



The Linguistics Wars

Randy Allen Harris

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When it was first published in 1957, Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* seemed to be just a logical expansion of the reigning approach to linguistics. Soon, however, there was talk from Chomsky and his associates about plumbing mental structure; and a new phonology; and a new set of goals for the field, cutting it off completely from its anthropological roots and hitching it to a new brand of psychology. Rapidly, all of Chomsky's ideas swept the field. While the entrenched linguists were not looking for a messiah, apparently many of their students were. There was a revolution, a revolution which has colored the field of linguistics ever since. Chomsky's assault on the mainstream and his development of transformational-generative grammar was promptly endorsed by new linguistics recruits swelling the discipline in the sixties. Everyone was talking of the revolution and major breakthroughs seemed imminent. But something unexpected happened - Chomsky and his followers had a vehement and public falling out. In *The Linguistics Wars*, Randy Allen Harris traces the origins of this revolution in linguistics and tells how Chomsky began reevaluating the field and rejecting the extensions his students and erstwhile followers were making. Those he rejected (the generative semanticists) reacted bitterly, while new students began to pursue Chomsky's updated vision of language. The result was several years of infighting against the backdrop of the notoriously prickly sixties. The outcome of the dispute, Harris shows, was not a simple linear matter of a good theory beating out a bad one. The debates followed the usual trajectory of most large-scale clashes, scientific or otherwise. Both positions changed dramatically in the course of the dispute - the triumphant Chomskyan position was very different from the initial one; the defeated generative semantics position was even more transformed. Interestingly, important features of generative semantics have since made their way into

The Linguistics Wars Details

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From Reader Review The Linguistics Wars for online ebook

Anie says

A wonderful history of the development of generative grammar and the intellectual developments which led to the rise and fall of generative semantics. It's both engaging and, in my opinion, fair-minded; it presents a very nice overall view of the debate.

It also, of course, brings up the question of the primacy of meaning in grammar---excellent food for thought on that level.

Phoenix says

Excellent Backgrounder to the Field

Eminently suitable reading if you are embarking on a modern study of the field of linguistics or are writing an essay on the people and personalities involved or just like reading about the history and evolution of a science. Reads like a good novel. There are a few spots where the uninitiated might be intimidated by the technical treatments but they can be skimmed over. One gets a good sense of how, because of Chomsky, a Kuhnian style paradigm shift occurred. What's missing perhaps is some insight that transformational grammar found a fertile ground because Chomsky was at MIT which did not have a deeply established linguistics department but did have a bias towards mathematical and notational models.

The author warns you that the personalities, esp. Chomsky, come off a little abrasively. I got a sense of Chomsky as exceptionally brilliant, revolutionary but a man seduced into creating his own orthodoxy - and quite mean about it too. One wonders what might have happened had Chomsky not been dismissive of the study of semantics.

I enjoyed it a lot. Prof. Harris writes extremely well. ;-)

David says

Really enjoyable discussion of the progression of linguistics and the personalities of the field's players.

People say my name should be Jeff says

This isn't about "Linguistics" so much as it is about semantics.

David says

This book manages to describe academic battles without making it very clear what the substance is.

Admittedly, some of the work in this field is rather dense, but the book could have been a lot clearer and more sprightly. I did not care enough to get more than halfway through.

Dan Slimmon says

This tale of the generative/interpretive semantics debate manages to illuminate a very abstract, dry topic through thrilling narrative. I love Harris's wit and even handedness (the latter despite his clear affinity for Chomsky-pedestaling).

Despite reading *Aspects* twice, I've only got only a very superficial picture of what it's arguing and why. Armed with the context presented so vividly and thoroughly in *The Linguistics Wars*, I think I can make my next reading stick on a much deeper level.

Nat says

This is a very readable intellectual history of 20th century linguistics. The most enjoyable part of the book is the account of the revolt against Chomsky in the late 60s and early 1970s by the Generative Semanticists.

The Generative Semanticists thought Chomsky's use of examples was too stodgy. Chomsky's famous examples involve John:

'John is eager to please'
'John is easy to please'

Whereas the Generative Semanticists introduce a whole bunch of crazy countercultural names, like "Norbert the Nark" and "Figmeister", and "Quang Phuc Dong", the pseudonym for J.D. McCawley, who was at the University of Chicago. And their examples can be pretty entertaining:

"Amerika's claim that it was difficult to control Vietnamese aggression in Vietnam surprised no one"
(Grinder, 1970)

*"The shit that John took weighed 600 grams" (Quang, 1988)

*"I don't want to kiss no gorillas" (Postal, 1974)

Eventually the generative semantic program fell apart, but its practitioners went on to develop other areas of linguistics that are still in operation.

One of the semantics instructors at the U of C now said that the generative semanticists were doing interesting work but didn't have the technology to properly apply all of their interesting data.

Aaron says

A great history of war in academia, with emotional betrayals, highly abstract argumentation and many nasty words. And as a truly great academic clash, most people have never heard about it, and it probably affected them very little. As a non-linguist, this book also served as a serviceable introduction to some of the field's basic ideas, and it was interesting to read about Chomsky in his original role. I was only familiar with him through philosophy and politics. Seeing how he fought in this intellectual skirmish, I understand why one of my friend's email is "chomskyisntnice".

Othman says

Quite dense but very informative.

As the title indicates, Harris gives the readers a well rounded view of the heated debates that have occurred within the realm of linguistics since Chomsky's syntactic breakthrough in the 1950s.

Marc says

This is a really fascinating book on the sociology of science. It is also a really good background read on contemporary linguistics.

Katja says

I wonder who this book was targeted at. It is not a fun pop-science book, if names like Lakoff, Ross or Chomsky-the-linguist do not ring a bell then you'll probably read less than twenty pages (out of 400), it is too boring. However, if you know what these people are famous for, you probably also know something about linguistics and would like to see more technical substance which the book is short of. So who would appreciate it other than a student in linguistics writing a semester essay about how wrong linguists were just 50 years ago (and still are)?

Yifot says

too much historical over-view and hard logic based examples.

Tom says

What can I say about this book. It's approximately 300 pages long and it took me 2 years to read it. I'm not even sure whether I finished it. I just stopped reading and didn't care enough about the ending to continue.

It's not exactly bad. The scholarship is good and it's funny, at times. Maybe it's just not engaging, too theoretical. It seems unfair to call it too theoretical, it's a book about theory, but the author does seem to recognise this at times, diverting his digressions to the notes in the back.

I'm giving it 2 stars because I think it does what it sets out to do really well. For me that just wasn't enough.

Thomas says

This book chronicles both sides of the Generative Semantics vs. Interpretative Semantics debate and its aftermath. Highly recommended if you're into some semi-recent history lessons of the field of linguistics. It's also written in a pleasing and comprehensive style.

Kira says

I just really enjoyed this in the page-turner way. Recommend to linguists and philosophers of language for a good time.
