Interview

Trains of Thought on the Issues of Syntax, the Lexicon, and Pragmatics: An Interview with Noam Chomsky

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József Andor: Thank you very much, Noam, for giving me a chance to interview you during your extremely short stay at the Olinco meeting in Olomouc. My previous interview with you took place in your room at MIT roughly 10 years ago. Ten years is not a very long time in the development of fields of science and scholarly work. Still, I would like to ask you to let me know what you think have been the major, most outstanding advances taking place in linguistic theory in general, and also concerning the generative trend of linguistics in particular, in the last ten years.

Noam Chomsky: I have my own personal interests, of course. They are not necessarily the interests of the field. What interests me is the progress that has been made in the areas that I talked about today, showing how much the basic structure of language and the nature of language can be explained in terms of extremely simple, elementary principles about the nature of computation and the simplest possible computational operations. And it turns out that a fair amount is falling into place, for the reasons I discussed. I think that it’s a

1 Chomsky’s plenary talk given at the Olomuc Colloquium (June 5, 2014) was entitled Problems of Projection: Extensions.
reasonable goal for linguistics to expect that that can go rather far, but it’s a challenging problem. In addition to that, there’s just been a huge expansion of the range of languages that have been studied at a level of depth of which was never conceivable before, and in certain areas there is simply totally new material coming out, notably in formal semantics, pragmatics, syntactic theory, and other areas. So the materials available for study are vastly richer than they were before, and I think there are promising efforts to attempt to find principled explanations for many fundamental aspects of language, and I think there are pretty far reaching implications.

J.A.: I would like to continue by asking you about the role of the lexicon and its relation to the tenet of syntactocentrism dominating in your model of linguistic description. Are speakers required to have a full grasp of the meaning of words both at the lexical (i.e. dictionary) and the encyclopedic levels of knowledge to be able to construct contextually appropriate and valid sentential strings during communication?

N.C.: Well, I would distinguish encyclopedic levels of knowledge from meanings of words. Those are different topics. So you can know all the meanings of