship between the modern writer and the ancestral authority figure, rather than in any overt sarcasm in the language used. Sarcasm is in fact one possible way of achieving the distance, though not the one most commonly found in academic discourse in the modernist period. Returning to the analogy of pre-Raphaelite painting, there was never any question of mistaking it for work from the 15th century.<sup>2</sup> Nor could any musically literate person hearing Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* (1920) for the first time confuse it with compositions by Pergolesi and his contemporaries from 200 years earlier, whose themes inspired it. The melodies may be borrowed, the harmonies authentic, but the driving rhythm, strongly contrasting dynamics and rich orchestration create the ironic distance that makes *Pulcinella* an unmistakably modern composition.

The lack of awareness of how ironic distance functions in academic writing can be seen in a 1998 exchange between Margaret Thomas and a foursome led by Susan Gass. Thomas contends that the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) suffers from ahistoricity. SLA ignores the wide range of studies from earlier decades and centuries which supply it with an impressive pedigree. In a highly defensive response, Gass et al. attempt to deny the charge. Much as arguments over Chomsky's impact boil down to definitions of 'revolution', here the debate is ultimately over what does and does not count as 'modern' and as 'history'. The argument offered by Gass et al. for why their field is not ahistorical is, for me, and no doubt for Thomas, a perfect demonstration of why it is.

[W]e do not wish to deny premodern texts, only to say that they do not seem to have played an informing role in the development of the field of SLA. It is only in the '50s, '60s, and '70s that we begin to see a flurry of intellectual activity that converges on a coherent body of scholarly work — a body of work that begins to ask the important how and why questions of second language learning to which widely accepted methods of analysis are applied. (Gass et al. 1998: 412)

The authors are right to recognise how historicity is linked to continuity. Without that criterion of having "played an informing role in the development of the field", interest in the past can be simply antiquarian — not a bad thing to be, though neither is it the

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2. The same is not always true of the neo-Gothic style which the pre-Raphaelites precipitated. The cathedral near our house which most visitors assume to be medieval is actually a product of the 1870s Gothic Revival; and I myself thought that the wooden chest in our bedroom must be Jacobean, until I became familiar with this particular brand of Victorian atavism.

same as being historicist in a continuist way, something which Gass, Thomas and I all agree is much richer. But what do Gass et al. mean by “deny premodern texts”, if not to say that “they do not seem to have played an informing role”? To deny that they exist? That would be lunacy. The authors are first of all introducing a surreptitious distinction of modern and pre-modern, treating it as a given when it is in fact not only subjective but circular within a discussion of historicity. What is modern is what is continuist with today’s work, and that continuity, they resolutely claim, does not extend back beyond the 1950s. This shallowness of time depth is precisely what Thomas means by ahistoricism. The criteria for continuity are evident in the rhetoric used by Gass et al.: *converges, coherent, body of work, important questions, widely accepted methods*.

We can see that history begins for them with an institutional recognition extending into the present time, which is a perfectly modernist view. It is as though the past of an academic field divides into a preterite (like English *wrote*) and a present perfect (*have written*), where the former is used in the context of a time period that does not include the present, the latter in one that does. *I wrote five pages this morning* is what one says in the afternoon, a time when one might also say *I have written five pages this afternoon*. For the continuist Thomas, history starts at daybreak, and ahistoricism means imagining that it only started at noon. For the discontinuist Gass, until noon there is nothing coherent to write a history about, so to speak of ahistoricity is absurd.

To substantiate their insistence on disciplinary coherence, Gass et al. structure a history of SLA that traces it back to a 1967 article by S. Pit Corder (1926–1990), and they point to work since then that recognises this lineage. They are right to identify Corder’s article as a breakthrough event. However, they fail to appreciate how even those within the lineage they trace ironically distance themselves from Corder, even while claiming to extend his heritage. This example by Antonella Sorace, a former student of Corder’s and sometime collaborator of Gass’s, is a textbook example of ironic distancing:

While Corder’s theories clearly were on the right track, they had a speculative flavour that, with hindsight, is easy to ascribe to a lack of conceptual and methodological tools for analysis; like other early second language theorists (e.g. Krashen 1981), he was in a sense ‘ahead of his time’, which meant that many of the innovative concepts he proposed could not receive either a full theoretical interpretation, or an empirical validation, until much later. (Sorace & Robertson 2001: 264)

Undoubtedly a sincere tribute to Corder is intended.<sup>3</sup> The ironic distance arises through a rhetorical imperative for constant reassurance to ourselves and our paymasters that we are achieving progress — an enduring modernist heritage.

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3. More doubtful is whether Corder would have appreciated being bracketed together with Krashen, whose approach was very different from his own, or whether Krashen, closer in age to Sorace than to Corder, did not feel ambivalent about being treated as a historical figure while still academically active.

One can look into any work on linguistics from the late 19th century onward that contains discussion of historical predecessors and find instances of ironic distance. The first 'modernist' linguistic work is arguably that by William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894), and no small part of what qualifies him for the label is his very abrupt disjuncture from the multiple traditions that feed into his understanding of language. Alter (2005: 71–76) has shown for example that the Scottish philosophy of Thomas Reid (1710–1796) and Dugald Stewart (1753–1828) had a shaping influence on Whitney's thought, in particular through the *Rhetoric* (1776) of George Campbell (1719–1796), a foundational book in Whitney's studies (see also Joseph 2002: 30–32). But it gets no mention in Whitney's work, which gives brief attention only to a handful of 18th-century figures who are treated as either dealing in "speculations" or adding piecemeal "facts and first classifications" to create a sort of puzzle that then more or less solved itself. Linguistics came into being, he writes,

by the suggestive and inciting deductions and speculations of men like Leibniz and Herder, by the wide assemblage of facts and first classifications of language by the Russians under Catherine and by Adelung and Vater and their like, and by the introduction of the Sanskrit to the knowledge of Europe, and the intimation of its connections and importance, by Jones and Colebrooke. No one thing was so decisive of the rapid success of the movement as this last; the long-gathering facts at once fell into their proper places, with clearly exhibited relations, and on the basis of Indo-European philology was built up the science of comparative philology. (Whitney 1875: 317–318)

He does go on to give the familiar litany of German names — Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), Franz Bopp (1791–1867), Jakob Grimm (1785–1863) and those who followed them — along with just three non-Germans, Rasmus Rask (1787–1832), Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852) and Graziado Ascoli (1829–1907), who he says "have most right to be mentioned on the same page with the great German masters" (*ibid.*, p. 318). Yet even this tip of the hat to his predecessors calls for the requisite modernist ironic distancing.

But while Germany is the home of comparative philology, the scholars of that country have, as was hinted above, distinguished themselves much less in that which we have called the science of language. There is among them (not less than elsewhere) such discordance on points of fundamental importance, such uncertainty of view, such carelessness of consistency, that a German science of language cannot be said yet to have an existence. (*ibid.*, pp. 318–319)

Whitney's 1867 book had been so thorough in its ironic detachment that its German translator, Julius Jolly (1849–1932) felt obliged to add two chapters tracing the history of historical-comparative linguistics in detail.

Whitney's modernism was no small part of why he was so 'revered' by Saussure (see Joseph 2002: 44), who followed Whitney's lead in ironically distancing himself from the Germans. Saussure's *Mémoire* (1879) on the original Indo-European vowel

system opens with a “Review of different opinions put forward on the system of *a*’s”, briefly tracing the history of treatments of the subject from Bopp, to Georg Curtius (1820–1885) and August Fick (1833–1916), to August Schleicher (1821–1868), and warning readers that

No subject is more controversial; opinions are almost infinitely divided, and rarely have the various authors given a perfectly rigorous application of their ideas. (Saussure 1879: 1, my translation)<sup>4</sup>

When he paid to have this book printed Saussure was a student at Leipzig, just turned twenty-one and yet to receive any university degree. One of the “various authors” whose intellectual rigour he was questioning was Curtius, his university’s senior professor of comparative linguistics. The young man in a hurry was so impelled by the double imperative, first to locate his system at the endpoint of the evolution of the discipline, and secondly to establish its complete originality, that he badly mismanaged the economy of dreams. The result was a life-long alienation from the German linguistics establishment that helped shipwreck his career. This is a danger inherent in distancing oneself too far from the immediately preceding generation, as Chomsky would rediscover 80 years later, though in career terms he would stay nicely afloat however stormy the seas.

Much safer was the sort of historicism undertaken by Sapir in his master’s thesis on Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). Early on he displays a scholarly humility absent from Whitney and Saussure before him, and most other linguists after.

Despite the vast accumulation of linguistic material that has been collected since Herder’s time, and the immense clarification that has been attained in linguistic conceptions, processes, and classifications, we cannot today make bold to assert that this problem is satisfactorily answered, or apparently in a way to be satisfactorily answered in the immediate future. (Sapir 1907: 110)

By the end, however, Sapir is fiercely staking out his ironic distance from the subject of his thesis.

Contradictions even of no small significance and lack of clearness in the terms used will have been noticed in the course of our exposition of Herder’s essay [...]. Setting aside faults in the essay itself, it is evident that the new vistas of linguistic thought opened up by the work of Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt, and the more special labors of Bopp and Grimm, speedily relegated Herder’s treatise to the limbo of things that were. (ibid., pp. 139–140)

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4. “Aucune matière n’est plus controversée; les opinions sont divisées presque à l’infini, et les différents auteurs ont rarement fait une application parfaitement rigoureuse de leurs idées”. Examples could be drawn as well from the *Cours de linguistique générale* (Saussure 1916), but I have confined myself to a text which Saussure himself published.

For the rest of his career Sapir would be the ultimate modernist of the period's major linguists, discussing no predecessors at all in his book *Language* (1921) or in any of his widely-read papers.

Bloomfield's approach to his intellectual ancestors is, by contrast, more muted and immediately balanced. One gets the impression that his decision to discuss a particular predecessor already reflects a judgement that his work is valuable, and the ironic distance comes in quite matter-of-factly. Of Whitney (1867, 1875) he says that "today they seem incomplete, but scarcely antiquated, and still serve as an excellent introduction to language study" (Bloomfield 1933: 16). Hermann Paul's (1846–1921) great work of 1880 is judged by Bloomfield (*ibid.*) to be "Not so well written as Whitney's, but more detailed and methodical", adding that "students of a more recent generation are neglecting it, to their disadvantage". Yet when the next sentence delivers the ironic distancing, it is pitiless:

Aside from its very dry style, Paul's *Principles* suffers from faults that seem obvious today, because they are significant of the limitations of nineteenth-century linguistics. One of these faults is Paul's neglect of descriptive language study. [...] The other great weakness of Paul's *Principles* is his insistence upon "psychological" interpretation. (Bloomfield 1933: 16–17)

A subtler form of distancing is found in Bloomfield's earlier review of the *Cours de linguistique générale*, which ends as follows:

I should differ from de Saussure chiefly in basing my analysis on the sentence rather than on the word; by following the latter custom de Saussure gets a rather complicated result in certain matters of word-composition and syntax. The essential point, however, is this, that de Saussure has here first mapped out the world in which historical Indo-European grammar (the great achievement of the past century) is merely a single province; he has given us the theoretical basis for a science of human speech. (Bloomfield 1924: 319)

This appears at first to move from an initial distancing toward an out-and-out compliment. But the compliment turns somewhat back-handed when one realises how little importance Bloomfield accorded to a "theoretical basis" divorced from practical applications (see Joseph 2002: 139).

Again, examples from the modernist period could be multiplied *ad infinitum*. All those cited, from Whitney to Sorace and Robertson, illustrate the general principle of how figures closer in time — in Whitney's case, Bopp and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) — are taken as closer to the truth than those more remote, even by just one generation. Sapir though shows an awareness displayed by none of the others, least of all the young Saussure, that the first and perhaps most valuable lesson gained from historicity is the realisation that any sense we may possess of being the first to arrive at the truth is an illusion that will last only until the next generation falls victim to it.

### 3. The exceptional Mr Chomsky

All these modernists reject tradition either by ignoring their predecessors or keeping an ironic distance from them, in varying degrees and using a range of rhetorical devices. It is so much a part of the fabric of modernist discourse that to find it virtually absent in the writings of just one linguist is stunning. To be precise, Chomsky's early work *is* very much concerned with distancing itself from the generation of his teachers, and from their principal master, Bloomfield. But it does this in an unprecedented way, by wholeheartedly *embracing* tradition, as represented by a series of figures prior to Bloomfield whose approaches he perceives as being closer to his own understanding of language than what was being professed in the 1940s and 1950s. Not a ray of ironic sunlight separates Chomsky from his claimed ancestors.

In Joseph (2002: 147–150) I have shown how in the early 1960s Chomsky's search for an intellectual ancestor took him back first to Saussure, then to Humboldt.<sup>5</sup> This shift can be traced through the various versions of the address Chomsky gave to the Ninth International Congress of Linguists in 1962. He first presents his own work as fitting within "the classical Saussurian framework" (Chomsky 1964: 512), and while he notes two ways in which his approach differs from Saussure's, they are treated neither as insurmountable obstacles nor as progress from his predecessor's relative primitiveness. Saussure is discussed as though he were Chomsky's contemporary. Even when Chomsky's subsequent reading takes him back a further hundred years to Humboldt (1836), in whom he discovers a far more deeply kindred spirit, he does not distance himself ironically from Saussure.

Through the later versions of this paper he maintains his earlier remarks about Saussure, though they come to be dwarfed by the growing amount of far more glowing admiration of, first Humboldt, then René Descartes (1596–1650), Gérauld de Cordemoy (1626–1684) and the authors of the Port-Royal grammar, Claude Lancelot (c.1616–1695) and Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694). This is the 'Cartesian' linguistic tradition that Chomsky identifies as culminating with Humboldt, before subsequently being undone by the line that extends from Whitney to Bloomfield and his followers. Subtly, Chomsky comes to detach Saussure from his earlier linkage of him to Humboldt, and to associate him instead with Whitney and the anti-Cartesian-Humboldtian-Chomskyan line. Finally Chomsky (1965) will cut himself off from Saussure absolutely: the three mentions of

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5. This is a fitting opportunity to answer Koerner's (2002: 138) question about the basis for statements I have made concerning Chomsky's "earliest" published references to Saussure; it is that I spent untold hours in the Georgetown University Library in 1989–90 digging out and reading through all of Chomsky's early publications, with much appreciated guidance from Koerner & Tajima (1986).

him occur in conjunction with the words “reject” (p. 4), “naïve” (pp. 7–8), and worst of all, “taxonomic” (p. 47). The preface to the book begins:

The idea that a language is based on a system of rules determining the interpretation of its infinitely many sentences is by no means novel. Well over a century ago, it was expressed with reasonable clarity by Wilhelm von Humboldt, in his famous but rarely studied introduction to general linguistics (Humboldt, 1836). (Chomsky 1965: v)

Those whom this encomium inspired to read Humboldt's book were surely taken aback to find that whatever rules had determined Chomsky's interpretation of “introduction to general linguistics” were idiosyncratic, and accorded only remotely with what one expected of such an introduction in the wake of Saussure (1916), Bloomfield (1933) and the more recent textbooks by Henry A. Gleason Jr. (1917–2007; 1955) and Charles F. Hockett (1916–2000; 1958). Nor would they have had an easy time working out where Humboldt said anything about a system of rules determining interpretation. Never mind; the point is that, when Chomsky transfers his allegiance, it is completely. If he agrees with a predecessor on the basics, he does not quibble about particulars. In the original version of his International Congress of Linguists paper, written when his loyalty still lay with Saussure, Humboldt is criticised, along with Paul, for failing to take account of “creativity” in language production (Chomsky 1964: 512; cf. Chomsky 1964: 22). Such criticisms of Humboldt now disappear, and he no longer has a positive word to say about Saussure.

It is necessary to reject his [Saussure's] concept of *langue* as merely a systematic inventory of items and to return rather to the Humboldtian conception of underlying competence as a system of generative processes. (Chomsky 1965: 4)

Come *Cartesian Linguistics* (1966) and Saussure has been air-brushed from history almost entirely. The name appears twice in a list of those — including Paul, Bloomfield, Otto Jespersen (1860–1943), Hockett and “many others” — “who regard innovation as possible only ‘by analogy’” (p. 55), and are responsible for the fact that “Modern linguistics has [...] failed to deal with the Cartesian observations regarding human language in any serious way” (p. 12).

*Cartesian Linguistics* is an extraordinary book in any number of ways. One of its claims to uniqueness lies in how these figures from a past that would seem as remote as it is possible to be from M.I.T. in the 1960s are discussed as if they were active members of its faculty. The book is a condescension-free zone for linguists before Paul. It stays true to the programme announced in its Introduction:

I will limit myself here to [...] a preliminary and fragmentary sketch of some of the leading ideas of Cartesian linguistics with no explicit analysis of its relation to current work that seeks to clarify and develop these ideas. The reader acquainted with current work in so-called “generative grammar” should have little difficulty in drawing these conclusions for himself. (Chomsky 1966: 2)

The continuity between his own work and that of his 17th-century predecessors, in other words, is so complete as to be self-evident.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Love your enemies

The demolition of Chomsky's claimed intellectual pedigree came in two waves. Salmon (1967) was the first to cast serious doubt on Chomsky's historical framework. Her review is a *tour de force*, a virtual encyclopaedia of relevant works from the medieval period onward; Chomsky's book necessarily ends up looking very thin indeed by comparison. Treating Chomsky's argument seriously, Salmon acknowledged that he limited his claims of a 'Cartesian' tradition to imply only the sharing of certain key ideas that derive from Descartes. She showed however that even with these limitations the Cartesian categorisation made little historical sense. The key ideas in question were already present in medieval grammars and treatises on language, and this was known to those who revived them in the 17th century, independently of Cartesian philosophy. She showed too that British linguistic enquiry was not so monolithic as Chomsky tended to portray it in his occasional references, and that the Bloomfieldian approach, which assumed language to be arbitrarily structured rather than grounded in any innate, universal mental principles, was no 20th-century innovation but had its own 17th-century counterparts.

Robin Lakoff's 1969 review of an annotated facsimile edition of the Port-Royal grammar, while not citing Salmon's review, drew a similar conclusion about the earlier provenance of the ideas Chomsky ascribed to Descartes. Lakoff's review focussed as much on *Minerva* (1587) by Franciscus Sanctius (1523–1601) as on Port-Royal. Despite some concern about "doing violence to the thoughts of" these predecessors, she "would state definitively" that they were "in some sense, generative grammarians" (R. Lakoff 1969: 346). The review thus upheld the basic historical framework put forward by Chomsky, but differed from him greatly on what belonged where within the framework. The fact that it appeared in *Language* — a journal which carried no review of *Cartesian Linguistics* until the book's reissue in the present decade (Falk 2005) — and was written by someone who had until recently been associated with Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar, meant that the criticisms stung, even if the overall thrust was supportive. Finishing off this first, historically-oriented wave, Aarsleff (1970), again in *Language*, dwelt on figures Chomsky did not discuss, particularly John Locke

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6. To be clear, I am passing no judgement here about the validity of the claimed continuity; on that question, see Koerner (2002: 131–150).

(1632–1704), and Aarsleff's own hobby-horse, Condillac (1714–1780).<sup>7</sup> Idiosyncratic in its focus and vitriolic in its tone,<sup>8</sup> Aarsleff's piece redeemed most of the damage done by Lakoff the year before, since it only adds credibility to one's position to have an opponent appear irrational.

The really serious critiques came in a second wave, starting with an article by John Searle in the *New York Review of Books*, where he had the following to say about *Cartesian Linguistics*.

Chomsky is really making two claims here. First, a historical claim that his views on language were prefigured by the seventeenth-century rationalists, especially Descartes. Second, a theoretical claim that empiricist learning theory cannot account for the acquisition of language. Both claims are more tenuous than he suggests. Descartes did indeed claim that we have innate ideas, such as the idea of a triangle or the idea of perfection or the idea of God. But I know of no passage in Descartes to suggest that he thought the syntax of natural languages was innate. Quite the contrary, Descartes appears to have thought that language was arbitrary; he thought that we arbitrarily attach words to our ideas. Concepts for Descartes are innate, whereas language is arbitrary and acquired. Furthermore Descartes does not allow for the possibility of *unconscious* knowledge, a notion that is crucial to Chomsky's system. Chomsky cites correctly Descartes' claim that the creative use of language distinguishes man from the lower animals. But that by itself does not support the thesis that Descartes is a precursor of Chomsky's theory of innate ideas. (Searle 1972)

The readership of the *New York Review of Books* was on the order of one hundred times that of the most widely read linguistics journal, *Language*. And being a philosopher — indeed the new heavyweight champion of the philosophy of language — Searle could be expected to know a thing or two about Descartes. What he wrote was devastating for Chomsky's perceptions and claims of continuity. Eight months later the same

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7. When in 1988 Aarsleff did something similar in his introduction to a translation of Humboldt (1836), Cambridge University Press soon issued a second edition with a new introduction that was actually about Humboldt. All this is a pity because, at his best, Aarsleff is an inspiring historian of linguistic ideas.

8. For example: "I do not see that anything at all useful can be salvaged from Chomsky's version of the history of linguistics. That version is fundamentally false from beginning to end — because the scholarship is poor, because the texts have not been read, because the arguments have not been understood, because the secondary literature that might have been helpful has been left aside or unread, even when referred to" (Aarsleff 1970: 583). For his part, Chomsky attributes the end of his engagement with the history of linguistics to what he sees as Aarsleff's intellectual dishonesty (Barsky 1997: 105), claiming that the flaws so vehemently denounced in Aarsleff's article are absent from Chomsky (1966) but abound in Aarsleff (1967).

periodical published a letter to the editors arguing that Searle actually did not go far enough in distancing Chomsky from his claimed intellectual ancestors.

Chomsky's account of so-called Cartesian linguistics is as inaccurate as his portrayal of structural linguistics. Searle has criticized Chomsky for inaccurately interpreting Descartes' writings, but he ignores the devastating critiques of Chomsky's treatment of the Port Royal grammarians and of Locke that have appeared in the linguistic literature. Chomsky claims in *Cartesian Linguistics* that Cartesian rationalism gave birth to a linguistic theory like transformational grammar in its essential respects. He bases his claims on the *Grammaire Générale et Raisonnée* by Antoine Arnauld (a disciple of Descartes') and Claude Lancelot (a language teacher), published in 1660. The *Grammaire Générale* followed a series of other grammars by Lancelot, the most extensive being his Latin grammar.

Chomsky appears not to have read this Latin grammar (an English translation of which was in Widener Library) but Robin Lakoff studied it and published her findings [R. Lakoff 1969]. She discovered that in the introduction Lancelot credited all of his interesting findings to Sanctius [...]. In short, what Chomsky called Cartesian linguistics had nothing whatever to do with Descartes, but came directly from an earlier Spanish tradition. Equally inconsistent with Chomsky's claims is the fact that the theories of Sanctius and the Port Royal grammarians differ from the theory of transformational grammar in a crucial way. They do not acknowledge the existence of a syntactic deep structure in Chomsky's sense, but assume throughout that syntax is based on meaning and thought. Chomsky has steadfastly opposed this position from his earliest works straight through to his most recent writings. (G. Lakoff 1973)

Lakoff was here doing more here than questioning Chomsky's historical knowledge and interpretations. The last two sentences portray Chomsky's Cartesians as forerunners of generative semantics, the approach based precisely on that belief "that syntax is based on meaning and thought" which "Chomsky has steadfastly opposed". It is a hard blow indeed to be told that your own grandparents are working for the enemy.

Chomsky's (1973) reply to Lakoff's letter took aim at a discrepancy between the conclusions drawn by the two Lakoffs, with Robin basically endorsing the Cartesian framework and George discrediting it. He chastised them both for failing to mention the footnote to the introduction of *Cartesian Linguistics* which stated that

Apart from its Cartesian origins, the Port-Royal theory of language [...] can be traced to scholastic and renaissance grammar; in particular, to the theory of ellipsis and 'ideal types' that reached its fullest development in Sanctius's *Minerva* (1587). (Chomsky 1966: 97, n. 67)

Chomsky insisted further that his views on language had been distorted by George Lakoff. But he did not address the charge that his claimed link with the 17th century was spurious. Ostensibly the misrepresentation of his views removed any need for this,

yet it is striking all the same that, from this point forward, he would not develop the 'Cartesian' connection further. With *Language and Mind* (1968) the emphasis began shifting toward David Hume (1711–1776), who would come to be Chomsky's most frequent reference by the time of *Reflections on Language* (1975), as Humboldt retreated to the background. The allegiance to his 'Cartesians' was never given up, however. They never became the target of Chomsky's criticism.

By now the atavistic revolution was over, in the sense that Chomsky was no longer focussed on developing historical links. Victory had been achieved over the Bloomfieldian generation, now retired and starting to die off. Despite the competition from generative semanticists and other rivals, Chomsky himself was becoming the ultimate authority on linguistics — and a more run-of-the-mill modernist on the rhetorical level. For example, when Saussure resurfaces at a couple of points in *Language and Mind* (1968; see Joseph 2002: 152), it is in the standard pattern of invoking his authority by calling him "the great Swiss linguist", then creating ironic distance by showing how Saussure supposedly limited linguistics to segmentation and classification (p. 17). From this point on, Chomsky's discussions of earlier linguists tend increasingly to treat them as historical figures, not timeless intellectual contemporaries.

We can never know for certain whether the success of Chomsky's programme would have been diminished if his enemies had not done him the service of discrediting the historical framework he had worked so hard to construct. It was, however, a crucial part of the economy of his dreams, something that bought him credibility in an early phase of his career when he needed it desperately. Had the framework endured in a more robust form, it might have limited his claims, or rather those made on his behalf, to be the most original, the most 'revolutionary' linguistic thinker of the 20th century. By undoing it, his opponents brought about the equivalent of financial deregulation. For half a century one linguist's dreams would know no limits beyond those he imposed on himself.

## 5. Conclusion

Chomsky's atavistic revolution was revolutionary in more than its approach to language. It broke all the rules in terms of the stance one could take toward intellectual predecessors in the wake of modernism. It showed how "a deliberate break with classical and traditional forms or methods" could be brought about, not by ignoring traditional methods, or taking an ironic distance from them, but reinterpreting them with a greater time depth. The ultimate irony lies in how Chomsky's opponents forced an ironic distance on him, turning him into a mere garden-variety modernist — and by so doing, helped to guarantee the success of his generativist programme.

The broader question of whether Chomsky brought about a revolution in linguistics may, as I said at the outset, be a matter of semantics. ‘Atavistic modernism’ offers a possible alternative for those who want to stay unambiguously neutral by avoiding any endorsement that ‘revolution’ may seem to them to imply. But that Chomsky revolutionised the rhetoric of the field is an observation which I doubt even Koerner would dispute, though he does not believe, as I do, that revolutions are rhetorical first and foremost. While this paper has done no more than scratch the surface where Chomsky’s rhetoric is concerned, I hope to have pointed the way toward what should be, in the decades ahead, a three-faceted project for the history of modern linguistics, as we strive to understand the sources of Chomsky’s linguistics, the verbal means through which he manufactured consent among a critical mass of linguists, and the complex reception of his work, so complex in fact that enemies could end up as unwitting collaborators.

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