Noam Chomsky Biography

The father of modern linguistics

Famed scholar Noam Chomsky is known for both his ground breaking contributions to linguistics and his penetrating critiques of political systems.

Who Is Noam Chomsky?

Noam Chomsky was an intellectual prodigy who went on to earn a PhD in linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. Since 1955, he has been a professor at MIT and has produced ground breaking, controversial theories on human linguistic capacity. Chomsky is widely published, both on topics in his field and on issues of dissent and U.S. foreign policy.

“Some of my earliest memories, which are very vivid, are of people selling rags at our door, of violent police strikebreaking, and other Depression scenes. Whatever the reasons may be, I was very much affected by events of the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War, for example, though I was barely literate.” –Noam Chomsky

Early Life and Education

Noam Chomsky was a brilliant child, and his curiosities and intellect were kindled greatly by his early experiences. Born in Philadelphia on December 7, 1928, Chomsky felt the weight of America's Great Depression. He was raised with a younger brother, David, and although his own family was middle class, he witnessed injustices all around him. One of his earliest memories consisted of watching security officers beat women strikers outside of a textile plant.

His mother, Elsie, had been active in the radical politics of the 1930s. His father, William, a Russian Jewish immigrant like his mother, was a respected professor of Hebrew at Gratz College, an institution for teacher’s training. At the age of 10, while attending a progressive school that emphasized student self-actualization, Chomsky wrote an editorial on the rise of fascism in Europe after the Spanish Civil War for his school newspaper. Rather amazingly, his story was substantially researched enough to be the basis for a later essay he would present at New York University.

By the age of 13, Chomsky was traveling from Philadelphia to New York, spending much of his time listening to the disparate perspectives hashed out among adults over cigarettes and magazines at his uncle’s newsstand at the back of a 72nd Street subway exit. Chomsky greatly admired his uncle, a man of little formal education, but someone who was wildly smart about the world around him. Chomsky’s current political views spring from this type of lived-experience stance, positing that all people can understand politics and economics and make their own decisions, and that authority ought to be tested before being deemed legitimate and worthy of power.

Some Interesting Facts:

* Chomsky was born into a middle-class Ashkenazi Jewish family. He faced anti-Semitism as a child and recalls German "beer parties" in Philadelphia celebrating the capture of Paris by the Nazis.
* He wrote his first article about the spread of fascism when he was ten years old.
* He is a critic of US foreign policy, capitalism and mainstream media, and got arrested multiple times for his strong opinions.
* In 2013, a newly discovered bee species was named after Chomsky as 'Megachile Chomskyi'.
* He has written over 100 books on various socially relevant topics.
* He is known for his witty quotes and dry humour. Chomsky said his success is "a series of accidents".
* Chomsky has starred in around 160 films, documentaries and TV series like "Best of Enemies" and "The US vs. John Lennon."

The Scholar

Just as World War II was coming to a close, Chomsky began his studies at the University of Pennsylvania. He found little use for his classes until he met Zellig S. Harris, an American scholar touted for discovering structural linguistics (breaking language down into distinct parts or levels). Chomsky was moved by what he felt language could reveal about society. Harris was moved by Chomsky’s great potential and did much to advance the young man’s undergraduate studies, with Chomsky receiving his B.A. and M.A in non-traditional modes of study.

Harris introduced Chomsky to Harvard mathematician Nathan Fine and philosophers Nelson Goodman and W. V. Quine. Although an industrious student of Goodman's, Chomsky drastically disagreed with his approach. Goodman believed the human mind was a blank slate, whereas Chomsky believed the basic concepts of language were innate in every human’s mind and then only influenced by one’s syntactical environment. His 1951 master’s thesis was titled "The Morphophonemics of Modern Hebrew."

In 1949, Chomsky married educational specialist Carol Schatz, a woman he had known since childhood. The relationship lasted for 59 years until she died from cancer in 2008. They had three children together. For a short time, between Chomsky’s master's and doctoral studies, the couple lived on a kibbutz in Israel. When they returned, Chomsky continued at the University of Pennsylvania and executed some of his research and writing at Harvard University. His dissertation eventually explored several ideas that he would soon lay out in one of his best-known books on linguistics, Syntactic Structures (1957).

Linguistic Revolutions

In 1955, the professorial staff at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) invited Chomsky to join their ranks. Now a professor emeritus, he worked in the school's Department of Linguistics & Philosophy for half a century before retiring from active teaching in 2005. He has also been a visiting professor or lectured at a range of other universities, including Columbia, UCLA, Princeton and Cambridge, and holds honorary degrees from countless others throughout the world.

During his career as a professor, Chomsky introduced transformational grammar to the linguistics field. His theory asserts that languages are innate and that the differences we see are only due to parameters developed over time in our brains, helping to explain why children are able to learn different languages more easily than adults. One of his most famous contributions to linguistics is what his contemporaries have called the Chomsky Hierarchy, a division of grammar into groups, moving up or down in their expressive abilities. These ideas have had huge ramifications in fields such as modern psychology and philosophy, both answering and raising questions about human nature and how we process information.

Chomsky’s writings on linguistics include Current Issues in Linguistic Theory (1964), Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (1965), The Sound Pattern of English (with Morris Halle, 1968), Language and Mind (1972), Studies on Semantics in Generative Grammar (1972), and Knowledge of Language (1986).

Politics and Controversies

But Chomsky’s ideas have never been relegated to language alone. Weaving between the world of academia and popular culture, Chomsky has also gained a reputation for his often radical political views, which he describes as "libertarian socialist," some of which have been seen as controversial and highly open to debate.

In 1967, The New York Review of Books published his essay "The Responsibility of Intellectuals." In light of the Vietnam War, which Chomsky adamantly opposed, he addressed what he saw as a disgracefully resigned intellectual community, of which he was an embarrassed member, with the hope of igniting his peers into deeper thought and action.

In a 1977 article Chomsky co-authored with Edward S. Herman in The Nation, he questioned the credibility of the reporting of atrocities under the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia and suggested some reports were propaganda to "place the role of the United States in a more favourable light." Decades later, Chomsky acknowledged in the 1993 documentary Manufacturing Consent “the great act of genocide in the modern period is Pol Pot, 1975 through 1978. . ."

In 1979, Chomsky signed a petition in support of the free-speech rights of Robert Faurisson, a French lecturer who denied the existence of the gas chambers used in Nazi concentration camps. As a result, Chomsky found himself in the middle of a heated controversy, and in response, he asserted that his views are "diametrically opposed" to Faurisson's conclusions and his intent was to support Faurisson's civil liberties not his Holocaust denial. The incident haunted Chomsky for decades, however, and his reputation in France, in particular, was damaged for some time afterward.

Chomsky also sparked controversy with 9-11: Was There an Alternative? his 2002 collection of essays which analyses the September 11 attacks on the United States, the impact of U.S. foreign policy and media control. In the book, Chomsky denounces the “horrifying atrocities” of the attacks, but is critical of the United States’ use of power, calling it “a leading terrorist state.” The book became a best seller, denounced by conservative critics as a distortion of American history while praised by supporters as offering an honest analysis of events leading to 9-11 that weren't being reported by the mainstream media.

Among his many books addressing politics are American Power and the New Mandarins (1969), Peace in the Middle East? (1974), Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media (with Edward S. Herman, 1988), Profit over People (1998), Rogue States (2000), Hegemony or Survival (2003), Gaza in Crisis (with Ilan Pappé, 2010), and most recently, On Western Terrorism: From Hiroshima to Drone Warfare (2013).

Table 1 Portrayal of Noam Chomsky across newspapers, countries, and political orientations [2]

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Publication | N | Marginalization | Critical | Neutral | Positive | Consecration |
| Globe and Mail | 267 | 18 | 7 | 153 | 39 | 50 |
| National Post | 199 | 42 | 19 | 124 | 7 | 7 |
| Toronto Star | 216 | 8 | 4 | 158 | 21 | 25 |
| New York Times | 283 | 12 | 16 | 219 | 19 | 17 |
| Wall Street Journal | 61 | 21 | 4 | 33 | 0 | 3 |
| Washington Post | 147 | 9 | 7 | 115 | 5 | 11 |
| Canada | 682 | 68 | 30 | 435 | 67 | 82 |
| USA | 491 | 42 | 27 | 367 | 24 | 31 |
| Liberal | 913 | 47 | 34 | 645 | 84 | 103 |
| Conservative | 260 | 63 | 23 | 157 | 7 | 10 |
| Totals | 1173 | 110 | 57 | 802 | 91 | 113 |

Current Affairs

Despite his often-controversial viewpoints, Chomsky remains a highly respected and sought-after thinker who continues to author new books and contributes to a wide variety of journals and remains active on the lecture circuit. Over the course of his career, Chomsky has also amassed a wealth of academic and humanitarian awards, including the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award from the American Psychological Association, the Kyoto Prize in Basic Sciences and the humanitarian Sydney Peace Prize.

In 2014, at age 85, Chomsky remarried, to Valeria Wasserman.

References

[1] The New Indian Express. (2018). <https://www.newindianexpress.com/lifestyle/books/2018/dec/07/noam-chomsky-birthday-10-fun-facts-about-the-father-of-modern-linguistics-1908565.html>

“Noam Chomsky’s birthday: 10 fun facts about ‘America’s Socrates”

[2] Lannigan & McLaughlin. (2017). <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11186-017-9293-3?shared-article-renderer>

“Professors and politics: Noam Chomsky’s contested reputation in the United States and Canada”

[3] Biography. (2019). <https://www.biography.com/scholar/noam-chomsky>

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Sources

All content on this webpage is sourced from the cites listed in the references.