



Introducing Chomsky

John Maher, Judy Groves (Illustrator), Richard Appignanesi (Editor)

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The epoch-making theories of linguist Noam Chomsky maintain that the human brain has an innate language faculty, and that part of this biological endowment is a "universal grammar," a theory of principles common to all languages. Thus, all human languages and the ways in which children learn them are similar.

Introducing Chomsky traces Chomsky's understanding of the cognitive recognition involved in the use of language, and the technical apparatus needed to represent it. The book also describes Chomsky's radical critique of the institutions of power and the pathways of oppression, and his commitment to freedom and justice.

Introducing Chomsky Details

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From Reader Review Introducing Chomsky for online ebook

David W. says

Starting from page 120, the book diverts from Chomsky's work in linguistics to "radical critique of the institutions of power and the pathways of oppression, and his commitment to freedom and justice." Page 144 for example has him popped up with a quote balloon: "There's an unpronounceable 5-letter word in the United States – 'CLASS'." I've read better overall books in this Icon Booms series (HELLO, JOYCE, DARWIN, EINSTEIN & KAFKA.) but I've never seen a better diversion than this one.

Andrew Nguyen says

I picked this book on a whim, but it was a bad whim. Thumbing through the book, the art was quirky and I thought it might be an easy introduction to linguistics, a topic I know nothing about.

My main gripe is that the topics are covered in such little depth and switched between so quickly that I never had time to digest any of the ideas. I'm not sure if this book was meant to be a reference, but it would be a poor one at that. A lot of the explanations straddled the line between hand wavey and inscrutable detail. The art also really added nothing to my understanding, and a lot of the art just ended up being a cutout of Noam Chomsky talking with several unrecognizable (to me) linguistic figureheads. I learned maybe a little bit about linguistics from this book, but a lot about what Noam Chomsky looks like.

I'm not sure who the audience for this book, but maybe it should have been titled, "Introducing Chomsky for People who Already Study Linguistics and Also a Few Random Chapters on Politics."

Guy says

I purchased *Chomsky for Beginners* without much expectation, but as a Chomsky book to put into my library. I was very pleasantly surprised by the quality of the exposition and thought that went into putting this excellent synopsis of Chomsky's ideas in linguists and their role in utterly transforming our understanding of human language. Even more than that, Maher and Chomsky include a range of contrary opinions and subsequent arguments that, although very concise, clearly illuminate the issues, thinking and controversies.

The basic evisceration of the behaviourist model of language acquisition was well articulated throughout. But I like how he approached Skinner.

The Refutation of Behaviourism

In 1959, Chomsky composed a basic refutation of behaviourist psychology in this review of B.F. Skinner's Verbal Behaviour. According to Chomsky, children are not born tabula rasa. On the contrary, each child is genetically predisposed to structure how knowledge is acquired.

"The phrase 'X is reinforced by Y' is being used as a cover term for X wants Y, X likes Y, X wishes Y were the case, etc. Invoking the term 'reinforcement' has no explanatory force, and any idea that this paraphrase

introduces any new clarity or objectivity into the description of wishing, liking, etc., is a serious delusion."

Skinner's account rejects all postulations of inner states and sees human behaviour as entirely a function of antecedent events. For Chomsky, this reduction of human behaviour to 'conditioned responses' contradicts the actual [and demonstrated] complexity and freedom of consciousness (43).

I find the few quotations supplied to be on point and interesting. As a reader of fiction, even of so-called 'literature' I was bemused to read:

Perhaps literature will forever give far deeper insight into 'the full human person' than any model of scientific inquiry can hope to do (9).

The bulk (2/3) of the book covers linguistics. The balance of the book is Chomsky's political and media criticism. This was of less interest to me, that being where the bulk of my Chomsky reading has been. However with that exposure comes my ability to assess how well that section is put together. But more than that, the precise and clearly articulated criticisms of the media and socio-political thought in general was hugely informative and entertaining to read. For example, the contrast that Chomsky draws between 'enlightenment values' and how far our science and social perspicuity have fallen from them is delightful.

For example:

The American Paradox

The United States proudly calls itself 'the leader of the Free World'. We know the US as a free and open society, more so in many ways than societies of Western Europe. And yet, Chomsky has criticized the US as blind to what it really is...

- 1. One of the most depoliticized nations in the industrial world*
- 2. One of the most deeply indoctrinated societies in the industrial world*
- 3. One of the most conformist intelligentsias in the industrial world.*

Q: IS THIS NOT A PARADOX?

A: It only looks that way.

The freer the society the more well-honed and sophisticated its system of thought control and the indoctrination. The ruling élite, clever, class-conscious, ever sure of domination, make sure of that (138-9).

It is clear from the very first page that, unlike the one or two 'Dummy' books I've tried, the writers of *Chomsky for Beginners*, John Maher and Noam Chomsky, demonstrate deep respect for the readers' intelligence and ability to understand complex ideas. This at no time feels dumbed down. This book has been described as a good introduction to Chomsky's ideas, and it is. But far, far more importantly, this is a book that introduces one to the challenge of really *thinking*, even those who are, like me, familiar with Chomsky. And I loved that.

Now, everything up to this point would have earned from me four stars. So why five? Because for the first time I read someone else make the connection between C.G. Jung and Chomsky's ideas of language and language acquisition. I was so excited to see this! (For my connection, see my review of Noam Chomsky: A Philosophic Review by Justin Leiber.) From *Beginners* Maher does not elaborate on the connection beyond a citation on the Collective Unconscious which he implies has a correspondence to Chomsky's concepts of *Deep Structure* and *Universal Grammar*.

"One part of our biological make up is specifically dedicated to language. That is called our **language faculty**. **UG** is the **initial state** of that language faculty" (77).

...

Universal Grammar is that part of cognitive psychology (ultimately human biology) which seeks to determine the invariant principles of the language faculty and to determine as well the range of variation that those principles allow — that is, the possible human languages (78).

Now compare with Jung's idea of the collective unconscious and archetypes:

*The human psyche is composed of innate forms always present, giving direction and form to their actualization in images and action. The **collective unconscious** is universal: it is shared by everyone. "The autonomic contents of the unconscious or 'dominants' ... are not inherited ideas but inherited possibilities, necessities even, of bringing to birth the ideas by which these dominants have been expressed, every region has its forms of speech, which can vary infinitely" (80-1).*

Bettye Mashack says

Chomsky

I did not complete this book. really chose it by mistake. Was unable to complete. Was not what i thought it would be.

Savvas Katseas says

Πολ?, πολ?, πολ? κακ? μετ?φραση. Μια συλλογ? απ? ιδ?ες του Τσ?μσκι ?που φιλοδοξε? κ?θε σελ?δα να σε εισ?γει σε μια αντοτελ? ιδ?α του γλωσσολ?γου και διανοητ? αλλ? αν θ?λεις να την κατανο?σεις πραγματικ? πρ?πει ν' αφοσιωθε?ς, να ψ?ξεις σε ?λλες πηγ?ς και να επιστρ?ψεις. Και αυτ?, δεδομ?νου του ?τι υποτ?θεται πως προσπαθο?με να καταλ?βουμε το ?ργο εν?ς γλωσσολ?γου με την βο?θεια εικ?νων, κ?μικ και απλο?κ?ς γραφ?ς, ε?ναι μια τραγικ? ειρωνε?α.

Dulnath Jayasighe says

A clear, condensed explanation of Chomsky's linguistics.

The section on his politics provides an insightful critique of capitalism and American policy.

Zach says

A great book on Chomsky -- the linguist & the social critic. The analysis & exploration of Chomsky's linguist side was particularly fun.

"There are no magic answers, no miraculous methods to overcome the problems we face, just the familiar

ones: honest search for understanding, education, organization, action that raises the cost of state violence for its perpetrators or that lays the basis for institutional change -- and the kind of commitment that will persist despite the temptations of disillusionment, despite many failures and only limited successes, inspired by the hope of a brighter future." (Noam Chomsky)

kewan alghofaily says

????????? ?????? ??? ?????????? ???? ??? ?????????? ???? ?????? ???!

Josh says

Okay, maybe this isn't exactly a news flash, but Chomsky is pretty smart. In fact, he's too smart for me. And I'm a pretty sharp marble. But still, I don't get it. I get his political and social theories all right, but the linguistics is just over my head. Maybe if Powells weren't getting rid of the Introducing Books, and I could have gotten a copy of Introducing Linguistics, to read first, it might have made more sense, but lacking that, Introducing Chomsky is like getting a really intellectually stimulating and totally dry ass-raping.

Aristodemos says

I am not a linguist, nor do I have any interest in it, so the first part of this book was a waste of time. Skip to page 120 for the political part.

John says

A good lucid introduction to Chomsky's Linguistic accomplishments and theories, ending with an entree to his passion for libertarian political thought and his inspiring activism on behalf of the politically enthralled and unconsciously enslaved masses, ourselves included. Inspired to read this and more of his political philosophy by the documentary CHOMSKY: MANUFACTURING CONSENT.

Joe Lanman says

An 'introducing' book should be accessible, this isn't. Uses complex language and moves through difficult concepts too fast with little time spent explaining them

Ronan McDonnell says

Not sure i agree with his linguistics, but i don't have the expertise. It just seems to me that he doesn't prove that the intrinsic structure of language is received biology.

The politics i completely agree with.

But that's Chomsky, to review the book itself: it's excellent. Chomsky's oeuvre is enormous, this is a good start

Sinta says

An overview of Chomsky's linguistic theory and political views. Mainly focussing on his linguistic work (generative grammar). I enjoyed it, even though I was looking for more of a political POV. The short section on his politics was brief but clear, and even slightly satirical at points.

Siti Aziz says

Beautiful effort to simplify the subject. Although some images are quite random and the topic did not flow quite well
