

SAARA HAAPAMÄKI

THE HISTORY OF SWEDISH GRAMMAR AND PROFESSOR CHOMSKY¹

1. Introduction

Noam Chomsky's theory of grammar has sometimes been characterized as a kind of revolution in the history of linguistics.² Whether it really can be described as a scientific revolution in Thomas Kuhn's sense is controversial,³ but one could perhaps say that no linguist or no linguistic school after Chomsky has been able to ignore totally his theoretical work.⁴ This is also true for Swedish grammar; in fact, Chomsky's theory was given a very enthusiastic reception in Sweden, particularly in the early 70's. It has, furthermore, left lasting traces on grammatical description, although the general tendency in Swedish linguistics today should perhaps rather be described as anti-Chomskyan.

My aim in this paper is *not* to provide a newer or better interpretation of Chomsky's ideas, nor is it to provide a criticism of them. It is rather to point out a couple of problems that arise when some aspects of Chomsky's theoretical work are adopted by Swedish grammarians,⁵ while some other very central general assumptions and principles are given less importance or are even ignored.

2. The goals of grammatical theory

One of Chomsky's most fundamental questions is why any individual (a child) is able to learn any language (as his mother tongue) by confronting only a very limited input, i.e. how he can understand and produce an unlimited set of sentences that he has never heard

-
- 1 The title of this paper is, of course, an allusion to Hans Aarsleff's article "The History of Linguistics and Professor Chomsky" (in *Language*, vol. 46, nr 3, 1970, pp. 570-585), although the aim of my paper is quite different from his. Aarsleff discusses Chomsky's view of the history of linguistics, while I discuss the influence of Chomsky's theory on the Swedish grammatical tradition.
 - 2 For example, N. Smith & D. Wilson, *Modern Linguistics: The Results of Chomsky's Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Middlesex: Penguin, 1979), J. Lyons, *Chomsky* (Third edition, London: Fontana 1991) and P.H. Matthews, *Grammatical Theory in the United States from Bloomfield to Chomsky*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
 - 3 See e.g. K. Percival, "The Applicability of Kuhn's Paradigms to the History of Linguistics." In *Language* (vol. 52, nr 2, 1976), pp. 285-249.
 - 4 See also Lyons, *Chomsky* p. 9.
 - 5 In this paper I focus mainly on the grammar-textbooks (not on Swedish linguistics in general), that is, those that more or less are intended to serve pedagogical purposes.

or produced earlier. Chomsky assumes that every speaker of a language must possess linguistic knowledge and that this knowledge is located in the mind/brain and is manifested by the ability to distinguish grammatical sentences from non-grammatical ones.⁶ Chomsky's technical term for this fundamental ability is *competence*, and for "the actual use of language in concrete situations", *performance*.⁷ His aim is to provide an explanatory theory that deals with the mental representations of the linguistic competence of an idealized speaker-listener. He furthermore assumes that this so-called competence consists of a limited set of rules that can generate an unlimited set of structures, which are to be discovered by the grammatical theory.⁸

A central point, according to Chomsky, is that a generative theory must be able to explain how a child constructs a (correct) grammar (or, in Chomsky's words: a theory of grammar) for his mother tongue.⁹ Chomsky's solution is a genetical one; the child is supplied with universal principles that make possible the construction of an intrinsic grammar. If we assume that this is true, then it follows that we should be able to discover those universal principles by studying any natural language.¹⁰

Now, we could, of course, think that the linguist's knowledge of the user's competence or of the universal features of language must be won by studying the so-called performance. But for Chomsky, the opposite is true; the performance cannot be studied without an explicit theory of competence.¹¹ In his view, there are far too many factors involved in actual language use, and they have nothing to do with the object of his interest, the internalized grammar. In other words: "[t]o study actual linguistic performance, we must consider the interaction of a variety of factors, of which the underlying competence is only one".¹² Thus Chomsky sees his idealizations as methodological necessities. Consequently, not only is competence a theoretical construction, but performance is as well. As he himself writes, in *Aspects*:

Only under the idealization set forth in the preceding paragraph is performance a direct reflection of competence. In actual fact, it obviously could not directly reflect competence.¹³

It is also worth noticing that Chomsky stresses the fact that the rules of grammar that he is trying to grasp are not conscious for the speakers of a language; a generative grammar, in his sense, deals "with mental processes that are far beyond the level of actual or

6 E.g. Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1965), pp. 4, 8, 15; Chomsky, "Topics in the theory of generative grammar." In *Current Trends in Linguistics*, ed. T. Sebeok. Vol. III: Theoretical Foundations. (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), pp. 4f; Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge*. The Managua Lectures. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1988), p. 3.

7 Chomsky, *Aspects* p. 4.

8 Chomsky, *Aspects* pp. 3ff; Chomsky, "Topics" p. 57.

9 Chomsky, *Aspects* p. 25.

10 Chomsky, *Aspects* pp. 27ff; Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge* Lecture I, pp. 1-34.

11 Chomsky, *Aspects* p. 10; Chomsky, "Topics" pp. 3, 57.

12 Chomsky, *Aspects* p. 4.

13 Chomsky, *Aspects* p. 4.

even potential consciousness".¹⁴ And he further maintains that "a generative grammar is not a model for a speaker or a hearer".¹⁵ This means that a generative grammar in Chomsky's sense has very little to do with actual communication. The rules of grammar, located in the human mind, do not necessarily play any role in the actual understanding or production of sentences:

When we say that a sentence has a certain derivation with respect to a particular generative grammar, we say nothing about how the speaker might proceed, in some practical or efficient way, to construct such a derivation.¹⁶

The crucial point here, I think, is the hypothetical character of Chomsky's grammatical theory. As he says, the theory of competence (i.e. the theory of grammar) "is an empirical hypothesis"¹⁷ and "deals with abstract structures, postulated to account for and explain linguistic data",¹⁸ and, further, that so-called competence, "[I]ike most facts of interest and importance, [...] is neither presented for direct observation nor extractable from data by inductive procedures of any known sort".¹⁹

This point is worth emphasizing, particularly since it seems to have been ignored in almost all Swedish grammar-textbooks that are in other respects influenced by the generative theory. The fundamental goals that Chomsky had with his theory are in most cases not even mentioned by the grammarians; neither do they explicitly attempt to provide an explanation of the mental representations of grammar. Östen Dahl, for instance, begins his Swedish introduction to generative grammar by presenting structure-trees. He then moves on to phrase-structure rules, transformations, deep- and surface-structures and so forth.²⁰ What remains unsaid throughout is the aims and purpose of so-called generative grammar and role played by the theoretical notions under discussion. Even more striking is that the Swedish grammar-textbooks all postulate a mental entity called 'grammar', although they do not share Chomsky's fundamental intentions in postulating that entity. The term *grammar* stands, not only for a specific theoretical description, but also for the *object* of description. And the grammarians have learned from Chomsky that this object is located in the human brain. The task of the grammarians now consists in constructing a grammar that performs the very same function as the brain, that is, a grammar that generates sentences such as *Lasse saknade hästarna* (Lasse missed the horses), but not sentences such as **Lasse saknade* (Lasse missed).²¹ But as already mentioned, the main concern of the grammarians is not to provide an explanatory theory of universal linguistic competence. Their aims are quite different. Ebba Lindberg, for ex-

14 Chomsky, *Aspects* p. 8.

15 Chomsky, *Aspects* p. 9.

16 Chomsky, *Aspects* p. 9.

17 Chomsky, 'Topics' p. 13.

18 Chomsky, 'Topics' p. 57.

19 Chomsky, *Aspects* p. 18.

20 Ö. Dahl, *Generativ grammatik på svenska*. (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1971), pp. 7ff.

21 U. Teleman, "Grammatik för gymnasister". In: *Språket i blickpunkten*, ed. B. Loman *et al.* (Lund: Gleerup, 1972), pp. 98f.

ample, maintains that her grammar is “totally descriptive”, and that she wants to describe the existing Swedish language, so that the description fits with the linguistic reality.²² In a similar way, Östen Dahls grammar is also “a description of how the Swedish language functions”.²³ But these goals were explicitly not the aim of Chomsky’s theory. In this respect, Chomsky’s criticism of so-called traditional grammar could just as well be made of these grammarians; according to Chomsky, the fundamental failure of the traditional grammar consists in that it does not attempt to incorporate the mechanisms of the – ‘*faculté de langage*’.²⁴

3. Chomsky’s theoretical notions in Swedish grammar-textbooks

Although the Swedish ‘generative’ grammarians do not share same goals for the grammatical theory as Chomsky, they nevertheless have taken over several notions from Chomsky’s theory. Such notions include *surface structure*, *deep structure*, *base*, *transformations*, *kernel sentence* etc. These technical terms – which have meaning *within* the generative theory – are occasionally used by Swedish grammarians as if they were unproblematic and, in some obscure sense, given in the language itself. The notion of transformation, for instance, is sometimes used in a way that might lead one to think that transformations are *properties of languages* and not components of a certain theory of grammar.²⁵ Furthermore, some grammarians seem to suggest that the transformations are applied to surface-structure sentences (for example, that a passive sentence is derived from an active one),²⁶ while Chomsky explicitly maintains that transformations are always applied to deep-structures, and that all sentences, including the so-called kernel sentences, are generated through the application of at least some obligatory transformations. Thus non-kernel sentences (such as passive sentences) are *not* derived from kernel sentences, but in the same way as the kernel sentences, from an underlying abstract structure.²⁷ In Swedish grammar-textbooks, the notion of transformation is occasionally used in some sort of ‘surface-near’ way, that is, without regard to deep-structure, as Tor G. Hultman explicitly asserts.²⁸ In a somewhat related way, Ebba Lindberg considers the introduction of the notion of transformation as a method for simplifying and explaining the analysis of sentences. She suggests that the notion can be useful even if one does not

22 E. Lindberg, *Beskrivande svensk grammatik*. (Stockholm: AWE/Geber, 1976), pp. 9f.

23 Ö. Dahl, *Grammatik*. (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1982), p. 9.

24 Chomsky, ‘Topics’ p. 4.

25 See for instance A. Ellegård, *Transformationell svensk-engelsk satsslära*. (Lund: Gleerup, 1971), p. 70; Teleman, ‘Grammatik för gymnasister’ pp. 128f.

26 E.g. E. Andersson, *Grammatik från grunden. En koncentrerad svensk satsslära*. (Uppsala: Hallgren & Fallgren, 1993), p. 119; Dahl, *Grammatik* pp. 93ff; T.G. Hultman, *Liten svensk grammatik* (Lund: Liber läromedel, 1975), pp. 41, 53ff; Lindberg, *Beskrivande svensk grammatik* p. 162; Teleman, ‘Grammatik för gymnasister’ p. 120

27 E.g. Chomsky, *Aspects* pp. 16ff; see also Chomsky’s criticism of Uhlenbeck in ‘Topics’ p. 14, note 11.

28 Hultman, *Liten svensk grammatik* p. 53

explain what is actually meant by it.²⁹ For a descriptivist, such as Lindberg, there probably can exist several different ways of describing a language, and the so-called transformations may belong to one of these descriptions. In itself, this is of course a plausible point of view. But I would be inclined to think that introducing the notion of transformation, as well as other notions of this kind, and partially modifying them in the way described above, probably brings more confusion than clarity. It might also be good to bear in mind that since Chomsky considers grammar an autonomous system of mental representations, i.e. a mental fact existing independently of our descriptions of it, in his view there can only be one true description. Thus mental representation either includes transformations or it does not, not both.

In this context, we can turn our attention to another strange phenomenon. Teleman maintains that generative grammar makes it possible to ask *realistic* questions, such as:

What is deleted? What is added? What is moved? What stylistic effect does the transformation have? Which other sentences can be transformed in the same way? Which not? Why?³⁰

For my part, these questions are rather strikingly vague and abstract. In which sense can we say that something is deleted or added? According to generative grammar, it of course can not be a question of concrete sentences in, say, an essay, where we delete a word and add another. As we well know, the whole discussion about deleting, adding and other kinds of transformations is based on the assumption that there are some abstract entities, 'deep-structures', together with the further assumption that certain formal operations, 'transformations', are applied to these entities. But it seems as if the whole hypothetical entity, the internalized grammar, has become something through and through *concrete* for grammarians such as Teleman. That is why he also can say that grammar, in the generative form, turns out to be something very funny and exciting.³¹ This, again, is one of the reasons why Teleman wants to introduce generative grammar into the schools. But, as a matter of fact, it is also an attitude toward which Chomsky expresses a fair degree of scepticism. He generally thinks that there are much more important things in the world than linguistics: "people ought to have other interests [...] linguistics is just too specific an interest".³²

But grammar is not only more exiting in its generative version; according to Teleman, it also provides a shorter, simpler and more economical grammatical description.³³ Yet, when we think about Chomsky's very complicated and esoteric theoretical models, this statement is almost incomprehensible.

29 Lindberg, *Beskrivande svensk grammatik* p. 157

30 Teleman, "Grammatik för gymnasister" p. 117.

31 Teleman, "Grammatik för gymnasister" p. 118

32 Chomsky, *The Generative Enterprise*. A discussion with Riny Huybregts and Henk van Riemsdijk. (Dordrecht: Foris, 1982), pp. 51ff.

33 Teleman, "Grammatik för gymnasister", p. 100.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0691-3>

The Practice of Language

Gustafsson, M.; Hertzberg, L. (Eds.)

2002, VI, 273 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0691-3