A reply to Andy Rogers's review of *The Linguistics Wars: Chomsky, Lakoff, and the Battle Over Deep Structure* (2nd edition) in LINGUIST List 33.3261 (26/10/22)

(I HAVE UPLOADED this to *LingBuzz* because of constraints on the LINGUIST List platform, where I initially tried to reply, under encouragement from its editors. Upon trying to submit it there I discovered it has a rather small hard-wired character count for Discussions, with apparently no alternatives. I had over run it by a factor of five. This is not a dispute with Rogers, whose review was overwhelmingly generous, just a chance to clarify a few points about the review and discuss a few implications. The delay between his review and this reply—uploaded to *LingBuzz* on 3 December 2022—is from communication lags with the LINGUIST folks, looking for an alternative.)

LINGUIST List (LL) and *The Linguistics Wars* both came on the scene in the early 1990s as the Internet was slouching toward the World Wide Web but before it had yet got there. It was a fortuitous convergence. John Lawler reviewed the book in LINGUIST 4.644, quickly sparking some really interesting and occasionally contentious discussions (in issues 4.644, 4.649, 4.654, 4.658, 4.671, 4.722) of a sort that were unknown before LL brought linguistics 'online;' prior to that exchanges were either transient (conferences) or glacial (journals).

So I was delighted that LL decided to review the new edition; more so that Andy Rogers, someone who was in the thick of the events it chronicles, was the reviewer. He does a good job of representing the content of the book, and says some very kind things about its scholarship and fluidity, but I do have a few comments I'd like to add.

To start, I'd like to thank Rogers for the review, in part because it is generous and quite reflective of the book, but in larger part because it helps bring into sharper focus a few things about the conflict I chart. I have talked and corresponded to a lot of linguists who were active during the years at the heart of my book, extensively before the first edition and periodically since—not always at my own initiative. *The Linguistics Wars* struck a chord with that generation. Linguists often come up to me at conferences wanting to share their War stories, or they just spontaneously email me after reading the book (something many others have done, as well, sans the eye-witness accounts and personal grievances). But Rogers's review still kindled fresh insight.

Most notably for me, the simple chronology he gives of the notorious 1969 "Texas Shootout" was very suggestive. That was the conference at which one gunslinger, Noam Chomsky, delivered his catalogue of the misconceptions and obscurities he diagnosed of early Generative Semantics (1972/1969), later published with the innocuous title of "Some Empirical Issues in the Theory of Transformational Grammar," and at which another gunslinger, Paul Postal, outlined his imperiously christened "Best Theory" (1972/1969). One wore a black hat. One wore white. But which wore which?

That conference (on the Goals of Linguistic Theory; see Peters 1972) was widely agreed to be the crucial turning point in a bifurcating movement away from the Standard Theory codified in Chomsky (1965), setting off a decade of animosity and bitterness that lingers still in some quarters (detectable at points, I think, in Rogers's review). But it wasn't the two big position papers by Chomsky and by Postal that marked the turning point, so much as one particular episode on the final day. Everyone, without exception, isolates that episode as the harbinger, if not the cause, of all the hostility to come. It was an exercise of nearly inexplicable contemptuousness by Chomsky that cast the die. He refused to even allow Haj Ross to ask a question from the floor by talking over him relentlessly, until Ross finally gave up and walked away.

What is so remarkable about the episode is that Chomsky was not just at the absolute zenith of linguistics at the time, while Ross was a bottom-feeding junior professor only two years post dissertation, but that Ross was also very well known to Chomsky and universally well liked for his gentleness and geniality; more than that, he had been recently hired into Chomsky's own department at M.I.T. They had even flown down to the conference together, seat mates. Most remarkably of all, Ross had been Chomsky's student and they had worked together on a highly creative line of research that would soon become among the most influential set of proposals in formal syntax, the Island Constraints. Chomsky's behaviour violated every norm and obligation of a supervisor, who is expected to foster and support the careers of their students.

Ross, along with George Lakoff and others, had published arguments which pushed (without hostility but not without arrogance) against some positions in Chomsky's recent crown jewel, the framework-defining *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. And Ross would likely have pursued those arguments had he been allowed to speak. But one would expect his supervisor to listen respectfully, compliment the acuity of his student, maybe even cite his relevant contributions for the record, and then kindly but forcibly disagree with whatever he found unpalatable. Not so. Chomsky couldn't even tolerate a few syllables from him.

Chomsky's conduct was seen as an act of unparalleled viciousness by Lakoff and Postal in particular, who described them to me, but not only them. Ross himself, though, seemed to recall it more as baffling discourtesy than as enmity. He recounted the incident to me sadly and regretfully, almost as if he was somehow responsible for what he called the "bad vibes."

But Rogers's telling of it brings something out that had somehow escaped me previously:

> I attended the conference as a graduate student. It was held in the Student Union, which has several large adjoining ballrooms connected by opening large folding doors. Word of mouth billed the conference as the Texas Shootout: Chomsky versus Generative Semantics. Paul Postal, one of the Generative Semantics leaders, and Chomsky both gave papers; Postal's (1972), "The Best Theory", came first. …
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> When it became clear that Chomsky was not going to allow Ross to finish his question, much less answer it, Ross walked away from the microphone and left the room. In the much later Ross interview in Huck and Goldsmith, Ross says [1995, 125] "I remember I talked to him [Chomsky] about it afterwards. I can't remember exactly what he said, but it was something like, 'I just couldn't take it. Here these people were saying wrong things.' I don't remember him saying he was sorry, exactly, he was just trying to explain why he had to do what he did." (*LINGUIST List* 33.3261)

I termed Chomsky's public humiliation of his student "nearly inexplicable" above. I added the *nearly* because Rogers's account provides some inklings of an explanation (one that can at least take us beyond variations of the "Chomsky's a pr*ck" explanations I have been offered more than once).

Now, psychobiography is far from an exact science. But when enough factors converge it is not unreasonable to speculate about motives and impulses, and Rogers's outlining of the chronology, coupled with Chomsky's later vaguely gesturing quasi-apology, strongly suggests that Chomsky belittled Ross as a proxy for Postal and probably for Lakoff. The fact that Ross never actually said anything, and that Postal's paper had preceded Chomsky's, and that Chomsky's later rationalization to Ross was notably collective ("these people"), all point to Chomsky responding not to Haj 'personally;' rather, to

making him a kind of scapegoat for someone he perhaps felt deserted by, Postal, and for someone he seems genuinely to have disliked, Lakoff. It's still unforgiveable to drown out a former student and junior professor like that, but these lineaments make Chomsky's obnoxiousness a little more explicable than the narrow character-assassination interpretation it usually gets. It is certainly worth noting, too, that Chomsky's heavy involvement in the anti-Vietnam war efforts of the time (writing, speaking engagements, protests, media interviews) might have been gnawing at his nerves as well.

I also want to explain a correction that Rogers notes in the third printing of the second edition of *Linguistics Wars*, but that he leaves hanging. The first and second printings of the new edition read as follows:

> In 1949, a shatteringly precocious undergraduate did write in his senior thesis that the set of sentences generated by the linguistic system he was investigating was "not necessarily finite," and therefore that "the resulting grammar will in general contain a recursive specification of a denumerable set of sentences" (Chomsky 1979 [1949]:67), an insight that has driven the field of linguistics, through a welter of instantiations and reactions, pretty much ever since. It's been a bumpy ride. Several instantiations grew mutually antagonistic, most dramatically with the Generative Semantics Heresy, and all of them were definitionally antagonistic to various other approaches. But Chomsky, the presence, has towered over the field for the better part of a century since that thesis[.] (Harris, 2021, 416)

This passage basically says that a twenty-one year old undergraduate discovered the importance of recursion as a defining criterion of grammatical modelling, propagating a feature of Chomskyan mythology. Young Isaac Newton was hit on the head by an apple. Young Noam Chomsky was struck by recursive function theory. As Rogers notes, the text has been fixed to now read:

> In the early 1950s, a shatteringly precocious young Chomsky did begin a research program anchored to the insight that 'grammar will in general contain a recursive specification of a denumerable set of sentences' (Chomsky 1979 [1951]:67n2), an insight that has driven the field of linguistics pretty much ever since. It's been a bumpy ride. Several variations on that theme grew mutually antagonistic, most dramatically with the Generative Semantics Heresy, and all of them were foundationally antagonistic to various other approaches. But Chomsky, the presence, has towered over the field for the better part of a century since he first wielded his recursion insight[.]

In short, the claim that a "recursive specification" insight occurs in Chomsky's undergraduate thesis needed to be voided. It was wrong, and frankly I should have known it was wrong. No doubt Rogers didn't bother to explain the correction because it seems so trivial, a tiny and arcane scholium on the very tangled history of Generative Grammar and its master architect. But it is worth explaining the error here, as a symptom of how unreliable that history can be.

Chomsky is untrustworthy with facts, not least with the facts of his own personal history, and he also reworked his exploratory early writings (his Undergraduate and Master's theses (1979/1951) and *Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory* (1975/1955)), the writings in which he first pursues issues of generativity and formulates his breakaway version of Transformational Grammar, rejigging those texts at a time when he viewed this research, in his own phrase, as "a private hobby" (Chomsky, 1975/1955, 29). His most shocking breach of the facts, to a degree that is hard to distinguish from deception, if not malice, is his recurrent claims that his supervisor for all three theses at the University of Pennsylvania couldn't be bothered to read any of them (Harris 2018a), casually implying an extraordinary degree of professional

negligence. (Fortunately, he seems finally to have backed away from this insistence—see McElvenny 2022.)

With respect to the idea that a grammar must 'recursively specify a denumerable set of sentences,' Chomsky seems clearly to have lit on this notion by the mid-1950s. There's just no evidence it participates in his undergraduate or masters theses, as I originally wrote. The thing is, Chomsky implies in several places that the notion does date to those works (Barsky 1998, 53-55; Chomsky 2021a, 5; Schiffman 2013, 184-185; see also Freidin 2014, 139; 2019, 2), which is where I got it from. I should certainly have known better, but I wasn't careful enough with my note taking and overlooked that the crucial phrasing ("not necessarily finite … recursive specification") occurs only in a footnote to the 1979 publication. The original documents are difficult to obtain, but Daniels (2010) closely compares two versions Chomsky's Master's thesis (one that immediately incorporated his senior thesis and was accepted to earn his degree and one that he significantly re-edited as he calibrated and reshaped his ideas; the latter is the text of Chomsky 1979/1951).

Shortly after the publication of my second edition, both Bruce Nevin and Geoffrey K. Pullum contacted me to remind me of how Daniels's essay falsifies the provenance claim of recursion back to Chomsky's Senior thesis, and Oxford UP was good enough to agree to a correction.

Chomsky was, I would be the last one to dispute, an absolute prodigy, but perhaps marginally less prodigious than my original passage, leaning on his own accounts, claims him to be. Again, this is a very small wrinkle in the historical fabric of generative grammar, backdating a claim a few years, but it clearly reveals something that anyone writing about Chomsky's life and intellectual contributions needs to be aware of, and which is impossible to miss, his unreliability with the facts, but which very few of his chroniclers acknowledge. Most just take his word as gospel.

Chomsky's questionable accuracy about the timing of his generative insight might be attributable to all kinds of things, but it patterns with many other mischaracterizations, which I chart in the book (in particular, pages 363-421; see also Harris 2018a, 2018b).

Returning to Rogers's review, I also want to note my particular appreciation that he singled out the expanded account of Robin Lakoff's contributions to Generative Semantics and linguistics at large (see also Goldsmith 2022). One of my (several) regrets about the first edition that I tried to redress in the second is that I did not give her sufficient due for her role in the development of the field through the "Wars" and beyond. My attempt to do so now, I also want to acknowledge, is due in large part to complaints from George Lakoff. He was kind enough to correspond with me about the manuscript of the first edition, mostly expressing disagreement. We tried to resolve our differences, but it didn't end especially well.

When I agreed to write a new edition, the first thing I did was to revisit all the reviews and the correspondence around the first edition, especially concentrating on the critical aspects. G. Lakoff was adamant in our correspondence that I neglected R. Lakoff's role at the time and her subsequent impact on linguistics. I also revisited the original literature and tracked post-bellum developments closely and soon realized he was right. I may not have fully corrected the record on her place in the history of the field, but the new edition sketches it out in more detail and with more appreciation.

One final point with respect to Rogers review, a predicable one I'm sure. He concludes that the Linguistic Wars of the 1960s and 1970s amounted to "an academic conflict which seemed important at the time, but in retrospect seems rather less so." I wouldn't have written, and especially rewritten, the book if I believed that. Rogers's retrospective re-evaluation of its significance is perhaps connected to

the pessimism he also expresses about the role of theory in linguistics, remarking that it is of little consequence to the Ordinary Working Grammarian.

The Generative/Interpretive Semantics dispute was not a pointless squabble by belligerents over best forgotten theoretical technicalities. My motivation for a second edition comes from exactly the opposite place, a conviction that the linguistics of the twenty-first century, the linguistics of now, would be very different without that fracturing of an impending Chomskyan hegemony. I'll leave it to your imagination what an alternate history might look like, but my own feeling is that there would have been much less room to develop the varieties of Cognitive Linguistics that are now flourishing and that even such influential Chomskyan phases as Principles and Parameters may not have arisen without the friction of Generative Semantics. At its core, the Minimalist Program, with its Basic Property, *is* Generative Semantics. What would the linguistics of now look like if Postal and Chomsky and Lakoff had collaborated on "a computational system coded in the brain that for each individual recursively generates an infinite array of hierarchically structured expressions, each formulating a thought, each potentially externalized in some sensory-motor (SM) medium" (Chomsky 2021b, 6), the best theory that Chomsky apparently wanted to defer for twenty years?

My argument, explored narratively as well as logically, is that social, personal, and institutional dynamics shape research in very ramified ways. Certainly these factors, as the book reveals, extend much more dramatically to the daily, ordinary work of linguists than Rogers acknowledges. "The OWG, fortunately, was relatively unaffected by the wars," Rogers says. That's not what I heard, repeatedly. On the personal level, linguists trying to go about their ordinary, daily work faced hiring difficulties, publication obstacles, even access to data, just for being on the wrong side of various theoretical ideologies by some hiring committee's or granting committee's or editorial board's metrics; neutrality was rarely an option for a decade and beyond. But more to the point these OWGs are, as Pullum notes 'shadowy figures' (1999, 1), straw mannequins propped up to devalue … who? Extraordinary Working Grammarians? Ordinary Non-Working Grammarians?

Real linguists, in real hallways and real classrooms and real fields, need access to the instruments of pragmatics, figural language, constructions, semantic frames, x-bar theory, nominalization rules, and so on, all of which have their roles in linguistics in very substantial measure because of the Great Generative Disruption of the 1970s.

Clarifications and errata

- Rogers quibbles that I put my closing profile of James D. McCawley in the chapter entitled "The Aftermath: Twenty-First Century Linguistics" because "McCawley died in 1999, which, the last time [he] checked, was not in the twenty-first century." McCawley did indeed pass away in 1999, on the 10th of April to be exact. But the profiles in that chapter are meant to address legacies, not biological existence, and while McCawley may unfortunately be read less and less these days, no one stopped reading his work on the 11th of April, 1999, not even at 11:59 on the final day of the twentieth century; nor did his more diffuse scholarly influence (can you say "logical form"?) go up in smoke with the end-of-millennium fireworks.
- Rogers says, somewhat abashedly, that "[Harris's] degree is in technical writing." I do in fact have a degree in Technical Communication, of which I am justly proud, as well as degrees in literature and psycholinguistics, but my terminal degree, which is what people usually mean when they name only one, is in Rhetoric.
- Rogers says that Chomsky was Robert Lees's supervisor. That is true in spirit, but Morris Halle was Lees's supervisor of record.

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