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# 1

## Noam Chomsky



*Figure 1.1* Noam Chomsky, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, 2013 (photo by John A. Lent)

### **Biographical sketch**

Noam Chomsky was born on 7 December 1928, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His undergraduate and graduate years were spent at the University of Pennsylvania, where he received his PhD in linguistics in

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1955. From 1951 to 1955, he was a junior fellow of the Harvard University Society of Fellows. During this time he completed his doctoral dissertation, entitled “Transformational analysis.” The major theoretical viewpoints of the dissertation appeared in the monograph *Syntactic Structure*, which was published in 1957. This formed part of a more extensive work, *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, which was circulated in mimeograph in 1955 and published in 1975.

Chomsky joined the staff of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1955 and in 1961 was appointed full professor in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics (now the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy). From 1966 to 1976 he held the Ferrari P. Ward Professorship of Modern Languages and Linguistics. In 1976 he was appointed as institute professor.

During the years 1958–1959, Chomsky was in residence at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, New Jersey. In the spring of 1969 he delivered the John Locke Lectures at Oxford, UK; in January 1970 the Bertrand Russell Memorial Lecture at Cambridge University, UK; in 1972 the Nehru Memorial Lecture in New Delhi, India; and in 1977 the Huizinga Lecture in Leiden, among many others.

Chomsky has received honorary degrees from the American University of Beirut, Amherst College, Cambridge University, the Australia Asia Research and Education Foundation, Bard College, Central Connecticut State University, the University of Massachusetts, Bologna University, Columbia University, the Free University of Brussels, Georgetown University, Harvard University, the Islamic University in Gaza, Ljubljana University, Loyola University Chicago, McGill University, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), National Tsing Hua University, Peking University, Santo Domingo Institute of Technology, the School for Advanced Studies in Trieste, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, the University of Western Ontario, Swarthmore College, Delhi University, Universidad de Chile, Universidad de La Frontera, Universidad Nacional De Colombia, Universidad Nacional del Comahue, Universitat Rovira i Virgili (Tarragona), the University of Athens, the University of Buenos Aires, the University of Calcutta, the University of Chicago, the University of Connecticut, the University of Cyprus, the University of Florence, the University of London, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of St. Andrews, the University of Toronto, and Uppsala University. He is a member of the American Philosophical Society, a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the National Academy of Science, and a foreign member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. In addition, he is a member of other professional and

learned societies in the United States and abroad, and is a recipient of the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award of the American Psychological Association, the Kyoto Prize in Basic Sciences, the Helmholtz Medal, the Dorothy Eldridge Peacemaker Award, the Ben Franklin Medal in Computer and Cognitive Science, the Adela Dwyer/St. Thomas of Villanova Peace Award, and others.

Chomsky has written and lectured widely on linguistics, philosophy, intellectual history, contemporary issues, international affairs, and US foreign policy. His works include *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*; *Cartesian Linguistics*; *Sound Pattern of English* (with Morris Halle); *Language and Mind*; *American Power and the New Mandarins*; *At War with Asia*; *For Reasons of State*; *Peace in the Middle East?*; *Reflections on Language*; *The Political Economy of Human Rights, Vol. I and II* (with E. S. Herman); *Rules and Representations*; *Lectures on Government and Binding*; *Towards a New Cold War*; *Radical Priorities*; *Fateful Triangle*; *Knowledge of Language*; *Turning the Tide*; *Pirates and Emperors*; *On Power and Ideology*; *Language and Problems of Knowledge*; *The Culture of Terrorism*; *Manufacturing Consent* (with E. S. Herman); *Necessary Illusions*; *Deterring Democracy*; *Year 501*; *Rethinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War and US Political Culture*; *Letters from Lexington*; *World Orders, Old and New*; *The Minimalist Program*; *Powers and Prospects*; *The Common Good*; *Profit Over People*; *The New Military Humanism*; *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind*; *Rogue States*; *A New Generation Draws the Line*; 9–11; *Understanding Power*; *On Nature and Language*; *Pirates and Emperors, Old and New*; *Chomsky on Democracy and Education*; *Middle East Illusions*; *Hegemony or Survival*; *Imperial Ambitions*; *Failed States*; *Perilous Power*; *Interventions*; *Inside Lebanon*; *What We Say Goes: Conversations on U.S. Power in a Changing World*; *The Essential Chomsky*; *Hopes and Prospects*; *Gaza in Crisis*; *How the World Works*; 9–11: *Was There an Alternative?*; *The Science of Language*; *Making the Future*; *Peace with Justice: Noam Chomsky in Australia*; *Power Systems*; and *On Western Terrorism: From Hiroshima to Drone Warfare* (with Andre Vltchek).

## Noam Chomsky

**Interview conducted by John A. Lent and Michelle A. Amazeen,  
8 November 2013, Massachusetts Institute of Technology,  
Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA**

*Lent:* How and why did you decide to take the route of the critical researcher in communication? What personal and professional experiences influenced you?

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*Chomsky:* As far as communication is concerned, which is not really my life, my life gets frantic. I mean, apart from personal life, part of it is what's around here: professional linguistics, philosophy, cognitive science. The other part is what's happening in the world and what's happening in the media and what we can do about it, political activism and so on. The second part of my life – it just began that way. I mean, I grew up in the Depression. Earliest childhood memories are people coming to the door trying to sell rags because they were starving, people – women being beaten up in the streets when they're striking outside a textile office plant.

My family was mostly unemployed working class. It was the Depression, so at first the rise of fascism in Europe, which was very frightening. Doubly frightening because we happened to live in a – though my parents didn't know it, we were the only Jewish family in a very anti-Semitic neighborhood, Irish and German Catholic. For a boy on the streets, you saw it firsthand, and that sort of combined with hearing Hitler's speeches over the radio and seeing what was going on in Spain and Austria and so on. So I just grew up with it – and then came the world war, the war, and the British repression of Greece and all sorts of other things.

And then there's the question of how it was being represented in the media. It was being grossly distorted. I did in fact discover that when I was a young teenager. So, for example, I happened to be particularly interested in Spain, in the Spanish Revolution and the Spanish Civil War. And I was looking up the documents from secondhand book stores in New York, which were being run by immigrants, Spanish immigrants, many of them anarchists fleeing Spain. The left-wing offices, the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*, the Yiddish anarchist group had an office in Union Square, New York. I spent time there. Anyway, I had a fair amount of documentary evidence by the time I was maybe 12 or 13.

And you could see that what was reported in the press just wasn't true. So, for example, theoretically, the United States was supposed to be neutral in the Spanish War. But in fact, the US government was permitting the Texaco Oil Company to ship oil to the fascist junta illegally, but it was permitted. And the State Department denied it, but it was true. You could see the documents; later it was conceded. And there are things like that all the time, so it just was never a question in my mind as far as the other half of my life, you know the formal profession. It was kind of accidental.

I was very bored with – I went to college when I was 16. I was excited by the catalogue. Lots of exciting courses. Every course I took was so boring, I never wanted to hear about the topic again. After about a year, I was ready to drop out when I happened to meet through political contacts a member of the faculty who turned out to be the leading linguist in the United States. And he kind of – our connections were mostly through the political activism that he suggested to me that I start taking his graduate courses. I suspect he was trying to quietly induce me to go back to college.

Anyhow, I started taking his graduate course and was interested, and then sort of other graduate courses in philosophy and mathematics, in fields that I had no background in, but I just got into, sort of accidentally. Not total accident. There was something in my background. My father was a scholar of – a Semitic scholar, mainly worked with medieval Hebrew grammar. I read his thesis when I was about 10 or something. So it was in the background anyhow.

*Lent:* This was in Philadelphia, right? You went to Central High School, right?

*Chomsky:* Yeah. Bored stiff.

I thought college would be better and was very disappointed [*laughter*] when it wasn't.

*Lent:* The second part of that is what price have you paid, if any, for going in a different direction?

*Chomsky:* Well, there's plenty of that, but I don't take that very seriously. I mean, there are death threats, bomb threats, hysterical accusations. Look up the Internet on my name, you'll find a list of defamations 10 miles long. And there were periods up until recently, in fact, when I had to have police protection if I was talking on the Middle East, for example. Early in the Vietnam War, we had to have police protection sometimes if we were talking about the war. And I came pretty close to a long prison sentence, but that was for things I was doing. It wasn't a threat from the outside.

But the real cost just is it takes an enormous amount of time and energy away from things I'd like to do. Like there's plenty of work I'd like to do in the other domain of my life, which I just don't have time for. Linguistics, mathematical linguistics. The history of linguistics and philosophy, lots more. In the 1960s, before it really took off, I was doing work of a kind that I had to drop on mathematical theory of automata, on a history of linguistics and philosophy, on phonology, which I was working on intensively.

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And a number of other things which I was just going to pursue – but I had to drop them – which I would have liked to do. Because time's finite.

*Amazeen:* Have you had trouble getting any of your work published?

*Chomsky:* Oh, yeah. For example, the book *Political Economy of Human Rights*. The big book that Edward Herman and I wrote, a two-volume work. The first edition of that came out five years earlier. It was much smaller. It was a small book called *Counter-Revolutionary Violence*, and it was published by a textbook publisher, a pretty successful textbook publisher. It was intended as kind of a text. The publisher was owned ultimately by a big conglomerate, ultimately what became Time Warner. And an executive of the top company saw the advertising for the book and didn't like it and wanted to see the book.

When he saw it, he was outraged, and he ordered the publisher to stop releasing it, 20,000 copies that were already published. Now, they refused. He put the entire publishing house out of business, not only destroying the book but all of their stock. That's the most extreme case I've seen. I actually brought that to the attention of American civil libertarians, and they didn't see any problem with it because it's not government censorship. It's corporate censorship. And that's permissible in a capitalist society.

*Lent:* And perhaps worse than the government.

*Chomsky:* It's much worse, I think. Yep. In fact, that's a lot of what goes on with the media. The media are not subject to government censorship, but they are subject to internal censorship, which derives in large measure from the institutional structures in which they're embedded – corporate ownership, advertiser reliance, links to government, and just the general intellectual culture, which happens to be highly conformist.

*Lent:* And that's accelerated in the last few decades, right? Or do you think it's always been like that?

*Chomsky:* There's a lot of talk about a golden age in the past, but I never saw it. I think it's actually better now than it was 30 or 40 years ago.

*Lent:* What do you see different in critical studies now? How has it advanced in the last 40 years or so... or has it?

*Chomsky:* There are contrary tendencies. One of them is, I think, self-destructive. That's post-structuralism, post-modernism, which I think has been a – I mean, there's exceptions, but its general impact I think has been self-destructive. One sort of diverting

energy and effort into things that are intellectually extremely thin or even worse. But also isolating critical studies from the general population. I mean, nobody can read this work. Every sentence has to have 12 polysyllabic words in it you've never heard of and obscure references and so on. So it kind of isolates it from the general community, and when you take it apart, I think it's extremely hard to find anything concrete. Some of it is entirely ludicrous.

I don't know if you ever read a book by Jean Bricmont and Alan Sokal. I think it came out in French originally, but in English I think it's called *Dangerous Delusions* or something like that. They go through post-modern work, mostly Paris, on science, truth, evidence and so on, and it is just unbelievably ludicrous. You can't believe that people are saying these things, but it's very influential in small intellectual circles, which are isolated from the world.

Actually, the place where it's most dangerous is in the Third World, because in the Third World, activist movements need participation of intellectuals. They can contribute something. And if they are drawn off into fantasies about how there's no truth, there's no reality, everything is power and so on and so forth, they're gone. They're just not making the contribution they should. And that happens. I've seen many cases. My view here is it's mostly kind of a nuisance.

But another tendency has been towards more effective critical analysis. The 1960s opened a lot of people's minds, and those people went on to do much more, in my view, insightful and critical scholarship and media inquiry too, investigative journalism, than had been done in the past. And some people came straight out of that movement like Seymour Hersh. But others were influenced by it, and I know a fair number. So I think in scholarship and in general intellectual culture, I think there's a contrary tendency.

There's also another one, and that's towards reimposition of discipline and authority and conformity that are very strongly supported. In fact, that's taking place all over. The reactionary tendency, it's part of the whole neoliberal assault on the population. In some places like England, it's becoming, I think, pretty grotesque. Actually, I think you might take a look at quite a good article that just appeared in the *London Review* by Stefan Collini on what the coalition government is doing to higher education. I think it's very accurate and pretty damning – and one of his conclusions, his basic conclusion is that the Tory government is converting first-class universities into third-class commercial enterprises. It was kind of an

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exaggeration, but basically the thrust of things that are happening. It's been going on since Thatcher and is much worse now. And similar things are happening here with the corporatization of the universities, imposition of bureaucratic models and administrative models. Bottom-line business concepts of efficiency, which are pretty harmful.

*Lent:* And the corporatization of academic publishing.

*Chomsky:* Oh, yeah. That too. Well, academic publishing has become – it's either online or libraries, and scholarly books are now priced out of sight. Individuals can't buy them.

*Amazeen:* So where should critical research be heading?

*Chomsky:* It should be headed towards good old-fashioned simple virtues like truth and honesty and seriousness and significance. All the things that post-modern culture tells us don't exist. Just take a look at what they say doesn't exist. That's what you ought to be doing.

*Amazeen:* Are you familiar with some of the political fact-checking movements? FactCheck.org, PolitiFact.com that evaluate...

*Chomsky:* Checking accuracy and – It's okay but there's much more serious things I think, and that is investigating the fundamental bias that's part of the whole framework of discussion. In fact, there's a concept of objectivity that's actually taught in journalism schools in the United States at least. To be objective means to tell the truth about what's happening inside the beltway, inside the political class. And these organizations you talked about try to find errors in that. Did you quote John Kerry correctly or did you misquote him? Okay, that's all right, but much more significant is the constraints that are imposed, the radical constraints that are imposed by keeping to the debate within the beltway. And that shows up all the time.

So, for example, take today's new, big discussion. Maybe there will be an agreement with Iran on nuclear weapons. Well, there's other things to say which can't make it into the press because they're not discussed within the beltway. So, to take one example, whatever threat you think Iran is, and most of the world doesn't see it as a threat, if there was honest, truthful news reporting, they would point out that when John Kerry says the international community demands so-and-so, he means the United States and a couple of its allies. Now most of the world totally disagrees. The non-aligned countries don't agree. In the Arab world, they say the Arabs regard Iran as a threat. They're referring to the Arab dictators, not the populations. In some polls, few of the populations do.

We have extensive polling results from Western sources showing that of course they don't like Iran. They hate it, in fact. But they don't regard it as a threat because it isn't a threat. But the dictators don't like it, and within the beltway, all that matters is what the dictators say, not the populations. The hatred of democracy is very profound for good reasons. So the reporting reflects that.

Well, okay, whatever threat you think Iran is, is there a way to deal with it? The best way would be to impose a weapons-of-mass-destruction-free zone in the region. Block all weapons of mass destruction in the region. There's overwhelming international support for that, overwhelming, primarily motivated by the Arab states, but it brings in everyone else. It's so strong that the United States has to formally agree on paper, a nice idea, but not now. And this came to a head just a couple of months ago. There was supposed to be an international conference in Finland to move forward on this proposal. Israel said they wouldn't attend the conference. Iran said that they would attend the conference without preconditions. A couple of days later, Obama canceled the conference. There was barely a single word about that in the American media. I had a friend do a database check. Not a word. Why? It's not discussed in the beltway, and so it's not objective to talk about that. Things like that are vastly more important than fact-checking. Okay, so somebody made a mistake on a fact. Who cares?

*Lent:* Do you think there are effective alternative media where one can get the truth behind the facts?

*Chomsky:* I mean, if you search you can – I mean, everything I just said is public. I've written about it. You can find it in the arms-control journals. You can find it on some of the Internet blogs and *Z Magazine*. They're available, but it's hard work. I mean, for an individual in the streets, it's essentially inaccessible. A person that's working 50 hours a week can't do a research project when he gets home at night. You have to know what to look for, and it's claimed that the Internet is a huge asset. People can find out anything. But that's like saying that if you want to be a biologist, just go to the Harvard Graduate School of Biology and look at the library. It's all there. Yeah, it's all there, but it doesn't do you any good. And the Internet is much worse because the library, at least what's there is probably more or less accurate. But what's on the Internet is important things, but also tons of pure garbage.

*Lent:* How much of your work comes from the Internet? I noticed that you have a cupboard out there full of paper, which I'm very happy to see that you still use paper.

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*Chomsky:* Oh, yeah. All the time. Well, I use the Internet for research. I mean, it's easier than going across the street to the library. I mean, it was always possible but more work. Like when I did work on the *New York Times*. I used to have to go to the library and read the microfilms, and it's a lot easier to sit in my desk and push buttons. But fundamentally, the change from libraries to the Internet is much less than the change from no libraries to libraries. That was a huge change.

It's kind of like communication. So being able to e-mail to a friend in England is faster than sending a letter, but the telegraph was vastly faster than sailing ships. The big steps, I think, have mostly been made in the past. We're getting small increments. When people talk about the creative innovations that are so exciting, they're talking about apps for little devices so you can do something a little bit better than you could before. Okay, that's nice, but these aren't substantial improvements, I don't think. They're useful. I use them.

*Amazeen:* So you had mentioned that your work has been schizophrenic. There's your academic linguistic work and then there's your political activism. What changes have you seen as a result of either of those two areas?

*Chomsky:* Well, the academic work has been in a very exciting phase for the last 50 years or so. Language has been studied seriously for 2,500 years. But what's been learned in the last 50 years just overwhelms anything that was known in the whole 2,500 years before. And the kind of questions that students down the hall are asking, you couldn't even imagine 50 years ago, a lot of them 10 years ago. So it's a very rapidly developing field, a lot of exciting material, a huge proliferation of publications.

And it was the case back in the early days of this department – it's 50 years – that every member of the faculty could be on any PhD committee. Maybe it wasn't what you were working on, but you knew enough about it to be able to have a sensible evaluation. Now that's far from true. So by now, you can just about keep up with your own specialty, and there are much more far-reaching things that I don't think are well understood that I think are quite significant. Anyway, it's an exciting field and has developed.

The rest is – I don't have to tell you the way the world's going, but we're facing a strong possibility of just self-destruction. It's not remote. And unfortunately it's being accelerated. There's several cases. The worst case is environmental destruction, which is very

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