**Lecture Four**

**Noam Chomsky**

Noam Chomsky (1928-) is a brilliant and an important philosopher of the language who has major impact on both linguistics and contemporary ideas in general. He is among the ten most-cited writers in all humanities and social sciences.

Chomsky first introduced his theory of language (which is a grammar) in two versions or models named ‘old version’ and ‘new version’. The first version was introduced in his book ‘Syntactic Structures’ published in 1957.

Linguistics since 1957 (the publication of Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*), has been dominated by Chomsky’s ideas. He criticized Bloomfieldian linguistics for being too ambitious and too limited in scope; ambitious in that it was unrealistic to expect providing rules for a perfect description from a corpus (revolution against discovery procedures), and it was too limited because it concentrated only on already produced utterances while the language has infinite number of utterance (linguistic creativity). Therefore, a grammar -for Chomsky- should be more than a catalogue of old utterances, it should also take into account possible future utterances.

1. **Behaviourism versus Mentalism**

Behaviourists claim that human beings are born as blank sheets; they acquire knowledge via imitation and repetition. Thus, any inappropriate behavior should be banned and *punished* to avoid its reinforcement. On the other hand, appropriate behavior should be enforced through *rewarding.* Following this stream of thought, the acquisition of language is not innate; it takes place through listening repeating and imitating the language spoken in the surrounding environment (the language of care takers). Linguists who believe in the behaviouristic perspective tend to focus on the already produced language behavior to study it. In other words, they describe already produced utterances.

Mentalism questioned considering the human being a *tabula rasa;* mentalists argue for the existence of an area in the mind (Language acquisition Device ‘LAD’), that the human being is born with, and which helps in an easy acquisition of the language. For them, language acquisition is not a matter of imitation and repetition; rather, samples of the language are taken from the environment to be processed in the mind to develop a system. The latter enables individuals to produce unlimited number of utterances which were not heard or produced before.

Unlike the Bloomfieldians, who were behaviourists, Chomsky brought back *mentalism*. He is considered to be the father of the mentalist school, he argued for the existence of an innate faculty in which a universal grammar resides.

1. **Competence versus Performance**

Similar to De Saussure’s notion of *langue/Parole*, Chomsky introduced *Competence/ performance.* “Competence” is what a native speaker knows, implicitly, of his or her language. Performance is the individual production of actual utterances, the latter can be affected by physical and psychological situations of the native speakers including memory limitations, distractions, shift of attention …, hence, *performance* is not an accurate realization of *competence.*

However, for De Saussure, PAROLE is a social product; it does not rely only on one individual, but rather considers the whole society. PERFORMANCE, for Chomsky, is related to the native speaker. In other words, the mastery of performance is a matter **maturation**. It does not rely or depend on society but on the individual’s achievement. This maturation becomes more complete with the advance in age: the older we are, the more mature we become.

De Saussure viewed LANGUE as the individual property of the mind, while Chomsky considered COMPETENCE to be the ideal language-system innately existing in the speakers’ mind.

The utterances produced by native speakers may be affected by memory limitations, distraction, shift of attention …and result in error that is why Chomsky did not focus on performance in his theory. Still, sometimes performance is a direct reflection of competence i.e. the more perfect our performance is, the more it reflects competence.

Henceforth, Chomsky used performance to reach the level of competence. He selected speakers from a given society and asked them a set of questions in order to draw out rules. He claimed that these speakers were supposed to know the syntactic, semantic and phonological rules of their language thanks to their *intuition.* He referred to this type of speakers he selected and trusted to give him necessary data of the whole system of the target language as *‘the ideal speaker’.*

The ideal speaker, for Chomsky, is a native speaker who lives in a homogeneous speech community. He should be old (mature), highly-educated (mainly those involved in language teaching and learning), and have good physical and psychological situations. Chomsky did not consider variation in dialects rather he considered the standard language as a reference.

However, the knowledge of language that native speaker has in mind –competence- is implicit. He has intuitions about language but these intuitions often result from a particular training, and may be in error. This is a major issue that Chomsky was criticized in.