N. Chomsky: Topics in the Theory of
Generative Grammar

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The theory of the Generative Grammar of Chomsky is really one of the most prominent achievements in the long history of language theories from the antiquity down to the present age as is recently indicated with full right by Dinneen in his latest work (1966, 355ff.). The author of the theory is said to have received in his attitude toward language very much from the Humboldtian idea of language of which indeed we feel we can perceive in his works, though implicitly and yet vividly, several important traces of influence,—and owing to, or availing himself of which he seems to have been able to liberate the language and the language studies from the rigid “physical” refrigerator of Bloomfield-Brand. With Chomsky just as with Humboldt, a language is not “ein todtes Erzeugtes” at all (Humboldt VII, 44; recently Menze 1965, 229; 365, N. 7). He has properly and lawfully (that is to say, exactly and flexibly according to the real nature of language) launched his linguistic inquiries through setting in his front the syntactic structures of language. This is the only right way of getting a full insight into the nature of living and working language as a whole and is at the same time the proper attitude of deferring to the important Humboldtian concept of “Energeia” (Humboldt I, 255f.; VII, 46).

But Chomsky did not confined himself within the limits of the Humboldtian thinking. The gist and core of the Humboldtian thinking of language was centered around the problems of the “Eine Sprache” of the whole humankind (VII, 51). But this concept of the “Eine Sprache” was
as much of a metaphysical character as that of the "Urpflanze" of Goethe in his botanical theory (Izui 281). Both of them, however do not lack the character of being entities respectively. But the concept of the "Eine Sprache" is by its very nature highly ambiguous and elusive (unerfassbar) at any rate, so much so that Humboldt himself gave up his mind at last to realize any explicitly retional (i.e. categorical and specific-language-independent) device of describing objectively not only the "Eine Sprache" but, more than that by extention, also any natural language in particular, though, concerning the latter case especially, he had once been very eager to set up this kind of fully general formulae of complete descriptive adequacy (his letter to Schiller, 11–v–1795; Izui 138). Chomsky's great merit is that he has made here a brilliant break-through ("Durchbruch", to use an emotional term of German phylosophy) where Humboldt had hesitated to take any positive step further, and has developed a highly attractive general theory and positive procedure opening a novel way leading to realize such a device or formulae as was desired and yet missed by Humboldt.

Needless to say, Chomsky is one of the most penetrating and creative rationalists of today, assuredly worthy of the name of an eminent Cartesian. But generally a good rationalist is not a rigidly mechanical ratiocinator, just as Kant is not in his First Critique nor even Wittgenstein in his Tractatus and Investigations. All of them knew and know the pre-existence and the intrinsic power of the human intuition and also the ultimate indescribability of the human "energie spirituelle [primordiale". Thence as a matter of course, we find Chomsky's Cartesianism is happily floating upon, and intimately inter-acting with the Humboldtian way of thinking, though these two disciplines are ordinarily not compatible. (Humboldt himself seems to have been not very much interested in Descartes, as we can perceive it in his diary (XVI, 636; Izui, 144)). It may not be accidental that the Chomskian Syntactic Component which generates SD's (syntactic descriptions) each of which consists of a 'surface structure and
a deep structure (Chomsky: Topics, 7 and passim) reminds us of the Humboldtian “third party which combines Sounds [phonology] with Concepts [semantics]” (VII, 101).

The Generative Grammar of Chomsky may be a realization of the “innere Grammatik” postulated but not formulated explicitly by Humboldt which he himself called a “grammaire sousentendue” in his letter to A. Remusat (VII, 312—313; Izui 264). Chomsky is really a successful continuator and at the same time a breaker-through (Durchbrecher) of his great predecessor.—More successful he would have been if he had not confined himself solely and strictly within the rigid syntactical structures of the contemporary English language.

Lastly just one thing to beg his instructions. In all his works Chomsky touches very rarely upon the problems of word order of a sentence. Is this because he treats ordinarily a language of fixed word order like English? or because he thinks the matter is wholly out of the question? or because his transformations can be carried out only with “continuous constituents” (Chomsky: Topics, 7) to keep the grammaticalness of a sentence? Then how does he think about the phenomena of Hyperbaton (or Traiectio) in Latin f. ex.? There is indeed something of “purely stylistic” (Chomsky: Topics 38) in here, but the fact that the Hyperbaton does never abolish the grammaticalness nor the acceptability of a sentence must be explained with descriptive adequacy. How could we explain the generative process of the following simple sentence by his Temb device f. ex.? Quos ecce greges a monte remotos cernis in aprico decerpere gramina campo, hos tibi do senior iuveni pater (Calpurnius Siculus, Micon, 7-9). The mode of structure of the whole semantic content of this ‘sentence’ is conditional upon this order of words in a subtle manner, and the matter of this kind is presupposed already as self-evident in Hofmann-Szantyr also (1965, 397 ff.; 689 ff.).

There are, on the other side, some serious difficulties in Chomsky’s attitude intending to “break through” everything syntactic by means of his
systems of formal rules. True seem to be in this Connection the follow-
ing words of Grunig (1966, §3): "Nous avons ici, dans les termes formels
de la théorie chomskienne, donné la démonstration—ou un aperçu de ce
que peut être la démonstration—de l'insuffisance, pour la génération de
toutes les phrases d'une langue naturelle, d'une grammaire générative basée
exclusivement sur les systèmes formels".

Any great men, and any great books and treatises, have never given
any definitive and imperative general-conclusions on anything human and
linguistic. They seem to have been so minutely acquainted with, and to
have taken so serious a view of, the subtle details in men and languages
that they duly hesitated to bridging so simple, so straight, and so regu-
lating a theory over the subtle and remarkable details. See the remarks
of Uhlenbeck (1967).

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