★ FORUM ★

Clarification

Henk van Riemsdijk

It appears that some passages in my interview with Kleanthes Grohmann that appeared in the first issue of *Biolinguistics* have given rise to unexpected and unintended interpretations. These concern specifically the passages on the second page about when and how the biolinguistics program was first mentioned in the fifties.

1. I observed that there was no explicit mention of the biolinguistic program in *LSLT* [Chomsky 1955] (modulo the introduction to its 1975 edition that was written much later), in 'Three Models for the Description of Language' [Chomsky 1956], and in *Syntactic Structures* [Chomsky 1957]. The observation as such, (as was pointed out to me by Paul Postal, p.c.) had already been made in J.J. Katz' 1981 book entitled *Language and Other Abstract Objects*, pp. 40-41).

2. I intended to leave open the question of whether Chomsky already had the biolinguistic program in mind at that point. The abovementioned introduction to *LSLT* states that the "realist position", the assumption that the structure of language is a "system with 'psychological reality'" (p. 36), is taken for granted in *LSLT* (p. 37). In actual fact, Noam Chomsky (p.c.) informs me these ideas had already come up in late 1951 in discussions with Morris Halle and Eric Lenneberg. I was not principally interested in the question as to when these ideas first came up, but rather that in the Skinner review that appeared in 1959 [Chomsky 1959] the biolinguistic perspective was explicitly and forcefully presented for the first time. Whatever the reasons, I feel in retrospect that this was a wise strategy.

3. In speculating about the reasons why Chomsky did not mention the biolinguistic perspective in the 1955–1957 publications, I (at least in part mistakenly) suggested that this had to do with the fact that audiences at MIT were more interested in the more mathematical aspects of Chomsky's research. This may have been true for *Syntactic Structures*, which was based on lecture notes from Chomsky's classes at MIT in 1956, but when *LSLT* was written, Chomsky was still a Junior Fellow at the Harvard University Society of Fellows. In the MIT lectures he addressed undergraduate MIT students who "had been taught that information theoretic approaches […] were the answer to the problems of language and psychology" (Noam Chomsky, p.c.). Clearly it was important in those lectures to address these misconceptions and

then present the arguments for a transformational approach to language. In characterizing the audience I made the mistake of suggesting that the military, like the students, had an interest in the information-theoretic approaches that Chomsky was arguing against (that research was often financed by the military was quite common and in no way implies any pressures on the content of the research). By this I did not intend to suggest that Chomsky in any way adapted his work to the requirements of the military or that his choice of lecture topics was influenced by the perspective of an appointment at MIT. If the text permitted such an interpretation, I apologize — it was entirely unintended. *(Editors' note: Due to the publication schedule, we had to urge Prof. van Riemsdijk to postedit and proofread the entire interview at the very last minute.)* What I had in mind was that then and now certain choices of topics and certain ways of presenting them to the public can be influenced by strategic considerations. After all, the intellectual climate at the time was (and in many ways still is) quite hostile to many of Chomsky's ideas. Thinking about strategies to present these ideas in the most convincing and forceful manner is in no way unethical, in fact it is part and parcel of the generative enterprise, as it is in many other branches of science.

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