

Review of Harris 2021 *The Linguistics Wars: Chomsky, Lakoff, and the Battle over Deep Structure* (2nd edition) New York: Oxford University Press, ISBN 9780199740338

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What is the role of meaning in theories of grammar, and what idealisations are required in theorising about language? *The Linguistics Wars* is the revised second edition of a well-known book about a schism in linguistics driven by different answers to these questions. Those involved were pioneers of Noam Chomsky's cognitive revolution in linguistics: Chomsky and like-minded syntacticians on one side, and on the other, adherents of what came to be known as 'generative semantics' including George Lakoff, Robin Lakoff, James McCawley and Haj Ross, several of whom had recently been Chomsky's students.

For a few years around 1970 the debate was noisy, sometimes vicious. The opposing camps disagreed about many things, from rather technical points in syntax to the deeper questions about meaning and idealisation already mentioned. But by the mid 70s the two sides had grown apart, Chomsky and others pursuing a research agenda – now called 'generative syntax' or 'generative linguistics' – unfolding from assumptions made in his earlier work, while the generative semanticists came to reject most of the foundations they had inherited from him. Their research programme ceased to exist, and individuals had to rebuild from the ground up.

The new edition brings the story up to the present day, and interestingly reframes the conflict as an episode in an ongoing clash between two narratives about language, with Chomsky the leading figure on one side and George Lakoff said to exemplify the opposing tendency. But it becomes clear that Harris is convinced one camp is right about language and the mind, and, perhaps for that reason, he is not a good guide to the other side's perspective.

The Linguistics Wars presents the generative semantics debate in considerable detail. The theories are nicely explained for the most part, but the focus is just as much on argumentative style and who influenced whom, reflecting Harris' expertise: he has degrees in English literature and technical communication as well as psycholinguistics, and has published extensively on rhetoric in science.

An introduction sets the scene: what is linguistics, who were the parties to the dispute, and what sort of data did they disagree about? After that the book proceeds chronologically, starting with Chomsky's revolution in the 1950s and 60s. The heart of the book follows: five chapters which explain how generative semantics emerged, what it initially espoused, and how views on both sides evolved.

Early on, Chomsky proposed that there are two kinds of grammatical rules: phrase structure rules that build up basic sentence structures, and transformations that take one underlying structure and produce (e.g.) a declarative or a related interrogative clause, an active sentence or its passive congener.¹ Generative semantics took this further, claiming that at a fundamental level of representation, synonymous sentences are identical. For example, Lakoff proposed that (1a) and (1b) are derived from one underlying structure:

- (1) a Alba killed the bogies.
- b Alba caused the bogies to die.

As Harris says, an obvious worry is that the underlying structures will have to be very complex: e.g. *assassinate* might be analysed as “cause x to become not alive for political reasons in a covert manner, where x is a reasonably important human” (p. 81). What started out as an explanation of the relationship between clauses risks having to build the whole of semantics and pragmatics into syntax. Trying to construct a theory that covers everything may lead to no theory at all, a consequence some generative semanticists came to embrace (see Newmeyer 1996: 51).

There is a good deal more to say, of course – for one thing, lexical decomposition was only one topic among several; for another, some of the ideas explored by generative semantics have resurfaced in later syntactic theories and lexical semantics. Also, pragmatics and formal semantics were just emerging as distinct areas of linguistics and where to draw the lines was one of the things at issue. (Harris notes that generative semanticists contributed to pragmatics, but doesn't mention the *prima facie* clash with Grice's aim of keeping linguistic semantics simple by explaining much about speaker's meaning elsewhere.)

In any case, it became clear that generative semantics had run its course. Harris explains what the leading figures did next in two chapters that cover subsequent developments, with a particular focus on Construction Grammar and Lakoff's work on metaphor. The book ends with a chapter attempting all-things-considered judgments of Chomsky's style of argumentation and his impact on linguistics.

¹ The operations proposed and their explanatory role have evolved over the last seven decades. Their descendants in contemporary generative grammar are Merge and Move. Chomsky has recently argued that movement in the grammar is a natural consequence of Merge, the operation that builds structure. See below.

There's a wealth of detail about linguistics and linguists in this book: primarily various versions of generative grammar, but also touching on everything from prototype theory to non-linear phonology. Harris seems to have tracked down and read practically everything from the generative semantics years – no small feat, given that a lot of the key works circulated in mimeograph and were only published much later, if at all, and – to the considerable benefit of historians of the discipline – he interviewed many of the protagonists, and quotes liberally from these interviews.

All of this might make the book seem like hard work. But Harris breathes life into the issues and imparts a strong sense of the personalities of the linguists involved. He has a particular gift for a memorable, illuminating phrase, like the one that begins the book: "Language is the strangest and most powerful thing ever to exist on this planet".

On the other hand, Harris often strains for effect, with a tone so determined to be irreverent that it grates. That's mostly a matter of taste; less so the way that frequent rhetorical swipes at Chomsky cumulatively undermine Harris' claim to be neutral (p. xv). A few examples, of many: "Chomsky says, thumbs in his vest"; "up to familiar tricks here"; "was too busy opposing something else, the Vietnam War, to find the time or the energy for such a trifling matter, even if he wanted to, which he didn't, so there", plus repeated references to Chomsky as an 'alpha silverback' or 800-lb gorilla.

More seriously, Harris fails to clearly present the assumptions underlying Chomsky's research programme. As in the first edition, he underestimates the extent to which developments in Chomsky's thinking in the 1960s and 70s were driven by his core commitments rather than disputes with generative semantics: to see grammar as a distinct mental system, and to understand acquisition of that system as highly constrained by the innate endowment (Langendoen 1995: 586).

Also carried over from the first edition is a comparison of Chomsky's influence on linguistics to the famous passage where Hamlet bullies Polonius into agreeing that a cloud looks like a camel, then a weasel, then a whale. The impression given is that Chomsky made changes to his theories just to wrongfoot his critics. Fine to make the charge, but Harris doesn't make it stick, instead revealing that he hasn't grasped the motivations for the changes, a concern to simplify and broaden the theory of the mental grammar and its innate component.

An excellent example is Chomsky's recent reduction of the Move operation to a variety of Merge. The new edition gives the impression this is a camel/weasel case:

"the transformation [is] gone now. Conceptually, that would seem pretty dramatic [but] at Chomsky Inc., its removal [...] was just another day at the office. Quite

literally, the last remaining transformation, Move, was given a new name one day, assimilating it methodologically into the new star in the program, Merge.” (p. 364)

But it becomes clear later (pp. 377–8) that Harris knows that this is not a purely verbal move. Whether the reduction works can be debated, of course, but Harris doesn’t give the reader any sense of why it seems a good idea to some, perhaps even, as one eminent syntactician has called it, Chomsky’s “best idea for a long time” (Adger 2019b). The claim is that displacement phenomena such as *wh*-movement are a natural consequence of the operation that builds structure: if so, this would be a considerable gain in the simplicity and explanatory power of the theory.

There are several similar passages there isn’t space to deal with here. Of course, there are some difficult concepts here and problems with evolving uses of terminology, but these have been clarified in secondary literature, and a key role of a book like this is to set such things out for the reader. Instead, in concert with Harris’ focus on argumentation and rhetoric, the way he treats these issues risks fostering the impression that there’s something fraudulent about success in modern linguistics – who wins depends only on “the opprobrium or approbation [of] the largest and loudest audience” as Mabry (1995: 85) concluded from the first edition – rather than a more reasonable view: this is science proceeding as usual, with – yes – confusion and arguments, but also deepening insight.

The most serious problem with the book is that it never really gets to grips with the issues that drove the generative semantics debate: the role of meaning in theories of grammar, and abstraction away from messy data. Because of the chronological organisation, comments on both themes are scattered throughout the book. That needn’t have mattered, but Harris fails to join the dots for the reader, so one has the frustrating sensation that the wood is obscured by masses of trees.

Harris actually puts the key point about abstraction quite well early on: “Every science needs to slice their pies somewhere [...] or it can’t produce coherent explanations” (p. 11). The key questions are therefore where the slices need to go according to the different sides of the dispute, and why. But Harris completely misunderstands Chomsky’s position. Chomsky doesn’t advocate imposing “arbitrary” limits on the area of study to get a “more manageable data set” (p. 184); rather, that we focus on data that bear on questions that will admit of general, systematic explanation. Given Chomsky’s view that there is a discrete cognitive system for syntax, to investigate its properties it makes sense to abstract away from complications caused by the interaction of that module with other aspects of cognition such as working memory and theory of mind. Harris mentions encapsulation a few times, but that is irrelevant to Chomsky’s claim, which is not about a processing module, but a discrete body of knowledge: a mental system that is distinct from the rest of cognition in that it is organised by proprietary principles.

In the new concluding chapters, it becomes clear that Harris thinks Chomsky's view of cognition is simply passé. He writes, "Cognitive Psychology changed under Chomsky's feet. Predominantly it now means a fundamentally organic and embodied mental system, decidedly nonmodular" (p. 361), and it becomes clear he favours linguistic theories with very broad coverage: recursion *and* metaphor, not either in isolation. But both the ontological and the methodological questions remain open. Plenty of psychologists work on distinct mental capacities – visual processing and mindreading are two prominent examples. And in linguistics, progress has been made by specialisation: we have separate theories of structures the mind can build (syntax) and what we can do with them (pragmatics) including figurative speech. Just because we pre-theoretically regard both as in some sense 'linguistic' phenomena doesn't mean there must be interesting generalisations to be discovered that cover both. Again, it's fine to take sides; the problem is that Harris is so unresponsive to Chomsky's underlying assumptions and motivations that he fails to present them clearly to the reader. That risks making one side seem merely unreasonable or misguided, a fatal flaw in a work of intellectual history.

Those wanting an introduction to generative linguistics or its history should look elsewhere (Adger 2019a; Newmeyer 1996). Still, *The Linguistics Wars* is an indispensable resource for anyone interested in the dispute it covers and its aftermath, as long as its limitations are kept in mind.

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