SOME REFLECTIONS ON CHOMSKY'S LINGUISTIC UNIVERSALS

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The work of Noam Chomsky no doubt brought about a revolution in the study of language. His work caught the attention of everybody when Chomsky claimed that human beings are innately disposed to learn certain types of language. In other words, the languages that actually exist are the ones which children are predisposed to learn. If this thesis is correct then a study of language should reveal things about the nature of mind. Such *mentalism* of Chomsky asserts that the child is born with a perfect knowledge of *universal grammar,* that is, he is born with a fixed schematism that he uses in acquiring language. A grammar of a language should not be taken simply as a description of that language, but as a model which helps in explaining how a native speaker actually produces and understands language. A grammar, according to Chomsky, can be regarded as a set of rules in terms of which sentences can be generated. We can regard native speakers as being acquainted with such rules as they speak and listen. Chomsky says :

> "The person who has acquired knowledge of a language has internalized
> a system of rules that relate sound and meaning in a particular way".[1]

Thus, the rules of a language which constitute the competence of a native speaker are mentally represented, since they are derived from some innately possessed organising principles. When the linguists study the rules of grammar, they actually study an aspect of the human mind, for these rules are nothing but part of a person's intellectual equipment.

Chomsky tried to show that competence or a set of rules which a speaker has internalized and which enables a speaker to produce and understand indefinite number of possible grammatical sentences or knowledge of native

speakers cannot be explained without presupposing it as an innate endowment of mind. In this respect Chomsky's claim sounds like the claim made by *Descartes* and *Leibniz* to the effect that there are innate ideas and that there is innate knowledge.

Now the question is, how can one say that a native speaker's competence is linked up with innate ideas? Chomsky obviously refers to the child as being endowed with a set of abstract categories and rules which she applies to absorb and internalize the data of the language she is learning. As the child is said to be innately acquainted with a set of Universals or with a set of substantive and formal rules, she is capable to form unconsciously, an infinite number of hypotheses about how sentences are to be produced, understood etc. After this she is exposed to the utterances and sentences of the language she is to learn. She then finds that many of the hypotheses formulated do not match with the facts about the language - however, some hypotheses do match. Finally, by continuing this process, the child unconsciously comes to accept only those hypotheses which enable him to give correct interpretations of the language. According to Chomsky, this is the way how the child becomes a master of his language.

Chomsky's claim that human beings are innately disposed to learn certain types of language, can be supported by two observable facts : first, that human languages have striking similarities among them; and secondly, that a child follows the same routes to learning the languages they learn.[2] The former is obvious if we observe that the languages all of which tend to form relative clauses seem to do so on broadly similar lines although the languages may be otherwise unrelated to each other. That human beings are predisposed to build relative clauses can explain the fact that there is this striking similarity among languages. The latter fact is also very evident. We often observe that any child, while learning her own language, passes through similar stages of learning. For instance, a child learning English language goes through a stage of producing two-word utterances like :

    1. Mummy sleep.

    2. Daddy gone.

Again, when the child first learns to form negative sentences she utters mostly in such ways :

1. No Mummy sleep

2. No Daddy come.

Then at a later stage the child puts the word *"not"* before a verb when she tries to utter a negative sentence :

1. Mummy not sleep.

2. Daddy not come.

The child gradually comes to the final stage, where the English verbal system is completely grasped by her and by that time she is able to construct sentences like the adult :

1. Mummy is not sleeping; Mummy must not sleep.

2. Daddy didn't come; Daddy has not come etc.

The assumption that all languages follow, in these respects the same pattern as that there are *linguistic universals,* gives stress on the search for linguistic rules. But to support the claim for/to *linguistic universals* does not mean that languages, do not have their own linguistic idiosyncrasies. Rather, it is better to say that even these idiosyncrasies will fall into universal patterns-languages do not vary without limit.

Chomsky's account of language which may be said to be a rationlaistic one shows itself in two ways :

a)   The native speaker's competence of language is connected with innateness.

b)   Further, this innateness can satisfactorily account for linguistic universals.

Hence, to Chomsky, in spite of the surface differences in language, all languages have many basic similarities and these are called *"universals"* of language. Thus .

> "any child will pick up the language of any community in which it finds itself. Rather than postulate that every child is born with a hundred innate grammars .... it is a better guess that all languages share a single underlying structure, and that children are born with a dispostion to follow this structure in projecting an actual language on the basis of what is said around them".[3]

Now one may object that the *language-using* chimpanizees stand as a threat to the Chomskyan claim that humans are innately endowed with linguistic skills. Thus it is legitimate to think, that since Chimpanzees can be taught to communicate with a humanly built linguistic system, so human language cannot be said to remain unique to man. However, the conclusion that has been drawn is not very convincing. For, from the fact that chimpanzees can be taught to speak human languages (though in a limited way), it does not follow that humans are not innately disposed to learn languages, just as, from the fact that man can learn to build bird's -nests, it does not follow that birds are not innately equipped to build their nests. In fact it is the genetic issue which plays a crucial role here. Or, in another way the linguistic development of a child is genetically determined

The grammar or the set of rules that is said to be embedded in the brain of a human-being, in a sense, is a construct of the linguist - in that linguists always attempt to construct grammars. But the importance of grammar is displayed when it is the construct of the child, who within a very short span of time becomes a master of it, and also by the adult who knows it . It can be said that grammars are psychologically real. Each person may have his own grammar differing perhaps in some respects from the grammars of other person. But it is to be noted that every grammar has certain things in common with every other grammar and this is due to the result of genetic constraints on the ability of human beings to learn languages.

Now the limitation of such a rationalistic theory of language lies in its emphasis only on the structure of language and not on how language is used. The Chomskyan assumption that child is innately endowed with a universal grammar - the forms that are common to all languages which human-beings can speak, does not take us very far, unless socio-cultural factors appear on the horizon. Chomsky overlooks the crucial fact about language that it is fundamentally a social behaviour. We cannot ignore such aspects as how language is used, the circumstances under which different utterances are produced, the purposes of the utterers or the effects on the hearers. In fact language is not a self-contained system of rules and structures independent of context and ways of life.

Here we can take Searle's view with profit :

"I think that the most interesting questions about syntax have to do with how form and function interact - they have to do with the questions : "what are these syntactical forms for'? Language, for me, is to talk with, and to write with, so I want to say that the study of the syntax will always be incomplete unless we get a study of linguistic use".[4]

Actually the structure of language, as I believe, is influenced by communicative function. Language is not a formalized system by which we can explain the competence of the native speakers only with reference to having an internal representation of such a system of rules.

Moreover, we must be aware of the fact that human beings from their early stage learns many complex patterns of social behaviour in the same *"untaught"* manner in which he learns his language. If it is very odd to postulate any distinct innate schemata to account for the human being's learning (at his early childhood) of complex patterns of social behaviour, why should things be specifically different in the case of language acquisition? It is not really clear why lingusitic competence should be regarded as innate, why it should not be continuous with other human capacities. Actually language, is not only one and unique element in the spectrum of human capacities. We are also capable of different non-verbal social intercourse which ranges from religious ritual to how we behave in a subway crowd. The infinite diverese interpersonsal situations are really isomorphic with that of linguistic behaviour. One must notice that the contingencies in interpersonal stituations are equally novel or unbounded - the rules are equally finite and recursive. Thus there is no reason why linguistic competence should not be regarded as continuous with other human capacities, e.g. driving a car or playing a game. We have the rules of driving and this enables us to drive a car through a potentially infinite number of different situations. Now shall we have to postulate *"innate schematism"* in order to explain these abilities? If it is implausible to maintain innate schematism for such abilities, then what is the ground for postulating innate schematism in the case of language?

It is somewhat implausible to think that language is nothing but it is a matter of making hypotheses in terms of innate schemata and then grasping a language all at once. Language learning is rather a fact of many trials and errors - it is a gradual process of a child from simple to complex language games

the process which takes a human-being from naivety to sophistication. Rules of language, I believe, are infiltrated by a series of beliefs and expectations. These beliefs are the shared responses of a community constituted and developed by its common practices, modes of activities. The point that I want to hammer most is that language is very much a part of a child's growing participation in a common form of life, and thereby in a common agreement or beliefs about how rules are to be applied. This is the point which Chomsky under his innatistic framework has not really sufficiently attended to.

Philosophers are quite often found to search for adequacy conditions on which a theory should stand. Chomsky thought that a theory of linguistic competence can be adequate if innatism is embraced by the theory. But the danger is that such adequacy conditions are taken as a means for cancelling alternative theories.

However, we can have an idea of lingustic universals in a different mode. This alternative explanation of linguistic universals, as proposed by Habermas gives emphasis on the communicative function of language. Habermas' theory may now stand as an adequate alternative approach to the foregoing Chomskyan scheme. With the help of the proposal of Habermas, we can show that an analysis of language is possible not by taking into account the mere syntactic system but by taking communicative aspect as the basic medium. It is a fact that in speaking we not only make well-formed sentences, but relate our speech to others around us.

Thus Habermas says :

"In order to participate in normal discourse, the speaker must have - in addition to his lingusitic competence - basic qualifications of speech and of symbolic interaction (role behaviour) at his disposal, which we may call communicative competence".[5]

Communicative interaction is an autonomous sphere in which cultural traditions are historically transmitted and social relations are institutionally organised. Language is dependent upon social processes which are not fully linguistic in nature. Habermas says, "it is also a medium of domination and social force".[6]

However, Habermas like Chomsky talks about adequacy conditions upon

which his theory of communication stands. He says -

1)   The speakers should be free from any constraints - internal or external.

2)   The speakers should be free to speak according to the dictate of reason.

3)   The speaker should mean what he says.

According to Habermas, communication between the speaker and the hearer will be successful if there are no external threats of the power - the threats which become ideology and internalized by the people and as a result which takes shape as an internal constraint. Communication, thus, will become successful when both the speaker and the hearer will be in the the same footing and will not have any difference between them by the domination or force of the power or ideology or by any other source. Habermas thinks that since we are rational beings we can be treated with equal dignity and honour. And since we are rational beings no communication will be successful unless it is dependent on the principles of reason. According to Habermas, there should not be any emotional factors involved in the communication, only one must be rational and guided by the principles of reason. Hence it stands that Habermas speaks about the *ideal communication* which is different from the communication that we understand normally.

Habermas talks about *action* and *discourse.* "Action" refers to everyday situation of social interaction, in which information is captured through sensory experience and exchanged through ordinary language. Whereas, "discourse" refers to a realm of communication which is abstracted from the contexts of everyday life. In discourse participants are there to search for arguments and justifications and not perform actions or to share experiences. However, the motive to search for arguments and justifiacation is *"a cooperative readiness"* to arrive at an undestanding. According to Habermas, by communication it is not only meant understanding, but by communication it is also meant agreement of the hearer with the speaker.

According to Habermas, when we are engaged in speech acts, we are subject to the essential conditions of the speech-acts which consist in making four validity claims :

1) intelligibility

2) truth

3) correctness, and

4) sincerity

The successful performance of a speech-act essentially needs that in issuing an utterance, the speaker implicitly claims that what is said is *intelligible,* that the propositional content is *true*, that the performative part is *correct* or legitimate, and that what is believed is expressed with *sincerity.* The hearer in the same way understands the utterance by generally assuming that the speaker is sincere, that he takes what is said to be true and so on. Hence these are the four validity claims stated above, and these competent speakers must reciprocally maintain with each of their speech-acts, and this creates the background of normally functioning language-games. Thus the differentiation of the standard speech-act shows two levels that are involved in communication : (1) the level of intersubjectivity, upon which the speaker and the hearer communicate with one another and (2) the level of objects, about which the speaker and the hearer come to an understanding. Any successful speech-act, according to Habermas, results in the establishment of a relation in which at least two subjects come to an understanding about a state of affairs.

Now the ability to generate grammatical sentences in speech-acts and also the ability to communicate presuppose, that all languages have a universal core or native speakers have *pragmatic universals* or *dialogue-constitutive* universals. These universals are intersubjective, *a-priori* linguistic elements which enable the speaker, while producing a speech-act, to reproduce the general structures of the speech situation. The universals are not merely a linguistic articulation of pre-existing conditions, rather they are the elements which establish these conditions. Without these universals speech-act, interaction and communication are not possible among the speakers and hearers. Actually when we learn to speak language, we master these pragmatic universals and, thus, acquire commucative compertence. Habermas refers to several categories of expressions which function as pragmatic universals and these are as follows :

1)   Personal pronouns like ''I'' and ''You'' secure intersubjective validity of semantic rules.

2)   The deictic expressions of space and time which connect the intersubjective domain (the interaction between ''I'' and ''You'') with the domain of objects about which they talk.

3) The perforamative verbs that are sub-divided into four classes :

    (i)   *Communicatives* (to say, ask etc.),

    (ii)   *Constatives* (to assert, to describe),

    (iii)   *Representatives* (to admit, to conceal),

    (iv)   *Regulatives* (to order, to prohibit).

These performatives help the native speakers to express relations and to make certain distinctions which are very crucial for a speech situation.

According to Habermas, all these above universals are the elements which establish the validity or essential conditions of language as communication. These are the Habermas' pragmatic universals which communicatively competent speakers have at their disposal and these are the means for the construction of an ideal speech situation.

Hence we can see that the linguistic universals are not the prerogative of innatism alone. Further, Chomskyan theory of linguistic universals does not give us a comprehensive account of language, for it fails to recognize the cultural and communicative aspect of language, which in Habermas' scheme has been given an important role to play. When Chomsky holds that

"Our knowledge of language involves properties of a much more abstract nature, not indicated directly in the surface structure",[7]

it is not clear how starting from the culturally contingent features of language we can pass on to the culturally indifferent, universal, unchanging and unlearned linguistic rules.

NOTES

1.   Chomsky, N., 1968, *Language and Mind,* Harcourt Brace & World, P.23

2.   Smith, N. & Wilson, D., 1979, *Modern Linguistics The Results of Chomsky's Revolution* Penguin Books, p.27

3.   Hacking, IAN.,1975,*Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.66

4.   Serle's dialogue with Maggee, *Men of Ideas*, Oxford, Oxford University Press,
       1982, p. 171

5.   Habermas, J. 'Toward a Theory of Communicative Competence', in H.P.
       Dricitzel, *Recent Sociology*, No.2, New York : Macmillan, 1970, p.131.

6.   Thompson, J. B.,''Universal Pragmatics'' in J. B. Thompson and David Held
       (eds), *Habermas : Critical Debates*, London : Macmillan, 1983,p. 117

7.   Chomsky, N., 1972, *Language and Mind* (enlarged edition), New York, Harcourt,
       Brace Jovanovich, Inc.,p. 37.