

**Randy Harris, My Biggest Cognitive Science Mistake: I called Noam Chomsky a liar.**

My mistake is that I called Noam Chomsky a liar.

So, it's not a talk about cognitive science research. It's about the history and culture of cognitive science. But that's a field I work in, so it is a research mistake—*about* cognitive science, rather than *in* cognitive science.

Actually, there are two incidents, one in which he thought I was calling him a liar—that was person-to-person, in his office, at MIT—once when I actually did, in print. It's only the latter that is a mistake.

So, Chomsky: We have some youngsters in the audience, so a primer might be in order.

He is among the most influential thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and universally acknowledged as a founding father of Cognitive Science, along side George Miller, Herbert Simon, Allen Newell, maybe Marvin Minsky.

He completely renovated linguistics in the late 1950s, turning it

- from a sociological field to psychological field
- from a field concerned mostly with the sounds of language to one concerned with syntax and semantics
- from a field concerned with description of language behaviour to one concerned with knowledge representation
- from general accounts of language to precise mathematical modelling
- from stamp collecting, as the sentiment used to go, into a science.

All of this was highly consonant with contemporary work in psychology and computer science, and his work was the frequent paradigm case for a cognitive approach to humans and knowledge

- He also wrote a devastating critique of behaviourism which helped clear the ground for cognitive psychology.

He is also, from the mid-sixties, perhaps the most prominent American dissident, relentlessly attacking American foreign policy, corporate media control, and domestic social policies.

He has written hundreds of books. He's now 88 years old. He published two books this year. He is a citation giant, up there with Marx and Freud. Google returns 10 million hits. The *New York Times* has called him "The most important intellectual alive"

He's a really big deal. I called him a liar.

It was in a review of a biography about him. Well, the publisher calls it a *biography*. The Dewey Decimal system codes it as a biography. Really, it's a hagiography, a *saint's life*. The author was completely smitten with Chomsky, as many people do. And he served pretty much as Chomsky's stenographer, simply writing down whatever Chomsky told him, with no attempt to discern the truth.

Here's what I say, in part:

[W]ith the most recent biography of Chomsky—Robert F. Barsky's *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent*—it has become extremely difficult for me to believe that Chomsky's distortions of the truth aren't deliberate. Barsky is too star-struck and too ill-informed to see anything in his subject but Saint Noam, enemy of all things evil. But he quotes Chomsky at great length, obviously, and the evidence ... seems overwhelming that Noam Chomsky lies. (Harris

Of course, I document this claim. It's not hard. I mentioned a few cases and then put one particular incident under the magnifying glass, a grudge Chomsky has for guy named Hans Aarsleff. Here is how Barsky treats Aarsleff (the opening voice is Chomsky's):

"... Aarsleff[f] wrote savage denunciations of *Cartesian Linguistics* (in *Language* and elsewhere), claiming that I had made this idiotic error, which he did make [himself] a year after *Cartesian Linguistics*, and which is explicitly and unambiguously rejected in *Cartesian Linguistics*" (31 Mar. 1995). As Chomsky writes, Aarsleff[f] identified the error as the failure of *Cartesian Linguistics* "to recognize the pre-Cartesian sources of Port Royal

and later work, which was not only false (they were explicitly and carefully mentioned) but pretty audacious, since in his independent book a year after *Cartesian Linguistics* he had referred to all of this work as solely Cartesian, without any mention of the earlier sources” (14 Aug. 1995).

Chomsky's not through:

Such “absurdity and falsification,” in Chomsky’s view, is only to be expected. “Furthermore, [Aarsleff]’s version has become accepted Truth. I’ve never bothered to respond, because ... my contempt for the intellectual world reaches such heights that I have no interest in pursuing them in their gutters.

All of this is false. All of it. Aarsleff reviewed Chomsky's book and corrected some of its erroneous history, but

- it was not a savage denunciation—certainly not in the same league as Chomsky's own savagery in denunciations.
- Aarsleff did not accuse Chomsky of failing to recognize pre-Cartesian sources.
- Aarsleff wrote a book about philosophical grammar, the one Chomsky must be referring to, but he does not call those ideas Cartesian. He doesn't even use the word *Cartesian* and Descartes is mentioned only twice, pretty much in passing.
- Aarsleff did not fail to recognize previous sources. He spends a lot of time on sources going back to the Middle Ages.

—Any of this could be easily checked. Barsky didn't bother. In fact, Chomsky characteristically misspells Aarsleff's name. So does Barsky.

I'm not the only one, by the way, who has called Chomsky a liar. There is a website entitled "Top 200 Chomsky lies." That one mostly concerns political issues however—he is accused of denying Soviet atrocities, Khmer Rouge violence, the Chinese annexation of Tibet, and so on. I will stay out of this territory, because the facts are mushy and the motives are shifting.

But scholars—linguists, philosophers, psychologists, computer scientists—have said such things frequently. Paul Postal was one of his earliest recruits. Postal advanced Chomsky's program theoretically, and advocated Chomsky's program rhetorically. Chomsky's rise in linguistics was, to use the quaint Kuhnian term, *revolutionary*, and Postal was storming the barricades with him.

Postal now says,

After many years, I came to the conclusion that everything he says is false. He will lie just for the fun of it. Every one of his arguments was tinged and coded with falseness and pretense. It was like playing chess with extra pieces. It was all fake. (Quoted in MacFarquar 2003)

Here we have the greatest intellectual alive sounding a lot like Donald Trump.

More temperately, WVO Quine said of one of Chomsky's accounts of him, in a review of *Word and Object*:

Chomsky's remarks leave me with feelings at once of reassurance and frustration. What I find reassuring is that he nowhere clearly disagrees with my position. What I find frustrating is that he expresses much disagreement with what he [says is] my position. The more absurd the doctrine attributed to someone, *caeteris paribus*, the less the likelihood that we have well construed his words. In *Word and Object* I urged this precept. ... I wish Chomsky had considered this precept before attributing to me the absurd belief that ... (Quine 1969:302)

And here's Margaret Boden, author of *Mind as Machine*, a sober two-volume history of cognitive science with many laudatory things to say about Chomsky, but Chomsky found it uncongenial and attacked it. Here, in part, is her response:

According to [Chomsky], I said that cognitive scientists, himself included, had overlooked Karl Lashley's paper on serial order in behavior [see Chomsky 2007: 1099]. Moreover, he complains that I didn't realise that the early ethologists had had much of relevance to say. He's mistaken on each count. I'd already discussed Lashley at length. I'd even pointed out that [Lashley's] serial-order talk was converted from "a mini-

sensation" at the Hixon Symposium in 1948 into "a genuine sensation" in about 1960 by Miller and—guess who!—Chomsky. Similarly, I'd outlined the work of the pioneers of ethology, including four of the names listed by Chomsky, explaining how their views differed fundamentally from the behaviorist orthodoxy. (Boden, 2008: 1958).

These misreadings by Chomsky, with accusations of incompetence and/or malice on the part of the author, are remarkably common. So the disbelieving replies which attempt to set the record straight are equally common. Even in private communication. I have stacks of letters (these were paper documents people put in envelopes and sent to each other before email) from him in which he completely misinterprets previous letters.

But that's when the penny dropped for me. That's when I started realizing it is not lying for fun, not lying at all, in the strict sense. That's the mistake. I have examined scores of such cases, looking at Chomsky's claims and looking at the facts, and while his traffic in falsehoods is undeniable, I no longer believe he is dishonest.

I don't doubt his sincerity of belief. I think he has rhetorical pathology, a hermeneutic disorder, caused by incredible negligence and blinding arrogance.

Chomsky is firstly a *very inept reader* and *an equally inept listener*. To anyone who knows his formidable intellectual prowess, this seems like heresy. Chomsky reads vast quantities of material, at tremendous speed, and comes out with facts and figures he can recite ten years later, twenty years later, a lifetime later. He can listen to an argument, fasten on to particular propositions, trace out their distant implications, and turn the argument inside out with a few flicks of his tongue.

But by *inept reader and listener* here, I mean *negligent reader and listener*. Chomsky he reads so opportunistically—especially in polemical contexts, when he looking for places to attack—and with such blinding arrogance that he never doubts his own first impressions. He will tell a person to their face, or in a letter, what they said and what they meant, with utter disregard for that person's protests and with equally utter disregard for the actual document.

So, I was wrong, I think. He doesn't lie. And it does make a difference. Margaret Boden's final verdict on Chomsky is that he "cannot be relied on to tell the truth." There is no room to dispute that. But the recklessness and egoism behind that unreliability are not the same as dishonesty.

Chomsky's rhetorical practices are so apparent and have been so consequential that some explanation is required, and I am more comfortable with the view that arrogance leads him into an unreliability with the truth, than I am with the view that he lies for sport.

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